

Equity for the Urban Transgender in India: Perspectives from Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Laxmi Me Hijra*

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There are very few writers and activists who work for the betterment of transgender. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is such a writer and activist. In spite of her sufferings, she has established herself as a successful activist. She comes forward not only for herself but for the welfare of the transgender community. She is a leading LGBT rights advocate and activist whose autobiographical work *Me hijra me laxmi* is a distinctive feature in Indian writing in English literature. This work records the struggle of Laxmi as she raises her voice against injustice done to hijras. "Transgender individuals in India are commonly known as hijras. They are usually born males who assume neither male nor female identity. Being a transgender focuses on gender identity and not on sexual orientation. They are expected by the society only to perform rituals such as badhai. Otherwise they became one of the most neglected communities throughout India" (www. Hera- single p1). Today in India, many hijra (transgender) live in urban ghettos and many are confined to undignified begging or many are forced into sex trade for a living. A large number of transgender indulges in projecting themselves as a good omen to bless the bride and the groom, or a newly born baby and demand money in excess, if denied then prove vulgar. The author recounts her struggle to get an Indian passport issued and other such struggles against institutionalised discrimination. The role of the hijra is much discussed, accepted and visible in Indian culture and mythology. But, modern Indian society has relegated them to an extremely marginalised and miserable existence. The author questions the lack of equal opportunities and the right to human dignity which a transgender faces in urban India. They have been denied basic human rights, education, health care and respectable job opportunities. We are living in the period of modernity which gives opportunities to facilitate the social conditions in which subcultures emerge and nourishing. The post modern theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, contends that, "compared to the past, contemporary life is fluid people change jobs, religions, homes, nationalities, husband/ wives, life style and political ideas." (Haenfler 29).

The autobiography of Laxmi reveals different shades of her life from the beginning to the present day. It explores the sexual violence of the most invisible, unheard and sexual out caste transgender community and their resistance as a particular sexual minority through her autobiography. Recalls her childhood is a painful experience for her. She was not a happy child as she had lost her innocence that makes a child what it is. In a very early age, she was molested by her relatives and friends and lost her virginity. When she understands the real meaning of molestation, she raises a voice against unfavourable incidents and decides not to do anything against her will.

There is a big question before her how she should understand herself. Sangita Sethi her teacher suggests to her to meet Mr. Ashok Raw Kavi who works for men like you. She is disturbed and also sexually attracted to men. Why am I not like everyone else? Am I abnormal (Tripathi 11)? Ashok smiled and said, "No, my child you are not abnormal. You are absolutely normal. What is abnormal is the world around you".

(11) Ashok wants to convey her that it is a difference of the perception of the society otherwise she is absolutely normal. At this moment she is too young to understand the real meaning. When she passes her SSC exam then she would better meet her mentor, Ashok again. After getting result, when she met, he explained the meaning of the word gay and tried to satisfy her with these words "Welcome to the gay community. You have become one of us'. I learnt a new word gay"(12). At that day she comes to understand the real meaning of the word gay. Attraction towards the same sex is also a hint of abnormality. Her relationship with Rohan is a good example of it. Before understanding of this word she was inclined towards Rohan and that fascination was not a normal fascination it was more than that. She says- "with Rohan I was having sex by choice for the first time in my life. Now, there was ecstasy not agony". (14)

The profession of sex without love is an important feature of hijras. It has been depicted in the autobiography. In the case of Laxmi, she could never get real love. Everywhere she gets frustration, sorrow and sadness. Rohan is not an exception. "I began to doubt whether Rohan really loved me. There destructive thoughts tired me out, and I wanted to take revenge on the whole world"(15). The life of Laxmi is barren because everyone is after her body not for her love. As she has relationship with Ravi, earlier he was co-operative and loving but he was also after her body. So, can Laxmi rely on anyone in her life? This is a big question mark. The role of society is important as: "Society would never allow Ravi to 'marry me or live with me even if he wanted to, such relationship may be okay in the west, but not in India which is conservative. By being with Ravi, was I contributing to his downfall?" (20) Here Laxmi wants to convey her feeling that a gay hasn't right to love towards other. She always suppresses her feeling for the welfare of others. People believe that hijras are somehow psychologically different from normal people. In this way, the autobiography does not only depict revolt against the rigid traditional conventions, but also reflect the impact of prevailing postmodernist thought of celebration of differences.

