

LIFE AND CULTURE OF TRANSGENDERS: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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Introduction-

Historically, and in most parts of the world, sex, in the sense of a biological category, and gender, which is more a cultural interpretation, had conformed to a conservative perception that there are two sexes, male and female. In this conception, all human beings would fit into one or the other of these sexes. This perception has persisted to the present day. However, seeing all human beings as either male or female overlooks a fact, viz., that there are people who are not easily put into either category because of the complex mix of biological characteristics, gender identity and sexual orientation. Thus, what we find is that there are not just two sexes, but three, where transgenders could be seen as the third sex.

It needs to be recognized that those described as transgenders have some characteristics, such as a person who has the anatomy of a man but who feels like a woman, or vice versa, about which one may even suggest that they have been born into a “wrong body”. This has presented several conflicts within the functioning of the family, society, and in employment, where conventional perceptions are that there are two sexes, male and female, and none other. Even social relations and cultural practices have generally been clearer sexes. Those who did not fit into the binary of male and female identities suffered from being in “limbo”, i.e. neither here nor there, and has forced people of the transgender group to present themselves as male or female, or remain outside the mainstream of society, where they are not considered as being able to start a family of their own, or find employment through a system that most often discriminates against them.

Transgenders face lot of difficulties, which have given them no place in society. They are not allowed to lead a normal life as we people are leading in a smooth way. Transgender people often experience dilemma between their gender identity or gender expression and their assigned sex. They are also termed gender queer people whose identities may be masculine or feminine, bigender, agender, third gender etc. The term is also referred as cross-dressers. They are also identified as heterosexual, bisexual, asexual etc.

John F Oliven, a psychiatrist from Columbia University coined the term transgender in 1965 in his work Sexual Hygiene and Pathology in which he says instead of the term transsexualism, “transgenderism” should be used because sexuality is not a major factor.

By the mid 1970s both transgender and Tran’s people were used and the term transgenderist was used to describe people who wanted to live as cross-gender without sex reassignment surgery.

On March 31st of every year, The International Transgender Day of Visibility is celebrated which is dedicated to transgenders and also to raise awareness of discrimination faced by them. It was founded by Michigan based transgender activist Rachel Crandall in 2009.

Every year on November 20, The Transgender Day of Remembrance is held in honour of Rita Hester, a transgender who was killed on November 28, 1998 in anti-transgender hate crime.

Transgender is a worldwide phenomenon. They have existed in all parts of the world, with their own identities, customs and rituals. They have been variously known as 'baklas' in Philippines, 'berdaches' among American India tribes, 'xaniths' in Oman and 'serrers' in Africa. They are diverse and include both male and female transgenders.

This study takes up the issue of transgenders and their lives within their complex system of physical and cultural patterns, where they have a style of life that is conjoined with their physical characteristics, and the fact that in many ways they do not completely fit into what may be considered as "mainstream" society. One should understand that this group of people is not considered as a "deviant" group in any sense because of their physical features, but the physical features and their cultural practices together have given rise to a pattern of behaviour that is somewhat unique to their group. This is the focus of the present study.

TERMINOLOGY OF THE WORD TRANSGENDER-

In English language the transgenders are called as EUNUCHS. The Hindi word "Hijra" is alternately called as hijira, hijada, hijara, and hijrah. Kinnar is the older name, more respectable and formal term of hijra.

In South India, it is believed that Yellamma, a goddess has the power to change one's sex. Male devotees who dress in female style are called as Jogappa. Jogappa perform dancing and singing at weddings and birth ceremonies which are similar to the roles of hijras.

Across India hijras are referred to as Kothi or Koti. They usually take feminine role in sex with men. Hence they are regarded as feminine boys or men. In Kolkatta they are referred as Durani, in Cochin as Menaka, in Nepal as Meti and in Pakistan as Zenana.

Kothis generally dress as women and they act in feminine manner in public. Their partners are masculine men who are "normal" male. These partners are usually married. Their sexual relationship with hijras or kothis is kept secret from the whole community. Some hijras even go to the extent of getting married to those male partners, though their marriage is not recognised by any law or religion.

Transgenders and Society-

People who are in this category or group of transgenders have a physical component that distinguishes them from others. Thus, it could be a person with male sex organs who chooses to be female, and therefore has undergone sex change measures, such as the use of hormones and/or surgical measures. At an earlier time, these people were also referred to as transsexuals (i. e, those who had a surgical change of sex), but this term is considered as outdated, and the preferred term is transgender. Transgenders should not be confused with transvestites. "Transvestites" does not imply any sex change, but involves "cross dressing", where, for example, a man chooses to dress as a woman, but has no physical differences between him and other males.

