

INHABITING THE IN-BETWEEN: EXPLORING THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF  
TRANSPeOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL

by

Srabasti Chatterjee

Synopsis of Thesis

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Women's Studies

Faculty Council of Interdisciplinary Studies, Law & Management

Jadavpur University

2022

The term “transgender” implies the spectrum of gender identities that defy social gender norms based on the uni-linear relationship between sex and gender. The term “trans” is often used as an inclusive category implying the journey from one's ascribed/assigned gender to the achieved/preferred gender. Transgender as an identity category is used to signify individuals who resist rigid, binary gender constructions, and who express or present a breaking or blurring of culturally prevalent stereotypical gender roles.<sup>1</sup> The thesis talked about the lived experiences of the people who dress differently from norms associated with their socially ascribed gender, use prosthetics, cosmetically change their body, undergo voice therapy, hormone replacement therapy (henceforth referred to as HRT), partial or complete Sex Reassignment Surgery (henceforth referred to as SRS) in order to live their preferred genders. They could use one or all of these methods to express their preferred genders. Until recently gender nonconformity and the desire to express one's gender different to the gender assigned at birth was considered a pathological condition by psychiatrists and psychologists. The third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (henceforth referred to as DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association used to refer to this condition as Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and in 2013 it was completely de-pathologised and renamed to Gender Dysphoria in DSM-5 to remove any stigma that may be associated with this condition. Being transgender is not a disorder; there could be an underlying gender or body dysphoria that creates distress which can be resolved through one or many kinds of gender expressions and/or psychological/psychiatric therapeutic interventions/counselling and medical/surgical interventions.

In this research I have tried to understand the lived experiences of the transgender individuals in contemporary West Bengal. The focus of this thesis has been on trying to comprehend the trans-individual's perception of 'gender' and look into how societal understanding of the binary gender construct and the uni-linearity of sex and gender perceives and impacts the lived experiences of the trans-persons and how the trans-individuals' non-normative life and living impacts the mainstream understanding of sex, gender and sexuality. The thesis discusses the role of Gender Affirmative Therapy (henceforth GAT) in the lives of the transgender people. It also tries to explore their liveabilities based on their capabilities with a focus on livelihood options and opportunities for them. It also discusses the course of the trans-movement against the backdrop of the NALSA judgment, reading down of IPC Section

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras\\_transgender\\_in\\_india\\_hiv\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_social\\_exclusion.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras_transgender_in_india_hiv_human_rights_and_social_exclusion.pdf) (accessed on 18.10.18)

377, The Transgender Persons (Protection of rights) Act 2019 and Rules (2020) with the aim to trace its trajectory and the way forward.

The study becomes significant, where we have the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules 2020 which has thrown out of context the rights based effective and uncomplicated method of changing identity documents for transgender individuals based on the Supreme Court's NALSA judgment of 2014, which talked about self determination of gender even without undergoing GAT or SRS. The current act has introduced a form of gate-keeping from the state in the garb of a welfare stance that in all probability has been introduced to either keep the trans-individuals in a separate gender category box outside the ambit of the patriarchal family structure allowing entry into the binary (woman and man) domain only when the person surgically conforms to the gender stereotypes, norms and constructs associated with the gender the person identifies with. This study becomes even more important as the act challenges the NALSA judgment, the lived experiences and desires of transgender persons to live their life at par with their gender expression with or without changing the identity documents or changing their body.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

I have tried to trace the trajectory of feminist movements through which 'woman' as a gendered category has evolved. I have also tried to understand how the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality has taken shape through the shifts from liberal to radical to intersectional and post-structural feminist movements. The 1900's saw the feminist movement gather momentum with increasing demands for reforms in education, law and politics that soon started a mass movement for political action on these demands and a mass campaign for voting rights (Bryson, 1992: 36). This was a liberal feminist stance which believed in bringing about gender equality between women and men. Contrary to the liberal stance, radical feminism (1960's to 1970's) emphasised on the difference between women and men, the reason being the division of the public and private sphere. Giving women access to the public sphere did not ensure any change in the private sphere as their role did not change. According to radical feminists, that could only happen by bringing about a change in the private sphere (Bryson, 1992: 182). Private sphere is about the 'core' and 'essential'

aspects of being a woman and the domain includes sex, motherhood and social reproduction/domestic work (which are not even acknowledged as work). Concealed under the garb of culture and tradition, the injustice propagated in these domains is normalised and considered to be unquestionable. Thus women have to accept the fact that the struggle to transform the private sphere has to be fought by women alone and during the late 1960s and early 1970s radical feminists like Catherine A. Mackinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Alice Walker began to challenge the private sphere, the domain of domesticity (Donovan, 1992). But both the strands (liberal and radical) of feminism believed in the concept of sex being fixed and gender being constructed.

Radical feminism talks about the celebration of the difference of women from men that gave rise to separatist politics. In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw, an American lawyer and intersectional feminist first coined the term intersectional feminism to highlight the intersectional discrimination of black women where they were discriminated on the basis of their skin colour (race) as well as gender. Intersectional feminists say that separatist politics is problematic. Biological difference is heightened and politicised through separatist politics. It creates an essentialist understanding of 'women' as a rigid gender category based on biological sex. Liberal and radical feminists reinforces the binary, intersectional feminists challenge it. The intersection of other identities with the woman identity is important and the movement needs men to be a part of these movements. Intersectional feminism questions the homogenisation of the 'woman experience'. According to this essential understanding, if a person is born a cisgender<sup>2</sup> woman (which means there is no incongruence between the ascribed gender and the sexed body), she goes through a narrative of suffering and deprivation and therefore she is entitled to be a part of that movement. This had political implications for the trans-movement. Because transpersons do not go through this socialisation, they have not been born a 'woman'; they do not have the experiences of a 'woman' and then how can they be part of the 'women's movement'? Hence, though gender's constructedness is acknowledged but the essential nature of 'sex' categories remain unquestioned. And this concept of 'sex' based on biological essentialism continues to uphold the patriarchal construction of womanhood.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cisgender denotes a person whose gender identity is congruent with biological sex and gender assigned at birth

At this juncture Michel Foucault's seminal work on tracing the history of sexuality becomes significant. According to Foucault if something has a history it cannot be biological. Through his work he offers a lens of viewing the human subject not as fixed, essential and determinate but rather as discursively produced historical products. Foucault talks about sexuality as a historically produced evolving concept (Foucault, 1998). History implies that sexuality has changed and it is a social thing. The experience of sexuality may be same but our understanding changes. The raw fact of biological sex may be constant but who one calls a woman depends whether one is in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Foucault (1998) the binary classifications are only means to order the world and with reference to that world order, subject positions are discursively created.

