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SEXUAL ACCIDENT: HIJRA COMMUNITY IN MUMBAI

Introduction

Hijras occupy an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women. In contrast, the transsexual role in Western culture is not accepted as a fully recognized gender in India. This non-acceptance is due to a lack of religious sanction and an unyielding Western commitment to a dichotomous gender system (Nanda, 1990: 137), which expects all 'normal' persons to conform to one of only two gender roles. Western ideology, uncomfortable with ambiguity, strives to resolve in-between categories.

Traditional ideology in India not only accommodates the reality of ambiguity and diversity among different personality types, but also conceptualizes androgynous persons as special sacred beings. Hindu mythology makes frequent reference to combined man/woman beings. The cognition of hijras as religious figures, as neither men nor women, provides them with social respect and an institutional character. They are seen as representatives of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mala, which gives them ritual power. Not just tolerating contradiction but actively embracing it.

Hindus believe that hijras have powers to bless heterosexual marriages so that they will be fertile and infant males, so that they will grow up to become masculine men. Many anthropologists have written about number of inaccuracies among hijras:

First, they are not morphological hermaphrodites, but were androgynous in character from early childhood and voluntarily joined a hijra community during their adolescence.

Second, they are not forced to undergo a surgical operation to remove their penis and testicles, though many of them do this by their own wish.

Third, most *hijras* are sexually active with men, being the insertee in anal intercourse. Some gain their livelihood through prostituting themselves to masculine males, while others marry a man and live together.

Traditionally, Indian society did not see such pairings as "homosexual," since hijras were not considered to be the same gender as their masculine partners.

Hijras are not defined as men, because they have no desire to engage in masculine labor and activities. They do not wish to have sex with women, and do not want to father children. Conversely, hijras are not seen as women, because even though they may engage in women's occupations, they do not menstruate and cannot give birth. Hijras dress in women's clothing and wear feminine hairstyles and jewelry. Yet, Indian people recognise that hijras are not actually women. They are not-men/not-women.

Due to the western colonial influence, which condemns gender variance and homosexuality, the status of *hijras* in modern Indian society has declined. Among Westernised Indians, presence of hijras at weddings and baptismal ceremonials is only barely tolerated. Temples of hijra community are not given adequate financial support and many hijras suffer employment discrimination. As a result, prostitution, dancing and begging are often the only occupations (gainful activity) open to them.

Transgender community or the Eunuchs are popularly known as "hijras", and "chakkas" in Mumbai. The number of this community member is estimated to be over one lakh. There are about forty thousand of them, who have been able to identify themselves openly as members of this transgender community.

This study proposes:

- (a) To trace the existence of Eunuchs in the city historically
- (b) To understand these people as a distinct community
- (c) To locate the trials and tribulations of these members
- (d) To focus on the problems faced by them
- (e) To highlight their major issues of concern and solution
- (f) To suggest some alternatives to ameliorate their condition

"Guru" inducts every member in this community. Each member is in turn authorized to adopt "Chelas". Their community is a well-knit and close circuit community. As has been observed they seemed to have matrilineal community relationships like "mausi", "sister", "tai", "khala", "phuphi", "nani", "didi", etc., apart from being in a "Guru-Chela" relation.

The Hijra

'Hijra' community has increasingly been seen as representative of a third gender in India by many thinkers. Third gender is qualified as a culturally available 'role' for those whose 'innate' tendencies do not allow them to fit into the binary framework. The concept of a 'third' gender has been the notion of 'the mind of a woman trapped in the body of a man'. The Hijra community was quite often listed as 'castes and tribes' in the compendiums and glossaries

compiled by British administrators and scholars. The hijras too perceived themselves as a distinct community having a separate identity.

The term *hijra* literary means “impotent one” in Urdu. In Hindi, *hijra* may be spelled *hijada*, *hijara*, *hijda*, *hijira*, or *hijrah*, and is pronounced somewhere between “heejra” and “heejda”. An older, more respectable term for *hijra* is *kinnar*. An abusive slang Hindi term for *hijra* is *chakka*.

