



PORTRAYAL AND REPRESENTATION OF HIJRAS IN INDIAN MEDIA

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate how Hijras are depicted and represented in Indian media, drawing on research findings, and also to highlight the role of the media in shaping these portrayals. It explores how TV, movies, and newspapers influence public perceptions of the third gender community and underscores the significance of portraying them accurately and respectfully. Recent research sheds light on the changing portrayal and socio-political dynamics of the hijra community in South Asia. The portrayal of Hijras in Bollywood films and on social media platforms is analysed, revealing both perpetuated stereotypes and attempts at nuanced representation. The article also highlights the role of media in showcasing the challenges and achievements of Hijras and its impact on societal attitudes towards transgender individuals. Ultimately, it emphasizes the pivotal role of mainstream media in fostering inclusivity and understanding of all gender identities in Indian society.

Keywords: *Hijras, India, Media, Representation*

Introduction

Media, especially social media, has become an inevitable part of our lives. Media can include newspapers, magazines, comic strips, novels, CDs, and videos. All these various types of media can influence the general public's perceptions of different gender variations and their consequences (Varalakshmi & Anuradha, 2022). Media is an umbrella term that includes print media such as newspapers and magazines; radio, television, internet, movies, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. Persuasion, surveillance, interpretation, linkage, and socialization are specific functions of media, along with the dissemination of information and facts.

On social media, Hijrah is shown in many ways. It's not just about pictures and posts; it's about religion, society, and ideas. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook are places where people talk about Hijrah, share stories, and try to convince others it's important. People like Ustadz Teuku Hanan Attaki use these sites to talk about Hijrah and why it's meaningful. They use words and pictures to explain how it can change your life, how you can live differently, and how it's connected to different beliefs. So, on social media, Hijrah isn't just a topic—it's a big part of what people talk about and believe in.

In India, the Hijra people are recognized as a third gender through the NALSA verdict in 2014 by the Supreme Court of India. It is essential to understand how people perceive Hijras through the media,

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especially social media. Additionally, it is important to consider relevant research findings, including novels and books about Hijras, to explore people's perceptions and conceptions towards Hijras, with a special reference to the media. The intent of this article is to explore portrayal and representation of Hijras in Indian Media on the basis of research findings and also point out media's role in this context.

Literature Review

Juliansyahzen (2023) examines the development and meaning of the hijrah movement on social media, revealing its transformation from a personal religious journey to a broader socio-religious phenomenon. Hijrah, originally understood as a shift from past misguidance to adherence to Islamic principles, now also signifies individuals becoming more religious. This change is evident in aspects like clothing choices, work preferences, and social relationships. The study highlights how social media has become a pivotal platform for the ideologization and popularization of hijrah, driven by digital activists and preachers with large followings. These influencers use social media to commodify religious practices and mainstream conservative ideologies. The research, employing critical discourse analysis and digital hermeneutics, shows that religious discussions about hijrah on social media are intertwined with commercial interests and conservative dominance.

Sequeira's (2022) study, "Show and Tell: Life History and Hijra Activism In India," critically examines the narratives of Hijra activists through their life histories, arguing that these autobiographies function more as auto ethnographies of activism rather than straightforward testimonials. By analyzing works like A. Revathi's 'The Truth about Me' and Laxminarayan Tripathi's 'Me Hijra, Me Laxmi', Sequeira suggests these texts document an idealized journey from marginalization to advocacy, reflecting the socio-political landscape influenced by India's economic liberalization and the rise of NGOs. The study highlights the complex identities of Hijra activists, who navigate multiple roles and resist normative conceptions of belonging through various networks. Sequeira calls for a reevaluation of NGOs' roles in queer political life, emphasizing the nuanced and sometimes resistant engagement of Hijra activists with these organizations, thus challenging simplistic narratives of empowerment.

Nova et al. (2021) explore the complex interactions and identity disclosures of Hijra individuals from Bangladesh on social media platforms. This research is set against the backdrop of significant stigmatization faced by gender and sexual minorities (GSM) in South Asia, particularly the Hijra community. Using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with 61 Hijra individuals, the study delves into their online participation and behaviours through the framework of personal social media ecosystems. The findings reveal that the Hijra community navigates a multifaceted social media landscape influenced by platform-specific audiences, affordances, and norms. Moreover, the participants' skill and knowledge, coupled with cultural influences, play crucial roles in their online interactions. These factors lead to varied benefits from privacy features available on different platforms, which in turn affect how Hijras perceive online spaces and manage their self-presentation and disclosure behaviours over time. The study also highlights a significant aspect of social media's role in the lives of Hijra individuals: the intersection of social media ecosystems with local cultural norms and the broader implications for identity management and social interactions. It emphasizes that the complexity of online identity work for GSMs in non-Western contexts is compounded by differing audience perceptions and affordances.

