Chapter 12
"Families We Choose": Kinship Patterns among Migrant Transmen in Bangalore, India

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12.1 Transmen: The Invisible Population

Transmen or FTMs (Female to Male transgender individuals), terms I will use interchangeably in this chapter, are people who are assigned female gender at birth, but who disidentify with this assigned gender and desire to live instead as men. Jaison Cromwell (1999) discusses four levels of marginalization and invisibility faced by transmen and FTMs. The first level comes from discourses like anthropology, psychology, and history, where the discourses purposefully invisibilize transmen by maintaining that these individuals are actually women, as the truth of their gender identity lies with their female bodies. The second level comes from medical and popular discourses. In Cromwell's view, these discourses articulate transmen and FTMs as pathological women. Third, many FTMs chose to be invisible by living as men. Hence they are invisible as transgender people, but visible as men. Fourth, if society finds out that a particular person is a transman, he will be treated as less than fully real. This may contribute to the loss of partners, friends, and employment opportunities. Hence there is always a danger associated with their trans identity.

As Tanupriya points out in Chap. 11, female masculinities have received inadequate attention in both Indian and Western academia. Transmen are highly invisible in India. Scholarship on transgender people in India discusses extensively the lived experiences of transwomen or hijras (e.g., Reddy 2005 and Nanda 1999). Transmen are invisible in all these writings. Being born female, leaving their biological

Families we choose is a term used by Kath Weston (1997). This term is used by her to indicate the alternate families formed by lesbians and gays in the Bay area of San Francisco. Here this term is used to denote the chosen families formed by the migrant transmen in Bangalore.

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families, and forming groups akin to the groups formed by hijras have been relatively difficult for transmen. Hence, they have remained invisible.

This chapter explores the experiences of transmen who migrated from their birthplaces in villages or towns to Bangalore, the capital of the Karnataka state in India. They built solidarities between themselves. They supported each other, cared for each other, and slowly built a home in the city. Their family consists of transmen brothers and their female partners, providing them with their strongest support system in the city. Some of them call it a family, while others avoid calling it a family for fear of going back to the same system that rejected them. This chapter thus examines the dynamics of kinship patterns among migrant transmen in Bangalore, drawing on field data from transmen who have moved from towns and villages of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and rural areas of Karnataka state.

While having a conversation with one of my respondents, he suddenly told me that whenever he reads any research on trans persons, he always finds that the writers argue that transgender persons are suffering. He then suggested to me, "Why don't you say to your readers that we are trying to find meaning and happiness in this city, despite difficulties and challenges in life." This was the starting point for thinking about the concept of Bangalore as a home for its trans migrants. Other chapters in this volume articulate the multiple levels of discrimination transgender persons encounter in their everyday lives. To live a transgender life is difficult in a cisnormative society, as suggested by all contributors to this volume. This chapter focuses on two key questions. First, how do the dynamics of kinship patterns formed by transmen serve as the basis for a strong support system in the city? Second, how do migrant transmen find meaning and happiness despite the marginalization and discrimination they encounter in their day-to-day lives?

12.2 Marginalization and Discrimination in Natal Homes

From villages and towns in South India, a large number of transmen migrate to Bangalore to escape the violence and discrimination they encountered in their birthplaces. Bangalore is characterized by a large population of migrants from across the country. This helps transmen build a safe space in the city, where anonymity helps them avoid frequent questions about their gender and sexual identities, while providing the freedom to express their identities as they wish. Suresh is a 36-year-old transman. (To protect the identity of respondents, all names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.) He migrated to Bangalore in 2003, and he recounts his childhood in Kerala.

> When we grow up, we recognize the changes in the body. I hated being a girl. But society keeps on reminding you that you are a girl. They will always demand you not to do this. I hated to obey. My parents were angry with me. They started harassing me physically and mentally.

