

## СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ СТРУКТУРА, СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИНСТИТУТЫ И ПРОЦЕССЫ SOCIAL STRUCTURE, SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES



Original article

УДК 305

DOI: 10.18413/2408-9338-2022-8-2-0-5

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**Gender Diversity in Indian society:  
Identity distinction between Hijra and Transgender**

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**Abstract.** Ethnomethodological explanation of the social construction of gender highlighted the natural attitude of society towards binary gender categories (men-women); gender groups other than men and women are socially and culturally rejected. Gender in everyday life is a kind of displaying appearances and behaviour in the forms of masculinity and femininity. Gender is also described as the performance of individuals in their everyday life. The binary gender system (men-women) is perceived as normal or socially acceptable because of the “natural attitude” (preconceived notion regarding gender) regarding certain fixed social roles and behaviour of men and women. The paper has examined how the social construction of gender contradicts gender diversity. There are four gender categories in Indian society: Men, women, transgender and third gender (Hijra). It has shown the distinction between transgender and third gender identity in Indian society. Hijra is a native third gender category in India, that structurally contradicted the compulsory binary gender system but transgender or transsexuals are in favour of fluidity of sexual orientation or sexual preferences.

**Keywords:** Gender diversity; transgender; third gender; Hijra; Non-binary gender  
**Information for citation:** Laskar, M. H. (2022), “Gender Diversity in Indian society: Identity distinction between Hijra and Transgender”, *Research Result. Sociology and management*, 8 (2), 60-72. DOI: 10.18413/2408-9338-2022-8-2-0-5.

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**Гендерное разнообразие в индийском обществе:  
различие в идентичности между хиджрой  
и трансгендером**

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**Аннотация.** В этнометодологическом объяснении социальной конструкции пола выделено естественное отношение общества к бинарным гендерным категориям (мужчины-женщины): гендерные группы, отличные от мужчин и женщин, социально и культурно отвергаются. Гендер в повседневной жизни – это своего рода отображение внешности и поведения в формах мужественности и женственности. Гендер также описывается как поведение людей в их повседневной жизни. Бинарная гендерная система (мужчины-женщины) воспринимается как нормальная или социально приемлемая из-за «естественного отношения» (предвзятого представления о гендере) к определенным фиксированным социальным ролям и поведению мужчин и женщин. В статье исследуется, как социальная конструкция гендера противоречит гендерному разнообразию. В индийском обществе есть четыре гендерные категории: мужчины, женщины, трансгендеры и третий пол (хиджра). Показано различие между трансгендером и третьей гендерной идентичностью в индийском обществе. Хиджра – это коренная третья гендерная категория в Индии, которая структурно противоречит обязательной бинарной гендерной системе, но трансгендеры или транссексуалы выступают за изменчивость сексуальной ориентации или сексуальных предпочтений.

**Ключевые слова:** гендерное разнообразие; трансгендер; третий пол; хиджра; небинарный пол

**Информация для цитирования:** Ласкар М. Х. Гендерное разнообразие в индийском обществе: различие в идентичности между хиджрой и трансгендером // Научный результат. Социология и управление. 2022. Т. 8, № 2. С. 60-72. DOI: 10.18413/2408-9338-2022-8-2-0-5.

**Introduction.** The sociological explanation of gender diversity has to be understood in the theoretical framework of the social construction of gender. Many sociological studies (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Kimmel, 2011; Kessler & McKenna, 2000; Butler, 1988) have illustrated the societal norms of compulsory heterosexuality and a binary gender system that categorizes humans as male-female sexes and men-women gender. The binary gender system is questioned or challenged by the idea of gender diversity across societies of the

world. Generally, men and women are regarded as the opposite sex, which implies the belongingness of men and women in distinct sex categories. Sex signifies that the bodies of men and women differ biologically in terms of characteristics such as chromosomal differences, external and internal sexual structures, hormonal production, physiological differences and secondary sex characteristics. Sex marks a distinction between two physically and genetically different or opposite categories of people. These physical differences turned into socio-culturally distinct gender identities

like man and woman. The notion of masculinity-femininity characterizes men's and women's gender existence in society. Masculinity and femininity guide an individual's conduct and activities. Cross-behavior or interplay of femininity and masculinity is strictly forbidden in society. Gender cannot be conceived outside masculinity and femininity. But the phenomena of transsexuality and homosexuality opposed the idea of a sex-gender normative structure. Gender diversity actually can only be understood in a society where men, women and intersexuals live together. Who are intersexuals? Intersexuals are neither men nor women, who have born with ambiguous genitals. They are also called hermaphrodites. Those who castrated their genital are called eunuch, who has a long history of palace guard of royal women. India's Hijras fall into the intersexual category and they live a distinct socio-cultural life.

