

Transgender is having a gender (identity) which is different from the sex one was assigned at birth, such as being assigned male at birth but having a female gender or vice versa.<sup>1</sup> Kinnar (mythological), Hijra (in North India), Hinjida (east India), Ranga (west Odisha), Chhaka (coastal Odisha), Kliba (in *Bhagbat Gita*), Kothi, Aravani, etc. are the different terms used for third gender or third sex by different regions of India.

Hijras are a social group, partly religious cult and partly caste. They are culturally defined either as “neither men nor women” or as men who become women by adopting women’s dress and

are different from the Cisgender. Most of them are shunned by their family members and the feeling of unloved ruled over them as a crushing force. The acute segregation from the mainstream compelled them to find a space for them only in their own community.

They earn their livelihood by singing and dancing in certain happy occasions, such as when a child is born and in wedding ceremonies, begging for money in traffic signals, trains, buses and sometimes as sex workers.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes Hijras dance in nonritual roles, such as at stag parties, for college functions, or in films. A small number



## Transgender to Third Gender : A Short History of the Journey

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behaviour. These people are an ethnic group found in Indian, Indonesian, Burmese, Cambodian, Thai, Tibetan and Filipino cultures. Their presence is found in Hindu Sanskrit Literatures and Purans, Buddhist Jataka tales, Jain scriptures and sculptures of above mentioned cultures. They are a group of people love to dance and sing being patronized by the royal elites.

When the third sex is identified, he/she is routinely kept segregated from any mainstream areas, such as schools, office, malls, etc. as they

of Hijras also serve the goddess Bahuchara Mata at her major temple in Gujarat, blessing visitors to the temple and telling them the stories of the goddess in exchange for a few coins. Hijras can also be found as hotel boys, household servants and cooks, and in some cities in India they run public bathhouses. Hijras are generally called eunuchs, and sexual impotence is central to the definition of a Hijra and a major criterion for initiation into the group.

It is impossible to say with certainty how many Hijras there are in India. Large cities

like Mumbai or Delhi may have 5,000 Hijras living in twenty or thirty localities; the national estimate may be as high as 50,000 but another source estimated their number about 3 million in India.

## HISTORY

The word “Kinnar” is an ancient one. It appears in a Mesopotamian tablet that lists trade items from ‘Meluhha’ aka the Indus Valley. Sanskrit and Indus script scholar argues that the word ‘Kinnar’ comes from the proto Dravidian verb, meaning ‘to strum’ or ‘to pluck’ (the way one plucks a string instrument). Another historical connection of the Hijras appears to be with the Magna Mata cults in ancient Greece whose devotees also dresses in women’s clothing and sometimes castrated themselves. In India most of the devotees of Lord Krishna dresses themselves in women clothing and tries to appear before Krishna as Sriradha, the perpetual lover of Lord Krishna. Indian epics have provided the names of some ancient important species such as Nara, Banar, Yaksha, Rakshas, Gandharva, Kinnar, Sura, Asura etc. presented in the world. Odia Adikabi Sarala Das in his book the “*Mahabharat*” has given a description of some species as:-

**“Kandha Mallhar Kirat nrupati**

**Gandharva Kinnar Chandra Surya sama  
gotri”<sup>3</sup>**

(Sarala *Mahabharat* (Odia), Adyaparva, 15<sup>th</sup>  
century)

Adiparva of the *Mahabharat* says in the language of Kinnars as “we are everlasting lover and beloved. We never separate as we are eternal husband and wife and never do we become mother and father. No offspring is seen in our lap.

We are lover and beloved ever embracing. We never allow any body to come in between us and demand affection. Our life is a life of perpetual pleasure.” In the Sankhya Yogo of *Srimad Bhagvat Gita* it has been told by Srikrishna to Arjuna that:-

**“Klaibyan maa sma gamah partha  
naitatwajyupapadyate”<sup>4</sup>**

Meaning, “O Partha, don’t be a Kliba (eunuch), it is not good for you and it should not be in this time”. So Kliba is a term used against the eunuch character of a man. Indian mythology and Buddhist mythology describes Kinnars as celestial musicians, paradigmatic lover with a benevolent character, a feature of half human and half bird with a feminine beauty residing in Himalaya. But Southeast Asian mythology has a belief that they were residing in Himayanta Mountain. Kalidasa in his *Kumara Sambhava* describes them as dwelling in the Himalayas. Kinnaras lived also over the hills of Pandaraka, Trikutaka, Malkangiri, Candaparbata, and Gandhamardana (Jataka No. 485). *Lotus sutra of Buddhism* names an ancient string instrument as “*Kinnari Veena*”. Burmese Buddhists believe that out of the 136 past animal lives of Buddha, four were Kinnara. The kinnari is also one of the 108 symbols on the footprint of Buddha. The Kinnar and Kinnari couple is considered as a sacred symbol of the Karenni people of Burma. The statue presented as award to the winner of “Myanmar Academy Award” is of a Kinnari. The ancient sculptures of Sanchi, Barhut, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Mathura, and the paintings of Ajanta depict Kinnaras invariably.<sup>5</sup>