Starting in childhood, he used to wear boys' clothes at home. But when he reached fourth class, his parents asked him not to wear boys' clothes anymore. He played

cricket at the time and was part of a cricket club, so he tried to convince his parents that since he played cricket, he preferred to wear boys' clothes. His parents were dissatisfied with him, and when he did not obey them, they beat him and even mentally tortured him. However, he could never be happy with his assigned gender. Despite being tortured, he continued to wear the kind of clothes he wanted to wear. He hated wearing girls' uniforms, which was required as he advanced in school, and ultimately he stopped going to school. Many transmen have encountered the same problem, and one of the major reasons for the high rate of dropout among transmen is their inability to conform with expected gender norms.

The physical and mental harassment Suresh received from his parents forced him to leave his hometown. He initially contacted a child helpline for assistance, and the helpline authorities introduced him to a Kerala-based NGO working with sexual minorities. This NGO had contact with a Bangalore-based NGO that I will refer to by the pseudonym Saheli. Through Saheli, Suresh migrated to Bangalore in 2003.

Saheli was formed in 2001 to ensure the rights of sexual minorities. During the early 2000s, it formulated a funding program with the help of a foreign donor to help runaway transmen and their partners. When transmen and their partners came to Bangalore, Saheli provided a variety of support, including food, shelter, protection, legal support, and employment assistance. The organization is not currently providing shelter for migrant transmen, but during its initial stages the support provided by Saheli helped transmen build their own space in the city. Those who came and settled earliest started providing shelter to later migrants, and with Saheli's support they could survive in the city. Many of them are no longer associated with Saheli, but instead are connected to different NGOs in Bangalore. However, those who received initial support from Saheli remember its critical role in helping them surviving in the city.

My respondent Ebin described a similar experience. He is an adopted son of a hijra mother from Mumbai who was a sex worker. She used to visit him only during festival times, so he was fostered by her sisters. His mother never liked him behaving like a boy. She wanted to marry him off and see him grown into an ideal woman. When he disappointed her, she started beating him continuously to correct his behavior. He says that:

> My mother's view was no different from the public. So she knew only three types of gender: hijra, male, and female. This was new to her. So she never accepted me. She started asking questions to me like: Is that possible? How will you get a penis? How will you be able to provide for a child? So I fought a lot with my mother. Hence, she put me under house arrest, and I had to face lots of restrictions. My mother used to gift me pants and shirts on special occasions. Since I behaved like a man and never showed femininity, she thought that I was behaving like this since she gifted me pants and shirts to wear. So she burned all my pants and shirts. She gradually reduced my freedoms, one by one.

Since he could not live under such restrictions and harassment, he tried to commit suicide twice. In 2004, he ran away from his home and moved to Bangalore.

As these respondents tell their stories, they always experienced a conflict between their mind and their body. Heteronormative expectations further accentuate their tensions and conflicts. As Shalini Jayaprakash argues in Chap. 2, transgender bodies

defy societal expectations by not conforming to established definitions of gender and sex. Non-conformity is seen as a threat to the system. This in turn leads to the unleashing of violence against transgender persons.

When transmen choose to run away, they look for anonymity and freedom to escape from the frequent questions about their gender and sexuality. Transmen who run away with their partners look for a safe and comfortable space to live. City spaces provide such anonymity and freedom. The existence of a large migratory population increases the heterogeneity of city spaces. Thus, many transmen choose to migrate from their villages or towns to metropolitan areas, and in South India, many transmen choose Bangalore for migration. The next section examines how Bangalore became the migratory destination of transmen in South India.

12.3 Transmen Migration and Bangalore

Janaki Nair (2005) has tried to examine the growth and development of Bangalore through a historical lens, as she studies the growth and evolution of Bangalore from a small town to a metropolitan city. She argues, "Bangalore has suffered from the general neglect of urban studies in the Social Science disciplines" (17). Nair describes the history of Bangalore as consisting of eastern and western parts. The western part is five centuries old, while the eastern part—also known as the cantonment area built by the British army—dates back only two centuries (25). In her view, the Bangalore region started developing with the invasion of the local chieftain Kempagowda (28). Fortified settlements developed by him attracted artisans and merchants.

