

The Many Genders of Old India

GOPI SHANKAR

TRADITIONAL INDIAN CULTURE is replete with legends and mythologies where heroes and heroines have chosen various genders without guilt, and their choices have been accepted and respected by the community. Ironically, today the Western nations are progressive in research and education about variant expressions of gender and sexuality, while in India—despite our rich cultural heritage of representing and celebrating gender variations and choices—we are lagging behind the West, having lost that sensibility of old India. It is due to the colonial legacy of English rule and its shallow Victorian values that we have come to see gender variation as deviant and even criminal.

“Gender” is related to physical and emotional perception of an individual. Restricting gender to non-intersecting binary categories of female and male is erroneous as a factual matter. In traditional India, there are more than twenty terms corresponding to separate gender categories. This diversity in turn gives rise to a wide variety of what we would call sexual orientations. Here the focus will be on gender variants rather than on homosexuality as such.

While students of medicine, engineering, law, and literature specialize in their many subdisciplines, we lack the basic tools with which to study the biological, bio-ethical, legal, psychological, and social dimensions of the fundamental emotions concerning sexuality and gender. Though the Indian universities can offer studies in a range of synthetic disciplines that are recognized worldwide, we lack any basic, axiomatic framework pertaining to gender and sexuality. In contrast, some universities in the West *have* started their own departments of gender and sexuality and even sponsored related research activities. In India, the most painful condition is that even psychologists are mostly unaware of gender variants and their localized issues pertaining to Indian conditions.

India’s pre-colonial traditions—and even some localized folk traditions that survive to this day—adopted a surprisingly inclusive attitude toward sex and sex education, one that contradicts those who try to map Indian culture onto the still dominant, male-centered Victorian value system. Various folk deities and traditions emphasize the fluid nature of gender, and mythologies have stories that reinforce this idea. Children growing up in such an environment will not elicit shock or experience guilty feelings upon discovering their own gender-variant sexuality or that of other people. The Koothandavar temple festival in Tamil Nadu is an example of a local folk tradition that’s organically linked to pan-Indian culture’s conceptualization of gender variants.

Gopi Shankar, a student of religion, philosophy, and sociology at the American College in Madurai, India, is the founder of Srishti Madurai, a space that explores genderqueer culture in India and globally.

These cultural possibilities need to be taken up and explored to create democratic social space for gender minorities. Stories from traditional Indian culture provide a ready and comprehensive solution to the challenge of inculcating a social awareness of gender variation starting from grade school days and progressing into the high school curriculum with a biology and psychology of gender issues over the whole spectrum of human variation. At the college level, teachers should be trained to initiate healthy debates and open-minded discussions on these issues. The reality is that this social responsibility has been neglected by both government and social organizations for decades, even after independence. Our social and political institutions still suffer from gender bias and the colonial mindset of the Victorian era.

One issue that needs to be addressed is terminology. Typically the terms sex, gender, and sexuality are taken to mean roughly the same thing. But they all mean different things. One’s sex (e.g., male or female) is a biological feature, while gender is a socio-cultural role that shapes social perception as well as self-identity. Sexuality refers to one’s erotic attraction toward a particular category of person.

In its long history, Indian culture has recognized a large number of genders, though the existence of this vocabulary is largely unknown, even within the GLBT community. Some forms of gender don’t even have a proper English equivalent in the Tamil dictionary, and I have coined terms in both Tamil and English for a few traditional words. In the following compilation there are more than two dozen genders other than male and female.

BASIC VOCABULARY:

- திரௌநர் — Transgender
- திரௌநங்கை — Trans-women
- திரௌநம்பி — Trans-men
- பால்புதுமையர் — Genderqueer

SPECIALIZED GENDER CATEGORIES:

1. பால்நடௌநர் — Androgyny
2. மௌமுநர் — pan-gender
3. இரௌநர் — Bi-gender
4. திரௌநர் — Tri-gender
5. பாலிலி — A-gender
6. திரௌநடௌநர் — Neutrois (see below)
7. மறௌமாறிகள — Retransitioners
8. தௌ:ஂறறபாலினத்தவர் — Appearance gendered
9. மௌரணதிரௌநர் — Transbinary
10. பிறறபால்உடயணியும்திரௌநர் — Transcrossdressers