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SOCIAL STIGMA AND RESILIENCE IN 'TRANSGENDERISM'. A READING OF 'I AM VIDYA: A TRANSGENDER'S JOURNEY'

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ABSTRACT

The notion of gender identity is the issue of the moment where gender means not only the biological imperative of one individual, but also the keen perception of self as masculine or feminine or both or neither. Nowadays, the 'third gender' movement embraces something which goes beyond the margins of hitherto set visions of gender identity. Transgender and Gender nonconforming people confront both physical and mental dilemma in innumerable social realms. The social stigma and the feeling of incompleteness, the transgender people encounter in the arduous journey for redefining the self is woeful. The Transgender people are pushed to the periphery, despite the progressive laws in India to thwart such intolerance, which reflects the entrenched societal perceptions towards them in the country. The autobiography named 'I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey' delineates the doleful circumstances transgender people have to get to grips with and how the problem of social inclusion and equality stir up the hornets' nest in their life. This paper focuses on day to day issues and challenges the 'transformed' Vidya came across in her strenuous journey to self-identity, and the predicaments transgender community face when they do not conform to the prevailing expectations about gender in society.

Key words: transgender, stigma, resistance

Transgender people are those whose gender identities do not adhere to their biological sex and differ from stereotypes about how men and women are supposed to be. Transgender people confront several social, psychological, economic and legal challenges in their lives owing to the difference between self-identity and the sex assigned to them at birth. When they become outside the spectrum of the prescribed gender norms of society, even getting a shelter home becomes an uphill struggle for them. Even though they belong to all walks of life, they get ostracized and neglected in all spheres of society such as family, education, employment, medical care, etc. The staggering levels of discrimination towards transgender community keep them away

from varied forms of political and cultural activities, all kinds of educational opportunities, civil rights etc. The doleful circumstances arise when they get shunned from their family. At times they are forced to leave their parental home as they are being deemed as disgrace and shame to the family. Their hardships in life are heightened when the ostracism and negligence towards them remain unaltered.

The heart wrenching story of a transgender is brought out in the text 'I am Vidya, A Transgender's Journey'. This autobiography delineates the traumatic journey she confronted, the atrocities and injustice she faced, the immense pleasure she felt through "nirvana" (sex reassignment operation).

Vidya, being born as a boy was the sixth child to the parents, named as Saravanan received considerable attention from parents and siblings. As she was the only 'son' in the family, sisters poured great affection on her and her father had great expectations for her. She was forbidden to play to concentrate in studies. "I was a privileged member of the household. Of three children who didn't have to do any work at home" (Vidya,12). At times she had to bear merciless beatings from her father when the academic performance got lowered. The tremendous, intolerable sufferings due to the agony of being trapped within a man's body was extremely lamentable. From childhood onwards the feeling of rootlessness afflicts her. She had to struggle hard to claim her identity and escape from the brutality of the society. She confesses "Even kids from lower classes teased me at school: 'Look at this lady', they shouted after me" (Vidya, 24).

Nevertheless, they constitute a marginalized section of society and are discriminated against at all levels. The denial from family and community brings grievous situations and some of them commits suicide when they fail to cope up with predicaments on their pivotal path for searching identity.

"No, I couldn't live any longer as a man. If I could not become a woman, I'd rather die. I wasn't confused now. I had come to a clear decision, and it burst out in words" (Vidya, 56). These are the words uttered by Vidya, while her friend insisted her to cancel her feminine identity. Owing to the persistent traumatic events and the basic human need to be accepted, these people try to search for the possible ways out of this dreadful status. The strenuous journey of Vidya to express herself as she really was, caused mental fatigue several times. The Journey of Vidya to reveal the identity of her true self begins when she gets introduced to the transgender fictional family. Indeed, each and every member in these families consider each other as kith and kin. But the daring of Vidya is highly remarkable.

