OLD WORLD TRADE AND INTERACTION

VOL. 1(1): pp. 67-76, AUGUST 2025
ISSN: 2978-4123
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16534556
http://www.owti.uk

Body as an Object: Deconstructing the Tritiya-Prakriti Social Stigma Through Material Culture of Precolonial India

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Abstract

Although the recognition of genders outside the male and female binary has only recently gained attention in Western societies, in India, the third gender communities have been shaping civilisations for over 2000 years. Focusing on the Tritiya-Prakriti ethnic group, this study explored the representation of gender fluidity in Indian material culture through a selection of ancient texts, architecture and iconography from the Iron Age to the Late Modern period (circa 400 BC- 1858 AD). It posited that the poor visibility of the gender fluid heritage in the modern era is indicative of the historical criminalisation under British colonial governance and the subsequent marginalisation of gender diversity in archaeological discourse. Material culture revealed a multitude of androgynous representations of Hindu deities, non-heteronormative sexuality, and cross-dressing. These findings underscore the acceptance of gender fluidity in precolonial India, highlighting the role of material culture in not only establishing but also preserving traditions and decolonising heritage. The uniqueness of the Tritiya-Prakriti community lies in its existence outside the traditional social structure and society's historical acceptance of this position. As such, India provides the richest source of knowledge about the historical third gender. Understanding the Tritiya-Prakriti systems and transformations can therefore provide a broader context for addressing contemporary inclusion challenges.

Keywords: Tritiya-Prakriti, Gender identity, Androgyny, Indian material culture, Decolonisation

Introduction

The convergence of advancements in genomics, digital technology and social consciousness has emphasised the importance of inclusivity in preserving our history and addressing misrepresentations and colonial attempts to obscure the facts. Scholars have been prompted to reevaluate their mindsets and approaches to interpreting ancient texts and material culture that have shaped our understanding for centuries, leading to a closer examination of their validity. Although the advocacy for realigning the disciplines and professions of history and archaeology with contemporary beliefs and circumstances divided academia, it has also led to a shift in how we perceive our past as a body of knowledge that has been helping us understand gender relations (Nicholson 1988). A topic with a powerful lens for examining how identities were shaped within various periods and contexts. A subject that serves as a tool for directing attention to the processes of identity transformation, resistance, and subversion. A socio-cultural phenomenon potent to cause divisions within social structures and at the same time provide valuable insights into the specific mechanisms through which identities are altered in the context of gender.

Cultures have historically been delineated on the basis of material characteristics associated with sites in specific geographical areas and periods, with the presumption that cultural continuity reflects

communal continuity (Gezentsvey *et al.* 2013). Nevertheless, attributing a gender identity to specific objects or monuments in relation to the community responsible for their creation has generally not been a focus of archaeological inquiry up till three decades ago (Van Helden 2020). Unravelling the ever-changing concept of identity from the compressed layers of time is one issue; exploring how material culture can enhance the visibility of communal identities as part of proactive efforts to decolonise the field is quite another.

Religious endorsement of a patriarchal worldview, monogamous partnerships and moral judgment are embedded within at least three main ideologies and exist across diverse religious traditions, contributing to perpetuating gender discrimination and societal inequalities (Ezzy *et al.* 2022). The lack of promotion of inclusive practices in academia further fuels the taboo of accepting many facets of gender in history, leading to the internalisation of discriminatory beliefs (Prince and Francis 2023). The limited representation of gender-fluid cultures, for instance, may be attributed to biases in artefact collection policies created by the traditionally privileged white elite. While rectifying this historical imbalance may seem daunting, contemporary scholars have the opportunity to challenge preconceptions about which objects are deemed worthy of study and to shift the perspectives from which object stories are told. Diversifying the people behind the objects and the intellectual paradigms through which they are examined is necessary, especially since material culture often evolves into intangible entities. This way, it serves as a fundamental yet adaptable medium, utilised in establishing traditions, preserving conventions and normative behaviour, as well as challenging such norms. As such, material culture is worth considering as a method for exploring gender identity, as it is inherently involved in its construction.

Focusing on the Tritiya-Prakriti ethnic group, this paper provides an overview of the representation of gender fluidity in Indian history through ancient texts, architecture, and iconography. It argues that the lack of visibility of gender fluid heritage in the modern era reflects decades of criminalisation of non-procreative sexualities by British colonial rule and long-standing rejection of gender inclusion in archaeology.

