

## Social Prejudice and Transgender Identity in Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*: A Critical Study

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### Abstract

This study examines how gender and sexuality are represented in discourse. It also highlights the basic rights every individual deserves the freedom to love, the right to live without discrimination, the right to dignity regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, and the right to life. The discussion is based on the transgender autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) by Manobi Bandyopadhyay, which powerfully exposes the struggles and resilience of India's first transgender principal. The book tells the story of Bandyopadhyay's struggles, strength, and success as she moves from being treated as a "hijra" to becoming India's first transgender college principal. It also shows the harsh mistreatment she faced from colleagues and society, where prejudice often reduced her professional identity to her gender identity. Despite her academic and administrative achievements, society often treated her success as an exception rather than genuine recognition of merit. Her story reveals the deep stigma faced by transgender individuals while also showing how education and self-empowerment can challenge marginalization, which is central to this study. This study investigates Bandyopadhyay's life to show how transgender individuals still struggle to claim their rights and identities in a society dominated by heteronormative values. Her story serves as both a personal testimony and a social critique, reminding us that true equality can only be achieved when dignity, acceptance, and justice are extended to all, regardless of gender identity. It urges society to move beyond prejudice and see transgender individuals as equal participants in education, work, and public life. Her journey stands as a call for change, showing that acceptance and respect are essential for real social progress.

**Keywords:** Transgender Autobiography, Gender Identity, Discrimination, Education, Empowerment, Social Justice.

### 1. Introduction

*A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) is the biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, India's first transgender college principal, written with journalist Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey. The book traces Bandyopadhyay's life, beginning with her childhood struggles with gender identity, her pursuit of education, and the many social, cultural, and institutional barriers she faced as a transgender woman. More than just a personal story, the autobiography offers important insights into the experiences of transgender people in India, where society is still shaped by rigid gender norms and heteronormative values. The biography portrays Bandyopadhyay not only as an individual fighting for her own identity but also as a symbol of resilience against social stigma and systemic

discrimination. Although she was academically accomplished and professionally capable, she was often reduced to the label of "hijra" by colleagues and society, who doubted her legitimacy as an educator and leader. Her appointment as principal of a government college was a landmark achievement, yet it also revealed the deep-rooted prejudices that remain in educational and professional spaces.

This work plays an important role in discussions on gender, sexuality, and human rights. It shows how autobiography can serve as both a personal testimony and a form of social critique, questioning dominant narratives that marginalize transgender identities. By placing Bandyopadhyay's life within the broader struggle for gender justice and equality, the book highlights the urgent need for

social change, institutional reform, and recognition of transgender rights in contemporary India. At the same time, the text challenges readers to reflect on their own perceptions of gender and identity. It opens up space for dialogue on inclusivity, acceptance, and justice, reminding us that the fight for transgender rights is inseparable from the larger struggle for human rights. By centering the voice of a transgender woman who has broken barriers, the work not only documents personal resilience but also inspires collective responsibility toward building a more equitable society.

The biography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, co-authored by Manobi Bandyopadhyay and journalist Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, narrates the life of India's first transgender college principal. It traces Bandyopadhyay's path of self-discovery and her fight for dignity and recognition as a transgender woman. Her experiences mirror the larger realities of gender discrimination in India, revealing how education functioned both as a barrier and as a means of empowerment. The book describes the prejudice and exclusion she faced while pursuing education but also highlights her resilience in overcoming these barriers. Her story becomes a symbol of courage, showing how education can transform the lives of marginalized people. Beyond her personal achievements, the biography also raises important questions about inclusion, representation, and the rights of transgender individuals in academic and professional spaces.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay is an influential and inspirational transgender who works in the real world in addition to speaking about social issues. She is an activist who does not merely write or speak in a theoretical way. When transgender people were recognised as the "third gender" in 2014, she achieved success. Bandyopadhyay's battle is a lifetime one, despite the media's attention being drawn to her after she was appointed principal of Krishnagar Women's College in West Bengal on June 9, 2015. In early 1995, she started fighting for all LGBT individuals, not just the 490,000-transgenders in India, when the transgender magazine *Obo-Manab* was first published. In 2003, she underwent gender reassignment surgery, ending her body-soul duality

