

Unveiling Trans- Masculinity: A Study on the Invisible Status of Indian Trans-Men

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As an aftermath of homophobic tendencies of hetero-normative societies, 'people of the difference' are forced to hide their identities fearing severe threat to their lives, and for centuries LGBTQIA+ people worldwide falls prey to brutal violence, injustice and homicide. Among them the plight of those who were born with the body of woman is much worse, where issues regarding their gender or sexual variations are even more silenced and dragged to invisibility. A queer person, who has already been caged as a woman in this patriarchal society, gets doubly suppressed when attributed with a gender/ sexual variation. Even while transgender identities gain visibility in society recently, only the trans-women (male to female) persons get their voices heard, where trans-men (female to male) category remain as the doubly marginalised 'other'. In a country like India, where trans-women community claim very deep roots in nation's history, and also performs a part in tradition and rituals, trans-men community still remains invisible leaving their existence ambiguous.

This study thus focuses on the invisible status of trans-masculine persons in India whose voices are unheard since they are born with a female body. Through this research, it is intended to understand different levels of degradation of trans-men category in India and the possible reasons that support them.

Keywords: Trans-masculinity, double- marginalisation, the 'other', media, invisibility and silencing.

It has not been so long that the society we see today has evolved into its so called realms of civilisation which is highly patriarchal as well as binary in nature. It reminds us about the history of mankind which embraced differences among human beings, which even agreed on the fact that those differences are to be celebrated and nurtured. But the conservative religiosity which was followed by normalisation of the mainstream morality mercilessly rejected anything that put its balance at stake, eventually resulting in projecting those differences as evil and unnatural. Thus society acquired a definition that was limited to the binary concept of man and woman. Even in this dichotomy a hierarchy was born that attributed power to man by undermining the position of women to an inferior state.

For the existence and smooth workings of religions, this ideology had to be necessarily maintained. Religions exist through multiplication of its disciples and anything that is against procreation would challenge its position. Therefore anyone who stood outside this boundary became eventually evil. In those countries, where law and order was essentially based on religion, people with non- normative attitudes were branded as sinners. Victorian morality is just one example of such stringent moral principles.

As an aftermath of homophobic tendencies of hetero-normative societies, 'people of the difference' are forced to hide their identities fearing severe threat to their lives, and for centuries LGBTQIA+ people worldwide falls prey to brutal violence, injustice and homicide. Among them the plight of those who were born with the body of woman is much worse, where issues regarding their gender or sexual variations are even more silenced and dragged to invisibility. A queer person, who has already been caged as a woman in this patriarchal society, gets doubly suppressed when attributed with a gender/ sexual variation. Even while transgender identities gain visibility in society recently, only the trans-women people get their voices heard, where trans-men category remain the doubly marginalised 'other'. In a country like India, where trans-women community claim very deep roots in nation's history, tradition and rituals, trans-men still remains invisible leaving their existence ambiguous. The sexual connotations attributed to the femininity in male bodies leads to general

curiosity towards a trans-woman body. Also, a man's transition to femininity is seldom tolerated in a patriarchal society, where this degraded status is dealt with much contempt. The huge fuss resulting due to such rejection of masculinity, is one of the reasons of much societal attention directed towards trans-women, rather than the general public's acceptance of their existence as such.

A trans-man is a person who is born in a female body, and forced to spend most of their lifetime as a woman while psychologically being a man. This duality in gender identity puts that person's position problematic and difficult. The biological developments in a female body, such as menstruation, formation of breasts etc. are traumatic, and usually create gender dysphoria. The transition from a female body to a trans-man is highly regarded as an escape from the chains of womanhood and a yearning towards male privileges in society. This common misconception about trans-men which exists questions their identity and degrades their existence. Rather than a choice, gender is a self-realisation.

In Indian society, gender expressions and performance of male and female are clearly determined and distinguished. Even a woman faces discrimination if lenient towards non-binary practices. Here family, which should ensure safety and security, becomes the base of toxicity, where the concept of love is twisted as an emotional weapon, mostly used to curtail personal freedom of its non-normative members. The element of family plays an important role in restricting the voice of its non-binary/ transgender members in the name of securing honour before society. A queer person well supported from their family is much happier, and confidently surpasses the hurdles in life than the one who is not. But unfortunately, when a family identifies an LGBTQIA person in their household, anxiety arises as their existence questions the norms of society they live in. As a result trans-persons are brutally silenced within their homes and are forced to normalisation damaging the very essence of their being.

