



BETWEEN SILENCE AND SURVIVAL: EXPERIENCES OF HIJRAS IN THEIR UPBRINGING IN WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The study is about the experiences of Hijra individuals in West Bengal and their upbringing. The researcher used a qualitative research design, using in-depth semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. Ten self-identified Hijras aged between 25 and 45 years, residing in various parts of Kolkata and adjoining districts, were interviewed between February and April 2025. The primary objective of this research was to explore Hijras' early life experiences in West Bengal, focusing on familial and social nurturing. Data were analyzed thematically using grounded theory, allowing themes to emerge inductively from the narratives rather than imposing preconceived categories. The upbringing of Hijras in West Bengal is marked by isolation, violence, and a lack of familial or institutional nurturing. Their experiences challenge conventional definitions of childhood and development, revealing how gender non-conformity leads to early life exclusion. The study calls for a more inclusive approach that protects gender non-conforming children and ensures supportive environments for their growth.

Keywords: *Experiences, Hijras, Upbringing, West Bengal*

Introduction

The Hijra community in India, often recognized as a third gender, has a long cultural history and holds a special place in religious and social life (Nanda, 1990; Reddy, 2005). In most cases, behind the public image of blessings and performances, their personal stories, especially from childhood, are filled with pain, struggle, and courage. In West Bengal, the experiences of Hijra individuals growing up are layered with emotional wounds, rejection, and a constant search for belonging. Many of them, from a very young age, feel different from other children and face misunderstanding, ridicule, or even abuse from their own families (Chatterjee, 2013). These early experiences leave deep scars, forcing them to leave their homes and seek comfort in the Hijra community, where they find guidance and support from gurus and fellow members.

Even though there have been legal efforts to recognize their rights and improve their lives, such as the state's welfare initiatives (Government of West Bengal, 2015), the everyday reality has not changed much. They continue to face barriers in education, healthcare, and work opportunities (Mal, 2015). Their nurturing is often informal and rooted within their community rather than from family or society. For many Hijra individuals, joining hijra community shelter is not just about survival; it's about finding care, understanding, and a sense of belonging that they were denied as children (Nanda, 1990).

This article focuses on how hijras faced rejection from family, discrimination from society, and psychological struggles that shape their sense of self and identity. It brings to light not just their hardships, but also their resilience and strength. Understanding these early experiences is crucial to building support systems and policies that help them live with dignity, respect, and equal opportunities.

Review of Related Literature

In West Bengal, very few studies have taken a close look at the childhood and early life experiences of Hijra individuals. One of the few available works, by Chatterjee (2013), examined the lives of Hijras in Kolkata and described how they are excluded from formal education and often rejected by their families at an early age. Ghosh and Banerjee (2018) explored how factors like class, gender, and identity intersect to create barriers for transgender people in Bengal, particularly from their formative years. These studies shed light on Hijras's challenges but mainly discuss early family rejection and alienation in general. They don't detail

what daily life looked like for these individuals before they left their homes, nor do they describe how nurturing happens within the community once they join a Hijra gharana.

There are a few other works that touch on related issues. For example, Roy (2017) discussed how social stigma prevents transgender children from accessing healthcare and education. Banerjee (2018) explored the mental health challenges faced by transgender youth and showed how social exclusion contributes to their psychological struggles. However, many of these studies don't go far enough in capturing the personal stories or providing a clear picture of how Hijras are supported or left without care during the critical years of their upbringing.

Despite the increasing attention given to transgender issues in recent years, a significant gap remains in first-person accounts and systematic documentation of the everyday realities faced by Hijra children and adolescents in West Bengal. These questions are rarely explored.

Research on the broader transgender population in the state points to high levels of discrimination. Studies by Mal (2015) describe how social stigma, exclusion from schools and workplaces, and lack of proper healthcare push many Hijras toward survival strategies like begging, dancing at ceremonies, or sex work. While government initiatives like establishing the Transgender Welfare Board have been welcomed as positive steps (Government of West Bengal, 2015), there is little evidence showing how these programs reach Hijra youth at the grassroots level. Their lived experiences of nurturing, education, mental health care, and integration remain largely unaddressed.

