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The North Indian *Hijra* Identity: Sexual and Gender Stratification

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Introduction

The *hijra* community had been a world of the ‘other’ to me till I met Kajol-di, a eunuch-leader (*guru maa*) from New Jalpaiguri (NJP) Station, who had approached our NGO for assistance under the out reach program for the marginalized people. Initially it was a very uncomfortable moment for all of us. But later on, that moment of intimacy seemed to be almost an epiphany for me, for it is not just the face that I gained a good friend, but my exposure to a world—that is exotic, since it has been made visibly invisible through isolation, apparently vulgar due to the different erotic norms, but a unique community with distinct socio-historic (rather mythical) and religious tradition with a rich demonstration of folk culture, apparently dangerous through its show of power/abuse, inwardly extremely insecure and miserable due to an acute crisis of being ‘otherised’, neglected and despised, and apparently a world of the gender blender and therefore initially confusing as well. There is a saying that familiarity breeds contempt, but it has been proved thoroughly wrong by my *hijra* friends residing round the NJP station. Rather, they have motivated this non-academic person—for them the sole representative of the constructed *bhadroloke*—to apply for a research project (I am thankful to the UGC for their approval) and at least start making them visible among the ‘normal’ circuit of the academicians/intelligentsia and thereby get them rid of the Mr India like existence through their absence. I am, therefore, grateful to all these *challa-walis* (i.e., a term to denote the railway beggars and distinguish them from *paan-walis*, the singing and dancing *hijras* and *khijrinda-walis*, the extensive sex-workers) for motivating me to penetrate through this alienated world and enable me, with the help of their all-encompassing interviews, to overcome all my misconceptions and also provide me with ample possibilities of socio-political, historio-mythical as well as academic interest.

Before coming to into the real question, I feel a compulsion to outline some elementary conceptions that are desirable for proper apprehension. There has been a politically motivated effort on the part of the NGOs like the NAAZ foundation or *Hum-safar* Trust to propagate the ideology of ‘choice’ and ‘preference’ which is also one of the main tenets of Judith Butler. Shanti, the *hijra* volunteer who works in the North Bengal area (the umbrella term used to denote the six districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbihar, North and South Dinajpur and Malda of West Bengal) said:

I think there should be a right of free choice, though most of the *hijras* would not agree with me. Even a few years before, I too would argue that I was born like this, and it is not my fault. But I have changed and now I say, this is who I choose to be. The argument that we are ‘born that way’ makes us weak. (Interview)

This can apparently be a good means of gearing them up. But Ator-di, one of Kajol-di’s *chelas*, would shout at the ruinous consequence of this propaganda:

When I say we were born this way, automatically I would get sympathy. But if I say I choose to be this way, people can ask, “Today you choose to be this, tomorrow what will come next?” Are we pretenders?! (Interview)

Apart from Ator-di’s apprehensions of being yet again treated as fake, the reports of the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy too have asserted that the theory of ‘voluntary preference’ is flawed:

There is a broad consensus among medical researchers that transgenders are rooted in complex biological factors that are fixed at birth. This research confirms what transgendered people know and experience on a much more personal basis: being transgendered is not a choice nor a ‘lifestyle’, but a difficult, uninvited challenge. (1995 Conference)

The *hijras*, however, do not want themselves to be bracketed alongwith the transgenders/transsexuals of the western construct. According to Shanti:

The *hijras* are really different from transgenders or transsexual persons. There are differences of class, of language, of the kinds of discrimination and harassment. For me, when I think of a transgender or transsexual person, what comes to my mind is people who have greater access to information and support, have a very different class privilege and have hardly any link with our culture or community living. For *hijras* that is not the case—unlike many transsexuals who get expensive surgery and can pass of as men or women, lots of *hijras* are very easily recognizable as *hijras*. (Interview)

This discomfort of the *hijras* is the main source of the impetus that has made me curious to probe into their world only to discover that their identity is indeed very different from the stereotypical sex/gender categories, and is founded on a new binary of sexuality.

