

Cultural Implications and The Transgender Community- Remarks on The Role of Jalsa for Visibility

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Abstract:

Religion and beliefs play a role in shaping the primary human character. Due to genetic differences and hormonal imbalances, the female gender expression in the male body and the male gender expression in the female body return to their true essence over time. Family and society are alienated when they shift their gender identity through surgery. Religion is also taking a step back from the community most of the time. The transgender community believes in their single faith and moves forward with it. Transgender people practice their rituals named Haladi Mehendi and jalsa when they transform into another gender identity through gender reassignment surgery, from male to female. Constructed thoughts like femininity only towards women and masculinity only towards men, what would be the expressive status of transgenders? Being a part of many celebrations, Kerala excludes the transgender community from many, but they have some rituals and celebrations of their own. The present paper assesses the role of jalsa rituals in a transgender-closed community and to what extent the jalsa ritual liberates transgender communities from excluding other religious ceremonies.

Keywords: Jalsa, Religion, SRS, Exclusion, Binary Construction

Introduction

Culture always plays a crucial role in our social lives. It denotes shaping our social relationships, maintaining and challenging social order, how we put a sense of the world and place in it, and also boosting our everyday actions and experiences in society. Culture is the duo of material and non-material things as well. In social settings, it usually represents their way of life. Performing a cultural ceremony also involves sharing values, knowledge, and experiences with people. Every community has its cultural traditions for sharing its expertise and values. Society changed its values and traditional practices according to its needs and developments. But the core functions of culture continue to exist in their old form. Every culture has defined specific gender roles assigned to males and females. While males are expected to work hard and look after their families, females are expected to provide nurture and care. However, apart from dividing the gender roles for males and females, almost every culture ignores other diverse genders in society other than males and females.

‘Transgender’ is an umbrella term used to denote individuals whose gender identity or gender expression does not adhere to the naturally associated sex to which they were assigned at birth. Transgender people suffer from categorizing gender into generally accepted traits of masculinity and femininity since it makes

it difficult or nearly impossible to categorize them clearly under a single category. The transgender community is very inclusive about its culture and practices very few ceremonies independently. They were ignored in priorities and made their position in their cultural rituals.

Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative framework, the study examines how Haldi Mehandi and jalsa are celebrated in the transgender community of Kerala. The paper is an outcome of participant observation by the researcher in the transgender community's Jalsa ritual. The study explains the importance of jalsa celebration after sex reassignment surgery. Participant observation helps to understand the cultural environment in a given group and greater credibility to interpret the observations. Here researcher is trying to understand their attitude towards rituals and practices of the transgender community in Kerala. The paper examines why other mainstream religions exclude the transgender community from their ways and ceremonies.

Culture, Festivals, and Entertainment

Transgenders have their own subcultural identities that they enculture through their socialization process. It is distinguishable and powerful enough to build an intimate bond between them. They can be traced from customs, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, etc. The transgender community follows a different type of habitat and system that may not be digested by mainstream society. These strict habits lead them on their way. Caste and religion never become a matter of discussion in this community. There is no consideration of financial and community status among them, but they have their rituals, customs, festivals, and entertainment.

Koothandava Temple and Koovagam Festival

The festival in koothandava temple is the biggest celebration of transgender life. 'Iravan' is the idol of the koothandava temple, which is situated in the *koovagam* village, which is near Villupuram in Tamil Nādu. Almost all transgenders in south India come to this temple every year on chithrapournamy day in April and May to be part of this festival, and villagers welcome them wholeheartedly. The festival is based on the story of Iravan, a character in Mahabharata. Iravan is the son of Arjuna and the serpent goddess *uloopi*. He was sacrificed for the victory of the Pandavas. Iravan's dying wish was that he have a wife for at least one day. Since no one wanted to become a widow immediately after the marriage, the lord Krishna transformed into Mohini and married *iravan*. Iravan is called aravan in Tamil Nādu. Hence transgenders are also known as aravanis (wives of aravans)

The chief priest in the temple supervises the marriage of transgender people who believe they will be the wife of *aravan* and they will be well dressed. Each transgender selects one *iravan* from the village for the first night. After one day of their marital life, they accept their widows. They rub their tilak and break their bangles. It reveals the difficulty of being a widow.

