Exploring New Perspectives of Gender-Diverse Recognition through Social Innovation

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Abstract

This study examines the historical and contemporary recognition of gender-diverse individuals through the lens of social innovation, highlighting the persistent social and linguistic marginalization faced by non-binary, intersex, and third-gender communities. Historically, societies such as the Indus Valley Civilization and early Buddhist communities exhibited degrees of gender inclusivity, with texts and practices acknowledging diverse identities without pejorative intent (Anderson, 2001; Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2016; Jaffrelot, 1996). Over successive political, religious, and colonial regimes, recognition declined, as seen during the Mughal, Brahmanical, Sikh, and British colonial periods, culminating in systematic erasure and stigmatization of gender-diverse communities (Nanda, 1990; Omvedt, 2003; Reddy, 2005; Zelliot, 1992). Contemporary legal reforms, including the 2014 NALSA judgment in India, signify partial redress, yet linguistic exclusion continues to undermine social dignity and visibility (Pattanaik, 2020; Monro, 2021).

Linguistic marginalization manifests in the absence of widely recognized, respectful singular pronouns for non-binary and intersex individuals, forcing reliance on inadequate terms like "they"

or objectifying pronouns such as "it" (Pronouns & Inclusive Language, 2024). Historical plural terms in South Asia, such as kinnar, aravani, thirunangai, hijra-log, and kinnar-samudaay, reflect inclusive cultural recognition but are context-specific and insufficient for everyday grammatical usage (Nanda, 1990; Reddy, 2005; Lingaraju, 2017). Globally, language innovation has addressed these gaps through gender-neutral pronouns like Swedish "hen" and Spanish "elle," or English neologisms such as "ze/zir" (Monro, 2021).

To address ongoing exclusion, this study proposes the singular pronouns Heo (dual-gender male) and Sheo (dual-gender female) as culturally neutral, linguistically adaptable, and intuitive solutions. These pronouns facilitate social recognition, improve communication, and uphold the dignity of gender-diverse individuals across discourse, education, media, and law (Dos, 2021; Turner, 2013; Anderson, 2001). While adoption challenges exist, including social resistance and initial confusion, Heo and Sheo exemplify socially innovative strategies that bridge historical marginalization and contemporary linguistic gaps.

Key Points: Social Innovation, Transgender, Historical recognition, South Asian Plural terms, Global strategies, proposed pronouns.

Introduction

Social innovation, defined as the development and implementation of new ideas, strategies, or practices to address pressing social challenges and improve societal well-being, provides a powerful conceptual framework for understanding how societies have historically approached the recognition and inclusion of gender-diverse individuals (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010). At its core, social innovation seeks not only to respond to existing social inequalities but to transform the structures and cultural norms that perpetuate these inequalities. From this perspective, examining historical and contemporary attitudes toward individuals who do not conform to traditional male or female categories reveals a long-standing interplay between marginalization, ethical imagination, and innovative social strategies.

Historically, individuals whose identities diverged from the male-female binary faced systemic marginalization and social exclusion. This pattern has been well-documented in both feminist scholarship and studies of caste and Dalit experiences in South Asia, highlighting how intersecting systems of gender and caste hierarchies reinforced exclusionary norms (Omvedt, 2003; Zelliot, 1992). Within patriarchal and Brahmanical social structures, gender-diverse individuals often occupied liminal social positions; they were simultaneously visible and marginalized, incorporated in certain ceremonial or performative roles while denied access to broader civic and religious rights. Feminist historians have argued that such marginalization was not merely a product of cultural prejudice but also an outcome of systematic social and legal codifications designed to maintain hierarchies of power (Dirks, 2001; Reddy, 2005).

In South Asia, some scholars suggest that the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 3300–1300 BCE) may have exhibited hints of gender role fluidity, though the evidence remains indirect and fragmentary. Archaeological interpretations of terracotta figurines, depictions of dancers and ritual figures, and burial practices suggest that some degree of social recognition for multiple gender roles may have existed. However, direct evidence of third-gender identities is limited, and interpretations are often contested due to the scarcity of textual records and the ambiguity of material artifacts (Jaffrelot, 1996; Singh, 2014). Similarly, pre-Buddha inscriptions and texts occasionally reference individuals who did not conform to standard male or female roles, although the degree to which these references reflect genuine social recognition versus symbolic or ritualized acknowledgment remains debated (Nanda, 1990). These early glimpses, however tentative, suggest that historical South Asian societies may have recognized gender diversity in nuanced ways, even if such recognition did not translate into full social equality.

A transformative shift in the historical recognition of gender diversity occurred with the rise of Buddhism in South Asia. Buddhist ethical and social frameworks introduced more inclusive paradigms for addressing human diversity, including the diversity of gender and sexual expression. The Pali Canon, a foundational textual corpus for Theravada Buddhism, explicitly recognized diverse identities such as ubhatobyañjanaka (intersex individuals) and napuṃsakapaṇḍaka (sexually non-normative persons), without assigning them pejorative moral or social judgment (Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2016; Anderson, 2001). Within monastic and lay communities,

ethical guidelines and social rules extended opportunities for participation in religious life to those previously marginalized. Monastic codes allowed for entry and recognition of non-normative individuals under specific ethical conditions, and lay ethical precepts encouraged compassion, equitable treatment, and inclusion in social and ritual spaces (Jaffrelot, 1996; Pattanaik, 2020).

