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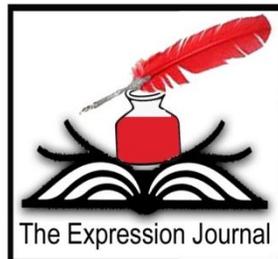
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PLIGHT OF THE HIJRAS IN 21ST CENTURY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Living in the 21st century, we Indians still blindly adhere to some age-old rules and customs. We, as humans are fond of compartmentalizing gender into two categories: male and female. But apart from that, there exists people who do not adhere by the gender roles fixed by the society. Through the performing of their gender non-conforming, or deviant behavior they challenge the social rules. The hijras belong to such a section. Often called jogappas, kothis, aravanis, we distinguish them as males having feminine behavior, wearing loud make-up and creating a ruckus with the clapping of their hands, or asking for money in traffic signals. But do we try to look at them from a humanistic point of view? This paper tries to point out the trials and tribulations they face from society which make them behave like thus in public. This paper tries to look at them from a humanistic point of view.

Key-Words

Transgenders, Hijras, Gender, Sex, Sexuality.

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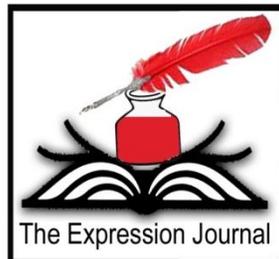
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Out of an intimate connection with Queer theory, Transgender Studies emerged around the 1990's. As a separate field of study, it addresses the least discussed issues like identity, sexuality, gender, and embodiment; and the theorists working in this field try to investigate into the intricate relation between sex and sexuality. Feminist discourse tried criticising the heteronormative structure of sex, gender, and sexuality; but its shortcoming lay in failing to capture the lived experiences of transgenders, who belonged to the marginalised sections of the society. The need of the moment was to construct a theory which would be able to do justice to the lived experiences of transgenders with respect to their gender non-conforming identity, body politics, as well as sexuality. The aim was that the new theory should challenge the gender binary norms and instead, try to understand the politics of the transgender or transsexual identity.

This research study aims at highlighting the trials and tribulations of the hijra community in India and seeks to bridge the gap between them and the mainstream society.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'transgender' as:

"of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth; *especially*: of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity is opposite the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth." (*Merriam-Webster*)

The term transgender is a broad spectrum which can include males who converted into females, females who converted into males, intersexed persons, hijras or eunuchs.

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The term 'hijra' is basically an abusive term, derived from the Urdu '*hijra*'. A hijra is one who has left his tribe or society. In Urdu, they are also known as 'khwaja sara'. However, there is a wide difference between a 'hijra' and a 'hermaphrodite'. A hermaphrodite is one who has both male and female sexual organs at birth, but a hijra is a male who later transforms into female through surgery.

Indian mythology is replete with stories of gods and goddesses who changed their avatars as per their will, or for a greater cause. But when a gender non-conforming person stands before us, we loathe them, see them as evil in the society. As per the Shaivites, the earliest form of God that existed was Ardha-narishwar, suggestive of creation and fertility existing in a single form. One of the major epics of ancient India, The Mahabharata, has the mention of Mohini avatar of Vishnu, Arjuna's transformation into Brihannala avatar, as well as Shikhandi who was reborn to destroy Bhishma, for the wrong done to her by the latter. Even the other Indian epic, The Ramayana has the mention of people who are neither men nor women. Legend has it, when Rama was exiled by his father, a huge crowd had assembled with teary eyes who wanted to accompany him. But Rama had said, "Ayodhya ke sabhi nar nari, apne gharon ko laut jaye (all men and women of Ayodhya may return to their homes)" (*Life of a Eunuch* 11) But since Rama had mentioned only men and women, the people belonging to the neither gender stayed there for fourteen years until Rama returned.

