

Transgender in Kerala : Culture and festivals –the ways for their life spectacle

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Abstract

Kerala while through a tremendous change and achievement in the matter of HDI, PQLI, and GDI and is the leading state in India in matter of Education, socio-economic Development and the related development criteria's. Development indicators In Kerala and the community of Transgenders have a meager role in their economic and social transformation and stages. . The measured population of Transgenders in Kerala is around 25,000; located in almost all the districts in the state. In the category of LGBTQI transgenders occupies an important place. Transgender have a recorded history of more than 4,000 years. Asian countries have centuries-old histories of existence of gender-variant males who in the moderns times are labelled as 'transgender women'. India has a history of people with a wide range of transgender related identities, cultures, and experiences. People with such identities include Hijras, Aravanis, Kothis, Jogtas/Jogappas, and Shiv-Shakthis. Ancient myths bestow them with special powers to bring luck and fertility. Kama Sutra provides vivid description of sexual life of people with 'third nature' (Tritiya Prakriti). There happened a big crisis in transgender identity in Kerala. Gender variation and gender expression often leads to Transphobia and stigma in Kerala. Automatically there raised a lot of issues in the society made them an unwanted element in the society. These identities have always been part of the broader culture and were treated with great respect in the past though only some are accorded such respect in the present. Our society is, however, very harsh on gender-variant people. Some transgenders have lost their families, their jobs, their homes and their support. Transgender children may be subject to abuse at home, at school or in their communities. A lifetime of this can be very challenging and can sometimes cause anxiety disorders, depression and other psychological illnesses. These are not the root of their transgender identity; rather, they are the side effects of society's intolerance.

Key words: Transphobia, Tritiya Prakriti, stigma, gender variation

Transgenders had been part of Indian society for centuries. There was historical evidence of recognition of “third sex” or persons not confirm to male or female gender in near the beginning writings of ancient India. The concept of “tritiyaprakriti” or “napumsaka” had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epics and early Vedic and Puranic literatures. The term “Napumsaka” had been used to denote the absence of procreative ability, presented by signifying difference from masculine and female markers. Thus, some of the early texts extensively dealt with issues of sexuality and the idea of ‘third gender’ which was an established thought therein. In fact, the Jain text even mentions the concept of “psychological sex”, which emphasized the psychological make-up of an individual, distinct from their sexual characteristics. Lord Rama, in the epic Ramayana, was leaving in the forest upon being banished from the kingdom for 14 years, turns around to his followers and asks all the ‘men and women’ to return to the city. Among his followers, the hijras alone did feel bound by this direction and decide to stay with him. Impressed with their loyalty, Rama sanctioned them the power to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like child birth and marriage, and also at inaugural functions which, it was supposed to set the stage for the custom of badhai in which hijras sing, dance and confer blessings. Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Nagakanya in Mahabharata, offer to be sacrificed to Goddess Kali to ensure the victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war, the only condition that he made was to spend the last night of his life in marriage. Since no woman was

willing to marry one who was doomed to be killed, Krishna assumes the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and married him. The Hijras of Tamil Nadu considered Aravan their progenitor and call themselves Aravanis.

Festivals and functions

As like any other communities in the world, transgenders have also their own festivals and cultures. They prefer and preserve the cultural pattern and beliefs they have received from generations. The occasions of festivals and celebrations is one of the important way for the expression of emotions and feelings of the Transgender community. The Koovagam festival at the Kuthandavar Temple in Villupuram, Tamil Nadu revolves around the myth of Mohini. During the battle of Mahabharata, the Pandavas needed a human sacrifice to ensure victory. Prince Aravan, son of Arjuna, volunteered on the condition that he should be able to marry before he dies. No damsel came forward to marry the doomed man; so Lord Krishna took the form of Mohini, married Aravan, and upon his being sacrificed the next morning, mourned him. At the Koovagam, the transgenders in general, are called Aravanis—the wives of Aravan. On a designated day the priest of the Aravan temple ties the nuptial thread around the assembled Aravanis who thus marry Aravan and celebrate the ‘wedding night’. The thread is cut the next day and the Aravanis mourn the death of their ‘husband’ for the next forty days. But the Koovagam was not always so prominent festival.

In 1921, the Right Reverend Henry Whitehead documented the village deities of South India in his ‘The Village Gods of South India’. He points out that most village deities or ‘grama-devatas’ are female in the Dravidian tradition possibly because the Dravidians are agricultural people and worshipped the female principle in nature. He mentions the temple of Kuthandavar which was in the South Arcot District in the village of Devanampatnam, Villupuram where the Koovagam festival takes place was a part of South Arcot District till 1993. Whitehead does not mention transgenders at all. He observes “a crowd of men dressed as women come to the shrine with talison in their neck. In the evening at sunset the tali are cut, because the God has died and all the people dressed as women have become widows. There is apparently no immorality connected with his worship. The members of the Padaiyachi caste, who have got educated in recent years and attained a much better social status, tend to give up the worship of Kuttandavar (Whitehead 27-28).

