

Transgender Identity in Ancient Indian Thought: Text, Tradition, and Contemporary Gender Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the historical, textual and philosophical paradigms of gender-diverse identities and their representations in ancient Indian thought through the lens of how early textual traditions expressed gender fluidity through concepts like tritiya prakrti ("third nature") and napumsaka. Through an analysis of canonical Sanskrit texts ranging from Vedic hymns, epics, dharma sastras (texts on law), medical and erotic texts, this paper will seek to understand how gender variance was structured in ancient South Asia. This paper juxtaposes the above paradigms with the extreme marginalization that contemporary trans and Hijra communities face in India. Finally, it will explore how ancient indigenous models interact with contemporary global gender discourse and the role of historical text and tradition in the making of legal and social liberation.

Keywords: Tiritiya Prakrti, Dharmasastra, Gender Fluidity, Epic Narrative, Gender, Vedic literature, kamasutra, colonial period

INTRODUCTION

Gender has historically been understood through diverse social, cultural, religious, and philosophical frameworks. Although contemporary discussions of gender identity are often framed through concepts such as transgender, gender diversity, non-binary identities, and gender fluidity, variations in gender identity and expression are not exclusively modern phenomena. Across different historical societies, individuals whose identities, bodies, or social roles did not conform to dominant gender expectations have occupied complex and often contradictory positions within social and cultural structures. Ancient India provides an important intellectual and textual context for examining these complexities. Its extensive literary traditions contain references to diverse forms of gender identity, bodily variation, sexual expression, and social roles that challenge the assumption that Indian society has historically been structured exclusively around a rigid male–female binary (Vanita & Kidwai, 2001, Zwilling & Sweet, 1996).

The study of gender in ancient Indian thought, however, requires methodological caution. Contemporary categories cannot be directly applied to historical societies without considering the conceptual vocabulary and social institutions of their own period. Terms such as tritiya prakrti ("third nature") and napumsaka, found in different textual and intellectual traditions, emerged within particular linguistic, social, legal, medical, and philosophical contexts. They should therefore not automatically be treated as exact equivalents of the modern category "transgender."

Ancient Indian textual traditions offer a particularly rich field for such an investigation. Vedic and post-Vedic literature, the epics, Dharmasastras, medical treatises, and works on sexuality and social conduct engage with questions of sex, gender, reproduction, bodily characteristics, social roles, and sexual behaviour in different ways. The epics, particularly the Mahabharata and Ramayana, contain narratives involving transformations, gendered role changes, and characters whose identities complicate conventional distinctions between masculine and feminine (Vanita & Kidwai, 2001, Pattanaik, 2014). Similarly, legal and normative texts attempted to classify different forms of sexual and bodily difference, while medical literature approached questions of sex and bodily formation through its own conceptual frameworks (Wujastyk, 2003). The Kamasutra, meanwhile, provides another significant textual site for understanding variations in sexual practices and social identities.

These diverse textual representations provide an important historical lens through which the contemporary socio-legal status of transgender and Hijra communities in India can be examined. The recognition of transgender persons within the modern Indian constitutional and legal framework represents an important transformation in the understanding of gender identity. In National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India (2014), the Supreme Court of India recognized transgender persons as a "third gender" and affirmed their constitutional rights, including protections associated with Articles 14, 15, 16, 19, and 21 (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 2014). Subsequently, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 established a statutory framework addressing the rights and welfare of transgender persons and prohibited

discrimination in several spheres of life (Government of India, 2019). At the same time, formal legal recognition does not necessarily eliminate social discrimination, exclusion, economic marginalization, or institutional barriers. The contemporary experience of transgender persons therefore reveals a complex relationship between legal recognition and lived social reality.

The relationship between ancient traditions and contemporary gender discourse must therefore be understood through a nuanced historical lens, recognizing the complexities and contradictions present in both past and contemporary contexts. Ancient Indian texts themselves contain normative hierarchies, social classifications, and restrictions, and different texts often present divergent understandings of gender and sexuality. For example, terms such as *kliba*, *sandha*, *pandaka*, and *napumsaka* acquired different meanings in different textual and commentarial contexts rather than functioning as fixed equivalents of a contemporary gender category (Zwilling & Sweet, 1996, *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, 2025).

