

Indian Transgender: Socio-Cultural Aspects of Hijra Community and the Oppression

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Abstract

Being neither male nor female, the Hijras, or transgender people, are social misfits in Indian culture. People who identify as Hijras in India form a culturally unique gender category. Hijras' culture, nationality, demeanour, and gender preference remain unknown to the general public. In the developing world, social injustice and persecution have never received much attention. It has endured for a very long time and developed into a distinct cultural group in the Indian subcontinent despite being severely neglected. In many Hindu stories, narratives, customs, religious roles, and beliefs, dual gender depiction is encouraged. Due to portrayals of hijras in rituals, rites of passage rituals, fables, mythologies, urban legends, and folk art, hijras have been able to build a culturally relevant, regulated, and structured sector within Indian cultures. Their identities are clearly located outside of the heteronormative family, which is thought of as the ideal standard. The Hijra community creates a distinct social family and related subsystems, which turns into a crucial aspect of hijra identity. The current study concerns the social structure of hijra culture and the crises faced by the Indian Transgenders. The study has taken the self-narratives of transgender writers A.Revathi, and Living Smile Vidya.

Key Words: Hijra, Heteronormative, Social misfits, Hijra rituals, self-narratives.

Introduction

Transgenders are the one whose biological sex is not related with social gender expression. The person who is born as male and recognises themselves as female is called transwoman. In Indian context such individuals are referred as hijras in northern part of India and the word has so many variations around the Indian states. Transgenders or hijras of India has rich heritage since early civilisation. Colonial era of India is considered as the black age of hijras as the government of colonial India had criminalised the hijras by levying an act 'Criminal Tribe Act' of 1871. The aim of the Act was to completely eradicate the culture and the existence of hijras, as the British embodiment considered them as unnatural being, and they considered their culture as falsehood (*Governing Gender and Sexuality* 34).

Transwomen are viewed as lucky omen in north India. There are a lot of folktales about transgender ladies in northern India. They are invited to important gatherings including weddings, housewarming parties, and blessings of new babies. Revathi, a transgender writer and activist, writes "“Delhi for centuries, they’ve treated us like gods. They fall at our feet and seek our blessings. Our word is considered all-powerful and whatever we say comes true. When we go to shops, we clap hands and say “Ramramji! Namaste babu!” and they give us money, a rupee or 5 rupee, or whatever they want to give” (*The Truth About Me* 44).

The populace believes that the Hijra's presence bestows luck and success onto them. In the northern parts of India, the term "hijra" is frequently used to refer to transwomen. Additionally, governments refer to the isolated Hijra community using the word "Hijra." Different words for transwomen in numerous other Indian languages are given below:

“Nabunsagudu” in Telugu, “Khwaja Sara” in Urdu, “Paavaiya” in Gujarathi, “Kusra” in Punjabi, “Hinjaada” in Odiya, “Kathra” in Sindhi, “Chandhan” in Malayalam, “Chakka” in Kannada, “Kojji” in Kongani, “Nupi maanpi” in Manipuri, and “Nabumsak” in Kashmir and Assam languages. “Chandhali” is a language spoken in Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Mizoram, Odisha, Tripura and West Bengal. In this language, transwomen are mentioned as “Kakra”. In Sanskrit, transwomen are addressed as “Nabumski”, and transmen are mentioned as “Nabumskar”.

Up until 1997, transwomen were commonly referred to as "Ali" in Tamil. In written and visual media, this expression refers to the transgender community. The protagonist in Su. book Samuthiram's *Vadamalli* is a transgender woman. He called transgender women "Ali. Even faculty members in Tamil Nadu schools call transgender children "Ali" in jest and ridicule. Revathi puts in her words, “At school, teachers and students made fun of me. I was called ‘ombodu’, ‘ali’ and ‘pottai’, all derogatory terms used to describe trans women and kothis” (*A Life in Trans Activism* xi).

The transgender community itself interprets the disparaging terms used by society to describe its members as either harsh or complimentary. Revathi, for instance, says, “they would chant, ‘Girl-boy!’, ‘Ali!’, ‘Number 9!’ . My heart would sink at these words, but I also felt faintly gratified and even happy that these boys actually conceded that I was somehow a woman”(6). When people refer to her in a derogatory manner, she feels both offended and content. The transgender Kokila guarantees that she is not worried by the insults directed at her because she has become accustomed to them. To quote Kokila, “All of them gazed at me mockingly. Since I was called pottai from my young days, it did not bother me” (*Our Lives, Our Words* 27).

