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IN-BETWEEN THE BINARY GENDER DIVIDE: CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDERS

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Abstract
Developing a gender identity for most of us is a smooth process. We are treated as a boy or a girl by people around us and without much trouble learn our gender as we grow up. But, the case may differ for a section of population whose biological and psychological realities are at odds with each other. This section of population known as the 'third gender' was recently provided legal recognition by the Supreme Court of India on April 15, 2014. As per the 2011 Census, the 'third gender' population in India is around 4.88 Lakh. A number of nomenclatures are used to identify individuals belonging to the third gender like Kothi, Aravani, Hijra and Kinnar. A few more, chakka, sixer, gaandu and fifty-fifty are commonly used to joke upon their sexual orientation. Innumerable stories and myths thrive in our society about this invisible population. In these stories, the transgenders have no voices, familial affiliation or history. These stories contribute in increasing the divide between 'us' and 'them'. There is a need to break this culture of silence and know their version of experiential reality. In the absence of which, the existing stereotypes and prejudice for the third gender may further strengthen. This paper attempts to study the childhood and school experiences of the 'third gender' in a heteronormative society as described in A. Revathi's book, 'Our Lives Our Words: Telling Aravani Lifestories'. Attempt has been made to unravel the myriad themes underlying their narratives like, gender identity formation, hostility, discrimination, victimisation, marginalisation and support mechanisms.

The present paper attempts to explore the childhood and school experiences of transgender or gender variant children, that is, those who do not fit within the binary gender divide 'masculine' and 'feminine.' 'Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe people whose self-identification or expression transgresses established gender categories or boundaries' (Sears, 2005). The book 'Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Lifestories' written originally in Tamil by A. Revathi and translated in English by A.Mangai serves as inspiration and source of information. This book is a compilation of narratives and ethnographies of hijras (South Asian generic term for transgender people). Revathi states that these stories are the stories of 'izzat' reasserting Gayatri Reddy's argument in 'With Respect to Sex' that 'hijras were most commonly described using the trope of sexual and gender difference, but hijras themselves did not understand their own sexuality or their community through this trope.' Reddy, argues that the hijra community has complex codes of izzat, implying 'respect' rather than 'honour'.

As described in the book, this section of population is both 'invisible' and 'hyper-visible.' They are considered invisible as the social structure assumes a binary classification of gender and hypervisible as homophobhia is rampantly evident in masses. Innumerable stories and myths thrive in our society about this (in)visible population. In these stories, the transgenders have no voices, familial affiliation or history. 'Stories and myths abound: the singing and dancing; the power to curse; the power to shame by exposing the different body; the clap; the accusations of crime and theft; sex work; the stealing of children; stories of castration; the harassment for money at traffic lights, weddings, offices and new homes' (Bhan in Our Lives Our Words, 2011). The flip side of these stories is their need to deal with, explain and move away from visible sexual difference and non-conforming gender identity, that is, one that doesn't fit within the binary gender divide of 'male' and 'female'. Trangender presence is evident in ancient texts and epics, like for instance, Brihannala, Shikhandi and Krishna as a woman marrying Arjuna's son Aravan in Mahabharata; Shiva is depicted as Ardhanarishvara (half male and half female) in several paintings and sculptures; hijras were regarded as the most trustworthy servants, advisors and harem guards during the Mughal rule. Although, several references of their existence can be found, but, not much has been detailed in these texts about their lived realities. Revathi in this book tries to give voice to the lives of aravanis (term used for hijras in Tamil Nadu). Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) also mention that there is a need to understand the lived experiences of transgenders. They state, 'the whole idea is to construct a theory of gender identity that would include both *self-embodiment* and *self-construction* of identity which will include embodiment of transgenders in the context of social expectations and lived experiences'. In the preface of the book, 'Our Lives Our Words' Revathi (2011) illustrate the crisis of a *hijra's* life by questioning,

> Are they Gods at all who create us with male bodies but give us female feelings? Are my parents responsible for this? Am I simply shameless to put on this garb? Who am I? Which gender do I belong to? Is it right or wrong to be thus?

She further asks hard-hitting questions:

> A man and a woman love each other and get married. Why are the law and society denying me the right to marry a man? Why don't they accept our relationship? We understand you in all possible roles- as brother,

sister, mother, father, friend, or teacher. We can understand all these relationships and their emotions. Why can't you do the same?

The paper attempts to break the culture of silence around transgender lives and seeks to understand their version of experiential reality through their narratives in A. Revathi's 'Our Lives Our Words'. Effort is made to unravel the myriad themes underlying these narratives.

