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Sonakshi Anand

Chandra Prakash Bhakuni

Rahul Anthwal

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REDEFINING GENDER AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES

Sonakshi Anand, Chandra Prakash Bhakuni and Rahul Anthwal¹

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years there has been an increase in research on ‘gender studies’. ‘The term ‘gender’² is a socially constructed term and therefore needs critical analysis. The entire debate surrounding sexual minorities³ is about attributing a term to define them. This in itself is stigmatizing the community in a way. The entire exercise to try and fit people into ‘man’ or ‘woman’ in the accepted modern society is critiqued by various theorists and this is the basis of the overall gender debate. Hence, the paper argues that there is no need for a term to define sexual minorities; however, it does call for a change in the mind-sets of society about ‘gender’.

The paper deals with gender as well as sexual minorities. It has been found that making a distinction between the two is difficult. ‘Transgenders’ are mainly the gender minorities people whose gender identity and or gender expression differs from their birth sex. On the other hand, transsexuals are transgenders who intends to undergo, is undergoing or has undergone gender reassignment through hormonal treatment or surgery. Hence, their sex itself has been changed and transformed to meet their gender needs. Under the umbrella of sexual and

1 2nd year, MA Development from Azim Premji University, Bangalore.

2 Gender is a construct of biological, psychosocial, and cultural factors generally used to classify individuals as man or woman. (Kenneth H. Mayer. “Sexual and Gender Minority Health: What We Know and What Needs to Be.”)

3 People discriminated against due to their sexual identity or orientation or gender identity. This includes gays, lesbians, bisexuals, hijras, kotis, transgenders, etc. (Human rights violations against sexuality minorities in India by A PUCL-K fact-finding report about Bangalore. <http://sangama.org/files/sexual-minorities.pdf>. (Accessed 14 April 2013).)

gender minorities, the paper has included transgenders, transsexuals, transvestite or cross-dressing people (those who wear clothing traditionally associated with the other gender either occasionally or more regularly), androgyne or polygender people (those who have non-binary gender identities and do not identify as male or female), and others who define as gender variant⁴ and their perspectives about society and how they perceive themselves in the society through these identities. It is believed that individuals who thought themselves to be MSMs were in fact transgenders because they felt they were women trapped in male bodies and wanted to be treated like women. Hence, the paper focuses on these various identities of people who belong to the wider group called 'trans'⁵ and various other challenges they face due to these identities that society doesn't approve of.

The paper looks at the existing review of literature and empirical findings based on the theories of sexual and gender minorities' identity formation. Moreover, it tries to map out how these communities face discrimination due to their marginalised identities, dealing to a certain identity formation among them. The need to study the transgenders' perceptions based on their identities is important because no study in India has focussed on how their identities change the way they perceive themselves in society and what is the basis of this perception. Thus, the paper would like to add to the existing body of knowledge on this objective.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDENTITY

Michel Foucault proposes that gender becomes a 'thing' that one must adhere to as a part of the prevailing social order that already exists. In way, he tries to say that one can not belong to any gender group which is not considered as 'normal' by the society. Hence, those do not wish to belong to any 'official' gender group, believe in the Foucauldian stance that gender transcends the 'social environment' and one is free to choose a gender. Thus is a way this state of 'trans' tends to exist, which Foucault sees as perfectly natural. The social process of categorising people

4 Howarth, Martin Mitchell and Charlie. "*Trans research review*." EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, 2009: Research report 27.

5 The paper assumes that this name-calling can be discriminatory, hence, 'trans' as term included MSMs, transgenders, transsexuals, transvestites, female to male 'transwoman' as well.

into normative groups is what leads to social exclusion. People identify themselves by comparing with others to see what goals and values are shared and by contrasting with others (Josselson, 1996). It is in the context of shared values and differences inherited by different group that Foucault argues that society should not exclude anyone trying to break the dichotomy that exists between man and woman. Since society cannot break this dichotomy, the shackles of social categories continue to exist, leading to exclusion of those who do not fit in.

Most post-structuralists argue that subjectivity is an after-effect of the prevailing logic of culture and society. Hence the process of attaining an individual identity which is not widely accepted by society is difficult for sexual minorities. As Foucault argues, the need to acknowledge this 'trans' has begun to publicly struggle for legitimacy and "naturalness" starting with the 19th century. The struggle to integrate the so-called third sex has become wide spread. Foucault's analysis is deeply linked with who holds the power to categorise people. He believes that as long as societies exert power on their members, the dichotomy of man and woman shall continue.

