

Indian Third Gender – Literary Representation and Place in the Social Structure

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Abstract

Hijras are one of the most controversial social groups which over the years has occupied an extremely marginalized position in Indian society. Inherently inscribed in the landscape of India, mentioned and described in both Indian epics and other ancient texts, nowadays they are feared, mocked or ostracized. Even if today marginalized, they co-create Indian culture. Their condition based on rejection by family, cultural and societal isolation is still neglected. Their identification as a uniquely positioned third sex becomes much more complicated when the *hijra* lifestyle is discussed with respect to this contemporary reality, instead of historical or mythical representation. But who exactly are they? Messengers of Gods or derided, queer dissidents? This article will try to answer to that question.

Keywords: third gender, hijras, literary representation, society, social structure.

1. Definition of the Third Gender

Indian society is deeply divided along the lines of gender, caste, religion, class, language, education, all of which intersect with sexuality to create deeper divides and oppressions. However, differently than in Western societies, in India from the dawn of history the division between sex is not binary but trinary where the gap between male and female sexes is filled by the third, 'neuter' gender, which is neither male nor female.

Commonly known as *hijras* in their own narratives, they view themselves not simply as 'neither man nor woman', but also as deficient in terms of masculinity and not completely feminine. Instead of taking a place outside the female-male binary, the *hijras* have created a life somewhere in between, one that is restricted by deep-rooted cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. Nowadays the word *hijra* is used almost exclusively by the non-transgender community, to denote the man deprived of masculinity, eunuch, impotent, it has a pejorative, depreciating aspect and basically it does not reflect reality. Indeed, *hijras* are not unsuccessful men but rather women who regained their proper identity by getting out of the shape not belonging to them or representatives of the third gender with characteristics of both other sexes, spread out in different proportions.

Intrinsically carved in the scenery of India, yet they are marginalized in this caste-based social structure. Largely, the community expresses a feminine gender identity, coming closest experientially to what would be referred to in the West as a transsexual, that is, a female trapped in a male body. It is a socio-religious construct marked by extreme gender -nonconformity in the sense that there is no correlation between their anatomical sex and gender identity.

According to popular religious practice, they are believed to be endowed with special powers to confer fertility on newlyweds or new born children, this is why how wants the tradition, they sing and dance at weddings as well as childbirth functions, and they are rewarded for these services with money, clothes or jewelry. Singing and dancing has a respectable status in the *hijra* community; it gives them a sense of power as it reaffirms the fact that the people who ask them to sing and dance during the childbirth believe in their power. However, due to poverty, discrimination, lack of education and skills, many of *hijras* have no means of earning money. So, they engage in commercial sex work and begging.

The term *hijra* is a 'term- umbrella' which includes all the non-cissexual as well as non-heterosexual individuals like transsexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, intersexed, eunuchs, impotents, homosexuals, bisexuals, androgynies, gynemimetics, emasculated, impotent, castrated, effeminate, transgendered and so on, in simple words: all those who are somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional or who are considered queer. The *hijras* themselves use to distinguish between those who are born with ambiguous genitals and those who are made such through castration. While in Western culture gender and sex have been described under two distinct realms: male and female (identities which to some are determined solely biologically), in the Indian culture they have grown to become a prominent and well-known member of the society, a separate entity who carries its own culture but who have suffered from discrimination and have struggled for its basic fundamental rights from the time of the European, specially British, colonialism.

2. Literary and Religious Representation

Transgender characters appear in early Indian literature; we can encounter them in two ancient Indian epics: *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. They have their place in the Hindu and Islamic mythologies. We find them in Sanskrit "Encyclopedias" of Hinduism: *Puranas*, in the treatises from the field of politics and law, *Manusmriti*, in the Indian *ars amandi*, *Kamasutra*, in historical documents from the Mughal era. They are present in the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Jain traditions.

In the literature they are defined as a *tritiyaprakriti*, which means 'neither man nor woman', what is a fully satisfactory designation for *hijras*. The literature of Jains developed this conception very well distinguishing between 3 sexual orientations: *striveda* (sexual feelings of a woman), *pumveda* (sexual feelings of a man) and *napumsakaveda* (sexual feelings of a hermaphrodite).

