

## **IV. MY WORLD, MY PEOPLE**

(IAV 86)

Society is defined as a group of people with common territory, interaction, beliefs and culture. According to Bhushan et al it is a highly structured system of human organization. Human beings are connected by a complex network of social relations. They associate together for religious cultural, political, patriotic, benevolent and other purposes. The way of life of the members of the society is called as the culture of the society. Haralimbos defines culture as “the collection of habits and ideas which the members learn, share, and transmit from generation to generation”(48).The culture of the society provides an important part of the guidelines and directives necessary for an ordered society.

Clyde Kluckohn’s elegant description of culture as a “design for living” held by members of a particular society conveys the need for culture in a society. Only a shared culture ensures communication and co-operation. Culture has two primary tendencies, according to Haralambos, “Firstly it is learned and secondly it is shared” (49). Culture regulates the society’s actions and it defines the outlook on life. It defines the accepted ways of behavior for members of a particular society. Not all societies accept or share the same cultural values. Some customs that appear strange and remote prove sensible, rational or accepted, as part of life for some other societies.

The process of internalization of their culture by individuals is called socialization. Every member of the society learns the large number of guidelines, which direct their conduct in particular situations, by this process. These guidelines are the norms that they internalize from a very tender age. As they grow up, they occupy a number of social positions called statuses. The social roles of the individual at various stages and statuses regulate and organize their behavior.

As an aspect of culture, these roles provide essential guidelines and directives necessary for an ordered society. Every status of the society is accompanied by certain norms, which guide how an individual of the status is expected to act.

Society's impositions are not accepted totally with implicit obedience by all members. There are members who deviate from the prescribed paths. Deviance consists of those acts which do not follow the norms and expectations of a particular social group. Deviance cannot be defined in isolation. It can be defined only in relation to a particular standard. But no standard can be absolute or permanent. The standards set by the society are always in a state of flux. It keeps changing according to the age and developments during that particular age. Two main reasons assigned for deviance are physiological and psychological. Genetic makeup and abnormality predispose individuals to acts of deviance.

Inequality and marginalization created by society act as the prompters of deviance. Some groups enjoy privileges to the detriment of other groups. Biological inequality is natural but sociological is not. But these biological inequalities are the foundation upon which the society raises the edifice of social inequality. This structure of social inequality is assimilated by the members of the society as a culture and is handed over to posterity, until some enlightened members understand the predicament of the subalterns and take up their cause. They strive to bring about a change in what is perceived normal and which is culturally defined. Normality is a term used to define human behavior in any culture. At the same time as Haralambos opines "abnormality is a term used by the particular civilization for those behaviors that it does not use" (249). The long traditional habits of the society, which condition the way the members look at the problems, need persistent pressure to alter the members' outlook and to bring about social justice.

Indian mainstream society, which has been in existence since time immemorial, is made of various cultures, customs, religions, myths and social practices. It has regions, which have distinct social and cultural formations. Religion and mythology structured the Indian society, laying the foundation for a heterogeneous culture. Religion has been the backbone of Indian social power. Varnashramadharma- conduct of one's life according to position (Varna) and stage of life (Ashrama), became the basic tenet of Indian Social life. Caste brought hierarchical elements into play not only in Hinduism but in the other prominent religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. The foreign rulers both Islamic and European played a role in bringing about modifications in the cultural practices.

Western education imparted by the British has had its own bearing in influencing the thought process of the Indian society. English education had exerted not only positive but also negative impacts. It has sought to understand the ways in which meaning is generated, disseminated and produced, through various beliefs and customs, institutions, political, economic and social structures within the culture. But it has super imposed its ethical values on a culture, which was at variance with it, especially in relation to the treatment of sexuality and gender. The British imposed the then prevailing Victorian sexual mores on Indian soil. Until the Mogul period not only was there a plurality of sexualities but also no criminalization of sexual practices.

Western belief that there are only two sexes and two genders - its binary fixation, contradicts with the oriental belief which considers sexuality fluid. The occidental belief that the sexes are permanently, biologically determined and each exclusive of the meanings and characteristics of the other imposed itself on many of the cross gender and third gender roles in the non western societies, as a result of which they fell into oblivion. The cultural imperialism associated with colonialism, modernization and westernization had a role in bringing about a

change in perception about the different gender identities. Later the post modern analysis, critical theories, LGBT and queer studies have liberalized the binary rigidity and have validated the existence of other forms of sexuality, renewing interest in the study of alternative gender categories and their significance to the mainstream society.

Third gender roles and gender transformation form an inseparable aspect of Indian mythical theme. Many Hindu myths attest the perception of the self as transsexual. The great gods Shiva and Vishnu transformed into female forms in a cycle of myths. The Ardhanarishwara - half female and half male form of Shiva and the Mohini avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu are very ancient myths. The lunar clan of ancient India owes its beginnings to the union between Budha and Ila, who were cursed to be transsexuals. Budha was cursed by Brihaspathi, the king of demons for his mother Thara's infidelity, to be neither man nor woman. Budha wanted to marry Ila who was actually king Ila cursed into becoming a woman. Ila with goddess Parvathi's benevolence remained a man during alternate months. Budha and Ila made a good match to produce progeny, who were called the lunar clan. The great epic *the Mahabharata* which is the story of the lunar clan- 'Chandra Vamsa' has many more myths about transsexuals, those of Shikandi, Brihannala and Krishna assuming the forms of women, a reminder of their ancestry. According to Doniger the term *kliba* that has been in existence since ancient days includes a "wide range of meanings under the general rubric of a man who does not act the way a man should act" (280). It is a "catch all term that traditional Hindu culture coined to indicate a man who is in their term sexually dysfunctional" (280). It included sterile, impotent, castrated, transvestite males with defective sexual organs and finally a hermaphrodite.

