Transgender Subalterns: The Voices (Un)Heard Today

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the issue of transgender politics as one among the other subaltern group politics in India. It explains the concept of 'transgender' and their various struggles as a subaltern group within the mainstream Indian society. It also puts into light the various crises faced by the transgender subaltern community in India with respect to identity, employment, education, family life, public facilities, political and decision making, medical benefits, behaviour and mannerism and lastly with respect to culture. The paper puts forward comprehensive analyses of the various rights demanded by the transgender community in India and the developments that took place in this respect till date. The paper essentially puts into forth the reality of this subaltern community and their constant struggle for recognition within the mainstream Indian society by challenging the heteronormative concepts. The findings and analysis of this paper is based on the secondary sources to highlight the present scenario and condition of living of the transgender community in India.

Key words- Transgender community, Subaltern studies, Identity politics, rights and developments.
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Introduction

India is a country of diversity with many languages, religion, culture, practices and demographic groups. The population is hierarchically segregated according to their income, education, gender and various other factors. In this context, positioning one group at an advantageous position or referred as the 'elite' group and the other group at an inferior, low and marginalised position or identified as the 'subaltern' group. It is important to look into in this respect the subaltern studies which emerged around 1982 as a series of journal articles published by Oxford University Press in India. A group of Indian scholars trained in the West wanted to reclaim their history. Its main goal was to retake history for the underclasses, for the voices that had not been heard previously. These scholars they hoped to break away from histories of the elites and the Eurocentric bias of current imperial history (Ludden, 2002). Historian who use the term 'subaltern' take it from the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Francesco Gramsci who defined the term in his famous book the Prison Notebook in a number of volumes. In notebook 4 he referred the term subaltern to refer to any subordinate social group or class. Therefore, the term subaltern refers to "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation (Louai, 2012).

Several other scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have borrowed the term 'subaltern' from Gramsci in her well-known book "Can the Subaltern Speak" she tries to overthrow the binary opposition between subject and object, self and other, Occident and Orient, centre and marginal and the majority and the minority. 'Subaltern' according to her meant those who belong to the third world countries. It is impossible for them to speak up as they are divided by gender, class, caste, region, religion and other narratives. These divisions do not allow them to stand up in unity and makes the condition of the subaltern all the more pathetic (Notes & Spivak, 2019). Another Indian scholar Ranajit Guha also made contribution in subaltern studies by bringing into light that the historiography of Indian nation has been for long dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. According to Ranajit Guha historiography has two parts- elite and subalterns, where the latter is left out by the elitist historiography. So, many scholars during 1970s raised the question about those knowledge and interpretation of the past with an

elite bias that was taken for granted both academically as well as politically to lose its certainties so that the domain of power no longer associated with the elite group, to bring into light how the subaltern groups have revolted and resisted against the elite dominant group and their role in shaping history (Guha, 2014). Thus, subaltern studies are about the inferior, low ranked and unheard voices of the Indian society subjected to exploitation, marginalization, discrimination due to gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation-based differentiation from the elitist tradition of the society. It is also about how the subalterns are constantly voicing their grievances and resisting against the injustices to empower themselves with developments and protective measures for their own community's welfare from the Government.

Speaking of the subaltern studies, in India, among many other subaltern groups and communities, the transgender community is one of those subaltern groups which had been marginalised for centuries. They are still fighting for their right to identity because the society understands, accepts and recognises the binary concept of gender of male and female, the former dominating over the latter in a patriarchal bounded society. In this respect it is important to understand the basic difference between 'sex' and 'gender'. The former refers to the biological characteristics whereas the latter refers to the social and cultural characteristics. Sex is what we all are born with but gender is constructed by the society (Srivastava, 2014). Thus, our body gets gendered as either male or female according to our assigned sex at birth. All characteristics associated with masculinity are considered as superior and those associated with feminity as inferior. This is how sexual politics developed its roots by controlling over sexuality. Both male and female are used as primary category in all societies but with time there have been changes in the perception of the people with regard to their gender identity. In this respect, the concept of 'transgender' emerged, which is relatively new, dating from the late 1980s and it was not until the mid-1990s that it was used in its current popular sense (Todd Weiss, 2009). The term transgender can be accurately applied to self-identified bigenders, gender radicals, butch lesbians, cross-dressing married men, transvestites, intersex individuals, transsexuals, drag kings and queens, gender-blenders, queers, gender queers, two spirits, or he-she's. These individuals may form their own social networks, hence the term "transgender community" used (Burdge, 2007). Thus, the term transgender is used to refer to people who claim the term on the basis of feelings that their assigned gender role is incongruent with their sense of self. So, the transgendered individuals are targeted for mistreatment when others attempt to enforce conventional gender boundaries on them.