Banu and Yasmin (2020) opined that the portrayal of transgender individuals in media, especially in Indian cinema, has evolved from insensitive and stereotypical representations to more nuanced and empathetic depictions, although significant challenges remain. Historically, media sensationalized transgender stories for higher ratings, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and minimizing their struggles, but recent advertising campaigns like 'Six Pack Band' and 'The Seatbelt Crew' have begun to present the transgender community positively. Indian cinema, despite some strides towards sensitivity and realism in portraying transgender characters, often defaults to using them as comic relief or outlandish figures, thus failing to challenge entrenched myths and stereotypes (Banu & Yasmin, 2020). The impact of cinema on societal attitudes is profound, as it shapes perceptions of gender roles and influences public acceptance of sexual minorities. Despite the legal and social challenges, including the legacy of Section 377 of the

Indian Penal Code, which criminalized homosexuality, there is a growing demand for realistic and respectful representations of transgender individuals in media to catalyse social change.

Woltmann(2020) observed that Indian law has only recently decriminalized homosexual behaviour and begun extending full citizenship rights to queer individuals. Historically, government regulations were influenced by colonial practices that silenced non-binary subjects. Hijras, a third gender typically born male but presenting as female, often face alienation and stigmatization both in India and in the diaspora, leading to what is termed “ideological diaspora”—a state of internal exile even within their home country. Systematic marginalization renders hijras subaltern subjects, complicating their efforts to form dialogic identities. In Western media, hijras are often absent or ridiculed. Sensitive portrayals in film, novels, and autobiographical texts can help assert their identities and foster a sense of community among third-gender youth, shifting their perception from “Other” to “another”.

Taracuka and Kochb (2021) investigate the impact of a media intervention on changing attitudes toward transgender and gender diverse individuals. With issues related to this population gaining national media attention, advocacy for equality and inclusion by mental health and LGBTQ+ rights organizations is increasingly prominent. The study, conducted with 223 students from a large Midwestern university in the USA, involved a 45-minute media intervention alongside pre- and post-testing. Results from split-plot factorial ANOVAs suggest a statistically significant interaction indicating increased positive attitudes and beliefs toward transgender and gender diverse individuals following the intervention, as measured by the Transgender Attitude and Beliefs Scale. However, there was no significant effect observed in willingness to engage in social action on behalf of this population, as measured by the Social Justice Scale. The study underscores the potential of media interventions to shape attitudes positively, while also highlighting the need for more robust strategies to foster social action. Implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

Chinnappan (2021) explores how hijra community-based organizations (CBOs) in India use social media, mainly Facebook, to represent hijra identities. It employs social media ethnography and involves analyzing five Facebook pages and interviewing 30 CBO members in Mumbai. The study is set against the backdrop of recent legislative changes in India recognizing third-gender rights and decriminalizing homosexuality. It investigates how hijra CBOs use social media for identity representation, health communication, awareness, and advocacy. The findings show that Facebook and other platforms help hijra CBOs create a digital presence, resist mainstream media misrepresentation, and enhance community visibility. This thesis underscores the critical role of social media in shaping hijra identity in contemporary India.

In their study “Hijras in Bollywood Cinema,” Kalra and Bhugra (2015) explore the complex portrayal of the hijra community in Indian cinema. The hijra community, known for its diverse practices and rituals, boasts a rich history spanning millennia. They participate in significant cultural rituals such as Hindu marriages and childbirth celebrations, despite enduring physical attacks and societal ridicule. Their depiction in literature and Hindi films, which influence audiences in India and beyond, varies widely, often presenting them as either comic figures or nurturing maternal characters. This paper examines the diverse nature of these portrayals, using examples from Hindi cinema, and highlights the importance of considering social and cultural contexts when understanding diverse sexualities.

Jobe (2013) explores the pervasive influence of media on American society, emphasizing its role in shaping perceptions of various social groups, including the transgender community. The media’s representation of transgender individuals, spanning from news coverage to television shows and movies, often perpetuates negative stereotypes and reinforces societal prejudices. Through an analysis of twelve media examples from 1975 to 2013, Jobe highlights the prevalence of inaccurate and unfair portrayals of transgender people, with many instances depicting them in a humorous or mocking manner. This perpetuation of stereotypes not only contributes to the marginalization of the transgender community but also hinders progress towards greater understanding and acceptance. Jobe argues that media outlets bear

responsibility for their portrayal of transgender individuals and calls for greater accountability from both the media and society itself in challenging and reshaping harmful narratives.

