



Perspectives

A collection of essays on
Language, Ethnicity & Identity



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Third Gender in Society: A Study on their Struggle for Dignified Survival

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production
ings, often making it more complex. Gender is a key component which divides human beings into different categories assigning them specific roles to perform in society. It also creates a structural conception that human beings act and interact with one another in accordance with the role they play. Basically, the cultural norms that assign specific roles both to man and woman are determined by human biology at birth. In the process of socialization, a social hierarchy is formed among the genders and status is given accordingly. On the basis of the social status the position of an individual is determined in the society. In comparison to the two genders (men and women), the people of the third gender cannot enjoy their rights and respectable position in the social set up. The present study deals with the people who belong to the third gender, who are neither man nor woman and are few in numbers compared to the first and second genders. But in true sense due to their sexual distinctiveness they are not included in the human grouping as it refutes a binary norm i.e. male and female. Third Gender is an umbrella term which includes Hijras, eunuchs, intersexes, transgenders, transsexuals, cross dressers, transvestites, androgynous people, queer people, drag kings and refer to those who does not choose to adhere to the strict attributes society imposes on gender. Due to their biology, this group of people is still struggling for a better status in the society. As a result till today the group of third gender people are deprived, exploited and are fading away from status in the society because of their sexual identity.

Objectives

The objectives of the present paper are as such to examine the status of the Third Gender as human beings and as members of society.

Methodology

The methodology used here is primarily qualitative and analytical. The present study gathered information from secondary sources of data. The relevant secondary materials have been collected from the Annual Reports of Human Rights Commission, Autobiographies of Hijras, Government publications, books, journals, newspapers, censuses of India, on line resources etc.

Main Issues

Socially Outcaste

Caste is an important component of the Indian social structure. It plays an important role in the socialisation of an individual and builds the status hierarchy in society. Caste system

is traditionally rooted in the Hindu religion. Indian caste hierarchy is created as values are created and are thus necessary for social life (Belkin, 2008). Sociologist, Talcott Person remarks that In other words, in India such social hierarchy is reflected in the caste system. But when hierarchy equates with power system in the social structure, caste based inequalities among the members of society increase.

Even when caste relations were more fluid in India, there were historically few instances in which members of different castes could be deliberately pulled out of their own castes and incorporated into a single unit (Belkin, 2008). The third gender (Hijras) is among the groups which are excluded from the caste system and are treated as a distant category outside the social hierarchy. Most often the third gender is compared with untouchables and, is renounced from their families and homes as outcastes in Hindu society (Jaffrey, 1996). The third gender people are small in number in the society in India and have held positions considered within the caste structure, but not a proper caste. They are regarded as a fairly complete understanding of an unusual feature of India's caste system, the pseudo class. They were placed outside the caste-related duty of marriage, because the Hijras were not engaged in formal marriages with other caste Hindus (Belkin, 2008).

Interestingly, the third gender is regarded both as inauspicious and auspicious on different occasions. To be a eunuch was a curse; even the sight of them was defiling to a Brahmin. No one was allowed to accept alms from them. No one was allowed to consume food prepared by them and they were excluded from all rituals (Dalrymple, 1993). They were excluded from rituals to honour ancestors, because they were "deemed unworthy" (Jaffrey, 1996). On the other hand V.A. Ramaswami Shastri refers to solitary concessions given to non-Brahmins who were permitted to watch the dance performance of the Third gender. He also cites that Kautilya allows a wife to desert her husband, if the latter is of a bad character, has become a traitor to the king, endangers her life or has become an outcaste or is impotent (Sastri, 2000).

Since eunuchs were considered "incapable of keeping a secret," they could not serve as witnesses, nor could they be struck in battle, 'in contempt for their effeminacy.' A special penalty was imposed for killing them. Because they were sterile, they were 'ill-omened', and the very sight of them was defiling. A eunuch could not be converted or ordained and was not allowed near the king during consultation (Jaffrey, 1996). Besides a taboo of orthodox Hinduism that the Hijras should not be touched or even seen by a new bride so that their impotence would not contaminate her reproductive potential (Nanda, 1998). They also perform in marriage ceremony to bless the married couple for fertility. But some families do not allow the bride to be present in the courtyard with the Hijras, believing that the infertility of Hijra's will contaminate the girl and prevent her from having a son (Nanda, 1998). The Laws of Manu mention impotent men more negatively, explaining that such people must be excluded from ceremonial activities, warning kings from killing them and elucidating the sexual situation that leads to the birth of a hermaphrodite (Belkin, 2008). On the other hand the third gender is sometimes called

Mangala Mukhi which in English is "auspicious face". It is believed that Hijras have the sacred power to bless or curse. They are invited to attend all birth, marriage and religious ceremonies as their presence was regarded as a symbol of good luck (Wilhelm, 2013). They bless in forms of singing and dancing. The only social role the third gender (eunuch) has is that they are called to give blessing. Otherwise they have no social role. Indian people believe that they have the power to give blessings because they are neither man nor woman and people believed all of them are God-created (Singh, 2001). The third gender or third sex were all considered to be sexually neutral by Vedic definition and were protected and believed to bring good luck (Wilhelm, 2013). They were accommodated according to their nature and grew into adulthood without much problem under the Vedic system (Wilhelm, 2013).

