

Empowering the Marginalized Hijras in West Bengal: An overview

Soumya Narayan Datta

Contractual Full Time Lecturer in Sociology

Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah, West Bengal

Email id-dattasoumya87@gmail.com

Abstract: Transgender are those who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex. These may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine. Transgender fall within the category of third gender. In West Bengal transgender are known by Hijras to refer to trainwomen meaning male-to-female transgender individuals. During weddings and childbirth celebrations these Hijras dance and sing known as badhai as they are believed to possess special powers to grant fertility and prosperity to a newly married couple or a new born baby. In the era of pre-independence, they were labelled as 'criminal tribes' by the authorities of the colonial rule leading towards ostracism from the mainstream Indian society and due to such situation they were denied accessibility towards basic rights. This paper attempts to research into the ways towards empowerment of Hijras in the state of West Bengal henceforth reflecting towards a shift from the sphere of marginalization to the domain of the rays of inclusion.

Keywords: transgender, Hijras, empowerment, marginalization, inclusion

Transgender as a concept

Transgender mentions about a diverse group of individuals whose gender does not match their biological sex at birth. This umbrella term describes a wide range of gender-variant groups and individuals ranging from those who engage in transgender behavior on occasion, such as cross-dressers, to those who do so at all times. A version of the term transgender was first used in 1969 by Virginia Prince in *Transvestia*, a magazine for cross-dressers. At that time, Prince used the term transgendered to refer to a person who lived full time in the gender opposite their sex but had no desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery (Tauches 843). In 1992, with the printing of Leslie Fienberg's pamphlet "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come," the term took on a broader scope as Feinberg used transgender to refer to all people who were gender variant. This is the meaning of the word as it is currently used. Thus it can be stated that

apart from cross-dressers, transgenders also comprises of transsexuals, androgynes and genderqueers (Tauches 843).

Theoretical background of transgender

There are three main theories of gender that can be used to explain transgendering which are essentialism, social constructionism and performativity. All three view sex and gender as having differing degrees of importance in the social world. Essentialist theory places emphasis on biological processes and argues that gender is a fixed trait as opposed to a social construction. This means gender is something that will not vary much over time and space either on an individual basis or in society in general (Tauches 846). In essentialism, transgendered individuals might view themselves as always having felt that they were actually members of the sex category opposite their biological sex at birth. Some argue that they were born transgender; for example, they state that they were born male but have felt for as long as they can remember that they were supposed to be female. In this case, they view their sex as male but their gender identity is actually female (Tauches 846). This is an essentialist notion of transgendering as it relies on the idea that a person has a gender identity that he or she is born with as opposed to one that is constructed or developed throughout that person's life. An example of the essentialist theory is seen in the narrative given by some transsexuals. Transsexuals feel the need to change their sex to match their gender identities seen as an inborn trait. Their narratives often involve the feeling that they were born into the wrong sex and therefore need to change their physiology to more closely approximate the sex that corresponds with their sense of gender identity (Tauches 846). Social constructionism refers to the notion that sex and gender are separate concepts and that both are socially constructed. Sex is thought to be socially constructed by the medical community as doctors define who is male and who is female. Gender is also socially constructed as gender changes over time and across cultures. Further, while gender is thought to be based on sex, there is always the possibility that individuals may break the social norms that are dictated (Tauches 846). Transgender individuals in this case may view sex and gender as completely distinct and believe that there is no reason for their gender to be based on their sex. This leads some to break conventional gender norms and develop a gender distinct from their sex. Gender identity is still a key concept here as it is used to describe why a person might change from one gender to another though it is not necessarily seen as something one is born with (Tauches 846). Rather gender identity is viewed as something the individual develops over time and that has the

