

Transgender in West Bengal

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Abstract

Transgender people are discriminated in our society and stigmatised in every aspect of their living which strongly affects their living. Their sufferings are almost unknown to the world until recent transsexuals' rights recognised by international organisation (UDHR)¹. They are devoid of their basic rights of education and employment. Majority of them are thrown out of their homes at very childhood age and thus deals with psychological stress for their entire life. They are the victims of any legal protection and majority of them earn their living either by begging or prostitution. The present study is conducted in assessing the contemporary conditions of transsexuals in west Bengal based on qualitative research analysis with interviews and surveys as primary data. The findings might help the government in knowing their current situations and can cooperate them in upgrading their state of living.

Keywords: Transgender, West Bengal, NGOs, Prostitution, Schemes, etc..

Historical perspective of transgenders in India and West Bengal

In India Transgender are known as *Hijras*. It is difficult to get a proper meaning in English but it has its origin in Urdu which is stated as Eunuch or hermaphrodite. The meaning clarifies the inability of a person to perform sexual role, rather devoid of genitals since birth. They are this categorised as third gender. Some of children, born in poor living gets emasculated at a very early age and become transgender. They have several names all over India like that of *Aravanis*², *Kinnars*³, *Shivshaktis*⁴ etc. There is estimation that all over South Asia there are about 1.5 million eunuchs. They follow a *Gharana*⁵ and the leader of it is known as *Guruma*. The members of the *Gharana* are known as *Chellas*. They mainly earn their living by performing at marriages, rice ceremonies of new borns, begging and prostitution.

Walking down the busy streets of Kolkata, travelling in buses, local trains, in traffic signals we all have seen them earning their livings by begging. Their loud voices, claps and typical dressing make the atmosphere irritable for the rest of the world. They shout and retaliate when people refuse them money and bless them who give. They are hijras, the most abandoned and discriminated section of our society. They never get their share of rights- the basic rights of education, employment, a life of dignity. In this study, I have kept my hard limits to transgender of the LGBTQ⁶ community because for gays or lesbians it is easy to deal with social discriminations – that never stops education or employment. But it is prohibited for transsexuals

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unless recent development of several schemes for their welfare and their recognition as third gender.

Hijras have their strong roots in Indian mythology. Mahabharata, Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads have mentioned the existence of eunuchs many a times. A version of Ramayana stated that while Sri Ram left for his 14 years of exile from Ayodha, entire city was following him till Gomti river. After reaching riverside he asked men and women to return back but mentioned nothing about third genders. Thus they waited for his return for 14 years beside Gomti. There are several such myths about eunuchs in Indian history. In *Vatsanyas Kama Sutra* we have seen references of eunuchs as slaves. Even in Hindu rituals like that of Chhaat puja⁷ and Kartik puja⁸ we have seen active participation of eunuchs as they are related to marriage and birth of children. Eunuchs celebrate Yelamma⁹ puja which is solely a festival of the eunuchs in India. In Puranas there is a reference of third gender or *Tritiya Prakriti* who often were courtesans and masseurs. Mythology says lord Indra disguised as rooster tried to convince him that the night has passed and he must call it a day. Gautama soon realised *Indra's* falsification and cursed him. In Maharashtra, eunuchs are known as jogtas. There is another popular myth in Maharashtra that a sage (*jamadagni*¹⁰) who wanted his sons to kill their mother as she was involved in extra marital affair. His youngest son Parasurama killed his mother and emasculated all his brothers. They crossed dressed themselves and spent the rest of their life as *jogtas*¹¹ or *jogappas*. While analysing the mythological participation of eunuchs, we must not forget about the famous Mahabharata character *shikhandi*¹² who stood in front of Bhisma's chariot in the disguise of a woman as *bhisma*¹³, on principle never attack women. Taking the advantage of such situation, *pandavas*¹⁴ killed bhisma. Shikhandi was convergence of Shiva and Vishnu. In the Mughal period, eunuchs were kept by the emperors to protect their wives. With the end of Mughal rule, their existence in the society became prominent and later it became their tradition to visit auspicious occasions where they used to celebrate and earn money out of it which forms their basic earning. In various parts of India, lord Krishna is worshipped as *ardhanarishwar*¹⁵. With these mythological analyses we know how deeply the transgender are entwined with India and its culture and religion, but it is important to know that even if the entire community has such mythological significance, it becomes difficult for them to achieve basic rights of living a dignified life. This discrimination started from British rule, with the end of Mughal rule.