Identity in Question

The term ‘sexuality’ commonly refers to sexual behaviour (what people do) and sexual desire (what people want to do and what they fantasize about doing) as differentiable from either the term ‘sexual’ that refers to genital or sex (anatomical and productive differences) that men and women are born with or develop, or the term ‘gender’ that refers to the cultural meanings, social/psychological roles and personality traits associated with sex differences. Our law has insisted that there are two normal sexes: male and female—and two corresponding genders: masculine and feminine. It is limiting/narrowing down the complexities of identities if one tries to view *hijras* solely within the framework of sex/gender binaries—as the quintessential ‘third sex’ or ‘neither men nor women’ (Serena Nanda), for the *hijras* seem to dismantle ‘categories’ of sex/gender as viewed by the society and create a new category of binary division of their own.

In Hindu mythology and early *Vedic/Puranic* literature, we can see the pan-Indian acceptance of the third sex (Vanita & Kidwai). Now it appears to me, perhaps I am sure that the translation by the westerners, e.g., Richard Burton’s infamous translation of *Kama Sutra* (Zwilling & Sweet) or of those belonging to the western tradition, has been a bit misleading. The actual term in Hindu scriptures is *tritiya prakriti*, i.e., third femininity/nature, the other two being *purush* (men/masculine nature) and *prakriti* (women/feminine nature) as differentiated on the basis of *linga* (sex/gender). We also have *kliba*—the term that originally evolved as a synonymous term for the *napunkshakas* (impotents) but slowly, with the influence of Buddhist thought, extended in meaning and in Sanskrit/Pali idioms, the term *kliba* now ranges in meaning from eunuch/*hijra* (a translation that, as Doniger observes, possibly dates only from the Turko-Persian influence of the ninth century) to someone who is sterile (*napunkshaka*), castrated (*khoja*), hermaphrodite, androgynous, etc., However, all these categories were drawn on the basis of the ability of procreation. The Jains, however, rejected both these Brahmanical and Buddhist formulations for differentiating the masculine and feminine markers. The credit that we give to the western socio-philosophers and feminists for the segregation of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ had been demarcated long before in the Jain system of thought

(See *Dravyasamgraha* in Jagdishchandra Jain's *Life in Ancient India as Depicted in the Jain Canon and Commentaries*). In the Jain philosophy there has been distinction made between *dravyalinga* (i.e., biological sex organ/gender) and *bhavalinga* (i.e., psychological gender). The logic behind this was such that if we discriminate on the basis of procreation ability then a woman ceases to be a woman after menopause. The Jain commentators also connoted the term *napunkshaka* from not-male to not-man (i.e. not normal human being) but in the process have paved way for the possibility of homosexuals and bisexuals as well. Moreover, the Jain division of *purush-napunkshaka* and *pandaka* (i.e., *stri-napunkshaka*) is based neither on sex nor gender but on sexual practice—whether they are receptive partners in sexual intercourse (then they are feminine) or they are versatile, that is both penetrative and receptive (that gain makes them masculine). This exactly resembles with the *kothi* and the *parikh* (i.e., the bottomers and the toppers) categorization in the homosexual/bisexual relationship. The identity categorization made by the *hijras*, about which I have learnt during my field works, is slightly different from this model. However, Jain texts did not examine these eunuchs—the ‘third’ among the sex/gender hierarchies—in their canonical texts.

The Glorified Tradition

The *hijras* feel content to describe themselves—in the words of the spokesman of the All India *hijra* Kalyan Sabha [Welfare Organization], an organization that purports to make the voices of the *hijras* heard in a democratic polity as “descended from Hinduism from olden times, right from the *Ramayana*.” As Rama prepared to go 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. According to the *hijras*, he turned to his people and while imploring them to wipe away their tears added the following words: “Men and women, please go back and perform your duties.” When Rama returned to Ayodhya fourteen years later after his victory over Ravana, he found a cluster of people still gathered at the same spot, and was told 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 sanction of Rama to consecrate others with the blessing of marriage

and fertility. Now also we find the *hijras*, touching our forehead in a manner of blessing us after they are given their share.