This opposition to a monolithic concept of women was the pivotal juncture at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in feminism that led to development of post-structural feminism (Donovan, 1992). The post-structural feminist movement was partly borne out of the inability of radical feminism to take into account the difference in 'woman' or the intersectional identities of women which cannot be homogenised under 'woman' as an over-arching category. In post structural feminism the aim is to bring about multiple voices of 'many feminisms' such as black-feminism, dalit-feminism, lesbian-feminism, transfeminism. Gender was anyway known to be constructed and at this juncture Judith Butler 'troubles' gender and sex when she says 'sex' is constructed too (Butler, 1999). Butler questions the fixed nature and biological essentialism of sex. Just as Foucault questioned the biological nature of sexuality and through writing its history brought it to the realm of the social and the political, Butler questioned the existence of the biological nature of sex. There might be a sexed body but the question is how is it constructed? The sexed bodies are gendered through social construction and thus man and woman are created. Differences exist between different bodies in terms of genitalia and other anatomical aspects but the patriarchal binaristic system dictates that if one is biologically male (determined by the presence of a penis), one's gender identity will be masculine, gender expression will be masculine too and one's desire will be towards a biological cisgender woman. Butler troubles this unilinear, essentialist understanding of sex, gender and sexuality and aims at breaking the 'natural and obvious' connections between them. According to Butler performativity constructs a subject. Sex is not what lies between the legs or in the chromosomes, it is actually how one gets constructed as a social being, sexing and gendering are both processes of construction. The body is thus a representation, not the foundation of social gender. Butler becomes so important because Butler states that

the difference on which radical feminist movement is based is not real, it is created socially by the 'speech act' (Austin, 1955) an act or doing produced by something it names (Butler, 1993). When the doctor comes and announces 'it's a boy' that is when the 'boy becomes a boy'. The boy has no other reason to be a boy. According to radical feminists sex is biological, it cannot be changed. But sex can be changed and is being changed by us continuously. Post-structural feminism denaturalises sex, making it constructed and socially changeable. If we consider gender to be constructed and sex to be constructed too, the categories become blurred and there is no problem in thinking that this same body that one has, can be the body of a man, or a woman or a trans-person. According to Butler (1999) one is not born with the sex that they are given. Sex, gender and sexuality all are activated at the same time at the moment a child takes birth. Thus the existence of the trans-individual poses a threat to patriarchal essentialism of sex and also to the understanding and position of trans excluding radical feminists (TERF). When a trans-person performs certain gendered activities with a body that is not assigned to perform them in a heteropatriarchal society, patriarchy becomes confused. This 'confusion' is a post-structural tool of warfare against patriarchy (Butler, 1999). At a same time it also has a profound impact on the feminist movement. If the category 'woman' gets blurred then who remains as the subject of feminism? How do we then define woman if transwoman can become an integral part of this category? How do we then define woman if man becomes the ally? How can we then define woman if a person taking birth in the body with a vagina claims their space as a man? According to transfeminists anyone who identifies as a woman is a woman. This raises larger questions in the feminist movement about whom to build solidarity and form alliances with. Who is the subject of feminism? Who is the women's movement for? How am I defining women? At this juncture the lived experiences of the trans-persons becomes significant for problematising the sex-gender unilinearity and aims at broadening up the iron clad binarised gender categories creating a spectrum of multiple positionalities.

## **Methodology**

This doctoral research has intended to follow Feminist Standpoint Theory as an epistemological basis, in order to bring about the voice of the transpeople who have been continuously 'otherised' beyond the realm of the 'other'. The thesis has followed a located, ethical, feminist research methodology. According to Sandra Harding a feminist analysis requires the researcher to place herself in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, so that the researcher appears not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real

historical entity with specific desires and interests (Harding, 2004). This prevented from a hierarchy to be created in research relationships and writing about it, a hierarchy which feminist research aims to break. Thus the aim was to make the study reflexive, through honouring the lived experience and knowledge of the people involved in the research and making the process empowering for both the researchers and the subjects through mutual sharing of knowledge and experiences.

As a feminist researcher I carried on this research with the belief that there is a crucial link between feminist scholarship and activism. As someone inhabiting both the domains I took this opportunity to share my experience of working with the transgender individuals and tried to initiate a discussion around sex, gender and sexuality through the feminist lens. I have consciously used ‘plurals’ in order to highlight the plurality of experiences as narrated by my respondents. My research also aimed at bridging the gap between activism and academia by discussing new locations, new positionalities, new relationships and new possibilities that might have the potential to bring about better laws and improved institutions.” (Reinharz, 1992:175).

In my thesis, an exploratory and descriptive research design with a non-probability purposive sampling has been used. The exploratory and descriptive research design has helped me to gain better insight on the issue, as in West Bengal qualitative research focussing on transperson’s lived experiences with respect to Gender Affirmative Therapy and the question of livelihood hasn’t been done so far. For purposes of the empirical research a qualitative method is adopted. The research aims at exploring the lived experiences of the transpersons, through taking in depth interviews, writing narratives, analysing them and sharing the findings with the respondents.

In this study my respondents are both transmasuline and transfeminine individuals. Following a feminist research methodology I have put an effort to bring about different voices in my research in order to understand the plurality of experiences that the transpersons go through. The different voices expressed different perceptions about sex, gender and sexuality. The research explored various experiences of trans-individuals regarding gender in relation to their biological sex. It has attempted to find out the various negotiations of the trans-individuals within their intimate spaces and the social and political spaces they inhabit. In doing so as a researcher, I have followed the path showed by Urvashi Butalia (2017) in her seminal work on voices from the partition of India, and tried not to ask questions during in

depth interviews, in order to facilitate the free flowing nature of the narration. This helped me to read each interview as a continuous narrative without any interference from outside.

Apart from the qualitative thematic analysis of the narratives obtained from the in depth interviews I have used simple percentage analysis for understanding the trend shown by the sample size I worked with. This work is solely based on the sample size (27 transmasculine and 33 transfeminine) I have worked with and thus has no purpose to generalise but to flag some trends that surfaced. In order to understand Gender Affirmative Therapy, livelihood options, the process of legal document change, relationship with the feminist and LGBTIQHK+ movements and the way forward, along with the interviews of the trans-individuals I have also interviewed eight gender rights activists, three doctors specialising in GAT, one lawyer working on trans-issues, six partners of trans-individuals, three office colleagues of trans-persons and three corporate personnel and working in human resource development and two entrepreneurs.

The aim of this research was to capture the diversity by enumerating multiple experiences and talk about a range of gender expressions. Thus the research focused on exploring and understanding both transfeminine and transmasculine individuals' lived experiences in order to reveal the variations and possibilities. Before going for in depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions were conducted with small groups. These helped in brainstorming about the significant main themes on the basis of which the semi structured interview schedule was planned. As a result of conducting couple of FGDs in the field, the interview schedule was formed which was divided into seven parts starting with a consent form in the beginning of the schedule.

**Geographical area - Districts of West Bengal**

Bardhaman Division	Jalpaiguri Division	Presidency Division
Bardhaman	Cooch Behar	Kolkata / Howrah
Hooghly	Darjeeling	Nadia
		North 24 Parganas
Birbhum	Jalpaiguri	South 24 Parganas



The above mentioned geographical locations were selected on the basis of association of these areas with the queer movement starting from the late twentieth Century (1990s). Also the presence of CBOs working on the issue in Coochbehar, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Kolkata, North and South 24 Parganaas is a significant reason for choosing the areas for my study. In Birbhum there is a dearth of CBOs working on trans-issues but in 2017, while working for a project initiated by Sappho for Equality in Birbhum, I had found that transgender individuals were scattered in the district and were in need of community support. Through *Swapnil's*<sup>3</sup> intervention in the district I contacted my respondents in Birbhum. As I was associated with MANAS Bangla from 2006 to 2010, I developed an idea about the transgender community in the districts which helped me decide on the geographical location of my thesis with better understanding and acceptability in the field areas.