Thus the education and wealth lead the folks to abandon the practice as they find it socially embarrassing. The adoption of the Koovagam festival by the transgenders has a history of more than thirty years. The idea could be to have a God of their own with whom they could identify and present as a talisman for garnering popular support. However, the coming of the British and the resulting smear campaign had led to transgenders being branded unclean and freakish – their marginalization was more severe than that of the Indian male who was termed effeminate and devious. Thus the Koovagam is a means of creating a tradition that can be projected as a culture of their own. Moreover, the rituals that are part of the festival are the processes that transgenders find to be in their comfort zone as they feel that their culture and festival heritages have become under threat.

Another important cultural event is the Chamayavilakku festival at the Chavara Kottankulangara Sridevi Temple, Kollam, Kerala. At the culmination of the festival, men dress up as women and hold lamps as offerings for the Goddess. The festival is not really meant for Transgenders. But many Transgenders will attend this function. But due to the nature of the festival, there is escalating transgender presence. The legend behind the temple throws light on the origin of the Chamayavilakku. A group of cowherd boys chanced upon the deity when they hit a coconut against a stone to dehusk it. It is said that the stone began to bleed. On consulting astrologers, the presence of Vana Durga was revealed, and a temple was built on the site. The little boys get

dressed as girls holding lamps to welcome the Goddess. Another version has a lot in common with the Transgender cult of Bahuchara Matha. In this version, the cowherds used to dress as girls and venerate a stone and playfully offer kottan (the squeezed out kotthu) to it. The Goddess was pleased by their devotion and blessed them. Bahuchara Matha—a manifestation of the Goddess Kali—is said to appear before men and asks them to become *Hijaras* to serve her, and thereby become her children. If they obey, they are guaranteed a life as virile, potent men in the next birth, so goes the belief. Therefore, the men who undergo emasculation are called Nirvan or the ‘reborn’, and are the elite among transgenders.

For the Chamayavilakku, the men shave off moustaches as it seems ungainly to dress up so, thus undergoing the ritual castration which enables them to become better men or later prove their strength through the fulfilled wishes. The devotee castrates himself or by the Goddess and thus relieves himself of the anxiety over his incompetence to fulfill the sexual needs of the mother.

There is much difference in cultural, social, and political support of the Transgenders in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Seeing the massive presence of Transgenders in Tamil Nadu, the Government has put in motion steps to bring them into the mainstream, namely education, franchise and job opportunities. The advocacy for gay rights is an example. While the ‘coming out’ of the upper and middle class gays has lent an informed and articulate voice to the battle, the Transgenders are yet to get there. Perhaps, Koovagam is the Transgenders’ own pride march. Kerala, on the other hand, should gain the power to match up to the level of commitment that its neighbouring state is showing. The Chamayavilakku provides an avenue for examining the tendency of passing. Passing refers to hiding of one’s true sexual preferences and trying to appear as normatively male or masculine or female or feminine. But in reality, the Transgender population in Kerala chooses states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra to ‘come out’ permanently, the Chamaya vilakku is a carnival site where, under the aegis of a religiously sanctioned festival, the transgenders ‘appear’ for two nights. These include persons from other states also. The festival thus seems like a stage for elusive sexuality. Chamaya vilakku is interesting from that point of view.

Transgenders are very happy on their festival. Chamayam means makeup. So, with the coming off the make-up, the adopted roles must also be doffed. But the question is do they really come off?. The two festivals become a major site for cultural performances— an arena of consent and contestation. The Transgender replicates the message received from society, and is under pressure to mark up a performance that matches up to the ‘expectations’ of others. There is also pressure exerted on the Transgenders to follow the patterns of kinship and relationships rampant in society, which is a performance of a different kind. This in turn requires heterosexual performers to tighten up their structures and become exemplary, thus dictating the ‘must and cannot do’ of sexual and social performances. There is also the apprehension of ‘appropriate reaction’ along with the heterosexual gaze. Perhaps, the two festivals are a stage of realization and execution or setback of desire, where direct performance or transposition takes place. The anxiety of performance is reversed. The exhibitions of real tendencies among the Transgenders are the realization of their Gender identity.

