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REVIVING THE SACRED AND THE SOCIAL: INDIGENOUS GENDER KNOWLEDGE AND THE FUTURE OF GENDER JUSTICE IN INDIA

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Abstract: Decolonization is a complex process as the colonizers operated through the systematic imposition of foreign cultural, economic, religious, and epistemological systems leading to the suppression and erasure of diverse indigenous knowledge systems that were deeply rooted in specific regional and social contexts. The contemporary revival of the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represents an essential act of cultural decolonization, as it seeks to dismantle these enduring colonial narratives by recovering and promoting indigenous knowledge systems. A crucial dimension of this revival is the decolonization of gender and sexuality, long distorted by colonial legal and cultural interventions.

Index Terms - Cultural decolonization, Indigenous knowledge systems, Need for revival, Performativity, Traditions of gender and sexual fluidity

I. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Cultural decolonization extends beyond the political rejection of colonial rule; it encompasses a critical response to the broader structures of domination imposed during and after territorial conquest. Colonialism operated not only through the occupation of land but also through the systematic imposition of foreign cultural, economic, religious, and epistemological systems. This process led to the marginalization and suppression of diverse indigenous knowledge systems that were deeply rooted in specific regional and cultural contexts. Rather than merely altering political boundaries, colonial regimes profoundly reshaped worldviews by replacing locally grounded epistemologies with standardized Western paradigms, often presented as universal and superior. Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education not only underrated indigenous intellectual traditions but also fortified a hierarchy of knowledge that persists in many postcolonial societies today. This transformation had enduring implications for institutions such as education, healthcare, and cultural production, fundamentally altering the way knowledge was defined, transmitted, and valued.

The colonial encounter in India not only resulted in territorial subjugation but also brought about a profound reconfiguration of epistemic traditions. Through the selective reinterpretation and interpolation of Indian texts, colonial powers imposed their social, religious, and political ideologies, leading to the obliteration of indigenous worldviews. These imposed frameworks, deeply fixed in educational and cultural institutions, have proven difficult to dislodge. The contemporary revival of the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represents an essential act of cultural decolonization, as it seeks to dismantle these enduring colonial narratives by recovering and promoting indigenous languages, philosophies, and scientific traditions, and reinserting India's intellectual heritage into national curricula and public discourse.

This process of reclamation involves more than the recovery of ancient texts; it requires critical engagement and reinterpretation, supported by efforts such as the digitization of classical manuscripts, the institutionalization of IKS in academic programs, and the facilitation of pluralistic dialogues. These efforts collectively aim to reassert India's civilizational identity and foster a more inclusive and non-hierarchical knowledge ecology, moving beyond the residual mental frameworks inherited from colonial rule.

A crucial dimension of this revival is the decolonization of gender and sexuality, long distorted by colonial legal and cultural interventions. The 'coloniality of gender', as conceptualized by María Lugones, reveals how colonial regimes imposed European gender binaries onto diverse and complex indigenous structures of identity, kinship, and embodiment. In the Indian context, this imposition was institutionalized by the British through legal instruments such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1861), which codified Victorian moral standards and criminalized non-normative sexualities. The law, alongside colonial education and religious reform, stigmatized and effaced India's longstanding traditions of gender and sexual fluidity, replacing them with rigid, binary, and moralistic notions of masculinity, femininity, decency and propriety. This transformation was not solely juridical but

epistemic. It reshaped how individuals could conceive, articulate, and experience gender and sexuality in both private and public spheres.

Reintegrating ancient Indian perspectives on gender is thus a vital component of knowledge decolonization. Pre-colonial Indian societies frequently embraced non-binary gender identities, as exemplified by the Sanskrit term tritiya-prakṛti, meaning 'third nature', which encompassed individuals whose identities did not conform to the male-female binary. These identities were not only recognized but also embedded in religious, artistic, and social life, demonstrating a cultural framework that allowed for gender diversity fluidity and complexity.

