Exploring the Social Realities of Hijras in India: Challenges, Resilience, and Pathways to Inclusion

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Abstract

This research examines the social realities of Hijras in India, contextualizing their historical and cultural significance, legal recognition, social stigma, and community organization. Drawing on the lens of the Muted Group Theory and secondary data review, the study explores the experiences of hijras within the context of Indian society, highlighting the complexities of their identities, social structures, interactions, and resisting marginalization. The researchers begin by tracing the historical and cultural roots of hijras in India, to their recognition as the "third gender", and analyzing the implications of this legal recognition for their rights and social inclusion. Next, the research explores the social stigma and discrimination faced by hijras in various aspects of life. It also delves into the unique social structure of the hijra community, exploring the roles of gurus and chelas and how the guru-chela system provides social support and a sense of belonging. Finally, this research offers recommendations for future research and community-based initiatives to address the needs and rights of hijras in India. It underscores the importance of collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and academic institutions to promote greater inclusion and equality for hijras. Through its comprehensive analysis of the social realities of hijras in India, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of this marginalized community and advocates for meaningful action to address their systemic challenges.

Keywords: Hijras, India, Muted Group Theory, Social Stigma, Community, Discrimination, Legal Recognition

1. Overview

1.1. Introduction

Hijras, a community of transgender individuals in India, have faced systemic marginalization and lack of representation in mainstream discourse. This paper aims to examine the lived experiences of hijras through the lens of muted group theory, which states that certain groups are rendered voiceless or muted due to societal power structures dominated by privileged groups.

1.2. Background and Literature Review

The existing literature on hijras is limited, with much of it being historical accounts or literary representations written from an outsider's perspective. There is a lack of firsthand narratives and contemporary studies capturing the realities hijras face across various spheres like education, healthcare, employment, and housing. Muted group theory provides a useful framework to analyze how hijra voices have been systematically suppressed and excluded from dominant discourses.

1.3. Methodology

This study employs a secondary literature review methodology, analyzing relevant academic sources and articles. Muted group theory will be applied to identify how hijra perspectives have been muted across different contexts.

1.4. Findings

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The literature indicates that hijras face significant obstacles due to discrimination based on their gender identity. Lack of employment opportunities and social acceptance further marginalizes hijras economically and socially.

1.5. Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the systemic oppression and voicelessness faced by hijras in India through a muted group theory lens. It calls for centering hijra perspectives in future research, policymaking, and social efforts to dismantle the structures that have historically muted this community

2. Third-gender Hijra contextual understanding

To fully understand the Hijra, it would require an appreciation of the religious, cultural, and historical contexts through which they have evolved while also appreciating the challenges and strides made by the community to achieve recognition and societal acceptance.

The term "hijra" refers to persons who identify as having the third gender (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). In Hindu society, people of the third gender have been identified as far back as the 16th Century from the Mughal Empire Era. Historical research finds the terms eunuch and hijra were used interchangeably, though the term 'Eunuch' in reference to Hijras in India is deemed pejorative (Goel, 2022). Eunuchs in the Mughal Empire were related to Hijras, albeit these people could potentially be male or female (Nanda, 1999). Through their gender "uniqueness," the eunuchs were allowed to travel freely between the mardana (men's side) and the zenana (women's side) of the Court, guard the women of the harems and care for their children (Jaffrey, 1996, p. 53). Third-gender people were often revered and respected throughout South Asian history, and many rose to significant positions of power under both Hindu and Muslim rulers (Pandey, 2014).Believed to have the ability to bless, many would seek out Hijras for blessings during important religious ceremonies such as marriages and childbirth.

Hijra privileges and culture as they knew it then came under attack by the British Raj in 1858, and despite being an integral part of Indian history for thousands of years, the Hijra community faced discrimination and persecution. The British colonial rule reshaped the identity of Hijras by criminalizing their existence and imposing a legal framework that marginalized them within society. This included the creation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which made illegal any "unnatural offenses" that were deemed "against the order of nature." (Singh, 2022). In later years, the Criminal Tribes Act (also referred to as CTA), Act 27 of 1871, designated them as a 'criminal caste, banning them from public areas. This decision was based on Christian notions about gender that were prevalent during that time (Singh, 2022) and forced the hijra community underground as they were considered "eunuchs" responsible for sodomy, kidnapping, and castrating male children (Hinchy, 2019)

Hijras are most often male-assigned GNC people who leave their families in their teenage years (usually due to abuse for their gender expression and/or perceived sexuality) (Mount, 2020). Hijra Culture and communities are concentrated only in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. No other South Asia country has the Hijra Culture and community (Reza, 2022). It was estimated that around 3 million third-gender people live in India alone (Chowdhury, 2020). The largest hijra populations in India are concentrated in the northern and central states (particularly Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan.) (Bisen, 2015).

