

# Navigating Kinship and Discipleship: The Gharana System in Laxminarayan Tripathi's Narrative Me Hijra, Me Laxmi

Anshuman\*

Research Scholar, Department of English, Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, India

Dr. Nikhilesh Yadav

Professor, Department of English, Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, India

\*Corresponding Author Email: anshuman24095@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The intrinsic web of relationships in Gharanas is a firm ground on which ages-old Hijra communities rely. The multi-layered system offers a strong lineage despite non-biological relationships and works in an organised system, granting rights to all community members. The extended familial relationships, ties, and bonds with community members reflect the adoration and acceptance of the curated family system, which often works through word of mouth. The Gharanas are multidimensional and hierarchical as they work on power ties and seniority, in which kinship and discipleship play an essential and irrefutable role. This paper explores the concepts of kinship and discipleship as practised within Gharanas, focusing on the dynamics between gurus and chelas. It aims to contribute to a broader understanding of these relationships beyond the confines of caste, class, and biological ties.*

**Keywords:** Gharana, Hierarchy, Kinship, Discipleship, Heteronormative, Family, Biology.

## INTRODUCTION

The intrinsic web of relationships in Gharanas is a firm ground on which age-old Hijra communities rely. The multi-layered system offers a strong lineage despite non-biological relationships and works in an organised system, granting rights to all community members. The extended familial relationships, ties, and bonds with community members reflect the adoration and acceptance of the curated family system, which often works through word of mouth. The Gharanas are multidimensional and hierarchical as they work on power ties and seniority, in which kinship and discipleship play an essential and irrefutable role. This paper explores the concepts of kinship and discipleship as practised within Gharanas, focusing on the dynamics between gurus and chelas. It aims to contribute to a broader understanding of these relationships beyond the confines of caste, class, and biological ties.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The question of gender has remained central to several disciplines, whereas the inclusion of the 'Third Gender' has not frequently been noticed in most of the studies undertaken. The third gender or Transgender community is one such part that cannot be neglected as it has been an important part of India since times immemorial. Most of the studies in the past discuss the existence of Transgender people in mythology, ancient history and scriptures; for instance, in *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and several other tales, there has also been a focus on the effects of marginalisation on this community. It is pertinent to mention that a deeper sneak peek into the lifestyle of Hijras as a family with a lineage system through the age-old gharanas needs more attention. The current study dedicates itself to the idea of Kinship and Discipleship, which is integral to the gharana system as the whole functional setup runs through dependency on each other as kin or disciples. The people identifying with gharanas acknowledge themselves as a lineage member and agree to several rules and conditions. However, many people identifying as Transperson are not part of the familial systems and gharanas.

## I

"Family isn't always blood, it's the people in your life who want you in theirs: the ones who accept you for who you are, the ones who would do anything to see you smile and

who love you no matter what.” – Maya Angelou

## KINSHIP, FAMILY AND LINEAGE

Hijra kinship functions as a family network that transcends traditional binary gender roles, with its continual dependency on a system of nonbiological discipleship lineage. Hijras function within systems of discipleship-kinship that govern their actions and establish a hierarchy within their community. Historically and contemporarily, hijras are frequently inducted into hierarchical relationships between mentors and disciples through ritual initiation, which varies across the nations as there are several hijra gharanas across India. The word gharana can be understood by associating it with the word ghar, which means home. Thus, gharana means a community or house where several members, irrespective of biological ties, live together and run their livelihoods in agreement with the rules of Gharana. Hijras live in households organised by discipleship lineages, and various lineages have designated areas where they can perform hijra rituals such as Badhai, also known as blessing ceremonies. The idea of livelihood and lineage displays similarity with the heterosexual family setups, thus reflecting the social organisation of the Hijra community.

Hijra Gharanas denotes the diverse communities or lineages within the larger hijra (third gender) community in South Asia, especially in nations such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Each gharana or house is a unique social entity characterised by its traditions, customs, practices, and leadership systems. The Gharana system reinforces a sense of pride and solidarity, helping members to resist societal marginalisation and assert their place in the world.

Gharanas as a family constructed parallel to the traditional family patterns followed by heteronormative society and works as a unified system of practices and beliefs accustomed to rules and regulations that the family members practice; as Laxmi mentions, “The hijras are a family. The guru is the mother. Then there’s the dadguru who is the grandmother, and the purdahguru who is the great grandmother” (Tripathi, 2015, p.158).

The kinship terms work within the hijra community; feminine addresses and pronouns denote most kin relation terms. However, chela (lower in the hierarchy) and nati-chela (lowest in the hierarchy, disciple of a disciple) are referred to using male pronouns. Additionally, disciples under the same guru are considered to be brothers to each other to signify their relationship. These relationships serve as the foundation of hijra kinship.