potential to change in the future. The category of social constructionism involves a person who is a transgenderist that is someone who lives full time as the opposite sex but feels no need for sex reassignment surgery. Their sex and their gender do not match, but they do not see this as a biological issue as they have no desire to change their biological sex through surgery. Performance is a third way to view transgending (Tauches 846). Performance theory is very different from essentialist notions which rely on a gender identity and social constructionist notions which rely on a distinction between sex and gender. Attributed to theorists Candace West and Don Zimmerman as well as Judith Butler this outlook sees gender as a performance that must be done on a daily basis. This performance does not have to be based on sex or on gender identity (Tauches 846). Frequently, it is so routine that one might not pay attention to it or think of it as a performance, rather it is just seen as something “normal” that one does in daily life. A person’s gender performance may change depending on who that person is interacting with (Tauches 846). In this case, transgender people might view their gender as more of an expression or performance rather than as an aspect of identity or an expression of their sex. The example of a drag queen is a good way to think about gender as a performance. Drag queens are male-bodied individuals who perform onstage as females. Though this is a very literal example, if one considers everyday life and interactions to be a broader stage on which to perform, it is easier to picture gender as a performance (Tauches 847).

Hijras and their marginalization in West Bengal

Hijras are often referred to as India’s “third sex” and they have become the subjects of numerous scholarly works over a few years. Many adult hijras have undergone nirvan surgery or castration operation as adults. During weddings and childbirth celebrations these Hijras dance and sing known as badhai because they are believed to possess special powers to grant fertility and prosperity to a newly married couple or a new born baby. Many hijras are also involved in sex work (Iyer 420). During the colonial regime, hijras were not only classified as a separate caste or tribe because of their distinctive social organization and occupational identity, but they were also identified as a “criminal caste,” and were placed under surveillance and regulation. They were arrested under Article 377 of the Indian Penal code which prohibits sodomy (Iyer 421). Hijras identify themselves as Islamic and thus many perform the hajj to Mecca and assume Muslim names. They also worship at the tombs of Muslim mystics along with other Indian Muslims and celebrate Islamic holidays. However, hijras also maintain Hindu practices especially in the

worship of Bahuchara Mata or Bedhraj Mata who is regarded as their prime goddess and also thought to be the incarnation of the mother goddess (Iyer 421). Worship of the goddess is especially important to hijras before and after their castration surgery. The nirvan surgery with its attending rituals and ceremonies that mimic Hindu rituals at childbirth is the most important event in a hijra's life. These risky and painful surgeries, although illegal, are performed by sympathetic medical personnel or by a daimaa meaning midwife. Hijras also worship Lord Shiva as ardhanarisvara which is an incarnation in which Shiva is represented as embodying both male and female principles (Iyer 421).

In West Bengal researches performed indicated a high degree of ostracism of Hijras. The results showed that in India, Hijras are a marginalized and stigmatized community. They professed that mainstream society does not understand their culture, gender and sexuality. Violations of their human and sexual rights have been overlooked in the traditional doctrine. There is a significant paucity of understanding of those transgender people as human beings whose lives encompass a complexity which goes beyond the normative correlation between biological sexes on the one hand and gender identity and sexual orientation on the other (Mal 110). While focusing on the social problem, researchers found that family members often do not support their presence. Within the family, Hijras are faced with a variety of problems that include verbal and physical abuse, isolation and rejection, denial of family property etc. Based on their sexuality or gender disorder society often stigmatizes and discriminate them. Social stigma includes being looked down upon, labeling and negative attitude towards such as sex work or sex solicitors (Mal 110). The Health problems explored the impact of discrimination and stigma on health care access for rural and urban transgender individuals. The research was conducted using with self-identified transgender individuals in the society. Maximum respondents have been spotted suffering from various illnesses such as blood pressure, diabetic, headache, joint pain etc. Some of them have AIDS and STD. On the other, about half of the respondents stated that they suffer illnesses like knee pain mainly caused due to strenuous walking and climbing during begging whether in trains or shops and also malaria and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) etc. (Mal 111). The Hijras who suffered from herpes and STI infections also did not reveal their HIV status. Many Hijras do not like to go to Government hospitals or any other health care sectors. For instances, there is no space available for them like for e.g in hospital wards. The authorities do not admit them in women's ward because women do not feel comfortable or free in their presence and in men's ward they face sexual abuse

