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‘Me Hijra Me Laxmi’: A Stirring Saga of a Transgender

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Abstract:

‘*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*’ is the most evocative and moving autobiography about the *hijra* activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi popularly known as Laxmi. It talks about the heartrending tale of a transgender Laxmi who always felt comfortable in the garb of a woman, though born as the eldest son of her father. The autobiography exemplifies the journey of a transgender who underwent innumerable sufferings but ultimately decided to live life with his head held high. He bravely declared himself as *hijra* and fought for the community ceaselessly abused, insulted and denied basic rights. His/ Her quest is to bring about a positive change in the society to enable the transgender acquire dignity and respect by their inclusion in jobs in public and private sectors. Her bold representation as a transgender on the international platforms determines her adeptness in voicing the issues related to LGBT.

The present paper aims at evaluating Laxmi’s traumatic yet inspiring voyage from anguished life to the acquisition of a loud, appealing and convincing voice of a transgender. The paper also focusses on Laxmi’s contribution in the upliftment of LGBT community and her efforts in securing a respectable status for them.

Keywords: *hijra*, transgender, *chakka*, LGBT, Bollywood, Maharashtra Trithiya Panthi Sangathana (MTPS), APTN – Asia Pacific Transgender Network.

Laxmi’s Early Years

Born as the eldest son to parents from Uttar Pradesh, with a conservative Brahmin background, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, alias Raju lived in a shanty on the banks of Siddheshwar Lake in Thane, Mumbai with his parents, sister Rukmini and younger brother Shashinarayan. At one point of time, he realized that he is a *hijra*, though at home, he was treated as the eldest son and expected to wear men’s apparel. As a child, he was sickly and mostly fraught with illness. But he was well looked after by his parents. Though there was no dearth of friends around him, yet he started to live the life of a loner. He had asthma from an early age and till date he has been suffering from the disease. But his frail and weak body was no hindrance to his love for dancing. In childhood, he would dance to the tune of Bollywood songs and participated at various functions organized by school. He danced to such a frenzy that his chronic breathlessness and cough did not come his way. Though dancing had a therapeutic effect on him, people could observe that in spite of being a man, his body language was that of a woman. He was being teased by others as *chakka*. It was true that his mannerisms, his walking style and his way of talking were all feminine. But he was unable to understand the mystery of his body which drew him more and more into a cocoon.

The cruelest part of his life was that he was sexually exploited from a very young age of seven. Once he had gone to his hometown for his cousin’s wedding with his parents where in the midst of hubbub and fanfare of the celebration, he was lured by a distant cousin of his into a dark room where he was raped and then threatened of dire consequences if he shared

the incident with his parents. After few days, he was molested again by his cousin and few of his cousin's friends who took turns to violate him. But Laxmi remained silent and did not utter a word about the incident to anyone. It now became a routine that during family functions, he was sexually exploited by his older cousins and their accomplices. They derived a sadistic pleasure from his suffering and there was none with whom Laxmi could share his grievance. He was doing everything against his will, but a day arrived when he decided not to surrender to any of their demands. He turned brave and bold and threatened all who dared to touch him. He became aggressive and his strong resistance forced the boys to run away and maintain distance from him. He realized that passivity did not pay; therefore he resolved never to do anything in life against his will.

Laxmi's Pronouncement as "Hijra"

Laxmi went on to join Mithibai College and finished his graduation. He wore female attire on campus, became a model coordinator for Bollywood, staged dance shows, became a bar dancer... and all this without the knowledge of his family! Laxmi took to drinking, struggling with the dual identity and the deception of playing "the man of the house" when all he wanted to was to be acknowledged as a woman. It was the year 1998 when Laxmi finally decided to become a *hijra*. She made up her mind to represent *hijras* and fight for the rights of her community. As Shobha De rightly puts, "*She [Laxmi] is entirely comfortable in her skin, and says it is important for every human being to love himself/herself.*" Laxmi proudly asserts that she is fortunate in the sense that unlike other *hijras* who are driven out of their house by their parents, she received a lot of support from her family, especially her sister Rukmini who taught her the Bollywood style of dancing.

After leading an anguished life for years, today Laxmi stands tall and has become a loud voice and undisputed spokesperson of transgender community; striving hard to fight for their rights in India and representing *hijras* on global platforms. On an occasion of a reality show in which Laxmi's father Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi also remained present, he proudly replied when asked about Laxmi, "*A hijra can be born to any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars. Driving Laxmi out of the house was out of the question.*" Laxmi expresses her heartfelt gratitude towards her parents, who wholeheartedly accepted her the way she was, despite suffering continual derisions and contempt from their family and social circle.

