

Chapter IV

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Transgender Culture and Heritage Across Nations

The word 'transgender' has been in use only for the past couple of decades and its terminologies are still not understood by many. It is derived from the root word 'trans' which means 'on or the other side of' or 'beyond'. Transgenders are people who cross over society's constructed cultural boundaries of gender and sexuality. The sex assigned at birth is incongruent to their gender identity or gender expression. They are treated as an outcast for they cannot be contained under the binary gender ideologies. The transgender community is viewed as a minority group, by definition; they are less common than cisgenders and often experience prejudice, subjugation, and discrimination. Society is constructed in a way that favors the majority either deliberately or unintentionally thus ignoring the detrimental stereotypes and mischaracterizations faced by the less common people.

Transgender people were shown in a negative light for a long time. For a certain period of time stories, movies, and media portrayed them as greedy, lustful, and uncivilized people. Common people were misled by those depictions and treated them with disgust and hate. Many were thrown out of their homes because people believed that having a transgender in the family is a curse. But there were times when trans people were treated with dignity and respect. They held prime positions at the courts of kings and lords. The terms like 'gender fluid', 'third gender', 'gender non-confirmed' and 'transgender' came into usage as a result of various debates and discussions during the 1950s about how to categorize people who cannot be included in the binary system but that does not mean trans people were not present before the

time. Far from being a new phenomenon, transgender and non- binary people have existed among cultures across the globe.

Around 5000 to 3000 B.C., in Sumeria, the people worshiped an ancient Mesopotamian goddess named Inanna who was associated with love, beauty, sex, justice, and war. Inanna's temple had trans priests called 'gala' who took feminine names and spoke their own dialects. The art around the Mediterranean regions which dates back to 3700 BC depicts transvestite or cross gendered people. In the eighteenth century, the Itelmens of Siberia, had recorded about 'Koekchuch', a community of people who were assigned male at birth but expressed themselves as women. In Turtle Island (an indigenous name for North America), the common people used the term 'two- spirited' to describe transgenders. Likewise similar representations of trans people can be seen in the great ancient civilizations like Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. They had a rich cultural heritage and practiced community living. The knowledge about the transgender culture, rituals, ideologies, and way of living are only slightly known to the cisgender community.

In earlier times of Europe, Asia, Northern Africa, and the Middle East had the practice of worshiping 'the Great Mother', an intersex deity. The evidences are found in ancient artifacts excavated from the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Assyria. Neolithic and Bronze age drawings that dates back to 7000- 1700 BC were found depicting human figures having breast and male genitals. In Philippines gender incongruent people groups were called as 'third sex'. The Europeans addressed them as 'berdache'. As they had characteristics of both the genders, they held a special status in those days. Apart from all these evidences, the four Vedas state the existence of transgender people. *Manusmriti*, one of the earliest written texts about the constitutions of society details on the biological origin of three sexes. The most

primitive Tamil grammar book *Tolkappiyam* written by Tolkappiyar around first century BCE refers to trans people as the third gender.

Monical F. Helms an American transgender activist, author, and veteran of the United States Navy designed the 'transgender pride flag' in the year 1999 and it was first flown during the pride march in Arizona, US in the year 2000. It denotes the unity in diversity of the gender spectrum. The flag consists of five horizontal stripes; two light pink and two light blue with a white stripe in the center. The light blue for boys and the pink for girls and the white in the middle for those who are transitioning or for those who feel they have no gender. The pattern, irrespective of the way of hoisting always means the same suggesting that trans people are trying to find correctness in their lives. The other symbols that are usually associated with trans people include a pink and blue butterfly (symbolizing metamorphosis) and yin and yang symbol. Yin and yang is the concept of duality forming a whole. It shows how apparently opposite forces are complementary and inter dependent and how they give rise to each other. Another popular symbol that depicts transgender people is a modified element of both female and male symbols. It is illustrated with a circle with an arrow on the top-right for the male and a cross projected from the bottom as per the female with an additional arrow combining the female cross and male arrow from the top left.

Culture can be defined as the identity of a group of people living in a specific place or as a community. It reflects how the community reacts, responds, and grows in society. This chapter analyses the cultural aspects such as traditions, beliefs, and rituals of trans people among various nationalities. The culture of transgender community varies from place to place and nation to nation. The rules they follow, the terminologies they use to address themselves, and their conventions are not the same. As transgender people exist in every part of the globe their culture is vivid and

diverse. One cannot comprehend or amalgamate that entirety in one concept or theory. The prime focus of this chapter is to explore the uniqueness along with the historical antecedents of transgender culture. The Indian memoirs *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, and *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya would be analyzed with Yulia Yu. Sakurazawa's *Transgendered People of India: Forsaken Tributaries*, Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More* which explores the Hawaiian culture is reviewed through Niko Besnier's *Polynesian Gender Liminality Through Time and Space*, and the American Female to Male trans memoirs *Both Sides Now: One Man's Journey Through Womanhood* by Dhillon Khosla and *Once a Girl, Always a Boy: A Family Memoir of a Transgender Journey* by Jo Ivester is validated through *FTM: Female- to- Male Transsexuals in Society* by Aaron Devor.

Transgendered People of India: Forsaken Tributaries by Yulia Yu. Sakurazawa illuminates the life and sufferings of hijras in India. She loved India and it was during one of those visits she happened to meet the hijras at Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Sakurazawa had heard about a clan, who are male bodied but wears female clothing, accessories and heavy make-up. She was once told that these people kidnap young boys and castrate them forcibly to join their groups and send them for begging in the streets which she later found out were false accusations. She had a brief moment of interaction with the hijras one night and felt empathetic towards them. She returned to Japan and did an extensive study on hijras and their culture. The book *Transgendered People of India: Forsaken Tributaries* gives a detailed account on the transgender community of India. Sakurazawa interviewed many trans people and gathered information as much as possible. The transgenders are generally a little discreet about their rituals, customs, and their life style. Her book has covered the nuances of Indian transgender

livelihood, terminologies, love life, and traditions. The language peculiar to hijras of India is also highlighted in this chapter. It is a segment that talks about the relevance of transgender culture within the history of India as their roles highlight many Indian cultural themes. Their activities that appear absurd become meaningful when it is studied in the Indian context.

