

Narratives of Becomings

Re-conceptualizing Hijra Identities

Thesis Submitted to Jadavpur University
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Arts)

By

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Introduction

My doctoral research, entitled "Narratives of Becomings: Re-conceptualizing *Hijra* Identities" is an attempt to re-conceptualize *hijra* identities as 'becomings' through the narratives of the lived experiences of thirteen *hijras* (from West Bengal). In general, the *hijras* are identified either as 'deviant' or as 'supernatural' beings. They are recognized as the representative of 'third gender' of India. Flashy make-up, non-feminine body, harsh voice, provocative body language, loud (feminine) dressings, *tali* (a particular style of clapping), *dholak* (a rhythm instrument), song and dance performance in occasions like wedding and childbirth, exaggerated womanliness etc. are important identifiers of a *hijra*. They appear in premise of mainstream household in order to bless the newly married couple or new born child for the healthy progeny and in exchange of their blessing common people please them with cash or kind.¹ Beyond this, *hijras* 'lives are (perhaps intentionally) wrapped in mystery, silence, misconceptions and alienation.

Identity is something through which we introduce ourselves to the society at large. It gives us a sense of 'I' as well as of 'me.' This sense of self is mediated through the categories of sex, gender, sexuality, class, religion, race, caste, ethnicity, geographical location, nationality etc. On the basis of the dominant notions about these axes, those, who conform to the norm, are recognized as normal and those, who cannot conform to the norm, are marked as deviant. In the context of the axes of sex, gender and sexuality, the formula is like that a biological male must be masculine by gender and a female must be feminine and the sexual act must take place between these two normative categories. These arrangements of binary sex/ gender system and of heterosexuality are assumed as natural and essential. In contrast to this normative heteropatriarchal formula, *hijras* occupy a position that cannot be defined either as man or of woman

¹In the contemporary urban scenario of Kolkata, *hijras* are also seen as begging in the traffic signals or in local trains). Even, a specific group of *hijras* are also involved in sex work. This thesis, however, concentrate on the *hijras*, who are associated with the traditional *badhai* profession.

(the two normative categories of hetero-patriarchal system). They can be fitted neither into the formula of natural correspondence between sex and gender identities nor into the formula of heterosexuality. Hence, they are socially considered as deviants and it leads to their marginalization and criminalization. In this attempt to re-conceptualize *hijra* identities, I will emphasize on the axes of sex, gender identities and sexual orientation. It does not mean that it is only through these axes that the *hijra* identities are constructed. But it also cannot be ignored that primarily, their identity as *hijra* stands upon their ambiguous sex-gender status, i.e., 'neither man nor woman'. However, this thesis accepts the importance of intersectionality and tries to focus on how *hijra* identities are constructed through the intersection of different axes like class, religion, kinship, ethnicity, geographical location, legitimacy as well as that of sex, gender and sexuality.

This attempt of re-conceptualizing an identity (or something) requires an understanding of how *hijra* identity has been conceptualised. There are multiple academic and popular discourses such as the discourse such as medical science, law, language, literature (fiction, biography, autobiography), media and politics through which different identities (including *hijra* identities) can be conceptualised. Keeping that in mind, in this thesis I focus on the academic discourse and popular Hindi (Bollywood) cinematic discourse to comprehend how *hijra* identities are conceptualised. Through the study of these academic and cinematic discourses, I have deciphered that these discourses have produced some essentialized notions about the identity category called *hijra*. To move beyond this essentialism, I have aimed to re-conceptualize these *hijra* identities through the narratives of their lived experiences. Here, I perceive these discourses (academic, cinematic, legal and narratives of lives experiences) not as detached from each other, rather as constitutive of each other. However, the narratives of my thirteen *hijra* respondents show that *hijra* is a 'becoming' rather than a being. Through the help of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender as becoming, I have tried to look at *hijra* identities as heterogeneous becomings (not as essentialized being or becoming). The primary research question of this doctoral thesis that is, 'how the *hijra* identities are constructed,' actually points towards the following questions² which are repeatedly highlighted throughout the thesis:

- whether *hijras* can be conceptualized as homogeneous 'third'?

²I am sure that there must be the possibilities of many more questions which can initiate the further scopes to re-conceptualize hijra identities.

- whether *hijra* identities can be conflated with other gender variant identities like transvestites, eunuchs, homosexuals and hermaphrodite?
- whether *hijras* challenge the norm or reinforce the hetero-patriarchal norm through their performance of non-normativity?

Methodological Structure of the Thesis

This thesis stands upon the principal of feminist epistemology. Here, a question can be raised -whether it would be possible at all to look at *hijras* (who are not 'women') through the lens of feminist epistemology? Feminism questions the hetero-patriarchal politics that stands upon the privileging of man as the norm and marginalization of the other. The other is what the norm is not. In that sense women as well as *hijras* are the other as both of them are not men as both of them lack the signifier, i.e., the phallus. Moreover, *hijras'* otherness is more severe because they not only lack the signifier, i.e., the phallus, but also (unlike women) lack the ability to reproduce. It transforms them into the 'pathological other'.

Hetero-patriarchal oppression is not a one-dimensional concept. It has many forms and many faces. Without understanding the voices of the "deviations from normal" it would not be possible to understand the voice of the marginal, different forms of oppressions as well as different forms of struggles (against those oppressions). From that perspective, not only women but also all the marginal identities like *hijras*, who are excluded from the domain of knowledge production, are the subjects of feminist epistemology as well as feminist politics.

So, this thesis on one hand, intends to regard *hijras* as the potential knower. On the other hand, it strongly criticises the androcentric tendency of the mainstream research process that looks at the known as the object of research (whose only task is to be looked at) and therefore reinforces the patriarchal forms of hierarchy between the known and the knower. This thesis stands upon the epistemology that both the knower and the known contribute in the production of knowledge. Hence, it intends to critically comprehend *hijras'* lived experiences through their narratives. Their narratives can depict the ways through which the difference and discrimination between the core and the periphery can be destabilised. Moreover, it is their lived experiences

which show that their identities are constructed through multiple layers and that creates heterogeneous meanings and interpretation of *hijra* identities. It does not mean that I intend to bypass the importance and necessity of the collective identity. Definitely, *hijras* share common experiences of patriarchal oppression and of struggles against it, with each other as well as with other gender variant identities. What I mean to say is that sharing a common space does not mean that all the gender variant identities can be conceptualised as a homogeneous category. Rather, it is their lived experiences which talk about the collective as well as about the heterogeneous possibilities.

