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Dr. Ambika Bajpai
Associate Professor, Navyug
Kanya Mahavidyalaya,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India

Study of third gender in transgender historical inquiry

Dr. Ambika Bajpai

Abstract

Third gender/Transgender identities that express gender fluidity as a way of life newline question our most basic assumptions of gender and sexuality. There are various trans identities newline in India- Hijra, Aravani, Jogappa, Shivashakti, Kinnar, and Sakhi-Bekhi newline among others. Each of these identities is both temporally and spatially specific. It has newline been claimed that, Third Gender have got a strong historical presence in the Hindu newline mythology and concept of tritiya prakrti or napumsaka has been an integral part of newline ancient literatures. With the advent of modernity, the binarism of gender also newline pervaded the Indian society.

Keywords: Colonial, imperial historian's historiography, historical consciousness

Introduction

The identity of an individual is defined on the basis of gender, religion, caste, class, race and ethnicity. It is often claimed that modernity gave rise to dichotomous sex- gender system which polarized sex, gender and sexuality into binary categories. However, all humans do not fit in the male-female binary. Those who do not fit into these two categories are referred to as transgender or third gender. Even third gender is not a homogenous category. Rather, it includes diverse groups of people. Third gender individuals are on the lowest level of gender hierarchy in most societies. They live on the fringes of society and have to struggle economically, socially and culturally. They also face serious identity crisis.

In India, there are various trans-identities- *Hijra, Aravani, Jogappa, Shiva-Shakti, Kinnar*, and *Sakhi-Bekhi* among others. It has been contended that the third gender people had a better position in the society in pre-colonial India. The present study is an attempt to explore the notions of sex and gender in ancient India with respect to third gender, and locate their position in the ancient Indian society. A study of selected classical texts has been undertaken for the purpose of the present research.

Until not very remote times, history had been a documentation and interpretation of battles between kings and politics. 'History' had been written largely about men and their interests. It had been bounded by dominant constructions of masculinity. The history of women and other gender identities had been obscured, hidden, ignored and lost; no one had taken an interest and bothered to record it. Women were as a consequence omitted from history, while the mechanisms and products of history- writing served to enhance the ' authority ' of men. Broadly the historians were white, middle class men and till 1960s, women were not considered as a legitimate subject and object of study. This total neglect of women as sharers of the historical space was challenged, and it was contended that women's contributions to the making of the past needs to be recognized and recorded. As a result, contributory and compensatory histories were written which provided some space for recording women's contributions and experiences. However, even such a history writing ignored other groups which were suffering equal marginalization in history, if not more. Feminist historians and writers of Women's histories could not recognize other gender identities and focused their studies only on women. The theory and practice of gender and women's history have been influenced by post structuralism and postmodernism. Joan Scott offered a different approach for rethinking and rewriting history.⁶ She was influenced by Derrida's deconstructionism and Foucault's formulation of dispersed power, she suggested the historians to analyze the language of gender, to observe how perceived sex differences had appeared historically as a natural and fundamental opposition. According to post modernists, language is not the - mirror of nature and it is semantically self- referential.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Ambika Bajpai
Associate Professor, Navyug
Kanya Mahavidyalaya,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India

The meaning of the word is not static and perceived same by everyone in the world. The emphasis on language and discourse challenged the old feminist criteria about lived experience, the nature of women's subordination and the use of the category woman. Judith Butler emphasized that gender is the performance and acting of social role. Butler asserts that an act is performative, if it produces a series of effects. Gender identity cannot exist prior to gendered acts, because gendered acts and gender identity exist at the same time. Since gender identity is continuously formed by the repetition of gendered acts, according to her gender should not be understood as stable identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses transgender figures of the drag queen and butch lesbians as examples of gender performativity, while in *Bodies That Matter* transsexuals represent a limit to performativity. Butler is trying to deconstruct the concepts of gender and sex. According to her, gender is the ideology which shapes sex. She suggests that sex is as culturally constructed as gender and she concludes that if that is the case, then gender and sex are the same. This poses a real problem for transgender people and transsexuals since they need the term *gender identity* to explain the mismatch between the gender that they know they are and the sex of the body they were born into. This approach has led to a deeper understanding of gender and has been instrumental in legitimizing the academic study of transgender people.

