



Identity And Acceptance: A Study Of Transgender In Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Transgender is an umbrella term that covers all those persons who do not conform to the traditional binary system of the sex-gender dichotomy. Those who fail to enact gender identity with their genital configuration cast doubt on the validity of the sex-gender category. Gender, the social construction of identity as either male or female, is embodied with appropriate social roles that make them accepted as social beings. Subsequently, the notions of masculinity and femininity further act as reinforcing agents for proper gender roles. In the transgender spectrum, this paper focuses on those individuals who are biologically born male but changed their gender to female. In contemporary Manipur, transgender people (male to female) identify themselves as "Nupi Maanbi." Nupi in Manipuri means female, and maanbi means look alike. The transgender identity of femininity, their manifestation as a female, and their gender role in mainstream Manipuri society are being criticized for overexposure in terms of dressing up and their pattern of speech. Albeit the legal recognition made by the Indian Constitution, transgender people in Manipuri society face various forms of discrimination in the social and cultural domain of womanhood, and the acceptance of their identity is still contested. This article will explore the identity of Nupi Maanbi, their everyday lived experience through the process of coming out, and the idea of community feeling that develops consequently in their community.

Keywords: Gender, Nupi Maanbi, Identity, Transgender, Manipuri Society

INTRODUCTION:

According to Kimelstein (2019), the concept of transgender as a community was developed around 1984, and the term transgender covers all the range and diversity of identities within transgender communities. An individual who identifies as transgender does not identify with society's traditional, dichotomous, social construction of gender (Budge et al., 2010). The sex-gender category became questionable for those who fail to enact gender identity with their genital configuration. Gender, the social construction of either male or female, is assigned according to their genitalia and the appropriate social roles that make them accepted as social beings. Sexual stereotyping of gender amongst children is commonly practiced in every society. For instance, children brought up are different according to their gender and assigned different toys. Culturally, as society is guided by norms and customs, gender is given and experienced rather than achieved or individually chosen (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, gender is interwoven within the context of socio-cultural appropriation for any society.

The emergence of Nupi Maanbi as an identity:

In contemporary Manipur, transgender (male to female) identifies themselves as "nupi maanbi." Nupi in Manipuri means 'female' and maanbi means 'look alike'. In the later years of the 20th century, transgender people were widely known as 'nupi shabi' which is the imitation of women by dressing patterns and way of speech but their prominence as 'nupi maanbi', a distinct social group, is recent. Transgender people in Manipur have been a part of this society for many centuries and generations. There was evidence of similar non-conforming gender identities in traditional Manipuri society during early and medieval times. It can be said that during those periods, transgender people had legitimate power both in administrative as well as sacred domains. Yumkhaibam stated that "the loss of royal patronage following the Third Burmese invasion of Manipur (1819-1826 AD) and the consequent coming of the British colonial influence might have subsequently

led to the subversion of the presence and privileges of the gender variant persons in Manipuri society" (2020, p. 180).

Transgender as an identity in Manipur is often associated with Shumang Leela, which is based on social issues. Shumang leela means courtyard performance, a theatrical art form of the Manipuris (Kamei, 2020). Before the prevalence of the term 'nupi maanbi,' transgender people were widely known by the name Nupi Shabi. The role of Nupi Shabis in Shumang Leela is that of an actress. They imitate the characteristics of a female in terms of costumes, hair and make-up, bodily gestures, and patterns of speech. This helps the visibility of transgender people not only in Manipur but across the globe. Shumang Leela played a crucial role for transgender people as it provided a platform to express and embrace their identity in Manipuri society. Therefore, Nupi Shabi as an identity of a performer became a sanctuary for trans (male to female) individuals for their gender expression, and it can be adequately concluded that Shumang Leela flourished because of Nupi shabi. Therefore, this platform may be a factor for attracting other transgender people as they find their community, a way for the acceptance of their gender identity. Apart from this, the HIV/AIDS intervention programs and the beauty industry emerged as a pattern of collectivization and visibility emerged as a unique narrative in South Asia (Sharma, 2018).

