
The Society of the Outcasts**Gargee Ghosh***Research Scholar, Visva Bharati, Shantiniketan, (W.B.) India***Abstract**

This article discusses LGBT issues especially its most prominent member, Hijras. In the Indian context they form the largest group of this visibly 'invisible' category. Their lives as outcasts are the focal point of this paper. Brief accounts on their life style, needs and demands are focused. The society's negative attitude that troubles them the most and have forced them to hide, allowed them to create a unique matriarchal society, this is broadly discussed here. A well-known autobiographical account and an open ended testimony collected as a part of survey are included. The impact of recently passed Bills and amendments in the favor of transgender community are also analyzed.

Key Words: Hijra, MSM, MSW, Heteronormalcy**Introduction**

Until recently 'Hijras' were labeled as deviants or outcasts in the wider spectrum of the Indian society. Ironically however rising interests in Gay Studies post 1980 (including hijras within MSM and MSW groups) have made this formerly 'visibly invisible' group our point of present discussion. Hijras maintain particular social structure which is highly modified and conform to the hierarchical status within their groups. It is important in the way of maintaining integrity and personal identity by challenging the so called heteronormal societies from which they wish to differ.

Hijras stand out in the Indian crowds in marked contrasts to intersex/ transgender/ transsexual people of the West in their looks. Caked in cheap rouge, kajal, powder and lipsticks, they are usually dressed in ill-fitting blouses and colourful saris or salwar kamiz roaming in busy market places, railway platforms, bus stands, and are often

found terrorizing the commoners, hustling them for money. What is noticeable in each case is that they are always found in units, they are very rarely alone. This is due to our attitude towards them. They are looked down upon with disgust and perennial fear, hapless and strange, bereft of sexual potency and the very word 'hijra' carries with it the obvious sense of denigration. So if found alone, she is usually molested, beaten up or even sexually abused.

In India today almost nineteen lakhs of hijras live as outcasts. They form class within themselves; living in secretive communities with well defined law and order, boundaries, own religious beliefs, local identities, customs and rituals. For centuries they have retained their unique distinguishing features in different regions of the country. For general understanding I have broadly classified their distinctive social characteristics under five following headings-

a) Gendered relations and names:

Upon starting their lives in the guru's home the person is given a new feminine name discarding the previous masculine identity. Being matriarchal in nature the new relations are labeled as nani, dadnani (mother of nani), mausi, didi, gurumai (head of band), gurubhai, chela, nati chela, amma or maa depending on the nature of the relationship.

b) Religion:

Hijras do not usually retain the religion of their parents but assume that of their guru. Most of the hijras adhere to Islamic faith maintaining that they are in certain way physically and psychologically castrated or circumcised persons just like Muslims. For instance, Ravi who has now changed to Heena becomes chela of Yasmin alias Rasool Sheikh and is given the name Heena Rasool Sheikh. Hijras have rituals of their own that may not be strictly divided into rigid religious categories.

c) Clans or Gharanas:

Like musical gharanas e.g. Jaipur or Benaras gharanas etc., hijras too are usually known by their gharanas. According to data based studies as conducted by Dr. Piyush Saxena in Mumbai there are presently seven gharanas, viz.

- i) Haji Ibrahim
- ii) Dongri
- iii) Bhendi Bazaar
- iv) Lashkar
- v) Poonawala
- vi) Lalan and
- vii) Chakla.

And in Hyderabad, two predominant gharanas or clans as Gayatri Reddy has pointed out are:

- i) Lashkarwala and
- ii) Sheharwala.

Rivalry among gharanas is common, just like in the regular Indian social fabric. Hijras of some gharanas are considered superior to those of other gharanas. In Mumbai Haji Ibrahim, headed by Farid Nayak, is considered superior to all other gharanas.

d) Organizational structure:

A hierarchical guru-chela structure exists in the hijra society. Each band has its own guru. These gurus also have superiors above them, called nayaks. A hijra becomes guru on basis of her age, seniority, number of chelas, wisdom and one's ability to lead and troubleshoot. Many a times, the guru takes initiative to take care of new entrants. This is her investment. Such gurus may not be old or senior person. Their society is strictly hierarchical and a hijra's life is governed by regulations laid down by her immediate superior.

The guru is responsible for the welfare of all hijras under her band. She trains, provides for and in return receives part of the daily income of her chelas. She is also responsible for sorting out issues, such as rivalries or occasional brush with law.

After a person is thrown out of the house for being 'different' she has none to turn for assistance, in her desperate search for succour, she turns to those persons she can identify with, a band of hijras. Recognizing the outcast as one of their own, they take her to their guru. If the newcomer has a choice

between more than one gurus, she is free to compare her living conditions with both of them before settling for one. A chela, if wishes to leave her band, has to give back the maintenance charge that may be taken back by her guru.

Some particular amount of funds is sent to the leaders if the chelas live away from 'homes'. Funds raised through contributions are significant in the way they are spent on celebrations and charitable work.

e) Means of livelihood:

Rarely a hijra is educated enough to earn her livelihood. The social, psychological, physiological challenges that leave an adolescent fighting for sense of belongingness with the persons of her family also bring in her a sense of loss. She generally and gradually withdraws herself from the rigid social norms that also do not allow her to take serious interests in studies.

Begging has become a basic part of income in hijra life. Devoid of substantial education, change in gender identity, and point of constant ridicule in the heteronormal society begging forms a regular source of income. Hijra groups have marked territories or area of operations; they usually follow a code of conduct. They normally visit each market or residential colony about once a week. Asking, in fact, bullying for alms in shops, trains, buses are also common.

