

# Innovations

## Transgender Quest for Identity and their Representation in Indian Literature

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**Abstract:** *The word 'transgender' used to refer to people whose socially defined gender behaviour and expression are different from typical expectations based on the sex assigned at birth. They are pushed to the edges of different human realms because of their gender related queer identity. In India, transgender have a long-standing history dating back to the ancient times. From classical to contemporary Indian literature, there is a great shift in the delineation of their life, identity and roles in the society. The article delves into the multifaceted portrayal of transgender in Indian literature from the trajectory of ancient scriptures to modern day works while also analyzing how the concept of sexual orientation, gender, and identity shape and influence one another. Indian ancient texts including Vedas, Puranas and mythologies granted them a respectful position close to the divine. But colonization in India brought them into subordinate position. However, today they are expressing their agonies and struggles through their own writings. The representation of their voices through self writing in Indian literature is limited but evolving significantly. They do not only portray the true picture of their lives but strive to find a rightful and respectful place by demanding reformation of conventional gender norms. This article seeks to highlight their literary relevance and recent advancement in Indian literary work.*

**Keywords:** *transgender, gender, Indian literature, identity, self writing*

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### Transgender Quest for Identity and their Representation in Indian Literature

In recent years, transgender literature has been gaining more attention as a new genre. The term transgender describes to a person whose conventionally expected gender identity diverges from the sexual identity assigned to them at birth. According to The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, passed by the Parliament of India, 'a transgender person' is:

[A] person whose gender does not match with the gender assigned to that person at birth and includes trans-men and trans-women (whether or not such person has undergone Sex Reassignment Surgery or hormone therapy or laser therapy or such other therapy), person with intersex variations, genderqueer, and person having such socio-cultural identities such as kinner, hijra, aravani, and jogta. (The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019)

Oliven in 'Sexual Hygiene and Pathology: A Handbook for the Physician and the Professions' (1965) has used the term 'transgenderism' to describe a physiological condition involving a strong urge to alter one's sex or gender, encompassing a range of gender-diverse people. Feinberg's "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come" (1992) was instrumental in influencing public discourse about gender diversity. Historically, gender-nonconforming behaviours, including cross-dressing and gender variance, were pathologized and categorized as mental disorders. One of the first works to pathologize homosexuality was Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 'Psychopathia Sexualis' (1965).

In contrast to Krafft-Ebing, who focused on sexuality, the German doctor and sexologist Magnus Hirschfield made a clear distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation, promoting a consideration of gender diversity that did not inherently abnormalize it (Krafft-Ebing, 1965; Mancini, 2010). Like the works of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Hirschfield has the view in support of the legalization of homosexuality. They both challenged the dominant view of gender variance as a mental disorder and accepted the biological determinism hypothesis (Ulrichs, 1994; Mancini, 2010).

"Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come" (1992) written by Leslie Feinberg played a key role in shaping public discourse around gender diversity. His work has major contribution in emphasizing the fluidity and complexity of gender beyond binary framework, paving the way for the expansive and dynamic discourse surrounding gender today. The word "trans" has several meanings and is constantly "under development" in gender study and queer literature.

Hirschfield's emphasis on gender identity, particularly his study of cross-dressing, laid the groundwork for later understanding that separated sexual orientation from gender identity (Mancini, 2010). The late 20th century saw a growing recognition of transgender identities, not as disorders, but as part of the natural spectrum of human experience. This evolution in thought, driven by both academic research and advocacy, reflects a broader societal shift towards viewing gender diversity with greater acceptance and understanding, moving beyond binary gender constructs and acknowledging the fluidity of gender identity.

### **Exploring sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation**

Gender and sex are not explicitly classified categories; they are interconnected to each other and influence identity and culture. The concept of Gender identity describes one's inward feeling of being either male or female or any other gender. Sex is assigned at birth either as a boy or a girl based on external genitalia (Bockting & Allen, 2012). On the other hand, sexual orientation is different from gender identity. When an individual feels romantically, physically, or emotionally inclined towards the other person it may be understood as sexual orientation. Bailey et al. (2016) define sexual orientation as "relative sexual attraction to men, to women or both" (p. 45).