3. Hijra vs transgender and LGBTQ

Hijras comprise the most prominent, publicly recognized group of sexual and Gender Non-Confirming people (Mount, 2020) in India. Though Hijras are often imagined under the rubric of transgender (Dutta & Roy, 2014), various research indicates efforts by some transgender women to differentiate themselves from hijras, possibly because hijras continue to be disparaged within the "general society" because of their poverty, their supposed dirtiness (Hinchy, 2014). The hijra identity is complex, with distinctions made within the community between "real" hijras and those perceived as imposters. Authentic hijra identity is often tied to affiliation with a hijra gharana (house society), which serves as a symbolic unit of lineage guiding the social organization of the hijra community in India (Goel, 2022). Dutta 2012 alludes that affiliating to a house (Hijra Gharana) is one of the main ways to differentiate between the Hijra and Transgender women. Some hijras have opted to identify as transgender or undergo sex-reassignment surgery, while others continue to assert their unique identity as hijras (Bearak, 2016). Hijras are often born male but identify more with the female gender. They may undergo a castration ceremony and live as part of a community under a guru. Hijras challenge conventional sexual orientations and are considered a distinct gender (Rhude, 2018).

Although definitions of the term transgender itself are contested, 'transgender' is coming to represent an umbrella term under which resides anyone who bends the common societal constructions of gender, including cross-dressers, transsexuals, genderqueer youth, drag queens, and a host of other terms that people use to self-identify their gender. (Stotzer, 2009). While transgender is a relatively newer category in India, it is often framed in

opposition to the longstanding yet stigmatized category of hijra. (Mount, 2020). Transgender individuals in the West have gained increased visibility and recognition, particularly since the latter half of the 20th century after the Stonewall Riots in 1969, which was pivotal in advocating for transgender rights. Stonewall reflected the beginning of a new chapter in gay and lesbian history (Andrus, 2010). There are widespread anxieties about transwomen being mistaken for Hijras mainly because of similarities in class locations. Hijras are not transgender. The vast majority of hijras identify as members of the third gender, meaning they are neither male nor female and are not transitioning (Singh, 2022). Although many trans women are connected to hijra groups, they undertake identity work to raise awareness and promote understanding of their identities; this work often focuses on delineating (and thus reifying) the differences between themselves and hijras, the group with whom they are most likely to be confused (Mount, 2020).

Reddy (2005) indicates that feminine-presenting people may identify with other terms. For example, though the"Zenanas" in Hyderabad are often associated with hijra groups, they do not identify themselves as hijras. The "Kothis" are sometimes at pains to assert themselves as separate from, and even superior to, hijras (Hall, 2005). Some groups present themselves as hijras and engage in occupations undertaken by hijras, yet they are not part of hijra lineages and may not be recognized as hijras by hijras who participate in such lineages (Mount, 2020; Dutta, 2012b; Reddy, 2005)

4. Hijra Community and Meaning

The Gurus (mostly older Hijras) play multiple roles by providing a sense of belonging, support, and protection. They also sponsor the young aspirant hijra (or chela) in their formal induction into the hijra community. The Guru (Guruma) is expected to instruct and acclimate their chela to the hijra way of life in exchange for "Ulti" (Bengali meaning "backward"), a secret language used only by hijra and influenced by Persian vocabulary, is used to train them (Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2009).