The main problem on which the present paper focused is misunderstanding and ambiguous understanding of gender diversity in India. There is a misrepresentation of Hijra in transgender discourse. Hijra is a gender category, different from men and women. Hijra gender consists of both born hermaphrodites and castrated men. It is believed that all Hijras are hermaphrodites (intersexed) but studies (Nanda, 1999) revealed that many joined in Hijra community willingly through emasculation in the latter part of their life, who are not born hermaphrodite. In Indian society, transgender is an umbrella term for transsexual, genderqueers and intersex people (The Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Bill, 2019). There is an ambiguous understanding of gender diversity in India. It is perceived that transgender and third gender are one category. Here the sociological issue is binary gender and non-binary gender in Indian society. Hijra is a non-binary gender category in Indian society. So the present paper focused on the identity distinction between transgender and third gender (Hijra) in Indian society.

**Methodology and Methods.** Qualitative techniques have been used to understand gender diversity and third gender existence in Indian society. It is difficult to trace the exact

numbers of Hijra homes and their population because there is no data available on it and no non-government organization has specific working objectives on Hijra. Empirically the issue is examined based on case analysis among some Hijras residing in areas of Hatigaon, ISBT and Railway Station in Guwahati city of Assam (India).

The article is grounded in the theoretical postulates of ethnomethodological and phenomenological ideas of the social construction of gender. Gender is a socially constructed system that established a binary relationship between notions of masculinity and femininity, whereas, sex is a biological construct that differentiates the body into male and female in terms of genitals, hormonal differences and others. But, this binary sex-gender model is challenged by homosexuality, transsexuality and transgenderism on the one hand and alternative gendering or development of the third gender on the other hand. Studies (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Kimmel, 2011; Kessler & McKenna, 2000; Butler, 1988) have shown that correspondence between male-female sexes with men-women gender is rooted in the social structure that developed compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender system. West and Zimmerman considered this social construction of the binary gender system as 'doing gender'. Men and women undertake 'doing of gender' as members of society; the proficiency of men and women as members of society depends on the production of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126). Human beings use the method of 'gender display' in the gendered society. People display masculinity and femininity in their everyday actions as natural behaviour. Individuals have to be in any of the two sex categories by displaying appropriate attributes and behaviour (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127-128). The social construction of gender for Michael Kimmel is the differentiation of masculinity and femininity, which has no overlapping attributes. Cross-behavior or interplay of femininity and masculinity is strictly forbidden in society. Gender is the expression of masculinity and

femininity in an appropriate way that is eventually recognized as men and women (Kimmel, 2011: 3). This fixed categorization of gender and its distinct attributes happens to exist as a result of the natural attitude of society toward gender. Kessler & McKenna asserted that gender is constructed through the consistent use of 'natural attitude towards gender' and gender is accomplished in everyday interaction of the people (Kessler and McKenna, 2000: 12). Gender is further described as 'performative acts' (Butler, 1988) of human beings in society. People in their everyday life perform the role of specific gender which they have imbibed through socialization. The human body is gendered by performative acts in the cultural and social regulative framework (Butler, 1988: 526). Gender is not a pre-given entity for human beings, it is not a fixed attribute to acquire or it is not something that is imposed upon human beings naturally. Instead, gender is a kind of displaying the distinct attributes; doing things as a particular gender and also a type of performance as specific gender by the members of society. People's everyday life is in a process of gendering or other words, it can be said that every act of human beings is gendered; nothing is outside of gender regulations. People typically assume gender as something naturally given and their attitude towards behaviour that doesn't match the prevalent narratives makes it evident that there cannot be anything extra-gender or beyond the gender line.

