

## Prominent Transgender Activists of India





## Gender Identity, Voices and Action Transgender Activists of India and Their Worldviews

*Maheswar Satpathy, Fasiha Noor & Lokanath Choudhury*

Transgender Identities across Asia has been sparse, and oblivious, and sometimes poignant. In a chaotic background where identities are negotiated with space and time, individuals have come to discover and create space for themselves in their unique contexts.

This critical piece aims at uncovering, identifying and representing voices while celebrating their identities and their contributions to the society. The struggles they have endured, the space they have created for themselves and for all in the society is a matter of pride for the whole Transgender Community! The following is a collection of representative voices from different parts of India, symbolically telling us lives and how they come to create a space for them in Indian society. Each of these 7 figurine represent unique voices, and are representative of nobility, virtue and worth. While Laxmi represents a never-ending source of inspiration by her sheer determination, Abhina is enigmatic with her endurance, Dhananjay epitomizes humility and grace, Ranjita of oratory and zeal, Rudrani of her 'beauty' in its purest form, and Meera and Sadhana embody 'action' as it channelizes and gets reflected in a momentum of change.



*Laxmi Narayan Tripathi*

(Mumbai-Pan India)

Claiming herself to be 'a woman who can put all other women to shame', Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a goddess for many Transgenders, because the way she became the flag-bearer in the community, pulled out many a man from their state of dilemma, and helped them to identify their sexual orientation so as to begin their new journey in life as a transgender. In fact, Laxmi's motive is to beautify the lives of transgender- a dignified, deserving and a life worth living. She is a lady who is profoundly awe-inspiring- a fighter in herself who stood up for her choice of becoming a transgender. Having vast experience as a transgender rights activist, dancer as well as an actor. She is an achiever- very bold, fearless, and incredibly fabulous one.

She is the first transgender activist in Mumbai representing Asia Pacific in the UN in 2008. She actively partakes in transgender community services and has served on the boards of various Non-Governmental Organizations especially doing LGBT activist work. She represents India in numerous international



forums. Her take on why she chose to become a Hijra is very clear. She created history by raising her voice very strongly to fend off people with HIV in India. What is more powerful about her personality is her attitude towards life. Laxmi started an organization named ASTITIVA which focuses on the promotion of the welfare of sexual minorities. This became a revolutionary step for people like her from all over the world. Her achievement scroll begins with one of her first victories, it was when her passport stated that she is a female. She says, "I face hatred even today, but who cares?" This attitude is her strength to stand up against her haters, fall on her knees, endure every suffering, lament over the situation for some time but finally get up once again on her feet, dust herself off and fight back.



*Abhina Aher*

(New Delhi-Pan India)

Abhina Aher represents and is a figurine of transgender movement in India and worldwide. She is a program manager of HIV/AIDS Alliance, New Delhi. She has co-organized with Jeff Roy-a prestigious recipient and alumnus of United States-India Educational Foundation (USIEF)'s

Fulbright Fellowship a dance performance and film screening at Godrej India Culture Lab, titled "The dancing queens: a celebration of India's Transgender Communities'. The event marked the first appearance of a transgender performance ensemble at a major Indian corporate campus and was featured in a number of media outlets in India.



She shares her story of growing up as a Transgender in India with parallels. It was clear to her family that she certainly wasn't the average boy or girl. She recalls dressing up as a woman, and wanting to be addressed as one, but, constantly being pressured by her family to dress and act like a man:

"I was mesmerized by that. When I used to be at home, I used to have grand performance where I am calling all the neighbors and dancing in front of them and putting up a show exactly replicating what my mother is doing on the stage". Aher remembers "One fine day, she just found out, and she just got really mad about it. I was asked to sit in front of a God and make a pledge that I will never do that again". But, Abhina Aher felt empty, as if something was missing all her childhood, because she was forced to be someone she wasn't. As she grew a sense of feeling of incompleteness also grew inside her. She was abused by her classmates, and had received no visible support from Teachers who said, "Your friends are doing this to you because you are behaving in an extremely feminine way, and that's what is an issue".

She had a very tumultuous journey in her gender identity development during which she was subjected to psychiatric consultation and treatment. "I had to do that almost for 10-15 years. I used to watch myself, how I walk, how I talk, how I behave, how I dress up, just to hide my sexuality, just to fit into the heterosexual world". Aher continues "I finished my education... and I started working as a software engineer. There was a huge feeling of incompleteness all the time- having something wrong with your body all the time, not being able to connect with your soul all the time".

