



Gender Inclusivity Of LGBTQIA+ Community In Hinduism

Neha Gangwani

Abstract

This research paper will discuss the meaning of terms like Gender and Inclusivity, it will also understand the basic philosophy of Hinduism and will try to understand the concept of Gender Inclusivity in relation with LGBTQIA+, the research paper aims at understanding how gender inclusivity in specifically LGBTQIA+ community has been practised since ancient times in Hinduism. The researcher will mainly focus on how LGBTQIA+ community has been included in Hindu text since centuries, this paper will mainly use text of Mahabharata and some other Hinduism references. The aim of this research paper is to shed light and understanding that gender inclusivity has always been present in India and it can be used as an example to promote gender inclusivity in today's times.

Keywords: *Gender, LGBTQIA+, Queer theory, Gender Performativity, Gender Inclusivity, Hinduism*

Introduction

Man is a social animal that lives in society and gets involves with other beings. We humans live in families and are tied up with societal norms where we enjoy inclusivity with others, however LGBTQIA+ community is being struggling for this inclusivity since decades, many literary works are finally coming into light; namely novels like *MiddleSex* by *Jeffrey Eugenides* , *Annabelle* by *Kathleen Winter*, *If I was your girl* by *Meredith Russo*, etc. Not only novels but various Indian autobiographies like *Me Hijra Me Lakshmi*, by *Laxminarayan Tripathi*, *Truth about me, The: A Hijra Life Story* by *Revathi A*, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by *Living Smile Vidya*, *A Gift of God Lakshmi* by *Manobi Bandhopadhyay* and *From Manjunath to Manjamma* by *B. Manjamma Jogathi* are also published. These books discuss how gender inclusivity is still a foreign feeling for LGBTQIA+

community and in order to understand the concept better of Gender Inclusivity let us see meaning of word Gender and Inclusivity separately.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender identity is not confined to a binary (girl/woman, boy/man) nor is it static; it exists along a continuum and can change over timeinstitutionalized in society.

Inclusivity

The fact of including all types of people, things or ideas and treating them all fairly and equally.

Gender inclusivity

Gender inclusion is a concept that transcends mere equality. It's the notion that all services, opportunities, and establishments are open to all people and that male and female stereotypes do not definePromoting gender inclusion through the creation of demonstrative examples of the concept in action is of the utmost importance as we strive toward this goal.

From the above definitions we can understand that gender means the societal structures that are constructed by society and gender is not binary it changes over time; inclusivity means treating everyone fairly and equally whereas the term gender inclusivity is not only limited to equality but it is a notion that all services opportunities and establishments are open to all people irrespective of their gender.

Queer Theory

LGBTQIA+ term comes under an umbrella term Queer. The word Queer itself means strange, any strange behaviour is termed as queer. In 1920's Queer Studies came into light when many gay relationships were established. In 1990's, Queer theory was born from Queer Studies which focused on studying texts from Non Binary or Non-Heterosexual point of view. This take of reading and understanding of texts had profounding effects in the fields of Philosophy and Literature. When we talk about queer theory it aims studying and theorizing gender that does not comes under the category of Men and Women i.e. Binary Studies. It aims at studying the genders that are out of Heterosexuality such as *Gay, Lesbian*, etc. LGBTQIA+ stands for *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexuals, Queer, Intersex, Asexual*, and more. Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* spoke about how power and sexuality are related in societal structure. He located how certain sexualities were constructed unnatural and deviant, this provided first

basic structure for queer theory. Judith Butler one of the most important name in gender studies in her book *Gender Trouble* published in 1990 explains how gender is not something natural rather it is constructed

.....because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.

In the above definition it is clear that society plays an important role in structuring the norms of particular gender and it's performativity, with respect to this we can say that if the society is inclusive of all genders it creates environment of safety, security and inclusivity which can be witnessed in Hinduism.

Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world and it's religious texts like The *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Bhagwad Gita* has always been advanced for its age. These texts have surpassed the understanding of various concepts that science even today cannot understand. In an article printed in newspaper Times of India dated Oct 15, 2021 by Pankaj Jagannath Jayswal wrote:

Advances in science and technology are the main reason for the growth of human civilization. India has been contributing in the field of science and technology since ancient times. Even today what we call "traditional knowledge" is actually based on scientific reasoning.

When we delve deeper into Hinduism we understand that this religion has many diversities and is primarily practised in Asia from 1000's of years. It is a Polytheist religion and there are many sects of Hinduism.

Hinduism, also known as Sanatana Dharma, is the world's oldest living religion. It is a natural religion, meaning its philosophies and practices are considered universally accessible through sincere study, reason, and experience apart from special revelation. Hinduism is also an indigenous religion made up of a diverse family of philosophies and traditions that have been practiced primarily throughout Asia for thousands of years.

Hinduism also advances the concept of the equal worth of all mankind, as expressed in the ancient hymns *Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya*. "No one is

superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity.”

In various Hindu texts many queer friendly stories are present. In the *Mahabharata*, an epic of ancient India written by *Vyasa* narrates story of *Kurukshetra* war between two groups of princely cousins, Kauravas and Pandavas. The epic has various characters and some of these characters fall under LGBTQIA+ community like *Shikhandi*, *Brihannala*, *Mandhata*, *Bhangashvana*, *Mohini*, etc. Some Hindu Gods and Goddess like *Shiva's Ardhnareshvara Form*, *Vishnu's Mohini Avatar*, *Krishna's Mohini Avatar*, *Bahuchara Mata*, worshipped by Transgender people in India, *Agni*, *Bhagvati devi*, *Gopeshwara*, etc.

Gender Fluidity in Hinduism

Shikhandi was a character from *Mahabharata* who was a woman and becomes man later in life. *Arjun* a very important character of *Mahabharata* who was cursed to become Transgender for one year to show restraint and his name was changed to *Brihannala* for that duration. The female form of Lord Vishnu *Mohini* can be repeatedly seen in various texts of Hinduism, one such story from *Mahabharata* is that of a sacrifice which was to be made of a strong warrior and son of *Arjun, Aravan* was the one who was to be sacrificed but he wanted to get married before getting sacrificed and since no women wanted to get married and live life of a widow, *Krishna* took *Mohini* avatar and married him. On the day of sacrifice *Krishna* in his avatar wept like a wife, wallowing, losing her husband. Even today every year a festival is celebrated known as *Koovagam* in Tamil Nadu where all transgenders gather and act as wives of *Aravan* and on the day of festival they cry like widows. In many parts of South India transgender community is known as *Aravanis*. *Devdutt Pattnaik* in his book *Shikhandi and other queer tales* mentions many such stories. One such story reported in *Times of India* dated 31st March 2023 is of *Chamayamvilakku* festival in Kerala where men dress as women and carry the divine *Chamayavilakku* (traditional lamp) and walk around the temple as a symbol of their devotion. This festival is one of the festivals where transgenders can celebrate their identity.

Chamayamvilakku festival that happens every year at the *Kottankulangara Sree Devi Temple* at *Chavara* in Kerala's *Kollam*? It's a festival where men shave off their moustaches, wear sarees, get decked up with jewellery and elaborate make-up to take part in this unique festival..... The men hold the divine *Chamayavilakku* (traditional lamp) and walk around the temple as a symbol of their devotion to the presiding deity, and pray to get their wishes

fulfilled.....If reports are to go by, this festival has also turned out to be the largest congregation of the transgender community in Kerala as it offers them a space to celebrate their identity.

.....*Lord Shiva* took form of a milkmaid so that he can dance around *Krishna* in the paradise of cows (gau-loka) is also worshipped today as the milkmaid God or *Gopeshwar Mahadev* in Mathura.....*Bhagashavana* lives part of his or her life as a man, husband and father and the rest as woman, wife and mother.*Yuvanashva*, who drinks a magic potion, becomes pregnant and delivers a son from his thigh..... ‘*Purush napunsaka nari va jiva charachara koi, sarva bhaav bhaja kapat taji mohi param priya soi.*’ (‘Men, queers, women, animals or plants who approach me after abandoning malice are beloved to me.’) Here, *Lord Ram* is making himself accessible to all living beings, even the queer (napunsaka).....All of these descriptions of inherent fluidity and diversity in physical bodies demonstrate the remarkable comfort with the queer found among the Hindu gods and narrated in their mythologies.

