

BEYOND THE TWO GENDERS: THE QUEER PERSPECTIVE IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

God's gender is not restricted to the male form as is common in monotheistic religions. Fertility is not restricted to women. Divinity is associated with enchantment and sensory pleasures. Our Indian myths are full of queer stories. The Europeans noticed these queer stories in Indian myths. They showed that queerness is not just the part of Western countries but India owns it too. Indian diversity is much more than the two genders. The diversity is beyond it. Many Indians are not aware of these queer stories and deny these facts. This paper is an attempt to highlight the queer stories in Indian myths and to show what our culture is.

Keywords: Gender, Queerness, Gods, Myths, Indian myths, Androgyne.

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'To appreciate this fluidity of nature
And the shifting rigidities of culture
Is to appreciate queerness.' (Pattanaik 4)

Feminism, the idea that men and women are equal is, however, discovered in Hinduism as the scriptures point to the difference between the soul and the flesh. The soul has no gender. Gender comes from the flesh. Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness. Queer stories are not restricted to Hindu mythology but can be seen in different mythologies – North America, Aztec, Egyptian, Japanese, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Persian.

Androgynes have a significant place in the human religious imagination. Androgynes, they are people who embody both male and female characteristics. But this basic definition must necessarily be qualified by recognizing the diverse forms of androgyny. For example, there are physiological androgynes—such as hermaphrodites—but there are also psychological androgynes. Wendy Doniger identifies three kinds of psychological androgynes: a 'splitting androgyne,' who embodies male and female qualities but must 'split' to become creative; a 'fusing androgyne,' who must merge with a male or female side of the personality to become bisexual; and a 'two in one' androgyne, often represented by a couple that unites in a perfect love. There are also androgyne-like figures such as eunuchs and transvestites.

In the Bhagavat Gita, in the tenth chapter, Krishna shows his cosmic form to Arjuna and says, 'I am all there is, was and will be.' In Hinduism, the world is not distinct from God. The world is God. God contains everything. The queer is not excluded.

No less complicated than androgyny is the category of myth. In recent decades, the category of myth has been challenged in the academic study of religion. Many scholars have argued that 'myth' is a Western category that does not correspond well to the way religious traditions understand their own authoritative stories. For example, Christians would not

understand the story of Jesus as a 'myth,' nor would Hindus speak of the 'mythology' of Shiva. But unless one is inseparably joined to a rigid form of empiricism, myth is a useful scholarly category to describe special kinds of religious storytelling. Myths are narratives, but not simple stories or "tall tales." Myths are narratives with a special claim to authority—a divine or transcendent authority that sublates or encompasses other claims to truth. In this way, myths are not only narratives that ground the worldviews of particular religious traditions, but also personal revelations and experiences that seek a special kind of recognition.

In the karmic worldview, you are queer because of karma, and it may be a boon or curse. In the one-life worldview, you are queer because you choose to be so, to express your individuality or to defy authority (Greek mythology) or God/ Devil will it so (biblical mythology). Hindu mythology reveals that patriarchy, the idea that men are superior to women, was invented.

The celebration of queer ideas in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals is in stark contrast to the ignorance and rigidity that we see in Indian society. When the queer is pointed out in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals, they are often explained away in metaphysical terms. No attempt is made to enquire, interrogate and widen vision. Thus queerness is rendered invisible. India's third gender, the hijras, has a peculiar clap to make sure the world does not render their queerness invisible.

'All things queer are not sexual

All things sexual are not reproductive

All things reproductive are not romantic

All things romantic are not queerless.' (Pattanaik 37)

Androgynous myths can be seen in accounts of creation, as well as in the diverse spiritualities and religious figures embraced by the world's religious traditions. Myths of creation often invoke powerful androgynous imagery that reflects an understanding of primordial union. Rashi and Abraham Ibn Ezra, two renowned medieval Jewish commentators, interpreted the creation of Adam as told in the topic of Genesis as an androgynous myth, because God originally created man and woman as one. When God created woman, he effectively separated the female side from the androgyne Adam. This understanding of creation as originally undifferentiated also finds its way into Christian esoteric speculation.

Splitting Androgyny: 'The splitting anthropomorphic androgyny is originally created as a male and female in combination and must subsequently separate in order to create.'

The image of the splitting androgyne is especially prevalent in Hinduism. In the Vedic period, the figure of *Dvaya-Prithvi* or Sky-Earth is another primordial androgyne who subdivides into masculine, feminine, and neuter parts. In the Upanishads, the figure of Purusa subdivides into male and female parts to begin the process of creation. In the Puranas, a later

series of Hindu mythological texts, Prajapati divides into male and female parts, which then incestuously copulate.

Androgyny is also an important spiritual theme that suggests equilibrium. For example, Jacob Neusner has written about 'androgynous Judaism,' while Carol Ochs envisions an androgynous Christianity, beyond patriarchy and matriarchy. Of course, neither Neusner nor Ochs speaks of 'androgynous myths' per se. However, both use the trope of androgyny to frame the mythic discourse with their own religious traditions to emphasize or point to a balance between male and female elements or themes.

Textually speaking the Vedic period provides wonderful imagery in regards to androgyny. Androgynous myths can be seen in accounts of creation, as well as in the diverse spiritualities and religious figures embraced by the world's religious traditions. In Hindu mythology the power of the combined man/woman is a frequent and significant theme. In one instance, when the male gods were incapable of destroying the buffalo demon, Mahisha, they manifested Durga. She is the result of all the male gods combining their energy, so her gender could be interpreted as being rather ambiguous, although today she is worshipped as a female deity.