Though they were not included in the caste system they occupied prestigious position in society being outcastes. In the Mahabharata the perfect example concerning the proper treatment of the third sex people can be found in the behaviour of Maharaja Virata. When the Pandavas were in exile, Arjuna cross-dressed and disguised as Brihannala took shelter with King Virata for a year. Brihannala acted as a member of the tritiya prakriti (Wilhelm, 2013).

In medieval period they occupied a prestigious position and status in different empires. In Mughal period (1580A.D.-1700A.D.) there was hardly any area in which the eunuchs were not required to play a significant role. They were regarded as man of trust and offered the title of P'timad (Jeffery, 1996). They were regarded as a distinct class associated with the royal courts. But they lost their status and position in the British period due to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 which criminalised the entire community (Jeffery, 1996). Although the Hijras have survived into the present day, they survived in the same pseudo – caste (not proper class) status in which they have done historically, despite changing conceptions of India's caste system. Thurston in his book titled Caste and Tribes of Southern India (1909) suggested that by considering Hijras as a tribe, they were seen as a pseudo-caste with criminal instincts. British censuses of 1891 and 1901 approved this group as a caste (Census of India, 1891). Thus it is clear that their sexual identity is the basic factor for excluding them from the social hierarchy of power on one hand and accepting them as a 'distinct class/caste' on the other.

On the basis of the above references it is desirable to argue that the third gender in order to survive in society, enter into social alliances with those who have same sexual orientation. In the context of such individuals, it is observed by many scholars that they form separate sub-culture and try to carry on their activities. In the same context, it has also been noted that being rejected by society they formed their own subculture, hidden from the main society. As sexual orientation is the basic criterion for belonging to the third gender community, the members comprising the community come from all strata of society. Outsiders (men or women) are not welcome within the community.

Exclusion from Family

It is difficult to visualize a social system without the family. Activities of production, reproduction and providing residence in an atmosphere of emotional and affectionate care

cannot be fulfilled by any other institution. For the individual, the family is the site where they experience security and care. The family in India is largely patriarchal, in which men enjoy a better status and position. Within patriarchy, family and society begin the process of socialisation or gendering. Every society prescribes and fixes the roles, responsibilities and attributes for both male and female, thereby, creating gender hierarchy. Males are regarded as superior in this social hierarchy. Society in general tends to give privilege to those individuals who are born with male and female gender identity so that the social position they occupy are better than the social position of those who are born with the third gender identity. Due to this a sexist injustice developed against the third gender and these people are still searching for their identity in main stream society. They are also facing the problem of social segregation.

According to National Aids Control Organisation (NACO), 2011 survey, 41.2 per cent transgender / Hijra were not accepted by their family members due to their gender status, 75.2 per cent of the respondent's family mentioned that the transgender / Hijras status was not accepted and as a result they were forced to leave their parents' house. Thus, the third gender people were forced to lead a separate community life due to their expulsion from the family and the society where they were born. Hijras cannot remain in their families as they are different in manners, gestures, feelings which are more like a woman (NACO, 2012-13). To be a eunuch or Hijra means giving up all other relations (Singh, 2001). Being born impotent is considered shameful and possibly contagious, so most Hijras leave their families to join a Hijra group and find other people with whom they can more easily identify (Belkin, 2008). In fact, a British law compiler, writing in 1826 found that hermaphrodites (a category included in Hijras) were legally excluded by their families from their caste of birth (Arthur, 1986). Satish K. Shah in his work opined that the visibility of the third gender is determined in rural and urban area due to difference in economic and social structures. In his research study he found that the length of stay of a Hijra with his parents in rural areas is shorter than in urban areas (Sharma, 2009).

The People's Union of Civil Liberties, Karnataka (PUCL-K) 2012, published a monograph on the violation of Human Rights of the Transgender community. This report shows the structural violence towards the transgender community from all strata of society. In the Indian society there is no space within family to express a non- heterosexual identity. In this conservative context most of them have chosen to come out of their families as they have an alternative sexual orientation. Many of them have committed suicide due to social persecution which can also be considered as social murder. The report again states that some families give psychiatric treatment to their children to convert them to the existing norm of heterosexuality (PUCL, 2003). Being aware of own sexual identity the third gender people face a stigma leading to severe identity crisis. This fear of stigma is so strong among general populace that it drives the third gender out of their homes. Again it puts into danger their family relationships and also affects their future relationships. These circumstances have a pervasive impact in the determination of their personality and they adopted the role accordingly.