Among the numerous Hindu creation myths, there is one in the *Linga-purana*, in which Shiva is asked by Brahma and Vishnu to create the world. Thereupon Shiva retreats into the water: but as he remains plunged in it for a thousand years, Brahma is induced by Vishnu to create all the gods and other beings. When Shiva finally emerges from the water, and is prepared to commence with creation, it dawns on him that the universe no longer has any vacuum. Consequently, Shiva breaks off his phallus and tosses it aside with the remark that he has not much further use for his generative organ; yet as the phallus falls and breaks into pieces, it extends fertility over the entire earth. Thus, even as Shiva himself becomes a sexual renunciate and loses the power to procreate, his phallus becomes emblematic of “universal fertility,” and it is to this circumstance that one can trace the cult of lingam [phallus] worship. The *hijras*, in their own life, provide a mirror image of this scenario: while themselves impotent, they confer the blessings of fertility on others. One of the other popular representations of Shiva is as Ardhanarisvara, or “the Lord who is half woman”. In numerous miniature paintings and sculptures, one half of his body has a female breast, long hair, and anklets. Even the Buddhist *tantrikas* have their androgynous icon of Aryavoliteswara, a form of Bodhisattva, whose left side consists of his wife, Tara. Shaivite *tantrikas* of Nepal also have dictums like *Shivah shaktiyatmakam jagat*, i.e. the world is the ‘Shakti’(stree) that lies within ‘Shiva’ or *Shakti vinah Shivah Shavah*, i.e., ‘Shiva’ without ‘Shakti’ is a corpse—the manifestation of which has been made through the *ardhanariswara* image. It is this representation of Shiva that, not coincidentally, is evoked in the figure of Arjuna, who appears in the guise of a eunuch in the fourth book of the *Mahabharata*, the “Virataparvan”.

To Virata, Arjuna appears as “a great man wearing the adornments of a woman”: he is not, however, merely a transvestite: the text speaks of him as belonging to the *tritiyam prakrtim* (See Vaman Shivram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*). To the Kauravas, who fail to penetrate his disguise, “he has something of a man, something of a woman” in his manners, again an unmistakable allusion to the *ardhanariswara* form of Shiva. He offers dancing and music lessons to Uttara, the king’s daughter: in this aspect of his disguise, too, he bears a proximity to Nataraja, the

dancing form of Shiva that carries with it the two-fold overtones of auspiciousness, the triumph of knowledge over ignorance, but also cosmic destruction and dissolution. When Virata eventually offers him his daughter's hand in marriage, Arjuna refuses with the words, "I dwelt in the seraglio always seeing your daughter, secretly and in the open, and she trusted me like a father". But if Arjuna is the primordial eunuch, who has shared an asexual and parental intimacy with Uttara, he must preside (as do *hijras*) over a marriage and the birth of a male child. This is accomplished when Arjuna arranges for the marriage of his son Abhimanyu to Uttara and prepares her, in a manner of speaking, for the birth of her son, Pariksit, on whom alone will fall the burden of continuing the dynasty of the Kurus. At the conclusion of the great Bharata war, Pariksit, remains the sole surviving member of the Kuru family, a testimony to the folly of humankind and to the inevitable hubris that leads human beings to reproduce themselves. This is the hubris from which *hijras*, however unwittingly, are spared.

