



The Kinnar Akhara: Deconstructing and Reclaiming the Symbolism of Inclusivity in Sanatan Dharma

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Abstract

The establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in 2019 represents a watershed moment in the contemporary articulation of gender inclusivity within Sanatan Dharma. This paper examines the theological, sociological, and symbolic dimensions of this unprecedented inclusion of transgender and intersex individuals within the formal structure of Hindu monastic orders. Through textual analysis of classical Sanskrit literature, ethnographic observations, and interviews with key stakeholders, this study argues that the Kinnar Akhara's formation constitutes not merely an act of modern progressive accommodation, but rather a reclamation of ancient Vedic principles of cosmic duality and transcendence that have been obscured by centuries of patriarchal interpretation. The paper traces the historical trajectory of hijra communities within Hindu society, analyzes the scriptural foundations for gender fluidity in Vedic cosmology, and evaluates the transformative potential of the Kinnar Akhara's institutional recognition within the broader context of contemporary Hindu reform movements.

Keywords: Kinnar Akhara, Transgender Spirituality, Sanatan Dharma, Gender Inclusivity, Hijra Communities, Vedic Cosmology.

1. Introduction

The 2019 Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj witnessed an event of profound theological and social significance: the formal recognition of the Kinnar Akhara, the first monastic order exclusively for transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming individuals within the institutional framework of Sanatan Dharma. Led by Mahamandaleshwar Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, this akhara's establishment marked a revolutionary moment in the contemporary understanding of gender and spirituality within Hindu tradition (Chakraborty, 2019, p. 142) [6].

The formation of the Kinnar Akhara raises fundamental questions about the nature of inclusivity, authenticity, and reform within Sanatan Dharma. Critics have dismissed it as a modern concession to progressive politics, while supporters argue it represents a return to the tradition's most ancient and authentic principles. This paper contends that the truth lies in a more complex understanding: the Kinnar Akhara simultaneously represents both innovation and restoration, challenging contemporary Hindu society to confront the gap between its textual ideals and social practices.

The significance of this development extends far beyond its immediate participants. As Vanita and Kidwai observe, "the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities within formal religious structures represents a crucial test of any tradition's capacity for self-renewal and authentic interpretation" (2001, p. 67) [37]. The Kinnar Akhara's emergence thus provides a

unique lens through which to examine broader questions of religious authority, textual interpretation, and social transformation within contemporary Hinduism.

2. Historical Context: The Hijra Community in Hindu Society

2.1. Ancient Foundations

The presence of gender-variant individuals in Hindu society possesses deep historical roots that predate contemporary Western concepts of transgender identity. The Sanskrit term "tritiya-prakriti" (third nature) appears in classical texts as early as the Mahabharata, suggesting an ancient recognition of individuals who transcend binary gender categories (Zwilling, 1991, p. 383) [40]. The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana explicitly discusses the "tritiya-prakriti" in its taxonomy of human sexuality, describing individuals "who dress, behave and make a living like women" (Burton, 1883, p. 147) [4].

Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization reveals artifacts suggesting the veneration of hermaphroditic deities, indicating that gender ambiguity held sacred significance in pre-Vedic religious practices (Kenoyer, 1998, p. 89) [14]. The continuity of such symbolism into classical Hinduism can be observed in the widespread worship of Ardhanarishvara, the half-male, half-female form of Shiva, which represents the fundamental unity of masculine and feminine principles in cosmic creation.

2.2. Medieval Institutionalization

During the medieval period, hijra communities developed sophisticated social and economic structures that paralleled, yet remained distinct from, mainstream Hindu society. The Mughal period saw the institutionalization of hijras within court hierarchies, where they served as guardians of royal harems and held positions of considerable influence (Sharma, 2000, p. 274) ^[28]. This period established many of the social customs and ritual practices that continue to characterize hijra communities today.

The hijra tradition of blessing newborn children and newly married couples emerged during this era, drawing upon ancient Hindu concepts of fertility and auspiciousness. As Nanda observes, "the hijra's blessing is sought precisely because of their liminal status—neither male nor female, they are believed to possess special powers that transcend ordinary human limitations" (1999, p. 23). This ritual function demonstrates the complex relationship between social marginalization and spiritual authority that has long characterized hijra identity.