Compared to trans-women, the female to male trans-men presence is hardly visible in India. Trans-men category seldom comes out as a group revealing their true identity in public, and most prefer separate individual life rather than community living. There are many

positive as well as negative reasons to their invisible nature. Trans-femininity is ridiculed more than trans-masculinity in India, and patriarchy has an important role to play regarding the matter. Our societal construction is such that a man's identity is associated with strength, smartness and valour, whereas a woman is weak, coy and timid. Even though from childhood gender reversal behaviours are prohibited in India, a girl trying to reach the status of man or displaying some amount of masculine characteristics is encouraged in the family and society to a certain extent, whereas not even a slightest feminine behaviour is tolerated from a boy. A girl in boy's attire is commonly accepted as gender neutral appearance, and the society approves such choice as an individual preference. Even if it is frequented, she is just tagged as a 'tomboy', which everyone believes as a passing phase in a girl's life that can change with marriage. Sometimes even a family takes pride in such 'upgrades' from femininity and describing their girl child to be smart, intelligent or outgoing 'as a boy', as those features are considered to be relatively masculine. Usually a problem arises only when the girl refuses for a heterosexual marriage or if she insists on sex re-assignment surgeries and sex altering hormone intakes (Sarfaraz 2). This leniency is never experienced by a male to female transgender, since society cannot tolerate a man's degradation to a woman's status. Therefore the gender deviancy of a trans-man is not so obvious in nature than a trans-woman. Even after the transformation, a trans-man easily passes for a cis-gender man in the eyes of the society, and hence they rarely expose their true selves in public, as they otherwise have the opportunity to lead a life without much unnecessary complications. Even though they experience much liberty in the status of man, similar to a trans-woman the identity of a trans-man too attracts much trans-phobic hatred from cis-gender category. They also face gender dysphoria in many points of their life, most probably in the initial transformative days.

In India, the way of life trans-women is embedded with traditions and rituals unique to India, which is supported with a solid history exclusively owned by their community. They mark their presence with their loud flamboyant nature, and this is their way of celebrating femininity. Unlike trans-women, "who have an alternative

social support system such as the *jamaat*, and live together, trans men have no such support structures” and mostly their fight for survival is in an individualistic or personal level (Revathi). Due to the invisible status of trans-men, many people doesn’t realise such a sub-sect is present within transgender community, and it is even more interesting to note that “many of them who are experiencing gender disphoria or questioning their own gender, they don’t even know that trans-men exist” (Sarfaraz 1). One of the reasons of this muted life of trans-men can be the way in which they were raised from childhood as a girl, exposed to several ‘no’s and denials towards freedom, which curtails the capability within them to take an initiative. Also, trans-men individuals usually undergo through a shock in terms of gender performativity, as they realise that they need to alter their mannerisms which relates more to a man while they sit, walk or talk. It is a great leap forward for a trans-man in terms of gender performance, opportunities, mobility and liberty. This gender unlearning process of a trans-man is a direct exposure of our patriarchal system that complicates a woman’s position compared to a man.

The ‘coming out’ phase asserting gender deviancy is different for a trans-man and a trans-woman. Usually this phase of self-proclamation leads to their family’s outright rejection, forcing trans-individuals to run away from their homes due to fear of verbal/physical abuse. Prior to transformation, a trans-woman is in the appearance of a man that ensures their safety even on streets, which is not the case of a trans-man. A trans-man is still in a woman’s body before sex reassignment surgery and they hesitate to put their safety at stake by literally leaving their homes. Most trans-men experiences physical as well as mental abuse from their own family members within the confinement of their home, until they agree to a heterosexual marriage. Since physically a woman’s body is much vulnerable to danger, it becomes even more difficult for trans-women to survive revealing their true selves.

In the case of gender confirmation certificates for transgender people, “changing their ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ in official documents can be a tedious, and difficult process, dependent on the whims of individual persons in the concerned government departments. Further, there is

no official recognition of this possibility, or overall guidelines that government officials can use to make a simple change from female to male or vice versa” (Narain 6). Due to this unawareness and ignorance, especially the trans-man identity is often disregarded, as there is a common misconception that the rule is only associated with ‘Hijras’ or trans-women. Even in ‘Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act’ of 2019, the term trans-man is only mentioned once without much focus, cementing their invisibility among the public. Revathi. A, who is a male to female transgender, accounts in her work *A Life in Trans Activism* that compared to trans-women the lives of trans-men are literally “shrouded in secrecy and silence”. When it comes to sex reassignment surgery, the doctors are well equipped with male to female transformation, and also the surgeries and hormone intakes of trans-men are much expensive than that of trans-women’s (Sarfaraz 3). Due to these unfavourable circumstances, only few could afford the heavy expense of surgeries, and thus others are forced to remain with the burden of undesired sex organs. As a result, not only they could enjoy their true selves but also puts their safety at stake which makes their survival difficult in society.

