Revisiting *Nagarkirtan* (2017) and addressing the Hijra (Transgender/Third Gender) Community in Indian Context

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**Abstract:**

The article is a comparative study between the religious representation and social reality of the Hijra community of India. The article draws references from the religious texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and other ancient texts besides various religious rituals and festivals of India to highlight their religious representation. On the other hand, the Bangla film, *Nagarkirtan* (2017) has been taken to focus on their present and practical social living in the traditional Hindu society. In this way, the article attempts to study how they are marginalized in every possible way which threatens their very existence. This paper, overall attempts a critical gaze at the Hindu patriarchy that victimizes the ‘other’ communities like the Hijra or transgender in India.

**Keywords:** Hijra, Indian, Hindu, Patriarchy, Gender, Religion, Community, History, Marginalized, Practical, Real life.

In India, while the third gender includes a few different groups, the most common are the Hijras. Phillip Baumgart and Shariq Farooqi in “India’s hijras find themselves further marginalized amid the pandemic” published in the *Atlantic Council’s South Asia Center* point out, “The word 'Hijra’ is an umbrella term used to describe the socio-religious group of typically transgender women and intersex people who have long been part of South Asia's cultural tapestry. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, 'Hijra’ and 'transgender' are not synonymous, as Hijras occupy a space in the region's ancient religious traditions that modern,
globalized conceptions of transgenderism do not”. Over the years, since colonial rule imposing its own moral ideas on Indian culture, Hijras have been a marginalized community and they cannot place themselves in mainstream social structure of this country. Even before 2014, the third gender was not officially recognized in India. In this complex situation the majority of Hijras have been trying to claim their position in Indian society through their community consciousness in Hinduism as in Hindu religion they have a strong history of their origin and existence. The prevailing belief about them as a population is that they have a life-altering religious power. So Hijras are often treated with both respect and fear. Despite having an important position in Hindu religion in a country where majority follows Hinduism, Hijras are almost always excluded from ‘normal life’. Structurally any major world religion originated and has grown in patriarchal societies- that is, societies where men hold most of the culture's power, and people of any other gender are largely excluded from power structure. Therefore, Hijras are often victims of violence and abuse. After 2018, the liberalization and legal progress towards protecting gender and sexuality, India’s Hijra community continues to live on the fringes of society, particularly they find themselves further marginalized amidst the present pandemic of Covid-19.

