

Miria Bowers

Prof. DasGupta

FEMST 163

19 May 2022

Revathi *A Life in Trans Activism* Review

I experienced many mixed emotions when reading A. Revathi's *A Life in Trans Activism*, but I will start with the good. Revathi's book is half memoir, and half interview-based coalitional research project¹ regarding the lives and experiences of transgender men in India. Roughly, the first half follows Revathi through her abusive upbringing, her running away to Hijra communities and entwining with their culture (for better or worse), and her entry into and departure from queer Indian NGO activist spaces. The second half is a collection of interviews, stories, and activist pieces from trans men Revathi has come into contact with in the hopes of shedding more light on FTM experience in India. Initially I was worried that the shift between the memoir side and the interview side would be jarring to experience, but Revathi actually makes both sides flow beautifully into one another, citing her own experiences with lack of visibility as a gender-variant child as her motivation to use the platform she has to share the stories of transgender men.

Revathi's writing itself is quite accessible, echoed when she describes her desire for her first book to not "present . . . in an academic style, but want[ing] moving, deeply personalized stories that emerged during the course of intimate conversations between my people and me."² Even though the sections on transgender men are not necessarily written by Revathi herself, we can still see this same dedication to intimate stories and conversations within. What this latter

¹ Debanuj DasGupta. "Revathi PPT," Feminist Studies 163: Trans Studies (class lecture, University of California Santa Barbara, Goleta, CA, Spring 2022).

² A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism* (New Delhi, India: Zubaan Publishers, 2016) p. 80, Kindle.

half of the book does in regards to the archiving of trans stories is an example of what I meant by decolonizing in my review of Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* and the need to move away from linear narratives of history and culture that are presented from a single, omniscient perspective.³ While the goal of Revathi's collection here was not to present transgender (masculine) experience in India from a historical perspective, the techniques she uses in connecting these stories with ones of her own life as an activist and public figure within the Hijra community can teach us a lot, I feel, about how to present narratives of history and culture itself.

I also briefly want to touch on Revathi's personal politics; I was struck by her perspectives on the rights of sex workers and on neighboring sites of queer identity activism (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, FTM, etc). As a person who has experienced much abuse while performing sex work, Revathi is able to hold and honor her personal trauma from those exploitative conditions while at the same time having the clarity of vision to promote the decriminalization of sex work to reduce both stigmatization and the fear of being caught by police or working at the mercy of local gangs.⁴ Additionally, upon seeing the violence and discrimination foisted upon other queer and lower class/low caste peoples for the crime of loving the "wrong" person or for being in the "wrong" body, Revathi also takes a beautifully intersectional stance when she declares, "For us to be liberated from gender oppression, we must also be liberated from caste, race, and religious oppression. Our struggle must be against all these systems of power and not just one,"⁵ something that after the one hundred-and-change pages leading up to it, I was genuinely not expecting.

³ Susan Stryker. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Berkeley, CA; Seal Press, 2017).

⁴ A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism*. p. 72; p. 91.

⁵ A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism*. p. 106.

I'm glad to have had the information, beauty, and context of Indian, Pakistani⁶, and Bangladeshi⁷ Hijra communities explained to me in prior materials from this class, because without these alternate perspectives, this book would have had an immensely negative impact on my view of Hijra culture. Revathi's experiences within hierarchical Hijra "families" are largely abusive; her gurus regularly rob and beat her, or simply take the majority of her earnings from sex work.⁸ The Hijra that Revathi live with over the course of her early life "did not accept her," to the point where before joining the NGO Sangama, Revathi oscillates between a life of begging and sex work with other Hijras and living with her also-abusive blood family. The destitution (due to discrimination) of the Hijra culture is not what bothers me; the actions of the gurus and those in the "family" structures do. We also see this play out later on in the narrative of a trans man raised by a Hijra who beats him regularly in public, this young child living in fear of such violence as being scalded by hot oil.⁹ I am not nearly informed enough on Indian and Hijra familial norms to make a judgment call on whether this behavior and treatment of children is normalized within the culture(s), or a side effect of Hijra hierarchies themselves, so I will not. But, even Revathi herself seemingly has little problem sending this particular child back to his dangerously abusive household at the end of his narrative.¹⁰

All in all, if I had to describe this book in one word, it would be exhausting. The constant graphic description of assault, rape, child abuse, domestic violence, molestation, forced cisheteronormativity and much more were difficult to wade through in order to get to the shining nuggets of wisdom and comfort in Revathi's narrative. This being said, I am able to recognize *A*

⁶ Faris Kahn. "Khwaja Sira: 'Transgender' Activism and Transnationality in Pakistan," in *South Asia in the World: An Introduction*, ed. Susan S. Wadley (England, UK; Routledge, 2014)

⁷ Adam Hossain. "De-Indianizing Hijra: Intra-regional Effacements and Inequalities in South Asian Queer Space," in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, Aug 2018).

⁸ A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism*. pp. 22-23.

⁹ A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism*. p. 186.

¹⁰ A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism*, p. 191.

Life in Trans Activism as a vital book to add to the archive and the legacy of trans activism among Indian Hijras, and an invaluable chronicle of those women, men, and children whose voices need to be heard the most.