

A SPACE OF THEIR OWN: TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY IN KERALA

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Abstract

Transgender in Kerala, one among the sexual minorities, are more visible both in the social and political scenario unlike earlier times and this brings to the notion that they have done something or the attitude of the society got changed. The present much wider visibility of the transgender community also infers about the space that they have created in the mainstream society through different methods. Thus, the central driving force of the present research article could be considered as the acceptance of this perception. The research article tries to identify the ways in which the transgender community in Kerala used to create a space of their own.

Keywords: Transgender, Society, Space, Methods

INTRODUCTION

Transgenders are accepted and received by many western nations and provide them with the necessary legal rights system, whereas the so called pretended cultural state like Kerala tries to abuse homosexuals and casts out them from the society. Kerala adopts a quite deplorable attitude towards transgenders. It seems that, society of Kerala finds it difficult to accept natural diversities. The deceitful moral pretenses of Keralites play an important role to ostracize transgenders from the mainstream of the society. But the present transgender community tries to enlarge their working space in Kerala using different methods like political organizations, effective use of visual media, participating in government initiated programmes etc.

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Intellectuals those who work in the fields of sexuality and gender issues generally opine that patriarchy is a challenge for sexual minorities. Transgender writers and activists have the same opinion about dealing their issues. In a personal interview with the transgender poet and activist Vijayaraja Mallika says that a major problem that she faces today is of patriarchy. The system and influence are everywhere in controlling sexuality and too in poetry and literature and language is structured in accordance with the system of patriarchy. Structured things are always structured by patriarchal norms. To overcome such a situation, she uses an unstructured language when she writes and talks. Structured language makes subjects submissive to patriarchal system. A presence of all observing power could be seen and the exhibition of domination can be identified. An against language of not so being 'structured' makes the system collapse and such a language gives freedom to express the transgender identity. When the language is unstructured it becomes liberal and thought provoking. Patriarchal language always objectifies things, especially in the case of curious sexuality. Thus, like the poet's attitude, many other transgender activists too have accepted the notion of using an unstructured language. So, when we try to communicate with them, or when we read something written by them, directly or indirectly it points to this notion. They deliberately avoid a language which is completely and perfectly structured, because it does not give the sexual minorities a freedom of expression and

the writing space.

When it comes to create new spaces and identity, political activism of the community becomes important. In Kerala, there are good organizations working for the upliftment of the community. According to the transgender activist Sheethal Shyam, who is part of the organization called the Voice (which was originally formed for gays), opines that there are different organizations in the districts of Kollam, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta, and Ernakulam. Actually, these organizations provide spaces to unite or meet the members every year. Another important organization is SMFK (Sexual Minority Forum in Kerala). This particular organization works for sexual minorities. 'Queerala', 'Ananya' are other famous organizations. These organizations help the community to form a unity and create an identity for themselves. We know that unlike other states, transgenders in Kerala are not living by communities and not completely unified. These organizations help them in providing a common place to meet and discuss their problems. When they are becoming part of a group, they will be strengthened and politically organized, thereby able to create a kind of friendship ties across different districts in Kerala. The community can gain many advantages if they are politically organized. We can take the example of the organization called Dhwayah Arts and Cultural Society. Actually, this organization was responsible for conducting the celebrated first transgender beauty contest in India. The programme gained the attention of media and masses. The event was inaugurated by Kerala Health Minister K. K. Shailaja at the CIAL Convention Centre, Nedumbassery. The programme was a milestone in the history of transgender people in Kerala. Another important event that the community has organized in Kerala to widen the working space and functioning is the 'pride parades'. This event was conducted by LGBTQ community in Kerala, is gaining acceptance and it functions like an awareness programme. Pride walks are organized to celebrate or perhaps to commemorate the incident that the Delhi high court historically laying down the section 377 in the Indian Penal Code and also to make the people aware of the existence of different communities like LGBTQ. Every year they conduct pride walks, which were actually started by the queer pride, Kerala. The transgender activist Sheethal Shyam says in the session "Our Politics is the Politics of Survival" in the book *Transgender: History, Culture and Representation* that the queer pride walk that they conduct every year can also be considered as a protest against Supreme Court of India that abolished the revolutionary proclamation put forward by Delhi high court. She says,

We shift this procession as a platform to voice openly to the public our own experiences of struggles, afflictions, sorrows and crisis. The procession will transmit a self-spirited courage to those suffocated and suppressed people who finds it difficult to reveal their gender identity and bring them to the mainstream and enable them to reveal their identity and equip them to live fearlessly. (127)

The first queer pride March in Kerala took place on 2009 and almost all queer groups were participated. The sexual declarative procession, which voiced the politics of existence, brings about an apparent change in the attitude of Kerala society.