The hijra community is characterised by a social hierarchy that operates within a system of prestige economy. Within this system, the social status of hijras is determined by their relationships, which are influenced by various factors such as power dynamics within hijra groups and their gharana networks. Though not much information is available about formal rules or written guidelines governing hijra gharanas, several oral rules, regulations, and implicit expectations regarding hijra behaviour and conduct are practised in the hijra community, which may vary across gharanas. In her narrative *‘Me Hijra, Me Laxmi’* (2015), Laxmi shares:

The charter of rules and regulations is explained to the aspirant. These concern everyday things like how a hijra must walk, and how she must serve water to a visitor. While serving water, the glass must not be held at top or the middle. Instead, the glass must be balanced on palms joined together. The pallu of the hijra’s sari mustn’t touch anyone as she moves around. One shouldn’t lie with one’s feet facing the guru. The guru’s clothes mustn’t be worn by the chela, nor should she utter her guru’s or gharana’s name. The hijra should not talk back to her guru. And so. On. (p.159).

These expectations shape the ideal image of a good hijra, mirroring the way gender roles are enforced in these societies through unspoken norms; thus, performative kinship within the hijra community revolves around respect and livelihood as the relations are sustained through an established discipleship lineage rather than biological ties and blood relations. This kinship system remains central to the hijra community, which organises itself into households, societies, and groups based on this discipleship.

The members of the Hijra community who possess positive kin relations within the broader community and with a significant number of individuals in their gharana networks hold superior wealth and status compared to other hijra kin. To compete for the position of great chiefs, or maha nayaks, the topmost position within the councils and hierarchy, the gurus or the nayaks, are elected through rules and regulations set by the council and the panchayats or sometimes the guru selects a successor and ensures to train her.

The maha nayaks are primarily responsible for maintaining kin relations and cordial relationships among different Gharana networks of hijras within a particular state or across various states in India. The hierarchy ensures the highest position for maha nayaks, who function as the head of the family and look after all the ongoing things. The maha nayaks do not engage in earning activities such as badhai or any other work. The guru or maha nayaks possess the authority to distribute badhai, which refers to the monetary compensation provided for traditional dance performances and the blessings conferred by Hijras during significant life events such as weddings or the birth of a male child. Within a Hijra gharana, adherence to established hierarchical structures is essential. Those Hijras who occupy higher positions within this hierarchy enjoy specific privileges, including the entitlement to receive a portion of the collective earnings. The discipleship and kinship help to maintain cordial relationships amongst the people associating with the same Gharana; thus, the strong disciple lineage ensures that contributions are made according to the hierarchy; thus, shares of guru and maha nayaks are maintained from the earnings of chelas. In return, the maha nayaks preserve order, rules, and regulations along with social interactions in the community.

The practice remains to maintain cordial bonds and to promote harmony within the hijra community by serving on internal governing bodies like panchayats or jamaats. The financial management among the hijra community is based on a structured approach that involves financial support to gurus from the chelas. The chelas, often the family’s breadwinners,

earn and provide financial assistance to gurus who assist their gurus and maha nayakas. Those of higher status are responsible for their subordinates' well-being within the hijra prestige economy. They also offer support to individuals who have experienced sexual harassment, assault, or encounters with law enforcement. Lower-ranking hijras, the chelas, often hold multiple jobs, such as engaging in begging or sex work. Regardless of their workload, they are expected to pay their gurus, who then distribute a portion of the earnings to those higher in the hierarchy, ultimately reaching the maha nayaks at the top tier, reflecting the solid economic support system of the gharanas. The strong discipleship lineage ensures a strong kinship amongst the community and displays the management of the multilayered intrinsic hijra system of earning and living. Various gharanas possess distinct cultural rituals, celebrations, and ceremonies inherited through generations. These traditions may encompass religious observances, matrimonial events, and other significant life-cycle milestones that reflect the community's understanding of hijra identity. The process of discipleship transcends mere practical instruction; it also involves the transmission of the gharana's cultural and spiritual legacy. Numerous hijra gharanas engage in unique spiritual practices, often linked to particular deities or a blend of Hindu, Muslim, and indigenous beliefs. The guru plays a crucial role in conveying this spiritual knowledge to their followers.