The policies of Emperor Ashoka further illustrate the early application of social innovation in a historical context. While Asoka's welfare initiatives were not explicitly directed toward intersex or transgender individuals, his commitment to dhamma, which emphasized non-violence, social equity, and protection of all beings, created a normative and institutional framework for treating marginalized groups with dignity (Omvedt, 2003). By embedding ethical principles within political governance, Ashoka's rule demonstrates how available resources—religious texts, legal norms, and administrative authority could be leveraged to mitigate social marginalization. Viewed through the lens of social innovation, these historical measures represent early attempts to combine ethical, legal, and cultural strategies to enhance the well-being of groups who had been historically excluded. In other words, even centuries ago, societal actors were experimenting with creative approaches to address pressing social inequalities, laying the groundwork for more systematic interventions in later eras.

Despite these early innovations, the recognition of gender-diverse individuals eroded under subsequent social and political regimes, including Brahmanical consolidation, Mughal governance, Sikh orthodoxy, and British colonial rule. These periods introduced new social hierarchies, legal codes, and moral frameworks that often marginalized non-binary and intersex persons, either relegating them to symbolic or ritualistic roles or criminalizing their existence altogether (Nanda, 1990; Omvedt, 2003; Reddy, 2005). Social innovation in this context faltered not for lack of moral imagination, but due to structural consolidation of hierarchical power that systematically excluded non-conforming individuals from legal, civic, and cultural participation.

In contemporary society, these historical trajectories intersect with ongoing social and linguistic challenges. While many countries, including India, have implemented legal reforms recognizing third-gender and transgender rights, such as the landmark 2014 NALSA v. Union of India judgment, language remains a critical site of marginalization. Across many languages, respectful

and dignified terminology for transgender and intersex individuals is either absent or inconsistently applied, creating gaps in social recognition and inclusion. The lack of widely accepted singular pronouns for non-binary and gender-diverse persons, for example, limits their ability to assert identity, be accurately represented in discourse, and access equitable participation in social, educational, and professional contexts.

Addressing these challenges requires an approach informed by social innovation: creating culturally and linguistically meaningful solutions that extend historical commitments to inclusion into the modern era. Just as Buddhist monastic codes and Asoka's ethical governance sought to integrate marginalized identities into societal frameworks, contemporary initiatives can leverage linguistic innovation, legal reform, and social advocacy to ensure visibility, recognition, and dignity for gender-diverse communities. The introduction of culturally neutral singular pronouns, inclusive educational materials, and media representation are contemporary embodiments of this approach, affirming that social innovation is not only a tool of the present but also a bridge connecting historical ethical frameworks with modern strategies for social equity.

Historical Trajectories of Gender Diversity Recognition

The historical openness toward gender-diverse identities in South Asia has not been linear; rather, it gradually declined over centuries, shaped by the interplay of political power, religious ideologies, and social hierarchies. In early periods, some communities exhibited a degree of fluidity and tolerance toward gender diversity, often incorporating individuals who did not conform to conventional male–female roles into ritualistic, artistic, and social functions. However, as centralized empires and codified religious orthodoxy expanded, the space for recognition and social legitimacy for non-binary and third-gender persons contracted, reflecting broader structural hierarchies of power and morality.

During the Mughal period (1526–1857 CE), the hijra community maintained a visible presence in courtly and cultural spheres. Hijras frequently served as attendants, musicians, and performers within royal courts, roles that often conferred status and proximity to power (Nanda, 1990; Reddy, 2005). Their performances in courtly ceremonies, including music and dance, were valued for aesthetic and symbolic reasons, and they occasionally held administrative or ceremonial authority

over courtly rituals. Yet, this recognition remained largely confined to elite spaces and rarely translated into broader societal acceptance. Outside the palace, hijras faced social marginalization and were often excluded from mainstream civic, religious, and economic life. Their inclusion was conditional, performative, and framed by the court's utilitarian needs rather than a commitment to social equity.

Concurrently, Brahmanical orthodoxy entrenched rigid gender and caste hierarchies that further restricted social mobility for gender-diverse individuals. Foundational texts, including the Mahabharata, the Manusmriti, and various Dharmashastra treatises, codified gendered and caste-based norms that reinforced exclusionary structures (Dirks, 2001; Omvedt, 2003). These texts not only delineated expected gender roles but also prescribed moral and social penalties for those who deviated from normative male–female expectations. Within this framework, non-binary and third-gender persons were often assigned ambivalent or marginal positions: neither fully integrated into society nor entirely excluded, their existence was acknowledged symbolically but systematically constrained in social, religious, and economic spheres.

Sikhism, in theory, espoused egalitarian ideals, emphasizing spiritual equality and the rejection of caste-based hierarchies. Guru Nanak's teachings and later Sikh scripture promoted moral and social equality, yet the practical inclusion of third-gender individuals remained limited. In practice, gender-diverse persons were often marginalized from community life, ritual participation, and inheritance rights, reflecting the tension between doctrinal egalitarianism and entrenched societal norms (Kaul, 2020, 2021). This gap between principle and practice illustrates a recurring theme in South Asian history: ethical or religious ideals of inclusion existed, but structural and social hierarchies often inhibited their full realization.

The advent of British colonial rule intensified these patterns of marginalization, embedding them into formal legal and administrative frameworks. The 1871 Criminal Tribes Act, for example, criminalized hijras and other socially non-conforming groups, categorizing them as hereditary "criminal tribes" subject to surveillance, restrictions, and social ostracism (Nanda, 1990; Zelliot, 1992). Colonial governance prioritized upper-caste and male-centric narratives, systematically erasing the historical contributions, agency, and visibility of non-binary communities from official

records (Omvedt, 2003). Christian missionary interventions, meanwhile, often reinforced heteronormative moral frameworks, introducing moral and linguistic norms that further delegitimized gender diversity, even as localized communities continued to maintain ritualized spaces for hijras and other third-gender groups, albeit with stigma (Lingaraju, 2017).

