

ALTERNATIVE VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM: SOCIAL IDENTITIES, INEQUALITY AND EDUCATION OF TRANSGENDER (TG) STUDENTS

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Abstract: Are Transwomen less of women? Shouldn't their issues be an integral part of women's issues? Girls and women were placed at the heart of gender discourse. Moreover, attempt to understand the effect of discrimination based on non normative gender identity/sexual diversities (Transgender identity) and education are few. Thus, a whole range of educational experiences and identities are made invisible. This study focuses on all those missing voices, overlooked concerns and the significance of education institutions in socializing the learners into a world of discrete binaries, which leaves no scope of celebration of multiplicities of existence. Thirty Delhi based Transwomen became a part of the study and voiced their lived experiences, within the formal education setup. This paper is an attempt to provide a turf to create space for this on-going struggle to achieve equal and safe education for Transwomen and provide interventions and advocacy for their better future.

Transwomen: Women who were assigned gender male at birth and have now taken the transition. Terms like Hijra, kothi etc. are often used to refer to them in Indian culture.

Keywords: Formal Education System, Heteronormativity, Transwomen.

Introduction: In the transition from traditional to the largest democracy, India still remains deeply orthodox with entrenched attitudes towards traditional family life, gender roles, gender identity and any diversion in gender identity and expression is strictly forbidden. Indian society remains highly conservative and voices of gender/sexual minority are made unheard. We stand witness to the recent Supreme Court judgment (NALSA judgment on 15 April 2014) which acknowledges Transgender community as a minority in our country and provides them with their due advantages to be at pace with the society but, the percolation of such initiations in the masses must be probed in due course of time. Education with other socio-cultural factors lends primacy to this particular ordering of sexuality and gender, over spectrum of possibilities. It is a well-established fact by now that education is not a neutral enterprise, it not only reproduces norms but also hold the capacity to transform these systems. Judith Butler theorizes how assuming these binaries to be 'The' way of existence leads to power dynamics. Taking this thought forward, it is enticing to look at gender and sexuality as the sites of power manifestation in educational institutions. In past few decades educational discourse has addressed the issue of gender with a restricted perspective. Girls and women were placed at the heart of gender. Moreover, attempt to understand the effect of discrimination based on gender identity/sexual diversities (Transgender identity) and education are few. The representation of this entire community can hardly be seen in contemporary educational discourse. All those who do not fit into these gendered norms of the educational culture find themselves on the margins of the system and are

discriminated regularly [1]. Present day Indian education is unable to encompass multiplicity of desires and identities and question the naturalness, the rightness and the inevitability of the existing 'normal' gender identities. The 'normality' this requires is produced, maintained, policed and reproduced by the by Education system. Present day Indian education socializes the child with already existing cultural and social stereotypical gendered norms of existence and expression.

Being A Transgender In India: Tg community faces discrimination and harassment from Indian society, religion, their family, educational institutions, the medical professionals, legal system, from within the community and it is still difficult to openly live as a Tg in India. Our society is pre dominantly assumed to be *straight* and words like Hijra, Kothi, eunuch and Transgender are constantly used in derogatory manner.. Seldom, our society realizes or cares to realize the trauma, agony and pain which the members of Transgender community undergo, nor appreciates the innate feelings of the members of the Transgender community, especially of those whos mind and body disown their biological sex [2]. Sexual/ gender diversion was acceptable but never celebrated in Indian history.

Transgender Umbrella: Transgender is generally described as an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to their biological sex. It consolidates a large variety of identities and experience in its purview including Transsexuals i.e. female-to-male and male-to-female sexually re-assigned, drag-queens/kings, cross-dressers. In India it is difficult to reach a consensus on who should be included under the term Transgender, due to diversities and

regionally variant vocabulary. Hijra, eunuch, kinnar, aravani, jogtas, shivshaktsis all form similar identities with some basic variation, but it important to confess here that the list of identities under Tg umbrella presented here is not at all exhaustive. We do not get deep into the specificities of the identities covered under its confines, hence is not seen as a monolithic whole in this paper [2].

Space For Transgenders In Our Education

System: Educational institution is a microcosm of society with people from diverse backgrounds come together and have the freedom to explore a diverse set of topics, find strength and work on their weaknesses, all in pursuit of being ready to conquer the outside world. But looking at gender as two discrete boxes, leaving little or no scope of transgression and compulsory norm conformity cease the establishment of the concept of gender as fluid, cutting across all disciplines, basic to the construction of knowledge, pervasive and having wide-ranging implications for human relations in general and education in particular[3]. The Supreme Court 2015 judgment (NALSA judgment) clearly bestows right for reservations in educational institutions for Transgender community.

Thirty Delhi based Transgender persons became a part of the study and voiced their lived experiences, within the formal education setup through semi structured interviews and life narratives spread over a period of more than three years.

Forms of discrimination faced by Transgender

students: Bullying: Practices like bullying has infected even educational institutions and transformed them into a place where transphobic sentiments are imprinted on the minds of 'normal' students. Transgender students face physical, cyber and verbal abuses in the form of remarks, alienation from the peers, bullying, physical harassments, physical assaults and psychological punishments once they are suspected transgressing the social norms attached to the sex they are born with. Unks explains "Picking on persons because of their ethnicity, class, religion, gender or race is essentially taboo behavior, but adults and children alike are given license to torment and harm because of their sexuality [4]."