Different Types of Media and Their Roles

The media plays a big role in how people think and understand things, especially when it comes to including the third gender community in India. Here are some ways different kinds of media can help include them:

- **Mainstream Media:** TV, movies, and newspapers can show the third gender community respectfully and accurately. This helps people see them in a fair way and understand them better.
- **News Media:** News can talk about issues and struggles faced by the third gender community, which helps people learn about them and see them as real people with their own stories.
- **Social Media:** Platforms like Facebook and Instagram are useful for the third gender community to share their stories and connect with others. This helps raise awareness and support for their rights.
- **Educational Media:** Schools can use books and videos to teach students about different gender identities, including the experiences of the third gender community. This helps kids grow up with a better understanding of diversity.
- **Entertainment Media:** Movies, TV shows, and music can show different gender identities and celebrate people's experiences. This helps change how society thinks about the third gender community.
- **Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns:** Media campaigns can tell powerful stories and show visuals to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding of the third gender community.
- **Collaborative Media Initiatives:** Media organizations, advocacy groups, and the third gender community can work together to create events and campaigns that share their voices and experiences, promoting greater acceptance and understanding.

Media Representation of Hijras

The portrayal of Hijra people in media varies widely. In Bollywood films, stereotypes are often perpetuated, while platforms like Instagram are used to promote the concept of "hijrah" among Muslim youth (Kumari & Singh, 2022; Muntazori & Sunarto, 2020). Social media, particularly Facebook, significantly influences the religious and ideological perspectives of Hijra communities in Indonesia, resulting in religious superficiality and ideological hybridity (Nayak & Panda, 2021). In India, media often homogenizes Hijra identity, neglecting the community's diverse traditional livelihoods (Hidayat & Wanto, 2020).

Bollywood has a long history of featuring comic sequences and songs with cross-dressing male stars, such as Amitabh Bachchan portraying a eunuch in a sari in "Laawaris" (1981), or various songs featuring hijras (Sabharwal & Sen, 2017). Many popular Hindi films like "Mast Kalander" (1981), "Sadak" (1991), "Tamanna" (1997), "Murder 2" (2011), "Bullet Raja" (2013), "Rajjo" (2013), and "Queens! Destiny of Dance" (2011) have depicted hijras as villains filled with jealousy, hatred, and disillusionment. However, these portrayals often overlook the economic, social, health, and identity issues faced by hijras. Some mainstream films have attempted to explore hijra identity, but they failed to gain significant attention despite their novel topics. For instance, "Shabnam Mausi" (2005) by Yogesh Bharadwaj, which tells the story of India's first transgender MLA, and "Daayra" (1996) by Amol Palekar, featuring a hijra character who connects with a rape victim, were critically acclaimed but did not achieve box office success. The critical issue is whether these films portray minority characters realistically to raise awareness about their problems and issues (Ghosh, 2017).

"Arekti Premer Golpo" (Just Another Love Story) is a 2010 Indian drama film directed and written by Kaushik Ganguly. Starring Rituparno Ghosh and Indraneil Sengupta, the film is notable for being the first to explore queerness after the Delhi High Court's landmark decision on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009. The story centers on the mental struggles and societal rejection experienced by transgender

individuals. Premiering at the 60th Berlin Film Festival, the film sheds light on the challenges faced by the transgender community.

“Nagarkirtan” is a 2019 Bengali film by Kaushik Ganguly, starring Riddhi Sen as Parimal, a trans woman, and Ritwick Chakraborty as Madhu, a flute player. The film portrays the hidden lives and struggles of the transgender, hijra, intersex, and gender non-conforming communities, often ignored in Indian cinema. It explores their experiences of prejudice, taboo, and societal rejection, while avoiding moral judgments. The film seeks to create a narrative of resistance and change for these marginalized communities.

Chakraborty (2015) extensively discusses hijras in his book ‘Holde Golap’, portraying them as a legitimate third gender. He delves into their lifestyle, dress, rituals, and livelihood, including activities like baby dancing and begging. Chakraborty reveals that many hijras seek refuge due to a mismatch between their external gender and inner identity, with financial struggles often leading them to hijra professions. He highlights the challenges they face in hospitals and during cremation, as well as the dangerous practice of genital mutilation.

