

## The Politics of Passing...and the Dangers of Not

**How important is “passing”? While it’s something some folks really care about, for others it’s not that big a deal. For some though, it can affect their safety. Debbie Das shares her thoughts and experiences.**

*Note: ‘To pass’ is to be seen as cisgender instead of being seen as the gender a person is assigned at birth. The opposite of that is ‘getting clocked’ which means that a person is visibly seen as trans. This has a lot of connotations. Of late, the trans community has had problems with both the term ‘passing’ and the act of wanting to pass.*

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As a child, I always felt an itch. Not being able to understand the discomfort of being me, I rarely saw myself from a proximity. When I did, I wanted to change everything. I kept asking myself over the years – ‘Am I a woman?’. The answer would always be in the negative. Every time I saw transgender women or Hijras, I could feel a certain pull to understand them, maybe to understand myself better. The options for transness were always limited in India. Hyper femme trans women did have an appeal, but it felt just as wrong as being perceived as a man. Hijras on the other hand have a socio-cultural implication in the Indian sub-continent. That of being sex workers, beggars and are often vilified by the masses. Mysterious, sometimes venerated, often scary.

At the age of 24, a friend gave me permission to be a man or a woman or neither. They decked me up in their femme clothes and made me look pretty. I finally acknowledged the person in the mirror as me, after years of self-loathing. I finally knew what being home in my own body meant. I also knew that if I were to accept myself the way I am, society may reject me.

My journey of self-love started with loss. I lost most of my friends and family. Some transgender people implied I was faking my transness as it wasn’t based on passing. Passing. It has always felt a bit uncomfortable on the tongue. Passing what, and for whom? Desirability got tossed away when I chose self-love. These arbitrary standards of beauty, aesthetics that denied my personhood didn’t seem important at all. I was more concerned about other things, for instance my safety every time I would step outside. I am a tall, femme-presenting person with body (and sometimes facial) hair. I don’t get to be invisible in a crowd.

Over the years I’ve encountered a few other people who don’t care about public appeasement. Passing isn’t a priority for them. Authenticity of the self negates expectations of transness and what it should be. I remember a friend called Saira\* telling me her experiences with trans womanhood. She is a model. If she doesn’t pass, she rightfully assumes that she would get fewer modelling gigs. Her own journey with transness has maybe been stunted by societal expectations defining her personhood. She is convinced that passing is the only true way of being trans. Any trans person who isn’t conforming to the rigid binaries of gender may as well be faking it. I don’t blame her for the limited lens with which she sees people. I certainly no longer ‘pass’ her test of true transness. There are others like Saira, both within and outside the community gatekeeping what it means to be trans. She is a product of the same society which tries to hinder our truest selves. Her transness is as true as mine.

Certain things are no longer possible as I prioritise my safety. Public transport is one of them. I can't use the general sections of buses or the metro as I get groped by men. If I enter the section reserved for women, there often is a backlash by its occupants. The same applies for restrooms. Unless there is a unisex restroom available at the places I visit, I must return home early. Women's restrooms are gatekept and men see me entering their restroom as an invitation for assault. I can't travel by flights any longer as airports usually have two gendered options. The same applies for changing rooms in departmental stores and malls. Thankfully I know a few places in my city where the changing rooms are individual cubicles instead of being segregated by gender. Hyderabad, the city where I live has transgender bathrooms in a few public places. These were never cleaned or maintained and hence trans people stopped using them. They eventually locked these toilets for good, citing obsolescence.

Sometimes the thought of starting hormones has crossed my mind, not because I want to look more femme. The idea that if I passed, my life would be easier in public spaces seems appealing. I have been denied services by two renowned salon chains on the same day as I am visibly trans. I've also had Ubers refuse to let me in their car and drive away seeing me.

Trans people in India are usually seen in one of three situations. Hijras, asking for alms on traffic signals and trains. Movies, where we have been demonised or used as a punchline. And thirdly, porn. So, when I enter a restaurant and the staff and patrons start laughing at me instead of treating me like a customer, I try to understand where they are coming from. They have been taught by the movies that it's the appropriate response. Empathising with the oppressor doesn't erase the pain though.

I pass occasionally when I wear a face mask. I know this because these are the rare instances when I don't get harassed. I was waiting for my Uber after dinner one night. Auto rickshaws piled up to have a proper look at me. Most of these men assumed that I was a sex worker, because in their head, why else would a trans person stand in the road? Despite telling them that I didn't need a ride or anything from them, two refused to leave. They catcalled and were insisting that I get in their auto for a 'free ride'. As I'm recalling this, I feel lucky that it was just that. A few weeks back, a trans woman got murdered in my city right after she got off a bus. Another trans woman in Pune got violently assaulted by a group of men in broad daylight. These are just a few of the horror stories that I've heard. I wonder how many of these go unreported and unheard. I must be lucky right?

I am a trans femme person and don't like masculine adjectives or pronouns used for me. I shave, put on makeup and jewellery on most days I step outside. I do this for one primary reason. If I put in an effort to appear more femme, maybe I won't be masculinised. I'm still not in a place where being misgendered doesn't feel like a denial of my basic humanity. Discomfort around how people perceive me is still a festering wound. Often, I get addressed as 'sir', which indicates respect and puts me in my place simultaneously. It's the collective telling me that I'm not who I say I am. I will always be construed as the shackles I thought I'd managed to hack off.

\* name has been changed for anonymity