

Understanding Attitudes Toward Hijras: A Comprehensive Guide

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Historical and Cultural Context of Hijras

The study of societal attitudes toward the Hijra community, a distinct socio-religious group predominantly found in South Asia (including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), requires a deep understanding of their unique historical positioning. The term **Hijra** generally refers to individuals assigned male at birth who adopt a feminine gender identity, often undergoing ritual or actual castration, and live within organized communal structures. Historically, their presence was documented and often respected during the Mughal Empire, where they held positions of influence, particularly as guards in harems or as political advisors, benefiting from a social structure that recognized gender variance as part of the natural order. This era provided a degree of institutional protection and allowed them to perform significant ceremonial duties, creating a framework of acceptance that contrasted sharply with later periods. Their roles were not merely functional but were often imbued with spiritual significance, linked to their perceived power to confer fertility blessings or invoke misfortune.

This historical acceptance began to erode severely following the arrival of British colonial rule. The implementation of laws designed to enforce strict binary gender norms led directly to the criminalization and marginalization of the Hijra community. Specifically, the notorious **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871** targeted various marginalized groups, including Hijras, classifying them as habitual criminals. This legislation systematically stripped them of their social standing, economic stability, and legal recognition, forcing them into hidden, segregated communities and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and dependence on stigmatized survival strategies. This colonial legacy is crucial, as it fundamentally shifted the dominant social attitude from one of complex, albeit conditional, inclusion to one of overt legal and social exclusion, generating prejudices that persist strongly in contemporary society and influence modern psychological and sociological research into their status.

The shift from institutionalized respect to systemic criminalization established the core tension that defines modern attitudes toward Hijras: a deep-seated cultural memory of their sacred power coexisting uneasily with profound social stigma and legal vulnerability. Understanding this historical trajectory reveals that the negative attitudes prevalent today are not solely indigenous cultural constructs but are heavily mediated by colonial interventions that successfully dismantled traditional social safety nets and ritual roles. Consequently, modern psychological approaches must analyze how these historical trauma and structural violence contribute to contemporary discrimination, manifesting as housing insecurity, employment exclusion, and heightened risks of violence, thus reinforcing the need for targeted interventions to counteract centuries of imposed prejudice and marginalization.

Ambivalence in Social Attitudes: Reverence and Stigma

Attitudes toward Hijras are characterized by a profound and often contradictory ambivalence, representing a complex psychological and social negotiation. On one hand, Hijras are frequently sought out for specific ritual performances, particularly **badhai** ceremonies conducted during childbirth, weddings, or housewarmings. During these events, they are seen as possessing the spiritual authority to bless the participants, ensuring fertility, prosperity, and good fortune. This reverence stems from mythological accounts and traditional beliefs that link them to powerful deities and grant them a unique, liminal status outside the conventional gender binary. The perceived potency of their blessings ensures they maintain a foothold in the cultural landscape, guaranteeing their temporary acceptance and ritual importance within the societal structure, often eliciting respect mixed with a degree of fear.

Conversely, immediately outside of these ritual contexts, the dominant social attitude reverts swiftly to deep-seated stigma, exclusion, and intense prejudice. In everyday life, Hijras face widespread discrimination in public spaces, employment, education, and housing. They are often subjected to verbal abuse, physical violence, and public ridicule, resulting in severe social isolation. This stigma is rooted in societal discomfort with gender nonconformity, coupled with the historical criminalization and the association of their survival strategies (such as begging or sex work) with immorality and deviance. The psychological mechanism at play here is often the defense mechanism of splitting, where the community is categorized into a powerful, sacred figure during ritual contexts and a despised, marginalized outcast in daily interactions, protecting the general public from having to reconcile their own conflicting feelings about gender variance.