Not all trans-people choose to medically transition. It can be because of their personal choice, medical issues, financial issues or lack of resources. Trans-people who are in the process of transition are also in the verge of trouble as they seldom pass according to the stereotypical ideas of gender binary, and are likely to get mis-gendered in public spaces unintentionally. And unfortunately, any transgender person, who has not undergone sex re-assignment surgery, is regarded with suspicion about their identity and also blamed for fraudulence. Therefore when it comes to trans-men, their invisible status in society puts their position even more problematic, especially when they have not undergone breast removal or sex re-assignment surgeries. Trans-men commonly undergo mistreatment and harassment, if the public comes to know that they are still in woman’s body and hence just covering them up in man’s attire alone seldom helps.

In areas of higher education or job opportunities, trans-men still faces challenges and are usually marginalised as much as trans-women. They are perpetually under fear when in bigger public spaces.

They feel uncomfortable because of questioning glances of other people trying to fit them in boxes either as male or female. Sometimes these glances may turn into verbal abuse or uncomfortable questions regarding their gender expression, potentially leading to physical harassment or outright violence. Lack of public washrooms for trans-people is another important matter of concern. The thought of using public washrooms trigger anxiety among trans-people. They feel uncomfortable going to either male or female washrooms fearing verbal/physical/sexual violence from public, where the plight of trans-masculine persons is much worse.

In India, trans-men identities are hardly under limelight and their presence in literature as well as films are quite unknown, while there exist an abundance of literary books in forms of autobiographies, theory, fiction, critical studies etc., about trans-women. Very few Indian works are available on trans-masculine identities such as *Invisible Men: Inside India's Transmasculine Networks* by Nandini Krishnan, and *A Life in Trans Activism* by Revathi, A, where the authenticity of the former work is still under dispute. When it comes to cinema, apart from recent web series and short films, the only trans-man film released in India is a Malayalam movie *Irattajeevitham* (2018), directed by Suresh Narayanan, which is presently unavailable. Such is the status of representation of trans-men identities in Indian Literature and cinema, which are huge platforms for infinite number of possibilities in terms of gaining visibility.

Conclusion

As trans-women gain much visibility in our society through many years of struggle and torment, trans-men still endure a non-existent status. Since the concept of trans-men is still alien to the majority because the definition of 'transgender' is limited solely to trans-women community, the society is puzzled about trans-men presence and fails to acknowledge them which put their survival at unease. This invisible position calls for some advantage to trans-men individuals, such as they easily pass as a man before general public that makes their daily life less prone to risks compared to trans-women. But this prolonged silence gradually nullifies their existence and their 'absence' before law questions their actual being. Indian families which

yearn for sons simultaneously disown their daughters who literally transform to ‘sons’, where a double standard is clearly evident. Physical and emotional violence begin within the family itself ranging from conversion therapies to forced marriages and rape. These inhuman treatments are culturally legitimised that most transgender individuals are prone to suicidal tendencies. Their distrust towards mainstream heterosexual cis- society is a sum total of the offensive experiences that they have received throughout their lives.

When it comes to sex re-assignment surgeries in India, trans-men transformation is mostly limited to breast removal and uterus/ ovary removal because “the phalloplasty or the metoidioplasty for construction of a penis is not a very well-developed surgery in India. The surgery is complicated, and prohibitively expensive” (“‘Five letter word’ - Struggles faced by the invisible men of India”). The ignorance of government officials is an urgent matter of concern where trans-men community have to prove their existence in order to safeguard them from fraudulence. For general public they are an object of curiosity and there is an element of voyeurism involved in the way in which that they are perceived. At any time in public or private spaces their bodies are at the point of dissection either by society or by law enforcers which put their safety, freedom and dignity at stake.

Reasons of double marginalisation within trans-community are to be seriously taken into consideration, and the continuing invisibility of trans-masculine lives is indeed a matter of significance. Therefore, awareness about the presence of such marginalised lives in our society is essential. There should be policies that ensure the inclusivity of trans-men individuals in Government job sectors through reservations. Also creation of public safety shelters for the trans-men individuals who come out of their homes is an immediate necessity. As trans-women confirmed their presence in different walks of life like Shabnam Mausi (MLA in Madhyapradesh, 1998-2003), Joyita Mondal (trans-woman judge from West Bengal, 2017), Dr. V.S Priya (trans-woman doctor from Kerala, 2021), Prithika Yashini (trans-woman sub-inspector from Tamilnadu, 2017, and Manabi Bandyopadhyay (transgender with PhD and a College Principal in West Bengal, 2015), trans-men also should come out to the political fore-front making milestones in history.

Reformation must happen continuously within mainstream society as well as in the queer community, to assure visibility along with safety of trans-masculine identities.

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