Structurally the thesis is qualitative as it values not the quantitative but the qualitative understanding of *hijras'* lived experiences in order to find out the meaning of 'becoming *hijra*'. It requires a detailed and in-depth understanding of their narratives. So, I have chosen case study as the research method and in-depth interview as the research tool because through these, it would be possible to listen and understand the voices and nitty-gritty of *hijras'* lived experiences. This research method has helped me to study the cases as well as the context and other complex conditions which are interconnected with the cases. As I intend to look at *hijra* identities through multiple layers, I purposefully choose multiple cases from different locations of West Bengal (Howrah, Hooghly, North 24 Pargana, South 24 Pargana and Kolkata). For the selection of cases I have depended on my personal connections, friendship pyramiding and snowball procedures. My research analysis is based upon the in-depth interview of the thirteen *hijras*, all of whom are *nirvan* (emasculated) *hijras* and are associated with *badhai hijra* culture. I look at my thirteen *hijra* respondents not as the representative of *hijra* society as a whole, but as individuals who narrate their lived experiences in different and specific ways. So, I have no intention to illustrate any generalized interpretation about *hijra* as a universal identity category on the basis of the narratives of these thirteen *hijras*. On the basis of their narratives, I have realized that the facets such as their experiences in pre-*hijra* lives (their desire to become women or to perform femininity, social humiliation, identity crisis, the need of social recognition and a way to earn livelihood, structure of the community, religion, emasculation, mythical and historical references, ascetism, sexual relationships and the claim of authenticity play significant roles in the construction of their identities. Through the analysis of all these facets, in this thesis, I aim to re-conceptualize *hijra* identities not as a monolithic identity category but as combinations of heterogeneous identities.

Beside the case study method, I also depend upon the method of content analysis in order to understand how *hijra* identities are conceptualized in academic discourse. The qualitative analysis of the content of the academic works has helped me, on one hand to find out the problems that are reflected through the ways the scholars have tried to re-conceptualize the identity category called *hijra*. On the other hand, it has helped me to critically analyse those problems and find out the ways through which the researcher can be reflexive while conducting the research. At the same time, to understand how *hijra* identities are conceptualized in the cinematic discourse I have emphasized on the value and quality of the cinematic representations of *hijra* identities in Bollywood Hindi films. I have followed the method of critical discourse analysis under the principal of feminist qualitative methodology in order to comprehend how the cinematic conceptualization of identity category called *hijra* is constituted and re-constituted by the normative social structure; how the cinematic conceptualization constitutes the dominant interpretation of *hijra* identities; how the power relations influence the representations/conceptualization of *hijra* identities in the cinematic frame. On the basis of my *hijra* respondents' familiarity (as the voices of research subjects are important for me) and quality of the representation (how significantly *hijras* are represented in the cinematic frame), I have chosen three popular Hindi (Bollywood) films named *Sadak*, *Tamanna*, *Shabnam Mousi* and one parallel Hindi (Bollywood) film, named *Darmiyaan: In Between*.³

Chapter One: Hijra Identity as Conceptualized in Academic Discourse

From G. M. Castairs (1957) to Swadha Taparia (2011), different scholars like Morris E. Opler, Serena Nanda, Vinay Lal, Satish Kumar Sharma, Bhaswati Chakravorty, L. W. Preston, Walter Penrose, Sonali Pattnaik, Ajay Basu and Niloy Majumder depict *hijra* identities from different angles. All of them discuss in detail that in this process of construction of *hijra* identity, the issues of non-normative desire of performing femininity, class, societal oppression, emasculation, religion, historical and mythical reference, ascetism, sexual relationship with

³*Sadak*, directed by Mahesh Bhatt(1991, India: Spark Worldwide, 1998), Film.

Tamanna, directed by Mahesh Bhatt (1998, India, Mumbai: Spark Films), Film.

ShabnamMausi, directed by YogeshBharadwaj (2005, India), Film.

Darmiyaan: In Between, directed by KalpanaLazmi (1997, India, Mumbai: Pan Music and Magazine Ltd.), Film.

pantis, claim of authenticity, economic and social security and recognition play important roles in the constitution of *hijra* identities. In this synopsis, instead of going into that detail, I would prefer to highlight the important trends through which *hijra* identities are conceptualised in the academic discourse in general.

In the academic discourse, *hijras* are conceptualized by different scholars as institutionalized homosexuals (G. M. Castairs, 1957); as men minus men; as men plus women; as quintessential third gender in India (Serena Nanda, 1990); as ‘neither man nor woman’ (Serena Nanda, 1990; A.M. Shah, 1961); as social deviant (Satish K. Sharma, 1989), as a ‘combination of both’; as people with an ‘in-between’ status and as an alternative community of gender variant people (Gayatri Reddy, 2005). All of these previously mentioned definitions point towards their sexually impotent or emasculated state of being. On the basis of their emasculated state of being or their neither man nor woman status, the scholars like Serena Nanda, Walter Penrose, Satish Kumar Shah, L. W. Preston conceptualise *hijras* homogenously as ‘third gender.’ **Secondly**, in this discourse the *hijras* are clubbed with other gender variant identities like hermaphrodites, *khojas*, *jogappa*, *aravanis*, *shivasatis* and *kotis* as well as with *mahu* (people with an intermediate gender identity in Tahiti), *berdache* (people with neither man nor woman status in Native America), and *xanith* (people with an intermediate gender identity in Oman) into a single group, assuming that all of them are challenging the binary structure of sex and gender. These two positions actually give birth to the following problems:

- The classification of *hijra* identities essentially as third gender reduces them to merely a sex-gender category. It bypasses the importance of above axes (of class, religion, kinship, ethnicity and sexuality) in the construction of their identities while these axes are socially connected (as well as constructed) with that of sex and gender.
- It blurs the differences and specificities among *hijras*.
- It blurs the differences and specificities between *hijras* and other multiple sex/gender variant categories like hermaphrodites (a biological status), *khojas*, *jogappa*, *aravanis*, *shivasatis* and *kotis* (Indian categories) as well as *mahu*, *berdache*, and *xanith* (non-Indian categories).

