



# The Narrative of the Marginalized in India:

A Study of A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me, A Hijra Life Story*

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Transgender denotes or relates to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex. First of all what needs to be understood is that it is not a disease or psychological problem. It is a problem that lies within right from their birth.

Transgenders are generally identified with trans-women but not trans-men. There are trans-men also. However, they are not easily distinguished.

Going as far back as 12,000 years ago during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, unearthed drawings and sculptures give us some insight into the early existence and depictions of potential **Trans people** in ancient civilizations. In some indigenous cultures, they are called Hijra. Trans people have existed and do exist in cultures around the globe. However, the current paper is confined to transgender people in India.

Transgenders in India trace their history back to mythologies. The first reference of transgender is the female avatar of Vishnu-who takes the form of Mohini. Mohini literally meaning enchantress. Mohini had appeared first when the devas and asuras had churned the ocean with the assistance of Vishnu as the (Kurma) – (tortoise avatar to acquire Amrita (the elixir of immortality) using her charm had to separate the fight between devas and asuras and provide the Amrita to the devas.

Mohini makes reappearance in the Vishnu Purana when she disguised herself to save Shiva who had bestowed Bhasmasura with the boon that would incinerate anyone whose head he touches.

In the Ramayana, Lord Rama was banished from the kingdom and he was asked to spend 14 years in the forest. His supporters followed him to the forest but he requested all the “men and women” to return back to Ayodhya. The transgendered community (hijras) stayed back in the same place till Rama returned from Vanavaasa. Lord Rama was greatly

moved by their love and loyalty sanctioned them the power to confer blessing on auspicious occasions like marriages, child birth and inaugural functions.

In Mahabharatha, Aravan (Tamil literally the son of a snake), the son of Arjuna and Ulupi (a snake princess) was offered to Goddess Kali to be killed to ensure the victory of Pandavas in Kurukshetra war. The only condition was that Aravan should spend the last night of his life as a married man. No woman was willing and come forward to marry Aravan as he was going to be killed after the marriage. Lord Krishna took the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and married him. This is the reason why the Hijras of Tamil Nadu call themselves Aravanis named after Aravan their progenitor. In Kooragam, Tamil Nadu, there is an 18 – day festival every year where the village trans-women dress up as his wives and then mourn for Aravan's death.

Another incident from the epics can be related to the transgenders. This is with regard to who Arjuna got cursed by Urvashi that he would lose his masculinity when he rejected her advances. The curse was reduced by Indra to a period of one year of Arjuna's choice. This turned out to be a boon for Arjuna because he stayed in disguise as a dance – teacher Bruhannala during the last year of exile period of the Pandavas. He taught dance and music to the daughter of king Virat and her friends. King Virata when he came to know the real identity of Arjuna, he offered his daughter's hand to Arjuna to marry her. King Arjuna rejected this offer as he had been a teacher to her and considered her a daughter.

The transgenders are supposed to have enjoyed certain privileges in Pre-colonial past. During the Mughal period Hijras played a famous role in the royal courts of the Islamic world, particularly in the Ottoman empires and the Mughal rule in Medieval India. They rose to well known positions as political advisors, administrators, generals as well as guardians of the harems. A transgender is considered relatively stronger than a female, so they were left in the harem to protect the queen in the time of need. Hijras were considered clever, trustworthy and fiercely loyal and had free access to all spaces and sections of population, thereby playing a crucial role in the politics of empire building in the Mughal era.

Through the onset of colonial rule from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the situation changed drastically. Accounts of early European travellers showed that they were repulsed by the sight of Hijras and could not comprehend why they were given so much respect in the royal courts and other institutions. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British colonial administration vigorously sought to criminalize the hijra community and to deny them the civil rights. Hijras were considered to be separate caste or tribe in different parts of India by the colonial administration. The criminal Tribes Act, 1871, included all hijras who were concerned in kidnapping and castrating children and dressed like women to dance in public places. The punishment for such activities was up to two years imprisonment and a fine or both. This pre-partition history influences the vulnerable circumstances of hijra in this contemporary world. However, In north India, transgenders are invited for marriage, birth ceremonies to receive blessings. In the recent past, they are being received quite well

in South India too during special occasions. Most of them are found to be daily wage earners eking out a living from begging, sex work or “toli badhai”.

Besides the daily wage earners, there are transgenders who have tread the difficult path in order to pave a career for themselves against all odds. Among them Sathyasri Sharmila, became India’s first transgender lawyer, Manobi Bandhopadyay, first transgender college Principal and first transgender person in India who completed Ph.D. Joyita Mandal became the first judge appointed at Lok Adalat in North Bengal in October 2017. Similarly Mumtaz, a social worker is the first transgender who came out to contest the elections in Punjab from BSP so also Shabnam Mausi contested elections from Sohagpur constituency, Madhya Pradesh respectively.

Besides transgenders who are holding good positions, there are transgenders who have come out with their auto-biographies. “Me Hira, Me Laxmi” the autobiography of Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi, a transgender rights activist star on Indian Television and dancer and first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific at the UN, and also Toronto’s World AIDS conference, Manobi Bandhopadyay penned the Bengali novel *Endless Bondage on eunuchs*, which became a national best seller as well as started a group for Bengal’s transgenders.

