

A Caged Entity: A Study of Trans Body Narratives in India

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Abstract This paper explores the lived experiences of hijras in India, specifically focusing on individuals assigned male at birth who later identified as female. Drawing on the autobiographies *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxminarayan Tripathi, and *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya, the study examines the socio-political marginalization and systemic exclusion faced by the hijra community. Despite being recognized as the “third gender,” hijras remain subject to profound discrimination, relegated to the lowest echelons of society, and often denied basic human dignity. Through an intersectional and gender-fluid lens, this research highlights how societal perceptions rooted in rigid binary constructs perpetuate their exclusion. It underscores the need to push theoretical and societal boundaries of gender beyond traditional binaries to foster greater acceptance of diversity in gender identity. By examining the personal narratives of these authors, this paper aims to shed light on the transformative yet challenging journeys of hijras as they navigate societal rejection and struggle to assert a positive self-identity. The study ultimately calls for a reimagining of social attitudes to promote a nuanced understanding of gender fluidity. Recognizing and respecting hijras' identities is imperative not only to mitigate the adverse impacts of marginalization but also to cultivate an inclusive society where all individuals can thrive with dignity and equality.

Keywords Autobiography; Hijras; India; Identity; Society

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Introduction

“Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns ... which give form, order, point, and direction to our lives We must ... descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face.” (Geertz 13)

Georges Gusdorf defined autobiography as an “art” and “representative” of the leading thinkers of its era because it “recomposes and interprets a life in its totality” (Gusdorf 38). Trans-autobiographical writing is basically anti-normative and sporadically given any importance as a focus of study as they are not seen to be enigmatic enough to do justice to the academic standards and literary canons. Not only in life but also as a form of literature, marginalization prevails. If life of the trans-people need to be revolutionized then it is mandatory to scrutinize their autobiographies from where we can revise our concept and understanding of their lives, voice, sexuality, struggle and in some cases victory. It becomes a mode for self-articulation. Autobiography, therefore, can be the only platform by which they can leave an everlasting presence in history. Autobiographies seem to be the only instrument for these derided invisible subjects to become visible. This literary form has endless possibilities and therefore the narratives of self-actualization seem to be a reflection of all the other people who have not been able to voice their yearnings. This in turn will help the readers to a better understanding of different cultural practices and learn to look beyond the cultural stereotypes of society. One needs to

outmaneuver gender essentialism and combat against all kinds of misappropriation by the presiding conventional autobiographical theory albeit with the realization that one autobiography of a trans-individual is not the prototype of others who are not just socially oppressed but also financially marginalized. By writing about the life of the trans persons, we are righting the injustices that have been hurled upon them. Hence, we can safely say that “from autobiography becoming a “metaphor of the self” (Olney 1980), it has come to explore the “changing self” (Spengemann 1980)” (Vakoch 19).

Around 1990s, academia encouraged the idea that being a trans does not mean that a person is necessarily suffering from some kind of mental disorder. This made trans individuals more open to the truth about themselves and hence venture further into acceptance and exploration. Trans activist and writer A. Revathi views writing as a powerful space for a transgender individual like herself to assert her identity, allowing her to embody both the narrator and the subject. “Writing my own story has also helped me examine my life afresh and that has been both challenging and enjoyable” (Revathi “Voice for Visibility”). The postmodern concept of deconstruction has brought forth a mammoth transformation to the concept of sex and gender. It now seems to be intrinsically ingrained in the individuals who experience them. Mostly people have an unreal concept of gender and on the basis of that they tend to stigmatize and oppress trans people. As has been rightly stated by Stephen Whittle, “Homophobia and sexism are not based on your genitals or with whom you sleep, but on how you perform the self in ways that are contraindicative to the heteronormative framework” (Stryker and Whittle XII).

