

UNDERSTANDING TRANSGENDERISM THROUGH AYURVEDA – A PARADIGM SHIFT

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ABSTRACT

Transgender can refer to any individual whose gender identity differs in some way from their birth or biological sex. A significant step in the modern conception of transgenderism was the separation of gender as a social construct from biological sex as a given at birth. Despite India showing progress in various medical, economic, and social fronts, the care of the transgender individual is still encumbered by the various biases and taboos that people hold. But this was not true in antiquity. Unlike the present era, Hindu mythology has always shown us many examples of transgender individuals thereby proving that they were also a part of our society. It is only in recent times that they have been at least given the necessary social security and an ability to integrate into the community. Furthermore, these individuals are subjected to stigma and biases that make them prone to both medical, as well as mental health issues. Ayurvedic science has a detailed explanation regarding the third gender called *Napumsaka*. Having learnt about the causes of *Napumsaka* in our science, it is our duty to ensure the production of healthy *Beeja* for developing a healthy upcoming generation.

Keywords: Transgenderism, transgender, Ayurveda, *Napumsaka*.

INTRODUCTION

Sex is a biological category, whereas gender refers to the set of traits and behaviours that are traditionally associated with a particular sex. Transgender is a term self-applied by persons whose gender identity varies from that traditionally associated with their apparent biological sex at birth. In its broader sense, transgender is closely related to the more recent term genderqueer, which refers to a person who is either transgender, a third (neither male nor female) gender, or a fluctuating gender. A person who is transgender experiences and expresses a disjunction between sex and gender¹. Sexual orientation, in contrast, is defined in terms of the sexes or genders to which a person is sexually, emotionally, or romantically attracted.

Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages in the world and is known to use three genders: Masculine, feminine, and gender neutral. The concept of “*Napumsaka*” had been an integral part of Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic and *Puranic* literature. The concept of *Ardhanareeshwara* is also one of the important contributions from our culture showing the presence and importance of equality of all genders in our society. Other beautiful examples like Shikhandi, Brihannala have also been mentioned in our epics.

Mythological References

Many deities in Hinduism and Indian epics are represented as both male and female at different times and in different incarnations or may manifest with characteristics of both genders at once. The most popular reference of transgender in our ancient texts is the *Ardhanareeshwara*. It is a combination of three words “*Ardha*,” “*Nari*,” and “*Ishwara*” means “half,” “woman,” and “lord,” respectively, which when combined means the lord whose half is a woman. It is believed that the God is Lord Shiva, and the woman part is his consort Goddess Shakti. It conveys the inevitable unity of opposites in the universe like construction and destruction, darkness and light, day and night, etc. It illustrates how Shakti (the female principle of God), is inseparable from Shiva, (the male principle of God), and vice versa. It also

signifies the coexistence and interdependence of the *Prakriti* and *Purusha* in this world.

There are different versions of the story of *Ardhanareeshwara*. The one mentioned in *Shiva Purana* is the most popular. Once the Gods and sages had gathered at Shiva’s abode, and they paid their respects to Shiva and Parvathi. However, the sage Bhringi had vowed to only Shiva and ignored Parvathi while worshipping and circumambulating him. Agitated, Parvathi cursed Bhringi to lose all his flesh and blood, reducing him to a skeleton. In this form Bhringi could not stand erect, so the compassionate ones who witnessed the scene blessed the sage with a third leg for support. As her attempt to humiliate the sage had failed, Parvathi punished herself with austerities that pleased Shiva and led him to grant her the boon of uniting with him, thereby compelling Bhringi to worship her as well as himself in the form of *Ardhanareeshwara*. However, the sage assumed the form of a beetle and circumambulated only Shiva. Amazed by his devotion, Parvathi reconciled with the sage and blessed him².

Arjuna also had a similar encounter when he was cursed, by the celestial dancer Urvashi for rejecting her sexual advances, to become a third gender. Hence, he took the form of Brihannala and served as a dance teacher for princess Utthara in Virata kingdom for one year¹. This also became a blessing in disguise for Arjuna during his period of exile.

