

Chapter 10

Employability Issues of Transgender Individuals in Gujarat, India: An Analysis of the Origin



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10.1 Introduction: Who Are Hijras?

In the Indian context the primary source of employability for transgender individuals is their hijra identity, especially in the case of individuals coming from the lower socio-economic strata. Individuals coming from the higher socio-economic strata have in several instances achieved high levels of education and work as activists, lawyers, academicians, models, artists, and authors (Ashoka University [n.d.](#); Kunihiro [n.d.](#); Mazumdar [2018](#); Narayanan [2019](#); Sathyendran [2016](#); The Butler Banner Project [n.d.](#)). There are cases such as Assam Swati Bidhan Baruah, India's first transgender judge, who transitioned only after completing her education (Mazumdar [2018](#)). This is also the case of Kalki Subramaniam, who comes from a family of academicians (Kadapa-Bose [2016](#)). Finally, there is the life story of the author A. Revathi, who joined the guru-chela system but eventually rose above her circumstances to become a writer of world renown, whose autobiography is taught in universities across the world, including India (Deeksha [2019](#); Glasberg [2019](#); The Butler Banner Project [n.d.](#)).

There exists a strong class differential within India's trans community (Deeksha [2019](#); Kapada-Bose [2016](#); Shah [2015](#)). While transgender individuals coming from middle class or upper middle class with access to English-medium education can achieve a degree of individual agency on their own, it is the members of the hijra communes that are in most need for state initiatives of upliftment through access to

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education and employment opportunities (Chak 2018; Shah 2015; Kumar et al. 2016; Narayanan 2019; Subramaniam 2016 Tabassum 2020). However, as the Kochi Metro initiative has demonstrated, hijras are often used as tokens to connote progressiveness of organizations and institutions, when in fact, discrimination pervades the workplaces where they are employed (Deep 2018; Masoodi 2017; Rajeswari 2019). The hijra identity—with its enactment of traditional roles of performing in various festivals that celebrate fertility, childbirth, and marriage—as a means of employment is essential for transgender individuals who are unable to complete their education and secure employment in the mainstream sector. Often it is the stigma attached to transgender identity that keeps these individuals from securing gainful employment. They have no option but to take recourse to the *guru-chela* system, wherein they acquire an identity that locates them in the societal matrix, which both facilitates them and marginalizes them from mainstream society (Kanodia 2016; National AIDS Control Organization (India) 2017). It is this identity that provides them with sources of employment and locates them within a network of familial relationships that satisfy their need for a community and safety (Kunihiro n.d.; Nanda 1999).

The hijra identity in the Indian context, by which we remove it from the modern connotations of the term transgender and specifically refer to transgender individuals living in hijra communes, bases itself on mythical sources such the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which vary from state to state (Loh 2011; Nanda 1999). In the case of the state of Gujarat, the hijra identity is based on the legend of the Goddess Bahuchara Mata and Lord Shiva (Kanodia 2016; Nanda 1999; Sheikh 2010).

10.2 The Birth of the Hijra Identity: The Myth of Bahuchara Mata

Bahuchara Mataji's main temple is located in the Becharaji town in the Mehsana district of northern Gujarat. There are, however, temples of the goddess throughout the state of Gujarat (Kanodia 2016). The importance of the temple at Becharaji is highlighted by the fact that nearly 100,000 hijras gather there for annual fairs (Kanodia 2016; Kunihiro n.d.). There are guesthouses around the temple to accommodate them during these fairs (Kanodia 2016).

Bahuchara Mata is a goddess of the Charan caste. The Charans are a pseudo-divine Brahman caste. The myth is that Bahuchara and her sisters were going on a road, when the looter Bapiya attacked their caravan. It was then that Bahuchara cursed Bapiya with impotence and cut off her breasts and self-immolated. The curse could only be undone if Bapiya worshipped Bahuchara Mata by dressing and living as a woman in his present life (Kanodia 2016). Since Charans were considered a divine caste, shedding their blood was a sin.