Textual Representation of Gender Fluidity

The Tritiya-Prakriti, which translates to the third gender in Sanskrit, is an ethnic group whose roots are traced back to the earliest Hindu scriptures (Aggarwal 2017). The Kama Sutra (circa 200 - 300 AD, for instance, contains references to the performance of *fellatio* by individuals of a third sex, known as *tritiya prakriti* (Remya 2017). The Puranas (circa 550 BC – 1000 AD) further identify three types of divine beings of music and dance: female, male, and neuter people. In history, Tritiya-Prakriti have identified as neither wholly male nor female and have embraced an array of gender expressions, including transgender, homosexual, intersex, and eunuch individuals (Wilhelm 2004). Most members of this ethnic group are born as biological men and live within communities that follow the *guru-chela* (or disciple) kinship system (ibid.).

In the broader context, ancient Indian texts, including the Vedas (circa 1500 BC), the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana (circa 500 BC - 500 AD) also portrayed gender as a relatively fluid concept, with Vedic texts, for instance documenting *shanda* (male-to-female transition) and *stripmusa* (female-to-male transition; Wilhelm, 2004) while certain gods were depicted as assuming attributes of the opposite sex or undergoing complete gender transformations (Heller 2017). The body was considered a temporary vessel for the soul, and the androgynous deities reflected the soul's essentially sexless or multi-sexual nature (Michell 1988). Indeed, there is no shortage of androgynous figures among Hindu deities. Ganesha, the elephant god and the child of Shiva and Parvati, for instance, is believed to have been created by Parvati alone from water. Interpretations of Ganesha's features include his flaccid trunk and tusk as phallic symbols, while his prominent temples and plump belly are seen as female indicators (Pattanaik 2011). Rudra, an aspect of Shiva, known as the god of destruction, is also associated with androgyny (Singh Rai 2019), while Daksa, a form of Prajapati, is described as an androgyne who divided his body in half, gave birth to daughters, and ultimately abandoned the female aspect of himself (Long 1977).

The establishment of a caste system that elevated the Brahmins to power in the 6th century BC also saw the emergence of numerous renunciants, including Prince Gautama Siddhartha, known as the Buddha. A

number of statues from the 2nd-century AD Mathura to the 5th-century AD Gupta periods depict Buddha as androgynous. The Lotus Sutra– a 3rd-century Buddhist scripture (Figure 1), expounds on the concept of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara's manifestation as assuming male or female forms and passing the message that each individual, regardless of gender, can achieve enlightenment akin to Buddha's (Hong 2000). In the narrative of the 'Dragon Girl', further, Shariputra, the foremost disciple of Buddha, dismisses the notion of the girl achieving Buddhahood (Figure 2). She, however, defies his doubt by transcending her female nonhuman form and assuming the male form of a Buddha (Peach 2002).

Figure 1: A Lotus Sutra scroll of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, circa 1257[1]. Calligrapher: Sugawara Mitsushige/Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public domain

Architectural Representation of Gender Fluidity

The acceptance of gender fluidity during Classical India (circa 200 BC – 650 AD) can also be observed through the mythological forms of Yakshis and Yakshas, female and male nature spirits associated with the sacred groves of India, as well as fertility and the fluidity of gender (Gokhale and Lal 2024). On the pillars of the Chaitya cave of Karle, Maharashtra (50-75 AD), displaying *mithuna* (Sanskrit for sexual intercourse in Hindu Tantra), one couple is depicted as two bare-breasted women, embracing. Typically, during this practice, the heterosexual couple is believed to become temporarily divine, with the woman embodying deity Shakti and the man embodying deity Shiva. Just as neither spirit nor matter alone is effective, but working together brings harmony, *maithuna* is considered effective only when the union is consecrated (ibid.).

Figure 2: 'Devadatta' chapter of the Lotus Sutra (Hoke-kyō, Daibadatta-bon), circa 12th century[2]. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain.

Elephanta Caves, a collection of temples on Gharapuri Island built circa 550 AD, further features depictions of Shiva in various forms, including his androgynous manifestation Ardhanarishvara (or the half-female Lord) and the symbol *urdhvalinga* (Doniger 1999). The concept of Ardhanarishvara is considered the root of all creation and represents a form of the deity Shiva combined with his consort Parvati (ibid.). Ardhanarishvara is hence typically portrayed as half-male and half-female, symbolising the inseparability of the two principles of God (Rukshar 2022).

