



# Shikhandi and Other Stories They Don't Tell You

*Devdutt Pattanaik*

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*Patriarchy establishes men as superior to women.*

*Feminism views women and men as equal.*

*Queerness questions what constitutes male and female.*

Queerness isn't only modern, Western or sexual, says mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik. Take a close look at the vast written and oral traditions in Hinduism, some over two thousand years old, and you will find many overlooked tales, such as those of Shikhandi, who became a man to satisfy her wife; Mahadeva, who became a woman to deliver his devotee's child; Chudala, who became a man to enlighten her husband; Samavan, who became the wife of his male friend; and many more . . .

Playful and touching—and sometimes disturbing—these stories, when compared with their Mesopotamian, Greek, Chinese and Biblical counterparts, reveal the unique Indian way of making sense of queerness.

## Shikhandi and Other Stories They Don't Tell You Details

Date : Published July 20th 2014 by Zubaan and Penguin India

ISBN : 9789383074846

Author : Devdutt Pattanaik

Format : Paperback 196 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Mythology, Nonfiction, Short Stories, Asian Literature, Indian Literature, Cultural, India

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# From Reader Review Shikhandi and Other Stories They Don't Tell You for online ebook

## Karan Gupta says

A friend recently told me that he had read Dr. Pattanaik's "Jaya" and had found it quite interesting. I had been meaning to read it for some time and found myself browsing through the shelves of the bookstore at Jaipur airport for the book. Of course they had it, but another book caught my eye. "Shikhandi and Other Stories They Don't Tell You" seemed to be quite interesting so I got it instead. "Jaya" would have to wait for another time.

I was immensely impressed by Devdutt Pattanaik's "myth=mithya". He seemed to be one of those sensible mythologists who seek out the history in mythology. This book tried to justify the LGBT movements that India saw recently in terms of Hindu religion and mythology. Dr. Pattanaik uses the word queer to refer to any sexuality that is not sanctioned by the major religions. Though the usage of the word might seem a bit ironic, especially when the author is arguing that the queer are just as natural as the non-queer, but if you rid the word of all the negative connotations that it has gathered over time, it is just another word. The book looks into all the twisted stories from various mythological sources of Hindu cultures across India and tries to establish that diversity in genders and sexuality are not only present from times immemorial but are also accepted and celebrated by the pantheon of Hindu gods.

The book talks about gods and men who find themselves in a position to do many of the acts that modern religions (including modern Hinduism) find inappropriate and unnatural. These include acts of changing gender, same sex love, cross dressing, castration to fit a role and many such acts that seem outrageous to our trained minds. All these acts are either done out of volition or as a result of a curse or boon. But never are the subjects of such action frowned upon or outlawed in these stories. Dr. Pattanaik also tells how and why such stories have been suppressed from popular mythology or modified to more suitable forms.

The short read was quite impressive in terms of showing how stories are forgotten when the popular culture does not support them. It was also quite interesting from a point of view of curiosity as it shows the diversity that the Hindu folk lore contain. However, reading the book I felt that Dr. Pattanaik is not an unbiased observer. He is rather someone who holds Hinduism in a higher esteem than other ways of life. Not that there is anything wrong with it, especially when it is being used to bring about a change in the uptight style of living that the monastic order has made popular. But this attitude also tends to distort the interpretation of mythology and things get modified in translation.

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## Richa says

The book is interesting, principally because the folk lores it narrates are interesting. All the lores are stated in concise with author's notes in a bullet form. A quick read. Very light and breezy.

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## Book Riot Community says

A collections of tales from various Hindu myths that deal with gender fluidity, Pattanaik uses these to

illustrate the fact that queerness is not a modern construct. The sources, whether oral or written traditions, are cited to provide context, and these taboo stories themselves are not only extremely important, but are told brilliantly.

Verdict: Buy, along with the author's beautifully illustrated retelling of the Mahabharata.

from Buy, Borrow, Bypass: Hindu Mythology Retellings: <http://bookriot.com/2016/05/23/buy-bo...>

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### **Arun Divakar says**

If memory serves me right, this incident happened around 13 years ago. It was my first trip to Goa and having not traveled much out of Kerala, it surely was filled of excitement for me. I was on a train coming To Goa from Delhi with a whole bunch of raucous teenagers of my own class for company. There had been the odd murmur of "hijras" all through the trip. A classmate who had taken a train journey through this route earlier opined like a wise old man that you better be careful with them. Needless to say, there was a bit of apprehension building up inside me. I do not remember exactly as to where it happened but slowly the tones of clapping and singing reaches me and suddenly in comes a group of six hijras. To the uninitiated, the first sight would be a jolt from normalcy and it was more so for me coming from a rigidly orthodox society like Kerala.(In quite simple English, hijra is the Indian name for a transgender individual)

