

# The third gender the hijra sociology essay



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In western culture, gender and sex have been described under two distinct realms-male and female. These identities to some are determined solely biologically, and many are oblivious to the fact that in many cultures, different genders are present. One of the most prominent third genders is based in South Asia, specifically India. Known as the hijra, they have grown to become a prominent and well-known member of Indian society, but have suffered from discrimination and have struggled for their basic fundamental rights.

Based in India, the hijra are physiological males who identify themselves as females at an early age, wearing women's clothing and performing stereotypical female gender roles. Indian society refers to the hijra as a third gender. They are not female nor male, but a separate entity who carries their own culture, values and traditions. In relation to the western world, the closest form to the hijra would be known as a transgender.

The hijras trace their origins back to the religious era of the deity Ram. As told in the Ramayana epic, " just before his sojourn into the wilderness, Ram instructed all men and women who had come to see him off to return to their village. The hijras, being neither men nor women stayed at Ram's point of departure until his return years later. Upon seeing their devotion, Ram blessed them and promised them the right to rule during the final age of mankind" (Amisha\_2010: 835). As religion is a major aspect of Indian culture, much of the hijra's history is based off the Indian polytheistic religious era. As religion is of great importance to the hijra, this event historically marked their first interaction with the Indian gods.

Many hijra undergo a painful castration process known as nirvan to officially identify as a hijra. This process of the utmost importance as it ends with the new hijra embracing the femininity he has identified himself with his entire life. The process has been documented:

His transformation is nearly complete as he prostrates his naked body before the murti of Bahuchara Mata, praying for her blessings. When he stands, his chela (guru) will complete the ceremony with two swift slices of the long blade, permanently severing his manhood. The remaining blood that gushes from the cut is considered the last of the " male part." Hot sesame seed oil will be poured over the open wound, which will later be prodded repeatedly to ensure that the urethra remains open. No anesthesia or surgical tools are available, for it is believed that medically performed castration would diminish the spiritual experience of the ritual. (Patel\_2010: 835)"

Once the castration process is completed, the hijras both physically and spiritually feel as though they have transformed themselves.

As the hijra undergo a physical transformation, they also follow a strict household structure. Members of the gharana, the communal hijra household, ardently support the hijra code. The hijras maintain the basic family hierarchy. The GWU report states, " An elder naik oversees the basic running of the household, and chelas initiate hijras and turn over a portion of their earnings for household expenses. In addition, all hijras pay a fee to the jamat, or congregation of hijra house leaders recognized within the larger community. (Patel\_2010: 836)" Many houses are situated relatively close together. As much of Indian society and culture rejects the hijra, the hijra

feel it is necessary to isolate themselves from the mainstream culture. Not only does this give the hijra a sense of community, but it also preserves their security and safety. Despite these protective measures, hijras remain a marginalized group in a country that continues to ostracize them.

India is two-sided in its social perception of the hijra lifestyle. As a community, Indian society treats hijras with a combination of "fascination, revulsion, and fear" (Patel\_2010: 836). As a means of survival, hijras predominantly participate in begging and prostitution. For a small fee, they also perform "badhai-local families sometimes welcome them into their homes to bless auspicious births or weddings (Patel\_2010: 836)." For the most part, however, sex work is the most profitable option for the hijra. As a result, India's hijras struggle as an ostracized social class, subject to gender violence and various other human rights violations. There are very few domestic policies protecting hijras. Although there have been recent pushes for their rights, few have been successful.

The hijra have struggled to enjoy the basic human rights many Indians enjoy. Most importantly, Indian law does not recognize them as a third gender. This denies them the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to marry and the right to claim formal identity through any official documents such as a passport or driving license. Accessing healthcare, employment or education becomes almost impossible. In the face of such odds they are forced to earn money any way they can (Harvey\_2008: html1). Hijras are regularly robbed and sexually assaulted on the street at the hands of gangs and other local thugs. A hijra who served as chairperson of a human rights organization said, "We have no constitutional rights. That is the problem. We

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don't have voting rights; often we cannot get housing. This is not allowing us to have an identity of our own" (Harvey\_2008: html1). Reports show however, that attitudes are gradually beginning to change.

An initial difficulty in addressing the rights of sexual minorities is in recognizing the differences between the concepts of "sex" and "gender." Sex, by definition, "operates within the classic binary biological model, in which the human species is clearly divided into neat categories of either male or female" (Patel\_2010: 836). Gender, however, is a more inclusive term, which includes "social constructs of personal belief and sexuality that have deeper meaning than the traditional biological sex distinction" (Patel\_2010: 836). In addition, the classic Western binary models of sex-male and female-and sexuality-homosexual and heterosexual-do not fit neatly into India's traditional concepts of gender and identity. As a result, hijras are the unknown-the "intersex" gender between male and female in India.

Although the hijra have been ostracized for many years, conditions are slowly starting to improve. As technology and media communication have vastly improved in India, more people are beginning to not only notice the presence of the Hijra, but also appreciate it. The Hijra have formed unions to organize protests for their human rights and will continue to fight for legislation until they are satisfied. India has taken many steps toward recognizing transgender rights.

In recent years, hijras have become increasingly visible in the political arena. After gaining the right to vote in 1994, a few have held political office in various states in India, and often have the support of religiously affiliated

majority parties as " safe" candidates. In 2000, Kamla Jaan, a hijra in the state of Madhya Pradesh, was elected mayor of Katni after running as an independent. Indian society perceives hijras as un-entrenched political candidates-secular, casteless, and asexual-simultaneously able to understand the plight of the downtrodden and able to gather the support of outsiders. Furthermore, mainstream society has recast these candidates as " embodiments of respect and morality," above traditional corruption that permeates Indian politics. As a result of their improved prominence, India has taken some effective measures in acknowledging the legal status of hijras. For example, " there are three distinct gender classification choices available on the Indian Passport-male, female, and 'others'" (Patel\_2010: 836).

In addition, the prominence of hijras in the media has fostered increased social acceptance of transgendered individuals. Thus far, the state of Tamil Nadu seems the most accepting. There, a transsexual hosts a local talk show called " Ippadikku Rose." The state also hosts an annual transgender festival to facilitate acceptance of hijras into mainstream society. In addition, hijras are making appearances in the fashion industry, and recent Bollywood films portray them in a positive light. In 1994, the South Indian film Tamanna portrayed the life of a hijra who saves a young girl from life on the streets and later adopts her. In 2008, a hijra was cast as the first transgender in the country with a lead role in a mainstream Tamil movie.

Despite receiving some recognition and social acceptance, hijras remain an ostracized and differentiated social class. Hijras struggle to reconcile their physical visibility with the invisibility of their community as a whole. In the <https://assignbuster.com/the-third-gender-the-hijra-sociology-essay/>

end, however, community invisibility makes hijras susceptible to gender violence and other human rights abuses. By creating and recognizing transgender rights, India has the capacity to battle its current HIV/AIDS epidemic in a meaningful way, give real effect to the human rights of sexual minorities, and serve as a model for other nations to recognize gender-based rights. In order to accomplish these goals, however, India must repeal current discriminatory laws and enact equal opportunity legislation on the basis of gender and sexuality. In order for there to be meaningful change, formal legislation must be passed, and with the help of the human rights activists and unions, the legislation could very well happen.

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