For the koovagam festival, transgenders come from various states in India. There will be Miss Koovagam's completion, seminars, dance programs, etc. During this occasion, transgenders every moment of their participation; even the villagers accept the festival. Finally, they return to their home, hoping to go the following year. The community members unite at the koothanva temple on the worshipping day. This occasion makes a platform for transgenders to meet most transgender community members. Most of them reach on time and participate in the programs.

Kottankulangara Temple and Chamayavilakku

Transgender festivals are conducted in Kerala very rarely. It is a festival for transgender in the kottankulanagara Sridevi temple situated in chavara, kollam. The number of participants in the celebrations is increasing every year. In kottankulanagara, they practice a unique ritual in the history of temples in the Malayalam month of Maenam. Men come in front of the goddess with devotion, dressed as a woman and a lamp in hand.

Arunima, 28. Ernakulam said, “my parents cared and loved me like a girl child. As a dancer by profession, I am blessed to take up the lantern”. Another experience was shared by Seema, who got to take up the lantern ‘ I think I got a chance to take up the lantern because I am transgender”.

Kottankulangara temple gets its name from the offering in that temple, which is the remains we get after squeezing a coconut called kottan in Malayalam. Years ago, some children tried to break a coconut by hitting it on a stone, and blood came from the rock. Then the villagers did puja and realized the ‘Vana Durga’ stayed in that stone. So they made a temporary temple around it and worshipped kids like girls. The belief is that the goddess appeared before them because she got pleased. Men fasting for chamyavilakku will dress up their wives, daughter, and mother. Some come dressed from home, and others will get ready from the temple.

Jalsa and Haldi Mehendi

A king goes to war and ends up in a forest. Then, when he got off the horse, he saw a pool in front of him full of hair. ‘Whose is this?’ as the king asked, a head appeared, and his hair swirled violently. The horse’s genital organ is trimmed with that hair. Then the king’s genital organ is also cut off. The apparition tells the distressed king that ‘ a race like you will again be born here. This is the belief of the concept of the santhoshimatha diety.

Many programs are held in Kerala for the empowerment of the transgender community. The main programs are ‘queer pride. ‘Athletic meet,’ and ‘Dhwayah queen, transgender kalolasavam.’

Queer Pride March

Queer pride Kerala is an independent and non-profitable initiative for the rights and unity of queer and allies in Kerala. The main objectives of the movement are an affirmation of sexual minorities’ rights and dignity, increasing their representation and visibility as a part of society to provide good sexual equity among the public, and assisting sexual minorities in the immediate phases. This group was formed in Kerala to share the historical fate of the Delhi high court in an appeal against IPC 377. Even though only a couple of women are involved in the sexual assumption process and affiliate programs, this community is aimed at political intervention for gender minorities.

People belong the LGBTQIA++ community and allies from all over Kerala gathered in a selected city in Kerala to take part in the pride parade. The pride march invited curious looks from onlookers, but for once, those who walked in the parade stood together without the fear of judgment. The group marched the entire stretch shouting slogans demanding an end to the homophobic activities of society. The eleventh edition of the queer pride organized by the LGBTQIA++ communities was held in Kerala, Kollam district, on 17th and 18th September 2022. It has been held annually across various cities in Kerala, beginning in July 2010 in Thrissur.

Transgender Athletic Meet

While activists of the transgender community are still battling for their rights throughout the nation, Kerala went a step ahead by organizing the first-ever athletic meet. The transgender athletic meet was held at the central stadium in Thiruvananthapuram on 28th April 2017. About 130 athletes from the transgender community participated in the event, which was well appreciated by a good crowd of onlookers (Babu, 2017). There were only six disciplines-100,200 and 400 m sprints and 4*100m relay, shot put, and long jump.