Conclusion

These stories show how Hinduism has always been supportive of gender Fluidity and has accepted Non Binary views of Gender and have celebrated it as well.

The eclectic nature of Hinduism’s historical attitude towards non-heterosexuality – where context and interpretation are vital components – thus provide rich resources for contemporary disputes and plausibly more so than any other major religious tradition.

The Indian religion seems very flexible with non-heterosexuality or queerness, as it has been openly discussed in the various sacred texts. The references can be found in the Veda, Purana, Dharma- Shastra, Kama-shastra, Natya-shastra, and so on.....This study has used the mythical literature that makes us remember that the world is not only privileged to males and females but also the third Prakriti

.....The queerness has a home in nature.

The abuse faced by queer community has been increasing day by day. The above examples must be taught, discussed and included in Academics to create Gender Sensitization and this will create an acceptance of Gender Fluidity which will ultimately lead to Gender Inclusivity.

Works Cited

1. Government of Canada, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institutes, Institute of Gender and Health,. *What Is Gender? What Is Sex? - CIHR*. 8 May 2023, cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48642.html.
2. *Inclusivity*. 27 Dec. 2023, dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/inclusivity#google_vignette.
3. “Definitive Guide to All-Gender Inclusion | Maryville Online.” *Maryville University Online*, 11 Oct. 2023, online.maryville.edu/online-bachelors-degrees/liberal-studies/guide-to-gender-inclusion.
4. “Vedic Knowledge Compatible With Modern Science.” *Times of India Blog*, 15 Oct. 2021, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/youth2020/vedic-knowledge-compatible-with-modern-science-38284.
5. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory : From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Uttar Pradesh, India Pearson India Education Services Pvt Ltd, 2017.
6. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, Routledge, 1990.
7. Pattanaik, Devdutt, and Jerry Johnson. *I Am Divine, so Are You : How Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism Affirm the Dignity of Queer Identities and Sexualities*. Uttar Pradesh, India, HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.
8. Devdutt Pattanaik. *Shikhandi*. Penguin UK, 20 July 2014.
9. “Hinduism Basics - Hindu American Foundation.” *Hindu American Foundation*, 14 Nov. 2023, www.hinduamerican.org/hinduism-basics.
10. Amar Chitra Katha. “Shikhandi: The Reincarnation of Amba - Amar Chitra Katha.” *Amar Chitra Katha*, 27 Dec. 2022, www.amarchitrakatha.com/mythologies/shikhandi-the-reincarnation-of-amba.
11. Rajendran, Abhilash. “Story of Brihannala – the Eunuch Form of Arjuna in Mahabharata.” *Hindu Blog*, 21 Aug. 2014, www.hindu-blog.com/2014/08/story-of-brihannala-eunuch-form-arjuna.html?m=1#google_vignette.

12. scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=6023947628910080178&hl=en&as_sdt=2005&scioldt=0,5#d=gs_qabs&t=1703532882531&u=%23p%3DsvC9xnNcmVMJ%20taylorfrancis.com.
13. scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=6023947628910080178&as_sdt=2005&scioldt=0,5&hl=en#d=gs_qabs&t=1703532796918&u=%23p%3DCmBpEHaGSRoJ.
14. scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=queer+themes+in+hinduism&oq=queer+themes+in+hindui#d=gs_qabs&t=1703532994845&u=%23p%3DeJCNEqdVtd0J.
15. Times of India. "Chamayavilakku Festival, a Unique Festival Celebrated in Kerala, Where Men Dress up as Women." *Times of India Travel*, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/destinations/chamayavilakku-festival-a-unique-festival-celebrated-in-kerala-where-men-dress-up-as-women/articleshow/99117448.cms.

