



## Understanding the Psyche of the Indian Hijra: A Woman's Soul in a Man's Body

Kodad H.S.<sup>1</sup> and Kazi S.A.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Karnataka State Women's University, Bijapur, INDIA

<sup>2</sup>Dept. of Social Work, Dean of Social Sciences and Registrar, Karnataka State Women's University, Bijapur, INDIA

Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in)

Received 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2013, revised 29<sup>th</sup> June 2013, accepted 8<sup>th</sup> July 2013

### Abstract

*A masculine physique, feminine clothes, garish make – up, a coquettish walk, loud attitude, the trademark clap, that is the HIJRA put in a nutshell. The overtly sexual language, sometimes bordering on vulgarity, an incessant demand for money and teasing comments all constitute the public behavior of the hijras. It is but natural that the behavior of the hijras is met with disgust by the average onlooker, curiosity by a few and fear by many as there is every chance that the pestering for money may culminate in a lifting of the saree to show a flash of the mutilated genitals. However, it is essential to look beyond the obvious. The human being that exists behind this rough and vulgar persona needs to be explored. Like the mask worn by actors on a stage, the hijras have donned this role from time immemorial. Behind this mask is an individual, as unique as every individual born on this earth is, with likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, feelings, sentiments, moments of fear, moments of joy and a desire for a life with family and friends. Of course, the so called sexual deviance touches every aspect of life of the hijras. Every small wish seems like a big dream, impossible to achieve, every dream is questioned by the norms of the society. This article tries to delve into the heart, the mind, the psyche of the hijras and understand the human being hidden behind the public image.*

**Keywords:** Hijra, psyche, feminine essence, woman's soul.

### Introduction

The hijras may be born intersexed or may be physiological males. However, the one thing that they share is the deep sense of femininity. From an early age, the hijras exhibit feminine traits, which often elicit remarks from the observers. They love to dress in feminine clothes, wear jewellery, play with girls and engage in feminine household chores. As they grow up, they realize their inability to fit into the expected gender role assigned to them. They find it difficult to behave like the so called normal Indian male. Confusion pervades them everywhere including their sexual desires for a man. With great difficulty they come to terms with their identity and may be lucky enough to find a person who has been through a similar predicament.

The next step after accepting their identity is to make it known to their near and dear ones and to the whole world. But such revelations are often met with disapproval and at times total rejection. The only place where they find acceptance and understanding is the hijra community.

### A Few Stories of the Hijras

The hijras are spread in different parts of India. They hail from different backgrounds, belong to different religions, different castes, different classes. But, all their stories seem to be on similar lines, all of them seem to have endured the same pain,

the same conflicts, the same reactions and finally found solace in the hijra community.

The article, 'Hijra's own story' reveals the story of Revathi. Revathi, a hijra born in Tamilnadu writes that as a child, she helped her mother with housework. She would clean the entrance clean and cover it with *kolam*. Sometimes, she would try her sister's clothes and look at herself in the mirror. She usually kept company with girls of her age and played with them. When she turned 15, she started having various feminine desires. She began to feel shy and self conscious when men were around and felt a growing need to dress up and look good like a woman did. She was male but also womanly. Since she was male in body, she concealed her femininity, her desires and found herself deeply shaken by her inability to hide her feelings for long<sup>1</sup>.

Serena Nanda describes Salima, another hijra in her essay, 'Life on the margins: A Hijra's story'. Salima was a muslim born in Byculla, a Muslim neighbourhood in Mumbai. From the beginning, she used to dress and behave as a girl. She enjoyed playing with the girls. She never thought of herself as a boy. She would sit with the girls in school, playing with them, playing with girls' toys, sweeping the house, cooking and doing all the female activities. She would put on girls' clothes, put on kajal (eyeliner) and rouge<sup>2</sup>.

Serena Nanda has also given a similar description of Shakuntala, also a hijra. In her article, Serena Nanda relates that Shakuntala clearly expressed a female gender identity. Ever since her childhood Shakuntala felt like a girl. She liked to dress in female clothing, engage in feminine household chores and preferred girl playmates. She got involved in a long term monogamous relationship with a young man in her neighborhood whom she hoped to marry. She underwent the emasculation operation because she wanted to become more beautiful, like a woman<sup>3</sup>

Top of Form Siddharth Narrain (2003) gives an account of Sachin's feelings in an article entitled, Being A Eunuch.

Sachin is yet another such individual from Namakkal, a small town in Tamil Nadu who always identified himself with a woman. He says that he is male but has only female feelings. His story is very much similar to Salima and Shakuntala. The parents of Sachin looked at him as a girl. During his childhood, he loved to apply make up like a girl and engage in household chores normally carried out by the females. He was mocked at and ridiculed by the neighbours and relatives for behaving like a girl<sup>4</sup>.

