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**Traditions as Cultural Markers: Understanding *Hijra* Culture in A. Revathi's  
*The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* and *A Life in Trans Activism***

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**Abstract:** With the dawn of digitalization, one can notice a shift in the representation of people who reject heteronormative norms of sexuality and gender. Many now identify with the term *queer*, using it as an inclusive label to express their gender identities and lived experiences. While discussing different gender identities, the terms 'transgender' and '*hijra*' are commonly used interchangeably; however they denote different identities. Moreover, *hijras* have been an integral part of Indian culture and society but following colonisation, their existence was denied and ignored. Although they enjoyed a reputed status in the 18th century, they are now devoid of even the most basic human rights. The study uses Serena Nanda's ethnography on Indian *hijras*, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, to understand A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* and *A Life in Trans Activism*. The paper shall attempt to trace the trajectory of *Hijras*' identity and to understand their established counter-culture vis-à-vis mainstream culture. The paper shall also discuss the workings of the *Gharanas* and the limitations of their traditions and culture, which eventually leads to the marginalisation of their own kind. The research paper delves into how the *hijra* culture restricts and stifles the development of transgender people since it fails to acknowledge the existence of transmen and places obstacles in the way of transwoman's development.

**Keywords:** *Hijras*, *Hijra* culture, Transgender, Transwoman, Transman.

**Objectives:** The paper aims to demonstrate how transgender people have created their own space after facing rejection by heteronormative society. It provides a detailed study of *hijra* culture, rituals, community structure and its limitations. The *hijra* community has established a culture that aligns with the framework of mainstream culture, and its social system is hierarchical in nature. The paper also delves into the importance of castration and myths attached to it. Furthermore, it highlights the diverse names/labels that have been associated with them, which varies across different geographical location.

**Introduction:** In LGBTIQQA, “T” represents transgenders. There are four major terms associated with the transgenders: Eunuchs, *Hijras*, Transmen & Transwomen. The term ‘Eunuch’ is derived from a Greek word *eunoukhos* which means ‘bed room guard’ and is used for castrated males, who served as guard to the women of Oriental courts and have existed since 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. Various nomenclature have been attributed to transwomen or male to female transpeople in different parts of India: *shiv-shakthi*, *hijra*, *thirunangai*, *jogti*, *kinnar*, *ardhanari*, *kothis*, *jogappas*, *panthi*, *Tritiya-prakrti* etc. Dr. Sonna Ray says “The Sanskrit word *shandha* refers to men who behave like women.... This can refer to many types of third-gender people but is perhaps most commonly used to describe those with complete transgender identity”(47). Transgender is an umbrella term used for people who undergo a transformation and reject the binary division of gender. It denotes a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth. In *A Life in Trans Activism*, the term transgender is described as “a range of people with diverse gender identities and experiences” (xxviii). Transgender community comprises both Transmen and Transwomen. Transwomen is used for people who are biological male but identify themselves as women. Whereas, Transmen are the people who are assigned female at birth, but identify as men.

Due to their status as minorities, they are frequently marginalised and silenced in Indian society and therefore, are easy prey to abuse and brutality. Transgender people find "no space" in the entire corpus of social strata, forcing them to dwell on the periphery of the society, as unfit components of any mechanism are discarded. They are forced to live a life of struggle since their needs and rights are not recognised.

We demand acceptance

From parents

From society

From the world

To be human

To live as we have chosen. (Revathi, *Trans Activism* 68)

“Othered” in the social fabric, *hijras* have developed their own customs, traditions and culture to live by. Culture works at multiple levels, namely Individual, Family, and Society. The culture of *hijras* has been confined to two spheres: Individual and Family, as they have been ostracized from the mainstream societal structure. They develop a sense of togetherness by creating their own traditions and rules which give structure to their community and a way to lead a respectful life within their community. Rejected by their ‘birth homes’, they find shelter under their *gurus*. They construct their own world by creating their own identities, which are often denied by the mainstream.

Culture is a broad term which includes social behaviour, practices, and beliefs of various societies, arts, laws, customs, traditions and living experiences of the people who live in a particular habitat. Culture can be defined as an acquired way of thinking, set of

norms and rules which one has to follow to be a part of a particular culture. But the biggest irony with Transgenders is that they have always been a crucial part of Indian culture and still face discrimination and are marginalised.

