SAGAS OF STIGMA, SHAME AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF HIJRAS IN INDIA

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Abstract - Hijra (Transgender) Community in India is the most backward community which is rejected and socially excluded from participation in any social activity. It is forced to live on the fringes of Indian society. They are rejected, ridiculed, hooted and jeered at wherever they go and any relation with them is seen as taboo. They live on the margins of Indian society and earn their livelihood by chuckling "badhai" (blessing) songs on ceremonial occasions and occasionally engage in sex. Their everyday experience is filled with Stigma, shame and harassment leading to a strong rejection of their identity which further makes them extremely vulnerable to violence, sexual assault, molestation and rape. The present paper attempts to study the life, culture, desire, trauma and pain of transgender exclusion at the hands of dominant culture as well as their silence in expressing themselves through two hijra autobiographies The Truth about Me by A Revathi and Me Hijra, Me Luxmi by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi.

Index Items - Castration, Culture, Exclusion, Hijra.

I

Hijra Community in India is the most backward community which is rejected and socially excluded from participation in any social activity. It is forced to live on the fringes of Indian society. They are rejected, ridiculed, hooted and jeered at wherever they go and any relation with them is seen as taboo. They live on the margins of Indian society and earn their livelihood by singing "badhai" (blessing) songs on ceremonial occasions and occasionally engage in sex. Though we talk of equal rights for every individual very boldly in democracy, the hijras had no right of their own till 15April 2014, when the Supreme Court of India declared 'transgender' to be the 'third gender' in Indian law and asked the government to provide them legitimate space in India. Justice KS Radhakrishnan noted in his decision that, "Seldom, our society realizes or cares to realize the trauma, agony and pain which the members of transgender community undergo, nor appreciate the innate feelings of the members of the transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their biological sex" [1]. Any individual effort by them to get a job other than their accepted profession of begging or singing "badhai" is thwarted by stating that they are destined to remain as they are by God.

According to 2011 Census Report [2] there are about 4, 90,000 transgender men in India. Their everyday experience is filled with discrimination, shame and harassment leading to a strong rejection of their identity which further makes them extremely vulnerable to violence, sexual assault, molestation and rape as no cases are reported in police stations because of their silence against such happenings. Their enrolment in educational institutions is near zero and same is the case with their employment. They never avail essential services like health care due to fear of rejection and discrimination. Their access to public places like cinemas, malls, restaurants is very limited and the use of public toilets is a big problem as there are no separate toilets for the transgender community.

II

Due to the reason that the hijras are ostracised from society they remain illiterate and are forced to pursue their occupation of begging, singing, dancing and sex work. In spite of the fact that some of them were elected as Mayor and representatives in Municipal elections in past years, their win was a result of the anger of voters against the prevailing candidates rather than their own ability. As a result, during their tenure they could not do much and were forced to work as pawns in the grab of influential people. Our little knowledge about their lived reality, difference, culture and experience in such ostracising circumstances is very limited and we lack knowledge about what undergoes inside their existence as very minimal attempts have been made on their side to express themselves through writing stories, songs and autobiographies. As a result no government or social organisations can frame action plans or policies to ameliorate their situation and conditions. The government orders that have followed the Judgment have asked its departments to ensure acceptance of transgender community as a distinct cultural identity and have stated the need of doing more to ameliorate the discrimination and deprivation of this community so that the rights of TG students are safeguarded. Various organizations have been ordered to create TG friendly infrastructure like wash rooms, rest rooms as a way to assist the upcoming TG students to study without fear, stigma or shame.

No ethnographic research on the life and culture of TG community has been done so far to understand TG subcultures in order to dispel several myths pertaining to this community embedded in popular

discourse since ancient times? As writes LaxminarayanTripathi in her autobiography, "People are curious to know about hijras. How do we live? Behave? What do we do? Do we kidnap children? What funeral rites are performed for a hijra after her death? Is she cremated or buried? Such questions do not have answers…because we hijras are so secretive about our lives, hearsay rules the roost" [3]. On International level there do exist some medical researches and HIV reports about the transgender community of other countries but none of them throws any light on the circumstances of hijras in India. Their point of enquiry is descriptive and narrative and they are not based on facts or research. There are some videos on Face book and Google related to their dancing, singing and ways of dressing but none of them delves deep into their psyche and problems faced by them day to day in India. These non-serious attempts to depict the transgender people bring to our notice the complexity of their lives. According to Justice P. Sathasivam, "transgender" has become an "umbrella" term that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experience… whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical". He further describes them as "gender variant", "gender different", or gender non-conforming". [4] The UNDP Report on "Hijras/ Transgender Women in India: HIV, Human Rights and Social Exclusion [5] has underlined the multiple forms of oppression faced by a transgender in Indian society. It includes HIV and health related risks as well:

Most transgender people, especially youth, face great challenges in coming to terms with one's own gender identity and /or gender expression which are opposite to that of the gender identity and gender role imposed on them on the basis of biological sex. They face several issues such as : shame , fear, and internalized transphobia; disclosure and coming out; adjusting, adapting, or not adapting to social pressure to conform; fear of relationships or loss of relationships, and self-imposed limitations on expression or aspirations.