This binary constructed gender is challenged by gender diversity or pluralism in various societies. Transsexuality, transgendering and homosexuality have exposed the fluidity of sexual orientation and challenged compulsory heterosexuality. Hijra is an Indian third gender category that often faces rejection and humiliation in society. Transgender activism and identity politics is quite active in India but they overshadowed the third gender identity of Hijras. Hijra as a third gender embraced certain roles, which are considered anti-social or a challenge to normative gender roles. The social role of men and women are perceived as natural or pre-given; so, the third gender has no so-

cially recognized role or space to live normally. The third gender is pushed into the marginalized position in society. However, the most striking issue of gender analysis is the ambiguous use of the term transgender and third gender in India. The transgender movement or transgender politics evolved through transsexualism, queering and homosexuality in the West as well as non-Western societies. But an important fact that should be pointed out is the limitation of transgenderism to binary gendered society; it doesn't cross the binary gender line though fluidity of sexual orientation and cross-behaviour is encouraged. The third gender on the other hand has changed the entire narrative of binary gender and moved towards gender diversity and pluralism. Indian Hijra is a third gender category that is peculiarly recognized as a deviant gender kind or abnormal human group. The study is carried out with the objectives to understand the social construction of gender and gender diversity in the context of India, and examining the Hijra as the third gender category in Indian society.

**Research Results and Discussion.** The result of the study proclaimed that transgender or transsexuals manifest fluidity of sexual orientation and gender within a binary gender system. Transgender doesn't challenge the binary gender system. The binary gender model is challenged by intersexuals, who are called the third gender and popularly named 'Hijra' in Indian society. The existence of Hijra as the third gender raised the question of the possibility of gender diversity in Indian society. In Indian society, Hijra or the third gender challenges binary gender or compulsory heterosexuality and gender role. In India, Hijras are either born intersex or castrated. Intersex individuals are also called hermaphrodites. Those men who have castrated their genital are called eunuch, who has a long history of serving royal palaces of various dynasties since the ancient period in India. The Hijra category consists of born intersexuals as well as castrated individuals. Sociologically they fall into the third gender category because of their exclusion from binary gender roles in society. In the paper, it is argued that Hijra is a third gender category,

which is unique in Indian society. Due to the 'natural attitude of society' towards binary gender and sex, Hijras are labelled as deviant or abnormal people.

The paper has attempted to answer certain questions: Is Hijra just merely a deserted, unwanted and deviant community? Are Hijras conscious of their third gender identity? Whether they oppose the gender binary? The study revealed that Hijra is a socially, economically, culturally and politically excluded and marginalized gender category. Hijras are not conscious of their third gender identity rather they conceive themselves as transgender due to the popular use of the term in India. Hijra as a third gender category in Indian society is suppressed. A popular use of the term 'transgender' has overshadowed the identity of the third gender. Hijras are not transgender but an indigenous third gender of Indian society. Hijra gender opposes the gender binary of Indian society. Indian society like any patriarchal society sets the socio-cultural role for men and women but Hijras are excluded from the binary role. Hijras are now bound to take up certain roles like begging, dancing in marriage events, performing in birth rituals and involvement in prostitution, which led to labelling them as deviant gender kind in Indian society.

The detailed discussion is presented in the following sections.

*Transgender or transsexual category manifests fluidity of gender within a binary gender system.* Husserl's phenomenological idea of the natural attitude is the best means of understanding the gender binary in a socio-cultural setting. Natural attitude refers to an individual's unquestionable axioms about a world that appears to exist independently of particular perceptions or construction of it (McKenna and Kessler, 2006:344). Man and women exist as distinct genders that are their independent quality of maleness or femaleness within society's natural attitude towards gender. Ethnomethodology emphasized understanding how gender in everyday life is constructed and practiced (McKenna and Kessler, 2006:344). The terms 'transsexual' and 'transgender' often create ambiguity over the question, of whether