Joseph Pulitzer mentions, “Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light” (Ireland 68). A trans person is commonly known as a “hijra” in the Indian community. They are considered to be the ‘third sex’ and have the lowest social standing. In this paper, I am exclusively looking into the condition of those hijras who were born male but desired to be females. For this I will be delving deep into three autobiographies—*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxminarayan Tripathi and *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* by Living Smile Vidya. Hijras are mostly considered as a group that experiences all forms of socio-political marginalization and exclusion. Their only wish is to get basic dignity as a human being. The entire deprivation is based on the absence of an understanding related to a separate gendered entity beyond the male-female ambiguity. This has led to a social exclusion which has furthered their chances of being abused in all possible

ways and forms. Nobody can deny that the position of the trans is not only difficult but also problematic. The heteronormative framework has taught us that the concept of gender is very conveniently segregated as a man or a woman. But this fails to fathom the experience of trans people as their perspective and history is very different. Often what remains etched in our minds is the bewitching and exotic elements but the real lives of the transgender remain in oblivion. Therefore, it is extremely crucial to push our theoretical boundaries on gender beyond the rigidity provided by the concept of binaries and to understand and accept gender fluidity. This will help the society to see how marginalization directly has an impact on their identity and learn how to give recognition to a positive trans identity. B. Manjamma Jogathi, in her autobiography, mentions—“Our only effort is to enable inclusive acceptance of those like me by sharing our struggles, our pain, our joys, our fears, and making you, the reader, a part of who I am” (Jogathi and Bhat X).

Transgender Archetypes in Mythology and History

Gender fluidity has long been embedded in the mythology of the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism embraces this concept through figures like Ardhanarishwar, a form of Lord Shiva that symbolizes the union of masculine and feminine energies. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna assumes the form of Shikandi, playing a pivotal role in the Pandavas' victory over the Kauravas. Similarly, in the Ramayana, the monkey king Riskha transforms into a woman and marries the Sun God and the Rain God, giving birth to Sugriva and Vali (Pattanaik). These narratives underscore the cultural acceptance of gender fluidity within Hinduism.

Hijras were once a respected and integral part of Indian culture. References to eunuchs and individuals embodying both masculine and feminine traits can be found in the Vedas, ancient Hindu scriptures. They were considered bearers of good fortune and believed to possess unique powers associated with fertility (DelliSwararao 515). Hijras are perceived as channels of the Mother Goddess's divine energy, turning their barrenness into a force of creation and vitality. They are considered to be the dual entity of both Shiva and Shakti (Nanda 5). Ancient Indian writings provide evidence of the acknowledgment of a “third sex” or individuals who did not align with conventional male or female gender identities. Concepts such as *tritiyaprakriti* and *napumsaka* were deeply woven into Hindu mythology, folklore, epics, and early Vedic and Puranic texts. During the Mughal period, transgenders held significant status in royal courts. They were esteemed for their sharp intellect, reliability, and unwavering loyalty, granting them access to all social strata and enabling them to play a crucial role in Mughal political affairs.

Transgender individuals were treated with respect and held significant positions in the courts of the Mughals. “Hijras were considered clever, trustworthy and fiercely loyal and had free access to all spaces and sections of the population, there by playing a crucial role in the politics of empire building in the Mughal era” (Michelraj 18).

The arrival of the British significantly altered the lives of transgenders in India, making them victims of colonization. The privileges and recognition they once enjoyed under Indian rulers were stripped away. The British, unable to accept the respect and prominence accorded to hijras by Indian kings, actively criminalized the hijra community and deprived them of their civil rights. Colonization introduced a shift in societal attitudes, leading to widespread discrimination against transgenders. They faced ridicule for their appearance and behaviors, resulting in severe psychological trauma. Today, transgender individuals in India continue to face societal abuse, familial rejection, and marginalization, leaving their current status deeply challenging (Subapriya 62). In their narratives, hijras recount enduring persistent harassment, disapproving gazes, and an overwhelming fear of navigating public spaces. These fears extend to the risk of not making it home alive, using communal washrooms, attending school, or facing arrest.

Repudiation and Identity

Most literary works depict a coalition between transgenders and middle-class life. Laxminarayan Tripathi “lived in a shanty on the banks of the Siddheswar Lake in Thane, Mumbai” (Tripathi 1). Similarly, A. Revathi states in her autobiography, “I am from a small village in Namakkal taluk, Salem district” (Revathi 1). Living Smile Vidya also mentions that her “family wasn’t exactly well off” and her father was “a municipal worker of the lowest rung: a sweeper” (Vidya 10). As has been highlighted by Estivill “Social exclusion is an accumulation of confluent processes with successive ruptures arising from the heart of economy, politics and society; gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in positions of inferiority in relation to centre powers, resources and prevailing values” (Estivill 19). Beall and Piron suggests, “a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power” (Beall and Piron 9).

