



Research Paper

From Drag Queen to Mahamaya: Unveiling the Transformative Journey of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi

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Abstract:

There is nothing more difficult for one to take in hand something, that has been neglected for a long time of period than to deal with something, that is already in existence. Transformation happens in one's life when someone gets ready to understand the things happening around with the sense of acceptance. The real change occurs when one completely gets acquainted with oneself. Such is the story of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a versatile transgender activist who doesn't need any introduction. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi was not just born but she is the incarnation of God for trans community. The present research paper takes into account the long and arduous journey of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and her transformation from menial personality to an elevated and gracious one and throws light on how she proved herself to be a boon for the welfare of the transgender people of India. For a country like India, full of superstitions, under development, divided into various segments of religion, caste, creed and gender, the most common and serious problem, in majority of cases, occurs with the transgender people. Though transgender people secure pious and sacred place in ancient India yet gradually, their values remain limited and their condition became very worse and pathetic. They started facing many problems like unemployment, rejection from the society, mental stress, dejection, identity crisis, sexual orientation and humiliation. The condition is this much worse that trans people can easily be seen begging at signals and selling their bodies for the sake of money. Though much improvement in the condition of trans people is visible nowadays since the govt has repealed a part of article 377 which allows them to live freely with their partners. For this, much efforts have been put by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi herself. The history itself is evidence that there always has been a long restless fight for every victory. The case becomes much more important when it is about the fight for fundamental rights of a specific community.

Keywords: drag queen, Mahamaya, hijra, transgender, third gender, queer

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Drag Queens are usually men who dress themselves in gawdy clothing of women and wear makeup also, to mimic women and often to intensify femininity. Their main purpose is to entertain the people through comedy and social or political commentary. It includes dancing, singing and also expresses gender roles from feminine perspectives. It basically represents gay culture or gay community and often takes place during LGBT Pride parade. Similarly, when females are dressed as men for the purpose of entertainment and to present masculinity, they are called Drag Kings. Our Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, after struggling with identity crisis, she tried her hands in many communities just to get a suitable place to fit in. She did not only join gay club but also started performing drag shows being drag queen in the parties. She writes,

“Then I became Drag Queen, donning women's clothes and dancing at the parties and enjoying myself...”

(M.H.M.L, 29)

Once, while giving an interview to The Times Entertainment by The Times of India, she states,

“During my college days, I was the only drag queen on campus. My professor used to tell me to get out of the class...and I would say, okay, bye bye.”

(while giving interview to Times Entertainment by The Times of India on Apr 30, 2014)

Though it was not the tradition of her family which belonged to Hindu brahmin community. Her family culture would not give permission for such manners which would pollute or defame their respect among the society. Amidst all this turbulence, somehow, she was able to secure sixty five percent marks in SSC and got herself admitted to Mithibai College. About it she states in her autobiography,

“I had become a riotous figure (totally Mahamaya...) I was carefree but not careless, not irresponsible...”
(M.H.M.L, 30)

That time, she didn't know that she was really going to be a Mahamaya for well-being of transgender people. On further acquaintance with gay society, she began to feel discomfort knowing that they too contain the impact of outer world within them and it all made her feel languor. She had to wear women's clothing for being a drag queen but not just for sometimes but forever because she really not only liked to present herself as a woman before the society, but she also felt like one from inside and so she wanted to continue with it for whole of her life.

It was just after the discovery of the self when true activism got initialized. The curtain fallen over the identity crisis was raised when she met Lawrence Francis, in short, Shabina who was a transgender. It was she who got her acquainted with many things about hijra community and helped her identify her gender. All the deeds of activism became effective after discovering the identity. It was the year of 1998, when she joined the hijra community and went through certain ritual ceremonies, necessary for being a hijra and from here onwards, her journey of becoming Mahamaya finally got started. After becoming a trans, she went to meet her guru Lata for the first time and she writes in this context,

“Hereafter, there would be many things that I would do for the first time...”

