



# I AM I

*The Hidden Pages*

**Vinodhan**



Description of the front cover: Illustrated portrait of a brown woman gazing with a purple ring on her left hand held against her left eye, through which her gaze is coming. The illustration has a yellow background. And the woman has straight black hair. Above is the title 'I am I' in bold violet letters. Below is 'The Hidden Pages' in italicised brown letters. The author's name is written in smaller, bold white letters on a violet box: 'Vinodhan'. At the very top is the red-coloured CREA logo.

Description of the back cover: The back cover has the author's portrait and a short bio of the author on a yellow background. On the bottom of the page is the red-coloured Crea logo and below is written 'This work was produced as part of CREAtE Initiative by CREA.'

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# INTRODUCTION

Like our Milky Way galaxy that wanders among millions of other galaxies in the universe, like the species of humans that wanders alongside many other living species on our planet Earth, I too traverse life alongside humans divided by their sex and genders: men, women, trans women, trans men, and I as an intersex person.

The birth and existence of intersex people is not a new phenomenon. We have lived in our societies and communities for many hundreds of years all along. There has been only a lack of understanding of our identities, and a gap in identifying us. Some were born centuries ago and lived as warriors, ascetics in many religions, spiritualists, and royalty. We are going to look back at these disappeared and hidden pages of our history, forgotten due to the cycle of time.

To shed light on the lives and experiences of intersex individuals, I have written this book which contains first-hand experiences of living with intersex conditions, both at the margins and at the intersections of sex, gender, and identities. Some of the people featured in this book have disabilities and others do not and this book is not about disability. Some individuals have expressed that they feel 'deficient', however this is not to say that they are disabled. Disability and 'deficiency' are two different terms and thus should not be treated as one in the same.

Some individuals accept their physical 'deficiencies' as a disability and are open about it, while others live their lives having accepted it and not sharing this aspect of their life

with their immediate social circle. Regardless of whether the individuals featured in this book identify as having a disability or not, they are all leading full lives in society.

This book has three parts.

First, we will journey through my personal life, through my childhood, school, and college education, through how I discovered that I was an intersex person. I have mentioned significant events in my life, my hardships and my love—which are a part of every person’s life and a basic right for every individual—that shaped me as a person today. I have highlighted those parts of my life to emphasize to others that, contrary to

popular belief, we as people with disabilities and intersex people go through similar life journeys, including romantic relationships, and live a full life like any other human being. At the end of my life story, I describe how I have been selected as a Creator, as part of the Create Initiative, how I conducted awareness and sensitization events, and how I met many other intersex people—some of whom were disabled too, like me! We will briefly see how I came to write this book eventually, after

Per the Persons with Disability (PWD) Act, a person is deemed disabled if their disability is  $\geq 40\%$  and it is certified as such. According to the PWD Act, sensory disabilities (sight, hearing, etc.), motor disabilities (of the limbs) from birth, disabilities due to accidents, learning disabilities, genetic disabilities like cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, Parkinson’s syndrome, autism, etc. are categorized under 21 different heads. There is a government statute called the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RoPWD) in India, and a separate committee



interviewing some intersex people who identify themselves as having a disability and/or health difficulties in their bodies too.

Second, we will journey through various intersex persons' life stories, significant events in their lives, the loves and the hardships they experienced, which will highlight the diverse experiences of intersex individuals in India. We will note the significant role a person's immediate family plays in their life, and also the significance of the person's caste identity, which largely shapes their upbringing and general access to amenities. We will also see the intersectional issues and situations in each of their lives and how these shape their livelihoods.

Third, I have consolidated all the events and programs I conducted as an intersex activist and as part of the Create Initiative program to both learn and contribute to society. Following my experiences and the insights I gained from the process of writing this book, conducting events, and as a Creator, I have consolidated some salient points for readers to note. This part includes prescriptions for the media, government, medical personnel, and the general public for the welfare and upliftment of intersex persons, to highlight their rights, and the necessary aids to be rendered by the respective authorities. I have also included an Annex, which contains more information for people who would like to know more about intersexuality and intersex conditions.

The life stories in this book are not just stories, but the lived experiences of intersex people, on their life journeys like you and me. We will witness the significant moments in their lives, their happinesses and sorrows, their battles, because of their bodies, minds, society's restrictions, and prevalent casteism. We are going on different journeys in this book to understand

people's right to self-determine their gender and sexuality, their needs and expectations from society, and the problems they face. These are held up here for the awareness and sensitization of the general public, media, medical professionals, and governments. We will witness the aspects of intersectionality in each of these individuals' lives. Their identities are not limited to the one—intersex; they have various other individual identities in this society, based on their caste and disabilities/abilities too.

**Note:** The names and addresses of individuals in this book have been changed to protect their identities and to safeguard them and their families from potential harm. The contents of this book are obtained and published with the consent of everyone involved. The bibliography section is a consolidation of references of the facts mentioned in this book and also further sources for enthusiastic readers!

**VINODHAN'S  
LIFE  
STORY**

# MY BIRTH AND BIRTHPLACE

I was born in a town on the outskirts of the business capital district of Tamil Nadu. I was born as the second child to uneducated parents. My father was a daily-wage worker and my mother was a homemaker who was largely unaware of anything unrelated to household chores and lacked societal or worldly awareness.

My father had married my mother, who was his cousin, when he had just reached adulthood. My mother was 18 when she got married. Our family is that of a typical daily-wage worker's and we belong to an oppressed caste (Dalit caste).

I was told that my birth was a difficult one for my mother and that I had been born en route to the hospital. Then they took us both to the hospital. My parents were told by the doctors that they had a beautiful daughter and that was how I was brought up, as a girl. My parents were delighted to have a daughter and brought me up with utmost affection.

Our village was a constant reminder of caste oppression, a village devoid of basic toilet facilities, a village in which getting regular meals and clothes to wear was hard. Everyone had to carry water pitchers and walk to the next village to get drinking water. The highest education level of most villagers was fifth grade in government schools.

Government schools in Tamil Nadu provide free education, including books, uniforms, and various other materials to help underprivileged children. But government schools, especially those in villages, lack scholastic activities, playgrounds, and

extra-curricular activities. Private schools provide amenities like computer training and extracurricular activities like karate, music classes, etc. But they were expensive. One needs to be from the middle class at the least to afford a private school education and extra tuition. It was widely considered that education was for the rich anyway. I have heard villagers talk about how the dominant caste did not allow a few good students from our village to continue their education. Schools were meant for those belonging to the oppressor castes, not the oppressed.

The lives of people belonging to the 'lower' castes were like this in the early 1990s. Even today, a lot of the people living in the most underdeveloped villages on the outskirts of towns continue in the same state. Untouchability and oppression practices such as separate glasses in tea shops (the 'two tumbler' practice), separate queues, and prohibition of sitting alongside 'upper'-caste people in restaurants are still prevalent in these rural villages.

# CHILDHOOD DAYS WITH MY DAD

Work, from dawn till dusk; drunk, from dusk till dawn—this was his routine.

My mom fed us with whatever remained of the wages my dad brought home each day.

My dad was an extremely vibrant personality in his youth. He used to get into a lot of fights. Then he would come home drunk and fight with us too. There were some nights that I tried to fall asleep before he returned from work just to avoid his tantrums and shouting. Even then, I couldn't escape the banter and fights that broke out at home.

My dad usually returned home around midnight, totteringly intoxicated, trying to hold his lungi together, with food items tied loosely with the upper end of his towel and spilling some on his way home inevitably. He immensely enjoyed feeding me and himself the food he had brought with him, in his unwashed hands, irrespective of the lateness of the hour.

My dad, a porter, was a drunkard, but he was also a caring father. He was just addicted to alcohol. None of our relatives helped us out and we didn't rely on anyone's help for our survival either. During lean periods, he helped get food on the table by chopping firewood and selling it.

As it was, the full responsibility of caring for and nurturing me and my brother fell into my mother's hands. In this way, I grew up. At the age of five, I was admitted to an all-girls primary school. Like all girls my age, I went to school with pigtails. Growing up in a largely uneducated family, I was not

good at school either. I was an average student at best.

# FIRST STEPS OF CHANGE

I had an older brother. We both were very similar to each other, with almost the same complexion and features. The only difference between us was that he was assigned male and I was assigned female at birth...

During my school days, I used to play with the girls there. But I couldn't understand the 'female bond'. I did not feel that comradeship between other girls and myself.

Everyone started noticing my boy-like traits and characteristics when I was in fourth grade. I grew up as someone gutsier and bolder than others. Once, we were allowed to wear colorful dresses instead of our school uniform on a Saturday, and I went to school wearing my brother's pants and shirt. My school teachers were furious with my choice of dress and berated me for it. They said to me, "Since you wore boys' clothes, you look like a boy and everyone else will follow your bad example and defy school rules. Pack your bags and leave the school immediately." I informed my mom about what had transpired at school, but she was not too bothered by it. Wearing boys' clothes for the first time was very much to my liking though. If there had been understanding from my family or awareness among the teachers, I would have found myself and my identity when this happened. But due to their ignorance, they humiliated me.

Somehow, I reached fifth grade. Some of my classmates had seen my genitals by then. Unaware of moral rights and wrongs, I had made some childish mistakes back then. I didn't realize that my traits were boyish during those days. I just liked to



play like other boys and wear boy clothes.

Then my sexuality brought a lot of changes in me. I was labeled the naughty kid at school. I didn't realize my behavioral changes were because of my gender identity and sexuality back then.

I started feeling attracted to my female classmates by sixth grade. I mistook those feelings as friendship.

Eighth-grade girls were instructed to wear half-sarees as school uniforms. I couldn't accept this school rule and didn't like to wear a half-saree either. Despite my dislike, I tried to force myself to wear it but it didn't work. Everyone else wore half-sarees at that age. I didn't wear a half-saree and I didn't have a menarche either. Instead, I had a growth spurt. My parents thought that my growth in height and physique was normal.

# INTRODUCED TO A HOSPITAL

On one Monday morning, my dad and I got ready and wolfed down the tomato rice my mom had made for breakfast. I kept thinking that something significant was going to happen that day. My parents were stressed that I hadn't had my menarche (my first period, the start of my menstrual cycle) yet. So they discussed this and came to a decision: to take me to a hospital and get me checked out.

My dad and I left home and boarded a bus.

The first thing I saw on arrival was the 'Government Hospital' signboard at the entrance. Wearing a churidar and holding my father's hand, I meekly walked into the hospital to get a token. We reached the Obstetrics department. The nurse gathering patients' information and giving tokens for consultation approached me:

"Name?"

"\_\_\_\_\_"

"Age?"

"15."

"Who are you here to visit?"

"Doctor."

"When did you last have your period?"

"What does it mean?"

"Go to the reception and sit in that chair."

We did as we were told. Many women were loitering around holding their big bellies, with their scan reports and chits in their hands. I was looking around and started wondering what the 'Maternity and Foetal Health' ward encompassed. A nurse called me to go inside the consultation room after a while.

I went in alone since my dad was not allowed inside. He said to me before I went in, "Tell them all your mom taught you to say, dear." I was confused. My mom had only told me to pray for my menarche while praying to the gods that morning, and nothing else.

The consultation room was furnished with wooden benches, wooden chairs, and four doctors in coats, like all traditional government hospital rooms. I staggered inside and sat in front of a doctor.

"Tell me, what is your name?"

"xxx."

"Age?"

"15."

"Why have you come? What is your illness?"

"Ummm..." (Silence)

I was wondering how to phrase what I had to say. I was also silent because of the presence of so many people around me.

"Say—what is wrong? Did you do something inappropriate? With whom did you do it? Are you pregnant? Don't be afraid. How many times did you do it? Did you use any safety measures?"

I was blinking hard and thinking this felt like something else

entirely and clarified, "No, it's not like that."

"I don't understand. Okay, when was the last time you had your period?"

"I didn't get any periods at all." "When? Last month?"

"No, not even once until now."

The doctor got very confused and asked, "What? Was it last month you didn't have your period? Or this month? Tell me correctly. Or you haven't even started menstruating until now? Oh, you haven't had your first period yet?"

I thought to myself: "Phew! Finally understood!" and responded "yes" to the doctor.

"Okay, go outside and sit on that bench over there. The chief doctor will come."

I went and sat on the bench as instructed. After a while, the chief doctor arrived. She beckoned to a nurse to come help her. She told me to get inside an examination room and undo my pants.

Feeling shy, I went into the room and lay down on the examination table. The doctor put on new gloves, asked me my name, moved to lower my pants and move my underwear away, and then proceeded to examine my genital area. I was looking at her face the whole time. I felt her eyes contract, her lips pursed with some unknown meaning of my examination conclusion. She took off her gloves immediately, and asked me, "How long have you known about this? You should not consult in this department." And proceeded to talk to her colleagues in English.

I wore my pants and came out of the room with relief and a sigh that it was over. The doctors directed us to go for a consultation in the urology department. I felt ashamed and told my dad what had happened in tears. We went to the urology department and gave them our token.

There we were told that maybe I had a vitamin deficiency, prescribed some vitamin tablets, and they sent us on our way. The doctors there had no understanding about this either and we returned home after buying the prescribed pills.

## EARLY TEENAGE YEARS

No one liked me and I didn't like anyone either. My female classmates were divided into groups of friends among themselves.

I was growing up with no feminine traits in me, my body looking more like that of a teenage boy with every passing day, with masculine traits. But I also had breast development like other girls my age.

I didn't know then that this was because of my hormonal deficiency. My family members were growing agitated that I hadn't started menstruating yet. When I was in eighth grade, my relatives and friends learned that I had not got my period. My relatives started teasing me about it. My family took me to many temples for rituals and prayers because of this situation. I was told to consume the prasadam<sup>3</sup> (sacred offering) consisting of a mixture of lemons, sacred ashes, and water at these temples. They believed that these temple offerings would make me menstruate and help me come of age.

I didn't tell anyone about the changes that were happening in my genitalia. I just assumed that what was happening to me was the same for other girls.

Ultimately, the fact that I hadn't started menstruating exploded into a massive issue in our family.

# EDUCATION

In those days, my identity or its ambiguity didn't plague my life. Hence, I focused entirely on my education.

I was passionate about Tamil, the language, and its literature. My English teacher, Sabaabathi-sir, was my favorite. My social studies teacher Shanmuga Sundaram-sir would also encourage me to study well during the classes, as he was aware that I was from the Dalit community.

Other teachers were not this supportive. They practiced casteism and caste-based discrimination too. For example, the Dalit boys and girls were given the tasks of sweeping and cleaning the school buildings, while no other children from other castes were instructed to do the same. (In some schools, the Dalit students were not allowed to sit inside the classrooms and had to sit in the doorways of the classrooms, or were placed in a segregated corner at the back of the classroom.)

I reached my tenth grade in this way. I was determined to focus on my studies that year because of the looming end-of-year public board exams.

For this reason, I and a few school friends took extra tuition classes after school. I felt alone among all the girls who had attained puberty there also. I felt as if I was apart from everyone else because I was different from them.

Just before our tenth-grade board exam, my school friend and I went to a temple to pray to the gods for good exam results, but the first request that occurred to me was to pray for attaining puberty. I was distressed about this fact more

than anything else.