There are also stories of transformation of women into men in Indian mythology though they are rare. Amba, the discarded princess was transformed into Shikandi, the warrior

son/daughter of Drupada and acted as the human shield for Arjuna to slay Bhishma in the Kurukshetra war. The myth of Gangamma enacted during Telugu jatra (festivals) and the Cudala myth of Kashmir are other examples of female to male transformation. The purpose of all these myths, composed by humans actually reflects the human attitudes to sexual transformation. The transsexual gods and the stories that revolve around them tell explicitly about the way of the world, about deviances and about alternative sexualities and the fluidity of sexualities. These myths contribute to the Hindu view that sex or gender does not form an intrinsic part of human identity, but it is the Karma (deeds) that makes the difference. *Manu Smrithi* (the ancient Indian law book) recognizes a 'thrithiya prakriti' (third gender) apart from the male and the female sexes, adding strength to the Hindu belief about the fluidity of sexuality.

Transgenders, who are called hijras by the Indian society, form a part and parcel of Hindu Culture. They fulfill a socio cultural role that is exclusively reserved for them. The well known role of hijras, as omens of good will, especially in North India speaks of their importance during wedding ceremonies as performers and in blessing new born male babies to bring fertility and good luck to the child. India's westernization and urbanization which started with the European rule had ruined their traditional role, as it had done to other traditional practices, creating a vicious cycle that has reduced them to be mere beggars and prostitutes, earning them contempt, disdain and hatred from the mainstream society.

This chapter concentrates on the hijra culture not only for the light it sheds on issues concerned with gender roles but also on other political issues that call for immediate rectification. A variety of factors have contributed to this revitalizing of transgender politics. They are "the new political concept of queerness, the AIDS epidemic, the rapid development of the internet" (Stryker122).

The texts explore the social context of the transgender lives and give precious information about a group that has virtually been neglected. Insights into these lives can provide an understanding of their culture and an opportunity to understand our own culture better. The three books chosen for study endow the readers with in-depth knowledge about the transgenders' ancient and significant way of life. They high light the social structures in a hijra household - 'parivaar' and also the several cultural rites practised by the clan, the feeling of spiritual pride in 'real' hijras, though they are harassed, hounded and marginalized. The tolerance level of Indian society towards them had been eroded by the British regime which accused hijras of having "carnal intercourse, against the order of nature" in its Indian Penal Code, Section 377. But they have striven hard to create and sustain their culture, in order to earn the satisfaction of having led a fruitful and meaningful life. The books also validate a positive identity for them by identifying alternative gender roles with deities and mythic figures of Hinduism. Transgender visibility, that has increased manifold times after the interest shown by journalists, human right activists and LGBT movement have all prepared a receptive atmosphere for the authors to air their rights and views through their works. The books chosen vindicate the protagonists' life choices and also give expression to the repercussions they faced due to their options. The authors do not stop with limiting them in their frame work of sex/gender difference but "go far beyond by providing an insight into the complexity of their lives and their embeddedness within the social fabric of India"(Reddy 4).

The transgender community has assimilated most of the social and cultural aspects from the mainstream society. Though they were respected in the earlier times for example, Shigandi and appreciated during the Mughal period notably the eunuchs like Malikafur, it was a challenge to seek honor and dignity as equal citizens. Being born in an atmosphere, where group cohesion

is the accepted norm the dependence of transgenders on their community is entirely consistent with the structure of Indian society. Unlike the westerners who believe in individualism, Indians believe in community cohesion and this in-built trait makes the transgender people stick together. Moreover rejection of the transgenders by their natal families makes them seek refuge in a social set up. They leave the family to erase the stigma that their presence casts on the family's reputation. An example of the illtreatment meted out by the family, where even the mother was a witness is narrated in *The Truth about Me*:

I tried to protect my face and head with my hands to keep the blows from falling. But nevertheless they came down hard, and I felt my hands swell. I was beaten on my legs, on my back, and finally my brother brought the bat down heavily on my head. My skull cracked and there was blood all over, flowing, warm

'That's right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away', I heard my mother say. (55)

They understand early that dependence on the group is very important and independence is mere social suicide. Ample evidence to this fact is provided in all the three texts, where the protagonists' fears from a very early stage are assuaged only by those who belonged to their kind. When Saravanan realized that in a world of men and women he was going to be a problem, he decided to pursue his path, his life, desires and dreams with thirunangais in Pune. In the same way Doraisamy could immediately recognize the similarity between the men on the fort in Namakkal and felt close to them, even affectionate and "his heart grew calm" (TTAM18). When Suyambu reaches his mentor, Ganga Devi, she accepts him into her fold saying "Just as a river

flows into the ocean so you have come to us. Don't worry. Hence forth, all your ups and downs shall be with us" ((TTG194).