Feminization of the Third Gender

Masculinity and Femininity is socially constructed and taught in patriarchal structures (Bhasin, 2009). Masculinity traits considered superior must be learnt to be in control to maintain their power and perpetuate the social system. Understanding and challenging masculinity, therefore, basically means understanding power and challenging all hierarchical power relations and systems. (Bhasin, 2009). Thus, masculinity creates specific norms in society to preserve and sustain their power. The existence of the third gender is threatened and endangered by the existing binary norm set up by patriarchy. The third gender is treated as the most inferior in comparison with the two other genders. It may be asserted that because of masculine resignation to accept them as men, most of the third gender individual moves towards femininity, as the only alternative for their survival. Acceptance of the third gender is viewed as a threat to the social order and poses a question to masculinity. One who expresses a desire to be female in public and disavows one's maleness often becomes victim of abuse and assault. Three different autobiographies by hijras reveal this very fact. Revathi's autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* illustrates the trauma she experienced on knowing that she was different from others. Remarks made by her own fellow students as 'Hey number 9!', 'female thing' and 'female boy' were unbearable at times (Revathi, 2010). Punishment was given to Sarvanan (Vidya) when he was dancing like a girl. 'What are you doing, dancing like a girl at an unhappy situation?' Appa slapped me.', narrates the author in *I Am Vidya: A transgender's Journey* (Vidya, 2013). Laxmi in her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* quotes these words, "In Patriarchal, misogynistic cultures such as ours, dancing is seen as a womanly pursuit. So I was teased. People began to call me a homo and a chakka. They couldn't see the cathartic and therapeutic effect that my art had on me. All they could see was that though I was a man, my body language was that of a woman." (Tripathi, 2015) On the basis of these life stories it may be stated that anybody who develops a personality beyond the norms of society is not tolerated, rather is treated as abnormal. In Indian context terms like *Napumsaka* and *Namard* are used to describe the hijra. Being different from both the sexes they have to accept femininity, as already explained. It shows that individual status is given on the basis of masculinity. In the process of assimilating with femininity, they are required to remake their bodies. In the patriarchal society this group is feminized and marginalised due to their sexual orientation. Sexual identity has the worst effect on the third gender leading to the phenomenon of feminization of this group in society. In India this group is visible with feminine traits, attire and names. The kinship patterns and terminology resolve around feminine roles. Usually in Hijra community newcomers are given female name. In different periods of time this group has been discriminated, excluded and denied their self identity within the patriarchal structure. This strengthens our assumption further.

Social Organization

The organized existence of Hijras indicates the fact that like any other social organization they do have an institutionalized code of conduct, a value system and a specific life style. The

group has their own distinct organizational set up for their protection. The tradition of hijras is still prevalent in India along with some of the South Asian countries (Saxena, 2011). The hijra gender maintains a secretive society. As stated by Dayanita Singh in her work *Myself Men* Ahmed, nobody has reached the bottom of their society, nor will they ever be able to. They have their own rules and do not listen to judges or the police. They have their own government. Those who do not obey them are thrown out of their community (Singh, 2001). When the Mughal court was disbanded, Muslim Hijras were exposed for the first time to the other Hindu tradition of eunuchry. In typical Delhi fashion the two traditions merged and the Hijras became subject to the Indian compromise. Thrown out of their homes, rejected by their families, they came together for protection (Dalrymple, 1993). Hijras have self-analogized themselves as a caste saying there is only one caste of eunuchs all over India, all over the world. (Belkin, 2008). The Hijra household is organized as a commune (Nanda, 1998). Members of Hijra community live like a family, perform their household work and also are busy with their profession. Serena Nanda mentions that the Hijra community is organized as gharanas or houses on the basis of descent groups. There are seven Hijra gharanas or houses in India – Lakarwallah, Chaklawallah, Lalanwallah, Bendi Bazaar, Poonawallah, Ballakwallah and Adipur. These gharanas are structural principles of organization; they do not have a spatial dimension. They may be thought of as symbolic descent groups like clans. (Nanda, 1998). In North India there are separate Hijra gharanas, each with their own parivars (Revathi, 2010).

The Hijra household functions as both a residential and an economic unit. These named divisions exist with some slight variation from region to region all over India.

Hierarchy within the Organization

The Hijra community is very similar in function to the Hindu Caste System. It is a community unto itself, a sect within themselves, united like the family system. There are seven nation-wide communal households known as gharanas for the most part in cities throughout Northern India. Each has its own history and rules of behaviour. Each house of this community consists of certain portfolios on the basis of hierarchy. The highest portfolio enjoyed by the chief of the community is called a Nayak or a leader, then Guru (literally teacher) and Chela (disciple) respectively. (Revathi, 2010). Nayaks have performed certain powers and functions within the community. They can call meetings on certain occasions like decision-making regarding policy formulation, celebration of death anniversary of important Hijra, amicable settlement of disputes among them. The meeting of Nayaks is called Jamat or meeting of the elders (Nanda, 1998). It functions like a Village Panchayat. Generally, the Hijra community lives in a hierarchy of gurus and chelas. Every Hijra has a guru, and initiation into the community occurs only under the sponsorship of a guru. A person who becomes a chela for the first time is called ghorī moorathan (Revathi, 2010).

A separate ceremony is organized by each Hijra community to welcome a new member in their household. All the leaders or Nayaks are invited to this jamat or ceremony. The whole ceremony is sponsored by the guru.

With their unique style of clapping, confirmation is made about the guru's claim on the chela. Then the chela is given a new female name by which she gets her guru's gotra (surname) and takes clan name of her guru.

