

# A Study of Hijra Narratives in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** *This study shows the in-depth qualitative exploration of the life narrative of a Hijra Guru residing in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Born in a Kashmiri pandit family, the Guru's early life was marked by the migration of their family to Punjab, childhood discrimination and gender identification. Feeling of exclusion in the family as well as in the society led them to join the hijra community in Punjab, where they found the place of belonging. Later they moved to Kangra where they got the opportunity to hold the position of a Guru from chela as the former guru hands over the position to them before leaving the place. This study describes their life experiences, explores the role of identity formation and looks into the mechanisms of social exclusion using different sociological frameworks. Beyond personal survival, their life is focused on creating a safe zone for their disciples, helping the poor, contributing in local welfare and breaking the preconception via the act of empathy. The finding reveals the interplay between personal resilience and solidarity among other marginalised communities, highlighting the urgent demand for policies and societal attitudes that acknowledges the dignity and agency of gender diverse individuals.*

**Keywords:** Identity Formation, Social Exclusion, Stigma, Leadership Transformation

## INTRODUCTION

The hijra community in South Asia is a well recognized social group from centuries which occupies a complex position within the culture and legal landscape of India (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). Historically, hijras have been recognised as third gender, embedded within religious and cultural traditions such as giving blessings to newborn and at marriages (Nanda, 1986). One of the most visible transgender cultures in the world by the Eunuch (hijra) community is contained in Indian society (Jayant, 2020). Yet they continue to experience social marginalization, biases, and stigma despite their long history (Gagneja, S., 2024). Hijras are unique because they have an active social organization that is both traditional and ritualistic (Freilich et al, 1991). Despite being recognised in Hindu history, they have also been documented as trustworthy and honourable servants especially to serve the upper class ladies of Islamic culture (Chawla, 2021). Even after having a precious role in Indian society, they are not accepted within the normal family or social structure, they are perceived as a curse and the name Hira is often used as a derogatory term (Chawla, 2021).

Present paper which is based on the narratives of a hijra guru focuses on their life journey, who have faced stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion yet managed to build their identity. This study helps to analyse the role of identity and social exclusion of hijras.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As already mentioned this paper is aimed to document hijra narratives, therefore mentioned theories were found relevant to the study.

### Queer Theory:

The theory is developed by scholars like Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, emerging in 1990's. It develops a way of thinking that challenges the old or traditional way of viewing or understanding about gender and sexuality, it argues that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and performed rather than set or innate. Hijra's gender expression in the society is related to the rituals, clothings and mannerism etc. that distinguishes them from both male and female. This theory investigates how hijras oppose gender norms and how institutions promote or challenge homosexuality. (Riggs & Treharne, 2017)

### Stigma Theory:

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, explained in his 1963's book 'Stigma', explains stigma as a discrediting attribute that lowers the social value of a person, creating a

“spoiled identity”. This theory becomes important in this research as it shows the societal rejection and the adaptation of stigma by the hijras. (Clair, 2018)

### Intersectionality:

Crenshaw Kimberlé’s framework intersectionality, established in 1989, explains individual’s identities such as gender, race, class, caste and sexuality etc. intersect to produce distinct expressions of oppression. This theory seems relevant to present study as it very much relates to the hijras who are facing multiple layers of discrimination, marginalization, where inequality can not be simply solved by inclusion but requires power structures for transformation (Sen, 2023).

### Structural Functionalism:

Structural functionalism which is developed by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, suggests that each societal role contributes to the stability of society. It views society as a complex system of interrelated elements that work together to maintain stability and solidarity. The theory helps to explain how social change has affected the lives of hijras and their role and status which leads to their marginalisation (Duignan, 2025).

### Suicide:

Suicide is a theory given by the profound sociological Emile Durkheim, in his book named as ‘Suicide’ published in the year 1897. In this theory he argues that suicide is not just a psychological phenomenon, rather is social phenomenon. He identified Egoistic, Altruistic, Anomic, and Fatalistic types. Applied to the current study this theory highlights how instability and exclusion contribute to mental health crises and suicidal tendencies of hijras. (Durkheim & Simpson, 2002).

People of the Hijra community undergo a variety of socio economic challenges that occur in their lives. Some of the researchers have talked about them in their studies which are listed below:

### Education and Employment

While talking about education and employment, Safa (2016), in their study of “Inclusion of excluded: integrating need based concerns of hijra population in mainstream development” talked about how social limitations make it difficult for the Hijra population of Bangladesh to obtain formal education and employment (Pinki et al. 2020), highlighted in their study of “Status of transgender in India: A review” that, transgender people in India have lack of work options. Despite the developments in the law, they highlighted the widespread social stigma faced by hijras.

### Health and harassment

Kalra (2012), in the study “Hijras: The unique transgender culture of India” explores that, because of the under-privileged status of hijras, they experience severe neglect in healthcare access, while being an important part of Indian culture. In article titled as “Problems faced by Hijras (MTF) with reference to their Health and Harassment,” Anitha Chettiar, (2015) provides an analytical account of the issues that the Mumbai district’s transgender community faces, paying particular attention to their socioeconomic status, health, and harassment.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do narratives show hijra’s experience with identity?