‘Third’ may be a collective term for classifying those people who are different from the binary categories of man and woman. It does not mean that all of them are neither man nor

woman in the same way. This practice produces an essentialized image of gender variant categories whereas each of these groups is different from others. There is no fixed form of the space, termed as 'neither man nor woman.' It is a culturally constructed concept and hence loses the fixity. It can be multiple rather than a monolithic concept. I do not intend at all to claim that the differences are never recognized in that discourse.⁴ The differences may be recognized following the simple additive model that is - 'add differences and then stir them'. However, this trend of essentializing *hijras* as third is criticised by another group of scholars like Gayatri Reddy, Lawrence Cohen, Bhaswati Chakravorty and Sonali Pattnaik. They rightly point out that it is necessary to think of *hijra* identities not solely through the lens of sex, gender and sexuality, but through multiple lenses of class, caste, kinship, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and nationality. They give emphasis on the importance of the embodied knowledge while trying to conceptualize these identities. **Thirdly**, the myth that *hijras* are asexual beings is broken by this academic discourse. At the same time, it produces another essentialized interpretation of *hijra* identity as homosexual on the basis of their sexual relationship with men. As *hijras* are neither man nor woman, they lack the ability to participate in reproduction as well as to perform the ideal sexual pattern.⁵ Thus, it is the ground from where the conceptualization of *hijras* as homosexual is originated.⁶ If we think that the conceptualization of *hijras* identities must be based on the embodied knowledge then how can we conceptualize *hijras* as homosexual? In fact, the *hijras*, who are the subjects of my research, dislike identifying their sexual relationships as the expression of homosexuality as they feel some pleasure in identifying themselves as women. **Fourthly**, the identity of *hijra*, marked as 'third,' is conceptualised by the scholars like Serena Nanda, L. W. Preston and Walter Penrose as useful to prove that non-Western society is more liberal than Western society as it accommodates these non-normativities with proper recognition.⁷ This essentialistic assumption reinforces the binary between Western or non-Western society, ignoring socio-cultural specificities, histories, changes and fusion, associated

⁴ There are several other scholars like Gayatri Reddy, Lawrence Cohen, Sonali Pattnaik and Bhaswati Chakravorty who criticises this trend of looking at this identity category only through the lens of sex and gender, and essentializing them as third. In spite of that, the influence of this practice of essentialism is so strong that the identity category called *hijra* still remains as the representative of 'third gender' in India.

⁵ The concept of heterosexuality is marked with the purpose (reproduction) and the pattern of sexual act (peno-vaginal).

⁶ The sexual act that *hijras* perform with men is non peno-vaginal sexual act and so it is not resulted into reproduction.

⁷ Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: Hijras of India* (Belmont, California: Wardsworth Publishing Company, 1990).

with different societies (either Western or non- Western). On the other hand, the scholars like Lawrence Cohen, Sonali Pattnaik, Vinay Lal and Swadha Taparia, have shown how the conceptualization of *hijra* identities as well as the social treatment towards them changed with the introduction of Islamic rule and again of the colonial rule. **Fifthly**, the scholars, like Sonali Pattnaik, Swadha Taparia and Bhaswati Chakravorty definitely illuminate how social violence is inflicted upon these marginalised identities because of their non-normative performances. But, can we conceptualize *hijras* as the passive objects whose main task is to receive the hetero-patriarchal oppression? What is missing in their analysis is the depiction of the modes of operations through which *hijras* negotiate with the patriarchal oppressions. Before conceptualizing *hijras* as invisible entities or excluded beings (that are academically perceived as the proof of social violence inflicted upon *hijras*) it is important to note that it is *hijras'* visibility and inclusion as the other or deviant that can serve the hetero-patriarchal interests of establishing the idea of norm more firmly. **Finally**, *hijra* identities are discursively represented in this academic framework by the scholars like Serena Nanda, Walter Penrose, Swadha Taparia and Bhaswati Chakravorty (to some extent), essentially as the agents to subvert the dichotomous sex-gender system and heterosexual norm. In this context too, *hijras'* existence as 'third' is deployed as the tool.

Can we conceptualize *hijras* homogenously as third, just because they are physically and socially neither man nor woman? Can we conceptualize their sexual identities as homosexuals just because they cannot be fitted into the framework of peno-vaginal sexual interaction? Does their status as neither men nor women or as 'third' mean that they are transcendental solution to the sexual dimorphism question? Here it should be kept in mind that their identities either as third or as 'neither man nor woman' or as non-normative gender variant people are defined on the basis of the normative binary structure. Moreover, it cannot be ignored that it is their desire to become woman that drives them towards being converted into *hijrah* hood. What I want to say is - before burdening *hijra* identities with any essentialized assumption/s, it is important to comprehend whether *hijras* are challenging the patriarchal economy of dichotomous sex/gender system or reinforcing the very norm.

Chapter Two: Hijra Identities as Represented in Hindi Cinematic Discourse

Hijras are what the man is not. *Hijras'* non-normative identity vindicates the norm in opposition of which they are the 'other'. It is the position on the basis of which the practices of criminalization, othering, essentialization and marginalization are operated against *hijra*. The second chapter, through representational lens of Bollywood Hindi cinema, illustrates how these practices constitute *hijras'* identities essentially as deviation. To analyse how the *hijra* identities are conceptualised in the narrative discourse of Bollywood Hindi cinema, I have concentrated on three popular Hindi films, namely *Sadak*, *Tamanna* and *Shabnam Mousi* and one parallel Hindi film, namely, *Darmiyaan: In Between* (in these films *hijras* are represented as more than a passing reference or object of fun).

Representation is one of the modes through which it can possibly be understood how individuals, objects, events or any abstract ideas are dominantly conceptualized (or looked at). Stuart Hall and Niall Richardson argue that representation is always re-presentation of something. It is not the innocent reflection of something that is natural or real. It is always constructed "in accordance with a specific set of politics and ideas."⁸ The practice of representation is always mediated through the language (or sign/s) that produces specific meanings which mark out and maintain identities and differences within and between groups in a specific cultural space. These films, through using specific language or signs represent *hijra* identities in different ways.

The narrative frame of the traditional cinema in general (as argued by Laura Mulvey, 1985) and mainstream Bollywood Hindi cinema (as depicted by Gayatri Gopinath, 2000), in particular are hetero-patriarchally structured. In this frame a man is represented as the symbol of power who rules the narrative. According to Laura Mulvey, he enjoys the erotic pleasure through looking at women as a sexualized object while for women, the task is to be looked at as erotic objects and to be controlled by men. It does not mean that she is not necessary for the plot. Rather, she is very much important for the plot as only she can complement the norm in reinforcing the essentialism of reproductive heterosexuality. In this hetero-normative framework, a *hijra* is neither a norm nor is the complementary self of the norm. Hence she is the synonym of

⁸ Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representation in Films and Popular Culture* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012), 3.

threat to the dominant order. From that perspective, how a *hijra* can be incorporated in this hetero-patriarchally structured frame of Hindi cinema?