Juxtaposing these indigenous gender epistemologies with the relatively recent emergence of Western LGBTQ+ discourses provides a comparative framework that challenges Eurocentric historical timelines and affirms the pre-modern existence of plural gender systems outside the West. By reclaiming these narratives, India can contribute to a global rethinking of gender histories and resist the erasure that colonial epistemologies have produced.

Emergence of Gender Concepts in the West

The conceptualization of gender in Western societies has evolved significantly over time, though its foundations were historically rooted in deeply patriarchal and binary frameworks. In pre-modern Europe, gender roles were largely defined through religious doctrine, classical philosophy, and early medical theories, which upheld the dichotomy of male and female as biologically and divinely ordained. Parallel to this, indigenous cultures, including many Native American societies, recognized gender-diverse identities such as the Two-Spirit role, long before the imposition of Western colonial ideologies. These systems often included third-gender roles or acknowledged fluid expressions of gender that were integrated into social and spiritual life. There existed instances of gender ambiguity and fluidity, manifested in cultural practices such as cross-dressing and in the lives of mystics and saints.

During the colonial and modern periods, Western imperial powers began to codify and export rigid gender binaries through religious expansion, scientific rationalism, and administrative policy. The enforcement of binary gender norms became a tool of cultural dominance, resulting in the erasure or criminalization of indigenous gender systems across colonized regions. In particular, Victorian gender ideology in the 19th century ingrained the notion that men and women occupied naturally distinct roles, justified by pseudoscientific and moral reasoning. Men were positioned as rational and public figures, while women were relegated to domestic, emotional, and moral domains.

Resistance to such rigid frameworks emerged through cultural shifts, notably the rise of the 'New Woman' in late Victorian literature and society. This figure symbolized a challenge to fixed gender roles, advocating female autonomy, education, and public presence. The cultural and intellectual impact of this figure laid a significant groundwork for questioning the essentialist assumptions underpinning gender roles, and contributed to the emergence of modern gender theory.

By the mid-20th century, scholars such as John Money began to articulate gender identity as a category distinct from biological sex, introducing subtler understandings of gender within psychology and medical science. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, along with the gay liberation movement, further propelled critical discussions around gender and sexuality. Yet, even these early progressive discourses often operated within binary frameworks.

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in academic and activist circles with increased engagement in non-binary and fluid understandings of gender. A pivotal moment came with the publication of Judith Butler's Gender Trouble in 1990, which introduced the concept of gender as performative; gender is considered not as an innate characteristic but rather a set of repeated acts that produce the illusion of stability. Butler's work, informed by post-structuralist theory and feminist critique, profoundly influenced contemporary gender studies, queering traditional distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality.

In recent decades, especially from the beginning of the twenty first century onwards, the notion of gender fluidity has gained increasing visibility in public discourse, particularly among younger generations, educational institutions, and activist spaces. There is a growing recognition of transgender, non-binary, and gender-queer identities that marks a significant shift in the Western conceptualization of gender, moving from fixed, essentialist views toward a more pluralistic and performative understanding of identity.

Gender Identity in the Ancient Indian Context

The recognition of gender fluidity in the Indian subcontinent predates colonial modernity by millennia. Ancient Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata include narratives that complicate binary gender classifications. These texts feature characters who defy conventional gender roles: Shikhandi, a warrior was born female but raised and later identified as male; Ardhanarishvara, the composite deity representing both Shiva and Parvati, symbolize the unity of masculine and feminine energies; and Mohini, the female form assumed by Lord Vishnu. Additionally, oral traditions recount that Lord Rama, upon returning from exile, bestowed blessings and recognition upon individuals who were neither male nor female, an act that acknowledges non-binary gender identities within sacred history.