During her school years, Vidya was also ridiculed by her classmates. She was subjected to offensive teasing using the word "Ali." The term Ali was made fun of by punning it. She claims,

Crude puns were invented by my classmates to scribble with my name on the blackboard— for instance, adding the suffix ‘ali’, a colloquialism for eunuchs, to regular Tamil words to describe me. Some such were padippaali, uzhaippaali. The word padippaalli in Tamil means a learned person, and the word uzhaippaali means an industrious person. Often when we returned after lunch to the classroom, the blackboard would carry such graffiti as ‘Saravanan the padippaali’ or ‘Saravanan the uzhaippaali’ — the shortening of the vowel giving the word an offensive twist. (Vidya 25-26)

In both clinical and academic work, it is vital to acknowledge the reality of such verbal discrimination and abuse and to devise a strategy to combat it. The social life of a Hijra is wholly different from that of the general population. Hijras are diverse individuals with a broad range of emotions, beliefs, and ways of thinking. Like all people, they are shaped by their heritage and the role they play in society. Many Hijras live double lives in this binary-gendered culture to avoid being mocked and persecuted. Hijras dress like women

and use feminine names when interacting with the rest of society. They dress and behave like guys when they live with or visit family. The major individuals in hijras' lives deny their femininity. Hijras' effeminate postures frequently result in trauma to the mind and to the body.

In comparison to other communal household members, hijras have a distinctive household structure, way of life, pattern, and social hierarchy. When new hijras are accepted into the community, a custom known as the guru-chela is carried out. This website must be operated and supported by the guru. The guru feeds the called-in hijras and gives her chela a new name. The chela will always respect and heed her guru and elder guru bhai, and the guru will watch over her. The Guru provides her chelas with a home, a safe place to live, financial security, etc. She extends a friendly greeting to everyone without distinction. Each chela gives the guru a share of its earnings for house up keep.

Revathi discusses the Hijra's way of life in her writings, "I had to become a chela (disciple or daughter) to a senior hijra, who is known as guru on the hijra tradition. I had to live with my guru for two years, take care of her, earn for her and once I had understood the hijra culture and tradition, then my guru would help me with the surgery" (*A Life in trans Activism* 12). Larger groups of hijras from diverse places form different lineages or homes known as Gharanas, and they live together in one house.

Each of these gharanas is under the direction of a Naayak, who acts as the primary decision-maker. There could be numerous gurus answering to each Naayak. These gurus rule the community members and have complete influence over every element of their day-to-day existence. Many chelas (followers) may be under a guru, and they will learn from the guru about specific hijra rituals and practises (Kalra 123). The gharanas are discussed by Revathi in her *A Life in Trans Activism* book. She explains, "The hijra community has seven gharanas or houses. Each house has its own nayak or leader. To become somebody's chela, it is necessary to bring the seven nayaks together in a jamaat (the social support system in the hijra community) and place a reeth (a symbolic token of adoption) in their presence" (18).

A Jamat, or council of elders, is made up of the heads of these families in a given city or region. This group participates in new member initiations, oversees important community decisions, and resolves any disputes that may arise. There are no listed Hijra houses, and there are no notable cultural or social distinctions among them. Each house, however, has an own history and set of peculiar customs (Chaturvedi et al 356). Revathi discusses the Jamaat framework in her writing, Revathi discusses the Jamaat framework in her writing, and "The hijra jamaat is a collective of transgender people. For people like us, who are forced to leave our homes because our families refuse to accept our gender identity as women, the jamaat offers us shelter and protection. It is a sanctuary" (*A Life in Trans Activism* 12).

Revathi has examined her home's oppressive atmosphere. While they have been shop-begging together, her guru has not shared any money. She writes, "At the end of the day, we would share our earnings. I wasn't given any money as my share went directly to the hijra in whose house I stayed" (*A Life in Trans Activism* 15). She expresses her desire to leave the neighbourhood. She never received the money from the senior hijras; they instead utilised it. To get money, she started doing sex work, but even then, her guru received money straight from the clients. Revathi, who is distressed, writes "even that money I would give my guru.

In spite of taking all the money, my guru never bought me good clothes. She spent the money on going out to bars with her boyfriend" (*A Life in Trans Activism* 22).

In the Hijra House, Revathi recounts her awful incident:

The head of the Hijra beat me because of my drinking. She was angry that I was wasting my time like this while clients were waiting for me and going away. When I answered back she hit out at me. While doing so, her glass bangles broke and cut me, I still carry the scar from that wound on my forehead. (*A Life in Trans Activism* 24)

Revathi has begun working for an NGO after escaping the hijra community's grasp. She has made it her life's work to transform society. In order to improve the quality of life for these transgender minorities, she also wants to ease the rigorous community regulations in accordance with coming generations. She wants the hijra culture to respect her fairly. The hijra society's traditional and patriarchal structure is oppressive. Revathi asserts that she cannot manage her chelas and must treat her juniors with the same respect as herself. Revathi wishes to leave the hijra group's ethnicity and culture in order to achieve ultimate empowerment.

The elder hijras' harsh behaviour is primarily caused by their ignorance of who they are. They repent society for just about everything they go through and renounce the dominant culture. Today's hijras drive them away from their network of support because they want to alter how society views them. They never abandon their community, despite the fact that they work against its will. Many experts, including Revathi and many others, are actively assisting their gurus. Because of their gurus and society, they are the people they are now.

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