Kerala Transgender Art Festival

The transgender kalolsavam is named 'varnapakittu 2019', the first edition of the state transgender art fest held in Thiruvananthapuram. The festival, organized by the social justice department transgender cell on October 8th and 9th of 2019, has given new hope to the aspiration of many artists from the transgender community in Kerala. The event hosted over 150 transgenders vying for honor in 20 competitions (Manorarama News, 2019). The second transgender kalolsavam was held on September 22nd and 23rd of 2022 at Thiruvananthapuram. 'it is lovely that we have a festival like this happening in Kerala. Members of our community often don't get other venues to perform and present their skills, ' said Druv, an individual champion among transmen (Cris, 2022)

Queen of Dwayah

Kerala has been taking extra measures toward greater inclusivity for the transgender community. Dwayah is a charitable and cultural society conducting the Queen of Dwayah to encourage the fashion sense of the transgender community. They will select a beauty pageant among the participant through proper evaluation. This program has been conducted annually at the CIAL convention center in Nedumabssery in Ernakulam from 2017 onwards.

Rituals and Practices of Haldi Mehendi and Jalsa

Jalsa is a celebration conducted to satisfy the transgender deity Santhoshimatha. It is performed after the transgender sex reassignment surgery. Still, its rituals start before the surgery and are performed once it is over. The jalsa rituals are unique and complicated; only people with proper knowledge can achieve them. The ways of jalsa start with the chanting 'jay jay matha santhoshimatha.'

Once the prayer is over, they will apply turmeric paste all over the body, shower, and do the '*kappu*,' which includes one rupee coin and a nail. They walk barefoot for the surgery after this. They will arrange '*padukka*' using fruits and sweets for the worship they consume afterward. It is considered a '*prasadha*,' an offering by the devotees. They must leave their clothes and other things before surgery as they cannot be used later. After the surgery, once they enter their identified gender, they are supposed to use new materials and clothes.

They must follow a strict 41 days diet with utmost care after their surgery. There are many restrictions on food and daily life, including avoiding face-to-face contact with men, mirrors that keep them from seeing their faces, and pictures of other deities other than santhoshimatha. They have to think only of snathoshimatha. They cannot consume milk, meat, and eggs. Also, they are asked to avoid anything that includes coconut, as it is kept with turmeric to prevent '*drishtidosha* .'As santhoshimatha sits on top of a hen or chicken and should be avoided, they should place this in their head or lap, called '*madikkaya*.

During these 41 days, special baths should be performed at specific intervals. The jalsa is performed on the 41st day after the 11th, 21st, and 31st shower. The 11th shower is performed after the 11th day of surgery once the pain subsides. They use turmeric, acacia concinna, oil, mehndi, boiled water, and 'Ved.' These will be followed in the coming shower. They prepare unique dishes out of mutton, including curry, soup, and so on, which helps boost their physical health.

Jalsa is considered to be an extraordinary moment in their life. It is celebrated once they transform themselves into a woman mentally and biologically. 'Jama-ath'- the celebration starts at ten o'clock in the night and continues till midnight. They follow some of the Islamic traditions and celebrate extensively. The festival includes people from their transgender community known as 'Parivar.' The head of each Parivar and 'chelanathikal' – children and siblings will sit in front and back, respectively.

The elderly 'naik' host the 'reeth' ceremony where they can select their new children. They consider this event an opportunity to discuss and solve their problems and disputes within the community.

They will be visited by the 'soukam Parivar,' which stays opposite them. They will bring a saree placed on the top of the head of the person who underwent surgery and will be later made to sit towards the qibla covering their face. The guest will give gifts by announcing their name and relation to the woman who underwent surgery. 'Gurubhai,' the guardian will take her inside with those gifts. Gurubhai or other older people in the community take the initiative role to conduct the shower because the people who belong to the position of daughters cannot perform it. The eldest naik in the group will apply oil and turmeric first, followed by henna, to the hands. They will also give sweets to her. After that, the rest of the community members can repeat this. The people from the community can join the shower ceremony by pouring hot water into her vagina. They will also pray to avoid the evil eye by giving odd sums of money, which will be later given to the person who takes care of her after the surgery.