The superstitious minds often believe that one might become impotent or sick if hijras would curse them. Blessings of newborns, blessings at marriage ceremony, or before the ritual pooja at hotels, shops and others are often sought. This is again so because in Indian societies hijras are often revered for

the mystifying blending of both male and female nature in them.

Prostitution however has brought hijras in the forefront of engaging medical, legal and socio-economic discussions of today. Most of the hijras are born male but have psychological urge to become female. They become part of Men having Sex with Men (MSM) or otherwise Male Sex Workers (MSW) groups. With alarming increase in Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS epidemic throughout the world and South East Asian countries the hijra life has gained importance. It has become necessary for us to know about them in the way that they are usually bereft of our conscious support, medical help and even humane sense of belongingness.

The discussion of the hijra life remains incomplete without referring to true life stories. Here to form the part of my basic argument I have taken up Revathi's autobiography called *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* and some intimate interactions with my friend, Chandani, a hijra from Uttarpara, Hoogly.

Revathi's journey as an effeminate boy from Tamil Nadu to slums of Delhi and Mumbai, and back to Bangalore is amazing in the way that it has captured the very essence of hijra life, its complexities, expectations and harrowing experiences for being different. Indeed she has joined a NGO, Sangama to voice the rallying cry for those individuals who are oppressed due to their sexual preferences.

The life at Salem became increasingly difficult for Doraisamy, the youngest son of the family, as he '...could not stop [feel]

being a girl' (Revathi 7). Beaten up and bruised he decides to run away and join some of his kind in Dindigul and then to Delhi. Being accepted cordially in hijra household Revathi had to learn the intricacies of hijra social life in which she delighted. However in order to become a complete woman a hijra may go through the process of 'nirvaanam' or castration. Revathi's first hand account of the operations performed surreptitiously by quacks is terrifying and heart rendering.

The life that Revathi always wanted opened up new vistas for her. She left begging and joined the queue of sex workers to satisfy her libido. It is important to note that throughout the process of 'danda' or anal sex, these persons find it pleasurable to play the role of passive or receptive partner. Delight was not without pangs of exasperation, her father completely disowned her from his will and on the other hands her brothers tried to snatch her earnings claiming them to be their own.

Taking up a male partner as so called 'husband' is sometimes the biggest dream of hijras. Revathi's account of her marriage ceremony is peculiar to the hijras of the South Indian hijra community. Yet like many others before her, her marriage failed. She is now working as a writer, actor and activist with the NGO, Sangama.

Revathi is successful in getting her story reach other people. Her fight against injustice and oppression has made us aware that our rallying cry of equality, liberty and fraternity still leaves out a chunk of humanity. As we strive to prove ourselves truly emancipated, we are still living in the

world of ignorance, misbelieve and hatred towards our own kind.

Chandni, aged about 45yrs, recounts the true horrors of her childhood as she was born without proper genitalia for a male or female child. Her father accused her mother and used to beat both of them. He never let her outside the house. Her brothers and sisters went to school and played with other children but she lived the life of a shadow. Chandni's existence was leaked out by some goons to hijra mausis [clan members] of the locality and they dragged her out of her home, away from her frantically crying mother, brothers and sisters. Ever since she was seven years old she has lived to face the harsh realities of the hijra life.

Chandni never had 'nirvanaam' but she was pretty young girl sent over years for the ritualistic dance of 'lagan' to parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and now Chhattisgarh. 'Lagan' requires ceremonial blessings of hijras and cameo dancing as part of entertainment for the crowd gathered together to celebrate the end of the year festival. She has been repeatedly subjected to inhumane psychical exertions in lieu of petty money. Moreover the rich farmers gather together to quench their libidinal urges upon them. In places where the male-female ratio has dropped due to foeticide and infanticides, hijras provide easy respite to their sexual thirst. Being molested under the gun point her face, hands and chest were scratched and burned by acid drops.

Chandni has now deserted her guru's house. She lives in a slum near to Uttarpara railway station and has earned mutual trust of the simple working class women. She takes care

of their children when they are away and doles divine medicines to sick and needy people. Interestingly, many Panskura, Purba Medinipur hijras have taken up the job of baby-sitting rather than begging and prostitution. This indeed may be considered as the part of reformation in hijra lives that are subjected to so much of pain and torture and insensitive treatment from us who consider hijras as 'the Other'.

In India Naz Foundation, an NGO, had won the battle for the recognition of the third gender people and repeal of the Section 377 of the IPC in 2009 (Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi). However only on 15 Apr. 2014 the Supreme Court of India granted hijras and other transgender people reservations in education and job and entitled them as socially and economically backward class. On 24 Apr. 2015, the Rajya Sabha passed the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014 guaranteeing rights and

entitlements, reservations in education and jobs (2% reservation in government jobs), legal aid, pensions, unemployment allowances and skill development for transgenders. Moreover the Delhi University pioneered the education for transgendered students and reservation for them to champion that Bill. Still the conditions of the larger uneducated and unemployed LGBT mass have remained more or less unchanged.

Taking Revathi's own words to wrap up the argument, we may ask ourselves, 'How much longer can we continue to live in fear? Don't we deserve to live free? ... Don't we all want the violence to end, or [at] least decrease? If each one of us is to think that this is none of my business, then how are we going to get people to understand hijras?' and stop these undue discriminations (Revathi 245-46).

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