Deepali, who identifies herself as kothi narrates how in ninth standard, "seniors in my school, a couple of times, took me behind the bushes in playground and tried touching me, they said they wanted to check mere saath problem kya hai and used to feel my genitals forcefully." All this and much more made Deepali hate school.

The kind of atmosphere students get in a school determines the school climate. Majority of Indian Schools are hostile towards Tg students and they do not feel safe at school. Teachers either turn blind eye or force the Tg students to change their gender

expression/identity. Tg students generally end up dropping out of such schools or wish that they were different [5]. An insight into the hostility enforced upon Tg students can be forged in the following illustrations. Roshni, class 5 drop-out, who identifies herself as kothi narrates,

"I was in class 4 and my principal would call me to his room during prayer time, when all other students were out in the ground. He started with pinching me here and there, kissing me and then sexually abusing me. This continued for more than a year and stopped only when I gathered courage to report this to my parents. They filed a complaint against him. Principal eventually got transferred, but out of fear and shame, I stopped going to school, completely."

On the other hand there are passive schools, where most of the staff stay quiet and believe that there is no place for such topics in school. Amit (born male, but thinks of himself as a female), M.A. Economics elaborates, "My classmates used to bully me all the time for my feminine body language. My teachers clearly heard all the comments but never did anything to stop it, they could have stopped it and saved my 10 years of schooling."

Inclusive school climate, which are based on the premises that all students, no matter what their size, color, gender and sexual orientation is, deserve to come to school and feel safe. Salil, 24, had a difficult school life, but kind words by his teacher were what it all took. "My english teacher called me to the staffroom and said I completely understand your situation and will always be there for you. I got my lost confidence back seeing a teacher always in my support."

The idea of inclusive schools seems utopian and unfortunately most of the Indian schools lie between Hostile and Resistant schools.

Curriculum: The existence of gender/sexually diverse individuals is rarely if ever discussed directly anywhere in the curriculum of most of the educational institutions in India. Without accurate information about this minority group, students both heterosexual and LGBT are more likely to accept and internalize negative stereotypes and misinformation floating all over, about this community. Text-books in Indian schools are overloaded with heterosexual tales, images, characters and examples enforcing normative heterosexuality. **School events** including assemblies, dance performances, dramatic enactments, debates etc. all spread the message of discrete binaries of male and female being the only legitimate way of gender identity. The absence of information and representation of gender diverse figures in historical, literary, political, artistic spheres of education is regarded by school officials as taking a "neutral" stance on gender/sexuality. Myopic vision of Sexuality Education curriculum focuses mainly on

avoidance of HIV and instructional mode of transferring information about reproduction (a chapter in Biology). Lack of role models representation through curriculum, increases stress and confusion for Tg students, as they end up believing that they are the only one and feel tremendous pressure to conform to heterosexual norms since they do not have a role model to look up to and learn coping strategies while they are exploring gender roles and sexual orientations.

Hidden Curriculum: Over the past decade and half several studies of school culture have included an examination of a hidden curriculum in schools. School administrators and staff members assume that all students are heterosexuals and these irrational assumptions are reflected in **uniform regulations, rigid sitting arrangements** that make gender boundaries rigid and compel gender definition. Staff and students get involved in **transphobic language** including name calling to bullying.

Envisaging A World Beyond Binaries: Over past few years we have entered a state of transition regarding treatment of the Transgender community. But, for every proponent that says that transgenders must be treated equally in all forms, there are opponents that ridicules transgenders on road, malls, trains, schools and believe them to be less males and less females, hence must be denied equality and should keep leading the life they are 'destined to live'. The scenario in educational institutions does not provide any contrast. Hence, there is a pressing need for re-examination of the current model of education, generally followed in schools and the values it inculcate, which contribute to the lop-sided personality development.

It is clearly evident, school and colleges plays a very influential part in the lives of most of the Transgender students. Consequently, it is crucial for schools to be more open and affirming when it comes

to questions of gender [1]. This does not require humongous transformations, but some little steps, like educating peers and staff, avoiding transphobic language, open climate that enables non-moralistic discussions about non-conformation to the binary gender (male/female), sexuality, transgender identity, gender neutral uniform and washrooms, clearly spelt out code of conduct for students, representation of Tg community in curricula resources through language, social-sciences, art, dramatics, sexuality education, suggestion/ complaint box, presence of special educators and school psychologists, organize campaigns and anti-bullying programs.

All the above mentioned recommendations can educate both who discriminate and those who are discriminated against, on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender nonconformity and lead to an educational institute which is safe for all regardless of their diversities. It is only when the diversity of gender identity, gender roles and sexual orientation is seen as indispensable to the academic experience that campus climates for transgender students will ultimately transform. If all campus administrators, policy makers and opinion leaders incorporate even some of these changes, it can bring about gigantic differences in the lives of both current and questioning Tg students of our country. The only rule to be remembered is "You don't have to do everything; you just have to do something [5]."

*All the names of persons have been changed in keeping with the confidentiality. As far as possible all references to geographical location and other identifiers have also been generalised or edited out.**The paper is based on the unpublished M.Ed dissertation 2012-13, with Department of Education (C.I.E), University of Delhi by Manvi Arora titled "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (Lgbt) Students and Their Educational Problems in India."

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