As luck would have it, I was seated at a corner seat and slightly away from my other friends while all around me were a group of soldiers on their way to a training assignment. As the group came into the compartment, they were met with silent and impassive stares from the soldiers and me trying my best to behave as normal as possible in the corner. With giggles and gestures they moved on to other seats to my immense relief. Some of the others in my group were not so fortunate when they refused to give money to them for 'blessings'. The results of such a refusal from my friends elicited responses from them which were downright comic and gave us a lot of stuff to laugh about later. Looking back at this incident a decade later, I was trying to place what could have been my actual emotion at that moment. Shedding all pretenses of glorification of a moment past, I can frankly say that it was one of fear. A rather irrational fear of the unknown and one that is quite common. As time would have it, there have been more travels to those places again and I have seen hijras on my travels too. Blessings, smiles and wishes have been passed to me and I have lost any and all vestiges of that juvenile fear for them. The Indian society also acknowledged and accepted them only of late. It is rather stunning to note that transgenders have been legally declared as the third sex by the Supreme Court of India only as late as April 2014.

Against this background, this book offers extremely enlightening anecdotes as to what history and mythology thought about transgenders and sexuality in general. Devdutt Pattanaik gathers thirty odd tales from the epics, *puranas*, folklore and oral traditions that turn the sexual rigidity of the Indian society on its head. A look at these stories will tell you how accommodating and amused India was in the past towards the whole aspect of sexuality. The author offers insights into the paradigm shift in the way of thinking that started frowning upon sexuality and made it a taboo occurrence to be thought of only behind closed doors. These stories serve as reminders of how the ancients used to think of sex as just another part of life rather than glorifying it into a hush-hush affair. Borrowing from the philosophy itself, it can be inferred that the soul has no gender and is quite timeless while only the ephemeral flesh thinks of gender. This leads us to gods, goddesses, demons, heroes, kings and queens who were absolutely comfortable with slipping into the

guises of one gender or the other. The stories here feature the archetypes of Hindu alpha-male gods like Siva, Vishnu and Krishna and legendary heroes like Arjuna shifting genders to achieve suitable ends.

These stories are fascinating and thought inducing for the amount of crazy, kinky ideas they pour forth. These are the kind of stories that make you sit back and wonder whether you have been viewing Hindu mythology through the right lenses all this while. There is more to be gained however from the very first part of the book where in a slightly detailed essay, the author captures the essence of gender as World mythology sees it. Quoting from a variety of sources, Pattnaik argues that the concept of gender was a very flexible one as far as the ancient world was concerned. There is more food for thought here than the stories themselves.

As a reader, I did not have much to gripe about this book. The only challenge that I felt was brevity of the stories themselves. It is like taking a three-course meal and compressing it into a tablet which you take with a drink of water. After it goes down your throat, the chap who manufactured the tablet sits you down and explains the contents of the meal in detail. To a reader who is totally new to India's myths, this book wouldn't be very helpful. However, I doubt if the author meant it for such an audience.

Think on these stories for they will make you re look at the mindset that firmly divides human beings into the two buckets of male and female gender !

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### **Sukanto says**

Devdutt Patnaik does not disappoint ever, as his latest work proves again. Shikhandi rides on the brilliance of two things primarily: the meticulous research of the author and the superb introduction to the stories, where Patnaik puts forth the relevance of these tales in contemporary times. And yet avoid being overly judgemental, to be fair to all readers. Also, the lucid narration of these stories, some of which may have hardly existed in written form before, makes you want to understand the issue, if you have been consciously or unconsciously trying not to do so till now. Another one of my best reads for this year.

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### **Veturi says**

The first book I read of Devdutt Patnaik, "The Pregnant King" was a richly detailed, thoroughly researched work by an author who was passionate about the story he wanted to tell which introduced me to an eccentricity I never thought was allowed in our epics. It was a kind of eye opener in that way and it was with this curiosity that I picked up his latest and his most ambitiously titled "Shikandi and Other Tales They Won't Tell You", and I hate to inform that this one is not among the best of his works till date.

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### **Indiabookstore says**

This is a collection of 30 stories about gender and sexual identity – Shikhandi, who was born a woman but raised as a man, Krishna, who became a woman for one day to become wife to a doomed man etc.

