

Issues, Analysis and Synthesis on Third Gender: A Case Study Approach

NAMITA MOHANTY

Professor in Psychology
Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha
India

SUVARNA SARANGI

Research Scholar
Department of Psychology
Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha
India

Abstract:

As humans we understand a little about our complex bodies even with the greatest medical science. Most of us are being taken for granted either as a man or a woman as our sexual identity is one of the basic facts of who we are. However, there are some among us who know with conviction regarding their sexual identity but it contradicts the reality of the bodies that they are born in. A man with a female psyche and a female with the feelings of a male are referred to as transgender under GLBT group or third gender. The present research has been conducted by case study method on seven individuals who have male to female gender identity crisis. In this study, they have been referred to as Hijras. Completely isolated and marginalized by the society, Hijras build their own community carrying its own mysticism. The study has focused on getting an insight into the psychological state of a group of these individuals based in the city of Bhubaneswar in Odisha. Hijras live with humiliation, brutal punishment and rejection by the family and the society as a result of which self-blame, feelings of guilt and suicidal attempts are quite common among them. However, despite there being a feeling of void, some of them are working with full commitment for the welfare and security of the members of their community. They indeed play the role of wounded healers and are also

advocating for their right to live with dignity. Hence the need for change in attitude and mind-set toward the Third gender as well as active implementation of welfare schemes for them has been reiterated by the participants of the study.

Key words: Third gender, Hijras, problems, discrimination, welfare measures

When psychology overrules biology the decision is best left to the individual. The person decides who he or she is in assigning the gender type. As Third gender is a creation of the nature, therefore it is a sexual orientation other than the socially accepted males and females. Individual across time and culture have reacted in different ways to the people who are neither males nor females (Bucholtz, 2003). The term 'transgender' is generally used to describe those who transgress social gender norms. Transgender is often used as an umbrella term to signify individuals who defy rigid, binary gender constructions, and who express or present a breaking and blurring of culturally prevalent stereotypical gender roles. Transgender people may live full or part-time in the gender role 'opposite' to their biological sex. Categorizing of all human beings as 'male' or 'female' is left unquestioned. However, this does not always fit with local realities (Bondyopadhyay, 2002). In contemporary usage, "transgender" has become an umbrella term that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including but not limited to pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative transsexual people (who strongly identify with the gender opposite to their biological sex); male and female 'cross-dressers' (sometimes referred to as "transvestites", "drag queens", or "drag kings"); and men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical. A male-to-female transgender person is referred to as 'transgender woman' and a female-to-male transgender person, as 'transgender man'. But who

exactly is a transgender? A man who wears a sari? A woman who feels she is a male trapped in a female body? Can both be included? Are there other diversities? These are some of the questions that need to be clarified before understanding their physical, psycho-social, cultural and economic turbulence in life.

According to Mendelez and Pinto (2007), the term transgender refers to individuals whose sexual assignment at birth does not correspond with their current gender identity. Estimates on the number of transgender vary widely from 1 in 40,000 to 1 in 10,000. Endocrinologist, psychologist, and surgeons are united in their opinion that there can be no single definition for a transgender, as the condition could be a result of biological, hormonal, genetic, psychological or environmental factors. A person's gender is what a person chooses. In other words, no government, no doctor can decide someone's gender. "What right do I have to tell you that you are a male or a female?" asks Dr. Kalpesh Gajiwala (2005), a Mumbai based plastic surgeon who specializes in sexual reconstruction surgery. He points out that the factors that make one feel uncomfortable with the biologically assigned gender are complicated. Changes in an embryonic stage can leave someone with ambiguous genitalia. There are also those considered "psychologically neutral," who could fall on either side depending on environmental factors.

Nanda (1990) in her book "Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India" defines Hijras as occupying an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women. She points out that the transsexual role is not accepted as a fully recognised gender. The non-acceptance, she argues, is due to a lack of religious sanction and an unyielding commitment to a dichotomous gender system which expects all "normal" persons to conform to one of only two gender roles.

Hindu ideology not only accommodates the reality of ambiguity and diversity among different personality types, but

also conceptualizes androgynous persons as special sacred beings. They are seen as representatives of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata, which gives them the ritual power. Hindus believe that Hijras have the power to bless heterosexual marriages so that they will be fertile and infant males so that they will grow up to become masculine men. But reports of witch hunts, false incrimination, sexual harassment and even homicide of Hijras are heard wide and often.