The transgender groups around the world are subjected to many atrocities, affecting them psychologically to cope up within the mainstream society. The constant rejection from the society in every possible aspect makes them vulnerable to several health diseases out of crisis- mental, economic, social and cultural. This one kind of subaltern groups, living in their closet for several centuries, is unknown to the people about their existence as a human.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to:

1. Bring out the condition under which the transgender subalterns are living in India.
2. To also discuss the various methods through which they are voicing for their rights to break the heteronormative stereotypes in society.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this paper have been developed keeping in mind the objectives it intends to explore. It therefore states that:

1. There is no significant correlation between transgender groups subjected to various crises due to their subalternity.
2. There is no significant correlation between transgenders voicing for their rights for an inclusive society in India.

Methodology

The discussion and analysis of the paper has been done by using secondary sources to able to fulfil its objectives. The descriptive analysis of this paper have essentially been taken from sources like the government publications, books, journals, articles, newspaper publications and other sources to understand the social, economic and political condition and status of the transgenders in India. The paper intends to bring

out a generic picture of this subaltern community in India by critically analysing various aspects.

Discussion and Analysis

With time transgender politics has emerged as one of the escalating issues in our contemporary Indian society which challenged the age long concept of gender dichotomy as well as the legitimacy of the State. The community is subjected to subalternity resulting to various crises in the following manner:

- ***Identity crisis:*** This is the biggest challenge that they face in every step of their life. They are constantly fighting for their identity as a 'trans-gender' and also for their existence as a 'human being' and not as an 'alien'. The struggle continues because of the lack of recognition from the society which recognises the binary division of gender of 'male' and 'female' as legit. Trans people is stigmatised because their gender identity is questioned at every possibility of their life even after it has been legally recognised as the 'third gender' by the NALSA declaration in 2014 (Menon, 2014). As a result, their right to vote as a citizen of India is undermined. Though, in 2009 the Election Commission of India had allowed transgenders to vote by marking their gender as 'other' (Times of India, 2017). But handful of them enrols in the voters list and hardly come to vote out of the fear of social harassment at the poll booth centres and out of the prejudice that their condition will not change in the society, made them reluctant to vote.

- ***Employment crisis:*** Non-acceptance from society resulted in lack of employment opportunity for the transgender people in India. They are often questioned inappropriately for their gender identity disorder during job interviews or at the work places. Few people of this section of the population mostly has to conceal their self-identified gender and is forced to work with their traditionally assigned gender identity at their birth. Others are thus, left with the only option of begging and the ceremonious performance they do for a new born as a form of blessing, for their sustenance. They even earn money through sex work. Such practices are condemned and ridiculed by the Indian society as means of earning one's livelihood.

- ***Education crisis:*** Transgender people merely receive the opportunity to education, especially at the higher level. The families, especially of hermaphrodites, hardly send them to school out of the fear of social harassment primarily and the fear of their child will be taken away by the Hijra community. Though this is not the case with all the families, this is the case found mostly in relation with the intersexed child. Even in the cases with those- Male to Female (MTF) and Female to Male (FTM) transgender people, to pursue education, they either have to hide their real gender identity or have to give up studies out of social harassment. The Delhi government's Directorate of education (DoE) have planned to come up with guidelines to make 1,100 schools inclusive for transgender students in collaboration with SPACE, a Delhi based non-governmental organization (Iftikhar, 2018). In order to address this issue of the concerned community in higher educational Institutions, UGC has issued a circular on 2014 to all the Vice-Chancellors of the Universities requesting them to include a column for transgender category in all application forms and other relevant documents processed by them as well as by their affiliated colleges (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). Recently colleges and universities are coming up with the provision for 'third gender' or as "other" category in educational institutions like in Kerala State Government allotted two additional seats for transgender students in all universities and affiliated colleges across the state (University World News, 2018) and also in West Bengal, Kolkata prominent educational institutions like the Jadavpur University and Presidency University having provision for the third gender category (Bag, 2015).

- ***Public Facilities crisis:*** This is the area where they face immense problem and harassment. Though a significant move by the Ministry of Sanitation have been taken which issued guidelines to the Swachh Bharat Mission stating that members of the third-gender community are allowed to use public toilet of their choice which mostly categorised either as 'gents' or 'ladies', but they still face resistance from the mainstream section of the gender group (Wire, 2017). Transgender

toilets have come up though in small number like in Kolkata "tridhara toilets (Singh, 2022). The community continuously have to fight for their basic rights and use of other public facilities like- they are not allowed to cremate their fellow member of the community during the day time, harassment from the police which has though reduced in number but still exist or while travelling in public transport they have to deal with public taunts, teases and gaze that signals rejection towards them. Similar condition they face while visiting restaurants, in hospitals and other places.

