



The Third Nature

Alignments

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: Asian American Studies, Hindu American Studies, World Religion, US History

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: Historical Knowledge, Centering the Lived Experiences of People of Color, Intersectionality and Systems of Power, Self and Collective Transformation, Recognizing Resistance and Transformation

Oregon Standards: HS ES.03, 05, 06, 08

Standards Alignment: CCSS RI.9-10.6 & RI.11-12.6; W.9-10.1 & W.11-12.1; SL.9-10.1 & SL.11-12.1

C3 Standards: D1.5.9-12; D2.His.1.9-12; D2.Civ.14.9-12; D3.1.9-12; D4.1.9-12

Lesson Overview

This lesson explores how societies define gender and how understandings of gender diversity have existed across cultures and history, with a particular focus on Dharmic and South Asian perspectives. Students will examine the concept of *tr̥t̥yā prakṛti* — "third nature" — an ancient Dharmic recognition of gender identities beyond the male-female binary. The lesson introduces students to the complexity of gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation as shaped by biological, cultural, spiritual, and legal factors.

Students will engage in personal reflection and small group discussions to consider how different societies determine which genders are recognized, and how these definitions affect people's roles and rights. They will explore how *tr̥t̥yā prakṛti* individuals were sometimes honored with spiritual roles in temples, courts, and ceremonies, while at other times faced exclusion or legal restrictions, particularly under British colonial rule.

The lesson connects these historical perspectives to contemporary LGBTQ+ issues, including legal recognition, military service, and social acceptance, allowing students to draw parallels between past and present struggles for inclusion. Through readings, discussion, interactive spectrum activities, and reflective assessments, students will gain a deeper understanding of the long-standing presence of gender diversity and the social, legal, and spiritual forces that influence how individuals are included or marginalized.

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Key Terms

Gender Spectrum — The idea that gender is not limited to two categories (male and female) but exists across a wide range of identities and expressions.

Tṛtīyā Prakṛti — A Sanskrit term meaning “third nature,” referring to people whose gender identity, expression, or sexuality does not fit into binary categories of man and woman in ancient Dharmic thought.

Non-Binary — A modern term for people who do not identify strictly as man or woman.

Transgender — A person whose gender identity is different from their biological sex.

Intersex — A person born with physical sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, hormones, and/or anatomy) that don't fit typical definitions of male (XY) or female (XX) bodies.

Hijra — A traditional third nature community in South Asia, with cultural and spiritual roles often linked to blessing ceremonies for births and weddings.

Kothi, Aravani, Jogappa — Other terms used within South Asian cultures to describe specific third nature or gender-diverse identities and roles.

Manusmṛti — An ancient Mīmāṃsaka legal code that includes laws about gender, tribe, and social behavior, dating roughly from 200 BCE to 200 CE.

Mahābhārata / Rāmāyaṇa — Ancient Hindu epics that contain stories reflecting gender fluidity and third nature figures.

Kāmaśāstra — A group of ancient texts (including the well-known *Kāma Sūtra*) that discuss love, sexuality, and human relationships, including descriptions of third nature individuals.

Dharmaśāstra — Legal codes of the Mīmāṃsā tradition outlining moral values, social duties, and laws for the specific South Asian kingdoms that followed the Mīmāṃsā tradition.

Khawaja Sira — A term originally used in Islamic South Asian contexts (such as in Mughal courts) referring to gender-nonconforming palace officials and guardians.

Tantra — refers to Dharma traditions and sources of knowledge that focus on augmenting energies for both having a happy, fulfilling life, and also spiritual progress. Some Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Dharma traditions are based totally on them, others include them in their traditions, and others do not include them.

Colonialism — The control and rule of one country over another, resulting in the imposition of foreign laws and cultural beliefs.

Criminal Tribes Act (1871) — A British colonial law in India that criminalized Hijra communities, severely restricting their traditional roles and barring them from raising children (even their own).

Section 377 — A British colonial law criminalizing same-sex sexual activity in India. This was finally decriminalized in 2018.