and becoming a woman. Many "others" have been motivated by this occurrence to discover their actual gender identity by creating a body that their minds have long desired. She has been fighting for equal human rights for transgender people in India for the past ten years, and in 2019 she won the fight a second time with the Transgender Persons Act. She has been a part of the grassroots Transgender Rights Movement for the past ten years. Social media has helped raise awareness of LGBT rights in today's culture; although prejudice against them is still prevalent, it is now more acceptable. The only way for any law to be effective is if we stand with transgender people, who merely want the most fundamental of human rights.

Manobi's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal* is a story that aims to welcome transgender people as fellow human beings. He was a treasured possession for his father, who was frequently made fun of for not being able to have a son, and was born as Somnath, the lone son of the household. People would dismiss Somnath's wearing his sister's clothes as childish when he was younger. However, they quickly understood that something was wrong. For as long as he could, his father would not witness Somnath's slow transition into Manobi. But the outside world saw the unsuitable transformation. Somnath's feminine tendencies would frequently make him the target of jokes. For most individuals in society, she still identifies as transgender even after she was appointed college administrator. She drafts: "For them I am just another excuse to watch a *tamasha*..." (viii).

After earning a degree in Bengali literature from Rishi Bankim Chandra College in Kolkata, West Bengal, Manobi went on to Jadavpur University in Kolkata, for her master's and master's degree, and Kalyani University in Kolkata, for her doctorate. After having sex change surgery, she legally changed her name from Somnath to Manobi, and it was under this name that she received her PhD. Manobi's intelligence was never overpowered by criticism. She was aware that the only thing that could free her was education. She was hired by Srikrishna College in Bagula, as a part-time instructor. She then got a permanent job at Patulia

Boy's School. Later, Manobi joined Vivekananda Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya in Jhargram as a lecturer, where she worked for many years despite facing hostility and discrimination from some colleagues. Her dedication to teaching and research, however, never wavered. In 2015, she broke a historic barrier by becoming the principal of Krishnagar Women's College in Nadia district, West Bengal, making her the first transgender person in India to hold such a position. This achievement was not only a personal milestone but also a landmark moment for the transgender community, symbolizing courage, resilience, and the transformative power of education.

The neighbours would frequently be curious about Manobi's feminine behaviours. They would question and think it odd that someone they would have called a hijra had gone on to teach in a school. The West Bengal College Service Commission later sent her a letter appointing her as a lecturer at the Vivekananda Satavarshiki Mahavidyalaya in Jhargram, West Bengal. Manobi experienced the most severe types of hate crimes in Jhargram. Some of her colleagues believed that a hijra had no right to hold a professorship, therefore they not only verbally but physically mistreated her. She would occasionally avoid going alone out of fear of being trapped since she felt so intimidated. Her motivation to stay in the teaching profession came solely from her students' desire to learn. She founded her own publication, "Abomanob" (subhuman), which alludes to the rank that society bestows upon transsexual individuals. It served as a kind of protest the deceitful society that masquerades as inclusive.

Society shapes how sexual identities and preferences are seen by setting norms of what is "acceptable" or "unacceptable." In this system, heterosexuality is treated as the natural and superior order. Any identity outside this framework is pushed to the margins and denied equal recognition. Human identity, however, is diverse, with many sexualities, orientations, and gender expressions that are equally valid. These should be respected and valued, not dismissed or ridiculed. When societies fail to do this, people who do not follow conventional gender norms face prejudice

and discrimination. Those who fit heteronormativity enjoy privilege, while others suffer exclusion and stigma. Therefore, it is important to move beyond rigid ideas of gender and sexuality. By recognizing and accepting diverse identities, societies can reduce stigma and ensure dignity and equality for all.