I passed my tenth board exams with flying colors and ended up holding the second rank in our school, which was a proud moment for me. Even this didn't have the expected reaction in my family. Rather than celebrate, they were so stressed out that my achievement largely went unnoticed.

Life continued the same, with the constant fights and conflicts in our family.

I went to my mom's elder sister's house during my tenth-grade vacations. There I was a constant source of gossip because I hadn't attained menarche.

When a girl doesn't attain her menarche, it is seen as a bad omen for the entire family. There are some superstitious beliefs such as women are impure during their menstruation. They are generally given a separate space and utensils in the house during that time. At the same time, the first menstruation of a girl is celebrated in the presence of all relatives and friends as a promise that the girl had come of age and was ready to get married and bear children.

It is also a great source of pride for the family. Usually, after a girl turns 13, the family awaits her menarche and pushes her to do holy rituals to please the gods, and do them in temples if she has crossed 15 years of age or so without menarche.

A person's family's care, affection, understanding, and acceptance are a necessity for everyone. If I had had my family's care rather than their superstitious beliefs to contend with, I would have escaped much of the emotional and psychological distress that I went through.



## LATE TEEN YEARS

During the vacation I spent after my tenth standard at my aunt's house, she took me to all the nearby temples to offer prayers.

I was thinking about what major I should opt for in the eleventh grade. My dad told me to stop going to school and start working, while my mom vigorously supported my desire to continue my education. I chose to pursue maths and science in the eleventh grade due to my familiarity with the teachers who taught those classes.

From a very young age, my ambition was to become a doctor. I used to write my name down with the 'Dr.' title everywhere and feed my happiness and purpose in life. I had scored 427 marks out of 500 in my tenth-grade board exams and the trace of it with my compass engraving on my house wall is still visible today to mark my achievement.

I was introduced to new girl friends when I started eleventh grade. All the girls had attained puberty by then except me. This fact was an intensely agonizing reminder for me. All the eleventh-grade girls in my town wore half-sarees while I was still in my skirts and shirts.

Much of my family's discord was centered around me and my body. I used to fake my sleep to listen to their squabbles and conversations. Their discussions were about my body's visible maturity and the contrasting lack of changes in my traits and behavior.

All through eleventh grade, I felt many changes in my body.

I was growing into a tall and thick-bodied woman. I perceived the changes in my feelings towards some of my female friends, which were hitherto unnoticeable. They seemed like angels to me amazed at the diversity among women. I was thinking about what menstruation was, why I hadn't started menstruating yet, and what it meant to attain puberty. During those days, my mom grew excited even if I had a low-level stomach ache with the expectation that I was starting to menstruate finally. I discerned a lot of hitherto unknown feelings in me and felt attraction toward some girls too. While these new moods and feelings arose in me, my male organ also grew. Until then I had not paid much attention to this body part of mine and thought it was something I was born with, but then I was unaware of the full extent of changes and growth in me too.

I lost my focus on education. I had no discernible friends and just went to school for the sake of it. All my classmates would engage with each other and seemed happy and giggly most of the time, except me.

My school friend Kumari fell in love for the first time with a brother named Jeeva from twelfth grade. She used to take so much pleasure in talking about it all the time. She recounted her experiences to her friends of meeting Jeeva in secret, how she received a rose from him at Rock Fort temple, and the way he described her, and I felt amazed at this rendezvous. I had seen and heard about 'love' in movies and songs only. When my classmate started sharing her feelings of being in love, I started wondering if everyone experienced love in their lives, how they chose the person to fall in love with, how these feelings arose, and why I hadn't experienced it myself. I was also contemplating why I was unable to mingle with my peers and get close to at least one person.

# PUBERTY CEREMONY

It is common all over Tamil Nadu to conduct a puberty function when a girl comes of age, i.e., when she has her menarche.

Usually, the families await the day their daughter has her first menstruation from 12 years of age or so. Her bodily changes are duly noted by the family members and some families set aside funds in anticipation of conducting the puberty event too.

Finally, when a girl has her menarche, she is put in a separate room or, in some families, into a one-roomed hut near her house and given separate utensils to use to clean herself. No one is allowed to touch her and she is not allowed to touch anything other than the things set aside for her. This is because of the "impurity" associated with menstruation. If anyone touches her or touches anything handled by the girl, they are not allowed to go to temples and first have to take a bath.

On the third or fifth day of the girl's first menstruation, depending on the caste/community's practices, the family hosts a celebration, sending out invitations to all their relatives and friends, serving them food, and the girl receiving gifts from her relatives. The family also honor maternal uncles (and other prominent relatives) with new traditional clothes and gifts too. In turn, the maternal uncles are expected to gift their niece gold.

Some families conduct these events in their house, while others book communal halls for convenience and also grandeur.

There are a series of rituals a girl is expected to undergo as

instructed by her own family and custom. This puberty event, as it is commonly called, is believed to be conducted to announce to the world that the girl has now turned into a woman, that she is available for marriage and can bear children. It is also an announcement that brings honor and showcases the family's prosperity.

These events exist only for girls. In fact, as soon as a girl is born, the family adds the puberty event to the list of events the girl will have in her life and start planning for it. While the boys do not have any puberty rituals, they are much more respected as soon as they attain puberty and especially when their facial hair starts to show. They are given special permissions and responsibilities in the families. Any function in the family, from weddings to funerals, the men give and receive gifts and/or money; they are given special seats at events while the women and girls are only there for carrying out their duties. In fact, there are customs such as an in-person invitation presented to the male head of every family, special honors in part of every ritual, etc.

My family held the belief that if they performed my coming-of-age (puberty) ceremony, then I would attain menarche (usually a puberty ceremony is held only after a girl's menarche). So they proceeded with the ritual and invited all our relatives to the ceremony too. I thought of myself as a puppet doll during the entirety of this process. It was agony to be a part of this and I was distressed about my life.

Our family's finances had not improved over the years and life went on with its ups and downs. Endless conflicts at home were the usual way of our life.

Then, my brother took the responsibility of being the head of

our family. He treated me as a girl/woman. As I grew up, my male traits became apparent and we ended up having brawls and fights because of our ego clashes and our similar traits. These exploded into major altercations in the house. Every day I was lectured on being a woman and ordered to behave like one. At the end of each day, I was reduced to tears because of their regular criticisms and advice. I was deeply hurt and had suicidal thoughts at that time. I tried hard to change my traits to be more feminine, to no avail.

# DISRUPTIONS

I failed in all my subjects at school.

All of a sudden, I couldn't see what was written on the blackboard when I was in twelfth grade. I used to copy from my neighbor's notebook to take notes during classes. Until then, I had not had any vision-related difficulties. It came upon me suddenly. I couldn't distinguish the paths to my house in the evenings. Sometimes, I couldn't perceive the direction I was walking in. Those sudden stumbles were disconcerting to me. I managed to reach home every day though.

Similar instances occurred repeatedly for a few days, once this began. I tripped on things that were on the floor and foundered while walking since I had trouble seeing the ground when I looked ahead.

I decided to get my eyes checked at a nearby eyewear shop. They advised me to wear glasses and I started wearing the prescribed specs.

But my problem was not resolved. I couldn't see people on my flanks. I was scared to confide this to my family because they would get extremely frightened too. So I went to Aravind Eye Hospital alone to get myself examined. I underwent a thorough eye examination and at the end of it, Dr. Sathiyam enquired if someone had accompanied me. I told him, "No." Then he asked me whether my parents were related to each other and I replied affirmatively. He instructed me to bring someone from the family for my diagnosis and results.

By this time, I had lost interest in my studies and was distracted

distracted by my internal struggles and confusion. It was anguish to live my life and I tormented myself that I did not deserve to live. My primary source of grief at home was my inability to attain menarche. I was very depressed. My uneducated parents had big dreams for me and trusted that I would be the family's source of pride and success. However, my day-to-day life became a struggle.

My vision difficulties increased and I resorted to going back to the same eye hospital for medical guidance. The doctors there told me the devastating news that I had a disorder called retinitis pigmentosa. They informed me that this was a progressively worsening disorder, that I could potentially lose my vision significantly within a few years, and that there was no effective cure or treatment for this anywhere.

I was astonished and begged them to help me if they had any treatment in their highly renowned hospital.

The doctor consoled me, saying that this disorder occurs in a lot of people but that there was no medical cure yet. I was extremely sad and left the hospital. I felt like my life was over and it would be better to end this torment. I returned home after crying my heart out. I didn't disclose my diagnosis to my parents for fear of causing even more pain and agony to them. I comforted myself so as to stay strong for my parents, who could lose their will to live if they knew about my prognosis and kept this information to myself for as long as possible.

I had my examinations in the following days. I was vexed at my circumstances. On the one hand, I was confused about my gender identity and my body-related problems; on the other, I was going blind. These were the constant thoughts running through my mind at that point. I got my exam results and my

fear that I would secure low marks in all the subjects came true.

During that period of my life, I was at my wits' end. My family started growing more suspicious of my visual condition. My mom forced me to talk about my vision issues and I ended up divulging my visit to the Aravind Eye Hospital and the information about my diagnosis imparted by the doctor. As expected, my mom broke down completely.

Then she accompanied me to the same hospital and consulted my doctor, who explained my condition and prognosis to her clearly. She was devastated at the ill fate that had befallen her child. I learned that there were relatives with the same disorder in our family, including my mom. I discovered that my grandparents and their siblings had the same disorder as me. This created a lot of chaos in our family. It was a dark period for us as a family. All my family members were overwhelmed by this news.



# RADIOLOGY

My family coped as best they could and life went on for us amidst all the chaos. I wanted to pursue my further education at a private paramedical college and obtained permission from my family after much beseeching. My dad accompanied me to the college for my admission. Everyone perceived me as a woman over there.

I pursued a diploma in radiology. Learning about human anatomy, organs, and physiology as part of my coursework led me to approach a well-known hospital to get a medical opinion about my body and physiological condition. After being subjected to a lot of tests and scans, I was informed that I had neither uterus nor ovaries. I was astonished at this new information and utterly bewildered. Was I a woman with no ovaries? But what does this mean? Most importantly, was I a woman at all? These and a thousand other unanswered questions engulfed me.

I doubted if I was a transwoman. In the process of finding myself, I went in search of transgender women and their housing communities. I introduced myself to them and explained my situation to them. They didn't believe me. They then saw my organ with their own eyes and exclaimed that I was god's child. Their behavior and way of living felt so unfamiliar, however, that I left, never to return. One of them had advised me to visit a large hospital in a nearby city and so I heeded her advice and headed toward yet another hospital.

## AWAY FROM HOME

The hospital I was directed to was three hours away from our home. One day, I left home early for the hospital visit without telling my family.

I met a doctor named Prasanna and I described all my physical and psychological problems to him. He didn't even examine me. He told me that this might be a chromosome-related issue. He then wrote me a prescription detailing several blood tests and scans to be done at another hospital.

I thought about what I should do in the next couple of weeks at home. Then I decided to put a full stop to this agony and know the truth at last. I took some money and some jewels from my house and traveled alone from our town to another city for the first time in my life. I informed my family that I was going camping and left for Chennai by boarding the Coimbatore–Chennai express train. I was an unafraid, self-sufficient youth back then.

I finally reached Vellore Christian Medical College after much difficulty. I hadn't known that I needed an appointment beforehand for my medical consultation. So I stayed and loitered around the hospital overnight since I did not know anybody in that unknown city.

Finally, I was able to obtain an appointment at 8 am the next morning and went in for a consultation. All the doctors present there spoke in English or Hindi. I didn't know any other language other than my mother tongue, Thamizh. One Thamizh doctor named Dr. Kanagamani helped me. They ordered some blood

tests and I stayed there at the hospital for three days. Finally, on the day my results arrived, the endocrinologist, Dr. Choudhary, and his team called me in for a consultation. They enquired if I had someone accompanying me and I replied, "No."

Dr. Kanagamani explained to me, "Look here, from the reports of the genetic test results, we determine that you are genetically male and have male chromosomes. This is called Testicular Feminization Syndrome, which comes under the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome group. You can choose to live however you like but operating costs will be high." They told me that I would have to undergo some surgeries, which was a devastating blow to me.

I prayed to a thousand gods! I made numerous offerings and prayers to the gods! Not one god had thrown a blessing at me. No one warned me about what I might have to face in my life. How do I accept this? How can I be a man when I was known to be and brought up to be a woman? How do I explain this to my parents? How will they live peacefully after I disclose this new information about me? What will our friends and relatives say? I would be bullied and possibly ostracized by them and society!

I was in complete shock and turmoil. I left the hospital saying that I would bring my parents for my next consultation and boarded a train back to my town. All through the train journey, I fretted over how to reveal this information to my parents and how they would react. I eventually decided not to tell my parents and went back home. I was in complete misery, brooding over my diagnosis. My mom discerned that something was distressing me deeply and kept insisting that I share with her whatever my grief was.

# PROMISES

I couldn't bear the stress after a certain point and ended up divulging everything to my mom. My mom said I had an incurable eye disorder and now I have a gender disorder too and sobbed uncontrollably. To witness the anguish and sorrow of my mom and to know it was caused by me was unbearable and pushed me to attempt suicide, to end the misery. But my family broke down my door and saved me from hanging myself. I convinced my other family members that my suicide attempt was because of a heated argument between me and my mom.

After a few days, my mom and I went to consult Dr. Aravind regarding my medical reports and test results. He explained the results and inferences in my reports to both of us in detail. My mom was absolutely surprised to realize this was a real possibility. The doctor finally sent us on our way.

I was worried that my mom didn't speak a word to me all through our return journey. I prompted, "Amma, what shall we do?" She replied with sobs, "You don't have to do anything. Live with us until we die."

"Don't disclose this to anyone else," my mother said. "You stay like this until the end. I and your dad will be there for you, to be with you and support you." She made me promise that I wouldn't take any further decisions regarding this situation.

I couldn't deny my feelings, I couldn't accept my current life, and I couldn't deny that I wanted to live the way I wanted and choose my own identity and destiny. But I could not deny the

societal problems this would cause either. So I couldn't say anything to my mom and promised her as she requested.

Even though I had promised my mother, I couldn't help thinking about who I was and why this was happening to me. My only outlet was to cry my eyes out because of my helplessness and anger. I didn't have anyone to care for me or to comfort me at home. I roamed around with no one to ask what I was going through in my life and only felt anger and resentment toward others. I didn't know what to do. I could not live as a woman; I had no future as a woman and how was I going to live my life as a blind woman with no family? What was the solution to this problem? I didn't sleep at night. I grew more depressed and became a mentally unstable person. Thoughts like "What if I lived my life as a man? Wouldn't it be better to live as a man when the alternative was to live as a blind woman with no personal or social life?" engulfed my mind. I lost my faith in the gods since I was dejected that after all my prayers and offerings, I had not received mercy from a single god. I started to dismiss the existence of gods by saying that if there were gods in the world, my life would not have become such a misery and full of agony.

# THE OUTSIDE WORLD

I felt ashamed at the notion that I was a man pretending to be a woman and wearing women's clothes. I tried different clothes to see what suited me best, to no avail. I was also terrified of what my village people would say about the alternative.