In the third-century B.C.E. in the linguistic treatise, *Mahabhasya* [*The Great Commentary*, 4.1.3], we find this description: "What is it that people see when they decide, this is a woman, this is a man, this is neither a woman nor a man? [...] That person who has breasts and long hair is a woman; that person who is hairy all over is a man; that person who is different from either when those characteristics are absent, is neither woman nor man."¹ or "bereft of either a masculine or feminine nature."

Hijras themselves believe their origins are dated back to the period of the *Mahabharata*. According to the Indian tradition and to the epic itself everything what is present in its verses is religiously and legally sanctioned, while whatever is not found in the *Mahabharata*, does not exist. Thus, in its fourth book intitled *Virata Parva*, Arjuna in 13th year of the Pandavas' exile cursed by

¹ After: Lal V. s.130

the nymph Urvashi has to spend one year in the court of the king Virata as Brihannala, wandering as a dancer and singer among women, dressed in a saree, reputed to be unmanly like eunuch.

Then later, there is another episode, present in the southern version of the *Mahabharata*, where during the Kauravas-Pandavas war, the Pandavas have to make a human sacrifice, for ensuring victory in the war. No one is ready to volunteer, till finally, Aravan, the son of Arjuna comes forward and offers himself for sacrifice. There is but one condition: he should enjoy one night of marital bliss before the sacrifice. This proves to be a difficult situation since no king is willing to marry his daughter to Aravan, knowing well that she would be widowed the next day. Finally, Lord Krishna takes a female form of Mohini and spends one night of marital bliss with Aravan. Thanks to it, Aravan is duly sacrificed the next day. The story has become more and more popular through the ages and now, every year, in the village of Koovagam in Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu, there is a temple festival of *hijras* who come from all the country to attend it.

The *hijras* trace their origins back to the religious era of Rama, again finding the confirmation in the southern version of the second great epic, The *Ramayana*, which narrates that when Rama was sent into exile with Sita and Lakshmana at the behest of his father, he was followed to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest by his adoring subjects. Reached the shore, he turned to his people and said: "Men and women, please go back and perform your duties". When he returned to Ayodhya fourteen years later after his victory over Ravana, he found a cluster of people still gathered at the same spot. They told him that since they were neither men nor women, they had felt themselves exempt from Rama's injunction. For this act of exemplary devotion, they received the blessing of Rama.

As religion is of great importance to the *hijras*, they underline their origins and connection with Indian gods. They identify themselves with the god Shiva, a central, sexually ambivalent figure in Hinduism, who integrates both male and female characteristics in his hermaphroditic aspect of *Ardhanarishvara*, "*The Lord whose half is a woman*". The mythology of *Ardhanarishvara* originates in the *Puranas*, but it was developed later to explain existent images of the deity that had emerged in the Kushan era. It is mentioned again in the *Mahabharata*, that Shiva explained the rise of the universe from the union of sexes, as represented by his half-male-half-female form. In some narratives, Shiva is described as dark and fair-complexioned, half yellow and half white, half woman and half man, and both woman and man.

3. Place in the Social Structure

As we could see, while transgenders are despised and treated with contempt in most societies, they are supposed to have a sanctioned place in Hindu society (especially in weddings, births and festivals) as a recognized 'third gender', accommodating gender variation, ambiguity and contradictions. Overall, they are a visible force, and part of an organized community. Despite this supposedly elevated status, reality is starkly harsh. All over the country, in any part where the *hijras* reside, their lives are often physically, mentally and emotionally scarred by experiences of shame, dishonor and gruesome violence. In the contemporary scenario, it's not just the ambiguous gender but also the class dimension of the *hijra* community that has a severe impact on issues which the upper class so conveniently take for granted, such as access to education, job or medical care.

As the majority of the Indian society and culture rejects them, *hijras* tend to isolate themselves from the mainstream culture, what gives them a sense of community, but it also preserves their security and safety. That is why they form groups and they situate their houses relatively close together.

India is two-sided in its social perception of the *hijra* lifestyle. From one side, Indian society treats *hijras* with a combination of fascination and devotional fear, from the other side they are rejected and mocked. As a result, Indian *hijras* struggle as an ostracized social class, subject to gender violence and various other human rights violations.

Fortunately, slowly, slowly, their conditions start to improve. They form unions under the leadership of their representatives like Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi, A. Rewathi or Kalki Subramanyam to organize protests for their human rights. After almost two centuries of persecutions, in 2014 the Supreme Court of India finally conferred to them the status of the legal third gender.

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