



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 homophobia 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'. Transgender 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,