The very basic dichotomy that is experienced by the individuals themselves is an inability to relate to their physical and emotional states. It is nearly impossible to recognize and put a name to a transgender identity in oneself at a tender age. So

what undergoes is basically a sense of confusion and anxiety in their gender identity. Laxminarayan Tripathi mentions in her autobiography:

Yes, it is true that I was like a woman. My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine. But why was it so? I did not know. I wasn't of the age to answer this question. Loner that I already was, I drifted even further into my cocoon. (Tripathi 4)

Vidya mentions: "I thought he was the one relative to see through me and recognize my abnormality, when all the others saw me as eccentric" (Vidya 31). Self-assertion is achieved by adhering to terms like "abnormal" or "eccentric." Thus, leading to a heightened sense of agitation at being unable to relate to the self. Michael Foucault has highlighted that heterosexuality has become such a norm that any deviation from the same is considered to be sick or abnormal. It is also seen to be a means of exerting power and retaining one's authority (Foucault).

Marginalized by society, they have no recourse to understand this gendered split. Hence, they feel entrapped in their own being. A. Revathi also goes through the same: "I could not talk to anyone about my confusions. Not to my brothers, or my parents. Nor could I stop my heart from wandering and so I went about as if crazed" (Revathi 9). This process reminds us what Simone de Beauvoir had mentioned "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 295). Butler argues that "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a pre discursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Butler 12).

Aaron H. Devor has referred to Anne Bolin and Frank Lewins who have devised models to highlight how individuals come to recognise themselves as transsexual women. Bolin has proposed a four stage model whereas Lewins has mentioned a six stage model. The first stage usually begins with a state of confusion and agony at not being able to understand oneself and then it gradually moves towards a transsexual identity. This is followed by a recognition of the self as a woman and ultimately that leads to the refusal of a transsexual identity in the quest to be recognized as a true woman. Bornstein, Feinberg and Green have advocated that "many transsexual women and men openly acknowledge their transgender histories today and take pride in this identity, rather than considering it shameful or stigmatizing and seeking to become invisible" (Devor 52). Devor highlights a fourteen stage model that reiterates the last stage as a sense of self-exaltation which

“implies both a personal sense of pride in oneself and a political stance” (Devor 57). Although we cannot use a single model to fathom the varied experiences of trans people, nevertheless, these models act as tools to help us get an enlightened perspective about the identities of trans people.

Social ostracization furthers the angst of the trans people. Humiliation and rejection is abundantly provided to them. This is primarily because of the panic that people experience when they see trans individuals going beyond and against the meticulously established normative norms regarding not just their behavior but also mannerisms. A. Revathi mentions: “I was teased often at school, for behaving like a girl, for doing women’s work, and on the streets too, was bullied often. I had a stammer and would also get teased for that. I was thus a regular source of amusement and curiosity” (Revathi 6). Hatred breeds hatred and even children imbibe the behaviour of the adults and consider it to be normative to indulge in ridiculing trans individuals and practicing gender tyranny. Vidya highlights her angst –

Even kids didn’t spare me. Once they followed me when I was on field duty and sang raucous film songs at me. Who taught them to do this? Where did they learn such domineering behaviour? If you see a tirunangai, attack her, insult her, make her cry, chase her away whimpering, screaming – that seemed to be the rule, regardless of race, religion or creed. (Vidya 135)

Aaron Devor mentions “Each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by others for whom we are. Each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others’ eyes as we see ourselves” (Devor 46). This is very important when they are undergoing a process of identity formation. When this interaction turns into rejection and apathy, it leads to great psychological trauma. In the context of trans people, it “is also about seeing oneself in the eyes of others like oneself” (Devor 46). In certain scenarios, even after realising one’s gendered identity, the next struggle is to hide that identity from the world to save themselves from further humiliation. Thus, the struggle to lead the pretentious life of a cisgender ensues. Vidya states: “I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world” (Vidya 33). Succumbing to the desire of professing their true identity, even if for a short time span, would require utmost carefulness. For Vidya, dance liberated her from the shackles of societal gendered normativity. But it had to be done in a fastidious way – “I took great care to shut all the windows properly, checking and rechecking that I had done so, and then filled the keyhole with paper” (Vidya 32). She had to meticulously

select even the sari that she would wear:

...I always wore a sari from Akka's pile of clothes meant for the laundry: I couldn't fling it away in that manner if I wore a fresh sari, could I? I would have to fold it neatly and put it away, and the delay in opening the door would give the game away! (Vidya 33)