transsexuals or transgender challenge binary gender or reinforce the gender binary. McKenna and Kessler extended various meanings of the prefix 'trans' in the term transgender to end the diverse and confusing interpretations. They presented three meanings of 'trans': change, crossing and moving beyond. The first meaning is change as in the case of transformation implies changing of gender. It is the change of body from male to female and vice-versa. Transgender changes their bodies from one with which they were born to bodies that they think match their gender. In this sense, the term transgender is synonymous with transsexual. The second meaning of 'trans' is crossing, which has been used in academic writing for a long. Transgender are those who don't express conformity to the expected men and women gender roles prescribed by society. In the second meaning, transgender is an umbrella term for cross-dressers, transvestites and transsexuals, gender blenders, drag queens, bi-genders, feminine men, androgynies, drag kings, intersexuals, masculine women, passing men, gender dysphoric and others who might consider themselves a gender outlaw (McKenna and Kessler, 2006: 348-349). The third meaning of the term 'trans' is moving beyond or through an invariant gender system; similar to the meaning the word 'transcutaneous' suggests. This meaning of 'trans' in transgender derived from the gay and lesbian activist's discourse of queering gender in the 1990s. Transsexuals here do queer 'compulsory heterosexuality and gender model. Queering of gender refers to the deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality and sex-specific gender role. Those who have joined in queer politics of the 1990s adjusted them to the transgender category as their identity (McKenna and Kessler, 2006: 350-351). It is clear from the above interpretations regarding the comprehensiveness of the term transgender; the term transgender encompasses many identities, sexual categories and behaviours that contradict the natural attitude towards gender. But on the other hand, transsexualism doesn't challenge the natural attitude toward gender, as it refers to the changing of



one's genitals through surgery. Two genders remain static even for transsexual persons because he/she is just moving from one gendered body to another gendered body. Thus transgender in this sense means a person's move from one gender to another or certain aspects of one person crossing a gender (McKenna and Kessler, 2006: 349). This dissociation of genitals from gender made some writers think and consider intersexuals as transgender too. Intersexuals are known as a hermaphrodite, which has various local terms across the world (McKenna and Kessler, 2006: 350). Unlike transsexuals, intersexuals fall outside the binary men-women gender model in any society. Transsexuals ultimately accommodate them within the men-women gender model through genital surgery, gender-appropriate performances and gender display but intersexuals challenged this model and proved the prevalence of the third gender category. The term transgender is an identity as well as an umbrella term to encompass other fluid sexuality and gender expressions. It includes those sexuality and gender expressions other than gay and lesbian because they are confined within men and women genders. Transgender people are trying to take sexual preference away from gender.

*What is Third gender?* The binary gender model is challenged by third gender or intersexuals, which has raised the question of the possibility of gender diversity in society. The approach 'gender pluralism' is very relevant for cultures, which already have a third or other sex/gender, for example, those that exist in Indian society. Kothi and Hijra identities fit easily within the sex/gender pluralist model. Hijras in India are considered the third sex/gender, which has a history of more than 4,000 years. Hijras are born intersex as well as castrated in Indian society (Monro, 2010:247-248). Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan (2006) stated that the term 'third gender' is being replaced by or conflated with the newer term 'transgender' in social science. The term third gender was introduced in 1975 by M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, who used it for drawing attention to the ethnographic evidence

that gender categories in some cultures cannot be explained within the binary gender system. This term helped feminists and gender theory to think outside the dichotomous gender system. The term third gender is also used to understand the behaviour that challenges heteronormative gender systems. It is a very effective term for societies (mostly non-western) to provide institutionalized 'intermediate' gender concepts and practices (Towle and Morgan, 2006:668). Gilbert H. Herdt, the most acclaimed anthropologist used the 'third gender' concept to discuss particularly gender and sexuality among the Sambia, a New Guinea group that practices 'semen eating' (in which young boys perform fellatio on older men) and to provide a discursive space for analyzing non-dichotomous gender categories. Herdt used the third gender concept as a heuristic device for understanding non-dichotomous sex/gender categories (Towle and Morgan, 2006: 669). In modern times, medical intervention has included intersex persons in the purview of diagnosis. The development of medical science with advances in anaesthesia, surgery, embryology, and endocrinology in the twentieth century changed the discourse on intersex persons from just labelling as hermaphrodites to an object of diagnosis (Chase, 2006: 301). Transsexuals have become patients in modern medical discourse, whose bodies according to medical experts are in disorder. So to give order in the body, male or female sex must be assigned. This is necessary because society nurtures the child according to its sex and provides the associated gender. Transformation of intersex bodies by surgeries at the early age of child began a new strategy to relocate these into either of the male or female sex/gender. A team under the guidance of urologist Hugh Hampton Young at John Hopkins University developed a principle of rapid postnatal detection and intervention for intersex infants by the 1950s intending to undergo surgery early enough so that the child would have no memory of it. According to the John Hopkins model, the birth of an intersex infant is considered a "psychosocial emergency". This emergency case is

