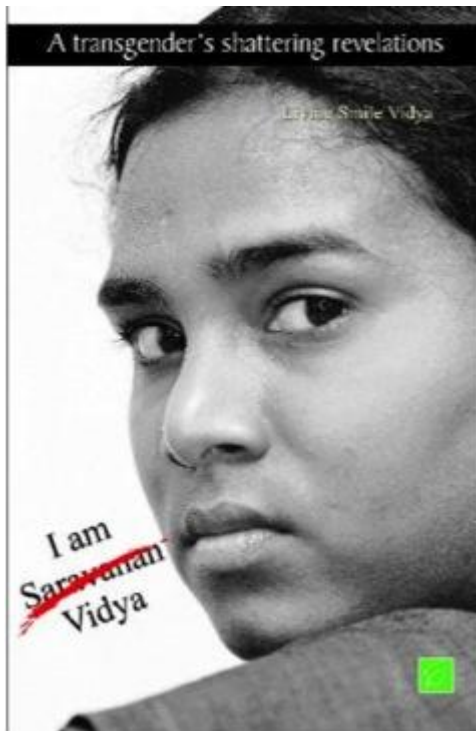


(Trans)gender and caste lived experience – Transphobia as a form of Brahminism: An Interview of Living Smile Vidya

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Sanhati



Living Smile Vidya

Note from the interviewers: This is the transcript of a conversation between dalit transgender feminist writer and theater artist Living Smile Vidya, who lives and works in Chennai, with her transgender brothers Kaveri Karthik and Gee Ameena Suleiman from Bangalore. This conversation took place on a late night after 11 pm in the basti where Kaveri and Gee live, following a day-long discussion between the transgender men and intergenders and lesbian community of Bangalore with a group of visiting dalit activists and intellectuals from Tamil Nadu. After the other ladies in the basti left the common space on the footpath and went to sleep, the following conversation unfolded:

Kaveri: "Can you tell us a little bit about gender and caste dynamics in your own life while growing up?"

Living Smile Vidya: Actually, though we settled in Chennai, we belong to the Arunthathiyar caste in Andhra Pradesh and migrated from there a few generations ago. Our caste is the lowest of the dalits because occupationally we did manual scavenging. So, my mother would have a job everyday doing street cleaning as a government worker, then do domestic work on the side, in several houses for a couple days of the week each. 50% of her earnings would go to her husband. She had to do both house work in our own house as well as work in many jobs outside to make ends meet. My father was an alcoholic and his income contribution to the family was only 40%. But since he had physical control over her income also, I would have to get my school fees from him, though it was actually my mother's earnings. My father would drink and physically and verbally abuse my mother and the rest of us. The whole colony knew about this because the houses are close by

and small. In big houses belonging to savarnas also, women suffer but that cannot be seen or heard by us because it happens in the privacy of the thick walls of their house. But at least you can hear dalit women shouting back, threatening to hit their drunk husbands etc when these fights happen in our colonies which most of the modest, "good wives" of upper/middle caste families cannot even imagine doing.

Kaveri: What has your experience of caste been when you were young?

Living Smile Vidya: "Food in urban areas for my mother who worked as a domestic worker would be served in a simple leaf. So that she doesn't eat in their vessels."

Gee: "But she can clean the vessels for them and then she can touch them, right"?

Living Smile Vidya: "Yes, That is not seen as touching by a dalit. Because then, who will do all their household work? My relatives in the rural areas were coolie workers (manual laborers) and for them, the owners pour the coffee from a great height into coconut shells. This also would be done only outside their houses so that nothing spills on the floor. If there are washed clothes in these houses, we can't push them aside, can only move around them or bend under them to walk so as to not touch them. Sometimes, when visiting, I would walk from 1 dalit compound to the other which were separated by savarna colony. To go between houses you had to walk all the way around to avoid these house compounds and their lands, because they would yell if you walk near their property. Even in urban areas you find that dalit colonies will be pushed to the outskirts of the city but the major portion of the work in the cities is done by them. Untouchability is practised in urban areas also, but the forms are less direct sometimes than in rural areas.

Gee: " I have heard that earlier in Kerala, even the shadow of dalits should not fall in the way of the upper castes . Dalits had to move backwards wiping their footprints if an upper caste had to walk the same path.

Living Smile Vidya: "Yes and before my time even the mundaani of women [upper cloth across chest] would have to be removed when upper castes came across you on the path. There was a big protest that happened over this issue in Tamil Nadu – *ThoL seelai porattum* – and then this practice stopped before my generation.

