

THE TRUTH ABOUT ME: A HIJRA LIFE STORY

A.Revathi (translated by V.Geetha, published by Penguin Books, 2010).

I am from a small village in Namakkal taluk, Salem district in Tamil Nadu. I was the youngest son born to my parents who named me Doraisamy. Since I was the youngest son, I got a lot of attention and affection from both my parents. We lived in an old double-storeyed pucca house with a cowshed at front. My father had a milk business and drove a lorry. As a child I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground. Everyone at home thought that it was a phase and that I would overcome it. At school in the village, I played with the girls—we played five stones, hopscotch and hide-and-seek. But boys at school, as well as men and women who saw me outside the house, would call out 'Hey, Number 9!', 'female thing', and 'female boy'. Some even teased me, saying, 'Aren't you a boy? Why do you walk like a girl? Why do you wear girls' clothes?' I understood that I was indeed like that. In fact, I wanted to be so. I was thus a regular source of amusement and curiosity.

At school, I was afraid of the senior boys in Classes 11 and 12. Whenever I walked past them on the school grounds, they would call me names, like 'Hey girl-boy', and would beat me up and would pinch me on my chest. At the same time, I also felt drawn to the boys who did not tease me. I was confused with my own desires. I wondered being a boy how could I like a boy? I could not talk about my confusions to anyone at home. I started to be irregular in school and I was beaten up when my family got to know about this. For temple festival in my village, I was asked to play a female role or to dance as an impersonator due to my effeminate nature. To the world, it appeared that I was dressing up and playing a woman, but inside, I felt I was a woman. I was in Class 10 when I experienced changes in my body. I experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness and I felt like a woman who is trapped in a man's body. I was baffled by my own thoughts and desires. I wondered why God has not created me fully as a woman. I was confused and anxious.

Unable to pay attention in studies, I failed my Class 10 English exam. But I wanted to take my English exam again and asked if I could go to a tuition class for it. My request was granted. I saw a fort looming over the town every evening when I cycled to Namakkal for my classes. One evening, I decided to climb up to the fort. When it was getting dark, I noticed four men dressed in lungis climbing up. I noticed that they swung their hands as they walked and that one of them had grown his hair long. They stopped at a point below where I was sitting, and I could hear them address each other as girls do. After some time, they began to dance like women. The man with long hair had spotted me and began to climb up. I was wondering whether these men were perhaps like me, female inside and male outside, when the man arrived and sat down beside me, he asked 'Where're you from, lad?' After I met these men, I realized they were like me. I frequently went up the hill to spend time with my new friends. They became more than friends to me. They informed me that there are other people like us—who wore saris and had an 'operation', and that

they lived in Erode and Dindigul and in places like Delhi and Mumbai. I learnt from my friends that there was a woman, an ‘amma’, in Dindigul, who wore saris and had an ‘operation’, and that she received other women like her from Mumbai and Delhi during the time of the Goddess festival. During the month of Aadi (mid-July to mid-August), when the Amman festival was celebrated, I decided to meet these women. At home, everyone was busy with preparation for my sister’s wedding, I sneaked out to Dindigul to meet these women. My friends and I boarded the bus on the morning of the temple festival. After reaching Dindigul, we found our way to Amma’s place where we found at least ten other older people. An elder asked me my name. When I gave my name as Doraisamy, she said, ‘I meant your female name.’ I explained that I did not have one yet. We then asked if we could wear the *saris*, we had brought with us and make ourselves up as women. They said yes, and so we changed into *saris*, wore wigs and the jewellery we had brought along. Thus arrayed, we came out and stood in front of the elders. One of them said to me, ‘You look like the actress Revathi.’ And in my heart, I imagined that was my name— Revathi!

