

# Transgender activism can be lonely in India

PROFILE  
RAIPUR, INDIA

But a grass-roots mission to 'live with dignity' is leading to change

BY KAI SCHULTZ

It happened one evening as Vidhya Rajput neared her home in the central Indian city of Raipur. A cluster of about two dozen men began screaming slurs at her from the roadside.

There was nothing new or surprising about the scene. Growing up transgender in India, Ms. Rajput, 42, had endured decades of abuse. In school, boys had urinated on her and locked her in bathrooms so frequently that she was forced to go outside instead. In her teenage years, the abuse became so unbearable that she tried several times to take her own life.

This time, though, something snapped, and Ms. Rajput turned and faced her tormentors. "I answered them in their own words," she said in an interview. "I stood against them, because I am less than no one."

It was a galvanizing moment for Ms. Rajput, who since that confrontation a decade ago has grown into one of India's most prominent transgender activists. Her talent for grass-roots lobbying has contributed to a remarkable transformation across India, where a gay rights revolution has recently toppled a clutch of repressive laws that classified people like Ms. Rajput as criminals.

In recent years, Ms. Rajput has helped officials conduct a regional census of transgender Indians and persuaded her home state of Chhattisgarh to include sections about L.G.B.T. people in high school textbooks, to donate 190 apartments to transgender people and to spend thousands of dollars on a project recruiting transgender police officers.

And in September, Ms. Rajput marched at the front of the first gay pride parade in Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh. She said her most meaningful breakthrough was persuading officials to help organize 15 wedding ceremonies for transgender people from around the country this year.

Legal recognition of those marriages is probably a distant proposition in India, where gay sex was decriminalized only last year. But Ms. Rajput said today's horizon was brighter than the one she saw as a child, when she had no idea that her feelings could even be named.

Her motivation, she said, was to help young Indians gain access to the things she never could.

"My loneliness keeps me going, the discrimination, the fact that I do not have anyone to care for me," Ms. Rajput said. "I think, 'If I help others, the situation could be better.' Loving them, mentoring them, all of that, I do."

Ms. Rajput was born in 1977, off a dirt road in Pharsgaon, a small village south of Raipur. When she was an infant, her father died of cancer, leaving her mother, who was illiterate, to support six children by growing and selling papaya, sal seeds to make flour and homebrewed liquor.

Ms. Rajput, whose first name was originally Vikas, knew at an early age that she felt different from other boys, gravitating to the girls in her village, learning to apply makeup and secretly trying on her mother's clothing.

Puberty brought a cycle of sexual and psychological torment. Peers stole her lunch at school and pulled down her pants. She says a neighbor regularly sexually assaulted her, as did one of her brothers.

Ms. Rajput said her mother would beat her when she complained and blamed her for inviting the abuse. Only later in life did she come to understand that this was her mother's way of trying to protect her.

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herself several times, swallowing poisonous seeds, drinking pesticide and, at one point, standing at the edge of a cliff, ready to jump off.

Ms. Rajput said she had held back only because she could not bear the thought of leaving her mother. Through it all, she says, she had a soft spot for her mother, whom she felt a need to protect. She was still determined to make peace.

In the late 1990s, she moved to Raipur and took a job at a low-budget establishment called the Hotel Guru. The work was a blur of 12-hour-shifts, but there was a silver lining: Two employees, themselves transgender, told her about a park where other transgender people gathered.

Ms. Rajput, who still presented as male, was unsure how to identify. She had not met transgender people in Pharsgaon, but knew that they were relegated to dark corners in India. Shunned by their families, many of them are forced to work for gurus — some of them transgender, others religious figures — who exchange social support for payments made through prostitution and begging.

At the park, transgender women told Ms. Rajput horrifying stories about H.I.V. outbreaks, gang rapes and sexual slavery. She refused to accept that fate.

"Everybody wants to live with dignity," she said.

By her 30s, Ms. Rajput had become more sure of herself. She began wearing makeup and growing out her hair. She changed her name to Vidhya. She also made peace with her mother, who moved into Ms. Rajput's apartment, a gray, airless room with a communal bathroom and just enough space for a bed.

Then came the evening when Ms. Rajput confronted her abusers, who numbered around two dozen.

**"I think, 'If I help others, the situation could be better.' Loving them, mentoring them, all of that, I do."**

After she yelled at them, they charged her. Fortunately, she was almost home, so she ran into her building and barricaded the door. Alarmed at the commotion, Ms. Rajput's mother, then in her 60s, ran downstairs and lunged in front of her daughter just as the mob broke in and began beating them before neighbors intervened.

"She was trying to protect me," Ms. Rajput recalled through tears.

Several months later, Ms. Rajput was out running an errand when her mother suffered a fatal heart attack. They did not get to say goodbye.

"I miss her all the time," Ms. Rajput said. "Despite not being so literate, she started to understand why I had come out of her stomach."

Ms. Rajput threw herself into activism as a way to heal. In 2009, she used her monthly salary of \$14 from the Hotel Guru to start Chhattisgarh Mitwa Sankalp Samiti, a transgender advocacy organization.

Leaving meetings with government officials, she would regularly hear "loud roars of laughter" behind her. But the persistence paid off.

The government started allowing her to lead sensitivity training for state employees. Officials threw their support behind transgender beauty contests and sporting events that she organized. Using her own funds, she often provides young transgender people with money for food, and she calls them regularly to make sure they have a safe place to sleep.

"She transformed my life," said Soniya Janghel, 22, who worked in the sex trade before Ms. Rajput helped her get a job in the Chhattisgarh government last year.

As much as she has accomplished, Ms. Rajput knows there is still so much to do.

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But back then the hardships took their toll. "Every day I thought I should die," she said of her youth. "I felt like I was in a river, and there was life, lots of water, and I had to journey here and there, but nobody understood me."

The family's finances plummeted, and around the age of 12 Ms. Rajput started sleeping with men to pay for pens and notebooks for school. Her depression became so severe that she tried to kill

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Ms. Rajput said her isolation reflected one of the hardest parts of her work: persuading others to view her as a worthy partner, employee and friend. It was this ache for love, she said, that would consume her until the very end.

"Maybe in 200 years people will accept me as a woman," she said. "I want to believe that, because I have everything, all of nature's softness and power. There is no difference between you and me. Not a single thing."

*Surabhi Singh contributed reporting.*



ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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