So I took up a job at a private hospital.

I couldn't escape my thoughts that constantly reminded me that I was a man. I instructed my parents to find a suitable woman for my brother to get married to and start his life because I felt at least one of us should have a decent life without all the misery and unresolvable issues.

I conversed with my female colleagues at work casually and one of those women complained about me to the hospital administrators. I felt like I was a transwoman that day and that was a huge source of sorrow for me. All the feelings about the nonexistence of gods came rushing into me and I started cursing at these nonexistent gods and the cursed life that I was forced to live.

Even though people in our world know that change is constant and inevitable, they are unwilling to embrace change. My youth was not a happy time in my life because I couldn't live as a woman or as a man even within my body. I was always 'othered' and perceived as different in my ideologies and real life. I resented people of my age and their happy lives while I didn't have the opportunity to live a typical life. I grumbled within myself that I was the only person on this planet to have been born this way and thought desperately that no one else

should go through such an unbearable life.

During these difficult times, I was allowed to pursue graduate education. I thought that this was a way out for me, to get some peace of mind away from my home and my village. My mom was also very apprehensive about my future and said that it would be a great opportunity to learn some skills for my future jobs and livelihood. So I joined the course with my mother's blessings.

# FIRST LOVE

I joined as a bachelor's student in the psychology department at a private college. There were about 40 students in our class. Around 13 students were staying with me in the students' hostel. The students hailed from Ooty, Kannur, Theni, and various other districts in Tamil Nadu.

My education started well, with a new social circle and new friends. After about two months of my stay there, a woman called Devi joined a teacher training course in our college. We got introduced and became friends initially. And then pretty quickly we became close friends in just a few days. She said that her thoughts were always centered around me all through the days and it was a new, unknown experience for me too.

One day, while I was taking a rest in my dormitory, Devi came directly to our hostel to see me, sat near me, and started crying earnestly. I asked her why she was crying and she replied that she couldn't tolerate not seeing me and being apart from me even for a day. I was alarmed and asked her, "What happened? Is there a problem? Tell me!" to which she replied, "No! I couldn't stand not seeing you the entire day!" and sobbed.

My dormitory classmates burst out laughing at her proclamation. My hostel mate Laxmi asked, "What is going on between you two? Are you lovers? You are bawling your eyes out for just not seeing each other for one day?"

Devi wiped her tears away and responded, "Yeah, I love her," and abruptly kissed me on my lips in front of everyone. My



hostel mates were astonished that a woman kissed another woman and quickly this was brought to the notice of our college Head. We both were called to the Head's office and somehow we managed to convince them that it was just a joke. After we left the Head's office, she turned to me and said, "It was not a joke, it is real. I love you so much!"

Even if I didn't acknowledge her words, it affected me so much that I skipped morning classes on days I felt extremely disoriented and went only to the evening training classes. She used to give letters to my classmates to be passed on to me and demanded reciprocating letters from me too.

As days went by, we became closer to each other. I couldn't understand or describe our relationship.

On the day of Vinaayakar Chaturthi, I was invited to Devi's house for the celebration. We boarded a bus to go to her house after college. It was already dark and I was wondering how I would manage walking in the dark while the rain was pouring down on us. We were met by her younger brother at the bus stop and he took both of us to their house on his motorbike. We both got rid of our drenched and wet clothes and I wore her brother's clothes. She liked my men's attire and I stayed at their house that night. During the night, I awoke and noticed that Devi was not asleep and continued to look at me as she lay down. I asked her why she was looking at me instead of sleeping, to which she replied that she liked looking at my peaceful, beautiful face while I was sleeping. We laughed and I went back to sleep.

Devi's family members were very kind and cordial, and took good care of us. Devi started to invite me over to her house frequently. During one of my short vacations, I went to her

house and stayed there for a week. One day, she took me to their coconut grove to drink some tender coconut water. There she engraved both our names on a tree along with a cupid heart. She said with so much happiness, "Look how beautiful it is! This won't ever change or disappear in the years to come." Her care and love changed me and brought up hitherto unknown feelings in me.

I only suspected this was love initially, and it became the truth in a few months. She said that she loved me. I was also in love with her. We don't know if it was because we were hormonal or young and in love, but for the first time, we became physically intimate with each other. From that moment, she was very possessive of me.

Her classes had begun, while I still had holidays, and so I stayed at her house and waited for her return from college each day, and wrote poems for her during the day while she was away. Each day, before she arrived from college, I got ready and waited for her. Then we would eat together, after which she read the poem that I had written for her that day. Her love for me increased every day. I felt manly when I was with her and slowly I started being myself with her. This lasted for almost six months.

# CASTE AND DISABILITY

Devi was from a 'dominant' caste. They generally don't allow oppressed people like me to stay at their houses. In a few days, they found out that I was a Dalit. This fueled some unpleasant comments and behaviors from her family. But Devi continued to treat me the same way.

As days went by, I could feel my love for her too. Our love blossomed beyond our caste, gender, and social differences. Other people couldn't understand our love. When I mentioned this to Devi, she exclaimed, "Why couldn't you have been born in my caste?" and grew sad.

After that, I did not see her. I thought to myself that our relationship wouldn't be socially acceptable and that it wouldn't end well for either of us if we continued like this, and ended the relationship. I started going to work and did not pay heed to my unbidden feelings and loneliness.

I did not understand casteism and its deep roots in our society until then. Later, I thought of our relationship as a friendship and our parting as a natural course of friends going their separate ways.

I graduated from college and started work at a hospital in my hometown. In just a few days, all my friends started teasing and bullying me for my body language and masculine traits. They didn't see me as a woman and there were hurtful comments made to me continuously.

I couldn't confide in or seek support from anyone. People like me and our feelings are not respected. Feelings of joy, sorrow,

love, lust, and pain are common for all living beings. But even our basic feelings are disregarded by our society and crush our lives in the name of social and moral standards.

What more rules formulated by society do we need to follow for a life like any other commoner!? Is there no one to speak about our love? Shouldn't voices for our rights be heard? Are we emotionless things to navigate amidst people who see us as something hideous? Is it our fault to be born in an oppressed community?

My parents were born in the same caste—how do they differ from any others? Even though they are good-natured and uneducated, isn't our economic status the most distinguishing factor to determine our upper- or lower-class status in society?

So I decided to aim for a better economic standing in this society. I believed that if I worked hard and played by the rules, I could change how I was perceived by this society. I didn't know until later that this would not be as fruitful as I had imagined.

# SOCIETY

I decided to improve my family's financial standing and searched for a suitable job in many places. I was rejected at all the places I applied.

Society judges a person on their physical appearance and natural traits instead of respecting a person as a human being. Society discriminates against people belonging to the oppressed caste, people who are disabled, and people who do not conform to majoritarian gender and sexual identities, and I stood no chance against prejudice since my identity encompassed all these three discriminatory categories.

Living life for the sake of birth was not appealing to me. I wanted to identify people like me, work for the upliftment and benefit of all those suffering in this society, and help them as much as I could.

I faced rejection and ignorance everywhere. I had lived a lifetime of grief and struggle at a very young age. I didn't know whom to trust or to confide in, and floundered about like a lost bird during those days. Feelings are the right of all living beings, but why were my feelings disregarded? Who cut my wings so I could not fly and soar like everyone else? I felt like a butterfly stuck in a thornbush. Could I live my life with the question of who I was and what my identity was looming everywhere I turned?

I had turned 25 years old. Everyone I came across seemed to be living their lives vibrantly, with none of the woes of the world, while I was stuck in a muddy pond with no visible way

to escape.

During this time, I came across an advertisement for a teaching job at a nearby factory. The job description mentioned that they required a person who had suitable experience. My gender and my eyesight were there to betray me everywhere I went. But I made up my mind to apply for the job as it was a good opportunity and didn't want to miss it.

I finally got a job. My job entailed teaching the women workers at the factory and required me to stay in their hostel facility. I joined work even though I was extremely scared. I resolved to not indulge in my emotions and focus only on my job in that decent working place and in these new surroundings amidst new people.

I was sincere at my job and kept my head down, but my resolution didn't last long. All the factory workers were women. I couldn't be like them and stood out among all the women at my workplace. I felt pressured and so I decided to prefer loneliness and avoid everyone else. I used to go to my hostel room after everyone else had gone to sleep and start getting ready after everyone else left the hostel for work. If I woke up early, I always felt uncomfortable in the presence of women getting ready, changing their clothes in front of me, and doing their makeup for the day.

Days went by. I stayed there for almost two months before I made some new friends. My friends commented that the shirt and pants that I wore at night were more suitable for me than the churidar that I wore for work during the day. They teased me that I was a miss without a mustache and beard. I didn't take it to heart.

I faced more discomfort in using the common restroom. It was built so that 10 people could take their baths at the same time. I felt awkward and embarrassed to enter these restrooms.

There was a woman named Diya, who was very childlike and became my friend. She laughed easily, trusted everyone and treated everyone with kindness and honesty. I was amazed to have come across such a person in my life who was genuinely kind-hearted. But I should also mention that she lacked maturity for her age. I thought of her as a “good kid”.

All relationships in our life start as strangers but those relationships shape and leave their marks on our lives inevitably. I hid my true identity from her, but she found my true self somehow. She too was from an upper caste. She said she felt attracted to me. I dismissed her proposal by saying that this was unnecessary for us and that it wouldn't work out. My past experiences of love rose to the surface of my mind.

As it was, we continued to be good friends for about a year or so. After a year, I asked myself why I shouldn't take this forward and face my life bravely. Until then, I had avoided pain and grief by staying on the sidelines of my own life, but fate intervened. I had come into a passive state of mind because of my past failures and betrayals.

But then I was transferred to a different facility after four months. They warned that I might have more work to do over there but I accepted the position anyway.

I bid farewell to Diya and got ready to leave. Diya sobbed earnestly on the day of my departure. She continued to call me after I started working at the second factory too. Within a week of my departure, Diya became unrecognizable with

sadness.

I thought that she would get over our friendship as time went by and I focused on my job. One day I received a call from Diya saying that she had been admitted to a hospital. She mentioned that she couldn't forget "that day" and that she had feelings for me, and couldn't forget me. She said, "It has been three days since I ate anything, I know this is wrong but I couldn't tell you how I felt."

I was taken aback and wanting to avoid further complications, and to calm her down, I told her, "This is just a phase. Don't confuse yourself. This is just an infatuation, that is all. I am a woman and you are a woman. While this is the case, how can you think about those things?" Yet that was the moment when my gender identity became a huge question to me.

Since we were in constant touch over the phone, her feelings for me didn't go away. She insisted on meeting me one day. Hence I decided to tell her all about myself as truthfully as I could. I told her which caste I belonged to, about my birth defects, and mentioned that I was struggling with my own life to deal with my vision disorder and gender identity disorder. I told her the truth about me and advised her not to confuse herself any further.

Diya responded, "I didn't know you or who you are and I fell in love with you. But now I can see that I have fallen in love with the right person." But I was not convinced and started avoiding her to sidestep further problems and unnecessary complications in life. I stopped taking her calls after telling her that I already had to struggle with many troubles in my life and I couldn't get involved with her.



Knowing that I was ignoring her calls, she came to my workplace to confront me. I was surprised that she traveled all the way to come in search of me. I tried to communicate that this was a bad idea and ignored her completely. But then she came to my family home in search of me.

I went to the Bangalore Hospital for a medical consultation. They informed me that I was a male at birth and that my condition arose due to improper genetic coding.

I took six months to come to terms with this medical opinion and deliberated about my life and relationships. I recognized that one strong, unwavering and constant support in my life to be none other than Diya. Diya proclaimed that she loved me completely, she accepted me as a man, she was born for me, and she saw me as her husband. I disregarded her advances by saying that she would have a full and better life with anyone else but me. She was determined to love me and met my parents and disclosed everything about our situation to them. Then I felt as if a new, wonderful chapter was beginning to unfold in my life and accepted her. She encouraged me to be myself, to change my attire, and cut my hair. I felt as if my life's purpose was to live and die for her. I took it upon myself to transform into a complete man for her. When her parents brought up discussions about their plans for her wedding, she nagged me that we should get married. I was so much in love with her too. I talked about my Diya to everyone wherever I went as the angel descended to change my life.

I left my hometown for her and got a new job. We rented a house together to live as husband and wife. I transformed myself completely for her. But our happiness didn't last for long.

Her relatives and family members contacted her via phone calls and informed her that they were searching for potential grooms for her. Since she hailed from a different state, they were not aware of our relationship and the life we were leading together. She had only mentioned to them that she was in love with someone.

I started to face problems at my job too. They said I needed to own a bike to stay on the job, as the job entailed much traveling around the city. Meanwhile, I had been advised by my eye doctors not to drive vehicles because of my loss of peripheral vision as it was not safe.

It was during this time that I received an invitation from the Solidarity Foundation in Bangalore to participate in a support group meeting. I talked about my birth, the environment I grew up in, my struggles, and my recent transformation and the reason for it in that discussion. I received much applause and was praised for being an example of self-confidence. For the first time in a long time, I felt my life had taken a turn for the good and that it was a new beginning.

# MY FATHER'S ACCIDENT

My dad met with an accident and the bones in his leg were completely shattered. We took him to a private hospital in an ambulance. We were told that his treatment would be expensive. I didn't know what to do. My whole family relied on me financially. How could I suddenly arrange such a huge amount of money? No one else was there to support me.

We moved him to the government hospital for treatment. Initially, I thought that it was a minor accident. But it turned out to be the reason for the removal of his entire leg bone. I had just started living a happy life after years of struggle, and this came as a huge blow to all of us. On the one hand, my dad was admitted to the hospital for a long term, and on the other, I faced a lot of hardships at my workplace. Apart from this, I also had to take care of my girlfriend, who relied upon me entirely. No one from my extended family or relatives came forward to help us during that time.

I was torn between focusing on my parents' health and my own health conditions. I knew I could support my parents monetarily only if I retained my existing job. So I gave more of my attention to my dad's treatment whilst working at my job.

His doctors informed us that his broken leg needed to be completely removed but I beseeched them for any other treatment option. I felt that I was a person with an invisible disability, and didn't want another family member to become disabled too. So, abiding by our request, they advised us to take my dad back home and visit the hospital for a regular check-up every month.

## WAITING...

I got introduced to a lot of new people through the Solidarity Foundation Fellowship. I learned a lot about the varied backgrounds and environments of people from marginalized gender and sexual identities.

It was a shock to me initially to learn about the lives of LGBTQ+ people. The way everyone respected each other's self-identity seemed like the most respectful way to treat each other. I dreamed that I would live my life well too, like these people, after my dad's health improved. But my life was ill-fated.

Until September that year, while I was in Bangalore, I was invigorated and running toward the next stages in my life. It felt like a dream, and I resolved to live my life for my parents and my partner, and not to heed any abuses thrown at me by other insignificant people. I had just returned home from a meeting at the end of the first week of that September when my Diya, who had promised that she would never leave me under any circumstances, who had said that she was born for me, who had rejuvenated and encouraged me to dream of a better life for myself, turned away from her promises.