The Hijra community is a fully stratified society on the basis of authority. Like society in general, hijras do observe differences among themselves on the basis of sex, caste, income and wealth. This type of differentiation forms the basis of stratification among them. The guru and chela relationship too, indicates the presence of hierarchy. A hijra with more income is recognised as a person of high status in comparison with low income Hijra. Male Hijras are more dominated than female Hijras in decision making in the community (Sharma, 2009). Muslim and Hindu Hijras are alike in all respect except they do not dine together (Preston, 1987). Religion is not a barrier within the community but caste play a vital role to determine their status. Hijras belonging to low caste, like jamadar (sweeper) etc. are not allowed to enter the kitchen. They are not even entitled to touch the utensil and sleep with the other Hijras within the household. It is observed that the practice of untouchability was present within the Hijra household. But at the same time it is important to mention that all Hijra Deras do not follow this practice of untouchability (Sharma, 2009). Though there is differentiation and stratification within the community they have to continue their own culture and tradition. There is major coordination within the community that is Hijra Panchayat (Sharma, 2009). However, the Hijra community is more organized with their unique culture and tradition.

Practice of a Secret Language

Hijra community has its own private language (Jaffrey, 1993). Hijras use a secret language called Koti or Hijra Farsi, resembling much with Urdu and Hindustani rather than with Persian. But their lexicon is invisible in society, though it remains in use across much of India and Pakistan. They use this language within their community. From the British period this practice continues within the society for self preservation. Nobody outside the Hijra community can understand this secret language. A research paper by Islamabad-based scholars, Muhammad Safer Awan and Muhammad Sheeraz, who studied the language spoken amongst Pakistan's Hijra community, shows that the language contains its own unique vocabulary. It has its own syntax that differs from other mainstream languages, making Farsi "as good a language as any other" (Mukherji, 2013).

Another research paper by Himadri Roy, Professor at Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi shows that much like any other language, the language of the Hijras has nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and other parts of speech, with verbs used to complete sentence. Piyush Saxena in his work *Life of a Eunuch* mentions about the secret language among the Hijras as gupti or uli bhasha. (Saxena, 2011).

Conclusion

After analyzing the social status of the third gender community, it was found that they are socially outcaste. They are not included in the caste structure. Status of a person determines the power enjoyed by an individual in society. Still they are the members in the twilight corner

of human society. They are alienated not only from the society but also from their own families and relatives. They are afraid of their own image in the mirror. They regard their birth as a curse. But the birth of these people is not abnormal. They led a graceful life in the Vedic period and also in the Mughal period. They enjoyed a high social status in those days. But during British rule they not only lost their status but were also thrown to the darkest corner of society. Their existence was recognised by the Vedic literature as tritiya prakriti along with the other two prakritis. They could lead their own life and liberty to choose any profession. But with the passage of civil society new outlook was developed to understand the concept of the third gender. For their survival from this social discrimination they live in an organized community. They developed their own culture and tradition. Outsiders cannot be a part of it. They have their social hierarchy and their own language. There exists a line of demarcation between them and the society at large. They observe certain festivals for their enjoyment and also assert their identity in society. They have their own legislation like Hijra Panchayat which provides some strict rules and regulations to unite them. The present study observed that this community was the most disempowered community in the entire society as they are regarded not as a human. Till today the third gender are struggling a lot for their identity as a human and a member of society. It is high time to develop a congenial mind set to accommodate enough space for those people marginalised and discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation.

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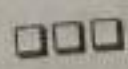
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The Invisible Minority in Literature and Society

Haunting Tragedies

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The Third Gender in India and Assam from the Pages of History

Roshmi Dutta

Most often in the streets of India, we come across a strange group of clean shaven man with female appearance, wearing lots of make up in female attire, singing and dancing loudly by clapping their hands in an unusual manner. They are the member of third gender which is regarded an alternative gender category. The third gender is popularly known as 'hijras' in India. Hijras are categorized as neither man nor woman (Nanda, 1998). In English literature the word eunuch is used to describe hijra which is a Urdu term. Also transgender, third sex, transsexual are used to depict them. Whatever be the name, they are one species of the human race born with a male body and grow with a female psyche. Hijras have an ambivalent place in Indian society.

Historically it is very difficult to trace the origin of the third gender. But through various references in ancient scriptures, literatures, it was found that the existence of these people since the story of human life has been recorded. Erica Belkin in his thesis "Creating Groups Outside the Caste System: The Devadasis and Hijras of India," states that the literature about these groups is very contemporary and the group itself has changed so much over the past few hundred years (Belkin, 2008). Also Belkin asserted that the tradition of this group was found in the Indus Valley civilization dating as early as 25,000 B.C. Archaeological survey from North India and Pakistan exhibits mother goddess worship similar to that which the hijra tradition of modern India is based on.