They are often treated as social outcasts even though their flaws are not their faults. Vidya states "What sin have tirunangis committed? If to be born male and feel female is a sin, it is nature's creation. What can we do about it?" (Vidya, 82). Some are

being forced to sex work due to the lack of livelihood resources. Apart from this, the major problem this community outface is recurrent denial of housing as they don't get legal protection. Fida, a member of India's first transgender group says "Wherever they stay at rent, the people say, why have you kept this Hijra? Then where do we go? That is why we need ashramam so that we can live respectfully with our own community".

Indeed, the landmark judgment in 2014 (the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014) crumpled the binary gender constructs of 'man' and 'woman' that is profoundly embedded in Indian law. As per the judgment they are entitled to basic rights and it stated that "the gender to which a person belongs is to be determined by the person concerned". Without the need of surgical or medical intervention the government assured the right of gender expression. The NALSA judgment opened new doors for the third gender to uphold the rights of the community. Thus, they could enjoy "full moral citizenship". As per this, one had the option of choosing to identify themselves either as a 'man', 'woman' or 'transgender'. The new bill 'Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016' contravenes several of rights ensured by the Supreme Court's verdict in 2014. Even if NALSA remains unfulfilled, the policies and principles gave them a provision for finding a firm footing in the community. As per the Transgender Bill of 2016, the procedure to obtain a certificate of identity is burdensome. They have to apply to District Screening Committee, comprising the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the District Social Welfare Officer, a psychologist or psychiatrist, a representative of the transgender community and an officer of the relevant government. In fact, human rights get violated grossly by all means when such medical examinations exist to determine their identities.

Bill falls short at several levels, as the Bill makes an effort to demolish the age old tradition of begging by stating that "Whoever compels or entices a transgender person to indulge in the act of begging or other similar forms of forced or bonded labor other than any compulsory service for public purposes imposed by Government shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall

not be less than six months but which may extend to two years and with fine". Most of them resort to begging due to their meager opportunities for earning. Most significantly, the high cost of obtaining medical care they need, coerced this community into act of begging. "Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honor – I had even begged on the streets to achieve that end" (Vidya, 3). These words outline Vidya's long awaited moment to unveil the real self-identity. She could make it possible by earning money through begging and all.

Section 13 of transgender bill of 2016 states "No transgender person shall be separated from parents or immediate family on the ground of being a transgender, except on an order of a competent court, in the interest of such person [...] Where any parent or a member of his immediate family is unable to take care of a transgender, the competent court shall by an order direct such person to be placed in rehabilitation center." This provision entirely denounces the right of fictional families of transgender community. In reality most among them who are away from home get solace when they get attached to these kinds of unions.

In case of Vidya, she seeks refuge in such transgender association when she gets alienated and her family refuses to accept the gender she feels. Vidya mournfully remarks "They refuse to accept me as I am. When people cannot accept my gender as I feel it, how can I continue to live with them, even if they are my own people?" (Vidya, 80). Indeed, even though there is a third gender option on official documents, many of them are scared of changing their identity to transgender, because third gender IDs do not address significant basic rights such as marriage, property rights etc. Most often, they cannot meet the challenges of life and afford the expenses of life as companies are hardly hiring trans people. The denial of property rights adds to their woes.

It becomes hard for a transgender to live peacefully when oppression and exploitation permeate in all spheres such as economic, social, educational, medical, family system, mental health

etc. Within the economic sphere, due to lack of livelihood opportunities, it is onerous to fulfill their earnest desires and dreams. When they get isolated from societies, it becomes hard to pursue their way to attain success. Vidya painfully remarks in her work "I knew clearly what I was going to do – beg-pain and simple. As long as I did not want to be a sex worker, begging was my only option" (Vidya, 82). Vidya withstood this hurdle by getting employed in the banking sector and thus she could survive to an extent.