In 1949, the Bangalore corporation was formed by bringing together Bangalore and the cantonment under one roof (77). In Nair's view, it took only a few decades to witness the growth of Bangalore from a small town to a metropolitan city (79). Bangalore was the home of large-scale public sector industries, and more recently, it has become the center of information technologies and private electronic industries (81). State-led industrialization during the post-independence period transformed the economy of Bangalore. Later the city started developing as a center of computer software and hardware, earning it the moniker of the Silicon Valley of India. Also, it became the center of skilled labor in the public sector, and simultaneously engineering colleges started mushrooming in the city. All these led to the city's growth as a center of attraction for Indian and multinational firms. Hence the city slowly became the IT hub of India (86). The city grew into a metropolitan city. This invited an increasing rate of migration, and the city started accommodating people from across the country, which led to the heterogenization of the population in the city.

Anand is one of my study participants. He was born and brought up in Bangalore. In his view, Bangalore is a very heterogeneous space, and that is the one reason for the city can accommodate migrants across the spectrums. As Anand describes the city,

> Bangalore has a history. Bangalore is not a Kannada kind of space. Bangalore was a hill station. It was not culturally a Kannadiga-dominated space like Mysore. British liked Bangalore very much. British made it the capital of Karnataka. In the entire Karnataka, the best agricultural land was in Bangalore. However, it was destroyed because of the development. The city employed multiple kinds of people, including sex workers. You will get the best anonymity here.

The anonymity of the city is a major factor that attracts transmen, who fear that if people find out their trans identity, they will be questioned and pushed aside. Anonymity will help them to invisibilize their transgender identity and to live as men. Along with anonymity, the specific queer activism and politics developed in the city have also helped transmen migrate and settle in Bangalore. Anand says, "Bangalore earlier did not belong to queer people. They fought and transformed it into a safe space" According to Sunil Mohan, Rumi Harish, and Radhika Raj (2019, 109), "We are arguing that the few public spaces we access without fear have not existed naturally but have been built, nurtured and cultivated under great risk, with great compromise and creativity."

12.4 Kinship Patterns among Transmen in Bangalore

The migrant transmen could develop strong bond and intimacy between them. Some of them preferred to stay together as a collective. Later these bonds translated in to loosely developed kinship system. Elizabeth Freeman (2007) has argued that the most relevant contribution of anthropologists of kinship is that they have started recognizing that kinship is not a matter of biology, but rather it is a cultural fact. However, the gender and kinship studies in India have yet to expand to incorporate alternate families (Kumar 2020). In this section, I will discuss how loosely formed kinship patterns serve as the basis for a strong support system for migrant transmen in Bangalore.

According to Kath Weston (1997), "chosen families" are the families that lesbian and gay men choose, in contrast to their families of origin. Chosen families are created by queer people who are rejected by their blood ties. Weston explains, "Gay or chosen families might incorporate friends, lovers or children in any combination organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation" (27). She has also called this an "alternate family" (35). She argues that through chosen families, gays and lesbians can create their own families outside of a heterosexual procreative, reproductive framework.

As Weston puts it, family is a contested concept. The traditional model of the family does not accept alternative desires and sexual orientations. Transmen either chose to migrate or were forced to migrate due to rejection and violence from their families. However, in the city, transmen cannot live alone; they need a support system. The rate of survival of migrant transmen in the city depends on their access to resources, and this access is determined by the specific social locations of the transmen. As Ken Plummer (2020, 158) suggests, "Human sexualities are grounded in

intersectional inequalities. Always shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, age, nation, and other human differences." As Andeep, one of my respondents, explains, "There is a loosely formed kinship system among transmen, and it is stronger amid working class folks." The basis of such a kinship pattern is solidarity and shared politics. The friendship and bond between them transform into a strong relationship that substitutes for heterosexual families. Unlike hijras, transmen do not have customs or norms for living with a community. They are scattered here and there in the city. Those who need support live close to one another, with some calling this kinship arrangement a family. Others are afraid to call it a family, as they do not want to go back to the same system that abandoned them. Therefore drawing on Weston, I would argue that Kinship formed by migrant transmen in Bangalore is a chosen family which replaces the biological ties. However unlike in the West, queer people in India do not have the right to adopt and hence they can not form families through reproduction technologies or adoption as Weston mentions.