### **The research questions of the thesis**

Three major research questions:

1. How do trans-individuals perceive their gender identity? Is it a social construct or a 'sense of being' or a blend of both or something beyond?
2. How far do livelihood options for transgender individuals determine what kind of gendered bodies they can inhabit? Thus what is the relationship between their capabilities and liveabilities?
3. How do laws and the movement (feminist and queer) look at various transgender identities that inhabit the in-between and what are the points of connection and disjuncture between the feminist movement and the trans movement?

The research is significant as in the last decade trans-persons have come out with confidence, asserting their different gender preferences and claiming a visibility both within the private intimate spaces as well as the more public arena. The thesis tries to understand GAT through exploring the spectrum of trans-persons' gender expressions. These expressions range from keeping the body as it is and living the preferred gender through perception, imagination, cognition and behavioural expressions, to changing the body through complete SRS, both

---

<sup>3</sup> CBO in Bardhaman district run by MSM, Transgender, *Hijra (M2F)* community people

being expressions that describe them instead of being ascribed on the basis of social norms. Within this spectrum there exists a number of experiences constituting and reconstituting the rainbow. Part of the assertion is in the domain of wanting to construct and reconstruct their sexual identity – partially or fully, biologically and/or socially, to achieve that desired body so significant to their existence. The transition appears to be an integral issue but transition gets defined ultimately through various markers that vary across individuals and structures.

### **Chapter divisions**

The thesis comprised of five chapters exploring personal narratives of transmasculine and transfeminine respondents who participated in my research and my professional experiences as an activist, a social worker, a psychological counsellor and a mother of a gender non-conforming child. I have tried to understand the sociological implications of the transgender identities and the lived experiences associated with it through a feminist lens.

#### First Chapter: Sex, Gender, Sexuality and the Transgender Identities: An Overview

The first chapter reflects on my theoretical understanding as a researcher. I have tried to understand the changing discourse around sex-gender-sexuality by panning across the different forms of feminisms. The chapter tried to trace the trajectory of changing notions around sex-gender-sexuality by touching upon the understanding of achieving 'sameness' of genders as understood by the liberal feminists, passing aside the idea of 'difference' as propounded by the radical feminists and then coming to the post-structuralist understanding of intersectional identities, and arriving at the continuously evolving, intricate, open spaces of dialogue through deconstruction. Through my reading of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, I came across the enriching experiences of creating spectrums of sexes, genders and sexualities. As I have posited my research against the post-structuralist readings I could appreciate how just like gender, sex got socially constructed too and how this knowledge impacted the feminist movement as well. With the aim of understanding transgender individuals' lived experiences I took the opportunity to read sociologists and transgender theorists like Candice West, Don Zimmerman, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy Mckenna, Stephen Whittle, Leslie Fienberg, Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, J. Prosser, Gayle Rubin, Gayle Salamon, Harriet Bradley and Jamison Green. The theoretical framework against which the question of liveabilities and livelihoods were seen was the 'Capabilities Approach' as propounded by Prof. Amartya Sen and the meaning of liveability as conceptualised by Judith Butler. The axes for exploring the lived experiences of the transgender individuals

became two fold, one being Gender Affirmative Therapy and the other the livelihood question. I read the works of Richard Ekins, Dave King, Brent L. Bilodeau, Kristen A. Renn, J. Kessler, Wendy Mckenna, Susan Stryker, Stephen Whittle, Sivananda Khan, Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan and report publications of LABIA<sup>4</sup>, Alternative Law Forum and Sappho for Equality.

## Second Chapter: Transition, Transformation or Transcendence: The Transmasculine Experience

The chapter has tried to understand the trajectory of transmasculine narratives starting from their emergence and gradual visibility in West Bengal through interviews of transmasculine individuals and activists. The thesis explored various aspects of gender identities, gender expressions, gender roles through rich stories of childhood and growing up, inhabiting the private and public spaces like families, friends, neighbourhoods, intimate relationships, support spaces and work places through the interplay of autonomous self and relational selfhood. I have also tried to understand the development of the transmasculine identities through GAT/SRS.

## Third Chapter: Transition, Transformation or Transcendence: The Transfeminine Experience

This chapter has tried to trace the evolution of the transfeminine narratives starting from the effeminate male component of the MSM targeted intervention project to transgender targeted intervention and the emergence of the pre-op and post-op transfeminine individuals. The transfeminine experience has a history of its own in West Bengal starting from the advent of HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme by NACO. The chapter has tried to understand the reason for greater visibility, multiplicity of expressions through a range of trans-bodies and trans-lives. The chapter has traced the consolidation of transfeminine identities and expressions and their negotiations with various patriarchal institutions. The chapter has tried to show how the transfeminine narratives have repeatedly broken the sex-gender unilinearity and reinforced the constructedness of sex and gender by doing, undoing and redoing gender. The second and third chapters have tried to highlight the spectrum of trans-identities that constitute the rainbow.

---

<sup>4</sup> LABIA is a Mumbai based queer feminist LBT collective

#### Fourth Chapter: Capabilities, Liveabilities and Livelihood

This chapter explored transgender individual's lives through the lens of 'capability approach' as propounded by Professor Amartya Sen by considering the three fundamental capabilities - health, education and income (Sen, 1993) and its relation to liveabilities, a concept introduced by Judith Butler (Butler, 2009). It studies questions around livelihood and attempts to understand trans-person's lived experiences across a spectrum of trans-bodies and gender expressions. Livelihood is one of the most important issues being raised by the transgender movement in India at present especially after the Covid crisis and this research is important given the fact that the last decade has seen a many fold increase in visibility of trans-persons including transmasculine individuals who are coming out confidently and claiming their rights.

