

## THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Volume 2, Issue 2, 2022

### **The Field Perspective**

#### **The Dancing Boys in ‘Launda Naach’ – The Politics of Identity**



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Kothis, the ‘indigenous sexual minorities’ have always been rendered invisible as a gender category, by virtue of their overlapping identity. They are often described as ‘passive homosexuals, effeminate, lower-class, non-English-speaking vulnerable group’ (Pushpesh Kumar, 2016). They inhabit both the heterosexual and homosexual spaces to suit the demand of the situation. In other words, they impersonate their psychic gender within their homogeneous community and act straight in a homophobic society. Unlike the hijras who have a cultural and hierarchical ancestry and have occupied a specific social space as ‘third gender’, the kothis occupy a fluid space and usually remain ambiguous in identarian caging and straight jacketing. Usually, the kothis stick to their hetero-normative family while keeping away from cross-dressing, unlike the hijras who forsake their biological homes to join the community. But in spite of the differences, when the family space becomes judgmental with their effeminacy and shuns their incapability to conform to the masculine performativity, these kothis draw

strength, moral support, and camaraderie by joining the hijra community; thereby, becoming one with them. The article explores the *kothi/launda* dancers, their identity, and desires as evident in the performing art. In the pandemic, when dancing had taken a back seat and the kothis had to go back to their home spaces, they felt cut off from their community which used to be a space of comradeship and bonding. I would also like to examine the discourse of politics of identity that have shaped their (kothis) social image within the larger unit of the queer community.

The kothis in urban and rural India are engaged in diversified professions that range from street begging to prostitution to entertaining viewers during 'lagan' (ceremonies and functions mostly held in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh). These entertainers are also known

as launda dancers who earn their living by dancing in the ceremonious functions mostly held in the Bhojpur region of Bihar. For those looking down upon such performances by male disguised as females (laundas) with indignation, it is imperative to know that such performances existed much before in folk art forms in different parts of rural India by the name of 'nautanki' (Bihar) and 'alkaap' (Murshidabad), 'jatra' (Bengali open theatre) where in spite of the availability of females in some cases, the charm lied in making the males perform the female roles. As Jianendra Kumar Dost writes in his article, *Naach, Launda Naach or Bidesiya*, "...over the years, while other forms have allowed women to perform female roles, Naach continues to work with Launda performers only.' Such is the vivacity and aura of the dancing boys, that biological women failed to replace them in this popular musical theater form.

On the ideological platform, the illusion or 'maya' that the dancers create with their charismatic aura on the viewers gets ruptured when practicality creeps in. The life-halting Covid-pandemic that has been a severe blow to mankind in general, has impacted the dancers too; dancers who often remain uncouncted in the census as they are rendered invisible due to their non-normative gender orientation. These artists are well off in their community where they bond on similar desires and identities and are mostly othered in their own family spaces. The familiar home spaces turn out to be correctional spaces, as gender orientation is modelled only on hetero-normative binary structure and these artists do not fit into the created moulds of identity and hence othered. The Covid situation has captured many queer-identified bodies into the closeted home spaces where their liberating 'self' that otherwise breathes in queer affirmative spaces, gets throttled. With the 'New Normal' being the existing norm of life, this community is continuously in the process of yielding to the normative patterns of life sometimes in the form of resistance (suicides), acceptance ('straight-acting'), and remaining stigmatised. The marginalised communities had taken the utmost beatings of the consequences of the pandemic that no other section of the society had encountered. The class, caste, and gender minorities had always been at the centrifugal sphere in terms of equality and justice. On the contrary, they had always occupied the center in moments of crisis and suffrages, be it economic, social, emotional, or physical. The sexual minorities bore the severe brunt of it on their mental and psychic state; not to mention their financial disability. Cut off from their community which was not only a space of bonding and belongingness but also of comradeship and activism that made them aware of their rights and prerogatives, the community members felt completely shattered and homeless. This feeling of homelessness even in their home spaces is what took away the vitality within them that was needed for sustenance and survival. A US-based charitable initiative, 'The Trevor project' reported an insurmountable surge in SOS calls from the community people across the country with proliferation in cases of shelterlessness, unemployment, depression, and suicides.

The situation for the launda dance artists was far worse. These artists sustained their livelihood through dancing and the theatre form on Naach, practiced in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It has enabled them to appropriate their femininity to the fullest as they impersonated lucrative females through make-up, costumes, and inherent coquetry. As Amrita (the female name of a biologically male dancer) mentions that she used to be at the top of the world when the crowd cheered her during her performance on stage and applauded her feminine grace. She considered that acknowledgment as a major reward than monetary returns. Now, Amrita has to dress up like a man and act straight because of his homophobic family members. Another dancer (preferred to be called anonymous) expressed her willingness to stay with her same-sex partner in Bihar instead of returning home but finally was compelled to return to his biological family as the co-existence of homosexual couples is not socially sanctioned. Hence, the internalised fear prevented them to stay together and

drove them back to their normative family spaces. Amal (name changed), a launda dancer and sex worker, is facing acute financial stringency as the pandemic has left indelible fear on the minds of the people to afford luxury and sexual gratification at the cost of health. His world centered around his dance community and his professional friends who sustained him emotionally and financially. With the disruption in the order, he wandered without anybody to fall upon and finally, chose the path to ultimate liberation from the unbearable burden of socially 'unwanted' life. Unable to sustain the intensity of stress and anxiety, he attempted suicide but was fortunately saved by another friend from his community. All these respondents had one thing in common- during the pandemic, they realized the toxicity of their family spaces and society in general. These female impersonators and transvestites had always been victims of exclusion and othering. They doubly encountered segregation when forced into the hetero-normative spaces. The reason behind this intense stigma is, in fact, their 'too-transgressive' nature. The hyper-femininity of the launda dancers is the necessary cause of the stigma attached to them that puts them at an added disadvantage to the other members of the community. As Dasgupta writes- "Effeminate men, both on cyberspace and in physical space, threaten to unmask the normativity that many gay men build around themselves". The same applies to the launda dancers who impersonate as exaggerated women and hence considered as stigma even within the community spaces.

During the fieldwork, I have conducted interviews with four insiders and am thankful to them for the factual information on the consequences of the pandemic on the artists. The predicament of the artists during the pandemic outside their closed community has opened up several analytical discussions on the issues of socio-cultural stigma borne by them. The discourse on the dichotomy between the radical and the assimilative thinkers will probably help in understanding the politics of identity that have shaped the performativity of the kothis, in general, and the laundas, in particular.

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