We had planned to have our marriage registered on my birthday, the 5th of October, 2018. I was mentally prepared to share my life with her and start a new, wonderful chapter of our lives together, and was planning for our lives together. On the 7th of September, I received a call from Diya, who said, "I am going to live my life for my parents. I have to be responsible for my younger brother's and younger sister's lives and they are the most important to me in the world. I lived

with you for four years and nothing happened. Can you take me out at night? I like to ride motorbikes a lot—can you drive me safely? I need a partner who satisfies all my needs.”

Was this the same person who said that she would wait for me for as long as need be? Was she the same person who had said that she was born for me? All the arguments that I had given her as potential problems in the future when I had myself avoided her initial advances were the same reasons she now mentioned to end our relationship. If she had not liked me initially, I would have stayed away and none of this would have happened. I fretted that she had discarded me because of my inabilities. I had done whatever she wanted me to do. I had changed myself into a ‘complete’ man. What more should I have done? I had said no and stayed away initially; she forced her love on me and now threw my disabilities in my face as the reasons for leaving me. Whom could I ever trust? Was it my fault to have been born this way?

I didn’t know who to blame for my misfortunes. I agonized over my lost life and I fretted over my parents’ health. I was once again pushed towards suicidal thoughts. I became extremely depressed. After about six months of her departure from my life, the thoughts that most affected me still were the reasons she had hurled at me for the end of our relationship. No one was there to care for me, no one except my parents to support me. To not cause more anguish to my parents by sharing my grief with them, I kept my anguish to myself, and locked it in my palm-sized heart, and tried to slowly dissolve it with my tears.

My dad stayed bedridden and unable to walk. I told myself that I should be grateful for my parents, who had brought me

up lovingly even after realizing my disability, and that I should live to care for them in their hour of need. I patted myself on the back that it would be enough to allow me to smile on the day when society's dark face of discrimination, based on body, ability, caste, class, gender, and sexuality, would be destroyed. I contented myself with my life and with my soul that I was left with in this world, and convinced myself that society and its faults were not worthy to be spared a moment of my thoughts. myself that society and its faults were not worthy to be spared a moment of my thoughts.

## AS AN ACTIVIST

I became the answer to all the questions for which I had been searching all along. Life in our society is hard if one of our identities belongs to a marginalized caste or gender or physical ability. But I carried all these three identities within me and battled all my life.

I traveled digitally to find intersex people like me on social media platforms. About 1.7% of the world's population is said to be intersex. We still do not have extensive surveys or information about them. Each one of them is living their unique life.

Many intersex people are also born with various disabilities. The reason for this is said to be incorrect genetic coding. All the talk about safeguarding disabled children is not enough to safeguard us and our lives. People feel pity or look down upon disabled people in general. People insult, hurl abuses, hurt, and ostracize transgender or minority-gender people.

Society does not treat every human life equally. To fight this injustice and to fight for much-needed change in society, I decided to dedicate my life to being the voice for us all and setting an example for the future generations to come. I wrote many articles about intersex, through which I got introduced to similar activists and like-minded friends, and participated in the Asian Intersex Forums. I also participated in a lot of awareness and sensitization programs held at various medical colleges and hospitals all across India to share my knowledge and concerns. I joined hands with Intersex Asia to conduct various awareness campaigns all over Tamil Nadu.

My life's purpose and destiny are to identify intersex people in South India and fight for equal rights for the categorically marginalized communities based on their caste, gender, or physical ability. Relationships and separations are of no major consequence to the public. This book was written to realize the life of marginalized people like me, and to be taught as a lesson to students, medical students, and future generations.



**LIFE STORIES  
OF THE  
PEOPLE  
VINODHADHAN MET**

# MALAR

I was born as the second son of a government servant in a temple city of Tamil Nadu. I was brought up as Aravind, a bit peculiar, probably unlike anyone else you'd meet. I am opposed to casteism, 'dominant-casteist' ideologies and practices, unlike my parents and other family members. I am a rebel at home, starting with not wearing the punool<sup>5</sup> (sacred thread). But I acknowledge that I was born with dominant-caste privileges in this society. I would like to refer to myself here as 'she'.

My family has a relatively educated and well-to-do background. My father was a government employee, my mother was also a college graduate, and I grew up financially comfortable, not wanting for anything. Dad was down-to-earth and friendly with everyone, irrespective of their status or class in society. My elder brother, elder sister, and I were brought up with three principles: education, discipline, and piety. I still believe that if you pray to God, you will surely get all the blessings and strength you need in life. I am a firm believer in faith. If you pray wholeheartedly, not betraying your subconscious mind, you will find success.

Those were the days when I understood myself by following rituals, growing up amidst similarly religious relatives in my large family. Although I was raised as a boy since birth, I have always had a woman's spirit in me. I am closer to my mother than my father and I can go as far as to say she is my friend. I liked to play with a doll, like most girls my age, rather than go outside on the streets and play like boys. However, I used to be friendly with everyone.

My parents always wanted me to pursue post-graduation and reach a high status. That drive was instilled in me as well. I started my schooling in an English-medium school, enrolled as Aravind, as I had been born.

However, my body language, my appearance, and even my voice betrayed to others that I was a girl. Soon, my body began to change. Hormonal changes began to overwhelm me. Although I was born with male chromosomes, my body and mind became like that of a female. This was because my body did not accept male hormones and ignored them completely. Even my private parts don't look like a man's organs. It was, for the most part, hidden inside my body. Even during my adolescence, there was no change, nor growth, nor any other development of my genitals to maturity. The reason for this became known only later. For what it was, I never escaped bullying until the end of my school days. I never confided or sought help from anyone on this matter.

I focused on my studies completely. I knew the day would come when I would identify myself correctly.

By the time my sister got married, I had finished my higher secondary school education. No one knew about my physical changes. Everyone believed that I was naïve, and innocent for my age.

Every one of us carries some sorrow in our hearts. I was weighed down more by the changes in me than by the unknowability of my identity. I was not like my brother or my sister. I asked myself why I was this way. Everyone in my house started asking these questions too.

My brother picked fights with me as he was unhappy about

my general behavior and mannerisms. He told my parents that his friends mocked him because of my feminine traits. I could only do what came naturally to me, and I couldn't understand what was wrong with just being myself.

My family took me to a hospital. There they informed us that I have some kind of hormonal deficiency and it will get better eventually. One day, I examined my body. Fully hidden female genitalia, breast development, face devoid of facial hair—am I male or female? I was perplexed. I just didn't know how to share this confusion with anyone.

When my mother started questioning my feminine characteristics and traits, I took her to my room, stripped down completely naked, and said to her, "This is my body, this is who I am." My mother was stunned. She asked me, "How do you look exactly like a girl! Did you ever tell your father about this?" and broke into tears. She immediately brought this matter to my father's attention as well.

I am a firm believer that education and discipline can lead us to a better place in life, no matter what. Accordingly, I continued my studies further. I was constantly ridiculed during my school days, and college was no exception.

Initially, people thought that I was a boy with some feminine features, but eventually, they understood that my body was like a woman's. I studied in a co-ed college. I had more women friends there than guy friends, and I preferred it that way. Women's patronage and acceptance of me as myself was a huge support to me.

But I did not escape from society's gaze. I was seen as an oddball among the people of the society where I lived. I was

ostracized by my very close relatives and friends, for whom I had great love and loyalty.

There could be no worse experience than staying in boys' dorms during college days. My body trembled whenever I entered the men's restroom in college. I was extremely anxious because of my underdeveloped genitals and my external appearance. I cannot use urinals like other men. Those were the days when I stayed in the men's hostel with fear, shyness, and people's shenanigans. I had to endure constant taunts every day, but I dared to move on and look forward to the next day with hope.

Love bloomed in my heart too. There was a man named Seshu near my house. We met as friends and eventually developed a close relationship. He frequently visited my house. He treated my parents like his own family members.

I couldn't describe our relationship without knowing what it was myself. He liked the femininity in me. But that was not the only reason. Above all, we both had a good understanding. He was very happy that I took great interest in his goals and progress in life. There was no noticeable change in me at that time.

I told my parents about us when I finished college. Meanwhile, my relatives were determined to get me married to one of my cousins. My parents said, "That girl will accept you, there will not be any problem," and told me to get married. I protested strongly. My body exudes femininity. How could I marry another woman? I said I didn't want that kind of life.

Sheshu and I transitioned from friendship to love, and talked often. As my body was like a woman, when I donned men's attire like shirts and trousers, it didn't suit me well. "What was

the solution for this? Just one thing, shall I become a woman like my body?" I wondered. Seshu was against it even though he was aware of my femininity. He vehemently opposed this idea and said, "Society will talk contemptuously about you and conclude that you are a transgender woman."

I was wondering what I should do in this situation. One day, I received the news that Seshu was to be married soon. I was horrified. As a woman at heart, I had perceived him as my husband. How had he agreed to this? Meanwhile, I had finished college and had recently joined a private company in Chennai. After I was made aware of this development, I went to meet Seshu. He responded with words that hit me hard: "I want to live with you. But you are neither a man nor a woman. Can you wear anklets and sarees? Can you don a mangalsutra? Can you give birth to a baby?"

"Is it my fault that I was born this way?" I asked myself. It took me another six months to come to grips with the fact that this society is not only divided by caste and religion, but also according to gender and sexuality as well.

I was extremely distressed, to the point of depression. As I was unable to recover from it by myself, my family supported me through this, and also comforted me such that I did not resort to any extreme decisions. I realized that family is the only support to stand with us during hardships and emotional upheavals. Eventually, I recovered from depression and worked many jobs. Yet I exclaimed to God every day, "Why did you create me like this?"

I cried every day, wondering how to rise above this and move on with my life. I discussed my troubles with my family. My family was initially opposed to my decision to live as a woman.

Gradually, my father, mother, and my brother's family came around to support my decision, considering my future. I moved from Tamil Nadu to Bangalore because I knew that since I had a good education and self-confidence, relocation would lead to change.

Life in Bangalore was new to me. Many companies were willing to offer me job opportunities. I joined a new workplace. I decided to change my body according to the idea of the woman I wanted to be. There were many struggles early on. I didn't lose heart and switched companies. I was open about my situation and plans to transition while approaching the new position at the new company. They accepted me. I overcame all my hardships and hurdles, and became successful in my own way. There the women co-workers accepted me as a friend too.

Eventually, I went back to the same town where I had been insulted for being an for being an intersex person, where so many had caused me mental suffering, but this time as a woman. Those who eyed me skeptically back then have now accepted me as a woman. Those who disregarded my feelings and passed lewd comments earlier cannot look me in the eyes, and avert their gaze, feeling ashamed of their past behavior. I have not sinned. This is God's creation, He made me this way.

I have been blessed by nature with a great family who supports me. If children like me receive unflinching support from their families and are given the right to choose their gender, then they can succeed in their lives and also create a positive change in society.

**Author's note:** Throughout our conversation, I could feel in Malar the confidence of a woman who has a clear vision, who burnt all her obstacles away, and who wrote a new chapter in her new life. Malar says with a wink that her family is looking for someone to be her partner in her new life and that she is going to live a happy life. Malar is an intersex person from a 'dominant' caste, for whom understanding and undying support from her parents has helped her live life like any other, despite many hurdles.

Malar was born with complete androgen insensitivity, an intersex condition, and is also hard of hearing from birth due to a genetic defect. The education and understanding of her parents helped Malar live the life she wanted. They approached us when they couldn't find suitable medical help initially. After proper guidance,



# RAJAN

I am Rajan. I was born in a small village near a famous hill town in western Tamil Nadu. I was born Dalit. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. My father earned a living by selling fish in various towns nearby. I am the first-born child in the family. I was perceived as a girl when I was born in that little-known village. I was brought up like all girls. Growing up, I attended an all-girls school. At home, my family treated me as a girl.

I also got along well with other girls my age. My body underwent changes when I was 13. I stood out as an oddball because I didn't look like other girls. I didn't have menarche and its subsequent bodily changes like girls my age. I didn't even think about it at that age. Then my mom and dad got suspicious about the changes in my appearance and checked my genitalia.

They saw that I had a penis and asked me about it. I said it's been there for a while. They took me to the nearest hospital. They went there and told the doctors that they had misconstrued my gender and brought me up as a girl while I was a boy. That doctor said, "This is something that needs to be checked in a major hospital. So go to Chennai for a definitive diagnosis and thorough check-up." They wrote a letter to the Chennai Government Hospital and said that it would come in handy. At that time, I was 14 years old and studying in the ninth standard. At that age, I thought I was a girl.

In that town, I wore a half-saree and skirt as my school uniform from when I was in the eighth grade. Segregation based on

on caste was practiced in our village as well. Everyone looked at me differently in that uniform. But I didn't think about it that much and just went to school with my friends.

A boy from our community named Ambedkar took a liking to me and I was in love with him for three years. But then we found out that I was not a girl and that I did not have a uterus or vagina at all. I was Ambedkar's girlfriend and didn't consider my lack of women's organs as a big deal at that age.

However, there were rumors about my gender and genitalia going around the town. My parents thought it best not to delay my physical check-up any further. I had just completed my 10th-grade board exams and we went to Chennai during my summer vacation.

We went to the Chennai government hospital for the first time in our lives. My father was very supportive and kept telling me that we would alter my life in any way necessary, according to what the doctors advised. I was admitted to the genitourinary department as directed by the medical team.

I was admitted to the pediatric ward there. The medical team that examined me initially advised us to do a thorough physical and a complete genome sequencing test. We received the medical report five days later. I got the result that I had a male chromosome combination, that is, 46XY chromosomes. They offered to perform surgery according to our wishes. My father understood that.

Doctors said that 15 years was the right age for surgery. But I was thinking of Ambedkar the whole time. I lament even today why I had to have such a life. Dad told me, "If you live as a woman in this society, you are not safe under any

circumstances. Besides, you were born as a male, so you can live however you choose. I will support you through whatever decision you take.”

Then, I was admitted to the urology department in the same hospital for further tests because they couldn't detect my testicles. The doctors who examined me said that my testicles were lying somewhere in my stomach and that they were developing. So we unanimously decided then and there that I would live as a man. The doctors also informed us that my genital organs would not develop completely.

We accepted the information they gave us and came back to our village. I used to have long hair like girls. After we reached home, I cut my hair and was admitted into an all-boys school in the 11th standard.

There was a lot of talk about me in our village. People talked about me in front of me and loudly wondered whether I was a girl or a boy. When I shared this with my family, my parents told me that this will pass and not to worry about it. Despite their stoicism, they were deeply worried about me themselves; but they were not discouraged. They gave me more than enough support and attention, and also took particular care of my education.

After I completed the 12th standard, I was admitted to a private college. There I learned to live as a man among men. I changed my way of speaking and my body language so that no one would find out my secret. All through this, however, there was a feeling of femininity in me.

In college, I preferred to be known as a bad student rather than as a good student. In the college hostel, I made a lot of

friends. Yet the guilt that I was not like others never left me. I developed many harmful habits as an escape to forget my life situation.

Any thoughts of post-college life, married life, and job hunting induce a lot of dread and anxiety in me.

**Author's note:** Rajan is a Dalit intersex person living in Tiruvannamalai district, the son of a fishmonger in a rural area where caste-based untouchability still has an intersex condition called Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (PAIS) and has a condition of severely stunted physical and mental growth due to untreated congenital deficiency of thyroid hormones.

