

# “Who Are They?”: The Third Sex in India

Lopamudra Ganguly, Department of Geography, University of Calcutta, 35, Bullygunge Circular Road, Kolkata-700019

**Abstract-** The word “Third Sex” is a jargon in the socio-economic structure of Indian society. “Neither man nor woman”-this concept is not very clear for the present Indian culture. But it is a striking fact that Indian ancient documents gives a witness of this “Third -Sex “phenomena. “Hjra” (common term used for Third Sex) sometimes related with another argot term prostitution. This paper accumulated the fact from ancient past with the present day scenario relates with the societal structure with this “Third Sex”.

**Index Terms**—Hermaphrodite; Hijra; Homosexuality; Impotence; Prostitution; Third Sex; Zenana

## INTRODUCTION:

“I am the third sex, not a man trying to be a woman. It is your society’s problem that you only recognize two sexes”. (Hijra Mona Ahmed to author Dayanita Singh). (1)

“THIRD GENDER” OR “THIRD SEX” is not a very familiar one or its better to say the world generates fear-psychosis. The terminology describes individuals who are recognized to be neither man nor woman. The more common phrase about “THIRD SEX” has been used in India is “HIJRA”.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

If we try to make a postmortem of the jargon “Hijra” from the very past in Indian mythology a very common term has been emerged that is “Ardhanarishvara” (dual male and female personality in one corpse), where Hindu GOD “SHIVA” is often represented as. Indication of third sex can be found throughout the different texts of India’s ancient religious tradition- such as (i) Hinduism, (ii) Jainism and (iii) Buddhism, and it can be inferred that ‘Vedic Culture’ acknowledged three genders.

Traditional Hinduism makes many specific references to alternative sexes and sexual ambiguity among Gods as well as among humans. Ancient Hinduism identified third sex and also divided it into two categories: a) the male eunuch called the “Waterless” because they had shrunk their testes; because of these castrated; they called hermaphrodite, “not woman,” or female eunuch (refers to a woman who does not menstruate). b) In second category belong to those, who were more feminine (whether males or females) wore false breasts and imitated the voice, gestures, dress, delicacy and timidity of women. All of these categories of persons had the function of providing alternative techniques of sexual satisfaction, classical Hindu sex manual; the Kama sutra detailed this information very carefully. (2)

Homosexuality was condemned in the ancient law books. The laws of Manu, the first formulation of the Hindu

moral code, held that men who engaged in anal sex lost their caste. Other medieval writers held that men who engaged in oral sex with other men were reborn impotent. But on the other hand homosexuals were apparently tolerated in reality. The Hindu philosopher of 2<sup>nd</sup> century ‘CE’ Vatsyayana, author of the Kamasutra, responded to critics of oral and anal sex by saying that, “in all things connected with love, everybody should act according to the custom of his country, and his own inclination.”

During the Mughal period the motivations for an individual to become a hijra might have been fuelled by different considerations. Hijras guarded harems and often occupied important positions of trust and responsibility. They often owned considerable properties and had large financial assets as a result of being trusted confidants of powerful individuals. Very perceptibly they were considered safe persons to guard the harems of kings because of their safe sexual inclination. The prevailing patronage of eunuchs by monarchs was closely associated with the wishes of individuals to turn eunuchs, not only in India, but in diverse cultures throughout the world. (3)

19<sup>th</sup> century accounts report that impotence was an essential qualification for admission into the hijra community. A newcomer initiated into this community was on assessment for a long as a year. During this time his impotence was carefully tested, sometimes by making the person sleep four nights with a prostitute. Only after impotence was established would the new comer be permitted to undergo the emasculation operation and become a full member of the community.

While in South India, where hijras do not have the cultural role that they do in North India, the terms used for hijra, such as Kojja in Telegu or pottai in Tamil, are epithets that connote a derogatory meaning of a cowardly or feminine male, the term hijra itself is rarely used this way.(4)

In parts of North India, effeminate male who are assumed to play the passive role in homosexual relationships are referred to as zenana, literally meaning woman: By becoming a hijra, one removes oneself from this category. Zenana are said to think of them in the male gender, generally wear male clothing, and sometimes may be married and have children. Some zenana may live with hijras and perform with them, but they are not "real" hijras. Although hijras assert that such men are "fake" hijras.

#### ARE THERE ONLY TWO SEXES?

The chromosomes for males are XY and those for a female are XX, but hermaphrodite chromosomal combinations documented such as XXY or XYY. According to this basic term there are at least five sexes, but because of preconceived notions we force them into two categories, namely male and female.

