Writing the Margins: Plural Perspectives on Transgender Lives from Transgender Activists in India

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Abstract:

The Supreme Court of India in a judgement of 2014, affirmed recognition of transgenders. This was hailed as a great step forward. However, a more nuanced understanding shows that the verdict also increases greater state and social control over gender marginality and gender expressions that question the binary. This contradictory judgement compels me to look at literary articulations of transgender activists, examining the plural, often quite divergent perspectives that occur. Manobi Bandyopadhyay tells of the conflict between the physical and the mental orientation, and hegemonic concept of physical identity and gender performativity. Her writing also sharply questions by implication the component of the SC verdict where transgender seems equated with hijra. In Living Smile Vidya's I Am Vidya, the focus is on the transformation from the supposed to the real, which in a way is also a journey from the centre to the margin. A Revathi's, The Truth About Me looks at the violence, trauma and degradations that transgenders face, especially when being a hijra and being a sex worker appear the main occupations before them. Finally, Kalki Subramaniam's We Are Not The Others, reinserts the transgenders in the world in its totality, and in a combination of poems and essays, sets out to challenge, and subvert binary visions based on traditional culture, such as Krishna, 448 the male god protecting Draupadi when she is about to be disrobed, in a poem that both invokes that image and then rejects it. This study will be based on autobiographies and other writings of Indian transgenders, and also on theoretical insights developed by Indian queer activist – scholars. It will examine the problems involved in the interaction between Indian lived reality and terms originally developed in the West.

Keywords: Transgender, Citizenship, Memoirs, Hijra

Documents Defining Transgender – Memoirs of Some Transwomen Activists

Transgender is a term encompassing a range of persons with gender dysphoria and are perceived in different ways. Committed and competent queer scholars, like Aniruddha Dutta (Dutta, 2014; Dutta, 2019) and Sayan Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 2019) have examined the legal ramifications, as well as the complexities of meshing realities (originated in a different social-cultural-linguistic milieu) with the transgender identity. Looking at the famous NALSA (National Legal Services Authority, April 2014) Supreme Court (India) judgement, Dutta finds a common trait (Dutta, 2014), among certain earlier documents issued by transnational bodies like the UNDP or the National AIDS Control Organisation, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) Report 'issues relating to transgender persons', and the 2014 judgement. These documents seek to delineate who is/not transgender. In addition, they also deal with the legal identity of transgender persons and how to implement the recognition of such a legal identity.

The NALSA judgement shuttles between an overarching term comprising wide range of positions outside the cis-male and cis-female binary, and a narrower definition based mainly on hijra and transwomen identities (Dutta, 2014, pp. 231-234). The judgment, like the MSJE report, demonstrates contrary tendencies between an attempt to grant self-determination of gender identity without showing surgery/hormonal transition, and the bureaucratic imposition of gender identities. The NALSA judgement, in places, appears to blend all *hijra* and transgender people into a 'third gender'; while elsewhere the same judgement put restrictions on who can be identified as 'male' or 'female', based on external criteria like surgery or psychological tests. Sayan Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 2019), asked whether the conferring of citizenship to transgenders by the judgement and law does not also involve the potential for violent exclusions.

It is in the light of these questions that I want to look at the different ways in which different transgender activists have related their experiences, and how these come together to question many of the assumptions behind the Supreme Court judgement. My methodology in this paper seeks to combine Policy Documents with the experiences and oral testimonies of some of the transwomen activists.

The Transgender/Hijra Spectrum and Conflict: Manobi Bandyopadhyay: A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi

This autobiography (Bandyopadhyay, 2017) traces how young Somnath started getting signals that he was not the man he was expected to be. The effect was traumatic for not only Somnath/Manobi, but also for the family. As she relates, in public understanding, the term and concept of a 'transgender' did not exist. What existed was the 'hijra', seen as violent, uncouth, and only questionably human.

In August 2016, the Government of India (GOI) approved The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2016 (GOI, 2016) to supposedly protect rights of transgender people in India. The Bill had incorporated none of the feedback given from the country-wide transgender community-led consultations in response to a draft of early 2016 (GOI, 2015). The Bill defined "transgender" as:

> one who is (i) neither wholly female nor male; or (ii) a combination of female and male; or (iii) neither female nor male. In addition, the person's gender must not match the gender assigned at birth. This will include trans-men, trans-women, persons with intersex variations and gender queers (GOI, 2016).

