



- [About GSDM](#)
- [Our Team](#)
 - [Main Editorial](#)
 - [Special Correspondents](#)
 - [Latin America](#)
 - [Eastern Europe & Central Asia](#)
 - [South Asia](#)
 - [South East Asia](#)
 - [Africa](#)
 - [Northern Africa](#)
 - [East Africa](#)
 - [Horn of Africa](#)
 - [West Africa](#)
 - [Middle East & North Africa](#)
- [Current Issues](#)
- [Past Columns](#)
 - [October 2011](#)
 - [July 2011](#)
 - [April 2011](#)
 - [January 2011](#)
 - [October 2010](#)
- [Journalists with GSDM](#)
 - [Correspondents](#)
 - [Creative Content Specialists](#)
 - [Fact Checking Specialist](#)
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By Tithe Farhana

Hijras have for a long time been entertaining spectators on the big screens of South Asia. In the Hindi movie *Woh Aashiq Aagaya* (1977), for example, they accompanied one of the heroes, Akbar (Rishi Kapoor), in a song entitled "Tayyab Ali Pyar Ka Dushman" ("Tayyab Ali, the Enemy of Love"). Many other films portray their beauty, skills as entertainers, and spiritual and ritual value to society.

Much of their skills in song, dance and other creative arts, comes from the fact that hijras typically live together in large groups overseen by a leader called Guru Ma. This is not necessarily a choice, but the only option for them as outcasts.

The reality of many *hijras* is very different to their portrayal in old Bollywood movies. The advent of television, other entertainment and changing cultural practices have meant that demand for their arts has declined. Many are pushed into crime and prostitution as a result and, today, their story more closely resembles discrimination, marginalisation and dejection.



The Third Sex

In the customs of South Asia, a hijra, is usually considered a member of “the third gender” — neither man nor woman. Most are physically male or intersex, but some are physically female.

According to Adnan Hossain, a PhD programmer in Social Anthropology Department of Social Sciences University of Hull:

“Hijras or hermaphrodites are people with ambiguous genitalia and are also called intersexed. Hermaphroditism is primarily a medical condition which results from multifarious biological factors. The term ‘intersexed’ is reserved to refer to a somatic condition in which the hermaphroditic person is supposed to possess both masculine and feminine traits”.

Although many dress as women, the Hijras of Bangladesh define themselves as people who are neither male nor female; with neither female nor male genitalia. Importantly, many regard themselves as people incapable of sexual sensation.

Not all hijras are hijras by choice or nature, as was pointed out by Shale Ahmed, the Director of Bandhu Social Welfare Society

“A lot of people assume hijras were born hijras. Their parents hide them from the eyes of society for as long as they can, ashamed of their ‘sexual anomaly’. At one point these people ‘come out’ and start living the way they do”, he said.

“However, in reality there are many who simply decide to enter this community because of hardships they suffer in life, economic or otherwise. Some are forced into it. They leave their old family and find a new one. They all have to be castrated, according to the rules. Many of them try getting this operation done in the hands of quack doctors and die. So there are only just a few properly castrated hijras out there”, Shale added.

Social & Institutional Marginalisation

According to the Canadian researcher Aude Leroux-Lévesque “in the last two centuries, *hijras* have progressively struggled against marginalization, harassment, malicious rumours, denial of human rights and lack of resources.” Consequently, as outcasts in society, the number of *hijras* who have turned to prostitution has risen dramatically. This is possibly partly the result of a high demand for hijra sex workers by male clientele.



Such a phenomenon – according to the *hijras* themselves – is mostly due to the fact they are not given any support by the government or local authorities. *Hijras* are a significant presence in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and are part of the variegated South Asian culture. However, national governments deal differently with *hijras* based on their constitutional and religious identity. When it comes to *hijras* and prostitution, the law is particularly strict, but there are signs of progress in parts of South Asia. In 2000, for example, *hijra* sex work was declared legal by the Bangladeshi High Court.

However, *hijras* still live in the margins of society. Leila Hijra, who runs Shustha Jibon, an NGO advocating for hijra rights, says:

"People who are building a new house sometimes hire us to dance in each new room, to take away any potential bad luck. We are also hired to dance at weddings and to celebrate the arrival of new-born babies. The everyday life of Bangladeshi hijras is far from being a laughing matter. With the spread of modern forms of entertainment – particularly TV – the call for hijras is dying up. Increasingly, we are compelled to earn our living by collecting money from shopkeepers – a form of mild extortion – and by prostitution."

Abu Mokeram Khondaker, Secretary General of Association for Environment and Human Resource Development (AFEHRD), a ten-year advocate of a better life for hijras had this to add:

"Hijras face prejudice and discrimination at every turn. Marked out by their sexual difference, they are hounded out of schools, and hence lack the necessary qualifications to get proper jobs. It's almost impossible for them to become educated, to get a passport, or even to open a bank account."