This dynamic tension between reverence and revulsion creates immense psychological pressure on the Hijra community. While the possibility of delivering a powerful blessing grants them occasional leverage, the constant threat of social ostracism necessitates resilience and the formation of strong internal support systems, known as **gharana** structures. Sociological analysis suggests that this ambivalence serves a societal function: it allows the dominant culture to acknowledge and ritualistically contain gender variance without having to fundamentally alter its rigid binary understanding of gender roles in the mainstream socio-economic sphere. Therefore, any effective intervention aimed at improving attitudes must address not just the overt discrimination but also the underlying cultural mechanisms that maintain this complex, contradictory state of conditional acceptance and pervasive exclusion.

The Role of Religion and Mythology

The spiritual status of the Hijra community is deeply entrenched in South Asian religious narratives, providing a foundational source for both their ritual power and their perceived difference. In Hinduism, the concept of the **third sex** or gender fluidity is not entirely absent, and specific deities

or mythical figures are often invoked to justify the Hijra identity. A prominent example is the worship of Bahuchara Mata, a goddess associated with fertility and chastity, who is traditionally considered a patron deity of the community. Devotion to Bahuchara Mata often involves vows of self-castration or service, linking the physical alteration to spiritual devotion and reinforcing their role as sacred intermediaries. This religious sanction provides a powerful counter-narrative against purely secular or biological definitions of gender, reinforcing their claim to a unique, divinely ordained social position.

Furthermore, Hijras are frequently referenced in major Hindu epics, solidifying their place in the collective consciousness. In the **Ramayana**, it is recounted that Lord Rama, upon leaving Ayodhya for exile, instructed his followers to return home. However, the Hijras, interpreting his command literally as applying only to men and women, remained behind, demonstrating unparalleled devotion. Upon his return, Rama, touched by their loyalty, granted them the boon of power to confer blessings and curses, cementing their ritual authority. This mythological validation is a critical psychological resource for the community, providing a source of collective pride and historical legitimacy that helps buffer the pervasive effects of modern prejudice and discrimination rooted in non-religious, often Westernized, societal norms.

However, the religious acknowledgment is not universally protective. While mythology grants them power, the practical application of religious law and social custom often prioritizes binary gender roles, leading to their exclusion from mainstream religious institutions and rituals not specifically designated for them. The persistence of the belief in their spiritual power often manifests as **fear** rather than genuine respect, as individuals seek to appease them to avoid their curse, rather than integrating them fully into society. This transactional relationship, driven by superstition, highlights the fragility of their religiously derived status. To foster truly inclusive attitudes, the focus must shift from fearing their punitive power to recognizing their inherent human dignity, moving beyond the mythical role into the sphere of civil and human rights, addressing the psychological distance maintained by the general population.

Socioeconomic Marginalization and Survival Strategies

The attitudes of systemic exclusion translate directly into severe socioeconomic marginalization for the Hijra community, creating immense pressure on their survival strategies. Due to historical prejudice and ongoing discrimination, Hijras are routinely denied access to formal education and stable employment opportunities in the mainstream economy. Employers, guided by deep-seated biases regarding gender identity and perceived social deviance, often refuse to hire them, regardless of their qualifications. This widespread economic exclusion ensures that the majority of Hijras remain highly vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, and exploitation, forcing them to rely on traditional, often precarious, sources of income that further reinforce negative public attitudes.

The core survival strategies adopted by the community--performance (badhai), ritual begging (seeking alms), and, critically, sex work--are direct consequences of their exclusion from formal labor markets. While the badhai ceremonies are culturally sanctioned and provide income, they are often inconsistent. Ritual begging, though traditional, reinforces the public image of Hijras as dependent outsiders, fueling contempt. Furthermore, economic desperation forces many into sex work, which exposes them to high levels of violence, health risks (particularly HIV/AIDS), and further criminalization, intensifying the cycle of stigma. Psychologically, this dependency on stigmatized labor creates a profound sense of external shame and internalized stigma, contributing significantly to high rates of mental health issues within the community.