Laxmi's Voice on the International Platforms

Speaking on the occasion of International Conference on the "Voices of the Oppressed and the Marginalized" organized at Mehsana, a district of North Gujarat, Laxmi assertively talked about the social stigma associated with the transgender in India. She expressed her displeasure at the fact that the mainstream populace has yet not accepted them as integral part of society. She also pointed out that transgender children are thrown out of their families and therefore they are left with no other option but to beg and enter into the sex trade for survival. Talking about her own self, she said, "*I was just as normal as any other boy or girl. Society made me feel different.*" She opined that the perception of society regarding the transgender is partial and discriminating. She emphatically remarked that "*the ideas of gender and sexuality are all in our minds. If you allow people to discriminate you, they will discriminate you totally.*" According to her, the biggest problem in India is the lack of awareness among people regarding the constitutional right of freedom of speech and expression, right to equality and right to education irrespective of gender, caste or colour granted by Constitution of India framed by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Laxmi firmly believes that if the uniform

employment opportunities are opened for the transgender, then they will also lead their lives respectfully and become respectable beings of the society.

While talking about the avenues of job opportunities for the transgender, she cited an example of the frequent rape cases in the compartments of the moving trains, which could be avoided by employing a *hijra* as a security guard. By doing this, the *hijras* would get the dignified job and the official right to treat the menace which could indeed be a great help for society. Laxmi opines that if the transgender are treated equally, respectfully and given employment like other citizens of India, then their lives will also blossom and they will also lead their lives happily. But it is only through proper education and free information that this gulf of knowledge could be bridged.

The Laxmi of today makes persuasive statements regarding the ill treatment meted out to transgender people and other members of the LGBT community. Recently she participated in the reality show as a guest at the request of the Bollywood actor Salman Khan. Laxmi also played a lead role in a movie called “Queens of Destiny” based on the lives of *hijras*. She won the approbation of celebrity like Hema Malini and various prominent stars of Bollywood. She was also interviewed by a renowned writer Salman Rushdie. Laxmi, today has become an international celebrity and prominent social activist. She has become an icon of transgender; tripling around the world, posing for selfies and signing autographs for her countless fans.

Her Societal Contribution

In order to bring about the recognition of human rights of sexual minorities, especially transgender persons, and people living with HIV/AIDS, Laxmi has been travelling across the world and voicing the issues related to *hijras*. Through media appearances, regional, national and international consultancy, cooperating with various non-government organizations (NGOs) across India and presiding over CBO Astitva Trust, Laxmi is the vanguard of social work and advocator of the transgender in the country. She is the founder member of Maharashtra Trithiya Panthi Sangathana (MTPS) and a core founder member of APTN – Asia Pacific Transgender Network. Laxmi was the first transgender person to represent Asia-Pacific in the UN President’s Office Civil Society Task Force on HIV/AIDS. Laxmi was the core community representative in the planning commission of the AIDS 2014 conference in Melbourne representing Asia Pacific region. She was also the intervener in the Nasla Petition filed for Transgender Rights and recognition in Supreme Court of India Judgment in April 2014. Laxmi was part of the steering core committee set by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for Transgender Rights and upliftment. She was also a core member on the UGC committee set for Right of Education of the Transgender.

Key Role in the Plea to Re-examine Section 377 of Indian Penal Code

Laxmi was impleader in the path breaking Supreme Court case of India and subsequent judgement on upholding rights of *hijras* and the transgender in India. Section 377 of Indian Penal Code (IPC) bars “*carnal intercourse against the order of nature,*” a holdover from British colonial law dating back to 1861. In practice, this law had largely been used by police to threaten and blackmail gays, lesbians and transgender people. On December 11, 2013, the Supreme Court of India reversed a landmark 2009 decision by the Delhi High Court that decriminalized sex between consenting adults regardless of their gender. The violation of the law is punishable by a fine and up to 10 years imprisonment.

But due to the efforts of activist like Laxmi, the Supreme Court of India agreed to reexamine the Section 377 of IPC in February, 2016. The Supreme Court's move to order re-

examination of its verdict criminalising sexual activity between same sex consenting adults under section 377 of IPC is widely welcomed by activists today as "hope of upholding the democracy" in the country.

Conclusion

For Laxmi, there is no word called 'defeat' in her dictionary. Her battle for attaining the dignity of the transgender and other members of LGBT community is an unstoppable process. Her courageous representation of life in her insightful autobiography entitled "*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*" translated into English by Prof. R. Raj Rao and P.G. Joshi; originally written by Vaishali Rode, a journalist in Marathi language on Laxmi's behalf, is a landmark work on "*Hijra Literature*." Laxmi's life is an inspiring tale of battling against all odds of life and transpiring as an outstanding activist for LGBT community especially "*hijras*".

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