Kaveri: Yes, a friend Gangatharan told me about this *ThoL seelai porattum*, this struggle which he said started among Nadars Travancore against the practice of obc women being forced to not cover their chests in the presence of the savarnas. There were also severe atrocities against dalit and obc women such as assault and mutilation of their breasts which this protest struggled against, as it spread around Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Kaveri: Did your experience being raised as a child who was considered male by the family and brought up as a boy, but identifying and later living as a woman give you a heightened sense of the privileges given to men over women? For example, the first time I wore men's clothes and walked down the street, I realized ways in which I was oppressed as a woman that were invisible to me when the world looked at me and saw a woman. I realized suddenly I could actually look around at eye level, without lewd stares from men or disapproving stares from older people – and I realized the social pressure on women to look at the ground as they walked – something I knew in the back of my head but hadn't realized the full extent of until I dressed in men's clothes and was liberated from it. It sharpened my feminism. In a similar way for you, seeing both male privilege from society and identifying with women and later living as a woman and facing the dangers of being a woman and a transperson, can you talk about the way this journey has shaped your understanding of gender oppression?

Living Smile Vidya: I was a woman in my heart as a child, even as I was being given male privilege. I hated it because I dearly loved my sisters and mothers [my

biological mother as well as stepmother]. I identified with them and was so angry that my sisters didn't get the same things as me. I was mistaken to be male and couldn't yet articulate that I was a girl and so I was educated much more than my sisters. I still always believed my older sister was very smart, smarter than me, and her life would be very different now if she had been educated. She is doing the same work as my mother only because she was born a biological woman and similar to my mother is the backbone of the household. But from the beginning I was able to influence my stepmother to be different and so her daughter – my sister, is now studying final year B.C.A. This makes me very happy as despite being female born, she has joined the first generation of our family getting educated along with me. In the beginning, I was thinking, I should act in a way that everyone will recognize that I am a woman. I was very shy, like the way people expect girls to be. I would dress very modestly, etc. Even then, as a child I would dream of myself as a saree wearing, sword yielding, woman. Like of the kind that Bharatiyar described in his writings. Bharatiyaar was a Brahminical feminist, but still, at that time, I wanted to be like that. Bharatiyar was like the Tagore of Tamil literature, a great writer, poet, musician, well-versed in many languages, and a radical thinker, part of the independence struggle and very strongly against caste and gender oppression. We read Bharatiyar at school and college, but having read so much of his work, I can still feel some remnants of his Brahminism – for example, he fought caste by performing the upanayanam, the sacred thread ceremony, on a young dalit boy to “convert” him into a Brahmin, instead of fighting Brahminism altogether. Similarly his vision of a woman was as an embodiment of Shakti, and at first I wanted to be this kind of woman.

Later I realized that since all women get oppressed under patriarchy, and trans women and dalit women through the combined might of patriarchy with casteism and transphobia, I might as well have a loud mouth and be assertive than take everything silently – to be a strong but silent woman was not enough. I decided that I do not want to be modest and soft spoken to please others or to fit the ideal of a “good woman”.

Kaveri: How did your Sex Reassignment Surgery a few years ago change your feelings on this? Many transgender people have spoken of their struggle against the gender they are brought up in, and many transgender women are agonized by the pressure on the one hand to behave in a way that is clearly socially recognized as female, while feeling outraged at the way women are treated and expected to behave – basically the double pressures that come from transphobia due to being perceived as a transgender, and male chauvinism from being perceived as women. Some have said that only after their sex reassignment surgery when their bodies were universally recognized as female in the public realm, the pressure to assert their femininity decreases and they can react to the oppression of being a woman. What was your experience?

Living Smile Vidya: Before my nirvana [sex change operation] I was definitely anxious to prove my femininity. I had a lot of these thoughts about the injustice of the oppression against women and transgenders but I was struggling from day to day to just get enough food to eat, to eat as little as possible so I could save anything extra I made from begging. I couldn't be active on fighting for anything but survival. After my nirvana, I felt physically like a woman and then, it became easier for me to survive and to start to question my own model of femininity. With age also, my understanding of these things improved and I began to question femininity and masculinity and fixed gendered roles and behaviours more strongly.

Kaveri: Can you compare caste discrimination and transgender discrimination, for example with respect to being forced into some occupations like manual scavenging for dalit communities or begging and sex work for transgenders. How similar or different are they and what has your experience of this been?

