

BEAUTY PARLOUR AS A SCOPE FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AMONG TRANSGENDER NUPI MAANBIS OF MANIPUR

RUBANI YUMKHAIBAM

Research Scholar, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Sociology,
Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Nupi maanbis are the men to women transgender subjects of Manipur, in Northeast India. The nupi maanbi community is usually marked as socio- economically marginalised. Lack of education and professional qualifications are major factors for such marginalisation. The paper attempts to explore how the nupi maanbi community of contemporary Manipur organizes beauty parlours as a 'capital' for gaining economic niche and social acceptance needed for overcoming stigma, and negative stereotype tenaciously attached to their unconventional gender identity. However, parlour as a site for social and economic empowerment has major limitations. In this sense, the socio-economic success attained by nupi maanbis through parlour and its allied field, namely fashion, is not to be construed as liberalization of societal attitude towards gender and sexual identities of nupi maanbis. On the contrary, the mode of parlour economy and its association with nupi maanbi players reinforces stereotypes about nupi maanbis, such as the subjects' constant association with fashion and lack of education. Eventually, we are left with a bigger contention – Is parlour economy an adequate scope for social mobility among nupi maanbis who still exist within a narrow universe be it sexuality, gender or social success in the Manipuri society?

KEYWORDS: Nupi Maanbi, Manipur, Education, Gender, Parlour, Fashion

INTRODUCTION

Nupi maanbis are men to women transgender subjects of Manipur in Northeast India. In the last ten years or so, there has been an increasing visibility of the subjects, yet they still remain at the margin of the society. Lack of education and professional qualifications in addition to consequences of social barriers created by unconventional gender identity are some of the major factors responsible for such marginalisation. In due course, these circumstance leads to insufficient scope for socio-economic status among nupi maanbis. However, the emerging trends of economic ownership among many nupi maanbis distinctly suggest that the community has overcome some of the early socio-economic disadvantages. The emerging trend of beauty parlours run by nupi maanbi beauticians plays a crucial part in this emerging scope for socio-economic advantages for the nupi maanbi community.

The paper attempts to explore, how the nupi maanbi community of contemporary Manipur appropriate beauty parlours for two purposes: First beauty parlours as an economic niche, second, the popularity and success earned from beauty parlours as a way for overcoming stigma and negative stereotype tenaciously attached to their unconventional gender identity. Although, nupi maanbis' success in parlour economy is remarkable for the recognition it brings to the community, yet they have come to be seen exclusively within the scope of beauty and fashion. This equation is problematic, as it tends to exclude the subjects from other economic sectors, and create essentialist notions around their

identity and social opportunities. It is indispensable to reflect on the association between nupi maanbi community and parlour economy as detrimental to the dynamic participation of the community in the overall strata of the society. Additionally, it is also crucial to note that the success attained by nupi maanbis through parlour economy is not to be construed as societal acquiescence of gender and sexual identities of nupi maanbis. Hence, we are left with a bigger contention – Is parlour economy an adequate scope for socio-economic success among nupi maanbis who still exist within a narrow universe framed by heterosexual economy and societal prejudices in Manipuri society? In order to understand this chain of relations evolving parlour, socio-economic advantages and disadvantages, societal prejudices and stereotypes about nupi maanbis, I will start with a brief assessment on the educational status of nupi maanbis is the first section of the paper. The second section explores parlour as an economic unit and economic niche for nupi maanbi subjects. The third and the concluding section explore the social acceptance nupi maanbis gained from their success in parlour economy.

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS OF EDUCATION AMONG NUPI MAANBIS

The nupi maanbi community of Manipur has always been perceived by the general public as “educationally backward”. Reflecting on the conspicuous lack of education and schooling among nupi maanbis, a 37 year old nupi maanbi said, “The highest educational qualification among nupi maanbis these days is the twelfth standard.” The community’s awareness about the nexus between lack of education and many social disadvantages hints at two important insights: Firstly, educational qualification is a passport to good occupational opportunities. Secondly, educational qualification is a matter of taste, what Bordieu (1986) called “cultural capital”,¹ and hence educational qualification can bring respect and recognition to individuals in the society.