Post-independence India marked a slow trajectory toward recognition. While the Constitution guaranteed fundamental rights, social realities lagged behind legal frameworks. Gender-diverse individuals often remained confined to informal occupations such as performance, begging, or ceremonial roles, reflecting persistent structural marginalization (Omvedt, 2003; Kaul, 2021). Legal redress began in earnest only with landmark judgments such as the 2014 NALSA v. Union of India, which formally recognized third-gender persons and affirmed their rights to equality, non-discrimination, and social inclusion (Pattanaik, 2020). Despite these legal gains, social acceptance continues to lag, and many gender-diverse individuals face barriers to employment, education, healthcare, and civic participation, demonstrating that legal recognition alone cannot fully redress centuries of social exclusion.

This trajectory mirrors global patterns observed during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, where activism by transgender and intersex communities has reshaped policy landscapes and created pressure for legal and social reforms (Pattanaik, 2020; Jaffrelot, 1996). Grassroots advocacy, academic research, and international human rights movements have collectively highlighted the systemic marginalization of non-binary and third-gender individuals, encouraging governments to recognize and institutionalize protective measures. These contemporary efforts, however, must contend with deeply entrenched social norms, linguistic exclusion, and historical stigma, illustrating the complex interplay between law, society, and culture.

Viewed through the lens of social innovation, these historical and contemporary patterns highlight the need for creative strategies that not only provide formal recognition but also transform social structures and cultural perceptions. Social innovation, in this context, encompasses interventions that leverage available resources, including legal frameworks, linguistic tools, educational curricula, and media representation, to enhance visibility, dignity, and inclusion for gender-diverse individuals (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice, &

Mulgan, 2010). One critical dimension of such innovation is linguistic reform: the absence of widely recognized and respectful terminology for transgender and third-gender individuals continues to perpetuate marginalization, even when legal recognition exists. Introducing culturally neutral pronouns, inclusive language policies in education and media, and public awareness campaigns exemplify how contemporary social innovation can bridge historical exclusion, providing both practical and symbolic recognition while reshaping social relationships toward equity and dignity.

In sum, the historical trajectory from the relative visibility of hijras in Mughal courts, through the entrenchment of caste and gender hierarchies under Brahmanical and colonial rule, to the gradual emergence of legal recognition in independent India illustrates a persistent pattern of social marginalization countered at various points by ethical, cultural, or legal innovation. The challenge today lies in extending these interventions into societal norms and everyday practices, ensuring that recognition is not merely legal but also cultural, linguistic, and social, thereby fully realizing the principles of inclusion and equity for all gender-diverse communities.

Linguistic Marginalization and Social Innovation for Gender-Diverse Communities

Even linguistically, gender-diverse communities face systemic marginalization that both reflects and reinforces broader social exclusion. Language is not merely a neutral medium of communication; it is deeply intertwined with power, identity, and social recognition. Words carry historical legacies that can either confer respect or perpetuate stigma. Terms such as *hijra*, *kinnar*, or *ubhayalinga*, which historically carried neutral or even reverential connotations, gradually acquired derogatory meanings over time, shaped by socio-political and cultural shifts (Monro, 2021). In medieval and early modern South Asia, for example, these terms were often used within ritual and courtly contexts to denote individuals occupying roles outside the male–female binary. Hijras, for instance, held recognized positions as royal attendants, ceremonial performers, and ritual specialists, and these linguistic labels reflected their social functions without inherently pejorative undertones.

However, as successive cultural, religious, and political frameworks consolidated hierarchical norms, these terms increasingly became markers of social marginalization. The process of

semantic erosion—wherein originally neutral words acquire derogatory or stigmatizing meanings—is well-documented in sociolinguistics and demonstrates how language can encode systemic exclusion (Monro, 2021). Colonial interventions accelerated these processes, introducing Western moral frameworks and codifying legal and social hierarchies that devalued indigenous gender-diverse practices. Terms that once signalled respect or neutrality became instruments of social policing, contributing to the invisibilization of gender-diverse communities in public discourse.

This linguistic marginalization extends to English, which lacks singular, universally recognized pronouns for intersex or non-binary individuals. Contemporary usage often relies on the plural pronoun "they," which, while increasingly accepted, carries ambiguity and may fail to convey the individuality of the person being referred to. Worse, objectifying pronouns such as "it" are sometimes applied, erasing personhood entirely and reducing the individual to a linguistic placeholder (Pronouns & Inclusive Language, 2024). The default male–female binary embedded in most languages prioritizes conventional gender categories over human dignity, thereby systematically erasing intersex and non-binary identities from everyday discourse (Monro, 2021). This erasure is not merely linguistic; it shapes how individuals are treated socially, legally, and culturally, reinforcing cycles of marginalization.

Literature vividly reflects the challenges posed by these linguistic constraints. S. Ghanshyam Dos's *1947 – Migrant's Pain* (2021), for instance, grapples with the difficulty of representing an intersex protagonist within a context where socially acceptable terminology was either nonexistent or derogatory. Dos navigates these limitations through repetitive naming, euphemism, and circumlocution, revealing the tension between narrative necessity and linguistic scarcity (Reddy, 2005; Zelliot, 1992). These literary strategies underscore a broader social problem: when language cannot adequately articulate identity, storytelling, and by extension, social acknowledgment, it fails, leaving communities linguistically and socially invisible.