The next example is the story of the very famous Shikhandi from Mahabharata. He was originally born as a girl named ‘Shikhandini’ to King Drupada. In the previous life, Shikhandini was a woman named Amba, who was rendered unmarriageable by Bhishma. Humiliated, Amba undertook great austerities, and the gods granted her wish to be the cause of Bhishma’s death. Thus, Amba was then reborn as Shikhandini and was brought up as Shikhandi (prepared herself for the warfare like a man), confronted and defeated Bhishma during the Kurukshetra war³.

In Mahabharata, Aravan the son of Arjuna and Ulupi (a snake princess) was offered to be killed for

Goddess Kali to ensure the victory of Pandavas in Kurukshetra war. The only condition was that Aravan should spend the last night of his life as a married man. No woman was willing and came forward to marry Aravan as he was going to be killed after the marriage. Lord Krishna took the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and married him. This is the reason why the Hijras of Tamil Nadu call themselves Aravanis named after Aravan⁴.

Jumadi, also known by its Sanskritised name *Dhumavathi*, is an androgynous deity worshipped in the Buta Kola folk tradition. The Buta Kola cult is popular among the Tuluva ethnic people in the coastal districts of Karnataka, India. *Jumadi* is considered a deity of heavenly origin who descends to the Tulu Nadu region to receive worship from the people.

Napumsaka in Ayurveda

Ayurvedic texts have a very systematic description of the concept of *Garbha Sambhava Samagri* which includes *Ritu*, *Kshetra*, *Ambu* and *Beeja*. Our Acharyas have also explained various treatment measures for males and females, to be taken before the conception because the optimum health of all these factors is very essential for conception and ultimately for a healthy offspring.

Ayurvedic classics are also rich in description of the third gender known as “*Napumsaka*” or “those who do not engage in procreation”. Acharya Sushruta had explained the formation of *Napumsaka* because of equal dominance of *Sukra* and *Arthava*. Improper position during coitus may also lead to the formation of *Napumsaka*. Acharya Vagbhata has mentioned that when a man lies below the woman and the woman delivers a male child, then he will have feminine qualities and vice versa also⁵. Similarly, while explaining the effect of days of coition on the gender of the foetus, Vagbhata mentioned that coitus on the 11th and 13th day would result in a *Napumsaka*⁶.

Similarly, the shape of the *Napumsaka* embryo was also explained like an *Arbuda* (tumour)⁵. Acharya Vagbhata had coined the term “*Kaiba*” which is a word synonymous with *Napumsaka*⁶. Our classics also had references regarding the shape of the

abdomen of the pregnant lady indicating the gender of the foetus inside. Acharya Sushruta had explained that whose both flanks are depressed, abdomen indrawn in its front and absence of features of male and female child gives birth to a eunuch child⁷. Acharya Vagbhata also explained that the woman whose abdomen is raised in the middle gives birth to a *Napumsaka* child⁸.

Acharya Charaka had mentioned that “*Purvajanmakrita paapa*” (previous life deeds) are the cause for the birth of *Napumsaka* and explained about 8 types of *Napumsaka*. They were *Dvireta*, *Pavanendriya*, *Samskaravahi*, *Narashanda*, *Naarishanda*, *Vakri*, *Irshyabhirathi*, *Vatika Shandaka*⁹. *Pavanendriya* is the absence of *Sukra* and *Samskaravahi* is the obstruction of *Sukravaha Srotas*. *Narashanda* is the congenital insufficiency of *Sukra* and the same condition in females is *Naarishanda*. *Vakri* is when a person with *Sukra Kshaya* copulates in abnormal posture without the desire of the female and *Irshyabhirathi* is scotophilia. The feature of *Dvireta* is explained as “*Sthreepumsalingi*” which indicates the presence of both male and female external genitalia¹⁰.