#### Fifth Chapter: Beyond the Cis-tem - The Road Ahead

The concluding chapter revisits the questions asked and answers attempted throughout the research. Who is a transgender individual? What is gender affirmation? Do we need the term transgender after sex reassignment and gender affirmation? What is transition? What is it achieving? How do we distinguish between those who identify as transgender and those who identify as 'man' or 'woman'? The chapter has looked at GAT and SRS through the Foucauldian lens of biopower and biopolitics and has also drawn from Martha Nussbaum's 'Universal Capabilities' given that we are talking about human lives. This necessitates a holistic approach to well being to explore the opportunities and liberties that a human needs in order to actualise their personhood. The chapter has also tried to understand the transgender movement through a feminist perspective. Till the first half of 2018, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was the glue binding together the various factions of the LGBTIQHKA+ community but with 377 being struck down by the supreme court of India on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2018 that glue had ceased to exist. With the rise of right wing forces in India, the transgender movement stands at a critical juncture today. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 and Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules 2020 are considered to be laws that have not understood trans-identities and liveabilities. These laws have introduced a screening committee to verify the authenticity of the subjective transgender experience of an individual. This is completely against the spirit of the NALSA judgment of 2014. In light of these developments the thesis has tried to look at the movement in its present form. Where is the movement going? Is it being appropriated by majoritarian forces? What is the 'marriage question' telling us about the movement? Is it the initiation of

homo-normativisation? Is the movement losing its cutting edge? What is the future of this movement? These are some of the questions the last chapter has tried to answer. The chapter and the thesis end with a section on transfeminism. It is my understanding from this study that the transgender movement needs to have a feminist understanding of sex, gender and sexuality to thrive and make progress and the feminist movement also needs to understand and appreciate the transgender experience for broadening its understanding of 'woman' as the central subject of feminism. I have also introduced a new concept of 'gender creativity' that has emerged from the narratives of my respondents which talks about creating one's own gender. The chapter also touches upon 'trans non-binary' as identities or non/not-identities in the trans-spectrum which could open up new possibilities.

Through this research the search for identities and experiences opened a whole new range of options, ideas and possibilities. Body essentialism is there, but there seems to be an effort to transcend beyond the body. The urge for changing the body might not always come from a feeling of incompleteness or to satisfy the partner but as has been observed in the study, some of the transfeminine persons want to go for hormone therapy or breast augmentation just because they want to adorn their bodies, to look beautiful. Some crave for a new body in sync with their mind and for them SRS is the answer and some do not want to change their body but want to ornament and fashion it to look beautiful and in harmony with their preferred gender while others treat their existence as distinct and different and consider themselves neither male or female, nor a transfeminine or a transmasculine person but a 'transgender' person. Thus the 'queer movement' breaks gender stereotypes and opens not only a range of gender identities but a range of bodies or trans-bodies thereby breaking biological stereotypes. Here I would like to reiterate that the most important aspect of a person's life is 'self expression', the way the person wants to see the self and communicate it to others. Sexuality and gender expression is one's basic right for living a healthy and happy life and for mobilising the human mind to disapprove the concepts of what is 'natural and normal' and to disrupt the heteronormative systems of sex, gender, and sexuality providing greater possibilities for individual liberty and social understanding. Each individual that I have talked with is a 'creator', creating and claiming their identities and challenging the iron clad compartment of heteropatriarchy. With this immense possibility in mind the thesis raised the sail in search of the multiplicity of experiences, negotiations and expressions, beyond the man-woman binary, forming a rainbow of polymorphous bodies, genders and desires and opening up multiple ways to construct and reconstruct one's gender and therefore one's sex.

### **Research findings: ‘Gender’ as experienced and perceived by the trans-individuals**

Taking all the sixty narratives together I have tried to conceptualise the stages of gendering the ‘self’ in the lives of both the transmasculine and transfeminine persons as below:

- Conform–Trying to fit into the mould by conforming to the societal norms. This happens mainly in the initial part of the process.
- Reform–There have been narrations where the transgender individual said that he tries to become the ‘good boy’ of the family, fulfilling the need for a son.
- Transform–Transform comes at the end when the individual either wants to transform through bodily transition with the aim to match their preferred gender identity or transformation through taking and performing the preferred role or transformation by exploring one’s sexuality. Experiencing the processes separately or taken together one experiences peace with or without alienation.
- Revolt–In this research I have interviewed all self-identified trans-individuals. So it can be said that they have already walked the path of self discovery. Surfing through the narratives one common thing that surfaces is that each one of them had to go through conflict and chaos, and offered resistance sometimes passive, sometimes active, creating ripples of subversion, revolting against social gender stereotypes and travelling beyond it in order to create one’s own space.

The lived experiences of my respondents synthesise stories of ‘creation’ over ‘control’. All the above mentioned phases speak to each other in an effort to creating newer frames of reference. The journey is to create and claim spaces that have until now been controlled by the cis-het<sup>5</sup> hegemony. When we are talking about the lives of the transgender persons it is evidenced that they (here my respondents) are walking on the path of a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’ but their expression enriches the spectrum of ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ by defocusing the essentialist relation between sex and gender, by changing each of the axes, mixing and matching attributes and crafting out their lives defined by their gender as they perceive and visualise.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cisgender heterosexual

## The Politics of Transgender

Two phenomena of significance occur with the advent of a new language in the form of the word ‘transgender’. The first is the shift in focus from sexuality to gender as identities such as *kothi*<sup>6</sup> and *dhurani*<sup>7</sup> was always in relation to their sexual role and sexual acts with reference to their male counterparts – the *parikhs*<sup>8</sup>. The second phenomenon was that it provided much needed language for FtM (Female to Male) individuals who were till then subsumed under identities such as tomboy and butch. Some of the individuals previously identified as effeminate males or the ‘*Kothis*’ got a new word to express themselves through the expression ‘transfeminine’, while the butch identified individuals in the lesbian butch-femme relationship got expression through the ‘transmasculine’ category. The term ‘transgender’ addressed this vacuum in the vocabulary in understanding, owning up and representing the ‘self’ according to one’s desire and preference.

Another way of looking at trans-visibility would be to do so through the feminist lens. Though the masculine spaces feel threatened by the presence of the transmasculine individuals claiming that space, it is still considered acceptable as the ‘girl’ child who wants to be a ‘boy’ it is considered as climbing the social ladder. But in this patriarchal society where a woman is always the ‘second sex’ the situation of a transfeminine person becomes doubly stigmatised. The preferred life that they want to live is considered a threat to the patriarchal society as it is seen as a ‘fall’ from the social status that they are given on the basis of the ‘male body’ that they are born with.

Another interesting factor surfaced when Suhani a transfemale activist, actor and leader said<sup>9</sup>,

The way I identify myself is totally my experience of continuous becoming. I am a confident person. I can claim my rights and talk on behalf of myself. I feel that this confidence has come from my childhood experience of being nurtured as a boy. As a boy you get that social privilege of having the best food and having the freedom of exploring yourself. This is still true in village areas, where women are not given much importance; men are the most important part of the society. So I have grown up with all those privileges.

---

<sup>6</sup>Kothi is a South Asian term for feminine male assigned persons who may or may not like to be identified as transwoman. Kothis do not form separate community like the ‘hijra’ community, but some of them might join the clan as a profession and for experiencing belongingness (Source: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>, accessed on 13.12.20)

<sup>7</sup> In “*ulti*”, the language used by the *Hijras*, “*Dhurani*” is another term for *Kothi* who are “effeminate males” who engage in “*dhurpitti*” or sex work with the “*parikh*” or the male partner in the role of the person being penetrated.