Gender encompasses socially constructed roles, behaviour, and characteristics assigned to men and women, which shape how individuals interact in society (World Health Organization, 2016). Biological sex characteristics are largely consistent across cultures, but gender roles often vary, depending on social norms. As expounded by World Health Organization (2016) the biological and physiological distinction in males and females is considered as 'sex' while 'gender' is understood as the socially defined roles and behaviours typically associated with men and women. It outlines five key components of gender: relationship, hierarchical, historical, contextual and institutional aspects which influence how individuals learn and express their gender roles (World Health Organization, 2016).

When an individual or group of people do not comply with the pre-established norms of gender, most often they suffer from discrimination, stigma, and exclusion in the society which impacts their mental and physical well being. These impacts are observed in various societal settings, including workplaces, educational institutions, and communities (Medical News Today, 2021).

### **Transgender roots and its development in India**

Gender diversity in the country is prevalent since very long. Transgender individuals in the country are referred to by various names depending on the region and cultural context. Common terms include Hijra, Eunch, Khoja, Kinner, Aravani, and others. The term 'Hijra' is perhaps the most widely known and can be traced back to ancient times in India, particularly in Hindu mythologies (Nanda, 1999; Michelraj, 2015) and Mughal courts, where Hijras often held special roles as administrators, advisors and harem guards in Mughal courts (Nanda, 1999; Michelraj, 2015). In South India, they are also known as 'Aravani', while in northern parts of India, the term 'Kinnar' and 'Khusra' are used in different context (Kalra, 2012)

The concept of Tiritiya Prakrti or Napunsaka which refers to individuals without reproductive ability has been a part of the Vedic and Puranic literature (Michelraj, 2015; Remya, 2017). One enduring myth recounts Lord Rama's exile to the forest for 14 years. Upon his departure, he turns around and makes an appeal to all 'men' and 'women' to go back to their places. However, in the crowd hijras

were also there, failing to identify themselves in either of the category of men or women, decided to stay in the city. When Rama returned, finding their honesty and faithfulness was impressed and gifted them with power of blessing people on special occasions such as birth and marriage, and inauguration, which is believed as the start of the tradition of badhai, where hijras sing, dance and bless people (Nanda, 1999; Michelraj, 2015).

The role of hijras in this myth highlights their unique place within Indian spiritual and social structures. The 'badhai' tradition, deeply embedded in Indian society, grants hijra a significant cultural role, despite the marginalization and social stigmatization they often face (Reddy, 2005; Kalra, 2012). Gayatri Reddy's seminal work "With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India" (2005) offers an overarching exploration about the life of hijra and transgender individuals. This investigates the historical and religious roots of the hijra community, noting that they have occupied a distinct third-gender category in South Asia for centuries. It also shows their space in the culture of Hinduism and Islam.

However, the advent of colonial rule in the 18th century marked a significant change in the treatment of the hijra community. One pivotal legislative development brought was the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Law, 1871, which aimed to regulate the activities of the Transgender community. This law categorized the entire community as 'criminals' and accused them of committing non-bailable offences, warranting arrest without cause (Criminal Tribes Act, 1871). The law further stipulated that those who registered as eunuchs, dressed or ornamented as women in public spaces, or participated in public performances were subject to imprisonment for up to two years or fined. Under colonial law, the local government was mandated to record the name and residence of every eunuch suspected of criminal activity, including abduction, emasculation, or offenses covered under Section 377 of the IPC, which penalized same-sex relations. This regulatory framework persisted until India got independent, after which the law was repealed in 1949. However, the societal prejudice against the transgender community persisted, pushing them to the margins and denying them access to mainstream opportunities.