Development of Gender Identity

Developmental research indicates that by the age of two or three children can tell whether they are boys or girls and by the age of four or five they can label other people by gender. However, in these early years they do not see the physical world as invariable, that is, they think that they can alter their gender if they want to. As they grow up, a combination of maturation and experiences enables them to understand that their gender is unchanging. They now understand that a boy will always remain a boy and a girl will always remain a girl. Developing a gender identity for most of us is a smooth process. We are treated as a boy or a girl by people around us and without much trouble learn our gender as we grow up. But, the case may differ for a section of population whose biological and psychological realities are at odds with each other. Illustrating case of a hijra, to all outward appearances he is a male, but, his psychological reality is that he feels like a woman trapped in a male body. The following narratives provide evidence that transgender children identified with feminine roles. These gender stereotypes are widely held beliefs about what is appropriate for males and female in that culture, and it can be seen that they align themselves with female gender typical roles and behaviours.

> At home I would wash the dishes, clean the house and draw kolams in the front yard.(Roja)
>
> I used to have long hair while I was studying in the 5th standard. I used to plait it and decorate it with flowers when I would go to school. (Santhi Amma)
>
> I consciously remember wearing kajal, bindhi, two plaits and flowers and going to school. I used to fetch water and grind masalas and do similar chores at home. At school, I would sit among the girls. When the boys played cricket, I would play hopping with the girls. (Ranjitha)
>
> I would play kho-kho with the girls.(Aruna)
>
> I had a boy who was my friend in school. We used to play husband and wife games with toy crockery. I was the wife and he was the husband. (Rajam)

By the age of four or five children begin to engage in gender typical play. While playing girls begin to assume social roles traditionally suited for females, like, nurturance, assuming household responsibilities and so on. Boys on the other hand begin to assume traditionally masculine roles, like, decision-making, dominance, and so on. Children who are gender non-conforming and express identities that differ from their assigned birth sex receive varying responses from others, many of which are disapproving (Ryan and Futterman, 1998). This is evident in their significant others' responses.

> My brothers-elder and younger- would scold me saying, "Why do you keep doing these feminine jobs all the time?"
>
> My aunt and uncle would tease me saying, Why is he, a boy, plaiting and decking his hair like this?
>
> My peers would tease me as 'girlie' and looked down upon me.

Hostile Social Environment

The running theme in most of the narratives give evidence of heightened 'hostility' towards transgender children by family, peers and teachers. The common reaction of significant others' is to blame and punish the child for his/her failure to adapt to traditional gender norms.

> "..my brother beat me up with an iron rod and warned me not to become an aravani. He tortured me saying, 'We belong to a respectable caste. Don not bring shame to our community. If you are adamant about becoming an aravani, either commit suicide or run away to an unknown place. Or else, I will kill you. " (Ranjitha)
>
> At home they scolded me for doing such dances and burnt my leg-left and right, and my thighs...My father is a mechanic. He would pierce me with screw driver in his hand. (Sundari)

When the parents find out the child's gender variance, that is likely to produce emotional crisis for the whole family. The emotional reactions of transgender children in their growing up years show evidence of fear, anger, low-self esteem and in several cases suicidal ideation.

> I was scared to walk on the road for fear of people recognising me. I was worried someone might tease me while I walk on the road...I was scared to use the public toilet for fear that people might know my difference. (Revathi)

> I suffered such low self esteem that I wallowed in self-pity, thinking that I was no good for anything at all. (Aruna)

Most of the narratives illustrate that the common corrective measures used by family were physical punishment and endless mental harassment. Transgender children were constantly reminded that they do not fit-in. Thus, they were in constant search of an affirming environment where they could express themselves freely. This desperate search for affirmation often made them vulnerable to abuse and put them in risky environment. Roja describes how her Head Master forcefully had sex with her when she was in class four. At that time, she did not understand what had happened, she was scared and cried relentlessly. She couldn't reveal her suffering to her family for the fear of rejection. However, she reports that later she anxiously waited for the sexual encounter with the Head Master to happen. It seems to provide a way of expressing her sexuality and feeling loved. Many other report risky sexual encounters early in their childhood. Ranjitha shares that around the age of fourteen years she started doing (sex work) with other aravanis without the knowledge of her family members. Almost all of them, left their home in search of people like them. Santhi Amma, describes how she used to look longingly at other aravanis. When an aravani enquired about her and invited her to her residence, she without a second thought agreed. Aruna, too shares that she longed for friendship and would find happiness in dancing and singing with her aravani friends. In almost all cases, the children actively searched for people like them and in majority of these cases this was done discretely, that is, without the awareness of family. However, not all wanted to leave their homes. Rajam, who used to live with her elder sister describes that, 'I only wanted to wear sarees and lead the life of a woman. I got the opportunity to do so at my house. So I did not leave my akka and go anywhere else.' She found satisfaction in taking care of her elder sister's children and helping in cooking. She describes that her deceased mother never detested her for behaving like a girl and similarly her elder sister.