Sara Hosey in her paper underlines a different aspect of transgender identity in society wherein the physical characteristics which are conceived as unnatural by society, are purely natural and normal for the transgender because "the narrator faces obstacles because of other's understanding of her body, rather than because of her body's functioning or impairment" [6]. A transgender's social exclusion begins right from their birth or their recognition of being "different". Indian families do not accept their child if he starts behaving in a feminine way and as a result he is beaten, scolded or threatened again and again. Further it leads to eviction from the family or disowning him. As a result the transgender could never claim his share of the property or inherit what is lawfully his own. Due to this their life becomes insecure and challenging and they face physical and verbal abuse, forced sex or possible arrests by the police. Amid these, to earn livelihood is a tormenting experience. There is no employment available for them anywhere though some states like Tamilnadu (Transgender Women Welfare Board) have started welfare measures for them. There is total lack of health facilities and public amenities for them. During British regime, they were perceived to be criminals by birth as is evident from British Criminal Tribes Act 1871, according to which the police used to keep a record of all the eunuchs residing in the locality to keep vigil on them. The section 377 of Indian Penal Code maintains that "any eunuch so registered who appears dressed or ornamented like a woman in a public street… or who denies or plays music or takes part in any public exhibition… (could) be arrested without warrant". [4] (p. 3-4) Thus it is clear that there has been no respite for them from any side and ultimately their illiteracy makes their situation even worse.

Since the transgender have got voting rights, people's attitude towards them has changed, but a lot needs to be done so that our society accepts them as human beings who have the right to be what they are and what they want to be. Today, if taken as a subaltern group, it lacks even what Gramsci calls "conscious leadership" or the "restless impulse or instant to revolt" [7] (p.1). Though there are references to Kinnars, Shikhandi, Brihannala in ancient Indian epics who were used to fulfil the purpose of larger community, but not a single tale is found through which the transgender has expressed himself. There is a total lack of self-writing. Eli Clare, himself a transgender poet, tries to find a cause to this absence of self-writing and opines:

Grappling with this lack of self-writing by or accurate information about these individuals… I want to hear the stories, but like the stories of other marginalized people, they were most often never told, but rather eaten up, thrown away, lost in the daily grind of survival. [8]

III

The two autobiographies The Truth about Me (2010) by A Revathi and Me Hijra, Me Luxmi (2015) by Luxmi Narayan Tripathi have brought the question of transgender community in literary field and reader's attention has turned towards their denigrated status. The whole literary landscape in India had remained almost blank before these publications though these are still waiting to be hailed by critics of Comparative Literature. A Revathi's autobiography, The Truth about Me is the first of its kind for being a hijra life story. The gist of The Truth about Me can be easily understood by Revathi's Preface when she writes about her text:

In our society we speak the languages of rights loud and clear and often. But do the marginalised have access to their rights? Individuals are denied their

rights in the name of sex, sexuality, caste and religion. They have to either arrive at compromise or engage in a struggle. I am one such individual who has been marginalised because I was born a male and wanted to live my life as a woman. The Truth about Me is about my everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain; it is also about my endurance and my joys. As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society. Yet I dared to share my innermost life with you- about being a hijra… my aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires. [9]

Her story is an eye-opener to many who don't know an iota about a hijra's life in Indian society. Doriaswamy's (Revathi's original name) life turns upside-down when her family notices her characteristics and bent of mind. She is beaten, scolded and warned time and again to mend her manners and to behave like other boys. Her school teacher punishes her for being so feminine, "I remember being caned for 'not being brave like a boy'… I didn't know that I behaved like a girl; it felt natural for me to do so… It was like eating for me- just as I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat. I felt I could not stop being a girl, because others told me not to be so" (Ibid.7). (All further quotations belong to this book). Later when she plays the part of Chandramathi in the play Harischandra, she feels like enlivening her real self, "to the world, it appeared that I was dressing up and playing a woman, but inside, I felt I was a woman" (12). Her difference from others makes her anxious to know about men like her who live at places like Dindigul, Erode and Mumbai.