These figures and stories serve as powerful counter-narratives to Western conceptualizations which often frame trans, queer, or non-binary identities and experiences within fixed individualistic categories. In contrast, pre-modern Indian societies incorporated gender diversity into social, religious, and linguistic (in Sanskrit) structures, demonstrating an understanding of identity as relational, contextual, and spiritually inflected.

The colonial imposition of European epistemologies, however, disrupted these subtleties of traditions. Colonial administrators and missionaries often imposed binary gender norms, codified through law. As a result, fluid and plural gender categories were removed from public life. Reclaiming indigenous narratives of gender diversity is thus both a political and intellectual act. It resists reductive, Western-derived gender binaries and opens up space for alternative epistemologies grounded in local cultural logics and historical continuities. For instance, Indian feminist scholarship has increasingly sought to reframe gender discourse through indigenous frameworks. Initiatives like the Narivada – Gender, Culture, and Civilization network focus on recovering feminist consciousness from Indian philosophical texts, oral histories, and sacred feminine iconographies, rejecting the imposition of Eurocentric feminist models that may overlook the cultural specificity of gender in South Asia. Additionally, the framework of decolonial trans feminism has expanded this critique by emphasizing that identities such as hijra, kothi, or muxe are not mere analogues of Western LGBTQ+ categories. Rather, they emerge from distinct spiritual, kinship, and communal traditions, deeply

embedded in specific sociocultural milieus. This perspective challenges the individualist orientation of many Western gender theories, highlighting instead the embeddedness of gender in collective practices and ritual roles.

The revival of indigenous understandings of gender is thus, not just an act of cultural preservation, but a form of resistance against epistemic colonization. Through mythological figures, grammatical traditions such as the presence of non-binary categories in Sanskrit, academic networks, and lived communities this resurgence re-centres the pluralism of Indian gender thought. It affirms that gender in the Indian context has historically been more flexible, layered, and culturally rooted than colonial or Western models have allowed.

Gender Performativity and Indian Mythological Narratives

The theory of gender performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble, offers a profound framework for rethinking gender not as an innate or biological attribute, but as a socially constructed and performatively enacted identity. According to Butler, gender is constituted through repetitive acts, gestures, language, and behaviours, which over time give the appearance of a coherent, stable identity. These performative acts are governed by cultural norms, enforced by institutions, and subject to regulation and resistance.

Gender performativity is not a new concept in Indian culture; it has long been embedded in mythological, religious, and literary traditions. While Butler's framework emerged from Western post-structuralist thought, it finds powerful resonances in pre-modern Indian narratives, where gender has long been portrayed as fluid, performative, and situational. Myths, epics, classical literature, folklores, celebrations and rituals from the Indian subcontinent contain numerous instances of gender transformations, cross-gender performances, and composite identities, suggesting that non-binary and performative understandings of gender were embedded in Indian cultural consciousness long before the rise of modern Western gender theory. The taboo against gender non-conformity is a relatively modern, colonial construct, at odds with the indigenous knowledge systems of the subcontinent. Re-engaging with the pre-colonial narratives and practices offers pathways for the decolonization of gender in contemporary India and affirms the rich heritage of gender diversity embedded in its cultural memory.

In Mahabharata, Arjuna, the most valiant of the five Pandava brothers, takes on the role of Brihannala, a eunuch or gender-nonconforming dance teacher, during the Pandavas' incognito exile. Performativity here lies in daily practice: Arjuna wears feminine clothing, adopts the gestures and language expected of women, and inhabits a socially gendered role that conceals his warrior identity. This act demonstrates that gender identity is not fixed but enacted. It is through the continuous performance of feminine-coded behaviour that Arjuna becomes intelligible as Brihannala to others. Changing gender roles, and even gender identity itself, were not only accepted but revered.

Shikhandi, another character from the Mahabharata, is born as Shikhandini, a woman, and later transforms into a man through divine intervention. Shikhandi's gender shift is socially accepted, allowing him to play a decisive role in the war by confronting Bhishma. Shikhandi's gender identity is legitimized through ritual, recognition, and role performance, reflecting how performativity is embedded in both social validation and narrative function. The story challenges the rigid binary of male/female by emphasizing transformation and recognition over anatomy.