dealt with by a multidisciplinary team of intersex specialists. The team comprises surgeons and endocrinologists rather than psychologists, bioethicists, representatives from intersex peer support organizations, or parents of intersex children. The team decides the sex of the infant after extensive examination and assigns it accordingly and then the team informs the parents about the child's true sex. After doing sex assignment to the infant, medical technology is employed to mould the body in terms of hormone and genital to make sure that the body conforms the assigned sex (Chase, 2006: 301-302). Born intersex or hermaphrodite and castrated individuals are members of the third gender. Third gender social role is not yet defined or legitimized in any society. Their position in a society with a binary gender system is still ambiguous. Unlike men and women, the third gender has no uniform social role and social status in any society; often they face humiliation and social rejection. Their role and status vary from society to society and from time to time.

*Hijra is the third gender not transgender in India.* There is confusion over the identity of Hijra; mostly they are previewed casually under the transgender category. In India, confusion exists between transsexuals and the third gender. Transgender may encompass gender fluidity like transsexuals, gays, lesbians, transvestite through political movements but it creates an identity crisis for Hijra. The main issue that differentiates the third gender from transgender is the question of binary gender. The third gender challenges binary gender or compulsory heterosexuality and gender role. It signifies the existence of gender plurality opposite to the binary gender system. But transgender operates its affairs within the binary gender and sex; it just advocates for freedom of sexual orientation and preference. So, fundamentally transgender reinforces binary gender only but the existence of third gender questions the age-old perception of two-gender concepts and theory.

Who is Hijra in the sex category? Hijras are those born as intersexuals as well as castrated individuals. Intersex people are likely to

become Hijras, either through choice or because of rejection by their families (Monro, 2010:250). It has also been found that faith and tradition also determine the position of Hijras in Indian society. It is believed that Hijras have the power to curse or bless due to their spiritual heritage. Hijras also exercise a kind of power, embarrassing by exposing genitals if they are not paid during begging or attending events. Thus, Hijras are somehow maintaining a position of third sex/gender in Indian society (Monro, 2010: 251). Hijras have emerged as the third gender category in India. There is a popular perception that all Hijras are born hermaphrodites or intersexuals but studies (Nanda, 1999) showed that in empirical reality all Hijras are not born hermaphrodites rather many joined willingly. Before going into a discussion about the Hijra of India, we shall look into the medicalization of hermaphrodites and the politics of hermaphrodite identity. Phenomena of intersexuality or existence of hermaphrodites are the sign of nature's strategy to disrupt the normative system of sex, gender and sexuality; but binary male/female binary sex division is presumed as unchangeable. The colonial British regarded Hijras as deviant to binary sexuality and gender. To deal with eunuch and Hijra in India by the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, the British government labelled Hijra as professional sodomites, who kidnapped, castrated and exploited male children and polluted public space with their obscene performance and transvestism (Hinchy, 2013: 196). Hijras are also described as labelled deviants (Sharma, 2009). It implies the deviance from compulsory heterosexuality and binary genders.