“Males and females are distinct and different, and each must behave in a certain specific manner, otherwise

they are aberrations against nature!” is a relatively modern view. By contrast, ancient stories from Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Greek, Chinese, and other cultures feature human beings who question their gender identity and test the boundaries of sexual behavior, and this is not considered illegal or immoral. Such explorations of one’s identity, were accepted or rejected, celebrated or ignored, frowned upon or appreciated – but NOT punished or ridiculed or banned in earlier times. Read the full review: <http://www.indiabookstore.net/bookish...>

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## **Ashok Krishna says**

I was a kid when I first read about Shikhandi. It was the vernacular edition of the great Indian epic Mahabharata, translated by none other than Chakravarti Rajagopalachari - famously known as Rajaji - himself. Remaining fascinated by the adventures of Arjun and Karna, adoring the all-meaning acts of Krishna and reading through the scenes of the battle-field with the childhood curiosity, I paid little or no attention to the role of Shikhandi in the fall of that invincible patriarch of the Kuru clan, Bhishma.

As I grew up, the one character that stood alone in my mind was Krishna. With all his boyish charms, romantic adventures, mysterious mysticism, he remained rooted in my mind, along with his one true love, Radha. Yudhishtira, Arjun, Bhishma, Karna and Panchali, they all fell by the wayside. But recently I started coming across books that took to viewing the Mahabharata through the eyes of some of the lead protagonists and, at times, the antagonists. Having read a book that depicted the epic through the eyes of the pivotal Panchali and also having gone through a couple of poetry works that focused on her relationship with her various husbands, I felt a fascination to learn more about the individual characters. Shikhandi was the not even in the nooks of my mind.

But, the other day I came across this book in the bookshelves of one of the big retail chains in the city. It was love at first sight for me. The design of the cover itself was so intriguing. Here, Krishna stands holding the reins, controlling four powerful stallions that fiercely strain at the leash. Behind him stands that effeminate Shikhandi, wielding a bow shaped by his (or, is it ‘her’?) vengeance, waiting to fulfill his (or, again, is it ‘her’?) destiny by killing Bhishma. And, behind them all stands Arjun, one of the greatest archers that this land is said to have ever produced. Then there is this unmistakable presence of Hanuman, in the banner of the Pandava chariot.

Having heard about Devdutt Pattanaik occasionally and having seen many of his books in the store shelves often, I decided to pick up this book and learn more about the author as well as that crucial little cog in Mahabharata, Shikhandi. Well, it is not a disappointing experience.

This book, as it says in the title, is not just about Shikhandi. It deals with those characters, which the modern society labels as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual & Transgender), that have been existing in this world for eons. The author begins by listing down instances of ‘queer’ sexual behavior and attitudes as noticed in various cultures and epics across the world. He moves across the Time and cultures to pick out examples. From the physical consummation between Leda and Zeus who was in the form of a swan, to a mighty Chinese emperor who cut his robe in order to not disturb his sleeping lover (a man), from the ancient Amazonian female warriors who severed one of their breasts to freely wield the bow, to the Egyptian male gods who forcibly raped their fellow junior gods, he plucks out instances from across the firmament of Time.

But the book mainly focuses on the characters from the Hindu mythology and Indian history of yore. Starting with Shikhandi, this book goes on to recount the tales about male gods who took the forms of women to

protect or to destroy, the female gods that assumed fierce and masculine roles to destroy evil, male gods who took the form of midwives to attend to their devotees in times of need, and gods who mated with one another after one of them took the form of a female. As closely as our species are concerned, there are instances of female friends who didn't want to get separated for the sake of marriage and who decided to live together forever, male friends who underwent a curse with one of them turning into a female and how they overcame the same by marrying between themselves, the great hero Arjun who was cursed to face loss of manliness for an year, and even a poet and a king who developed strong friendship and platonic love for one another without even getting to meet ever.

The book picks up such 'queer' and 'unconventional' behavior from across the width and breadth of our country and points them out to us, without taking sides. Yes. One appreciable aspect that I found about the book is that it doesn't take sides. It neither takes a moral high ground by denouncing LGBT relationships as immoral, nor does it advocate for such relationships, by quoting them as a result of modernism and evolution. If anything, the book merely states the facts, raises a few vicarious questions from the viewpoint of the LGBT community and leaves the rest to us. We get to read about how such queer things have been happening in the past and how they are repeated now, but nowhere does the book pass any judgment whatsoever. That, I would say, is one of the strong points of this book.