- ***Marriage and Family Life crisis:*** The gender deviant community has been for centuries marginalised and ostracised due to Section 377 of Indian Penal Code, criminalising homosexuality. Marriage in India is recognised between two heteronormative individuals. Any deviation from this process invokes resistance from the society. As a consequence, the transgender people takes resort to social marriages with their partners and lives secretively with them or they are either compelled to opt for Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) for leading a 'normal' recognised family life. They also do not receive any help for free medical check-up except through few NGO's or community based groups. Recently, in 2018 the decriminalization of the Section 377 of IPC (Times of India, 2018), made a landmark judgement for the concerned gender-minority community in India. It has given them a sigh of relief after the long struggle they had gone through to improve their condition of living. They are yet to receive full recognition in terms of adoption rights, which is still denied to them in India. Since, this is a recent development that has taken place for the concerned community the acceptance from the society and to make it a normal practice is yet to be achieved to live their life with dignity.

- ***Politics and Decision making crisis:*** Recently, very few can be seen filing nomination as an independent candidate for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections from the transgender community in India. They otherwise are hardly represented in any political party and their interests are given prominence. Neither at the grass root level nor at the national level that they are adequately represented. Many community-based organizations have come up like Sangini (India) Trust, Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group, Sappho for equality, Umang (Beth, 2022) and others to work for the gender-minority communities in India. There are number of transgender activists, journalists and scholars that has recently made their existence felt within the conservative Indian society.

- ***Medical Benefits crisis:*** Transgenders are sexually exploited, harassed and susceptible to diseases like HIV/AIDS. No special wards are there in the hospitals whether private or public to look into their cause. They usually face utter confusion with regard to which ward they are to be admitted whether male or female ward. Other than this, they often have to bear the full cost for SRS if they wish to opt for. Added to all these problems, the constant mental distress they go through is barely considered as a matter of concern.

- ***Behaviour and Mannerism crisis:*** The community is looked down upon by the mainstream people due to their typical behaviour and mannerism of clapping hands, their particular style of speaking, often considered as 'vulgar' and the tone in which they speak, the way they dress up, walk and the way they express their sexual orientation. In other words, it can be said the pattern of living of this community is considered to be unsophisticated and incongruent with the established norms of gender behaviour and all possible ways have been undertaken by the people to ostracise them.

- ***Culture crisis:*** The community of the transgender people have a culture of their own which is unknown and invisible to the society. 'Bahuchara Mata' is one of the Hindu deities sitting on a hen, known as the goddess of chastity and fertility, having the power to curse and to remove curses is worshipped by the hijra community in India (Das, n.d.). Since the transgenders, essentially the hijras, been seen as descendants of Bahuchara Mata, they are believed to have the same power to curse by the Indian society at large and feared. A ceremony is also performed when someone joins the hijra community, they have various

hijra gharanas and they also have their own language of speaking which is considered as unconventional by the society (Tripathi, Raj Rao & Joshi, 2015).

Various mediums used for Voicing for their Rights and Developments

After looking into the socio, economic and political condition of the transgender community, it is important to look into the ways and means through which they have voiced against the discriminative norms and practices of the society by demanding the right to exercise and applicability of Fundamental rights as well as challenging the Constitution; by writing number of autobiographies by their own community members like Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, A. Revathi, Manobi Bandhopadhyay and others; to spread consciousness; taking active part at the level of civil society and into political activities by number of transgender activists; through movies and social media forums and through academic work and related books.

1. ***Demanding the exercise of Rights as well as challenging the Constitution:*** The transgender community has been raising their voices for the right to exercise the Fundamental Rights of India which guarantees a proper condition of living and rights for all its citizens along with reasonable restrictions upon them. Exercising these rights is a mark of being the part of the society which has never been granted to the community. Some of the rights which guarantees equal protection and applicability for the transgender community but never effectively enforced in reality, they are- *Article 14* which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws within the territory of India; *Article 15* of the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination against any citizen and ensures that no citizen is subject to disability, liability, restriction or condition and *Article 16* guarantees equality of opportunity to employment irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex, descent place of birth or any of them; *Article 19* ensuring protection of certain rights regarding freedom of speech and expression, to assemble peaceably and without arms, to form associations or unions, to move freely throughout the territory of India, to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India and to practise any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business; *Article 21*_of our Constitution provides that no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law and under *Article 21A* which provides that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may by law, determine and lastly *Article 23* prohibits traffic in human beings and beggar and other similar forms of forced labour are prohibited and any contravention of this provision shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law (Basu, 2013).