The character of combined man and women or androgyny is a frequent and significant theme in Hindu mythology. *Bahuchara Mata*, the

main object of Hijra veneration is specifically associated with transvestism and transgenderism. 'Ardhanariswar' (half male and half female) incarnation of Lord Siva is greatly honoured by the Hijras as they identified themselves with this form of Lord Siva. In the *Mahabharata*, Shikhandi is the most important Hijra character who mainly responsible for the death of Bhisma. Arjuna, the third Pandav spent a year as a eunuch in the name of 'Brihanala' in the palace of Biratnagra. Some scholars place Lord *Srikrishna* and *Vishnu* in the category of eunuch as he had transformed himself several times into female form. But no Kinnar character is described in the Ramayana. In Medieval India it was seen that Hijras or eunuchs served in the harems of the Mughal rulers.<sup>6</sup>

Architecture and Depiction on Kinnar is also found in Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Tibet and Greek. In Burma Kinnars are called 'Keinnaya' or Kinnay' its female form is Kinnayi or Kinnayi. The flag of Karenni state (Kayah state) include a figure of the Kinnar. Kinnaris of Burma were decorated with covered breast. In Cambodia the figure of Kinnaries are considered as the symbol of beauty and skilled dancers. Kinnaris are depicted more than that of the Kinnaras in Cambodia but in Indonesia the images of both Kinnara and Kinnaris (coupled figure) are depicted a large in the temples of Borbudur, Mendut, Pawon, Sewo, Sari and Prambanan. They are figured as half human and half bird, similar to the image of angels (Human head with lower limbs of Birds). In Thailand same to the Indonesian Kinnari figures are depicted. The most famous Kinnari figure of this country is Manora (manohara), the heroin character of the story book "Pannas Jatak" by Chingmai, the Buddhist monk (1450-1470). In Tibetan language

Kinnar is known as 'Miamchi' or Shang-Shang and depicted as a winged man and a celestial musician. In Nyingma Mantrayan traditions of Mahayogo Bauddha dharma Shang-Shang symbolizes "Enlightened activity". Harppy and Siren are the two Mythological characters of Greek Mythology resemble the Kinnar.<sup>7</sup>

### RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Social organization of Hijras has based on strong principles. The senior person of the organization is regarded as a Guru (teacher) and other members as Chelas (disciples). The Guru in the relationship with the disciples is just like a father, mother, husband or a guardian where as others are the dependents. The Guru takes care of the Chelas and fulfills all the material needs or primary necessities such as the food, shelter, safety and security of them in return the Chela has to pay respect, show his obedience and give a portion of her earnings. Co-chelas are like the sisters in relation. When a Hijra joins the community, she pays a "fee" which gives her the right to earn a living in the particular territory "owned" by her Guru. After a Hijra joins in an organization under a particular Guru she was allowed to earn her livelihood in the economic territory of the Guru. Guru's sisters are called Aunty and Guru's Guru is called Grandmother. A Guru passes down her wealth and possessions to one or more of her Chelas, usually the senior Chela. The Guru and the Chelas of the same organization are regarded as a descend group similar to a clan. There are number of clan organizations exist in a particular city, town or a geographical area. And the head of all these clan organizations, who takes major decisions, is called 'Jamat'. When a Hijra dies, it is the members of her house who arrange the funeral. Suspension from a clan is the result only of severe misbehavior,

such as attacking one's Guru. For lesser offenses Hijras may be warned, fined, or have their hair cut by the Jamat. A domestic unit of Hijra usually contains five to fifteen people, under the direction of a Guru or house manager. Hijra households are structured around a core of relatively permanent members, plus visitors or short-term guests, often Hijras from another city, who stay for variable periods of time.<sup>8</sup>

### WORSHIP OF BAHUCHARA MATA

Hijras worship Bahuchara Mata. The primary temple of Bahuchara Mata is located in Bechraji town in Mehsana district of Gujarat, India. They also worship Lord Siva and perform dance on Sitalsasthi (the sixth day of bright fortnight of Odia month Jyestha, May-June), the marriage ceremony of Lord Siva and Goddess Parvati with a faith to get the blessing (emancipation from Hijra life) of Lord Siva and Parvati. Most of the Hijras of Odisha visit the famous Sitalsasthi Yatra of Sambalpur, Odisha to perform dance. They also observe Sabitri Brata like the married women of Odisha for husband's long life.