Socio-political life of transgenders in West Bengal

Today, their socio-political existence is in crisis. There are several initiatives which are taken up by the government for the transgender after 2014. Supreme court of India with this has designated them as the third gender and has declared them eligible to have rights as any other citizen of India. However, none of the states of India lacks proper information about the number of eunuchs in providing them ration cards, pan cards, Adhaar cards, driving licence or passport. In 2009 Central government initiated programmes for providing Adhaar Cards to transgender communities. This would have facilitated them to open bank accounts, get registered mobile numbers and apply for the opportunities allotted in government services. But as mentioned earlier, none of the states have proper records of eunuchs of their respective state. Thus only 25 percent of the transgender all over India achieved such facilities. The percentage is much more minimal in west Bengal. At times of voter registration process, only 28,341 eunuchs got registered in the voters list while census has a different calculation of transgender. However, may register or not registered, only a few gets the chance of having a firm footing of living in the society with dignity. Projects like National portal for transgender persons and shelter homes like Garima Greh (ministry of social justice and empowerment) hardly reached to this discriminated community. The transgender protection of rights (2019) was viewed as another concrete step for transgender empowerment. But nothing has neither stopped nor decreased their sufferings.

However Government of west Bengal with TMC(Trinamool Congress) government took the initiative of placing the transgender community members in Civil Police Volunteer Force Of Kolkata. The entire credit goes to Sashi Panja (State Minister for Women and Children development). This initiative gave the transgender communities of west Bengal a piece of land under their feet. Beside this the Legislative Assembly Election (Bidhan Sabha) of 2016, the Transgender community of west Bengal were made the polling agents. West Bengal cooperates transgender in enhancing their education in colleges and universities as well. We can see Dr.Manabi Bandopadhaya (transgender woman) as the first transgender doctorate of west Bengal. She is currently the Principal of Krishnanagar Government College (Nadia). There are several NGOs working in west Bengal for the betterment of transgender communities. Some of eminent such NGOs are Anuprerona Welfare Society, Pratyay Trust, Sathi and Ritwik. However most of them suffer from immense shortage of funds. This forms a genuine reservation

in betterment of the transgender not only in west Bengal but in entire India. Some major initiatives are taken by Manabi Madam as she is the designated head of the transgender welfare community. Shelter for transgender of west Bengal-Astana is providing temporary shelters to its members-which includes ones who are thrown out of their families in their childhood. The coordinator (Ms.Sinha), who is also a member of the west Bengal transgender development board and national task force for the community mournfully said- no cooperation has been given either by the state or the central government for the betterment of the third gender. The organisation is running short of funds and is repeatedly seeking governments help. The west Bengal transgender development board, which was set up with too much of aspirations and enthusiasm, nothing remarkable has been done yet. One of the major reasons of the failure of such initiatives is lack of proper information about the numbers of transgender in west Bengal. Transgender is composed of trans women, (male to female), trans men (female to male) and eunuchs. According to the west Bengal board, number of transgender is 700 which lack authenticity. Different activist groups claim the number to be much more. Beside this the organisation lacks coordination amongst each other. They lack proper time management. Beside this none of the organisations of west Bengal has medical facilities for sex reassignment surgery. On this ground, the board chair person, Dr. Manabi Bandopadhaya said, that sex reassignment surgery has been facilitated in SSKM¹⁶ and R. G. Kar¹⁷ medical hospitals .This is time consuming surgery and excessively painful and at times expensive too. Thus it cannot happen overnight .She even suggested the reluctant board members to resign and allot their monthly salaries for the betterment of these projects before giving false promises in front of the media about transgender betterment. Beside these, the entire state fails to provide any separate toilet facilities for the transgender. They are not allowed to use public toilets. Even if a mere number of transgender get employment there is no work security for them. Despite the 2014 Nalsa Judgement¹⁸, which gave directives to the state and central government to ensure transgender employment, safety and equality- the government of west Bengal has failed in providing the community the justice the deserve. None of the policies supported them which initially ensured them a proper standard of living. In last 2021 election scheme, TMC government did not have any projects for the transgender community members. Only 16 percent of the transgender of west Bengal have Adhaar cards. In 2016, an important scheme called Swabalamban¹⁹ with Muktir Alo²⁰ started rehabilitation facilities for the female sex workers. It is an initiative of