Hijra is the indigenous third gender of Indian culture that differs from the western third gender that in other words called transgender, encompassed transsexuals, transvestites and others. If present transgender politics in India included Hijra too in its purview, Hijra as a non-western third gender community may overlap with that of the western third gender category. Hijra is a very complex gender entity that has to be understood based on the various dimensions of its meaning. Defining

Hijra is difficult because of the disjunction (Nanda, 1999) that exists between the cultural definition of the Hijra role and the variation of individual roles, experiences and life history. The first disjunction is that though culturally Hijra is defined in terms of traditional occupation (performance on auspicious occasions, begging etc.), most Hijras don't follow such occupation. The second disjunction is between the cultural definition of Hijra as neither men nor women on the one hand and the expression of individual experience on the other hand. Some Hijras may think of them as neither men nor women and others may consider them as women. The third disjunction is due to the question: whether all Hijras are hermaphrodites? It is believed that all Hijras are hermaphrodites (intersexed) but studies revealed that many joined the Hijra community willingly through emasculation in the latter part of their life, who are not born a hermaphrodite. Another disjunction is due to the distinction between the cultural definition of Hijra as emasculated and the real fact that many are not emasculated (Nanda, 1999: XIV-XX). These disjunctions about defining Hijras raised the questions: Are Hijras neither men nor women? Are they impotent men? Are they women with masculine attributes? Are they born Hijra (hermaphrodite) or made (eunuch)? Serena Nanda analyzed the Hijra as neither men nor women. The word Hijra is translated into English by the word eunuch or hermaphrodite (intersexed), which connotes the impotence of men in India. The word Hijras also implies the inability of sexual role or sexual impairment (Nanda, 1999: 13). So both terms eunuch and Hijra refer to genital disorders. Again there exists regional variation in the use of the term for those who are perceived as neither men nor women of ambiguous gender. Unlike North India, Hijras do not have any cultural role in south India. The term used for Hijra is kojja in Telugu or Pottai in Tamil, which connotes derogatory meaning for those cowardly or feminine men. It is believed that Hijras are impotent men but impotence is not the only condition because many join the Hijra community through the emasculation process. Hijra thinks of them as

in-between (neither men nor women) but the term Hijra is a masculine noun just like the word eunuch, a man who is less than perfect man (Nanda, 1999: 14-15). If Hijras are not men they are not women too. Hijras are not women because of the reasons such as improper genitalia, absence of menstruation and incapability to conceive. Hijras dress like female and wear makeup to keep them similar to women but their manner and behaviour is different from typical women. Nanda thus described Hijra as an alternative gender that can even accommodate multiple other cross-gender identities, attributes and behaviours, who are known as the eunuch, homosexuals, transsexuals, hermaphrodites and transvestites in the west (Nanda, 1999: 18-19).

*Whether Hijras are conscious of third gender identity?* 'Hijra' term is popularly used to refer to masculine females and feminine men. Hijra as identity is objectified by certain expressions and appearances like hard face make-up, physical appearance (masculine but feminine attire), the tune of the voice neither (neither masculine nor feminine), style of walk and clapping while begging and so on. Some Hijra individuals were interviewed in Guwahati City to explore their own experience of living in a socially constructed gendered society and to reveal how they perceive themselves.

Salima (name changed) is a 30 years old Hijra who lives in Guwahati city for livelihood and community support. According to her, she doesn't have proper genital of either male or female. She originally hailed from a village in Chaygaon but because of the lack of family support, she had to move to Guwahati at the age of six to join the Hijra community. She had undergone certain rituals of joining the community as per tradition prevails in the Hijra community. She dressed like a female but she is neither a perfect male nor a female. She does begging like other Hijras for livelihood as there are no other alternative professions for them. She studied only up to class four and discontinued due to lack of financial, family and societal support and was bound to take up the traditional begging profession of Hijra.



Salma (name changed) is a 35 years old Hijra born in a poor family from a village in Boko of Kamrup district. She discontinued her education in class IX due to the ridicule she received over her intersex identity. Once society came to know about the Hijra identity, the family didn't want to keep such a child according to her. She is born intersex but in childhood, she used to like female dresses and appearance but her identity was exposed when she grew up. Her occupation is begging and performing 'badhai' (blessings through Hijra dance) at weddings or events of newborn child's name initiation ceremony. She also experienced sexual harassment because she denied being part of prostitution, which is another traditional occupation of Indian Hijras.

Jasmine (name changed) is 28 years old Hijra resides near ISBT, Guwahati. Jasmine left her home at the age of 12 and came to Guwahati to join the Hijra community. She admitted that she is intersex by birth and used to be like a female in early childhood. But over the exposure to her actual identity, she had to leave the family. She also earns her livelihood through begging. She stated that her joining the Hijra community made her free from societal pressure on concealing her identity. She is now free to express her Hijra identity.