Being a person who always felt squeamish to feel or talk about the LGBT trend, I opened this book with a bit of awkwardness clouding my mind, but when I closed it, I learnt that it is possible for anything and everything to exist in this vast Universe of ours. To quote, paraphrased, some sage whose words I came across a long time back, 'Life is big. It is indeed very big. It is us humans that compartmentalize it and define as to what should be and should not be in it. But life is too big to be captured within definitions and to be found within bounds'.

Pick up the book. Worth reading once.

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### **Siddhartha Shankar says**

Challenges status quo & conformity :

This is a selection of tales on the theme of "queerness".(Probably)Well researched through ancient text like Vedas/Puranans.

It might be my non-aligned expectation wherein I expected to build it upto something, instead of reinforcement that orientation existed(in some form and shape) by multitude of anecdotes(monotonous at that).

At times, the 'questions' author asks are interesting & thought provoking but again, gets repetitive after a while.

An easy read for a couple of days. Doesn't make a lasting impression of sorts.

The author is not from a literary background so its casual toned but one may desire for a more structured presentations(hadn't been concern if content were more "absorbing" - a subjective predicament).

But yes - the good part it aims to challenge a status quo which is a brave front in itself. So can be briefly read to appreciate aptitude.

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### **Dibyajyoti Sarma says**

The book was marketed so vociferously in the social media that I had to get a copy. Apparently, the book is about the queer retelling of Indian myths, by India's bestselling mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik. The bestselling mythologist part of the title should immediately make you alert and question your judgment. And when the font-size of the author's name becomes bigger than the title, you know the publisher is trying to sell the book by the name of the author, not by the content.

I ordered the book, nonetheless. I had to see what India's bestselling mythologist is up to. I haven't read much of his work, except his retelling of The Mahabharata, which I thought was brilliantly done, especially the second part of his chapters where he explains the actions of the story, like a highlight, or like a moral of the story, if you like. And I like the way his draws. And I have heard that he is a nice person.

I liked the book. And at the same time it left me angry and frustrated. The approach to the subject and the entire execution is so puerile, so superficial that you wonder for whom the book is meant to, not surely for people who can spare some thought on the subject. This is book for the Facebook generation perhaps, "stories of gods and supernatural deities in drag", to like it and to forget it completely. Because, to begin with, the way the stories are told, without depth and feeling, they are quite forgettable. What surprised me was the matter of fact of tone of a stern school teacher. Was Mr Pattanaik worried that the government would seize the copies of the book if he showed emotion? And his usual footnotes, his morals, don't get me started on those.

What's sad is that Mr Pattanaik knows his mythology. He could have written an in-depth retelling, he could, like he did in The Pregnant King. Instead, he decided to write this, a catalogue of cross-dressing Gods. Sad, really.

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## **Anupama Ma says**

This may be politically incorrect, multi-religiously blasphemous and all that jazz, but seriously what were our ancients smoking? It takes truly brilliant minds to come up with such fascinatingly kinky, twisted stories, attribute it all to gods and goddesses and have centuries of humankind unquestioningly believe in them . To be safe, let me clarify that I say this in a positive sense.

'Queer' is a term I absolutely detest, because the very definition of the word defeats the purpose of creating an all inclusive, tolerant society. I don't know if the purpose of this book was to say that 'queerness' has the blessings of the gods, be it Hindu, Roman, Greek, Assyrian or Egyptian. Or whether it is to convince the upholders of present day morality to look within before they judge. Or to say that it has existed over several millennia so let's not be hypocrites about it. Or to say it happens, deal with it. Or whether it is just another book on Indian mythology for contemporary readers. But I've loved every one of Devdutt Pattanaik's books and I did like this one too.

Most of these stories aren't new to me. I've known many of them since I was a child, thanks to Amar Chitra Katha. But reading them again through adult eyes and from the perspective of 'queerness' is what makes this almost mindblowing. Take Karthikeya for instance. From ACK, all I remember was babies born through a spark from Shiva's head, floating in a river and six beautiful celestial mothers adopting them. These babies then go on to become one baby and is the much loved, much revered god. A heartwarming, beautifully illustrated tale. But now, reading about it from this 'queer' angle, I'm sorry to say, I find his actual conception (if you can call it that) plain creepy. Shiva shoots his seed into the mouth of Agni, it is cooled by Vayu, it goes on to impregnate all the male Devas, then finds its way into the wombs of six totally clueless women



who are so angry that they discard the foetus in the river. The baby(ies) survives inspite of that, a custody battle follows and in the end we get the god we know and worship as Skanda-Karthikeya-Muruga . How crazy is that.

