



Knowledge is the best medicine – only when it comes from an authentic source

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About fifteen years ago, one evening, I was walking towards the house of a professor who taught us at the Ayurveda College in Bangalore. The house is located in the busy Gandhinagar area of the city and the road leading to it, from the college, is a narrow lane. As I walked unsuspectingly, I was mobbed by a group of transgender women who looked rough and uncouth. Sensing that I was taken aback, one of them said, “*Ae kodu duddu, illa jip bichbidteeni* [Give me some money or I’ll unzip your pants]”. I felt both humiliated and frightened.

It was incidentally the day I had received my first stipend as an intern at the hospital attached to the college. My pockets, visibly full with currency notes, caught their attention. I knew not how to escape without giving them money.

Somewhat traumatized, I ran towards the professor’s house and told her of the unexpected event. She remarked in a consoling way, “Losing money to them is believed to bring good fortune. Don’t worry too much.”

Their rough behavior, their mysterious biology, and society’s attitude towards them, all left a muddled impression on me. The first thing I did after returning home was to read about the condition. I needed an understanding of their sexual biology. Specifically, I had to know this: they look like men, but are clad in sarees. What genitals do they have? And, why are they compelled to wear sarees in spite of apparently being men?

While the Ayurveda classics do recognize and describe transgender people, the information contained in them is mostly of a conjectural nature. Even when supplemented with a good modern commentary, like that of BG Ghanekar’s, the descriptions remain hazy.[1] Referring to an updated scientific publication, therefore, is indispensable in matters like this.

The Merck Manual, a medical textbook in continuous publication since 1899, is the reference I usually consult. The questions at hand led me to the section on Gender

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Identity in that easy-to-refer book.[2] It gave a lucid explanation of the condition and my doubts were satisfactorily answered. Concomitantly, I also saw the sad possibility of some good people around us suffering silently on account of being trapped somewhere on the gender incongruence spectrum.

Indeed, a few years after this incident, I had the occasion to help a patient with gender incongruence recognise and acknowledge her sexuality. The patient has told me on more than one occasion that knowing the biological basis of her condition was reassuring. She had, until then, been troubled by a lingering doubt that her condition was the result of 'perverse' thinking. Simply knowing that her sexual identity was natural and not acquired brought her peace. As always, self-awareness brings comfort and ease. This patient is a very fine human being and my interactions with her made me more empathetic towards people with gender incongruence.

The whole chain of events recounted here came to mind again when I read about Chief Justice DY Chandrachud being unfairly mocked for a remark he made during the ongoing court proceedings in the same-sex marriage case.[3] The judge had said that "male/female is not decided merely by the genitals you have. It is far more complex than that." The judge's view is, in fact, not wrong at all. Gender

incongruence results from a mismatch between one's gender identity (innate sense of being male/female/something else) and the anatomical sex.[3] One would wish people did some careful reading with an emphasis on ideas and intent rather than quibble on semantics. If anything, the Chief Justice must be applauded for being proactive in helping a marginalised community achieve its constitutional rights of liberty and equality.

Knowledge is the best medicine; equally, wrong knowledge is poison. In matters related to human sexuality, the best sources of information are certainly not random things picked up from the internet and its porn sites. Authoritative medical works are to be consulted.

There is a new tendency amongst a few vociferous and self-styled protectors of Indian culture, of suspecting that reputed scientific publications are a cleverly-hatched conspiracy against India to derail its civilisational mores. This is simply the result of an alarmism rooted in poor intellectual abilities and poorer cultural understanding.

Awareness, empathy, and compassion towards all life have been at the very heart of Indian culture. As Vagbhata memorably said, "*Atmavat satatam pashyet api kita-pipilikam* [One must empathise even with mites and ants as if they were one's own.]"[4]

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