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Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze the concept of gender diversity across historical and cultural contexts by examining the Dharmic concept of *tr̥tīyā prakṛti* and its role in South Asian societies.
- Evaluate the impact of legal, spiritual, and colonial systems on the treatment and social status of gender-diverse individuals in South Asia.
- Compare and contrast binary and spectrum-based understandings of gender and sexuality, reflecting on how different societies recognize and categorize gender identities.
- Discuss the relevance of historical understandings of gender diversity in contemporary conversations about LGBTQ+ rights, inclusion, and social justice.

Gender Diversity

Open the class by providing students with a reminder of discussion norms for the classroom. Start by saying, “Before we begin, let’s remember that this classroom is both a safe and brave space. That means everyone should feel respected and free to share, while also being open to thoughtful challenge and new perspectives. We value multiple viewpoints, especially those shaped by lived experience—but we also ground our discussion in reasoned, respectful dialogue.”

Begin the discussion by asking the class, “How do societies decide what genders exist? Could a society recognize more than two genders? If so, what might that happen?”

Have students silently reflect for one minute. Then have students discuss with a partner for 2 minutes. Then a small group for 3 minutes. Allow for discussion as a larger class if time permits.

Use discretion when having classroom discussions as student emotions may be intensified.

When presenting information to students, the information can be read aloud by the teacher or a student, read silently, or read in groups. If a copy is provided to students, have students underline or circle areas that resonate with them. If a copy is not provided, have students jot down parts of the reading that resonate with them on a separate sheet of paper.

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Gender and sexuality are important parts of who we are, and are informed by both medical science and ideologies that may derive from the religion or law of a specific place. While biological gender has conventionally been seen as a binary in the USA - that is just two - as male or female, there are cases of people who have intersex body parts, and that is seen as an exception. However, other people hold that gender and sexuality exist on a spectrum that goes far beyond the categories of just “male” and “female” or “straight” and “gay.” Around the world—and throughout history—cultures have recognized a wide variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. In Indian society, as in many others, people have expressed their gender and sexuality in diverse and meaningful ways that differ from strict binaries. Some people identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, while others do not. Similarly, people may be attracted to others of a different gender, the same gender, both, or none at all. These variations are natural and valid, and they are shaped by a mix of biological, cultural, personal, and spiritual factors.

Over time, societies across the globe have begun to better recognize and respect this diversity. Movements for gender and sexual rights have helped bring visibility to people who were often marginalized or misunderstood. In many places, younger generations are growing up with a broader understanding of gender and sexuality, leading to new conversations about inclusion, equality, and human rights. As our awareness of human diversity continues to expand, so too does our capacity to build more inclusive and compassionate communities.

Dharmic philosophers, seers, and medical scholars have also long observed that while most biological bodies are categorized as male, female, or intersex, human sexual orientation and gender identity are far more complex. The ancient indigenous Dharmic medical science of Āyurveda recognized that not everyone fits into strictly heterosexual relationships or gender roles. Instead, they described a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations which they recognized as inherent in an individual since their conception in the womb, and which collectively were known as *tr̥tīyā prakṛti*, or “third nature.” Remarkably, over forty-three distinct types of gender identities and sexual orientations were documented under this broad category.

Tr̥tīyā prakṛti is a Sanskrit term that translates to “third nature.” This category recognizes that not all people fit neatly into the binary divisions of male or female or with heterosexuality, which is often the dominant framework in Western societies. The idea of *tr̥tīyā prakṛti* reflects a much older understanding of gender diversity that existed in South Asia long before modern conversations about LGBTQ+ identities began. It acknowledges a natural diversity of human experiences, encompassing people whose gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation differs from the conventional norms of their society. Historically and today, individuals who might be called part of the third nature

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include Hijras, kothis, aravanis, jogappas, and others whose identities, bodies, and/or social roles differ from binary gender norms.

People described as *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* include individuals who today might identify as non-binary, transgender, gender non-conforming, intersex, or same-sex attracted. For example, some historical sources refer to men with feminine qualities, women with masculine qualities, or individuals who desire same-sex partners. Importantly, these individuals were not necessarily seen as outside of social norms; rather, they were often considered simply another part of the human spectrum.