Thus, the current society follows a theory of social construction even when they accept 'sexual minorities' by naming them so. Social construction advocates that sexualities accepted by society are products of social processes. A core proposition of social construction is that particular sexual practices cannot be interpreted as though they carry fixed meanings. Hence the entire debate on 'naming' the sexual minorities is flawed.

D' Augelli has framed the process of identity formation of 'trans'. There are several stages in the identity formation and its strengthening. The first step is to exit heterosexual identity and disclosing a 'trans' identity. The empirical findings have shown that whenever a 'trans' individual try to take first step, most of them get rejected and questioned on this attempt. Some of them were subjected to humiliation when they confessed to their parents about their true feelings and were forced into acting the way society expects their gender to act. Thus, suppressing their feelings of 'trans' is common for most transgenders interacted with. As Foucault says which gets proved in the empirical findings as well, the need for society to demarcate the gender of an individual leads to the notion of marginalisation and this is why many of these transgenders run away from home,

to lose their 'known' identity into the 'unknown' where they can start afresh. As a next step they adopt a personal label as 'trans' and also initiates seeking similarly labelled people in a community which help them to form a 'trans' social identity. "This involves creating a large and varied set of people who know of the person's sexual orientation and are available to provide social support" (D'Augelli, 1994).

III. MAINTAINING THEIR NEW FOUND IDENTITIES

The event relating to the running away from the family may not be a universal phenomenon among 'trans' and they may try to adjust themselves as per existing social norms. The work of Garfinkel and Stoller focuses on how male to female transsexuals try to maintain their own identity of being a woman in everyday situations which is an attempt to ensure that others 'attribute' the appropriate gender to them from the way they act. Hence, they present a societal construct of gender which they do not belong to with the hope of being accepted in society. Recent works by Woodhouse try to capture Foucault's idea claims that this need to be seen as 'normal' is what causes discrimination for transsexuals. Societies across the globe do not see transgenders as 'normal' and hence they are discriminated against. Moreover, the need to present themselves as a society's accepted form of gender which the transgenders want to belong to shows that the transgenders reinforce a taken for granted, dichotomous view of gender created by the society and do not break this dichotomy. Rather they continue to live in it, adjusting themselves to 'fit in' (Lewins 1995).

This theory was proven right through the interactions with the transgendered community in the closed settings. Most of them tried to act their new found identities the way society wanted to see these identities. Like for example, one of transgenders had changed her voice to talk like a women, when she would talk normally like a man as well. This she believed helped for gain for acceptance from the society. Hence, the need for them to be seen as 'normal' forces them to act out this 'normal' in the way society wishes them to be seen and accepted.

The entire need for these transgenders wanting to 'fit-in' with the society around them leads to changes in their perception about themselves. Such compulsions on the transgenders to make a covert existence in the society may have impact on their motivational process as self-esteem, self-efficacy etc. As

identified by Stets and Burke, it is possible that people largely feel good about themselves when they associate with particular group, typically feel confident when enacting particular role, and generally feel that they are 'real' or 'authentic' when their personal identities are verified. They have already begun to see themselves as 'outsiders' to this 'two-gender only' society. Hence there is a need for multiple identities that gets generated. Moreover the 'place' they belong is a factor that causes these changes in the identity. In this context, it is understood that transgenders who are staying in hamans, in an extremely overt way in society have a different identity formation and acceptance of themselves as staying as a group of transgenders makes their identity more safe as compared to those who stay with their families in a covert way, ensuring that they have various identities to cover up their true identity. Hence, in all this it is seen that a certain level of identity constructions of various kinds seems to be generated, where-in there are different identities of a single transgendered person in order to survive the society around him/her.

The paper tries to explore the different reasons for an identity construction of transgendered community at various levels. Linking identity formulation to discrimination faced by this community to the residence, either alone or as a group tends to influence their identity and perceptions about themselves.

IV. IDENTITY FORMATION DUE TO THE DISCRIMINATION FACED

One of the overarching problems that has identified through the interviews and the existing body of knowledge is that of 'discrimination' faced by transgenders in society. Using the theory of Foucault and Garfinkel, where both argue that society has certain 'constructed images of gender' which all individuals must adhere to. In order to understand transgenders and their perception of society, it is inferred that the theories of Foucault and Garfinkel have an effect on their perception. It is however important to understand the root cause of these perceptions and how they are constructed and how discrimination causes a change in their identity formation.