I asked one of the elders how she had become a woman. She said that if I had to go and stay with others like me, I would have to agree to be a *chela* to a *guru* and do whatever work I’m given. If I stayed for one or two years with a *guru* and earned for her, then she would agree to help me become a woman. A *guru* was like a mother, she would allow her *chelas* to share her home, and would clothe and feed them. Like a daughter, the *chela* was adopted by a *guru* according to tradition. It turned out that the elder I spoke to was from near my village. This made me happy, and I requested her to accept me as her *chela*. Next day in the evening, we got ourselves and went to the temple with our elders. It is the custom for the *pottais* (sari-clad feminine men) to gather at this temple during this time every year and sing and dance. That night, after we returned home and had our dinner, the *jamaat* gathered and my *guru* announced that she would like to adopt me as her *chela* in front of the *jamaat*. It was decided that my name was Revathi. That night I slept next to my *guru*. It was not so easy though to fall asleep wearing a wig, a bra, a blouse, a sari, and bangles and earrings. These things made me feel itchy and I wanted to scratch myself constantly. So, this is what it is to be born a woman.

That night my *guru* and a few others were to leave for Delhi. I did not want to return to my village. I was scared that my family members would beat me up if I returned. The next morning when the group from Erode left, I decided to accompany them instead of going home. I stayed at my *Nani*’s¹ house in Erode for some time. After a month of being away, I decided to return home. On my return, I was ruthlessly beaten up by my middle brother. My brothers decided that I was unlikely to study further. After my sister’s wedding I was to join them as a cleaner for the family lorry. Eventually I decided to leave my parents’ home. When I was in Erode, I heard that my *guru* was headed for J. J. Colony, in Delhi. With the help of one of my new hijra friends who arranged some money, I fled to Delhi. After two days of train journey, I finally reached Delhi. I took an auto to

¹ Nani in Erode means my *guru*’s *guru*, therefore, my grandmother.

J.J. Colony, where my guru was staying. To avoid confusions, my guru sent me to my Nani's place in Rafiq Nagar and asked me to come back after 10 days.

After ten days, I returned to J.J. Colony with my *Nani*. In my *guru's* family, our practice was to go to shops and ask for money. Sometimes I used to miss my family. Due to that I tried to connect with my family and wrote a letter to them. I gave a nearby cigarette shop's address as my own address. I did this without my Guru's knowledge. One day during my money collection from the shops, I saw a lorry-driver from Namakkal. He too saw me and started calling me. I fled the area and hurriedly returned to our house. Nani saw me very afraid and asked me what was wrong. I told her what had happened. After the lorry-driver episode, one day, the shopkeeper from Kerala handed me a telegram which said my mother was seriously ill and that I should return home immediately. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to go home. I confessed to my *guru* about the letter that I had written to my parents. She agreed to let me return home. My guru arranged for my travel. This time, I wore a sari and travelled in the lady's coach. I couldn't possibly return home in a sari. So, I tried to find a room in some lodge near the bus stand, but no one was ready to let me in. Finally, I told the man who stood in front of the men's toilets, who collects the money, that I was a man, and had dressed up as a woman for a show. Now that the show was over, I wanted to change back into my regular clothes. He took 5 rupees from me and let me in. I changed into the clothes I wore when I'd left for Delhi. My hair, though, was long, almost shoulder-length and to hide it I decided to wear a cap.

When I reached home, I found my mother in good health. It was 9 in the morning and my father and two of my brothers were at work, plying milk. My middle brother was at home. As soon as I stepped in, he shut the door, grabbed a cricket bat, and began hitting and yelling at me. I was beaten on my legs, on my back, and finally my brother brought the bat down heavily on my head. My skull cracked and there was blood all over, flowing, warm. I asked him why he was hitting me so badly. Then my brother said that I had been spotted in women's clothes, begging in the apple market. A few days later, my brothers took me to work with them. Everyone at the village and at work used to stare at me, talk about me and even tease me. Every day proved an ordeal and I thought to myself that all this will stop only if I leave home again, return to the *pottais* I knew, have the operation, and become a woman. After three months I left for Delhi. Back in Delhi, my *Nani* and *guru* listened to me kindly but decided that I must leave for Mumbai. As my hair was short and I had not got an operation done, they were afraid that I would bring dishonour to all *hijras* in Delhi. Besides, my family would know I had returned to Delhi. For all these reasons, I was put on a train to Mumbai and sent to another house of *hijras* there. The Mumbai *hijra* I was sent off to, was my *guru's* mother. My *guru's* mother's house was in a place called Ghatkopar. *Nani* presided over a large *parivar* or family. *Nani* also owned a house for sex work elsewhere in the city, managed by her *chela*. Throughout the week, I went to the shops. Initially, I went along with other *hijras* but after a month, I learnt to do this on my own. I had my own calendar.