<sup>8</sup> Partners of *Kothis* or feminine males

<sup>9</sup> Interview taken on

This social privilege a transfeminine person is born with is often not available to any person assigned female at birth, thus making the situation for transmasculine persons more difficult. The absence of this social privilege often delays the process of coming out and taking part in the larger movement for transmasculine individuals, the whole discourse around transgender lived experiences is dictated by patriarchy. Research respondents Avay<sup>10</sup> and Ayan<sup>11</sup> said that when transmasculine individuals opt for SRS and get their desired body, the family often accepts and even supports them as it is considered an ‘upliftment’ of status, an elevation of some sort in life. But when a transfeminine person changes her body and gets her desired feminine body, she faces tremendous opposition and stigma. This is like a fall from a position of privilege. The family expects a transfeminine person to bring a bride for the family, which never happens. Due to the hetero-normative system of control ‘masculinity’ is always considered to be better and higher, as a result the transmasculine individuals often get acceptance from the family, as claiming to live the life of a ‘man’ is a promotion from a socially lower position of a woman. 61% of the narratives from the transmasculine interviews are stories of acceptance and integration of a transmasculine person in the family after initial confrontation and rejection. From the research interviews it has surfaced that to a large extent, this acceptance and reconciliation is due to the preference of their parents for a male child. Another fact that emerged from the discussion was the preference of the transmasculine persons to get married or start their own household with a live in partner.

## **Gender Creativity**

I want a good teen age life. I want a happy teen age. I am creating my gender in my own way. I want my near and dear ones to understand me and accept me as I am. I want them to support me in my effort of creating my identity.

This is the candid sharing of Arjo<sup>12</sup>, who is 18 years old, bright and confident. Arjo is a transmasculine person residing in Kolkata and is about to start college. Arjo’s narration pushed me to think about gender as an act of ‘creativity’. We talk about gender performativity, where we always refer to the binary gender system and following Butler, we tend to understand gender as an array of stylised repetition of acts. Performativity constructs a subject; performance of a role creates a subject. There are radical possibilities in one hand

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview taken on 22.06.18 in North 24 parganas

<sup>11</sup> Interview taken on 01.03.19 in Kolkata

<sup>12</sup> Interview taken on 21.06.21 in Kolkata



but on the other hand it is limiting because of the limitation of available boxes of identities. Sex is not what lies between two legs or in the chromosomes; it is actually how the person is constructing the 'self' as a social being. Gendering and sexing is a construction process.

Though 'performativity' talks about following the binarised gendered acts still this performativity can also become subversive by confusing patriarchy. Patriarchy is focused on fixing down or pinning down one meaning, but when performing certain gendered activities is done with a body to which it is not accustomed – patriarchy gets confused. Because patriarchy cannot be sure about whether the person who is performing the gendered acts with a body which is not used to it is paying tribute to that gender that they are performing or making fun of it. But now as I am trying to conceptualise 'gender creativity' the very act of creating one's own gender identity in one's own way, with one's own understanding of who they are patriarchy is not only confused but also destabilised. Patriarchy based on the binary system of gender comes face to face with a whole spectrum of identities and expressions with no fixed extremities but an open, ever changing and ever evolving space where the gender identities and expressions interact, interweave, inter align, interface with each other creating spectrums without any fixed poles, the act of 'creativity' interplays in between and also go beyond any fixed locations understood as the two extreme points of a linear spectrum. Gender creativity also talks about spectrum but not a linear one. It takes different shapes, it creates different forms, it dissolves, it multiplies and it spreads across. Gender Creativity talks about the agential role of the individual human being which has the potential to transition, transform and also transcendence. On the one hand the acts of creating gender are done upon the 'sense of self' that each of my respondents has talked about, on the other it can also be said that through the acts of creating gender individuals get to identify and understand their 'sense of self' more intensely as well. Yet again each individual plays multiple roles in multiple contexts and with each and every role and each and every context their identities get created and recreated. Somewhere it is their activist identities, somewhere they talk about their lived identities, at places it becomes their sexed identities, yet at some other places it becomes their workplace identities. In each context, each individual continues to create their identities on the basis of the nature of their interaction with the environment. There are discursive shifts in each of the steps of identity(ies) building through creating one's own gender.

But even when gender as a social construct is challenged by the transgender experience, it is influenced by the existing binary frame of reference and the constructed notions of beauty

and aesthetics that are associated in the two available genders that the transgender individual has to choose from. So the transgender narratives of subversion resisting patriarchal gender constructs are becoming limited, restricted by the patriarchal frame of reference. While the current Gender Affirmative Therapy (GAT) protocol that starts with psychiatric evaluation and certification, followed by HRT and phased 'top / bottom' surgeries are becoming a part of the lucrative 'gender trade' minting 'pink money'<sup>13</sup> which is bolstered by the current Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 with gate-keeping and final approval of gender by the state, there are a multitude of stories of subversion that challenge this binary structure. There are stories of polymorphous bodies and identities shaped by desires that are dynamic and fluid, stories of individuals that adopt the transgender identity as a politics of their lives where 'personal is political'.

### **Capabilities, liveabilities and livelihood**

In this thesis I take the opportunity to discuss the three significant capabilities, education, health and income as propounded by Prof. Amartya Sen. These three capabilities are directly linked to liveabilities and the discussion on education and health is directly linked to livelihood. A good education opens up a range of livelihood possibilities. Health, both physical and mental health are also linked to livelihood. Good health improves the productivity of an individual which in turn generates income which again ensures health (both physical and mental) and wellbeing thereby completing the cycle. Mental health being a significant marker of 'good health' it becomes instrumental in the lives of the trans-individuals as well. As overlapping social, cultural, legal and economic factors contribute to pushing the transgender individuals to the margins (Campuzono 2008) the discussion on the capabilities that they might develop or acquire become important. Absence of capabilities restricts them from developing family associations, whether families by birth or families they create (preferred family) and societal membership (larger society or community support group). As a result they tend to drop out of education, have limited employment opportunities and even if they are employed, face discrimination at the workplace and encounter several problems in health care facilities as well (Cornwall, 2006).

According to Professor Sen, capability approach sees "human life as a set of 'doings and beings' - we may call them 'functionings'- and it relates the evaluation of the quality of life to

---

<sup>13</sup> Pink money refers to the purchasing power of the LGBT community.

the assessment of the capability to function” (Sen 1993: 43). Following this approach the focus is on the freedom of people to be and to do and not on what they can consume or on their incomes...thus the capability approach has enormous potential for addressing feminist concerns and questions (Robeyns 2003: 62). According to Professor Sen, development is the process to improve the quality of human life and the central process of this development should be the expansion of human capabilities which in turn translates to the expansion of real freedom that humans should enjoy to pursue the way of life they have reason to value. So expansion of capabilities gives us the freedom to be what we want and to do what we want to do. The kind of capabilities determines the kind of freedom we can have. Hence the ‘capabilities approach’ has been borrowed as the theoretical basis for understanding the liveabilities of the transindividuals. Translives start with social obstacles from the moment a transgender person identifies and expresses her/his/their preferred gender and questions the assigned gender at birth. She/he/they starts being discriminated, humiliated and ostracized for not conforming to the binary sex-gender construct and thus begins the onset of ‘limiting capabilities’, thus the thesis has made an effort to find out whether the transgender individuals receive equal opportunities with regard to their livelihood or whether they are forced to make gendered livelihood choices. Here capabilities become significant without which, rights cannot be exercised properly. Right to free and primary education is a right for all, but for the transgender people even if there are government schools for actualising this right, education as a capability cannot be always identified due to lack of awareness about trans-issues, discrimination, invisibilization and bullying in school. All the fundamental rights as defined in our constitution i.e. right to equality, right to freedom, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights, right to property and right to constitutional remedies can only materialise if individuals can have the opportunity to develop their capabilities. Capabilities influence liveabilities and livelihood being one of the central capabilities assumes great significance in this thesis.