It would not be appropriate to constrain third gender history, who lived at a time and place when the notion of transgender was available and used by them because many individuals in past centuries might not have conceptualized their lives in such a way or deliberately hidden their identity for variety of reasons. It would also be irrelevant to speculate that people who come under -third gender notion as present understanding, does not mean that they existed as such throughout the history. Complexity of term makes it an arduous task to trace the third gender historiography. Who felt that they were the opposite -sex and had been assigned the wrong sex at birth to be suffering from psychosis?

During 1940s most of the literatures on third gender were continued to be written by non – transgender practitioners whose research were based on the case studies of the client and treated gender non-conformity as a disease. Some of the physicians rejected the idea that gender non -conforming individuals were suffering from any form of psychopathology. Magnus Hirschfeld, who coined the term transvestites, focused on those individuals who were passionate to wear clothes of gender different than their birth gender. He emphasized in his work -Transvestites in 1910 that transvestite people were overcome with -feeling of peace, security, happiness and ecstasy when in the clothing of the other sex. According to him they are not suffering from psychopathology; neither they masochists nor fetishists. In the continuation of same idea a transgender British Physician (FTM) Michael Dillon in 1946 argued in his writing -Self: A study in Ethics and Endocrinology that nonconforming gender individuals were not mentally unbalanced and sense of self could not be change through therapy.

This is the time when third gender individuals began documenting their own lives and communities. They started to write their autobiographies.

Some anthropologists also studied and researched on third gender individuals. Anne Bolin concluded in her studies that members of MTF transgender groups embraced wider range

of possible gender identities. Aaron Devor researched on the lives of transsexual male and wrote a book FTM: Female to male transsexual society.

During the 1990s, a new perspective emerged named as -queer theory. It grew out from the study of Gay and Lesbian studies parallel to Feminist's Studies. It challenges normative sexualities. Queer theory holds that individual sexuality is a fluid, fragmented, and dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities and it may vary at different points during one's life. As discussed above that Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Teresa de Lauretis, began to deconstruct gender and examine its performative nature, which was criticized by some of the trans- academics and activists. They argued that the approach is developed by the cisgender scholars, ignoring the lived experiences of many trans individuals. So there is a need to involve transgender people in theoretical positions. *and Sexualities* tried to understand the motivations behind cross-gender behavior to trace a history of transsexual men. Historian Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* (2002) focused on trans political and social activism in the US from the mid twentieth century to the end of it. She explored how transgender people have experienced and responded to discrimination from those in the medical profession, the police and legal system, and some leading lesbian feminists. Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* influenced understanding of sex in popular culture, science, medicine, law, and daily life. There is an ongoing attempt to carve out a space for a history of the transgender in the West.

History Writing in India

It has been alleged from the perspective of modern historical understanding that unlike the historical consciousness of ancient Greeks or Chinese, Indians lacked the historical sense and did not produce any historical work. Such a contention was based upon the charges that chronology dealing with short period of time and objectivity in historical facts are absent in the ancient Indians writings. It is true that ancient Indians did not consider history as an inquiry into the past with the logical purpose of explaining its causes and consequences. Indians in their writings of history never knew how to keep fact and fiction separate. To them the facts themselves were more important than their chronological order. If history is defined as philosophy and not merely a chronological record of happenings in the past, ancient Indians had their own historical consciousness. The concept of time for them has been cyclical and not linear.

The two epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* have elements of historical tradition in the form of genealogy. The *Rāmāyaṇa* reveals the dynastic history of the Solar and Lunar families and other historical details of various kingdoms and principalities, towns and cities, polity and administration, the condition of the Aryan society, life and culture of some tribal people. *Mahābhārata* was first named as *Jaya Itihāsa*. The *Mahābhārata*, from the historical point of view, is comparatively more significant than the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There is no question that this is a semi-historical work. It is encyclopedic in nature and includes a wealth of materials related to certain possible aspects of ancient Indian history and culture.