2.3. Colonial Disruption and Contemporary Revival

British colonial administration fundamentally altered the social position of hijra communities through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which criminalized their traditional practices and economic activities (Hinchy, 2019, p. 156) ^[13]. This legal marginalization, combined with Victorian moral sensibilities, effectively erased centuries of cultural accommodation and reduced hijras to objects of social disgust rather than spiritual reverence.

Post-independence India has witnessed a gradual revival of interest in hijra traditions, culminating in the 2014 Supreme Court recognition of transgender rights in the NALSA judgment. This legal vindication has provided the foundation for broader social acceptance and the eventual establishment of the Kinnar Akhara (Dutta, 2018, p. 203) ^[9].

3. Scriptural Foundations of Gender Transcendence

3.1. Vedic Cosmology and Dual Principles

The philosophical foundations for gender inclusivity within Sanatan Dharma can be traced to the earliest Vedic texts, which conceptualize ultimate reality in terms that transcend binary categories. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states: "In the beginning, this universe was the Self alone... It desired, 'Let me have a wife, so that I may be born.' This desire became speech" (1.4.17, Olivelle translation, 1996, p. 34) ^[21]. This creation myth suggests that the primordial Self encompasses both masculine and feminine principles, requiring their union for manifestation.

The concept of "purusha-prakriti" (consciousness-matter) duality in Samkhya philosophy further reinforces the notion that ultimate reality requires the integration of masculine and feminine principles. The Samkhya Karika explains: "Purusha is witness, solitary, indifferent, inactive and spectator; Prakriti is creative, productive, active and unconscious" (Larson, 1979, p. 89) ^[16]. This philosophical framework suggests that spiritual realization involves transcending gender categories rather than reinforcing them.

3.2. Tantric Traditions and Gender Fluidity

Tantric literature provides perhaps the most explicit scriptural support for gender transcendence within Hindu tradition. The Kularnava Tantra declares: "The supreme Shakti is both male and female, and neither male nor female. She who is the cause of both creation and dissolution transcends all dualities"

(Avalon, 1918, p. 267) ^[1]. This text suggests that the highest spiritual realization involves recognizing the illusory nature of gender distinctions.

The practice of ritual gender reversal in certain Tantric traditions demonstrates the theological validity of transcending conventional gender roles. During specific ceremonies, male practitioners adopt feminine dress and behavior, while female practitioners assume masculine roles, symbolically enacting the dissolution of binary categories (Urban, 2003, p. 145) ^[35]. These practices provide clear precedent for the legitimacy of gender-variant spiritual expression within Hindu tradition.

3.3. Puranic Narratives of Transformation

The Puranas contain numerous narratives of gender transformation that serve as theological precedents for contemporary transgender spirituality. The story of Ila/Sudyumna in the Vishnu Purana describes a king who periodically transforms between male and female forms, eventually achieving spiritual liberation through acceptance of this dual nature (Wilson, 1840, p. 412) ^[38]. Similarly, the Brahmavaivarta Purana narrates Krishna's temporary assumption of female form as Mohini, demonstrating divine transcendence of gender limitations.

Perhaps most significantly, the Skanda Purana contains explicit references to individuals who "having been born in one form, live as another" and describes their spiritual practices as valid paths to liberation (Tagare, 1994, p. 156) ^[32]. These textual sources provide clear scriptural authorization for the spiritual legitimacy of gender-variant individuals within Hindu tradition.

4. The Formation and Structure of the Kinnar Akhara

4.1. Genesis and Leadership

The idea for the Kinnar Akhara emerged from discussions between Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and senior members of the Juna Akhara during the 2016 Kumbh Mela at Ujjain. Tripathi, already recognized as a spiritual leader within the hijra community, had long advocated for formal recognition within traditional Hindu structures (Singh, 2020, p. 78) ^[30]. The support of influential mahants within established akharas proved crucial in legitimizing this unprecedented initiative. The formal establishment process required extensive consultation with the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the governing body of Hindu monastic orders. As Tripathi recounts: "We had to demonstrate that our spiritual practices were authentic, that our commitment was genuine, and that our inclusion would strengthen rather than dilute the tradition" (Personal interview, February 2020). This process of validation reflects the careful negotiation required to balance innovation with tradition.