Traditionally recognized as Hijras and holding a significant role in India’s socio-cultural and religious context, transgender individuals have often been marginalized in contemporary society. Historically, Indian media has contributed to this marginalization by portraying transgender people in negative and demeaning roles. However, recent trends indicate a movement towards more nuanced and authentic depictions that reflect their true struggles and experiences (Vetrivel et al.,2024).

Role of Media for Transgender People in India

Transgender individuals deserve accurate, dignified, and respectful treatment, free from harassment, but historically media has sensationalized and stereotyped them, though recent positive representations are helping to challenge societal assumptions and improve their image (Tilak and Singh, 2019).

Prasad (2019) explores the impact of social media on transgender individuals in Kerala, specifically focusing on those residing in Thiruvananthapuram. The study analyses how platforms like YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and virtual communities contribute to consciousness-raising about transgender issues and the 'identity work' that occurs online. Utilizing a qualitative survey, Prasad examines respondents' detailed experiences with social media and traditional media, providing a nuanced understanding of how media representations affect transgender people's lives.

According to the 2011 Indian census, there are approximately 490,000 transgender individuals in India. Among them, there are remarkable examples of transgender people who have achieved significant success through a combination of talent, hard work, and dedication. Some notable examples of successful transgender individuals in India include Kalki Subramaniam, the first transgender entrepreneur; Padmini Prakash, the first transgender news anchor; Madhu Bai Kinnar, the first transgender mayor; Bharathi, the first transgender pastor; and Manabi Bandyopadhyay, the first transgender principal. These individuals are not only striving for personal accomplishments but are also committed to making a positive impact on their community. Media plays a crucial role in highlighting these inspiring success stories, bringing them to the public's attention. Through various media platforms, some transgender individuals have gained recognition and respect in society, serving as role models and sources of inspiration for others. The visibility provided by media helps to break down barriers and encourages more transgender people to step out and share their stories, rather than remaining hidden. Moreover, media coverage is vital in showcasing both the achievements and the challenges faced by the Hijra community. It not only celebrates those who are setting records and breaking stereotypes but also sheds light on the exploitation and discrimination that many still endure. By focusing on these diverse narratives, media can help to foster a more inclusive and understanding society, ultimately contributing to the broader acceptance and empowerment of transgender individuals (Varalakshmi and Anuradha, 2022).

Research shows that media significantly contributes to broadcasting stigmas. Studies on media and public attitudes toward homosexual stigma present mixed results. Media stigma is found to negatively impact identity disclosure among gender and sexual minorities, but this effect is mediated by their experiences of stigma and discrimination (Verma et al., 2023).

Mainstream media, encompassing television, film, and print publications, serves as a crucial platform for shaping public perceptions and understanding of the third gender community in India. By portraying them accurately and respectfully across various media formats, including news, entertainment, and documentaries, mainstream media can dismantle stereotypes and foster greater acceptance and understanding among the general public. Through raising awareness about the challenges and successes of the third gender community, sharing personal stories to highlight their humanity and uniqueness, challenging stereotypes, providing advocacy platforms for community leaders, highlighting positive role models, facilitating discussions, influencing public opinion on policies, collaborating with advocacy groups, and telling empathetic stories, media outlets can play a pivotal role in promoting inclusivity and creating a more accepting and equitable society for individuals of all gender identities.

Conclusion

Recent studies highlight the evolving portrayal and socio-political dynamics of the hijra community in South Asia. Media often shows Hijra people in different ways. Bollywood movies usually show them as villains or comic figures, which creates stereotypes. Some films try to show Hijra identities but often miss their real-life struggles. Recently, media is starting to show more realistic and respectful portrayals. Social media has transformed the hijrah movement into a broader socio-religious phenomenon, with digital activists commodifying religious practices. Indian legal reforms have recently begun recognizing queer rights, yet historical colonial influences and ongoing stigmatization persist. The hijra community navigates complex online identities influenced by cultural norms, while media portrayals in Indian cinema show a shift from stereotypical to more empathetic representations. Activist narratives reveal the intertwining of marginalization and advocacy, emphasizing the role of NGOs and social media in shaping hijra identities and challenging mainstream misrepresentations. Social media platforms are now helping raise awareness and improve their image. Successful transgender figures in India, like Kalki Subramaniam and Padmini Prakash, show the positive impact of media. Highlighting their achievements and challenges, media helps foster acceptance and understanding. Media interventions can improve attitudes but often fall short in fostering social action, underscoring the need for more robust strategies to translate positive perceptions into tangible support for gender minorities.

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