Urban Challenges Faced by the Hijra Community

Mohammad Abdullah Khan

PhD Scholar, Department of Civics and Politics, University of Mumbai

Abstract:

This research focuses on the challenges faced by the hijra community in urban India, touching upon issues such as economic marginalization, discrimination, and the point of intersection between religion and caste, all within the LGBTQ+ context. Hijras are individuals who are born biologically male, and identify as trans women, and live in small, secretive communities across South Asia, forming a very distinctive cultural group. This study draws on in-depth interviews with two members of the hijra community in Mumbai, India, offering a first-hand account of their struggles. The findings of this research revealed that many members of the hijra community confine themselves to low-income hustles such as begging, or sex work, due to rampant discrimination that exists in the heteronormative post-colonial South-Asian societies. This also contributes to their lack of access to healthcare, safe housing, protection from hate crimes, and a declining mental health on a community-wide level. Despite legal progress, a lot of challenges related to identity recognition and humanizing the community still persist. This introductory article thus advocates for various empowerment initiatives to facilitate a more inclusive and equitable environment in urban India for hijra individuals.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Hijras, Urban India, Economic Marginalization, Caste Discrimination, Empowerment

Word Count: 2146

Ethical Note:

The researcher declares that the individuals interviewed as part of this research have given their informed consent for the same, and have chosen to stay anonymous due to concerns of further subjugation, and doxing.

Urban Challenges Faced by the Hijra Community

In India, there is a significant shortage of understanding about the concept of being transgender, resulting in numerous misconceptions, all of which tend to be unfavorable. The general population fails to differentiate between the various identities within the transgender spectrum, grouping individuals like eunuchs, trans men, trans women, and others under the umbrella term of "third gender," often pejoratively referred to as 'chakka.' These misconceptions have severely impacted the transgender community, resulting in their widespread subjugation and exclusion, even within the broader queer spectrum. The derogatory use of such terms has dehumanized and marginalized these individuals, denying them their fundamental rights and dignity. The personal choice of being transgender is often misconstrued and not

respected, leaving many individuals with no alternative but to live silently within this subjugated identity. This raises a vital question about the right to live and be respected, a concern that warrants collective attention and introspection. The lack of knowledge, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and an unwillingness to learn due to non-acceptance propagate the ideas of hate, exacerbating the situation.

Transgender individuals, particularly those in the hijra community living in urban centers in India, encounter a multitude of intricate challenges, including economic hardships, social discrimination, and unique difficulties rooted in their cultural and historical context. Before delving further into this subject, it is crucial for us to comprehend the identity of the hijras precisely.

The transgender spectrum encompasses a wide range of aspects related to gender and biological sex. It also includes intersex babies, and regrettably, these terms are often improperly utilized, resulting in the misidentification of individuals. In South Asia, the situation has deteriorated for the hijra community, as their name is utilized as an epithet for anyone who does not adhere to heterosexual norms or does not conform to heteronormative beliefs.

Hijras are biologically male at birth, but as they mature, they develop a strong sense of being trapped in a male body. They undergo sex reassignment surgery and are then identify as trans women. A deeper understanding of the process, and the associated emotions behind it could be found in the autobiographical work of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi titled 'Me Hijra, Me Laxmi'.[i] Figure 1 depicts Laxmi Narayan Tripathi addressing a panel at Melbourne Writers Festival in 2017. However, the hijra culture extends beyond this procedure and is primarily concentrated in South Asia.

Figure 1: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a prominent activist within the community[ii]

Not surprisingly, after undergoing surgery, most of these women are ostracized from their homes and subsequently join one of the numerous secretive hijra communities in their localities. They follow the guru-chela system and reside together in their homes. Under their guru's guidance, they work and support their homes by begging, dancing, or engaging in sex work. Although they are free to pursue other occupations, the marginalization they face compels them to adhere to these designated roles. This essay examines the urban challenges faced by these communities and emphasizes the necessity for increased awareness and inclusiveness.

The following information was gathered through interviews conducted with Mumbai-based members of the Hijra community.

Economic Exclusion:

In metropolitan areas, such as Mumbai, hijra individuals often encounter economic exclusion. They are frequently assigned to low-income jobs, such as begging or sex work, owing to their limited employment prospects and societal discrimination. These occupations represent the only means of subsistence for transgender individuals, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of economic hardships. Employment discrimination further compounds their financial instability.