... “the total way of life of a people”; (2) “the social legacy the individual acquires from his group”; (3) “a way of thinking, feeling, and believing”... (Geertz 4)

Culture plays a significant role in the categorisation of a group as a community. The definition of a community revolves around the notion of a co-existence through a common culture, sharing the same habitat, norms, traditions, customs, etc., generating a sense of wholeness and a feeling of togetherness among themselves. The sense of community, then, depends on a cultural unity. Generally, every community has a specific culture, language, and norms with respect to its geographical space which gives it its unique features and distinguishes it from other communities.

While talking about *hijra* culture, one cannot overlook the significant role that religion plays in determining their unity as a community. Culture is determined by religion and religion influences culture. They don't have a full-fledged religion or religious books but they definitely have religious activities and Goddess/God. *Bahuchara Mata* is the patron goddess of the *kinnar/hijra* community. She symbolises non-violence due to which the devoted *hijras* never enter in any kind of violence. Most of the *hijras* houses strictly follow *Ahimsa* or non-violence. One can see *Bahuchara Mata* riding a rooster, which is a symbol of innocence. The goddess through dreams helps *hijras* awaken their *kundalini*, which leads them to go for *nirvana* or operation.

**Ritual of Liberation: Nirvana:** The word *nirvana* stands for *moksha* or a state where there is no suffering, pain, and desire, where one is free from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The word has many religious connotations and has a strong relevance in Hinduism and Buddhism. The *hijra* community has taken this word from the mainstream, instead of using the word castration, they use the word ‘nirvana’ which has a very significant meaning for them. *Hijras* have taken many terminologies from modern society and used them in their own culture with very unique significance and meaning. To get rid of male genitals is very absurd for the modern world; and the removal of male genitalia has been termed as *Nirvana* ceremony.

*Bahuchara Mata* is the goddess of chastity and fertility and is considered one of Durga's incarnations and the castration rituals are a showcase of one's devotion towards *Bahuchara Mata*, in Gujarat, and *Pottai Mata* in the southern part of India. Akiko Kunihiro says that “To ensure the legitimacy of the devotees of *Bahuchara Mata*, they experience the ceremony of bodily modification or castration” (9). The ceremony is carried out as an act of devotion but also to release oneself from the trap and from the ongoing bodily and mental sufferings. *Hijras* carry out the act in an effort to get closer to feeling like or becoming a woman. Serena Nanda also explains the relevance of operation in a *hijra's* life while

interviewing a *hijra*, named Meera, and said “For Meera, the most motive in having the operation was “to be more like a woman,” but she also viewed it very much as a religious ritual” (79). Physical alteration represents the desire to achieve what one has been longing for a long time. The bodily modifications are totally a personal choice as *hijra* community comprises both emasculated men and non-emasculated men.

After getting into the *hijra* community, one has to follow her guru’s commands and obey her to impress her because *guru* has a lot of powers in her hand. If one succeeds to be a good *chela* then the *guru* will definitely choose her best *chela* for the *niravana* ceremony. After the selection, the *guru* asks what kind of operation you want: a *thayamma* or one by a doctor. A *thayamma* operation is performed by another *hijra*, who herself has undergone castration by opting for a *thayamma* operation and “...those who had a *nirvaanam* done by that method enjoyed a special status and were respected” (Revathi, *The Truth about Me* 66). *Hijra* who performs a *thayamma* operation is known as *Dai ma*. It is believed that Mother Goddess herself blesses a *hijra* and gives power to perform *nirvana* ceremonies for others. Meera, a *Dai ma*, explains how she becomes one, “...Mata which gives the sanction to perform this operation. This dream also signifies that someone is coming to get the operation done. It is essential that we receive the permission from the Mata to operate; otherwise, the operation will not turn out well” (Nanda 80).

The castration is often compared to childbirth. After the ceremony, one has to abide by certain rules and live in a confinement for 40 days, as mentioned by Revathi in her autobiography. According to another scholar the confinement period is of 37 days, just as a woman kept in isolation after delivering a baby. The isolation period is mandatory to protect one from evil eyes. There are many precautions to be taken by the patient while in that period, Revathi states, in *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, that “We have to abstain from having milk and fruit....We were told not to look into a mirror, to see men or to comb our hair. We had to refrain from doing *paampaduthi* to elders” (84-85).