OBJECTIVE:

This paper explores the transgender of Manipur, specifically those who are born male at birth and change their identity to a female counterpart known as "Nupi Maanbi." This study aims to find out how transgenders undergo the process of coming out as transgender, the challenges and support in the transformation process, and the degree of acceptance by their family and society in Manipuri society.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

West and Zimmerman (1987) define 'gender' as a feature of social situations, both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. According to Gagne et al. (1997), gender identity is learned and achieved at an interactional level; it is made as a culture with sanctions, norms, and values, enforced through social institutions such as family, law, religion, politics, and the media. Similarly, feminist theory argues that the division of society and the emergence of subsequent inequalities are based upon gendered societies through the lens of the binary system of gender. Further, they opposed the prevailing inequalities made natural through the process of social arrangements and cultural beliefs that construct the social order, stating that this very construction evades the social processes that produce gendered bodies and behavior (Judith and Moore, 2007). Nonetheless, gendered bodies are a continuum of gender identity based on institutionalized social and cultural patterns. However, feminists argue that the social construction of gendered bodies does not allow the experience of diversity in the development of human bodies that are inclusive of different shapes, sizes, and physical capabilities. Therefore, it can be adequately concluded that human bodies, similar to gender, are socially produced under specific cultural circumstances.

The instance of Agnes (Garfinkel 1967), who was born with male genitals but categorized herself as a female, became problematic because of their biological anatomy. Her identification allows her to be transgender. Agnes, as a transgender (male to female), learning how to be a woman in the public as well as private spheres through interaction and observing others in her everyday life indicates the role of essentialism and reinforcement of gender. As Judith Butler asserts, we perceive gender as natural, but gender is naturalized through performative acts. Thus, gender is the product of social doings and is continuously created through human action, constituted through interaction, and is being produced as a socially organized achievement (West and Zimmerman, 1987). According to Judith Butler, gender is an identity constructed repeatedly through time and body, created by individual performance through acts of the body.

Transgender identity makes a challenging cultural and structural social order. This leads to a new representation of gender identity to pass for 'other sex'. The first step of transition for most transgender people is cross-dressing, followed by acknowledgment of similar others going through alternate identities. West and Zimmerman (1987) also argue that transgender identity at an interactional level is dependent upon others for recognition. Therefore, transgender identity in the public domain is influenced by others who have similar experiences with established idioms and risk the desired authenticity; rejected stigma, self-blame, and internalization of deviance are common (Gagne et al., 1997).

Even though transgendered people have the choice to challenge the social order of the binary system, instead they choose to be a part of the gender system and to be accepted as members of their chosen gender community. So, they opted to be female rather than a community with distinctive gender characteristics. To accomplish their alternate identity, transgender people often opt for the ability to perfect traits such as style, make-up, feminine body language, and feminine voice. Thus, performativity and appearance are vital for establishing and maintaining self and identity, and hence the identity of the 'trans' does not fall into the binary gender system as there are many gender interpretations between men and women (Gagne et al., 1997).

Postmodernist theorist Judith Butler (2004) emphasized that transgender people changing their identity should not be confined to a category (either feminine or masculine); rather, they are seeking a stable identity

as a social being. For them, 'coming out' is to be perceived, socially approved, and accepted as women. As transgender identity and gender representation fall outside the binary, they are stigmatized, ostracized, socially delegitimized, and sometimes fail to be socially recognized (Gagne et al., 1997).

METHODOLOGY:

This paper emphasized the qualitative research method in collecting existing data to understand the transgender community and how they are represented in Manipuri society. Moreover, this paper intends to apply content analysis for data interpretation and to give insights on transgender Manipur from the perspective of scholars and academicians. The study of transgender people's identity, their lived experiences, and acceptance by family and society was slow in progress only focusing on the transmission of HIV/ AIDS by transgender in Manipur. However, after the legitimization of the "other" in the gender category by the Indian legislature, a shift in the academic realm can be visible, and various aspects of transgender studies have increased in recent times.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:

During the colonial period, the Indian Census collected the population of transgender people under a caste or a tribe based on occupation, but they were not kept under a separate category; rather, their population was placed according to their chosen gender. For the first time in 2021, the Indian census included separate data for transgender people in the fields of employment, literacy, and caste. The 15th National Census survey of the Indian Census Organization placed a separate category of transgender and collected the population for the first time. The transgender population in India is 4.88 lakhs with a literacy rate of 56.07%. Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra are the first three highest states with transgender populations. The total transgender population of Manipur is 1343, of which the child population is 177; SC and ST constitute 40 and 378, respectively. The literacy rate of transgender people in Manipur is 67.50%. However, according to different organizations, there are 4000 transgender persons, out of which 2500 identify as transgender women and the remaining as transgender men. Only a few have separate identity cards as transgender, while others have separate voter cards. Recently, the office of Manipur chief electoral officer Pradeep Kumar Jha released the final electoral rolls, having only 239 transgender (inclusive of all gender variants) voters. There are incidences of secrecy of the transgender identity of some individuals due to certain circumstances such as single male children, societal pressure and approval, and lack of support from their family and friends.

