

Third Natures: How are Transgender Identities Expressed in South India?

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Introduction

In January 2016, I had the opportunity to go to India with a group of fellow students. While we were there, we researched a topic of our choice. During an overnight train trip, I saw women begging on the train, and as told that they were transgender women called hijras. I chose non-binary gender as my topic, and soon learned the term *third nature*.

The Sanskrit words *tritiya-prakriti* (third nature) refer to people who cannot be categorised as men or women. Vedic texts further classify these people into categories such as *shanda*, male-to-female transgender people, and *stripmusa*, female-to-male transgender people (Wilhelm, 2008).

Third Gender Identities

Hijras are India's most well-known transgender communities, occurring throughout the continent. Hijras are male-to-female and intersex people, and may have gone through a castration ceremony. They live in groups based around familial roles, and are believed to be able to give blessings of fertility (Busby, 1997).

Jogappas are male-to-female transgender people who live in small religious communities in northern Karnataka, making a living by begging, singing, and dancing near temples. While some were dedicated to the goddess Yellamma by their families, many chose to become jogappas (The Hindu, 2014).

Transmasculine identities are less common, but female-to-male transgender people were also recognised in India's history. Transmasculine people served as porters and bodyguards in the royal palaces, as well as being permitted to take on a male role in their families. Indian mythology includes several women who transformed into men (Penrose, 2001).



Ardhanarishvara: The Lord who is Half Woman

A composite deity representing the merging of the god Shiva with his wife Parvati. Ardhanarishvara signifies that male and female principles cannot be separated. One origin story for this deity is that the creator god Brahma only made men at first, until Shiva transformed into this form in order to demonstrate that both the masculine and feminine are required for creation. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016).

Conflict and Acceptance

The worldview of 19th century British aristocrats was threatened by non-binary genders. 19th century descriptions of hijras included descriptions such as "disgusting" and "abnormal". These views have influenced contemporary Indian society (Tiwari, 2014).

The Supreme Court recognised third gender identities in April 2014, and Karnataka was the first state to form a committee to create new policies. However, reform is slow, and the Karnataka transgender community has presented demands for equal rights and opportunities (Deccan Chronicle, 2016).

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