I had learnt from Ashok Raw Kavi that i wasn't abnormal. But then, what was going on inside my body? Though I was born as a boy, how come I feel in love with boys and not with girls? Slowly, gradually, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't a boy. I was a girl. But then I had a penis and testicles not breasts- so how could I call myself a girl? I was bewildered- I did not have the answers to these difficult questions. I wanted to end my life. (22)

When she finally considers herself as a gay or hijra, the first lesson she got from Baby Jonny, that a man should first respect herself. "She taught me how to be myself without compromising on my dignity and self respect. In order to be respected by others, one had to first respect oneself. It seems to me that a lot of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people don't know this"(25). Due to the impact of Baby Johnny, she starts her own dance class and people acknowledge her as a good dancer. Mostly hijras work in a dance bar not for enjoyment but for fulfilment of their basic needs. Laxmi advocates that it is not a matter of hatred towards sex worker. She gives a lesson to all hijras that everyone should come forward for their rights. When she declares herself a hijra a great burden was lifted off. She says:"I was now neither a

man nor a woman I was a hijra. I had my own identity no longer did I feel like an alien.” (43)

Though it is a reality that Laxmi is a hijra but it is difficult for her to disclose her identity before her family members. So many questions come to her mind whether they will accept me or not. She tries to hide her identity. With the passage of time it was difficult to hide, and at last she discloses her identity. All family members accept her as it is. And support her in a critical period. Laxmi is really a blessed child. She receives respects not only from the family but from the society as well. It is a plus point in her career. There is a famous saying that if the root of a person is strong he or she can pass any hurdle in life. In the case of Laxmi, no one could treat her as a doormat: “But I alone being respected wasn’t enough. I wanted that respect to percolate down to the lowest of the low among the hijras, so that we were are treated as par.” (62)

Determination and hard work is the key to success. Her character reflects this idea and she became the first chairman of the DWS. After getting success, she totally wants to forget her past life. So, here the attempt is made with regard to the equity of transgender. Urbanism acts an important role in her life but her success is not a result of a single day it is a step by step process. It is a social belief that hijras are outcast people of the main stream society. This perception is changing in a modern society.

We are hijras. We’ll not do this and we’ll not do that’. I was livid. I hated the idea of a ghetto or a gated community yet, that is exactly what the hijras seemed to want. I reasoned it out with them. ‘What does it matter if you are a man, woman, or hijra when something’s got to be done? I asked, “Why segregate yourselves from mainstream society to such an extent?’ (67)

The autobiography is a true record of the psychic trauma of the transgender community in relation to sexual abuse, attempted suicide, problems of livelihood, health issues and lack of education and use of aggression as a means of survival. In the modern time the role of social media plays an important role in the life of transgender and they are finding an encouraging space. There are movies which raise questions about the social status of transpersonal as Mahesh Bhatt movies *Tamanna* and *Sadak* which break the stereotypes against hijra.

Sometimes a person himself decides and set the limit of his work without knowing its wholeness. Laxmi, in the novel, establishes herself as a respectable person among other men and women of the society. She plays a leading role in a film by Anita khemka in Torento film festival: “I was one of the nine Indians invited to participate in the gig, and the only hijra, representing all the hijaras of India, I was so proud” (75). There is a great difference between the ideology of Lataguru and Laxmi. Lata doesn’t like, if Laxmi crosses her limits. She behaves in the traditional way of life whereas Laxmi is an educated hijra and cannot bind herself under the backward limitations. Education is the rope through which she crosses the hurdle of life. It is due to the effect of foreign visit she develops her ideas and perception of life. She says: “I discovered that their life style was poles apart from our lifestyle in India. In India, becoming a hijra in a spiritual process.” (87)

The attitude of the Indians is quite different from the foreigners. Though we are progressing, still our outlook is traditional in comparison with them. Due to the effect

of foreign visit, Laxmi feels herself energetic both physically and mentally. When a person is fully satisfy inwardly and outwardly it means that she will be able to do her task successfully. So like a robust person she decides to work independently and tries to empowering the hijra community and to educate society. Hijras are like the subaltern and untouchables who denied their fundamental rights. Just as downtrodden and outcasts had struggled a lot for their betterment or their place in the society, in the same manner hijras are fighting. And at last they got success. The Supreme Court of India has recognized transgender are the separate "third gender" and the declaration of the law, equal opportunities are providing to them for their livelihood. Though the government has made different laws for them but the part of the society is still dominant and important to shape their personality. So they should change their perception towards them. To stop oppression, violence and discrimination there is a need of love and sympathy of the people for them. Only law cannot change the outlook and perception of the people, it is just a tool to give them direction. Change can't happen overnight, behaviour and attitude take time to shift but human linkages are sustainable, and as the society works to maintain them.