(M.H.M.L, 43)

It is rightly said by someone “You win some, you lose some.” Or “No pain, no gain.” Indeed, it proved out to be true in reference with Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. She had to go through a lot in this crucial journey. What she lost in the path of finding respect for third gender, were her friends, relatives and lots of other people. Leaders don't lose, they sacrifice and she remained determined that she would not take her steps back after deciding finally to walk on the path she chose. Right after her becoming a trans, people or society started maintaining a distance from her or started neglecting her as they generally do after an encounter with a trans. The concept of neglecting trans or ignoring them has become the instinct of society which makes it clear that no one bothers about the upliftment of transpeople as nobody cares. This outlook of the society towards transgender people, needs to be changed, this was what decided by Laxmi. She was always of the opinion that trans themselves are responsible for their pathetic condition because they consider themselves out of this society. The more they come close to the people the more the behaviour of the people will be changed.

When in the year 2000, the whole country was asking to remove article 377, it was the time when Laxmi Narayan Tripathi first appeared in front of media to give her bite about it as a transgender to Zee News. Being in trouble that her family would come to know about her being a trans, if she gives the bite, still she decided to let it be the way the things are. Had she not been filled with the qualities of an activist; she would have denied for coming forth and would let her family ignorant.

But at that time raising voice for the rights of LGBT was much more necessary than to think about one's personal benefit and she absolutely knew it. So, this is how her transformation as a hijra came in front of her family. For real activism, true spirit of self-confidence is the most prominent thing to begin with. Her activism found a platform when three hijras, who used to dance in a bar, were troubled and caught by the police, though these hijras were not her chelas, yet she went to the police station and did whatever she needed to do to escape those hijras. The incident was trivial yet capable to show the glimpse of her further struggle, life and activism.

Another incident came forward where a perfect blend of inner strife and grief for the trans community and external stiffness can be seen when one of his chelas, Subhadra, who had gone for sex work, did not return as she got murdered. Hearing this, all the hijras, along with Laxmi Narayan Tripathi became mentally deranged. But being their head or guru, how could have she got startled so easily? All of them became an easy prey of uncertainty about the dangers of becoming a hijra. She had to bear the responsibility of being their guru, she did all she could to solace them. But their inner grief finally found the way to come out. They sobbed whole night embracing each other thinking about the unreliability of their lives. The cops kept coming for enquiry and would arrest any of them and when Laxmi Narayan Tripathi came to know about this, getting enraged at this behaviour, she gave the police a ‘bollocking’ and got her chelas finally released. Though the case was shut afterwards like nobody cared but it mattered for her community and got them a reminder of ‘*Ekla chalo*’ song by Rabindra Nath Tagore.

Indifferent behaviour of the society paved way for an institution to think about the safety of transpeople. Such an institution was Dai Welfare Society, ran by some of Tripathi's friends but later, on all the responsibilities of DAI were about to be headed by her only because of her friends leaving Dai. The main aim of Dai was to take care of the health of trans people, to make them know about sexually transmitted diseases or AIDS and to distribute condoms to trans who do sex work for their living. It did not only provide the benefits of

safe sex to the hijras but their customers too. Dai was the only institution in which the hijras themselves were working for other hijras. When a situation came to close this institution due to the elopement of leaders of the DAI, Laxmi herself came forth to take all the responsibilities of DAI because she was of the opinion that it was the only committee made by hijras for hijras. So, it must not be closed by any means.

And this is how she accepted the challenge of social work for her community by becoming the president of DWS (Dai Welfare Society) along with the determination of maintaining the prestigious dignity of the post she got and by deciding not to go to the bar to dance any more. And this proves for her as a few steps ahead from a drag queen to an activist.

It will not be justifiable to limit her struggles and agitation just for upliftment of hijra community. Instead, she raised her voice for prostitutes too. She too, had lived the life of prostitutes but not by selling her body. She joined the agitation of prostitutes of Kmatipura, a famous red-light area of Mumbai when the contemporary home minister gave the orders for the brothels to be shut down because of its bad impact on our society and youth but nobody thought about those prostitutes who would starve if they didn't work. Laxmi accompanied these prostitutes and gave her controversial bites to news channels which also worked to make her popular. Meanwhile, the DWS began to face some arguments with her but as a leader she made it very clear that if hijras would segregate themselves from the mainstream, the society will also not accept them. She made a remark,

“What does it matter if you are a man, woman or hijra when something's got to be done?... Why segregate yourselves from mainstream society to such an extent?”