Bourdieu (1977) in his groundbreaking work titled *Outline of Theory of Practice* has differentiated between official kinship and practical kinship. Official kinship is related to genealogy, and it is the basis of legitimizing the kinship order. In contrast, practical kinship is based on "utilization of connections" (32) and is "non-official" (35). He further defines practical kinship as being based on the practical interests of individuals. Thus, the basis of practical kinship according to Bourdieu is not genealogical, rather is practically motivated. His argument comes from his fieldwork on traditional Arab marriages. However, Bourdieu's practical kinship can be applied to understand queer kinship, which is formed by individuals for a very practical purpose. Migrant transmen who were abandoned by their blood families find an alternative family among their close friends and partners. These kinship ties challenge genealogical assumptions and also serves as the basis of a strong support system for transmen. Thus I would argue that, chosen families formed by transmen come under Bourdieu's practical kinship.

Kinship among the transmen in India is under-explored. There is vast literature on hijra kinship (Reddy 2005; Nanda 1999). Gayathri Reddy (2005) has examined kinship among the hijras of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, detailing ways that hijra identity is constructed through kinship based on guru-chela (master-disciple), husband, and daughter relationships (144). She argues that hijra kinship does not conform with the procreative framework that operates under the caste system in India (145).

Reddy (2005) also points out that hijras' houses include gurus, mothers, and chelas as the crucial kin bonds through which they constitute a lineage and reckon kinship and descent (150). Hijra rules say that the real hijra is the one who renounces sexual desire after nirvana (castration). Once they join the hijra community, they are supposed to break all ties with their natal families. Otherwise, they will not be given due consideration within the hijra family (147). Chelas are bound to respect their gurus, do all the domestic-household work, and also have to give a part of their daily earnings to their gurus. In return, gurus are obliged to look after and protect their chelas, provide them with food and clothes, and train them in the rules and customs of the hijra community (157). If chelas cannot please their gurus, gurus can disown

them and expel them from the hijra family. Nanda (1993) argues that guru-chela relationships provide a substitute for the family system that hijras have renounced to live with their chosen identities**.**

Once part of the hijra system, it is difficult for a hijra to get out of the system even if she wishes. As the hijra Aliya who resides in Bangalore told me, "I am stuck under this system. I wanted to run away. But they won't allow you." I have seen her ruling her chelas, wielding her power as a guru to discipline her chelas. She has also adopted daughters, who are very obedient to her. But still, she is not happy as she has to obey her own gurus and other elder gurus in the household. Hijras try to build a family alternative to their blood ties, and even though their hijra family gives them shelter and protection, it is hierarchical and following every rule is mandatory. The rules are an imitation of the heterosexual framework, where the younger ones are supposed to obey their elders on every matter, even though they do not want to. When the younger ones disobey, they are threatened.

Since the hijras are male-bodied, leaving their house and forming a community was relatively easier. Hijras also connect their stories with the culture of India to validate their historical existence. (For more on the presence of hijras in ancient Indian literature, see Chap. 2 by Jayaprakash and Chap. 5 by Sutradhar.) But being assigned the female gender at birth, for transmen it is not so easy to leaving their houses, making it difficult to develop a kinship and family system like that of the hijras.

I have also met transmen who are accepted by their families. They migrated to Bangalore in search of employment. These transmen did not want to stay under the kinship pattern, but they were connected to other transmen in the city. They invisibilized their trans identities to claim the privileges enjoyed by cisgender persons. Among these groups of transmen, the most privileged ones sought independent life in the city, as their privilege gave them access in the city, and hence they were not in need of a support system.

