Marginalization: Transgenderism in the contexts of Mythology, Fiction, Policies, and Socio-economic Aspects

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Abstract:

Objectives: This paper focuses on transsexuals and transgenders, a community that has long been overlooked, neglected, and ostracised, in an attempt to raise empathy and draw the attention of the relevant authorities to their social standing.

Method: An exploration of the marginalized communities led us to the transgender community which continues to suffer, while the condition of other marginalized sections has witnessed considerable emancipation. Most of the data represented in this paper are from secondary sources. Members of the community are not very forthcoming for fear of being recognized and being looked down upon. Hence primary source data that we collected through direct interviews, though present, is limited.

Findings: The ideology of a nation based on "equality for each citizen" brought forth the question of whether every individual does enjoy equality, freedom, and the right to live on one's own terms in every aspect of life. Transgenders in India have always held a dual position of fear of their curse and simultaneous invocation of reverence for their blessings. Yet the familial and public treatment of these individuals has compelled them to live in seclusion from the rest of society. Research shows that about 98% of transgender children are deserted by their parents at a tender age. Moreover, health and employment policies and programmes are so formulated that result in transgenders being treated as outcasts of the race they were born into. Besides, the apathetic/antipathetic and mocking attitude of the cisgender society can be very taxing for them, as found in our conversation with some members of the community.

Novelty: Drawing focus towards the current condition of the said community, hoping the authorities will formulate more policies and programmes to uplift the community and social empathy towards the members, and bring in inclusiveness in society.

Keywords: cinema, literature, marginalization, mythology, policies, transgender

Introduction:

Marginalized populations exist in every land and include women, the LGBTQ+ community, people who are challenged physically and mentally, Scheduled Castes (Dalits), and Scheduled Tribes. They are denied any role or involvement in activities related to economic, political, cultural, and social aspects. In other words, they are discriminated against and excluded from partaking in activities that are sometimes significant to their existence, besides influencing the way they live, and most often deprive them of available resources.

The Oxford Dictionary defines marginalization as "treating a person, group, or concept as insignificant or peripheral", or, "the overt actions or tendencies of human societies, where people who they perceive to be undesirable or without useful function, are excluded". Hence, Marginalisation refers to the exclusion of a person or group of persons from mainstream society, treating them as insignificant and keeping them powerless, holding the power to define how they should be treated, and how they should live their lives, besides relegating them to the peripheries of society. The marginalized, being shut out from mainstream society, form a Group or Community for their emotional support, protection, and integration, creating invisible boundaries within which their opportunities and resources for survival get restricted. A nation can enjoy development in the fullest sense only when every citizen is treated with equality - equality in rights, distribution of resources, educational and employment opportunities, medical and health benefits, equality before the law, equal authority in decision-making, especially if the decisions affect them directly or indirectly, and last but not the least, equal respect in society, so they can enjoy a free, healthy, productive and creative, and most importantly, a respectful life. However, the complex problem of marginalization prevents a large number of people from participating in the development process.

Let's take a brief look at a few marginalized sections:

Women – Gender inequality has been deeply rooted in most societies across the globe; each sex is stereotyped into certain roles. The unequal distribution of power and authority in family and society, with males being the dominant section, led to a wide gap between the males and the females with regard to financial aspects and a corresponding weakening, dependency, and subjugation of women in physical, mental, and psychological terms. However, history shows us that pockets of this marginalized group were successful in breaking away from societal shackles. As early as the 7th century, the socio-religious Bhakti Movement in India saw several women who set out on a journey to define their own rules and live by them. During the 6th century, the Therigatha Nuns expressed their freedom through their anthology and fearlessly discussed what they had escaped from. Numerous writers have been addressing the issue of the marginalization of women. Their writings have possibly been instrumental in motivating this section of society to break barriers and give wings to their dreams.

In the West, the Pioneer of women's literature in English, Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal treatise *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* was published in 1792, was a watershed for this community to explore their lives through their writings, while overtly discussing the issue of their marginalization, and probably the beginning of feminism as a mass movement that soon spread across many countries.

Scheduled Castes or Dalits – It is said that the caste system was introduced in the Manusmriti and was a societal hierarchy based on the karma of people which divided them into groups. Around 1500 BC the arrival of the Aryans caused a modification in this structure which then also included the job profile (Dharma or duty) that one is placed into by virtue of his birth. The Brahmins were placed at the top and the Shudras, or the untouchables, at the bottom rung; the latter, because of the menial and unclean jobs they were assigned, became the marginalized group and were made to settle away from the main living areas of the upper castes; they were ostracised socially, economically and culturally. In the present-day scenario, a sizable population of Dalits still remains oppressed. They are impoverished, socially and educationally deprived, live in unhealthy and unhygienic conditions, and have little or no access to resources, which subsequently affects their health. Besides, they are deprived of opportunities in private services and employment and are compelled into menial jobs as their source of income. However, because of new policies in recent years that include legal protection, the intensity of discrimination has considerably decreased.