The concept of third nature appears in many ancient Indian texts. In Hindu epics like the Mahābhārata, we see the story of Śikhaṇḍī, a warrior born female who identifies and lives as male. In the same epic, Arjuna, one of the main heroes, temporarily adopts a transgender identity as Bṛhannalā during a year of exile. The *Rāmāyaṇa* also contains stories where gender is fluid or transformed by divine intervention. The Kāmasāstra includes descriptions of *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* people, exemplifying that ancient Indian culture understood that the human species naturally has people with a variety of gender expressions and sexual orientations. The Dharmaśāstras (Mīmāṃsaka legal codes) also make reference to people of a third nature, often detailing their social roles, legal status, and participation in certain ceremonies.

Spiritual and Social Roles of Tr̥t̥iyā Prakṛti

The existence of *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* illustrates that there was deep historical awareness of gender diversity in Dharmic societies. While the exact way these individuals were treated varied over time and place, many were able to take on unique social and spiritual roles. In some historical periods and regions, certain third nature individuals served as priests, artists, dancers, musicians, or spiritual intermediaries, believed to have special spiritual powers or insights because of their unique gender identity.

Their position outside conventional male-female categories was often believed to give them unique access to certain divine energies that others did not possess. In some Hindu traditions, especially those influenced by Tantra beliefs, particular types of spiritual power were thought to emerge from the blending of masculine and feminine forces. Because *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* individuals embodied aspects of both, they were sometimes seen as naturally attuned to sacred forces that transcended ordinary human experience.

In temple settings, some third nature individuals were involved as ceremonial specialists, dancers, singers, or caretakers of deities. Dance and music have long been considered sacred arts in Dharma traditions, with performances understood as offerings to the Divine. Some *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* people became custodians of devotional music, dance, and sacred

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storytelling, contributing richly to cultural and spiritual life. In South India, for instance, there are historical accounts of third nature individuals who served in temple communities, preserving and performing spiritual ceremonies, songs, and dances.

In royal courts, some third nature people served as court entertainers, advisors, guardians of women's quarters, or warriors. Because they were seen as outside typical male-female roles, they were trusted with responsibilities that would have been considered inappropriate or unsafe for cisgender men. In some Islamic Mughal courts, similar roles were held by the *khawaja sira* (sometimes spelled *khawaja sara*), gender-nonconforming individuals who often gained considerable political power as administrators or advisors within palace structures.

Spiritually, some *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* individuals acted as intermediaries between the human world and the divine. In many cultures, those who do not fit rigid categories are believed to have access to "in-between" spaces — not fully part of one world or another, but able to move between them. This liminal status was seen as sacred. In Hindu ceremonies, the blessings of third nature individuals were often believed to carry special potency, especially for significant life events like births, weddings, and fertility ceremonies. This belief continues today in some Hijra communities.

Recently, the Hijra community has established its own spiritual organization called the Kinnar Akhada. This group now participates fully in the Kumbh Mela, one of the world's largest and most sacred Hindu festivals, held every twelve years. In 2025, the Kinnar Akhada was not only welcomed but honored with a central place in the festival. Its spiritual leader, Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, holds a respected role among Hindu religious authorities. Remarkably, she is not only a spiritual guide for members of the Hijra community but also for many cisgender, heterosexual Hindu families who have become her disciples. Her camp was placed in the heart of the Kumbh Mela alongside the senior-most leaders of other Hindu sects, a position that reflects deep spiritual respect. This inclusion represents a powerful shift: it challenges rigid social divisions and affirms that spiritual leadership and wisdom are not limited by gender identity. Through the Kinnar Akhada, the Hijra community is reclaiming a sacred space that acknowledges their history, spirituality, and role in shaping religious life in South Asia.

Legal Restrictions and Social Stigma

At the same time, while some *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* individuals were honored, others faced significant social stigma, legal discrimination, and economic marginalization. Their treatment varied depending on era, kingdom, and political powers. In some legal codes, including parts of the *Manusmṛti*, *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* people were excluded from certain religious duties and denied inheritance rights. For example:

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- The Manusmṛti restricted participation of third nature individuals in Vedic offerings and priestly functions, considering them ineligible for certain ceremonies.
- They were often barred from inheriting family property, especially if they did not marry or have children according to traditional norms.