They will be made to wear a green dress called a 'jock' after the shower. A green saree, green blouse, and green underwear will be worn. Her Guru gives 'mitti,' anklets, and 'lacha.' Nose pins were also provided. Usually, Guru does not give a sari; instead of that, sisters are the givers. She wears whatever the Guru gives her that day. After that, the pooja continues. A new pot with milk is named after the person who has undergone surgery. Again, she comes after getting dressed and closes her eyes. That eyes will be opened later to see her 'matha.' Then she hides her face, puts the milk pot on her head, and takes a circle three times. They will repel the evil eye with pumpkin, coconut, and lemon. Also, they will do Arathi. After that, she will be taken to the nearest sea in a vehicle and shower with milk. Then she and those gathered around her must have been chanting, '*Jai Jai matha Santhoshimatha.*' They believe they are not supposed to think or speak anything else then. After reaching the sea, puja is performed there, called puja to goddess Ganga. After that, the garland, 'madikkaya' and 'kappu' tied around her hands are all pulverized. It is because they are afraid of evil eyes. After that, she turned around and poured the milk in the pot into the sea, then immediately collected the seawater. After, she will be shown her vagina and clap her hands to remove all the harm. Then they say, 'O God, let my urine flow like the water flowing in the sea' because it means that their bowel movements will not be disrupted after a complex surgery. When he comes back sees a single tree and goes near it and says forgive all her evils before the surgery. Then she exposes her vagina before a black dog, claps her hands as before, and prays for forgiveness. After all that, she reaches home and takes her directly to 'matha' after performing *aarathi*. They don't even open their eyes, only to see the sea, the tree, and the dog. After that, in the puja, the Guru gives 'lacha,' a nuptial knot to her. A guru is a person who holds an important position, mother and husband. Lacha is a nuptial knot with gold balls on a black string. After that, the image of 'matha' is shown through the mirror, and she can pray

whatever she wants. After that, permission is given to see three people of her choice. She is also believed to get one of their excellent traits when she sees them.

After that wears a silk saree and comes as a bride, and continues to participate in the puja. After that, one should close the eyes and take any fruits prepared there. The custom is that they should not be eaten for a year afterward. Then the fruit should be eaten at the next matha puja. It is believed that such fruits are avoided for the sake of sandoshimatha. The day's rituals end with this, and all the guests return.

The yellow string tied on that day should be broken after three days at Ganesh temple or any other temple. On the following days should go to the temple and Dargah. This is basically what jalsa is called.

On the first anniversary of the jalsa or surgery, she again prepares herself as santhoshimatha's bride and performs puja again. The forbidden fruit should be eaten on this day. If there is an intention to perform puja next year, one more fruit can be taken blindfolded, and fasting can be observed. During Varsha puja, they could give sarees and gold to those who cared for and served them. This means that they have to find finance themselves for the entire function. On some occasions, some collect money through fundraising, and others receive it by donation. People in the community donate gold, food, and so on

Some people have not hosted the jalsa due to many problems. Many people say that money is a significant problem. It cannot be ruled out that a massive sum of money goes out of hand after all these ceremonies. But jalsa is not a compulsory thing. Those who do not have faith in God do not perform jalsa.