In between these forty days, on the twelfth and twentieth days of the isolation period, the household calls neighbouring *hijras* to visit and pour water on the heads of the ones who had undergone the surgery. They visit the place all decked up and bring fruits and gifts. The *hijras* then put turmeric paste all over the body and stuff one’s mouth with sweets to celebrate and consider it as a lifetime achievement.

On the fortieth day of the isolation, *hijras* of the household conduct a special *haldi-mehendi* ceremony for the castrated ones and celebrate just as the mainstream celebrates the day when a girl attains puberty. The *haldi-mehendi* ritual is followed by “...a puja to Mata and another ritual similar to the puberty rites done after the first menses to declare the girl free from pollution, that we could leave the house” (Revathi, *The Truth about Me* 86).

The fortieth day ceremony is an important day for the castrated *hijras*. Their *gurus* celebrate the day by gifting them a *jok*, which comprises a green saree, a blouse, and an inner

skirt along with nose-ring, anklets, and toe -rings, to mark their womanhood. This *jok* is supposed to be worn only on the day of this ceremony, and after that one has to give *jok* to those who are still waiting for their *niravana*. Revathi's ceremony was held at her *nani's* house in Bhandup, where other house *hijras* helped her bathe and made her ready for her big day. They first offer their prayers to *Mata*, who gave them the power to undergo the surgery and made it a successful one. After prayers, Revathi and her *guru-bai* were given a mirror to look at themselves for the first time after the *nirvana* ceremony. To their surprise, they found out that they looked more feminine and beautiful.

**Marriage Ritual:** There are many stories and myths connected with the existence of *hijras* or *kinnars* in India. One of the stories from the *Mahabharata* text is attached to their marriage rituals which *arvanis* perform, the festival is called the *Kuttandavar* festival. This is an unusual festival in which transwomen visit *Kuttandavar's* temple in Kuvagam village in the Tamil month of *Chithrai*. All the transwomen present in the temple tie *thali* (the sacred thread of marriage) around their necks and put vermilion to show that they are married which makes them relish and enjoy their womanhood, they are devoid of. They enjoy their marriage for one day, after that the local priest carries a procession and on the last day of the festival *Kuttandavar* is beheaded. After the metaphorical death of the groom, all the transwomen wail at the death of their husband, and perform rituals, and become his widows for the rest of their lives. This is a very significant ritual for *hijras* of the southern part of India.

**Hierarchical Setup of the Community:** Nanda claims that they follow the same hierarchical setup as modern society, except for the caste division. The *hijra* community is matrilineal. They share relations with sisters, daughters, mothers, and granddaughters, which focuses on the fact that they reject any male relations and patriarchy, as it is due to the patriarchal setup that they suffer this much.

It is known that all *hijras* face forced displacement from their birth homes, which led to the formation of the *hijra* community. They have developed a system to cope with the rejection of society and parents. To feel loved and have a family connection, they make their family and welcome them as they are. The *hijra* community has households that work like a commune, where one has to share a fixed amount of one's income to contribute to the household's expenses. These houses work like an organisation, and all over India, there are seven *gharanas* (houses). The seven *gharanas* are named into which all *hijras* are divided:

Laskarwallah, Chaklawallah, Lalanwallah, Bendi Bazaar, Poonawallah, Ballakwallah, and Adipur. These named divisions exist with some slight variation from region to region all over India. The main function of the houses appears to be to divide the community into groups in order to facilitate intra community organisation. These houses are not ranked,...(Nanda 39).

Each house has a *naik* (head of the family), under whom all the *hijras* work. The *naik* has the power to make decisions and represents the household in a *jammam*. A *jammam*

is exactly like a *panchayat* of a village, where chosen members from other villages come together to make decisions. The term *jammatt* is derived from and copies Muslim cultural patterns. Nanda mentions that "...the hijra organisation is modelled after the Muslims where "all people come together for social occasions and the men come together to decide things. Like the Muslim *jamat*, we *hijras* also spread a white towel on the floor and keep a plate with pan (paan) leaves [the traditional Indian offering of hospitality] and fruit on that, and make our decisions" (40).