Families typically abandon transgender people to fend for themselves. They are denied a dignified life because they are stereotyped as objects of mockery. It breaks down the public's preconceived notions about transgender people. Whether they are Hijras, Kothis, Aravanis, or Devadasis, India's transgender people have been compelled to live on the periphery of society. They exist on the periphery of civilisation. On the one hand, hijras are viewed as outsiders and are dreaded for their supposed power (gift of prophecy, which can bring blessings or curses to pass). However, the mere sight of a transsexual person evokes feelings of disgust and disdain. Manobi drafts:

How many times have you stopped at a traffic signal and turned your face away from the hijra who stood outside your car window asking for money? ... You thought of her as a strange, detestable creature, perhaps a criminal and definitely subhuman. (vii)

The public often encounters hijras in very limited situations—such as dancing at ceremonies, singing, or begging at traffic signals. Beyond these moments, very little is known or acknowledged about their everyday lives, struggles, and aspirations. This narrow visibility creates and sustains stereotypes, where hijras are reduced to fixed roles rather than being seen as individuals with full human dignity. Such stereotypes shape society's prejudiced opinions, making it easier to dismiss or dehumanize them instead of understanding their diverse identities, talents, and contributions.

As a child, Manobi, who was Somnath, would frequently dress like her sister and look at herself. Such acts would be disregarded by her parents as being immature. She is frequently made fun of for acting like a girl. Her father tries to ignore the behavioural shift that is readily apparent to others. Her mother would make futile attempts to explain

things to her. Her traumatic journey is described in the narrative. She has been hired by Vivekananda College as a lecturer. She experiences both physical and psychological abuse at this college. Most people find it hard to believe that a transgender person can hold a lectureship.

Manobi takes over as Krishnagar Women's College's principal. She maintains her transsexual identity as her dominant identity while serving as a college administrator. This kind of identification is reductive. She has experienced discrimination because she is transgender at every point of her life. For most people, she is more than simply a college principle; she is a transgender principal.

Manobi is the first transgender person to hold a college principal position in India. She was aware that the only way to escape the horrible existence she was compelled to lead because she was "different" was through education. "In some way, I did not allow my sexual awakening to influence my intelligence ... triumph in this unfair battle," (11) she records. On the first day of her college for the graduate classes, she describes how people reacted to her in a very light-hearted way: "Students just stood and gaped at this good-looking youth, in a long kurta and salwar, who, with a woman's gait and disposition, was headed towards the Bengali department. I certainly did not fit the definition" (40). Her gender was clearly visible, and she publicly asserted her identity without any inhibitions. She exuded confidence, and no amount of mockery or teasing could deter her from enrolling in college and finishing her advanced coursework.

Somnath enjoyed dressing like his sister. He would wear his sisters' clothes, which were larger than his own, and spend hours staring into the mirror, admiring himself even though they were years older than he was. Even though these behaviours were initially dismissed, his mother and sisters eventually understood that something was wrong with his actions. His mother would make fruitless attempts to explain to him that such actions could bring disrepute to the family. However, he would disregard his mother's counsel. He believed himself to be a woman, thus he was unaffected by his mother's advice. "Instead, he'd think, "But Ma, I'm a woman. Do you not think so? Ma, let me be a girl"

(10). A desire to dress like a female consumed Somnath. "I knew that just like the girls of my age, I was attracted to men and wanted them as my partners," Somnath said, demonstrating his conviction that he was a girl and not a gay. "How, then, wasn't I heterosexual?" (32) Manobi frequently doubted herself. "I would stand naked in front of the mirror for hours trying to examine the image that stared back at me," she records. "I detested him. I wanted to pull away and run away from the body of the man I was born in" (109).

Manobi's urge to spend her life as a woman was uncontrollable. She would frequently doubt her identity and personality because she felt trapped in the wrong body. She writes: "I was really perplexed. Who was I? Was I confused about who I was, or why was my body different from my soul? What made me this way at birth? Was I being forced to pay such a high price for some old karma? How do I get out of this trap?" (31) Manobi would frequently become so confused by her daily annoyances that she would start to doubt herself and the course she had chosen in life: "Am I truly a woman locked in a male body, or are these just hallucinations? Why does the entire world consider me to be a wimp of a man?" (109). She would be experiencing mental turmoil.