Without access to these structures, many third nature people were left economically vulnerable. Some formed alternative kinship networks, living in tight-knit communities for mutual support much like the Hijra communities seen today in parts of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. While the *Manusmṛti* placed responsibility for financially supporting *tr̥tīyā prakṛti* individuals on their families, these protections were not always upheld. Importantly, other Hindu legal texts offer a more inclusive perspective. For instance, the *Vaśiṣṭha Dharmasāstra* recognized the potential marginalization of *tr̥tīyā prakṛti* individuals and explicitly stated that if a person was abandoned by family or could not support themselves—especially in old age without a partner or children—the kingdom (meaning the government) should provide for their care. This example shows that ancient Hindu thought on gender diversity was not uniform; it included both restrictive and protective frameworks. While one kingdom might enforce exclusion, another could uphold obligations of state support and dignity.

When British colonial rule arrived in South Asia, these challenges intensified. The British introduced rigid Victorian beliefs about gender and sexuality, criminalizing many practices that had once been tolerated or even celebrated. Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, Hijras were first made into a separate caste, which was then officially declared a criminal caste, and their public ceremonial roles were outlawed. British officials tried to erase Hijras' traditional spiritual and cultural functions. Further, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in 1861, criminalized same-sex sexual relations entirely. This law remained in place for over 150 years, until it was overturned by India's Supreme Court in 2018.

It's important to understand that the 2018 ruling did not completely eliminate Section 377. Instead, the court struck down the parts of the law that were used to criminalize private, consensual sex between adult men. Section 377 still applies in cases where the sexual act is non-consensual or takes place in public, and those situations are still punishable by law. Also, the law never really applied to most lesbian relationships, since it only banned sexual acts that involved penetration. This narrow definition reflected the limited and biased views of the British colonial system, which often ignored or misunderstood the diversity of human relationships.

The impact of these colonial laws cannot be overstated. They deeply disrupted cultural systems that had once made space for gender and sexual diversity, creating long-lasting

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harm and contributing to continued stigma in the post-colonial era. These colonial influences continue to affect LGBTQ+ communities in South Asia even today.

Contemporary Legal and Social Developments

In recent years, the Indian government and judiciary have taken significant steps to recognize third nature individuals. In 2014, India's Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *NALSA v. Union of India* case that transgender people have the right to self-identify their gender as male, female, or third gender. This ruling recognized the constitutional rights of Hijras and other transgender individuals to equality, non-discrimination, and dignity.

In 2019, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was passed, aiming to protect the rights of transgender individuals. However, many activists argue that the law still has serious shortcomings, such as requiring government certification of transgender status and not doing enough to address systemic discrimination.

Social acceptance remains uneven. While some urban areas are seeing more visibility and acceptance of third nature individuals, discrimination, violence, and exclusion are still common, especially in rural areas.

The history of *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* individuals in South Asia shows that gender-diverse people have always existed, but their treatment has changed depending on cultural, religious, and political circumstances. In some times and places, they were celebrated as spiritually powerful and socially valuable; in others, they were pushed to the margins or actively persecuted. This history challenges any simple narrative, showing that attitudes toward gender and sexuality are shaped by broader systems of power and culture.

By learning about *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti*, we see that conversations about gender diversity are not new — they are part of long, complex global histories. They remind us that human diversity has always existed, and that inclusion and understanding are choices that societies make. Today, as movements for LGBTQ+ rights continue to grow worldwide, we can draw lessons from the past to help build more inclusive, compassionate, and equitable communities for everyone.

Discussion Questions

- *Do you think it is or is not important for today's LGBTQ+ rights movements to study histories like that of *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti*? What value do you think we can gain from understanding this history?*

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- *Spiritual traditions like Tantra and legal codes like the Manusmṛti often led to very different treatments of tṛtīyā prakṛti people. In what ways did these differing views shape how tṛtīyā prakṛti people were treated in society?*
- *If South Asia had never been colonized by the British, how might the roles and rights of tṛtīyā prakṛti people have evolved differently? What makes you think that?*
- *We've talked about ancient texts like the Manusmṛti. If we want to understand how tṛtīyā prakṛti individuals lived, how helpful are these texts? What are the strengths and weaknesses of using ancient laws designed for specific kingdoms at specific periods of history as our main source of information?*

Activity

Materials Needed:

- Spectrum Signs (1. Male — Third Nature — Female; 2. Highly Respected — Sometimes Accepted — Marginalized/Excluded; 3. Central to Spiritual Traditions — Some Spiritual Role — No Role)
 - Each spectrum works independently and can stand alone as a meaningful discussion activity.
 - Each spectrum lasts approximately 15 minutes.
- Prompts
- Open classroom space

Preparation:

- Clear space for students to move freely.
- Set up 3 physical spectrum lines using string, tape, or imaginary lines across the room.
- Post labels at each end of each spectrum.