Apart from being the liminal identities, their identities are located separately within the family structure, where the heteronormative family is considered as the ideal norm. There settles the importance of hijra kinship and bonds, i.e. social arrangements and subsystems or gharanas that become a significant part of hijra identity. Family, also generally regarded as a social institution, is created by biological kinship, marriage or adoption, etc. Kinship refers to the relationships and bonds between individuals based on blood, marriage, or adoption. In many cultures, kinship extends beyond biological ties to include chosen family members who provide emotional and social support. The structure of Kinship often works around defining and sharing the set of rules, social norms, and responsibilities performed in the community. Kinship also ensures maintaining cordial relationships and being a support system to others, whereas Discipleship is the process of learning from and following a mentor or leader. It involves a close, often spiritual relationship where the disciple receives guidance, knowledge, and support from the mentor. In the context of the Hijra community, kinship and discipleship are intertwined through the Gharana system as it helps individuals integrate into the community, giving them a sense of belonging and identity.

## II

The analysis and understanding of these relations amid the gharana subsystem are attempted within the scope of Hijra's autobiography by Laxminarayan Tripathi. The narrative provides autobiographical reminiscences of the author's life and association with the hijra community. In the candid account of her deep-felt emotions, Laxmi constantly expresses how she, as Raju, always desired to be a female and expressed her femininity in every way possible. The dynamic

relationship of kinship and discipleship among hijras is presented in the narrative as it opens up to various incidents, which displays how these complex kinship networks navigate, drawing strength from their internal systems while challenging societal norms. The first reference to discipleship in the opening chapters refers to Laxmi's interaction with Shabina, who introduced her to the hijra tradition, lifestyle, sources of income and Laskhar gharana. The Gharana system involves a christening ceremony called 'reet', which denotes the starting of a guru chela relationship, as the disciples are welcomed in the gharana after the reet is performed in front of the jamat to which the leaders of the seven houses are invited as Serena Nanda in her work '*Neither Man nor Woman: Hijras of India*' shares:

Every hijra has a guru, and initiation into the community occurs only under the sponsorship of a guru. When a new recruit is about to join the community, her sponsor, who will become her guru, calls a jamat to which the leaders of the seven houses are invited" (Nanda, 1999, p. 43).

New members undergo a ritual known as reet to be formally adopted into the gharana, solidifying their position with-in the community and establishing kinship bonds. Laxmi reminiscences her short initiation ceremony, "I was given two green saris, which is a ritual that takes place when one joins the community. They are known as jogjanam saris" (Tripathi, 2015, p. 42). The 'Tijja of Muhharam' is also mentioned as unique, as it holds great significance for hijras. For Laxmi, the day was more important as she performed chatai for her disciples and became a guru (mentor) and guru bhai (a fellow disciple under the same guru). Laxmi mentions:

"According to custom, ten hijras became my disciples and I performed their chatai. Some of them were Subhadra, Winnie, Sheeba, Rita, Harsha and Neeta" (Tripathi, 2015, p. 51).

It is pertinent to mention that kinship is deeply ingrained in the structure of discipleship and familial connections that a hijra performs in the gharanas. As Laxmi shares about her roles, "In time, my disciples had their disciples. I became a nani, then parnani" (Tripathi, 2015, pp. 51-52).

Thus, the central kinship dynamic exists between the guru and chela, resembling a familial bond where the guru assumes a parental role by offering guidance, support, and protection. Hijras are often part of gharanas, acting as extended families with their regulations, traditions, and territories. Laxmi's family grew after her disciples became gurus to their disciples, reflecting a strong lineage system. The familial bonds led all hijras to enjoy the status quo of disciples, guru and kins to each other as Laxmi shares, "I was their guru, the head of a large family. All of them lived in a cattle shed near Kharegaon Lake" (Tripathi, 2015, p.52).

Although Laxmi became a guru to several disciples, it was obligatory to obey the rules and regulations of Lataguru, who accused her of not being acquainted with hijra behaviour as she was offended by Laxmi's way of life. Being in the hierarchy and senior to Laxmi, she reprimanded her, saying, "Your birth family may make you do things that are forbidden to us. We are neither male or female. Why, then must you



cling on the male-female society” (Tripathi, 2015, p.72). The rift further led to Lataguru’s inclination towards teaching hijra culture, which she initiated by making Laxmi wear feminine attire all the time.

A clear hierarchy exists within the gharana, with senior members, typically the gurus, holding authority and making decisions for the group. Chelas are required to demonstrate respect and obedience towards their gurus. Obedience and respect form a significant part of the gharana system, as discipleship demands unquestionable devotion towards the guru. This kinship system creates a robust support system where members depend on each other for emotional, financial, and social assistance, fostering a sense of belonging and community. As Serena Nanda in *‘Neither Man nor Woman: Hijras of India’* asserts:

This dependence of hijras on their community is entirely consistent with the values and organizational principal of Indian society: a willingness of individuals to submit to hierarchy, a combining of resources and expenditures (as in a joint family) as a means of economic adaptation, and a conviction that there, is no security without a group. This holds for men as well as women in India, so that most hijras, regardless of the extent of their feminine orientation, find these values and organizational principles congenial and appropriate in cultural terms. (Nanda, 1999, p. 48).

