

BECAUSE THEY HAVE A VOICE: REVISITING TRANS-HISTORY

IN INDIA THROUGH TRANS-NARRATIVES

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Abstract

The Phenomenon of diversity is core to the Indian culture and traditions. Our land is diverse in the fact that it encompasses inclusivity in terms of its religion, race, culture, class and ethnicity. This diversity has been hailed world widely as a distinct quality of our culture that is immensely acknowledged in all spheres of our lives. This calls for a detailed analysis of our culture and ethnicity which has embraced third genders since times immemorial. With the ongoing progress our society still witnesses the stereotypes and prejudices that the colonials had left in the Indian psyche. Studies show, despite our nation's growth, their existence has still been encumbered by the biases and prejudices left by the colonials. Gone are the days, when despite their different sexuality they enjoyed equal status and reverence. Still leading the colonial legacy, the individuals have always remained out of the margins as the most disadvantaged section of our society. There is a need to critically study and expose the plethora of prejudices and biases that have been haunting the third gender community since colonial times. A study of their narratives with reference to Trans' history since ancient times coming to the modern era definitely makes it

imperative to question the still existing notions of gender and sexuality and revise our understanding to recover their long-lost existence. This paper examines the lives of the third gender individuals in India through two narratives, Manobi Bandhopadhyay's Gift of Goddess Laxmi and A. Revathi's A Life in Trans Activism with special reference to the historical existence of Third Gender.

Keywords: Third gender, Culture, Tritiya-Prakriti, Hijras, Queer, Spaces.

Introduction

Since the dawn of human evolution gender diversity has been celebrated in our rich Indian culture and tradition. Our nation is world widely acknowledged for its inclusivity in terms of its acceptance of every gender, caste and sex. The grounds of diversity are deeply rooted in the history of ancient India. The ancient scriptures witness a time where diversity prevailed. Vedas are considered to be the most imperative part of our Indian Literature and an important aspect of it was the acknowledgement of transgenders i.e. the third sex; one that is neither male nor female but something other. The history of hijras and transgenders in India is not a new one but deeply rooted in our Indian culture and tradition. Transgenders have had a very strong historical presence in the Hindu mythology and find a resonance in our ancient religious texts as well. Their group comprises of people called *Hijras*, *Kothis*, *Eunuchs*, *Aravanis*, *Jogappas*, *Shiv Shaktis* and many more. The sacred texts of Vedas mention individuals who were non-binaries and gender variants called "tritiya prakriti" or the third gender. Our ancient text *Kama*

Shashtra divides them into several categories and describes them as third gender. The third sex is usually described as a natural amalgamation of the male and female as manifested in their behaviour and this category has served as an important tool for the recognition of such persons within our society.

Colonialism however rejected the idea of gender variants and sexual diversity. They restricted themselves to the idea of Gender Binary which favoured the ideas that classified one's assigned gender or sex at birth and puts forth the view that our assigned sex or gender aligns with our traditional social constructs i.e. masculine and feminine identity and its very expressions. This gender binary has always been refuted by the contemporary west, non-binary or what we usually call genderqueer those who do not adhere to the principles laid down by gender binary. They refuse terms like male and female and look for a very postmodern and a post structural thinking. In accordance to its binary principles gender binary has always favoured terms like male and female and has down the line brought a decay to others who do not identify as either and that's where the transgenders find their place.

The mark of identity as put forth by Queer theorists however exposes the idea of sexuality and its construction. The ideas of writers like Judith Butler reveal how the notion of gender and sexuality is a mark of identity which is none other than a social construction. Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* describes the process of identity construction and its labialization and clarifies how identity is related to our performance, and what we perform decides our role as she writes,

“To say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start... we act as if that being of a man or that of a woman is

actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time. (Butler 25).