Joel Anderson summarises Axel Honneth's opinion on identity formation is influenced by "the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself can only be acquired and maintained intersubjectively, through being granted recognition by others whom one also recognizes. As a result, the conditions for self-realization turn out to be dependent on the establishment of relationships of mutual recognition. These relationships go beyond (a) close relations of love and friendship to include (b) legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, and (c) networks of solidarity and shared values within which the particular worth of individual members of a community can be acknowledged" (Honneth XI). It is usually seen that the first experience of rejection is encountered in the family itself and if ever acceptance takes place, it might be because of financial dependency. According to Suzy Woltmann, "The displacement, alienation, and homelessness that many hijra youth experience leads to what I call ideological diaspora—a form of internal diaspora predicated on intersectional oppression and exile" (Woltmann 3). In this regard, transgender autobiography acts as a platform to humanize the experience and trauma of the trans people. Other trans individuals see a reflection of their lives in the narrator's and experience a feeling of solidarity and communal harmony. Hence, these writings empower and motivate them to fight against all kinds of stigma. Laxmi's acceptance by her family challenges prevailing norms and serves as a model for other families with children who defy traditional gender expectations. In Laxmi's autobiography, this shift in familial attitude is evident when she reflects on her participation in the television show *Sach ka Samna*, with her family. Their acknowledgement of her queerness was evident. Shielding Laxmi's identity, her father asserts:

Why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility. A Hijra can be born to any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars. Driving Laxmi out of the house was out of question. (Tripathi 123)

While analysing the autobiographies, one early indication of trans identity is seen in an individual's love for cross dressing. This acts as a medium of expressing one's gender identity. Cavallaro and Warwick in their work, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and Body* discuss clothing "as a figurative supplement of identity" (Elahi 195). A. Revathi states: "I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh" (Revathi 4). Even Vidya mentions the same:

...I was aided and abetted by my sister Manju's skirts and midis, her eyeshadow, bangles, bindis and costume jewels. Lipstick was easily replicated by applying coconut oil to my lips and rubbing it in repeatedly. Long, plaited hair was an altogether different issue, but I knew how to overcome that problem too: just spread a thin cotton towel – a large kerchief... (Vidya 19)

Thorner and Krishnaraj state that "subaltern history employs the principle of self-representation as a means of recovering suppressed identities. It seeks to retrieve the subject-hood of oppressed groups by highlighting their everyday activities" (Thorner and Krishnaraj 18). Mostly transgenders are seen to adorn themselves in flamboyant makeup. Vidya describes another trans woman, "Sugandhi had a massive physique. She wore her salt and pepper hair in a tight bun and the two-rupee-coin sized kumkum bindi on her broad forehead instilled awe in onlookers; her mouth constantly chewed paan, while her bell-like voice matched her impressive physical appearance—Sugandhi Ayah looked formidable" (Vidya 2). It seems like the impressive and loud exterior is purposely maintained so that the marginalised and voiceless get a voice and visibility. However much one may try, it will be impossible not to take a note of them. This is their way of attaining their identity, an identity that even the government did not want to give them. Ignominious comments, to some extent, seemed pleasurable as that gave them their desired identity, that of a woman's. A. Revathi mentions how her classmates would call her "'Girl-boy!' 'Ali!' 'Number 9!' My heart would sink at these words, but I also felt faintly gratified and even happy that these boys actually conceded that I was somehow a woman" (Revathi 6). Even Vidya highlighted the same:

When I walked down the street, youngsters started teasing me: 'Look at the nattamai's son. He walks like a female!' The teasing did not hurt me. On the

contrary, it pleased me. It made me happy to know that at least some onlookers understood what I was feeling. (Vidya 23)

As Reddy suggests, “Viewing hijras solely within the framework of sex/gender difference—as the quintessential ‘third sex’ or ‘neither men nor women’—ultimately might be a disservice to the complexity of their lives and their embeddedness within the social fabric of India” (Reddy 4). Their writings “call attention to the fact that ‘gender,’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity” (Stryker 3). Many people fail to realise that there are numerous other trans people in the world who were way different from what the binaries provided. A recognition of the same automatically enlivens their spirit. Confidence heightens with the feeling of sisterhood. Laxminarayan Tripathi describes her elation thus, “When I got home that day, I floated on air. I was not alone. I had met people who were my kind. They shared my sexual attraction for members of my own sex. My confidence rose” (Tripathi 12).