Attempts to integrate Hijras into the formal economy face significant attitudinal barriers. Even when vocational training programs are offered, the lack of acceptance from potential employers and the public's discomfort with having Hijras in visible, professional roles often undermines these efforts. Addressing this requires not merely skills training, but comprehensive anti-discrimination mandates coupled with extensive public awareness campaigns designed to deconstruct the long-held stereotypes associating Hijras exclusively with begging or sex work. Until mainstream society accepts them as capable and deserving economic participants, the negative attitudes derived from observing their marginalized economic status will persist, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of exclusion and dependence.

Legal Recognition and Policy Shifts

A significant shift in the legal landscape regarding attitudes toward Hijras occurred with the landmark 2014 ruling by the Supreme Court of India in the case of **National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India**. This pivotal judgment legally recognized transgender and Hijra persons as the **Third Gender**, affirming their fundamental rights under the Constitution, including the rights to dignity, life, and personal liberty. Crucially, the ruling mandated that the government provide affirmative action measures, such as reservations in education and employment, and ensure health services that are sensitive to their unique needs. This legal recognition marked a formal governmental acknowledgment of their identity and represented a major step toward dismantling the institutionalized prejudice inherited from the colonial era, providing a legal framework for challenging pervasive negative attitudes.

However, the implementation of these progressive legal mandates has been slow and often met with bureaucratic inertia and continued societal resistance. Subsequent legislative efforts, such as the **Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act**, have been criticized by the community for procedural shortcomings and for potentially undermining the spirit of the NALSA judgment, particularly concerning requirements for identity certification. The gap between legal theory and social reality remains vast; while the law demands respect, everyday societal attitudes often lag far behind. Many government officials, police personnel, and healthcare providers retain deeply

ingrained prejudices, leading to the continued denial of services, harassment, and failure to enforce protective measures, demonstrating that legal change alone is insufficient to alter deeply rooted psychological biases.

The process of legal recognition has also influenced public discourse by creating a formal language for discussing gender diversity, thereby facilitating greater visibility. This increased visibility, while necessary for advocacy, sometimes exacerbates prejudice among segments of the population uncomfortable with rapid social change. Therefore, the long-term effectiveness of these legal shifts hinges on the successful integration of anti-discrimination training across all public sectors and sustained educational efforts aimed at the general public. These efforts must emphasize that recognizing the legal rights of Hijras is not merely a matter of judicial compliance but a prerequisite for building an equitable and inclusive society, directly addressing and challenging the negative attitudes that fuel discrimination at the grassroots level.

Internal Dynamics and Community Structure

The attitudes and dynamics within the Hijra community itself are profoundly shaped by their need for mutual protection and survival in a hostile external environment. The community operates primarily through a highly formalized, kinship-based structure known as the **gharana** system, characterized by strict hierarchical relationships between the **Guru** (spiritual and administrative head) and the **Chela** (disciple). This system replaces the biological family structures from which many members are ostracized, providing essential psychosocial support, economic stability, and socialization into the unique cultural norms and rituals of the Hijra identity. The Guru acts as a protector, educator, and financial manager, demanding strict obedience in return for safety and belonging, ensuring the survival of the group identity.

The internal attitudes emphasize solidarity, resilience, and the maintenance of traditional practices, which serve as crucial coping mechanisms against external prejudice. New entrants, often young individuals fleeing rejection from their natal families, undergo rigorous socialization, learning the specialized language (such as the secret dialect known as Farsi), ritual performance techniques, and the communal code of conduct. This process fosters a strong collective identity, transforming the shame projected onto them by society into a source of unique cultural strength. The structure is psychologically essential, mitigating the effects of minority stress by providing a secure, affirming environment where their gender identity is not only accepted but formalized and celebrated.