After I had spent two months in Mumbai, my Mumbai *Nani's chela* asked me if I would consent to be her *chela* and further assured me that she would arrange for me to have the operation. The *naiks* called the *jamaat* to order and announced loudly for everyone to hear that Revathi was being made a *chela* of such-and-such *chela* of such-and-such *parivar*. My guru then explained *hijra* kin terms to me. I was also told that I must do whatever elders want me to do. I did not live with my guru, but with my *Nani*, and therefore turned over my earnings to her. For next six months I stayed there and did all the work asked. There were other *gurubai's* who were like me. Arrangements were being made to send them for their operation. A *puja* was performed in front of a picture of *Pothiraja Mata*, the goddess seated on a cockerel for their wellbeing. *Nani* asked me if I was willing to undergo an operation as well. I agreed to it, and she suggested that I should go to a doctor for the operation. When I was wearing men's clothes, I wanted to wear what women did. But after wearing women's clothes, and trying to live like a woman, I still felt that I was a man. So, when *Nani* sent me off for my operation, I felt that finally the female in me would be freed from her male body. I did not expect this to happen so soon, and I was ecstatic. Arrangements were made to send me and my *gurubai chela*. We were each given our tickets and 7000 rupees for the operation and put on a train to the town of Dindigul in Tamil Nadu.

We reached the hospital in the morning. It was a small house. There were many women and men occupying the beds, accompanied by their families. We realized that this was a regular hospital where people came to get treated for different ailments. Within the hospital compound, there was a smaller building with a red-tiled roof. We found out that this was the place for our sort of operations.

We had to decide which one of us would get operated upon first. My *gurubai chela* pleaded to go first and I agreed to it. Both of us were not able to sleep that night. We had brought with us a small picture of Pothiraja Mata which we put up on the wall. We kept gazing at it all night and praying for protection through this ordeal. My *gurubai chela* asked me to stay with her during the operation. The next morning, they took my *gurubai chela* to the operation theatre. She was pale faced when they took her in and entreated me to look after her. I was scared too and I was not allowed inside.

After two and a half hours, they took me in to see her. There she lay, her legs wide apart, a tube fixed to where her organ once was, stuffed with blood-speckled cotton. I felt my head whirring, my eyes closed of their own accord, and darkness swept over me. I fainted. After some time, I felt the doctor shaking me awake. My *gurubai chela* spoke to me and assured me that everything was alright. She was given an iron bed, on which they had spread a sheet of plastic. For the first half hour, she seemed fine. Soon, however, she started screaming in pain, and yelled that she felt a burning down there.

I felt her pain and burning, as if they were my own. The *ayah* brought a cup of black tea, and I made her drink it. After a couple of hours of crying and screaming, she slipped into an exhausted

sleep, and slept through the day. The next morning, they took me to the operation theatre. There was thus no one to see me off, no one to tell me it would be all right. Inside there were the doctor, a nurse, and a compounder. The doctor told me that they were going to give me an injection so that I do not feel any pain. I figured that the doctor was not quite able to put his needle through, that he was perhaps searching for the right spot, for a nerve end or whatever. I got scared. What if the injection did not find its way to the right spot and it hurt while they were operating? I felt suspicious too. But it was soon done, and I was asked to lie on my back. The doctor pushed my legs apart and then asked me to count to ten, which I did. He then took hold of a small hammer and hit me on the leg with it. He asked me if it hurt. When I said that I did not feel any pain, he said I was ready for the operation.

