

Expounding Oppression of Transgender in India: A Study of Living Smile

Vidya's *I Am Vidya*

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Abstract

Indian mythology and cultural history have always been rich with the presence of queer individuals. Similarly, transgender community has long been an integral part of the Indian culture and history. With such a rich history and numerous examples, one might assume that the concept of gender and sexual fluidity within the transgender community would be easily accepted and understood in a country like India. But unfortunately, this is not the case. Transgender individuals still encounter various biases and taboos in their everyday lives. Despite India's remarkable advancements in various fields, including medical, technological, economic, and social aspects, transgender people continue to face discriminatory practices and oppression. The transgender community in India continues to exist in a highly oppressed, exploited, and marginalised state. Recently, there has been a surge in transgender literature as it has been not explored enough and now transgender individuals are taking it upon themselves to discuss their lives, experiences, hardships, traumas, all forms of oppression as well as the initiatives taken to overcome all of them. One of the most fitting and frequently opted genres for recounting their life stories is self-life-writing or 'Autobiography'. It serves as an effective tool for conveying the truth of their lives, the struggles and the traumas resulting from multiple forms of oppression while focusing on transgender individual's desire to be accepted, understood, and included in the mainstream society. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the oppression of transgender individuals in India as depicted in Living Smile Vidya's autobiography *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2013).

Keywords: *Oppression, Transgender, Autobiography, Marginalisation, Queer*



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Introduction:

Sex and gender are referred to various facets of biological and social identity. Sex refers to an individual's biological makeup, which is often classified as either male or female based on the anatomy. However, some individuals are intersex, possessing sex traits that do not conform to the typical male or female classifications. Despite this, the great majority of people are biologically classified as either male or female. On the contrary, gender can be understood as a cultural, psychological or social construct that dictates a set of expected roles for individuals based on their identification as a male, female, or a non-binary within a specific social structure. It is a broad notion with many facets that includes a variety of identities and expressions that do not always correspond with a person's assigned sex at birth.

Many societies have historically followed a binary gender system, where people are expected to fit into particular roles and behaviors based on their sex. Beyond the dichotomy of male and female, many cultures and groups do, nevertheless, recognize and respect a variety of gender identities, including transgender, gender queer, gender fluid, and such others. Gender is a socially and culturally produced notion that spans a wider range of identities and functions beyond sex, which is tied to biological features. Promoting inclusivity, upholding individual identities, and developing a more accepting and understanding society all depend on understanding and recognising the difference between sex and gender. Mary Holmes in her work *What is Gender?* also talks about the difference between sex and gender. According to Holmes, "sex and gender are two completely different terms; where sex is used to describe the anatomical and other physical characteristics and differences, gender is used to be able to discuss femininity and masculinity as socially produced way of acting" (18).

The term 'transgender' serves as a catch-all for those whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. To put it in another way, transgender people identify themselves with a gender that is different from the one that is traditionally linked to their biological sex. A transgender person, for instance, is an individual who was born as a male but now identifies as a female, or who was born as a female but now identifies as a male. Even if it deviates from cultural norms or the sex assigned at birth, the gender identity of a transgender individual is legitimate and deserves respect. Each person has a different experience of his/her

gender, which is a deeply personal and a fundamental component of his/her identity. People who identify as transgender can choose to go through a variety of social and medical transitions, including changing their name, pronouns, attire, and appearance to reflect their gender identity. Some people may also choose to have medical procedures, such as hormone therapy or surgery, to strengthen their gender identity. To foster an inclusive and encouraging environment for everyone, it is crucial to treat transgender people with respect, use their preferred names and pronouns, and acknowledge their gender identification.