The dependence of transgenders on their community duplicates the mainstream social set up. They subject themselves willingly to the hierarchy, pool their resources and share expenditures which replicate the economic adaption of the mainstream society. They are provided with the much needed security and solace during times of trouble as a payback offer. When Doraisamy / Revathi has had her operation it is only people of her class who could understand and help her, "being with other pottais helped us bear with it" (TTAM82) He says that "We are in a sense, like a flock of crows. We stick together and gain strength because of numbers". (TTAM82). When Vidya was bullied in the train during one of her train begging routines, Priya was beside her and screamed at the man:

"Who cares if you are a soldier? Come with us to the Pune Police Station. We'll hold a parade for you there. All the transgenders will be waiting there for you. We won't let you cross Pune. Just wait and see". (IAV104).

They pretended to mobilize the whole community which was enough to scare the opponent who was advised to settle the issue amicably by the on lookers, who suggested, "Why do you want to antagonize these people?" (IAV104).

The transgenders date their origins to the pre-Muslim rule even, to the mythical days of Ramayana, but it is Muslims who brought them closer instead of pushing them away. So their presence in the Muslim ruled North India and Hyderabad is validated. All the three main characters Doraisamy, Saravanan and Suyambu and most of the transgenders of Tamilnadu flee to Dehi, Bombay or Hyderabad to join the community of hijras who welcome them with open

arms. When Doraisamy reached Delhi, the mother who adopted him explains the ways of hijras there, "In this Hindi country we hijras are meant to do this and not other things...In the old days hijras waited upon queens and princesses." (TTAM44) Saravanan confides:

“If we want to live as women and stay clear of violence and atrocities, we have no option but to go north. Some go to Mumbai and some to Delhi or Kolkota. I went to Pune because Arunamma who adopted me had connections there”. (IAV88)

Vidya continues:

South Indians are god fearing,religious people. But no myth, no epic seems to have positive impact on them where thirunangais are concerned. They don't seem to realize that thirunangais eat, sleep, work hard and live just like others. They look down on them, they approach them in a domineering spirit, with contempt, with disgust as if their very proximity can pollute (88).

The words used in Tamil, Telugu for transgenders - pottai and kojja have negative denotations. They are used derogatorily, whereas the term hijra used in the north does not translate thus. There is a hidden honor in the use of the word hijra. But the glaring paradox of this situation is that, there are temples for Koothandavar / Aravaan, their deity in places called Koovaagam, Pillaiyar Kuppam and Manjakuppam in Tamilnadu. Aravaan is the mythical husband of all transgenders and is worshipped on Chitra Purnami. (April full Moon day) Most of the transgenders throughout India deem it a duty to visit one of these places at least once in their life time probably, in imitation of the mainstream society's belief that one's life is not complete without a pilgrimage to Kasi/Varanasi and Rameshwaram.

Social relationships define identities and statuses in India. This inbuilt mechanism instigates the transgenders to strike a relationship with others of their ilk to tide over stigmatization and marginalization by the mainstream society. The hijra society imitates the themes of hierarchy, respectability and reciprocity of the mainstream society. The social structure of transgenders and their cultural norms reveal how these serve their own community and also in adopting to the mainstream society and allows the transgender community to survive and thrive. The transgenders live in a house of five to fifteen members. Some live alone but definitely keep tabs on the communities of their locality. Though their preferences and independence, talents and ambitions make some stay away, they do share a part of their income and expertise with the community.

The household of the transgenders is like a commune. The members who join the household contribute their earning to the household and in doing all the domestic chores. They in turn get shelter, food and protection from police and ruffians. Whatever their nature of work, begging, performing or prostitution they get a place for their business. Doraisamy makes this aspect of their life clear:

"I lived in this situation for six months, attending to my nani, helping around the house, listening to her advice. There were two others at home my gurubais who went to the shops to collect money like I did and helped with the house work". (65)

Revathi talks about the protection given by her people when she had to earn her living as a sex worker she confides, "If there were rowdies troubling us, my gurubais would handle them. They never involved me in this" (106). Houses in transgender culture serve as both "physical and social units of identity or lineage affiliation" (Reddy 9). Houses can be assumed to be symbolic

descent groups like clans. The members belonging to one house may reside in different households. The houses are not connected with any particular trade. Members of all the houses are involved in all kinds of work as and how they want. Each of the members will do a different job - train begging, traffic begging badai or shop begging. The houses that make up the clans take away the castes among transgenders. Revathi gives a vivid account of these facts:

While there are no castes among hijras, there are houses or clans. There are seven clans or houses, and each has its own name. Hijras can choose their guru from any house and sometimes shift their allegiance to another house. This is allowed. Each of the seven houses has its own elected or chosen head, known as *naik*. A naiks' *parivar* comprises sister, younger sister, daughter, and granddaughter and so on. But they don't necessarily live together, and meet occasionally, at festivals or when jamaats hold their meetings...I also came to understand that hijras had evolved a culture of their own to enable them to exercise order and restraint and also to exercise rights. (62)

The *naik* takes care of settling disputes and initiation or change over from a house of a new recruit. The word *Jamaat* is from Muslim culture, and it is like a village Panchayat. The importance given to Islam may be due to the patronage they received earlier as eunuchs, from the Moghul courts as guards of the king's harem. Though hijras give a pride of place to Islam they derive their livelihood by practicing Hindu religious rites. Another reason for the choice of Islam can be due to its egalitarian ideal, in comparison with the hierarchical nature of Hindu caste system. The members of hijras' houses come from all sections of society, irrespective of caste, religion and class and so there is a union of ideas from those members with a variety of social background. Though they do not have caste or religious differences, there are rivalries among

hijras about their parivars and houses. "I did not have the support of hijras who shared the house with me because I was a pottai from another parivar"(145) is the lamentation of Revathi.