Kauṭilya had an in-depth idea of history. According to him, *Itihāsa* is not a single work, but a genre of literature consisting of the *Purāṇa*, *Itivṛtti* (a description of the past

event, a narrative or story), *ākhyāyikā* (biographies of kings or princes and important historical characters), *udāharāṇa* (an illustration), *Dharmaśāstra* (law) and *Arthaśāstra* (political or state science and government). All of these together constitute history. *Itihāsa*, *Purāṇa*, *Ākhyāna* and *Ākhyāyikā* are also alluded to by Kātyāyana (second half of 4th century B.C) and Patañjali as different literary works. Manu also alludes to *ākhyāna*, *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa* which were learnt and taught.

Historical biographies came to be written from 7th century onwards as a response to the formation of regional kingdoms. These were mostly written by court poets who had royal patronage. *‘Rājatarāṅgiṇī’* written by Kalhaṇa in the 12th century is generally accepted as the first proper historical work produced in India.

During the medieval period, history writing was influenced by the Western and Central Asian scholars who arrived in India after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. Sultanate historiography is chronologically arranged account of rulers and their subordinates. Sultanate historiography was theocratic and providential. Mughal historiography was a continuation of the Sultanate historiography.

Modern Indian historiography has been fundamentally formulated by the West. This new 'history' came to be established in the context of 'positivism' which had its roots in the Enlightenment debate and the emergence of nation states in Europe. Positivism is a philosophy, introduced by August Comte which emphasizes rationality, objectivity, verifiability of facts and scientific method in Social Science research. According to Ranke, the strict presentation of facts formed the supreme law of historical writing.

The impact of positivist method, new technique and treatment of history writing had been seen significantly in Indological discourse on Indian history. Initially, Europeans were motivated for studying India's past to understanding the native laws, customs and traditions that seemed crucial for the effective governance of the subject colony. The Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded by William Jones. It was modeled on the Royal Society in London and was meant for specialized studies in Indian history and culture. European scholars like Charles Wilkins, H. T. Colebrooke, H. H. Wilson and William Jones explored the classical literature of India and found significant philological similarities between Sanskrit and European languages.

The Utilitarian or Imperialist historians among the Orientalists strategically portrayed India as inferior to the West. The colonizing efforts depicted India as an uncivilized, barbaric and rude nation. This was aimed at establishing cultural hegemony and legitimizing British rule over India. James Mill and Vincent Smith were the prominent scholars of imperialist approach. In *—The History of British India 1817*, Mill portrayed the Indian society as caste centric and dominant by the Hindu religion ideology which made the society static and unchanging. He declared that the people of Europe even during the feudal ages, were greatly superior to the Hindus.

Nationalist historiography evolved as a counter reaction to the imperialist/colonialist historiography practiced by a group of Western historians and scholars who took no interest in socio-cultural heritage of India. It was considered to be the solemn duty to rewrite the true history of India to be able to counter the allegations made by the colonialist historians. Nationalist historiography played an important

role in establishing an ideological basis for the freedom struggle and in exploring the economic consequences of imperialism. Their main focus was on external that is on colonial exploitation.

They glorified the Indian past, events and culture ignoring the importance of critical analysis. Since women's question had become central in the backdrop of colonialism, some of the nationalist historians tried to focus on the position of women in the Indian society in ancient times to be able to show the glorious past of India. This will be dealt in more details subsequently in the discussion of historiography of women in India.

Further the colonialist school as neo-imperialism was led by Anil Seal and John Broomfield who have been known as the Cambridge Historians. *—Subaltern Studies* emerged as a new approach to history writing. Ranajit Guha tried to introduce the subaltern method to inquire into the history of the marginalized people. This new style of investigation of history was initiated by Rony Hilton, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudo, Sobul etc who had taken common people in the centre of studies. But prominently it was popularized by Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) in 1982. They believed that the history was written by elites and of elites, and that there is a need to record the histories of the subalterns- the tribals, peasants, workers, oppressed women, lower caste people. According to the Subaltern school, these groups played a key role in shaping history and culture of India, but history as a discipline had failed to record their contribution. Besides Ranajit Guha, David Arnold, Gyan Pandey, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Spivak, Julie Stephens, Aravind Das, N.K. Chandra, Stephen Henningham, Dipesh Chakraborthy, Goutam Bhadra, etc. have enriched subaltern historiography. However, the transgender groups could not find any place in the Subaltern historiography too.

