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## **Silences and Voices of transpersons or Transgenders of India: A Historical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the high status given to transgender community in India in age old times, with the coming of British rule, their condition started worsening. They were silenced for decades. From the struggles they are facing since British rule, they have reached too far. Yet they have not achieved their full freedom. However, some of them tried to fight against the injustice they are facing and they took different steps for their struggle. This paper attempts to highlight the status of transgenders since age old times and also how they try to create a space of their own through various mediums like law, literature etc and their achievements too far.

**Keywords-** Transgenders (persons), Life-writings, Transgender

Breasts and long hair- is this a woman? Beard and  
moustache-is this a man? But what of a soul,  
which is neither man nor woman?

### Introduction

Transgender community nomenclature differently as Hijras, Eunuchs, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas, Shiv-Shakthi etc were visibly present in Indian society since age old times. They are given eminent status in the history of India especially in ancient times. Starting from Ardhanarishwara, the composite androgynous form of the Hindu God Shiva and his consort Parvati, transgenders are believed to be the form of Lord Ardhanarishwara. The concept of “Tritiya prakriti” or “Napumsaka” had been a vital part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epics and early Vedic literatures. Lord Rama, in the epic *Ramayana*, while leaving to forest on being banished from the kingdom for 14 years, turns around to his followers and asks all the ‘men and women’ to return to the city. Among his followers, the hijras alone decided to stay with him. Impressed with their loyalty, Rama sanctioned them the power to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like child birth, marriage etc. A similar merge occurs between goddess Lakshmi and her husband Vishnu, forming the hermaphroditic or androgynous Lakshmi-Narayana concept. Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Nagakanya in Mahabharata, is considered as the progenitor of the hijras in TamilNadu and they named themselves as Aravanis. Jainism too make a detailed reference to transgenders which mentions the concept of ‘psychological sex’. Hijras played a prominent role in the royal courts of Islamic world, especially in the Ottoman empires and Mughal rule in medieval India. During Mughal reign they were given positions such as political advisors, administrators and they were the group who were closest to kings and queens.

But things began to change when Indian subcontinent came under the British rule. History shows that British people were interrogating the reason for giving them high status in royal courts. They were repelled by the presence of these people. However, by 19<sup>th</sup> century British administration decided to criminalise the hijra community and they were denied even basic civil rights. They were given punishment of two years or fine or both. From then onwards their circumstances turned to be worst. Situation didn’t change even during post-independent era. The legacy of considering them as marginalised and as criminals continued since they are being prejudiced. transgenders who constitute the marginalised section of society in India experience intolerance, discrimination, harassment, threat of violence and humiliation. They are given limited opportunity to establish themselves in the mainstream or to make any social contributions since they are stigmatised and are treated with prejudice by the public. As a result, they tend to develop low self-confidence and esteem. However, despite all these problems some among them have been trying to establish their identity in society by excelling in various fields. In their journey from the marginalised domains to the mainstream domain,

they are constrained to overcome many hardships due to societal pressure. Yet some of them have written their narratives of success with the help of their endowment, hard work, dedication and perseverance. They include Kalki Subramaniam, a social activist as well as an actress, Padmini Prakash, a kathak dancer and the first transgender news reader, Madhu Bai Kinnar, the first transgender mayor, Bharathi, the first transgender pastor, Manobi Bandyopadhyay, the first transgender principal. Some of the transgenders try to portray their struggle for existence and their success stories through their writings.

The narratives of transgenders can be classified as 'life-writings' since they portray their social struggles to become the advocates for the rights of transgenders and in creating a social domain of self-identification through their life discourses. They also try to spatialize themselves as a new sex and gender in the mainstream domain through their narratives. Life writings expresses the crossing and blurring of the traditional generic borders of autobiography, biography and fiction, and the different way of inscribing the Self in literature. Life writings apply to many genres like autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, testimonies, personal essays and, more recently, digital forms such as blogs and email and other social medias. Life writings are the shaping and constructing of a life since they draw both on fact and fiction and so it generates the effects of both reality and truth. When people write about themselves they identify themselves as warriors who battle against a particular construct and can act as a tool for the marginalised to write about their hidden lives. Other genres cannot do similar justice with the marginalised subjects as the essence to express one's individual self in relation with the culture and society will be lost. Thus for transgenders, autobiography as their 'life writings' is a discourse through which they strive to produce truth and the cultures coded in this writings can be judged as truthful. Literature is a tool by which marginalised genders could reach out to the larger domains through the portrayal of their hidden lives. The emergence of transgender writings as a genre of transgender literature has assumed significance since it offers an insight into the extent to which the trauma of a transgender can be understood and evaluated.

Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* sketches all the indignities forced upon a transgender by a society which divides and defines itself as men and women in terms of biology. The text also narrates her travails of emotional and physical harassment to grapple with her true identity. A Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* is an unflinchingly courageous and moving autobiography of a transwoman who takes on ridicule, persecution and violence both within her home and outside to find a life of dignity. Her life becomes an incredible series of dangerous physical and emotional struggle to become a woman and to find love. Manobi Bandyopadhyay in her *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* narrates a moving story of her transformation from man to woman, about

how she continued to pursue academics despite many odds and upheavals and went on to become the first transgender principal of a women's college. Laxminarayan Tripathi's autobiographies *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* seek to make readers aware of who the hijras are and how their personalities are shaped. They seek to dispel myths about the hijras and help us shed gender based prejudices. She also tries to make aware the readers that hijras are just ordinary citizens.