5. Sociality and mainstream

5.1. Community Structure

The hijra community often has a unique social structure with gurus (leaders or mentors) and Chelas (disciples). Gurus play a significant role in the lives of hijras, providing guidance, support, and a sense of community. Mutual obligations characterize the relationship between gurus and Chelas, and gurus may act as protectors and advocates for their Chelas.
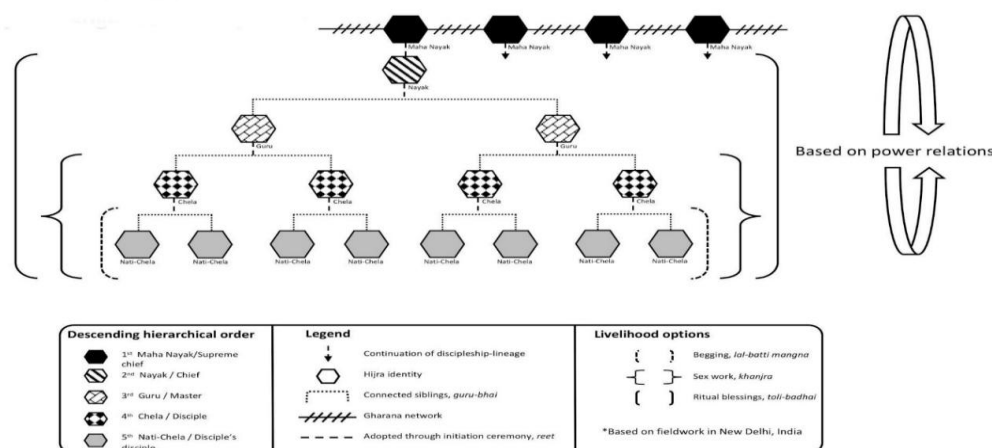

Figure 5.1. Hijra prestige economy. Image sourced from Goel, 2022.

An authentic hijra identity is based on its affiliation to a hijra gharana (house society) (Goel, 2016), which are symbolic units of lineage, guiding the overall schematic outline of the social organization of the hijra community in India. (Goel, 2022). Hijra are typically estranged from their biological families, usually due to abuse for their gender expression and/or perceived sexuality (Mount, 2020), and live in artificial kinship networks structured around the relationship between a Guru and a Chela (Stief, 2017). To identify and be accepted as a hijra, a person must be initiated through a ritual adoption by a hijra guru into the hijra community (Nanda 1990 and Reddy 2006). The Gurus (mostly older Hijras) play multiple roles by providing a sense of belonging, support, and protection. They also sponsor the young aspirant hijra (chela) in their formal induction into the hijra community. Dutta 2012 alludes that affiliating to a house (hijra gharana) is one of the main ways to differentiate between the Hijra and Trans women. "Real" hijras have a house affiliation whereas "fake" hijras do not have this

affiliation. "Fake" hijras are men who are "cross-dressed beggars" and not "legitimate hijras but are often mistaken as having a hijra identity by the "mainstream public" (Dutta, 2012). The major principle of social organization among the hijras is the relation between gurus (teachers) and their Chelas (disciples). This relationship is a replica of both the Hindu joint family and the relationship of spiritual leader and disciple in Hinduism.

5.2. Social Control

The hijra community has established strong social control mechanisms over its members, mostly because of the near monopoly of its elders over work prospects. A hijra pays a "fee" upon joining the community, which grants her the ability to work in the specific area "owned" by her guru. (Countries and their culture, 2024). A hijra loses her ability to work with the group once she is expelled from the community by her Guru. This expulsion can significantly impact a hijra's livelihood and social support, given the close-knit and hierarchical nature of the community (Knight, 2016). A hijra without a guru will not be called to perform, nor may she solicit alms in any location already assigned to another hijra group since a guru organizes all hijra performances. A hijra who has been expelled from the community could try starting her work group, but this is nearly impossible as it involves finding a lucrative area not claimed by other hijras (Countries and their culture, 2024).

Hijras use both verbal and physical abuse to protect their territories (Mal, 2018), and suspension severely inhibits one's ability to earn. Suspension typically occurs only in cases of serious misconduct (Goel, 2022). The most important norm in a hijra household is honesty concerning property. Furthermore, as ritual performers, hijras sometimes enter the houses of their audiences; therefore, maintaining a reputation for honesty is necessary for their profession (Countries and their culture, 2024).

Because the hijra household is both an economic and a domestic group, pressures to conform are great. The geographical mobility allowed inside the community prevents serious confrontations (Wijetunge, 2023). The national network of hijras can work as a blacklist as well as an outlet for diffusing the disruptive effects of conflict.