Pinky Hijra of Badhan Hijra Sangha expressed hopelessly that:

"there are no authentic statistics on how many hijras there are in Bangladesh. According to newspaper reports, the number varies from 30,000 to 150,000. Hijras get little sympathy from society. We are commonly subject to ridicule and rejection."

According to Joya hijra, who took dance as a profession:

"We are not only deprived of human rights, but also abandoned by family members. We can go home while our parents are still alive. But after their demise, our siblings and neighbours reject us".

Speaking of additional religious marginalization, Leila Hijra adds:

"The hijras in Bangladesh are predominantly Muslim. There are some Hindu ones too. The community is an amalgam of all the religions that are out there. We are buried in accordance to whatever religious background we came from. However, this is done secretly. We want to avoid any possibility of conflict regarding whether or not to treat the dead body as male or female".

According to the Bangladeshi constitution, equality before law is guaranteed on the basis of citizenship, not on the basis of sex. But the Hijra community is essentially deprived of several rights under Bangladeshi law, because it recognizes only two sexes, male and female. All Bangladeshi governmental documents, therefore, are prepared only for men and women, leaving hijras with the cognitive dissonance of having to conform to one of the two restrictive categories.



NGO & Civil Society Efforts

According to Sébastien Rist, a Canadian researcher & film director:

"Similar to any marginalized society, the majority of Hijras lack access to proper education, proper healthcare and, due to their lack of employment opportunities, live in lower-income neighborhoods. The Hijras who earn an income through sex work run a higher risk of contracting and spreading HIV/AIDS and STI's".

There are in-roads as the third sex is starting to take matters into their own hands.

"Thankfully, with the help of international NGO's, local Hijra communities have created community centers where blood/STI tests, as well as sex-education, are readily available", continued Sébastien.

Under its country program, for example, the United Nations Population Fund have engaged the locally based Bandhu Social Welfare Society (BSWS), in a joint prevention focused effort to reduce the risks of STI/HIV transmission among Hijras in Bangladesh.

The Association for Environment and Human Resource Development (AEHRD) is promoting and enlightening individuals as well as organizations on 'Bisexual and Transgender' rights through training & recreational cultural activities. Abu Mokeram Khondaker, the Secretary General of the organization, said this about their other plans and initiatives:

"We have a plan to publish a research book on the Hijra community, with the aim to push for the establishment of human rights amongst bisexual and transgender (Hijra) people; to promote education, especially Human Rights Education, amongst them; rehabilitate Bisexual and Transgender (Hijra) community; empower bisexual and transgender (Hijra) people through networks, linkages and cooperative association; and strengthen and promote bisexual and transgender (Hijra) organizations."

There are many other efforts all around the country that support the third sex community. Badhon Hijra Shongho, Shocheton Shilpi Shongho (SSS), Social Advancement Society, [Bangladesh Association for Gays](#) (BAG), [Gay-Bangla](#) and [Queer-Bangla](#) are all great examples of local efforts.

Their work is vital to bring equality of citizenship to hijras I Bangladesh:

"If a blind, deaf or any other physically disabled person has the privilege to enjoy the rights of citizenship, like other normal citizens, then why should the Hijras be restricted in having it?", said Pinky Hijra.

Although Bangladesh remains quite undeveloped in terms of recognizing the third gender and giving them rights and an identity in society, there have been some attempt to draw attention to this issue in parliament and look into extending voting rights. Less helpfully, attempts have also been made to begin to classify these people as 'physically handicapped'. The problem is, negative views of hijras and the marginalizing culture that accompanies them is hard to break:

"It will be very hard to change the perception in one day. Hijra communities across the world, even in the most liberal, open and developed nations still suffer from stigmatization", commented Canadian Researchers Sébastien Rist' and 'Aude Leroux-Lévesque comment.

"This said", they continued, "countries like India have recently taken the necessary steps to help better the lives of hijra by legalizing homosexuality. Likewise, Bangladesh must hope for a fair representation of the third sex in the press and media; one that is as objective and as representative as possible."


Hijras have much to offer the world and their creativity and spirituality should be harnessed in a national environment of acceptance, equality and support.

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The Tale of the

THITHI FARHANA

Hermaphrodites have often been depicted in cinema to provide some comic element. Seen as freaks of nature; they are ridiculed and sometimes feared in our culture that does not tolerate anything that diverges from the common. In the Hindi movie *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) they accompanied one of the heroes, Akbar (Rishi Kapoor), in a song. But one of the first sympathetic portrayals was in Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995). Off-screen their story is one of discrimination and dejection. In the customs of South Asia, a hijra, is usually considered a member of "the third gender" neither man nor woman. Most are physically male or intersex, but some are physically female. Hijras usually refer to themselves linguistically as female, and usually dress as women. To Indian anthropologist Serena Nanda, Hijras described themselves simply as "neither man nor woman."