The guru-chela relationship provides not only an economic network but a social one too. These social networks are the basis for the geographical movement of the community which is a marked characteristic they put to best use to earn their livelihood. When Saravanan decides to become a woman he seeks the help of Arunamma a transgender who ran a social service outfit:

I told Arunamma I had made up my mind, but did not want to beg in Chennai. Could she help me to relocate elsewhere?... Aruna held my hands with love and concern. Aruna decided to send me to Pune, to her 'amma' and my nani, Sarada Ammal". (73)

The fictive kinship gives a base for livelihood and favorable conditions to carry on their business. Seniority is a vital element of social setup in the community of hijras. It is not judged by age but by the time of joining the community. Seniority is expressed in a hierarchy of gurus and chelas. Seniority is accorded prime importance in deciding and settling issues, such as decisions about who has to undergo surgery first. The question is settled by considering seniority. "Ayah came to a decision. 'Satya is your senior; let her go first, you go after her,' she said... Sugandhi Ayah was particular about seniority. There was no point in pleading with her (IAV14). But when it comes to making a choice of a person to undergo nirvana, only the discretion of the elders count. For instance Doraisamy was allowed to undergo the operation along with two others who "had been at nani's house for longer than I had" (TTAM65).

Seniors demanded implicit obedience from the new recruits. During his first outing with Sathya, Saravanan narrates an event:

'you can't beg in any of these shops, OK'? Satya said to me. 'Not just this bazaar, you can't beg in any of the bazaars around our street. Do you understand?'

'Why, Akka?.'

Don't ask why. You can't, you must not' Satya was firm. Wasn't she my senior? Though only slightly older than me, she had been part of the Tirunangai community for quite a few years now. In her speech and actions, she constantly reminded you of her seniority.

(90)

Kinship is of vital importance to this community. It is a social arrangement which duplicates the mainstream family and organizes the reproduction of material life. It is inconceivable for a transgender to remain without a kin network. Nobody hears of a hijra leading an independent and aloof life. Despite constant complaints about their chores and abuse meted out to them by their gurus nobody dares to live alone. As Reddy states, "Hijra authenticity and relatedness are evaluated in terms of belonging - having a rit, a guru and extended hijra kin-factors that signal not just hijra identity but also their difference from others"(143). What authenticated and legitimized transgender status is the rit in their chosen houses and their relationship with their gurus. Only those who had a rit in a hijra household are perceived to have a status. The hijras claim a non procreative identity but still follow hegemonic rituals and principles by entering into a 'parivar' and establishing kinship with others.

The initiation into transgender world is called 'rit' in their parlance. If a transgender has to stay with people like her she has to have his ears and nose pierced, let his hair grow long and learn their ways. When Doraisamy's nani advised him against wearing a sari till his hair grew long and to live in male attire he did not understand the meaning behind the caution. Only later he realized:

If I wore a sari without growing my hair I would be seen a man wearing a sari and that meant dishonor for the entire household. I learnt too that while we felt like women it was equally important to look like them and the long hair was an important marker of being feminine. (28)

Having feminine ways and enacting gendered practices are some of the important determinants. Though looking like a woman is not a compulsory criterion, most of them valued it, as it quenched their inner thirst. One of the elders on seeing Doraisamy exclaimed, "If this one were to undergo nirvana she'd look like a real woman. Others agree too, 'yes. Amma she has no facial hair and is very beautiful" (22). Moreover they should be a chela (disciple) to a guru and do whatever work given. If they satisfied her, the guru would agree to help them fulfill their desire of becoming a woman by providing the means for the performance of nirvana. The chela was adopted according to their tradition, before their jamaat. "A jamaat is a meeting of sari clad elders. They discuss matters of importance to them and others like them, agree to take on chelas and so on"(TTAM23). They play a stellar role during settling of disputes between household, houses and during the changeover of chelas.

During the ritual of rit, the jamaat members sit in a circle, covering their heads with their sari. A steel plate placed in the centre has a white cloth cover with betel leaves and coconut. The guru offers a sum of thandu (fee) for adopting her chela, out of which a token account is given to the jamaat. When the initial formalities are over the new recruit is greeted into the community with the ritual 'deen, deen' and the typical transgender clap. The chela and guru greet each other with hugs and kisses.

The guru-chela relationship which is central to the identity of transgenders gives out rules and obligations to the chela. The guru in turn gives the new entrant membership of the house to which she belongs, which gives acceptance and advancement to the chela in the community ranks. Reddy says "Within the hijra family it is the guru chela bond an iterative relationship that serves as the primary axis of kinship and genealogical descent" (157). This guru-chela culture not only exercises order and restraint on the transgenders, it also allows them to exercise their rights. The new recruit is instructed about the dos and don'ts. Whenever paan is given to an elder, they have to do the ceremonial feet touching and say 'paampaduthi'. As Revathi explains, whenever they happen to see a man crossing their path they should bend their head bashfully and cover their heads and "make sure that a youngster's dress does not so much as brush an elder's arm or leg and do all that an elder asks"(47).

Guru is the one who gives the chela all her kins and honour that the chela needs in the community. She gives them the needed bonds with, nani, kaala guru, gurubai, naathi chela and nanaguru helping the new chela to tide over difficult times. The chela does not compulsorily live with her guru always she can live with her nani who also instructs the chela about their cultural practices and warns her against "taking to drinks and seeking a husband"(TTAM65).