Transgenders differ from the typical male and female in ways that are related to their gender identity and expression. It is also difficult to imagine what a transgender person goes through in life without being a transgender. A simple illustration would serve to highlight what, at a superficial level would be visible to outsiders. If a person, who was born as a woman, is considered as attractive and feminine, suddenly feels that "she" is not any more a woman, but is actually a man, then complications arise, in what would be the appropriate mannerisms of a man rather than a woman, dresses being worn, jewellery, hair style and so on, then many changes have to be made, by the person involved, and in social relations with others. What would be appropriate in

a relation between a man and another man, or a woman and another woman, now has become a relation between two persons of different sexes, and hence a new form of relation has to be devised and carried out. It's another matter if the person in question was recognized as a "transgender" at an early age, and was brought up in a different manner. "Changing" the sex at a later date, when the person is an adult involves not just the physical features, but also involves a change in behaviour and how they present themselves to people of either sex (i.e, to those who are not transgenders).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY OF TRANSGENDER-

Gender, like all social identities, is socially constructed. Social constructionism is one of the important theories sociologists use to put gender into historical and cultural focus. Social constructionism is a social theory about how meaning is created through social interaction through the things we do and say with other people. This theory shows that gender is not a fixed or innate fact, but instead it varies across time and place.

Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell argue that the social constructionist perspective on gender explores the taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be "male" and "female", "feminine" and "masculine". They explain " women and men are not automatically compared; rather, gender categories (female -male, feminine-masculine, girls-boys, women-men) are analysed to see how different social groups define them, and how they construct and maintain them in everyday life and in major social institutions, such as the family and the economy.

The Process of being a transgender-

Transgenders are generally referred to as "eunuchs", "hermaphrodites" and "effeminate males". There are usually two ways of becoming a transgender:

- 1) Hermaphrodites, or an intersexual by birth
- 2) To be born with a male body but with a feminine gender identity.

In both these cases, a person is born as a transgender. However, one can also become a transgender through the process of socialization which begins with one's entry into the transgender "family" which stands on a relationship of a "chela" (disciple/student) and "guru" (teacher). Each chela is a part of the guru's lineage. Usually, every guru lives with a minimum of five chelas. Whatever the income chelas earn has to be given to their guru, and the gurus maintain the household.

The physical process of becoming a transgender, and in this case a sex change from being a male, involves a very special religious ritual, which is called emasculation. It refers to the total removal of the penis, testes, and scrotum in men.

Life and Identity of a Transgender-

The question of their identity has remained ambiguous, resulting in several difficulties in acquiring a livelihood, employment, and habitation. Most people who do not have any such ambiguity in their sexuality or identity based on their sex, see the transgenders with some disquiet, and do not feel comfortable in the presence of the transgenders. This is in spite of the transgenders being called on special occasions, to bless members of their families. In northern India, hijras (as they are otherwise called), are considered as having unique powers and therefore, they are called on auspicious occasions such as weddings, and the birth of a child, where they bring blessings, as well as sing and dance. They are treated with respect and paid according to what they ask. In fact, if they are not paid what they ask, they may curse the family, which is not desirable since they are said to have both powers of bringing blessings as well as ill fortune on the home of those who have called them. In

southern India, on the other hand, the position of the transgenders is not as well regarded, and thus, their means of livelihood and occupations are such that they are prone to come within the ambit of the police, through their means of income generation such as sex work or begging.

While the legal identity of these transgenders has been in question, they suffer various forms of indignities, and inability to access benefits that may otherwise come to them because they may have been eligible in terms of economic factors for example. Thus, since they do not have a clearly recognized sexual identity, in terms of gender, they have not been able to get an education, employment, or even find recognition that they have a unique sexual identity other than the conventional binary perception of sexual identity. Modest recognition from government agencies, through reservations in certain positions, has not had the requisite result to make an impact on their lives.

While coming to the reservation issue, we should really appreciate the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala to introduce a transgender (hijra/aravani) welfare policy. According to this policy, transgenders can access free sex reassignment surgery (SRS) in the governmental hospitals (only for male-to female); free housing program; various citizenship documents; admission in government colleges with full scholarship for higher studies; alternative sources of livelihood through formation of self-help groups (for savings) and initiating income generation programs. (IGP). Tamil Nadu was also the first state to form a transgender welfare board with representatives from the transgender community. In 2016, Kerala started implementing free SRS through government hospitals.

On April 2015, the Rajya Sabha passed the Rights Of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014 guaranteeing rights and entitlements, reservations in education and jobs (2% reservation in government jobs), legal aid, pensions, unemployment allowances and skill development for transgenders.

Acceptance has to be seen in two areas of life, one being the social side, where people find it difficult to accept the transgenders as their associates and friends, and the other is in the employment field, where because of their ambiguous and unrecognized identity, they do not have the possibility of earning a livelihood through respectable and legitimate means.