In order to conform to the identity which is seen as 'normal' or as the so called 'constructed' notions of gender, transgenders are faced with the need to act or be like one of the two 'normal' genders of the society. They are forced into

adopting a certain level of conformity to ensure that they are not marginalised from the society around them. Most transgenders have mentioned that they face discrimination right from their families to their schooling to their work place. Hence, for them to survive in this society, they either cover-up their 'trans' behaviours and only show their 'true identity' in their community or they fully develop their social identity by starting living in with similar people in the form of a community. Sometime reintegration into original family may happen even after the disclosure of sexual orientation but the lack of social norms relating to acceptance of 'trans', force the families to push child to act 'normal' in the society around them so that they are not questioned about their children and hence, not marginalised or made fun of.

Society considers transgenders as 'outsiders' who are different from the societal norm and hence, discriminated against. Most of the transgenders have faced some discrimination when they decided to work in the society. Either they were not given a job due to their orientation and are hence, they are forced to do sex work or beg on the streets, or if they were then they were teased by the employers and peers in the job. Many of them were forced to leave their jobs due to their way of acting which was not accepted. Others were molested and harassed in these workplaces and at times forced into sex and they have gotten raped as well. Thus, they avoid working.

Discrimination faced by transgenders initially in their life have an impact on the need to forcefully keep their identity undercover and they start seeing themselves as 'different' or as 'outcasts' of society. Next section, examines that how the environment in the later stages of the life shapes, moulds and concretizes the identities formed at the previous stages. The transformation of the identities depends on the social, physical, psychological spaces where transgenders operates rest of their life

V. IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION FORMATION AT THE HAMAMS

As compared to individuals, identity formation at hamams⁶ is much different. This is because of the whole group collective identity which seems to have a positive

⁶ Hamams are places where transgenders and transsexuals live together as a family, contributing to the income by sex work.

impact. According to Karen A. Cerul, *“a collective’s members were believed to internalize these qualities, suggesting a unified, singular social experience, a single canvas against which social actors constructed a sense of self.”*

Transgenders who stay at hamams had a different perception of the society and how they belong to it. Transgenders at hamam felt that hamam was a place where they felt safe and a part of the wider family. They live together like a family and hence, are happy being a part of the community. Hamams provides an avenue of interaction with each other. They could share their emotions and feelings with each other which help them get over their agony and pain. Even at the time of threat from outside hamam or society, they get support of their whole family. Particularly at the times of discrimination and violence done on them by external agents, they stood by each other. Thus, staying in hamams helps them, get over their physical and psychological ailments at a much faster rate than living in seclusion. Prioritising these categories, it was found emotional support gains prominence over support in case of physical tragedy among transgenders. This shows how bereft, insecure and vulnerable transgenders are both emotionally and physically in the contemporary society.

The use of power is also seen in the case of hamams. Just as families can be oppressive and abuse their members, so is the case of hamams. The head of the Hamams can beat and alienate them from going out or interacting with certain people over the most trivial things. Moreover, if an individual is adopted formally into the Hamam, she cannot possibly ever leave it. Even when a city is changed the networks of the gharanas are so strong, the same gharana will force the individual to belong to it. However, if the process isn’t formal one can leave and search for a hamam that is not so repressive.

Thus it is seen that the power of control and various rules of conduct exist in the hamam community, just like they do in the society. Some of them live in the fear of their so called ‘dadi, nani’ and they know they need to pay them from their daily income. If they fail to do so they might be beaten or ostracised. Hence, at times, they are rejected by society and tortured by their own community. In spite of that, they may not leave the hamam, just like a family member cannot leave or disown his or her family.

Thus, it can be said that they face harassment at both levels, one at societal level and secondly at their community level. The type of harassment varies in both places. In the case of society, it is of sexual or physical harassment based on 'transphobia' and non-acceptance of them as a part of society, whereas in hamams it is mainly due to economic reasons (where they have to pay the specific amount to their gurus) that the harassment occurs within the community. If the economic stability is ensured for them in some way the harassment within the community can be escaped. At the same time eliminating the 'transphobia' can lead not only to their acceptance in society but also make them to perceive themselves as a part of the society.