From the perspective of social innovation, this linguistic gap constitutes a pressing societal challenge. Social innovation, as conceptualized by Mulgan et al. (2007), Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller (2008), and Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan (2010), involves the development and

implementation of novel solutions that are more effective, sustainable, and equitable than existing approaches to social problems. Applied to gender-diverse communities, social innovation emphasizes the creation of solutions that do not merely impose top-down norms but engage with cultural and linguistic resources to produce meaningful, inclusive change. The absence of dignified terminology for gender-diverse identities represents both a social and a linguistic problem: it is not simply a question of naming but of recognition, respect, and the ability to participate fully in societal, legal, and cultural life.

Historical Buddhist traditions provide instructive examples of inclusive linguistic and ethical frameworks that can inspire contemporary social innovation. Pali, functioning as a scholarly and religious lingua franca across South Asia, sustained Buddhist humanism and promoted recognition of gender diversity in both monastic and lay contexts. Early Buddhist texts explicitly acknowledged identities such as *ubhatobyañjanaka* (intersex) and *napuṃsakapaṇḍaka* (sexually non-normative), integrating them into religious, ethical, and communal frameworks without pejorative intent (Turner, 2013; Anderson, 2001; Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2016). Monastic guidelines and ethical codes extended opportunities for participation and moral agency, demonstrating that language and social recognition are mutually reinforcing. These texts illustrate that inclusive linguistic practice is not merely descriptive; it is constitutive of social dignity, shaping how communities engage ethically with difference.

Unfortunately, these inclusive sensibilities eroded under foreign linguistic, religious, and cultural impositions. Brahmanical orthodoxy, Mughal court culture, and colonial administrative languages all contributed to the creation of exclusionary vocabularies that framed non-binary identities as deviant or invisible (The Hindu, 2025). Missionary schools and legal codes introduced additional layers of heteronormative language, further constraining both personal identity and communal representation. Today, these historical legacies persist: derogatory terminology continues to circulate in common parlance, while English and other modern languages often lack equivalents capable of fully capturing the dignity of gender-diverse individuals.

Bridging this linguistic gap requires socially innovative strategies that leverage language as a tool for transformative social change. For instance, the introduction of culturally neutral, singular

pronouns such as *Heo* and *Sheo* provides a concrete avenue for restoring dignity, promoting visibility, and fostering inclusive representation. Unlike prescriptive or externally imposed solutions, such strategies are participatory: they invite communities to co-create vocabulary that resonates with lived experience and cultural contexts. By establishing terms that are both recognizable and respectful, these initiatives enable individuals to articulate identity without fear of dehumanization or erasure.

Socially innovative linguistic strategies also generate ripple effects across education, media, and policy. Inclusive curricula and literature can normalize respectful usage, ensuring that new generations acquire the cognitive and ethical frameworks necessary for equity. Media organizations, when adopting inclusive language, can reshape public discourse and influence societal perceptions, demonstrating that linguistic reform is inseparable from social recognition. Policy documents that institutionalize neutral pronouns further embed social respect into legal and administrative structures, illustrating the interconnectedness of linguistic innovation, social equity, and human rights.

Ultimately, the marginalization of gender-diverse communities is not only a matter of law or policy; it is deeply linguistic, historical, and cultural. Words matter: they shape who is seen, heard, and acknowledged. The erosion of neutral or reverential terminology, coupled with the absence of widely accepted respectful pronouns, has contributed to social invisibility and exclusion across centuries. From a social innovation perspective, addressing this gap is both urgent and feasible. By developing culturally sensitive, linguistically inclusive strategies, societies can enhance visibility, dignity, and social participation for gender-diverse individuals. Such efforts extend the ethical imperatives observed in historical Buddhist traditions into contemporary practice, using language as a lever to realize justice, recognition, and human rights. In this sense, linguistic reform becomes not only a technical matter but a profound instrument of social transformation, capable of redressing historical marginalization and fostering a more equitable, inclusive society.

Pronouns and Their Limitations

Traditional linguistic systems are deeply gendered, structured around a binary model that privileges the pronouns "he" and "she" (Monro, 2019; Pronouns & Inclusive Language, 2024).

These pronouns function seamlessly for cisgender individuals, aligning grammatical forms with culturally prescribed gender norms. However, for non-binary, intersex, and third-gender persons, such binary frameworks are insufficient and often exclusionary. The systemic reliance on male–female categories in grammar and syntax is not neutral; it reproduces social hierarchies, signalling whose identity is recognized and whose is rendered invisible. In effect, language becomes both a mirror and a mechanism of social marginalization, shaping perceptions, interactions, and societal expectations.

The practical consequences of this exclusion are pervasive. In everyday conversation, speakers may feel compelled to either misgender individuals or resort to awkward circumlocutions, repeatedly using proper names or titles to avoid pronouns entirely. In literature, authors struggle to portray gender-diverse characters without inadvertently reinforcing stigma or erasure, often relying on repetitive naming or vague descriptors that obscure identity. Academic writing and professional communication face similar constraints: the lack of widely recognized singular pronouns complicates clarity, precision, and inclusivity, while simultaneously signaling institutionalized exclusion. Even in contexts where legal recognition exists, linguistic structures remain lagging indicators of social acceptance.