The question of legitimacy needs to be mentioned here, in that, transgenders are brought within the purview of 36A of the State Police Act (Karnataka) in 2011. This section was inserted to the Karnataka Police Act-1963, came into effect from April 26, 2011. The section apparently has the intention of controlling the “objectionable activities” of “eunuchs”. “The sub section (c) of Section 36 A gives arbitrary powers to the police commissioner to prohibit by an order any eunuch from doing any activity as stated in the order. It is left to the whims and fancies of the commissioner to determine what an undesirable activity is as no policy directive are provided to guide them. As a result, the commissioner has unfettered and unqualified discretion to regulate what a eunuch can or cannot do”, the Karnataka Sexual Minorities Forum claimed. (Times of India, Nov 3, 2015). Essentially, however, the position of the transgenders is such that whatever they do will be considered as unlawful, and they do not have the opportunities of doing what is lawful. Since transgenders are seen as being mostly involved in prostitution, and begging, they are not seen as being engaged in activities that are not only lawful, but being gainfully employed. Resulting from some of the activities that transgenders (not all) are engaged in i. e, sex work, results in health hazards, and some of them have been afflicted with diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Sheridan (2009) a transgender herself describes that at a very early age she understood that she was “different” from others. This difference manifested itself later

as a transgender identity. According to her, being a transgender means that one is not always readily understood or accepted by everyone in society. There are plenty of myths and misconceptions about transgenders may cloud the judgement of people and organizations, causing them to make unfortunate decisions about hiring and/or working with transgenders.

In a case of transgender, Lakshminarayan Tripathi (2015), who was born a boy, but never felt like one. A question that occurred was, what was he then? In this autobiography, Tripathi, who now calls herself Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, says she (now) had felt attracted to boys, and loved to dance. However, others made fun of “him” as he was seen at that time. Fighting against emotional turmoil from a very young age, Tripathi, born in a high caste- Brahmin household felt confused, trapped and lonely. Slowly, he began wearing women’s clothes. Over time, he became bold and assertive about his real sexual identity, and found “her” true self, as Laxmi, a hijra. From numerous love affairs to finding solace by dancing in Mumbai’s bars, from being taunted as a “homo” to being the first Indian hijra to attend the World AIDS Conference in Toronto, from mental and physical abuse to finding a life of grace, dignity, and fame, the autobiography is an extraordinary journey of a hijra, who fought against tremendous odds for the recognition of hijra, and their rights. People who like to be identified as transgender or transsexual feel that they are born into the ‘wrong body’.

A Revathi in her autobiography, *The Truth About Me- A Hijra Life Story* (2010), describes the struggle she has faced in order to get recognition in the society. Born as Doraisamy, in Tamil Nadu, she wanted to be dressed as a girl at the age of 9 itself. She says the satisfaction they get as they dress as women but the society always looks them astonishingly. She also says that no one tries to understand our emotional feelings. Her life became an incredible series of dangerous physical and emotional journeys to become a woman and to find love. Currently Reavathi is working for Sangama, a sexuality minority’s human rights organization for individuals oppressed due to their sexual preference.

Similarly, Vidya, a transgender has a master’s degree in linguistics and is very much interested in contemporary theatre and cinema. Now she works for a voluntary organization engaged in serving destitute people in Chennai. In her autobiography, *I am Vidya, A Trans gender’s Journey*(2013), Living smile Vidya opines that every society divides and defines itself in terms of men and women in terms of biology alone. From being rejected by her family members, she has struggled a lot by begging on the streets as a social outcast, to dress as a woman and also to undergo surgery to lose her manhood, suffering both emotionally and physically in order to arrive at true identity. Despite all this, she says ‘I have found a body that is perfect for me’.

Pat Griffin and Mathew Quellett (2003) provide a historical overview of changing perspectives in education, practice and literature on addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in public schools. They also describe how the presentation and analysis of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in the past 80 years have evolved into one of the primary points of contention in the battle over what values related to sexuality and gender schools should reflect.

Over the past 5 decades, important societal changes have occurred for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in the USA. Laura Hackimer and Sherrie L. Proctor (2015) have expressed their views on the community based efforts by Stonewall Riot and the Gay Liberation Front in the late 1960s to the more recent repeal of the US Military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Policy and also passage of different states’ marriage equality laws which have led to awareness of issues that have a large impact on LGBT individuals in the USA. They have also observed increased attention

towards LGBT issues in US institutions in relation to issues such as employment, families, schools and so on.

Kristen V Luschen and Lesley Bogad (2003) explain that the sexual identities of youth constructed within a school context to show how the public manages, interprets and presents the embodied performances of the sexual/ gendered identities of teachers. They also narrate one example of removal of a transgendered teacher, Dama Rivers, from Centre High School outside of Sacramento, California which shows the practice of violence against transgenders.