Though in general, *hijras* are represented in the mainstream cinematic premise either as an object of fun (comic relief) or as passing reference, in these four films, *hijras* are represented through different and significant modes. The film, *Sadak*, constructs the image of *hijra*, named Maharani as a typical villain, who acts as an obstacle in the path of ideal consummation of love relationship between a man and woman. She is an object of male repudiation as well as of female fear. She is represented as threatening what is fundamental, universal and essential - the reproductive heteronormative relationship. Thus, the solution (as represented in this film) is the punishment (deletion) of that *hijra* (the threat) under the authority of the man (the norm). On the other hand, the film *Tamanna* represents a *hijra* (named Tikku) as weak, helpless, honest and decent human being. He does not challenge the norm. The weakness and helplessness and 'non-*hijraness*', inscribed in his portrayal, render him acceptable in normative society. For the same reason, in the film, *Darmiyaan: In Between*, Immi is also entitled to positive social reaction because, in spite of being a *hijra*/ intersex, he as well as Tikku expresses their hatred for those *hijras*, who perform *hijraness* in their regular lives. In contrast, Maharani is not seen to express any shame for her identity as *hijra*. Rather she converts her 'good for nothing' image into a significant one through the display of power. Immi is an 'other', who cannot accept her identity as neither man nor woman. But unlike Maharani, Immi does not challenge the norm. It saves Immi from being interpreted as an object of social punishment. Instead, Immi prefers to remove himself from the normative system through committing suicide. It gives birth to a sympathetic attitude. However, from all of these embodiments of *hijra* identities it seems that Maharani is the representation of what a *hijra* is while Tikku and Immi are the representation of what a *hijra* should be like. In a different form, we can see a *hijra* as struggling to achieve respect and the right to live life as a human being in *Shabnam Mausi*. Shabnam Mousi deserves an appreciation because she dares to enter into the mainstream society and therefore into the political domain (that is traditionally reigned by men) ignoring the social frown. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that she does that after leaving the *hijra* culture and society in order to live a better and civilized life. On one hand, she raises her voice against the social humiliation and marginalization of *hijras*. On the other hand, she sometimes seems to re-fabricate (idea instead of questioning) the social politics of establishing the image of a *hijra* as a deviant or negative

creature. Through associating the image of *hijras* with the terms like 'coward,' 'unmanly,' 'spineless' and 'uncivilized,' she helps us to interpret *hijra* identities as monster.

So, in this cinematic discourse, the *hijra* remains as an object either of social hatred (in case of bad *hijras*) or of social sympathy and grace (in case of good *hijras*). But in both cases they remain as deviations. They lack the symbols both of the norm and of the complimentary self of the norm. So, in comparison to woman's otherness, *hijras'* otherness is doubled. She is the other of the norm as she lacks the signifier, i.e., the phallus. This lack does not render her a woman because unlike a woman she cannot reproduce. So, the representation of *hijras* is deployed in these films to vindicate the meaning of 'real man' (the norm) as well as the 'real woman' (the complementary other). **Secondly**, the definition of *hijras'* identity does not depend upon what she has, but upon what she lacks. It is her lack (both of signifier and of reproductive quality) that renders her otherness as more grave or as pathological. **Thirdly**, these films omit the issue of castration very silently whereas this issue plays an important role in the constitution of the *hijra* identities. The possibility of castration signifies the loss of virility, the loss of the very symbol of power and hence disturbs the notion of masculinity as an ideal form of personhood. Hence, in the cinematic discourse, it is suppressed that most of the *hijras* are actually born as males and later castrate themselves in order to become *hijras*. **Fourthly**, to protect the normative order of reproductive heterosexuality, the *hijras* are represented in all these films as performing sexual renunciation. The domain of sexuality is burdened with the reproductive purpose. *Hijras'* intrusion into that domain will never result into reproduction and therefore can challenge the essentialism of reproductive heteronormativity. **Fifthly**, these films through its representational strategies portray the two different images of *hijras* - good *hijra* and bad *hijra*. A good *hijra* is the one, who accepts her position as a 'doubled other' and perform accordingly. Bad *hijras* are those, who dare to cross the boundary of otherness and violates the norm through intruding in the domain of pleasure (in spite of being an objectified other), domination and authority (that is supposed to be the domain of a man). The films through its representational politics convey the message that to be incorporated in the normative social structure a *hijra* must be docile, submissive, and ready to accept her status as a deviation and must disown the typical *hijraness*. On the other hand, bad *hijras* like Maharani are subjected not merely to marginalization, but also to criminalization and exclusion. This representational politics in its own way reinforces the norm itself. It strengthens the sex-gender hierarchy,

essentializes binarism, and re-establishes reproductive heteronormativity as fundamental and therefore essential. Hence, it situates *hijras* within this normative structure either as criminals or as submissive, weak and helpless beings in order to pacify their voices and to suppress the possibility/ies of subversion of the norm. What is missing in this andocentric cinematic discourse is the depiction of *hijras'* subjective position. *Hijras'* embodied experiences according to which it is a 'becoming' rather than a 'being' is just absent in this cinematic framework.

Hijras' non-normative desire talks about the possibilities (alternative) other than the heteronormative duo - man and woman. It does not mean that it is a one-dimensional concept of possibility that can be defined only through the reference of binarism. Rather, their narratives talk about multiple possibilities which on one hand, dismantle the validity of binary framework and on the other hand, problematize the monolithic concept of *hijra* identities as 'third.' There may be the series of actions that are continuously performed, revised and consolidated by *hijras* over time and therefore this process creates scopes to re-conceptualize *hijra* identities in multidimensional ways.

Chapter Three: Hijra Identities through the lens of their Lived Experiences

According to my *hijra* respondents' narratives, *hijra* identity is not something that one gets by virtue of being born (either as male or female and intersex). To them it is a rebirth, a process of becoming that is operated through different layers. It starts with joining *hijra* community that is followed by the initiation ritual, emasculation, religious conversion into Islam, adoption of community custom, the traditional *hijra* profession (*badhai*) and performance of sexual renunciation. Why they at all need to take this rebirth? According to *hijra* respondents' narratives all of them were born as males. Still, they expressed an offensive and dangerous desire to live their lives like a woman. In their cases, the correspondence between their sex and gender identities was absent because of which, they experienced long and continuous process of social humiliation that compelled them to leave the mainstream society. Some of them cherished the desire to become a 'real' woman (a woman psychologically as well as biologically) while to others, what is important is to perform femininity (feminine attire, feminine make-up, feminine gestures, feminine roles and feminine household jobs etc.) rather than biological femaleness. In

this situation, the poor background of class and education, social humiliation, lack of familial support drove them towards the path of 'becoming *hijra*.' From that perspective, *hijra* community has emerged as the shelter that can provide them a relief from an unwanted identity, a scope to perform their desired gender role, social acknowledgement in favour of their non-normative existence, protection against the social humiliation and a mean to sustain themselves financially.