The displeasure that the chela earns from her guru by disobeying can cause serious repercussions in her chances of promotion within the community and also recognition among peers. Not only that, the guru can hinder her routines like eating, sleeping patterns, her domestic chores, the money the chela has to pay and the money given to her for fulfilling her basic needs but even the chela's leisure time. The chela has to leave the place and live on her own if she does not like her guru. But the chelas know that as Revathi says, "living alone was not easy and brought with it a host of new problems" (99). Mostly they reconcile with their guru with stoic

patience since they understand that, "If I listened to my guru and nani I too would attain their status and achieve the freedom they possessed" (99).

Changing one's guru according to the chela's needs both physical and biological is possible in the community. Revathi was not satisfied with the job of begging in shops, but was interested in sex work. She decided to change her guru. This change also involves yielding to stipulated practices. The naiks of the afore mentioned seven houses decided on such matters:

If I had merely come to the new guru and not become her Chela, then perhaps according to the laws of the hijras I might have been returned to my first guru since that was not the case I had nothing to do whatsoever with my old gurus now". (TTAM103)

Before accepting the chela, the new guru has to confirm if she had brought things from the old guru, if she had accumulated bad debts and also the reason for deserting the old guru. When the new guru is sure, that the chela "gave all earnings to the household, she arranged for nirvana and presented with a nose ring, lajja and anklets" (TTAM104). They are expected to give back the jewellery given by the old guru to the naik of the old house. Revathi says that the new guru "paid a sum of hundred and fifty rupees to the house that had arranged for my nirvanam. After this I was declared a chela of my new guru" (104). Every time the chela changed her guru she had to pay double the amount of money she paid earlier. This in most cases resulted in chronic debt and furthered the economic bondage to the guru.

The guru chela relationship is another major measure in deciding the respect for a guru because the acquisition of chelas is an important milestone in their lives. After undergoing the nirvana operation and proven that one is a real hijra, it is the enrolment of chelas that signals

maturity in a hijra community. That is the reason why some gurus don't easily allow their chelas to acquire chelas of their own.

Gurus have responsibilities towards their chelas. The gurus have to look after those who are ailing. They have to support and represent them in jamats. If there are fights amongst transgenders, it is the guru who has the last word. She alone has the right to scold an erring chela. During festivals, gurus give their chelas dress and money. The chela's behaviour is a testimony of the guru's upbringing and together they are responsible for keeping up the respect of their house.

The biggest and most important responsibility of a guru is to arrange for the nirvana of her chela. She gets the permission from their goddess Bahuchara Mata for this. She has to provide the monetary, material and manual help for her chelas, whom she has chosen to become 'real woman' during the surgery and till their period of recovery. She has to host the feast and declare to the world her chela's newly acquired status. Though it is an economic burden, the gurus perform this contentious responsibility to their chelas, probably with the hope that the chela would be made to pay back every rupee. They are involved in this operation because the chelas have to have the social sanction from a guru, even if they have enough creature comforts to undergo this operation on their own.

The emasculation operation which is the ultimate 'goal' of every transgender in India is called 'nirvan' Every transgender who respects his status in the community, expects and awaits this day in his life. "Nirvana ! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honour – even begged in the streets to achieve that end."(IAV11) says Vidya about her longing to undergo this operation. As Nanda

contends, “The operation is explicitly a rite of passage, moving the nirvan (the one who is operated on )from the status of an ordinary impotent male to that of a hijra”(26). When this operation is performed the impotent male dies and in his place is reborn a new person endowed with the power given to them by Mata or Shakthi to bless people. This authenticates and validates the transgender’s status.

In the olden days the operation was performed during initiation in the temple of Bahuchara Mata or Morkematha. Since this rite was outlawed despite hijras’ protest, it is performed clandestinely. Now the operation is performed anywhere the hijra resides and it is done secretly, since under the Indian Penal Code it is still a criminal act. Despite ban by the government, the operations have not died out but some surgeons in select towns perform it. The operation is performed in two methods- one by the practitioners of medical profession and the other by an experienced hijra called dai ma (midwife).Of the two, the second type is considered prestigious because the hijra who operates, despite lack of medical training, is believed to have the power of the Mata behind her.

The guru in most cases sought the blessing of the Mata before deciding on the type of operation. Revathi’s guru called her to ask, “Do you want to have an operation performed by a doctor, or by a ‘thayamma’?”(66) and she came out with the final decision herself, “you might not be able to bear a thayamma operation, so it is best you get it done by a doctor”(66).