She has undertaken a long and arduous journey, feeling marginalized since childhood and have attempted suicide thrice. However, she finally rejected her biological sex and opting to become a Hijra. Then finally after the law was placed recognizing the third gender, she began to notice some changes. She can finally be addressed as a woman, and dressed the way she pleases. The sweeping decision redefined their rights and the state's obligation to them as one of India's most marginalized groups.

Speaking on a desperate attempt by many to go through sex reassignment surgery following the 2014 SC judgment on TG recognition, she observes "It's not joke", says solemnly. "It can be psychologically and physically traumatic; their body-altering hormone, often followed by operations to reassign sexual organs in a process known as feminization" besides their costliness. She continues "after the castration, you can't walk for almost 1 ½ month. It is not an easy task, it's a journey of pain. It happens in a dingy room, a 10 by 10 probably. Immediately after the castration, 2 hours, the Hijra is asked to leave that place, because it is illegal. The operations are normally done by quacks, and a lot of Hijras die because of that".

Hijras have long been discriminated against in jobs, housing, education and healthcare. They are routinely turned away from hospitals. Aher recalls being turned away by 17 hotels in a row

whole on a business trip in the Indian state of Kerala, which is thought to be more enlightened on gender attitude than other states.

She has triumphed the cause of TG community by adequately representing them in all national and international forums, by giving TED Talks, and states on the never-ending fight against colonial Section-377, "what we have done is that we have put a foot inside a door, which is a door of hope, and we will open it- very, very soon".

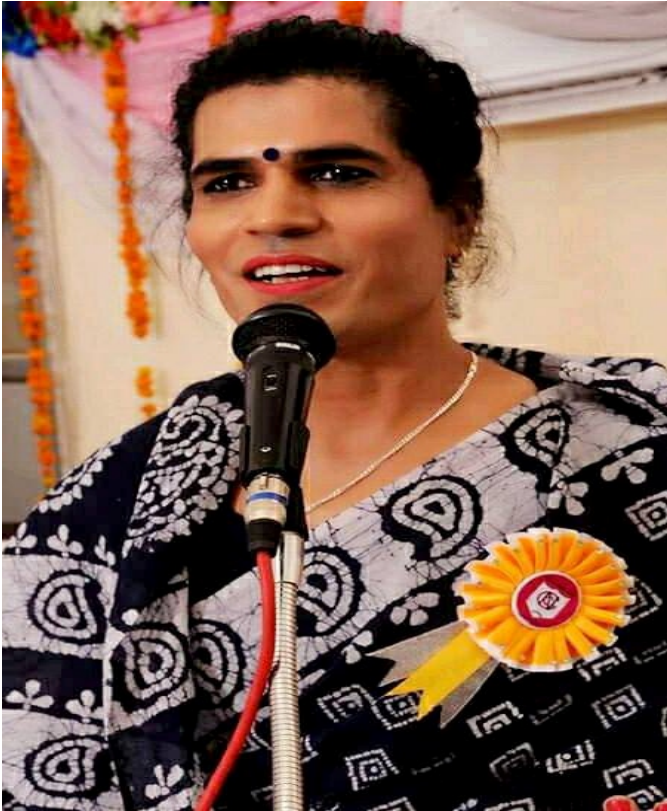


Speaking at 21st International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa (2016), representing India where more than 400 TG representatives took part, Abhina Aher indeed threw light on that year's theme i.e. 'No more lip service: Trans Access, equity and rights now!'. The programme also looked at how TG people could be better engaged in the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria. Abhina Aher emphasized on the role of TG people in decision-making processes by saying "Our issues and vulnerabilities are more than just about HIV. Resources for Transgender people are not reaching Trans organizations and they don't have access to funding".

When asked about what she desires of her future, Aher speaks with a hearty laugh "I just wanted to become a beautiful butterfly."







*Dhananjay Chauhan Mangalmukhi*

(Chandigarh, North India)

She is a social and human rights activist, reformer, counsellor, motivator and a student representative at Punjab University in Chandigarh. From an identity struggle faced with maintaining family and earning basic livelihood, to a person who has suffered insufferable Ignominy, horrendous psychological and physical abuse and trauma and years running errands seeking justice and retuning without any favor she has evolved, matured and has emerged the voice of the voiceless. Dhananjay is the 1st TG at a reputed higher education institution such as Punjab University and has been a front runner in challenging the status quo, fighting the hierarchy and represent needs of a historically invisible community in front of the authorities of the universities and negotiate a space which they rightfully deserve. Dhananjay is credited with an initiative to institute a separate

toilet for TG (male, and female) at PU after a 2-year running to authorities, bargaining, convincing and demanding for their desperate needs. Finally, the authorities understood the valid need that this community has.