The last time I read about Aravan, after maybe an ACK comic, was in Devdutt Pattanaik's Jaya. All I felt then was anger towards Arjuna for being so callous and unfeeling about his own son, one whom he didn't even remember and was ready to sacrifice. I was irritated with the son of Uloopi and Arjuna for wanting to help the father who had no clue about who he was. And the unfairness of it all. But I didn't give much thought to the queer angle of this tale. And the lesser said about what I think of Krishna the better.

There are thirty such stories in this book, twisted stories, stories of gods and men being castrated for showing restraint, for not showing restraint; men turning into women, women turning into men; deer eating seed and giving birth to humans with antlers; crossdressing gods, sons of gods and mere mortals; men taking the form of animals and sneaking into unwilling women's beds; Bhagirath ,whose very name means what it means, born to two women; men giving birth to men, men giving birth to women, men giving birth to iron maces. There are also tales from Rome, Greece, Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and other ancient civilizations where Things happened.

Maybe these stories started off with the good intention of encouraging ancient societies to embrace all kinds of people. Or maybe these stories were all made up by cunning men to justify their kinks. (I won't say women, it was a male dominated society) Or maybe these stories were just versions of pr0n or fantasy fiction back then.

But whatever it was meant to be, then and now, this book left me totally mindfucked. And looks like that was one bodypart that our gods or our ancestors didn't actually do.

Reviewed here

<http://thebookstoryblog.wordpress.com...>

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### **Satish Inamdar says**

This book is a collection of queer stories (stories that challenge the expected notion of sexuality).

The author has collected many such stories from mythologies and various other forms like oral traditions or folklore of Odiya, Tamil, Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka etc.

The stories are unusual and interesting. Since it is not an original work but a collection from various sources author has went on and provided his commentary/views for each story.

His views are not biased, he poses interesting questions rightly ignoring the taboo associated with them.

This surely is an interesting read, I recommend, in case you want to explore lesser know, weirder stories of our mythology and traditions.

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### **Saraswathi Sambasivan says**

I picked up this book with a great deal of expectations, wanting to know about Shikhandi, who changed the

course of the Kurukshetra war. I was disappointed, mainly because, this book felt like a hurried overview of many characters from the puranas, who were queer. I felt, maybe, the author was treading on egg-shells, so as to not offend people with these tales. A detailed book about such an game-changer in the Kurukshetra war would have been more welcome. Some of these stories I already knew, many, I did not. But this book did leave me with an overload of stories- some that I can remember, some I do not. An average read.

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## **Amresh says**

“Queerness questions what constitutes male and female.”

The first part of the book explained the idea of Queerness and its existence in Hindu mythology. The author has referred some of the world’s ancient mythologies for having the presence of queer behavior. The second part of the book is a collection of 30 Hindu mythological stories making a strong mark about the queer behavior and therefore bridging with the first part of the book.

Both male and female and their natural personality traits are the creation of the God. Lord Shiva, who became a woman to deliver his devotee’s grandchild, when she was unable to reach her daughter’s house in time due to the incessant rainy condition. Lord Vishnu transformed into Mohini to delude Bhasma-asura and burn him to ashes. Lord Shiva and Mohini’s together created many warriors, who protected the world from demons. It seems that sometimes, the Gods have adopted unnatural path within their own creation to bless the devotees or to achieve certain purpose in broader prospect. The intention of transformation is purely inspired to benefit and serves other.

I always enjoy the Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik’s way of mythological narration. The stories in this book could have been little more explanatory rather than just introductory.

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## **Sahitya says**

This is a wonderful collection of stories, most of which you’ll be aware of if you have extensively read various versions of our Hindu epics. What changes is the perspective that the author offers, looking at these stories from a queer perspective - how gender and sexuality were quite fluid in ancient times and it’s only through the passage of time and influence of other cultures that has made our culture now more rigid and intolerant of anyone who don’t confirm to the gender and sexual binaries.

This book definitely made me wonder how easy it has always been for me to accept the queer undertones of these stories without ever acknowledging it and just attributing it to the actions of gods. Wish life were that simple and there was widespread acceptance of everyone irrespective of their identity in our world.

Definitely give this book a try because it offers a very different approach to interpreting our traditional stories and might just open your eyes a little more.

And I leave you with this last one from the book —

“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.”

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