Acharya Sushruta had mentioned only 5 types of *Napumsaka* – *Asekya*, *Saugandhika*, *Kumbhika*, *Irshyakam*, *Shandakam*. *Asekya* is when the person obtains an erection after licking the semen as he is born deficient *Sukra*. *Saugandhika* is olfactophilia which is sexual arousal due to smell and odour. *Kumbhika* is sodomy when sexual arousal occurs through anal coitus. *Irshyakam* is voyeuristic and *Shandakam* is he who copulates with the woman, out of ritukala (fertile period) overcome by desire (sexual) and himself behaves like a woman (in copulation)¹¹.

While explaining the genetics in Ayurveda, Acharya Charaka had also mentioned two unique concepts – *Varta* and *Trinaputrikam*¹². The main characteristic feature of *Varta* is “*Asthriyam Vartam*” which means the child is born with all feminine characteristics, but still is not a complete woman and this is because of vitiated *Beejabhagaavayava* responsible for the formation of *Garbhashaya*. Similarly, *Trinaputrikam*

is where the child is born with all masculine features, but still is an incomplete man – “*Apurusham trinaputikam*” and the cause here also is vitiated *Beejabhagaavayava*.

Hermaphroditism

The concept corresponding to this in reproductive biology is hermaphroditism. The word had originated from the Latin word *Hermaphroditus* – two sexed children of *Hermes* and *Aphroditus* (*Venus* and *Mercury*) in Greek mythology. A hermaphrodite is an organism that has complete or partial reproductive organs and produces gametes normally associated with both male and female sexes. It is also referred to as intersex and is characterized by a discrepancy between the external and internal sexual and genital organs¹³.

Here it is important to understand the process of embryological gonadal development. A human being is not a pure unisexual organism. Each human organism bears the potentiality of both male and female sex. It is the predominance of one over the other sex which determines sexuality. The primitive gonad is bisexual and has two distinctive parts: the inner medulla with the potentiality of developing into testes; and the outer cortex with the potentiality of developing into ovaries. The presence of one healthy Y chromosome causes the cortex to regress and the testis develops; but if the chromosomes are both X, then the ovary develops, and the medulla is regressed. After the testes are formed, two hormones, testosterone, and Mullerian regression factor (MRF) are elaborated by them in the male fetus. The MRF causes the disappearance of the Mullerian duct (the female tube), and the testosterone retains the Wolffian system and induces the formation of the rest of the male genitalia. In the female, due to the absence of testis (and not due to any influence of ovaries), the Wolffian system disappears and the Mullerian system differentiates into the uterus and uterine tubes. Both types of hormones are secreted in both sexes. Testes secrete not only a large amount of androgen but also a small amount of estrogen. Similarly, ovaries secrete a large amount of estrogen, but in addition, they secrete a small amount of

androgen. So, masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive.

Types:

There are 4 types of hermaphroditism -

- True gonadal intersex/hermaphrodite
- Female pseudohermaphrodite
- Male pseudohermaphrodite
- Complex/ undetermined intersex.

True gonadal intersex/ hermaphrodite:

An individual with true gonadal hermaphroditism has both ovarian and testicular tissue, either in the same gonad (referred to as an ovotestis) or in one ovary and one testis. Possible gonadal combinations include an ovotestis with an ovary, bilateral ovotestes, and an ovary and a testis. Ovaries remain intra-abdominal, whereas gonads containing testicular tissue may lie within the abdomen or undergo varying degrees of descent, depending on the extent of testicular tissue in the gonad¹⁴. Some affected individuals have XX chromosomes, others have XY chromosomes, and others have a combination of both. Likewise, the external genitalia can vary in form, from male, or female, to ambiguous. This can be correlated with “*Dvireta*” explained by Acharya Charaka in our classic.