Living Smile Vidya or Smiley wrote her autobiography *I am Vidya* in Tamil and translated into English, Malayalam, Marathi and Kannada. She was the subject of the award – winning Kannada film Naanu Avanilla ..... Avalu, based on her autobiography of the same name.

A. Revathi’s autobiography. “The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story Published in 2010 in English has been taken for this paper .The book was written in Tamil and translated into English by feminist historian V. Geetha. A Revathi’s autobiography is chosen mainly because she is not all that literate. Sufferings of the transgenders are almost the same in the society with a little variance. However, without education and no support from family or source of income, the suffering is even more. Revathi faced struggle within herself, struggle from outside and struggle with her peers and society.

Revathi was born as Doraiswamy in Namakkal district in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and was assigned a male gender based on Physiology. As a child, Revathi experienced violence in her school and within her family for her “feminine” ways. She preferred playing with young girls over boys and dressed up as a woman in her mother’s or sister’s clothes, and always remained distressed by the feeling of being a female trapped in a male body. There was a lot of inner struggle in the male body of “Doraiswamy” which he could share with nobody. Nobody ever was ready to understand the pain and agony of being trapped in a wrong body.

Her personal and social hardships affected her academic performance, and she had to drop out of school as a result of having failed the tenth grade. However, she met a group of

people from the Kothi community with whom she felt a sense of kinship and decided to run away to Delhi with them so that she could be true to her gender identity.

In Delhi, she met a group of people belonging to the Hijra community and began living with them. She later underwent sex-reassignment surgery which was considered a rite of passage to get formally initiated into the hijra household. She describes the pain and suffering she encountered during and after the surgery. After her operation, she was rechristened as Revathi by the guru or head of the household. Though she could finally be true to her gender identity, Revathi discovered the harsh realities of life as a hijra, where social exclusion, violence and sexual assault were all too common. She had to resort to several odd jobs to survive including dancing at weddings, begging and sex work. Also the chelas oppressed them and exploited them for money.

Revathi's struggles did not come to an end even after the sex-reassignment surgery. She faced lot of struggle even after her sex-reassignment surgery. Infact, she was exploited more by the Police who were supposed to protect the Law. She was treated in a very brutal manner, literally pulling out all her clothes in the police station. Protectors of law broke the law and exercised their authority and cruelty on this marginalized gender. Revathi's case is just one example. After some months, tired of her life in Delhi, she ran away and went back home, where she discovered she was not welcome.

She subsequently left her home in Tamil Nadu and moved to Bangalore for work, while she initially took to sex work, she finally got a job at Sangama an NGO working for the rights of sexual minorities. Here, she was exposed to activist meetings and learnt more about her rights. While she started off as a peon in the organisation, she rose in the ranks and finally ended up as the director. She now works as a transgender-rights activist based in Bangalore.

It is an LGBT rights group based in Bangalore, India. When it began in 1999 it acted as a documentation centre but it has since grown to become an LGBT rights and HIV prevention NGO that mobilizes against sexual harassment and discrimination and conducts HIV prevention seminars.

A Hijra has set a goal for herself .A Female trapped in the male body, wants to discard anything that goes with male body. Their main goal is sex-reassignment surgery. Previously there were no expert doctors who could perform the sex-reassignment surgeries. It was not legally accepted. Very often the patients died due to complications in surgery and heavy bleeding. In Revathi's autobiography too she describes the unbearable pain after the surgery and the hormonal treatment she underwent. As these transgenders want to get rid of their male identity they pool up lot of money by way of begging, prostitution in order to go for surgery and hormonal therapy thereafter. To overcome all humiliation and find a source of income, these transgenders need education, must be courageous and fight for their rights.

NEP 2020 provides for setting up a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) especially for girls and transgender students to build the nation's capacity to provide equitable quality

education for all girls as well as transgender students. The transgenders demand that when mythological figures like Bruhannala and Mohini, can be considered as deities why not we claim the same respect in the society.

In 2014, India recognized hijras and other gender-conforming people as part of a third gender category. However, despite the court ruling and outreach by NGO's, hijras remain a stigmatized and marginalized community. Often they are being called with derogatory terms like 'Khoja' mada, etc. However, in the recent times, to some extent, society has begun to accept them. Earlier, there was the stereotypical portrayal of hijras as 'mada' character in the movies which often provoked fun and laughter. But now – a – days, movies such as 'Kanchana' directed by Raghva Lawrence have made a powerful impact, and champions the cause of transgenders. They are portrayed in a dignified manner. The entry given to transgenders into Big Boss shows also reflects that society has begun to be accommodative.

However, many more changes have to be adopted to pull them away from the marginalized status and get them closer to the mainstream. In this direction, government has to come forward to provide them education, jobs, Aadhar Cards, subsidy for sex-reassignment surgeries, qualified medical doctors, homes, passport. Their demand is that when the physically challenged have been given a reservation in jobs and other places why not they receive a third gender reservation.

Similarly, these transgenders are allowed neither to use the men's toilet or women's toilet. Hence, they demand separate washrooms in public places for their community just as the physically challenged persons are provided.

Above all these things, we as human beings should begin to treat them like any other normal human being and accept them without any stigma.

**Works cited:**

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