The list of such hijras can go on and on. The common thread among the narratives of all these hijras seems the intense need to adopt a female role, a feeling of total rejection of the male body and a strong yearning to metamorphose into a female physique. Strange though it may seem to an individual born as a heterosexual and socialized into believing the male and female genders to be the only two acceptable genders, it is high time to accept the reality that there also exist in our society individuals who are physically males and psychologically females.

### Why do the Hijras Display the Feminine Traits?

The big question is, why is it that these individuals develop these feminine traits? Why is it that they undergo such painful castration risking their very life? Why is it that they go to the extent of having sex change operations to assert their femininity. Why do they loathe the male body and desire a female identity. But most important of all we need to answer, why we as rational human beings fail to understand and empathise with the hijras. It is important to find an answer for these questions.

### Theories of Transsexualism

There are various theories regarding transsexualism. A look at the various theories might help in having an insight into their behaviour.

In 1868, Karl – Heinrich Ulrichs came up with the phrase, feminine soul enclosed in a male body for homosexual men who preferred to identify themselves to the feminine gender. The phrase given by Karl – Heinrich Ulrichs encases beautifully the complexities of the hijra mind.<sup>5</sup>

The phrase introduced by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs found further acceptance when it was taken another step ahead by Harry Benjamin who put forth the idea that there is a possibility of the existence of a male individual with a female soul.<sup>5</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw further progress of this theory when it gained support from important sexologists.<sup>5</sup>

This phrase puts in a nutshell the inner conflict faced by the hijras. Be it Revathi or Shakuntala or any other hijra, all of them, have felt their bodies to be totally out of harmony with their inner self. A female trapped in a male body, the hijras have gone to enormous lengths, even risking their very lives through non medical castrations to synchronize their physical self with their psychological self.

Ray Blanchard's, "Feminine essence theory"

Another important theory which helps in understanding the psyche of the hijras is the "Feminine essence theory" presented by Ray Blanchard in 2008. Blanchard's theory looks at the male to female transsexuals as females inside male bodies.<sup>5</sup>

J. Michael Bailey, a sexologist has also explored the transsexual psyche. He describes the transsexual feelings of identifying themselves with the opposite sex and feeling the urgency to undergo a sex change operation to own a body which is in sync with their feelings.<sup>5</sup>

These statements echo the feelings expressed by the hijras in India. The hijras also seem to detest the male sex organs to such an extent that they undergo castration. The sex reassignment surgeries have started not many years ago, but the process of castration has been in practice among the hijras from the ancient periods.

Neuroanatomic research: Yet another theory to explain the psychology of the hijras is given by Bailey and Triea who opine that the transsexuals might be owning female and not male brain anatomy. This theory is supported by Simon LeVay's findings about the hypothalamus of male homosexuals and female heterosexuals having a region that are similar in size.<sup>5</sup>

Ganguli Dibyendu in her article on harassment on male homosexuals in metropolitan Kolkata, India has written that every society has certain norms of behavior for males and females. She writes that a homosexual male exhibits feminine traits subconsciously. The behavior assumes femininity quite subconsciously without any explicit efforts<sup>6</sup>.

The various theories put together agree unanimously on one thing . The transsexuals, like the hijras are born with certain physiological conditions which bestow on them the unique feminine personality, though physically they are males. The yearning to don the female role is not a result of faulty socialization or any mental illness or a psychological disorder.

Rather, it is because they are born with a unique combination as put forth by various theorists.

## Conclusion

The psychology of the hijras is difficult to demystify. However, these theories throw light on the behaviors of the hijras. It is important to look at the hijra community in a different light bereft of stigma and prejudice. They should not be treated as queer, unnatural, deviant or unacceptable. Rather, they need to be empathized and be understood and accepted in the unique way they have been created and the unique way in which they expect and deserve acceptance.

## References

1. Revathi, A Hijra's own story, Because I have a voice: Queer politics in India, 225 (2005)
2. Nanda S., Life on the margins: A hijra story, Everyday life in South Asia, 124, (2010)
3. Nanda S., The Hijras of India: Cultural and individual dimensions of an institutionalized third gender role, Anthropology and Homosexual Behaviour, 124 (2010)
4. Narrain S., Being A Eunuch, Frontline, *the Peoples Union of Civil Liberties (Karnataka) Report on Human Rights Violations Against the Transgender Community*, <http://www.countercurrents.org/gen-narrain141003.htm> (2003)
5. Feminine essence concept of transsexuality, *Wikipedia, the web encyclopaedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminine\\_essence\\_concept\\_of\\_transsexuality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminine_essence_concept_of_transsexuality) (2013)
6. Ganguli D., Negotiating Sexual 'Otherness': An Exploratory Study of Harassment on Male Homosexuals in Metropolitan Kolkata, India, *IRJSS*, 2(3), 27 (2013)