Some transmen who were initially rejected by their families are now accepted by them. But they do not wish to go back and rejoin their families. Because they cannot live as their true selves when they are with their blood-related families, they create a new family with fellow transmen in a kinship structure that not rigid, lacking the mandatory rules and regulations and the kind of hierarchy practiced by hijras. Suresh describes how this chosen family serves as a support system for runaway transmen in Bangalore:

> At the time when we migrated, the internet or Facebook or WhatsApp was not that widespread. Physical space was important for us. So we had developed a space where people migrated from different places and formed collective solidarity. Today also I would say that such a physical space is important. We built such solidarities. I am having years old connection with Vinu. I have a similar connection with many people here. Even though we stay in different rented houses, we have a relationship that is beyond friendship. If you ask me that, shall we call it a family, I am a bit nervous. Because it will bring us back to the same system which denounced us.

For Vinu, his family in Bangalore consists of transmen brothers and their partners. Vinu migrated from Kerala to Bangalore in 2004, and both of his parents have died.

His relatives abandoned him due to his decision to transgress gender norms. Hijras have started adopting transmen as their sons, and Vinu was adopted by a hijra woman named Nivedita. Vinu's friend Ebin is Nivedita's partner, and Vinu used to visit Nivedita along with Ebin. Slowly Vinu became close to Nivedita, and she adopted him as her son and he later became a member of the hijra family. His other transmen friends know about this, and they do not have any problem with him being part of the hijra family. As Vinu summarizes;

> I have felt that Bangalore is a home for me developed out of friendship networks. Another home is that part of hijra culture. Inside it is part of their family. My father and mother have died. My family consists of my friends. My partner Bhama was Nivedita's friend. After Bhama's death, I had no space to stay. So I lived with people from different communities. I became close to Nivedithamma through Ebin. At that time I did not consider her as my mother. She was a good friend. After that, only she accepted me as her son. Here among friends, I have another family. Let it be Niranjan or Maya [a transman and his female partner]. I consider Niranjan as my elder brother. Pointing out Maya, he says, I am considering her as my sister-in-law. I call her nathoon [a Malayalam term for sister-in-law]. That is another form of relation. Friends are another kind of relationship. Suresh is my friend. For me, his partner is like a younger sister. I also have relationships beyond the community. Some people call me a bhava. Bhava in Kannada means sister's husband. Heterosexual people who work for the community call me bhava. But I have a family in the community. This family consisting of transmen is my favorite.

Pranav is a transman who migrated to Bangalore from a village in Tamil Nadu in 2008. Pranav has a different opinion on this. Pranav says that transmen are imitating hijra kinship. In his view, such solidarities exist only among working-class transmen. He believes that privileged transmen do not need such a support system and hence mostly prefer individual life in the city. Like Pranav says, the transmen who live like a family mostly come from marginalized social backgrounds. They need support and solidarities to survive in the city as they have access to only limited resources in the city. Privileged transmen might be connected to these transmen families, but they do not stay under a family or kinship framework because they do not need a support system like transmen from marginalized backgrounds. The privileged transmen I met preferred independent life. They could also access the wider networks and resources in the city. Thus a family out of shared solidarities was not a necessity for them. He emphasizes,:

> Recently onwards a loosely structured kinship system has developed among the transmen. But you cannot see such a kinship system among urban privileged transmen. They mostly prefer individual life. There are many transmen in the city. But those groups of transmen stand together always. Since they are not privileged that kind of a family unit is very much needed for them.

However it is evident from the narratives that traditional kinship system like that of Hijras is absent among transmen. Pushpesh Kumar (2020) argues that most queer persons in India live a hybrid existence, which means they are connected to their natal families, while simultaneously secretly sustaining their alternate kin networks. Hijras persons; he has studied mention about this hybrid existence. They are married to heterosexual women, and they find it challenging to give up these ties out of fear of losing the honor and dignity of their natal families. However, they secretly

maintain homoerotic relations and follow a 'hybrid' life. Therefore in Kumar's view chosen families advocated by Weston does not exist in India and even if it exists, it is more prominent among elite queers. His argument is limited, because his conclusions are drawn from fieldwork conducted among hijras and he has ignored the existence of transmen. As I emphasized earlier, the kin network found among transmen has replaced biological families, not merely supplemented them as Kumar contends for queer Indians more generally. Moreover as demonstrated earlier most of the transmen who were part of such a kinship, belonged to lower socio-economic locations.