The earliest known images of Ardhanarishvara date back to the Kushan period, beginning of the 1st century AD (Sharma 2023). The representations are portrayed in a two-armed form, showing the female half on the left side with a rounded breast, holding a mirror. Her combed hair is adorned with pearls and flowers, and she wears a *patra-kundala* earring. The male half on the right side is depicted as ithyphallic with an *urdhvalinga*, matted hair, a skull and a crescent moon. Both halves share a common third eye on the face. Later depictions of Ardhanarishvara illustrate the deity with three (or more) arms. The left hand holds a flower and a mirror, with

[1] A scroll is part of 'Universal Gateway' (chapter 25) of the Lotus Sutra, which contains 34 images by an anonymous artist. It is the earliest known painted version of a litany praising the Bodhisattva Kannon.

[2] The iconography portrays the 8-year-old daughter of the Dragon King emerging from her palace beneath the sea to offer a jewel to the Buddha on Eagle Peak.

all hands being adorned with anklets or bangles. Parvati possesses only one arm, symbolising her submissive and less dominant nature (Sharma 2023).

Of all Hindu deities, however, Bahuchara Mata is the most widely celebrated patron goddess of the Tritiya-Prakriti community. The name 'Bahuchara' originates from the Bahucharaji village in Gujarat, where the principal temple is located. 'Mata' translates to 'mother' in Hindi, symbolising her nurturing and protective role (Mahanta 2022). The deity is revered as the embodiment of purity and fertility in her maiden form, representing the incarnation of the goddess Hinglaj Mata (ibid.). Believed to bestow blessings, particularly for the birth of male offspring and the healing of illnesses, Bahuchara Mata is also a significant figure in other religious traditions of Gujarat and Rajasthan (Shah 1961). One of the most renowned myths linked to Bahuchara Mata revolves around her metamorphosis into a goddess, where the deity is depicted as a young woman assailed by bandits while travelling. To safeguard her innocence, she severs her breasts and places a curse on the bandits, rendering them impotent. This act of self-sacrifice and bravery culminates in her deification as Bahuchara Mata (Kanodia 2016). While the deity does not feature prominently in major Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata or Ramayana, Bahuchara Mata tales are frequently recited during festivals and rituals, underscoring her significance in gender fluid communities and Gujarat's cultural and religious milieu (Khangai 2022).

The Bahucharaji Temple is, hence, one of the most authentic architectural structures associated with Tritiya-Prakriti (Figure 3). The original structure was constructed in 1152 AD, and its earliest surviving mention dates back to an inscription from 1280 AD (Samira 2010). Adyasthan, the oldest part of the three shrine complex, comprises a small temple that encloses a *Varakhadi* (Sanskrit for a tree where spirits dwell), which is believed to be the site where the goddess first appeared (Kanodia 2016). The iconography depicts her as a deity carrying symbolic representations that convey various aspects of her mythology: a balance between violence, creation, knowledge, and blessing. Seating on a rooster symbolises innocence. The sword symbolises self-sacrifice, the trident represents the balance of creation principles, and the scripture reinforces her legitimacy in the Charana caste (Selvaraj 2018).

Figure 3: The Bahuchar Mata Temple, Becharai, India. Photo by Branka Franicevic, 2023

Another notable medieval account of gender fluidity is documented in the temples of Khajuraho, constructed by the Chandela dynasty (circa 950 - 1050 AD). The temples are renowned for their Nagara-style architectural symbolism and a number of erotic sculptures. Situated within the Vindhya mountain range in central India, the archaeological site is steeped in local legend, which holds that Shiva and other deities frequented the hill formation in the Kalinjar area (Singh 2009). Among the surviving temples, six are dedicated to Shiva, eight to Vishnu and his avatars, one to Ganesha, one to Surya, and three to Jain tirthankaras (ibid.). The temples boast a rich display of intricately carved statues, with the erotic sculptures forming a part of the overall temple sculpture. These show scenes in which men are exposing their genitals to other men while women are portrayed in erotic embraces with each other. The southern wall of the Kandariya Mahadeva temple also displays a scene involving three women and one man, illustrating intense interaction between two women, one seated on top of the man while being caressed by the other, who gazes intently into her eyes. Some sculptures portray erotic scenes featuring heterosexual *mithuna* couples, while others include attendants who not only engage with the central couple but also interact with each other. Scholars have debated the meaning of these erotic scenes, with interpretations ranging from indicative of tantric sexual practices (Vijayakumar 2017) to the acceptance of *kama* (Sanskrit for sensory and aesthetic enjoyment) as an integral aspect of human life in the Hindu tradition (Menon 2009).