This chapter vindicates their existence by shattering the myth of the universality of western binary views. The dependence on mainstream society and their traditional roles as ascetics, bestowing fertility, and benevolence on bride grooms and new born babies are examined citing various myths in the India culture. These life accounts, written from varying existential grounds, reflect the unique heritage of the community. These texts share a common thread highlighting the cultural and historical contribution of these gender fluid individuals. By exploring texts in this way, it is expected to achieve a greater understanding of how traditions and cultural circumstances perform together to make an ambience in which certain value systems and sets of beliefs are questioned or reinforced. Attempts are made to look at the directions in which significations, identities, and stereotypes, both individual and collective are created within the community of hijras. The cultural framework of the transgender community in India is structured in such a manner that it helps them to assert their 'self' in hostile circumstances. The heritage which the hijras carried with them, along with the cultural tools they have forged in South Asian countries enables them to resist marginalization to a great extent.

The social structures of hijras are entirely different from that of the mainstream society. They generally prefer to live together as a community. An Indian hijra house is called a 'parivar', which literally means 'home' and in each parivar there would be an elder hijra who acts as a matriarch. In *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*,

Revathi gives a detailed account about the parivars and their functioning. It is mandatory for a young hijra to wish ‘paampaduthi’ (greetings) to her elders whenever she encounters them to which they bless ‘jiyo jiyo beta’ or ‘jeete raho’ (long live my child) in return. Basically in Indian culture there are specific terms to address the kith and kin and the hijra community is no exception to that. They are not allowed to call the elders by their names and that is something intolerable in that community. Revathi beautifully elaborates the kin terms in her book:

Badudaadi – great-grandmother’s guru

Daadaguru – grandmother’s guru (great-grandmother)

Nanaguru – guru’s guru (grandmother)

Guru – mother

Kaalaguru – guru’s sister

Gurubai – (my) sister

Badagurubai – elder sister

Chotagurubai – younger sister

Chela – daughter

Naathi-chela – granddaughter

Chandichela – great-granddaughter

Sadak-naathi – great-granddaughter’s daughter (64)

Every young hijra is supposed to learn these terms and follow the rules while living in the parivar. Though they have an occasional word to describe a male companion as ‘panthi’ who is a husband, they do not have words referring to male members as there

is no role for men inside the parivar. The terms might slightly differ according to the city and state the parivar is located but the relationships are all the same. There are also some more rules that have a bearing on the hijra culture, like the free end of a hijra's saree should not touch others else it's considered inauspicious. Hijras have specific guidelines even for serving water to visitors. They are not supposed to hold the glass at the middle with one hand or at the brim instead she should fold her palms in a way of saying 'namaste' (the traditional Indian way of greeting a person) and balance the glass on top of it.

Language encapsulates meaning. It is a symbol upon which people thrust their understanding. Words are redefined to have different meanings according to the need of the user. Some languages are created by groups to allow themselves to talk openly in the midst of strangers. Such of these languages permit group conversation that may not be perceived by others easily, thereby giving a sense of secrecy. Usage of special language can lead to significant influence and control in the group. The words that have become symbols of inner group deem any new entrant into the order, to learn them to gain oneness with the group. The transgender individuals who live in both cities and villages will be acquainted with this language. Sakurazawa points out that hijras have invented lexicons to supply secret information or to alert danger publicly to their kin. The language spoken by trans community is not a mere collection of secret code words. It has a unique vocabulary and its own syntax. The hijras claim that the language had been created for the purpose of self-preservation during British Raj, as a survival mechanism, because during the earlier regimes, they were considered as criminals by law. They used this technique as a survival tool in the society which was hostile to them.

Family is the basic yet powerful unit in the society. Young transgender individuals who were abandoned by their own families join the hijra houses. A person becomes a member of the family on the basis of kinship and not by blood, religious proximity, or caste. This relationship overcomes all the other bindings from their earlier life and they live together under one roof without any judgements. The matriarch or guruma is the most powerful person in the hijra parivar. A guruma is also called as ‘malik’, ‘malkin’, ‘murubbi’, and ‘mukh- hijra’ in some places. She possesses a great deal of knowledge and courage to lead the parivar. It is her responsibility to look after all her daughters, maintain the internal administration, and protect them from goons and sometimes from the police. Revathi called her guruma as ‘nani’ and spoke about her with utmost reverence.

Everyone feared, respected, and were worshipful of my old nani. When she was not at home, the atmosphere lightened and everyone relaxed, became affectionate, danced, watched television. But when they heard nani coming in, they immediately became quiet. Not that nani was cruel or anything. She too watched television, asked us to sing and dance. It was really like living with older people in one’s family—we respect them, don’t we? Among the hijras too, it was like that. (Revathi 61)

A guruma is expected to be loving like a mother and authoritative like a father. The financial status of the parivar depends highly on the matriarch so they quickly train their young hijras to ask for alms in the markets, streets, and bus stations. Those who are graceful with their bodies are sent to temple festivals to perform dance and other entertainments. Hijras generally clap their hands in a unique way while asking for money. These clapping are performed by holding their hands in a ninety degree angle. The hijras should give a certain share of money from their daily income to

guruma. When the matriarch dies, her jurisdiction is mutually passed on to the leader chela that the previous guruma entrusted. If she failed to mention her successor, the next leader will be chosen by an election within the parivar. The authority of the leader within the hijra parivar is an inevitable part of their culture. The parivar systems are of two types; Mumbai based and Hyderabad based. Seven different houses come under Mumbai parivar namely Pune parivar, Laalan parivar, Chakla parivar, Poolak parivar, Bhendi bazar parivar, Lashkar parivar, and Dongi parivar. Most of the South Indian hijras comes under Hyderabad parivar. It is mandatory for a hijra to be included in any one of these houses which is ruled by a guruma. The gurumas are very conscious of self- dignity. A guruma would not meet another guruma unless there is a ceremony, an emergency, or she was invited personally.