Living Smile Vidya: Transgender discrimination is more severe, I feel, than dalit experience in urban areas. On the one hand, transgenders can only get homes in dalit bastis as these are the only places where we can get any acceptance – but we usually have to pay higher rent than others. It hurts a bit when dalits discriminate, even though they discriminate less than savarnas – as it feels like my own people shouldn't discriminate against me at all due to our shared understanding of oppression as dalit. It is paradoxical for me to face added social disadvantage as a transgender. I feel like oppressed groups should try to understand each other's pain and work together.

Hijras or tirunangais as we prefer to be called in Tamil Nadu, at least have a community traditionally with an entire system of support [though at times, even the guru-chela system is oppressive and exploitative]. We can go to shops and ask for money. Female to male transpeople on the other hand, also known as tirunambi, can't ask for money in public and do not have this traditional community.

I feel like transgenders who are working class have no dignity of labour because socially they are allowed to only beg or do sex work. But some dalit groups have taken back dignity of labour by assertions from within the community. Like daily wage labourers in agriculture can at least assert that they are making food with their own hands for the whole country to eat or artisans can claim the status of artists, but not transgenders yet. We are reduced to the status of just beggars or sex workers. This is similar to what some dalit groups have faced as manual scavengers. This occupational fixity in both dalit and transgender communities, is done by closing off alternative options. Thus, manual scavenging becomes an occupation enforced on dalits through the exclusion of access to other jobs; in a similar way begging and sex work are forced occupations for transgenders through exclusion from other jobs. But in spite of this, we retain some of our dignity in the face of this exclusion .

To retain dignity we have to think these jobs are normal. Manual scavenging and begging just becomes like a practice. Children are mentally prepared by society to think it is normal. In school when they would ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" We dalits wouldn't say doctor, engineer, but our boys would say for example, "I will work in a cracker factory". Girls would smile and not respond. Dalits are socially conditioned to internalise that they are meant to do only some jobs and don't dream to do anything else or get the access to education and alternative jobs. Transgenders also when they first realize that they are trans women, they immediately think they will have to beg, because they see transgenders only in one place – begging on the street. So, by repetition historically and by not providing alternative options, these jobs become fixed. Amongst dalits with reservation, some changes have happened in the sense that access to educational facilities have opened up a bit but numerous other ways are used to torture us till we drop out or commit suicide or fail. Even in reservations, it is not the lowest of the dalits like us who benefit, but the more elite. This is somewhat like the savarna transgenders who have NGO funding claiming to represent the community and getting all the benefits. This kind of representational politics gives a false picture of progress of these communities from this funding model.

Kaveri: Is transgender a kind of caste? The Backward Classes Commission under C.S Dwarakanath has recommended that transgenders be included as OBCs for reservation. What do you think about this?

Living Smile Vidya: We need reservation on the basis of gender, not caste. But it has to be more complex. But I definitely do not want to be OBC. And you will understand why as a dalit, I do not want to come under the OBC category of all things! Putting transgenders under an oppressed caste category erases the caste privileges that savarna transgenders have. It is better for us to have caste and gender based reservation so that dalit women and dalit transgenders get representation. Otherwise reservation will only benefit savarna transgenders and dalit men.

Kaveri: Is there caste within the transgender community? Do people lose caste as they enter the hijra system?

Living Smile Vidya: There is not so much caste in the hijra community because everyone's names are changed. As you enter the hijra community, you lose location, language, last name. A few members of the transgender community who are dalit have figured out I am dalit and have secretly told only me because they knew I'm dalit. They have also told me not to talk about eating beef so that no one in the transgender community figures out I am dalit. Some castes though are very proud, such as Thevars and Pillaimars, who are always proudly asserting their caste. I have seen some kothis and hijras and say things like, "I might be a transgender like you, but I am a Thevar in the village".

Even I, have once pretended to be Thevar when I was confronted by an auto driver for smoking and it was a dangerous situation. I was taking his auto late at night. I saw the picture of a Thevar leader Muthuramalingam Thevar in the auto, so I put on a Madurai accent and pretended to be a Thevar girl to save my skin. He was so impressed he asked if I could ask my father for my hand in marriage! [Laughs]. There I was, a dalit, transgender woman passing off as an upper caste biological woman to save my skin and getting a marriage proposal at 2 A.M!

Gee: When you go for a jamaat or some such ceremony in the hijra community, if you even touch a senior hijra's saree accidentally, you have to pay a fine. Of course this is not a caste practice as it happens if any hijra touches any senior hijra's clothes, but do you think this practice has come from caste untouchability?