The hijra, India’s oldest ethnic-transgender community, is organized within the *jamaat*, a social structure where alternative relationships are forged based on shared marginalization, offering support and belonging in the absence of traditional kinship ties. A. Revathi describes the community as similar to an extended family and, like a household, is headed by an elder known as the guru who in turn adopts a set of chelas or disciples who are like daughters to her, the *jamaat* becomes their life and security (Revathi 22-23). With its own culture, rituals, and secret language, the community is matrilineal, structured around the guru-chela system, which fosters socio-economic interdependence. Acting as both a refuge for trans women excluded from the “cistem” and a challenge to heteronormative gender norms, the hijra community must be understood in the plural — “communities” — reflecting regional, linguistic, cultural, and caste diversity.

Anatomy and Identity

Trans-autobiographies can also be read as body narratives. A critical examination of the same highlights their tendency to center on the body, as somatic transitions play a pivotal role in shaping their lived experiences. Consequently, these autobiographies navigate the interplay between corporeal transformation and the liberation of the self, reflecting a dialogue between the somatic and the cognitive. Most people have the idea that hijras are traditionally believed to be born intersex and are taken in by the hijra community at birth. Many undergo an operation where

they get rid of their male genitalia but vaginal reconstruction is not done. This is often known as the emasculation operation or 'nirvana'. Thus, making them a group that is completely different from the heteronormative. But many do acknowledge themselves to be women.

For many, this inability to conform to any particular gender, is in itself quite liberating. They feel emancipated because they are not bound by the norms of hetero-gendered performativity. They can unshackle themselves from the pre-assigned gender roles and keep pushing their boundaries. Manjamma highlights that a trans person can even transcend the limitations imposed on heteronormative beings by dint of their anatomical framework— "Had I been born a man I couldn't have fathered that many, nor could I have given birth to so many had I been a woman. But my art has ensured I have the privilege and comfort of being 'Amma' to countless children across the globe" (Jogathi and Bhat X). Their non-conformity to dominant social practices enables them to explore and express their true selves, which is inherently "antinormative."

Laxmi's autobiography challenges the traditional definition of "hijra" and alters our perception of them. Laxmi states: "The word 'hij' refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called 'hijra'. The individual is not important here. What is important is the soul and the hijra community that possesses it. God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man—woman frame. A Hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijra's male body is a trap- not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man" (Tripath 39). This "suffocation" is largely caused by society's persistence on cisgender majority and prioritising it over everything else. As Judith Butler has claimed that there are only certain bodies that are important and are worthy of being safeguarded and lamented. Other bodies are rendered abject, violating socially constructed boundaries and norms that lack inherent significance. In contrast, bodies deemed "culturally intelligible and socially valuable" retain privileges and recognition (Butler 16). The hijras are considered to be abject bodies and so it is of hardly any significance whether they exist or not. No one pities their humiliation, derision or pain. Nor does anyone lament their loss. The abject body of the hijra disrupts established borders and boundaries, serving as a site of oppression within the patriarchal structure. Concurrently, the memories of "becoming," while elusive and immaterial, are intricately linked to the "materiality of their bodies" (Smith and Watson 27).

The major problem that is highlighted in these autobiographies is in the

dichotomous nature of their physical entity. They are constantly at war with their anatomical and psychological entities that are starkly contradictory in nature and formation. This makes their body a site for brutality. Patriarchy has always celebrated masculinity to such an extent that they never took into consideration the toxicity that was bred in its garb. Effeminate men, therefore, are considered to be less masculine and become victims of subjugation by the mainstream masculinity. Many, therefore, resort to unlicensed and illegal ways of removing this unwarranted entity that hinders them from having their desired identity.

Robert Phillips draws on Julia Kristeva and Catherine Roudiez's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* to describe this marginalization process, which excludes those deemed "other" by dominant societal norms. Phillips extends the concept of "abjection" to explore the "instability of the gendered and/or sexed bodies—especially those occupied by transgender individuals" (Phillips 19). He explains that, as Kristeva and Roudiez suggest, abjection "disturbs identity, system, order and encompasses a kind of borderline uncertainty—ambiguous, horrifying, and polluting" (Phillips 20). Transgender bodies, especially those undergoing transition, subvert the boundaries of systemic order by resisting rigid categorizations of sex and gender. As Phillips argues, "The abject can thus service the cleaving point of abstruseness and unease—separating, pathologizing, and psychologizing trans subjectivity" (Phillips 20).