Due to the lack of understanding about PAIS in the government medical college hospital, they proposed to perform a sex reaffirmation surgery on him. After we met him directly and provided more information, he described his intersex variation to the doctors and now there is awareness in the Department of Urology and Organ Transplantation in that hospital.

Now, Rajan smiles and says that even though he was born this way, he will become successful in life. He continues to live with the belief that time will show a

# JENNY

I am Jenny. I was born into a large family and was brought up as the favorite child among my siblings. I was born after two elder brothers and an elder sister. I was different from a very young age. I was engulfed in my mother's affection and care most of the time. My father was a highly regarded and respected man in our community.

My identity has changed completely from back then, because I was perceived as a male at birth. My parents named me Saravanaprabhu. I used to live happily playing with my brothers and being my sister's beloved and affectionate younger brother. How many changes have taken place in me without my understanding why! The social environment I lived in was huge. There were people all around who were proud of their caste fanaticism.

I was an average student in primary school, playing around with schoolmates. My heroine at home was my Grandma, who called me Paapuma affectionately. She used to sing me the songs sung in paddy fields from her younger days and used to tell me stories in the evening.

Most of these songs and stories were about women, their birth homes, and their upbringing. Given my young age at that time, I don't remember everything clearly. But I thought of myself as the character in these stories she told me.

One day, I had a severe stomachache and fever when I was about eight or nine years old. I've had stomach aches like that many times before. So I didn't think much of it at first. Then

I felt very ill and exhausted. I was rushed to the hospital and was admitted immediately. There is a lack of modern medicine and hospitals in the area where we lived; there were only a few small hospitals nearby. If you want modern medicine, you have to travel more than 30 kilometers to the city. Only well-to-do people would go to the hospital in the city back then.

They treated me for my fever and stomachache, gave me an injection, and sent me away. I stayed at home for three days and had no improvement in my health. Grandma tried a lot of potions, oil massages, and home remedies that she knew of. After three days, the stomachache had not subsided, so my father took me back to the village hospital after selling off the calf of our dairy cow. This time the doctor examined me and pointed out the swelling in my abdomen. He told me that I had an underdeveloped uterus and didn't have any ovaries, so he recommended surgical removal of my uterus.

At first, we thought that it was an inconsequential issue. They bought medicine and rubbed soothing oil as a temporary measure, and we returned home for the night. That same night, the stomachache came back more painful than ever. We hurried back to the hospital, where the doctors did some testing and then they informed us that I had both male and female genitalia. My father and I were shocked and we asked for their advice. They directed us to another doctor.

The doctor said, "This is natural, so come back when you are 13 years old and we will do the necessary surgery." After we came back home from the doctor's consultation, my dad informed my grandma and mom about the situation. My grandma said, "Well, he's fine now, I'll take care of him."

My sister had menarche a few days later. Her coming-of-age

ceremony was held surrounded by all our relatives. I felt a great change in myself. I thought, 'Oh! Why couldn't I have been born as a girl too?' I wondered about being a woman and its significance. It was on that day that I realized that femininity had emerged within me as well.

I was an 11-year-old boy. Why should I get that feminine feeling and longing? Who could I ask about this confusion within me? I felt as if my sister's puberty brought changes in me as well. I put myself in my sister's place in my daydreams. While my sister thought of me as her brother, I thought of myself as her younger sister.

I had a hernia operation when I was 12 years old, and then they decided to close my vagina surgically and performed that surgery as well. They sold the milch cow for the operation and it was kept a secret. Everyone else was informed that I had to have surgery because of my abdominal pain.

My sister's friends visited our house sometimes. They used to exchange bangles and earrings with each other. I was excited to try them out as well and very much wanted to be a part of their friends' group. During that time, I didn't fit in with other boys my age and I didn't like the boys' talk either.

There was one exception. Mahesh was my best friend back then. He was very fond of me. We studied together for four years. He was from an oppressed caste in Salem. I liked him very much. We used to visit Mahesh's house infrequently. Mahesh's father was a bullock cart owner. We loved to ride in his carriage.

Transformations started happening in me when I was 13 years old. I fell head over heels in love with my neighbor Sabari.

Sabari, who was studying in college back then, belonged to our caste. So, I was allowed to go to his house. I went there often because Sabari's talk and laughter exhilarated me and brought up hitherto unknown feelings in me. I loved that he loved to talk and laugh with me as well. He called me Pops fondly.

Then one day I told Mahesh about the surgery that had happened to me when I was 12. He didn't know anything about it, so he started laughing and said, "Don't just make up stories and pull my leg."

I couldn't bear to hide my femininity, especially during the Chithirai festival<sup>6</sup> in our village. All women wore new clothes and half-sarees, adorned themselves with jasmine flowers, and wore elaborate makeup for the festival.

I thought to myself, "What if I could do these things too?"

Mahesh and I went to the temple to dance, and Sabari had come there too. When I saw him for the first time in a veshti, I felt an overwhelming urge to hug him tightly and show my affection. I did so, and he was amused and asked me, "What's gotten into you?" Embarrassed, I managed to gloss over the incident and said, "It's nothing."

There were firework displays on the nights of the temple festival days. On one of those nights, it was already 1:30 am by the end of the festivities and so Sabari asked me to sleep over at his house. I was happy to stay at his house too.

Sabari was a single child and had his own room in his house. We bade the family goodnight and lay down to sleep in his room. I was 13 years old then. Sleeping near a man for the first time sent unfamiliar feelings and sensations through my



body.

I woke up in the middle of the night and felt a hand holding me. I realized it was Sabari. He leaned in to kiss me. I still remember that kiss we shared. But we didn't know then whether it was right or wrong. As time went by, I felt him doing things to me which were exhilarating and pleasurable. The next day I left as if nothing had happened.

I didn't go out for the festivities that afternoon and slept at home. My mom said that Sabari had come looking for me. I went in search of him of him and met him that evening.

I asked him "I fell asleep last night. Did you come home?" Sabari started weeping earnestly. I asked him why he was crying, and he said: "No, I thought you didn't come because of how I behaved last night." That was the day I felt love for the first time. I said, "No, I fell asleep, that's all. Why did you act like that?" He replied, "Don't get me wrong, Pops, I sense something feminine about you. That's why I felt that way towards you." I was happy that he felt the same way as me. I felt dumbstruck and did not know how to express my feelings to him.

I decided to be myself, a girl, with him. I took my sister's clothes and earrings without her permission and wore them when I was alone with Sabari. He liked it too. This was our secret.

I went to his house often and told my family that I was going to tuition for an excuse to be out. During those days, my facial expressions, thoughts, and body language evolved, and my school friends started to make fun of me. My brothers noticed this and reprimanded me, and then complained to our mother

too. I dismissed it as just an inconsequential thing when my mother asked me about these new differences in me.

How can I tell my family about these changes in me? I decided to ask Sabari what to do.

Sabari had become my lover. People were suspicious of our close relationship. One day, Sabari's mother chased me away from their home and told me not to come there anymore. When I asked Sabari about it, he said that we could meet outdoors. I didn't go to school for many days and instead roamed all over Kodaikanal with Sabari. But I wondered: How long can we live as friends outside and lovers inside?

In the meantime, Sabari graduated from college. Femininity took over my body. A lot of problems were raised at home. My sister ignored me. My brother used to beat me. I knew that there was something wrong with me, but my mind refused to accept it. One day, I told my parents the truth, that I felt like I was a girl. They were shocked and said that they had never seen nor heard anything like that in their life, and were troubled about what the people in our town would say and started to wail.

I said that I had no intention to change my decision, no matter what. My father said, "On that day long back, the doctor had indeed said that he had female organs." Nevertheless, no one accepted me for who I was. When I said that I wanted to live as myself, I only got thrashings and kicks as a response. The quarrels escalated, and one day, I decided to commit suicide and left home. They searched for me, caught me, beat me, and dragged me back home. I had not seen Sabari for a week at that point, so I went to see him without anyone's knowledge. I told him everything that had happened. Sabari remained silent

throughout. I begged him, “What are you thinking? Let’s go somewhere else and live our lives.” but Sabari said nothing.

Finally, he dismissed me with “Let’s not do this, no one will respect us”. My family didn’t understand me, and neither did the man who I thought was my boyfriend. I preferred to see myself as a transwoman rather than a man or woman.

So I left home and got my birth defect corrected surgically.

I went back home after being away for three years. When I went home for my sister’s wedding, they hit me and chased me away, saying that I had brought a bad name to them in our community. My brother and father stood aside helplessly and wept. I picked myself up and came away from there, not wanting to blame anyone.

I am 22 years old now. I have a new identity as Jenny. Mahesh, who was my best friend from my school days, accepted me and my identity, and became my life partner, defying casteism too.

*Jenny leans on Mahesh’s shoulder and laughs, and says they’re getting married in a year.*

**Author’s note:** Jenny belongs to an oppressed caste, lives in a village near Madurai district, has an intersex variation called 5 Alpha reductase, and has mixed gonads with ovary and testicles called Ovo testicles and the testicles release female hormones.

# ROBIN

My name is Robin. My hometown is a village in southern Tamil Nadu. I was born as the first child of a daily-wage worker, who is also a shepherd like many others before his generation. My parents were uneducated, yet we had no dearth of love in our large joint family. I was born as a girl, and since I was the first girl child in my family, I was showered with an abundance of love. I belong to the Dalit community. Our residence was segregated from the residences of people belonging to the dominant castes. Our family profession is basket making and goat herding.

I was enrolled in a primary school, and I loved going to school until I was 10 years old. After that, everything about me, including my body language, changed. Everyone ridiculed me for my traits. My school friends teased me repeatedly, and said things like, "You are not feminine, you look like a boy, don't sit next to me." My school teachers also started advising me to change my style, attire, and general behavior. I believed that I had menarche when I felt a severe stomachache at 13. Everyone took part in my puberty function. But I had not had menarche.

There was a lot of talk among the relatives that there was no visible breast development like in other girls my age, and even more, that my body structure was like that of a boy. As my family did not have enough awareness, it was my grandmother who took me to the hospital. I underwent a thorough physical examination there. I was then admitted to the urology department. This happened when I was 18 years

old. The doctors informed me that I didn't have ovaries or a uterus, and advised me to undergo three types of surgeries. My family discussed this and I informed them that I wanted to live as a man. My family supported my decision. My relatives and my villagers bullied me a lot and treated me differently, but I didn't care much about that.

I underwent a series of surgeries every six months to fix my genitalia. But it didn't work. I changed my identity and went to my relative's house. There I was recognized as a man. I let my relatives know that I was not a woman. The biggest obstacle to me going back to school was the incessant bullying. So I came out to my old friends as a man and they accepted me as a man. However, I was excluded from many activities because of my gender identity.

I thought it was my fate that I was born this way. After my last surgery, my mother told me that my sister might have the same condition as me.

My younger sister was born with a motor impairment and couldn't walk. We took her to the hospital to get her checked out and know for sure, since my family was confused. The doctors examined her and said that we both had the same defect. We all lamented that this was a cursed time for our family. I am the eldest child in the family, so all my family's responsibilities were mine to bear. Immediately we changed everything for my sister, from her clothes to her hairstyle, as well as to acknowledge his identity as a boy.

I have always loved painting since childhood. I am a decent artist and have won many prizes. I have been living as myself in our area for almost eight years now. I work any odd jobs that come my way to survive, because I didn't study much.

Currently, I am working in a steel plant.

I have wandered around many places in search of adequate medical help and psychological counselling, all for naught. We are left with nothing more to do. A lot of people degrade me because of my identity even in my presence. I do get frustrated and feel low during these instances, even after many years.

I mentioned my brother who couldn't walk from birth, the sibling we got to know was also an intersex person only after my diagnosis. I bear all my hardships to provide a decent life for my disabled brother.

About two years back, a woman fell in love with me and wanted to get married to me despite knowing my medical conditions, and so the wedding happened. We have an average, typical life now. But we are still in need of medical assistance. For this reason, I am working any kind of job to earn a living and for our much-needed medical expenses. What else is there to do? We have been born, and we have to live our lives no matter what.

During my teenage years, I was redirected around a lot in my search for medical help. Since my parents didn't have any awareness or plans, they took me to almost all the government hospitals in major cities in search of appropriate medical help. I was diverted and misdirected everywhere.

From the procedure to change my name legally to obtaining the required medical certificates, all the processes were delayed. Some people outright said that this procedure will not happen. No one thinks that we have a future too. Our basic need is to live like everyone else, as common citizens, and we expect help from the law, judiciary, and medical departments for this

reason. But still there are no official directions to address our basic rights and needs. If there is an ordinance or government directive for our rights and needs, it will be of life-saving benefit to people like us.

**Author's note:** Robin belongs to an oppressed caste of the Kongu region, has an intersex variance called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, and lives below the poverty line, largely dependent on goat herding for the basic survival of him and his family.

# VINAYAK

My name is Vinayak Mahadev. My hometown is a village on the Chettinad coast of Tamil Nadu. My family consists of my father, who is a farmer, two mothers, and four sisters. Yes, I was born as the eldest daughter of my father's first wife. I was raised as a girl.

From my childhood, poverty was a constant obstacle. Dad brought us up by working as a daily wage worker. This way of life is nothing new for the people of the delta area of Tamil Nadu. Although born as a farmer's daughter, I always thought that I should study and reach a high position in life like no one else in my family had managed to. I always had the desire to achieve something prominent in life. I have had big dreams since childhood.

I was admitted as a girl in school. As a 14-year-old, I felt my body and mind changing. My mother approached astrologers and checked all the horoscopes that she could find, because I had not had menarche. I was asked to perform rituals and offer puja to Lord Vinaayagar every week, and I didn't like it at all. No one cared about me or listened to my grievances.

I became so stressed that I couldn't even study in school anymore. I ran away to get a job at the Tirupur Vests company. I wore women's clothes and had long hair at that time. I couldn't last there for even a week and came back home again. I said that all my problems are because I hadn't started menstruating like all other girls my age. There was no response to this from my family.



While searching for resources to try and understand my bodily changes, I met a person who told me about transgender women and men. I also cut my hair and started wearing masculine clothes. I submitted a petition to our district collector asking for recognition of my identity. Through the collector's office, I was directed toward a charity organization. There, I was told I was a transgender person. They said, "Don't be alone, live together with other transgender people." So, I also thought that I was a transgender person back then. I didn't know that I was an intersex person.

My mom is very fond of me. She paid for all my medical expenses even when she had to take a loan or borrow from money lenders. In the urology department of the government hospital in our district, they said to me that they could not certify that I was a man and that they could only provide a certificate that I was a woman or a transgender woman after examining me physically. They prescribed a lot of tests and scans. I got all those tests done in a private hospital after incurring a lot of debt. I was determined to be a male in those test reports. My confusion was resolved.

I left my hometown and started living as a man. But I suffered a lot of humiliation and disgust while staying in the men's hostels. I was bullied a lot for my physical appearance. I couldn't live in those kinds of places.

I can't describe how much trouble and trauma I went through to change my name legally. There is no awareness even in the government departments and in the medical field. I was diverted or dismissed everywhere in the process. Many doctors referred to me as female. They said that the best course for my future would be to live as a woman and I was sent away.

