

What Does it Mean to Claim an Identity in a World Where Not All Identities are Equally Liveable?



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Drawing on personal experience across caste and sexuality, I find that dignity cannot be assumed to inhere in the right to self-identify, but depends on the social conditions that make identities bearable without humiliation.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.

As a child, I learned very quickly that some gestures invite correction. A slip in how one moves, speaks, or inhabits the body is met not with curiosity, but with ridicule. What one learns, early on, is not simply how to behave, but which ways of being are punishable, and which can be safely inhabited.

That lesson extends beyond gestures into the domain of identity itself. Long before one comes to name oneself, one learns that certain identities carry a density of humiliation that makes them difficult, if not impossible, to inhabit. As a child, I was attentive to hijras. I was curious, even drawn, but I was equally quick to absorb the social cues that surrounded them: laughter, mockery, the easy circulation of insult. That perception hardened when, as an adolescent, I was told – authoritatively, and with the weight of medical knowledge –

that hijras were “mentally retarded.” Whether this claim came from textbooks or from the informal authority of medical training mattered less than the effect it produced: an identity that might once have seemed imaginable was rendered unliveable.

When I eventually came out to my family, I did so as “homosexual,” not because it captured some inner truth, but because it was the language available to me. In time, that gave way to “gay,” a shift that coincided with my first experience of collective affirmation—most vividly, at a Pride march in London in the early 2000s, where identity was not merely named but sustained by a shared infrastructure of visibility and support. Later still, I would come to identify as “queer,” particularly within activist and intellectual spaces. Each of these shifts might appear, in retrospect, as a movement toward authenticity. But lived as they were, they tracked something else: the uneven conditions under which different identities could be inhabited with dignity.

Living through categories

A different kind of recognition – and risk – marked my entry into law school in 1993. I had gained admission in the general category, at my father’s insistence, in a moment shaped by the turbulence around reservations in the wake of the Mandal Commission debates and the decision in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*. Within the hostel, caste was both present and disavowed: an unspoken structure that surfaced most visibly in the stigma attached to reservations. To be identified as Scheduled Caste was to be marked, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, as less deserving, less capable – someone who had arrived by concession rather than merit.

It was within this atmosphere that I chose to disclose my caste to a roommate. I could have passed. My admission through the general category allowed for that possibility, and with it, a certain insulation from the everyday indignities that attach to being read as “quota.” But I had already learned, in other contexts, the psychic cost of concealment – how it demands a constant calibration of speech and self. Naming myself as Dalit was, in that sense, not an act of authenticity so much as a refusal of that burden.

And yet, this was not a simple embrace of a stigmatised identity. The conditions under which I spoke mattered. I was able to claim Dalit identity from a position partially buffered by institutional validation – the fact of having “made it” without recourse to reservations. That distance did not erase stigma, but it altered my relation to it. It made possible something like pride – not as an original sentiment, but as a counter to an already existing humiliation. What I was inhabiting, then, was not just an identity, but a particular configuration of it.

This moment would return to me later, in thinking about the language of pride that animates LGBTQ movements. Pride is often imagined as affirmation, as the celebration of

who one is. It is better understood as a response – an effort to push back against a prior field of humiliation. It does not emerge in a vacuum, and it is not equally available to all. Its possibility depends, in part, on the conditions that make an identity bearable in the first place.

Pride and the memory of humiliation

Read together, these moments suggest that identity is neither an inner essence waiting to be expressed nor a simple matter of choice. Long before one names oneself, one is positioned within a field of available categories – each carrying its own history of valuation, stigma, and possibility. To identify is to work with what is already there, to take up a name that is legible within a given social order, and to negotiate the terms on which it can be borne. As Michel Foucault observed, identities do not emerge from within the self so much as they are produced through the discourses that make certain ways of being thinkable. What appears, retrospectively, as a journey toward authenticity is often, in lived time, a movement across categories that are unequally habitable.

This is also why dignity cannot be understood as something that attaches to identity in the abstract. It is not secured simply by the act of naming oneself, nor exhausted by the recognition of that name. It depends on the conditions under which an identity can be lived—whether it exposes one to ridicule, exclusion, or violence, or whether it is sustained by forms of social affirmation. The difference between these is not merely psychological; it is structural.

An account of dignity grounded in lived experience begins precisely here. In one of his early autobiographical reflections, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar recalls a childhood journey during which he and his siblings, stranded at a railway station, disclosed to a stranger that they were Mahar. The disclosure was not accompanied by shame; the indignity followed. Upon hearing it, the stranger withdrew the help that might otherwise have been offered. The indignity lies not in the name itself, but in the relation it produces – in the refusal of care, in the denial of ordinary forms of assistance.

Ambedkar's later refusal to remain within Hinduism, and his eventual conversion to Buddhism, can be read in this light. It is not simply a matter of changing identity, but of refusing a social order in which that identity is bound to indignity. If dignity is to be more than a formal guarantee, it requires not only recognition but a transformation of the conditions that render certain identities degrading in the first place.

Dignity beyond recognition

Taken together, these trajectories point to a more demanding account of dignity than is often assumed. Dignity is not exhausted by the right to self-identify, important as that right

is. It turns on whether the identity one claims can be lived without degradation – whether it invites recognition or ridicule, support or withdrawal, safety or sanction.

This has particular relevance for contemporary debates around gender identity, where dignity is frequently framed in terms of autonomy and the right to self-determination. Frameworks such as the Yogyakarta Principles have been crucial in foregrounding these claims. To that extent, the emphasis on self-identification marks an important advance.

And yet, recognition alone does not dissolve the social worlds in which identities are lived. It is possible to be legally recognised and still be exposed to everyday forms of humiliation. Nor are these experiences evenly distributed. Some identities can be inhabited with relative safety, while others continue to carry a density of stigma that makes their assertion costly.

To acknowledge this is not to argue against self-identification, but to situate it within a broader account of dignity. If dignity is to be realised in any substantive sense, it cannot rest solely on formal recognition. It requires attention to the conditions that make identities liveable.

To think of dignity in this way is to return to that early lesson: that before identity is claimed, it is lived under conditions not of one's choosing. Some ways of being are made easy, even invisible; others are marked, policed, and rendered costly. What we call identity is shaped within this uneven terrain, and what we call dignity depends on how far that terrain can be transformed.

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