At social level, the physical abuse towards transgender community is rampant. They are getting assaulted and being attacked severely. Vidya points out the ruthlessness she experiences during her train begging: "They continued to beat me and I continued to scream. When the train stopped at Pimpi, someone shouted, 'Push the creature out'" (Vidya, 96). These lines successfully exhibit the atrocities and harassment a transgender endures in daily lives. The necessity of protecting human rights of everyone regardless of religion, caste, location, sex etc. has to be taken into account for the smooth functioning of a social system. The new draft bill does not include the adequate understanding of discrimination towards transgender, especially in jobs, education, workplace etc. There is a lack of enforcement provision with regard to gross violation of human rights. None of the laws in the bill such as the Protection of women from domestic violence, 2005, Sexual Harassment (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) at workplace 2013 etc. are not applicable to transgender community since they are out of the spectrum of identifying themselves. No obvious legal provision exists in the Transgender persons bill 2016 to protect them from these severe atrocities and sexual assaults.

Within the educational system, they come across several hindrances. It is to be noted that most of the educational institutions are not Trans friendly. Owing to the reasons like the wrong societal perception about transgender community and, lack of specific policies regarding education of transgender, they don't get favorable learning environment. This adversely affects their attendance and performance.

Due to the bias against trans students and verbal and physical attack against them in schools, most often many of them make suicide attempts and some of them gets addicted to drugs and alcohol. Even though Trans youth seek alternative schools to generate a safer and more acceptable environment, their demand has not been fulfilled yet. Vidya in her autobiography points out the torment she has to get to grips within schools. "I had no problem with people recognizing my femininity but hated it when they had made fun of me on that account." (Vidya, 50).

In case of access to medical services, they often meet turmoil of being transgender. She says "the hospital where my operation took place was low on hygiene. I was not even given a proper bed, just a steel cot with a newspaper spread on it. The surgeon gave me no guarantees, no counseling. The only pre-operation process was anesthesia- that through a local injection. They castrate you while you are watching and suture in the next few minutes, clean you with cotton and pack you off to recover. 'Next', they call out after" (Vidya, 100). Despite the medical science getting advanced day by day the gut-wrenching occurrences in the life of the Trans community does not get lessened. Most of people in India view transgender as 'unnatural'. But a doctor named 'Dr.Kaushik' responded to this sharply by saying "That way, all breast reconstruction in Hollywood and Bollywood is unnatural! There are so many females who don't have vaginas, and we make vaginas. There are many people with small penises, we correct the penis. You cannot say this is unnatural." In fact, health is really a state of both physical and mental wellbeing. If one doesn't feel comfortable with themselves and their body, they are not healthy. In this view, most of us, the so-called normal beings are also not excluded. It's really disappointing that Transgender Persons bill of 2016 does not provide provisions for health care. Even though the Supreme Court gave legal status to SRS surgery in 2014, only 23% out of 79% could undergo it in formal medical setting owing to the unavailability of services and lack of affordability.

Parents of gender non confirming people are uncomfortable with the behavior of their children.

They may feel desperate and distressed and at times, their reaction may wound the children who came out as transgender. Owing to the lack of understanding, parents cannot provide a supportive environment for their children. Indeed, it may engender severe complications in their lives. Without adequate support from family they may suffer depression, abuse and homelessness. Nevertheless, growing up as a transgender without a supportive environment is immensely dreadful. Embracing a child's true gender identity may assist him to life of completeness. The rejection from family members may deprive transgender people of accessing the social support.

"Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan any more, I am Vidya – a complete Vidya. A whole woman. Where are you, Amma? Can't you come to me by some miracle. At least for a moment? Please hold my hand, Amma. My heart seems to be breaking into smithereens. Radha please Radha, I am no longer your brother, Radha I am your sister now, your sister. Come to me Radha, Chithi, Maju, Prabha, Appa... Look at me Appa – Look at my dissected body. This is a mere body. Can you see that I can bear all this pain? I can take any amount of pain, Appa. Look at me, Appa Look at me as a woman. accept me as a girl, Appa" (Vidya, 9). These lines portray the huge relief she attained after 'Nirvana'. But the reaction of her parents was appalling. They responded "Why are you crying? Aren't we the people who must weep? What did you lack? Why have you done this to us?" (Vidya, 9)