Belonging to the marginalized sections of the society, hijras follow an idiosyncratic lifestyle. They belong to particular gharanas, headed by a 'naik'. There are seven gharanas: Bhendibaazarwala, Poonawala, Lalanwala, Dilliwala, Lucknowwala, Bulakwala, and Hadir Ibrahimwala. They start their life under a particular 'guru' and with a new feminine name. The guru becomes their mother. They have a family system where the mother of the guru is called 'naani', disciples of the guru are called 'gurubhais', disciples are called 'chelas'. After a 'chela' had lived with her guru for around two to three years and had been a good disciple by following the guru's orders, she is then sent for sex reassignment surgery. They have a committee called 'jamaat' which deals with all the issues within the community. "The hijra jamaat is a collective of transgender people... It is a sanctuary." (*A Life in Trans Activism* 12)

The sex change surgery that the hijras undergo is a painful, unhygienic process. Living Smile Vidya in her autobiography *I am Vidya* recounts, "The hospital where my operation was performed was low in hygiene. I was not even given a proper bed... They dumped me on a bare cot immediately after the operation." (*I am Vidya* 106-107) Moreover, such operations are carried out in secrecy since it is considered an illegal act in India. Under Section 320 of the Indian Penal Code, it is a punishable offence. But Vidya says, "Our male identity is an unfortunate accident. We are, we want to be women... That is why we crave the surgical procedure..." (*I am Vidya* 105) After they undergo 'nirvana' or the sex change surgery as they prefer to call it, they are kept in a secluded place. It is only

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on the fortieth day that a puja is done and she is allowed to meet other people. The whole process of 'nirvana' or castration is considered to be a spiritual process. She is offered green sari and green bangles by the 'guru'as if she is a new bride after marriage, given a ritualistic bath after turmeric is applied all over her body. After they perform all the rituals in front of the image of their deity, Bahuchara Mata, the hijras perform dancing and singing to express their joy. From the next day, she is considered to be a complete woman. As Dr. Piyush Saxena in his book *Life of a Eunuch* writes, "She is no longer an 'akwa' but a respected member of her community..." (*Life Of A Eunuch* 178)

A hijra life is fraught with identity crisis too. They live in a limbo cause their birth certificate marks a gender which they are not. And since sex reassignment surgery is not considered legal in India, the hospitals where they undergo the surgery does not provide them with a sex change certificate. Till the year 2011, there was no provision for a 'third gender' category in the Indian census. However, the Election Commission of India, in the year 2009, gave them a choice to be enrolled in the 'Others' category. Revathi says, "I was the first trans woman in the country to have been issued a passport." (*A Life in Trans Activism* 70)

While people struggle at some point in their lives, for the hijras it is their daily way of living. Not only do they have to fight for their identity against their family, friends, and relatives; they are oppressed by the upholders of law, that is, the policemen, as well as feuds are common within their community. They earn their living by begging, or doing sex work. The sex trade that the hijras perform is known as 'danda'. Vidya writes, "Denied job and higher education opportunities, transgenders in India have no option but to resort to begging or prostitution." (*I am Vidya* 105) Even then, they have to bribe the local rowdies as well as the police. "The police took bribe from us all the time, and yet at the end of the month we were taken to the police station, beaten, hurt and sent back." (*The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* 210) It is just for the sake of carrying out a daily living that the hijras put aside their honour and resort to begging and prostitution. Fuming with anger, Revathi writes, "...I'm called a hooker. What should the police be called then-they who use us and snatch money from us?" (*The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* 221) Vidya writes that in spite of having a Masters degree in linguistics, she had to beg in trains to feed herself. She narrates a shocking incident of her life while she was begging in train one day.

"Most of my bad experiences in Pune were at the hands of Tamils. One such instance was on the Nagerkoil train... There was a foursome there. Three of the men were tall and well built. The fourth one seemed to be a kindly person. I avoided the toughies and approached the softie. He gave me two rupees. 'Can't you make it five, Tamil sir?' I said. Hardly had I spoken when a hard slap landed on my cheek. It was delivered by the buffalo sitting in the opposite seat..." (*I am Vidya* 101)

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In the end, nothing could be done for the upliftment of hijras unless the narrow mindsets of people change. The hijra community will be truly empowered if all the citizens of the nation join hands for their overall development. Families need to understand that having gender non-conforming behavior is not abnormal. They should be educated, scholarships should be given so that they could continue their education even in adverse situations. The Supreme Court of India passed a landmark judgment on April 15, 2014, where hijras were included in the third gender category. The Supreme Court asked the Centre to treat transgenders as socially and economically backward, and include them in the OBC (Other Backward Castes) category so they would get rightful reservation in education and job sector. Moreover, the states were advised to devise welfare schemes and organize public awareness campaigns to wash away the social stigmas which had repressed the transgender community for decades.

At present, Odisha is the first state to give transgender persons in the state hundred days of paid work annually as well as pensions. Moreover, they would be entitled to food benefits under the National Food Security Act.

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