### EMASCULATION RITUAL

The Hijra emasculation ritual is the central ceremony of Hijra life. It is a surgery or operation in which all male genital parts are removed and transformed from impotent male to a potent Hijra. It is regarded as rebirth or Nirvan. This process links hijra with Arddhanariswar image and power of Lord Siva and Bahuchara Mata, their chief Goddess. A Hijra midwife performs the ritual. It needs 40 days to complete the process of Nirvan with post emasculation restriction like the seclusion period of a child birth. At the end of the forty-day isolation period, the Nirvan is dressed as a bride, is taken in procession to a body of water and

subsequently to a ritual involving fertility symbolism relating to marriage and childbirth, becomes a Hijra, and is then invested with the power of the goddess to bless and curse.<sup>9</sup>

### HIJRA MARRIAGE

There is a tradition in Koovagam village, Villupuram district of Tamilnadu that, the first 18 days of Tamil New Year is celebrated with a special marriage ceremony of Kinnaras with God Aravan. During first sixteen days the Kinnars enjoy a lot by dancing and merrymaking and in 17<sup>th</sup> day they dress as bride and with the help of a Pundit they marry to God Aravan. On 18<sup>th</sup> day they destroy the image of God Aravan and become widow. They observe mourning. This tradition is related with the great epic *The Mahabharat*. During Mahabharat war Pandavs were in search of a prince who voluntarily comes forward to sacrifice himself before Goddess Kali for their victory in the war. But they failed to get such prince. Finally Aravan, the son of Nagakanya Ullupi and Arjuna came forward to sacrifice himself for the sake of his father's victory with a condition of marriage before death. But no king had agreed to give his daughter in marriage to Aravan, as he would die after a day of marriage and his daughter would become widow. At last Lord Krishna transformed himself into a female form of Mohini Kanya and got married to Aravan. Next day Aravan offered his head to Goddess Kali and Mohini Kanya became widow. So the Kinnars have a faith that Lord Krishna also belongs to their community.

### WORSHIP OF YELLAMA DEVI

It is also related to another story of the great epic *The Mahabharat*. One day Rishi Jamadagni doubted on the chastity of his wife Renuka and ordered his five sons one after

another to kill Renuka. First four sons became reluctant to do this job but the fifth son Parsuram did it. So out of anger Rishi Jamadagni cursed his first four sons to be eunuchs. So the Kinnars believe that they are the children of Renuka Devi and worship Yellama Devi as another form of Devi Renuka.

### DEATH RITE

The last rites of Kinnars are carried out in a normal way like the Hindus. Sometimes it is seen that like the Jain saints some Kinnars gave up their foods before death. It is also believed by the Kinnars that they have the power to know about the arrival of their death before some months or days. So they maintained a habit of aloofness and gave up their foods to welcome the death. Other fellow beings pray for her salvation. The dead bodies of the Kinnars are cremated.

### STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE AND LEGAL PROTECTION

The history of transgender in India traces back to the *Mahabharat Age* but they remain neglected socially, economically, politically and legally since that time. They have been facing a lot of discriminations. The social status of the transgender in India had not lifted up much till date but in 2012 a petition was filed by National Legal Services Authority in the apex court of India to provide them essential legal protection. Honorable court said it is not a social or medical issue but a human right issue. They are also citizens of India. So the spirit of the Constitution of India is to provide equal opportunity to every citizen to grow and attain their potential, irrespective of caste, religion, and gender. A bench of Justices K.S.Radhakrishnan and A.K.Sikri in separate but concurrent judgments said eunuchs apart from the

binary gender are treated as third gender for the purpose of safeguarding their rights under our Constitution and the laws made by Parliament and the state legislature. On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014 Honorable Supreme Court recognizes transgender as third gender and on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2018 in a landmark ruling the Supreme Court of India created the third gender status for them.<sup>10</sup>

The bench directed the centre and the states to take steps to treat them as socially and educationally backward classes and extend reservation for admission in educational institutions and for public appointments. This year 22 transgender candidates are going to appear the CBSE 10<sup>th</sup> examination.

The transgender community being recognized in India by the order of Supreme Court as third gender, and the recent election of a Hijra Mayor (Madhu Bai Kinnar won election of the Raigarh municipal corporation of Chhatisgarh by 4357 votes, defeating BJP candidate Mahaveer Guruji on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2015), things seem promising and we seem to be moving towards a more inclusive future albeit slowly and not without setbacks. Padmini Prakas is also appointed as India's first news anchor. On July-8<sup>th</sup> 2018, 29 year old Mondal became the first transgender judge of a Loka Adalat, Islampur of North Dinajpur, West Bengal, on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2018 Sathyasri Sharmila, 36 became the first transgender lawyer, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016 Aishwarya Rutuparna Pradhan became the first transgender civil servant. K Prithika Yasini is the first transgender police Sub-inspector in Tamilnadu, India. India's first transgender school "Sahaj International" has started at Thrikkara in Ernakulam District of Kerala and was inaugurated by Transgender activist, writer, and actor Kalki Subramnyam.<sup>11</sup> Laxmi Narayana Tripathy, Transgender rights

activist is playing a major role for uplift of the third gender community. With all we seem to be marching forward in a right direction for the sake of Thirdgender.

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