The nurse covered my eyes with a strip of cloth and asked me to repeat Pothiraja Mata's name. The doctor continued to talk to me, even as he did the operation. I could not see anything, but I heard the knife scraping. *'Do you want me to arrange things so that you pee like women do, from below? Or as men do, from above?'* *'I want to live as a woman, which is why I wanted this operation. Please make it like it is for a woman.'* I did not know how women peed, but I wanted to be a woman. After two hours, I was told it was all over. They made me sit up a bit and placed a pillow against my back, so that I lay with my head raised. The doctor brought me a cup with pieces of flesh in it. *"Here, look at your organ. We've cut it off and made a woman out of you."*

The compounder carried me as if I were a baby and put me on a bed next to my *gurubai chela*. She was still asleep. A tube was attached to where my organ once was, and a bag hung at its other end. This was for my urine. The compounder tucked the bag away underneath the bed. (At that time these two beds were in a hall, against a wooden screen which partitioned them from the rest of the room. The cots we lay on had no mattresses. Neither did they use stretchers to carry us. I wonder how it is now in that place.) The effect of that injection for a few hours, after which I felt a great burning down there and pain. Initially, I held back, gritting my teeth. But soon, I began to scream. I pleaded to them to give an injection to numb the pain. A nurse came in and said that if I did not want everyone to know what kind of surgery I had, I must keep quiet and put up with the pain.

An old woman who was attending to someone who lay on the other side of the wooden partition had come over too, attracted by my screams. The old woman was explained by the nurse that I had a stomach operation. I understood then that this sort of operation was done stealthily.

I lay writhing in pain for nearly two hours and then felt this huge pressure on my chest. Bile rushed up to my throat and I threw up the black tea. At that time, it seemed as if I would surely die. But I felt better, the burning was less acute, the pain too was bearable, and my heart had stopped beating wildly. I felt like I had been born again. I slipped into a dreamy sleep and did not know who cleared up my vomit and cleaned me. When I woke up the next morning, I saw my *gurubai chela* sitting up on her bed. She was talking to the *ayah* and eating a bowl of *rasam* and rice. She asked me how I was feeling, and she was smiling. On the third day after the operation, they remove the tube, and we are expected to pee normally. We did not even have a nightgown those days and had to go the bathroom in our saris. Holding our saris high and away from the operated area and walking with our legs far apart, we had a time of it. If the pee did not flow freely, we had to be careful and not

force it out, for the pain would be unbearable and there would be bleeding. When I think of that time, I shudder even today. I was also scared that the stitches would come off.

On the seventh day, they removed my *gurubai chela*'s stitches. It was my sixth day, but I insisted on having them removed. We were down to 500 rupees and had decided that we would leave for Mumbai as soon as possible. I asked the doctor if removing the stitches hurt and he said that it would hurt slightly. He said he would remove a portion of the stitches and the rest would fall off on their own. But it was very painful for me. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth as before. I had to put up with all these painful procedures, if I wanted to become a woman. From the meagre amount left we had to part with a certain sum to the nurse, the compounder, both of whom didn't help us much but wanted money from us. heads now that we were leaving. Still, we gave 50 rupees each to the nurse and compounder and left, clutching our precious 400 rupees, we left for Mumbai. We got down at Dadar station. After reaching my *Nani*'s home at Ghatkopar, me and my *gurubai* were welcomed with an '*arthi*' and the four hijras who travelled with us were also welcomed respectfully. During our post-operative days, my *kaalaguru*² used to take good care of me and my *gurubai*³.

In our hijra community, there is a customary practice that the hijras who undergo sex reassignment surgeries must follow certain prohibitive rules for forty days. After forty days, a ceremony was performed to commemorate and celebrate our womanhood. Just like my mother and sister, I too wished to be married to a man and have children. When I used to go to the markets and ask for money, I felt attracted to some men. But I was scared to make a husband. My *guru* and my *Nani* were not supportive of the fact that I would have a husband. I had to live with my *guru*, two *gurubai* and a *gurubai chela* in a jhopdi. There was just one room where we had to eat, sleep and bathe. The railway lines were used as toilets. My heart sank when I realised that I had to live in such an environment. But I could not go back. I was officially adopted as a chela by my new *guru* in front of the *jamaat*. I knew that in my previous house with *Nani*, I was taken care of and led a good life and lacked nothing. But I decided to become a chela to my new *guru* because I longed for sexual happiness.