According to their narratives, *hijra* groups mostly resemble the structure of normative families. Here, *guru* performs the role of supreme authority whereas *chelas* perform the role of her subordinates. Within the *hijra* society, the *hijra chelas* can be passed from one *guru* to another through a system like slave trade. In *hijra* communities, *hijras* are generally associated with each other through feminine kinship terms like sister, mother, daughter, wife, granddaughter, grandmother etc. Interestingly, in case of the relationship between *guru* and *chela*, the *gurus* perform two contradictory roles together - the role of a mother and the role of a husband of their *chelas*. In this framework, *guru's* role is inverted from a feminine figure into a masculine figure or vice versa. But, the *chelas* are always supposed to perform the subordinate or feminine role either as daughter or as wife. They always carry the marks of Hindu married women like *sindur*, nose pin, earrings, bangles etc. After the death of their *gurus*, they, even, perform widowhood. But, according to my *hijra* respondents' accounts, unlike normative married couple, there is no space for sexual bonding between *guru* and *chela*.

During my field work, I have noticed that these *hijras* have repeatedly provided a number of mythical and historical references to justify their rightful existence in society. They associate themselves with the myths of Bahuchara Mata, Lord Shiva's *ardhanarishwar* form, Shiva's broken *linga*, Arjuna's *brihannala* form and of Shikhandi to prove their legitimate space in mainstream society. Interestingly, unlike the real incidents of gender alterations, these mythical incidents of gender transformations do not disturb the normative heterosexual assumptions. The transformations of identities, in case of these divine and mythical figures are not caused by their desire to perform femininity. These transformations are caused by some noble purpose, after which they uniformly return to their 'original' form.

To transform their identities from a pathological other to socially recognized and respectable one, they also take refuge in both of the Hindu and Islamic religion. According to their traditional belief the *hijras* are supposed to be Muslims by religion. The *hijra* respondents,

who were Hindus in their pre-*hijra* lives, state that they are converted into Islam as soon as they joined the community. However, their conversion into Islam provides them the scope to legitimise their position also through citing the reference of eunuchs. These *hijras* regard themselves as the successor of the *khojas* of medieval period as these *khojas* also played the role of 'neither man nor woman.' Then, how can they associate themselves with the Hindu mythical figures? According to them, the mythical and historical references prove that both the Hindu and Islamic religions sanction *hijras'* rightful existence in mainstream society. That is why, the *hijras* belong to both of these religions. So, their identities as the successors of *khojas* as well as the devotees of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata problematize the notion of essentialism also in terms of religion. Hence, in this frame of seeking legitimacy and recognition, complicated religious identities and religious performances (such as the act of emasculation) become something more than the outcome of their religious belief. It seems that mythical and historical references, mystification and religious positions are deliberate strategies of survival. These are like the recourse for *hijras* to claim legitimacy in favour of their non-normative existence (which, in normal terms, cannot be socially legitimised) in the mainstream society.

As I have said, all of my *hijra* respondents are *nirvan hijras*. It means that all of them are emasculated. This emasculation, however, is intrinsically associated with the constitution of *hijra* identities. In order to justify the act of emasculation that is normatively regarded as punishable offense, these *hijras*, even, interlink this with their religious identities. Through the lens of their religious identity as Muslims, they interpret this emasculation as an extended form of circumcision. It should be kept in mind that this ritual is performed by Muslim men. Again as Hindus they interpret it as the way to achieve salvation from earthly desires. Is it all about religious custom and obligation for which they perform this life threatening act? According to their narratives, it is the way to become free from the maleness through the omission of male genitalia. Traditionally, it is believed that after the emasculation operation, through the bleeding, maleness flows out and femaleness flows in. The emasculation is also socially necessary for *hijras*. It is the ultimate proof of their deformed sexual identity and impotency through which they can achieve social sanction, recognition and promotion within the community as well as in the larger society. Thus, it can be said that this act is interlinked in heterogeneous ways with the constitution of *hijra* identities.

Emasculation is also a tool through which these *hijras* prove themselves sexually impotent and hence authentic *hijras*. This issue of authenticity guarantees their social respectability, legitimacy and their monopoly over certain financial recourses. In that sense, it is connected with the constitution of *hijra* identities. In this frame of claiming authenticity, these *badhai hijras* differentiate themselves from the *chhallawalis* and *khajrawalis*. According to these *badhai hijras'* narratives, the *chhallawali* and *khajrawali hijras* through the performance of unruly acts like begging and sex work pollute the authentic *hijra* culture and therefore the image of 'true' *hijras* in public. Moreover, they regard themselves authentic in opposition to the *kotis* or 'real' men, whom they regard as fake *hijras* or *zenanas*. These *zenanas*/ fake *hijras* neither have the mark of emasculation nor belong to *hijra* society. They perform the *badhai* profession just for financial reason. It produces social suspicion and disrespect about the *hijra* culture as a whole. So, in order to be recognized as 'real' *hijra* and to secure the position in society a *hijra* needs (1) to prove her biological as well as social identity as 'neither men nor women through castration; (2) to perform *badhai* profession (that is - blessing newly married couple or new born child for healthy offspring); and (3) to perform sexual renunciation. In fact, to establish themselves as 'true' *hijras*, these *nirvan hijras*, on one hand, have tried to conceal the difference between the castrated and hermaphrodite *hijras* and on the other hand, perform the corporeal act of emasculation as it finally makes them as impotent as hermaphrodites.

Hijras are socially conceptualized as asexual because of their emasculated and reproductively incapable status. They, themselves claim that ascetism is the source of their divine power as well as the key to achieve social recognition. Do the *hijras* really perform asexuality? Their narratives depict that in spite of this custom of sexual renunciation; almost all of them maintain sexual relationship secretly with men as the revelation of their sexually active role can lead towards the production and re-production of their identities as criminals. According to them, to protect the respectable position of *hijras*, they never perform any sexual act in their *hijra dera* or in public premise. On the other hand, they believe that as human being they should not be denied from the domain of sexuality. However, they dislike to define their sexual relationships as homosexual relationships. As they state, in their relationship, their *pantis*/boyfriends always play the masculine role while they experience themselves as women. Can we essentialize *hijras* as homosexuals just on the basis of the pattern of the (non-peno-vaginal) sexual act, ignoring these different experiences?