On the basis of the research findings from this thesis, it can be said that the variety of job experiences is more in case of transfeminine individuals than the transmasculine ones. The transmasculine individuals are either engaged in formal sector or they are self employed. One striking finding that has surfaced is that among the transmasculine individuals 11.11% are students and 22.22% are jobless at the time of the interview. But not a single transfeminine person that the study came across is jobless and there were no students in the transfeminine population of this study. The transfeminine individuals are involved in different professions

starting from development sector to beauty sector and entertainment industry. The range is wide and varied. As far as income is concerned 11.1% of transmasculine respondents and 12.1% of transfeminine respondents do not have a stable income. Among the transmasculine individuals those who are earning between Rs. 20,000 to 25,000 are from the organised sector. 22.22% of the respondents in this group are associated with corporate sector or government institution. One respondent is self employed having his own coaching class. The experience differed in the transfeminine narratives. All the individuals in the higher earning group, i.e. the range being Rs. 20,000 to 25,000 are all self employed, 18.18% belong to this group. The transfeminine individuals in this group are graduates with only one individual with a post graduation degree and one having studied till Class XII, whereas in the transmasculine group the respondents were all graduates and post graduates with one individual pursuing his PhD. Percentage of respondents from the lower earning group is 54.54% in case of the transfeminine individuals and 22.22% in case of the transmasculine individuals. This difference is quite striking.

Corporate HR policies in many private sector companies have changed in the last few years and have become queer-inclusive. As Parmesh Shahani, head of Godrej India Culture Lab during the occasion of the launch of ‘A Manifesto For Trans Inclusion In The Indian Workplace’, mentioned that, “If your company is not inclusive, it will wither away and die,”<sup>14</sup> At present big corporate names like Godrej, TATA Steel, Infosys, Lalit Sri Hospital, Medica Superspeciality Hospital, Intel, Wipro, Deloitte, Capgemini, IBM, Cognizant, Tech Mahindra, Wipro have their queer friendly policy in place. A report written by Perna Sindwani said, India has nearly 5% to 10% queer employees in its workforce. Over half of them have reported discrimination at work. The 2016 World Bank report suggests that India recorded a loss of \$32 billion due to homophobia<sup>15</sup>. All these reports paved the way towards positive inclusion. From the narratives it surfaced that many trans-individuals are now being able to undergo Gender Affirmative Therapy after actually going and talking to their superiors, HR personnel and they are able to retain their jobs. This is true for those who did not come out before and are transitioning now after a very long time. So, somewhere there is a change, acceptance is building up but it is a long way to go. This awareness has only grown with time. Companies like TCS, Deloitte, Salesforce, Intel. IBM, Infosys, HSBC,

---

<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/iRTcQo4LtMIBgg5orMnG3I/The-year-of-transfriendly-workplaces.html> ( accessed on 24.04.21)

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.businessinsider.in/careers/news/tata-steel-joins-the-small-but-growing-list-of-companies-like-accenture-capgemini-which-are-lgbt-friendly/articleshow/72454325.cms> (accessed on 24.04.21)

Wipro, Tech Mahindra and Tata Steel are leading the way on creating trans-inclusive work spaces. However, as many of the respondents said during the respondent's meet on 30. 01. 2022, most of these changes are tokenistic. Even if such policies exist on paper, there is no sensitisation of corporate employees and very little understanding of the issue. Transgender individuals continue to face discrimination and humiliation in these offices. The concept of collegiality becomes significant here. In work-spaces where the individual is questioned for being the way she/he/they are disrupts the feeling of collegiality and alienates the individual. Use of the washroom and absence of unisex toilets still remains an area of concern. Many offices which have such policies for fresh employment are asking for transgender certificates obtaining which is a very complex process and remains yet to be streamlined.

However as public sector organisations are owned by the government, run by the government and operated with money raised from public taxes, these organisations are bound to abide by government policies and frameworks. The framework here for transgender individuals is built around the Supreme Court judgments of 2014 (NALSA), 2017 (Right to Privacy) and 2018 (decriminalising homosexuality) and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019. The strength of this framework gives the transgender individuals job security in the public sector. Whether happily or not the co-workers and authorities are bound to accept them as a part of their work force without discriminating against them. 6.67% among the 60 transgender respondents in this study are working in the public sector and are not under the constant threat of losing their job. But in the private sector the situation is different. There is always the threat of being fired and this threat of losing one's job and livelihood looms much larger over the transgender individuals.

Due to the ever judgmental social environment the absence of any mention of job related reservation in the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 and the crisis created due to the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown the concept of community livelihood has become the need of the hour.

In such a scenario resources for imparting vocation training, soft skills training, job referral, career counselling is much needed. Self employment, community livelihood and falling back on traditional livelihood such as begging, seasonal dancing, blessing in marriages and childbirth and sex work provide means of employment and means of survival for trans-individuals.

## **Movement and the discourse around transfeminism**

One of the important findings of my study has been the lack of awareness of trans-issues in NGOs working with areas concerning human rights, mental health, gender based violence, trafficking etcetera. There is also a significant lacuna in building empathy and understanding about trans-individuals. Many feminist organisations still grapple with the concept of transgender being a spectrum of gender categories. They feel uncomfortable and unsure specifically about the transfeminine issues. Ironically the marker / signifier of a woman continues to be the vagina. In the respondent's meet conducted on 30.01.2022 for sharing my research findings with my respondents, one of my transfeminine respondents Jhora<sup>16</sup> (42 years, North 24 Parganas) who had recently been sexually abused and faced harassment and was blamed for being a transwoman at the local police station said, "I went on facebook live and appealed for help on social media. If what happened to me had occurred with a cis-woman do you think the response would have been the same? None of the feminist organisations have come forward and taken up my cause." In the case of a transfeminine respondent who had come to my chamber for counselling, she shared that she was facing domestic violence by her natal family members and had sought help from a leading feminist organisation working towards preventing gender based violence. They were clueless as to how they could accommodate her and told her that they would get back after reviewing her case and their policy. In a recent online event celebrating 'One Billion Rising'<sup>17</sup>, the Director of a feminist organisation working in the red light district of Kalighat, Kolkata to prevent trafficking, gender based violence and improving the quality of children and youth in these areas said that 14th of February was 'V' day, the day for women, for bodies with vagina. Ironically the OBR 2022 campaign<sup>18</sup> defines women on their website as "Women = cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities that are subject to gender-based violence." The marker for women still remains the vagina and that of a man the penis and this brings us to the ongoing raging debate of 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism' (TERF). The roots of TERF originated in the late 2000s and its origin lay in the 1970s divide among radical feminists along the lines of those who wanted to include transwomen in feminist spaces and those who didn't like Janice Raymons and Sheila Jeffreys. The fire has been rekindled with two recent statements, the first being a tweet by J. K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter in June, 2020 and the second being a statement at a workshop in May, 2021 by noted feminist poet and activist Kamla Bhasin both of