The operations performed by doctors are done in nursing homes which do not have adequate facility. Vidya narrates her experience:

Unfortunately, these operations are carried out in primitive, unsafe, unhygienic conditions in India. A kothi undergoing castration is not administered any tests. No questions are asked

either. The kothi only learns the fee payable, ranging from 3000 to 10,000 rupees, depending on the place where it is done. The only test done is to determine if the kothi is HIV positive. (105)

Saravanan who is educated wants to know “Would there be no more tests? Wouldn’t they test us for BP, blood sugar? Only AIDS”(13). The operation does not take long, “In barely twenty minutes a man and woman wheeled” (14) the patient out. The attendant and nurse did not appear to be trained personnel. Vidya saw them lift “Satya from a wheel chair, and spreading a couple of newspapers on a steel cot, dropped her unceremoniously on it. Their unsafe, unhygienic approach made” (14) her nervous. The transgenders are asked to chant the name of Mata during the surgery. Vidya’s description of the process indicates the crude manner in which the operation is performed. “The surgeon gave me no guarantees, no counseling. They castrate you while you are watching” (106). In the room were a solitary cot and a masked doctor stood by his side. “Two more people a man and woman, filled the miniscule room. There was no way another person could enter” (15). Revathi’s experience was also similar. “I was only to keep my inner skirt on, which they told me to raise and tie around my chest” (72). Vidya continues “They made me curl into the embryonic posture and gave me a spinal injection” (15). The operation was performed only by giving local anesthesia. In the case of Revathi, the doctor found it hard to “put his needle through, that he was perhaps searching for the right spot” (72). When Vidya could not bear the first incision, a second dose of “spinal injection followed” her “screams of pain” (15). The pain rose to unbearable heights and vidya felt “as if someone was digging deep into my innards with a long rod and removing my intestines” (15). The patients are dismissed summarily from the operation theatre after suturing and cleaning “with cotton and packed off to recover” (TTAM106) and dumped “on a newspaper covered steel cot” (IAV16).

The operation is summed up in succinct words by the transgender poet Kalki in her poetry anthology in Tamil. The translated lines read thus

Cutting the cock  
Drenching in blood  
Transcending death  
Became a woman (57)

The excruciating pain made Revathi wail, “I can’t bear this! It’s burning! Can’t you give me an injection” ... I don’t think I’ll live through this” (14). But what she got back for this screaming was only a reprimand, “Why are you screaming like this? Do you want those around you to know the sort of operation you’ve had? Just shut up and put up with the pain” (74). The intensity of the pain rose with the hour. Vidya exclaims, “My abdomen seemed to be afire. I could n’t move my arms and legs” (16). The post operative pain was almost as crude as that performed ‘at the butcher’s shop’. After the operation passing of urine was a difficult proposition. As Revathi confides “Holding our saris high and away from the operated area and walking with our legs far apart” (76) they had to urinate. Vidya also concurs, “a task that remains a painful, messy proposition until the wound heals” (106). They were discharged from the hospital at the earliest opportunity. They had to do all the cleaning themselves after the surgery. Revathi’s version of hardship is as follows:

My wound was still raw and fleshy red where the stitches had been removed. Blood continued to ooze from it... I threw aside the bloodied cotton ...and cleaned myself, all the while making sure that the wound remained dry. I took another wad of cotton, cleaned the

wound on the surface and applied boric powder, I put fresh cotton on it, and packed the wound in a loincloth. By the time I finished, my head was spinning. (80)

When the operated persons come back the elders look after them. They are “welcomed with burning camphor stuck on a coconut and an arthi” (84) to ward off evil eyes. They prepare warm water for them to bathe, to clean up, change the dressing and prepare black tea as medicine. They helped them to overcome pain. Vidya says that the elder guru “splashed hot water at the operation spot” (107). They inspected the wounds and gave reports about the healing to others.

The other emasculation done by thayamma (daima) is usually done by another eunuch along with his assistants. The thayamma looks for sacred omens by breaking a coconut. If the coconut breaks evenly in half, it is assumed that Mata has permitted. The operation takes place very early in the morning, a usual time for Hindus to perform auspicious events like marriage. Suyambu says that there usually is a picture of Mata in the room and “offerings of fruit incense sticks produced clouds of smoke” (207) seeking the blessings of Mata to make the knife effective. The victim is made to stand naked. His own hair is stuffed into his mouth. His hands are held tightly. Suyambu continues “Below his waist a black string was tied to his small penis and two strange eunuchs held the ends of the string – themselves tense and ready to tighten the knot when signalled” (206). The thayamma slashes the penis taking out a sharp knife hidden so far in the folds of her sari. The cut part is made to fall into “a new mudpot, containing sacred ash and kumkum” (206) held between his legs. The next one hour is considered golden since the gush of blood is not stemmed but allowed to flow, an indication of draining away the male part. This aspect is the one which speaks for the superiority of thayamma emasculation over doctor’s

surgery. Mere incantation of Mata's name is the dressing applied to the wound. Meanwhile the severed organ collected in a pot is buried under a living tree.

The next day the treatment given to the operated one is as follows:

One of the eunuchs dipped a spoon into the hot oil and poured it on the cut. At once the other eunuch took a spoon of hot water and did the same. At first the pain was killing. His face grimaced awfully. Soon it turned out to be soothing. In fact it seemed indispensable. Suyambu lay quiet. (210)

This is done because no sutures are made on the severed part and the wound had to heal on its own without any infection. Heat acts as the medicine along with the oil here.

An operated transgender, either by a doctor or thayamma has to undergo restrictions during the next forty days. This period is similar to that of a woman during confinement in the mainstream society. Certain foods are not allowed to women who have given birth. Likewise hijras who equated child birth with this operation abstained from having milk, eating bananas, looking into a mirror, combing hair, or seeing a man. They are given mutton soup, chappatis and bitter gourd. Revathi confides, "We could not bring ourselves to eat bitter gourd but nani stood watch over us, stick in hand, until we had eaten it up" (84). They were advised to drink copious amounts of black tea and "had to refrain from doing 'paampaduthi' to elders" (85). On the twelfth and twentieth days hijras in the neighborhood are invited to come and pour water over their heads and elders and peers smeared 'turmeric all over' their bodies and 'performed arthi'. Those hijras who visited them brought gifts of wheat, sugar, ghee and at times even tea. By forty days the wound is healed almost completely. This ritual reminds one of the mainstream ritual in South India when a young girl who menstruates for the first time is quarantined and women in

the neighborhood come to bathe her. On an odd day, either fifth or seventh, the puberty function is held. Then the girl is taken back into the household, as having come of age.