Though we lived poorly, and, in a hut, I was indulged by all, and was the darling of the household, chiefly because I was fair and pretty and spoke nicely. During this time, I had to face few such incidents where I had to face major forms of sexual violence, which shook me to the core. I cried and confessed that I wanted to go home to my parents. My *guru* was initially not ready to let me go. But after a lot of pleadings, she finally agreed to let me go for ten days. This time I entered my village as a woman. My mother and brother were not ready to accept me the way I was. My mother fainted after she got to know that I had undergone the sex reassignment surgery. However, my father did not say anything to me, and he asked my family members to let me be

² A *kalaguru* is *guru*'s sister. A *guru* and a *kalaguru* both have same *guru*. The *guru*'s *guru* is called the *nanaguru*.

³ A *gurubai* is like a sister who has also been adopted by the same *guru*.

myself. But I could not bring myself to speak with him. A strange fear held me back. My sister and her in-laws accepted me as a woman. When I used to go and visit my sister, she would introduce me as her sister to the villagers of her marital village. But curious stares and taunts were always there whenever I was in a public place. My mother used to tell me that she feared what would happen to me after they were gone. So, I decided to go back to Mumbai to stay with my own kind and earn my own living. But I feared what my guru would say if I went back. I had been staying in my village for three months then. So, I decided to go back to my *Nani*, my previous *guru*'s mother. *Nani* was quite upset with my leaving the place without informing anyone. I cried my heart out and told her everything that I had undergone all that while. *Nani* was disappointed with me. She said that as I had started feeling sexual desires, I should no longer go to the shops and ask for money. *Nani* decided to send me to her *gurubai*'s family in Crane Road, Mumbai, where sex work used to take place. The road was always crowded and noisy with the sounds of screeching vehicles, the cries of sex workers as they called out to their clients and the music from radios that blared out of tea shops and hotels. Shopkeepers who depended on sex workers, those who ran the sex work trade, were all busy in this market. Only those *hijras* who looked like women were allowed to do sex work. *Hijra* sex trade is known as '*danda*'. The house where sex work was carried out is called a '*danda kantra*'. In the house I was in, there were two *hijras* besides me. It was small and on the road. The building was very small with limited space and frequent fights over getting customers first.

In the area in which I worked, some of these houses were not only meant for doing *danda*, but families also lived there. I saw, heard, and got used to an entirely set of new experiences. People reached this place because of poverty, the burden of looking after a family; because they had been abandoned by their husbands, cast away by their lovers; because they had been raped and rendered unchaste. My heart melted seeing all these people, with their dreams, tears, and troubles.

I was witness to other people's sorrows; I came to know them as my own. Women doing sex work; *hijras* who had been deceived by men who praised their beauty and enslaved them, who stole their hard-earned money and spent it all, leaving the *hijras* with scarred faces, bruised by knives, who were little better than servants; those who had earned in thousands for their mistresses and were yet cheated by them and had to go to other places for work; those who suffered from sexually transmitted diseases and did not receive proper medical care and therefore died, those young ones with great sorrow in their hearts who yet stood on the streets, smiling at prospective customers; those who were carried away by the police for no fault of their own, who were beaten with whips and lathis and stamped upon by police boots, had electric current run through their bodies, who could only leave after paying the police a hefty bribe.

I was upset by seeing the sufferings of the women who seemed to be living like prisoners. It pained me to even think of soliciting clients for these women. I could countenance selling my body to earn a living, but not the bodies of others. I simply did not like it. But I could not talk about this to anyone there. I was waiting for a chance to run away.