There are three prominent patterns that have led to low educational status among nupi maanbis in Manipur today. In the first pattern, hostile atmosphere in school is the reason why many nupi maanbis did not get enough motivation to continue school. Many of them narrate the moments in which there arose an incongruity between the repressive school atmosphere and their desire to express themselves as nupi maanbi individuals. Both hostile teachers and spiteful fellow students discourage many young nupi maanbi students from successfully participating in the school and classroom atmosphere. As a consequence many young nupi maanbis left school at a very early stage. Thus, although school education is supposed to teach the children the skills to acquire the expertise for different occupations, nupi maanbis by virtue of being gender variant male subjects are considered unfit for such training. Leaving schools at an early stage leaves many nupi maanbis untrained for many occupational opportunities in different sectors – medicine, engineering, public services, academia, etc. In the second pattern, poor family background prevented many young nupi maanbis from attending school. In this case, many had to leave school and engage in helping family. In this case, such nupi maanbis start working in automobile workshop, agricultural labour or even joining parlours at a young age.

In the third pattern, quite unlike the case of nupi maanbis mentioned above, there are nupi maanbis belonging to economically more sound families. In many cases, the parents of such nupi maanbis try to curb gender different expressions of their children by trying to divert this instinct to other counter field like education. This is not always successful. This pattern is in consonance with the popularly held belief among different generations of nupi maanbis and

¹ In his exposition on forms of capital, Bordieu said, ‘Capital is an accumulated labour’ that enables individuals or a group of individual to ‘appropriate social energy’ in the ‘form of reified or living labour’ (Bordieu, 1986, p. 241).

Manipuris in general that nupi maanbis are generally not interested in studies. This proposition is not without critique. A counter proposition to such belief is that in many cases the stage of transgenering, where an individual starts experiencing various desires is believed to be the cause of putting an end to academic interest. In this trajectory, a 29 year old nupi maanbi said, "As soon as they realize their nupi maanbi tendency, they lost interest in studies." In many cases, parents are anxious that the process of acknowledging and expressing one's gender variant identity would put an end to the future perspectives of their nupi maanbi sons, in addition to social stigma and mockery. This pattern sets a conflicting relation between the process of transgenering and education. Education/schooling is seen as the crucial factor, which is either lost in the wake of transgenering or act as a controlling factor for curbing the process of transgenering. Education in this case acts as a regime against the freedom of identity.

The problem with low educational status of the nupi maanbi community lies in all the three related areas, namely, school atmosphere including school mates and teachers, poor family background and complex stage of transgenering. This situation leads to further marginalization of nupi maanbis on the spectrum of training and skill required for occupational opportunities and socio-economic advantages provided by formal education.

Notwithstanding the low educational status which is generally perceived to be detrimental to social success, the nupi maanbi community in contemporary Manipur has achieved significant socio-economic success. The following sections will examine how the nupi maanbi community has achieved socio-economic.

PARLOUR AS AN ECONOMIC NICHE

Parlours run by nupi maanbis (parlours, henceforth) emerged by the early 2000s and became extremely popular within the same decade. Parlours are the most visible space for transgender nupi maanbi community in contemporary Manipur. Here, a brief about the nature and organisation of such parlours is in order. Nupi maanbi parlour is veritably an economic unit. The physical organisation of nupi maanbi parlours synchronizes with parlour as an economic entity. It is usually set up at a rented space in the market areas of the small towns and urban areas, and mostly bears a big poster, usually indicated as unisex saloon, a descriptive used for attracting clients of male and female sexes; a picture of the parlour owner usually graced the big poster. A list of grooming work offered by the parlour is indicated in bold letters to attract the attention of the potential clients –bridal make up, permanent hair straightening, facial, etc. During the peak hour of the day, that is, late afternoon, clients going in and coming out of the parlours can be seen.

The internal organization of Nubia many parlours is closely linked to the economic motifs and opportunities it provides to both the owners and the working staff. Relationship between older nephew many and younger nephew mantis does not have a ritualistic aspect. The younger nephew many others due respect and acknowledgment to the older nephew many because of the training and other opportunities the leather has given. Younger nupi maanbis after getting due training and experience open their own parlour, and then start training other nappy menus. Trainings given in these parlour need not be formal training, mostly; it is informal learning through the help and apprenticeship. There is no expectation that younger nephew menus will stick to one parlour all their life. This offers younger nephew maanbis the opportunity to seek a larger scope for earning money. However, often the departure of Nubia maanbis from the parlour, in which they have lived and worked, creates conflict between the owners who had given the newbie maanbis an opportunity. However, in the clear cut economic vantage point implied by the opening of a new parlour, those who have enough resources and talent do open new palace, and this is not treated as a major transgression.