A pivotal 2014 Supreme Court ruling recognized the transgender community, including Hijras, as a marginalized segment that has long been subjected to ridicule and fear. The Court noted that this discrimination stemmed largely from societal superstitions (Supreme Court of India, 2014). The ruling established that transgender individuals are entitled to fundamental rights such as autonomy, dignity, access to education, freedom to speak, safeguards against abuse, and violence and discrimination. Furthermore, it affirmed the liberty to gender self-identification and expanded these protections to transsexuals, hijras, and others in the broader transgender community. Transgender individuals in India are now officially acknowledged as the 'Third Gender', a status granted by

the decision of Supreme Court in 2014. The Indian census has historically overlooked the recognition of the third gender. It was not before 2011 that data on third gender individuals were officially collected for detailed insights into their demographics. Census of India, 2011 records their existing population around 488,000. It also draws its attention towards their literacy rate which is 46% comparatively very low to the 74% literacy of the general population. This large illiteracy among them is attributed to frequent harassment and discrimination faced by transgender individuals leading to school dropouts, as mentioned by Gopalan (Times of India, 2014).

As with any marginalized group, the transgender community in India faces numerous challenges, including stigma, discrimination, and limited opportunities for social and economic advancement. A significant transgender individuals turn to prostitution as a last resort for survival, often left with few options beyond begging and indulging in sex work (Dasari & Reddy, 2018). The community continues to experience significant exclusion and discrimination in contemporary society (Reddy, 2005). In an effort to protect transgender individuals, the Indian government in 2019 took a legislative step forward by passing the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill. It has aimed at providing legal safeguards to transgender individuals and to promote their social, educational, and economic empowerment. By ensuring basic rights and protections, this legislation was designed to give dignity and equality to a community that has faced prolonged ostracism and discrimination (Government of India, 2019). For many, this legal recognition represents a potential shift toward equality and inclusion for transgender persons in India.

### **Transgender Voices in Indian Literature**

Transgender literature plays an important role in exploring how historical and structural factors shape discourses about their identity. Not only does it shape how people view transgender identities, but also helps in defining and understanding the transgender community. Transgender have often asserted that they are 'women' trapped in 'the wrong body'.

Indian classical literature, particularly religious and mythological texts, contains several references to transgender figures. Earliest mentions of transgender figures can be Shikhandi and Arjuna in Mahabharata. Shikhandi is a warrior who is born female but raised as man. Her role in the battle of Kurukshetra raises question about gender norms in the context of war. Another figure Arjuna spends a year as Brihannala, a transgender, during his exile. The story of Ila, a king in Ramayana alternates between being a man and a woman, also underscores the notion of gender fluidity. These are early acknowledgements of transgender identities however; these representations are frequently symbolic framed within divine circumstances rather than representation of the real life experiences of transgender individuals.

Post independence writers made an effort to explore the psychological and emotional complexities of transgender character beyond the symbolic representation unlike before. In recent decades we can hear the voices of transgender themselves as they have begun to make mark in writing which offer first-hand account of their experiences. Their unique sex identity and cultural significance were explored in various literary works including autobiographies. In the autobiography "I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey" (2007), Vidya narrates her challenges in the journey of self-acceptance and transition where she navigates the complexities of personal identity and social expectations. She has always felt disconnected to the male body, into which she was born. She has faced immense internal conflict about her body. Because the society had a rigid definition of gender norms she has to face societal rejection and isolation from a very young. She faces discrimination, prejudice and vulnerability but finds out her way when she embraces her true self and created own identity. She emphasizes the significance of joy, resilience, self-expression and self-acceptance amidst external challenges. The autobiography does not only describe her individual journey but reflects the emotional and psychological struggle that transgender people go through in their life.

"The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story" (2010) by A. Revathi is another prominent autobiography that offers a rare and authentic narrative of transgender lives. Her experience in the autobiography sheds light on the cultural and societal struggles of Hijras along with the complexities of their own identity. She was born as a boy in a traditional family in Tamil Nadu. She shares her internal conflict and confusion about her gender identity. Her early life was compounded by rejection, discrimination, violence and constant struggle for survival. It has a profound portrayal of hardship, discrimination and unsafe space of transgender community in India. Later on she finds a sense of belonging within the hijra community. She shares her moments of joy and empowerment while embracing her true gender identity.