4.2. Organizational Structure and Practices

The Kinnar Akhara follows traditional akhara organizational principles while adapting them to the specific needs of its membership. Like other akharas, it maintains a hierarchical structure with a Mahamandaleshwar at its head, followed by mandaleshwars, mahants, and regular sadhus (Gross, 1992, p. 267) ^[11]. However, the Kinnar Akhara has innovated in its initiation practices, developing rituals that acknowledge the unique spiritual journey of gender-variant individuals.

The daily practices of Kinnar Akhara members combine traditional Hindu sadhana with specific elements addressing transgender spirituality. Morning prayers include invocations to Ardhanarishvara and other deities associated with gender

transcendence. The akhara has also developed unique meditation techniques focused on reconciling bodily experience with spiritual identity (Chakravorty, 2021, p. 134) [7].

4.3. Ritual Innovation and Authenticity

One of the most significant challenges facing the Kinnar Akhara has been developing authentic ritual practices that honor both traditional forms and contemporary transgender experience. The akhara's approach has been to identify existing elements within Hindu tradition that support gender transcendence while creating new practices where necessary. The sacred thread ceremony (upanayana) for transgender initiates represents one such innovation. Traditional upanayana is typically reserved for males from specific castes, but the Kinnar Akhara has developed modified ceremonies that recognize the spiritual authority of gender-variant individuals regardless of birth assignment (Narayan, 2020, p. 89) [20]. These adaptations have faced criticism from orthodox quarters but have been defended on the basis of Vedic principles of spiritual equality.

5. Theological Implications and Debates

5.1. Orthodox Resistance and Conservative Critiques

The establishment of the Kinnar Akhara has generated significant theological debate within Hindu intellectual circles. Orthodox critics argue that the akhara represents an inappropriate modernization of ancient traditions, driven more by contemporary political pressures than authentic spiritual insight. The Dharma Shastri Sangh has published several statements questioning the scriptural validity of transgender spiritual authority (Sharma, 2019, p. 234) [29].

Conservative arguments typically focus on perceived violations of varna-ashrama dharma and concerns about ritual purity. Critics contend that traditional akharas have maintained their spiritual authority through strict adherence to ancient practices, and that accommodating transgender individuals compromises this integrity (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 167) [2]. These arguments reflect deeper anxieties about religious authority and social change within contemporary Hindu society.

5.2. Progressive Theological Support

Supporters of the Kinnar Akhara have developed sophisticated theological arguments defending its legitimacy within Hindu tradition. Progressive scholars point to the tradition's fundamental emphasis on the ultimate illusory nature of all worldly distinctions, including gender. As Ramanujan argues, "If the goal of spiritual practice is to transcend identification with the body and mind, then attachment to gender categories represents a form of spiritual ignorance rather than religious orthodoxy" (2018, p. 201).

Liberation theology perspectives within Hinduism have embraced the Kinnar Akhara as representing the tradition's authentic commitment to universal spiritual dignity. These interpretations draw heavily on Advaitic philosophy's teaching that the true Self (Atman) transcends all phenomenal categories, making gender distinctions ultimately irrelevant to spiritual realization (Satchidanandendra, 1997, p. 145) [27].

5.3. The Question of Authenticity

Perhaps the most significant theological question raised by the Kinnar Akhara concerns the nature of religious authenticity itself. Traditional Hindu thought has long recognized that authentic spiritual practice requires adaptation to changing

circumstances while maintaining essential principles. The concept of "yuga dharma" suggests that religious practices must evolve to address the specific challenges of each historical epoch (Biardeau, 1989, p. 234) [3].

The Kinnar Akhara's supporters argue that its establishment represents precisely this kind of authentic adaptation. By providing institutional recognition for individuals whose spiritual needs had been neglected by traditional structures, the akhara actualizes core Hindu principles of inclusivity and universal spiritual potential. Critics, however, contend that such adaptations sacrifice traditional authority for contemporary relevance.

6. Social Impact and Transformation

6.1. Community Empowerment and Identity

The establishment of the Kinnar Akhara has had profound effects on transgender communities throughout India. Beyond its immediate membership, the akhara has provided a powerful symbol of social acceptance and spiritual legitimacy for gender-variant individuals who had previously been excluded from formal religious participation.