The caste system and untouchability in India have been widely discussed by numerous writers in English as well as regional languages. We have the works of Mulk Raj Anand (*Untouchable*), Dr. B R Ambedkar (*Annihilation of Caste*), Munshi Premchand (*Deliverance*), U. R. Ananthamurthy (*Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*), Urmila Pawar (*The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*), Kancha Illaiah (*Why I Am Not a Hindu*) to name a few.

LGBTQ+ community – Those individuals identified as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, non-binary, etc., experience various forms of discrimination within society and the health system. Due to the dominance of heterosexual and cis-gendered people in society, individuals who are identified as anything but, are ridiculed and shunned by their own family who is ashamed of having them as one of their own and are deprived of physical and psychological support from society. Their requirements and struggles are excluded from various health policies and programs.

The global population figure of transgender people remains unknown for multiple reasons, the main being not coming out due to the fear of discrimination. Many places around the world do not accept the trans community, hence the data is unavailable as they are restricted from transitioning. Studies show that about 0.3 to 0.5 percent of the US population belongs to the transgender group. The data is updated only for the number of people who have taken steps for transitioning, and in the process, revealed that they have done so. Until 2011, India had never

accounted for Transgender, but in the 2011 census, the third gender was classified for further research. Through the census, around 4.88 lakh people in India were identified as transgender, with a literacy rate of 56%. This data is still incomplete as many cases are hidden and unaccounted for.

Understanding Gender and Sex:

Various organizations define and differentiate between Gender and Sex. The Canadian Institute of Health Research defines sex as a "set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy". Sex is usually categorized as female or male depending on the chromosomes and external genitalia but in a few cases, this distinguishing feature is not clear. People born with such a condition are called intersex.

The institute further defines gender as the "socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people", hence influencing people's perception of themselves and each other, their interaction with each other, and the distribution of power and resources in society.

Sex, as defined by the UK government:

- Refers to the biological aspects of an individual as determined by his/her anatomy, which is produced by chromosomes, hormones, and their interactions.
- Is generally male or female.
- Is assigned at birth.

While Gender, as defined by the UK government:

- "Is a social construction relating to behaviours and attributes based on labels of masculinity and femininity; gender identity is a personal, internal perception of oneself and so the gender category someone identifies with may not match the sex they were assigned at birth."
- "Where an individual may see oneself as a man, a woman, as having no gender, or as having a non-binary gender – where people identify as somewhere on a spectrum between man and woman."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is the fulcrum that people look towards to decide definitions regarding health. According to WHO, 'Gender' describes those characteristics of women and men that are largely socially created, while 'sex' encompasses those that are biologically determined.

So, in layman's language, Gender is a social construct and can vary from the sex that individuals are born into. Whereas, sex is something that is assigned to someone depending upon the genitalia and chromosomes they are born with. Mostly it is female or male, but there are instances where people are born intersex or of different sexes.

Roots of Transsexuality and Transgenderism in Ancient Indian Culture and Legends;

The roots of transsexuality and transgenderism in India date back to the origin of Hindu mythologies. Shikhandi, a transgender in the epic Mahabharata, sides with the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. As the legend goes, Shikhandi was born a girl - Shikhandini, to Drupada, the king of Panchala. She changed her gender to participate in the Kurukshetra war. Although there are many versions of the story, most of the versions depict Shikhandi to be a transgender male with few representing him as a Eunuch. Furthermore, Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages in the world, uses three genders: masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral.

The Hindu mythologies have numerous legends regarding gender non-conforming people commonly known as Hijras, or Kinnar, and other communities that have always been a part of Indian demography and culture. They command respect and fear parallelly, by society. Otherwise shunned, their blessings are considered to be the strongest, be they on a newlywed couple or a newborn child. Similarly, everyone fears their curse that has religious significance rooted in the story of Shiva and Parvati which depicts the union of Lord Shiva and Parvati to become Ardhanarishvara.

Another reason behind the blessings of Hijras is given in the Ramayana wherein the devotees of Rama follow him into the forest. Rama gives a speech asking 'men and women' to return to the kingdom. After completing 14 years of his exile, Rama is surprised to find the Hijra devotees, who identify themselves as neither man nor woman, have not moved from the spot where he gave his speech. As a token, Rama gives them the boon of *Badhai,* to bless people during auspicious occasions like childbirth and weddings.