This linguistic marginalization is not merely an inconvenience; it is a social problem with symbolic and material consequences. Words shape social reality, influencing how individuals are perceived, treated, and valued. When language fails to acknowledge a person's identity, it reinforces invisibility, denying recognition in both interpersonal and institutional spheres. Non-binary and third-gender individuals may be misrepresented in legal documents, media coverage, educational materials, and everyday interactions, perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

Through the lens of social innovation, this linguistic gap constitutes a pressing challenge that demands creative, systemic, and transformative solutions (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010). Social innovation emphasizes strategies that are not merely incremental but fundamentally reimagine social practices to achieve greater equity, effectiveness, and sustainability. In this context, the introduction of inclusive, culturally neutral pronouns represents a powerful intervention. Such pronouns address the practical

difficulties of communication while also symbolically affirming the dignity and social presence of gender-diverse individuals. They signal recognition, respect, and legitimacy, directly challenging the erasure embedded in traditional linguistic systems.

Implementing inclusive pronouns has ripple effects beyond language itself. In literature, it allows for more authentic representation of diverse identities, enriching narrative possibilities and ethical engagement with characters. In education, inclusive language fosters environments where students of all genders feel seen and respected, promoting social cohesion and reducing marginalization. In professional and legal settings, neutral pronouns facilitate accurate documentation, respectful address, and equitable participation. In each of these domains, language becomes a vehicle for structural and cultural change, demonstrating how innovation at the linguistic level can translate into broader social transformation.

Moreover, the introduction of inclusive pronouns exemplifies the dual goals of social innovation: addressing immediate functional challenges while reshaping norms, relationships, and perceptions. By embedding respect into the grammar of everyday communication, societies can move toward a more just and equitable future, where gender diversity is not an exception but a recognized and respected reality. In this sense, the evolution of language is inseparable from the evolution of social consciousness, highlighting the central role of linguistic innovation in fostering inclusion, visibility, and human dignity.

Respectful and Neutral Plural Terms in South Asia

The linguistic representation of gender-diverse communities in South Asia carries profound historical, cultural, and social significance. Across centuries, plural terms have been used not merely as identifiers but as markers of communal presence, ritual roles, and social recognition. While many of these terms have been marginalized or misrepresented over time, contemporary scholarship and activist movements have sought to reclaim and normalize them, highlighting their potential as tools of social innovation, visibility, and dignity.

1. **Kinnar (Sanskrit/Hindi):** The term *kinnar* has deep roots in classical Sanskrit and Hindi literature, historically denoting individuals who occupy a third-gender identity. Beyond its

linguistic function, *kinnar* carried connotations of spiritual and mystical significance, often associated with temple performances, ritual dances, and ceremonial duties (Nanda, 1990; Omvedt, 2003). In epics and classical texts, kinnars were sometimes depicted as semi-divine figures, symbolizing liminality, transformation, and the transcendence of rigid social binaries. Their plural usage historically recognized not only their collective presence but also their contribution to religious and cultural life, reflecting a form of social acknowledgment that extended beyond personal identity into community and ritual participation.

2. **Aravani (Telugu):** In the Telugu-speaking regions of South India, *aravani* denotes transgender individuals who historically held prominent ceremonial roles, particularly in fertility rituals, temple festivals, and life-cycle ceremonies such as weddings (Reddy, 2005). The plural form of *aravani* emphasizes collective identity, highlighting a shared social and spiritual function. Beyond ritual participation, aravanis have historically provided social networks and support systems for one another, fostering resilience in the face of marginalization. The continued use of this term in contemporary activist discourse underscores its dual role as both a linguistic and social resource—acknowledging identity while fostering solidarity and community visibility.

3. **Thirunangai (Tamil):***Thirunangai*, widely used in Tamil Nadu, refers to transgender women and has both social and ritual significance (Lingaraju, 2017). Historically, Thirunangais participated in temple ceremonies, processions, and community events, contributing to the spiritual and cultural fabric of Tamil society. The plural usage not only acknowledges the presence of multiple individuals but also affirms collective belonging within a socially recognized category. Contemporary efforts to normalize the term in legal, educational, and public discourse exemplify attempts to transform historically marginalized linguistic categories into instruments of social equity, emphasizing dignity, inclusion, and respect.

4. **Hijra-log (Hindi/Urdu, modern activist usage):** The compound term *hijra-log* represents a modern, activist-driven approach to pluralizing the identity of hijras in Hindi and Urdu. The suffix *-log* emphasizes collective presence and social solidarity, countering historical

narratives of invisibility and stigma (Nanda, 1990; Pattanaik, 2020). By framing hijras as a community rather than isolated individuals, this term facilitates recognition of rights, legal protection, and social participation. The evolution of *hijra-log* from colloquial usage into formal activist and legal contexts illustrates how linguistic innovation can serve as a vehicle for social empowerment, fostering both visibility and collective agency.

5. **Kinnar-samudaay:** *Kinnar-samudaay*, literally translating as "third-gender community," exemplifies contemporary efforts to assert collective identity in legal, academic, and activist contexts. The term integrates classical recognition (*kinnar*) with the modern concept of community (*samudaay*), reinforcing both cultural continuity and political agency. Its plural form underscores the existence of a social collective rather than fragmented individuals, aligning with principles of social innovation by leveraging language to foster recognition, inclusion, and structural equity. This term has been increasingly used in legal documents, academic studies, and policy discussions, bridging historical legacies with contemporary social movements.