The deity Ardhanarishvara, a synthesis of Shiva and Parvati, visually and philosophically embodies the non-duality of gender. The deity is depicted as half-male and half-female, signifying the interdependence and co-existence of masculine and feminine principles within one form. This iconography reflects an indigenous metaphysics of gender, not as oppositional categories, but as interwoven aspects of a larger cosmic identity. Ardhanarishvara performs both roles simultaneously, defying binary classification and demonstrating that gender is not inherent but represented and enacted through form, symbolism, and role.

The story of Mohini, the female avatar of Vishnu, further exemplifies gender performativity. In various Puranas, Vishnu transforms into Mohini to distribute the nectar of immortality or to seduce and distract demons. In one version, even Shiva becomes enchanted by Mohini's beauty, resulting in the birth of a deity, Ayyappa. Mohini does not reflect a fixed transgender identity in the modern sense but illustrates how gender roles are adopted and discarded performatively, based on context and social interaction.

Khajuraho's stone carvings boldly reflect a pre-modern recognition of sexual and gender diversity, woven subtly into the sacred architecture. These divine/mythological examples reinforce Butler's central idea that gender is not something one is, but something one does. Indian narratives show that gender is fluid, situational, and enacted rather than fixed or biologically essential. Social recognition and repeated practice legitimize identity, not anatomy alone.

Gender Fluidity in the present India

Gender fluidity in contemporary India cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay between tradition, performance, ritual, and law. There is a uniquely Indian intersection of indigeneity, postcoloniality, religion, caste, and modernity, where gender is not fixed, but performed, contextual, and often sacred. In some Vaishnava Bhakti traditions, Krishna's male devotees imagine themselves as female gopis (cowherd girls) in divine love with Krishna. Saints like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu saw themselves as Radha in ecstatic union with Krishna. Some male saints expressed feminine longing and spiritual surrender, blurring gender lines.

The Chamayavilakku festival is held annually at the Kottankulangara Devi Temple in Kollam, during the Malayalam month of Meenam (March). On the last two days of the festival, thousands of men from diverse backgrounds come to the temple, draped in sarees, jewelry, makeup, jasmine garlands, and moustaches shaven. They hold the chamayavilakku (a five-wicked lamp) and proceed in a procession around the temple, accompanied by traditional music. Although the ritual originated as an act of devotional offering rather than gender expression, the festival now holds special meaning for the transgender community, providing a rare public space for gender-nonconforming visibility and identity affirmation. The ritual normalizes cross-dressing in a ritual context, highlighting the consensus between religious practices and broader societal acceptance.

The Koovagam Festival, an annual 18-day festival, coinciding with the full moon of Chithirai month, takes place at the Koothandavar temple in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu. It starts with cultural performances and a beauty pageant. On the 14th day, transgender women dress in their finest attire and are married symbolically to the deity. The festival is a potent expression of gender identity and belonging. It fosters community among transgender women and heightens their visibility.

In regions around Mathura and Vrindavan, Holi's festive rituals have taken on unique gender-fluid symbolism. It is believed that Krishna is the sole male presence in Vrindavan, and all others are considered female devotees. During Holi, men dress up as Radha, Gopis, and Sakhis to enact devotional roles in Krishna's life. The region's spiritual traditions include the idea that even Lord Shiva

joined Krishna's Raasleela in the guise of a Gopika, worshipped today as Gopeshwar Mahadev. Mystics like Ramakrishna Paramhamsa immersed themselves deeply in Gopika roles, both spiritually and in appearance, to embody the feminine devotional stance. This illustrates how gender fluidity and role-reversal have long been part of Indian devotional culture.