Bahuchara Mata, the goddess of fertility, is worshipped by the members of the Hijra community. Legend says that the goddess cut off her breasts and cursed Bapiya, a thief who attacked her caravan, to remain impotent. The only way for Bapiya to lift the curse was to castrate himself and worship Bahuchara Mata by dressing and acting like a woman.

There are other significant legends in the Hindu mythologies that acknowledge the gender fluidity of particular characters. Lord Vishnu takes on the form of Mohini to steal the Amritam (elixir of life) from the Asuras (demigods) and gives it to the Gods. There are tales of the union of Mohini and Shiva and a child being born - Maha Shasta. The legend is fairly accepted in South India and Shasta is identified primarily with two regional deities: Lord Ayyappa Swamy from the state of Kerala and the Tamil deity Aiyanar. Mohini reappears in the *Vishnu Purana* when she tricks the evil Bhasmasura to use the boon granted him by Shiva on himself, one that would turn anyone's head he touches into ashes. Shankara Narayanan, or Hariharan, in the *Linga Purana,* owes his birth to the union of Shiva and Mohini (Vishnu).

Depiction of the Transgender community in Literature and Movies:

Literature and movies often bring us face to face with ugly reality. A. Revathi's *The Truth*

About Me: A Hijra Life Story, is a daring autobiography of Revathi who, although born a boy, felt and behaved like a girl. The author reveals the deep unease she underwent being in the wrong body. She was desperate to escape the constant violence thrown upon her by her family and villagers, so she ran away to Delhi to join a house of hijras. There followed a series of deadly physical and emotional journeys that she travelled through to transform into a woman and ultimately find love and acceptance.

Funny Boy by Shyam Selvadurai connects us to Arjie, a male child from an affluent Tamil family living in Colombo. Arjie would rather dress as a girl than play cricket with his brother. He needs to accept two aspects: his homosexuality and the racism of the society in which he lives.

Susan Stryker's *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* covers American transgender history from the mid-twentieth century to date: major movements, writings, and events. The chapters describe the transsexual and transvestite communities after World War II; trans radicalism and social shift, from 1966 to the early 1970s; the period from the mid-1970s to the 1990s - the era when identity politics and changes were witnessed in trans circles; and the gender issues that were witnessed through the 1990s and 2000s.

While there are movies that do represent the LGBTQ community, the stories of transgender people have always been a controversial topic and are very rarely depicted in mainstream movies. Although times have changed, the representation of transgender people as the main characters, and their struggles, are very rarely shown. Most often, these movies are considered controversial and debates arise whenever the depiction is close to the truth.

Boys Don't Cry (1999) - based on the real-life story of a transgender man named Brandon Teena portrays how his life progresses and the tortures he faces after his two acquaintances find out he is a transman. The movie depicts how prevalent hate crime is in the trans community. The story still holds relevance in today's times making it popular even today.

Paava Kadhaigal (Thangam) (2020) is a Tamil-language anthology. The first section of the anthology named Thangam which is set in the early 1980s shows the life of a transwoman in the rural parts of the country and how she is treated by her family and the villagers. The story also shows hate crime and the villagers not caring about how she is brutally murdered. As the times have changed, we might expect a better living situation and acceptance in society, but the movie truly depicts how transgender people are treated.

The Danish Girl (2015) is based on the novel of the same name and is inspired by the life of Danish painter Lili Elbe who is an early recipient of sex reassignment surgery. This movie shows how Elbe discovers her gender identity during the early 1930s. The support shown to her by her wife and the people around her is more positive than what we can see in society today. It clearly depicts the character development of each person. Unfortunately, Elbe dies due to complications that arose

during her 2nd surgery.

Debates and Policies Regarding Transgender People:

After 50 years of freedom for transgender people, the UK government recently banned providing puberty blockers to children undergoing gender dysphoria below the age of 16. This action was taken after Ms. Keira Bell from the UK de- transitioned from her Female-to-Male (FtM) identity after transitioning at the age of 16. This has caused a lot of uproar and debate on the topic of health and healthcare for trans youth. Puberty blockers delay the onset of puberty and help trans-children with their gender dysphoria which tends to increase during the puberty period, and do not cause harm or any permanent change in a teen's body. Once children are off puberty blockers, however, the body goes back to puberty and all the changes still happen.

Another major furore that occurred in recent years was the controversy over single-sex spaces. A transwoman is a woman and a transman is a man no matter their genitalia at birth. So they tend to use a female and male restroom respectively. Certain individuals disputed that trans women must be banned from using female restrooms as they may invade the privacy of a cis-gender woman. The cis-normative society says that allowing a transgender person into single-sex bathrooms may cause harassment and sexual abuse. This became a huge debate and talk after popular author JK Rowling tweeted her opinion on single-sex spaces. Although she denied being transphobic, the tweet clearly indicated her showing transphobia.