In India, transgender people have a long and complicated history that is intricately entwined with the nation's culture, religion, and social structure. Depending on the particular culture and region they belong to, transgender individuals in India are frequently referred to as 'Hijras', 'Aravanis', 'Kinnars', or 'Jogappas' among other regional names. It is significant to highlight that depending on the cultural, regional, and historical context, transgender people's experiences and histories vary greatly throughout India. In Indian history, there are long-standing precedents for the acceptance and acknowledgement of transgender people. Hindu mentions people who identify as neither male nor female. Even some gods are portrayed as androgynous. One illustration of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati as a combined body with both male and female characteristics is Ardhanarishvara.

Hijras have historically played a significant role in Indian society. They frequently performed some designated roles, in weddings and childbirth rituals, when it is believed that their special presence bestows blessings on the occasions. Additionally, they have a reputation for being talented dancers, musicians, and entertainers. As Rohit K. Dasgupta explores in his study "Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive" that there is a historical presence of Queer archive in India, which, in turn has paved the way for several new contemporary queer writings and has opened up new possibilities to discuss queer sexuality in the Indian scenario (653). While explaining the vast expanse of queer presence throughout the ancient Indian history, Vanita & Kidwai have come up with several tropes to explain same-sex love. One such trope is sex change, where Hindu deities were multidimensional and fluid in their form, with their remarkable feature being "multiplicity and variability" (*Same Sex Love in India* 56). The deities might appear in any form- male, female, neutral or even non-human form. This guides us in tracing the presence of transgender in Indian history, dating back to *Ramayana* and

Mahabharata and other Vedic scriptures. Vanita and Kidwai used the famous example of Sikhandin to quote the presence of transgender in *Mahabharata*. “The story of Sikhandin is perhaps the best-known case of sex change in any ancient Indian text. Sikhandin later became a term to refer to eunuchs and men of doubtful sexuality” (*Same Sex Love in India* 36).

In India, the legal recognition of the rights of the transgender people has made substantial strides in recent years. The Supreme Court’s ruling in April 2014, which officially recognised the existence of a ‘third gender’ category, was one of the significant developments. The Supreme Court declared that transgender people have equal legal rights despite being neither male nor female. Another big step was taken towards addressing the rights and welfare of the transgender community in India with the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019. The act intends to protect transgender persons from discrimination, give access to social welfare programs, healthcare, and education, as well as open doors for their inclusion in the economy and in society. The societal problems faced by transgender people in India continue despite legal acknowledgment and advancement. In numerous regions of the nation, the transgender community continues to face stigma, prejudice, and violence. Many transgender people still have trouble getting access to jobs, healthcare, and educational opportunities, which further marginalises them in society. The history of transgender people in India is extensive and complex, characterised by both acceptance and prejudice. Although there have been important legal and social developments recently, much effort has to be made to guarantee that transgender people are fully accepted, given equal rights, and included in Indian society. To advance a society where everyone may live with dignity and respect, regardless of gender identity, education, awareness, and efforts to create a more accepting environment are essential.

Oppression is the term used to describe the unfair or brutal use of power or authority, which frequently leads to the systematic abuse, dominance, and exploitation of some people or groups by others. It may manifest itself in a number of ways, such as social, political, economic, or cultural oppression. Oppression is the denial of fundamental rights, opportunities, and freedom to the suppressed individuals or groups. This results in their marginalisation and lack of autonomy or agency. Racism, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic class are just a few examples of the factors that can contribute to oppressive institutions. In Indian culture, throughout history, oppression has been a persistent problem that

has fueled inequality and hindered some demographic segments from reaching their full potential and leading dignified lives. Recognising and opposing oppressive structures, fighting for social justice, and demanding equal rights and opportunities for everyone, regardless of background, are all part of the fight against oppression. Fostering an inclusive and fair society requires an understanding of injustice and its many forms. Discussing oppression, Paulo Friere contends in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that a system of exploitation, violence, and oppression always obstructs the process of confirming identities. According to Freire, the liberation fight can help oppressed people rediscover their humanity, but only if they are the ones leading it (56). Additionally, he discusses how those who oppress others treat them like objects to be owned and see freedom as a threat, which leaves oppressed individuals feeling alienated and alone (57). According to Freire, the struggle for freedom must involve two phases: consideration of the nature of oppression and then effective action to end it. Leaders in this struggle must engage in communication with those who are oppressed rather than taking on the traits of the oppressors (67).