Archaeologist also founded the statues of goddess and also uncovered images of a three-horned Shiva pre-cursor. God Shiva as well as a goddess Bahuchara Mata, are the patron deity of the modern hijra (Penrose, 2001). The survey shows a contact between the Indus

Valley civilization and Sumerian neighbours. The Sumerians also have a third gender called Enki which is similar to the hijras of India. Also there are strong similarities between the Roman Galli and the hijras of India dating between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. The male born Galli were an official part of the Roman state religion, most of whom were self castrated and acted as women (Roscoe, 1996). The existence of this group was a notable feature of Assyrian and Chinese civilizations. Many civilizations of the world, there were the existence of the third gender with different names, culture and rituals. William Dalrymple in his book *City of Djinns* refers that third gender (hijras) were referred to in the very earliest of Hindu texts, the Vedas written in the second millennium B.C. (Dalrymple, 1993). The first domain of literatures about hijras relates to the analysis of ancient Indian text, Brahminical, Buddhist and Jain address the ostensible history of the third sex and sexuality in India (Reddy, 2005). Reddy also refers to the fact that the third sex existed in India for nearly three thousand years ago. While shifting forms, third-natured individuals, transposed genders, sexual masquerades, and same-sex procreation abound in the Hindu mythological, folkloric, epic, and Vedic/Puranic literatures (Doniger 1999, Vanita and Kidwai 2000, Doniger and Kakar 2002). Zewlling and Sweet, these authors set out to elucidate the third gender category - variously referred to in Sanskrit (Hindu) and Pali (Buddhist) texts as kaliba, pondaka, tritiyaprakrti or more commonly as napumsaka - providing historical evidence for a premodern (and pre-Islamic) concept of sexuality and the category of sexual thirdness in India. In Buddhist text, the third gender refers to impotents, who were called napumsaka. The Buddhist and the Summerians assigned gender which is based on procreative abilities. The Jains on the other hand rejected the Buddhist conceptions of procreative based gender in the fifth century and instead determine gender on the basis of sexual behaviour and role adopted in sexual intercourse (Belkin, 2008). They had four categories of gender including the masculine and feminine napumsaka, the former playing the penetrative and the later the receptive roles in sexual intercourse. Two of the terms used to signify the third gender in Jain literature also implied transvestism and dancing practices still associated with the hijras (Zwilling and Sweet, 1996).

In the Vedic literature the third gender citizens are fully incorporated into society, most notably within the artisan and monastic communities. Also in Vedic literature the sex and gender of the human beings is clearly divided into three separate categories according to prakriti or

nature. These are pums-prakriti or male, stri-prakriti or female and tritiya prakriti or the third sex. Also in vedic astrology the nine planets are each assigned to one of three genders. The sun, Jupiter and Mars are assigned to the masculine gender, the moon, Venus and Rahu are assigned feminine gender and the Mercury, Saturn and Ketu are assigned to the third or neutral gender (Wilhelm, 2013). In vedic period the third gender was recoded in literature. Reference to this group in Vedic texts such as *Kama Sutra and Mahabharata* are among the oldest in the world (Wilhelm, 2013). In the oldest scripture *Kama Sutra*, the author Vatsayana (300A.D.) seemed to imply not eunuchs precisely - castri, or the fully emasculated - but impotent beings, unable to bear children, perhaps hermaphrodites or those born with unusual gender characteristics, who had little choice but to become courtesans (Jeffrey, 1996). People of the third sex is analyzed in the *Kama Sutra* and broken down into several categories that are still visible today (Wilhelm, 2013).

Hijras trace their origin to myths of *The Ramayana*, one of the oldest holy epics (between 200 B.C. and A.D.200). God Rama, while returning from exile with his wife Sita and brother Laxman, blessed the hijras waiting for him for long 14 years. Rama ordered his followers to return back and asked, all men and women to go home. Hijras did not follow the instruction because they did not fit into the two categories and they remained there for the whole period of Rama's exile. Impressed with their devotion, Rama sanctioned them the power to confer blessing on child birth and the belief is that their blessing can make a barren women fertile (Dalrymple, 1993, Narrain, 2003). This myth enables the hijra community of present time to earn a livelihood.

Arjuna, one of the Pandavas and the hero of *Mahabharata* (1st century B.C.) plays the role of third nature Brihannala in the court of King Virata at the time of exile. In *Mahabharata* the character Shikandi who was the rebirth of Amba was also an impotent, and represent the third gender category of that period. Reddy had said that the eunuch were not new to the ages; he meant impotent men - in the epic Hindu period even older Vedic period (Reddy, 2005).

In Indian literature, to express the characteristics of gender a single term is used to define both natural and grammatical gender, that is the linga. Also the three distinct views emerged by which a person could be assigned the genders like-purusa, stri and napumsaka. The three genders assigned to a person on the basis of presence or absence of certain primary and secondary characteristics (Reddy, 2005)

According to Sweet and Zwilling, the class of transvestite singers, dancers and prostitutes known as hijras are the contemporary representatives of the unmale and third sex of earlier times. They also asserted that hijras are the contemporary representatives of the ancient *napumsaka* (Sweet and Zwilling, 1996).