Manobi knew that most of the insults she faced came from how society judged her gender expression. She understood that if she dressed and acted in a more masculine way, people might stop mocking her in public. To avoid this cruelty, she even tried to look and behave like a man so she could fit into society's expectations. However, this disguise gave her no peace, because it did not match who she truly was inside. Pretending only made her inner conflict worse, and she realized that hiding her identity was not the answer. In time, Manobi accepted the truth that she was a woman, and no external pressure could change that. With this acceptance, she chose to embrace her true self, knowing that only by being authentic could she live with dignity, even if society continued to show prejudice against her.

According to Manobi, her unclear gender identity was the most significant factor to other students during her time in college. It did not matter if she

knew a lot more about Bengali literature than any other student. Her unique look and demeanour obscured her expertise. Even if she was an excellent student, many would make offensive remarks or make fun of her. The fact that she is a college principal is not important to individuals in her situation. Her transsexual identity takes precedence above everything else. Her sexual orientation and gender identification prevent her from being allowed in public. Any other "normal" individual, instead of her, would have been referred to as the principal instead of a man, woman, or transgender person.

The "gender defenders" also intimidate Manobi in her work as a lecturer. One of the most painful experiences, she had in her life was probably working as a lecturer at Vivekananda College. When she first showed up to officially start working as a lecturer at the institution, she was met with a barrage of insulting remarks. Peers were attempting to catch a glimpse of the "odd" individual who had shown up at their campus dressed as a teacher. Because they felt that no hijra had the right to become a professor, other teachers banded together against her and threatened to destroy her career. They were able to persuade other educators that Manobi was an anomaly and that they all needed to expel her from the institution as part of their defence of the gender system.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay faced severe discrimination and hostility as a transgender woman in the educational system, which should have been a place of equality and respect. Many people said that a hijra should not be allowed to teach in a college or use common facilities like restrooms, staff rooms, or other spaces. Such views showed the deep stigma against transgender people, who are often denied dignity and equal treatment. Even with these threats, Manobi did not give up her job as a teacher. She continued with determination, showing courage against such oppression. But the discrimination did not stop at words—some of her colleagues even attacked her physically because she refused to hide her identity. This revealed that transphobia exists even among educated people and that colleges are not always free from hate. The paragraph also shows that hate

crimes against transgender people can happen not only in public spaces but also inside institutions that should be safe and inclusive. Calling these acts "heinous" highlights the cruelty of targeting someone only for being transgender. Manobi's strength and persistence prove both the struggles and the resilience of transgender individuals in a hostile world.

Manobi tried to be strong, but occasionally she would be so afraid that she would avoid going out by herself. She was always in danger of being raped and stripped naked. She only found a glimmer of hope in her students. Her favourite times were when her students patiently and attentively listened to her teachings. The pupils were eager to learn and hailed from extremely low-income homes. She was inspired and sustained by this reading and writing opportunities. When one of her students topped the university exam, her efforts were rewarded. Nonetheless, some educators persisted in plotting against her.

Manobi also had to deal with the separation of her visual and textual identities. Following her sex change surgery, she legally changed her name from Somnath to Manobi. Under her new name, she also obtained her PhD. According to her, "there was a great deal of confusion, and it posed a problem in my career advancement because all of my academic certificates bear the name Somnath Bandyopadhyay while my PhD bears the name Manobi Bandyopadhyay" (160). Even after receiving her PhD, she was not given the promotion she deserved to become a reader. She later received a promotion to Associate Professor. Her increments were taken away from her. She had to engage in a protracted battle with the state's higher education administration to convince them that Somnath and Manobi were the same individual to receive her promotion. She lost many years of seniority even though she eventually received justice and the appropriate raises.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay faced one of her hardest struggles when she sought help from the medical system. She was going through deep emotional pain because her body did not match her true identity. Hoping for guidance, she turned to psychiatric support. But instead of kindness, she

found a medical system filled with prejudice, misinformation, and little understanding of transgender lives. When she openly said she wanted a sex change surgery to escape the male body she was trapped in, the doctor reacted with shock and disbelief. This showed the bias in society and medical institutions at that time, where gender transition was often seen as abnormal rather than a valid need. Such attitudes only increased the stigma and made it harder for transgender people to access proper healthcare.