12.5 Bangalore as 'Home'

Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006, 10) differentiate the concepts of house and home. Whereas a house is just a dwelling, "home is a series of feelings and attachments, some of which, some of the time, and in some places are connected to a physical structure that provides shelter." While you might live in your house, you may never feel an attachment with your dwelling, and thus not feel like your house is also a home. The reverse is also possible. A home does not need to be a house. The sense of belongingness that comes with being at home is not restricted to a specific physical enclosure. This is necessarily attached with the concept of home.

Blunt and Dowling (2006) have identified three defining characteristics of the home. First, it is material and imaginative. Second, it is related to identity and power. Finally, home is multi-scalar. Home is material and imaginative because home is an emotional space, with a set of attached feelings. Home does not simply exist; it is created and re-created continually. Second, home is related to people's sense of self. Identities are produced through relations of power, so for example, home may be more closely associated with feelings of isolation for women than for men. Finally, to say that home is multi-scalar means that the home is more than a mere dwelling. As Blunt and Dowling (2006, 29) describe home, "It can be a suburb, neighborhood, nation or indeed the world." Drawing on Blunt and Dowling's conceptualization, I argue that Bangalore is a home for the migrant transmen and their female partners who were forced to migrate to Bangalore from their villages or towns.

While a city is a space that accommodates heterogeneity, it is also a space of marginalization and exclusion. These transmen also have faced issues and confrontations concerning their identities. They find constraints in getting shelter and jobs due to their gender identity. Even though the anonymity of the city spaces provide freedom, before transition transmen encounter many difficulties. Suresh shared with me that while he was traveling in an auto before his transition, the driver quarreled with him and asked him to prove whether he was a man or woman. Similarly, Vinu told me that during the initial stages of post-migration he had searched for employment at various shops. Shop owners used to advise him to come by wearing a saree if he wanted the job. After Vinu's transition, he is able to hide his identity and

hence he manages to escape from such humiliation. Transmen in Bangalore also find difficulty in getting jobs outside of NGOs.

Apart from that, the new trans act passed by the government of India poses a major challenge to the entire transgender community, including transmen. Previously transmen were able to change their name and gender on their identity cards once they managed to get their psychiatrists to certify that they met the criteria for Gender Identity Disorder (GID). But the new trans act gives the district magistrate the power to decide the gender of transgender persons. As Sangeetha Sriraam contends in Chap. 8 of this volume, this is a violation of the 2014 NALSA judgment, which gave transgender individuals the right to self-identification of gender. As Sriraam reminds us, this change could lead to the institutionalization of socio-historical marginalization of transgender persons. Transmen face multiple forms of marginalization and discrimination in their lives, but they have learned to question it, and they are trying to find happiness in the face of challenging circumstances.

Compared to their natal homes, where transmen were born and brought up, Bangalore has accommodated them, it has provided shelter for them, and the anonymity of the city has given them the great freedom to live with their gender and sexuality. Along with it, the language of queer politics in the city has given them a kind of boldness to question the status quo. The bond between transmen brothers and their partners constitutes a family for them that replaces their biological families. All my respondents told me that Bangalore is a safe and comfortable space for them. The anonymity and the specifically migratory nature of the city have helped them to build a home here. None of them want to go back; they feel that Bangalore is their home. As Blunt and Dowling (2006, 10) argue, home is a feeling of "being at home."

12.6 City and Politics of 'Hope': Toward a Conclusion

Bangalore is a migratory destination for many transmen and their female partners in South India. They leave their natal homes to escape the violence and harassment from their natal families. Bangalore has helped them to develop a safe space despite many challenges. Bangalore is a home that they create and re-create continuously. Bangalore is also a space that marginalizes and excludes many of its inhabitants, where access to resources is a determining factor. But compared to the places they were born, Bangalore gives transmen the great freedom to live. It gives them a family based on shared politics. The city of Bangalore has given a 'home' and 'hope' to its transmen migrants.

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