However, the gharana system, while protective, is not without its own internal complexities and challenges. The hierarchical nature can sometimes lead to exploitation or abuse of power, particularly regarding the control of financial resources generated by the community. Furthermore, the emphasis on tradition sometimes conflicts with modern notions of individual autonomy and rights, particularly as younger generations interact more frequently with LGBTQ+ movements and

global discourses on gender identity. Understanding these internal dynamics is vital for external stakeholders, as effective support programs must acknowledge the traditional structures while simultaneously empowering members to advocate for their rights, navigating the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and promoting individual well-being against the backdrop of pervasive external negative attitudes.

Modern Activism and Changing Perceptions

Contemporary attitudes toward Hijras are increasingly influenced by the rise of modern activism and the global visibility of LGBTQ+ rights movements. Hijras have integrated into and, in many cases, pioneered these movements in South Asia, leveraging their unique cultural history to demand recognition and equality. This activism focuses not only on legal rights but also on challenging the deeply ingrained social stereotypes perpetuated by media and public discourse. Activists emphasize the distinction between the traditional, socio-religious identity of the Hijra and the Westernized concepts of transgender identity, though there is increasing coalition and solidarity between these groups in the fight against discrimination based on gender nonconformity.

Media representation plays a critical role in shaping evolving public attitudes. While traditional media often sensationalized or caricatured Hijras, focusing exclusively on their marginalized economic roles, modern media--particularly social media and independent film--has begun to offer more nuanced and humanized portrayals. These positive representations, featuring Hijras in professional roles, as political candidates, or as artists, serve to normalize their presence and directly challenge the public's ingrained prejudices. However, this increased visibility also brings backlash, as conservative elements of society react negatively to the assertion of identity, often leading to intensified online harassment and public confrontation, demonstrating the ongoing struggle for acceptance.

The shift in perception is fundamentally about moving from viewing Hijras as exoticized ritual figures or objects of pity to recognizing them as citizens with inherent rights and diverse capacities. Educational initiatives are crucial components of this shift, working to demystify the community and address the root causes of prejudice, such as ignorance and fear of the unknown. By participating actively in politics and public life, Hijras are forcing a confrontation with existing societal norms, gradually chipping away at the foundation of negative attitudes and fostering a slow, arduous transition toward genuine inclusion and respect, supported by the growing psychological understanding of the harm caused by minority stress and exclusion.

Psychological Impact of Societal Prejudice

The persistent, complex, and often violent negative attitudes directed toward the Hijra community result in severe and measurable psychological consequences, aligning closely with the framework

of **minority stress theory**. This theory posits that marginalized groups experience chronic, high levels of stress stemming from external prejudice, discrimination, and the anticipation of rejection, leading to significant mental health disparities. Hijras endure daily microaggressions, structural violence, and outright physical assaults, which contribute to elevated rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation compared to the general population. The internalized stigma, resulting from absorbing society's negative views of their identity, further compounds these issues, leading to self-hatred and diminished self-worth among vulnerable members.

The experience of family rejection is a major psychological trauma that often precedes entry into the gharana system. Many Hijras report being disowned, abused, or forced out of their homes, resulting in profound feelings of abandonment and loss. This initial trauma is then reinforced by systemic exclusion from education and employment, which fosters a sense of hopelessness and limits opportunities for positive identity formation outside the communal structure. Effective psychological interventions must therefore be trauma-informed, recognizing the cumulative impact of both early life rejection and continuous societal hostility, and must be delivered by practitioners who are culturally competent regarding the specific needs and socio-religious identity of the community.

Despite profound adversity, the Hijra community also demonstrates significant psychological resilience, largely fostered by the strong communal bonds of the gharana. The internal structure provides affirmation, shared coping strategies, and a sense of collective identity that acts as a buffer against external stress. Research indicates that successful coping mechanisms include strong adherence to cultural traditions, reliance on spiritual beliefs, and active participation in community advocacy. Recognizing and strengthening these internal protective factors is essential for promoting mental health and well-being. Ultimately, addressing the psychological impact of prejudice requires a dual approach: providing specialized therapeutic support to individuals while simultaneously engaging in large-scale societal efforts to dismantle the negative attitudes and discriminatory structures that are the primary source of their distress.