This study investigates how ancient Indian intellectual traditions conceptualized and represented gender diversity through their historical, textual, and philosophical frameworks. It focuses particularly on the ways in which concepts such as *tritiya prakṛti* and *napumsaka* were articulated across different textual traditions and how these categories related to broader understandings of gender, body, sexuality, and social identity. By engaging with Vedic literature, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, *Dharmasastras*, classical medical texts such as the *Susruta Samhita* and *Caraka Samhita*, and the *Kamasutra*, the study seeks to identify both patterns of recognition and mechanisms of classification and regulation (Zysk, 1991, Wujastyk, 2003, Doniger, 2014).

At the same time, historical texts must be read within their own contexts and not selectively invoked to construct an idealized past. Such an approach allows ancient Indian thought to function not merely as evidence of historical recognition, but as a critical intellectual resource

for reflecting upon contemporary questions of dignity, identity, equality, recognition, and social emancipation.

Mythological and Epic Narratives: Fluidity in Tradition

Indian epic, mythological, and Puranic traditions contain a rich body of narratives involving gender transformation, changes in gendered social roles, divine androgyny, and identities that do not conform neatly to a fixed male–female binary. These narratives are significant for the study of gender diversity because they demonstrate that questions of sex, gender, embodiment, identity, and social recognition were represented through multiple symbolic and narrative frameworks in Indian traditions (Vanita, 2022; Hogan, 2018).

At the same time, these narratives should not be interpreted as straightforward historical evidence of the existence or social acceptance of contemporary transgender identities. Epic and mythological narratives operate within religious, symbolic, ethical, and cultural frameworks. Their significance lies particularly in the ways they make gender transformation, gender ambiguity, and the co-existence of masculine and feminine attributes narratively intelligible

(Hogan, 2018; Vanita, 2022).

Three particularly important examples are found in the narratives of *Sikhandi*, *Arjuna as Brhannala*, and *Aravan–Mohini*, while the figure of *Ardhanarisvara* provides a theological and iconographic representation of the integration of masculine and feminine principles.

The Mahabharata: Gender Transformation and Social Recognition

The *Mahabharata* provides some of the most significant narratives for examining gender transformation in ancient Indian literary traditions.

Sikhandi: From Sikhandini to Warrior

Sikhandi is born to King *Drupada* of *Panchala*. In the narrative, the child is born female but is raised and publicly represented as a male because of a prophecy associated with the child's future role in the destruction of *Bhisma*. The narrative subsequently introduces a dramatic transformation through the *Yakṣa Sthunakarna*. *Sikhaṇḍini* exchanges her femininity with the

Yakṣa's masculinity and thereafter lives as *Sikhandin*. The *Mahabharata* explicitly describes this exchange of sex characteristics, making the episode one of the most striking examples of gender/sex transformation in the epic tradition (*Mahabharata*, *Udyoga Parva*, 5.191–192; Hogan, 2018, Vanita, 2022).

The importance of *Sikhandi* extends beyond physical transformation. The transformed identity becomes socially and politically consequential. *Sikhandi* subsequently receives martial training and participates in the *Kuruksetra* war. *Bhisma* refuses to attack *sikhandi* because he regards *Sikhandi* as someone who had previously been a woman. His refusal ultimately enables *Arjuna* to attack *Bhisma* while using *Sikhandi* as a strategic shield (*Mahābhārata*, *Udyoga Parva*, 5.195; Vanita, 2022).

The narrative therefore presents gender as connected not merely with bodily characteristics but also with social identity, recognition, kinship, honour, political status, and martial agency. At the same time, *Bhisma*'s response reveals that the memory of an individual's earlier gendered status continues to influence social recognition. Thus, *Sikhandi*'s story can be read as a complex representation of both gender transformation and the persistence of gendered social classification (Vanita, 2022; Hogan, 2018).

Arjuna as Brhannala: Gendered Role Transformation

Another significant episode concerns Arjuna's year of concealment during the Pandavas' *añstavasa*. Following the curse of Urvashi, Arjuna assumes the identity of *Brhannala* and lives at the court of King Virata. In this role, Arjuna teaches music and dance and adopts a socially feminized identity (Mahabharata, Virata Parva, 4.10–11; Goldman, 2025). The significance of the *Brhannala* episode lies in its representation of the relationship between gender, occupation, appearance, and social role. A celebrated warrior temporarily assumes a gendered identity different from his conventional masculine role. His transformation allows him to enter a social space in which martial masculinity is suspended and artistic and performative abilities become central (Goldman, 2025).

The episode consequently demonstrates that epic narratives could represent gender not simply as a fixed biological characteristic but also through performance, clothing, occupation, behaviour, and social role.