The Sun temple in Konark (also known as Surya Devalaya), located in eastern Orissa, is another example of late medieval analogous imagery. Dedicated to the Sun god Surya, the temple's exterior is adorned with sculptures depicting erotic scenes from the Kamasutra. The temple, built in 1250 AD during the reign of the Eastern Ganga King Narsimhadeva-1, stands as a monumental representation of Surya's chariot, decorated with twelve pairs of wheels and drawn by seven rearing horses. The temple's walls, from the base to the crowning elements, are adorned with reliefs featuring exquisite miniature details resembling jewellery. Stone statues of male and female musicians holding various musical instruments, such as the veenas or taals, are also displayed on the terraces. While the architecture showcases sculptures of Hindu deities, *apsaras* (celestial beings), as well as various animals and legendary beings, the temple is renowned for its erotic sculptures, depicting various sexual acts, including polygamy, homoeroticism, and polyandry. These carvings illustrate couples in different stages of courtship and intimacy, including coital themes. The deliberate placement of the engravings, interspersed with representations of prayer and war rather than secluded in a corner, may suggest that the creators intended for gender fluidity to be openly viewed by all.

Iconographic Representation of Gender Fluidity

In the 15th century, India further saw the Bhakti movement gain momentum, similar to Sufism in the Perso-Arabic tradition, which redefined the perception of god and divinity (Singh 2006). With prominent poets including Surdas, Mirabai, and Vithabai re-examining societal norms, the deities were no longer merely worshipped as superior beings but were instead viewed as friends, lovers, spouses, and children (Dasgupta 2011). Inevitably, this shift in perception also led to a fluidity of gendered structure between the deity and the devotee. In contrast to isolated references to same-sex love in ancient Indian literature, this period witnessed a surge in relationships between men, coinciding with the influence of Islam (O'Hanlon 1999). Within the Turko-Arabic and Perso-Mughal Islamic court culture, a poetic idealisation of gender fluidity focused on elite men and their slave boys despite male intercourse being deemed unlawful in Islam (Blake 1986). Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, celebrated for his military conquests, was, for instance, known for his relationship with his slave, Ayaz (Kugle 2002). The 14th-century courtier Ziauddin Barani also produced a critical commentary on the infatuation of the Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khalji, who, in his old age, had developed a deep and passionate love for his eunuch slave Malik Kafur (Kidwai 2000). The relationship was described in disparaging terms, with Malik Kafur being depicted as castrated and exploiting the Sultan to acquire political influence (Gupta 2019).

Numerous vibrant deities and mythological beings that adorned temples during the classical and medieval periods now also stood in stark contrast to the early and late modern material culture. Much of the iconography from this time was presented within a limited spatial depth, which conveys a sense of tranquillity (Dhar 2018). The exploration of Mughal-style iconography illustrating homosexuality and cross-dressing in both Hindu and Muslim courts, for instance, adds to the expanding body of evidence concerning gender fluidity in historic India. An example is an opaque watercolour on paper artwork from the royal courts of the Punjab Hills (circa 1740)[3] that features five ethereal women in a garden in partial nudity from the waist up, having just completed a bathing ritual. The interconnectedness of the figures is notable, with a particularly intimate and emotionally charged dynamic, evident among three of the women as they engage in physical touch and share gazes with one another.

Another Mughal painting from Awadh[4] portrays women intimately engaged. The artwork depicts a woman reclining on her bed, receiving attentive care from female attendants serving tea, preparing food, massaging the lady's feet, fanning her, and tenderly caressing her arms. Meanwhile, the lady reaches back to touch one of the women's hands, emphasising the scene's intimacy. A cross-dressed, turbaned

[3] See 'The Absent Lovers: Five Ladies on the Terrace of a Palace'. The painting is courtesy of Mr. Kossak, a former curator in the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

[4] See Accession No. 1S.48:41/B-1956, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

female in the background carries a flask and accompanies a maid carrying a tray, suggesting that she is one of the attendants surrounding the couple (Chakraborty 2022).

A similar scene is shown in another 18th-century Mughal painting from Awadh[5], where a female couple is engaged in a subtle hierarchical relationship. In the depiction, the cross-dressed, turbaned female figure assumes the role of the dominant partner, tenderly lifting her lover's chin while sensually caressing her companion's feet with her toes. The romantic pair is accompanied by two elite maids; each depicted engaging with a red rose, likely symbolising romance. The couple is attended to by several other maids, who serve them wine and food and provide entertainment (Chakraborty 2022).