Historically transgenders have held a great position, and our ancient scriptures like *Kama Shastra* by Vatsayana, and *Charak Samhita* by Charak display their existence. Our Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also mention the third gender community in their own ways. In her eminent work *Neither Man nor Woman- The Hijras of India*, Serena Nanda mentions the tale of *Ramayana* wherein she mentions the story which tells how the Third gender community was bestowed with blessings by Lord Rama. Worth mentioning is the epic work *Manusmriti* in the field of sensual pleasure which mentions the birth of such individuals as a biological process as mentioned in *Dharma Shastra* well noted by Wilhelm, "A male child is produced by a greater quantity of male seed, a female child by the prevalence of the female; if both are equal, a third sex child (napumsaka) or boy and girl twins are produced; if either are weak or deficient in quantity, a failure of conception results". (Wilhelm 86)

The status however rose to significance in the medieval period in the hands of Mughals who gave them a high reverence and esteem. The Hijras of the Mughal period enjoyed special esteem in the hands of Mughal emperors who uplifted their status in the then society. From being appointed as confidants of the king to being considered loyal attendants of their harems they have held high positions in the society. While Hijras have always been treated with reverence since time immemorial or date back to 9th century onwards till the Mughal period as witnessed but much of this reverence did not survive with the advent of colonialism as Benton writes, "Historically pre-

colonial India demonstrated a culture open to gender fluidity that can be traced back to 5th century Jain literary tradition, as well as other ancient Sanskrit texts such as Vatsyayan *Kamasutram*, Charakha and Rekhi 13th cent".(Benton)

The advent of colonialism led to degradation of their esteem. The social esteem which they had been enjoying until the Mughal rule was questioned by the British officials. The Britishers came up with certain rules which led to their criminalization at large and degraded their status and recognition. The Britishers looked at them with utter detest, with their rigid techniques they came up with certain regulations which led to their criminalization. The status which they had been honoured with came to an end with their rigid protocols as Robert Young writes about the honour and equal respect that the third gender people got since ages, which henceforth marked a decline in early 1800s. They lost their traditional legitimacy when British refused to lend them legal support and under the criminal act 1871 labelled them as criminal tribe. Ever since, their recognition and importance in our ancient customs and practices the conditions have been deteriorating generation by generation. In Foucauldian sense if we talk about, the body policing as well as its medicalization imposed by colonial rule pathologized all non-heteronormative behaviours. These bodies are controlled through disciplines over centuries, by repressing and silencing sexuality.

Trans-narratives: The Idea of Self

The pathologization of the third gender community thus seemed fruitful to the British officials in fulfilling their aims and making them marginalized. As a result of certain discursively constructed practises the

community started getting pushed into the corners of the society day by day thus leading to their victimization. This in turn led to a revolution which came as a torrent in the form of narratives and exposed the lives of the third sex community and presented their experiences to the world. Transgender narratives across the world are claiming their space in the literary canon in the form of autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and short stories. These narratives are trying to bring into account their traumatic life experiences and talk about their rights as a human.

These narratives bring out their lives intricacies and the struggles of being in a hetero-normative world. These writers present their narratives as a medium through which they can reveal their inner urges and desires to be owned by a community which has been gender biased since colonial times. These autobiographies through the lens of Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist theory, emerge not merely as their personal memoirs but act as "testimonios" which as a matter-of-fact challenges caste, gender, and epistemic hierarchies. These life writings exemplify the praxis Rege had envisioned which in actual is grounded in lived experience and aims to bring a structural change in the society. These narratives depict the colonial mindset of the Indian society which has been a victim of their indoctrinate principles. The colonials left them a legacy from which they have no escape even till today. The colonial legacy as the writings reveal is so much instilled in the Indian psyche that there is no escape to it, as a result the third gender community becomes a victim of criminality in the hands of their own individuals.

Educated writers and activists like A. Revathi and Dr. Manobi Bandyopadhyay have used literature to pen down their life experiences and

tell the world about their struggles of living in a heteronormative world. Their experiences have no doubt created an awareness of the third gender community in the entire world. However, it was definitely herculean for them to come out and speak for their rights just like other normal humans. These stories depict their body as a metaphor which symbolized their inner conflicts and tendencies to accept one's own identity. This clearly aligns with Sharmila Rege's concept of "testimonio" which she calls as a collective voice that actually speaks from the margins. This frames Revathi's life writing as a political act of resistance against the abuses of Brahmanical patriarchy and gender normativity. These autobiographies speak for the community, her account of violence, abuse, stigmas and hijra kinship structures reflects what Rege calls 'the political urgency of speaking from the margins' (Rege 14). Her narration of violence, when read through Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist lens, reveals the gender biased social norms which depicts how caste and gender intersect to produce certain systemic brutality.