However, not all doctors shared these views. Some were more empathetic and professional, showing that while there are barriers in the system, there can also be allies. Still, transgender individuals often face rejection and ignorance when what they need most is acceptance and support. This incident highlights the urgent need for better medical education and inclusive healthcare for transgender people. It also shows the bravery required for them to voice their needs in unsafe or unsupportive environments. Manobi's experience is a reminder of the ongoing struggles of the transgender community and their strength in fighting prejudice.

In her own campus, Manobi did find the reassuring words she was looking for from a medical student. She was not an anomaly, he reassured her. Additionally, she could have a sex change operation with the aid of medical assistance. However, it necessitated extensive hormonal treatment and psychotherapy both before and after surgery. Over time, her physique started to change due to the influence of hormones. She eventually had the procedure done in 2003. She describes the freeing sensation as follows: "Manobi was born and Somnath had left me forever. I experienced a sense of completeness that had been denied to me at birth, and at last my spirit had found its body" (136).

At first, Manobi's parents also opposed her "deviant" status. Her parents had two daughters before Manobi, who plays Somnath, was born. The birth of Somnath made her father the happiest. At last, he was able to have a son. While Somnath was gradually changing into Manobi, the father did his best to overlook his son's transformation. He even decided to ignore my love of lipstick, kohl, skirts, and other feminine characteristics that were very

noticeable at the time, she adds. "He still thought I required harsh parenting because I was a little off the path" (25). Her father chose to ignore the reality that his son was gradually becoming his daughter. He would blame his son's mischievous attitude on Manobi's mother's tenderness. Her mother would also frequently make fruitless attempts to help her son realise that his unpredictable attitude was damaging the family's reputation. She may have known that she had given birth to a girl in a man's body for the third time, but she had recognised that she could not change what God had decreed.

The entire community had begun making fun of Manobi's parents for their inability to rein in their mischievous child. They started to shun them. "How can you let your son turn into a hijra right in front of your eyes?" (10) they would frequently ask. The public has begun to make fun of her parents. Despite their opposition to her "deviant" behaviour, her parents eventually came to accept her for who she was. "My mother... loved me when I was her son and still loved me when I became her daughter," (179) she records. Even though it took a long time, her father eventually acknowledged her as his daughter.

Manobi had the inner feeling of a female stuck in the wrong body even as a young child. The students at her school would frequently make fun of her. Society mocks not only the transgender individual but also the family. Her parents were also charged with failing to maintain authority over their son. However, nothing could deter her from achieving academic success. It took years for her father to accept that his son was his daughter, even though she had the support of her family.

Manobi goes beyond simply dismantling the stereotype of a transgender person. However, she simultaneously creates a positive representation of transgender people, making a name for herself in the public sphere. Her memoir also aims to show that a hijra person can do great things. Transgender's accomplishments ought to be equitably acknowledged. She drafts: "I write with the belief that it would help society understand people like me better. We are slightly different outwardly, but we are humans just as you are and have the same needs - physical and emotional - just

as you have” (ix). Through her autobiography, Manobi aims to refute the myth that hijras are subhuman.

## 2. Conclusion

This study concludes that Manobi went to the medical system for help but did not find the support she needed. She was in great emotional pain because her body did not match her true identity. Hoping for guidance, she visited a psychiatrist, but instead of receiving care and understanding, she faced prejudice and wrong ideas. When she expressed her wish to undergo a sex change surgery, the doctor was shocked. This reaction showed that both society and medicine often viewed gender transition as something abnormal. Such attitudes made it difficult for transgender people to get proper healthcare. However, not all doctors were prejudiced—some were understanding and supportive. Manobi’s experience highlights the urgent need for inclusive and sensitive healthcare. It also shows her bravery in speaking her truth, even when she faced rejection.

## 3. Conflict of Interest

The Authors have declared that no conflict of interest for this work.

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