The third and grandest of the trilogy of ceremonies in a hijra household that of 'chatla' or coming of age is done on the fortieth day after surgery. The transgender who underwent the operation is anointed with turmeric and mehendi, a red vegetable dye as those of a bride. The guru gifts her chela with a 'jok'. "The jok comprises a green sari, a blouse and inner skirt, and a nose ring and anklets and toe rings" (86) says Revathi. After bathing them and dressing with the sari they "pulled the ends of our saris over our heads to cover our faces clad thus we were led up to the image of Mata" (87). They are garlanded and "small bundles of betel leaves and areca nuts are tied into the folds of the green sari (87). Early in the morning when goddess Mata descends on the operated people they place a pot of milk on the head and they are taken to the "nearest well, balancing milk pots, they are asked to pour the milk into the well without taking the pot off" (87). They bring water in the pot and are asked to uncover their faces and see the glorious image of Mata. The transgender who had her operation has to reveal her private parts to water. Vidya narrates "This was the moment of completion of my nirvana. It was the moment of announcing my identity to nature" (108). This ritual was repeated 'infront of a black dog' and finally 'facing a green tree'. The ritual called chatla, the time honoured ceremony of transgenders is completed with a feast. If the nirvan sultan chose a sweet or fruit first, life would be pleasant is a popular sentiment among them. They are asked to say paampaduthi to everyone present and everyone blesses them and gifts them with money.

Another course of homilies is given to the transgenders after this ceremony. They are advised to honor the guru's parivar as their own. Revathi explains:

You have to respect and abide by the codes that hijras live by ... cutting your hair, running away to home- none of this is allowed. And don't spoil your life by taking on a husband... You must not lift your skirt and exhibit yourself, whether are fighting with other pottais or with a shopkeeper who hasn't given you money. No arrogance to be displayed! We do all this because we want to live like women. Not because we want to flaunt it in front of the world and shame ourselves thereby (90).

They are allowed to wear their jok only for that day. "Tomorrow you should give it off to those akuvapottais" (90) because of the superstition that if they wear the dress of those who had already undergone nirvana their chance would come early.

The practice of emasculation gives the transgenders some advantages. First of all, though they become impotent, this sacrifice of their maleness bestows them with the power of generativity. They become potential forces with divine powers, at least psychological powers, as their blessings are accepted by the society as good omen. This surgery enhances the respectability of the hijra as 'real'. The real transgenders do not accept or appreciate those who do not undergo surgery and believe that they do not have the blessings of Mata and so their blessings have no power. Another facet of this operation is that it assures them of economic niches which are crucial for earning their livelihood. This surgery helps them to organise themselves as a community organised around a traditional profession of badhai thereby integrating them with the mainstream society.

Many myths attest to the importance given to Bahuchara Mata or Moorke Mata in the hijra culture. One of the myths about the Goddess is explained in the *The Third Gender*. The Goddess had a cock and not a lion as her vehicle. She was once a beautiful lady. When the king

who ruled the country, saw her when he went to the forest for hunting, he took a fancy for her. Unable to defy the king's order she proposed a scheme out of this problem. She dressed her brother as herself and sent him to the king. The king arrived and sexually assaulted the man and went away. Yielding to her prayers Durga devi, who was sitting at the entrance dressed as her brother "castrated a dog and did the same thing to her brother also" (163). She created a separate world for him. She blessed him saying that eunuchs would come to see him and worship him. "That is why a castrated male should see a dog" (163). The revealing of the private part to a dog has relevance during the fortieth day ceremony after the surgery because of this myth.

There is another story about Bahuchara being a pretty woman in a party of travelers through a forest. The party was attacked by a gang of robbers. But Bahuchara tried to save herself from being violated by cutting off her breasts and offering it to the robbers. This act, causing her death was the cause of her deification. People secured her favour by mutilating themselves and by abstaining from sex. She in turn blessed them saying that whatever they spoke would come true thereby giving them divine power. This belief is the one which gives credibility to the power of hijras to bless the new born and newlywed for fertility.

The importance of the worship of Bahuchara Mata is narrated by the transgenders with a variation of the above myth. A prince who had duped a beautiful goddess into marriage did not consummate the nuptials. He went away every night. When the goddess followed him one night, he was seen with other men. The beleaguered woman who was in a rage cut off his genitalia. But later when she learnt that it was no fault of his, she stated that those people who were like him, if they worshipped her during their surgery would be helped to recover quickly and would be blessed with her power. The mainstream society which believes in this story sanctions the hijras sacredness and social legitimacy for the performance of badhai.