5.3. Power Dynamics

The power dynamics in a hijra community involve a combination of internal structures like discipleship-kinship systems and external interactions with mainstream society. These dynamics influence social relations, roles within the community, and strategies for survival in the face of marginalization and discrimination (Khan et al., 2009). The community operates through a system of discipleship-kinship that regulates their activities and establishes a power hierarchy among its members (Goel, 2022). This system is legitimized by councils known as hijra jamaats or hijra panchayats, which are formed by higher-ranked members within the community. These councils are crucial in governing the community and maintaining order (Goel, 2022). Within the hijra community, an inherent hierarchy impacts how members are perceived in society. For example, "Badhai" hijras, who cultivate their powers through asceticism and renounce sexuality, are respected for their dedication to spiritual practices. In contrast, "Kandra" hijras, who engage in sex work, are often viewed with less respect by other members of the community (Wijetunge, 2023). This distinction in roles reflects notions of authenticity and a "true" hijra identity, where certain practices are considered more authentic than others.

Despite being marginalized and facing various forms of violence and discrimination, hijras have developed survival strategies and organized themselves into groups with matriarchal structures for protection and support (Wijetunge, 2023).

The community has also established its own coded language for communication, indicating a level of cohesion and solidarity among its members.

5.4. Stigmatization and Marginalization

Since ancient times, the hijra community has been segregated from mainstream society (Hahm, 2010), and from the colonial era, they have been marginalized in social, political, and economic life (Hossain, 2017). The hijra has also been denied access to social institutions and services, including education, housing, and primary health care (Khan et al., 2009). Employment discrimination is rampant and because of this, many Hijras resort to begging, dancing, and prostitution to make a living.

The Hijras continue to experience inequality in their fundamental human rights to justice and development (Khan et al., 2009; Chakrapani, 2010). They are susceptible to daily acts of aggression and discrimination, which can have a snowball effect over time. Some of the effects are readily apparent, such as the outbreak of the HIV epidemic in the community of hijras. (Singh 2022)

5.5. Legal Recognition and Rights

Although hijras have been part of South Asia for generations, their identity and culture were in stark contrast with Western morality and their concept of gender. All non-heteronormative behaviors were labeled as pathological, thanks to British colonial rule's imposition of body policing and its subsequent medicalization (Hunter, 2019). Still prevalent in South Asian culture today is a stigma that dates back nearly two centuries to British colonial rule (Rhude, 2018) even though India has been independent of British rule since 1947, they have only just recently begun to make progress on removing legislation that has been used to attack the Hijra population.

In April 2014, the Supreme Court of India legally recognized that Hijras would be recognized on official documents under a separate "third gender" category. In 2018, India also decriminalized homosexual sex, overturning a 160-year-old law instituted by the British (Nelson & Fernandez 2022). The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, of 2019 has provided much-needed legal protection. The Bill prohibits discrimination in accessing social services, employment, education, and health care. (Singh, 2022)

While progress has been slow, in 2015, the first hijra mayor in India, Madhu Bai, was elected in the city of Raigarh, and in 2017, the city of Kochi hired 23 hijra to work for their public transit system. Government-set quotas were provided to increase access to job and educational opportunities for third-gender citizens — an estimated half a million (McCarthy, 2014, April 18). Though there have been some positives, there are still thousands of Hijras trapped in poverty due to discrimination. In 2017, India's first transgender school (Sahaj International School) opened in Kerala, which is run by six transgenders.

5.6. Activism and Advocacy

The hijra community's activism and advocacy efforts are ongoing, focusing on ensuring their voices are heard. The hijra community has actively engaged with law and policymakers to articulate their struggles and advocate for policy change and this has led to significant legal and social advancements, including the recognition of a third gender, improved health and living conditions, increased representation in the media, and increased employment opportunities.