I dropped out of school midway and went to work. Then somehow, I managed to take the 12th- grade board examinations privately. They registered me as a trans woman there. I appealed to the Education Officer and my appeal was accepted. A lot of people dismissed my application to change my gender by saying "You are a girl, you can be a girl." Eventually, some members of the transgender community helped me.

I was under a lot of pressure not knowing if I was a trans woman or a trans man. No one knew about my identity. Without any counseling or medical guidance, I wondered if I was the only one in this world with this identity problem. I was exhausted after three years of approaching offices and various hospitals for my legal name change and medical diagnosis.

This should not happen to anyone else. Had I had proper help and guidance, I would have gotten to a better place in life or even achieved something. Today I am taking professional typing lessons privately. I do construction work for a living. To live my life as a man named Vinayak, I had to overcome prejudice and ignorance every step of the way. At least in the future, the government should help us with resources, to navigate legal and medical processes and provide us with reservations so that such a condition of life does not befall any other person like me. After Vinodhan explained the medical and psychological aspects of the intersex condition, I got more clarity. I want to improve my quality of life and help others like me too. I had never met any other intersex person before, but I have now. Most people don't know the answers to questions that arise naturally about this condition. Meanwhile, this society treats us as inferior persons by excluding us in everything from education, residence to work. How can you live your life if the use of restrooms and the existence of your own body are the

problems?

**Author's note:** Vinayak belongs to an oppressed class from a village in the Chettinad Ramanathapuram district and is an intersex person with Testicular Feminization Syndrome. Vinayak, a graduate who lost his father at a young age, struggles for recognition of his identity, is still unemployed, and is humiliated wherever he goes to apply for a job because of his gender identity. He is He is struggling to get a job in the government sector as well. Vinayak waits with longing and hopes for a better life and future.

# GEETHAN

My name is Geethan. I am 23 years old, brought up and raised as a girl. I was born disabled and the last child in a typical family. I am paralyzed below the waist. I was a child with underdeveloped legs. Our family business is goat herding and shepherding. Until the age of seven, I was unable to sit up straight.

I was dependent on others my entire childhood and I got my physical disability certificate when I was seven years old. My family, unlike so many families, accepted and supported their child born with a physical disability. They took me to many hospitals and tried various treatments, to no avail. I was admitted to a government school. I was not a typical student. I didn't like to interact with anyone at school. I was teased by my classmates for my disability and they refused to talk to me because I belonged to the oppressed community. I went to school until fourth grade only.

Meanwhile, in my family, my elder brother was perceived as a girl child at birth like me, and later it was revealed that he was a boy. We consulted many hospitals, and then he began to grow up as a boy and then into a man. My mother told me that I too had genital ambiguity at birth, so they took me for a medical examination too. The fact that I too had the same intersex variation as my brother and that I too was male caused huge confusion and sorrow in the family. Although our family accepted him as a man, our neighbors and relatives mocked and bullied him. Even before all this happened, we never had the support of society since we belonged to an

oppressed caste. On the one hand, my family was worried about me and my life because I was a disabled person. Then my intersex diagnosis too came crashing down on us all.

They took me to the same hospital where my brother had undergone treatment for his intersex condition. It was there that it was revealed that my brother and I had the same type of physiological condition. They performed all the required blood tests. In the hospital, they told me the consequences of growing up as a boy and growing up as a girl. At that age, I didn't know what it was all about and couldn't choose my gender. My parents accepted that I was naturally male and had male features. I couldn't walk and I didn't want to go to school because of gender ambiguity as well. The fear of being ridiculed by others gripped me, and so I stayed at home. It was only when I was 15 that I realized the situation. I chose a name for myself. The disgusting attitude of society that hurts other people for their amusement has not spared me either. But my family and their constant support helped me to overcome them.

I love poultry farming. I find it more relaxing to interact with my pets than with other people. Sharing my emotions with them has been a great comfort for me. The government incentive provided to disabled people is my major financial source. My aged parents still carry me around like when I was a baby. Unable to walk, I am reduced to crawling, and this has resulted in my leg and arm joints becoming worn out. Amidst these issues, my gender change has become ironic and a point of ridicule to some and pitiful in the eyes of others. I don't like this at all.

Now I am 23 years old. I still cannot go to work by myself.

caste oppression is still very prevalent, and I am stuck at home with no other choice. My parents are extremely distressed about the fact that my brother and I were born in the same family with the same intersex condition. They regret that we were born like this because of some curse on our family.

Did we decide to be born this way on purpose? This is just natural. Why should we look at something that occurs naturally as a defect or abnormality? We should talk about this in our society and spread awareness and understanding. Although it's a different life and not a typical one, I'm happy.

After meeting all of you, thoughts like 'we are the only ones born like this' and that this is our bad karma have changed entirely. We now know that this is not a disease. I have taken it upon myself to fight for marginalized people like me who are oppressed by caste, gender, and physical disabilities. I have come to believe that my life should be devoted to serving as a mentor or guide to others like me.

**Author's note:** Geethan was a low-caste resident of the Kongu region who has cytogenetic lower limb prolapse and Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. He is doing poultry farming from his wheelchair. In fact, he joyfully takes a rooster in his hands and feeds it while speaking to us. He is a marginalized person based on caste, disability, and gender identity, and is living his life with the hope of governmental support.

# KUNDHAVI

Raised as a boy in a town near the Thanjavur district, I am Kundhavi, an intersex person with three older brothers.

I grew up without knowing that I had an intersex variation until the age of 15. An upper-class and extremely spiritual family background led our family to move to Tamil Nadu's capital city of Chennai. When I was 16 years old, I experienced hemorrhaging from my penis. My family was shocked and thought that it was a urinary tract infection initially. But they got extremely scared when it happened every month and the pain was unbearable.

We went to a doctor for a medical consultation and they told us that I have a uterus and a male organ through which I was menstruating. My family was shocked and were afraid of our society and what they will have to face if the truth came out. So they asked the doctors to remove my uterus via surgery and the doctors performed the surgery according to my family's decision.

After the surgery, I suffered unspeakable pain. I knew that I was attracted to men back then. The most confusing part was that I thought I was gay and then I found out that my genotype 46XXY was an intersex variant with a chromosomal mutation.

After the surgery, my penis became inactive and I used to feel a lot of pain just from urination. My urine flow was entirely disrupted post-surgery and I could only excrete in drips. I visited many doctors about this issue, but nothing could be

done. I went through each day like I was in hell. I couldn't sleep at night even if I was tired and sleepy. It took up to three hours to pass urine completely every time.

I attempted to commit suicide to end this life of torture. My mother was very worried and gave me unflinching support to face each day. All the hospital visits cost us a lot of money, but I couldn't go to work. I used to work in a media company and was sexually harassed there. Medical expenditure was mounting high, while my medical issue was not resolved at all. I had to resort to other people's generosity for my treatment. My monthly medical expenses became Rs 5,000 and then Rs 10,000. Apart from this, my diabetes and thyroid conditions deteriorated too.

Later, I consulted another doctor, who prescribed many tests, including genetic tests, and finally concluded that the hysterectomy surgery was botched and that the urinary bladder had collapsed and lost the ability to urinate because of that. I was taken care of by my aged parents entirely due to my health issues.

Even after the age of 40, the problems in my life have never been resolved.

I published about my intersex variation and the harsh life that I suffered because of this with the help of my friends in the media, in the hope that people will understand how painful life is for people like me. We published videos on major media platforms, including YouTube, titled 'Men menstruate too'. Most of the people didn't understand and their responses were othering. But hoping to get at least some information about intersex, I reposted it on various platforms.



Finally, I have put an end to my urinary problem now, through surgery based on the recommendation of a famous doctor. The surgery was performed to direct urine from my bladder through a tube and I will urinate only through that tube until I die. I have to replace my urinary tube every month and take medications regularly to prevent infection. My life had become hell, because of the ignorance of one surgeon. It had been many years since I slept peacefully.

I strongly feel that no future generation of intersex people should suffer hardships like me. The government should pave the way for inclusive, sensitized psychological counseling centers, and medical treatments for us, and should support us with education and employment opportunities. I am 45 years old now and still under the care of my parents, which is very difficult for them. We find it very difficult to rent a house after sharing our situation with the landlords, who refuse to rent their house to us. I don't know how long I will live, but the lives of our intersex people should not be like mine and must improve.

**Author's note:** Arasan is an intersex person who was brought up as a male child in his upper-class household. He has the chromosomal mutation 46XXY (Mixed Gonadotropin Syndrome) with prolapsed bladder dysfunction. He expressed his tearful anguish and hopes

# ASHWATHAN

My village is located in one corner of Thrissur district in Kerala. I was born as the last daughter of a poultry farmer. I have an elder brother and an elder sister. I had ambiguous genitals at birth, despite which my parents decided to bring me up as their daughter.

I was ridiculed and teased during my school days for my physical appearance, which was not like other girls my age. I belong to an oppressed caste. I was bullied in school, looked at like I was a hideous animal and not even treated like a human being by other people in my village.

My parents understood my plight and supported me. They said that good education was very important for life and provided me with a quality education.

I cried every day for the ridicule thrown at me. Even though I was shamed and bullied, I didn't give up my education. I studied well because my parents worked hard to provide for me. It was only when I went to college that I understood the outside world and how everyone thought that I was a transwoman.

I knew that I was not a transwoman and searched for resources to understand my identity. I found out that I was an intersex person. Intersex is not a defect; it is a natural variation.

Social exclusion and long-term stress from being bullied and harassed brought on psychiatric issues. I was admitted to hospital for bipolar disorder and continued treatment for six months.

After my treatment, I started working with people belonging to marginalized gender identities. I participated in many protests alongside trans people and college students to fight against caste, ethnic, gender, and economic class-based discrimination and oppression in society. I am a member of the Kerala government's Gender Welfare Board as a representative of intersex people.

My body, blood, and mind say that I am a man and I want to live as a man only. Everyone has the right to break free and live their life, rather than be stuck in the social structure and be suffocated until death. I take pride in fighting for that right, for the lives of people like me. Today I have created my identity. I am Ashwathan and I now identify myself as an intersex male.

I am pursuing my higher studies with the help of the government. Society, medical personnel, government, and media should understand us. This is just a natural variation, but our rights are being denied. The government should ensure and implement a separate reservation in education and employment opportunities for us. Marriage rights are for everyone, and we should also be entitled to them and the restrictions should be relaxed in our favor. No one should interfere with the lives of intersex people until they decide their gender and identity.

**Author's note:** Ashwathan is an intersex person from Kerala who has a psychiatric disorder called bipolar disorder. He is from an oppressed caste and provides psychological counseling to people like him.

# KARKI

My hometown is in a central district of Tamil Nadu. I have an upper-class family background and was born as the first child to my parents. My parents are well-educated government servants. I was born with sex ambiguity, and my parents decided to bring me up as their daughter. I have a brother who was born after me.

When I was about seven years old, my underdeveloped male organs were discovered inside me. My grandpa was a doctor, and following his medical advice, my penis and testicles were removed via surgery when I was a child. I was later told about this surgery, and the reason it was removed was said to be the fear that the underdeveloped organs might cause cancer.

I was different from other girls in my school days, and I was bullied as a result. I went through psychological issues because of this. Also, I studied in an English-medium school, and bullying is higher there compared to other schools. I faced it every day like a battlefield.

My parents wanted to bring me up as a girl child. I couldn't live life as a girl though. All of my classmates rejected and pushed me away, saying that I looked like a boy, my voice was masculine, and all my behavioral traits were masculine. My parents had warned me not to share my birth defect with anyone else, and I followed their advice willingly. But after I turned 13, I couldn't be like other women and go through life typically. At one point, I couldn't bring myself to go to school regularly and my mental health issues increased. I transferred to different schools before finishing my higher secondary

education.

I joined college as a woman, and I felt attracted to women only. When I shared my sexuality with my family, they still saw me as a woman and forced me to continue living my life as a woman. After my college education, I shifted to a different city in search of a job and there I got introduced to gender-diverse people. Due to a lack of awareness and knowledge, my parents brought me up as a girl child despite my sex being male. They couldn't change their view of me either and this created a lot of chaos in my life. I did not identify as a woman and I struggled to convince my parents. Finally, they understood my plight and supported my identity as a man. Due to the misguided notions and half-baked knowledge of a few doctors, my life was turned upside down.

Appropriate psychiatric help and proper medical care are the need of the hour for all intersex people like me. Due to the mistakes of a few people, our lives become like a battleground. Today I am 34 years old, and I have just started relevant medical treatments and hormone replacement therapy to live my life as a man. I recently got genetically tested to identify my sex as male too. My only request is to let us declare our own gender identity and sexuality, as negating this right leads to undesirable real-life consequences for us.

**Author's note:** Brought up by well-educated upper-class parents, Karki has suffered a lot due to some misguided doctors and their wrong medical advice. He is a pseudo-hermaphrodite, with an intersex condition, who is a bank employee and a photography technician. He volunteers for social work along with queer people

# CONSOLIDATION

Through the Create Initiative, I got the opportunity to meet and interview people with disabilities and people with intersex variations, which was an unforgettable experience for me. I am grateful to the Create Initiative team for giving me this wonderful opportunity. Three group training and awareness sessions were held, following the individual interviews. I am delighted to share the information gained from these events and my experience with you.

The most marginalized people in our society are people with disabilities, people belonging to minority gender and sexual identities, and people belonging to the Dalit community. These minority communities of people have been fighting and protesting for their rights and recognition separately. It has been my long-held desire to meet these groups of people, and do extensive research on their current situations and requirements by personally interviewing representatives from each of these communities. Finally, I got the opportunity and the resources from the Create Initiative.

We conducted three programs to ensure participation from all these minority groups in our narrative research. We met and planned these events with the guidance of queer-community organizations, non-governmental charitable organizations, non-profit welfare organizations for people with disabilities, organizations for education and employment skills training, public welfare trusts, doctors, and medical workers. Through these programs, we envisioned raising awareness about the status and livelihood of intersex people and differently abled people in society.

# AN EVENT WITH LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE

We organized an event for the queer people of Chennai and nearby districts to understand their knowledge of the existing laws and policies for LGBTQIA+ people and their views and awareness about intersex variations and the lives of intersex people.

There were about 25 people from varied backgrounds, such as gender-diverse and queer people, medical students and other graduate students, and members of renowned NGOs. The event started with a debate on the existing laws and rights of queer people. This debate was planned to enlighten and inform minority people about their legal rights. The second part of the event was an extensive doubt-clearing session about diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. The participants in the event partook in these discussions enthusiastically to increase their awareness and become more sensitized.

Most participants had a flawed understanding that intersex people are the same as transgender people, or vice versa. During the awareness discussions, the existence of various intersex conditions was explained in detail for the participants' benefit. There are LGBTQIA+ people among the disabled communities, and it was acknowledged that most of them were unaware of their identities due to a lack of awareness and education. Similarly, there is a lack of understanding about disabled people among the able-bodied queer communities as well. This awareness and sensitization gap was addressed and discussed in this event.