The transgender community of India is taking up literature as a means to raise their voice against all forms and means of oppression. Search for identity, acceptance, inclusion and representation are the central theme of transgender literature. One of the most fitting and frequently opted genres used by transgender to recount their life stories is self-life-writing or 'Autobiography'. The autobiography selected for this study is *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya. The narrative of *I Am Vidya* is one of a journey marked by proclamation and identity claiming. Vidya has experienced all the humiliations that a transgender person is made to endure by a culture that values distinct gender boundaries. The autobiography talks about Vidya's turbulent journey as she was ostracised by her family and she had to resort to begging as a source of income as a social outcast. Vidya also reminisces her feelings when she had the opportunity to openly dress as a woman, and her experiences and fear when she had undergo an agonizing medical treatment and surgery to lose her 'manhood'. She had to experience physical and emotional abuse on several occasions and had to survive within a system full of various forms of oppression until she found the strength and courage to realise who she truly is. Vidya's autobiography is not just a story of an individual's sufferings and difficulties, but it represents the plight of the entire transgender community. It also depicts Vidya's struggle

for accepting her inner female-self, how trans women are segregated from the mainstream society as Vidya perceives in her life-story, how they are denied of any rights, respect and acceptance, lack of safe space for the trans children in educational institute which results in high school drop-out rate, depression and addiction to drugs, etc. It focuses on Vidya's journey to be set as an example for posterity, to show vast number of hardships she has to experience, right from being confused about her anatomical configuration to her tyrannical father, being bullied and harassed in an all-boys school, to choose between sex work and begging as a means of survival, and even when she was being physically harassed and beaten up, nobody helped her.

Since ancient times, the transgender minority in India has experienced severe discrimination and persecution, which are firmly ingrained in societal norms, cultural attitudes, and historical marginalisation. Transgender people continue to face numerous forms of oppression in the nation despite legal improvements and rising awareness. In India, prejudice and social exclusion against transgender people from families, communities, and society at large are commonplace. They are often subjected to ridicule, derogatory slurs, and mockery, leading to a sense of shame and isolation. Vidya recalls being subjected to all forms of taunts and ridicule, "My effeminate ways- hitherto an object of ridicule on my street- now became the target of my schoolmates' taunts. Even kids from lower class teased me at school: 'Look at this lady,' they shouted after me" (24). This social stigma makes it challenging for transgender people to live openly and authentically. Hate crimes against transgender individuals are prevalent in India. They are subjected to physical and sexual violence, often with little to no recourse for justice. Violence against transgender persons continues to be pervasive in part due to a lack of legal protection and societal indifference. Access to education and employment possibilities for transgender people is hampered by prejudice and discrimination. Due to bullying and harassment, transgenders are often excluded from educational institutions or they decide to drop out. Their chances of finding steady and reputable job are further diminished by their lack of appropriate school credentials. Vidya talks about how harassment at school affected her studies greatly, "It became quite common for boys to trouble me. I was still a bright student, but I was lonely through high school. My studies began to suffer" (24). In India, transgender people frequently face barriers when trying to get healthcare treatments. Many medical providers lack

the necessary training to meet the unique medical requirements of transgender people, which results in subpar or improper medical care.

Transgender people frequently struggle financially because there are few chances for them to pursue education and jobs. Vidya recalls how most of the people advised her not to “ruin her life by undergoing sex change” (61) and how “with her education, she could get a job elsewhere...” (61). Another set of advice that she received was to understand “the importance of her education and being wary of social disapproval” (63). Many are compelled to beg or perform sex labour in order to make a livelihood, which exposes them to additional exploitation and vulnerability. For transgender people, the absence of support systems within their families and communities can have negative emotional and mental effects. Vidya had similar concerns regarding the reaction and level of acceptance from her family as well. Thinking of her father and her family, she often wondered, “How could I tell him I was not Saravanan, but a girl? How would my loving Chithi, my elder sisters whom I loved more than my life, my younger sister who it seems had been born to shower me with her love, how would they bear the shock of my disclosure?” (55). This lack of acceptance frequently results in some problems of mental health creating a dangerous cycle of vulnerability and marginalisation. When it comes to obtaining identity documents that appropriately reflect their gender identity, transgender people face institutional barriers. This can make it challenging to access government services and benefits.