Research conducted by the Centre for Social Research indicates that knowledge of the Kinnar Akhara's existence has significantly improved self-perception among transgender individuals, even those who do not participate directly in its activities (Menon, 2021, p. 78) [18]. The psychological impact of seeing transgender individuals in positions of religious authority cannot be understated, particularly for young people struggling with gender identity issues.

The akhara has also influenced broader hijra community organization. Traditional hijra societies, organized around guru-chela relationships and territorial divisions, have begun incorporating elements of the akhara's more egalitarian structure. This has led to increased educational opportunities and economic diversification within transgender communities (Reddy, 2022, p. 156) [26].

6.2. Mainstream Hindu Response

The response of mainstream Hindu society to the Kinnar Akhara has been mixed, reflecting broader tensions around gender and sexuality in contemporary India. Urban, educated Hindus have generally been more accepting, viewing the akhara as consistent with Hinduism's pluralistic traditions. Rural communities have shown greater resistance, often reflecting traditional prejudices against hijra communities.

Significantly, the akhara's participation in the Kumbh Mela has helped normalize transgender presence in Hindu religious spaces. Pilgrims who might never have interacted with transgender individuals have encountered Kinnar Akhara members in contexts of obvious devotion and spiritual authority. As one pilgrim observed: "Seeing them performing aarti and giving blessings made me realize that God accepts everyone" (Field notes, Haridwar Kumbh, 2021).

6.3. Legal and Policy Implications

The Kinnar Akhara's establishment has had significant implications for legal and policy discussions around transgender rights in India. The akhara's formal recognition by traditional Hindu authorities has strengthened arguments for broader social acceptance and legal protection of transgender individuals.

Legal scholars have noted that the akhara's existence challenges conventional understandings of religious freedom and minority rights. If transgender individuals constitute a distinct religious minority with specific spiritual needs, this

might justify special protections and accommodations (Dhanda, 2020, p. 289) ^[8]. The intersection of religious and gender identity thus opens new avenues for rights-based advocacy.

7. Comparative Analysis with Other Reform Movements

7.1. Historical Precedents in Hindu Reform

The Kinnar Akhara can be understood within the broader context of Hindu reform movements that have challenged traditional exclusions while claiming scriptural authority. The 19th-century Brahmo Samaj movement similarly argued for the inclusion of previously marginalized groups based on Vedic principles of universal spirituality (Kopf, 1979, p. 167) ^[15]. Like the Kinnar Akhara, these movements faced resistance from orthodox quarters while claiming to represent authentic Hindu tradition.

The Dalit rights movement within Hinduism provides another relevant comparison. Leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argued that caste discrimination contradicted fundamental Hindu principles of spiritual equality, much as Kinnar Akhara advocates argue that gender discrimination contradicts principles of transcendence (Zelliot, 1992, p. 234) ^[39]. Both movements have had to navigate tensions between traditional authority and progressive interpretation.

7.2. Women's Spiritual Leadership

The struggle for women's access to religious authority within Hinduism offers particularly relevant parallels to the Kinnar Akhara's situation. The debate over women's right to perform priestly functions has involved similar arguments about scriptural interpretation, ritual purity, and traditional authority (Leslie, 1991, p. 145) ^[17]. The gradual acceptance of female spiritual leaders in some Hindu contexts has provided precedent for the inclusion of other marginalized groups.

However, the transgender rights movement faces unique challenges that differ from women's rights advocacy. While women can claim inclusion based on their representation in traditional texts, transgender individuals must often argue for the spiritual validity of identities that challenge textual categories themselves (Vanita, 2005, p. 89) ^[36]. This requires more fundamental theological innovation than simply expanding existing categories.

7.3. International Hindu Diaspora Perspectives

The response to the Kinnar Akhara among Hindu diaspora communities has revealed interesting cultural variations in attitudes toward gender and tradition. North American Hindu communities, influenced by broader LGBTQ+ rights movements, have generally been supportive of the akhara's establishment. Organizations like the Hindu American Foundation have issued statements supporting transgender inclusion as consistent with Hindu values of diversity and acceptance (HAF, 2020, p. 12) ^[12].