The hijras usually try and live harmoniously within her parivar. However, where human beings exist, frictions are sometimes inevitable. In cases of extreme conflict, when a hijra desires to change her guru, she may be taken by another on the basis of whether the prospective guru appraises her to be a good worker or not. In such cases, the new guru pays a sum that is double the amount of what the hijra paid to the original guru at the time of initiation. It is a debt that holds against the chela; she is supposed to return the amount to the guru has invested in her once she has started earning enough for her.

When Revathi (then Doraisamy) was fifteen years old, she happened to hear about a goddess festival celebrated at Dindigul, a place in Tamil Nadu. She also learnt that many hijras from Mumbai and Delhi who had undergone sex reassignment surgery would attend that festival. So Revathi and her friends decided to go to Dindigul without the knowledge of her parents. There for the first time she met people from her community fearlessly wearing female clothes, doing chores usually done by

women in her household and addressing each other by feminine names and female pronouns. Revathi stayed there for two days but felt like she found the place where she belonged, and not ridiculed or thrashed for being effeminate. She requested an elder hijra from her neighboring village to take her as a 'chela' (disciple or daughter) in front of the 'jamaat' that would gather the next day.

The word jamaat is derived from Arabic which means 'group'. Sakurazawa in her book *Transgendered People of India: Forsaken Tributaries* gives a detailed account the functioning of jamaat. In hijra culture jamaat is the group comprising of powerful elder hijras of seven households. The initiation or 'chela ceremony' is performed before the jamaat. During the ceremony the aspiring chela is made to sit on the floor before the elders and other hijras of the parivar. The guru claims her as her own by offering a small amount into a plate containing betel leaves. After the chela confirms to be the daughter of that particular guru, the 'reeth' (re-christening) is held. The chela is given a new feminine name by shedding his old forename, surname, and 'gotra' or the lineage. Afterwards the hijra leaders explain the rules and customs she should follow hereafter. The hijra community is one of the oldest secular subdivisions of India. Hijras of different caste, community, race, religion, and financial backgrounds live amicably under one roof. So after the reeth ceremony, a hijra sheds all her former status and accepts to begin life anew. The relationship between a hijra and her guru is like mother- daughter connection.

They were supposed to support each other and live in harmony. But sometimes frictions and feuds are inevitable among human species so in that case a hijra can take another guru and move to a new parivar. In such times the new guru is supposed to pay double the amount of money as offering to the jamaat and should also settle any debts her chela had in her old house. Sakurazawa points out that living in an organized

group or parivar is like a haven for hijras. They were protected from the cruelties of the outside world to an extent. The members of parivar are responsible to take care of hijras in their old age as they cannot go out earn. Most of the hijras are abandoned by their family members so if a member of their house passes away the other hijras bury the deceased by performing all the final rites.

According to the religion of the deceased hijra, the final rites are performed. In the case of a Muslim, she is taken to a specific burial ground to bury her. If she was a Hindu, she will be taken to a burning ghat. If the deceased happened to be a Hindu guruma, then the senior most chela is allowed to singe the mouth of the dead before cremation. Then she has to perform certain rituals for thirty days and in some places, it is thirty- nine days. The hijras of other houses also perform rites for the dead guruma. On the last day of the 'shradh ceremony', a sacramental procedure for the soul to attain peace will take place. People from the neighbourhood are also invited over to the shradh ceremony. In some places of West Bengal and Kolkata, the final rites are more discreetly done. In the dead of the night, the funeral procession is taken out silently. The hijras walk surrounding the body of the deceased. In the case of a Hindu, she is placed on the pyre naked. If she was a Muslim, the body would be bathed at midnight. Hijras choose that particular time of the night so that the sex organ of the deceased may not be unveiled before others. In some districts of Punjab, a dead hijra is taken out through the roof of the house by removing it. It is believed that the soul of the deceased permeates in the infinite if it comes out of the room through the roof and there is no possibility of rebirth as a hijra again. The corpse is beaten with a stick upon a belief that the humiliation of being in the wrong body should not continue in the afterlife. Consequently, she will have a beautiful and joyous life in rebirth.

In Indian society where a formal burial is seen as paramount irrespective of race and religion, being a part of a *jamat* ensures that a departed hijra is given a decent burial. Contrary to the common (somewhat distasteful) myth that the corpse of the departed hijra is thrashed with slippers prior to cremation, she is given a decent burial depending on the religion she is born into. Therefore a Hindu hijra is cremated, while a Muslim hijra is buried. When the funeral procession is taken out into the streets, all the hijras dress in male clothes: a strategy devised to prevent the general public from getting to know that the deceased is a hijra. This is probably the only time in their lives that hijras divest themselves of preferred feminine garments and, instead, don male clothes. (Sakurazawa, ch.5)

Revathi lived at her nani's house at Mumbai during her initial days as a hijra. For six months she lived there looking after her nani and doing household chores. Sometimes she went to the shops with her sisters to collect alms. One day the nani called Revathi and asked her to get prepared for the nirvana. She was elated on hearing that news. It was her dream to undergo the emasculation and to lead the life as a complete woman. Her nani called her again and enquired whether she wanted a 'thayamma castration' or an operation performed by a doctor. A thayamma castration is performed by an elder hijra of the clan without any anesthesia or medical procedures. Revathi was aware that hijras who had undergone the thayamma operation enjoyed a special privilege in the community but deep inside she was frightened of that procedure. Finally her nani decided to send her for an operation at a hospital. "You might not be able to bear a *thayamma* operation, so it is best you get it done by a doctor,' said nani" (Revathi 66).