Discussion and Analysis

Transitioning from gender nonconformity to desired gender is a well-planned and scientific process. The process begins with a psychological assessment, hormonal treatment, and finally, sex reassignment surgery when the individual is ready. Advanced technologies in Sex Reassignment Surgeries in Kerala made a significant turning point for the community. Hormone therapy plays an essential role in gender affirmation. This facility is an easy way for transgender to transition to the desired gender. The modulation of the voice, growth of the moustache and beard, the shift of body fat distribution towards the male, and the development of muscles greatly help a transman to adapt to his desired nature. Similarly, enlargement of the breasts, smooth skin to replace body fat to form feminine curves, and hair growth to replace male pattern baldness help a trans woman achieve the desired feminine role. Hormone therapy after orchiectomy in trans women also plays a vital role in bone health. In transgender individuals, hormone therapy provides a real-life experience as a partially reversible intervention before surgery. Therefore, hormone therapy is recommended for transmen and transwomen before twelve months of genital surgery unless the patient is willing to accept it or medically contradicted. It is recommended as an optional criterion for twelve months before breast augmentation in Transwomen. Here, twelve months is only a suggested period. If no significant increase in breast size occurs after this period, breast surgery followed by this may be considered. The patient must live in the desired gender role for at least twelve months before undergoing genital surgery such as phalloplasty, metoidioplasty, or vaginoplasty. This can help resolve conflicts related to gender expression and sexuality before undergoing irreversible genital transformation.

Significant Surgeries in transwoman is breast size increase and the process of making the vagina and related organs through gender reassignment surgery. The transgender person for femininity growth starts as soon as hormone therapy starts. But this growth is hemispherical and conical without distinct female curves. So many trans people opt for surgical augmentation rather than wait a year. Hormone therapy does not affect voice, limbs, and shoulders. There are many differences in the chest wall of men and women. In general, broad shoulders and tiny nipples are masculine characteristics. So, they didn't get deeper

cleavage. Vaginoplasty, clitoroplasty, labiaplasty, vulvoplasty, corpectomy, and feminizing urethroplasty are the methods to fulfill and implant new and completed genital organs. It's a beautiful soul without scars and painful conditions and feminine. Major surgeries in Transmen are breast reduction, hysterectomy, bilateral salpingo oophorectomy, vaginoplasty, etc. Before the introduction of medical surgeries and technology community was practicing old methods to transform their sexual organ.

Nirvan is the process of cutting the male's sexual organs to prepare the male body into a feminine state and finally into a woman. *Nirvana* is practiced in two ways. The first is the removal of sexual organs (penis) through surgery in a hospital. The second one is done by any other transgender especially experienced in this. This one is known as '*Thayamma nirvana*'. The *thayamma nirvana* is practiced, so modern society will feel it is barbaric. Sex reassignment surgeries play an essential role in jalsa culture. A person who has undergone sex reassignment surgery performs jalsa.

As a young child, the transgender community may not be able to relate to the celebration in their community. The transgender community itself often voluntarily abstains from these types of rituals and celebrations that involve binary genders. Transgender children are deliberately kept from these celebrations after discovering their identity. Most of the time, their parents are the ones who keep them away because they are afraid of others' hurtful words and staring. This aversion is caused by dressing and behaving contrary to the wishes of the parents and households. Celebrations like Haldi Mehendi and Jalsa are the cultural spaces they get when they come out with their identity and start interacting with the transgender community. In all these celebrations, everyone in the community gathers and dresses and behaves as they like. The specialty of these spaces is they can express their selves without any control and fearing the prejudices of others.

Conclusion

Generally, society associates gender with the constraints of males and females excluding other diverse genders. Due to the biased social exclusions they face and undergo, the transgenders created a space and community for themselves. They follow their own rituals, customary practices, and values. They treat themselves equally in their cultural world. They relate their cultural traditions with their gender transitions. From the barbaric traditional practices of 'nirvan' to the latest scientific advancement in sex reassignment surgeries, the gender transition methods of the transgender community underwent drastic changes. But they follow their cultural ceremonies in their purest form. The transgender community performs Jalsa and Haldi-Mehendi for transwomen who transitioned their gender identity from male to female. Here they are excluding transmen, the people who changed their gender identity from female to male. Transmen accompany and offers their solidarity during all the ceremonies but they don't have a practice that implies their position. Even transgenders performing their cultural practices tend to ignore some of their gender aspects.

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