Hinduism is the largest religion in India, with 79.8% of the population identifying themselves as Hindus, that accounts for 966 million Hindus as of National Census of India in 2011 making it as the world’s largest Hindu populated country with around 94% global Hindu population are being concentrated here. On Shashi Tharoor’s observation in his book ‘Why I Am a Hindu’ (2018) one assumes the uniqueness of Hinduism as it has no single founder or prophet, no organized church, no single holy book and so on; the faith is almost in the authorial diversity of its scriptures and tenets. In Hinduism, one imagines God in any form, since each form may be just as valid as another and none can be guaranteed to be more accurate than the next one. The various forms of God in Hinduism reducing abstract to the specific visual form, reflect the limitations of the human imagination rather than any shapes within which the divine must be confined. Indeed, Hindu legends have the gods manifesting themselves in so many shapes and
forms that the notion of one agreed form of God would be preposterous. Hinduism embraces an all-encompassing idea of human needs in a comprehensive vision—every person needs to learn and to earn; to have sex, food, and money; to love, to nurture, to assume responsibility; each individual also has a shared concern for the common good and an indefinable curiosity about the unseen, about that which can only be experienced and not understood through words. In such a religion that promotes pluralism, ‘Kinnar’ or Hijra people have been regarded as close to the Gods. It is forbidden in the Hindu religion to abuse a Hijra for fear of incurring the wrath of the Gods. Even in the great Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, there are numerous instances of the third gender holding a significant part of the story. It proves how they have not only been considered a normal part of ancient and medieval culture but also held an essential place in the epics, which are considered to be holy by a large portion of the Indian Hindu population. Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages in the world, was used to write all these major Hindu epics. Its grammar uses three genders: masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral. Transness was clearly recognized in India's past. Gopi Shankar Madurai says in National Queer Conference 2013, “Hindu society had a clear idea of all these people in the past. Now that we have put them under one label ‘LGBT’, there is lot more confusion and other identities have got hidden.” In the *Mahabharata*, Aravan or Iravan from whose lineage the transgenders are said to have been born, was the son of the great warrior, Arjuna and his wife, Ulupi, the Naga princess. He was a brave fighter like his father who fought in the Kurukshetra and gave himself up for a huge sacrifice. In the same epic, Shikhandi, a transgender person who was a woman reborn as a man, was considered the key to defeating the Kaurava army in the *Mahabharata*, and held a special place in Lord Krishna's eyes. Additionally, several tales of the Hijra community are prevalent as the mythical beliefs. Arjuna's change of appearance and Chitrangada's apparent transformation are relatively significant in the discourse of the Hijra community. The story of Ila, a king cursed by Shiva and Parvati to alternate between being a man and woman each month, appears in several traditional Hindu texts. Agni, the god of fire, wealth, and creative energy has same sex sexual encounters with Soma, the God of the moon. Mitra and Varuna are the gods of
great intimacy and often mentioned together in Vedic literature. The Bhagavata Purana lists Varuna and Mitra as having children through ayoni or non-vaginal sex. Some versions of the Bengali mythological text *Krittivasa Ramayana* contain a story of two queens of the Sun dynasty who conceived a child together. Again in Jayadratha's *Haracaritacintamani*, Ganesha's birth is the result of Parvavati's menstrual blood being washed into the Ganges, where it is swallowed by Parvavati’s elephant-headed handmaiden, Malini, who in turn gives birth, giving Ganesha an all-female origin. In some versions of the *Ramayana*, when Rama leaves Ayodhya for his 14-year exile, he orders his followers to return to their places in Ayodhya. When Rama returns, he finds that the Hijras have not moved from the place where he gave his speech. Impressed with their devotion, Rama grants Hijras the boon to confer blessings on people during auspicious inaugural occasions like child birth, marriages and fertility. Even in the Indian mythology, the stories of their origin also have a strong connection with the Lord Shiva, Lord Krishna and Bahuchara Mata. Hijras's purported supernatural powers are enshrined in Hindu mythology, and their gender fluidity mirrors the androgynous gods. The god Shiva is sometimes portrayed as half-male, half-female. There are many stories in which the male deity Krishna takes the form of a woman to briefly marry a man and the goddess Lakshmi and her husband, Vishnu, merge to form an androgynous person. Bahuchara Mata who stands for non-violence and innocence, is considered as the patron saint of the Hijra community. Ancient Indian texts like *Kama Sutra* describe the third gender as 'tritiya prakriti', or 'third nature', insinuating that three genders are the part of the natural order. Likely in Sangam literature there is a word called 'pedi' to refer to people born with intersex condition; it also refers to 'antharlinga' Hijras and various types of Hijra.