This androgynous representation in the Hindu tradition and its association with the god, incarnate or the most powerful and adored/ desired male has obvious positive implications. In the *Mahabharata* it is none other than Arjuna, the most macho among the lot who has to perform as *Brihannala*. This implication is that the acceptance of the feminine within oneself does not necessarily make one emasculated/ powerless. Again, Shiva's transfiguration from a male-god to *ardhanarishwara* with the loss of his penis (the phallic symbol of male-domination) is not limiting, rather expanding the identity spectrum, i.e., from dev (god) he becomes Mahadev (i.e., the god of all the gods). The identity equation that emerges is as follows:

Male – linga = androgyny (an acceptance by the masculine of the innate femininity) \equiv Superman/god

This androgynous model of identity can be an effective indigenous tool for Indian feminist criticism which Indian feminist critics, know, I am sure, but have hardly applied as a theoretical basis of any critical analysis, which again can result from their failure to associate themselves with the Indian thought of reception or might be again due to the internalization of the othering as far as the 'third' is concerned.

The fact that androgyny has been viewed as perfectly normal from the Hindu and Buddhist religious stance can be reinforced through these following arguments/citations:

1. In *tantra*, which according to Abhinavagupta is fundamentally

about the anesthetization of erotic pleasure, we have the necessities of gender mixity. In Tantrick '*kundalini-jagaran*', which is a must for attainment of *siddhi*, the goddess Kundalini (the icon of the feminine strength within) has to be raised inside the inner yogic body (which is often done with the assistance of the *sadhan-sangini*). In *Anuttarayoga*, the highest yoga tantra, deities are shown as sexually merged.

2. Secondly, the counter-culture of naturalizing androgyny lies in the very description of the mystical experience of the yogi, who, in the state of ecstasy experiences a reconciliation of all opposites: self and other, male and female and so on. It is an inner psychic 'androgynization' which the *Hevajra Tantra* describes as a state of "two in one"—a term which can equally be applied to the medieval Indian mystic Shree Chaitanya.
3. Finally, not only the case of Chaitanya, but the fact that even a male devotee can have a female *ishttha* and vice-versa, reveals how a male *sadhaka* may visualize the female goddess as oneself (as in the case of Shree Ramakrishna Paramahansa). This itself shows the religious sanction of the choice of androgyny as 'self'—for *siddhi* is nothing but knowing oneself, *atmanam vidhvi*, i.e., "know thyself"—in the Indian Hindu tradition.

Right from this traditional association of the 'third' with religion there surfaces another fact that is of no less significance—the fact that even while some *hijras* engage in sexual relations with men and take recourse to prostitution, they insist on being considered akin to sexual ascetics or religious ascetics because of their association with Shiva—the god represented in the Hindu tradition chiefly as a yogi, venerated for the *tapas* or power yielded by his practices of asceticism. The inheritance of this pollution complex (in the sense that if a *hijra* tries to gratify her sensual desires then she gets de-sanctified) has negative implications too. On one hand it has created a new hierarchical order of the *Badhai* (the pure ascetic and, therefore, superior or real) and the *Kandra* (*hijras* engaged in prostitution, or keep lovers/husbands, and in the process, becomes unreal and downfallen); and on the other hand, as most of the *kandras* have informed, the *badhais* also partake in sexual activities but in a hidden mode which makes them much more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases—since they apparently project themselves to be asexual, they get themselves excluded from all sorts of campaigning and sensitizing programmes related to AIDS and STDs.

The Politics of Glamorized Representation

The association of *hijras* with gods and the subsequent deification is a strategy which is highly political. The idea of the “auspicious” that our tradition transmits however, seems to be a mere construct of remote past if we take into account the amount of hatred that the *hijras* need to face all the time in their every day life. However, as a mode of escape from the ‘thorns of life’, *hijras* themselves often seem to be the harbingers of the auspicious. At what are traditionally held to be the two most auspicious moments in an adult person’s life, namely, marriage and the birth of a male child, *hijras* are conventionally allowed to come into their own as persons possessed of the power of conferring blessings and, complementarily, inflicting curses. It is said that a bride’s face must not be open to the gaze of *hijras*, since the curse of infertility might fall on her. On the other hand, when *hijras* confer blessings on the child, this ensures that the child will have healthy progeny. The presence of *hijras* is auspicious, and yet terrifying; and while themselves incapable of carrying or seeding children, they appear to have some mysterious inevitable power over the reproductive process. That the *hijras* consider an “auspicious” beginning as critical to their account of their originary place in Indian society itself suggests how much they are politically made to believe that they are being compensated for their inability to become biological parents—which all of them intensely desire only to realize the futility of such craving—by thrusting upon them an image of archetypal motherhood, i.e., even though they are not giving birth to babies but they are universal mothers because each and every newborn male child is the outcome of their blessing and they are almost their *manas-santan*.