There are a lot of myths and misconceptions about a thayamma operation, like it is performed in a deserted cemetery on a new moon night and it involves sorcery. Another myth is that hijras perform animal sacrifices before the rituals. But none of those are true. No spectators from outside were allowed to witness the hijra rituals. So most of it remained as surreptitious which provoked the commoners to assume things that do not exist. Sakurazawa stayed with hijra community to learn their culture. She did an extensive case study to segregate truth from the lies. In *Transgendered People of India: Forsaken Tributaries* Sakurazawa broke all the superstitious beliefs on thayamma operation and brought out the fact behind that ritual.

The term 'nirvana' in Buddhism and Hinduism actually means 'to attain the state of enlightenment' or serene transcendental state unleashed from all the worldly and sexual desires. For hijras through castration they reach the pinnacle of completeness. According to the hijra rules not everyone can easily qualify for castration. They believe that, Bahuchara Mata the hijra deity should bestow them with supernatural strength and will power to endure the pain. The preparatory period starts a month before the thayamma operation. The person should eat only 'saatvik' (pure and light) foods like fruits, vegetables, milk, rice, and pulses which are supposed to keep the mind and body in a calm and tranquil state. Spicy foods and stimulants like tea, coffee, and alcohol are prohibited. On the day of emasculation, the initiate hijra or called the nirvan is woken up at the crack of dawn. The elder hijra (dai ma or thayamma) offers prayer to Bahuchara Mata and sharpens her knife. All the other hijras of the parivar surrounds them and chants the name of the deity in unison.

The initiate hijra must feel relaxed and ready for the ritual and only then the thayamma would start the ceremony. To test the willingness and strength, the initiate hijra would be shown an image of Bahuchara Mata and is requested to gauge her

expression. If the nirvan interprets Mata as smiling then thayamma would go on with the ritual if it was interpreted as angry or sad then the ritual will be postponed.

Sometimes the nirvan was given a coconut to break and if he broke it into equal two halves then he is considered to be ready. It is important for the thayamma to make sure that the nirvan is mentally and physically equipped for what follows after that.

Suppose the *nirvan* is ready, he is made to sit on a stool by the *dai ma*. The assistant collects his hair, inserts it in between the *nirvan*'s teeth and asks him to bite hard on it. The penis and scrota are tied with a string to enable a clean cut. The *nirvan* is subsequently asked to focus on a picture of Bahuchara Mata and chant her name repeatedly. Once the *nirvan* goes into a hypnotic trance, the *dai ma* brings the readied sharp knife down and cuts off the *nirvan*'s male genitals. A stick is inserted into the urethra to keep it open. (Sakurazawa, ch.8)

The blood is allowed to gush, for they believe it drains the masculinity out of the body. For the next few hours it is like a life and death situation of the nirvan. This is defined as a tussle between Bahuchara Mata, the personification of life and her elder sister goddess Chamundeshwari, the one signifying death. If the nirvan survives, she would be kept isolated from the others and had to follow strict diet and rest. On the third day, nirvan would be bathed by applying turmeric and saffron and likewise on the twelfth, twentieth, and thirtieth day.

On the fortieth day of emasculation, a grand 'haldi- mehendi' ceremony is conducted. The hijra would be dressed in green or red saree, adorned with jewelry, palms decked with intricate designs of henna and veiled with a cloth or shawl.

The nirvan would be given a pot of milk to be carried on top of her head to be offered at the temple of Mata. With chants and prayers the milk was poured three times into a

pond near the temple. The guru unveils the hijra and asks them to take a bite from the food heaped there. It is believed that if the hijra chooses sweets or fruits their future would be pleasant. With that the haldi- mehendi ceremony winds up. The hijra from that day onwards can proclaim herself as a complete woman.

The deity Bahuchara Mata otherwise referred as Bothiraja Mata, holds a supreme position in hijra culture. No ceremony is complete without a ritual to Mata. All Indian hijras irrespective of religion believes in and is devoted to this deity. There are various stories about Mata and her powers. Sakurazawa during her research about the Indian transgender culture traveled to various states in the country and learnt the truth behind transgender goddesses and gods.

Even though some hijras worship Lord Shiva in his Ardhanarishwara or Shiv-shakti (half man, half woman form), the most prominent deity among them is the celibate Gujarati Goddess Bahuchara Mata, who is the daughter of a man called Bapan Dan Dehta who is supposed to belong to Charan; a caste considered divine in parts of Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. The Mata is depicted as a sari-clad, multi-armed woman sitting on a rooster. She holds a sword in one hand, a mace in another and a trishul (trident) in the third one. At times, her mode of conveyance is depicted as a Kurkut, a serpent which has two mouths. (Sakurazawa, ch.3)

A tale about Bahuchara Mata, is significant in hijra rituals and traditions. It was believed that once Mata was travelling with her sisters through the forest and they were stopped by a robber named Babiya. He tried to abuse them and in order to save their chastity all the women chop off their breasts and committed suicide. Babiya was cursed and became impotent. It was only after he agreed to dress in female

clothing, go into the forest and live the rest of his life as a woman the curse was lifted. As a penance Babiya worshiped Mata for the rest of his life. Mata cutting of her breasts signifies the self-mutilation her devotees undergo during transition.