Teacher Instructions:

- Read one prompt aloud at a time.
- After each prompt, students move along the spectrum to the position they feel best fits the scenario.
- Pause for brief discussion after each prompt.

Debrief Questions

- What did you notice about how often people fell somewhere in the middle?

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- Why do you think societies have treated gender-diverse individuals so differently at different times?
- How does seeing gender as a spectrum rather than a binary help us better understand *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* and related identities?

Spectrum Prompts

Gender Identity Spectrum (Male — Third Nature — Female)

Śikhaṇḍī from the *Mahābhārata* was born female but lived as a male warrior. Where would you place Śikhaṇḍī on this spectrum?

Arjuna disguised himself as Bṛhannalā, a transgender identity, for a year to hide. Where would Bṛhannalā fit on this spectrum?

Hijras often identify as a third gender. Where would you place Hijras on this spectrum?

Nepal recognized a legal third gender category in 2007. Where would you place this on this spectrum?

In some tribal communities, gender-nonconforming people served as healers. Where would they fit on this spectrum?

A biologically male person identifies as male but expresses in feminine ways. Where would you place them on this spectrum?

A person mostly identifies as female but doesn't feel fully female or male. Where would you place them on this spectrum?

Someone feels neither fully male or fully female. would you place them on this spectrum?

Social Acceptance Spectrum (Highly Respected — Sometimes Accepted — Marginalized/Excluded)

Temple positions offered *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* spiritual roles. How accepted were they?

British colonial law criminalized Hijras. Where would you place them on this spectrum?

Today, Hijras are legally recognized but still face discrimination. Where would you place them on this spectrum now?

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Male eunuchs who worked in Mughal palaces. How accepted were they?

During the Gupta Empire, third nature individuals had some spiritual roles but not full social acceptance.

Bangladesh legally recognized Hijras in 2013 but discrimination remains.

A follower of Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. Where would you place them?

Legal protection exists, but harassment and family rejection continue. Where does this fit?

Wrap Up

Throughout this lesson, we explored how different societies have understood gender in ways that go far beyond the familiar male and female categories. We learned that in Dharmic and South Asian history, the concept of *tr̥t̥yā prakṛti*, or 'third nature,' recognized a wide diversity of gender identities and expressions long before modern conversations about LGBTQ+ rights began. We saw how spiritual traditions, legal systems, and colonial rule shaped the lives of gender-diverse individuals in both empowering and harmful ways.

As we discussed, some people were honored with spiritual and social roles, while others faced exclusion, discrimination, or criminalization, especially under British colonial law. We also considered how these historical experiences compare to struggles and progress in the United States today, where LGBTQ+ individuals have fought for — and continue to fight for — legal recognition, inclusion in the military, and protection from discrimination.

This history reminds us that gender diversity is not new; it has always existed as part of the human experience. Societies make choices about whether to recognize, respect, or marginalize that diversity. Our conversations today help us understand how cultural, legal, and spiritual systems influence these choices and how we can work toward building more inclusive and compassionate communities now and in the future.

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Assessment

Instruct students to not put their names on their paper. Have students fold a sheet of paper in half. On the top half of the paper, have students answer, “Did anything in today’s reading or discussion about *tr̥t̥iyā prakṛti* or gender diversity in South Asia make you think differently about gender — either your own or society’s understanding of gender?”

Collect the papers from all students. Mix up the papers and randomly redistribute to students. Have them read the top half and then answer on the bottom half of the paper, “What is one idea, story, or fact from today’s class that you feel is important to remember when thinking about gender diversity?”

If time permits, have students read some of the answers.

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Homework

Complete the chart below:

Topic	Historical South Asia	Contemporary United States
Legal Rights		
Military/Government Roles		
Spiritual/Cultural Roles		
Social Attitudes		
Changes Over Time		

Then write 3-4 paragraphs reflecting on how these systems are similar or different.