In sum, respectful and neutral plural terms in South Asia, ranging from *kinnar* to *kinnar-samudaay* serve multiple functions: they preserve historical memory, assert communal presence, and provide tools for contemporary social innovation. Through these terms, language becomes a medium not only of communication but also of transformation, enabling gender-diverse communities to navigate, resist, and reshape social structures that have long marginalized them. Recognizing and institutionalizing such terms can foster dignity, visibility, and inclusivity, reflecting the broader goals of equity, cultural continuity, and social innovation in the modern era.

Historically Derogatory Terms

Language has long served as a powerful instrument for both recognition and oppression. In the case of gender-diverse communities, many terms that were originally neutral or descriptive gradually acquired derogatory connotations, reflecting broader social efforts to enforce binary gender norms and maintain hierarchical structures. Examining these historically derogatory terms reveals the ways in which linguistic practices can both mirror and reinforce systemic marginalization.

1. **Hijraon (Hindi/Urdu):** The term *hijraon*, derived from *hijra*, historically referred to third-gender or transgender individuals, particularly in North India. In classical usage, *hijra* carried neutral or sometimes even reverential connotations, reflecting roles in ritual performance, temple ceremonies, and courtly functions (Nanda, 1990). Over time, however, *hijraon* became a marker of social stigma, often employed in everyday language to evoke derision, suspicion, or moral judgment. This shift demonstrates the process of linguistic weaponization, whereby a term that once affirmed identity is transformed into a vehicle for exclusion, reinforcing the idea that deviation from the male–female binary constitutes deviance or social inferiority.

2. **Eunuch (English/Colonial):** The English term *eunuch*, adopted during colonial rule, illustrates how foreign linguistic frameworks imposed new hierarchies and moral valuations on indigenous gender systems. While originally denoting castrated men in imperial courts, the colonial usage of *eunuch* encompassed hijras and other non-binary individuals indiscriminately, often in a derogatory and sensationalized manner (Dirks, 2001). Colonial records framed eunuchs as inherently criminal, deviant, or morally suspect, erasing their complex social, spiritual, and ceremonial roles. This process reflects the intersection of linguistic labeling and colonial power, whereby terminology became a tool of control, shaping both public perception and legal regulation.

3. **Mooval (Tamil):** In Tamil, the term *mooval* historically identified certain intersex or transgender individuals. While initially descriptive, over time it acquired pejorative undertones in social discourse, particularly in urban or formal contexts (Reddy, 2005). The derogation of *mooval* mirrors broader patterns in South Asia, where local linguistic categories were transformed by moralistic or heteronormative frameworks, limiting recognition of third-gender identities and reinforcing social hierarchies rooted in gender and caste.

4. **Napunsaka (Sanskrit):** In Sanskrit, *napunsaka* referred to persons whose sexual characteristics or reproductive capacities deviated from normative male or female definitions. Classical texts, including Dharmashastra literature, often treated napunsakas with ambivalence—sometimes as morally neutral or even spiritually potent, but frequently

as socially subordinate (Omvedt, 2003). In practice, the term came to carry stigmatizing connotations, particularly when interpreted through the lens of Brahmanical orthodoxy, reinforcing the patriarchal binary and codifying exclusion in both social and ritual domains (Dirks, 2001).

Social and Linguistic Implications

These historically derogatory terms exemplify how language can be mobilized to enforce societal norms. By framing gender-diverse identities as inherently deviant or inferior, these terms perpetuated social hierarchies and justified exclusion from ritual, legal, and economic spheres. Linguistic marginalization, in turn, shaped self-perception, communal organization, and intergenerational transmission of identity, embedding stigma into the social fabric.

From a theoretical standpoint, the transformation of neutral identifiers into pejorative labels can be understood as a form of symbolic violence, where language itself becomes an instrument of power that naturalizes inequality (Bourdieu, 1991). By controlling the lexicon of identity, dominant groups, whether colonial authorities, Brahmanical elites, or heteronormative institutions, effectively regulated the boundaries of social legitimacy, shaping both public perception and the lived experience of gender-diverse communities.

Toward Linguistic Social Innovation

Recognizing the historical weaponization of language underscores the necessity of socially innovative linguistic interventions. By reclaiming or creating respectful and neutral terms, contemporary movements aim to reverse centuries of marginalization and affirm the dignity of gender-diverse individuals (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). Terms such as *kinnar-samudaay*, *aravani*, or proposed inclusive pronouns like *Heo/Sheo* are part of this effort, transforming language from a tool of exclusion into one of recognition, empowerment, and social inclusion.

Global Strategies for Inclusive Reference

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a social instrument that reflects, reinforces, or challenges cultural norms. Across the globe, communities have developed innovative linguistic

strategies to address the marginalization of gender-diverse individuals, creating terms, pronouns, and constructions that affirm identity, promote dignity, and foster social inclusion. These strategies demonstrate the transformative potential of language as a tool for social innovation (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008).

Gender-Neutral Pronouns in Global Contexts

In English, the historical lack of a singular, gender-neutral pronoun posed a significant challenge for representing non-binary and intersex individuals. Traditionally, English relied on the binary pronouns *he* and *she*, which marginalized anyone outside these categories. Over time, the singular *they* emerged as a practical and increasingly accepted solution. Though historically plural, *they* has been used in singular contexts for centuries in literary and conversational English, offering a flexible, non-binary alternative (Pronouns & Inclusive Language, 2024). Contemporary advocacy has also introduced neologisms such as *ze/zir*, *xe/xem*, and *ey/em*, which are explicitly designed to respect the identities of non-binary or gender-diverse individuals. These innovations exemplify the ability of language to evolve and accommodate social change, bridging gaps between existing grammatical structures and emergent social realities.