According to Adnan Hossain, a student of the PhD programme in Social Anthropology Department of social sciences, University of Hull, "Hijras or hermaphrodites are people with ambiguous genitalia. Also called intersexed, hermaphroditism is primarily a medical condition which results from multifarious biological factors. The term 'intersexed' is reserved to refer to a somatic condition in which the hermaphroditic person is supposed to possess both masculine and feminine traits". However, hijras of Bangladesh define themselves as people who are neither male nor female. They regard themselves as people incapable of sexual sensation. They also claim to have neither a male nor a female genitalia.

According to them, hijras are of three types. A 'real' hijra has no trace of genitalia except for a tiny hole for urination. They can be both flat-chested as well as big-breasted. The 'male hijra' has a tiny non-erectile phallus. More often than not, they go for a medical operation. The 'female hijra' look like women, have female genitalia but they do not menstruate. They may also possess masculine traits.

According to Canadian researcher Aude Leroux-Lévesque "in the last two centuries, hijras progressively struggled against marginalisation, harassment, malicious rumours, denial of human rights and lack of resources." Consequently the number of hijras who turned to prostitution dramatically rose. This is because according to hijras themselves, they are not given any support by the government or local authorities. Hijras



are a significant presence in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and are part of the variegated South Asian culture. National governments deal differently with hijras, according to their constitutional and religious identity. When it comes to hijras and prostitution, the law is particularly strict although the demand of hijras by male customers is extremely high. In Bangladesh sex work has been declared legal by the Bangladeshi High Court in 2000. However, hijras still live in the margin of the society. Bangladeshis, as other South Asians, respect hijras out of fear but at the same time, especially with the increasing spread of Islamist predication, overtly condemn their existence. Leila Hijra of Shustha Jibon a NGO of Hijras says "People who are building a new house sometimes hire us to dance in each new room, to take away any potential bad luck. We are also hired to dance at weddings and to celebrate the arrival of newborn babies. The everyday life of Bangladeshi hijras is far from being a laughing matter. With the spread of modern forms of entertainment --particularly TV-- the call for hijras is decreasing. Increasingly, we are compelled to earn our living by collecting money from shopkeepers --a form of mild extortion-- and by prostitution."

Abu Mokeram Khondaker Secretary General of Association for Environment and Human Resource Development (AFEAHRD) says, "Hijras face prejudice and discrimination at every turn. Marked out by their sexual difference, they are hounded out of schools, and

Outcasts



The everyday life of Bangladeshi hijras is far from being a laughing matter. With the spread of modern forms of entertainment --particularly TV-- the call for hijras is decreasing.

hence lack the necessary qualifications to get proper jobs. It's almost impossible for them to become educated, to get a passport, or even to open a bank account."

Pinky Hijra of Badhan Hijra Sangha comments, "there are no authentic statistics on how many hijras are there in Bangladesh. According to newspaper reports, the number varies from 30,000 to 150,000. Hijras get little sympathy from society. We are commonly subject to ridicule and rejection. Naturally, survival instincts make us live together as far as possible. We live in small groups and each headed by a senior leader called Guru Ma, who trains the newly joined hijras to dance, to sing, and to use musical instruments." Shale Ahmed Director of Bandhu Social Welfare Society says "A lot of people assume hijras were born hijras. Their parents hide them from the eyes of society for as long as they can, ashamed of their 'sexual anomaly'. At one point these people 'come out' and start living the way they do. However, in reality there are many who simply decide to enter this community because of hardships they suffer in life, economic or otherwise. Some are forced into it. They leave their old family and find a new one. They all have to be castrated, according to the rules. Many of them try getting this operation done in the hands of quack doctors and die. So there are only just a few properly castrated hijras out there".

According to Joya Hijra "We are not only deprived of human rights, but also abandoned by family members. We can go home till our parents are alive. But after their demise, siblings reject us and refuse to communicate with them." She further adds "I went to village when my father had died. Then I was rejected by family members. Like me, every hijra has a tragic history". Leila Hijra adds, "The hijras in Bangladesh are predominantly Muslim. There are some Hindu ones too. The community is an amalgam of many religions. We are buried in accordance to whatever religious background we came from. However, this is done

secretively. We want to avoid any sort of possible conflicts regarding whether or not to treat the dead body as male or female".

According to our constitution, equality before law is guaranteed on the basis of citizenship not on the basis of sex. But the Hijra community is essentially deprived of several rights under Bangladeshi law, because Bangladeshi law recognises only two sexes, male and female. All Bangladeshi governmental documents therefore are meant to be prepared for male or female citizens.