The majority of the nape maanbis today are engaged in beauty parlours and other allied fields like fashion and styling. Many young nephew menus are exposed to the harsh conditions of negligence and discrimination very early in life. In many instances, familial refusal leads many young nephew menus to leave home and carve out their own niche outside the comfort of family love and support, and outside the discipline and scope of formal education. However, such a departure also serves to facilitate rites of passage in the nape mambo community. The life narratives of many newbie menus show that they are exposed to harsh conditions of societal and familial rejection and conflicts at a time when parlour business was catching up in Manipur. Many of these young nephew maanbis who do not possess family support or education are thus absorbed in these nappies maanbi parlours. This also explains the reason why in many of the newbie parlours in Manipur today, the staff-membership is constituted by nope menus. The availability of young nephew menus, who are very desirous of making themselves socially successful (this has a strong financial motive) usually locate parlours, where they can train themselves and work. In many cases, parents also approach the owners of the parlours to train their young nephew many children, “Some parents approach me to keep and train their nappy many sons in my parlour. They want to make their nappy many sons useful unto themselves”, said a well known nupi many parlour owners. This also shows that there is a strong tendency to divert the resource and talent of otherwise stigmatized sons so that they are accepted in society.

The success stories of many newbie menus have shown that many have moved from a less privileged socioeconomic situation to a brighter prospect. In this manner, 31 years old Bindya has overcome extreme poverty through the earning from her beauty parlour. Bindya’s nupi many friends who is a beautician said, “Bindya was very poor. She did not have money to buy basic clothing. Then she came to Imphal and set up a parlour. With the money earned from the parlour, Bindya arranged for her younger sister’s wedding. She is a successful person now”. The binder is also very proud of her success. Today, in Manipur, many newbie menus are respected and accepted for their professional skill and money earning capacity. There are many others who are not established enough to work in a beauty parlour, nevertheless, they work at a local level, which primarily consists in getting hired for a particular function like a wedding, thabal chongba,² etc. These nupi menus have makeup kit and dresses to lend to women on these occasions. Whenever, there is a wedding in the neighbourhood, women approached these nappy menus for makeup and other kinds of styling. Moreover, some of these newbie menus are skilled weaver and dressmaker, and earned money through embroidery, tailoring, etc.

Nope menus are able to exploit their occupational roles as beauticians, thereby attracting material and other privileges. The increasing number of consumers of beauty and fashion facilitates nope maanbis’ movement into the desirable occupation of beauty parlours, a choice which is not usually taken up by men. In the recent times many young girls have joined parlours owned and trained by nope menus. They are usually students taking training under nappy many mentors. Thus, nupi menus skill and ability for beauty and fashion is translated into socioeconomic status of beauticians.

The money earning capacity of Nubia mantis is one among the many signified that that defines a good ‘normative’ and hence an acceptable nupi many. Thus, parlours provide a social status to the nape mambo community. The circumstances of material prestige that nope maanbis feel to have earned is evinced by the comfort and confidence many derived from their neighbours and relatives, thus a 25 year old nephew many says, “My neighbours do not harass me since I am a very controlled person. I do not engage myself in wantonness.” In fact, some attribute their success to the

² A popular festive event of dance for youths in Manipur.

respect others have for them as a 27 year old nephew many said, “My parlour has a good number of clients now. With the love and trust of the people, I have worked so hard. A few days after I opened my parlour, there was an article in the newspaper indicting the bad ways of Nubia menus. I cried the whole night. I thought my parlour would not work. But people love me and recognize my sincerity.” Such a concern about the public reaction brings the crucial concern of social “acceptance”.

SOCIAL ‘ACCEPTANCE’ OF NUPI MAANBIS

It is not only material success that completes the narrative of a good nappy many. Economic status allows fulfilment of economic aspirations and in due course, a certain level of social position. The capacity to earn money and help in the welfare of the family makes the nappy many ‘good’ and brings acceptance and respect in society. Being socially accepted implies that the nape mania has done ‘good, acceptable thing’, which outweighs stigma associated with unconventional gender identity. In this pattern of good napping many, a nupi mania is often associated with the figure of one who earns money through hard work, staying at home with parents and siblings, and sometimes taking up studies. These conditions improve the social status of newbie menus. It is also a process of ‘normalizing’ the otherwise unconventional and hence transgressive gender variant identity. This defines the social status of a “normative” nope mania who is socially acceptable in society. Such good nappy maanbis try to distance themselves from the construct of ‘idle’, bad stereotype, that is, nope menus who are “aimless” “wanton”, “wastrel”, etc.