Aravan and Mohini: Sacred Marriage and Gender Transformation

The Aravan narrative, particularly prominent in Tamil traditions, provides another important example of the intersection between gender transformation, religious devotion, sexuality, and ritual identity. According to the tradition, Aravan agrees to sacrifice himself for the success of the Pandava cause but expresses a desire to experience marriage before his sacrifice. Since no woman is willing to marry someone destined to die immediately, Kṛṣṇa assumes the form of Mohini, a female manifestation, and marries Aravan (Vanita, 2022; Roy, 2024).

The contemporary ritual tradition should, however, be distinguished from the ancient textual narrative itself. The modern Aravani identity and the Koovagam festival represent historically developed social and religious practices rather than simply reproducing an unchanged ancient tradition. The Aravan–Mohini narrative nevertheless provides an important cultural framework through which gender-diverse communities have constructed religious identity, community, and collective belonging (Roy, 2024).

The Ramayana and the Tradition of the Third Gender

The Ramayana tradition also contains narratives that have subsequently been associated with the cultural history of Hijra and third-gender communities. One widely circulated account describes Rama's departure for the forest and his instruction to the men and women of Ayodhya to return home. According to the later popular tradition, individuals who did not identify exclusively as men or women remained behind because Rama's instruction did not explicitly include them

(Reddy, 2005; Nanda, 1999).

When Rama returned after fourteen years, these devotees were said to have remained faithful to him. Moved by their devotion, Rama granted them a blessing associated with auspicious occasions, including births and marriages. This narrative has been invoked within Hijra cultural traditions to explain their association with *badai*, the ceremonial practice of offering blessings on significant social occasions (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005).

Divine Androgyny: Ardhanarisvara

Beyond narrative transformations and human characters, Indian religious traditions also contain theological representations that transcend conventional gender binaries. The most prominent example is *Ardhanarisvara*, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati represented as a single

divine body, conventionally divided into masculine and feminine halves (Kramrisch, 1981, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.).

Ardhanarisvara should not be reduced to a modern representation of transgender identity. Its primary theological significance concerns the unity and complementarity of Shiva and Shakti, and the integration of masculine and feminine principles within a single divine form.

The philosophical significance of the image can also be understood through the relationship between Shiva and Shakti, consciousness and power, or complementary principles of existence. Rather than representing a simple erasure of gender differences, *Ardhanarisvara* presents difference and unity simultaneously. The masculine and feminine are distinguished iconographically while being incorporated into a single divine whole (Kramrisch, 1981, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.).

Legal and Social Treatises (Dharmasastras)

The Dharmasastra tradition, including texts such as the *Manusmṛti* and *Naradasmṛti*, provides important insights into the classification and regulation of gender and sexual difference in ancient Indian society. Terms such as *sandha*, *kliba*, and related categories appear in different textual contexts, although their meanings do not correspond directly to the contemporary concept of "transgender." These classifications were often associated with bodily characteristics, sexual behaviour, reproductive capacity, and social status (Olivelle, 2005, McClish, 2025).

Manusmṛti connects questions of inheritance and familial rights with lineage, reproduction, and the performance of ancestral obligations. Certain categories of persons perceived as unable to fulfill conventional reproductive roles could therefore face restrictions concerning inheritance. Along this, normative provisions concerning familial responsibility indicate that such individuals were not necessarily excluded from the broader social

structure. This reveals an important tension between recognition and regulation, in which social visibility could coexist with legal or familial restrictions (Manusmṛti, 9.201–203, Olivelle, 2005).

The Dharmasāstras should therefore be understood primarily as normative texts rather than straightforward descriptions of everyday social practice. Their treatment of gender difference demonstrates how ancient legal thought sought to organize social relations through categories of sex, family, reproduction, and dharma (Olivelle 2005; McClish, 2025).

Medical Treatises (Ayurveda)

The classical Ayurvedic medical texts, particularly the Caraka Saṃhita and Susruta Saṃhita, provide another important perspective on bodily and sexual diversity in ancient India. As contrast the Dharmasāstras, which primarily approached such differences through social and legal categories, Ayurvedic texts examined them largely through embryology, reproductive processes, bodily characteristics, and sexual behaviour. Their discussions indicate that variations in sex and sexual characteristics were recognized within broader theories of conception and fetal development (Caraka Saṃhita, Sarirasthana, 2.17, Zimmermann, 1987).