In the ancient texts, epics and books there were references of the existence of the third gender or third sex people. But in the 11th and 12th centuries with the arrival of the Muslim rulers the number of eunuchs increased drastically in South Asia. Several scholars have noted that in the Islamic world, especially in the Mamluk Sultanate (Egypt) and Ottoman empire as well as in the (non-islamic) Roman, Byzantine and Chinese empires the eunuch tradition have been well documented (Reddy, 2005). Shaun Tougher noted that the eunuchs played prominent role in imperial court of those empires. He also noted that the condition of the eunuchs as a castrated man is what made them valuable commodities as slaves in the politics of empire building. Many references were found in history about the important role played by the eunuch in various Islamic and non Islamic empire of the world. The origins of the deliberate castration of males for the purpose of the creation of eunuch are unknown. Shaun Tougher in his work *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* noted that Assyrian and Chinese civilisation created the eunuch culture for royal court (Tougher, 2008). The Assyrian civilisation created the institution of eunuch for the Mediterranean world. Eunuchs were found mainly in court environment as royal servants in both inner and outer courts. Also in China Shang Dynasty (traditionally dated 1776- 1222 B.C), Ming Dynasty (A.D 1368- 1644), Quing Dynasty (A.D 1644-1911) were the followers of the eunuch tradition. In India in the eighth century the eunuch tradition was started by the Arabs. This tradition was continued and lasted in the Mughal period. The word for court eunuch in India came from Persian -Kwaja sara (kwaja honorific, meaning "real master"; sera to decorate). The castrated male or Indian eunuchs in medieval period were known as hijra. The word used for the Indian eunuch today is hijra, the language the soldier used in the Mughal bazaar's, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic (Jeffery, 1996). In Mughal period the eunuchs were the notable feature of kings court and his seraglio. In Mughal Empire most of the eunuchs who served in the courts were castrated. They existed as an institution (Sharma, 2009). As the palace was the largest department under Muslim rule, therefore thousands and thousands of eunuchs were recruited to serve the king and his seraglio. Their cadre

was hierarchical. Senior eunuchs were known as Nazirs and Khwajasaras. Each one of them had a number of junior eunuchs. They were guards and guardian of the palace. They guarded the gate of the palace, checked and regulated ingress and egress of persons, male and female. Eunuchs occupied the highest position in the Sultanate of Delhi and the Mughal Empire. That time was the golden era according to the eunuchs in contemporary times.

Imaduddin Rayhan, the chief minister under Sultan Balban, Kafur Hazardinari, the army commander and vice-regent of Alauddin Khalji, and Khusrau Shah the favourite of Qutbuddin Mubarak Khalji who rose to be king, were all eunuchs. Muhit-ul-Mulk, a hijra was employed as the Kotwal during the kingdom of Sultan Muzaffar Shah II of Gujarat. Not only that, they held political importance. During the regime of Allaudin- Khilji, it is believed that hijras began to interfere in court politics and acquired political importance of an unusual type. They became the instruments of several court intrigues and even participated in battles and conquests. The star hijra, Malik Kafur, occupied a unique place during the Khilji regime. Malik Kafur gained political power over the king to such an extent that he, according historians, dismissed Khizr Khan, the rightful heir (Shah- A note on hijras of Gujarat). Khwaja Jahan Malik Sarwar, a black eunuch, was appointed Wazir of Sultan Mahmud, a successor of Sultan Firoz Tughlaq. In 1394 he was sent as governor of Jaunpur with the title of Malik-us-Sharq (Master of the East). Within a short time he brought under his control the vast region stretching from Kol (Aligarh) on the west to Tirhut in Bihar in the east and became known as Sultan-us-Sharq. On his death his adopted son Qaranful (the Clove i.e. Black) took the regal title of Mubarak Shah and issued coins in his own name. (Manucci, 1906)

Under the Mughals many important eunuchs, who were known as Nazirs and Khwaja Saras, rose to the position of Mansabdars, commanders of armies and governors of Subahs. The chief Nazirs or Khwaja Saras generally enjoyed the title of I'timad Khan or Aitbar Khan means trustworthiness (*The Invisibles*, p-37). One Aitbar Khan, who served under Babur and Humayun, was appointed Governor of Delhi by Emperor Akbar. Phul Malik a eunuch entered Akbar's service and was conferred the title of I'timad Khan. He was made commander of one thousand and entrusted by Akbar to improve the finances of the state. He took part in the conquest of Bengal in 1576 and was later appointed Governor of Bhakkar (*The Invisibles*, p. 37). Another Aitmad Khan in Akbar's service went on a pilgrimage to Mecca and brought a