Some hijras were made to be literal eunuchs — some of them against their will. The process isn’t ordinarily a pretty one, usually carried out without the aid of modern anesthesia or antibiotics. Most, however, are transgender of some sort and choose to foreswear their lives as men while retaining their sex organs. A few, however, are intersex and are considered to be “born eunuchs.” Hijras are usually considered to constitute a third sex or third gender in that they are neither men nor women. (Not coincidentally, both hijras and two-spirits — Native American “Indians” who are also of a third gender — have been said to refer to themselves as “not men, not women.”) Hijras don’t all look at themselves the same way. Some see themselves - or are construed by others - as females, feminine males, transsexuals, or androgynes. There are also female *hijra*, called *hijrin*.

The term *mukhanni* may or may not be a synonym for *hijra*. Another such term is *ali*. The relatively new (as of 2003) Aravani (*aka aravanni*, *aravani*, or *aruvani*), originated in Tamil Nadu, was popularized in India as a politically correct term to describe members of the third gender, yet it applies more to the devotees of Kutandavar Aravan (India’s god of the *ali*) than those of Bahuchara Mata (the goddess of the hijras). In Urdu and Punjabi, both in Pakistan and India, the term *khusra* is sometimes used. The Urdu term *moorat* — a contraction of *mard* (man) and *aurat* (woman) — is often used in Pakistan. In Gujarati, they are called Pavaiyaa. Another term is *jankha*. The word “*hijra*” has another, wholly unrelated meaning in another context: in Arabic, “*Hijra*” (*aka Hegira*) means “Migration”.

The hijras were listed as professional groups along with the category of ‘dancers and singers’ by British administrators. This category includes more than a dozen other groups such as the Brijbasi, Perna, Nayak, Kaneham Kalawant, Dasi, etc.

The Origin

There were three different patterns of recruitment for males with *malformed*, *deformed*, or *ill-developed* genitals.

- (a) Parents themselves give them to hijras;
- (b) The hijras claim them; and
- (c) On growing up such children join the hijras.

Another view found in the colonial literature is that they are impotent men.¹ Hijra were identified as ‘naturally impotent’. An equation made between eunuchs and impotency was sufficient for one to be member of the hijra community. The third process identified in this context is rooted in mythological and religious belief.

In detailed account of the hijra appearance Thurston states, “The hair of the head is put up as in a woman, well oiled, combed and thrown back, tied into a knot, and shelved to the left side, sometimes plated, ornamented, and allowed to hang down the back. They wear the cholee or a short jacket, the saree or petticoat and put on abundance of nose rings, earrings and toe rings”.

Thus, it seems obvious that hijras often exaggerate the use of feminine cultural symbols in their presentation of self, though dress, hairstyle, names and kinship terms.

The Definition

Morrison Castairs defined the hijras as a “class of professional male prostitutes...(who) adopt a parody of women’s faces, mimic women’s gestures and forms of speech and from time to time performs level initiation of women’s singing and dancing”.

It should be noted that the word ‘hijra’ does not have a Sanskrit root; it is an Urdu term with the primary meaning of ‘hermaphrodite’.

A. P. Sinha defines the hijra as a ‘sexual prevent’. He further qualifies their condition as one of ‘sexo-aesthetic inversion’ coupled with homosexual habits. That is to a type of inversion, which leads an individual to feel like a person of opposite sex.

The point is illustrated well in the narrative of an ‘artificial’ hijra. The hijra stated:

We are born like full human being... but at 5 or 8, or 10 years of age, you come to know that you are different. During my school I started going out with hijras and because I like this. From childhood itself I had lot of feminine tendencies. Only those who have had operation are the real hijra... if you want to be a pukka (pura) hijra, you must have the castration operation.

This narration brings into focus: (a) the incompatibility of a particular body with certain given tendencies, and (b) the consequent social necessity of committing such mistake. Indian society pursues an alternative gender only at the cost of acquisition of an appropriate bodily configuration.

The Castration

The boy in question is taken in the shrill of the night to a lonely deserted spot and ensconced in a hut. For two whole days and nights he is fed on a diet of opium and milk, keeping him in a state of intoxication.

Then in the wee hours of the third day around 2/3 a.m. five/six eunuchs hold the boy tightly as one of them ties a cord around his testicles, as tightly as possible. This stops the blood flow to the genitals, and thereby acts as a crude anesthetic.

Then one of the specialized 'surgeons' of the clan, takes a very sharp knife and with one stroke slashes off the penis and the testicles. The genitals are then buried after they have stopped twitching, which may last for nearly 30 seconds.

The wound is then allowed to bleed, thereby signifying the draining of manhood and the onset of womanhood. Many young boys cannot survive this ritual, but those who make it are considered to be new born.