As discussed earlier, in the Indian context, women were relatively visible in historical writing because their visibility was necessary for both the colonial and nationalist historians to support their agendas. The colonialist historians drew rationale for the British rule by saying that the Indians had barbaric customs like Sati, while the nationalist historians tried to prove that these oppressive customs were not native to the Indian society. They tried to prove that there were no such customs and practices in ancient India. However, they have been criticized for romanticizing the early Indian situation with respect to the position of women in ancient India, and also for their sole reliance on textual sources. Women remained almost absolutely absent from the writings of Marxist historians like Kosambi, Thapar, R.S. Sharma and others. Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Roy, Sukumari Bhattacharji, Suvira Jaiswal, Shalini Shah have tried to fill this gap. Also, there has been an effort to move away from efforts to determine the status of women in the Indian society to a more rigorous analysis of social and institutional structures, and to use sources other than only the textual for the purpose of recovering women's role in India's past. However, few of the works have still focused on the *dharmaśāstras* as the sources for their study. Vinita Chandra has tried to compare the textual sources and epigraphic and other sources to be able to find the gap between prescription and practice. Among the later writings, there is also a visible shift from discussion on women to discussion on gender relations.

In the Indian context, the first systematic study of the *hijra* community is done by Serena Nanda (1990). She shows how the cultural category *hijra* appears to be a magnet for a variety of sexual and gender conditions: ambiguous sexual anatomy, impotence, infertility, homosexuality, and others which may not have an analogue in Western cultures. In 1999, Nanda wrote her other book- *Gender Diversity*. The essays focus on the life of gay and lesbian people during the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial times in India. In her other book, *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, Ruth Vanita deals with the history written about homoerotic love. It explores that how the romantic relationship between men and between women have been represented in history, literature or mythology across time and space. It is obvious that there have been very few studies on transgender in India. They have dealt with transgender communities or the issue of homosexuality. The problem faced by *Hijras* and colonial policing of them has been almost entirely absent from the historiography of late nineteenth-century India, despite a growing body of scholarship on gender and colonialism. Like the West, some of the transgender activists have written their autobiographies. Autobiographies are rich and authentic source to understand their own lives, struggle and problems. These narratives reveal the discrimination that they have faced from their biological family and society at large.

Policies regarding Third Gender

The journey of laws and policies regarding transgender need to be explored since the colonial period. It has been often claimed that transgender individuals had a better life and position in pre-colonial period. British officials labelled them as criminals. Historian Jessica Hinchy documents the story of a eunuch named *Boorah*, who was brutally murdered in 1852 at Manipur district in Northern West Province of India. The British judges were convinced that her former lover Ali Buksh had murdered her in a rage for having left him for another man. During trial eunuchs were described as cross-dressers, beggars and engaged in unnatural prostitution. One judge said that the group was an -opprobrium upon colonial rule; while another argued that their presence was a -reproach to the British government. In 1865, the NWP (North West Province) announced that its goal was to 'reduce' the number of 'eunuchs' and thus slowly 'lead to their extinction, which eliminated their appearance from public domain.

After independence, CTA was considered as blot on the law book of free India. Transgender community was given the opportunity to identify themselves as other, first time in 2011. Very recently, a landmark ruling on April 15, 2014 of the Supreme Court of India granted legal recognition to the transgender people. National Legal Services Society Authority (NALSA) seeking the recognition of Transgender as a third gender, held that Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Indian Constitution do not exclude transgender persons from their ambit and take into account rights of *Hijras* as well. NALSA argued successfully that transgender people, similar to males and females, should have the right to express their gender identity freely. The Transgender Rights Bill (2014) passed in the Rajya Sabha was based on NALSA judgement. The modified Bill was further introduced in the Lok Sabha as The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights Bill) in

2016. It covers varieties of transgender identities in its ambit.

Conclusion

In this paper introduces the subject, and after initial review of literature, tells about the objectives of the present study. It further tells the methodology adopted, and sources used for the purpose of present study. The present study seeks to understand the position of the third gender in ancient India. However, the period from the 4th century BCE to 6th century CE has been taken for the purpose of study. This was the period when normative texts were being written. A study of the taxonomy of sex and gender during this phase might provide interesting insights into the understanding of the notion of gender in the ancient Indian context, particularly the third gender.

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