6. Theoretical framework

Muted Group Theory

Edwin Ardener, a British Anthropologist, developed the Muted Group Theory in the 1970s to explain that a dominant expression at every level of society forms a dominant structure within it (Syawal et al., 2024; Ardener, 1975). Sheila Ardener further expanded the theory to several marginalized groups beyond women. S. Ardener (1975; 1978) suggests a social hierarchy that privileges some groups over others in every society. Those groups that function at the top of the social hierarchy determine, to a great extent, the communication system of the entire society. (Orbe, 1998). While the theory primarily focused on gender, it has also been applied to other marginalized groups like the Hijras.
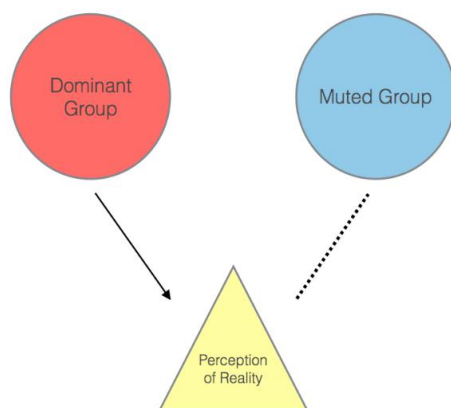

Figure 6.1. Muted Group Theory. Image accessed from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muted_group_theory

The theory suggests that language, which is made and controlled by dominant groups, devalues marginalized groups' words, thoughts, and experiences. Muted Group Theory's central premise is that members of marginalized or subordinate groups are muted or rendered unable to express themselves effectively.

This theory has also been developed to address issues concerning unequal power distribution between dominant and silent groups (Owusu, 2016). Instead of using explicit authority or force, everyday political and cultural practices are used to silence people. (Syawal et. Al. 2024). It highlights how the communication practices of dominant groups suppress, mute, or devalue the words, ideas, and discourses of subordinate groups. The dominant group creates and controls the language system that silences the subordinate group. According to West & Turner (2010), this silencing occurs through ridicule, ritual, control, and harassment. Members of non-dominant groups are often forced to utilize a communication system that fails to accurately represent their collective experiences (Orbe, 1998), and their identities and expressions have often been silenced or rendered invisible by the dominant heteronormative and patriarchal structures (Narrain, 2007).

Muted Group Theory is valuable for analyzing situations with power differentials (Warner et al., 2017), and when applied here, it highlights how the hijra community's perspectives, narratives, and lived realities have been systematically muted or overlooked within the mainstream discourse. (Chhavi, Bhushan & Tripathi 2022). This muting occurs through various societal mechanisms, such as stigmatization, discrimination, and lack of representation in decision-making processes.

During the British colonization of India, Hijras became marginalized and muted; hence, their lived experiences were not represented in the dominant structures. To counteract this impact, the hijra community has developed its own unique cultural practices, rituals, and language, which are often misunderstood or dismissed by the dominant groups.

7. Recommendations for Future research

The available academic literature on hijras is mostly derived from mainstream, historical, or literary sources authored by authors who lack intimate knowledge of hijra identities. To get more authentic viewpoints, future research should include sources from hijra communities themselves, such as blogs, primary interviews, oral histories, and other non-academic places where hijras share their own narratives and knowledge. This will be consistent with the goal of muted group theory, which is to elevate voices that have been systematically marginalized in dominant discourse.

While valuable, this narrow scope neglects contemporary lived realities and material conditions faced by hijras in everyday non-literary contexts like workplaces, healthcare, housing, etc. Muted group theory is meant to illuminate systematic marginalization, which requires examining hijra experiences across all spheres of life.

8. Conclusion

The lived experiences of hijras in India, as illuminated by secondary data and interpreted through the lens of Muted Group Theory, reveal a complex mix of marginalization, resilience, and gradual social change. Muted Group Theory posits that non-dominant groups are often silenced by the language and practices of the dominant culture, which is evident in the hijra community's historical struggle for voice and visibility. Secondary data sources, ranging from academic studies to NGO reports and articles, consistently highlight the systemic barriers hijras face regarding social stigma, legal recognition, and economic opportunities.

Despite these challenges, the hijra community has demonstrated remarkable steps in navigating a society that frequently relegates them to the sidelines. Their resilience is manifested in the rich cultural practices they maintain, the kinship structures they create, and the advocacy efforts they lead. The legal milestones achieved, such as the recognition of the third gender and the decriminalization of homosexuality, are a testament to the effectiveness of their collective voice, yet these victories are just the beginning of a long journey toward true equality.

In moving forward, it is imperative that scholars, policymakers, activists, and society at large engage with the hijra community in a manner that addresses the power imbalances that mute their experiences. Only then can we hope to foster a truly inclusive society where the lived experiences of all individuals, including hijras, are heard, valued, and given the space to flourish.

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