---

<sup>16</sup> Jhora, shared her experience during the respondents meet on Google meet on 30. 01. 2022

<sup>17</sup> One Billion Rising is a global campaign started in 2012, founded by Eve Ensler to end rape and sexual violence against women.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign/> (accessed on 15.02.2022)

which were considered transphobic. The Rowling tweet was as follows: *'People who menstruate.'* *I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud? Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate.*" Clips of Kamla Bhasin's statement from a workshop named 'Artivism 101: Sangat's Creative Workshop' were widely circulated on social media. In her statement she expressed her dislike towards the 'stupid', 'girlish' games of her childhood and the way her brother danced, stitched her *salwar kameez* and played with dolls. It was followed by a very casual remark on transgender identities, dalit and ecological activism. It was considered derogatory and dehumanised the struggles of large number of identities and feminist movements centred around dalit, trans and ecological issues. Bhasin spoke "If there is feminism, then it is against patriarchy. After that there's transgender [issues], there's ecological [issues], but that's different. But feminism and gender and patriarchy are limited to the notion of male, female and gender." The above statements not only exclude transwomen but also cis-women who may not share experiences such as menstruation thereby creating an ableist notion of woman based on biological essentialism. This once again reiterates what many feminists have been saying all along that the feminist spaces in India have always been occupied by upper caste, upper class, cis-gendered women. It dilutes the struggle of transgender and dalit movement and the politics of their language, expression and practices. It sparked of a signature campaign by feminist collectives condemning her statement. The current Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 is just a logical extension of this phallogocentric biological essentialism that constructs notions of man and woman based on biological markers and is now trying to streamline the trans-movement to fit into the heteropatriarchal man-woman binary social structure. Kamla Bhasin's last post on instagram is as follows:

I would like to unconditionally apologize for hurting the feelings and sentiments of many people. We come from diverse locations of caste, disability, sexual orientation, genders, race and class and I believe in sensitivity, recognition and respect for the diversity and multiplicity of feminisms. Feminism to me is about continuous learning and listening to each and every person. I will not try to explain the clips being circulated, but rather step back, reflect, learn and understand.

Kamla Bhasin sums up the debate beautifully by acknowledging the plurality of feminism, that there can be many feminisms complementing each other and the essence of feminism lies in the multiplicity of voices allowing space for the most marginalised to find expression. Perhaps Bhasin in her last post shows us the way forward.

### **The debate around marriage**

Another raging debate that seems to have split the community and the trans-movement is the debate and rift within the community critiquing the appropriation of the Queer movement by right wing and patriarchal institutions like marriage that are considered regressive and threaten the very fundamental core of the movement based on feminist ideology. The community is being fractured on the lines of pro-marriage and anti-marriage fronts as if the State is waiting with open arms acknowledging same sex relations and approving same sex marriage as well. On the contrary the state seems to be fighting it tooth and nail. The stance of the Union Government of India is very clear, "Homosexuality has nothing to do with same-sex marriages and a valid marriage can only take place between a biological man and a biological woman."<sup>19</sup>

That homosexuality has nothing to do, here at this point there is a tug of war between capitalism and patriarchy which otherwise walk hand in hand. Patriarchy condemns same sex marriage for breaking the sex gender unilinear principle which ultimately leads to procreation and a repetition and re-enactment of the patriarchal family structure as such an union between individuals would not being able to produce children. Capitalism however tends to take a different stance as marriage as an institution feeds capitalism by creating potential consumers. As far as the stance of the Union Government is concerned there is no scope for a transfeminine or transmasculine persons to get their marriage recognised by the state. This implies that they need to become 'man' or 'woman' by opting sex reassignment surgery and legal document change. From these perspectives it seems that the State has no space for the rights of individuals of marginalised gender and sexual identity to get married as long as they do not fit into the opposite binary boxes that have existed for eons. One of the transmasculine respondents pointed out in the FGD, "The merits and de-merits of marriage can be debated, the institution can be critiqued but why shouldn't we have the option to marry and enjoy the benefits to spouses, be it in terms of loans, accounts, insurances, mediclaim, jobs and inheritance that is available to cis-het individuals. Why shouldn't the choice be available to a transgender individual?"

---

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/samesex-marriage-plea-only-marriage-between-man-woman-valid-says-centre-in-delhi-high-court-101635188830742.html> (accessed on 15.01.2022)



## Challenging the Cis-tem - The road ahead

My PhD thesis started in 2016 when the trans-movement was picking up momentum in Kolkata. It gave a new language and a new identity to many individuals who were uncomfortable being identified in the heteronormative language on the basis of their sexual preference as *Kothi* or 'Butch'. Transgender gave them the language needed to express their inner feelings, desires and sense of who they really were, interacting with societal gender norms creating an identity out of the interplay between individual sense of self and relational self hood. Towards the end of my thesis at the end of a pandemic and lockdown that brought life to a standstill there seems to be a new language and a new identity emerging in the horizon - the language of 'Trans Non-binary'. I recently came across a post (dated 23 April at 22:58) on the facebook page of my friend Dr. Bhaskar Das,<sup>20</sup> medical practitioner from R.G. Kar Medical College identifying as Trans Non-binary. The post goes like, "Well, I thought Coming out was a one-time thing. But here we are. Trans Non-Binary ':-)'" The post was accompanied by the image of the 'Nonbinary Trans Flag'. The Trans Non-binary flag that was posted by Bhaskar on facebook seems to be an amalgamation of the transgender flag of Monica Helms and the non-binary flag designed by Kyle Rowan. There is mention of this flag at <https://cadehildreth.com/nonbinary-trans-flag/> posted by Cade Hildreth on 1st March, 2022. This flag has six stripes containing six colours - blue at the top, followed by pink, yellow, white, purple and black. Apart from the traditional male and female colours of blue and pink, it has yellow representing people falling outside the binary, white representing people with all or many genders and black at the bottom representing people who identify as being without a gender. As a queer affirmative counsellor, I can state from my personal counselling experience that many of my clients now identify as non-binary or trans non-binary. They do not identify with the feeling of being 'trapped in a wrong body' and look at their bodies as being different and not fitting within the biologically deterministic social structure of male and female. It is a body in transition but a body that is 'non-binary' or 'not-binary'. During a telephonic interview Dr. Bhaskar Das,<sup>21</sup> said,

Trans and non-binary were two terms that came to me separately. When I studied chemistry I came to know about the 4 bonding arms of the carbon atom. If two similar molecules are attached to the same side of two arms of the carbon atom it is known as a cis molecule and if different molecules are attached to the two sides we call it a trans molecule. It's like not aligning to the other self, when your biological sex or assigned sex isn't synchronised with your inner sexuality and self. So all identities that challenge the binary system or 'cis-tem' is trans. If I'm not 'cis', that is my gender assigned at birth and my sense of gender are not in alignment it

---

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bhaskar.flywithme> (accessed on 03.05.22)

<sup>21</sup> Interview on 07.05.22 (telephonic interview)

means I am not 'cis', I am 'trans'. The 'trans' identity seems to be now reinforcing the binary as in transman and transwoman, transmale and transfemale, transmasculine and transfeminine. But there are so many identities outside this 'trans-binary' like gender queer, intersex, gender fluid, gender non-conforming which are also 'trans' since they challenge the 'cis-tem'. So where do I place them because they are not cisgender and that is where trans non-binary comes in. So as we progress, as psychology and psychiatry, DSM-V... we are understanding that all these terms can come under the 'trans' configuration so many people now say I am not 'trans', I am 'trans non-binary'. That is how I feel comfortable in identifying myself

Their affirmation of Trans Non-binary is in the non-recognisability of their body and their identity within the domain of the heteronormative and even non-normative social structure. Whether this Trans Non-binary space carved out of the niche 'in-between transness', is gender creativity creating new shapes, forms and frames of references or just another box only time will tell and could perhaps become the scope of future research.