(Mal 111). Again the problems faced within the economic domain observed that most of the transgender people are school dropouts. Due to lack of adequate education and lack of employment opportunities, these Hijras or the Indian third genders are forced into sex work and begging. While some transgender manage to sustain their job in spite of stigma and discrimination in workplace, most of them resign from their jobs without tolerating stigma and discrimination (Mal 112). The Hijra asserted inability of getting a mainstream job due to lack of education and “unusual” non-conforming lifestyle that is regarded unacceptable for the working environment. They do not have access to any job because of their feminine gesture. They are always denied from getting any job on the grounds of destroying the work environment. Even though if some were able to get jobs, later on within a few days they were eventually dismissed when it came to the notice of their employers about their feminine attitudes (Mal 112). In some cases, many Hijras were verbally, physically, and sexually abused at workplaces for which they never received any justice. They rather lost their job because the employers wanted to save the workplace from sexual pollution as well as social pollution (Mal 112). But such kind of painful situation didn't last for long because later on in the year 2014 the Supreme Court provided them the status of a ‘third sex’ as a legal acceptance of these Hijras within the mainframe Indian society that helped them towards accessing basic equal rights.

Initiatives for empowering the marginalized Hijras in West Bengal

In order to eradicate the increasing nature of marginalization the West Bengal government took a strong initiative towards empowering Hijras. In a major development towards recognising the rights of transgender people the West Bengal government decided to set up a ‘Transgender Welfare Board’. This development came in the wake of a Supreme Court order delivered on 15th April, 2014 recognising transgender people as a third gender and directing the State governments and Centre to extend benefits of all welfare schemes, education, healthcare and jobs(Singh). While chairing the first ‘State Level Consultation on the Rehabilitation and Welfare of Transgender Community’, Dr. Shashi Panja as the Minister for women and child development, Government of West Bengal discussed on certain issues like referring them as “third gender” and whether transgender may be included in the Other Backward Class category. She asserted that the welfare of the Hijra or transgender community needs the requirement of the coordination of Department of Health, Backward Classes Welfare Department and the School Education Department (Singh). The Minister advocated towards having separate toilets in schools and

wards in hospitals for Hijras. During a meeting of the West Bengal Transgender Development Board, Dr. Panja also proposed the idea of empowering the transgender community by recruiting Hijras into the Civic Police Volunteer Force or CPVC. The job of the CPVC, also known as 'Green Police' is to assist primarily the Kolkata Police in traffic management (Singh). It has been observed for the first time in the 2016 West Bengal State Assembly elections that a group of Hijras were assigned the charge of the voting process at a polling booth in Kolkata. This was part of an initiative in order to include all sections of the society in polling process and the Election Commission has identified a booth where Hijras will be positioned as polling personnel (Singh). Such inclusive actions would inspire every Hijra to move out in the public sphere and remove the stigma of discrimination and ostracism. Henceforth this is a message for the entire third gender to come forward and disclose their identity in public. On this issue the district electoral officer highlighted on the fact that this inclusion in polling process would be a part of their social engineering experience (Singh). It has been observed in the West Bengal State assembly elections held in the year 2016 that Hijras are registered as voters. In this connection a report in the newspaper, 'Hindustan Times' highlighted that Aparna Banerjee who was a transgender and member of the state's Transgender Development Board quoted that earlier they would only cast their votes as males or females but in the 2016 West Bengal State Assembly elections they would vote as transgenders. Her three daughters would also avail the chances of voting based on the identity of transgenders (Singh).