Living Smile Vidya: It is like class, it's showing respect. It's not outlawed, but punished with a fine. Since we get no respect outside the community, the elder tirunangais say they have made some rules within like this to get respect with increasing seniority. When I was a younger kothi, I would respect all these traditions but then I found them oppressive and too hierarchical. It is like how victims in some respects become oppressors when they get the opportunity or power. I don't know where this particular association of not touching means respect comes from. You may be right in guessing that it comes from caste practice.

Gee: "Can you talk a bit about how migration plays a crucial role in our search for freedom whether it is as a dalit or as a transperson. For example, I read in Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography how he says that when he migrated from his village, he could "pass" as a non dalit. Similarly, we know that all of us as transpeople, move out of our native towns to find freedom and also "pass" more as women or men".

Kaveri: As someone who could pass as a non-dalit, non-trans woman, how do you tell other transpeople or dalits that you are one of them. How do you "out" yourself to them?

Living Smile Vidya: One's recognition as dalit or transgender within the village gets removed by migration, but some of the markers still remain. Outing oneself as transgender really depends on how you talk, how you walk. I "pass" most of the time in public as a woman. So, if I want to tell another kothi/hijra that I am also a

trans woman, I use our own kothi language to give myself away as one of them. As to outing oneself as dalit, the markers are where you live, how you speak- the dialect, last name etc.

From my experience, it is only non dalits who ask what your caste is. Dalits always know their brothers or sisters when they see us. When I want to find out if someone is a dalit comrade, I just ask a common dalit friend. But mostly, when we speak about dalit issues, we can tell if they are dalit or not. Because of sub castes and feeling of superiority, I am sometimes scared of outing myself as belonging to the arundhati caste [manual scavenging]. There is some discrimination even between different types of dalits. The adi dravida castes are considered superior to us and so even at home, my parents never allowed me to learn my mother tongue, Telugu, because they were afraid that the general public would figure out and discriminate extra against me. But because living spaces are so segregated on the basis of caste, it is easy to know who the dalits are in the village. Among the dalits, the Telugu speakers would be clearly identified as the so-called lowest dalit castes. I never hide from other dalits the fact that I am also a dalit, even if I don't reveal my subcaste. Similarly, I never hide to other trans women that I am also one of them.

Kaveri: What do you tell your dalit comrades when you attempt to unify the transgender and dalit struggles?

Living Smile Vidya: I try to explain that they have also been made to feel less human by savarna castes, in a way similar to how society treats tirunangais. I ask them why they can't understand our pain when they have had similar experiences individually and historically. When they ask me, "Why do transgenders beg and not work? You will get more respect if you just work like other people". I say, "Why don't dalits become bankers, doctors, engineers. Why are they still stuck in the same jobs after all these years? Is it because we dalits are not capable? Or because we are lazy and don't want those jobs? Actually it is because of lack of opportunity and discrimination. The same goes for transgenders. If you offer transgenders jobs, they will stop begging and work hard and live with dignity like others in society. Begging itself is very hard work". Dalit comrades need to fight patriarchy and transphobia along with casteism.

Transphobia is a type of brahminism. It gives us no other option but to do "dirty" jobs like sex work and begging and then calls us "dirty", just like caste system did with dalits. When I draw parallels like that, my dalit comrades understand better and work with me.

Kaveri: What do you think about unifying the oppressed peoples' struggles?

Living Smile Vidya: If I give a talk on, transgender issues, I tell people they have to join with our struggle if they believe in social justice. I always talk about working together, along with women's struggle. But I know that most so called feminists think that I am a man in woman's clothing. They would treat me as if I am not quite a woman. The general public accepts me as a transgender quite readily so why do activists take longer? Some of these feminists will wear fabindia clothes and their gold and think women must be modest. They talk as if the strongest and most satisfying thing in the world is to give birth and take care of their children. As a trans woman, though the fact that I cannot have biological children, is used against me to make me feel less like a "real" woman, I sometimes feel grateful that I have been spared being thought of just as a baby producing machine! They also are very patronizing about caste and can talk progressively but will have a dalit woman making tea and serving them at their meetings instead of also including her and learning from her experiences. Dalit movements also have to be worked with internally, so that their perspective on gender broadens. In another way, savarna

feminists should broaden their perspective to include trans women and also work really hard to lose their caste bias. But ultimately we have to understand that we are all people under attack whether the enemies are Brahmanism and caste, gender oppression, patriarchy, NGOs, the State, capitalism, multinational companies, Western neo imperialism etc. We must all unify to fight an effective struggle against these monsters.