Transgender population in India

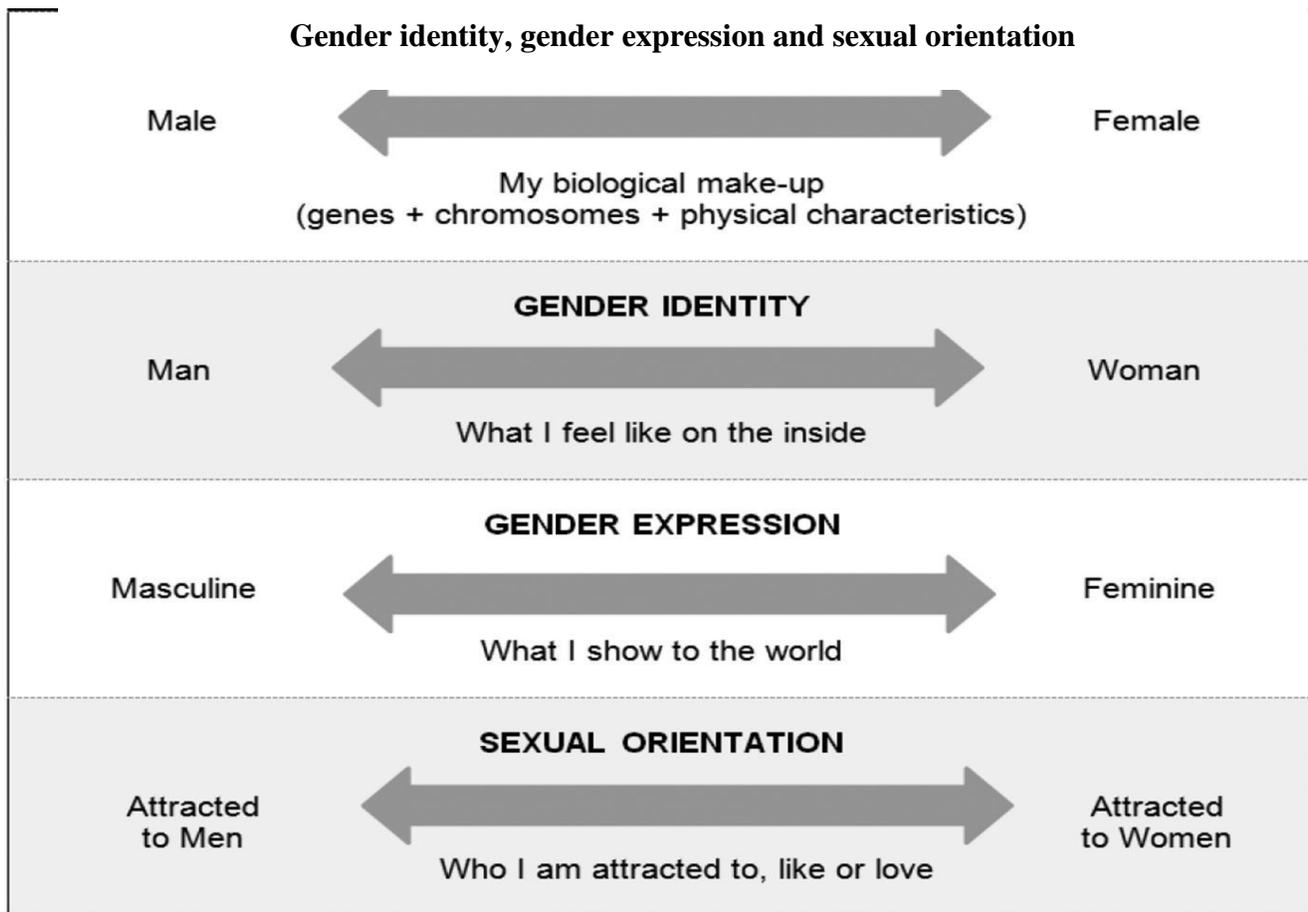
There is finally an official count of the Third gender in the country — 4.9 lakh. But the numbers to be six to seven times higher, they are thrilled that such a large number of people identified themselves as belonging to the Third gender, despite the fact that the census counting happened well before the Supreme Court order gave legal recognition to the Third gender in April 2014.

The highest proportion of the Third gender population, about 28%, was identified in Uttar Pradesh followed by 9% in Andhra Pradesh, 8% each in Maharashtra and Bihar, over 6% in both Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal and well over 4% in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha.

Rajasthan accounted for over 3% of the total Transgender population and Punjab for 2%.The proportion of those working in the composition of Transgender community is very low (38%) compared to 46% in the general population and only 65% of the total working population.

Hijra Culture

Hijras are a social clutch, part religious cult and part caste, who live mainly in North India. They are culturally defined either as "neither men nor women" or as men who become women by adopting women's dress and behavior. Hijras are devotees of Buhuchara Mata, a version of the Indian Mother goddess. The term Hijra comprehends an eclectic range of identities, appearances, and behaviors that haze and cross the biological gender lines in India. They do not conform to conventional notions of male or female gender but combine or move between the two. Their vulnerabilities, frustrations, and insecurities have been historically overlooked by mainstream society. Therefore, they are a marginalized and stigmatized community. On the other hand, marginalized masculinity is explained with specific reference to the configuration of practice generated in a particular situation in a changing structure of relationships. The Hijra claim that mainstream society does not understand their culture, gender, mentality, and sexuality.