A rounded branch of the 'pipda' tree is then inserted in the wound of the boy, who has survived this ordeal to ensure that the 'hole' is not filled. Heated oil is poured on it and a lump of 'katha' is used as antiseptic to further the healing process.

The 'new born eunuch' is not allowed to sleep for next two days (forty eight hours). He is kept awake to the deafening sounds of drums and music. He is given only liquid during this period.

Once this two-days period is over, after the ritual, the newborn eunuch is considered to be safe. The festivity follows during which the elder 'Chelas' and 'Gurus' serve 'Sheera' made in pure ghee to all. Another rejoicing ceremony follows after two months.

A 'hijra' is fully accepted in the clan only after he goes through equally painful and gory ceremony that follows. This requires the young, freshly castrated recruit to sit, with his rectum spread wide, on the top of the rounded handle of a grinding stone. Two eunuchs then keep on pushing the youngster on the handle, till he cries out in pain, and the first drops of anal blood start oozing. According to the tradition of the clan, this signifies 'the first menstrual period.'

One cannot get established in the clan if the individual does not undergo castration. Cruder methods of castration are often adopted obviously because they are inexpensive. Eunuchs do not require the sexual organ any more; rather the organ is chopped off, as it comes in their way all the time.

Some Images

The entire hijra population is divided into eight divisions under the direct supervision and control of a 'Guru'. Their territories are perfectly demarcated in the city. Most hijras are hand to mouth people.

They say: *"Hamara ek haath chandi ka hain our
dusara sone ka aur dono jab bajte hain
tab ham ko paisa milta hain"*

They follow their own religion². One finds Allah as well as Ram in each house of hijras. There exist a cult among them called “Sakhi Samaj”, which believes that they are to marry Lord Ram. They tie the sacred garland of ‘Tulsi’ beads known as ‘Mangalsutra’ around their neck.

They chant ‘Ram Naam’ and believe that Lord Ram will protect them. Their congregation is located at Ayodhya in U.P. The members of the cult were a part of the distinct group attending the “Simhastha Kumbh Mela” a festival held at Nasik after 12 years.

Recently some telefilms have been attempted on the life of the Eunuchs in Mumbai. Ajay Noronha shot a 16 mm film on the “Life of Hijra in Mumbai”. Bollywood has also not been lagging behind.

Films like “*Sadak*”, “*Darmiyan*” and “*Tamanna*” made attempts to depict the social and psychological problems faced by the members of this community in the country.

Another documentary on the life of “*Shabnam Mausi*” has been in the making to showcase the life and work of elected member of Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly, representing Sohagpur tribal constituency in Shahdol district. She was a resident in the Mumbai city and also has been a leader of this community in Mumbai. Shabnam Mausi has been herself a prominent member of this transgender community.

Another report on Rakesh Singh, a eunuch working as a bar dancer was a moving account of the member of this community trying to earn his livelihood even by subjecting himself to the hardships of dancing in liquor joints for entering people (customers) during late nights.

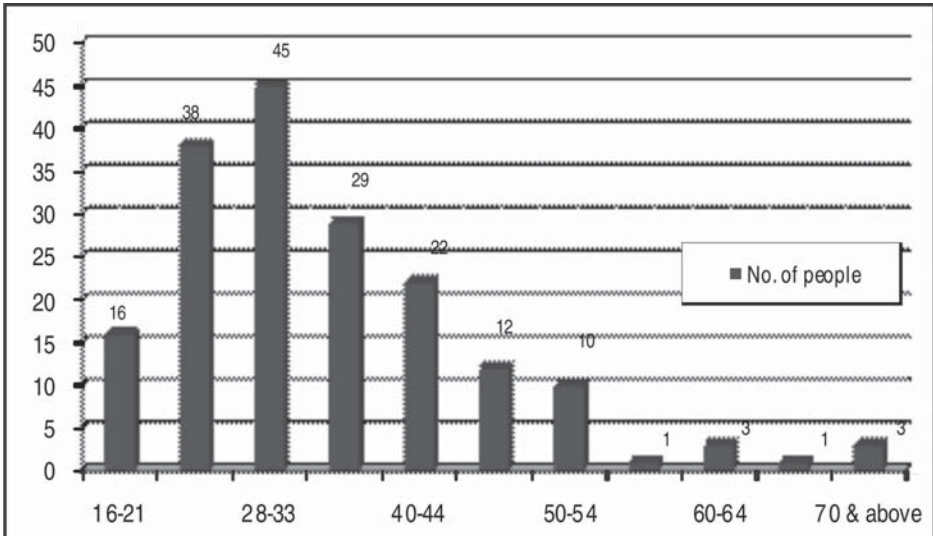
The Survey

A random sample survey was conducted during November 2010 and March 2011 at various residential colonies of the Transgender Community in Mumbai, referred here as Mumbai survey November 2010 and March 2011. The survey revealed certain striking features.