Female pseudohermaphrodite:

It presents an individual with 46XX chromosomes and the ovaries of a woman but has external genitalia that appears to be male. There are many causes of female pseudohermaphroditism. If a pregnant woman carrying a female fetus is exposed to excessive androgen during the first trimester, her fetus may be masculinized. Congenital adrenal hyperplasia is the most common cause and is an autosomal recessive disorder characterized by impaired cortisol synthesis. It results from the deficiency of enzymes required for the synthesis of cortisol in the adrenal cortex. Excessive amounts of adrenal androgens must be produced to overcome the decrease in cortisol production. In female infants, this results in masculinization with anomalous development of the genital organs. Another rare cause is aromatase deficiency which is characterized by reduced levels of estrogen and increased levels of testosterone due to

extremely low or absence of enzyme aromatase¹⁵. All these features are like “*Varta*” mentioned by Acharya Charaka.

Male pseudohermaphrodite:

Here an individual presents with 46XY chromosomes, but the external genitalia is either not completely formed, or resemble those of females. These individuals have testes, but their genital ducts and external genitalia are female. Secondary sex characteristics may never appear in some, whereas others may achieve a fully feminized appearance. The causes may be gonadal dysgenesis in embryonic development, inborn errors of biosynthesis of testosterone, androgen target cell abnormalities. Gonadal dysgenesis is the atypical development of the gonads in an embryo, with reproductive tissue replaced with functionless, fibrous tissue, termed streak gonads. Inadequate levels of testosterone and Anti-Müllerian hormone disrupts the development of Wolffian ducts and internal genitalia. The lack of male associated steroid hormones drives Müllerian duct development and promotes the development of female genitalia. Inborn errors of testosterone biosynthesis include 5-alpha-reductase deficiency which is the enzyme responsible for the conversion of testosterone to dihydrotestosterone, and thus there is abnormal masculinization of the external genitalia. Androgen target cell abnormality like androgen insensitivity syndrome also leads to ambiguous genitalia because of the inability of the cells to respond to the androgens¹⁶. All the characteristics of this type are like “*Trinapatrikam*” explained above.

Complex/undetermined intersex:

Complex hermaphroditism involves other disorders of sexual development including 45XO, 47XXY, 47XXX (either absence of X chromosome or presence of an extra X or Y chromosome). Here, the individual shows abnormal levels of sex hormones and incomplete sexual development. Chromosomal abnormalities like Klinefelter’s syndrome and Turner’s syndrome are included under this category.

Gender Dysphoria

All these types of hermaphroditism are exhibited due to a particular pathological reason. But there is

another category called gender dysphoria where there is no specific pathology involved. Gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder are those disorders in which an individual exhibits marked and persistent identification with the opposite sex and persistent discomfort (dysphoria) with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. This conflict between how society regards the person and how they feel physically and mentally can cause severe distress, anxiety, and depression. Gender dysphoria is of 3 types:

- Transsexualism
- Dual role transvestism
- Homosexuality

Transsexualism

Transsexual people experience a gender identity that is inconsistent with their assigned sex and desire for a permanent transition to the sex or gender with which they identify. They usually seek medical assistance to help them align their body with their identified sex or gender. Hence, they undergo sex reassignment surgery procedures like vaginoplasty, feminizing augmentation mammoplasty, phalloplasty, chest masculinization surgery, etc. There are enough examples of transsexuals who have achieved great positions in our society.

Dual role transvestism

It is characterized by wearing clothes of the opposite sex to enjoy the temporary experience of membership of the opposite sex. They do not have the desire for permanent sex change. This is different from transvestic fetishism where there is an excessive sexual or erotic interest in cross-dressing. Here, therapies like psychoanalytic psychotherapy are found useful.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is sexual behavior between members of the same sex or gender. They are of 2 types- male homosexuals and female homosexuals. The most common adjectives for homosexual people are lesbian for females and gay for males. The LGBT community is a loosely defined grouping of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBT organizations, and subcultures, united by a common culture and social

movements. The World Health Organization's ICD-9 (1977) (International Classification of Diseases) listed homosexuality as a mental illness whereas later it was removed from the ICD-10 in 1990¹⁷.