Salvador Vidal-Oritz (2008) with reference to transgender and Trans sexual studies explains the field of 'trans' studies, which incorporates trans sexual, transgender and cross-dressing has undergone tremendous changes within the century. The scope of trans sexual studies has been very wide across social institutions and within a rigid model of proving a person's true trans sexuality.

Sharmin (2017) talks about Nayan, a transgender who works in a garment factory in Dhaka. She spends her days dressed as a man, but when she goes home in the evenings, she changes into a saree, puts on make-up and waits for her boyfriend to arrive. Sharmin found that Nayan's deepest desire was to be a wife, and that she would find someone who would marry her.

Sex segregation has long been thought necessary ingredient of fairness in physical competitions, including Olympic sports. However, in another context, where physical characteristics are crucial to being in a beauty contest or pageant, Jenna Talackova, a trans woman, who had earlier contested in a competition for transgenders in Thailand, decided to compete in a Miss Universe contest in Canada in 2012. Initially, she was disqualified, that she was not a "naturally born" woman, but that decision was reversed, and she contested, though she did not win, and was not even placed in the top five. The decision of the pageant officials appeared to be a manifestation of transphobia, rather than indicating that Talackova was not a real woman (Bialystok 2016).

When we speak of transgenders, one of the main problems is that we cannot say for sure how many people in the population are transgenders. In Census 2011, transgenders were counted for the first time. They are included in the category of others. They also have basic rights like voting and crimes against them being registered. The government's technical advisory committee (TAC) had proposed during the 2011 census that transgenders will have code three category. Census figures only now have begun to indicate the third gender, and according to the census 2011, the third gender comprises 4.9 lakhs population in India, and 20,000 in Karnataka. However, this seems a very low figure, considering that unlike a clear articulation of being a male or female, it's likely that many families may not choose to disclose that someone in their family is not a clear male or female, but would qualify as a "third gender".

There is a tinge of stigma that is attached to someone who is not a male or female, and rather than face some form of public opprobrium, families may choose to keep quiet about any transgender family member. The literature gives various figures, but they are essentially speculative or plain guesses, and cannot be relied upon. However, rather than estimating the numbers in total, we can clearly state that there are sufficient number of transgenders to make this a recognizable group, and one that would qualify as a fit subject for study. They have an identity that can be observed, and from that factual background we can proceed with indicating certain areas of life where they are lacking, or where their sexual identity has been a hindrance to their achieving a better quality of life.

PROBLEMS OF TRANSGENDER-

For their livelihood, transgenders are usually engaged in three categories of work which are as follows-

- A) Most of the transgenders are engaged in showering blessings at various religious ceremonies, birth ceremonies and also at weddings. Their performances involve music, dance, singing etc by using dholak. This earns the transgenders gifts and rewards, either monetary or in kind.
- B) Secondly, they are engaged in sex work to earn their living. It involves home based sex work to street based sex work across different socio-economic groups.
- C) Third activity involves laal-batti mangna which involves begging by transgenders at traffic signals.

What are the means by which they are able to meet their basic needs of food and housing? Indications of another state(Tamil Nadu) suggest that they have very poor housing, and most of them do not possess proper housing, and even the housing that they had were of the *kachha* and semi *pucca* house, with poor sanitation, electricity or drinking water. Getting food through the public distribution system, at cheaper rates, has had the problem that the transgenders, cannot always identify themselves as transgenders, but have to identify themselves as male or female, and undergo ridicule and harassment from officials who are responsible for giving ration cards.

Most of the transgenders complain that doctors and staff of hospitals discriminate them in giving treatment and they advise them not to involve in such immoral activities instead of giving treatment. As there is some knowledge about transgender community among health professionals they are not willing to approach government hospitals. The process of registration to get a health card is also problematic for transgenders as it contains male or female option. They totally confused to recognize their gender among these two groups. They are also made to wait for a long time in male queue. Most of the transgenders prefer out-patient service where in they just the queue by clapping and also get better medicines free of cost.

Health security has been a problem of their peculiar existential condition. Those who need hormonal treatment and reconstruction surgery have to find the monetary resources to carry out such treatment. Considering the occupation that most of them carry out, namely sex work, health problems are a regular feature, for which they need to consult medical practitioners. This is not as straightforward as it may seem, since government hospitals are not always favourable to them in terms of treating them with some degree of kindness or respect. Most hospitals present a condition that includes ridicule and distress to the transgenders which may well reflect the perceptions of the general population. However, they may choose to go to private clinics, where they need to pay for the treatment that they receive.

An issue that needs to be considered is that the stigma and discrimination that transgenders may face in their native place, whether town, village or city, may make it necessary for them to migrate to another place. This may make a big city such as Bangalore a place that has some distinctly attractive features for a transgender to earn something to survive, and also find others their group, with which they can form some kind of bond.

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