The real politics lies not in this camouflage but in something else. The main reason behind deifying the *hijras* and thereby trying to convince them to live an asexual ascetic life like that of Mahadev, lies in what we refer to as ‘semen anxiety’. The sexual partners of these *hijras*, who associate themselves as feminine and thereby desire for a masculine, would obviously be males who, in turn would ‘misuse’ the semen, which is again traditionally assigned to be utilized only for the purpose of procreation. Hence this glorified image of the *hijras* in the traditional Hindu discourse, like that the almost elevation of the women only to exploit them, is a strategy developed to prohibit the *hijras* from participating in sexual activities with males which again is the prerequisite for avoiding ‘semen loss’—for in the whole of South Asia the loss of semen is equated with a loss of masculine strength and life force/vitality.

Stereotyping the Male: The Counter Discourse through the Formation of a New Model of Identity-Stratification

In a North Indian *hijra* community—on the basis of the microcosmic view of the macrocosm that I have perceived during my field work in the North Bengal area—there are only 1% people with the genitals of hermaphrodites, 3% are women who fail to menstruate and rest of the 96% are male transgenders in the sense that they are the people who think that they are psychologically female but possess a bizarre/stunted/obscure/deformed male organ, i.e., without testicles or a pierced scrotum or with a partially developed male genital. Since they are essentially female, they are *prakriti*, but due to some biological traits of *purusha*, they are *tritiya*. But there is a vital difference between the western transsexuals/transgenders in the sense that though there is a concept that the *bhabreshi* ought to get rid of the genital in order to become a *nirvani* (which is again a prerequisite in order to be reborn as a woman), the *hijras* rather prefer to retain their male genital unless they are forced to do so by the Guru, and it is mostly the straight male whom they catch and get castrated forcibly in order to render them as *hijras*. Hence, unlike the western transsexual/transgender, the *hijras* do not reveal any revulsion regarding their parts.

The *hijras* are required to play the role of a versatile, i.e., both active (topper) and passive (bottomer) during anal sex. In their adolescence days they generally take *nirodh* (anti-pregnancy pills) in order to inject female hormones in their body and thereby develop female features like enlarged breasts. However, soon they realize that their incompetence regarding erection and ejaculation resulting from the female hormones, reduces the number of customers who want them to perform the active role during anal sex. Oral sex is not very popular amongst them (unlike the gay couples) because it is not the oral but anal sex that helps them to perform their desired role of a woman. The interesting part is that in most of the cases the *hijras* do not have a orgasm while acting as the passive penetrated one which they desire most to perform. They have an orgasm either during foreplay or while playing the penetrator with their clients. However, the *hijras* never keep/love/desire someone as their ‘man’/‘husband’ who would desire the *hijras* to act as the penetrator or would touch their misshapen male genitals during intercourse. The *hijras*, despite the fact that they do not have orgasms, have told me that they get immense satisfaction from their ‘men’/husbands whom they keep till they confine themselves to playing the sole role of the masculine penetrator, leaving the *hijras* as the purely passive penetrated. One of the *hijras* informed me how after

staying together for four years, she went out of the relationship with her lover/husband because he had offered himself to be penetrated by the *hijra* beloved. The very act of getting oneself penetrated, casts the male as not-male in the eyes of the *hijras*. Now the imperative issues that arise are :