Thus, the State's definition of gender was rooted in the binary in which "transgender" as a category is simply a lack which needs to be pathologized. Also, by defining "transgender" as combinations of both or being neither, the State refused recognition to those trans-individuals who identify themselves as simply "male" or "female." In other words, the State resorts to a biologically deterministic definition. This wase somewhat modified when the bill was passed by the Lok Sabha in 2018, mainly due to large-scale feedback from the community, but my concern here is with perceptions.

F.L. Rudorfer defines (Rudorfer, 2014) Hijras more as a social group, part religious cult and part caste, than a minority. Moreover Serena Nanda (Nanda, 2014, pp. 28-31) sees the Hijras as women also unlike women, who are also both men and not men. Despite their ambiguities, she suggests that within their religious cultural contexts the hijra role gets a positive gender variance and even a measure of power. Hijras are also routinely viewed with suspicion. Colonialism had defined them as a 'criminal tribe' in the Criminal

Tribes Act, 1871, and though they were denotified by the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952 the stigma remained.

Thus, Somnath's identification as a Hijra was seen as a terrible stigma on the family. Coming from a middle-class family, and possessing academic abilities, Somnath survived by being good in studies. But as he grew older, faced problems and even betrayal in erotic relationships. Many who knew him considered him a *girlish boy*. But Somnath increasingly felt he was a woman trapped in a male body, a feeling that equated neither with the homosexual as others were considering him, nor the hijra. Somnath, in her college days (early 1980s) in Naihati, a small-town suburb (North 24 Parganas), decided to come out as a transwoman without using this word (Bandyopadhyay, 2017, pp. 47-49).

Manobi Bandyopadhyay tells of the conflict between the physical and the mental orientation, and hegemonic concept of physical identity and gender performativity. Her first attempt at Gender Affirmation Surgery (GAS) did not take off. As full-time college teacher at Jhargram Vivekananda Shatavarshiki College, certain teachers, who being part of the then dominant political party in the province, were sufficiently powerful to vitiate her work space. "Surya and Chandresh had managed to convince the other teachers that I was an aberration and that they collectively needed to force me out of the college. No one as lowly as a hijra should be allowed to teach in a college, share the same staffroom, toilet and facilities" (Bandyopadhyay, 2017, p. 93). Beyond these serious harassment issues, there was a constant mental turmoil. As Bandyopadhyay wrote:

> "my mind would go into a state of flux and the turmoil would sear me from within. *Am I really a woman trapped in a male body or are these just delirious thoughts?*"… I would spend hours standing naked in front of the mirror… I could not relate one bit to this body that was absolutely linear with no curves in sight" (p.109).

This also led to attempts at performing being a masculine person, by smoking. GAS did not solve Manobi's problems: a case was filed against her; she went through the trauma of having to 'prove' herself a woman with a vagina to a government doctor, and faced promotion related problems because the Education Ministry would not accept that Somnath, M.A. and M. Phil, and Manobi, PhD, were the same person. However, Manobi did manage to overcome the hurdles. But her story also shows that the social

capital, the fact that she was an educated person, a teacher, who was befriended by important human rights figures like Sujato Bhadra of Kolkata and Bratya Basu, a college teacher and theatre personality who became Education Minister under the new Trinamul Congress government in 2011, gave her a boost. This divergence attempts to identify all transgender with hijras.

Living Smile Vidya: *I am Vidya A Transgender's Journey*

Vidya narrates a somewhat different story. Queer theory is now taught and M.Phils and PhDs done on this area, in India. But no remarkable change has come upon the lives of hijras facing daily harassment including police arrest on sight. One reason is limited options open to them. Hijras are often born male, but look and dress in feminine traditions. Some choose to undergo castration. The defining characteristic of most hijras is that of leaving their home to become a part of the hijra community. Traditionally, this community is defined by a *guru-chela* relationship. The guru (teacher) teaches the chela (disciple). Hijras are expected to perform dan-ces, songs, and blessings at both births and weddings of Hindus. Traditionally, it was held that a hijra's blessings of a baby will confer fertility, prosperity, and long life on the child. While hijras are often invited to perform these rituals, they also attend births and marriages unannounced, claiming their right to ritual duties.