Thus, the community is trying spread the idea that it is the responsibility of every individual to respect the right of another individual irrespective of any discrimination in the full and equal enjoyment of all the fundamental rights contained in the Constitution and facilitating social and economic inclusion of the transgender community to enjoy public facilities and the equal protection of laws. Equal opportunity for education and employment is essential so that the community members don't take up sex work and begging as a feasible option for earning quick money for their survival. So, they have been fighting for their right to identification and place in the society at large, constantly pressurising the government to come up with measures that will protect the community from any mistreatment and exploitation. Finally, the Judiciary of India addressed the demands of the community of transgenders through the National Legal Services Authority or NALSA declaration, a landmark judgement made on 15th April 2014, recognized the 'third gender' along with the male and female and also gave directions for the protection of the rights of the transgender persons by including of a third category in documents like the election card, passport, driving license and ration card, and for admission in educational institutions, hospitals, amongst other **(**Menon, 2014.) After the NALSA judgement, the transgender people came out in the public and boldly announced projected their sexual identity. It no longer remained as a 'private' activity in the fear of getting ostracized from the society and more importantly punished under section 377 of IPC.

Some other initiatives taken by the Government of India in the process of ensuring welfare for the community are the Rights of Transgender

Persons Bill, 2014, 2016 and 2018 formulated for ensuring overall development, welfare and to mitigate the discrimination for the transgender person are to be undertaken by the State. Along with these developments by the Government of India towards the third gender community, they have been challenging Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code from a very long time, which States that 'Unnatural offences'- whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten year, and shall also be liable to fine (Times of India, 2018). This is a colonial era law of 1861 which makes the gender-deviant community vulnerable to police harassment, extortion, abuse, rejection and ostracization from the mainstream society. So, the transgender community have been fighting against this discriminatory law of the land restricting them in exercising their right to privacy under Article 19.

2. *Role of Activists and other organizations-* Activists and various other organizations whether community based or non-governmental, play a pivotal role in pressuring the Government to take up initiatives and welfare measures to empower the gender-minority community of the country. In 2001, Naz Foundation (India) Trust filed a writ petition in Delhi High Court challenging the constitutionality of section 377 on grounds of violation of right to privacy, dignity and health under Article 21, equal protection of law and non-discrimination under Article 14 and 15 and freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution. Later, on 2 July, 2009, Delhi High Court overturned the 150-year-old section, legalising consensual homosexual activities between adults which was again criminalised on 11 December 2013 by the Supreme Court of India stating that judicial intervention was not required in this issue. The curative petition were filed by NGO Naz Foundation, parents of LGBT children, mental health professionals and a coalition of human rights groups who called themselves Voices Against 377, among others to rehear the challenge to Section 377, made by them. Finally, after the long struggle Section 377 of IPC has been decriminalised by the Supreme Court on 6 September, 2018 (Times of India, 2018). Transgender activists like Ranjita Sinha, Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, Kalki Subramanian, Apsara Reddy and others have played the major role behind the success of decriminalising Section 377. These transgender activists played the role of a leader for their community members in arousing the consciousness about their position, rights and about the community itself to its fellow members and to the other people in the society with the sole purpose to develop a positive consent towards the transgender community. They are organizing queer pride parade, a festival celebrated to honour the queer community members and its supporters, seen as a sign of empowerment. These activists are trying to draw the attention of the policy makers into the issues of the concerned community and bringing into light the need for political representation of the transgender people and holding seats inside the government for effective policies and measures to be formulated. For the recent Lok Sabha election, nomination is also filed from the transgender community though in small number but a step towards making place within the Government.

3. *Autobiographies by the Community members-* Number of autobiographies have been written by the fellow members of the transgender community in India. They have shared their experiences of going through the gender dilemmas to the experiences of stigma, seclusion and exploitation from the mainstream society. They also brought into light the journey of them coming out strong with their self-identified gender and making a place and recognition in the mainstream society, marking an inspiration for their other community members and people at large. The primary motive behind writing about their lives is to spread the knowledge about the community, the kind of daily problems that the community members face and most importantly these books works as an inspiration for its community members to not give up on life or on anything. In a way, these books help in organizing the members of the community into one unit ready to fight against heteronormative framework of the society for making their own place. Some of the autobiographies are- "Me Hijra Me Laxmi" by Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, "I am Vidya" by Living Smile Vidya or Smiley, "A gift of Goddess Laxmi" by Manobi Bandhopadhyay and "The Truth about Me" by A. Revathi.