My *Nani* found a chela for me. Her name was Mya. She lived with my kaalaguru on the ground floor and did sex work along with the rest of the women there. She would secretly buy brandy for me at night. The booze was a salve for my wounded heart. But I made sure that my guru did not know I drank. One day Mya sought me out when I was alone and started to cry. I asked her what the matter was. She said that she felt very trapped in that house and asked me if I could send her away to some other place. She said she wanted to visit home. But *Nani* was not letting her go. I told her that even I wanted to leave the place and I did not know how I could help her. I told her that no matter wherever she went, she would always be my first daughter. She eventually left. Before leaving, she had assured me that after she left, I could also come to her. In that short span of time, I had known her, I felt in my heart that she was my daughter. Often, I thought of her and wished her well, wherever she might be. My guru spoke to me about my runaway chela. She cautioned me against running away. I did not confront her. I just nodded to whatever she used to say.

Going to the shops for them, keeping vigil, fighting over clients, not having enough money, not getting enough to eat in the mornings—all of this corroded my spirit. I did not know how to get money to run away from this place. Without the knowledge of my guru and the hijras of the house, I started doing sex work with clients who fancied me. I took them to houses run by women, where I rented a space for something like five rupees and got into the trade. Whenever my guru noticed my absence and asked me where I'd been, I lied, saying, I'd been downstairs, or that I had gone to the tea shop. Like this, I earned around five hundred rupees. Now that I had sufficient money, I could make plans to leave. I thought that I would be caught if I took the train, and so decided to go to Sion, and from there take a bus home. One morning I boarded a bus and left for Salem. For the second time, I entered my village in a sari. On my way home, I was greeted rather warmly by neighbourhood people, who did not know me very well. I could not get over my drinking habit. I thought to myself that if I got a job, I might be able to get over it. I searched job everywhere, but no one was willing to take me because I was a hijra. After a few days my middle brother came to my parents' house and when he saw me, he said that the brothers were fighting for property at the court. He warned me not to make any demand on our parental property.

It has been six months since I returned from Mumbai. My middle brother had taken to troubling my parents frequently. My brothers came home in my father's absence and threatened me to sign a statement saying that I do not want anything and that I have no claims on that property. I reported what my brothers had said to my father. He listened and then took me to the lawyer. After hearing everything, the lawyer suggested that I come to the court in man's garb for a day. But I refused. My father asked for an alternative option. He discussed something with my father in private and then asked me to sign a statement which stated that I could not be present in the court due to some unavoidable circumstances and that I had authorized my father to sign on my behalf and accept my due. However, I was made to sign as Doraisamy.

I did not know what my brothers, father and the lawyer discussed, but they told me that I had to pay forty thousand rupees towards expenses incurred in preparing documents. When I told them I

did not have enough money to give, they told me that I would not get my share of property and that I must be satisfied with whatever money my brothers would give. Each of them contributed thirty-five thousand rupees and gave me a lakh and five thousand as my share of the property. I also signed the document they wanted me to sign.

My brothers did not like me staying with my parents and wanted me out of the house. My parents too felt that my presence could cause trouble. They asked me to move out. Unable to counter them, I looked for a place and finally rented a room in an old woman's house for two hundred rupees a month. After having given away ten thousand to my sister and spent five thousand to buy things for the house, I had ninety thousand rupees left. I deposited this amount in a cooperative bank in our village and took to living off the interest. (I could make a deposit only in the name of Doraisamy.) Namakkal town, as I've mentioned, is about three kilometres from my village. If I needed to buy anything for the house, or wanted to go to the cinema, I had to go to town. I had to pay a bus charge of one rupee fifty paise to get there, and then pay again to get around the town by local bus. The bus was always crowded. People leaned on each other, were squashed up against each other—it was unpleasant. Through that three-kilometre stretch, I had to endure teasing, laughter and people grazing against me. I felt heart-broken when these things happened. Not wanting to deal with all this, I asked my brother if I could borrow his moped to go into town. As payment each time, I had to put in a litre of petrol or else buy him a quarter litre of whisky. Caught between a public that considered me odd, and my brothers who were willing to be affectionate for a price, I had to live amid people who did not understand me.