The acceptance of these good and “normative” nope menus is therefore not based on acceptance of a transgender identity; it is based on the role that a nappy many beautician performs in society. In this context, the rise of Nubia maanbi beauticians as socio-economically successful individuals should be located within a functionalist perspective. Nope menus also root for their acceptance in the society in the framework of their role in contemporary society. In this manner, many newbie menus claim that they are the stalwarts of beauty and fashion, the importance of which is stated by many newbie maanbis “We contribute to Manipuri society today. Beauty and fashion in cinema, weddings, etc. are our contribution. We are also important.” In this scenario, nupi many beauty artistes and their parlours have an important role to play. In a period when both men and women are increasingly visiting parlours for beauty treatments, nupi maanbi’s role as an arbiter of beauty and fashion is one of the most successful role-based identity (Kopytoff, 1990)³ identity outside the welfare scheme and services provided by the government. Correspondingly, it is required to look upon nupi menus in the context of their social role, beyond the considerations of ‘deviance’ and stigma. However, this does not necessarily remove stigma associated with a gender variant male identity.

The link between polar and socioeconomic niche discussed above, will provoke one question, namely, does being a newbie maanbi facilitate earning livelihood through beauty industry like pallor and subsequent rise in social status? In a decisive case in point, an 18 year old nephew many said, “It is easier to earn money by becoming a nappy much.” This hints at the connection between the economic potential of parlour work and a nappy many identity. The mutual nexus between polar and nape maanbi’s success is also attributed to another popularly held belief that nope menus intuitively excelled in matters concerning beauty and fashion. “There are many women who are excellent beauticians, but people trust us more”, said a 29 year old nephew maanbi beautician. Building on the strategic rhetoric of being suitable for fashion and

³ According to Igor Kopytoff role-based identities are those based on particular role people play in society, for example, a police or a teacher, “(role-based identities) are culturally perceived as being derived from what people ‘do’ that is, identities based on roles. . .” (1990, p.79-80).

beauty industry, nope many communities have emphasized on their “innate” talent and expertise in the same field. Such romantic notion of the self is important for the economic and occupational opportunities it provides. However, such notion about nappy maanbis’ “innate” talent in beauty and fashion has a downside, in this sense; the general public has come to see nappy maanbis exclusively within the paradigm of beauty and fashion. This perception along with the failure to remove stigma associated with nappy maanbis makes nappy maanbis’ success in a beauty parlour as a location of socioeconomic edge a cautious and fragile territory. In all these circumstances, ‘acceptance’ of Nubia maanbis remains an elusive practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The degree of socioeconomic niche that nope many parlours generate at present might not be the same in the future, it might accelerate, or it might be exhausted. In the latter case, it will become crucial to implement different mediums for economic participation in society. Education and professional trainings in other sectors will become more important. At present, because of the low pay and consequent dependence on the owner, many young nephew maanbis want to move out of the parent-parlour. This also explains the cause of raising the number of nappy many parlours in Manipur. But in order to carve out their niche they need money and experience. Automatically age becomes an important variable here. The majority of the parlour visiting clients prefer senior nupi maanbi beauticians or nape menus that have more years of experience. In this scenario, young beauticians in the age group 17 to 25 are not likely to be very successful. The keynote here is that from a close view socioeconomic edge of nape menus within the mileage of pallor is still limited.

From the discussion above, it is concluded that nope menus as a marginalized group exists on the margin of economic privileges. Lack of educational qualification, professional qualification still continues to be a bottleneck. However, a critical finding of the discussion is that Nubia menus that are marginalized for their gender and sexual identity emerged as a viable social group amidst limited scope for socioeconomic success among the Manipuris at large. Paradoxically, these circumstances lead to the broadening of the means through which socioeconomic prestige of Nubia menus can be defined and achieved. However, such redefinition and shifts should not be mistaken for liberalization of gender and sexual identities. Quite on the contrary, it reinforces stereotypes of nupi many identities like its association with low economic position, lack of education, parlour, etc. In this trajectory nope maanbis still exist within a narrow universe, be it sexuality, gender or occupational role in the Manipuri society.

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