Through these narratives they have ventured to speak to the world about their gender dysphoria and ultimately regaining their self-consciousness after their immense struggle. These narratives suggest the idea of sexuality in a hetero-normative world and the obvious outcomes of following the set notions of sexuality which is discursively constructed by those in power. Never had these writers been able to come out if they hadn't questioned their identity and accept their true self. The narratives in a similar train of thought suggest the inner conflicts of a person who associates himself being gender dysphoric as Revathi writes,

"Who am I? This was a question I often asked myself even as a child. I know it is common for children to ask such questions. But then I was no ordinary child. I don't mean that was I exceptional in any way, but I certainly was different from most children" (Revathi 1).

Revathi in her narrative *A life in Trans Activism*, shares her livelihood experiences where she clearly depicts her identity as dissuading between male and female and the inner conflicts she had to bear as a result of lack of family support. Her story brings to light the notions of identity conflicts as central to the life of Hijras which ultimately becomes a threat to their lives. The 'I' is often questionable in their lives since they sway between two worlds and cannot claim their true self. This loss of identity and the inner conflicts are undoubtedly seen in all these narratives which questions the idea of gender and sexuality. Writers like Revathi have ventured to subvert these heteronormative notions of society by questioning and critiquing them. Revathi despite being accepted by her Hijra community had to adhere to her family's patriarchal protocols and bear its consequences. An incident from the narrative mentions how she had to abide by her family in order to live in this world,

"The next day my head was shorn off at the temple, I felt more pain and hurt at this than when my brother thrashed me. I wanted to pour out my sorrow in front of the goddess. But even that I had to silently within myself. I felt like an ocean churning. But I had to keep my feelings bottled up." (Revathi 17)

Still living in conflicts, she chose to present an empowered image of herself in the society by penning down her life and working for her

community through her activism. Her constant urge to work for her community led her to understand the intricacies of the Hijra community in a hetero-patriarchal world. Her honest narration of her experience in sex work to earn her livelihood, and her community rituals defies these norms. Her account of being raped by a rowdy is not just trauma but a strong critique of how law enforcement treats trans individuals and other caste-oppressed bodies. When Revathi points such structures, she isn't just naming them but indicating our system which is highly stereotyped. Her narrative clearly asserts why trans survival isn't shameful but a political act which does more than just recounting her personal experiences but actively challenges systems of power and demands a social transformation in society. These autobiographies document lives and communities that are actually absent from official histories. By writing her story, she creates a counter-archive- a record of trans and casted existence that resist erasure. This act is actually political because it redefines what counts as history and whose voices in actual matter.

Revathi's writing is intertwined with her activism. She uses her story to advocate for her legal rights and demand healthcare and educational access to build solidarity and bring transformation. Her writing claims subaltern voice that are disrespected and ignored and creates a counter-history that actually claims subaltern voices as equally relevant than others. The story that she narrates is a feminist and Dalit act of resistance that fights for marginalized voices. Her narrative dwells upon her experiences of working for her community and fighting for their rights as minorities as she writes, even if her

dreams had to be bundled up in a gunny bag and forgotten, she definitely felt that others like her should not end up this way. She writes,

“But for me it was liberation. Liberation from the demeaning street-based sex work that robbed me of my dignity and subjected me to numerous violations...My decision to give up sex work was personal. But even today, I work for the rights of sex workers.” (Revathi)

Revathi places her story on a very wide social and political level and by penning down a history she has created a legacy for the entire transgender community to work for their rights. Her constant desire to work for her community by embracing her identity and associating with others becomes imperative in this context to understand how victimization of the third gender takes places at a large social and political level and how writers like her have taken writing as a mode of expression to subvert these gender notions. She mentions her views as entirely different from others. Since she believes that ‘we are who we are’ and being transgender to her is all about being who you are deep inside, nor on the outside. In any situations whether we associate ourselves to gender queer or female to male vice versa, we definitely have to struggle against oppression. Her constant endeavour as she mentions was to expose and subvert the gender notions and work for constant improvement of her community.