Important Rights of the Transgenders

1. Right to live as born:- The child born with some sexual abnormality is abandoned in fear of social stigma. Because of the shortage of mechanisms preventing the violation of rights of transgenders, such persons are easily defrauding the society. In the absentia of any legislation

and administrative policy decision, such persons are also defaming the real transsexual persons. Thus, right to life and to live in the family and society is first and essential right. Here right to life means the right of transgenders to live in family and society. This right can also be correlated with the right to life and the personal liberty as enumerated under Article 21 of the Constitution. Every child of any sex and gender or with any physically abnormal sexual appearance has a right to live comfortably and with dignity in the family. So, ethically, morally and socially, the child has a right to live with the family and society with dignity.

2. Right to Good Treatment: - transgenders are receiving ill-treatment from every corner of the society. Recently there happened atrocities by the moral policing. transgender activist Soorya” she shouted that all the transgenders are not sexual workers”. But the society put all the transgenders in one framework. This is a complete atrocity on them. Transgender and inter-sexual human rights has focused on violations dealing with administration of justice, issues such as torture and ill treatment and arbitrary detention. These types of violations are usually the most visible forms of state-sponsored persecution and, hence, the easiest to document and address. Several human rights mechanism already report and comment on the torture and ill treatment of sexual minorities. Article 24 is regarding the protection of children and provides that every child shall have, without any discrimination, as to colour, sex, language, religion, national or social origin, property or birth - the right to such measures of protection as are required by his status as a minor, on the part of his family, society and the state. It also provides that every child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have a name and accordingly every child has the right to acquire a nationality.

3. Right to Education: - For the development of an individual attainment of education is very essential. Every person in their life should get maximum education for self sustainability. Education in India is a fundamental right. It’s really impossible to live in the society without education. Any democratic society even a developed society cannot imagine to sustain without a quality education system. There are some countries of the world have ensured education without discrimination on basis of sex or gender. Sexual minorities should enjoy this right, and accordingly, develop their mental faculty. In India, as the transsexuality is considered a curse, Recently, India has ensured compulsory education for all the children. So, transgender should also get education under the mandatory state mechanism.

4. Right to Medical Treatment including the change of Sex: - most of the transgenders have some imbalance in life. It is well determined that transsexuality is not a mental disorder. It is a biological or genetic problem or sociological factor. This problem can be cured by proper treatment. Unfortunately, there has not been any systematic scientific research in the world on the causes and cure of transsexuality. In the present situation, psychological, biological or hormonal and surgical treatments are available for transgenders. The transformation from a man to women and the hormonal changes is a long process. The depression and suppression in mind is to be meted out carefully.

5. Right to Social Security (change of name, religion, sex, gender etc. in the official records):- This is agony of transgenders that they are permitted to change the sex from male to female or vice versa but they are not permitted to change the name in passport and other relevant documents such as birth certificate, school and college certificate etc.

6. Right to work: - Right to work is the important right of a person. Every Transgenders should be permitted to do dignified work. For getting a good job, education is very essential. But most of the transgender communities drop their education at their very early ages due to some personal affairs and commitments. For them the commitments are most important than education. Hundred percent of transsexuals require the right to equal and adequate opportunity in all the vocations of public life, but refused for any political support. If a transgender can be

permitted to contest the election for any political post, how can they be deprived of the right to work.

7. Right to Privacy: - transgenders are always at the mercy of others. It is very much clear that mentally these people are facing double burden than the mainstream population with respect to right to privacy.

8. The Right to Asylum: - The right to asylum is of particular importance when considering the human rights of sexual minorities since sexual minorities frequently reside in countries that persecute them. In almost no other area of international human rights law is the dialectic between national and international law so pronounced. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks. Most of the transgender in the present society is suffering from lack of proper Asylum.

Conclusion

All the gender variations are the results of some variation in their chromosomes. The most important issue before them is the social stigma and lack of acceptance from the society. The attitude of the people occupies an important role in the negligence of this community. There are many examples in the world itself have proved that they are also human beings, as the creation of God. But the authorities itself should be an umbrella for this marginalized sect to protect them. Our society is, however, very harsh on gender-variant people. Some transgender people have lost their families, their jobs, their homes and their support. Transgender children may be subject to abuse at home, at school or in their communities. A lifetime of this can be very challenging and can sometimes cause anxiety disorders, depression and other psychological illnesses. These are not the root of their transgender identity; rather, they are the side effects of society's intolerance of transgender people. Life of the transgenders has a close relationship with the culture and festivals. They find it happier because of the relationship of the transgenders with festivals and culture.

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