Lack of Safe Housing:

Securing safe and stable housing in urban environments is a pervasive challenge for the hijras. They often face rejection from landlords who refuse rent. Consequently, many transgender individuals are compelled to reside in slum areas or overcrowded substandard accommodations, often on a shared basis, experiencing social isolation combined with deplorable living conditions, as shown in Figure 2. The scarcity of affordable and accepting housing options exacerbates their susceptibility to violence and exploitation, underscoring the need for more inclusive housing policies.

Figure 2: A group of hijras socializing outside of their home in Mumbai[iii]

Discrimination and Violence:

Urban hijras are particularly susceptible to discrimination and violence. Hate crimes, physical and verbal abuse, and harassment are common experiences. Discrimination can be widespread, affecting access to public spaces, healthcare, and education. The risk of being subjected to violence further intensifies their sense of insecurity. Efforts to combat this include the creation of safe spaces and advocating anti-discrimination legislation.

Caste-Based Divisions:

The emergence of caste-based divisions within LGBTQ+ pride events, as highlighted in the first interview, is concerning. Banners representing specific caste groups within the LGBTQ+ community have appeared, which goes against principles of unity and acceptance. This raises issues of division instead of inclusion. To tackle this problem, it is crucial to prioritize gender identity over factors such as caste, religion, and cultural background within the LGBTQ+ community. Emphasizing unity based on shared experiences is

essential to ensure that LGBTQ+ events remain inclusive and welcomed.

The intersection of caste and religion within the transgender and hijra communities presents an additional layer of complexity for the urban challenges they face. While some members of these communities may belong to marginalized castes and experience compounded discrimination, others may come from religious backgrounds that have unique traditions and practices.

In the second interview, "tali bajana" was introduced as a deeply spiritual and traditional act. In this context, clapping is viewed as a means of connecting with a higher power and seeking solace from the challenges faced by transgender individuals. Recognizing the cultural and religious traditions of transgender communities, which often include unique practices like "tali bajana," underscores the richness of these diverse cultural and religious traditions and the need for acceptance and understanding.

Diverse Religious Beliefs:

The hijra community exhibits a diverse range of religious beliefs and practices. While some individuals adhere to a mix of Muslim and Hindu rituals, others may follow different beliefs. The acceptance of hijras within these religious communities is often influenced by their families' understanding and support, adding an additional layer of complexity to their experience in urban areas.

During the interview with a hijra individual, they mentioned that the religion practiced by hijras could vary depending on the region of India. They explained that the hijra community follows a mix of various religious practices that can include aspects of both Hinduism and Islam. In different states, the hijra community might primarily adhere to one religion over another, depending on the local context.

With every passing year, more places of worship in India are opening doors for the hijra community in a direction towards inclusivity, as shown in Figure 3. The diversity of the hijras' religious practices, along with their now legal recognition as the 'third gender', has compelled religious organizations to embrace the community, although with a slight reluctance.[iv]

For instance, in Hyderabad, some hijras were mentioned as following Muslim cultural practices, and the interviewee mentioned that when a transgender person from the hijra community passed away, the burial process typically involved rituals that were a mixture of Muslim and Hindu traditions. However, specific practices may vary depending on the religious background of the individual within the community.

Figure 3: Muslim hijra worshippers outside a mosque in Delhi[v]

Healthcare Disparities:

Access to adequate healthcare remains a significant issue for the hijras in urban areas. Many healthcare providers lack knowledge about transgender health issues, and transgender individuals often avoid seeking

medical care because of fear of discrimination and stigmatization. Consequently, they may not receive the healthcare they need. Advocating inclusive healthcare policies and training medical professionals is essential.

Mental Health and Well-Being:

The systemic discrimination and social exclusion encountered by hijras in urban settings may have severe implications for their mental health. Stress resulting from discrimination, economic instability, and social estrangement can contribute to a higher prevalence of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the resilience and strength of these communities, as they often support each other in dealing with these challenges.

Legal Recognition and Rights:

While India has made substantial progress with the repeal of Section 377, which criminalized non-heterosexual activities, legal recognition and protection for transgender individuals are still in progress. Challenges related to identity documents, legal name changes, and equal rights persist in urban settings. Legal advocacy and awareness campaigns play a critical role in pushing for change.

Transgender Empowerment and Education:

Initiatives aimed at addressing these urban challenges include education and empowerment programs. For instance, Kerala has taken significant steps towards providing financial assistance to transgender students pursuing higher education. Such programs seek to break the cycle of economic marginalization and provide a path for greater inclusion. These initiatives must be expanded and replicated in other urban areas.