4. *Voicing through Social Media and Movies-* Digital world made it easier to reach out to the people fast and conveying its messages quickly and effectively. Transgender people have also used the social media forum like Facebook, twitter, instagram, WhatsApp and other forums to voice their grievances, expressing their ideas and suggesting with remedies. Thus, providing an important platform and opportunity where they can directly connect with the world bringing them out of seclusion and exchange of ideas taking place making people conscious and more tolerant towards each other. It is also the best medium through which the community members come together and organise themselves through social media blogs and groups formed sharing stories around the world related with their community. The printing media also plays an important role in generating insights about the community and the need for its inclusion. The various news channel debates and forecasts are important in creating people's opinion towards the community.

On the other hand, movies and short documentary films on the queer community are one of the essential medium for voicing against the stigma, injustices and prejudices faced by the community. Movies like "Fire", "Chitrangada", "Memories in March", "Just Another Love Story" and other films based on the queer community have remarkably explained the complexities of their life. The trend of representing the hijra or transgender community through movies has also changed. It is a change from treating them as 'object' to 'subject' and from 'negative' to a 'positive' representation.

5. *Academic works and related books-* In the last few years a large number of academic works has increased on the subaltern group of transgenders in the country. It has also become a subject of academic discussion inside the classrooms and in other academic related activities. Though, the transgender community has no direct role to play in this respect but their constant fight and resistance towards the societal norms, perspective and gaze shaped by the heteronormative framework, have triggered interests and an urgent need for the researchers to look into the growing dimension of subaltern politics by transgenders in India. Apart from the contributions made by the academicians, a lot of book on the transgender issue in India has been written by Indian authors around the country like: "Halde Golap" by Swapnamoy Chakraborty, "The Pregnant King" by Devdutt Patnaik, "Same Sex Love in India" by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai and many other related books on the issue of the queer community.

From the above findings it can concluded that he various mediums through which the people of the community have been raising their issues have received attention and recognition on most of them from the concerned authorities. Out of them, the role of mass media has been more influential in the contemporary global age. The platform of mass media has opened a forum for the subaltern group of transgender people to express themselves which has always been kept unheard with the people at large within the mainstream society. This process has facilitated an inclusive democratic society within the country. It has also generated out opportunities and confidence to many of them to come out from their closet and mark their identity within the mainstream society. Apart from the role played by mass media, the role of the activists and social movements has been the constant pillar of strength to the people of the transgender community. The untiring work, dedication and never giving up attitudes of the activists have today opened up spaces for the transgender people within the Indian society. Despite much success, the constant struggle for existence continues for the transgender community in India. Nevertheless, with growing issues of this community, it has also attracted the attention of the academicians within the country. They have involved themselves into the study of this category of subaltern people to understand, know and bring them out of their present situation to a better one. A lot of academic and research work has resulted into not only deeper understanding about the community but also generating awareness about the transgender people. Along with this the autobiographies of the members of the community have also facilitated the process of awareness spreading among the people, both within and outside it.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be stated that it is the society to be blamed for such an unprogressive condition of the 'Hijras' as they are always isolated and disrespected. Laws can partially uplift the status of the transgender community but it is important for the society to accept them because laws can

only become effective when it is properly implemented, recognised and practiced by the public at large. In the eyes of the society they are recognised as 'abnormal' and 'unnatural' since they violate the 'order of nature.' The laws enacted by our Constitution which should be universally applicable hardly apply for the transgender people in spite of being a citizen of India. Instead these laws are used to harass and suppress the sexual minority groups in Indian soil in every possible way to maintain the conservative binary heterosexual relations among male and female. Gay, lesbianism, bisexualism and transgender relations should also be recognised as they have the right to choose their own sexual orientation and also has an urge to live life in accordance with their choice just like any other 'normal' citizens. The level of awareness is not only low among the illiterates but there is equally lack of consciousness among the literates to understand the problems of the transgender or particularly Hijras on ground of 'humanity'. Even if they try to step out of their shell and face the society boldly, that moment their moral strength gets challenged as they are bullied at schools, work places and in any other institutions of the society. Hijras have their own pattern of life and mannerism just like any normal male and female is supposed to have, but they are the ones who are deprived of their liberty to live in the manner they want. The society constructs the mode of behaviour for the respective genders- male and female; similarly, they should also construct the mode of behaviour for the third gender group of people which in reality has never taken place. In this respect the existence of the transgender community is always questioned and remained as a subaltern group in India.

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