Paradoxically, Hijras have a sort of sanctioned and visible place in Hindu culture but in the contemporary Indian context, it is the gender nonconformity of the Hijra that has a major impact besides lack of a gender recognition, sexual expression, employment, decent housing, subsidized health-care services and as well as the violence they suffer, especially when they choose to take up formal works. Particularly, the community goes into a further vulnerable state
in this pandemic. The lockdown almost destroys the livelihoods of the Hijras who are usually daily wage earners. The Hijra community in India has existed with a recorded history of more than 4000 years. However, most Hijras live at the margins of society with very low status; the very word ‘Hijra’ is sometimes used in a derogatory manner. Although many Hijras identify themselves as Muslims (During the Muslim Mughal dynasty, some Hijras enjoyed prominent positions as political, and legal advisers, administrators and generals), many practice a form of syncretism that draws on multiple religions, they usually follow their lineage or origin and worship Hindu gods and goddesses. However, living in the Hindu structure is not a utopia for them. Hindu traditional literary sources say little about homosexuality directly. “Homoeroticism” in traditional texts is often masked by adherence to strict gender and caste rules”(Morgan, Lawton 15). “LGBT themes are often ignored by ‘heterosexist scholars', and even early investigations into sexual minorities in Hindu culture failed to analyze stories or artwork depicting same-sex sexual acts between mythological beings”(Murphy 281-282). As a result, seeking security from attacks and harassment, Hijras form clandestine, ghettoized communities under guru-disciple system. In this system, disciples become domestic servants, beggars or sex-workers in exchange of shelters. Additionally, India’s caste system plays a role in Hijras’s social stratification. Some gurus do not permit their disciples to collect ritual blessings because she was born into the lowest caste. However, in recent years, queer theorists and activists have reinterpreted ancient texts 'searching for alternative voices' that demonstrate the diversity of gender models and sexualities in Hinduism.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the high priestess of the Kinnar Akhada convent of Hindu Hijra priestesses in conversation for the Sapiens, an anthropological journal says that the Hijra community is reclaiming the lost position in society through religion. January of 2019 marked a turning point in the Hijra community's struggle for respect. For the first time, the Kinnar Akhada fully participated in the Kumbha Mela festival by taking the 'royal holy dip’- a ritual traditionally reserved for Hindu priests, who are mostly male and Brahmin, or upper caste. Traditionally, castration is believed to give Hijras the power to confer fertility on couples. This
is why Hijras consider themselves to be godlike, as they undergo such pain that ordinary men and women cannot even think of bearing. Koovagam is a unique Hindu festival that revolves around the transgender community. It is an 18-day long festival that is celebrated in Koovagam village in the southern portion of India. Lord Aravan, from the epic the Mahabharata is one of the core elements of the festival. Besides, there are several temple festival where Hijras participate with faith and enthusiasm. In 2014, India’s Supreme Court officially recognized the third gender. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi who was a co-petitioner in the law suit became happy and soon after, she embraced Hinduism and started the Kinnar Akhada, the first Hindu monastic order of Hijras. In another victory, India decriminalized homosexual sex in 2018, overturning a 160-year-old law instituted by the British. Still, Hijras face many hurdles. Even their efforts to reclaim their status through religion have also courted controversy. When Tripathi publicly supported construction of a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Rama, many Indian gender-nonconforming, trans, and intersex individuals condemned the Kinnar Akhada’s support for the temple, saying it fueled anti-Muslim sentiment. These clashes highlight a dilemma that attempting to legitimize the Hijras’s status through Hindu doctrines, do the Hijras risk excluding non-Hindus and hindering the tolerance they are trying to encourage?

Though, the Hijras have been given a special place in those Hindu religious texts, the present scenario of this community tells a very different story. To understand their present condition in contemporary society of India, we would like to concentrate on the Bangla film, Nagarkirtan (2017) which has been used as a main text of our central argument.

Nagarkirtan (2017), a very significant and famous Bangla film by Koushik Ganguly captures the dynamic aspects of the life of those people who do not fall in the simplified, straitjacketed and, what is generally supposed to be, the ‘normative’ gender division of masculine and feminine or the biological attributes of being either male or female. As the English subtitle, The Eunuch and the Flute Player, would suggest, this film explores and highlights the almost invisible and unrecognized section of the society—the transgender, the eunuch or the Hijra- in their common and everyday existence torn between their desires and
expectations as a human being and the practical social reality that generally fails or, better to say, refuses to response positively. In a way, this film offers an important critique of our traditional society that deprives the transgender of their various social rights and dignities, economic opportunities and, mental and emotional well being. They have no social acceptance and recognition of their physical and emotional needs which are absolutely necessary for human survival. Now, let us concentrate on the representation of the transgender and their different experiences through the various characters, situations and incidents that the film has to offer.

The theme of *Nagarkirtan* (2017) is love and its tragic end. But this is not Romeo-Juliet type love happening between people of opposite sex and gender. This is a love between a woman trapped in man’s body, Parimal/Pari/Puti, the transgender and a man, Madhu. Both of them are from the family with comparatively poor economic background with little or no social influence. The narrative begins from the middle, the present and then moves to past returning again to present to move forward to future. In fact, there is a brilliant interplay, interchange and intermingle of time present, time past and time future adding fluidity to the narrative that deftly captures human experience adding authenticity to the narrative and making the characters living with an incredible touch of familiarity and nearness. The beginning is very ironic and oxymoronic as well. It shows how same thing, love can produce two completely opposite reaction from society. We see Puti, the trans-woman secretly and cautiously rushing through the lanes in Kolkata to meet Madhu waiting with a cab ready to fly to ferry ghat to boat to Nabadwip, Madhu’s village. With this visual we have a simultaneous background audio of Kirtan, religious song describing the meeting of Radha, after facing various hurdles and difficulties, with her lover, Shyam in Brindaban. The song further describes how excited Radha is to meet her lover and how all her “sakhis” female companions are beautifying her to her heart’s content for that occasion. So, that is the song that the group of people, *kirtanians* have been singing with great devotion. We can easily associate the Radha in song with the Radha (Puti, the protagonist) in the film as both of them share the same kind of feeling for their loved ones just as we can find association between Shyam, the beloved of Radha and Madhu, who is a skillful
player of flute which is an inseparable part of Shyam in the song. However, the identifications are not free from irony. The love between Radha and Shyam becomes a matter of spiritual celebration but the love between Puti and Madhu becomes a matter of secrecy, something which needs to be hidden from the common eye. Now, why it has to be so? Why one love is celebrated and spiritualized while other neglected and demonized? Does our (Hindu) religion promote this kind of discriminations?