In India, transgender people are banned from donating blood. According to the Guideline on Blood Donor Selection and Blood Donor Referral of 2017, issued by the National Blood Transfusion Council and the National Aids Control Organisation, the people belonging to the transgender and gay community, along with the female sex workers, are 'permanently deferred' from donating blood due to the baseless assumption that they may transmit HIV or hepatitis.

After the release of rulings of the Supreme Court on Section 377, when asked about the Indian Army's standings on the topic, Chief of Defence Staff of the Indian Armed Forces - Gen. Bipin Rawat replied, "The Army is conservative. We are not modernized, nor are we westernized. We are conservative." This also meant that the Army would not be accepting any member of the LGBT community for that matter, let alone a transgender person.

Transgender persons (Protection of rights) act 2019 was supposed to come as a saviour to the trans community. It was supposed to protect rights and ensure minimum security but discriminated against when it came to punishments and fines. Also, transgender people now cannot change their gender identity without undergoing sex reassignment surgery, but many cannot afford medical procedures. The act criminalizes begging on the one hand, yet, on the other, it does not provide transgender people with any reservations in employment or educational institutes. While many other communities, that include homosexuals, have been fighting for their rights and demanding

reservations for their upliftment, the trans community seems to be lacking the spirit and/or the unity to come out and demand even the fundamental rights to life, liberty, and social equality and respect for themselves.

Primary Source: The story of Nihar - a Transman (June 2021)

We were able to speak to Nihar (real name), a resident of Hyderabad, who shared his realities of being trans in a cis heteronormative society. When asked how his relatives and family treat him, he says that his parents were apprehensive and did not break the news to any of his relatives and extended family about his transition, for fear of being shamed. If and when they told someone, the recipients of this news would tell his parents to not allow him to transition and to marry him off as a girl, and that no one would ever need to know. According to them, it is a shame to be transgender.

In general, people apparently treat him not so different on the outside, but they cannot contain their curiosity and tend to ask inappropriate questions. However, he says he has met people who do not consider him to be a 'man' and do not let him do the things that are generally stereotyped as being a 'man'. There have been a few instances where people have said that he is not a real man.

Coming out is hard on everyone, be it the one who is coming out or the people surrounding them. Nihar speaks about his coming out to his parents as a hard process and his father did not completely accept the fact in the beginning. He visited 3 different doctors for help and had to go through a very long process before he could actually start transitioning.

One of the doctors whom he had visited said that he was mentally unwell. She tried to convince his parents not to let him transition and it was just a sickness that might have been caused by some tragic incident or some kind of influence. This increased the confusion of the parents who were trying to understand what was going on with their children.

Only when a senior doctor came to evaluate him was he permitted to take a step toward his transition. It is a long, arduous process, he says. First, he was asked multiple questions about why he thinks he is trans. Then his parents were evaluated. Nevertheless, after the tedious journey, he was excited when he received his first dose of hormones.

Nihar is a beatboxer and a great musician. When asked how people react after his performance, he says they congratulate him and try talking to him after the performance. But once they find out that he is a trans person, they

keep their distance from him and change the tone in which they talk to him. Even after all these hardships, he is happy and content that he can at least present himself as the person he is.

Another trans person we tried contacting through known sources was not comfortable participating in an interview. She said she "felt like a test subject as she had been giving several interviews lately." These stories are amongst the thousands of people undergoing somewhat similar discrimination at every point.

Conclusion:

All the above discussions indicate the high level of discrimination faced by the transgender community. People cannot grasp the fact and ignore it like they have been doing for the past hundreds of years. While the conditions for other minorities and marginalized sections are slowly improving, and their problems are being openly discussed on public platforms, conditions for the transgender community sadly remain the same, if not regressed. The main reason for this is that the vast majority of society is not properly educated, and is insensitive to the sentiments of this community. Besides, a topic of such discussion has been considered taboo for decades. This is a huge setback in terms of humanity. The older generations are brought up in a certain way making them trans-phobic. The sad part is that people are not willing to learn and educate themselves to get rid of the phobia or come to terms with the fact that this part of humankind is not 'abnormal'. Instead, they are preaching it to their youth who may end up being more hostile to the community. If this situation needs to be changed, the topic of LGBTQ should be introduced to children in their childhood days and in the school curriculum. It is vital to re-introduce the parts of history and mythology which specifically talk about this section of society to create society sensitivity. Maybe someday the community will not be as ostracised then and will become a part of the mainstream.

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