Transgenders are incredibly a part of Indian society like every other male and female, but they are marginalized from the public space thereby throwing them out of focus. Not only are they excluded from the mainstream arena but also humiliated and agonized for existing in the world. But what people tend to ignore is that the origin and history of hijras are closely associated with *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the two great epics of Indian culture. The evidences for the transgender existence in India can be traced since the period of Vedas and epics. In ancient times, they were privileged with influential positions in society and were considered as people with special powers. But as days passed, their positions altered with the pervasive invasion of binary gender ideologies. Young Revathi while living with her nani, at Bombay always wondered why some people approach the hijras to be blessed by them. Sometimes they were invited for weddings to bless the groom and young mothers brought their new born babies to them. There was a flower vendor at the market where Revathi went for alms. The old vendor woman insisted Revathi be her first customer and bless her for which she obliged. This went on for days for that old woman believed that if she began her day blessed by a hijra then her business would flourish. As Revathi could not hold back the curiosity, enquired her nani why some people at the market treat them like some demi- gods. Nani then narrated the well-known, yet ignored past of hijras from one of the most celebrated and worshiped epic, *Ramayana*:

Well, when Ramar went off on exile for fourteen years, his subjects, both men and women, came to see him off to the forest. They walked with him to the

forest's edge and would have accompanied him further inside, when he told them, "All of you, men, women and children, go back to your houses. I'll complete my fourteen years of exile and return to rule over you." So, everyone left, men, women and children, but a group of people stayed back and there they remained at the forest rim for fourteen years until Ramar came back. Astonished, he asked them, "Who are you? Why haven't you gone back to your homes in the city?" They replied, "Swamy! We belong neither to mankind, nor to womankind. You said then that men, women and children ought to return to the city. But you did not ask us to go. Bound by your wishes, we remained here." Rama was so astounded and moved by their sincerity that he granted them a boon. "Whatever you speak will be true. Your words will come true." (Revathi 44- 45)

Revathi was overwhelmed with pride after she learned the story. But on the other hand she felt pathetic for herself and her community for being ostracized and treated as an outcast. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by Revathi and *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya are significant trans narratives that gave stance to the cultural context of Indian trans community. The strenuous effort of both the authors to make the world understand their existence and heritage is noteworthy.

Sakurazawa talks about Jogappas also known as Jogtin, a small transgender subculture in North Karnataka, South Maharashtra, West Telengana, and Andhra Pradesh. They identify themselves as people who have been touched or possessed by goddess Yellamma. They become associated with their goddess through a ritual of dedication; a ceremony in which they tie 'muthu' (a string of red and white beads)

around their neck. The muthu signifies the unbreakable bond between them and Yellamma. The life of Jogappas is closely connected to their goddess and her temple.

The idol of the female Goddess they were carrying was that of Goddess Yellamma's (also known as Renuka). The jogappas were, in fact, supposed to be the devotees of Goddess Yellamma; they dedicated their lives to her worship due to innumerable problems in life such as penury, ill-health and so on. (Sakurazawa, ch.2)

Temple festivals and celebrations are interwoven with Indian traditions and culture. There would always be a historical event or myth that enriches the ritual. One such carnival for the Indian transgender people is the Koovagam temple festival otherwise called Koothandavar festival. Koovagam is a small village in Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu. It is an eighteen days long festival in the month of April or May that ends on 'Chithrapournami' (full moon day that fall in the Tamil month Chithirai). Transgender people from all over the country gather at Koovagam in remembrance of their deity Aravan. The Aravan temple is positioned in an open field in the middle of the village. On the day of the festival the idol of Aravan is taken out on a chariot for the hijras to worship. The small town of Koovagam turns to be a celebration field on those days. Aravan festival has its roots from the classic kurukshetra war. For hijras, it is a carnival of love, life, sacrifice, and death. Vidya in her book *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* and Revathi in *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* wrote about their community's heritage with instances from Mahabharata.

Pandavas, the protagonist subdivision of the epic *Mahabharata* declared a war against their malevolent cousins, the Kauravas. A few days prior to the battle, the Pandava brothers prayed to Kali, the goddess of death and time to bless them. When

she appeared they asked for the boon of victory which she agreed to but demanded a human sacrifice in return. The sacrificial person should be unblemished and of royal blood. Prince Aravan, the son of Arjuna and the Naga princess Ulupi, agreed to serve the purpose. But he proposed a condition, that he should get married first. No women agreed to marry prince Aravan to become a widow the very next day. Finally lord Krishna found a way and took the female form of Mohini, married Aravan, and consummated their marriage that night. The next day Aravan was sacrificed and Mohini wept for him. Transgender people of Tamil Nadu associate themselves with the female form of lord Krishna, so they call themselves 'Aravanis', wives of prince Aravan.

On the seventeenth day of kovagam festival, Aravanis go to the temple in their finest clothes, adorned with precious jewelries and flowers on their hair carrying lighted lamps, garlands, and fruits in their hands. The priests who stand before the idol of Aravan tie the sacred marital thread and apply vermilion on the parting of their hair. With this ritual aravanis are considered to be married to Aravan. For one day they pretend to be a newly wedded bride so they sing and dance to their heart's content, knowing that the next day their deity husband would be sacrificed and thus they would be widows. Sakurazawa in her book *Transgendered People of India: Forsaken Tributaries* penned what happens after the so called wedding on the seventeenth day. Her findings disclose the harsh realities of a hijra's life.

In the seductive darkness of the night, the consummation of the marriage takes place. The aravanis spend it in the fields or coconut groves behind the temple, where they have sex with a number of men each of whom is seen as a flesh and blood representative of the mythological Prince Aravan. After a night of unapologetic debauchery and bacchanalia (consumption of an excessive amount of alcohol), the transgender women wake up the next morning to the

symbolic death of Lord Aravan the head of whose idol/effigy is cut off. What follows is a loud pretentious display of grief by his 'bereaved widows'. In the manner of widows of yore and in some remote parts of contemporary India, the bereaved ostentatiously break their bangles, violently wrench off their *mangalasutras*, rub the vermilion of their foreheads and forcefully beat their breasts in lament to mourn the death of their so-called husband. (Sakurazawa, ch.1)

Each year thousands of transgender people especially trans women gather at Kovagam to take part in this festival. They take this occasion as an opportunity to be with their community, wholly accepted without any judgments. All trans women dreams of getting married and having a family of her own but only a few of them are fortunate to get that happiness. So on the final day at Kovagam, they wail their heart out, drain their sorrows and pray to be born as either a man or woman in their next birth.