HIJRA: A LIFESTYLE

In India, the history of Hijras can be traced back to centuries. They find mention in ancient scriptures like the Ramayana, The Mahabharata and even the ancient book called the Kamasutra. The term “Hijra” comes from the Arabic word ‘Hijr’ which refers to someone who has left his own community to embrace another one. Hijras are referred to by several names across different cultures. In India, they are popularly called as Kinnars, Hijras, or Brihanalla. They have different names in different parts of the country. Like Ranga in western Odisha, Aruvani in Tamilnadu, Khusra in Punjab, Durani in Kolkata and Menaka in Cochin. In Nepal and Pakistan they are called Meti and Jenana respectively.

Constituting about 490,000 of the Indian population (Census, 2011) Hijras face a life of ridicule, violence, and persecution both within their houses and outside in their effort to find a life of dignity. As per the Odisha assembly 2014 data, there are 1185 electors registered as “others” across all districts with the highest number of 110 being reported in Ekamra constituency of Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha.

In our society we speak the language of rights quite loud and often too. But do people wonder whether, beyond the slogans, the marginalized really have access to these rights? Individuals are granted and denied rights in the name of religion, caste, class, social status and gender to name a few. In

such a scenario where acquiring basic rights becomes a struggle, Hijras hardly have a choice.

The precarious life style of the Hijras, the unhygienic environment in which they are living in, the harassment which they face on a day to day basis and the indifference of government machineries often make a researcher curious about the life and living of this marginalized group of individuals. Even after the spread of awareness on third gender, people in general have a very callous and lackadaisical attitude towards the Hijras. From a humanitarian stand point, it is worth studying the different psychosocial and economic problems that the Hijras face, their self-perceptions as well as aspirations in life. The present need based study will help in gathering primary data from the Hijras and this will definitely help the government, NGOs, health workers and other social workers in giving them a life of dignity and provide them the alternative opportunities for earning their livelihood other than sheerly working as sex workers.

OBJECTIVES

The present study aimed to examine the following objectives;

1. To find out the early experience of Hijras belonging to third gender.
2. To identify the physical, psychological, and social difficulties faced by them.
3. To explore the aspirations of their life in the present socio-cultural context.
4. To assess the existing welfare measures for the benefit of the individuals belonging to this community and suggest future course of action.

METHOD OF STUDY

Design

The present study adopted Case Study method to conduct a qualitative research.

Subjects

Subjects of the present research consisted of members of Sakha, a CBO (Community Based Organisation) for Transgenders, functioning in the city of Bhubaneswar, Odisha. There were 7 male to female (MTF) transgender participants (Hijras) in this study. It was a purposive sampling. Information was collected from them about their lives, relationships, health needs and future aspirations.

Measures

Data were collected from the subjects through informal face to face interviews. In order to provide space and privacy to the respondents, interviewed were conducted in the lounge of the organization where they all were staying. Though the interviews were informal, in order to get information on certain sensitive aspects of their lives, some of the questions put to them were specific, focused, target oriented and thus in a way part of the interviews were semi-structured in nature. As far as possible both intensive as well as extensive interviews were conducted over several sessions to gather information relating to their physical, psychological and social aspects of their lives.

Procedure

The treasurer of the Sakha was initially contacted and over a period of time rapport was built with the inmates of the organization. Depending upon the willingness to participate in the research programme, the head of the organization subsequently selected the participants for the interview. Transgender individuals were informed that the interview was

informal and they would be asked questions about their lives, particularly relating to their psycho-social needs. They were further informed that their association with the CBO or access to any of the services provided would not be affected in any way, if they refrain from participating in the study. Interviews were conducted over a period of two months in individual sessions lasting for approximately one hour per participant. The sessions were in the form of individual case studies and analysis of their individual journey as well as the common issues faced by them as part of the larger society.

RESULTS

In order to probe deep into the problems of the third gender and to understand their thoughts, feelings and emotions, case histories were collected from the subjects individually after establishing rapport with them. Each subject was a case and each case had a history. All the 7 cases were analysed independently to find out the commonality and uniqueness of the problems that were associated with these cases. The following experiences and information were shared by the Hijras during the course of interviews.

It was revealed that the Hijras faced multiple problems, which necessitated a variety of solutions and actions. While some of the actions required immediate implementation such as introducing Hijra/Transgender-specific social welfare schemes, some other actions were needed to be taken on a long-term basis like changing the negative attitude of the general public and increasing accurate knowledge about Hijra/Transgender communities. The desired changes from a humanistic point of view rightfully deserved to be reflected in policies and laws formulated by the government; which would result in positive changes in the attitude of general public and health care providers.

Though there is uniqueness in each of the seven case studies, the common problems and concerns have been extracted and discussed.