School Experiences of Trangender Children: Exclusion, Discrimination and Victimisation

Almost all the accounts describe school to be an unpleasant and lonely place. Transgender children were constantly reminded that they were 'different' and that something was 'wrong' with them. The binary gender categorisation created another form of categorisation in the social spehere, that is, the tendency to divide the world into 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' or 'us' and 'them'. This further lead to the development of prejudice towards the 'outgroup'. Bullying and teasing were common phenomena. Impact of victimisation was so pervasive that many of them were 'pushed out' of the education system, thus, denying their right to education. Children who were frequently harassed in school tried to avoid the hurtful experiences by not attending the school. Common forms of victimisation were: threats of violence, merciless teasing, verbal abuse, physical abuse (punched, kicked, beaten and sexual assault) and threat of disclosure. The effects of a hostile school experience resulted in low academic achievement and damaging educational aspirations. Many of them reported discontinuation of education as early as after elementary schooling, in a few cases, even before that. This is evocatively described by the participants as below:

> I studied upto 6th standard. I could not pursue further studies. The teasing grew too much. (Ranjitha)
>
> I lost interest in studies. My friends poked fun at me and techers ridiculed me... everyone excluded me. Initially I attended school all five days in a week. Later I went only for two or three days. (Aruna)

Ayyash-Abdo (2002), also report a similar finding, 'hostile school environment may lead to emotional distress, depression, anxiety and even suicidality'. Aruna, painfully recollects her school experiences and shares that her school teachers would often say that she is not a metal but an alloy. While taking the chemistry class the teacher insensitively drew analogy of alloy with Aruna in the following manner, marring the educational aspiration of an interested student.

> He said, Iron is a metal. It will be heavy. An alloy will look like iron, but it won't be as heavy as that. It does not have a proper form. It will not have a specific shape. You know an example of an alloy would be this boy sitting here, and pointed at me. He appears to be male, but his behaviour is like a female's.

Sundari, describes her agony over the horrific school experiences she faced. She shares that when she was in class 8, senior students would pinch her breasts and watch her urinating. During games period, she preferred to play skipping rope like the girls. The sports master caught onto this point and forcefully had sex with her. Hearing 'number nine' was a routine thing. The consequence of all these experiences resulted in developing a feeling of 'self-deprecation' in her. She began to locate the cause of all the problems in herself. The discriminatory teacher attitudes and assigning of menial tasks due to her gender variance is also evident in Sundari's narrative.

> The warden of the hostel came to know that I was a hijra. He would order me to wash clothes, and reduce my quota of food... I used to feel like jumping off the terrace of the hostel.

Summary

A close glance at the narratives reveal multitude of themes underlying them. It can be observed that the awareness of neither being a male nor a female begins to crystallise by late childhood. Hijras identify themselves more with the feminine roles and

exhibit a yearning for free expression of their gender. Transgender children begin to assume traditional feminine roles in play, their non conforming gender behaviour brings ire of others. They are ridiculed and rejected by significant others. Hostile home environment, prejudiced beliefs by people around and discriminatory practices in school strengthens the belief in transgender children that something is wrong in them. The gender stereotypes exert a profound effect on social thought , as people do not try to understand the others' phenomenological world view and continue to judge them on the basis of existing mental shortcuts. The transgender children are pushed to the margins, denying them the basic right of education and right to live a life with dignity. The childhood of transgender children is full of tales of victimisation, isolation and rejection. The emotional reactions of these children show evidence of feeling of worthlessness, anxiety, anger and pervasive fear. Transgender children are constantly reminded of their inadequacy by their family, peers and teachers. These children desperately search for affirmation from others and often place themselves into risky environments, largely having sexual overtones. Leslie Feinberg (1993), a transgender activist summarises the harsh realities of a transgender child as follows:

> I didn't want to be different. I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me. I followed their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered me a name for what was wrong with me. That's what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through its constant refrain: 'Is it a boy or a girl?'
>
> 'I'm sick of people asking me if she's a boy or a girl,' I overheard my mother complain to my father. 'Everywhere I take her, people ask me.'
>
> I was ten years old. I was no longer a little kid and I didn't have a sliver of cuteness to hide behind. The world's patience with me was fraying, and it panicked me. When I was really small I thought I would do anything to change whatever was wrong with me. Now I didn't want to change, I just wanted people to stop being mad at me all the time.

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