Indian transgender people, especially in the Southern part were addressed as 'ali' for a long time. The print and visual media used this term till 1997. The term ali does not have any significance with transgender culture or history therefore many people from the community found it derogatory. Many movies projected trans women as a symbol of fun and mockery. In 1997 Koovagam beauty pageant, P. Ravi I.P.S was invited as a chief guest. He expressed his view that since trans woman of Tamil Nadu consider Lord Aravan as their husband and marry him in every Koovagam festival, they can be called 'Aravani' which means 'wife of Aravan'. Thereafter the name became popular and was appreciated by trans women. Writers started using the term 'Aravani' instead of 'Ali' in news articles, poems, novels, etc. Aravan is not an idol of one particular community rather he is an icon of sacrifice and valour in various other cultures. Apart from India, Aravan worship is observed in Indonesia too. He is

popularly known as 'Irawan' in Indonesia. Many islands in the Java region perform special rituals and traditions for Irawan. They believe that Irawan was married to Thithisari, the daughter of Lord Krishna. The story of Irawan was performed as plays in the traditional dramatic Javanese version called 'wayang' and the puppet show known as 'wayang kulit'.

People from the mainstream society try to avoid addressing the problems faced by trans community. The so called modern society shuns trans people instead of understanding their existential struggles. Such a conservative perspective of the society necessitates the need to study the unknown aspects of Indian religion, history, and literature on transgenders. Sakurazawa points out the transgender existence as natural by referring *Kamasutra*, which is considered as the fifth Veda in India. It was written by an ancient Indian Philosopher Vatsyayana. It is believed that he wrote this text in fourth century BC. It is a common stereotype that *Kamasutra* is a sex manual that deals with sexuality and eroticism, but this text is a guide to love life, nature of love, art of living, social engaging, finding a partner and so on. It has been translated into many languages across the globe.

Vatsyayana has talked about transgender love life and their emotions in his book. He addressed trans women as 'Kliba'. *Kamasutra* has segregated genders into three: male as 'pums- prakriti', female as 'stri- prakriti', and transgenders as 'tritiya- prakriti'. The segregation was not made based on the socially constructed frame for genders instead it is based on their mind and innermost emotions. Vatsyayana has addressed trans men as 'nabumsakar' and trans women as 'nabumsaki' or 'kliba'. He says that men who identify themselves as women adorn themselves in women's attire and accessories, and they engage in womanly activities. While trans men wear tight dress in a way the cloth tightly binds their breasts, build their body, grow beard, and

mustache. The book also states that transgender people are good at massage therapies, cooking, hair styling and sex work. Many kings kept trans women in their palaces to teach these arts and techniques to the royal women.

The heteronormative society alienates the trans community and refuse to provide the basic rights and liberties they deserve. The core value underlying all transphobia is a rejection of trans identity and a denial to acknowledge and believe that they are real and existed all throughout the history, nations, cultures, and traditions in different names. The only way to prove that the world belongs not only to the cisnormatives but also to those who deviate from those societal norms is by learning and understanding the history and heritage of trans community. People belonging to the third gender category are not seeking benevolence from the others. Their birth right for a dignified life was taken away from them. One of the other vital evidence that proves transgender existence as ancient and natural can be found in the art of sculpting. ‘Shilpa Shastra’ otherwise called the ‘art of sculpting’ is a manual for temple architecture and sculpture making. Researchers have found that there are forty-two types of stones in sculpture. According to the experts of Agama Shastra, (a Vedic manual about the construction of temples) three types of stones are used to make statues in temples; stones that are above the ground, stones which are half- buried, and stones that lies below the ground or under water. Based on these characteristics the stones are further classified into male, female and transgender stones. Priya Babu in her book *Transgenderism In India*, details about the way temple stones are segregated:

- If the stone is even from top to bottom with the same colour and rigidity, it is called as *Purusha Shila* that is male stone. When the chisel hits the stone, it has a booming sound. This stone is used to make male Gods like Lord Shiva, Vishnu etc.

- Some stones have heavy base and inclined at the top. Such stones are categorized as *Sthri* Stone which means female stone. This stone has long resonance and its sound is also very pleasant to hear when it is hit by a chisel. It is used to make statues of Goddess like *Ambal*.
- Transgender stones are called *Nabum sila*. These stones are very firm. It gives sound but its resonance will be less. These stones are made to construct sanctum sanctorum. (71)

The society is under the wrong impression that deviating or changing the sex assigned at birth is unnatural and a sin against God. Nevertheless most of the religions profess love and acceptance of the trans community and never to discriminate them for being different. Christianity accepts transgender people as they are. In the *Bible*, they are referred to as ‘eunuchs’, an umbrella term existed for gender incongruent people during those times and is used almost forty times. In the *Book of Acts*, Philip baptizes a transgender person who served as a finance minister in Ethiopia. Likewise Hegai an important character from the *Book of Esther* was a Eunuch who was placed in charge of King Ahasuerus’s harem. The scriptures clearly states that they are born that way and there is nothing to be ostracized. As a matter of fact, God emphasizes that a prime position will be given to Eunuchs, than the one given to others.

Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD,
speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither
let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree.

For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths, and choose
the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant;

Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56: 3-5)

Jesus Christ extends his compassionate hands to transgender people and promises that He would give them highest place in his church.

The study of culture is an interdisciplinary field that analyses the social, political, and historical dynamics of its foundation. It investigates how cultural practices are related to wider systems of power associated with, or operating through, social phenomenon. Like in India, transgender people in other countries to have rituals, customs, terminologies, and way of living. One such notable culture exists in the Polynesian countries. Polynesia is a sub- region of Oceania, which is made up of almost thousand islands scattered over the central and southern Pacific Ocean. The indigenous inhabitants of that area are called the Polynesians. They have many in common like language, traditional beliefs and cultural practices. Hawaiian Islands, Samoa, New Zealand, and Norfolk islands are some of the famous Polynesian. When people hear the word Hawaii, they envision of coral beaches, palm trees, and translucent oceans but apart from all these resources they have an affluent culture.