The visit to Kamatipura totally transforms her life. Seeing the miserable condition of the hijras, she is fully determined to change their life. She herself accepts as an activist more than the dancer. The sex workers of Kamatipura were unorganised and she decides to organize them, "My approach was twofold: I made the prostitutes aware of the squalor in which they lived, and I made society aware of the sordidness of the prostitutes' lives" (105). One important question Laxmi raised here that like other profession sex is a job for the hijras. Why societies make a hullabaloo about it? The prostitutes sold their bodies just as other people sold other things. "Why, then, didn't civil society accept them and confer respectability on them? Also, ironies of ironies, their clients were not outlaws: they were members of civil society itself." (105)

It is really a matter of pride that a hijra represents India in a foreign country, but with empowerment came responsibility too. It is an impact of Urbanization and the spark of equality. The character of Laxmi can be analysed on three aspects like family, society and on an individual level. On a family level she is strong. When her family comes to know her real character, they never try to humiliate her but support her like a great wall. Her father gives a good remark why should I expel Laxmi from the family? As a father, he is my responsibility. Driving Laxmi out of the house was out of question. Hearing Papa's words Laxmi's eyes were full of tears and she says how many hijras in India could boast of such supportive parents. We have emotions, just like ordinary human beings and are perhaps more sensitive than them. Because of getting full support of the family members, Laxmi proves herself like a true transgender activist. This is a famous saying that optimism is the key to success in every field of life. This line proves it well: "I wasn't born to accept defeat. It went against my personality to retreat from something. I had wilfully started. Laxmi always tries to maintain the values of her family. She believes that "I am what I am today on account of those values." (137) her efforts for the betterment of the life of hijras seems to be fruitful when she gets a certificate of appreciation from the Chief Minister. Society plays an important role to shape the personality of a person. Since the beginning of her childhood she is neglected, frustrated and humiliated due to her sex. Through

hard work she comes to society as a bright star and now she doesn't have regret for accepting it would help her as a hijra." The word: hijra is a social and not a biological construct. It is tiresome to swim against two currents one society and the other community. Both need to change their attitude. No change can be possible by a single hand" (173). Equity of transgender can be obtained not only through the formation of laws but through favourable and congenial atmosphere in schools and colleges. So that third gender kids did not hide their face.

If like the other two gender, the third gender person could access to all documents like a passport, ration card and an Aadhar card that would help them to establish their identity. A family is a great strength to man. If emotionally, one is strong and has faith on one's family members, can pass any hurdle in life. It is really a matter of pride that Laxmi proves herself like a true transgender activist. But society shows her the door on account of her episode and motivated her to fight for the transgender rights with renewed power. Her first achievement has done in all government application forms. Optimism is the key of success in every field. This line proves it: "I wasn't born to accept defeat. It went against my personality to retreat from something I had wilfully started" (134). Due to the negativity, they don't want to be nice. They grow with a feeling that nature partially neglected these people. So, there is no use to show them as good or humble. As in the case of Laxmi, in her autobiography "she speaks of humiliation but it is restricted to the early part of her narrative. When she is still a boy, once she becomes a hijra, Laxmi, unlike Revathi, begins to live life on her own terms. She becomes an activist, works for the eradication of AIDS among her people." (188) she has become a known figure who advocates for hijras rights not only in India but in abroad. She has successfully sensitised society to take initiatives to reshape their position and standard. It makes us feel that still third genders are suffering at the hands of people and are facing endless and never-ending problems in every field be it societal discrimination, family issues, problems in educational institutions, workplaces etc. It is suggestive that each and every member of the society has a duty towards the unprivileged people like transgender as they are the part of the society but it is unfortunate that the position of them has been most critical. Hence, there is a need to make laws that discourage and put off brutality against individuals and set up effective systems for their betterment. The constitution provides for the fundamental right to equality, and tolerates no discrimination on the grounds of sex, caste and creed. "The Constitution also guarantees political rights and other benefits to every citizen. But the third community continues to be ostracized. The Constitution affirms equality in all spheres but the question is whether it is being applied" (<http://iasscore.in/national-issues/Transgender-rights-in-India>).

To conclude, Laxmi always advocates the rights of hijras. She appropriately unfolds how the profession of hijras that is begging, singing and sex work, is not out of choice, but out of necessity. They are forced to accept these menial jobs. They get humiliation as people offer few rupees not because they are willing to give, but only to get rid of them. There has been a transformation in attitude and many initiatives have been taken to treat the transgender as a part of the society. Families are also supportive of their children who want to be trans-genders. If we talk about modern society, yes it is providing facilities, if a person truly involves in getting position or wants to give some

change in the society. Instead of feeling embarrassed and ashamed, they try to be with their children and support them. Involvement of the family members in the process of change for the transgender individual is important for both the family as well as the individual concerned. The thought process of the people has to be de-constructed. The person belonging to the minority community has the right to live happily like the common people. In the soul bearing autobiography what Laxmi achieves is to open an eye into the dark world of the hijra. All through her work, she is fearless by fate and her choices are simply heroic by her identity.

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