Swedish offers another instructive example. In the early 21ˢᵗ century, the pronoun *hen* was introduced alongside the traditional *han* (he) and *hon* (she). *Hen* functions as a gender-neutral pronoun applicable to all individuals, regardless of sex assigned at birth or gender identity, and can be used in both singular and plural forms (*henar*). Initially met with resistance from traditionalists, *hen* has since gained widespread acceptance in education, media, and legal contexts, demonstrating how societies can institutionalize inclusive language through deliberate, normative strategies (Monro, 2021).

Similarly, Spanish-speaking communities have experimented with inclusive adaptations of the traditionally gendered *él* (he) and *ella* (she). Terms such as *elle* (singular) and *elles* (plural) offer non-binary alternatives, particularly in written communication. These strategies often incorporate orthographic and phonetic creativity, reflecting the interplay of linguistic innovation and cultural adaptation. While debates continue regarding pronunciation, grammar, and standardization, such

efforts underscore the social importance of linguistic recognition in fostering visibility and respect for gender-diverse individuals.

Linguistic Innovation in South Asia

South Asia, with its rich historical recognition of gender diversity, offers distinct examples of inclusive reference strategies that blend tradition and contemporary activism. Collective or plural terms such as *hijra-log* (Hindi/Urdu) and *kinnar-samudaay* (Sanskrit/Hindi) emphasize community solidarity while asserting legal, social, and cultural presence. These terms function not only as identifiers but as instruments of advocacy and empowerment, reflecting a conscious effort to reclaim language from historically derogatory usage (Nanda, 1990; Pattanaik, 2020).

Hijra-log, for instance, foregrounds the social and political agency of the hijra community. By transforming the suffix *-log*, meaning "people" or "community," into a marker of collective identity, activists emphasize both unity and legitimacy, challenging centuries of marginalization. Similarly, *kinnar-samudaay*, combining the classical term *kinnar* with *samudaay* (community), bridges historical recognition with contemporary social activism, making gender-diverse identities visible within legal, academic, and policy frameworks. These neologisms highlight how linguistic innovation can operate at multiple levels, communicative, cultural, and political, to promote dignity and inclusion.

Social Implications of Inclusive Reference

The global proliferation of gender-neutral and inclusive reference strategies demonstrates the practical and symbolic importance of language in shaping social perception. Linguistic recognition affects visibility, self-perception, and the accessibility of social, educational, and professional spaces. Where respectful terms are available, gender-diverse individuals experience reduced marginalization, enhanced social legitimacy, and stronger opportunities for participation in civic life. Conversely, the absence of inclusive terms perpetuates erasure, reinforcing existing hierarchies and stigmas.

By drawing from historical, cultural, and contemporary precedents, socially innovative language strategies offer a path to meaningful social change. They exemplify the capacity of communities

to repurpose or invent terms to reflect lived realities, challenge normative frameworks, and assert rights and dignity. Whether through the adoption of singular pronouns like *they/them*, the introduction of *hen* in Swedish, or collective terms like *kinnar-samudaay*, these strategies demonstrate that language can function as a deliberate intervention in social structures, creating space for recognition, equity, and inclusion (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010).

Proposed Pronouns: Heo and Sheo

Language plays a critical role in shaping social perception, inclusion, and dignity. For centuries, gender-diverse individuals, whether intersex, non-binary, or dual-gender, have faced systemic erasure, partly due to the limitations of traditional linguistic systems. Standard pronouns in most languages, including English, are binary (*he/she*) and fail to capture the full spectrum of human gender diversity (Monro, 2021; Pronouns & Inclusive Language, 2024). To address this gap, this article proposed Heo (dual-gender male) and Sheo (dual-gender female) as culturally neutral, singular pronouns designed specifically to represent dual-gender identities (Turner, 2013).

Conceptual Foundations

Heo and Sheo are designed to be intuitive, adaptable, and culturally neutral, facilitating seamless integration into multiple languages without requiring extensive grammatical modification. Unlike existing solutions, such as English singular *they*, which carries plural ambiguity, Heo and Sheo directly and explicitly recognize dual-gender identities in a singular form. This specificity not only addresses practical communication needs but also signals social recognition and dignity by acknowledging identities historically excluded from linguistic and cultural frameworks (Anderson, 2001; Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2016).

The development of Heo and Sheo draws inspiration from both historical and contemporary efforts at gender-inclusive language. In Middle English, for example, experimental pronouns like *ou* or *a* were occasionally employed to represent non-binary or unspecified genders. While these forms did not achieve widespread adoption, they demonstrate a long-standing recognition of the linguistic gap in gender representation. Contemporary reliance on *they/them*, while functional, is

often perceived as cumbersome or ambiguous in formal contexts. By contrast, Heo and Sheo offer a simple, elegant, and consistent alternative that aligns grammatical clarity with social equity (UW-Milwaukee LGBTQ+ Resource Center, 2024).

Merits of Heo and Sheo

1. **Inclusive Representation**: Heo and Sheo explicitly acknowledge dual-gender individuals, creating linguistic space for identities previously erased or marginalized. Unlike generalized terms or circumlocutions, they assert individuality and social legitimacy.

2. **Linguistic Adaptability**: These pronouns can integrate across languages with minimal disruption to grammar, sentence structure, or syntax. They function in spoken, written, and digital communication, accommodating diverse linguistic contexts.

3. **Cultural Neutrality**: Unlike some historical terms tied to specific regions, religions, or rituals (e.g., *kinnar*, *aravani*), Heo and Sheo are **culturally agnostic**, making them suitable for global adoption and cross-cultural communication.