Niko Besnier in his essay *Polynesian Gender Liminality Through Time and Space* elucidates about the third gender terminologies, hybridity, and cultural complexities in Polynesian islands. The term 'liminality' is derived from the Latin word 'limen' which means threshold. Positioned between the binary gender ideologies, the reassessment of identity of third gender takes place only at a liminal space. Besnier breaks the stereotypes of gender by voicing out the obscurities experienced by the third gender while they try to lead a normal life. The islands of

French Polynesia have long been a popular destination for queer travelers, but the Polynesian culture also has a fascinating and ancient history with ‘mahu’ – a distinct third gender. The earliest known reference about mahu community was in 1789 by William Bligh, Captain of the *Bounty*, who mentioned in his logbook about a group of cross gendered people in Tahiti. He was certain that those people were men, but they had great marks of effeminacy. Those people were not discriminated but embraced into the mainstream society as caretakers of children and the elderly people.

Diverse gender roles exist in Polynesia with these roles named differently in different places. Though these gender roles are less institutionalized than in Asia and North America they suggest acceptance of sexual and gender diversity that is in contrast to the exclusivist system of binary oppositions of the west. Janet Mock was a Hawaiian born trans woman. In her memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More*, she has illustrated how her society viewed the third gender. Like any other part of the world Hawaiian people were also deep rooted in gender binary beliefs. They addressed men as ‘kane’, women as ‘wahine’ and transgenders as ‘mahu’. They believed that mahu embraced both feminine and masculine traits something that is not common yet cannot be denied of existence. Some trans women choose to call themselves ‘mahuwahine’ for they wanted to claim their identity as women and not just as a transgender. Historical records states that, in Hawaiian culture every individual had a role in the society, from chiefs to caregivers, and mahus also took part in those roles. They were caretakers, healers, dancers, and teachers of ancient traditions. In the past mahus were very much valued and respected.

The Western influence later dismantled their acceptance towards the third gender thus creating segregation between cisgenders and transgenders. Unlike modern Western society, which dives into the psychiatry of the individual and gender identity,

being mahu was considered a culture-bound transsexuality with a distinct and respected history. A mahu was definitely different, but the Polynesians found nothing unusual about them. For example, if a young boy exhibited feminine energy, they would simply be raised alongside the girls. Rather than hunting or going to war, they would sing and dance with women. They were even respected and trusted enough to become servants of the noble class once they grew older.

Niko Besnier in his essay *Polynesian Gender Liminality Through Time and Space* opined that gender liminality was not much alive in Polynesian regions like Hawaii and New Zealand due to the intensive colonization they underwent. During colonization, the British prohibited transvestism and criminalized effeminates. They imposed gender binary principles thus wiping out the native mahu culture from existence. The natives of Hawaii are still fighting to refurbish their long lost culture since the mid twentieth century. Besnier points out that throughout Polynesia the third gender people were particularly concerned about their appearances. They tend to adorn their hair with flowers, perfumes, and wear heavy makeup. They want to be noticed, recognized, and praised for their demeanor.

Besnier wrote about the importance of hula dance in Hawaiian culture. It is a Polynesian dance form accompanied by chants and songs. The dance was originally developed by the native settlers and hula dance portrays the heritage and culture of their region. It is recorded that mahus acted as choreographers and performers for hula dance performances. Mahu performed the roles of goddesses in hula dances that took place in temples which were off-limits even for women. Mahu were also valued as the keepers of cultural traditions, such as performing rituals for rainfall, good yield of crops and the passing down of genealogies. Traditionally parents would ask a mahu to name their children.

Notably, the cultural bond between performance and gender liminality is evident throughout Polynesia, from the most tradition- oriented island or village to the most acculturated areas. In very tradition-oriented societies like Nukulaelae atoll, the gender- liminal person is often the community's most accomplished and innovative composer and choreographer; at the other extreme, in a highly acculturated area like Hawaii, where chanting and *hula*-dancing feature prominently in efforts to reconstitute a Hawaiian heritage, both art forms are in large part controlled by *mahu*. (Besnier 312)

Unfortunately while working as care takers, many Hawaiian *mahu* were sexually harassed by men. Some felt they were easily available for the carnal pleasures of predators. By the 19th century, anti- sodomy law was imposed on the islands of Polynesia. The third gender community was considered sinners and was shunned by the religious authorities. By the mid nineteen sixties, Honolulu City Council even forced trans women to wear badges asserting their 'male' identity.

When Mock was living the life as Charles, she was ridiculed by many of her friends, family and neighbours for not being manly. She was afraid to express her emotions to her parents and other family members. So to escape their taunts and ridicules she pretended to be masculine. Mock dated girls to make others believe that there was nothing wrong with her gender and sexual identity. But one day, Wendi a trans woman from her school called Mock as *mahu*. Mock was taken aback by that salutation. Wendi was her senior at school and like Mock she was declared a male at birth but she acted unapologetically female. Wendi never tried to suppress her femininity amidst the laughs, taunts, and derogatory teases of others. She never tried to retaliate or justify her behavior to others, which made Wendi unique. Mock denied Wendi that she is a boy and not a *mahu*.