Pinki (name changed) is 35 years old Hijra from the Mangaldoi district of Assam who lives in Guwahati; she has 3 sisters and one brother in her home. She discontinued her education at the age of 10 due to unnatural stigmatized behaviour towards her. Her family, though in poor condition, approached a doctor to cure her genital disorder. But she was not willing to visit the doctor. Over the doctor's description of difficulty in curing the case, her family lost hope. She then chose Hijra life and joined the community in Guwahati. She is hesitant to reveal her sex life but admitted that as part of her profession she sometimes has to do prostitution. The client of Hijra prostitution is mainly truck drivers and industrial manual workers.

Sajina (name changed) is a 42-year-old Hijra, who hailed from the Barpeta district of Assam and lives in Guwahati. She has a

mother, two elder brothers and three sisters in her family. At the age of 11, she got to know about her unusual genitalia. Her family was worried about her intersex condition and societal response toward her. She then moved to Guwahati to join the community. Like other members, she also earns by begging and prostitution. But now she is the Guru (leader) in one of the Hijra homes. So she doesn't go begging, but rather manages other Hijras, and trains new members and their activities.

Hijras are not conscious of the difference between transgender and third gender identities. But they are conscious of being a distinct gender or sexual category. Hijras lack clarity about their identity. Mainstream society treats them as deviant gender kind. Due to the poor education and societal label as deviant category, Hijras are not able to understand their third gender identity. Common usage of the term 'transgender' includes those who don't follow appropriate male or female sex-specific behaviour and those who tend to change their assigned sex. But Hijras are different due to their intersex status and unique behaviour that doesn't match with any of the binary gender (men and women). Due to this uncommon behaviour, people perceive Hijra as a deviant gender group and attach negative meanings to their activities; common societal perceptions are that men and women are normal gender categories and other gender groups cannot be socially normal. People have acquired experience in their social world on how to live either as men or women. So, the activities or behaviour of Hijra are treated as unnatural and anti-social.

It is important to note that common people use specific meanings for the gender role of men and women. But whether Hijras can perform the gender role of men or women? The answer is no; because firstly, they are not allowed to live like normal family members, secondly they choose different attire, appearance and style of life that goes against the standard normative behaviour of society. Society treats this gender appearance of Hijra as distasteful and disregards social normativity. On the other hand, transsexuals may live as other

members of family and society though they may have to struggle if they want to get married or change their genitals through surgery. Often it becomes difficult to identify transsexuals because they live within the binary gender normativity. Common people usually don't have a proper idea regarding transsexuals and their identical appearance. The intensity of objectification through expressions and appearance is less among transsexuals; therefore, observers don't find it as unusual as they find in the behaviour of Hijras. For an example of a practical situation, if Hijras board the bus or train, fellow passengers feel uncomfortable and insecure but the identity of a transsexual cannot be traced easily, so any such disgraceful attitude is placed on them.

The existence of Hijra in Indian society proves the fact that gender diversity is possible beyond men and women. Moreover, Hijra is also a phenomenon of queering of the binary gender system and a sign of fluidity in gender practice. The existence of Hijra in Indian society challenged the idea of the mandatory binary gender model. Some cases are analyzed to understand the perception of Hijras about their own identity and how they encounter the 'natural attitude' of society towards them. 'Natural attitude of society' treats them as unnatural, abnormal and deviant people. Even transgender organizations are not clear enough about the distinctive identities of transgender and the third gender in India. These organizations loosely state Hijra as part of LGBTQ. But there is a huge gap in conceptual clarity over the identity. Due to this ambiguous state of condition, Hijras are still living on the margin of society.