This study seeks to give Hijra individuals a platform to share their stories, with a special focus on their childhood experiences and how they were cared for or overlooked during those years. These personal stories hope to offer a more nuanced understanding of how early experiences shape identity, resilience, and social participation, and how support systems can be built to meet their real needs.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To explore the early life experiences of Hijras in West Bengal, focusing on familial and social nurturing.
2. To understand the emotional and psychological consequences of upbringing within a stigmatized gender identity.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because it allows for a deeper understanding of the personal and emotional experiences of Hijra individuals. Since the aim was to explore how they were raised, what kind of care they received, and the struggles they faced during their childhood, it was important to give them space to narrate their own stories in their own words. A semi-structured interview schedule was used as the main tool for collecting data.

Ten self-identified Hijras between the ages of 25 and 45 participated in this study. They lived in different parts of Kolkata and North 24 Parganas, which helped capture a broader range of experiences. These participants were selected through purposive sampling.

Before starting the interviews, the purpose of the study was explained clearly, and oral consent was taken from each participant. The researcher assured that their names and identities would be kept confidential and that their participation was voluntary. The interviews were conducted in a supportive and non-judgmental environment where participants felt safe to express themselves freely.

The collected data were analysed through thematic analysis. This method involved carefully reading and reviewing the interview transcripts to identify common patterns, recurring ideas, and meaningful relationships between different aspects of upbringing and care. Themes such as early family rejection, experiences of loneliness, coping strategies, support systems within the community, and forms of nurturing were highlighted and organized to provide a clear understanding of how Hijra individuals experienced their formative years.

Findings

The study finds following facts based on qualitative analyses of the responses of hijra samples.

1. Early Familial Rejection

All participants felt confused during childhood about their gender identity. When they shared this with their families, most were met with anger, violence, or denial. Many were treated as if they were mentally unstable or possessed. One participant said their father stopped talking to them after they expressed their feelings.

2. Social Alienation and School Dropouts

Most participants faced bullying, abuse, and exclusion in school. Teachers often ignored the harassment or joined in the ridicule. This made them feel unsafe and unsupported. As a result, many dropped out before completing their education.

3. Search for Belonging and Entry into Hijra Gharanas

During adolescence, many left their homes, either by choice or because they were forced out. They found shelter in Hijra gharanas led by senior members. These communities gave them a sense of belonging but also required them to follow strict rules. One participant described it as a family in which they had to earn their place.

4. Psychological Trauma and Identity Conflict

Rejection from their families caused deep emotional injury. Many experienced depression, suicidal thoughts, and confusion about who they are. Despite this, some found support from others in the community. Occasional allies also helped them feel less alone.

5. Economic Struggles and Survival Strategies

Without proper education or family support, most participants turned to begging, performing at ceremonies and sex work. These became the main ways to survive. The work was often stigmatized, but it helped them meet basic needs. Many learned these skills from other members of the community.

6. Continued External Discrimination: Even within their supportive spaces, participants are likely to describe how discrimination from the wider society continues to affect them, limiting access to education, healthcare, and respectable employment, and influencing their self-worth and future paths.

7. Aspirations for Acceptance

Many participants wished for greater acceptance and respect. They wanted better access to education, healthcare, and work opportunities. They hoped younger members would not face the same hardships. One participant expressed the desire to live with dignity like others in society.

Suggestions

On the basis of the study, a few suggestions can be communicated.

1. Focus group study and data triangulation (verifying data from several sources or observing subjects of the study many a times) will be helpful for better clarification of the facts.
2. The samples of such type study may be collected from broad geographical areas or from other districts of West Bengal for more representation of such population.
3. Apart from interview schedule, others relevant tools such as opinionnaire, check list, observation schedule etc. can be developed and employed for data collection.
4. Coding analysis can be applied for greater interpretation of the data.

Conclusions

The upbringing of Hijras in West Bengal is filled with pain, loneliness, and rejection. Many grow up without support from their families or schools, and face constant exclusion simply because they do not fit into society's idea of gender. These experiences challenge what we usually think of as childhood, where love, care, and guidance are expected. For many Hijras, growing up means surviving in an environment that treats them as outsiders.

But their stories are not only about suffering. They also show great strength. Despite being left alone, they build their own families and systems of support. Through their community, they find ways to care for each other, share knowledge, and create bonds that help them survive and grow. Their resilience is a powerful example of how people can stand strong even when everything else is against them.

As awareness about gender diversity increases in India, it's important that we listen to these voices with empathy, not just to understand their hardships, but to see how they have fought for dignity and belonging. Policymakers, teachers, and social workers must take these experiences seriously and work toward creating safe spaces for gender non-conforming children. Schools, families, and communities need to be more supportive, helping children grow without fear or shame.

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