This shapes their identity because they always live under oppression and hence, develop the need to exert their power where ever they can. The reason behind this mainly that the notion of oppression and control has always been on their life, either by society or by the hamams, hence, they might develop the need to hide from society and even their hamams if it is oppressive. Moreover, all these have shaped their perception about themselves and the society they belong to.

The transgenders at hamams do not wish to belong to the society any more. They are happy in their own community and do not wish to move out. They wouldn't mind living in oppressive environments as long as they feel a group or community. They do want to work but are not employed and hope that the government would make some provisions for them. Moreover, they feel that the society takes them for granted and the reason given was that they are not getting given salary due to the fact that they are 'different' or 'sinners'. Many of them want to live a normal life and have hence adopted kids.

VI. IDENTITY FORMATION FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO STAY IN SOCIETY

Stark differences exist in the perceptions and the resultant identity formation of the transgenders living in the society. The perceptions of individuals who stay in society are also varied. These individuals switch on and off their identities whenever they deemed it to be safe and un-shameful while operating in the society. Through empirical research, it was found that there are four situation in which transgenders were to live which has an impact on their identity formation. They are differentiated as the ones who stay in their blood family in an overt or covert

way in terms of their lifestyle preferences, one who stays with their lover or partner and ones who live alone.

1. Individuals living in the blood relation family, but the family don't know about them:

It is seen that individuals who stay with the family and they do not know face lots of issues within themselves. One transgender was living with her blood relation family but her family does not know about her lifestyle choices. She perceives herself as women but cannot express the same in the house. She feels that the society will never accept her. She also has a lot of pressure and lives in the fear of her in-laws. She only reveals her identity in the community. She feels happy and liberated in the community. She feels that society is in conflict with the transgendered identity.

Thus, it seen that the individuals in a family feels suppressed in their expressions and cannot truly live they want to. In fact this transgender has a family with his wife and two kids, who do not know about his identity. She has learnt to act the way society expects her to as a male role and then as a female role in the community and with her lovers. In her words, *"I have seen society reject so many people when they know the truth. It is therefore, better for me to live a life in the hidden."* Thus, it can be inferred that the way society has stigmatised transgendered community has made them hostile towards it.

In these cases individuals though aware about their non-heterogeneity as well as selectively disclosed it they have not adopted the label as 'trans' and are thus facing identity crisis. In such cases 'trans' individuals have not very frank relation with the society and have no hope for any change in social norms to accommodate them in the society.

2. Individuals' living in the blood relation family and their family knows about them:

Individuals living with their family, who know about them, tend to have a more stable and secure identity. However, this comes with a caveat. The family expects the individual to act 'normal' in society; hence the individual has two identities and is forced to live with his two distinct identities. At his/her family,

he can act his 'gender' however in society he must act the perception of society based on their understanding of gender. This is where identity politics and multiple identity formation occur. The need of the family not to get embarrassed or rejected by society due to their member having a different identity overpowers the acceptance of their identity.

3. Individuals living outside the blood relation family, but are living with their lover or partner:

When individuals leave their pre-existing identity behind, they do feel that they can adapt and perhaps discover their true self. They start to see society as becoming more accepting towards, though not entirely. This is because once they are not of their 'family' the stigma attached to spoiling the dignity of the family is no longer a burden for them. They are free to act they want to and become confident. This has a definite impact on their personality and identity and how they carry themselves in society. Moreover, the added advantage of having a partner in their life, making them feel more accepted and loved and their perception tends to change.

One transgender living with her partner feels that society has changed a bit. Now the society is becoming or having a bit of tolerance regarding transgender. But still they are not completely acceptable in the society. Now she is no more afraid of the society. But she carries herself in a certain way to be more acceptable in the society. This is the point of contention. Her need to act a certain way so that society accepts her shows that she is living a life of fear of rejection.

4. Individuals living outside the blood relation family and all alone:

Transgenders who live all alone in society, outside the blood relation family, tend to have a negative perception about themselves. As a result they are more prone to committing or attempting suicide. Since they do not have any backing from a group like in the case of those who stay with hamams or with family or with a partner, the chances of them succumbing to the societal needs and pressures can be difficult for them. Most of them might feel that society is too rigid and they do not have a hope in life, making them prone to depression and suicidal tendencies. In the words of one of the transgenders, *"In the society there is no place for transgenders like me and hence society rejects them. Even when I took psychological*

treatment for my identity disorder, I was made to believe that I am gay because being gay in society is easier than being a transgender. That is why I have decided to live a covert life and interact with society that way it wants to me see, rather than the way I would like to live.”