(M.H.M.L, 67)

Laxmi's activism did not even remain limited to India while she took the trans community to another height of fame at world level when she was summoned as a chair person of DWS to the round table conference held on the topic AIDS. She was the only hijra among all the nine members invited. It was a high time for Indian trans community to be represented on international level. Amidst all of these things, her struggle with self was also continued. It seemed like it was not only a fight for acceptance of hijras by the society but deep down somewhere it was also a restless fight with their inner selves. Amidst managing everyone around her, it seemed like she herself got lost. Once, she became so aggrieved that she tried to commit suicide. But what would happen to the other hijras, if she had died. However, she got her counselling done and again filled herself with lively and positive thoughts. Another moment for hijras to cherish the pride at international level, came up when Laxmi had to go to Toronto, Canada, out of India as a United Nations AIDS delegate. She was assigned to represent Indian hijra community and to express her views about transgender and their problems in satellite session of India. Though her speech was extempore, it won thunderous claps. Before making a visit to abroad, the main hindrance in her way, was unavailability of her passport and the documentation which told that she was a male while she felt as female but she needed passport to refer to her as a trans. Great dilemma it was! but someone has rightly said, 'where there is a will, there is a way.' She came out here with flying colours and succeeded in representing her hijra community out of India and making it feel proud.

Similarly, in the year 2006, Astitva, another institution for well-being of hijra community was registered by Laxmi in collaboration with few of her acquaintances to make trans society more capable, to change the mindset and behaviour of people towards transpeople and to bring some sort of other changes in the society, all of this, demanded the need for establishment of Astitva and above all the main goal of Astitva was to get justice for hijras who had been longing for it since ages. Apart from this, they worked very hard for collecting all hijras from Thane distt., had meetings with them, made an attempt to know their problems and above all they made them aware of their fundamental rights as a citizen of free India.

Here it is admissible that Laxmi did not only represent Hijra community but she also got an honour to represent India at United Nations General Assembly. She was filled with extreme proud but at the same time, she had a great responsibility of presenting culture, tradition and etiquettes of our country, India. One obvious question can rise in the mind of the people like “Whether the condition of transpeople is same in every country of the world? And the answer is ‘No.’ If we talk in the light of her experiences of making tours to many countries, their condition in other countries is better. They can easily be found in fields like medicine, engineering, teaching, journalism and business and of course, all this did not happen overnight, there had been a stonewall riot of 1969 from where LGBT movement got its wings on the altar of many LGBT activists.

Laxmi is always of the view that trans people themselves must try to come across to the world. They should try to mingle with the society. The more they become amiable with the world, the more the world will be able to accept them.

For this, she always kept saying, “be visible though treated as invisible.” And for this, she chose bigger platforms like tv reality shows, media, news channels etc. in order to reach out her message to maximum number of people available. She took part in ‘*Sach Ka Samna*’ where she boldly faced the brutal truth of her life as well as the truth related to her community. Then, to expand the visibility of her community to greater extent, she became the contestant of the most popular tv reality show Bigg Boss in 2011. She remained in the house for the period of forty-two days not just as Laxmi herself but Laxmi; as a member of third gender community. All of

her efforts resulted into positive outcome as she started noticing a change in the behavior of people towards trans community and she started believing that they can also earn respect and that is normal too. Though she did not win Bigg Boss, yet she won the heart of the millions of people of India. To bring her community in front of the society and to enhance their self-confidence, she expressed her desire for a trans beauty competition and named it 'Indian Super Queen' to prove that hijras are not only to follow their traditional rituals of dancing and singing on special occasions but instead they must be treated as equal to ordinary men or women. Recently, she organized the second National Transgender Awards for 2023 in New Delhi. For this when she was asked for the idea behind starting this award, she said,

"We have awards for women, we have award for men or many other things. But not for transgender people..."

(while interacting with NDTV on the Transgender Awards, Jan 27, 2023 by NDTV)

To sum up, Laxmi always put her views or protested against the injustice or discrimination done to queer people. She was the one who filed the petition in the supreme court to remove article 377 in which the whole LGBTQ community became triumphant in 2018. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, as her name itself signifies goddess Laxmi and lord Narayan. Indeed, she is such a perfect blend of Laxmi and Narayan who has not just born but incarnated for upliftment or betterment of trans people. She has always proved herself for giving succor to hijra community. To give a final statement to my research paper, I would like to end it up with quoting one of her remarks about activism,

"Activism runs through my blood it is the elixir of my life."

(M.H.M.L, 117)

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