Caraka Saṃhita

The Caraka Saṃhita, particularly its Sarirasthana, discusses different forms of sexual and bodily variation in the context of conception and prenatal development. It uses terms such as *napumsaka*, *kliba*, *vakri*, *irsyabhirati*, and *sandha* to describe different conditions relating to reproductive capacity, genital characteristics, sexual behaviour, or bodily development. For example, Caraka Saṃhita 4.2.17 explicitly asks about the origins of several such conditions, indicating that these variations formed part of its medical classification of human development (Caraka Saṃhita, Sarirasthana, 2.17, Zimmermann, 1987).

The text also connects some of these conditions with *sukra*, parental factors, and the Ayurvedic concept of *dosas*, while certain passages relate their occurrence to *karma*. These explanations should be understood within the medical and cosmological framework of classical Ayurveda, rather than interpreted through contemporary biological science. Thus, the significance of the Caraka Saṃhita lies not in providing a modern theory of gender identity, but in demonstrating that bodily and sexual variations were explicitly incorporated into its account of human formation (Caraka Saṃhita, Sarirasthana, 2.17; Zimmermann, 1987).

Susruta Saṃhita

The Susruta Saṃhita further explores variations in sexual characteristics within its treatment of conception and fetal development. Its discussion *sandha* includes different bodily and behavioural configurations, including cases in which individuals exhibit characteristics conventionally associated with another sex. The text also discusses the formation of *napumsaka* and related categories in connection with theories concerning *sukra* and *sonita/artava* at

conception (Susruta Saṃhita, Sarirasthana, 3.42–45, Zimmermann, 1987).

These classifications indicate that Ayurvedic literature possessed a vocabulary for describing forms of bodily, sexual, and behavioural variation. However, it would be historically inaccurate to equate *napumsaka*, *sandha*, or *tritiya prakṛti* directly with the contemporary category of “transgender.” Rather, these were historically specific medical and cultural categories that combined ideas of anatomy, reproduction, sexuality, behaviour, and cosmology (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000; Goldman, 2025).

Considered together, the Caraka Saṃhita and Susruta Saṃhita reveal that ancient Indian medical thought did not assume a completely uniform biological model of male and female bodies. Their classification of diverse bodily and sexual conditions provides an important historical basis for examining how gender and sexual variation were conceptualized within the knowledge systems of ancient India. At the same time, these texts reflect the conceptual limitations and normative assumptions of their own period and should therefore be interpreted within their historical context rather than retrospectively mapped onto modern gender categories (Zimmermann, 1987; Vanita & Kidwai, 2000).

Erotic and Domestic Treatises: Kamasutra

Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra provides a different perspective on gender and sexuality by discussing *tritiya prakṛti*, or “third nature,” within its broader treatment of sexual behaviour and social relationships. The text refers to individuals whose gendered disposition and sexual practices did not conform to conventional male–female expectations (Vatsyayana, Kamasutra, 2.9.1–36; Doniger, 2011).

The Kamasutra is particularly relevant in this context because it discusses not only sexual practices but also the social roles and occupations associated with persons identified with *tritiya prakṛti* references to service, performance, grooming, massage, and intimate relationships indicate that such individuals occupied visible positions within certain social contexts (Vatsyayana, Kamasutra, 2.9.1–36; Doniger, 2011).

Nevertheless, *tritiya prakrti* should not be treated as an exact equivalent of the modern category of transgender identity. Rather, it represents a historically specific conceptual framework through which ancient Indian society understood forms of sexual and gender diversity (Doniger, 2011; Vanita & Kidwai, 2000).

Considered together, the Dharmasastras and the Kamasutra demonstrate that gender and sexual diversity were addressed through different intellectual frameworks—legal regulation, social classification, sexuality, and interpersonal relations. Their evidence points neither to complete inclusion nor complete exclusion, but to a complex historical relationship between recognition, regulation, and social marginalization (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000; Doniger, 2011).

Deities and Sacred Androgyny

Ardhanarisvara: The composite iconographic representation of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati as a single body divided down the middle. Ardhanarisvara symbolizes the non-duality (Advaita) of existence, demonstrating that cosmic power (Shakti) and consciousness (Purusa) are inherently integrated beyond strict binary limits (Goldberg, 2002; Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Historical Shift: Colonial Criminalization

Despite the extensive textual and mythological presence of gender fluidity, the social standing of third-gender communities underwent a sharp decline during the British colonial period (Reddy, 2005; Hinchy, 2019).

Victorian Moral Codes: The Victorian moral framework introduced by British legal scholars rejected non-binary gender concepts, viewing gender variance through the lens of pathology, criminality, and moral deviance (Hinchy, 2019; Reddy, 2005).

Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871: Part II of the CTA specifically targeted Hijras and cross-dressing individuals, labeling them as “systematic sodomites” and criminalizing their public appearances, customs, and property inheritance rights (Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, Part II, 24–31; Hinchy, 2019).

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860): Modeled on English Buggery Laws, Section 377 criminalized “unnatural offenses,” effectively delegitimizing same-sex intimacy and transgender expressions for over a century (Indian Penal Code, 1860, § 377; Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, 2018)

This colonial legal architecture institutionalized severe systemic stigma, stripping transgender communities of their historical socio-cultural status and reducing them to economic marginalization (Hinchy, 2019; Reddy, 2005).

Contemporary Gender Discourse and Legal Reclamation

The contemporary discourse on transgender rights in India represents a significant transformation in the legal and constitutional treatment of gender diversity. Ancient Indian textual traditions contain diverse references to categories such as *tritiya prakrti*, *napumsaka*, and *sandha*, although their meanings varied considerably across texts and historical periods. These categories demonstrate that gender and sexual variance had a place within pre-modern Indian social and intellectual frameworks; however, they should not be understood as direct equivalents of the contemporary category of transgender identity (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000; Nanda, 1999).

The colonial period introduced a substantially different legal framework. The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, for example, contained specific provisions for the registration and surveillance of persons classified as “eunuchs.” The Act empowered authorities to maintain registers of such persons and reflected a distinctly regulatory and criminalising approach toward gender-nonconforming communities. Colonial criminal law, including Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, further institutionalised the regulation of non-normative sexual conduct (Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, 24–31; Indian Penal Code, 1860, § 377; Hinchy, 2019).

The post-2014 period marks an important constitutional shift. In *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court recognised transgender persons as a distinct gender category and connected gender identity with constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21. The Court emphasised principles including self-identification, dignity, privacy, autonomy, and freedom of gender expression (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 2014).

This jurisprudential development was followed by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, which provides statutory recognition and prohibits discrimination in areas including education, employment, healthcare, access to services, and public establishments. The Act also contains provisions concerning recognition of transgender identity, residence, welfare measures, healthcare, education, and employment (Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, 3–17).

Thus, the historical trajectory may be understood as a movement from textual recognition colonial regulation and criminalisation constitutional recognition, statutory protection. The contemporary legal framework therefore represents not simply a return to ancient categories, but a legal reclamation of gender diversity through modern principles of equality, dignity, autonomy, and fundamental rights (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 2014; Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019).

The NALSA Judgment (2014)

In the landmark case *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court of India formally recognized transgender individuals as a distinct “third gender.” Crucially, the bench drew upon ancient Indian philosophy, epics, and traditional concepts of *tritiya prakrti* to establish that non-binary gender identities are deeply rooted in Indian cultural heritage (*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*, 2014).

The Court affirmed: Right to Self-Determination: Individuals have the constitutional right to self-identify their gender identity without requiring medical or surgical interventions (*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*, 2014).

Fundamental Rights: Transgender citizens are fully protected under Articles 14 (Equality before Law), 15 (Non-discrimination), 19 (Freedom of Expression), and 21 (Right to Life and Dignity) of the Indian Constitution (*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*, 2014). (Indian Kanoon)

Decriminalization of Section 377 (2018)

In *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court struck down the penalization of consensual same-sex relations under Section 377, explicitly citing the necessity of constitutional morality over conventional social morality and acknowledging the historical injustice inflicted upon sexual and gender minorities (*Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of transgender identity in India presents an instructive case study in how ancient textual traditions can inform modern human rights frameworks. Ancient Indian literature spanning epic mythology, legal codes, and medical treatises, —demonstrates that gender variance was recognized as an intrinsic feature of human diversity (*tritiyā prakrti*). While colonial interventions disrupted these indigenous frameworks by imposing strict binary criminalization, contemporary jurisprudence has successfully engaged with both constitutional principles and ancient cultural heritage to restore legal dignity to transgender citizens. Achieving full socio-economic equality requires continuing this synthesis of historic cultural validation and modern rights-based activism.

The study also emphasizes that ancient categories should not be treated as direct equivalents of contemporary transgender identities, but should be understood within their specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. The analysis further suggests that legal recognition alone is insufficient to ensure substantive equality, as barriers in education, employment, healthcare, and social acceptance continue to shape the lived experiences of transgender persons. A meaningful transformation therefore requires not only constitutional and legal protection but also greater social inclusion, institutional sensitivity, and recognition of diverse gender identities. Ultimately, engaging critically with India's historical traditions can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of gender while strengthening contemporary commitments to dignity, equality, and human rights.

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