Findings

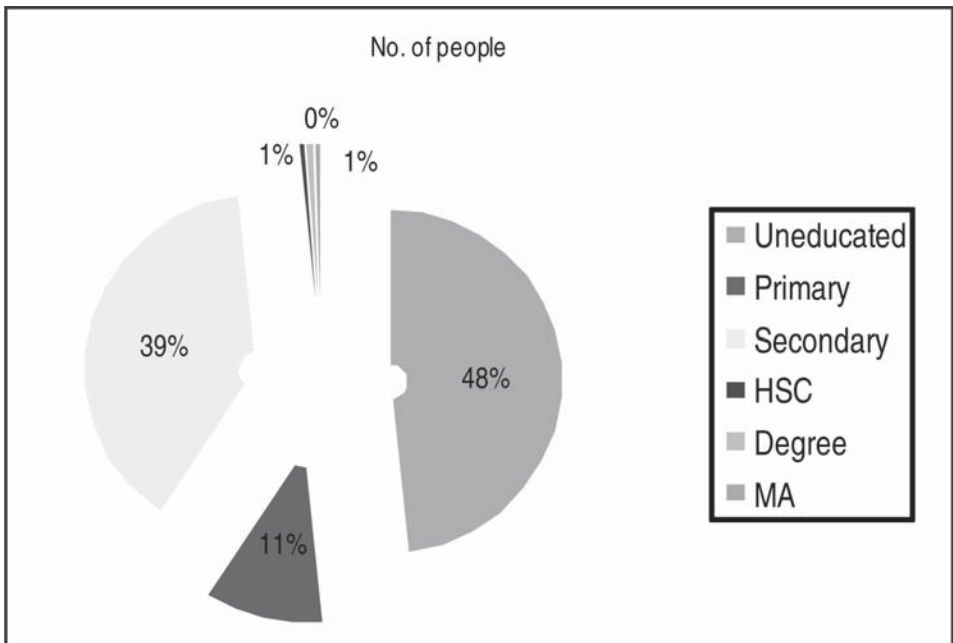
A rough estimate of the total number of transgender community member in Mumbai was around one lakh. It appears that only around forty thousand of them have been staying together and identified as hijras. The youngest of the members were in their teens and oldest among them were in the age group over seventies. Around fifty percent of them have been illiterate in Mumbai. Most of these members have been staying in congested slum pockets at various places in Mumbai. Major concentration of these members is at Sion, Malad, Mulund suburbs of Mumbai. They have their panchayat, which has strict control over the members. As a striking feature concerning

Chart 1: Showing Age-group Among Transgender Community in Mumbai



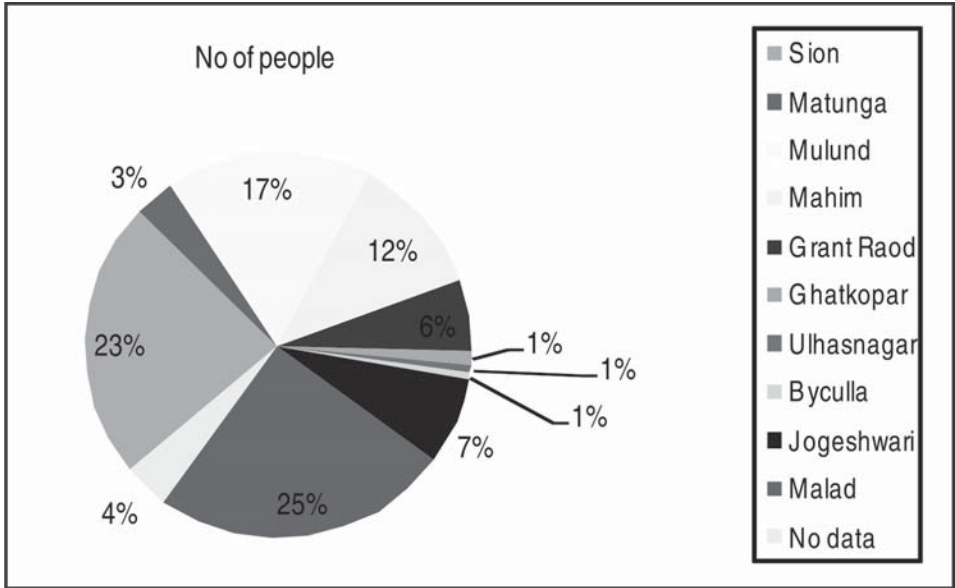
Source: *Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.*