*Gender ambiguity of Hijras in Indian Society.* Case studies have revealed that all Hijra in their Hijra home are born intersex and originally hail from different districts of Assam. They left their own home and took shelter in the Hijra home through a proper ceremony conducted by their Guru. All Hijras irrespective of religious background do worship Bahuchara Mata, the Hindu goddess of chastity and fertility. That is why all Hijra use attire similar to Hindu women. They use female 'pronouns'

for them in their conversation. But they claim that they are not perfect females, because they don't menstruate and don't have proper male genitals too. It is clear from the above cases that Hijra don't have social space in their original village or place; Guwahati city is commonplace for them to migrate and find Hijra home. There are several Hijra homes in the city and each home has a Guru (head). They maintain a kind of social organization in the home by categorizing them into grandmother, mother and child, based on the age and seniority in the Hijra home. They admitted that all the members of their Hijra home are intersex individuals but they all dress up like women. But they don't consider them as female nor women rather Hijra. For them, Hijra is their actual identity. They have not revealed their sexual orientation. But it is observed that they do prostitution for money. Their clients are mainly truck drivers and labourers. It has been found that all the Hijras of the case study are economically very weak and only their Guru (leader) enjoys certain good wealth due to seniority. Because all the subordinate Hijras need to hand over their earnings to Guru and they get an amount that is fixed by Guru.

An important point is that they face rejection due to the 'natural attitude' of society towards binary gender and sex. They fall outside the binary sex-gender, so societal response stigmatized their identity as intersex. Family members worry over the disclosure of actual identity in public and the inability to arrange marriage. Hijra home mostly prevails in city or town because of the livelihood scope in the form of begging, prostitution and ceremonial dance (in marriage, birth ritual and others). It is stated by respondents that the economic condition of Hijras is very deplorable due to lack of education, employment opportunities, and lack of acceptance in society as the third gender. Social roles and positions are designed in such a way that only men and women can accommodate; the third gender has no place in it. Therefore, Hijras choose alternative life even though it is miserable.

To make it clear whether a transgender organization encompasses Hijra into its purview or not, a volunteer of “anaajoree”, a Guwahati-based organization working for transgender rights is interviewed. It has been revealed that the organization looking into the rights of transsexuals, gays and lesbians. But the use of the term transgender is even referred for Hijra too. The organizations do relief work for Hijras in the form of food or amount of money in the time of crisis. The organization arranges various collaborative workshops, seminars or webinars as a platform for transsexuals, gays and lesbians to express their identities and problems. But no intellectual practice or identity movement exists for Hijra or the third gender of India. The organization simply treats Hijra as part of transgender.

But Hijra and transgender in India are two different identities that cannot be included in one umbrella term. Hijras are most vulnerable because they don't get social space to live in mainstream society. On the other hand transsexual, gay and lesbian gets to live in mainstream society and avail their preferred education and jobs. Their struggle is only with the expression of their sexuality that they can even enjoy in a certain way. But Hijras are excluded and marginalized gender, which doesn't even gets recognition as the third gender in legal discourse just included in the transgender category. Due to this confusion, it has become an ambiguous identity formation. Even those Hijra activists working for their rights don't know the fact that they are third gender, not transgender. But in the campaign or movement, they are often referred to as transgender. So far, it has been revealed that Hijra's third gender role in society is regarded as most degraded and sometimes regarded as deviance. People do offer to beg amount just to avoid any possibility of misfortune. What about their acceptance as the third gender in school, College, or University? Mere relief works are not enough.

**Conclusions.** It can be concluded that Hijra is a native third gender and intersex category in Indian society. Hijra gender has

quashed the narrative of the binary gender system and gradually the idea of gender diversity surfaced in academic debates. Transgender or transsexual people don't fundamentally challenge the binary gender system but Hijra as the third gender explored the idea of gender diversity in Indian society. But Hijras areneglected and excluded from mainstream Indian society; they are often termed as deviant or unnatural. Their identity is overshadowed due to the popular debate over transgender. Considering Hijras as transgender in India is a kind of distortion of their actual identity. Third gender politics or third gender discourse needs to be developed by separating it from the transgender movement in India. Indian society has accommodated four categories of gender: Men, Women, Hijra (Third Gender) and Transgender (transsexuals, transvestite and drag queens).

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Received 04 January 2022. Revised 10 June 2022. Accepted 11 June 2022.

Статья поступила в редакцию 04 января 2022 г. Поступила после доработки 10 июня 2022 г. Принята к печати 11 июня 2022 г.



*Conflicts of Interest: the author has no conflicts of interest to declare.*

*Конфликты интересов: у автора нет конфликта интересов для декларации.*

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