Transgender literature has come a long way in a short time. *Myself Mona Ahmed* by New Delhi-based photographer Dayanita Singh is the story of hijra Mona Ahmed whom Singh met and began photographing more than ten years ago. It witnesses the story of Mona's castration and the loss of her adopted child. *With Respect to Sex* by Gayathri Reddy is an intimate ethnography that pictures an account of sexual and social difference in India. The subjects of the study are hijras or the third sex of India. Tritiya-Prakriti's *People of the Third Sex* is a collection of years of research into a topic which is not even discussed. Based entirely upon authentic Sanskrit references and modern concurring facts, the book guides one through the original Hindu concept of third sex. *Kuri Arutheen (Phallus I Cut)* and *Vidiyai Ezhuthinen* are the most powerful poetry collection in Tamil by the distinguished transgender activist, Kalki Subramaniam. *Queer: 'Despised Sexuality', Law and Social Change* is based on the belief that the struggle for a better world for LGBT people has to be based not just on questioning injustice, intolerance and contempt, but also questioning and challenging it and also hatred in our families, schools, colleges, workplaces and public avenues. *Made in India: Decolonisations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects* by Suparna Bhaskaran traces the emergence of the Indian homosexual, the new trans/national heterosexual women, lesbian studies and the simultaneous evolution of modern homophobia and lesbian NGOs.

Representation and positive portrayals of minorities in popular cultures has gained widespread acceptance very recently. Cinema has become an important visual narrative concerning the incorporation of the oppressed. Positive portrayal of a marginalised section and representation of their psyche through this visual medium helps the transgender community gain both legal and social acceptance. The use of new media technologies like social media groups has helped many marginal communities to challenge the people in power and find a way to express issues that have been central to everyday experiences. The use of these technologies can be seen as the media which initiate the questioning of what is observed by the people who are being oppressed. It allows the subaltern to speak and create a discourse of their own. Creation of social media groups engages more people to participate and is an important step put forward by transgenders to create their space of identity. Their intention is to find a legitimate space for themselves and a place that ensures them equal rights for a dignified existence. However, as these groups of transgender narratives find voice and space for expression through these new media channels, the members of the group at the centre relate to the

struggle as they interpret such discourses and interactions within a wider social context. These social groups aim at empowerment which is possible through discovering their sexual orientation. Such virtual online social interactions make these marginalised communities more confident of their sexual identity.

Society often ridicules and abuses transgender communities and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, workplaces, theatre, hospitals, they are side-lined and are treated as untouchables. The general failure on the part of the people is rooted in society's unwillingness to embrace different gender identities and expressions and this is what we need to change. The studies on transgenders help to introduce to society their lives, sensitivity, dreams, desires, cultures, which will sensitise people of their capability and they could go a long way to establish their rights to live as equal citizens. Thus, these studies by transgenders are not merely literary texts but the representation of the experiential reality of a much-tortured community. Their psychological self is sketched in a sort of unending struggle to establish their gender identity.

Empowerment of transgender communities is important since they live through all the indignities forced upon a transgender by the society. It is necessary to intervene for the fulfilment of their basic human rights. Despite offering mental and moral aid which helps them to overcome numerous psychological complexes, society always attaches sexual stigma to their physical deviances. In the historic judgement of the recognition of transgenders in India on April 15, 2014, Justice K S Radhakrishnan who headed the two-judge Supreme Court Bench said that the recognition of transgenders as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human rights issue. Their struggle and perseverance need to be appreciated. By this amendment this third gender community will have their scheduled quota in job and educational institutions and they will be able to select their sex as third gender. This moderation of providing reservation is obviously a significant progress towards eliminating the discrimination against these people which is not only inhuman but also against humanity as well. In a major decision of including transgender community in the mainstream, University of Kerala has approved a transgender policy that transgender students can use a gender-neutral prefix 'Mx' in the column of University forms.

Today, there are so many positive developments in terms of LGBT rights. They are educating themselves, acquiring skills and struggling to do their best. Once barred from entering a mall, Delhi model Rudrani Chettri has set up India's first modelling agency for transgenders. In an effort to integrate trans people into Indian society, Kochi metro has hired 23 members of the hijra community. The new jobs are an unprecedented initiative in India, where the trans and third gender community is mocked and isolated. Though trans women have been given jobs in the past, the majority have to resort to sex work or begging to survive.

Presently, commonly known as transsexuals, cross dressers, and eunuchs, these transgender people live in a separate community and they eke out life by dancing and singing. It is reported that some of them earn their livelihood by begging or prostitution, which is neither prestigious nor hygienic for their safe living. In reality, despite all these developments they are neither considered as members of mainstream community, nor are they given general respect as a common human being. Though Transgender Protection Bill have been introduced, they have objected the Bill due to many disparities in the bill. The bill which was meant to safeguard their interests will only serves to undermine their life and livelihood. Along with acceptance in the constitution they also require acceptance, love, recognition from society and people. The prejudice of the public has not yet changed. People must be made aware that they too belong the class of humans with a body and a mind and they too are part of this Universe. This thought must be instilled in the society since childhood. Students, from their primary schools must be taught transpersons too are part of the society and they must not be marginalised and must not be viewed with contempt.

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