In Vidya's autobiography, the contested self and body serve as central themes throughout the narrative. Vidya's emotional and sexual conflicts, alongside challenges related to the negotiation of her multiple identities, emerge prominently from the outset. Through the act of writing, Vidya engages in a process of self-construction, crafting a coherent sense of self from the multiplicity of experiences and identities. The very first chapter of Vidya's autobiography is titled as 'nirvana'. It seems, as if, she begins her autobiography with a narration of her birth, a phoenix like resurrection, into her new and long desired entity as a woman.

Societal encumbrance in its lack of regard towards one's gendered identity beyond the established norms of heteronormative constantly debases the reality of the trans lives. Vidya claims, "I had no problem with people recognizing my femininity, but hated it when they made fun of me on that account. Worse was when they imagined I was a man sexually or romantically interested in a girl...To you, I may seem to be a man, but I am a woman at heart" (Vidya 50). Therefore, even after going through a painful operation, in an extremely unhygienic situation, she felt nothing but gratitude—"I thanked them silently. 'Thank you for removing my maleness from my body, thank you for making my body a female body. My life is

fulfilled. If I die, I'll lose nothing” (Vidya 8).

Conventional Roles Aiding in Compartmentalization

The hijra identity, marked by marginalization and the decline of its traditional roles, experiences dual victimization—by mainstream society and within its own community. While the guru-chela system offers support to those lacking agency due to poverty and gender identity, its limitations highlight the urgent need for affirmative action. Gender dysphoria transcends socioeconomic boundaries, yet access to education and resources determines outcomes. For transgender individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, state initiatives are vital. Sensitizing society, especially educational and employment sectors, is essential to promote the inclusion and self-actualization of the hijra community. Hijras, as part of a group, use their training to earn a living. In *Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality*, Vinay Lal highlights their cultural role:

At what are traditionally held to be the two most auspicious moments in an adult person's life in India, namely, marriage and the birth of a male child, hijras come into their own as persons possessed of the power of conferring blessings and, complementarily, inflicting curses. (Lal 123)

Hijras primarily sustain themselves through three means: *badhaai* (blessing during auspicious events), *mangti* (begging and threatening with curses if refused), and *dhandha* (sex work). Limited by lack of education—often disrupted by gender-based violence—and denied mainstream job opportunities, many hijras are compelled, as Laxmi states, “to find refuge in the hijra world” (Tripathi 8).

Azar and Vaudrey highlight the ways in which financial and social stigma compel many hijra individuals to lead “double lives.” In these circumstances, they may be constrained to live “as a cisgender man with wife and children” while simultaneously, and often discreetly, embodying the life of a hijra woman. This dual existence can result in significant psychosocial distress. Such individuals are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation by cisgender men and police.

Vidya lays bare the lived realities of tirunangais, revealing how systemic neglect compounds individual struggles. These reflections highlight not only personal struggles but also the structural inequalities that perpetuate their exclusion from mainstream society. “Most tirunangais are unlettered. Thus, they cannot find avenues of expression as I have done. Even if they are prepared for hard work, they have few skills. Who will help them if they want to study?” (Vidya 131).

Through her poignant narrative, Vidya underscores the multifaceted barriers that transgender individuals encounter in accessing education, employment, and basic civil rights. These reflections highlight not only personal struggles but also the structural inequalities that perpetuate their exclusion from mainstream society.

True, I was a graduate—an MA in linguistics, in fact—but did that mean there were government jobs waiting for me, a transgender person? And while there might be sympathizers in the private sector, how many would actively support tirunangais? If I wanted to strike the path of a self-employed entrepreneur, how many people would be ready to give me business, or even finance my venture? There is absolutely no social security for transgenders in this country. Who will step forward to help us, when the government itself is unprepared to extend any kind of basic recognition—it does not issue us a voter ID or even a ration card! (Vidya 92)

Even Nani succumbs to this societal disparity and suggests Vidya, “No jobs are waiting out there—your degrees will get you nowhere. You'd better do the sensible thing and concentrate on begging” (Vidya 106). For Vidya, begging serves as both an act of resistance and a means of reparation, symbolizing the compensation she claims from a society that marginalized and mistreated her. Even Revathi mentions,

We want to live as women, and if we are granted the facilities that will enable us do so, we'll live as other women do. We were not born to beg or do sex work. Circumstances, faulty laws and social hatred have left us with no course but to beg and do sex work. Our parents begot us like they did other children. We are also human. (Revathi 262)

Her statement highlights the systemic marginalization of transgender women, emphasizing how discriminatory laws, societal prejudice, and limited opportunities compel many to turn to begging or sex work as survival mechanisms. Her appeal calls for systemic reforms, advocating for legal protections, equal opportunities, and societal inclusion to ensure a more just and equitable environment for transgender individuals.