What themes emerge about the hijra’s narratives about their experiences.

What role narratives play in shaping the identity of hijras.

## OBJECTIVES

To study and document the hijra’s narratives.

To investigate the role of identity and social exclusion of hijras.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based on qualitative case study approaches, which mainly focuses upon the narrative of Hijra guru residing in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Taking ethical considerations, data was collected from August 2024 to May 2025, through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted both in Hindi and local dialect, which allowed respondents to feel free to respond. Both open ended story telling and targeted questions related to identity, social exclusion, and community leadership were asked. Each interview lasted between 40-50 minutes and was audio recorded with informed consent.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The narrative of the respondent (Hijra Guru) reveals the journey layered with self discovery, resilience, and identity negotiation. The life history of the respondent throws light on personal identity formation, family rejection, and community integration, which together illuminate the broader socio-cultural position of Hijra community in India.

### Family Pressure and Early Alienation :

From an early age the respondent went through the worst experiences of pressure from family to conform male gender norms, despite their internal sense of self. The respondent recalled: “*mere parivaar ne mujheladakonjaisavyavahaarkarane par majaboorkiya aur mujhe us roopmeinsv-eekaarkarane ko taiyaarnabin the jaisee main thee. lekinmujbeladakiyonjaisarabana, apaneemaankeetarabhindeelagaana aur auratonkeetarabkapadepahananapasandtha*” (My family forced me to behave like a boy and were not ready to accept me like who I was. But I liked to be like a girl, to wear *bindi* like my mother and dress like a female). “*Kayi baarmujhezehar dene ki baat ki gayi, maara-peatagya*”, (Many times there were talks of poisoning me, I was beaten up). The environment in the house of the respondent became a side of emotional suffocation, where their authentic identity was denied. This environment encouraged the respondent to leave the house to breathe freely. The respondent also shared that while playing with boys outside the house they often tease them by saying “*chalchaltujakejananiyonkesaathkbel*” (go and play with women).

### Leaving home and searching acceptance :

After completing the tenth standard, the respondent made a hard decision to leave the house by describing this act as both desperational and empowermental : “*mainneapanemaata-pita ka gharchhodak-ardaanaanagar (panjaab) meinapanejaise any logon kesaathbrabane ka phaisalakiya aur mujhevabaansveekerti aur samarthanmila.*” (I

chose to leave my parental house and stay at Dananagar (Punjab) with other people like me, and found acceptance and support there.) "*Maine apni guru maa ke pass rehna chuna.*" (I chose to stay with my Guru Maa). Participants' wording resonates with previous studies (Reddy, 2005) which highlights the Guru-Chela Relationship as a familial structure providing emotional and structured pathways into the Hijra community.

### Secrecy and Survival :

The period following the respondent's departure from home is marked by secrecy. Respondent's insight: "*maigharmaibolkechaligayikemujhe Chandigarh janahaibahanalgakar*" (I left home saying that i have to go to Chandigarh giving an excuse.) The respondent concealed their location from the family for 2 to 3 months staying in Deenanagar. This exemplifies "Goffman's (1963) concept of managing a spoiled identity in which people use concealment to stay away from stigma.

### Family conflict and understanding:

At that time the respondent had a cell phone, their mother called them back for their brother's marriage, which became a turning point to the respondent. "*Uss time mere baalbbibadbehnye the, jo mainegharnapisjaate time nahikatwayethe*" (At that time, my hair had grown long, which I hadn't cut when I returned home). After returning home, family members began to wonder about the changed appearance of the respondent and asked the respondent to change the getup and be ready for the marriage celebration. The denied behaviour of the respondent and the call from their guru, which was unfortunately picked up by the mother revealed the truth about the respondent in front of all family members and relatives too.

"*Uss din mere parivaar ne smajhlia ki maineisssamedaye ko apnane or apneasliroopmajjeene ka nirnaye le liyabai.*" (That day, my family finally understood my decision to join the community and be inca to myself). The status of the respondent changes from being silently misunderstood to being publicly acknowledged though acceptance was delayed and portal.

### Renaming and Legal Identity:

The new name was given to the respondent by their Guru Maa in place of their old name, the new name has symbolic meaning stressed respondent. The respondent also holds an Aadhaar card, identifying their gender as transgender.

"*yab naam ab merabai aur yabeemereepabachaanbai. mere kaagazon par likhabai ki main traansajendarhoon aur yabeemeresachchaehei.*" (This name is mine now and it is my identity. My paper says transgender and that is my truth).

Renaming is something similar to reconstruct identity, especially in marginalized communities where chosen names represent self-defination and rejection from mainstream society. In between, the respondent shifted from Punjab to Himachal Pradesh, under a new guru, who treated the respondent like their own child.