To some of my *hijra* respondents (case 7, case 13), '*hijra*' is their professional identity. According to other respondents (case 2, case 12), their profession is *badhai*, which is a part of *hijra* life. Again, some of them argue that if it is only a professional identity then they need not to practice *hijrahood* throughout the day. It is their life as a whole. It is the identity through which they introduce themselves to the mainstream society and through which the mainstream society recognizes them. It is the way to live their lives partially in feminine ways. It is very clear to them that becoming *hijra* does not convert them into a woman. But, it at least releases them from carrying the burden of performing an unwanted gender identity. Their performatively produced gender role is not recognised as femininity, but as an exaggeration of femininity that is marked by an incompleteness. They are incomplete both as man and as woman. That is why it is a middle way through which they can be released from an unwanted identity (of man) and can live their life in feminine way. So, it is not their intention to challenge the norm or to transcend the category of gender because of which they become *hijras*. Rather, it is a negotiation with what they do not want to become and with what they want to become.

Apparently, *hijras* have masculine bodies whereas they do not perform masculinity. On the other hand, they do not have feminine bodies while they want to perform femininity. Even, to a large extent, they have tried to become a 'real' woman. But their accounts, themselves, reveal that ultimately it would not be possible for them to become a 'real' woman. They seek legitimacy for this negotiated non-normative identity. In this framework of legitimacy, the mythical and historical references, emasculation, religious affiliation, traditional profession and ascetism become the channels through which they try to transform their unacceptable non-normative identity into a legitimised non-normative one. As they narrate, without these facets, the society will not pay them the respect and sanction. So, these are the conditions through which they can survive in this hetero-patriarchal society with their non-normative performance. Does it mean that all these facets establish *hijras* as 'third gender' in a homogeneous way?

Fourth Chapter: Hijra Identities as Problematising the Norm

Their narratives show that there are multiple layers through which *hijra* identities can be interpreted in different ways and therefore produce different meanings. But as I have shown, in the academic and cinematic discourse their identities are conceptualized in some essentialised manner. *Hijras*, because of their ambiguous sex, gender identities and sexual orientations contain the possibility of violation of the norm. Hence, they need to be controlled either through criminalization or through homogenization.

These 'difficult to interpret subjects' whose identities are formed outside the heterosexual norm have historically been emerged as problems and difficulty for the nation-state both in colonial and post-colonial period. Section 377 (in 1860) and An Act of Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs (in 1897) exemplify that in order to protect this norm from being disrupted by other possibilities, the institution of law has been used as a tool to establish these non-normative identities like *hijras* homogenously as pathological others and therefore to criminalize them. I have already said that according to the hetero-patriarchal norm, reproductive heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman is essentialised as the ideal form of sexuality. In that scenario, *hijras'* entrance (in spite of being incapable to procreate) into the domain can expose that sexuality is not always mandatorily driven by the purpose of reproduction. It talks about the possibility of different kinds of sexualities and therefore, challenges the patriarchal assumption that heterosexuality is the ideal, natural and essential form of living. So, Section 377 becomes the instrument to criminalize *hijras* on the ground of their non-reproductive (peno-vaginal) sexual performance. On the other hand, through the Criminal Tribes Act they were criminalised because their public appearance with a femininely ornamented non-feminine body or effeminate male body disturbed the colonisers' conceptualization or assumption about the binary categories of man and woman. These 'unintelligible' bodies, therefore, symbolized the loss of virility. Thus, these two Acts serve three interconnected interests -(1) it protects and reinforces the essentialized concepts of 'real man' as the norm and of 'real woman' as its procreative other; (2) it establishes reproductive heterosexuality as the ideal and essential form of sexual relationship; and (3) it establishes the identity category of *hijra* as the 'criminalized other'. In contemporary period, the *hijras* are not legally treated as criminals.

Even, the Transgender Persons (Protection and Right) Bill, 2016, theoretically seems to challenge the interpretation of *hijra* identities as the 'criminalized other.' It aims to legally recognize all these identities as 'third gender' of India as well as equal citizens (as men and women are) of the nation. Does it mean that they are recognized as subjects? This time, the patriarchal society very intelligently compartmentalizes different transgender identities, including *hijras*, under a blanket name - 'third gender,' ignoring the cultural specificities and differences among them. According to this Bill, the recognition of 'third gender' (through a certificate) is subjected to the recommendation of Screening Committee on the basis of medical examination of the bodies of transgender people. From that perspective, the process of deciding one's gender identity through the medical examination reduces *hijras'* identity to her biological status. Is not it a reiteration of the process of pathologising the 'others?' Secondly, this Bill, though talks about equal citizenship of gender variant identities, remains silent about the clause of Section 377. It indicates that it is their medically proven impotency and neither man nor woman status based upon which they can be provided the social recognition of 'third gender.' So, the third is the one, who is not the first, i.e. the man (the norm), not even the second, i.e. woman (the complementary other of the norm), but the pathological aberration of both. So, in a different way, it reinforces what is the norm and what is the pathological deviation.

The scholars like Gilbert Herdt, Evan B. Towle, Gayle Rubin and Jeffrey Weeks show that the people who cannot be fitted into the hetero-normative binary model as well as into the model of heterosexuality, emerge as the threat to the hetero-patriarchal order. These people are homogeneously clubbed together under the box named 'third sex' or 'third gender.' The social interpretation of non-normative identities is deeply interlinked with the hetero-patriarchal interpretation of sex, gender and sexuality. The patriarchal heteronormative structure is based on the assumption that reproductive heterosexuality is the natural and essential sexual form. Hence, the concepts of 'real' man and 'real' woman (whose sex identity and gender identity correspond with each other) must be considered as the only natural categories because it is through them that the reproduction can be ensured. All these equations, therefore, leave no room for parallel possibilities other than being recognized as 'abnormal,' 'deviation' and 'pathological other.' The absence of the male as well as female reproductive organs transforms these *hijras* into the pathological deviants. Because of their pathological otherness, these *hijras* are perceived by the patriarchal state as the challenge to the normative sex/ gender system as well as to the

reproductive heterosexuality. So, the concept of third sex or third gender actually emerges as the strategy to protect the norm of binary sex/gender system and of heterosexuality through the tools of homogenisation and suppression of differences or multiplicities.