According to biological angle, 'Hijra' (Hermaphrodite) has been classified into four general Categories-

- i) BILATERAL HERMAPHRODITISM – The individual has an ovary and testes on each side.
- ii) LATERAL HERMAPHRODITISM – She / he poses an ovary on one side and a testis on the other side.
- iii) OVATESTICULAR HERMAPHRODITISM – She / he possesses an ovotestis on one or both side.
- iv) UNILATERAL HERMAPHRODITISM – She/ he possesses an ovotestis on one side together with an ovary or testis on the other side. (5)

#### HIJRA AND INDIAN SOCIETY

The chauvinism against 'Hijras' flourished mainly is on two counts. The first and most obvious cause is that they are observed by so called "mainstream society" as unusual or "freak" in personality. The term 'Hijra' is often used as a term of abuse for a person who is womanly, effeminate, important or ineffective, in Indian societal structure. The second reason is that they are most reviled and detested because they may in fact, choose to emphasize their differences and also they may try to extort money from people by using abusing languages or resorting to indecent behavior, which may sometimes include revealing their mutilated genitals. Peculiarities in their behavior can be psychologically explained through a long and strenuous effort of analytical study. What is remarkable about the Hijras' is that the role is deeply rooted in Indian Culture and its socio-economic structure. A wide variety of temperaments, personalities, sexual needs, gender identities, cross-gender behaviors and level of commitment with its cultural context is penetrated in Indian civilization through this third sexual identity. This socially constructed category Physiological weakness involves to a special caste

and participating in a religious cult with its own mother Goddess "Bahuchara Mata". It is noteworthy that, becoming a hijira is the involvement of a process of gradual socialization and gradual assumption of non-male gender identify. The culmination of this process is a religious ritual that includes crude form of genital reassignment surgery where both the penis and testes are removed.

In the hijra community the "guru – chela (disciple)" relationship provides not only an economic nexus to the community but a social one as well. Chelas of the same guru are "like sisters", and the kinship relations of the guru become relations of the chela (disciple). In this way a guru's guru becomes a "granny" (mother's mother) and a guru's "sister" becomes an "aunty". The social networks are the foundation for the geographic mobility as one characteristic in the hijra community, especially among its younger members and as useful as an element of economic adaptation. This ever-expanding network of fictive kin permits a hijra to move from place to place, because it provides a welcoming environment and a base from which to earn a living wherever she goes. It also means that if there is some quarrel in a hijra household, especially where some latent anger might be potentially directed against the guru, some of the household members can temporarily shift to other households and let the conflict die down, before it can move to some permanent breach.

The more serious allegation that is sometimes leveled against the hijra community is that normal male children are kidnapped by members of the community and forcibly castrated. It is common place of knowledge in India that children are kidnapped and they maimed by adults, so that they can be used to beg. It is argued by some people (purely on the basis of their imagination) that hijras too kidnap male minors and turn them into hijras by forcibly castrating them. Such a theory reveals itself to be perverse even on prima facie examination because the hijras are never accompanied by children during their singing and dancing sessions.

One of the most striking things is that some hijras widely engage in prostitution; indeed, it may be their most important source of their income. In spite of this, however, it is also considered stigmatized within the community. Apart from the generally low standing of prostitution in India, as a sexual activity it goes against the wishes of the hijra Mother Goddess, who is herself celibate. It also contravenes the cultural ideal of the hijra as a "sannyasi" (saint), an "other-worldly" person, and a religious mendicant. Thus, hijras are reluctant to admit that they engage in prostitution, and most are defensive about it, at least initially (6). All hijra prostitutes claimed they engaged in prostitution because it was the only way they could earn for living. And the demand for sex with hijras appears to

ensure them of a living. But while it is true that prostitution can be a very lucrative source of income—some prostitutes claim incomes of over 30,000 rupees a year, a sum perhaps comparable to the salary earned by a middle-level executive—it is more likely that the guru, rather than prostitute herself, benefits economically. On one side of the coin it is also visualized that prostitute hijras are considered low status among hijra society. The reasons are, an individual prostitute has almost no control over her working conditions. She always works under the control of a hijra elder (sometimes her own guru, sometimes a hijra who runs a house of prostitution and who is perhaps not the guru of any of the prostitutes), and she must take on all kinds of customers (any profession). Prostitution is experienced as physically demanding work. In spite of the particular sexual demand many prostitute hijras do not live well, it's a big irony.

Hijra prostitutes are generally attached to houses of prostitution that are for hijras only. Sometimes these houses, or flats, are located in red-light districts of a city, while non-hijra prostitutes are located in separate areas throughout the city. In some cases, it appears that although some of their customers, such as those they may pick up at night walking the streets, mistake them for women, the customers that come to their houses know that they are hijras and prefer them over female prostitutes for a variety of reasons, which are suggested later in the text.

Prostitutes working out of houses of prostitution are often exploited by their gurus, or "madams," who take a permanent portion of their income. A prostitute must also pay a minimum daily amount to the house manager, whether she earns that much or not, it's not considerable. Although in some very special cases some gurus or house managers return a fair amount in living space, clothes, food, jewelry, and money for certain occasions, but there is little recourse against a guru who is not generous.

Prostitutes are carefully supervised to see that they do not malingering or run off with a customer, and they may be expected to do burdensome domestic everyday jobs as well. In spite of these difficulties, however, few hijra prostitutes work on their own. (7)

The hijra world may be considered a deviant world, surely it is outside the bounds of respectability, but it is not outside of Indian Society. Although becoming a hijra means making a commitment to a stigmatized identity in some respects, it is a commitment that nonetheless gives social support and any kind of economic security, as well as cultural meaning, to their lives, linking them to the larger world rather than isolating them from it.

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