### Community life and leadership:

The narrative of the respondent detailed the internal functioning of their community in which the

respondent who has become a Guru now, accepts people who are born Hijra only. According to the respondent, after initiation and observations, one is allowed to join the community and ultimately reside in the '*kotha*'. Respondent beautifully portrayed their role as a guru as both maternal and disciplining. "*ek guru keroopmeinmujhe ek maankeetaravyavahaarkaranapadatahai. main apaneshishyon ko aazaadee to deteeboon, lekin un par paabandiyaanbhelagaateboon. Issamudaay ko chalaanaaasaamabinhai*". (As a guru I have to act like a mother. I give my disciples freedom but also set restrictions on them. Running the community is not easy). According to the respondent guru as a mother and head of the community keep the important certificates of their '*chelas*' including death certificates, this reflected a symbolic and administrative control over the group's life cycle events.

### Handling Exploitation:

One of the most concerning aspects of the respondent's narrative was a debt issue between the former Guru and local people of mainstream society. "*kuchh log mere paasaee aur anuchityavahaarkiya. us samaymujheunake-iraadesamajbnahinaae. baadmeinmujhepatachala ki vemujhe is tarahpeetakarapanapuraanakarzhukaanekeekoshishkarrabe the.*" (Some people came to me and behaved inappropriately. At that time, I did not understand their intentions. Later I discovered they were trying to settle an old debt by beating me up in that way.) Respondent highlighted that if a disciple ever did the act of stealing money, borrowing or something like that, gurus will be responsible, Guru have to pay all the debts even often the death of the disciple. So they have to act careful at every step. These kinds of occurrences highlight Hijra Guru's vulnerability to intra-community exploitation, which has received a little attention in the existing literature.

### Comparative analysis:

The study highlighting the life story of a hijra guru can be better understood through different sociological theories mentioned earlier. Each from them explains the struggles, identity and leadership challenges in the community.

**Queer theory** reminds us that gender is not fixed as male and female. Guru's decision to leave the family after they forced them to behave like a boy shows how the respondent refused the traditional roles given by the society. The idea that only two genders exist has been changed by the respondent by joining the hijra community and living openly. Talking about the **Stigma theory**, it explains the shame and rejection faced by the respondent. The torture from the family and the different treatment from the society gave birth to a guru, who managed this stigma by creating respect and safety within the hijra community. **Theory of intersectionality** on the other hand shows us how different parts of the respondent's identity overlapped. The respondent was born as Kashmiri pandit, later shifted to Punjab joined hijra community and then became a hijra guru. This mix of gender identity and poverty shaped the life of the respondent in a complex way. On the other hand, the **theory of Structural Functionalism** helps us understand why the hijra community is organised in a guru-chela system. The guru takes over the role of parent and behaves like the same. This system provides stability and unites people who are excluded from their biological

families. Finally **suicide theory** by Durkheim reminds us that being rejected by the family as well as society can lead us to loneliness. But by finding belonging within the community, the guru avoided hopelessness and built a meaningful life as a leader spreading positivity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores the need of policies and reforms to reshape the hijra identity. Based on the findings, some recommendations are listed below:

Reservation policies and scholarships must be implemented in education to ensure their enrollment.

Special programs must be organised for the teachers as well as students to learn about gender and not to bully other gender people.

Stronger safety measures are needed to provide them protection from police abuse, harassment from the society and exploitation.

Safe places should be provided for them, where they can feel free to share their problems.

Discrimination in the family as well as in the society makes them feel as a burden, there should be some policies by which their families and society feel free to accept them.

The study of their historical role must be involved in the curriculum to prevent scolding in the schools.

Leadership programs must be organised to teach the leaders how to give direction to the people of their community for a better future.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the story of a hijra guru from Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, which tells us that identity is not about categories and gender but also about the struggle for acceptance and belonging. The respondent has endured rejection from the family, bullying from schoolmates, educational exclusion and lack of various opportunities, yet chooses to rebuild their life with courage, got the position of a guru and taught the disciples like a mother. Spreading positivity within the community and in mainstream society, guru helped the needy people within and outside their community in a specific area under them. Collective data shows that the journey of hijra guru begins with pain and dislocation which evolved into a collective form of leadership, where the struggle for survival of one individual becomes a source of inspiration and guidance for others. This paper shows that hijras are not only the subjects of stigma or exclusion but also the creators of a community showing care, culture and to give blessings. The bond made within the community members shows a beautiful kinship system which fills the social and emotional gap left by biological ones. This research is not just about documenting the life of a hijra guru but about knowing humanity at its best. Like everybody else this community seeks respect, inclusion and livelihood. To hear their tales is to acknowledge their struggles and also to respect their determination, hardwork, leadership and contribution to diverse India. By encouraging empathy, eliminating discrimination and making sure that no one is forced to choose between identity and acceptance, we may move closer to the inclusion of the community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We respectfully thank our participants for their kind consent to include their images in this research paper.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1: respondent as a chief guest in a cultural programme



Figure 2 : participant facilitated the marriage of a man in need.



Figure 3 : respondent pampering a child.



Figure 4: participant as a chief guest in another societal programme.



Figure 5: During the interview of the participant at Tushar Vatika, near NH 503 distt. Kangra, Himachal Pradesh.