Transgender people in India experience numerous forms of social oppression, including violence, isolation, and discrimination as a result of deeply rooted cultural attitudes, traditional beliefs, and societal conventions. People who identify as transgender frequently experience social stigma and are viewed as ‘outsiders’ in their own communities. They frequently experience rejection, mockery, and offensive slurs and insults. This stigma can cause people to feel alone and unaccepted by their families and society. Due to societal pressure and a lack of understanding, family of transgender people frequently reject and forsake them. Family support is essential for mental health and emotional stability, and transgender people suffer mostly when it is lacking. Vidya talks about her family’s reaction upon knowing her present state and how she couldn’t even openly cry at their lack of understanding and acceptance. Her father refused to talk to her and her sister Radha couldn’t stop her hysterical tears, “ Why are you crying? Aren’t we

the people who must weep? What did you lack? Why have you done this to us?" , wailed Vidya's sister (78).

The transgender population in India experiences severe economic oppression, which is manifested by a lack of educational opportunity, hostility at the workplace, and social exclusion. These elements frequently cause financial instability and a lack of job prospects for transgender people. The job sector frequently discriminates against transgender people. Due to prejudices and misconceptions, employers might be hesitant to hire them, which would limit their chances for employment. Even while employed, they could experience workplace harassment and get lower compensation than their cisgender coworkers. The development of skills and occupational training are frequently necessary for economic empowerment. Transgender people, however, might not have equitable access to these programmes due to prejudice and lack of support from the organizations that offer such training. Transgender people are frequently forced into stigmatised professions like begging or sex work by economic marginalization. Vidya reminisces how she was aware of the fact that if she wanted to live as woman, the way her heart desired, she would eventually have to resort to begging and sex work, " The only way I could live the life of a woman was by begging or becoming a sex worker. Neither my linguistics nor theatre experience could help me here" (66). These jobs frequently put them in danger and subject them to abuse and violence. A multifaceted strategy is needed to address economic oppression, including legal safeguards against discrimination, opportunities for education and employment, campaigns to promote transgender inclusion and rights, and the development of supportive environments for entrepreneurship and skill-building. Targeted social welfare programs and efforts can also be quite effective in increasing the economic independence of transgender people and their general well-being.

In India, transgender people frequently endure severe trauma over the course of their life as a result of various forms of prejudice, assault, and social marginalization. The transgender population has historically been marginalised by deeply ingrained societal conventions, cultural views, and attitudes toward gender identity. Family rejection, emotional abuse, and abandonment are possible consequences of coming out as transgender. The rejection of their gender identification by their families causes considerable trauma and emotional misery for many transgender people. In schools, colleges, and public places, transgender people are susceptible to

bullying and harassment, especially transgender youth. This may result in psychological anguish, low self-esteem, and loneliness. Individuals who identify as transgender may experience internalised shame, anxiety, and depression as a result of social discrimination and stigma. The persistent desire to conceal one's true identity can be emotionally distressing. Lack of social support systems and local resources can intensify feelings of isolation and alienation, which can lead to emotional distress. Creating a more open and welcoming society is essential to addressing the trauma endured by transgender people in India. This entails putting anti-discrimination legislation into effect and upholding them, raising knowledge of transgender rights and challenges, facilitating access to mental health care, and establishing safe spaces where transgender people can find acceptance and social support. Working to eliminate the deeply ingrained stereotypes and discriminatory behaviors that feed trauma within the transgender community is also essential.

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