2 years ago, when Dhananjay started study for her masters in human Rights after 20-year break from studies she was the only one at university representing the community. Just like any other she had also suffered occasional giggles, taunts and laughs. However, she didn't bother about it. One thing which make Dhananjay stand apart is she doesn't stand out, complain or lament over the systemic failures. As she candidly shares "if we wish to see any change in the system, we cannot afford to just make complaints. We must be inside the system and represent the system to make the changes in it. So, we need a little bit of tact, some amount of strategies and a lot of common sense. We can't afford to go ahead by standing opposite to each other, but by only being on the same side of table. We are not alone in this struggle. Everyone around me is a part of me as much as I am apart of them. So, we need to work together."



Dhananjay's contribution is clearly visible in an exceptional reception and acceptance and profound sense of support shown by the student community and elected representatives. Many of them have come forward encouraging her to take big leaps in bringing the transgender communities and enable them with an opportunity to pursue higher education at the university. Due to her never-say-no attitude, humility, determination and strength of character she could inspire five other transgender students who had left all desire and hopes to pursue their dreams of a life worth living.

As a representative of a queer community, Dhananjay has transformed the way a male dominated patriarchal society in Punjab and Haryana perceives the sexual minorities and treats it. We certainly need more inspiring figures like Dhananjay who has represented India internationally in countries like Netherlands and have played a prominent role in the activities of SAHRA (South Asian Human Rights Organization).



*Meera & Sadhana*

(Odisha, South-East India)

Everyone is born equal in God's creation. We may experience differences in terms of color, shape and looks, nature and behavior. However, all of us are part of the larger humanity bearing essential virtues endowed upon us by the almighty. And, everyone deserves a right to life with dignity and exercise their freewill. These essential yet unanswered questions have been broached upon by couple of people in past few years, and Meera And Sadhana are two of them.

Meera says, "I have a family, in which I got my parents and siblings residing. But, they have also never accepted us as normal human beings. I have always had questions lurking in my mind, why am I not 'normal'? why are they unable to accept me as I am? Wherever I used to go, people used to look down upon me, someone would refer me as 'Malli', 'Basanti' or 'Maichia' or someone will call me 'Hijra'. Why??? Don't I have a right to live? I used to have goosebumps thinking of these. Am I all alone in this world? Am I the only one who has been created like this? When I was a child, I didn't know much... I had spent most of my childhood just like normal kids playing in the neighborhood. I used to be fascinated towards all the girly activities and cross dressing. Would this childhood practice change my identity? Moreover, until I had reached my youth I had not realized my actual sexual identity. I could only make out that I embody certain differences. Only after I joined a dance class I came across people like me. These acquaintances helped me gain my self confidence and made me realize that I am not the only one. But no matter what, my family could never accept my reality. My parents got me married with an assumption that I will change. But unfortunately, it didn't happen!

After a chaotic marriage and a mutual separation, her real struggle begins. From a very young age she had learnt to be self-reliant. Her financial struggle begins with her first earning of rupees 35. After a long time suffering she finally ended up opening a travel agency. But all went in vain and the agency room collapsed, and no one supported her. She had also left all hopes and



thought of giving up life. Disappointed from the ongoing in her life she left for Mumbai where he got to meet LaxmiNarayanTripathy- a famous transgender activist in India. Outside Odisha transgenders are usually able to live a decent and respectful life while only in Odisha she feels that they are compelled to beg and resort to sex work as the last alternative to earn their livelihood.

Therefore, in 2005, she and her friend Sadhana Mishra (Subham) created an organization named SAKHA which has literally grown from four members to thousands of members. As a part of this organization's activity they have



worked tirelessly over past thirteen years to organize a collective of transgender and sexual minority community members and create awareness and sensitivity in the state. All this has been possible due to the dogged determination of Meera and sincere cooperation of Sadhana. They have become beacons of hope for many people just like them. Both have taken their friendship to a different level and have turned obstacles into their strength. This is reflected in their endurance of all the suffering and discrimination and yet maintaining strength of character. They have emerged as never-ending sources of inspiration for the whole transgender community in the state for whose rights they have fought tirelessly. They have represented the voices of transgender community and have demanded for social,

legal, and financial assistance from government for empowering the community.