In recent times, a homo-nationalist discourse has come up, which points to a few well-known cases in ancient Hindu mythology to argue that transgenders or hijras (again conflating the two) were well respected in India (Nanda, 2014, pp. 27-37) the reality is that hijra are often treated with contempt. They are almost always excluded from employment and education outside of their ritual roles. As a result, they are often stricken by poverty and forced into begging and sex-work to survive. As victims of violence, harassed by police, they are often refused treatment at hospitals. However, the outsider view, that hijras are beggars, or that it is a profession, does not recognize the socio-cultural dimension of being a hijra. Harassment, rejection, isolation and societal discrimination seem to lead to depression and suicidal tendencies and many other emotional and mental distress (Mal, 2018, p.100).

Vidya's book (Vidya, 2013) traces the transformation from her assigned male identity to the preferred female one. But unlike in the case of Manobi,

Vidya faced a greater trauma and a harder life. At home, she was never allowed to do household work, since she was a boy, and the sole male heir (another parallel with Somnath/Manobi, but again with differences). Unlike Manobi, Vidya did join a hijra group. Vidya tells us, that unlike in many countries, Gender Affirmation Surgery does not happen. Vidya's narrative makes it appear as though this is due to legal hurdles. In fact, social and economic hurdles are more important. Before undergoing GAS there is a need for therapy and protracted hormone treatment. Government hospitals have a generally bad reputation for dismissive handling of transgender patients. In private hospitals, the cost of gender affirmation surgery can be between Rs. 2 lakhs to Rs 5 lakhs for male to female, and Rs. 4 lakhs to Rs 8 lakhs for female to male (Ghosh, 2020).

The average monthly salary of regular wage earners in July-September 2019 amounted to Rs 13,912 for rural males and Rs 19,194 for urban males; Rs 12,090 in the same period for rural females and an average Rs 15,031 for urban females (Kapoor and Duggal, 2022, p. 29). As a result, though in recent years there has been some governmental financial support, but the rules include the need to show Transgender Identity Cards (TIC) along with other documents while the overwhelming majority of applications for TIC are kept pending for very long period. So, what happens far more often is for those born with a male assigned gender role who want to change:

> "What we undergo here is merely illegal castration under local anaesthesia – its fruits include a lack of social approval, such as denial of jobs and opportunities for higher education… The operation is no different from a procedure performed at the butcher's shop" (Vidya, 2013, pp. 99-100).

The life as a chela is described at length by Vidya. On one hand, she did finally find a companionship where she was accepted in the way she wanted to be. But it came with an agonizing public existence. For a Master of Arts in Linguistics, simply learning begging was complicated. And then there was the life of stress, facing abuse, leading uncertain existence. As she describes, while begging in a train, she was faced with not just taunts but violence. For saying the money given was too little she was slapped, and for protesting the slap, men collectively assaulted her.

> "one of them held my arms and intertwined them between the stairs of the ladder to the upper berth; another pulled my hair; a third thug whipped me with the buckled end of his belt, hitting my face" (Vidya, 2013, p. 96).

And the Vidyas had to tackle such violence by themselves. The police are generally hostile to hijras. A shift of locale to relatives did not help, because surgery or not, her identity was to cause irritation among them, leading to repeated trauma for her. As written/narrated by her, the journey was not a simple liner move to acceptance. There were some people who understood, and that was why she was able to get a job. But she had to risk life, as well as prestige, to gain the identity she wanted. Since she not only survived, but actually got a position in a micro-credit institution, it might appear as a tale of triumph. As Vidya weaves the narration though, the difficulties and barbs loom large. It took her a year and a half to get her name changed legally. (Vidya, 2013, pp.134-5). Even though accepted at her office, she records being the victim of insults just casually flung at her. Vidya's book ends with the following: "I do not ask for heaven – I am begging to be spared from living hell. I plead for myself and fellow *tirunangais*. Thank you for understanding" (p. 138). Saravanan, later renamed Vidya, had also taken a decision that she would beg, but would not become a sex-worker (p. 82). This is a record of her stance, not any value judgement.