Ravi Shankar Prasad –minister for communications and information technology. They facilitate their skill training. Each person has been allotted with 25,000 Rs as capital. But how much it has facilitated the transgender is a matter of huge question. They are also excluded from Gitanjali Scheme²¹. This scheme is the facilitation of one room residence for the homeless sex workers. As a section of the transgender community is involved in sex working, they believed to get the same facilities. No such information has been registered yet. West Bengal government announced the Khadya Sathi²² Scheme which could provide free rations to the Transgender community during Covid situation. Majority of them hardly got such facilities.

Media in highlighting transgender community in West bengal

The era of Indian movies started walking on the ways of more realistic theme portraying domestic issues in 1950s. While the film makers were trying to step outside the tracks of traditional Indian themes, it was still a huge taboo in the portrayal of trans sexuality. Thus eunuchs played a comic role in majority of the movies. Besides we have seen men or women cross dressing in the movies to entertain the audience. Changes came in 1970s. Garish makeup, manic clapping, crude gestures are some of the stereotypical images which are portrayed in the celluloid. Keeping an eye on tollywood we can see a few master pieces solely depicting transgender life. One such master piece is Rituporno Ghosh's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) which portrayed life of Chapal Bhaduri (master in playing female characters in his golden days when females were not allowed from Bengali families to go for theatres). The director finds a huge similarity with himself in the character depicted by Chapal Bhaduri in the movie. *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) is another master piece by Rituporno which portrays that every human being has the right to choose his or hers sexual affinity. A wrong soul in a wrong body gives birth to a transgender. Similar movie is *Nagar Kirtan* (2019) directed by Kaushik Ganguly where a little boy with feminine characteristics was brought up with excessive humiliations from the society and finally accepted death finding no other option. There are several other documentaries, talk shows and interviews filmed on transgender to make the society aware of their existence. It is media which has highlighted Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (eunuch representing transgender community in United Nations), and Pooja Sharma (Transgender dancing and begging in Mumbai local trains). However a minimal development has been achieved for them. India lacks energy of implementation of projects and thus their betterment is at stake.

Conclusion:

In the struggle of existence transgender are trying hard to get a piece of land where they can live with dignity. With all humiliations, unwantedness they are fighting hard. Humanity is hardly seen when society deals with them. West Bengal police force gets transphobic while registering any case for them. No rape case gets filed when the victim is a transgender. Only a few gets the guts to mark their existence in this brutal society. But they are human beings and deserve every right to live a proper life with family, education, employment. Above all it is necessary to break the stereotypicalities which society carries about transgender. Both the state and the central government need to cooperate them in their living because we all are human beings first.

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End Notes

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights- foundational document of international human rights law. It has been referred to as humanity's magna carta (Britannica.com)
2. The term for hijras in Tamil Nadu. They identify themselves as women trapped in male bodies, although many aravanis would prefer to be called Thirunangi.
3. The term for hijras in north India. In other parts of India, such as Maharashtra, term kinnar is being used more recently by the better-educated hijras refer to themselves.
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