The Sole Prerogative

Revathi poignantly illustrates the intersection of gender identity, objectification, and social exclusion. The intrusive comments and physical violations she describes

reveal the pervasive dehumanization transgender individuals face. Her reflection on the societal rejection and lack of support from both family and society underscores the profound isolation transgender people experience. Revathi's struggle to maintain dignity in the face of constant humiliation highlights the stark contrast between her desire for a life of dignity and the oppressive conditions that deny her basic recognition and humanity. She mentions,

Some men made bold to touch us, on our waists or our shoulders. Some others pointed to our breasts and asked, 'Original or duplicate?' At such moments, I felt despair, and wondered that people could be this way. How we could ever hope to make a living? God has made us this way, I thought, and we have no work of our own, our parents do not understand us and this world looks upon us with distaste. Yet we too go hungry. Above all, we wanted to live as human beings do, with dignity. I tried hard to ignore all that was happening around me. (Revathi 30)

The pursuit of dignity among transgender individuals is a fundamental aspect of their human rights, encompassing the validation of their gender identity and the provision of equitable opportunities in all spheres of life. However, this pursuit is often obstructed by systemic discrimination, societal marginalization, and legal exclusion. For transgender people, dignity is not only about personal validation but also about accessing basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and protection from violence. As such, the desire for dignity is intrinsically tied to broader calls for social justice and equality, requiring transformative changes in both social attitudes and institutional structures.

My expectations were simple: I wanted to live a normal life like all men and women. My being a tirunangai was natural, just as men are men, women are women, and cats are cats. Trouble arises when people do not understand this simple truth. We cannot even describe our problems as those of the minorities. All we need is equal opportunity to work and earn a livelihood. Only when people approach us with evil intent and harass us do we have to take specific steps with negative outcomes. Please believe me when I say that most of the violent behaviour of tirunangais in public places—their loud talk and aggressive soliciting, for instance—is out of self-defence. We live in a world which offers us no security. Only by doing something disgusting can we keep at bay men who are much stronger than we are. We can't even go to the police

when we are assaulted, sexually or otherwise. They don't take our complaints seriously. (Vidya 130)

Conclusion

Teaching transgender theory combines exploration with activism, engaging with evolving cultural landscapes to amplify trans voices and foster justice. This approach involves recognizing the limitations of traditional sex and gender categories, inviting us to reimagine identity as a fluid construct. By embracing the freedom to envision, express, and define identities, we aid in fostering a more inclusive, human-centered perception of gender and selfhood. Revathi, in her autobiography, poses a few questions that we all must cogitate on for enabling a more inclusive society:

How many of us are even conscious that there is a social group called hijra? Since people are not even aware of our existence, they think ill of us. It is our duty to dispel such ignorance. Just as how dalits have come to oppose the violence inflicted on them, why cannot we hijras get together and fight for our rights? Do we not have the right to change our sex? Aren't we human too, born of mothers, as others are? We have not descended from the sky, have we? We have rights, just like the others. We are citizens of this nation. Don't we want all those rights that are granted to other citizens: the right to have a ration card, to hold property, to have a passport, the right to work, to marry, adopt or raise a child? (Revathi 24)

Even Vidya highlights the same need, "We need to belong, just as the rest of humanity needs to belong. What can we do when we don't have a wall to lean on, when we can't find a place to stay?" (Vidya 131)

Empowering the transgender community and countering social stigma are crucial to fostering authenticity and well-being. Disclosure is a significant, often daunting step in the identity journey of many trans individuals, with the timing and method of revealing their true gender identity weighed carefully amid fears of rejection or discrimination. Transphobia and societal stigmatization frequently push trans people to conceal their identities, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and supportive environment that respects their journey and allows them to live openly. Engaging with the personal narratives of trans individuals facilitates a deeper understanding of their experiences and provides critical visibility to their struggles.

I speak because we need to be heard, I write because we need to be understood, I dare because we need to survive. (Subramaniam 30)

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