The gharanas act as autonomous bodies that work on their own terms and conditions, keeping in view the development of all members as an association with a gharana provides a hijra with a sense of authenticity and legitimacy regarding their identity in the larger community. This affiliation facilitates the acquisition of social recognition and respect, both among peers and in the broader society. Gharanas also exercise the idea of punishment and settle quarrels as Laxmi shares, “A hijra is obliged to observe the laws framed by our nayaks and gurus. We’re fined – and even excommunicated – if we fail to observe these laws. The laws, of course, vary from one gharana to another” (Tripathi, 2015, p. 174). Laxmi also shares instances of quarrels with her guru, which should be understood as a fundamental human tendency irrespective of gender and sexuality. The feminine pronouns and idea of caregiving to chelas and gurus reflect the congenial bonds shared by parents and children in an Indian heterosexual family where children feed their old parents, who become their guides and nurturers. However, this coin has a flip side, where people leave their gurus and gharanas to join others as Laxmi did due to dominance and interference. However, to go, she was also asked to pay a hefty amount, as Laxmi shares:

“She complained about me to Lata Nayak, and I was forced to part with the two lakh rupees that she demanded. As if that wasn’t enough, I was forced to gift her my chela Kiran’s Thane house, which the latter had transferred in my name” (Tripathi, 2015, pp. 154-155).

Despite the conflicts, Hijra kinship goes beyond the binaries of class, caste and blood bonds as they enjoy acquaintanceship and friendly bonds with people same or near lower in the hierarchy, whom they consider as guru bhai

or by any other names. As Laxmi mentioned how she enjoys the company of other hijras living close to Kharegaon Lake, she shares, “I would drop in at Sheelfata. I enjoyed the banter I had with the other hijras at Sheelfata. On the whole, life was good. I was proud that I was a hijra” (Tripathi, 2015, p. 52).

Thus, it is pertinent to mention that kinship and discipleship collectively establish the essential framework for community solidarity and cohesion. By fostering familial relationships and facilitating the transfer of cultural and spiritual wisdom, Hijra Gharanas create a secure and nurturing environment for marginalised individuals. Within these communities, kinship and discipleship are the fundamental elements of social structure. Kinship offers emotional and social support, whereas discipleship guarantees the continuity of knowledge, spiritual practices, and communal values. The relationship cultivates a system in which hijras can experience a sense of belonging, receive mentorship, and develop familial connections and security all while safeguarding their cultural heritage and addressing the challenges associated with societal marginalization.

## REFERENCES

1. Goel, I. (2016). *Hijra Communities of Delhi. Sexualities*, 19(5-6), 535–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460715616946>.
2. Gowda, A. B. V. (2023, May 24). Exploring the Guru-Chela Relationship: Hierarchies Haunting the Gharanas. *Nickled and Dimed*. <https://nickledanddimed.com/2023/05/25/exploring-the-guru-chela-relationship-hierarchies-haunting-the-gharanas/>.
3. Hinchy, J. (2019). *Governing gender and sexuality in colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Mal, S. (2015). Let Us to Live: Social Exclusion of Hijra Community. *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5(4), 108. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2249-7315.2015.00084.2>
5. Mal, S. (2018). The Hijras of India: A Marginal Community with Paradox Sexual Identity. *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 34(1), 79. [https://doi.org/10.4103/ijsp.ijsp\\_21\\_17](https://doi.org/10.4103/ijsp.ijsp_21_17).
6. Nanda, S. (1999). *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
7. Pamment, C. (2021). De/Colonizing Hijra. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 8(2), 265–269. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8890635>.
8. Reddy, G. (2010a). *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. University of Chi-cho Press.
9. Staff, E. (2018, April 13). Queer in Identity: The Hijra Community’ Struggle for Acknowledgement. *The New Leam*. <https://www.thenewleam.com/queer-identity-hijra-community-struggle-acknowledgement/>.
10. Tanupriya, N. (2020). Redefined Families and Subsystems: Reading Kinship and Hierarchical Structures in Select Hijra Autobiographies. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.riocls11n1>.
11. The third gender and hijras. (n.d.). Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School. <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/religion-context/case-studies/gender/third-gender-and-hijras>.
12. Tripathi, L. (2015). *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (P. G. Joshi & R. R. Rao, Trans.). Oxford University Press.