In the concluding part of my thesis, coming back to performativity, precarity and liveability, I have tried to bind all of these factors together through the lens of central capabilities as propounded by Martha C. Nussbaum. We are talking about human lives and liveabilities which cannot be understood by GDP figures only. To appreciate it we need to have a subjective approach for determining what these lives are actually being able to 'do' and to 'be' (Nussbaum, 2011). This resonates with the ways the thesis has tried to look at 'gender' through the 'beings' and 'doings' of the transgender individuals. In order to comprehend the liveabilities of the trans-individuals the exploration of their capabilities gives us a vast framework for policy formulation and social reform. All through the thesis I have used the plural forms of the key words like, genders, sexualities, roles, lived experiences, liveabilities, capabilities in order to emphasise that the most important elements of people's quality of life are plural and qualitatively distinct (Nussbaum, 2011:18). The capabilities are a set of opportunities and substantial freedom seen from the human development approach in order to maximise the quality of life and maintain the standard of basic justice. Whether people will use it or not depends on individual discretion. The choice is theirs. The capabilities approach respects each individual's power of self-definition. It resonates with the NALSA Judgment where self declaration of gender identity has been promoted for all. But here the context becomes equally important. An individual must have an enabling environment for exercising their agency. The external context, i.e. the social, economic, familial and political environment becomes important. In the absence of tolerance and acceptance, capability failure occurs due to discrimination and marginalisation (Nussbaum, 2011). Through reading

the trans-narratives, experiences of discrimination and abuse surface again and again indicating the abysmal situation of basic justice in our country. It is not only about the trans-experiences, whoever is 'different', whoever is not aligned to the patriarchal social order, whoever is asking for their rights, whoever is talking about variance, it is all about them, it is all about their quality of life. The more the variations surface, the more the majoritarian discourse loses its dominance and hence more the suppression of the non-normative ways of lives in order to maintain the status quo. What finally matters is to be able to live a life to its fullest with physical and mental well-being, freedom of choice and expression (including gender and sexual expression) without fear of violence and oppression. To be free to imagine, think and create and have full artistic, political and religious expression and to love and be loved according to one's needs and desires. To have critical thinking that brings about intellectual courage to question and challenge belief systems, to have the intellectual empathy to understand and feel the thoughts and feelings of others. To treat others and be treated with respect and dignity without any discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, caste, religion and nationality. To live in harmony with plants, animals and nature and to laugh, play and enjoy life. All are equal in importance, distinct in quality, yet interacting and interplaying with each other. This is all about 'personhood' that needs to be honoured. It is human living that we are talking about. Martha Nussbaum talks about good human living by bringing it to the political discourse, making it a moral basis of minimum constitutional guarantee.

Thus relationships between gender and sexualities are related, dynamic and multifarious. I have concluded my thesis critiquing my own study where I have also succumbed to the existing binary social structure by fitting the rich narratives of my respondents into two boxes - Transmasculine and Transfeminine. This has made me wonder that as the thick multilayered narratives talk about gender creativity, could my study not have gone beyond the gender boxes and envisaged an agendered world where gender is not an identity but just an expression. Richardson (2015:31) used the shoreline metaphor and talks about the relationship between land and sea creating 'patterned fluidities' explaining complex accounts of how genders and sexualities are related to each other and how identities are created and dissolved in a continuing process. Feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* has talked about 'borderland' (Anzaldúa, 1987) an indefinite, hazy space, a space in constant transition. This borderland is also ever changing and the *'in-between'* of my thesis is perhaps such a space carved out by each and every one of my sixty respondents.

## References:

### Books and Journals:

1. Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*.
2. Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture*. routledge.
3. Butalia, U. (2017). *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Penguin UK.
4. Butler, J. (1986). Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. *Yale French Studies*, (72), 35-49.
5. Butler, Bodies That Matter (1993). On the Discursive Limits of "Sex". *New York*, 38.
6. Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (10th Anniversary Edition). *New York and London: Routledge*.
7. Campuzano, G. (2008). Building identity while managing disadvantage: Peruvian transgender issues.
8. Chettiar, A. (2015). Problems faced by Hijras (male to female transgenders) in Mumbai with reference to their health and harassment by the police. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 5(9), 752.
9. Connell, C. (2010). Doing, undoing, or redoing gender? Learning from the workplace experiences of transpeople. *Gender & Society*, 24(1), 31-55.
10. Cornwall, A. (2006). Marginalisation by sexuality: report of an IDS workshop. *Gender & Development*, 14(2), 273-289.
11. Harding, S. G. (Ed.). (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies*. Psychology Press.
12. Lucas, S. D. (2016). The primacy of narrative agency: A feminist theory of the self.
13. Nussbaum, M. C., & Capabilities, C. (2011). The human development approach. *Creating capabilities*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard.
14. Reinharz, S., & Davidman, L. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. Oxford University Press.
15. Richardson, D. (2015). Conceptualising gender. *Introducing gender and women's studies*, 4.
16. Robeyns, I. (2003). Sen's capability approach and gender inequality: selecting relevant capabilities. *Feminist economics*, 9(2-3), 61-92.
17. Sen, A. (2003). Development as capability expansion. *Readings in human development*.

18. West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & society*, 1(2), 125-151.

Internet sources:

1. [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras\\_transgender\\_in\\_india\\_hiv\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_social\\_exclusion.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras_transgender_in_india_hiv_human_rights_and_social_exclusion.pdf) (accessed on 14.09.18)
2. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria> (accessed on 13.12.20)
3. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/samesex-marriage-plea-only-marriage-between-man-woman-valid-says-centre-in-delhi-high-court-101635188830742.html> (accessed on 15.01.2022)
4. <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/iRTcQo4LtMlBgg5orMnG3I/The-year-of-transfriendly-workplaces.html> (accessed on 24.04.21)
5. <https://www.businessinsider.in/careers/news/tata-steel-joins-the-small-but-growing-list-of-companies-like-accenture-capgemini-which-are-lgbt-friendly/articleshow/72454325.cms> (accessed on 24.04.21)
6. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria> (accessed on 13.12.20)