Participating in the government initiative programmes also helped the community to gain much space in the society. Government of Kerala is the first state government in India to conduct a transgender survey and to form a transgender policy. For forming the policy, a survey on transgenders was carried out and it was headed by 'Sangama' and the Sexual Minority Forum of Kerala. From the very initial stage of the survey, it was ostensibly evident that there are almost

twenty-five thousand transgenders in Kerala. The survey reveals the fact that 58% of transgender students are forced to give up their education before the completion of tenth standard owing to many kinds of physical and mental harassments and tortures and also due to many bitter experiences regarding their gender state. While 54 percent of them possess a monthly income below 5000, only 11.6 percent of them holds a permanent job status. 52 percent of transgenders have undergone tortures from police and 70 percent afraid to confront the police. 89 percent have encountered bad experiences in their workplace, 28 percent are molested or raped by their partners. 96 percent of transgenders hesitate to file a complaint to police against the violations faced by them. When 76 percent finds it unable to register their gender status, and 78 percent hesitates to reveal their gender identity in fear of discretion. 51 percent of transgenders hide their gender identity even from their own family members. Following the survey, the social justice department stepped forward to design a transgender policy. The transgender policy aims to provide a peaceful and fruitful living condition for transgenders by ensuring equal rights as of male and female sections, providing equal opportunities and freedom for them and also ensuring protection from all kinds of violence. The state again proved its stand on the issues of sexual minorities by conducting a sport meet in April 2017. It was the first sports meet arranged for transgenders in India. More than 130 transgenders participated and later appreciated by the crowd gathered at the Central Stadium, Trivandrum. The programme also gave them a platform to interact with the mainstream society and vice versa.

Another important thing that Vijayaraja Mallika says in the interview is that, Kerala lacks extreme religious and cultural groups and the freedom which a person gets from the society becomes much more than the other states of India. The transgender community is not religiously restricted and culturally controlled. Religion and culture in other states has been provided with special roles and jobs for the transgender communities and in a way, it restricts the working fields of the community and not a single person can get away with the traditional modes of living conditions and it becomes a grave problem for the community. Lack of such a system really provides a great opportunity generating system in Kerala. According to Vijayaraja Mallika, Kerala does give the community a space for self-expression and identity unlike other states of the country. The real reason behind this situation is, Kerala is the most literate state in the nation and majority of the transgenders in Kerala are well educated. Education means either academic or practical. In the case of Vijayaraja Mallika, who has a master degree in MSW and well spoken, does know about her problems and at the same time she knows where and to whom the problems should be presented. Thus, when a Trans person knows the problems and how to express it before the society, at a point the society may identify them with the transgender community and later end up in to some extent, giving proper space and time. According to Zara Sheikha, a transgender person, education was responsible for her change and she became the first transgender to become an IT professional. In her opinion, every space that she received is because of the education that she had, and in an interview, she said that there were many things that she had already lost because of her gender problems, at those times she had only her education. Now she says, the things that she had lost would be returned by the society through her education.