Process of coming out, acceptance, and community feeling of transgender:

The process of coming out is defined as the process by which people recognize and accept their sexual preference by adopting a sexual identity, informing others about their sexual orientation, and involving themselves in a relationship with others with similar sexual identities (Gagne et al., 1997). According to Gagne et al. (1997), the first step of transgenderism for any individual starts with the phenomenon of cross-dressing with the notion that gender is a natural expression of sex and sexuality and not a pretension to be a woman. Further, they asserted that for many individuals, the process of coming out as transgender depends on three factors. First, the experiences or incidents that dictate to them the feeling of wrongdoings such as the act of cross-dressing, adopting female triads, and so on. Second, the discovery of tags for their feelings, and lastly, learning of others who have similar experiences as them. To understand the process of coming out as transgender, there is a need to understand the overall social structure of a society. In Manipuri society with strict patriarchal norms and sanctions of the binary system of gender, transgender identity became inclusive in the prevailing inequality between men and women. Eventually, Nupi Maanbi, adopting a female identity, is subjected to various forms of unequal treatment and rejection, starting from family and extending to Manipuri society.

Albeit the rise of transgender identity as Nupi shabi on the platform of Shumang Leela, it is inadequate to put forward that their identity as transgender is accepted in Meitei society. Yumkhaibam (2019) argues that the identity of Nupi Shabi is inappropriate as it is an artistic identity where a talented transgender person can be a Nupi Shabi and not all nupi shabis are transgender. Kamei (2020) stated that outside this platform, transgender people are regarded as second-class citizens, ridiculed, and even treated as sex objects. The sexual promiscuity perception towards the transgender community of Manipur has created significant discrimination and unequal treatment for this minority, causing economic backwardness and exclusion from societal representation (Khuraijam et al., 2022, p. 54). Many scholars, upon research, discovered that the dropout among transgender people is very high, and the reason behind such action is due to discrimination, a lack of support from the family, and societal pressure of being different. Their identity is being mocked upon and called by many names, asserting their deviated character.

Nevertheless, the identity of Nupi Maanbi (with a different name) existed throughout the history of Manipur; their acceptance is still challenging in a patriarchal society like Manipur. The legal recognition of transgender identity has not changed much in overall welfare, and they are still vulnerable to discrimination and stigmatization. It is evident that out of the transgender spectrum, Nupi Maanbi stand out in terms of community feeling, providing guidance and support to those newly transforming into female transgender.

CONCLUSION:

Since nupi maanbi adheres to femininity and identity as female, they are conforming to socially accepted norms and behaviours. They observe and learn, live as females, and have the desire to be accepted as social beings having a role in society. Even after the insertion of “other” in the gender categorization, in a state like Manipur where patriarchal values are deeply embedded in the social structure, there still exists the “taboo” of being transgender. From being a man to changing their identity as a female or behaving like a female attracts a series of challenges for the person as well as a dispute to the existing social structure. Families that truly accept the identity of being transgender are still countable. On the one hand, every transgender person faces a series of discriminations from their surrounding environment, even from their parents and siblings, at the onset of transition, and on the other, the families start to acknowledge their identity as transgender when they can help or assist financially as a member of the family. Therefore, most of the transgender people in Manipur hide their identity until they have a proper stable occupation to support themselves, and some cannot come out of their closet of identity due to the fear of societal norms.

The transgender identity of femininity, their manifestation as a female, and their gender role in mainstream Manipuri society are being criticized for overexposure in terms of dressing up and their pattern of speech. Some undergo gender reassignment surgery to be fully transformed into females. But their womanhood is still denied, and they have no part in the social institutions known in Manipuri society. Nupi maanbi still needs a platform for the manifestation of their identity. Thus, occupation as one of the factors mediates as a stable platform for them and massive support from their own community. Also, their identity requires social recognition by other social beings and to be considered as a part of the wider society.

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