The individuals at the hamams feel that they do have some hope left in society as they live together as a family, hence they are more stable in their outlook towards life and they can live their life the way they want to and not how society wishes them to. On the other hand individuals, who stay out of hamams, are seen to more depressed and have almost no hope from the society. Though, every individual transgender might have a different story to tell, there is a congruence of the impact of society on their way of thinking about themselves and their role in society. Most of them have extremely negative view of society and have accepted themselves as different and would like to stay away from society. Those who have not accepted themselves as different try to fit themselves in the mosaic of gender roles the society has put forward. Yet they too have a negative role of society because of the experiences they have had.

VII. IDENTITY VARIATIONS WITHIN TRANS COMMUNITY

During the course of study it was found that gender identity differed within the Trans community. Next section will analyse that how the internal dynamics within ‘trans people’ shape identity between transgenders and transsexuals.

These two categories within the ‘trans’ community has sometimes transcend individual perception resulting into the politics within the community. This politics is termed by Roen as ‘politics of gender transgression and liberal transsexual politics’. Whereas the former seeks to destabilize and expand the ‘man’, ‘woman’ and ‘transsexuals’ while the later seeks to be accepted as man or woman. Thus, the identity gets shaped as ‘Both/Neither’ in the case of transgenders who refuse to fit into any category of man or woman either because of social compulsion or because of confused identity whereas ‘Either/ Or’ refers to transsexuals who convincingly fits into either man or woman (Roen 1996).

Apart from definitional differences, the identity contrast between these two categories can be synthesized from substantial emotional and perceptual deviations. All these differences were very clear during interactions with them.

On the one hand, transgenders, particularly the one living individually continue to face psychological turmoil because of their identity, not legitimised by the society. Though, through their covert behaviour, they are able to hide their actual identity from the society in the short run, the anger, confusion and frustration generated because of identity conflict often led them to depression and others psychological ailments. On the other hand, the transsexuals (specifically male to female) who post sex-change fitted themselves in one of the two genders constructed and recognized by society, have confirmed themselves psychologically their gender, even though they continue to face discrimination in their day to day life. Thus their confirmed sex provides a confidence, consolation to them though minimally, emotional stability with respect to their gender.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Looking at the perceptions, it is seen that there is a need for a change in the perceptions of society and how they treat transgenders. There has been a lot of activism that has over the years, though quite recently in India, crept its way into the LGBT community. They realise that they need to create awareness about themselves and their gender and sexual identity in society. This is the reason why the researchers were invited to the 'sports day' event as well. The transgender community has realised that they need to respond to the present state of marginalisation and social ostracization in a constructive way, rather than accepting their roles in society. Thus in general it can be said that these efforts might ensure their need to join the mainstream society, though not entirely. This change in their perception about society can only occur when society takes an effort to rectify and make amendments in the discrimination practices towards this community. This can occur only through change in the society's beliefs and attitudes, which the researchers feel will reflect in the perceptions of transgenders as well.

The study is a small initiative towards creating this change. Interacting with the transgenders on a first hand basis and understanding their perception through their own lens gives an account into the fact that they are human beings after all. Their need to be accepted in society was observed strongly. Quoting one of the

transgenders, “*We want you to create change maybe just in your college about us. We want people to know we are not ‘bad people’. Just people who have been discriminated against and hence we appear hostile. But we really are sweet and genuine people.*”

This quote explains the entire transgender community, their problems, their perceptions and the need for such a study. However, there is scope for the future studies as well. As explained by one of the transgenders that the LGB communities usually belong to higher classes or the upper classes; however the transgendered community usually belongs to the lower class. The reason behind this can be a scope of a new study. Moreover, in the words of the oldest transgender the researchers interviewed, “*There is a sudden increase in this community. I was born this way, but suddenly many people want to ‘belong’ to this category. At times I wonder why. Not like our community is doing well.*” This can be a study in itself. The entire need to belong to hamams and the reasons for this can give a good insight to the field of knowledge on transgenders.

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