In the personal interview with the transgender poet and activist Vijayaraja Mallika, she discusses about the representation of transgender community in medias. She says that media

only focuses on superficial. The objectification of transgender community could be seen from the part of media in order to generate the curiosity among the audience. Generalization of facts is another thing. They have a peculiar way of presenting information before the audience in a way that the audience will generate the notion that, every transgender community is same. Their profession and way of living is different from place to place and situation to situation. But at the same time, she says that media reports and programmes are also beneficial to the society in many ways because it helped the community to know about themselves and reports of transgender success stories too make an impact on the community. Thus, Vijayaraja Mallika, as a representative of the transgender community advocates that the media should avoid sensitiveness. The way of arousing curiosity in spectators from the part of the media should be avoided. Media could be used for awareness as it is one of the best ways to reach the society, but they are not doing the job, and at the same time they generate only curiosity. At this point, the transgender community realized to involve in the field of visual arts to promote films and documentaries which present the true transgender self. In Malayalam, there are good movies and documentaries where the characters are depicted almost in alliance with the reality. Such movies are, *Ardhanaari* and *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* and documentaries or short films like *Udal* and *Karuna*. In the opinion of Sheethal Shyam the movie *Ardhanaari*, is far removed from reality. The movie depicts the hijra community in an archaic manner. Hijras and transgenders are different. Trans is a gender identity and hijras are a cultural identity. All transgenders are not thus hijras. In the same case Soorya, another transgender artist, who took part in the movie with the mainstream actors, says that the director Suresh has done a research in the field, but some things cannot be presented open before the audience. She thinks the movie succeeded in making an idea about the transgender community to the Malayalee audience. Even though the movie *Ardhanari* depicts incidents in an archaic manner, the movie played its role in creating a better understanding about the transgender community in Kerala. The movie *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, depicts the story of a transgender named, Thampuru and his affection towards a man. Even though the movie does not go beyond the usual discussions, it depicts simply the problems that a transgender face in the Kerala society. Thus, the arrivals of films and short films which depicted the community truly and in the light of reality made some changes in the attitude of the mainstream society. In addition to this, Sheethal Shyam sees a positive sign when in the International Film Festival of Kerala (2017), there were 11 films giving a special category on transgender films unlike other years, where only two or three were shown. These films are an important textbook for those who are ignorant about the challenges faced by the community.

Another method of space creation that could be read along with the impact of visual media is that the effective use of social media. Activists of the community regularly use social media to project their problems and achievements. Through constant updates with the big digital society outside, it decreases the gap between the community and the mainstream society. Earlier sexual minorities were kept aside from the digital media and later with the interferences of activists and others; media took over the issues and clearly made the channel floors as a platform to discuss the problems. *Chuttuvattom* programme in Asianet TV channel, *Njangalkum Parayanund* in Mathrubhoomi, TV channel, *Chhondu Viral* in Mazhavil Manorama TV channel, *Selfi* in Kairali TV channel, Sree Kandan Nair show in Flowers TV channel and *JB junction* in Kairali TV channel produced and broadcasted at least one episodes on transgender community. Even though they were after the market value of these issues, the discussions clearly made a platform for the transgender community to make their points and problems. More TV shows and discussions

actually help the community to make their voice more clear and powerful.

Even though many changes are happening in the society, one thing needs to be noticed, that the writings or literature on transgender community are very limited. We have literature on transgenders, but it cannot be considered as authentic because the real problems of transgender community face in our society are the indifference of the people. It is because of the fact that many do not understand the situation and most of the people maintain a curiosity and attraction towards the vividness in matters of transgenders. Out of this curiosity and limited knowledge, there are many literatures created. *Napumsakangal* by Madhavikkutti, *Hijidaby* Narayanan Pillai and *Hijidayude Kutti* by Indu Menon are examples. But these writings are not enough to project the identity and problems of transgender community. In this context, the life writings of Jereena, *Oru Malayali Hijidayude Athmakadha* and the translation of A Revathi's *The Truth about Me, A Hijra Life Story* came to the literary world. These life writings actually helped the community to write more. Thus, we have blog writings of Sheethal Shyam and the poems of Vijayaraja Mallika. These writings in a way paved another area of self-projection, a space. It helped them in two ways. The first one is, these could be taken as models for further transgender writings and visual media creations. Secondly, it is through these life writings, a reader gets a perfect idea about the concept of transgender community. When someone gets a perfect idea about the community and its living, the feeling of indifference will be gone. When the indifference is broken, a feeling of connection happens and this finally give the transgender community to work with freedom in society. Thus, the transgender community in Kerala started using different platforms for expressing their identity and even started to present themselves because sometimes the media misrepresent the community which would adversely affect their working space.

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