4. **Social Recognition**: Usage of Heo and Sheo signals acceptance, respect, and acknowledgment, thereby challenging exclusionary norms embedded in both everyday language and formal institutions.

5. **Standardization Potential**: By providing singular, dual-gender markers, these pronouns can be systematically incorporated into educational curricula, official documents, legal texts, and media usage, promoting institutional consistency (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010).

Challenges and Considerations

Despite their merits, Heo and Sheo face adoption barriers and practical challenges. Language change is inherently slow, and introducing new pronouns requires collective social agreement. Initial confusion among speakers, educators, and policymakers is common, particularly in regions with strong attachment to binary grammar systems. Integration may also be uneven across cultural and linguistic contexts, as communities vary in their openness to innovation (Omvedt, 2003;

Monro, 2021). Additionally, local cultural preferences and historically rooted gender terms may influence acceptance, necessitating complementary awareness campaigns and educational strategies to ensure meaningful uptake.

Social and Institutional Implications

The adoption of Heo and Sheo carries profound social implications. In education, textbooks and classroom discourse can adopt these pronouns to normalize dual-gender representation from early stages of learning. In literature and media, authors, journalists, and creators can use these pronouns to enhance visibility and challenge erasure, thereby reshaping cultural narratives about gender. In law and governance, Heo and Sheo offer a linguistic foundation for more precise legislation, official documents, and administrative records, reducing ambiguity and affirming legal recognition of dual-gender individuals.

Furthermore, the symbolic dimension of Heo and Sheo cannot be overstated. Pronouns serve not only as linguistic markers but also as tools of social validation. When communities adopt these pronouns, they signal societal acceptance, dignity, and equal treatment, thereby promoting both psychological well-being and civic inclusion. In effect, the adoption of Heo and Sheo represents a socially innovative intervention, leveraging language as a practical and transformative instrument to address historical and contemporary exclusion (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008).

Historical Precedents and Future Directions

Historically, languages worldwide have experimented with gender-neutral forms, from Middle English innovations to modern Swedish (*hen/henar*) and Spanish (*elle/elles*). Heo and Sheo represent a contemporary extension of this long-standing pursuit of linguistic inclusivity, specifically tailored for dual-gender recognition. As global awareness of gender diversity grows, these pronouns provide a practical and socially meaningful solution, aligning with broader movements for equity, representation, and human rights.

The path forward involves strategic dissemination, including incorporation into educational materials, workplace policies, media style guides, and digital platforms. Awareness campaigns,

advocacy initiatives, and community-led efforts will be essential for normalization. Over time, the consistent use of Heo and Sheo can establish a normative shift, embedding recognition of dual-gender individuals into everyday speech, writing, and institutional practice.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study has highlighted the enduring marginalization of gender-diverse individuals, both historically and in contemporary society, and situated this issue within the framework of social innovation. From the relative inclusivity of Buddhist-era societies, which recognized intersex and sexually non-normative identities (Anderson, 2001; Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2016), to the successive waves of suppression under Mughal, Brahmanical, Sikh, and colonial regimes, the historical trajectory demonstrates how political, religious, and linguistic structures have shaped societal recognition. Contemporary legal advances, such as India's NALSA judgment (Pattanaik, 2020), represent critical steps forward but cannot fully compensate for linguistic and social exclusion that continues to impede dignity, visibility, and representation.

Through the lens of social innovation, addressing these gaps requires the development of creative, culturally sensitive, and linguistically inclusive solutions (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010). Proposals such as the introduction of Heo and Sheo as singular, culturally neutral pronouns exemplify transformative approaches to linguistic marginalization. By providing gender-diverse communities with practical and respectful linguistic tools, such innovations can enhance social recognition, improve communication, and promote equity across discourse, education, media, and legal frameworks.

Future Research Directions:

1. **Sociolinguistic Adoption and Usage:** Investigate the acceptance, adoption patterns, and resistance to Heo and Sheo across different linguistic communities and socio-cultural contexts. This includes both spoken and written communication, as well as integration into educational curricula.

2. **Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Applicability:** Explore the adaptability of Heo and Sheo in non-Indic languages, including tonal, agglutinative, and gendered grammatical systems, to assess universal applicability and potential limitations.

3. **Impact on Literature and Media:** Examine how the introduction of inclusive pronouns affects narrative structures, character representation, and identity politics in literature, journalism, and digital media platforms.

4. **Psychosocial Outcomes:** Study the psychological, social, and emotional effects of using culturally neutral pronouns on non-binary, intersex, and third-gender individuals, including measures of self-esteem, social inclusion, and perceived respect.

5. **Policy and Legal Integration:** Assess how linguistic innovation can influence policy-making, legal drafting, and anti-discrimination legislation, creating frameworks that formally recognize gender-diverse identities.

6. **Historical Linguistic Reconstruction:** Conduct comparative research on historical plural and singular identifiers, such as kinnar, aravani, and ubhayalinga, to understand how inclusive language practices evolved and were eroded over time.

7. **Technological and AI Integration:** Explore integration of inclusive pronouns in natural language processing, translation software, speech recognition, and social media algorithms to ensure digital spaces reflect and respect gender diversity.

In sum, bridging the historical and contemporary gaps in recognition for gender-diverse communities demands socially innovative solutions that combine ethical, linguistic, cultural, and technological dimensions. Future research that operationalizes these approaches can foster a more inclusive society where dignity, visibility, and equity are not merely legal abstractions but lived realities.

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Page | 74

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Page | 75