A Revathi: *The Truth About Me*

This same trauma, violence, and degradations are more ghastly underscored by Revathi who ran away from home while a young boy and less educated than Vidya, did not have these options, left to Vidya. Her guru was happy to find her. She followed her guru who had relocated to Delhi. But she spent a life in extreme hardship in Delhi and Mumbai, though she would again go to Chennai for her operation. But in her case, she was subsequently engaged in sex-work.

> "How people suffer to eat and live!.... This was a world I had not known until then. …. Women doing sex work; hijras who had been deceived by men who praised their beauty and enslaved them,

> …those who suffered from sexually transmitted diseases and did not receive proper medical care…." (Revathi, 2009, pp.132-33).

The life of a sex worker is hard, and that of a hijra sex worker worse still, as narrated by Revathi. She also tells in pitiless details just how policemen behave with hijras, rather than merely mentioning it as Vidya did.

> "Picking up a sheet of paper, the policeman…asked me, 'Where did those breasts come from'?... 'No, not on their own. I took hormone tablets to grow them'. "Bend down. I've got to inspect your back… He then asked me to hold my buttocks apart so that he could see my anal passage. When I did, he thrust his lathi in there…" (Revathi, 2009, pp. 205-208).

Revathi is however aware of the injustice done to her and others like her. As she remarks:

> "For the sake of money, I have put aside my honour and have taken to the roads. I'm called a hooker. What should the police be called then – they who use us and snatch money from us?" (Revathi, 2009, p. 221).

In *The Truth About Me*, Revathi speaks out about (and against) the displacements, the tortures, sexual assaults. And then she moves beyond to talk about how this experience made her move to public activism. When Manobi Bandopadhyay talks about her own life, she kept the community mostly at some distance. However, Revathi is clear that she is talking about herself, but through her own experience, she is expressing the physical and mental torture her community goes through.

And there is an amazing dynamic in Revathi. Growing up in a male body but feeling herself a woman, her life story often articulates very traditional notions of being a woman – wanting to cook, wanting to dress in 'feminine' ways. There have been often misunderstandings between cis-women feminists and transwomen that the present writer has witnessed as an activist in the women's movement. Much of this stems from cis-women ignoring the whole issue of what makes transwomen function and perform. To be a woman, it often seems to transwomen, means to be feminine. So, dressing up in traditional ways, desiring traditional relationships, markers of marriage appear not just normal, but extremely desirable and making them

visible and conspicuous. It is easy to condemn these behaviours as retrograde, or to exclude transwomen from women's rights issues. This condemnation ignores how the very act of being, or declaring, oneself as a (trans) woman leads to a loss of privilege, and a social status that actually goes well below not just cis-men but even cis-women.

Revathi spent years organising, and in speaking at academic institutions and elsewhere in a bid to increase awareness about the conditions and the lack of rights of transgenders. In a conversation with students at the Manipal Centre of Philosophy and Humanities in 2013, as recorded by Gayathri Prabhu, Revathi explained that her encounter with feminism led her to understand:

> "how very oppressive men have been towards women, forcing us to behave in certain ways (be docile, be obedient), making us think that being a good woman is to dress in a certain way (wear sarees, grow our hair long). I then understood how unfair it was! I now dress in any way I want. I have cut my hair short. There are many ways to be a woman" (Prabhu, 2014).

Kalki Subramaniam:
We are Not the Others: Reflections of a Transgender Artivist

The final text is not a straightforward autobiography or a memoir. In 2021, Notion Press published Kalki Subramaniam's collection. Born in a working class family, she, is the first Indian transgender to play a lead role in a film. An innovative campaigner, Kalki used art, film and literature to further the cause of transgenders. She also holds two Masters Degrees, in Journalism & Mass Communications, and in International Relations.

We are Not the Others is a powerful narrative of the lived experience of a transgender, presented through poetry, prose and illustrations. Kalki combines art and activism, keeping the artistic values while never ignoring the activism that brought her to this kind of work.

The prurient curiosity about transgenders lurking all too often in our minds is addressed powerfully. When we do not prioritise the fact that an entire community consists of people who feel trapped in a body that they do not want, and are mainly concerned about the acts of sex, we do get a range of questions we feel must be answered by the transgenders. This is answered

in two pieces, one a drawing with a short text, and the other a poem (written in Tamil, translated by herself).

The former is 'I should be known for what is inside my head, not for what is inside my panty' (Subramaniam, 2021, pp.44-45).