Once while I was returning from the temple of our family goddess, I stopped at a petrol bunk to fill petrol. There was a man filling petrol for a vehicle just like mine. He was dark-skinned, but something about him filled me with longing and made me want to look at him again and again. He returned my gaze, but we did not speak. I took off on the moped on the road leading to my village. I noticed that he was following me. So, I stopped, got off the moped and pretended I was searching for something in the side-pouch. He stopped behind me and asked me what had happened. Gradually we started talking and exchanged our whereabouts with each other. His name was Babu. He used to work in a cinema hall as an operator in Namakkal. He invited me to pay him a visit in the cinema hall. I wondered if I should go and visit him in Namakkal. Being impressed by his kind and respectful words, I went to the cinema hall that he worked in. I finally got a balcony ticket, climbed the stairs, and sat in a balcony seat. I sat alone, next to an empty seat. Suddenly I found Babu sitting on it. He greeted me and asked me to come to the operator's room during the interval. I went looking for the operator's room during the interval. He was alone. He opened a bottle of something cool and handed it to me. I learnt that he was a Muslim, that he had been working in this cinema hall for three years. I did not tell him I was a hijra. He started visiting me and sometimes he would stay with me at night. I used to cook for him just like any other wife would do. Deep down in my heart, I felt as if I was in love with him. My brothers got to know about my affair. One Sunday morning, my three brothers visited me. They started yelling at me and called me names. While my brothers were there, Babu also arrived. I made him wait in the college

students' room. He must have heard the yelling and had learnt that I was a pottai (hijra). Before leaving, my brothers threatened to kill Babu. That was that. After they left, I asked Babu not to visit me again. He did not respond and left.

After all that disrespect and hatred that I had received from my family, I decided to leave my village. While I was at Byculla (Kamatipura), I had heard about a hamam (bath house) in Bangalore, which is looked after by hijras. I thus decided to leave for Bangalore. After I reached my destination, I met a few of the hijras whom I had known from here. My chela Mya was also there. Initially, I did not become anyone's chela and was staying there as a guest. Being the most junior in terms of position, I used to help them out with a lot of household chores. When I used to go and buy vegetables and groceries, the vegetable sellers used to throw tomatoes at me and taunt me. I was not even respected within the house. Mya, who used to be my chela in Mumbai, used to behave very rudely with me. I realized that to sustain in the house I had to become a chela to a guru. Thus, I became a chela for the third time in Bangalore to a Hyderabad affiliated house. I again started doing sex work. I found out that to do sex work, I had to stand on random streets and solicit customers. I feared the police and rowdies. Many a time, I had faced police brutality. By harassing us, the police used to collect money from us.

While in Bangalore, I again visited my village. I bought clothes for everyone and toys for my nephews and niece. Everyone was happy. My mother said that they want to make some renovations in the house and asked for money. I accepted and started sending money back home. It was however very difficult for me to earn enough money. I had to do back breaking toil by engaging in sex work while facing harassment in the hands of the police. Once, after I got back from home, three friends came to me and said that they wanted to be my chela. They were from well-to-do families and could speak in English. My gurubais warned me against them and said that since they had done their operations on their own and had not followed any of the rituals of the hijra community yet, they might run away and might not earn for me. But I still went ahead and accepted the three- Mayuri, Famila and Rithu. Mayuri and Rithu left after I officially adopted them. Famila alone stayed with me for some time. Her parents called her back at home. But she could not stay with them for a long time. All of them were engaged in sex work. I used to know their whereabouts and used to visit them at times.

I remember it was the year 1999. My chelas took me to an organization called Sangama which was celebrating its first anniversary. I came to know that the organization works to empower sexual minorities like us. After I came to know about the kinds of work that they did, I asked them if I could get a job there. Three months later, I was given a job as an office assistant in Sangama. I stopped working as a sex worker, but I continued staying with the other hijras in hamam. My guru did not approve of my decision.