Family background and early childhood experience

An analysis of the cases revealed that most of the Hijras belong to families of low socio-economic status with limited access to education and other amenities. While this has no direct bearing upon being a Hijra, it certainly determines the general reaction of the family members by discovering the alternate gender identity of their “son” and the consequent adverse reaction that follows. While it is not easier for high SES families to accept the different gender identity of their child, families belonging to the lower socio- economic status find it particularly difficult given the multiple societal struggles that they have to cope with. Most families take it as a matter of grave shame and misfortune if a Hijra is born into their families, a consequence of which is constant humiliation, rejection, abuse and abandonment faced by Hijras. All bad memories are associated with early childhood experience. They are deprived of maternal love, parental care, cosy and conducive family environment, nutrition as well as a sense of belongingness and attachment. All these are the basic requirements especially during childhood and of course throughout the life span for the normal development and sustenance of healthy personality.

Education

Most of the Hijras have been unable to complete their basic education. This was not due to deficit in their intellectual capacity or motivation to learn but because of the several constraints they faced in the course of their education. They are constantly mocked at by peers. They are also frequently abused and humiliated. Lack of support and punishment from the teachers; and unhealthy criticism adversely affects the self-

esteem of Hijras forcing them to drop out of school and thus they fail to pursue higher studies.

Employment

With low education, poor skill training and social rejection, many Hijras do not get suitable employment for a decent living. Even for household work people do not give them employment. In spite of the fact that they being quite strong in their built and energetic by constitution, they have no place to work on a regular basis for a steady income. Most of them during their youth work as sex workers, earn some money by singing and dancing when a child is born in a family and the money that is being earned by them a quite meagre. They are bound to give a major share of their income to their Guru who looks after them by providing shelter. This little income also ceases when they age. When they become little older around forty years of age, their conditions worsen and the only option left out for their livelihood is begging. With the paltry amount, getting two square meals a day becomes difficult. It seems they are destined to suffer without food, medical care and social support. This is the irony of living human beings with a different gender orientation who are otherwise healthy and hearty!

Frustration based on dissatisfaction of basic urges of life

Informal interactions with Hijras reveal that they have the same bio-psycho-social needs as any other average person has but they have no opportunities to fulfil even the most basic of the needs with dignity. Faced with constant rejection from family members, most Hijras go into the shelter of a “Guruma” (a fellow Hijra) who provides them with shelter, arranges job for them, and is responsible for their survival. Most Hijras report getting the first sense of acceptance as normal human beings in the shelter of a Guruma or Hijra community. They develop the sense of belongingness and get solace in the midst

of other Hijras. Thus, induction into the Hijra community is a matter of great importance to them.

Aspirations and hope for the future

Hijras have hopes and dreams for their future like any other individuals but their physical limitation and lack of social acceptance often shatter their dreams. They develop hopelessness and helplessness as people do not treat them as human beings. Sometimes the treatment is so very cruel that they want to put an end to their life. The cruelty is beyond their capacity to tolerate. Even when they protest and raise their voice against maltreatment, people just turn a deaf ear to their suffering. While they stare at a future of uncertainty, most of the Hijras hope to have a family, for establishing a better identity for their peers, seek access to fair treatment on educational premises, have access to equal rights, get fair job opportunities, and a life of respect and dignity.

Mental Health

For most Hijras the realization of their different gender identity unfolds gradually. It gets consolidated mostly during adolescence. However, most of them go through the initial phase of confusion, identity crisis, self-blame and guilt. Lack of awareness in the society, negative attitude of family members combined with low sense of self-worth drives most of the Hijras into a world of isolation. Given the prevailing social norms, it is indeed a difficult journey for them. After being denied of an opportunity to access proper education, most Hijras have ended up getting low paying jobs. They are forced to engage in prostitution, begging and the like. This leads to depression, self-rejection, suicidal ideation and some even make attempts to commit suicide.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present qualitative research on Hijras has revealed some of the untold miseries of these socially marginalized minority group of individuals. Discrimination against them starts soon after birth and as they grow, they blame and curse the destiny for their unacceptable sexual identity. Neither they are accepted as human beings nor do they get an opportunity to express their needs, talents and other positive psychological capital. During early years of life, search for identity make them confused and they are torn in conflicts. It is a fact that self -acceptance and acceptance by others and experience of success in life are absolutely necessary for a sound mental health which ultimately leads to happiness. Hijras as a group of individuals are unhappy with life and their struggle for existence becomes the sole purpose of life. On the other hand, many talents from among the Hijras could have been blossomed with adequate social support allowing them to earn name and fame in the society.