A study of Hinduism and Buddhism reveals an 'androgynous spirituality' associated with Tantra. As SudhirKakar explains in his psychoanalytic study of Hindu spirituality, practitioners of Tantra attempt to cultivate a kind of androgynous awareness. For example, a man might imagine himself as a woman while engaging in sexual intercourse. Such meditative practices are necessary because assuming a particular gender identity is associated with being confined to the illusions of the phenomenal world, or *maya*, and its dualisms. According to some renditions of Tantra, human beings are divided into male and female parts, representing love and lust respectively, which must be harmonized or brought together. For Hindu practitioners of Tantra, especially important are myths concerning Shiva. According to one particularly prominent Hindu mythic theme, Shiva becomes an androgyne by incorporating his wife Parvati into his own body. The ascent of the female serpent Kundalini through yogic practice is also an androgynous myth in that Kundalini unites with Shiva as she enters the final energy center, or chakra, of the subtle body. Within Buddhism, particularly important are myths surrounding the yab-yum, or 'father-mother' union, as represented by the sexual embrace of a male deity with his female consort. Such images constitute a two-in-one androgyny in which the dualisms of the phenomenal world are transcended. Fusing – 'Originally created as a male and female in isolation and must fuse in order to create. The separate components are barren; only the androgyne is creative.' (Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty)

Shiva is a very famous splitting and fusing androgyne. Stories in the Vedic tradition generally move from Shiva as a splitting androgyne to a fusing androgyne. One famous episode of Shiva's fusing is in the Puranas, Shiva embraced Parvati so hard that they became one. Shiva was a beggar who smoked too much hashish and could not go on his usual begging rounds. Parvati took his place and fed him the food she had collected. He embraced her afterwards.

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Krishna, too, transformed into a woman to fight the demon Araka who, having never set eyes on a woman, was strong only because of his chastity. After being married for three days, the demon was destroyed by his wife. After the deed, Krishna revealed himself to the other gods in his true form, proclaiming there would be others like him, who, as neither man nor woman, would have the power to utter words, whether a blessing or a curse, that would come true. Today's *hijras* (eunuchs) are attributed this power, so hosts take care to reward them generously when they perform at celebratory events.

In the great battle of Kauravas and Pandavas, the three men in the Pandava camp were found worthy of sacrifice: Krishna the divine guide, Arjun the commander and Aravan, Arjun's son by the serpent princess. As Krishna and Arjuna were indispensable, the Pandavas decided to sacrifice Aravan. But Aravan wanted a wife before he was sacrificed; marriage entitled him to cremation and proper funerary offerings. But not a single woman on earth was willing to marry a man doomed to die the day after his wedding. Desperate, the Pandavas turned to Krishna, who turned into a beautiful woman called *Mohini*. He married Aravan, spent the night with him, and at dawn, after he had been sacrificed, mourned him as a widow. No widow ever wept for her husband as Krishna did.

More common are stories of women turning into men and men turning women. In the Mahabharata, Drupad raises his daughter *Shikhandini* as a man and even gets 'him' a wife. When the wife discovers the truth on the wedding night, all hell breaks loose; her father threatens to destroy Drupada's kingdom. The timely intervention of a Yaksha saves the day: he lets Shikhandini use his manhood for a night and perform his husbandly duties. In the Skanda Purana, two Brahmins desperate for money disguise themselves as a newly married couple and try to dupe a pious queen in the hope of securing rich gifts. But such is the queen's piety that the gods decide to prevent her from being made a fool; they turn the Brahmin dressed as a bride into a real woman. The two Brahmins thus end up marrying each other and all ends well.

Within Hindu mythology male androgynies far outnumber female androgynies and are generally regarded as more positive while female androgynies are generally negative. Within Hindu mythology the female androgyne is a phallic threat to the male, hence again the transformation into a mare. Male androgyne are accepted and seen as good unions because males perhaps already have a bit of female already inside of themselves. As such androgynes contrary to conventional wisdom symbolize not harmony but tension. As seen by the above-mentioned stories, one sex usually predominates; splitting androgynes symbolize the coming of

order and diversity into the universe while the fusing androgynes symbolize a yearning to dissolve ordered diversity back into chaotic oneness. In the end, we are left with a bitter testimony for this bodily representation laden with conflict, disequilibrium, and tension.

The Hindu worldview considers every behavior and identity a possibility in this endless boundless cyclical universe. Hindu society, however, with its foundations in patriarchy and heterosexuality, deems non-conventional gender identities and sexual behaviors inappropriate for social stability. They are tolerated only in fringes, especially if they express themselves through patriarchal and heterosexual vocabulary. This conflict between Nature and culture, and the resulting repression of choices that threaten the dominant discourse, is manifest in the queer plots and queer characters of Hindu lore. Queer tales, though subversive from one point of view, are conformist from another because they endorse traditional gender roles and sexual symbolism. In narratives where men become women and women become men, feminine imagery continues to represent material reality while male biology provides the wherewithal for spiritual prowess. Thus, throbbing beyond sexual politics, time-honored metaphysical metaphors and allegories retain their mythic power. Hindu lore also drives home the point that social law changes with time to meet the demands of a particular age.

I have a man's body. I reject this body. I desire no one.

I have a woman's body. I reject this body. I desire no one. (Pattanaik 3)

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