At Sangama, I learnt about what it meant to be a minority, be it sexual minority, religious minority, or someone from lower caste. Initially I used to be scared to admit that I was involved in sex work.

Then I learnt that I was not responsible for my situation. It was the societal inequalities that had pushed me into begging and sex work. I started attending workshops and started public speaking. I spoke about my experiences. I also tried to involve my community in the kind of work that Sangama did. I wanted to help them come out of the oppressive situation that they were in. It took me two years to convince them.

While I was doing good at my work front, my familial issues regarding property worsened. When I could not bear any longer, I decided to end my life by self-immolating myself. While I was going to do that, I suddenly realized that I must live and prove to those people that I could endure everything. Then I left for Bangalore. I developed feeling for an office colleague in Sangama. When I confessed my liking towards him, he agreed to be with me. We started staying together. Then I got to know that the man used to be in a relationship with another colleague of mine before he started dating me. Eventually some of the staff members got to know about me, my friend, and my partner. That made the situation very uncomfortable to work. I thought of leaving my job. But there was a board meeting that decided I need not leave my job. After three months of staying together, we got married. Even my family members accepted our marriage. But after marriage, our relationship started changing. I gave him all my love and expected him to reciprocate at least to an extent. But once he sat at the computer, he tended to forget the whole world. I would let him be, excusing him because he dealt with so much tension in the office. I kept my desires locked inside myself, while it used to hurt me. Our marriage broke after one year.

I was mentally broken. I could not understand how I was supposed to work in that same office. I felt as if I would die if I stayed in Bangalore. At that time, some of my board members decided to send me somewhere on a project to interview people like me and write a book on it. I decided to choose Tamil Nadu as the site of my project. As I was preparing to leave, I got to know that my chela Famila had died by suicide. I was deeply moved by her death. I started blaming myself for her death. She stood by my side when I was going through testing times in my relationship. As her guru, I had to do her final rites. Though I was emotionally very disturbed and wondered how I was supposed to focus on my work, I went to Tamil Nadu for the assigned project. Surprisingly, my work turned out to be healing for me.

I was in Theni district in Tamil Nadu when I received a call from Bangalore. The news that I received shocked me in disbelief. My guru was stabbed to death by some rowdies. That was the last nail on my coffin. After my chela Famila, my guru also left me. I became an orphan.

Despite the losses I had suffered, I somehow managed to finish writing my book, Unarvum Uruvamum. I decided to go away and live with my parents, leaving behind aravanis (hijras), my activist work and Sangama. Back at home, I had no money. I had no desire to live off the income of my ageing father. I asked around in local NGOs for work, but no one was willing to take me. Suddenly, one day, my mother who had blood pressure and diabetes fainted. I admitted her to the local hospital, and we learnt that both her kidneys had failed. For the next three months, I took care of my mother. My mother was not in good shape. She'd had two lakh rupees in her name, which helped with the initial expenses, but the money situation was beginning to look very bad. Around that time, I got a job offer from an AIDS prevention group in Karnataka. They offered me

work for fifteen days a month. But after they put me through all their training sessions, they failed to find work for me for the promised fifteen days. I had work only for one day in a month. With a single day's income, I could not afford to live in Bangalore. I was pushed back into poverty. I did not have the heart to go from shop-to-shop begging. I decided to go back to doing sex work and so returned to the hamam.

Getting back into sex work hurt me a lot, but I did not talk about this to anyone. It was difficult to do sex work, along with my guru's chelas and naathis. I could not really earn much because clients preferred younger women. These problems made me feel terrible, especially when I thought of the work, I had done all these years for the rights of sexual minorities.

After my guru's death, my guru's gurubai was very supportive. She tried to instil courage in me and gave me whatever money she could. That was of great help, but I did not like taking money from her. Unable to make a living, I wondered if I should end my life. The future reared its head in the form of a gigantic question mark. Unlike others, I could no longer fully inhabit aravani culture. I decided to remain alone, alienated from the community. Finally, I went back to work at Sangama.