The Need for Revival

Gender diversity, embodied by communities such as hijras, khwajasaras, and others held important cultural, religious, and sometimes political roles in the pre-colonial era. Hijras were one of the most visible gender-diverse communities in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Traditionally understood as neither male nor female, the term 'Hijra' often includes intersex, transgender, gender-nonconforming, or castrated individuals. They were considered bearers of fertility and were invited to bless weddings and childbirths. Hijras typically belong to structured household systems led by a guru, forming chosen kinship bonds that transcend biological family ties. British colonial rule drastically reshaped the status of Hijras and Khwajasaras.

Ancient Sanskrit texts like the Kamasutra, Jain literature, Sufi poetry, and Mughal-era chronicles document the presence and acceptance of fluid and non-binary identities across centuries. British colonial rule effectively erased and stigmatized India's rich heritage of gender fluidity. Pre-colonial acceptance gave way to criminalization and systemic marginalization of gender-diverse communities. The Hijra community represents a continuum of gender identity that challenges the Western binary framework. Their existence is not new, and their recognition has preceded Western transgender discourse by centuries. While modern legal reforms attempt to reverse these harms, the process of decolonizing gender norms and restoring inclusive acceptance remains a laborious task. The histories of Hijras and Khwajasaras reveal how South Asian societies have long held space for gender fluidity, long before contemporary LGBTQ+ discourses emerged. Their resilience in the face of colonial erasure and modern-day marginalization testifies to the deep-rooted cultural, spiritual, and political dimensions of non-binary gender identities in the subcontinent. Today, they stand as a testament to South Asia's rich gender pluralism, asserting that gender identity is not a modern invention, but a sacred, social, and lived truth. Post-independence India inherited colonial legal structures, and the Hijra community continued to face systematic exclusion. However, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of recognition

To truly normalize gender fluidity today, both legal recognition and social integration are crucial; so is decolonizing our understanding of gender through the lens of indigenous histories like those of Hijras and Khwajasaras.

Landmark Legal Progress

The Supreme Court of India verdict in 2014 explicitly recognized transgender individuals as a legally valid gender, affirmed their fundamental constitutional rights, and ruled that they must not be required to undergo surgery to self-identify. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and related government schemes like SMILE, transgender identity cards, health insurance provisions have created frameworks for improved access to healthcare, education, and social security for transgender and gender-diverse individuals. In 2023, the Telangana High Court invalidated a colonial era law - the Eunuchs Act - and ordered expanded welfare benefits and affirmative action for transgender and non binary individuals. These legal measures mark progressive shifts in institutional recognition of gender diversity.

A 2025 Ipsos survey found that Indians rank among the world's most progressive in supporting gender equality and rejecting stereotypical gender roles. Regarding LGBTQ+ rights, as of 2021, 66% of Indians agreed transgender people should have equal rights, and 62% supported legal protection from workplace discrimination. Public exposure to LGBTQ+ issues is increasing. Fashion, advertisement and media are embracing gender fluidity. Several Indian brands are launching gender-neutral or fluid collections, while celebrities openly advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion. Initiatives in education and media, such as the Supreme Court's notice on transgender-inclusive sexuality education, also help foster awareness and acceptance.

Conclusion

Both the sacred and the contemporary Indian tradition permit and sanctify gender performance, offering a culturally specific perspective to view performativity. Moreover, these narratives stand in contrast to the Western binary model, which became more rigid through colonial legal and moral systems. Indigenous representations such as hijras, tritiya-prakṛti, and mythological gender transformations challenge modern frameworks by situating gender within kinship, ritual, cosmology, and communal life. Exploring gender performativity through Indian epics and mythology helps decolonizing and expanding its acceptability. These stories reveal that performative gender roles were not marginal but central to the cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions of South Asia. Integrating these narratives into academic discourse challenges Eurocentric genealogies of queer theory, affirming that gender fluidity and performativity have rich, indigenous precedents.

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