Sensitization and Inclusion:

Addressing the challenges faced by transgender individuals and the hijra community in urban areas requires a broader societal shift. To foster understanding and acceptance, it is essential to implement sensitization programs in urban schools and communities by humanizing the experiences of these communities and integrating them into the broader social fabric, so that discrimination and exclusion can be mitigated. As discussed previously, a lot of members within the community are involved in sex work, a profession which has been historically marginalized. Figure 4 depicts a hijra individual who practices sex-trade for a living. To foster inclusivity, the sensitization must be intersectional, as sex workers who identify as hijras are likely to face a two-fold stigmatization for their choice of identity, and profession: a situation that puts them at a greater risk than others.

Figure 4: A member of the hijra community engaged in sex trade in Mumbai[vi]

These programs should include diversity and inclusion training for the police, healthcare providers, and educational institutions. Efforts to address the intersection of caste and religion also require an inclusive approach. Promoting unity within the LGBTQ+ community and respecting diverse religious and cultural traditions are crucial steps towards fostering greater inclusion. It is important to recognize that these traditions and practices enrich the tapestry of human experience and should be respected.

Takeaway:

The enlightening discussions have elucidated various aspects of the Hijra community in India, which comprises individuals with diverse gender identities, including transgender individuals who adhere to a unique system with distinct rituals and practices. Notably, different regions across the country exhibit different religious affiliations within the Hijra community and their rituals adapt accordingly to the local context. However, despite its rich cultural heritage, Hijras face significant social challenges, including societal rejection, discrimination, and marginalization, which impede their access to basic rights and essential facilities. While some regions, such as Kerala, have made notable progress in transgender empowerment through government initiatives, others, such as Mumbai, lack safe spaces and encounter substantial obstacles. Education has emerged as a critical tool for sensitizing societies to these issues.

The need for inclusive classrooms and broader educational initiatives aimed at fostering an awareness of gender diversity and promoting acceptance has become apparent. These conversations underscore ongoing advocacy efforts within the community, particularly in recent legal battles for same-sex marriage recognition. The glaring absence of transgender studies within the curriculum highlights the urgency to integrate comprehensive education on gender and sexuality. These discussions emphasize the pressing need to address societal prejudices, advocate for equal rights, and foster a more inclusive and accepting society for Hijra and the broader transgender community in India.

Conclusion:

The urban challenges faced by transgender individuals and the hijra community in India are multifaceted, including economic marginalization, housing insecurity, discrimination, caste, religion, healthcare disparities, and legal recognition issues. Initiatives for empowerment, education, and sensitization are essential for fostering greater inclusion and addressing these challenges. Recognizing the complex nature of these issues is the first step towards creating more equitable and inclusive urban environments.

Addressing these intersections requires a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences and practices of these communities. Initiatives for inclusion and respect, both within and outside these communities, are essential to creating more equitable urban environments and ensuring that the principles of unity and acceptance remain at the forefront of LGBTQ+ events and society as a whole. The ongoing struggle for the rights and acceptance of transgender individuals and the hijra community underscores the importance of addressing these complex intersections to foster lasting changes.

Endnotes:

[i] Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, R Raj Rao, and P G Joshi. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.

[ii] Image retrieved from : Rhude, Kristofer. "The Third Gender and Hijras." *Rpl.hds.harvard.edu*, Harvard Divinity School, 2018, rpl.hds.harvard.edu/religion-context/case-studies/gender/third-gender-and-hijras.

[iii] Image retrieved from: McCauley, Alison. "Alison McCauley - Hijra Communities in Mumbai." *LensCulture*, www.lensculture.com/projects/11389-hijra-communities-in-mumbai. Accessed 23 Oct. 2023.

[iv] Taboom Media. "India's Third-Gender 'Hijra' Community Balances Acceptance with Religious Identity." Taboom Media, July 14, 2015. https://taboommedia.com/2015/07/14/indias-third-gender-hijra-community-balances-acceptance-with-religious-identity/.

[v] Image retrieved from: Khan, Zeyad Masroor. "Hijras Are Welcome among the Men at This Mosque in Delhi's Rangpuri." *Vice*, 16 Apr. 2018, www.vice.com/en/article/bjp5gv/hijras-are-welcomed-among-the-men-praying-at-this-mosque-in-delhis-rangpuri. Accessed 23 Oct. 2023.

[vi] Image retrieved from: McCauley, Alison. "Alison McCauley - Hijra Communities in Mumbai." *LensCulture*, www.lensculture.com/projects/11389-hijra-communities-in-mumbai. Accessed 23 Oct. 2023.