**Takeaways from the event:** People were made aware of



their legal rights and the legal help available to them. The differentiation of trans and intersex individuals was emphasized. Most college students were largely unaware of the intersex variations, and they became more aware and sensitized at the end of the event. Furthermore, they promised to share their knowledge in their social circles to create widespread awareness too.

# EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM

Social reforms can be brought about by fundamental changes at the school and college levels. We organized this event to better understand the views and perceptions of disabled and queer communities in schools and colleges, to create awareness, and provide more insights to broaden perspectives. The event entailed awareness about the plight of disabled people and LGBTQIA+ people, how to stop bullying at schools and colleges by increasing social awareness, and how to best support these individuals.

Participants in this event included intersex, queer, and disabled people. They shared significant moments from their lives and their varied experiences with the audience. To improve awareness among the students and teaching communities, the importance and necessity of gender and sex education were explained in great detail.

Government employees highlighted the significance of reservation in education and employment to the participants. Steps to make educational and working spaces more inclusive and accessible for disabled people were listed. The importance of the availability of accessible and appropriate counseling for students, especially those from minority groups, was explained. The necessity of separate restrooms at colleges and workspaces was detailed. Creating skill training opportunities for disabled and queer people, and their potential to help with employment was stressed through this program. Monitoring of and severe punishments for discriminatory practices toward disabled and

and queer people were discussed, as well as their role in radical change.

A screening about the Section 377 law and its aftermath was shown to increase participants' awareness about their legal rights and their ramifications. The ramifications of the Madurai Sessions Court's restraining order against genital mutilation surgeries on intersex children were discussed,

This event was organized with the help of SAATHi (NGO) president L. Ramakrishnan and his team. Many people, including students, teachers, professors, government officials, and queer people, participated in this program.

**Takeaways from this event:** This program was conducted to emphasize the important role of accessible education and employment opportunities for marginalized people in society. Many participants shared their suggestions at the end of the program. This program was helpful as a doubt-clearing session for many participants too. The major takeaway from this program was to highlight the daily struggles faced by intersex and disabled people at workplaces and how best to support them.

# A MEET AND WITH THE DISABLED COMMUNITIES

This program was organized to review the awareness and understanding of other minority groups such as LGBTQIA+ people and intersex people by the disabled communities. This program addressed the issues faced by queer disabled people and their lack of available resources. This program also addressed the difficulties in identifying openly as a queer person while being a disabled individual as well.

Disabled people are dismissed based on their disability status and their identities as part of gender-diverse groups, and minority sexual orientations are suppressed. Their feelings are not respected equally. This was highlighted during the event. The majority of the participants in this event were not aware of the existence of various gender identities, intersex variations, and various sexual orientations. This program provided a space for their questions to be addressed. I was delighted to bring this awareness program about intersex people and other gender-minority people to the disabled communities with the help of the Create Initiative. The participants were enthusiastic about understanding the differences between various gender and sexual identities.

Nirangal (an NGO) organized a discussion and doubt-clearing session on the struggles faced by disabled people, including their ostracization by society, as part of our program. The basic necessity of romantic relationships is denied to disabled people and seen as abhorrent. This issue was highlighted to understand the existing social structure and the necessity for

for much-needed societal reform.

**Takeaways from this event:** It was painful to witness the reality that most participants were unaware of the term 'intersex' and the existence of intersex variations. The major takeaway was the fact that there was a lack of awareness due to a lack of discourses on this topic on all platforms. I could sense a deep sense of understanding in the silence of the audience when I recounted significant moments of my life as an intersex and disabled person to them. Through this program, we insisted that identifying oneself as one or more of the queer identities was a basic human right and that it applies to disabled people too. Many participants came forward to ask sensible questions and get their doubts cleared by the event organizers. Many suggested that these kinds of programs must be conducted all over the state to spread more awareness and knowledge among the general public. They shared the importance of education and employment opportunities for disabled people. Many participants also stated their belief that the lives of people belonging to minority gender and sexual identities would improve with a radical change in societal views.

# CONCLUSION

Through the Create Initiative, I chose to conduct the above-mentioned events as I considered them to be most essential. The general public is largely unaware of the struggles of intersex, queer and disabled people who are a minority in our society. These three events were planned to analyze the understanding and awareness of these separate minority groups about each other. On seeing these various minority groups together under the same roof, we can conclude that their basic rights and needs are still denied and their struggles for recognition are very similar. It was a prevalent notion among many that the queer and disabled minority groups should join hands in this fight for equal rights and legal protection. We are all minorities in this society but belong to different minority communities. The coalition of all these minority groups including queer, intersex, disabled, and Dalit communities would bring a radical change in social reform and the fight for basic rights. For this reason, various organizations like disabled welfare organizations, queer support NGOs, oppressed community welfare organizations, minority trusts, and government charity organizations should come forward to take formative first steps to bring about these social, educational, legal, and governmental changes.

**SOME THOUGHTS  
ON THE  
WAY FORWARD**

# BASIC REQUIREMENTS

## ***For medical personnel***

1. Correct identification of intersex children is essential.
2. Providing appropriate psychological counseling to families, parents, and guardians of intersex persons is critical.
3. Addressing the physical and social problems of intersex persons, recommendation of sensitized doctors is necessary.
4. Clinicians need to gain a thorough understanding and complete clarity of intersex variations. Training for concerned medical, nursing, and psychological counselors is essential. The medical sub-departments concerned need to update and improve their application methodologies.
5. Intersex awareness programs should be included in the college curriculum. Through this, new graduate doctors will gain awareness and insights. Medical education should offer a human rights perspective within intersex education to the new generation of doctors to equip them with intersex awareness and do no harm to intersex people in the medical setting.
6. Appropriate measures should be taken, considering the future of intersex people. For example, immediate surgical decisions taken with short-term considerations should be avoided. Until the concerned person is old enough to choose their gender, it is best to avoid unnecessary ambiguous treatments. This can avoid physical, social, and psychological



trauma that occurs after puberty.

7. Hand in hand with the development of modern medical technology, the old remedies/medical practices should be discarded and psychological recommendations and/or appropriate treatments should be prescribed.
8. Do not act on the request of uncomprehending parents. We should understand the psychological upheavals of parents, and offer them psychological counseling to help them understand their wards' medical condition better.
9. Data on the effectiveness of hormone therapy and plastic surgery should be collated and implemented.
10. Teams comprising obstetricians, neonatologists, and nurses should be coordinated in each government hospital to identify intersex babies after birth, to monitor their development, and to prevent unnecessary surgeries.
11. The government should provide integrated understanding and counseling for intersex people and families by setting up Psychological Counselling Centers.
12. Intersex persons should also be given an exclusive option under the Other Genders category in the gender choices in application forms.
13. Intersex people should be included in the reservation system along with women, transgender persons, and differently abled people in government jobs and other sectors. Recognition and implementation of the rights of intersex persons should be formulated.
14. It is wrong to consider intersex variations as a psychological illness or a medical defect. These should be recorded as

normal variations rather than as physiological disorders.

15. Intersex classifications should be taken as a separate subject so that prospective medical students can gain more understanding and awareness about the same.
16. Comprehensive sexuality education, including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) and the related rights, should be included in school and college curricula. Awareness and sensitization right from the school years are imperative for creating a more empathetic and inclusive generation to come. This would prevent a lot of mishaps and wrongdoings in the future.

### ***For Society/Media/Government***

1. On par with today's scientific developments, there needs to be a radical change in society's way of viewing and treating people from marginalized gender and sexual identities (intersex acceptance, trans awareness, SOGIESC awareness, etc.). People need to become more aware in our modern digital era.
2. Educators and students should approach issues faced by intersex, disabled, and queer people with social understanding. Genetic variations and related medical diagnoses should be approached with an open mind.
3. Media and social networking sites are the reflection of society and its views. Therefore, the people involved in media should be well-informed and gain awareness and

understanding before participating in related activities, with the guidance of the concerned people if needed. Media and websites should consult with intersex activists to understand the issues based on a human rights perspective, before reporting related activities and issues.

4. Journalists should not treat intersex variations as a disease, disorder, or disability. It should be approached from the point of view of a natural variation in the human body.
5. Socially aware media institutions should conduct sensitized discussions on intersex, queer, and differently abled people.
6. Transgender and intersex should not be considered as gender mutations or gender changes, but should be considered as aligning one's own body with one's identity. Hence, people's identities and pronouns should be respected.
7. There are many social problems that people have to face after identifying themselves as an intersex person. Therefore, the rules and/or norms relating to this should be relaxed in all government departments. For example, facilitating legal name and gender change, offering medical and psychological help, countering societal discrimination, ensuring accessibility in educational spaces and workplaces, etc.
8. Even after undergoing medical tests and diagnosis, we are not provided with appropriate medical certificates. Therefore, such inadequacies should be addressed and resolved at the earliest.
9. Many legal issues relating to the required proofs for name and/or gender change occur frequently. There should be proper norms and regulations in place for efficient and

regulations in place for efficient and faster processes.

10. Conversion therapy is illegal and a criminal offense under our Constitution, but many misdirected and misinformed clinicians continue to practice this today and they should be penalized severely.
11. The Marriage Rights Act should be inclusive of intersex people, and the rights of intersex people should be decreed in favor of their chosen identities.
12. Sensitization and awareness centers should be opened in every state to provide resources and support. These centers should be expanded in government hospitals to provide counseling directly to intersex people and their families/caregivers.
13. Access to free education should be provided in higher secondary schools and colleges as a special concession for intersex students.
14. Exclusive reservations should be made available for employment opportunities and participation in politics for suitable candidates.
15. The medical needs of intersex people should be included in government medical insurance schemes, because of the high expenses for intersex people (owing to the higher frequency of medical attention needed) . The government should bear the entire cost of the insurance schemes provided.

## DURING MY JOURNEYS...

I learned about the awareness and sensitization requirements for intersex people. I had an opportunity to meet with many doctors and psychological counselors one day. I was directed towards applying for the intersex fellowship. I was shortlisted among many others who had applied for this fellowship. I learned that there were support groups and counseling groups that work primarily for intersex people abroad. All the fellowship requirements were explained to me.

For this fellowship, I journeyed to meet other intersex people and learned about their life stories.

The biggest hurdle was identifying intersex people. They are living their lives in various cities, with as much knowledge as they could acquire, and by identifying themselves with the limited resources available to them. Some endured the trauma of being assigned to and forced to live within the binary genders, some people were subjected to unnecessary forced surgeries, and some live their lives unable to express their self-identity even today. I was able to accumulate all this information after identifying intersex people and traveling to meet each person after some grueling journeys. Conversations that often start with smiling faces end in tears. So many sorrows were buried inside everyone. How should we explain to society that this is a natural phenomenon and is not that particular intersex person's fault?

Who is responsible for all this? Me? My parents? No.

Doctors? Or society? No.

God? No.

It is the complete lack of awareness, lack of awareness and understanding about the invisible lives of intersex people and differently abled people. If I had received proper medical information, social understanding, and psychological support, my life would not have been so difficult. Some strangers' lack of understanding and caste-based discrimination has made my life hell. Even if there had been basic understanding, life would have been easier for people like me.

Emotions and a partner for life are for everyone. But the emotions of people like us are not respected. We are insulted, shamed, and ignored. Why can't intersex people, gender-diverse people, differently abled people, and other oppressed and marginalized people have feelings too? Shouldn't they have a life? Shouldn't I want a life partner? Shouldn't there be a future? Who does the law protect? Should we just get buried, unheard, inside the social structure?

Here is a vicious society where anything different is seen as abhorrent. In such an environment, where discourses about these issues are avoided, most of the intersex people I met don't want to reveal their identity. Some people recorded their opinions in a distasteful manner. But after enlightening them about the positive difference it would bring about by telling our stories, their opinions changed. Setting aside the most personal side of their lives, I have recorded only the pain and the emotions I felt during these discussions. Many people who initially were strangers have become good friends now. They shared their secrets and personal lives with me. With their permission, some of these personal anecdotes are shared here. I give my heartfelt thanks to CREA (Kriya

Pelosi group) for providing such an opportunity, to Hiker Chiu, Niluka Gunavarthane, Agnieszka Krol, and Smruti who were my wonderful advisors, to all those who made it possible to bring out the feelings that were buried deep, and to all those who listened to the difficulties I faced and gave me great advice.

All lives on earth have the same value. Is it fair to differentiate some of them as superior and some as inferior? One can only face so much suffering in one's life and hear only so many life-crushing words hurled at one. How terrible is the suffering of not owning your own body? The fellowship was a great opportunity for me to meet other people like me and support them in any way I can.

There are many more brothers and sisters unidentified, waiting for the change in their lives, in society, and how it views them. I want to dedicate my life to that change. My sincere request to you, friends, is don't discriminate against people based on their caste, gender, or physical ability, and realize that there is a life within that body. Change is within you.

I move in the dark like a genderless, sightless man looking for a change. With no eyes to see this despicable society, with a blue cap on my head, carrying a white cane used by the visually impaired in my hand, and holding the flag as an ambassador for the intersex people, I will await the change as long as I live.

# APPENDICES



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## **Explanation About the LGBTQI+ Community**

LGBTIQA+ is an initialism that stands for:

L - Lesbian

G - Gay

B - Bisexual

T - Transgender

Q - Queer

I - Intersex

A - Asexual

LGBTQIA+ as well as some of its common variants function as an umbrella term for sexuality and gender identity[1]. LGB and A denote sexual orientations, and T and I denote gender identities. The abbreviation Q is for 'queer', which is an umbrella term for all other gender and sexual identities except for the cis-hetero identity.

A brief explanation of the terms:

- **Cis:** A person whose gender identity is the same as their assigned sex at birth
- **Assigned sex at birth [ASAB]:** After the birth of a baby, the baby's sex is determined by the doctors and recorded (based on the baby's external genitalia)
- **Gender identity vs sex:** Sex refers to the biological sex based on genitalia, chromosomes, etc., while gender identity is the gender that a person identifies themselves with. It may or may not be the same as their ASAB.

- Sexual orientation: It refers to a person's sexual/romantic attraction towards others.
- Lesbian: A woman who feels attracted to another woman
- Gay: A man who feels attracted to another man
- Bisexual: A person who is sexually attracted to both men and women. The level of attraction the person feels towards any gender can vary for each bisexual individual.
- Transgender: A person who identifies as a different gender than the one they were ASAB. For example, a person who was assigned female at birth and identifies themselves as a man, is a transgender man.
- Intersex: Intersex persons are born with ambiguous genitalia, chromosome patterns other than XX and XY, etc.
- Asexual: A person who doesn't feel sexual attraction to anyone

There are many more terms like the ones above. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not related to one another. For example, a trans man can be gay, meaning he can be attracted towards men. Similarly, a cis-gay person is not a transgender person.

## **Transgender and Intersex People**

As we know, transgender people are people whose gender identity is different from the one they were assigned at birth. Though this may be true for some intersex people, intersex variations set intersex people apart from transgender people subtly. Some intersex persons identify themselves as a transgender person and some as an intersex person. It should

be noted that each person has the right to identify themselves, and their identity should be respected.