In excising her breasts, Bahuchara discarded her femininity and thus became a goddess. She gets her power from being from the Charan caste (Kanodia 2016). She

has the power both to bless and to curse, and in going through the process of voluntary self-castration, hijras re-enact the original action performed by the goddess, becoming a Bhagat or devotee in the process. It is by going through the process of ritual castration that hijras acquire the capacity to bless and to curse. The belief is that if they do not self-castrate, they would be impotent for the next seven lives. The act of physical castration is based on fear, not on devotion to the goddess (Kanodia 2016). The worship of the goddess thus has a punitive character to it. It is based on the goddess's capacity to take away the fertility of an individual and punish him with impotence for his next seven lives. This was the case with Bapiya who experienced the goddess's power in the form of a curse. Prince Jetho, on the other hand, experienced her powers as a blessing. Prince Jetho was born impotent, so the goddess asked him to self-castrate and live as a woman. In return, he was spared of impotency in the next seven lives. Self-castration is thus the price paid for the devotion to the goddess, for the acquisition of the same powers as the goddess herself. The hijra identity is thus based on "emasculatation, impotence and commitment to sexual abstinence" (Kanodia 2016, 103). The use of the self-castration ritual in the birth of the hijra identity is also based on the Lord Shiva's castration, which rendered him incapable of playing a role in creating the world (Kanodia 2016, 104). Thus, the act of castration in the birth of the hijra identity is legitimized by two myths: that of Bahuchara Mata and that of Lord Shiva (Kanodia 2016).

There are, however, also uncastrated hijra. Castration is more of a spiritual choice rather than a compulsory social demand for the hijras. The act of emasculation mirrors the act of Bahuchara Mata, cutting off her breasts (Kanodia 2016, 101). The ritual is of relevance within the community and not outside of it. This is why the ritual has greater spiritual than social significance (Kanodia 2016, 102). It is the castrated hijras that are considered "real" by the hijra community. In order to be considered a "real" hijra within the community, to show allegiance to the goddess, castration is a must. But to mainstream society, even an uncastrated individual would still be considered a hijra. Nanda (1999) corroborates this in her book *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, as she affirms that it is difficult to determine whether a hijra is castrated or uncastrated without a medical examination. However, given the veil of belonging to a particular marginalized community, to mainstream society the difference does not matter or even register. Thus, the castration ritual has more spiritual significance within the hijra community and more social significance outside of it (Nanda 1999; Kanodia 2016).

There are two versions of Bahuchara Mata—one Brahminical, which is worshipped by mainstream Gujarati society, and the other the hijra version, which is worshipped only by transgender persons. Thus, Bahuchara is a goddess both for mainstream society and for the marginalized hijra community (Kanodia 2016). Furthermore, even within the temple at Becharaji, worship is carried out by Brahmin priests, with the exception of the public part of this worship, which is carried out of by the hijras (Kanodia 2016). Hijras do not oppose the worship of the goddess by Brahmin priests, because according to them, it gives their community legitimacy in society (Kanodia 2016).

10.3 The Hijra Identity and its Economic Function

The endowment of the ability to bless or curse is what gives hijras the source of their livelihood, especially through their traditional role of performing badhai at weddings and celebrations following childbirth (Kanodia 2016; Nanda 1999). It is their gender identity, therefore, that is foregrounded in the traditional occupations that hijras take up as members of their community. The hijra identity, however, was criminalized and stigmatized during the British rule, leading to a decline in the social status of the community. The professions engaged in by hijras today are begging and prostitution, in addition to performing badhai (National AIDS Control Organization (India) 2017; Nanda 1999). Such occupations though have reciprocally pushed them further out to the margins of society. Marginalization is, therefore, built into the hijra identity of today, which at the same time allows them to earn a living (Kanodia 2016; Nanda 1999). This, however, is the case only in urban areas. In the town of Becharaji, hijras own properties around the temple, and the local population does not dare to refuse them anything because of the fear of being cursed by them (Kanodia 2016; Kunihiro n.d.)

As such, prostitution is considered the lowest form of profession for the hijra, with badhai or the traditional dance performances in marriages and instances of childbirth the highest of professions (Nanda 1999). This is so, because prostitution violates the code of celibacy of Bahuchara Mata, on which the hijra identity is based. Nevertheless, with Westernization of Indian society, belief in the efficacy of badhai has diminished, and hijras are usually not welcome in marriages or after childbirth. The loss of traditional sources of livelihood means that hijras have to take up the secondary professions of begging and prostitution.