Chart 2: Showing Educational Qualification of Transgender member in Mumbai



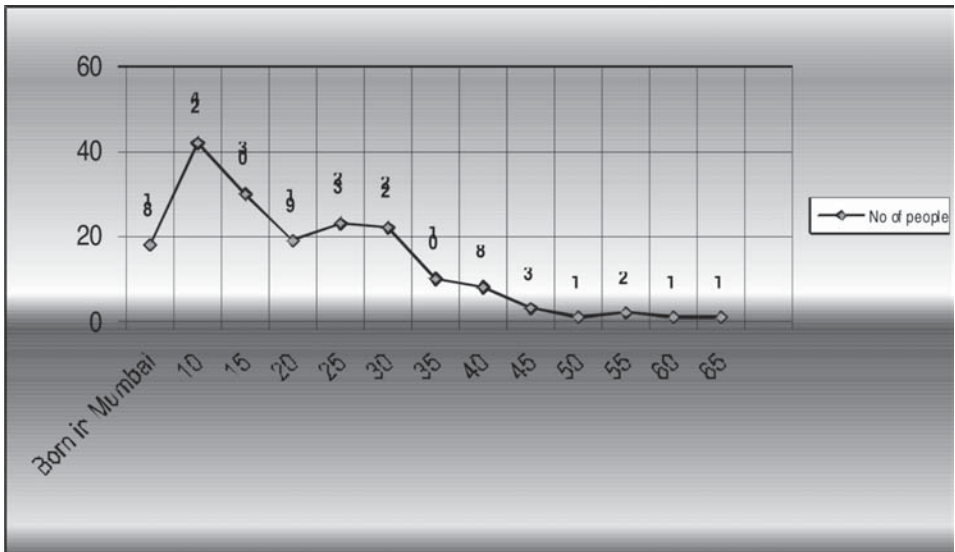
Source: *Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.*

Chart 3: Showing Residence location of Transgender Community in Mumbai



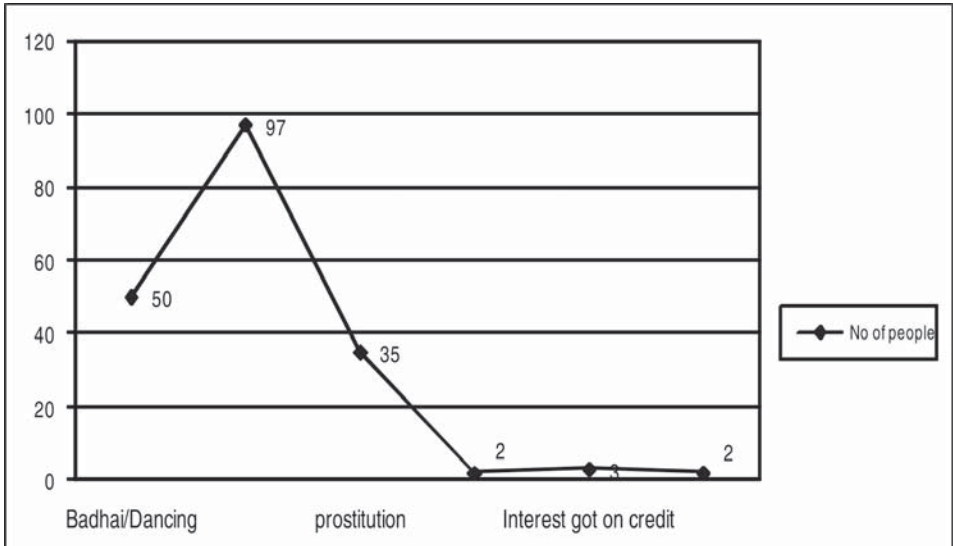
Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