The latter 'If You Don't Mind' is a poem (Subramaniam, 2021, pp.19-21) that has a conversation with a cis-male, addressed as *Thazar* (comrade), who wants to know if the transwoman's breasts are real and if her vagina is really like a woman's vagina. At this point, the transwoman responds:

> "If you won't take it as an offence,
> Shall I ask you something?
> Don't hesitate to ask me Thazar,
> I won't take it in offensively.
> Do you have a prick?"
> (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 21)

A powerful response that says, if cis-men, the top of the entire gender hierarchy, can think that they have the right to conduct the same strip-search metaphorically that the police often carry out physically on trans-genders, then they should be prepared for retorts in kind.

This slim volume contains sixteen poems, some of which have been translated from the original Tamil by N. Elango, four essays, and quotations and artwork, as well as reproductions of the Tamil poems in her own hand-writing. This book does share the journey of growth, through the trauma, and the sustained exclusions that transgenders face as a routine matter in India.

The title emphasizes the problem that the continued imposition of the binary has on transgenders. If they are not male or female, the inevitable binary, then what are they? The answer is 'Other *'* or sometimes, 'Third Gen-der'. To return to the essays of Dutta and Bhattacharya, we find them highlighting the problem of reductionism, of using the actually non-existing binary as the gateway to describing transgenders.

'Don't Tell That to Me' records, with the same angry mood, the things that so many transgenders get from 'normal' people in India – curiosity, sympathy, stares, whispers, questions and requests for blessings as if they possessed some divine power. Kalki writes:

"To you and to
the million others
I want to shout
I am made of
flesh and blood,
of fear and hope,
of joy and pain."
(Subramaniam, 2021, p. 34)

The struggle to establish one's womanhood is articulated in the poem, 'Piece by Piece' which says:

I am not a woman by birth
I was born as a shattered
Rubik's cube,
all my life I worked
step by step
to reclaim my honour.

To correct the wrongs,
I collected all of me,
my body, mind and soul
and put together in patience,
vouching with perseverance.
I endured shame and guilt,
yet I stood strong with grit.
(Subramaniam, 2021, p. 79)

In the Hindu epic, Mahabharata, there is an episode where Yudhisthira gambles away his wife Draupadi, and there is an attempt to disrobe her in public. She calls upon the God Krishna, who protects her.

In transgender parlance in India, *Nirvaanam* (Buddhist concept of eternal liberation) means the liberation from the bondage of the wrong body into which one has found oneself. So, it is the process of gender assignment surgery or (till recently in all cases, even now in most cases, as we saw earlier), just castration.

The poem *Nirvaanam* talks of the transwoman's joy at her anklet and the dance she dances. But she is then faced by a hostile world:

"There goes the pottai***"
Heckled those
who have their manhoods
hanging about them,
abruptly died my smile.
(Subramaniam, 2021, pp.109, 111)

It seems biological existence is the only way a woman can prove her womanhood.

"with tears rolling down
I remove my saree.
In this moment,
I do not want any Krishna
to save or rescue me."
(Subramaniam, 2021, p.112)

There is a subversion not merely in the act of disrobing but in rejecting the epic saviour. The female body now becomes the site not just of oppression but of resistance, as in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. (Spivak, 1981) It is interesting that both for Adivasi resistance and for transgender resistance against the multiple oppression and exploitation, the inversion of the same epic story is called forth.

This survey of her book may be ended with a brief reference to one prose text: "Will an Indian Man Ever Bring a Trans Woman Home and Say 'Ma, I Love Her'"? (Subramaniam, 2021, pp. 39-43).

Kalki evocatively describes the tremendous mental pressure on the transwomen to acquire the biological gift of womanhood through gender affirming surgeries, and how notwithstanding this, there is a prejudiced societal rejection of them as "real" women.

Each piece of writing in *We are Not the Others: Reflections of a Transgender Artivist* deconstructs the idea of transgenders as Others by deconstructing cultural signification and offering an insider's account of their dreams, desires, hope, pain and suffering, all too universal and all too human. Challenging the stereotyping of signifiers, these are pieces that vehemently bring home to us the fact that boy/girl/man/woman/first gender/second gender/third gender are hierarchical categories that we forcefully impose upon human experience with severe injustice and irreparable damage.

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