Recently, Meera and Sadhana both have got recognized by the international community for their inspiring work by getting an invite from the HRC of US. They have made enormous strides for social inclusion and have taken constructive steps for making their community members live a life of dignity. They have played a major role in revision of Transgender Bill 2016. They have also represented India internationally at international forums like APCOM Bangkok and SAHRA.

Here are excerpts from a brief personal interview with Meera and Sadhana:

Q: What do you do at SAKHA?

A. We promote the rights and dignity of TGs, populations affected by stigma, and non-inclusion and by doing so, improve their self-esteem, health and wellbeing. Sakha has organized countless community driven get-togethers for TG and Hijra community under one umbrella to increase self-acceptance and positive identity in Odisha. We have also worked tirelessly with our NGO partners for HIV prevention, awareness creation, Legal aid clinics in different parts of Odisha, and state and national level consultations for better HIV and Healthcare Programming, and most recently related to TG Bill pertaining to their rights. We are also starting to work on livelihood based approaches for TG community. We have also conducted numerous sensitization training programs for media, police, civil society, healthcare professionals, Govt. Officials and Corporators. We have also conducted several activities for social welfare like blood donation camps, jalchhatra, Swachh bhatabhiyaan, tree plantation program, and helping the poor and needy by offering livelihood, monetary assistance, and more recently scholarships to girl child.

Q: Last year you've received a prestigious Best Transgender Award. What would you say regarding it?



A. (Meera): Last December, 107 person were selected by the UNDP, NACO, HIV/AIDS Alliance and fortunately I received it and it is obviously a matter of pride for me. This honor certainly enables me to go ahead with constructive improvement for the community.

Q: Last year you had gone to US. How was the experience?

A. American government had voluntarily selected transgenders from all over India. We had gone to represent India in Washington DC where we met the previous secretary of the President Barack Obama who herself is a transgender, and had shared her journey of success. We had extensive discussions regarding American federal policies regarding transgender rights and how transgenders are working to create sensitivity in the mainstream society. We went from DC to Denburgh, San Diago, Boston and IOWA state University for reviewing the policies and practices regarding the transgender rights. This experience has subtly helped me in changing our mindset, working style and improving self-confidence.

Q: Last year government has taken certain initiatives inorder to improve lives of TGs, what are your opinion about it?

A. We would certainly consider it as a welcome step and would thank the government for their noble initiatives. The govt. has given us Aadhar card, driving license, voter card, ration card, shelter to dwell under through Biju Pakkah Ghar Yojana. We are hopeful that the govt. would continue to work on constructive and empowerment programs for the transgender communities.

Q: In past, you have contributed to the CM's relief fund, what is your take on this?

A. Everyone in the society has a role to play. With our hard work wherever we are able to earn we try to invest that in social welfare activities. We also contribute a large segment of our

income for several such welfare activities in our local communities.

Q: You have shared that a lot of Kinners resolve to begging and sex work, what is your take on this?

A. We believe that it can be attributed to lack of proper education, abject poverty, and virtually no support from family members which is pushing these people to succumb to such activities for earning their livelihood. If they could receive certain vocational training and means of employment, they would be able to come and be a part of the mainstream society.

Q: You have opened a boutique which has given employment to some Kinners, what would you say about it?

A. Yes, at our boutique many Kinners are actively playing a role and earning a decent livelihood. Recently we organized several ramps shows at prominent fashion festival in Odisha. I want to prove that given an opportunity they will be able to prove their abilities.

Q: What would like to say about your future?

A. We must learn to live a life of dignity without seeking anyone's help or being a matter of pity. We continue to struggle, and do something to make people happy. The path that I have taken isn't easy, is long and full of struggle. But we are fighters. We wouldn't yield so easily. We create our own path and change the mindset of the society.

Q: What would you say about the support in the community?

A. The support inside the community is immense. If we have survived, it is only because of our community members and how we love each other. For e.g. "when Meera came to my life", says Sadhna "I realized that I am not alone in the world. She might not be highly educated, but she has the ability to effectively implement a programme. She is a friend like no other and has a golden heart and we are sisters for life".







*Ranjita Sinha*

(Kolkata, West Bengal-East India)

Ranjita Sinha, a front-running TG activist hails from Kolkata and has represented the very vibrant transgender community across the eastern and north-eastern part of India. She has represented herself at all national and international forums, consultations and conferences including academic ones championing the voices of the transgender community.