In the cultural sphere there has also been a remarkable progress in the social status of these hijras. In the year 2016, on the eve of Durga puja in Bengal Hijras were given the rare opportunity of inaugurating a community Puja in the city. The committee members of a certain puja club located in the southern fringes of the city, urged the representatives of the Association of Transgender or Hijras in Bengal to inaugurate their Durga Puja (Singh). In a report published in 'The Hindu', Ranjita Sinha who was the secretary of the Association of Transgender or Hijras in Bengal expressed her overwhelming gratitude to the puja organizers for inviting their organisation to inaugurate a puja for the devotees thus providing the hijra community to come forward in the public domain and be a part of this four day national festival of Bengal (Singh). Ms Sinha further added by mentioning the fact that when Durga Puja presents plethora of themes on socially important issues it is fortunate for them that at least one Puja Pandal committee has thought about them thereby emphasizing the valuable presence of hijras involved in the Indian

society. Thus for the first time it was found that Durga Puja organisers have invited members of the transgender community for the inauguration of a puja. Such initiatives were the outcome of the Supreme Court judgement that has brought awareness and recognition for the community to some extent (Singh). The appointment of the first transgender principal Dr. Manabi Bandopadhyay by the education department of Government of West Bengal is held to be notable as it is a very significant step towards empowering the status of hijras in the sphere of higher education in Bengal (Mondal). But later on Dr. Manabi Bandopadhyay expressed certain resentment about her fellow colleagues for being non-cooperative towards her in administrative matters of the college. This kind of rejection and lack of support from the staff members of the college ultimately compelled her to place her resignation before the government but the situation changed thereafter when the state government interfered in this matter and stood in favour of Dr. Bandopadhyay requesting her to withdraw her resignation (Mondal).

Summary

Hijras were once accorded a very respectable position in Indian society due to their religious connection with Bahuchara Mata. But the emergence of the colonial rulers in India wrecked the image of these hijras as they were labeled as 'criminal caste'. Thus the process of rejection and discrimination resulting towards exclusion that was initiated during the colonial regime reached its peak later on when India attained independence. But the decisions taken by the Supreme Court brought rays of hope and encouragement within these hijra communities. In this process like other State governments of India the West Bengal government has also made a significant mark towards empowering these hijras through implementing various welfare schemes in different sectors ranging from health, education and also in matters related to employment. But the most surprising fact is that the mission of the State government along with the Central government is not yet completely over. Therefore, an important stress should be given on the issue of social awareness programme which should involve the main objective of empowering not only the hijra community but also mature the minds of the literate and the illiterate people that suggests for developing a positive outlook to create social harmony and equality with these hijras in the coming decades.

Works Cited

- Iyer, N. "Hijra/Hejira". *Encyclopedia Of Gender And Society*, edited by Jodi.O'Brien, vol. 1, Sage Publications, 2009, pp. 420-422.
- Mal, S. "Let us to Live: Social Exclusion of Hijra Community". *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2015, pp. 108-117. *Academia*, doi: 10.5958/2249-7315.2015.00084.2.
- Mondal, Halim. "First transgender college principal resumes work as govt refused to accept resignation". *Hindustantimes*, 4 January 2017, www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/first-transgender-college-principal-resumes-work-as-govt-refused-to-accept-resignation/story-oLUCtOkzUkJpfkegP3oczO.html. Accessed 22 February 2020.
- Singh, S.S. "Bengal to set up Transgender Welfare Board". *The Hindu*, 16 July 2014, www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/bengal-to-set-up-transgender-welfare-board/article6216502.ece. Accessed 22 February 2020.
- Singh, S.S. "In a first, transgender opens Durga Puja pandal". *The Hindu*, 2 October 2014, www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/in-a-first-transgender-opens-durga-puja-pandal/article6468005.ece. Accessed 22 February 2020.
- Tauches, K. "Transgender". *Encyclopedia Of Gender And Society*, edited by Jodi.O'Brien, vol. 1, Sage Publications, 2009, pp. 843-847.