huge stone which was said to contain an impression of the foot of the Prophet. He was appointed Governor of Gujarat and held the command of four thousand. Also Firozabad town was named after a famous hijra Firoze of Akbar's court. (Sharma, p-31) In the regime of Shah Jahan (1592-1627), hijras held high positions. English traveler, Robert Coverts noted that Emperor Jahangir had two hundred eunuchs. (Mughal Harem) Aitbar Khan, the chief eunuch of Jahangir, was the Governor of Agra city. A eunuch, Firoz Khan, was conferred a mansab of 1500/600 by Jahangir. Khwaja Saras Hilai, a hijra who joined Jahangir's services and built a tomb, Hilallahad. Ikitiyar Khan another hijra was his Wakil and hijra Itihar was the faujdar of his jagir. They were also employed in royal service during the time of Akbar the great. Smith wrote, "Akbar the Great, got a mosque built in Lohamandi, Agra, at the request of a saintly hijra, Yatim Shah, whose own and his three disciples' remains are buried in its vaults below. An Urs is held at the mosque in honour of Yatim Shah annually, a week after Muslim festival of Shabe-Barat". (Sharma, 2009) Another I'tibar Khan was appointed governor of Agra in the court of Aurangzeb (1618-1707) (Jeffery, 1996). Bakhtawar, Khan (d. 1698), the superintendent of eunuchs under Aurangzeb, held the rank of 1000. He was a great scholar and historian. He prepared an abridgement of Tarikh-i-Alfi and Akhbar-ul-Akhyar and wrote the Mirat-ul-Alam also known as Mirat-i-Jahan Numa. During the time of the later Mughals three eunuchs, Mian Khushfahan, Mian Arjmand and Mian Mahabat ruled the state on behalf of Mughlani Begum (1754-1756).

In short, there was hardly any area of Muslim rule in which the eunuchs were not required to play an important role. They also acted as spies and kept the emperor informed about the activities of the harem women. They provided information to the prince about the pretty young girls in the empire. Only eunuchs were allowed to enter king's harem. They rendered invaluable service in the affairs of the harem. Eunuchs were a desired features of the court, where they were found as personal attendants, trusted agents and influential agents. In early days they were in much demand as royal guards of harems, chamber maids and keepers of holy places. Also their employment as cooks in palace kitchens, bodyguards to queens, dance and etiquette tutors to princesses and many others highly sought after duties were taken up by them. (Saxena, 2011). The eunuchs were very much in demand with the aristocracy.

References of employment of eunuchs are also found in the 18th

century in the other royal courts of India. Under Maratha King Rahunathrav the employment of hermaphrodites (third gender) was found in the 18th century as cooks in the Maratha Army (Lal, 1999, Jeffery, 1996).

Also the reference regarding appointments of eunuchs in army was found in the reign of Shuja-'ud-Dawlah in 1765. Some of them were appointed as commander in chief in army. Khwaja- Sara] Basant Ali Khan was in command of two divisions, that is of fourteen thousand regular soldiers in red uniforms. Another khwaja-sara also named Basant had under his command one thousand regular lancers and one infantry battalion in black uniform. There were five hundred cavalry and four battalions of infantry under the standard of khwaja-sara Mahbub Ali Khan (Jeffery, 1996).

In the reign of Shuja-'ud-Dawlah and his first wife Bahu Begum had six separate kitchens to prepare food for them. The queen's kitchen and second royal kitchen were supervised by Bahu Ali Khan and Anbar Ali Khan who were eunuchs. Also the superintendent of Bahu Begum's household and estate was kwaja-sara Javahan Ali khan. The chief eunuch was also the principal attendant of the king's first wife. Thus they were men of great influence (Jeffery, 1996)

The hijras were powerful in the reign of Nizam also. They were employed during that time. In Nizam's time there were three categories of hijras; one was the confidante and advisor. The second was the supervisor in the house who looks after the children and accompanied the women to go outside the home. The third was the menial domestic, they were the domestic help as excellent cooks, nourishing children and cleaning household chores (Jeffery, 1996).

But in the end of the nineteenth century the new ruler, Mahboob Ali Pasha, the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad, there was the system of eunuchs' maintenance in the palace. Even the Hyderabad State had an Inspector for hijras in the Police Department to look after their welfare and assured that they should not be harassed (Jeffery, 1996).

Thus the third gender acquired a prestigious position in the medieval period. They served in the royal court as guards, companions of queens, spies for prince. Also they were working for powerful elite class. They could have been trusted due to their sexual neutrality and since they had no progeny they had no reason to siphon away the money. Eunuch slaves were employed for the care and surveillance of the female inmates of the harem. They were usually bought in childhood and castrated. Trade in eunuchs was carried on in Bengal in the thirteenth