"Me Hijra, Me Laxmi" (2015) and "Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life" (2016) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi chronicles the personal journey of dealing with discrimination, humiliation and violence as a transgender. She is a prominent transgender activist and made history as the first transgender woman to serve as a representative for India at the United Nations in 2008. Like two other autobiographies discussed above, Tripathi also in her works describes emotional and psychological turmoil of hiding her actual identity because of the fear of being ostracized by family friends and society. Furthermore, "Me Hijra, Me Laxmi" (2015) describes the physical and emotional violence she faced from getting bullied in school to being sexually harassed which adds depth and urgency to the narrative. It has exploration of societal exclusion and marginalization faced by the transgender people. On one hand they are called to bless weddings and childbirth but on the other hand they get discriminated in employment, education

and healthcare which force them to sex work and begging for survival. She gives a vivid account of how they are deprived of basics and narrates her fight for the transgender rights in India. On the other hand, “Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life” (2016) shows Tripathi’s candid exploration of love, affection, longings and romantic relationships as a transgender woman. She has found men in her life who objectify her while other reject her after getting to know her gender identity. She faces confusion and complexity in her romantic space. Throughout this memoir Tripathi reflects on the way society commodifies the feminity of transgender women and reduces their worth to physical or sexual attributes, rather than recognizing them as full human beings with complex identities and desires. She pushes back against the notion that transgender women are only to fulfil fantasies or desires of men, asserting their humanity and need for mutual respect in relationship. These give us a powerful insight into the life of Hijras and their struggles and aspirations. These autobiographical works do not only represent the transgender lives but brings out transgender individuals voice in Indian literature, a space where they can narrate their own stories rather than being spoken for by others.

Recent years have seen a surge in transgender literature in India. It has a more nuanced portrayal of transgender characters which is more sensitive and humanized. The subject of gender identity is getting attention from the writers of diverse backgrounds and their transgender characters are not restricted to the margins of narrative. For instance, transsexual identities and experiences have been depicted in Manobi Bandhopadhyay’s autobiography “A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi” (2017) who has become the first transgender principal of a college in India. Her autobiography is an account of her life and the struggles transgender people face in India. The story examines the intersection of gender and spirituality, with the gift of goddess Lakshmi serving as a metaphor for the protagonist’s quest for self worth and dignity. It also reflects the changing attitudes toward transgender in Indian society and highlights the role of education and empowerment in the transgender rights movement.

The autobiographies mentioned are significant works in Indian literature, as they all provide very intimate and raw insights into the experience of gender diverse communities within India. “I Am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey” (2007) and “Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life” (2016) is more about individual experiences of Vidya and Tripathi respectively, while “Me Hijra, Me Laxmi” (2015) and “The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story” (2010) give broader views of societal and community struggles. Revathi’s work explicitly integrates activism and advocacy for hijra rights. Tripathi delves into personal and intimate space of relationships. It adds an important dimension by discussing how intimate relationships are shaped by social expectation of gender. Bandhopadhyay’s autobiography “A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi” (2017) stands apart by exploring the spiritual and cultural aspect of the hijra community. Her voice is very important in

the transgender community as a transgender academic and activist. She addresses the intersection of education and gender. Each work brings an essential and unique voice and perspective to understand the complex issues faced by transgender individuals in India.

### **Conclusion**

Despite a historical backdrop that acknowledges and celebrates gender diversity in temples, religious narratives and mythologies, transgender individuals today encounter widespread discrimination, stigmatization, human rights violations and exclusion impacting families, schools, workplaces, law enforcement, healthcare, media and society as a whole. However, literature focused on transgender experiences has been pivotal in empowering the transgender community and advancing activist efforts. Their representation in Indian literature has evolved through time bringing about broader changes in attitude toward processing gender identity and sexual orientation. Their stories have raised awareness of the transgender experience and discrimination faced by transgender people, resulting in greater advocacy for the rights of transgender people and their inclusion in society. Through their writings, transgender authors have reclaimed their stories and promoted social change challenging the stereotype and misconceptions that have long plagued their identity. Their stories have broadened perspectives, empowered the transgender community, and brought about social change. There is a great shift from their symbolic and often marginalized depiction in classical texts to more realistic portrayal of their life and struggle for identity in their own words. The transgender characters have moved to be the center of literary narratives than just being at periphery. The evolving transgender literature has been essential in supporting transgender movements in India, helping to build an inclusive society for everyone.

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