To address those issues with comprehensive understanding, we need to see that matter from a larger perspective, the Patriarchy which uses different social institutions and religion as well to politicize gender and maintain its power. It’s the patriarchal discourse that has disseminated the hegemony that love to be considered as ‘love’ worth of celebration and social acceptance has to happen between two straight individual of opposite sex without any exception. Over the ages, this concept has been so deeply rooted in the common consciousness that even ones own parents and family refuse to accept and recognize somebody other than male and female or masculine and feminine. We have this kind of instance from the film in Puti’s, the trans-woman, childhood. In Puti’s childhood when he was called Parimal who participated in an event, ‘Go As You Like’, he begged the first position in the guise of “Maa Sharoda” a woman. But, Parimal’s father, a watch mechanic far from appreciating Parimal for winning the prize, was dissatisfied and even furious over the fact that his son had dressed like a girl. Parimal’s father was very much aware of the female entity inside his son’s body, “His [Parimal] way of walking, behaving and speaking are all different…like a girl. If this is entertained at present, all will be lost later in future.”[translation mine]. But, unfortunately, in spite of the awareness of Parimal’s father about the ‘female’ identity within his son’s male body, he, a father did not accept him the way he was. He (the father) rather tried hard to make his boy a boy and behave like a ‘boy’ neglecting the ‘girl’ inside him (Parimal). This is what Parimal turned Puti relates to his lover, Madhu, “In reality, I am a girl…They [Parimal’s family] could not make me a boy [a man]by making me wear Pant-Shirt [boy’s clothes] and naming me Parimal [generally a name for a boy] …By birth I am like this…a girl [ a woman].”
However, as Parimal or Puti said that his family could not suppress the girl within his body. So, Parimal began to grow up as a girl or woman with all the dreams and expectations that a woman might have in a traditional society. Parimal fell in love with his private tutor, Subhas Da who also reciprocated and used to call him Pari, generally given to a girl in India. But, Subhas betrayed Pari and got married to Pari’s sister. This Pari’s dream to marry, to have Subhas as his Husband and ultimately to have a family dashed to the ground. This actually shows the limitations of the traditional and contemporary society’s patriarchal perspective of ‘family’. We cannot think that a trans-man/woman and man can also constitute a family, a woman with a woman can build a family or a man can also build up a nice family with his male partner. The contemporary cultural representations like the Indian Television serials, shows, cinemas and various religious representations from various myths, Ramayana or Mahabharata and tendency of the contemporary political leaders in power are both continue to uphold and consolidate the same kind of patriarchal discourse about family, society, love, marriage, home which the uncritical mass accept and glorify.

We have a figure in this cinema, Nagarkirtan (2017), who represents the voice of the present hegimonised patriarchal Hindu society of India. This is Madhu’s (present lover of Puti) elder brother from a village in Nabadwip. Madhu and his elder brother are from a family of professional ‘kirtanians’ (who sing devotional songs in various religious occasions). When the fact gets disclosed that Madhu has brought a hijra (eunuch) or trans-woman, Puti to their family, this is how Madhu’s elder brother reacts, “Nobody has dared to point a finger towards the house of this kirtanians for that many years. But, you have managed that to happen today. Didn’t you feel ashamed even for once!?” So, Madhu’s elder brother makes a point clear while Madhu is about to leave the house to search for Puti, who has ran away after the discovery of his transgender identity, “Listen, now that you are going, please, don’t set your foot over the threshold of this house ever again.” Madhu’s father and mother do not try to stop Madhu or say anything except throwing glances of embarrassment for and shame on Madhu. So, here, Madhu too becomes the victim of Patriarchal hegemony. Madhu’s mistake is that he has been in love
with a woman inside a man whom he brought his home. Both, Madhu and Puti have tried to threaten patriarchy and its power-politics and therefore, both are rejected by their family and society.