I was afraid that Wendi had seen me, but beneath that fear of being visible was a sense of belonging that thrilled me. I recognize now that her stopping to ask, “You *mahu*?” (though I would later learn she didn’t identify as such) was her attempt at finding others like her- a connection I wasn’t ready to make. I gave her a scrunched crumpled expression resembling adamant denial, which made her roll her eyes and prance away. (Mock 102)

Mock was not much aware of the third gender and their culture before her transition. The only *mahu* she had encountered was Kuma Kaua’i, her hula dance instructor. Kaua’i was one of those *mahu* who reclaimed her position in the society through her unwavering footsteps in hula dance. She was actively engaged for the betterment of transgender people in Hawaii and she addressed herself as *mahuwahine*. Mock was unaware of the existence of trans women outside Hawaii. Later she understood that *mahu* is similar to *mahuvahine* in Tahiti, *faafafine* in Samoa and ‘*fakaleiti*’ in Tonga. Historically speaking, before the invasion of Western ideologies Polynesian cultures carved a place for the third gender, understanding and uplifting the diversity, span, and spectrum in human expression. As societal norms evolve, the term now encompasses a broader scope of gender and sexual orientation. These days they are actively involved in arts, medical field, politics, and proudly participate in beauty pageants.

Besnier points out that *fa’afafine* people are recognized as an integral part of traditional Samoan culture. They are born male but embody both male and female traits. Their gendered behavior varies from extravagantly feminine to mundanely masculine. The prefix ‘*faa*’ means in the manner of and the word ‘*fafine*’ means women. It is interrelated with words in other Polynesian languages like ‘*fakaleit*’ in Tonga, ‘*pinapinaaine*’ in Tuvalu, and ‘*whakawaline*’ in Maori. Traditionally they are

trained in women's chores. They are very well accepted in Samoan culture and have sexual relationship with men. Just like anywhere else, some faafafine recall engaging in feminine activities. There is no hesitation or ridicule in Samoan culture when a biologically male child claims to be a woman. Some of these gender liminal people have achieved fame by recreating traditional cultural performances. Though social mobility and economic benefits are derived from performances, the Polynesian gender divergent roles do not seem to be associated with religion.

Transgender people exist in every region, every racial and ethnic background, and from every faith community. They are people whose gender identity is different from the one they were thought to be at birth. The sex of an individual is determined based on the appearance of external genitals. Generally people who were labeled as male at birth turn out identifying themselves as men and those who were born with female genitals identify themselves as women. But some people's gender identity and their innate knowledge of who they are contradict from what was primarily expected when they were born. Such individuals designate themselves as transgender. Initially they would be confused about their sexual and gender identity. What they were told about their gender and what they feel would be totally ambiguous. The names, pronouns, gender norms, and behavioral patterns confuse them. Once the realization hits, it would be impossible for the individual to be contained under the societal binary norms.

Age is not a factor or barrier to realize one's gender identity as trans. Some individuals can trace their awareness back to their earlier memories. Others need more time to comprehend they are normal like any other human being only that they cannot fit into the gender ideologies society expect them to fit in. Some trans individuals try to hide their gender identity fearing the shame, hatred, ridicules, and hatred they have

to face from their family, friends and others. But trying to repress or change one's gender identity is not possible; rather it can affect the person's physical and mental health. As transgender people are coming out these days more visibly in fields like beauty, healthcare, politics, film industries etc. society gets to know about their needs, way of living and culture.

Transgender people are subjected to social stigma and harassments for who they really are. The trans phobic society tends to ignore and invisibilize the fact that trans community are a part and parcel of the world since ages. Like male to female trans women, female to male trans men are also discriminated for their gender identity. Unlike trans women who prefer to have a community living, trans men are scattered and choose to live not disclosing their past. The coming out and transition of trans men are equally difficult like that of trans women. Aaron Devor in his book *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* provides detailed information about trans men and their lives. Being a trans man himself, Devor wrote about who trans men are, how does it feel to be a man trapped in a female body and the ancient myths about female to male transgenders. He points out that, the records and evidences for the existences of female to male transgenders are scarce compared to trans women. Devor reasons that throughout the ages, sexism was prevalent; the dominance of men over women could be seen in every aspect of history. Many women who felt incongruent about their gender were either suppressed or forcefully married to a man. The liberty to express their gender identity was denied. This is one of the major reasons why not many records were available about female to male transgenders.

Sexism must be attributed with the lion's share of responsibility for this silence, but a long tradition of a lack of regard for the social history of everyday life must also be held accountable. The few stories which survive

from antiquity have largely been in the form of myth, some of which may have been embellished from fact. The surviving accounts of females who lived some parts of their lives as men in the centuries between the time of the ancients and now have been recorded largely because those females were somehow publicly chastised for living as men. For each person who was found out, there were no doubt many more whose gender transformations were never discovered. (Devor 32)

In *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* Devor brings out an ancient Greco-Roman myth about female to male transgenders. The ancient Greeks and Roman believed in multiple gods and goddesses. In polytheistic cultures, gender was a fluid concept and not a rigid one. Many pantheons in Greece were made up of different visions of godliness. Societies based on polytheism believed that the world and its beings originated through physical relationships between gods and goddesses, divine personages and humans and between deities. Folklores and myths speak about 'supernatural beings' that had the ability to change their sex from female to male, make their breasts disappear and could change their female genitals into male parts. Though there is no definite records, it is evident that the supernatural beings mentioned in the folklore and myths were definitely female to male transgenders.

In *Both Sides Now: One Man's Journey Through Womanhood*, Dhillon Khosla accounts all the intricate details of his transition. The memoir *Once a Girl, Always a Boy: a Family Memoir Of a Transgender Journey* by Jo Ivester is an optimistic books which proves that love can conquer all flaws. Both Khosla and Jeremy were not a part of any transgender groups or houses like hijra parivars in India or mahu groups in Hawaii. Khosla occasionally met some trans men in clubs and talk shows otherwise there is no record for community living among them.

The discrimination towards the transgender community started a long time ago and is still not eradicated. In every part of the world, the third gender is subjugated and criticized for their gender identity. The world pompously looks up at festivals, customs, and traditions that embody the culture and tradition of cisgenders, while the heritage of trans community were ridiculed and invisibilized. The epics, myths, folklores, and traditions prove the existence of transgender people along with cisgenders. Only acceptance, inclusion and equality can create a change to an entire community that has suffered discrimination for ages.