Romantic love between two women is further evident in the 18th-century Jaipur watercolour and gold painting[6]. The intertwining of their bodies, the interlocked gaze, and the shared gesture of holding hands while partaking in a glass of wine are central to the illustration. The setting is a white marble terrace garden adorned with gold embroidery, set against a sunset sky. In the scene, a maidservant is seen fanning the couple while two other maids attend to their needs (Chakraborty 2022).

The artwork of the Mughal Empire and the Deccan Sultanates often depicts figures of Ethiopian origin, too. The iconography reflects the empires' participation in the Indian Ocean trade, showing male slaves from East Africa imported for military training (Chakraborty 2022). The slaves often rose to high administrative positions, effectively becoming rulers and contributing to the construction of cities, forts, and mosques, as well as commissioning expensive paintings (Pouwels 2002). A Deccan artwork, for instance, shows two female lovers under a starry moonlit night sky, attended by dark-complexioned maids, possibly of African origin.[7] This portrayal strongly suggests that women of colour not only played servile marginal roles but also sometimes became the central figures in Mughal gender-fluid iconography (Chakraborty 2022). Despite the precolonial archive offering multiple avenues for understanding gender-fluid identity, however, the traditional understanding of ambivalent sexuality transformed during the rule of the British Crown (circa 1858 - 1947). The colonial rule imposed a binary system of genders, considering those who did not fit within these categories as outcasts (Hinchy 2020). An illustrative instance is the Indian Penal Code of 1860, which criminalised 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' (ibid.). The British encounters with the Tritiya Prakriti in western India in the late 18th century marked one of the initial colonial interactions with eunuchs. The observation was documented in the correspondence from contingents of the British East India Company during the early stages of mercantile colonialism (Hinchy 2020). As the British gradually assumed control of Maratha territories from 1817 onwards, the group's hereditary rights, including revenue shares, were curtailed under the indigenous Maratha regime (ibid.). The community began being increasingly marginalised into the expanding underworld comprising low-caste workers, prostitutes, and beggars (Jain 2017). The Tritiya Prakriti were subsequently criminalised under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a law that was revoked in 1952 after India gained independence.

Conclusions

A decade since the Supreme Court struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, decriminalising homosexuality, prompts the inquiry into the visibility of the Tritiya Prakriti cultural heritage. Why this ethnic group is still not a focus of broad scholarly research despite its rich and long history? To what extent can the silence be attributed to limited contributions to inclusive heritage by archaeology? Could it be argued that, despite the legal acceptance of the Tritiya Prakriti, colonial ideology still prevails in India, creating barriers to the inclusion of gendered categories and hindering the group from fully embracing its identity?

As much as cultural diversity is vital in understanding the evolution of historical gender, material culture is potent in revealing how ethnic identity is interconnected within the

[5] See Accession No. 1S.48:42/A-1956, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

[6] See Accession No. IM.105-1922, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

[7] See Accession No. 1967-30-394, The Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

academic spectrum, shaping and reshaping our insight into gender studies. As an interdisciplinary field, it thrives alongside archaeology, art, and history, raising key questions pertaining to the interpretation of meaning, the reasons, the processes and agents involved in the moulding of identity, and the emotional and sensory impacts on the growth of ethnic groups. Therefore, the material culture from pre-colonial India may serve as a visual repository documenting the extensive history of gender-fluid communities. As such, it contributes to the expanding corpus of evidence that challenges assertions by conservative religious factions regarding historic gender diversity. The relationship between material culture and gender fluidity is, indeed, a nuanced one that extends beyond a mere application of gender to an aesthetic category. It prompts reflection on how gender-based conventions of stability and timelessness have influenced our perceptions of our bodies and how gender-fluid communities, inherent in and repressed by conventional architectural practices, represented their bodily experiences. Throughout the evolution of the gender fluidity, the concept of the constant dynamics may have remained a significant undercurrent, highlighting the material culture as an archive that warrants revisitation to expand our understanding of how the nonbinary groups interacted with each other as well as with mainstream historic societies. The evolution of the Tritiya Prakriti group ethnic identity might have involved objectifying their cultural practices to recognise and communicate their differences in contrast to others. The extent to which their identity is embedded in material culture however may depend on the cultural changes brought about by the dynamics of interaction and power relations among different social groups. Therefore, although there may not be a direct correspondence between representations of identity and the material culture of this community, the resulting pattern may consist of overlapping boundaries shaped by context-specific representations of cultural differences, which were subject to reproduction and transformation within the ongoing processes of their social life. This way, because material culture incorporates a body of source material consisting of objects and spaces through which the Tritiya Prakriti identity has been constructed and defined, it is far from a witness but an independent agent in the creation of their history.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare

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