

LOST IN THE SHADOWS: THE GOVERNMENT THAT ABANDONED ITS PEOPLE



Chhotkanu Chaudary

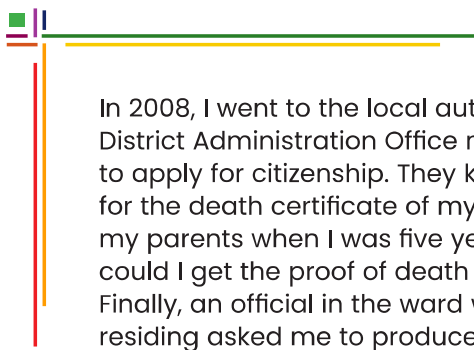
My name is Chhotkanu Chaudary. I have crossed 70 years of age. Both of my parents were from Bardiya (western Nepal). They passed away during my childhood when I could barely speak and I was raised by *sahujan* (master, landlord). My older brother and I grew up as servants in that household and it pains me to recall those early days without the protection of my parents. I can only recall deep sorrow, a life filled with hunger and thirst. At the time, it was common for people in my community from the far west to be employed in a master's field. I grew up working in the master's field and home.

I was born a boy, assigned male at birth, but I knew that I wasn't a man and when I was entering adolescence, around age 12, I started discovering myself through experiences of being a dancer at ceremonies, where I dressed up and wore make up. It was a tradition of the Chaudary family for males to wear female clothes for dancing. It's called *Nachaniya* dance tradition. I disclosed my identity to the *sahujan* and to my brother and it was accepted. There were no organizations at the time where I could get guidance on gender identity and sexuality. So, being a dancer helped me understand and embrace my identity as a third-gender woman. I would regularly dress in *lungi* (printed fabric worn like a sarong, mostly by men) and wear a *dupatta* (long shawl/scarf that covers head and shoulders, worn by women), so not completely male or female attire, it was both. Other workers for the *sahujan* did make fun of me. They called me *mehera*, which meant 'man's face and wearing women's clothes.'

At age 35 I got liberated from the master's clutches, and my brother and I moved to the Kailali District in the Far Western Province of Nepal. I got to know about programs organized by community based organizations like Indreni Srijanshil Samaj and Mitini Nepal. Another third gender woman from my village in Bardiya helped me find these organizations in Kailali. Individuals in these organizations were my mentors. Gradually, I learned about transgender rights to citizenship and dignified life. I started speaking and advocating for the rights of gender and sexual minorities.

Over the years, I have seen a slight acceptance of LGBTI community by Nepali society. But the senior citizens who are gender and sexual minorities are still facing many problems. They are deprived of various government services and facilities. They face loneliness, poor economic conditions, and a lack of caregivers. This has also been my experience.

During COVID-19, my livelihood completely stopped. I used to make *dhakiya* and *tokari* (baskets for storing fruits and vegetables). During the pandemic, physical movement was restricted and the market was not open so I could not sell my baskets. Yet I didn't receive any help from the state because I don't have citizenship certificate. I was also deprived of the COVID-19 vaccine because I didn't have a citizenship certificate with me. (Citizenship certificates serve as identity cards and have to be presented to receive the COVID vaccine.)



In 2008, I went to the local authorities and the District Administration Office nearly five times to apply for citizenship. They kept asking me for the death certificate of my parents. I lost my parents when I was five years old. Where could I get the proof of death registration? Finally, an official in the ward where I was residing asked me to produce five witnesses. However, to my distress, no one dared to help me given that I was transgender.


Even though I was born in this country, I am not recognized by the state. At age 70, I am stateless. Other citizens my age are receiving old age allowance and they were a priority for COVID-19 vaccination, except for me.

Due to the prejudice of people who have reached the level of governance in Nepal, proper identification based on sexual and gender identity has not yet been possible. Citizens of sexual and gender minority communities have the bitter experience of being rejected by the state that should act like a guardian to all. There are many citizens from gender and sexual minority communities who spend their entire lives not being properly recognized by the state. They do not enjoy the state's protection.

In my case, after so many ups and downs and struggles, my dream of getting Nepali citizenship was fulfilled only recently on 23 April 2023. With the help of Mitini Nepal, the official in Bhajani Municipality Ward No. 1 (in Sudurpashchim Province), Dharmendra Shrestha (ward chair in Ward 1, Kailali District), and Ekata Samaj (organization for landless, unhoused, and informally housed women) I acquired my citizenship based on Article 12 of the Constitution of Nepal, which provides the right to citizenship based on lineage of mother and father (descent). My neighbors from Ward 1 were my five witnesses. They were from LGBT and non-LGBT communities. Two of them were transgender women. Initially it was very hard but Ekata Samaj and Mitini told them that I am completely alone and needed help. The witnesses' contribution was key. Without them I would not have received my citizenship.

With citizenship, I am beginning my new life.

Postscript: In 2008, Nepal's 240-year old monarchy was abolished, a constituent assembly was elected, and Nepal was declared a federal democratic nation.



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