Chart 4: Showing Duration of Stay of Transgender Community in Mumbai



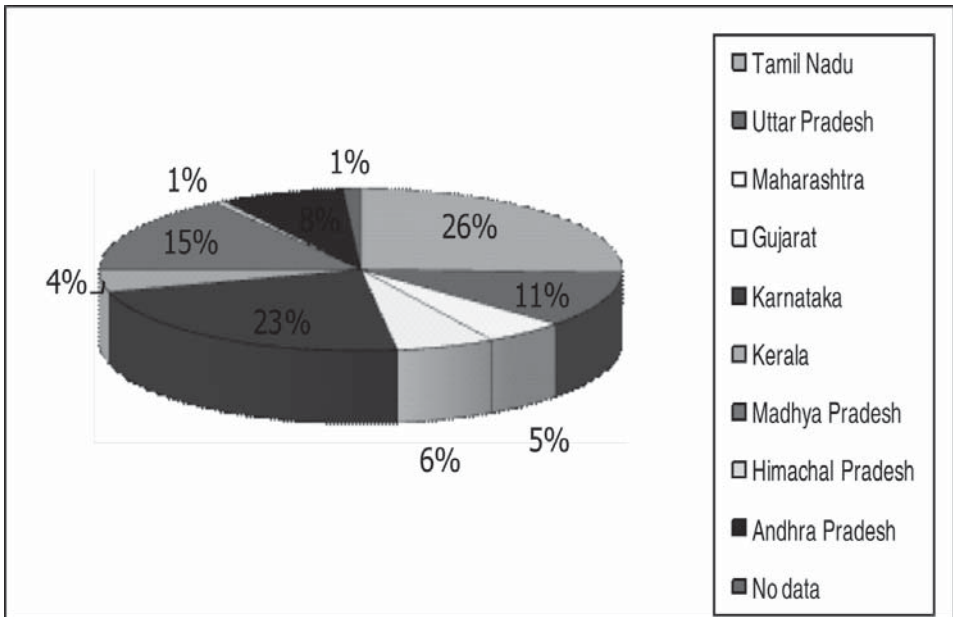
Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

Chart 5: Showing Gainful Activities of Transgender Community in Mumbai



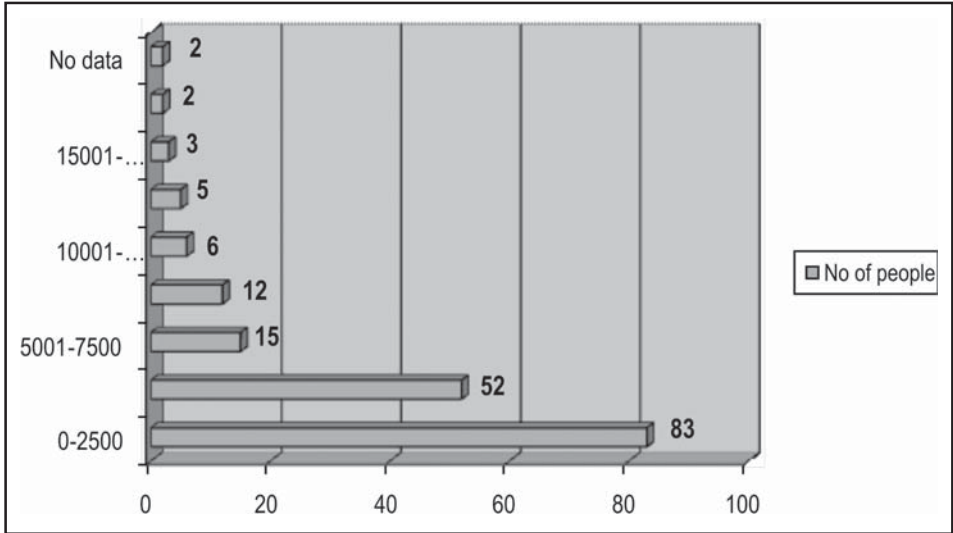
Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