Ranjita Sinha is the pioneer who established the Indian first Transgender Registered Network in West Bengal in the year 2008 and Association of Transgender/Hijra in Bengal (ATHB). She was earlier a member of West Bengal transgender Development Board and a member of National Task Force. Turning to the pages, some notable works can be marked with her name. She is being associated with 11 organizations like Bandhan, Birbhum Samporko, Anandam, Uttarayan, NatunAloo, Sampoorna and Collective Soul. working in different parts of Bengal where FTM and MTF all are to be noted in organizations

Another notable milestone attributed to Ranjita Sinha is celebration of Transgender Day, in the history of Bengal. At a time in 2008 when the supreme court verdict was also out, she along

with some other leading agencies of India as like NACO, UNDP, VHSDIVA, ALLIANCE INDIA etc. had celebrated Transgender Day in Bengal. She always turned her words into action and the project of Skills development for the transgender community under the government of India leading to the empowerment of Transgender community, which is an ongoing work dealing with various courses like Software Development, Sewing Model Operator, Hospitality Management, General Duty Assistant etc. courses. Another initiative taken by Ranjita in the field of empowerment was the project 'Snehonir' where the inert talent was expelled from the view that Transgender Community only deals with begging, sex work, etc. leading to a creation of Self-Made group displaying wonderful collection of handicraft, jewelry and other creative things made by the community people.

We know that the work always waits for the pages to be written about them in history. So



even the ongoing work which was started for the development of community and which will be going on in the coming times has been honored

by numerous awards. She is also working with the TG intervention leading with the SRS process of the community. She is also a member of TRG group of NACO.

Currently, she is serving as a board member secretary of Gokhale Road Bandhan. She has been one of the most vocal TG activists who have never minced a word when it comes to raising voices against indifference, apathy, systemic corruption and failure in dealing with causes of the community by the mainstream or even the community members who hold positions, but don't contribute enough.

She has been a part of numerous academic forums where she has spoken vehemently against systemic marginalization, inferiorization and discrimination prevailing in spite of the legal recognition by the supreme court of India. She believes that virtue comes as a result of ethical practices, and has been able to bolster and give a reality check to several politically backed-up community initiatives which have failed to contribute much to the needs of those who are deprived of their basic rights. Ranjita is an orator, and a critical spokesperson of the whole TG community of the West Bengal. Ranjita has also spoken of efforts to marginalize the TG community by their effort at under-representation. She spoke to us "The first basic flaw is conducting a proper census of people from TG community, which include Trans-women, Trans-men and Hijras or eunuchs & Intersex people. According to the board's record, the number is just 700. But as per figures compiled by different activist groups, the number is at least 30,000, and I think, it is even higher if a proper census is conducted".

Ranjita has also made enormous efforts for social inclusion and acceptance of TG community by mainstream society by participating and organizing activities such as D u r g a P u j a , C h a t P u j a , R a t h Yatra, Christmas, Bhai Dooj wherein large

numbers of Transgender and Kinnars took part, and felt recognized as an important part of the society.

Lastly, before we scroll down just few words that explains Ranjita Sinha is that "Ranjita sinha is the VOICE of the Community" which means the only words that we hear is not of Ranjita Sinha alone, but thousands of community people.



*Rudrani Chhetri*  
(Kolkata, West Bengal-East India)

Rudrani is otherwise known as the first 'Transgender Model Maker', and is a role model for many aspiring fashion models. She is also an owner of a group for TG modeling known as Bold Transgender Modeling Agency. Rudrani is a managing trustee at Mitr Trust (MSM/TG CBO) based at New Delhi.

She has been instrumental in the HIV program





for the NACP-III and NACP-IV by NACO and has played a crucial role in getting the TG community recognized as a high-risk population group. Moreover, Rudrani has played a major role in highlighting the issues faced by sexual minority in a male dominated north Indian society and has represented India several times at different forums. She has had her part of the struggle just like any other TG activist, but, she in our opinion is one of those most vocal and care free souls that India has ever seen. She has gone on to extreme ends to convince the bureaucracy to include community members in decision making, planning, and implementation, and therefore deserves recognition for inclusion and partnership of communities for changing mindsets. Rudrani has also made several initiatives to sensitize the mainstream society at educational institutions in Delhi and NCR regarding sexual minorities, and their rights.

Her current efforts are geared towards training and preparing many TG aspiring models, who would want to have a slice of their dreams, in the dream cities. She has made brilliant momentum in bringing TG models to the frontline of modeling profession, and has made financial success. She has also been a champion of animal rights besides her passionate engagement in human rights for past 2 decades.