Most transgender people are not born with any atypical body features or genital ambiguity. Transgender people are people who identify as a different gender from the gender assigned at birth. They could have typical male or female chromosomes and still identify with a gender not in congruence with their sex. There are cases where intersex people thought that they were transgender because of a lack of resources and awareness, but they should be considered intersex, not transgender, unless they themselves identify as transgender.

Some intersex people have faced humiliation, ostracization, physical violence, and unacceptance from their families and society because they were assumed to be transgender people. Transgender people in our society face discrimination, ostracization, and often violence because of the lack of proper awareness and sensitization around gender and sexuality. It is commonly believed that transgender people “choose” to be different from the societal conventions, that it is just “in their head” to transition to a different gender than the one they were assigned to. This societal conclusion is seen to be derived from ignorance or a fear of transgender people who defy the so-called social and familial norms.

Any person born into an Indian family inherits their family’s caste, socio-economic standing, and also societal and familial expectations and honor. Broadly, a person is expected to finish education at a certain age, marry a person from their own caste, own a house at a certain age, and finally to produce heirs to uphold their family’s honor and societal norms. Any deviation from these rules of society is seen as a dishonor to

their family. This is largely the reason for discrimination against transgender and queer people. By default, intersex people and transgender people are thought to be one and the same, and face similar societal retributions.

Similarly, the prevalent heteronormative narrative is thrust upon intersex people as well. Sexual orientation is a separate phenomenon, not necessarily related to gender identity. An intersex person can also be gay or bisexual.

## **Disability**

Disability is a phenomenon where a person lacks abilities to enable them to function to their full potential in a society. It can hinder a person navigating their societal and personal lives without aids. Disabilities can be physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, developmental, sensory or a combination of them. A disability may be visible or invisible in nature. For example, a person who has underdeveloped limbs can be visibly disabled, while a person with partial eyesight might be invisibly disabled.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines disability as:

long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder [a person's] full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

A person who is disabled is given special reservations in education and employment opportunities in India. The Ministry of Social Justice in India ensures the welfare and empowerment of differently abled Indian citizens.

Socially, however, any disabled person in India is treated like

Untouchable, and accorded no respect nor a say in their own lives. Often their voices are not heard even in their family circles. They are sympathised with, unlike queer people, that's true; but it is also prevalent for disabled people to be only seen as a burden. This is an offence punishable in accordance with the law as provided by Article 17 of the Constitution. Every person, including the disabled, has their life and liberty guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution.

## **Caste System in India**

People in India are born into the caste system. The caste system in India is based on two concepts: *varna* and *jati*.

The *varna* system in the context of the Hindu religion consists of four hierarchical categories, segregated loosely based on their occupations, namely:

- Brahmins: Vedic scholars, priests, or teachers
- Kshatriyas: Rulers, administrators, or warriors
- Vaishyas: Agriculturalists, farmers, or merchants
- Shudras: Artisans, laborers, or servants

Communities which belong to one of the four *varnas* or classes are called *savarna* Hindus. The Dalits and tribals who do not belong to any *varna* were called *avarna*. This quadruple division is a form of social stratification, quite different from the more nuanced system of *jātis*, which corresponds to the European term 'caste'.

*Jāti* is the term traditionally used to describe a cohesive group of people in the Indian subcontinent, like a tribe, community, clan, sub-clan, or a religious sect. Each *jāti* typically has an

association with an occupation, geography, or tribe. Under the jāti system, a person is born into a jāti with ascribed social roles and endogamy, i.e., marriages take place only within that jāti. The jāti provides identity, security, and status, and has historically been open to change based on economic, social, and political influences.

An intertwined phenomenon of various castes/communities exists even in modern India. An Indian citizen's caste or community largely determines their socio-economic background, their identity in Indian society, and plays an invisible but huge role in their lives.

Casteism means the continued adherence to the caste system, and the practice of prejudice and discrimination based on the caste system. The hierarchies between various caste/communities are vague and vary geographically. Nevertheless, access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment are influenced by a person's caste that they are born into.

As we know, the castes were based on and largely represented an occupation. A person is born into a caste and by default inherits an occupation. Historically, the avarna or Dalits and their professions were considered impure, and they were ostracized and had their own segregated residential areas, which were well apart from the main town or city areas. Purity is a loosely held belief, on the basis of which casteism operates too. For example, in Tamil Nadu, there were segregated wells for people belonging to the tribal or Dalit communities. They were not allowed to access water from other rivers or wells not allocated for their purpose. In tea shops, there was a 'two-tumbler system', in which the Dalits were served in separate clay or glass tumblers and the rest of the communities were

served in steel tumblers. Dalits were not allowed into the houses of other communities. These are just a few examples of casteism that existed in India until recently. Though the two-tumbler system and untouchability are largely eradicated, they are still in practice by staunch followers of casteism.

Overall, people belonging to the Dalit communities, due to the historical discriminations faced (including untouchability, denial of education, etc.), are socio-economically backward. They are given reservations in education and employment opportunities in India to bridge the gap and for the upliftment of these communities. Still, there is a long way to go with regards to social prejudices and the end of discrimination.



# ANNEXURE

# BIRTH: AN INTRODUCTION

Humans have various identities based on their sex, gender identity and sexuality, in which society predominantly considers only the two genders that make up the majority (male and female) and their default sexuality (heterosexual). A person's gender and sexuality are assumed, based on their reproductive organs at birth by default in our society. This understanding is flawed and should not be the norm.

Scientifically, a person's sex is typically determined by their chromosomes, that is, XY means male and XX means female. But these are not the only combinations of chromosomes. There are gene combinations such as 46XXY, 46X0, 46X0X, 45XY, 45X, 47XXX, 47XXY and 47X, all possible karyotypes.<sup>1</sup> These genome sequences result in physiological changes which encompass intersex variations. Intersex individuals comprise about 1.7% of the world population, that is, 1 in 2,000 children is born as an intersex person globally, according to the World Health Organization's (WHO) statistics.

Intersex people have varied gender identities and sexualities and cannot be categorized and classified into one gender. A detailed survey has not yet been conducted on the lives of intersex people. This is because we are largely invisible within their societies, and we ourselves may lack awareness. Even

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1 The typical human karyotype contains 22 pairs of autosomal chromosomes and one pair of sex chromosomes. The most common karyotypes for a female contain two X chromosomes and are denoted for the sex XX. Males usually have both an X and a Y chromosome, denoted for the sex XY. There are multiple types of sex chromosome identified in the genetical background.

if there is self-identification and self-awareness, expressing their gender identities and sexual orientations openly could pose a risk of rejection and unacceptance in our societies and communities.

Being born as an intersex person is as 'natural' as being born as male or female. Social ignorance and lack of awareness and acceptance, oppression by family and relatives, lack of awareness, psychological problems, and many other factors have completely obscured the identities and lived realities of intersex people everywhere. Nowadays, they travel in search of their identities, through modern social media networks to find answers and to understand their own experiences and identity. This is largely due to a lack of social awareness, lack of resources, and limited understanding of medical and educational institutions. Even as we live in a modern digital world, our understanding of nature and its phenomena is extremely limited.

Humans continue to keep evolving and adapting, and in some cases, leaving behind beliefs and ways of life that are no longer relevant or useful. Humans change with nature and with lifestyle changes, adapting to new technologies, new trends in food and clothes, etc., but it is a shame that there is— even with modern science and medical advancements—still a lack of acceptance of people who identify as a different gender that is different from the gender they were assigned at birth, of people with diverse varied sexualities, and of people with intersex conditions when they change their identity assigned at birth. Familial acceptance of an intersex individual and their freedom to choose their own gender identity and sexuality would pave the way for a 'normative' life for them.

varied sexualities, and of people with intersex conditions when they change their identity assigned at birth. Familial acceptance of an intersex individual and their freedom to choose their own gender identity and sexuality would pave the way for a 'normative' life for them.

The Himalayas were once completely under the sea, but today it is the enormous wall on the Indian border, signifying the constant changes of nature. If we realize our human nature and its variations, we would embrace people with intersex variations, people with disabilities, and people with non-cis-hetero bodies as well.

# WHO ARE INTERSEX PEOPLE

A person who is born with genital ambiguity, chromosomal patterns different from that of typical male and female sexes, or any other non-binary sex characteristics is an intersex individual. This phenomenon called 'intersex' is a combination of male and female sex characteristics. Our life is atypical because of body structures that are different from the 'conventional' (regardless of male or female genitalia), ambiguous genitalia, dynamic sex characteristics, psychological illness, incompatibility with certain societal expectations, etc.

More than 40 types of intersex variants have been identified and recognized by the World Health Organization so far. Intersex children are born with genetic variations, imbalances in their endocrine glands, and atypical sex characteristics. The atypical gene mutations that occur during pregnancy, and the atypical changes to physical development that occur due to this, could lead to the birth of intersex babies. This is an occurrence of nature. The births of intersex babies have been documented for many centuries historically. The majority of intersex children face extreme psychological problems because of their treatment by society, even before they grow up and before they realize their internal gender identity.

Gender identity and sexuality can be subjective to each intersex individual. The intersex condition can be caused by physiological, genetic, hormonal, genital, or psychological variations.

# INTERSEX CHILDREN

Children who are born with intersex conditions should not be expected to fully understand and determine their gender identity, and make life decisions based on their gender identity, when their brains are not developed fully. Generally, parents of intersex babies determine their baby's sex, and by default, their gender identity.

Intersex conditions can be varied and plentiful. For example, the intersex phenomenon has many types and variations. It includes a variety of physical characteristics as well, including the presence of both male and female reproductive organs, genital ambiguity, or partial reproductive organs, as well as hormonal variations (which can be common for all humans).

***Note on chromosomal and genetic mutation:*** Sometimes, in vitro, during pregnancy, due to various factors, the DNA and RNA strands of the genes tend to mutate (change) while replication, or copying. This may result in 'errors' in the genome sequences, which can result in genetic variations in the newborn. Some chromosomal and genetic mutations that occur during pregnancy result in differences in genital and internal organ development, which are demarcated at birth by the appearance of the genitalia. Sometimes, in the case of intersex children, the external genitalia are not fully developed or are not clearly defined.

Gender determination and sex identification based solely on one's genital organs is largely subjective and not based on facts or reality. Some intersex babies are simply assigned a particular different sex at birth by nurses, doctors, and

and medical practitioners to avoid identifying them as intersex, which is unethical and can cause lasting harm. Similarly, some intersex babies with intersex conditions that are unknown, are assigned a particular sex and gender are not identified at birth as intersex, are assigned a gender at birth simply based on their external genitalia. Finally, some babies are subjected to non consensual, non-medically-necessary surgical procedures to align them with a particular sex and gender, after they are initially discovered as having intersex conditions. For example, an intersex baby may, after being identified as intersex, undergo surgeries like the removal of underdeveloped testicles or multiple reproductive organs removed at the advice of doctors and/or insistence of parents, in an attempt to eliminate their sexual 'ambiguity' the removal of multiple reproductive organs at a very young age, on the advice of doctors and/or on the insistence of parents.

Children who undergo such operations early in life often when they are babies face a psychological upheaval while growing from childhood to adulthood. Unable to decide or understand what gender they are, they are subjected to great stress and confusion. Unable to express and observe the natural changes taking place within themselves and living with society's flawed ideas can be a great struggle for the growing children.

Even more astonishingly, in some places around the world (including in India), children who are identified as intersex are killed, which is far more prevalent than is known. Killing a newborn baby solely because they were born with intersex conditions is a grave tragedy and a violation of that child's right to life. Killing a newborn baby for the sole reason that it was born intersex is a gross violation of human rights. Both children and parents must be educated to develop their awareness of the

intersex phenomenon and be offered psychological counselling to help each child determine their gender. For that to happen, medical professionals need to be sensitized and educated first.

The relevant medical professionals should be aware of gender 'normalization', genital mutilation surgeries, their adverse effects, reproductive disorders, sexual dysfunction disorders, etc. Lack of such expertise leads them to make decisions without considering the individuals' health, wellbeing and human rights, and intersex population as a whole around the world. These affect a whole diverse population adversely.

While there have been significant advancements in medical research and practice, parents continue to expect that their children simply identify and live in accordance with their gender and sex as assigned at birth. In cases where the sex characteristics of children are ambiguous at birth, parents and medical professionals continue to conduct unnecessary and potentially harmful surgeries on these children in their infancy or shortly thereafter. This is due not just to lack of awareness, but also the fear and stigmatization that parents face when having intersex children.

These surgeries have been shown to increase gender dysphoria, body image issues, confusion about and frustration with their natural characteristics, and inability to navigate within society because of the general ignorance which makes their lives a nightmare.

How can a baby determine its gender? Moreover, why is there a need to undergo invasive surgeries like gonadectomy (removal of testicles), labial reconstruction, vaginoplasty or clitoral reconstruction, and hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) when they are just babies or little children? As children grow, they



should be able to determine their identity and how they want to live their lives. Yet they are denied these rights when they are subjected to invasive, non-medically necessary surgeries before an age to which they are able and permitted to give informed consent, and before they have had the opportunity to realize their own gender identity and sexuality. All of this amounts to a range of human rights violations.

## A WAY FORWARD

The birth of intersex people is a natural variation in sex and genetic characteristics. Hence, it cannot be determined as a disease or as a disorder. It should be depathologized and considered simply as a natural biological variation. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Rather, life-altering changing decisions are made for and medical interventions undertaken on intersex infants and children should not be taken without considering the well-being of intersex children and their rights and future. This must change. The lives and wellbeing of intersex people must be respected and protected.

# GLOSSARY

1. Half-saree: A traditional dress worn by adolescent girls, especially in South India, the half-saree is a garment consisting of three parts — a skirt, a blouse, and a cloth to be draped over the upper body.
2. Churidar: Tight trousers worn by people in parts of South Asia, typically with a kameez/ kurta (tunic).
3. Prasadam or prasada: A religious offering in Hinduism. Most often, prasada is a vegetarian food specially cooked for devotees after praise and thanksgiving to a god. Maha-prasada (also called bhandarā), is the consecrated food offered to the deity in a Hindu temple, which is then distributed and partaken of by all the devotees, regardless of any orientation.
4. Vinaayakar Chathurthi: An auspicious day for devotees of Lord Ganesha, which is celebrated by Hindus.
5. Punool: A thread worn across the torso by men belonging to the Brahmin castes. It is a sacred thread and is treated as such with respect and holiness.
6. Chithirai festival: A festival conducted in the month of Chithirai, according to the Tamil calendar. During this festival, temples perform special rituals to the gods, and people celebrate as a community with food, new clothes, and exhibitions. The month of Chithirai marks the Tamil New Year (though there is an ongoing debate, as some hold that Thai is the start of the Tamil calendar).



*Vinodhan*

Vinodhan (Dhanalakshmi) calls themselves a proud intersex. They are engaging and working in various ways for intersex, persons with disabilities, and human rights activists. Vinodhan is currently pursuing their MBA in human resources. They also have an undergraduate degree in psychology and a diploma in nursing and radiology. Vinodhan is one of the co-founders of Intersex Human Right for India (IHRI) and a former Intersex Asia fellow. Vinodhan has also written an autobiography titled *Walking the Intersex Alley*, which has been presented to various mental health and medical institutes for future generations to gain perspective on diversity.



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