European Hindu communities have shown more varied responses, often reflecting the specific political contexts of their host societies. British Hindu organizations have been influenced by ongoing debates about gender recognition and religious accommodation, leading to nuanced positions that support transgender rights while maintaining traditional practices (Raj, 2021, p. 156) ^[23].

8. Contemporary Challenges and Future Prospects

8.1. Institutional Sustainability

Despite its symbolic significance, the Kinnar Akhara faces significant challenges in establishing long-term institutional

sustainability. Like other akharas, it depends on donations and volunteer support, but lacks the extensive networks of traditional institutions. The akhara has been working to develop sustainable funding mechanisms, including partnerships with progressive Hindu organizations and international human rights groups (Financial Report, 2021).

The challenge of leadership succession also looms large. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's personal charisma and activism have been crucial to the akhara's establishment, but developing institutional structures that can survive leadership transitions remains a work in progress. The akhara has been establishing formal training programs for future leaders, drawing on both traditional gurukula methods and contemporary organizational development practices (Training Manual, 2021) ^[34].

8.2. Theological Development

The Kinnar Akhara's theological development remains in its early stages, with significant work needed to establish comprehensive frameworks for transgender spirituality within Hindu tradition. Current practices draw heavily on existing traditions with limited innovation, but developing distinctive theological contributions will be crucial for long-term legitimacy.

Scholars associated with the akhara have begun developing systematic theologies of gender transcendence that draw on Advaitic, Tantric, and Bhakti traditions while addressing contemporary transgender experience. This work has the potential to contribute significantly to broader Hindu theological discourse, particularly regarding questions of embodiment, identity, and liberation (Theological Papers, 2021).

8.3. Social Integration and Acceptance

The long-term success of the Kinnar Akhara will depend significantly on its ability to achieve genuine social integration rather than mere symbolic recognition. This requires ongoing engagement with mainstream Hindu communities, educational initiatives, and demonstration of spiritual authenticity through sustained practice and service.

Current indicators suggest gradual progress in social acceptance, particularly among younger generations and urban populations. However, significant work remains to address deep-seated prejudices and misconceptions about transgender individuals within broader Hindu society. The akhara's emphasis on traditional practices and mainstream Hindu symbols has been strategically important in this regard (Social Impact Study, 2022) ^[31].

9. Conclusion

Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine-Masculine Unity

The establishment of the Kinnar Akhara represents more than the inclusion of a marginalized community within Hindu institutional structures; it constitutes a profound theological statement about the nature of spiritual reality itself. By providing formal recognition to individuals who embody the transcendence of gender categories, the akhara actualizes ancient Hindu insights about the ultimate unity of all apparent dualities.

The resistance encountered by the Kinnar Akhara reflects broader tensions within contemporary Hinduism between traditional authority and evolving understanding. However, as this paper has demonstrated, the theological foundations for gender transcendence run deep within Hindu tradition, from Vedic cosmology through Tantric practice to contemporary

Advaitic philosophy. The akhara's achievement lies not in importing foreign concepts, but in recovering neglected dimensions of the tradition itself.

The symbolic significance of the Kinnar Akhara extends far beyond its immediate membership or even broader transgender communities. In a world increasingly polarized by rigid identity categories, the akhara offers a powerful model of spiritual community that honors difference while transcending division. Its emergence challenges all religious traditions to consider whether their institutional structures truly reflect their highest spiritual insights.

As the Kinnar Akhara continues to develop, its influence on broader discussions of gender, spirituality, and social inclusion will likely grow. The questions it raises about authenticity, authority, and adaptation will remain relevant not only for Hindu communities but for all religious traditions navigating the challenges of contemporary pluralistic societies.

The path forward will require continued theological sophistication, institutional development, and social engagement. But the Kinnar Akhara's establishment has already achieved something remarkable: it has created space within one of the world's oldest religious traditions for individuals whose very existence challenges conventional categories to find authentic spiritual expression. In doing so, it has enriched not only transgender communities but the broader Hindu tradition itself.

The ultimate measure of the Kinnar Akhara's success will not be its institutional survival but its contribution to the realization of Hinduism's highest ideals: the recognition of the divine spark within all beings and the transcendence of all artificial divisions in the pursuit of ultimate truth. In this light, the akhara represents not merely a progressive accommodation but a return to the tradition's most fundamental insights about the nature of spiritual reality.

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