10.4 The Hijra Household as an Economic Unit

The hijra community in India is divided into seven houses, each of which is headed by a naik. A house is a form of organization of the entire hijra community in India, and members from different houses may live together as a family in a single hijra household, which usually comprises five to 15 members. The house connotes a symbolic entity within the hijra community. Each house has a specific dress code. The household, on the other hand, is the spatial structure in which the hijras live (Nanda 1999).

The admission of a new entrant is carried out through a ritual in the presence of a jamat, or a meeting of the seven naiks. It is the ritual enacted by the jamat that marks the starting point of the economic enslavement of the new entrant. During a jamat a plate with paan (betel) leaves is placed on the floor, around which the naiks sit, covering their heads with their saris. The jamat is called to order in the name of the entrant for whom the event has been organized. The name of the new entrant is announced, and he is asked if he is willing to become a chela. If he answers in the

affirmative, then he is declared by the jamat as the chela of the sponsoring guru and is given a female name (Nanda 1999).

The new chela is supposed to pay a *dund* or fine amount of 150 rupees to the jamat to be considered for admission under the tutelage of his sponsoring guru. In reality, this amount is paid by the guru who is sponsoring the new chela's entry into the hijra community to the jamat, who shares the amount among themselves. The new chela thus owes the sponsoring guru the fine or *dund* amount and is therefore obliged give part or whole of her earnings to guru to repay this debt. Thus, the entry point of an individual into the hijra community is based on a system of credit, with the chela being constantly caught in the cycle of debt. If things do not work out between the guru-chela pair, and the chela wants to move to another guru, then the new receiving guru has to pay double the amount initially paid, that is 300 rupees to the relieving guru. This represents the cost of training and apprenticeship that the chela has undergone with the first guru. The chela then owes this new amount to her new guru which she has to make up by sharing her earnings with the new guru.

While a guru-chela pair is supposed to last a lifetime, the option of changing gurus does exist within the hijra system, albeit at a price to the chela requesting the change. This practice, however, is discouraged, and a chela who changes too many gurus is considered inconsistent. Furthermore, every time she changes a guru, the amount of debt she owes to her new guru increases, and she is forced to work harder to repay the debt. At virtually every step from admission to changing gurus within the hijra community, a chela is effectively reduced to a subordinate commodity that gurus exchange between themselves. This is clearly a form of economic bondage, providing the chela with safety and a sense of community (Nanda 1999).

The guru-chela system is an extremely hierarchical system, where chelas cannot question the gurus at any cost. Apart from the economic bondage the chelas are subjected to, they are also required to serve the gurus by doing household chores and taking care of their physical, material, and often sexual needs (Kunihiro *n.d.*; Nanda 1999). In fact, young chelas often complain about the restrictions placed on them by the hijra way of life (Nanda 1999). The territories for collection of alms are controlled by the gurus, and this ensures that the earnings eventually come to them. This is also true in the performance of *badhai*. The territories for prostitution are usually not controlled by gurus but by senior chelas. The social networking between the gurus ensures that their chelas stay under their control and remain captive and confined to the territories they control. Thus, the agency of the chelas is subordinated to the whims of the gurus. In fact, gurus can often become controlling and abusive in their relationships with their chelas.

The traditional role of hijra identity is prone to marginalization and abuse both by the mainstream society and the hijra community itself. It would of course be an excessively negative view of the guru-chela system to state that it is only a site of abuse. Clearly, while the hijra system facilitates such abuse, it also creates a space for individuals who have no means of developing individual agency on their own and who are caught in the cycle of marginalization because of both poverty and their gender identity. Therefore, it is all the more necessary that affirmative action be taken to bring them into mainstream society, allowing them opportunities for

self-actualization. Gender dysphoria as a psychological condition does not discriminate between individuals coming from lower or upper economic strata; it can occur to anyone. Those who can access education and find some means of developing individual agency can achieve dignified social existence to a certain degree. But for most members of the transgender community born into poor or lower middle-class backgrounds, with little or no access to English-medium education, affirmative state initiatives are the only option available. It is in this respect that society at large, and educational and employing agencies in particular, must become sensitized to the plight of the hijra community, and it is imperative that transpersons have the option of mainstream employment.

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