

Symbols of Emancipation? Images of God/dess, Devotees and Trans-sex/gender in Hindu Traditions

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From Ancient times the imagery and mythology of the most important Hindu gods Viṣṇu and Śiva – who are personified as males – comprise well-known and popular representations of transsexual/transgender phenomena. For special purposes, Viṣṇu takes on a female form called Mohinī, whereas the androgynous manifestation of Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara unites the male god with his female counterpart. The significance of these images does not remain the same throughout history. The varying interpretations change according to different cultural contexts, developments, discourses and interests. Regarding Viṣṇu Mohinī, she may represent the classical stereotype of the temptress, but can also be considered as a transsexual. Pictorial representations act as powerful symbols which legitimate traditional patterns of sex and gender, as well as their dynamic transformations.