The *jammatt* has laid down all rules for *hijra* households to be followed. It has the authority to punish a *hijra* who is accused of disobeying orders; the more serious the offence, the harsher the penalty. The hardest punishment for a *hijra* is expulsion from the community. To become a part of the *hijra* community, there is a process that has to be followed. One has to choose a *guru*, and then the *guru* has to declare her as her *chela* in front of the whole *jammatt* and has to offer betel leaves and a certain amount to the *jammatt*, which is known as *thandu* (fee) money. Revathi was taken by her *guru* and her *guru* offered 5 rupees along with 1.25 rupees to the *jammatt*. "The *thandu* is received and the *jammatt* declared me, my *guru's chela* and announced, 'Five rupees for Revathi, *deendeen*'", tells Revathi. That's how a *hijra* is taken by a *guru* and enters the community and her *guru's* household and this is called a *reeth*.

After the declaration, the newly admitted hijra has to offer her greetings to the respected *jammatt* and all the elders present there by saying *paampaduthi*. Revathi observes that "...this was very important, that a feminine man offers respect to the *sari-clad* and earns their goodwill. This is our tradition, I discovered" (21). Revathi says she has to say *paampaduthi*, every time she encounters them and mentions that "I have to make sure that my clothes do not touch theirs; bring them water in a jug,...and never be seen without bangles, earrings, nose-ring and anklets. Further, I could not cut my hair...shave off facial hair. Instead, I was to have it plucked using a *jimitta* or plucker" (*The Truth about Me* 65).

One has to address her *guru* as mother, by calling her *amma*. Revathi's *guru* tells her that she will soon introduce her to her other *ammass* as well. She will have sisters (*gurubais*), and *nani's* sisters (*kaalaguru*), and *chelas* in her new household and *kaalagurus* are her *guru's guru*, which depicts the kinship relations shared by *hijras* and forms *hijra* community a matrilineal commune. Amongst *hijras*, a *guru* is everything to a *chela*: a protector, a teacher, a mother and much more. "A mother is different, for a Hijra who is a daughter, the mother's home is like the natal home. The *guru's* home is like the marital home" (Revathi, *The Truth about Me* 59).

The *guru-chela* relationship has its own importance. Revathi compares her relationship with her *guru* and her *chelas*. Revathi's *guru*, on the very first day, told her how she is supposed to manage things, go to shops, and live as a *hijra*. She even told her how to pee and not to wear a saree until her hair grows to a certain length, as having short hair is considered a shameful act in their culture. Her *guru* was kind enough to guide her properly

but on the other hand, Revathi expresses that her guru was strict and always ensured that all the rules and regulations are properly followed by her *chelas*. Whereas, Mayuri, Familia and Ritu are the ones who belong to the modern world, but they wanted to live as women and undergo operations. They one day approached Revathi and wished her ‘Mummy! *Paampaduthi*’, even though she does not know them and has not taken them as her *chelas* yet. Longing for motherhood for so long, Revathi was moved by this act and happily gave them a place in her life. They want to be a part of *hijra* culture and to be taken in by Revathi but on their terms, which is not allowed. It is a punishable offense to have a chela without a *reeth*. Revathi, being a good *guru*, advised them to complete their studies and then go for operations because she was aware of all the pain and suffering. But her words were all in vain, they were headstrong and decided to be like her.

Revathi’s *chelas* brought shame to her when they, on their own, decided to have an operation. As they were not the chosen ones and according to their culture, only chosen ones can undergo *nirvana* ceremonies. But not being a traditional *guru*, she still accepts them as her daughters (*chelas*). Revathi wants to change the suffocating and restrictive culture, customs, and traditions, as she was herself a victim of these norms and customs. She was ready for all the consequences of supporting her modern *chelas*.

The harsh reality of their existence is that they do not wish to be born again as a trans person. To get around this, they carry out their death rites at night or after sunset. It is believed that a *hijra's* funeral rites are performed in secret so that no one from the general public will witness them performing the rites.