Chart 6: Showing the Native Place of members of Mumbai Hijra Community



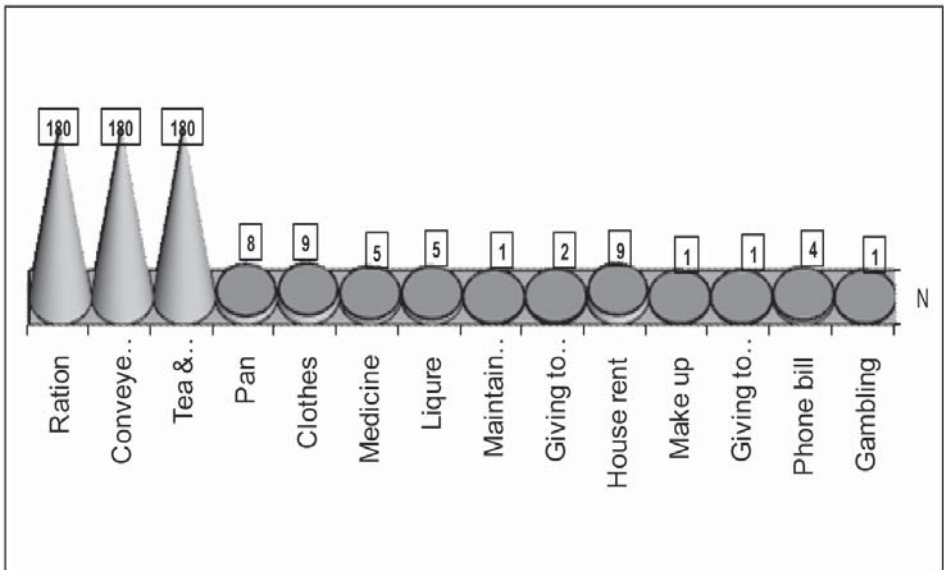
Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

Chart 7: Showing Monthly Expenditure of Transgender Community in Mumbai

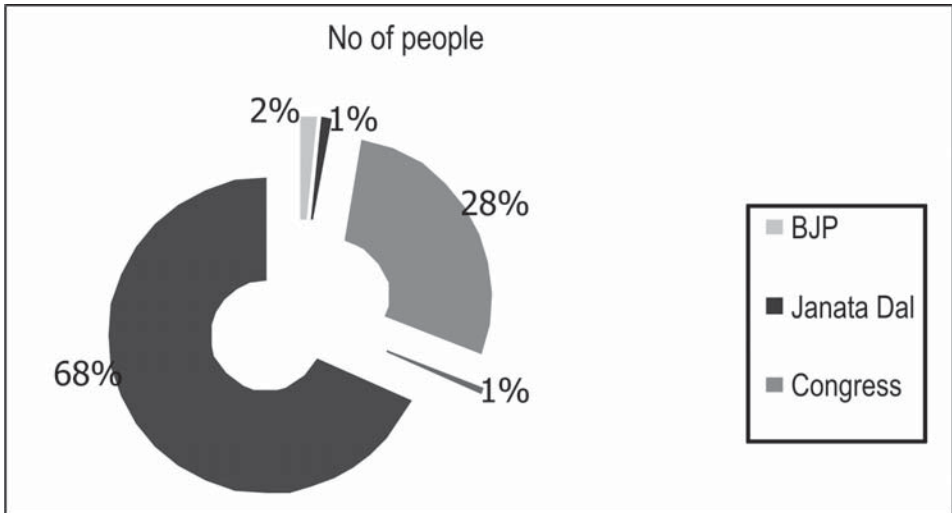


Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

Chart 8: Showing Spending of Transgender Community members in Mumbai



Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

Chart 9: Showing Political Identity of Hijra Community members in Mumbai

Source: Mumbai survey November 2010 - March 2011.

this community in Mumbai is that no member of this community had ever been charged by police for theft and robbery.

Their predominant earning activity is begging, dancing and prostitution most often a bunch of eunuchs is found in the places of traffic junctions, beaches, market places, opposite shopping centre, etc., to collect some alms from passengers and passerby's. An individual of this group earns at least rupees one hundred per day. The major expenses they incur were on monthly provision of ration, conveyance, room rent in slum, on their clothing and chewing of pan / gutka / tobacco.

Apart from refreshment i.e. primarily tea and vada pav, liquor, sickness and donation to the guru were also other major item of expenditure. Those engaged in dancing and prostitution had claimed major expenditure on items of make-up and cosmetics. Gambling was reported as another item for expenses by few of them. Telecommunication was also an increasing trend apart from expenditure on medicine and sickness.