1. Firstly, is sexual pleasure mostly psychological rather than physiological since the touch of the male-organ of the penetrator with the prostate gland of the *hijra*, the penetrated, can hardly provide any sensual pleasure to the passive *hijra*?
2. Secondly, the very act of equating the passive penetrated as 'not-male' (*na-mard*) and accepting the penetrator alone as the real 'male' shows how these *hijras* have internalized the traditional stereotypical sexual roles for male and female; and accordingly the very act of being penetrated (which is quite physically painful due to the absence of a lubricant like that of the vaginal fluid) gives them the satisfaction that they are acting the part of the Indian female with a lover/husband, who like a full/real male, plays the exclusive penetrator.
3. Thirdly, this again gives rise to the unique *hijra* category of identity stratification of male and not-male (which I tend to call a third category), that is neither based on sex nor on gender but on sexuality, i.e., whether one is the exclusive penetrator or not.
4. Fourthly, the *hijra* discourse of typecasting anyone who cherishes to be penetrated through, violating the stereotype image of traditional Indian males as not-male, ultimately results in establishing that most of the male are thereby not-male (see the research work done by NAZ foundation on the clients of these *hijras* and MSM, that has shown how most of them seek versatile service from these sex-workers)—a strategy that can be a subconsciously constructed weapon to politically encounter the social stigma that has always been attached to the *hijras* for appearing but not actually being male. The logic is:

A male is one who as per Indian convention exclusively performs the role of being an active penetrator.

No man is one (as per his subjective experience) who as per Indian convention exclusively performs the active penetrator

Therefore, No man is male

This *hijra* logic of identity formulation is indeed a very effective counter-discourse to attack the discourse of social stigma and abnormality for not being thoroughly male, that has been attached with

these *hijras* for ages. According to this model of identity, one can argue that if to violate the constructed predetermined prescriptions of malehood makes some one degraded as womanish/abnormal then most of the males (with homosexual/bisexual preferences or even the heterosexual straight males who prefer to play the passive/penetrated during intercourse) are also womanish/abnormal and, thereby, not-male. This vision of perception again can be a very powerful weapon of the critics of gender studies, particularly the feminists, for after the age-old compulsion of “becoming” woman due to the anxiety of being stigmatized otherwise, this binary opposition of male and not-male can also counter-reveal and consequently disgrace many of the males as not-male due to their failure of “becoming” a type-Indian man who is only supposed to be exclusively, an active penetrator.

Conclusion

Speaking of the denaturalization of sex, which is an outcome of the postmodernist approach to sex, William Simon proposes that:

The sexual is socially constructed, and the origins of sexual desire can only be found in social life, and its variable presence in the lives of specific individuals is predominantly dependent upon their experience in social life. (*Postmodern Sexualities*)

This can be practically demonstrated and confirmed through the *hijras*' preference of not participating in oral sex, which would have been much more convenient and rewarding, but rather in passive penetrative sexuality, because this and nothing else enables them to penetrate into the social domain of the Indian woman/feminine.

Finally, this third model of male/ not-male identity stratification can be utilized in exposing how the patriarchy becomes the victim of its own stereotyping compartmentalization of normal and abnormal on the basis of sex/gender performances. In Bengali, there are abuses and detrimental terms which signify sexual deeds forbidden for a real/perfect masculine male. Hence, on one hand the patriarchal society has accepted the possibility of such anal penetration but simultaneously it has made it prohibitive for any Indian man if he wants to remain acknowledged as a true male. But from the real life experiences of the *hijras*—that highlight how most clients violate the norm—most Indian men can easily, and scandalously get typeset as not-male. Hence, the *hijra* standpoint of perception originated from real life experiences which are significant enough to reveal how the patriarchal categorization of sex role is a stereotype not only vicious for the unprivileged sexual

orientations but also self-destructive for this predetermined construct which enshackles an Indian male to stick to his patriarchal assigned role, the smallest violation of which can easily cast him off as not-male.

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