**Limitation of Hijra Culture:** The *hijra* culture forces *hijras* to confine themselves to ghettos, which is suffocating for the ones who want to explore the world. Myra, Revathi’s *chela* (daughter), was one of them who identified herself as a transwoman but did not follow the laid rules which invariably defamed her in her own community. According to Revathi’s *guru*, a *hijra* has to follow the rules, traditions, and customs of the community, if she fails, she is bound to suffer and will be punished by the *jammatt*.

One of the other limitations of their culture is that they cannot have a lover or a husband. There are harrowing tales of transwomen who suffered at their husbands’ hands, which is why it is prohibited. If they somehow manage to have one, they get punished and have to pay the ransom. Shakuntala, from Chauhan house of *hijras*, is one of them who paid a price to have a lover. Her *guru* quarrelled with her every other day and tortured her to give her the amount that a *hijra* is supposed to submit as her contribution to the household. She lives with her love in a different house, but her *guru* asks for the share, which becomes suffocating for Shakuntala.

Few scholars claim that ‘all *hijras* have husbands’ which is not true. While studying the *hijra* culture in depth, one finds a clear mention of the fact that one is not allowed to have a husband and most of the *gharanas* follow this. Nanda also finds the claim objectionable

and her view is that "...having a husband involves a sexual relationship, it is contrary to the ascetic ideal of the *hijra* role" (122). Revathi *guru* strictly warns her "Beta, I don't want you ganging up with some *pottais* and take to drinking and seeking a husband. If you do that, you can be sure I'll brake your head!" (Revathi, *The Truth about Me* 65).

Revathi through her work, *A Life in Trans Activism*, vouches for the acceptance of transmen, she puts "The term transgender, I want you to acknowledge, also includes female to male trans people" (224). The *hijra* community comprises only transwomen and provides no space to transmen, which is contrary to the mere existence of the community in itself. Since the core of *hijra* identity and culture is to give space to those who fail to place on the gender spectrum. *A Life in Trans Activism*, the author mentions that, "...within the *hijra* community, female to male trans persons are not accepted, they are treated with contempt and scorn" (93). Christy is a transman who faced problems not from the mainstream but from his own chosen world, where his identity and gender expressions were rejected by a transwoman. The transwoman who adopts Christy does not accept Christy as a man until her death. This incident discussed by Revathi portrays the traumatising experiences of a transman within the *hijra* culture. They find it difficult to accept our transformation from women to men, says Familia. Since both their birth homes and their adopted homes reject them, transmen experience double oppression.

Albeit, one can find female to male trans persons or trans men in the earliest of literature, the tale of *Sikhandi* one of them. The tale is taken from the canonical text, the *Mahabharata*, which tells the transformation of Amba, who is reborn as Sikhandini, into a man named Sikhandi to take her revenge from previous life. Ruth Vanita in her book, *Same-Sex Love in India*, says that "Sikhandin later became a term to refer to eunuchs and men of doubtful sexuality" (36).

**Conclusion:** "To live as a trans woman is not easy at all because our society still does not accept trans women as 'real' women"(Revathi, *Trans Activism* 35). The paper explores the sufferings of transwomen from the world and within their community, which make their lives more than pathetic. Revthai's stories show how difficult it is to be a transwoman in a world that believes in two genders.

The research was conducted to study myths and clear misconceptions about the community and to explore and understand the workings of the community in a better way. The paper discloses the uniqueness of *Hijra* culture, their viewpoints, and the constraints of their independently developed culture that marginalise their own kind.

The research encapsulates the shortcomings of *hijra* culture, customs, and traditions. The rejection of transmen is contrary to the very foundation of the community. The *hijra* households should welcome transmen as they welcome transwomen and do believe in their existence. As mentioned, the story of *Shikhandi* from the *Mahabharata* works as proof.



Moreover, the community should be liberal enough to allow transwomen to have husbands or lovers so that they can enjoy the true sense of womanhood.

The *hijra* community will be a better place for *hijras/kinnars/pottais/avranis*, if it allows them to explore their talents out there in the world. The community should embrace them for who they truly are, rather than confining their roles only to traditional duties and occupations. The forceful imposition of rules and codes led *hijras* to change their houses again and again and in some cases, to leave the community to live a life on their own terms. The rejection from mainstream society works as a barrier to their progress because they need a place to belong, people to call family. The *hijra* community should be a progressive or better place for *hijras* to live by allowing them to chase their dreams.

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