A sizeable section of this community has been a resident of Mumbai for over thirty-fourty years. They have ration cards, however, voting cards are not issued to many. Interestingly there is hardly any discrepancy in their income and expenditure pattern. There are some commonly observed problem faced by these members enumerated:

1. General population teases them of being Hizda
2. There is no house that is owned by them individually
3. Lack of family support

4. No adequate gainful employment
5. No help from government
6. There is harassment from police.

There are Muslims, Hindu and Christians among them. Quite a few of them have three different names representing Hindu [Radhika], Christian [Alice] and Muslim [Mehrunissa], for example. Culturally they may represent various states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, but their community in Mumbai has developed an integrated culture of its own.

Many of them have come to the city out of sheer disgust of maintaining the strict sex-gender role as males [most often], which has been imposed on them by family tradition in the native place. They have been subjected to various kinds of harassment in Mumbai. There have been cases of police brutality and harassment.

They have been asking for government reservation for themselves in various fields including education and employment in government jobs. They demand reserved quota in police service, i.e. security and railway protection force.

They live in the world of female relationships. They have several of rituals and social practices including “rites de passage” at the time of death. The members of transgender community may have several vices including smoking, drinking liquor, chewing of pan/gutka but interestingly enough; they are very lively people who like to be jovial. They like to dress well with lot of jewelry, often imitation jewelry.

By and large they are god fearing and would like to claim that they are blessed with special powers by the almighty for blessing somebody or cursing somebody especially in the normal families where birth and wedding ceremonies are undertaken.

Conclusion

An exhaustive study is necessary to get the complete picture of various aspects of this community. What is desired is to understand their socio-religious behaviour in more details as members of the modern society in the metropolis. It is also necessary to have a comparative study of these members from various metropolitan centres in India.

It must be recognised that religion is the crucial factor in the acceptance of homosexuality and gender variance especially in Indian context. The alternative gender roles will be socially accepted when the religious ideology of that culture offers (1) a specific explanation for such difference, (2) formalized traditions in ritual, (3) a recognition that there are many different paths to personal fulfillment, enlightenment, or salvation, and (4) the idea that gender-

variant persons cannot resist following their own true nature and are fated to be the way they are. The implications here are important for a cross-cultural understanding of homophobia and what must be done for it to be overcome. It is not enough for a religion to be “tolerant” of gender diversity and sexual variation; it must also provide specific recognition for such diversity. The social advantages could be harnessed by appreciation for diversity.

Notwithstanding the hideously self-congratulatory impulses of modernity and postmodernism alike, modernity has been inhospitable to hijras. They are increasingly losing their traditional means of livelihood, they no longer enjoy the patronage of traditional elites, and their life options are in every respect narrowing. Moreover, mass culture is creating its own forms of homogenisation, and institutionalised forms of femininity and masculinity, which have been less predominant in Indian culture than appears to be the case from the rigid gender roles to which most Indians (particularly of the middle class) are now bound, might well render the hijras obsolete.

The “third gender” designation does not convey the full promise hidden in the term *hijras*. We shall have to venture, however tentatively, into a zone that might yield what would be described not merely as a politics of knowledge of hijras, but as a hijra politics of knowledge.

There is in the story and living presence of the hijras a curious power of grace and redemption, and to unravel that we will have to probe the nature of knowledge and dissent in our times. What can a census taker do with hijras, and are we at the point where we can imagine an official census anywhere stipulating a choice beyond male and female? There is something deeply transgressive about the life choices made by hijras, just as there is a deep anxiety about their identity, since they do not fall within the paradigms of classification and enumeration that are dominant in modern knowledge systems.

Hijras generate for the moderns all the anxieties that, to evoke what may appear to be an anomalous comparison, are experienced by each and every nation-state in Europe when gypsies are brought into their midst. Similarly, as we look into the lives of the hijras, and to the pace of globalization now overtaking middle India, we might reflect, with perhaps more than a tinge of sadness, on the fact that the hijras may well be among the last few dissenters as we move into the third millennium, among the very few who, shall we dare to say it, have been chosen to defy the very models of defiance.

NOTES

1. It may be noted here that the distinction between impotency and a state of genital ill formation has not always been made in these accounts. The function is not distinguished from structure and that was often seen as coexisted.
2. In the city of Bhopal there is a convention celebrating a festival of Bhujaria some time in the month of August every year. Traditionally the Eunuchs pray to the rain god during the festival (TOI 25:8:2002).

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