DISCUSSION

Throughout Vedic literature, the sex or gender of the human being is divided into three categories: *Pum* or male, *Stri* or female, and *Tritiya Linga* or the third gender. These three genders are not determined by the physical characteristics alone, but rather by an assessment of the entire being which includes the gross (physical) body, the subtle (psychological) mind and a unique consideration based upon the social interaction (procreative status).

In Hinduism, there are no accidents or errors, and everything in nature has a purpose, role, and reason for existence. According to Vedic literature children, the elderly, impotent, celibate and the third gender were all considered to be sexually neutral and were protected and believed to bring good luck.

According to Kamasutra, *Tritiya Linga* is classified into two types, based on their feminine or masculine appearance. These are known as *Kliba* or gay males and *Svairini* or lesbians. Each of these categories is then divided into two, depending upon whether their behavior is feminine or masculine. Gay men with feminine qualities are the most recognizable members of the third sex as they dress up as females. The masculine gay male is not as easily recognizable and would often blend into ordinary society, living either independently or within marriage to another man. The Sanskrit word *Svairini* refers to an independent or liberated woman who has refused a husband, earns her livelihood, and lives either alone or in marriage with another woman¹⁸. The example of Arjuna as Brihannala can be considered under this category. It is the same behavior found in the Kamasutra describing male to female transgenders who dressed up and lived as women.

The episode of Shikhandi in Mahabharata can be considered as a female pseudohermaphroditism wherein she was born as a female and as she grew up, she developed male characteristics and the triggering

factor was the boon that she had obtained in her previous life. It can also be considered under the category of “*Varta*” explained by Charaka.

Most of the types of *Napumsaka* mentioned by Acharya Sushruta mainly refer to various types of male sexual perversions whereas types explained by Acharya Charaka include sexual dysfunctions including male infertility. In terms of anatomical defects, *Dvireta* alone stands out with the presence of ambiguous genitalia. Similarly, *Varta* and *Trinaputrika* have been explained to have defects at the genetic level like the causes found in male and female pseudohermaphroditism.

One of the possible causes for the growth in the number of transgenders in today's scenario is the increased intake of hormone-injected foods like fruits, meat and dairy products. The concept of preparing a *Shuddha Shukra* and *Artava* before conception mentioned in our science becomes very relevant in this context. Our Acharyas have explained various *Sodhana* and *Samana Aushadhis* for *Shuddha Shukra* and *Artava*, the proper time for copulation and different measures to be taken care of during the pregnancy period. All these factors work collectively to produce a healthy progeny.

Some of the common problems faced by all transgenders are very well known to everyone. The most important one is inequality in all walks of their life right from education to employment, healthcare, etc and thus forcing them to enter prostitution for a livelihood. The next common issue is sexual abuse faced and the injustice towards them from the judicial system as well. Then comes the rejection of entry into some public places like temples, mosques, theatres, etc and they are also forced to leave their parental house at a very early age again leading to all aforesaid problems.

Though our judicial system was late to bring about a change in transgender's life, finally in 2014 they were publically recognized as the third gender. Followed by that, in 2018 the Supreme Court decriminalized the relationship between the same sexes. And in 2020, Supreme Court implemented the Transgender Protection Act to protect them against

discrimination in education, employment and healthcare.

CONCLUSION

Ancient Hindu scriptures and Ayurveda have a plethora of references about the broader third-gender category. Despite recent attitudes of taboo towards transgenders in India, traditional Hinduism was demonstrably far more understanding and liberal in its approach. This oppressed category played an integral role in the balance of both human society and nature, like how asexual bees play out their particular roles in the operation of a hive. Hence, it is important to consider, respect and empower them in today's world. Besides this, Ayurveda has always given importance to *Shukra* and *Shonita Suddhi*, to make sure that a healthy *Beeja* is taking part in the process of fertilization, thereby ensuring a healthy progeny. A country's development is based on the health of its young generation. Hence, as Ayurveda Vaidyas, it is our duty to provide optimum benefit to the upcoming generation through our system.

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