Indeed, the success stories of grit and determination, of several transgenders are really appreciable. The perseverance, the hard work and dedication liberated them from the clutches of all kinds of entrenched societal perceptions. Vidya, through this book, delineates her journey of 'declaration and claiming of an identity', and the success of Vidya was that she did not allow society to opt the destiny of hers. Vidya has achieved great success through sturdy determination by unifying the talent, hard work, dedication etc. When Vidya got spurned by her family, she withstood all the struggle she came across. During her childhood and school days she was subjected to ridicule so many times. She states "Even kids from lower classes

teased me at school: ‘Look at this lady, ‘they shouted after me. It became quite common for the boys to trouble me.’ (Vidya, 24). She points out that, though she was a bright student she felt solitude in her high school days. She survived against all odds in her life. She firmly claims and comforts her family through these words ‘‘Don’t worry about me. I am educated and can survive; I am worldly wise and know how to live; I can learn how to live. Yes, I am not Saravanan, but I am a human being, not some monster. Not some demon. My brain will protect me. Bye.’’ (Vidya, 80). During her job-hunting efforts, she expresses her deep frustration with several NGOs. She points out that ‘‘No Indian NGO had fought to liberate tirunangis from begging and sex work. What kind of rehabilitation was it to tell them, ‘Go on being sex workers, but do it safely?’’’ (Vidya, 123). But she overcomes all kinds of obstacles. In fact, the supportive circle of friends assisted Vidya a lot. She delightfully remarks ‘‘The dam burst and tears flowed down my cheeks at this demonstration of love and affection by my friends, which came as a balm to the emotional wounds I had accrued...’’ (Vidya, 121). After several attempts, she got appointed as an EDP assistant in Madurai Branch. Her post-graduation in linguistics and her keen interest in literature played an essential role to unveil the hidden life and the virulent desire inside her heart. Vidya writes ‘‘Literature and solitude were my companions’’ (Vidya, 34). Indeed, the trans literature authored by transgenders has to come at the forefront, especially autobiographies. Only then will society get the reflection of what the trans community really feels.

As a matter of fact, Kerala was the first state to bring about a policy for the trans community. Though the state policy for transgender in Kerala 2015 enforces the constitution rights of transgenders by taking the Supreme Court judgement (2014) into consideration, the gruesome fact is that, the mindset of society towards trans community still remains same. As a part of Kochi Metro Construction, the appointment of 23 transgenders was really appreciable. But 11 of the 23 transgenders have dropped out of their jobs. Faizu, one among them points out that the problem while they search for the accommodation ‘‘All

people whom we approached excused themselves saying neighbor would create trouble. Most people think we are looking for space for prostitution.’’

Even though the Kerala government tries to provide equal space for them, the prejudice against the trans community and the conservative nature of society still remain the same. Not only the lack of accommodation but also the stigmatization at all public places such as workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals etc. make them sidelined and are treated as social pariahs.

Indeed, the laws, policies and attitudes have brought changes to a certain extent. But the prejudice against the trans community has not wiped out fully. Transphobia is indeed deeply ingrained in people’s psyche. The misconceptions about transgender people have to be obliterated. The political spectrum in India has to join hands to ask the government to take more and more steps to bring transgender community into the mainstream. It was really unfortunate that the first passport issued to a transgender community occurred only in 2015. Nevertheless, national policy has to be implemented for enhancing the literacy and employment rates among the trans community. Indeed, the news that the Kerala government has set up a justice board for establishing justice and equality for members of the trans community is really appreciable. Central and State Governments have to introduce several social welfare schemes to enhance socio economic rights and employment opportunities for this community. In Vidya’s words ‘‘if the government takes one step – society will follow suit. Once we gain social approval, our families will also accept us. Politicians take out flag marches for a million causes. They can surely take some interest in this issue.’’ (Vidya, 138).

It is high time altering the norms in the contemporary world and making a breakthrough in society. Due to the voice of transgender community against oppression and violence towards them, the discrimination has lessened but not wiped out. In fact, they have been given a name and status in recent times. Each and every individual in this universe has the miracle of unique consciousness.

Letting others live their own lives is one of the keys to peace in our lives.

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