Her anxiety forces her to leave her native place and go to Dindigul to join the jamaat (group), to do nirvaanam (submit to castration and turn into full woman) and then become a chela. Her visit to Delhi to meet her guru makes her understand how difficult it is to be a transgender. Once when she returns home to see her parents, she is beaten mercilessly for bringing shame to her family, "He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me, I who had dared to run away… I was beaten on my legs, on my back, and finally my brother brought the bat down heavily on my head… there was blood all over, flowing, warm… (as) I had been spotted in women's clothes, begging in the apple market" (55-56). They take her to Samayapuram temple to shave her head so that she doesn't join her group and she prays to the shrine vehemently:

Amma! Why I must suffer like this… I have known only pain… It was you who made me in form, but with female feelings. And now, for your crime, I am being punished in your own shrine... Can't you understand another woman's feelings? (57)

Her nirvana operation adds a very excruciating chapter to her life. The doctor performs the operation in most unsanitary conditions and the pain she suffers is beyond description as she says, "I lay writhing in pain for nearly two hours and then felt a huge pressure on my chest… bile rushed up to my throat… at that time it seemed as if I would surely die" (75). She feels rejection in the eyes of people around and questions it pointedly, "men and even women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. I realized what a burden a hijra's daily life is. Do people harass those who are men and women when they go out with their families? Why a crippled person, a blind person-even they attract pity and people help them… but we- we are not considered human" (83).

Later when the question of dividing the ancestral property arises, her father and brothers divide the property equally among them and offer her a paltry sum to leave her claim on property. Though she doesn't say a word, their interference in her life never ceases. Later when she feels affectionate towards a worker in a cinema hall who visits her in Namakkal, her brothers can't tolerate this and chide her disrespectfully, "You Pottai motherfucker, you are a man, after all. We did not mind you traipsing around in a sari. But how dare you want a husband? If we hear that he is visiting you again, be sure that we'll tear your guts out… we'll finish you off as well" (184). It is very difficult for a transgender to receive affection of any kind in Indian society and as an after effect her house owner evicts her from the house.

When she indulges in sex work, she is never out of danger. It is work involving extreme pain and physical assault by the clients and the police often harasses her for money. Her account of her life in Mumbai is excruciatingly painful and denigrating but there is no employment available as she writes, "people like us always have problems. If you go out to do sex work, you get into trouble with rowdies, you bribe the police…if at times we don't earn enough, and they go to shops and beg" (190). Her life undergoes several ordeals and torments wherever she goes-Bangalore, Hyderabad. Bullying, throwing pieces of stones, tomatoes or verbal abuse is a daily phenomenon. Her experience with a policeman when caught on the pretext of indulging in sex-work is extremely heart-rending:

I fell at the policeman's feet. He kicked me with his boots…asked me to take off my clothes-right there, while the prisoner was watching. I pleaded with him and wept…when I was standing naked, he struck his lathi where I had had my operation…struck at that part with his lathi… there was not a soul there to take pity on me. (206-208)

Another rowdy strips him naked on the road and she runs away to the nearest building to save her. So many people watch the man beat her but no one comes to her help. Thus her autobiography is a grim tale of hijra's life in India. In addition, it throws much light about hijra'a distinct community culture and beliefs. The hijras are forced to live in their community because of their marginality, sexual minority and lack of their acceptance in India. It relieves the readers to hear that Revathi works with

Sangama as an office assistant. Sangama is a social organization working for the welfare of sexual minorities through seminars, workshops and public meetings.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography Me Hijra, Me Laxmi was translated from Marathi original in 2015 by R. Raja Rao and P.G. Joshi and it is a very lucid account of Laxmi's life , though much luckier than Revathi because she has not been disowned by her family and leads a much liberated life. As pointed out by Rao in the Afterword, "Laxmi's autobiography is one of the earliest works that belong to the genre of hijra literature. It seeks to make readers aware of who the hijras are, and what goes into the shaping of their personalities…it seeks to dispel myths about the hijras and help us to shed our prejudice"(183). While comparing both these autobiographies discussed here he opines that the two books are poles apart:

Revathi's account of her life, is, what I would call, essentialist…Laxmi's account, conversely, is anti-essentialist… Revathi derives her essential identity by virtue of her being a hijra. Laxmi, conversely, decentres through her being, the very idea of essential identity… Revathi consistently portrays herself a victim, whereas Laxmi's endeavour seems to be to show that, in spite of being a hijra, she is not a victim. (188)

Laxmi lives with her parents and siblings and supports her family. She is self-dependent and has become a star figure in Thane to the extent that Salman Rushdie interviewed her for his book AIDS Sutra and describes her "exceptional" and a "rarity" among hijras, "I went to Thane to meet an exceptional hijra named Luxmi, a hijra of exceptional articulacy and force of character…a local star of sorts…she works at home as a Bharatnatyam teacher. But when she leaves home, she is Laxmi, and everyone in Thane knows her…her beginnings are not unusual. [10]