century. They were sometimes imported from the farthest Malay islands also. Some of the eunuchs became the catamites of their masters (Ahmed, 2009). In Islam, chastity takes the place of castration as prophet Mohammad had forbidden castration. Because of this interdiction, in Persia, Turkey and Egypt, the rulers did not allow castration on the premises of their courts, but instead, bought already castrated youths in slavery, or emasculated prisoners who did not belong to the realm of Islam. In the colonial period the reference of the third gender was also found. In *A'in-i Akbari*, Abul Fazl during the 16th and 17th centuries there was the reference about the Bengal from where large scale of eunuchs are supplied to Mughal empire. Eunuch in Bengal are two kinds, one is native and other is foreign. Foreign source is shipped from Abyssian and ports of east Africa. Domestic source is native Bengalis. Jahangir tried to do away with the horrid practice of making and selling eunuchs, which was specially prevalent in Sylhet, East Bengal. He issued orders making it a capital offence. Soon after, Afzal Khan, Governor of Bihar, sent a number of offenders to the capital. Jahangir sentenced them all to lifelong imprisonment. But the practice seems to have continued, as Aurangzeb felt the necessity of renewing the regulation, strictly forbidden castration. Both these emperors, however, continued to employ eunuchs in their service (Aiyar, 2005). During the British India this community lost its respected position at imperial courts. Hijras are regarded as a community which has distinct identity and hardly regarded as a discrete gender. In the colonial period the hijras community are treated under Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 which called for the "registration, surveillance and control of certain tribes and eunuchs." Initially the act was only applicable to Northwest provinces, Awadh and Punjab, by the early twentieth century, many sections of this act were extended to the whole of British India. (Reddy, 2005). The British framed a law against the community, in that dressing as females and exhibiting themselves on the open streets and inciting the people became offence. Due to black legislation imposed towards this community they are pushed to dark areas of society. They choosed different path for livelihood. They took sheltered in "Baigis Kothas (Brothel)". But the study is not able to give the correct data to prove this statement. But it is presumed that in this period the existence of the third gender is totally extinct. But after that they are found in the path of prostitution. They choose prostitution as a means for their survival. The recent literature about hijras shows that because of the gradual erosion of popular beliefs in their power, most of them are facing a

decline in their income (Nag, 2001).

Third gender in Assam

The study also wants to trace the origin of the third gender in Assam as the population of the hijra community rapidly increase in the state. The literature about the community is very limited in Assam. Furthermore the existence of the third gender was found in history of Assam. Their existence in Assam is not strange because their birth is quite normal. They are born like other normal human beings.

Evidence of taking part in spy work by eunuchs in the medieval period is available. Most of them were recruited in spy mission due to advantage of their sexual identity. They were called Lehetia. They were engaged to work as spies for collecting information. This spy act was called as Ripua, a secret informer (Rajguru,1988). Also in Assamese literature the word Kinnar and Napumsaka are used to describe the third gender. There was the reference of Kinner in Sri Sri Sankardeva & Sri Sri Madhabdeva's Borgeet (Baruah, 2009). According to Dr. Maheshwar Neog the word "Borgeet" was first used in Katha Guru Sarit written in the 15th and 16th centuries. Dr. Banikanta Kakoty and Kaliram Medhi rightly remark that it was Noble Numbers and Songs of Celestial. Dr Banikanta Kakoty in his article 'Borgeet' asserts that it is difficult to locate a particular time framework for the creation of borgeet. But Dr. Satyandranath Sharma in his writing the first borgeet was written during 1490 century. The word Kinner is used in borgeet to refer the third gender. They are visible in ancient Assamese society.

The practice of eunuch priesthood was found from the ancient period in Cachar district of Assam along with Sylhet district of present Bangladesh. Among the people of lower strata of society a popular deity known as Darai is worshipped. To worship this deity a special kind of priest is required who is called Gurma. Gurma is a local name for a eunuch dancer cum priest and it is believed that none but a Gurma is privilege to worship Darai. So it can be said that in ancient period the third gender is found in this region but their existence is not recorded in Assam history (Choudhury, 1985). During the 16th and 17th centuries the subah of Bengal enjoyed an inevitable reputation as the principal source of eunuchs for the entire Mughal Empire. Specially Ghoraghat and Sylhet was associated with this commerce. The present study like to approach it from a different angle. In 16th and 17th centuries the Sylhet is under Koch (a dynasty) kingdom (Goswami 1970,

Sharma, 1973) In this background it can be presumed that the eunuch trade have its origin in Assam (Hambly, 1974).

There is a myth associated with Ojapali performance of Assam. Dr. Nabin Ch. Sarmah mentions that the Ojapali performance of Assam is a regional form of the Indian folk-tale (folk-lore) tradition. Various myths were created in the society relating the origin of this art form. According to divine origin theory, the origin of Ojapali become possible because of the benevolence of gods. King of god, Indra, patronised a dance programme by Urbashi to welcome Partha or the third Pandav Arjun to destroy and defeat the Asuras, the born enemy of the gods. After dance Urbashi fell in love with Arjun and informed Indra about this. Indra requested Arjuna to marry Urbashi, but Arjuna refused. Being very angry Urbashi cursed Arjuna, " The third Pandava will be eunuch for a year". After returning to the earth Arjuna had to remain as an eunuch for a year. During this period he taught Uttara daughter of Bipat acting, dance and music in the disguise of Brihannala. To display the expertise of this Gandharba Vidya properly Bihannala borrowed dresses and musical instruments from heaven. This Gandharba Vidya is nothing but Ojapali Vidya. Arjuna, Brihannala in disguise introduced Ojapali in the earth bringing it from the heaven for the first time. Thus the God's favourite Gandharba Vidya i.e. Ojapali Vidya came from heaven to earth by Arjuna in the grace of God. Thus the tradition of Ojapali began on earth (Devi, 2012).

In India and also in Assam the third gender existed from the time immemorial. But their existence is not recorded in the pages of history. The third gender is found in all cultures, languages but due to their sexual identity they have to live an isolated life. Their lifestyle has drastically changed from confidante to beggars. Yet, the community as a whole has been struggling till today for identity, dignity and rights - a quest for equality.

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