If the *hijras* as the pathological deviants threatens the norm then why they are not completely stamped out of the normative order? This question therefore points towards the necessity to rethink whether the categories of sex, gender and sexuality are natural at all? In fact, *hijras'* existence instigates a question that if being born with a specific anatomy necessitates its transformation essentially into the respective gender then how *hijras*, who are neither man nor woman or in-between can be fitted into that dichotomous sex/ gender system? *Hijra* identities are socio-cultural identities. According to my *hijra* respondents, it is a complicated multilayered process through which they have become *hijras*. Simone de Beauvoir's remarkable statement, i.e., "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"⁹ shows that being female and being woman are two different aspects of the identity termed as woman. The fact of 'being female' talks about the anatomical specificities. On the other hand, the concept of being a woman talks about the acquisition and embodiment of multiple cultural meanings and forms in different personalized ways. This formulation therefore depicts that our gender identity does not naturally flow from our biological identity. It means that the transformation of a female body into a fixed cultural meaning of femininity is neither natural nor essential. If sex and gender have a natural and essential one-to-one correspondence then these thirteen people, at all, need not to have the desire of performing femininity or to be converted into *hijra* in order to fulfil their desire. It means that the female body is the 'arbitrary locus of the gender 'woman'¹⁰ and so, there is the possibility that the female body (as well as the male body or ambiguous body) can be the locus of construction of different forms of femininity (instead of a fixed meaning of femininity) as well as of the construction of other genders. Moreover, the *hijras* as well as women embody not a monolithic form of femininity but different cultural interpretations of femininities while they have different but fixed sets of anatomical features. Does it mean that there is no definite concept of masculinity, femininity or non-normativity? Gender, as a cultural construction, talks about fixity as well as about displacement of that fixity. From that perspective it can be said that there are

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Penguin Books Ltd.: NY: 1972).

¹⁰ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex," *Yale French Studies*, No. 72, Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century (1986), 35.

fixed notions of femininity, *hijraness* and masculinity (having female body or male body and a deviant body is a part of those fixed ideas). At the same time as constructions, these fixed concepts contain the possibilities of shifts, displacements and multiplicity in terms of gender identity. The concept of 'femininity' is parodied by *hijras'* exaggerated performance of essentialized womanliness that is marked by the absence of female body. It, on one hand exemplifies that femininity has a fixed notion that we are repeatedly enacted. But whenever this notion is enacted, the possibility of displacement as well as the possibility of re-construction emerges. It does not mean that our gender identity is independent of our sex identity. *Hijras'* performance of femininity (as well as masculinity) cannot render them as woman as it is marked with the absence of female body (as well as male body). Perhaps, the *hijras* also consciously exaggerate the dominant notion of femininity to supplement that incompleteness. It should be kept in mind that there is a difference between biological facts and sex identity. As Beauvoir shows, there is nothing called 'pure' body that exists outside the domain of meaning. It is a situation where cultural interpretations are imposed, enacted, produced and reproduced and these processes constitute the meaning of the body itself. The anatomy becomes significant only when it is culturally interpreted under hetero-patriarchal norm and is marked as his anatomy or her anatomy and the anatomy of something else. Therefore it takes the form of discrimination and therefore is politically used to establish a compulsory binary sex/gender system. It is deployed to ascertain a hierarchical and oppressive relation among different sexual and gender categories. This proposition demystifies the status of sex as natural category; problematizes the assumption of gender as dictated by anatomy; and analyses gender as variable modes of body's acculturation and manifestation. It neither means that we are free to choose our gender nor means that gender is a passive style of living our body. For example, *hijras'* accounts of identity crisis that they experienced in their pre-*hijra* lives, show that it is difficult to exist in a socially meaningful way outside the established gender norms. Again, in order to sustain in the mainstream society in a meaningful way and with a certain amount of recognition they choose the path of renunciation of their male identity and of conversion into the identity of *hijra*.

Under the hetero-patriarchal system, the transformation of biological structure into two sexes, (that are imbued with cultural meanings) with 'natural' appearance and 'natural' heterosexual disposition, reproduces the norm of natural and compulsory heterosexuality to ensure procreation. The normative ideas of gender as well as sex are so purposively constructed

as dichotomous that there is no autonomous space, left for these indefinable bodies. It does not mean that their identities as *hijras* or as deviation are produced outside the norm. The explanation of the term, '*hijra*', as 'neither man nor woman' itself shows that their identity is constructed as pathological in respect of man (as the norm) and woman (as the complementary self). In that sense, *hijras*, as pathological other are the products of the very norm through which the normative categories of man and woman are produced. On the other hand, the *hijra* identities are constructed as spiritual song-dance performers through the cultural norm of *hijra* society. Through these two oppositional norms their identities are jointly produced not as normative one, but as non-normative one. They are the symbol of deviation and at the same time that deviation is made into legitimate one through the axes of religion, emasculation, historical and mythical reference (in favour of *hijras'* existence), performance of asexuality etc. *Hijras'* performances of multiple gender roles exemplify Simone de Beauvoir's theorization of gender as possibility of 'becomings'. From their lived experiences it seems that instead of enacting particular or fixed gender roles in a monotonous way, the *hijras* actually perform variety of modes through which their bodies acquire multiple cultural meanings such as 'neither man nor woman', 'in-between', a combination of man and woman, 'third gender' and doubled other. It exposes that there is nothing called 'natural correspondence' that interlocks our sex roles and embodied gender roles with each other. It is itself culturally manufactured in order to protect the norm of reproductive heterosexuality. At the same time, *hijras'* performance of femininity without having the female body illustrates that there is no 'causal and mimetic relationship' between anatomy and gender. It, in turn, questions the binarism latent into the dominant sex/gender system.

From this perspective *hijras* challenge the patriarchal order that stands upon the binary structure of sex/gender system (natural correspondence between sex and gender identity) and the system of reproductive heterosexuality (assumed as natural and essential). In spite of that, they are not entirely excluded from the social structure. Their exclusion may expose the instability, instilled in the hetero-patriarchal structure. In that case the patriarchal society very intelligently categorizes all unintelligible identities in a homogeneous compartment called 'third sex' or 'third gender' and therefore includes them as exceptions. It, on one hand proves the rule and on the other hand suppresses the possibilities of multiple identities, voices and threats in order to reinforce the hierarchical difference between the norm and the (pathological) other. So, the patriarchy deploys *hijras'* existence to vindicate what is the norm as well as what is the deviation.