Tripathi's childhood begins in a similar way to Revathi's and her parents gradually accept her as a different child. She does not play with boys of her own age and has an inbuilt interest in dancing and playing the act of women characters. As she says, "In patriarchal, misogynistic cultures such as ours, dancing is seen as a womanly pursuit. So I was teased. People began to call me a homo and a chakka. They couldn't see the cathartic and therapeutic effect that my art had on me. All they could see was that though I was a man, my body language was that of a woman… I was first sexually exploited when I was seven" [3] (4-5). She is continuously molested during family functions and it makes her an introvert being. After meeting Ashok Row Kavi (a homo social activist), she decides not to live in passivity and her outlook on her life changes throughout. Ashok makes her understand that it is quite natural to be like this, "No my child, you are not abnormal. You are absolutely normal. What is abnormal is the world around us. They simply don't understand". (Ibid.11)(All further quotations belong to this book) Her passing affairs with some friends instil confidence to some extent but it is her dance classes that give her much respite in such complex situation. She continually feels the fear of being molested again by rowdy boys around and finds her powerless as a victim:

Male dominated society nauseated me. I realised that I would have to put a lifelong fight to resist male lust. But how could I take on the whole world? As if to endorse how powerless I was, I was raped again…the dark side of lust, which made me a victim of sexual assault again and again. (28)

Her student life at Meethibai College acquaints her to the life of the affluent and introduces her to the models of Bollywood. Luckily she is selected for casting in Vaishali Samant's Album Lavani on Fire and it becomes a big hit. She becomes famous in the world of glamour. Her interest in becoming a hijra is still alive and later it results in her becoming a chela of Lata Nayak. She adds, "I began to realize that the hijras were a culturally rich sub-sect. Not everyone could become a hijra-it took guts…a hijra is neither a man nor 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 suffocated within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man" (39-40) She feels a relieving effect on her when a minor ceremony makes her a hijra, but at the same time, it brings her face to face with the lived realities of a hijra's life.

When one of her chelas gets missing, the police instead of searching the culprits, sees them with suspicion. He urges the police not to blame them, "not to think of us as hijras, but as human beings...the cops would arrive at the unearthly hour and randomly pick anuone of us up for questioning at the police station" (54-55) and when later the police shuts the case she realises that, "our fight with the world seemed so very pointless…a hijra's death, nay murder, didn't seem to matter to anyone" (56-57). The suffering and dejected state of her lot prompts her to join DWS which works for the welfare of hijras and later becomes the chairman of DWS. Her guru opposes her liberated life style and mixing up with people but she argues well against hijra's shying away from the mainstream, "We are hijras. We'll not do this and we'll not do that'. I was livid. I hated the idea of a ghetto or a gated community… 'What does it matter if you are a man, woman, or hijra when something got to be done…why segregate yourselves from mainstream society to such an extent?"(67). Though she is unable to make any difference still she keeps on trying to raise the issue of their welfare on different platforms, conferences and films like a film on hijras - Between the Lines, World AIDS Conference in Toranto (2006), and creation of 'ASTITWA', a society for bringing the hijra issue centre stage. To her the hijras are "the ultimate subaltern" (91). Her visit to the Transgender Film

Festival in Amsterdam, her participation in a Beauty Pageant for hijras, the role in TV show 'Sach Ka Saamna' and later her entry into 'Big Boss' transform her identity from Laxmi-the hijra to Laxmi-the transgender activist. She writes, "I opted for the latter. I wanted to use the show as a platform to make viewers aware that hijras are normal people, just like them. We're not extra-terrestrial. We have emotions, just like ordinary human beings, and are perhaps more sensitive than them" (125) When her father expires, she is denied the duty to perform the last rites of her father even though she is eldest of her siblings and she concludes her autobiography by avery realistic assessment of the state of hijras in India:

As hijras, we live ordinary lives, like everyone else. Like to underdog, we are respected by nobody… we are thus destitute. Estranged from family and ostracised by society, people couldn't care less how we earn a livelihood, or where our next meal comes from. If a hijra commits a crime, the mob rushes to beat her up, while the police are only too glad to press charges against us. (155)

While analysing these two life stories one can easily discern that Me Hijra, Me Laxmi is an autobiography of an educated and responsible hijra who has transformed her from the stigma of being a victim to realising the life of a hijra by loving it. Pradeep Patkar, in the foreword to the Marathi edition points out this fact as he writes, "Hijras are considered ugly, but when I see Laxmi-tall, sturdy, beautiful, and confident-my stereotypes are automatically destroyed. To hijras, Laxmi is the light at the end of the tunnel…her education, her talent, and the backing she received from her family have given her a good life…other hijras are not so fortunate" (225). Revathi's autobiography on the other hand brings out the suffering of her lot more comprehensively but she never seems to dominate for a single moment in her life.

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