In the 21st century, we witness a wind of change though still nascent but quite promising in giving a new identity to this deprived and underprivileged group of individuals. The existence of third gender which all through the history was felt but never surfaced to get a social sanction as another sexual identity. Social activists, the change makers from different strata of the society, the educated and well established individuals from the Hijra group itself raised voice against the inhuman social practice against them and claimed for a life with dignity. The little spark of change has gathered momentum slowly but steadily and has spread far and wide across the globe in sensitizing people to fight for a cause. As human beings, everyone has the basic need to love and be loved. It goes without saying that life becomes meaningful when there is a sense of belongingness, mutual understanding and acceptance.

Moreover, it is a truism that due to biological constraints, some of the basic needs and desires cannot be fulfilled but then there are an umpteen number of married couples who are unable to produce kids and therefore have not become natural parents. Keeping this fact in mind, one can go a step forward in exploring the possibilities of alternative arrangements for the Hijras, adding a little colour to their lives. It is time to think about how would an intersex person marry legally or how could an intersex couple (who are infertile) adopt a child legally or have a child through in vitro fertilization (IVF) legally? What about the equal laws and rights of the young, male, spouse caregiver of the intersex patient? Truth above all is a practical long-term solution. If allowing a “Third gender” option helps foster saying the truth then maybe that is the path to take. Some brave hearts are taking drastic steps by legalizing sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and leading a life of their choice.

When we talk so much about respecting human rights, it becomes quiet natural to accept the free choice of people in selecting their mates without interfering or harming the welfare of others. As human beings, the Hijras will not feel confined anymore to a binary definition of gender. The feeling of freedom of expression is priceless in its own way for every human being. Contrary to popular belief, the binary gender approach is impeding progress in the growth and development of individuals who are born with a third gender. As it is innate, they should not feel ashamed and guilty about it as they themselves are not responsible in the assignment of gender. It offers them the freedom from living in secrecy and lying. This ultimately enables them to build a better and meaningful relationship based on understanding and acceptance.

However, centuries of having to live with the oppression of an indeterminate identity came to an end for Transgenders/Hijras, when the Supreme Court of India recognized them as the Third Gender, separate from male or female. It gave them a leg up in their effort to secure a better social and economic

future by ordering their inclusion in the OBC category for education and jobs to assuage “the insult and injury suffered by them so far”. This has worked as a booster to speed up the process of securing full human rights of the marginalized community. The bench rightly said that transgender community had an inviolable constitutional right to enjoy freedom of expression (Article 19) and right to live with dignity (Article 21). It further added that gender identity lies at the core of one’s personal identity, gender expression and presentation and therefore, it will have to be protected under Article 19 of the Constitution.

While the apex Court’s judgement forms a welcome legal basis for transgender and Hijras to secure their rights, the spirit of the order also needs to extend to Section 377 of the IPC that criminalises homosexuality.

It is a welcome move on the part of the Government of India to have the third option besides males and females to include the Hijra under “other gender” category. Similarly while booking tickets in railways and flights, people can mark under Third Gender. There is a high demand to have separate toilets for them in offices, public places, educational institutions and also a demand to include them under OBC (Other Backward Classes) category to have the privileges earmarked for them in the form of reservation in education and employment sectors. Such policies and programmes will definitely elevate the status of Third Gender in the society.

Human beings should be treated as human beings and it is high time that people begin to respect human rights, dignity and individual choice. In this context, it is worth mentioning the views of Donna Evans who said “After all, it is a brave and honest person who can stand apart from the masses and openly challenge its most treasured beliefs”. Third gender individuals need social support from the majority in the main stream of the society for their rights and dignity. When it is possible to motivate and mobilize people to fight for a cause, it is not at all

difficult to make people realize how difficult it is for a Hijra to live in a society which is prejudiced against the third gender (Mohanty, 2012). Concerted efforts by the government and the public in enhancing the status of the Hijras in the eyes of the people will certainly bring in sea change in the attitude of people towards them. A positive outlook, compassion, good fellow-feeling, respect and unconditional positive regard for the third gender will for sure usher in new rays of hope among the socially isolated group of individuals to live a decent and dignified life with good education, jobs and a content social life. Besides Government policies, the NGOs can take up the issue for spearheading Awareness Generation Programmes regarding the stereotypes, myths and realities on Third Gender. Psychological interventions through Counselling can boost their self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, resilience as well as optimism. Further skill based training will help them getting opportunities for employment and improving their life and living conditions. Formulation of policies is not enough for improving their living conditions, the real changes can only be brought about when there is a proper implementation of these policies.

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