



## Education and Discourse: Reshaping Narratives

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Page No. 7- 10

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**Abstract:** This study explores the role of education in shaping the discourse and the narrative. It analyses the autobiography, *The Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, of Dr Manobi Bandyopadhyay, the first transgender principal in India, to explore how education helps her in challenging the dominant narratives that consider transgender people as deviants. It focuses on Foucault's idea that power shapes the discourse to analyse how the power gained from education helps people from the marginalized community to shape the discourse surrounding them. When people from the marginalized community, here transgender people, gain power, they challenge and also shape the discourse. Education acts as one of the powerful mediums of empowerment to challenge the existing narratives and shape their own discourse.

**Keywords:** education, autobiography, empowerment, discourse, transgender, narrative, marginalized

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### Introduction

Dr Manabi Bandyopadhyay is the first transgender principal in India. She has a doctorate in Bengali Literature and works as a principal in a degree college in Kolkata. She runs *Abomanob*, which translates to “Sub-human”, the first Indian literary magazine about transgender people. Through her yearly magazine, she communicates the experiences of transgender people and articulates their identity to people.

Bandyopadhyay was born as a biological male child, named Somanth. She always felt a sense of identity crisis as there was a difference between her biological sex and her gender identity. She was born as a male, but she considered herself a woman. She liked to behave and dress up like a woman she saw in her vicinity. As children, transgender people do not assert their identity, but they simply follow their heart. She was mocked by her classmates for behaving in a way that is considered conventionally feminine. It is instilled in the minds of children that a certain set of behaviours is fixed for men and women. If anyone does not fit in that traditional role, becomes a subject of mockery. Upon reaching adulthood and realising her gender identity, she started embracing womanhood. Social institutions tried to subjugate



Bandyopadhyay, but she did not let the societal attitude towards her be a hurdle to her education. As her parents also supported her education, she made education a tool of empowerment. Through her writing and research, she challenged the societal attitude towards them. The institutions at times tried to oppress her, but rather than being a subject in discourse, she used education to be a subject of discourse to challenge the societal norms and discourses that consider them deviant.

### **Role of Education in the Life of Dr Bandyopadhyay**

Educational institutions, being a part of society, often try to dehumanise the genuine experiences of transgender people, which contributes to their stigmatization. While education helps them to articulate their experiences with people and change their perspectives.

Dr. Bandyopadhyay challenges the Indian societal attitude of people who often consider that a transwoman's (woman who is assigned male at birth) role is confined to begging, dancing at ceremonies and performing sex work. People in India often identify transwomen as 'hijras', while hijra is a socio-cultural community for transwomen that provides them space to express their femininity. Whereas Bandyopadhyay has not become a part of the hijra community, and she does not identify herself as a 'hijra'. Her mother was blamed for giving birth to a 'hijra'. She was oppressed in school for her conventional feminine traits, but the hindrances did not stop her from continuing her education.

Bandyopadhyay writes that people of her college started accepting her and her gender expression when she started writing for the newspapers. The editors of the journal where she frequently wrote articles knew her identity, but they had never let her feel different. She further started embracing her identity and expressing it in the institution. (Bandyopadhyay 47–48). She gradually started writing about transgender people and their identity. This is the power of writing and education – it helped Bandyopadhyay change people's perception of her. She faced multiple challenges in academic institutions when she started working as a lecturer. Her colleagues at Satavarshiki College in Jhargram were hostile towards her. She was not allowed to use the staff's washroom and was kept away from other facilities. She was compelled to resign from her position as a lecturer at that college (Bandyopadhyay 93). Despite all the trouble, she kept doing her work and studying further. She started a literary magazine, *Abonamob* ("Sub-human"). She interviewed transgender people and incorporated various issues and problems faced by them. *Abomanob* became the basis of her Ph.D. thesis



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(Bandyopadhyay 112–113). Her research was accepted by a professor from Kalyani University. Bandyopadhyay is one of the first people in India to work academically on transgender people. As the Vice Chancellor of the university had already read her articles in various newspapers, he advised her to change her name in her thesis from ‘Somnath Bandyopadhyay’ to ‘Manabi Bandyopadhyay’ (Bandyopadhyay 159). This marked the beginning of a remarkable change — from being a person who was mocked and bullied for her identity to changing the discourse and perception of people towards her and her community. This example is rooted in Foucault’s concept of power being productive. Bandyopadhyay used her educational power to communicate her truth to people.

## **Conclusion**

Education is one of the most important tools of empowerment, particularly for a marginalised community, here the transgender community. The educational institution often tries to subjugate and marginalise their experiences and identity, or label them negatively. Education in itself empowers them to give voice to their identity and fight against oppression. Bandyopadhyay, being an educated transwoman, has fought through writing, both creative and academic. She challenged the society that treats transgender people as objects of curiosity or confines their roles to beggary or performing at weddings or other auspicious ceremonies. She wrote about transgender people academically and chose transgender studies as her research area. She was among the first people in India to include their studies in research, particularly literature. This shows that she has changed perceptions of people and also the dynamics of education. The inclusion of research on transgender people by Bandyopadhyay highlights that education can change the narratives and discourses of the various institutions, including educational institutions.



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