Her constant urge to pen down her life experiences definitely carved a niche for her to lead her activism. She writes how writing worked as an aide for her to speak for herself and work for activism as she mentions,

“The hunger to write, to chronicle my life, became the purpose of my life. I wrote the book not to sensationalize or cause a scandal, but because I

saw writing as a powerful tool in my activism and advocacy efforts to address some of the pressing concerns and needs of the hijra community, which faces a constant threat of erasure and marginalization." (Revathi 84)

Transgender narratives on a very similar train of thought present the idea of sexuality as restricted within certain standards and notions. Even a small thought of not associating with their sexual identity bewilders the life of transgenders since their childhood. In her narrative *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, Manobi openly speaks of the childhood trauma that a transgender child is blessed with. She writes how she couldn't associate to her sexual identity at her initial school days. She mentions the days of being in a state of flux and turmoil when she started questioning her identity in doubts. She writes as she questions herself, "Am I really a woman trapped in a male body or are these just delirious thoughts? Why is it that the whole world thinks of me as a man who is nothing more than a sissy?" (Manobi 109)

The ideas of sexuality as imposed by the society however causes a trauma to transgender individuals. Because of their different sexual orientation, they are considered outcasts and unworthy of any recognition. Any attempt to surpass the established notions causes double oppression to their lives. The narratives present that any idea beyond the gender binary as remote to the Indian psyche. These narratives have thus raised a voice against the set notions of sexuality which only accepts male and female and rejects others who fall outside this category. They voice against considering the subjects of same sex desire as taboos and favoured inclusivity in all spheres of their life. Same sex subjects and sex-change is quite a taboo in the society even

in modern times. The struggles of these writers present the intricacies that they had to witness in order to go under SRS and surpass the established notions of sexuality and achieve their true self. Manobi's life has had such instances where she was continuously advised not to think otherwise and stick to her given biological identity. She recalls one incident when her doctor was taken aback by her sex change ideas and explained her how she was out of her senses to think so and such destructive thoughts should not come to her mind even remotely.

A Plight to Success: Reclaiming their Spaces

The idea of belongingness is quite remote to the lives of transgender who have always been disowned and considered outcasts by our patriarchal society. In this context the lives of *Hijras* are quite a perplexed one. Their narratives present their journey from gender dysphasia to achieving their true identity, still being marginalized and abused at every phase of their life. The story of Manobi and Revathi explores the life experiences not only of these writers particularly but also the intricacies of the entire transgender community at large.

This dis-belongingness is an outcome of the socio-cultural practices that are highly patriarchal in their approach towards sexuality and gender. These practises are a result of certain notions that are determined by those who are in power. The discourse as a matter of fact controls and decides the state of normality. The society thus discards the transgender community as unnatural while considering only male and female as normal. This lack of association however leads to their alienation giving a hike to the so-called binary notions of sexuality. Despite being excelled in academics, the story of Manobi makes

us wonder stuck when we witness her being teased and abused for her sexuality on a professional level. She narrates the first day of her school where she was peeped through all corners as an alien. She recalls an incident of her life where she was brutally harassed by her colleagues, 'Keep shut, you Hijra, don't act smart. We will find out exactly where you stand.' (Manobi 94) Despite facing constant harassment and abuse what makes these writers reach success is their constant endeavour to fight for their rights and work for their activism. Manobi's story depicts her struggle from being gender dysphoric to achieving her own individuality. From becoming India's first transgender principal her story has been an inspiration to all as she writes towards the end, "Suddenly, I became the darling of the media and my phone hasn't stopped ringing since. Almost every day I am invited to speak at seminars both within the state and outside...I often pinch myself to see if I am dreaming of it all that is happening to me is true." (Manobi 183)

Conclusion

Transgender writers like A. Revathi and Manabi Bandyopadhyay amongst others have no doubt taken literature as a tool to expose and break the established notions of gender and sexuality. The works have exposed the idea of sex as a taboo in the society and by challenging the set patterns of the society, they have emerged with their own literature to claim their space in the literary canon. These narratives have undoubtedly turned the tables for these writers to emerge out and reclaim their long-lost spaces. Penning down their experiences has definitely acted as a mirror of this society to see how the binary notions of sexuality work in our society where the third gender

community is highly victimized and marginalized despite being advanced in every field. A loss of dis-belongingness is evident through these narratives which portray their life experiences in a very intricate manner. Writing to these writers have definitely emerged as a tool to showcase their lives, as Revathi writes; "Whatever affects the hijra community, also affects me personally. It was impossible for me to look the other way or keep quiet. Writing was the most effective tool to deal with the oppression. I had to write frankly and fearlessly about our lives that are lived perilously close to the edge." (Revathi 78)

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