Now, a point to ponder over is, is there any way they can compromise with the traditional social and religious discourse? The film, Nagarkirtan has addressed this issue as well. In this film, Puti, trans-woman proposes to go through sex reassignment surgery to transform his body into a woman’s body that can match with his inner woman entity so that Puti can marry Madhu and have a family of his own. But, the plan does not work due to their poverty. But, again the question arises, even if Puti could have done so, would the society have accepted his ‘new identity’ of being a woman? Can the society accept the woman made out of a trans-gender’s body? Let us remember a speech in the film, Nagarkirtan (2017) from another important figure Manabi Bandopadhyay, a transgender, well known as the first transgender Principal of a College, who herself is a character with the same name in the film, Nagarkirtan (2017) and who has physically transformed himself into a woman through sex reassignment surgery, “By Govt. record, Manabi Bandopadhyay is a woman today, but still the woman professors of the college did not let me enter their toilet. The people would make you understand the difference between the real and the fabricated by slapping on your face everyday.” (Manabi Bandopadhyay who is a principal of Krishnanagar Women’s College in the film makes that comment when Puti and Madhu come to her for suggestion about sex reassignment surgery.) In the Indian English daily, The Indian Express, dated May 27, 2015, Piyasree Dasgupta wrote about Manabi Bandopadhyay:

She took to travelling in the women’s compartments of local trains to work. But she realised that a woman’s body did not shield her from objectification. “When I [Manabi Bandopadhyay] would travel in a general compartment, I drew stares. But the woman’s compartment, more than being liberating, felt like an enclosure of chickens for tomcats on the prowl!”
Manabi Bandopadhyay further said in the same English Daily as quoted by Piyasree Dasgupta, “...no woman is stranger to the feeling of invasive hands trying to run over their bodies in the anonymity of a crowd. I felt, after I physically transformed into a woman, these touches were less hesitant, as if I was ‘easy’.”

So, what all these statements and references above suggest is that a transgender even though he physically transforms himself into a woman, is ‘not’ or cannot be a ‘real woman’ or ‘complete woman’. They will ever be considered (in words of Partha, a character from another film, Chitrangada: A Crowning Wish(2012), dealing with the same issue of transgender) as the “half” or the “synthetic” woman. That is why they will never have an entry into the social institutions like marriage, family and home. That’s why Puti must die. That’s why Manabi Bandopadhy must live all alone by herself. There is no way that a transgender can live with his new identity forgetting his past one because society would not let him do that. Their transgender identity becomes a social stigma from which there is no salvation ever except through death.

Since there is no way of social inclusion or acceptance of the trans-genders, it is no wonder that they are bound to suffer economically. Their social marginalization leads to their economic marginalization as well and which in turn pushes them further into the zone of political amnesia and negligence. So, we see Puti along with other fellow trans-genders singing with traditional claps of Hijras and collecting money at the traffic signals where the other men are selling either clothes or other essentials or going for a delivery of food. But, we should not think or talk about their social, economic and political rights unless or until we ask our-selves, do we consider them as ‘Human Being’? Do we really believe that they have dignity of their own and deserve respect?

Thus, the transgenders and the Hijras are suffering social exclusion, economic deprivation and emotional emptiness and anxiety where their previous connection in with the Hindu religious texts do not or cannot pave their way into the main stream of life. Their religious
representation and present practical social existence in India become almost oxymoronic. The present socio-religious and political structures of India Hindu society cannot do justice to the Hijras and transgenders since all those structures are heavily coated with patriarchal perspective. So, those structure needs to deconstruct and reconstruct first before the Hijras and the transgenders can hope for better future in traditional Hindu society. But, the change in outside structures is not possible without the change within. So, we must change our mind, our conscious so that we can accept and recognize the fact, as Madhu does at the end of the film, Nagarkirtan(2017), that “Hijre ra o manus” (The Hijras are human being too). We must try to hear the voice of the trans people and (as Stephen Whittle said in “Forword” to The Transgender Studies Reader) “…in order to hear the voices of trans people, as justice demands, one has to acknowledge the limit of sex and gender and move into a new world in which any identity can be imagined, performed and named” (XV). So at the end we must not forget what Susan Stryker said in (De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies” of the same book mentioned above, “‘gender’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity”(3).

Works Cited