Conclusion

According to the narratives of my *hijra* respondents, they are neither man nor woman, but it does not mean that they are third. They define their identities in following terms:

- Neither man nor woman
- In-between
- Woman caged in man's body
- Incomplete women
- Both of man and woman
- Transgender

The performance of this unintelligible social role questions the concept of the norm as well as the concept of the complimentary other of the norm. Their performatively produced role is coloured by an incompleteness. The *hijras* are incomplete, both as men and as women and that is why they are essentially conceptualized in academic, cinematic and legal discourse as 'third gender;' as criminals; and as pathological cases. On the basis of it, their identities are being translated, scrutinized and reconstructed continuously through the patriarchal lens as 'third gender.' In general 'third' is something that is neither first nor second; that comes after first and second. So, what is primary is the first. In our hetero-patriarchal society, man is regarded as the first (as he is ideal form of being), woman is regarded as second (she is the aberration of man or the other) and the rest, who are neither man nor woman, are compartmentalized as the ultimate aberration. The concepts of man/ masculinity and woman/ femininity are socially constructed as much as the concept of *hijra* or third gender is. It is a multidimensional process or processes through which one gradually becomes *hijra*. This process (or processes) is interlinked with so many axes or issues that the term *hijra* cannot be interpreted in a single or homogenised way.

'Becoming *hijra*' is actually a middle way, a negotiation. The social humiliation that they have faced in their pre-*hijra* lives and the urge to have a social recognition motivate them to join the *hijra* community. It is the ritualistic socio-cultural process of becoming '*hijra*,' through which their incomplete and illegitimate identities have been replaced with a formal declaration of a legitimate one, i.e., neither male nor female, in-betweens, both of men and women. It seems to

be the only recourse that can entertain their non-normative desire and therefore provide the way of survival.

In the academic discourse, *hijras* are essentialised (by a large section of scholars) as the potential agent to subvert the dominant norm whereas the possibility of subversion (associated with *hijra* identities) is consciously buried into the cinematic discourse. Can we conceptualize *hijra* identities either as subverting or as reinforcing the norm in an essentialised manner? Generally *hijras* use feminine kinship terms, perform the mother-daughter relationship (the basis of *hijra* family), maintain 'heteronormative' relationship with their boyfriends (in which they perform feminine role), wear feminine dresses, carry the marks of Hindu married woman, request ladies only seats in public transport, use ladies toilet, always prefer to go to the ladies beauty parlour, pluck their beard with tweezers, go through emasculation, imagine the post-castration forced bleeding as menstruation, use padded bra and regularly take high doses of hormonal pills (to achieve an affinity with female body). From these acts, it seems that they perform an essentialized femininity in an exaggerated way or uncritically perform their desired gender role (that is femininity) that re-inscribes the normative hetero-patriarchal structure (also pointed out by Gayatri Reddy). In fact, we cannot ignore that their existence depends upon the continuation of the reproductive heterosexual culture. Their accounts show that they themselves believe that man and woman are the two normal categories and sexual relationship between the two opposite sexes, i.e., man and woman, is the ideal form. It also cannot be ignored that the conversion into *hijrahood*, at least in case of these thirteen *hijras*, are driven not by their desire to transcend the normative sex/gender system or to become *hijra*, but by their desire to become women or to perform femininity.

At the same time, it does not mean that there is no subversive power instilled within their identities. Judith Butler proposes that it is through the embodiments of ambiguities by non-normative identities (like *hijra*) that the fixity of the binary opposition of masculine and feminine as descriptive terms can be subverted; and the possibilities of reproduction of gender into multiple phenomenon can be articulated.¹¹ The existence of the non-normative desire, itself throws a challenge towards the hetero-patriarchal assumption of natural correspondence between sex and gender identities. Their very attempt to perform femininity without having the female

¹¹Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex," 47.

body demolishes their desire of becoming a 'real' woman because it is itself an impossibility. At the same time, it problematizes the normative binary structure of sex/gender system as well as the assumption of natural correspondence between sex and gender identities. Moreover, the exaggeration of femininity along with some other gestures like clapping, lifting of their *saree* (to show their deformed genitalia) problematize the conceptualization of their identity as 'flamboyant feminine surrogates.'¹² Their explanation of emasculation as an exaggerated form of circumcision represents them not as women or 'third' or 'neuter,' but as men (in Islam, circumcision is performed only by men) whereas they lack the most significant symbol of manliness, i.e., the phallus. Again, when *hijra gurus* perform the role of husband of their *chelas* it seems that they are performing masculinity. Again, when these *hijra gurus* perform this masculine role without having the signifier, i.e., the phallus, it blocks the way to conceptualize them even as men. They are something other than patriarchy's two discrete sex and gender identities, i.e., men and women. This something can be translated in different and multiple ways.

Actually, the formation of *hijra* identities goes through the continuous process of cultural translation marked by various displacements, conflations and mixings. From being born as biological male to becoming *hijra*, *hijra* identities continuously emerge in multi-dimensional ways with different meanings through their performances of different modes such as masculinity, femininity, both of masculinity and femininity, neither man nor woman, in-between, mother as well as husband, Muslim, Hindu, devotees of Goddess Bahuchara, successors of *khoja*, sexual ascetic, feminine sexual partner of masculine men, real *hijras*, false *hijras* and many more. We cannot tag them either as in-between or as man and woman; we cannot identify them strictly as a Hindu or Muslim; we cannot define them distinctly either as the representative of Bahuchara Mata or as the successor of *khojas*; we cannot say that they strictly perform ascetism or a sexually active role. All the time this process cuts across the binarism and crosses the boundaries and wherever borders are crossed, new dimensions emerge, none of which is stable, static, fixed or original, but all of which create different spaces. This attempt to re-conceptualize *hijra* identities, therefore talks about the need for restructuring identity politics with the consideration of the complexity and heterogeneity of embodied experiences. The narratives of these thirteen *hijras* throw some very important questions to us which are repeatedly raised from within

¹²Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 136.

feminist as well as queer movement. Why are there only two sexes and two genders? Why does the notion of correspondence between sex and gender established as natural and essential? Their narratives show that the concepts of men, women as well as third are inadequate to define their identities and therefore complicate the normative understanding of the categories of sex and gender. Through this doctoral thesis, what I have wanted is to emphasize that there are different kinds of people with different sex, gender and sexual identities (which are at the same time intersected with other axes such as class, caste, race, kinship, religion etc.) and all of them demand their spaces and recognitions.

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Countersigned by:

Supervisor:

Joint Supervisor:

Candidate

Signature

Date

Signature

Date

Signature

Date