The rituals conducted during the death of a guru or member of the household reflect the sentiment of the hijras. In *The Third Gender* the disillusionment of the hijras is conveyed, “If any eunuch belonging to your group dies, you hang the body upside down and take it to the graveyard beating it with shoes and slippers all the way. You wish that the soul should not be reborn as eunuch” (TTG240). If it is a guru who is dead, the chela is expected to act the role of a Hindu widow. She is “required to wear a white sari and break all her bangles in grief” (Reddy163). The laccha or necklace given by the guru during the nirvan celebration is removed. For a requisite period she has to live in isolation in her house away from the community. But after this period of mourning, she can become the chela of another guru. Revathi’s experience during the death of the guru at the hamam is thus summed up in *The Truth about Me*

The last rites took place in a mandapam. The Hindu rites were performed in the morning – we tended the holy fire, we called a Brahmin priest to pray for my guru’s soul, and we fed the poor...

The concluding rite that aravanis do is known as *roundap* and that is done the Muslim way. Those who do the roundup are meant to give us widowed aravanis coloured saris. ...a senior aravani gave us the saris in our hands and dropped the money on our lap. (299)

The practices and rituals of the community bring at once to memory, the once marginalized and now defunct devadasi community. The devadasis did not have caste affiliation

just like the transgenders. Caste was never taken into consideration for entering into both communities. The rit ceremony of the transgenders which marks initiation has its counterpart in 'pottukattudhal' function of the devadasis when a new individual is initiated into the order. Moreover a devadasi became a 'woman' with the performance of 'sadangu' just as a transgender became a 'real' one after the fortieth day of nirvan. Another noteworthy similarity between these two communities is that both follow a matrilineal order. The mother hands over all her material possessions along with her social standing to her daughter in both the communities. Unlike the hijras, the devadasis can give birth, but a male child is not welcomed by them. This is in total contrast to the view of the mainstream communities. Almost all the primary relationships of belonging and caring in their lives are centered on this basic physical unit of mother daughter relationship in both the cases. During public performance both of them are scoffed at. Revathi narrates her experience when people talked about the similarity between the two in the following words, "we got stared a lot and I heard people ask rather loudly whether we were men or women or number 9s or devadasis" (29).

Transgenders live on the margins of the society but they interact with mainstream society. Most transgenders identify themselves with women. They feel comfortable with women, interacting with women is easier complaining about jewelry, price of vegetables or exchanging recipes. Most hijras resemble men, big and masculine and hence are feared and avoided for their belligerent, baritone voices and their inauspicious stigma. But they approach women only with the intention of getting money and almost never in a sexual context. Men have ambivalent relationship with them and in fact some are scared of them. Some seem attracted to hijras but at the same time they mock at them. These are the ones who are usually physically or verbally

abused by the transgenders, as they are the ones who taunt them. In some parts of North India, transgenders are treated as the bogeyman of India, who is used to frighten small children. There are accusations of kidnapping of children especially boys for castrating and making them beggars, but these are very rare and mostly fictitious charges.

Transgenders relate with the main stream society through their professions. Before colonial rule, occupational exclusivity marked the Indian society. Indian society in the earlier days was organized according to the profession of the people. The professions were carried over from father to son and remained the exclusive right of the practitioners. But the introduction of western education demolished this setup and brought a change in the structure of the society. To the exclusion of select professions, all the other jobs were thrown open to all members of society. But still social inequality is perpetrated upon people who have biological inequality. Some are prevented from enjoying social equality without the least realization, that biological inequality is natural whereas social inequality is not. Women and transgenders belong to this marginalized class. Empowerment for women has dawned after the women's liberation movement but the transgenders still suffer from social ostracism. Rejection by natal families deprives them of education and all the other allied opportunities and only allows them to take recourse to the traditional professional practices of their predecessors and those are badhai, begging and finally prostitution.

Badhai is the traditional occupation of the transgenders. The word means performing after the birth of a child, especially male, at the weddings and also at temple festivals. The ritual performance lends legitimacy to themselves and their society. The identification with the Bahuchara Mata and Shakthi the female Goddess who bestow creative power gives them a special place in Indian culture and society. In performing badhai, they claim to be like sanyasis

(saints) who have renounced worldly pleasures and virtually live a mendicant's life taking alms from people. Just like them these performers can curse and bless the people according to the treatment meted out to them. "Real hijias" they claim "do not have mental and physical desire for men" (Reddy 39).

The community traces its lineage from Shiva the Cosmic dancer who competed with his wife Sivagami as Nataraja, which is evident from the myth about the temple at Chidambaram. Arjuna in *the Mahabharata* who is blessed by Shiva took the form of a eunuch during his thirteenth year of exile. When the Pandava brothers were in exile in the Virata Kingdom, Arjuna took the guise of Brihannala as a consequence of the curse of Urvashi. Wearing white conch bangles, plaiting his hair like a woman, wearing woman's attire, he attended to menial works in the women's apartments. He also taught the women court singing and dancing. Transgenders identify themselves with Arjuna who is considered Lord Shiva's disciple. They see this role of conferring blessings as their traditional ritual role. The transgenders who earned their living through singing and dancing are called 'Badhai hijras'. They claim that they combine the dancing prowess of Arjuna and Shiva. They bestow blessings on the young couple and children as vehicle of the Lord who has given them this power. They are the highest ranking in the society of female garbed hijras.

A performing group has its geographical territory earmarked. One or two members of the group look out for the birth or marriage that is going to take place in their jurisdiction. *The Third Gender* gives a vivid account of this. "The two females described their experiences in the areas they had visited that day" (193). A transgender performing group may consist of three to five or more persons:

There were five females in all. One looked very much like kali; well-built wheatish in colour and carrying a dolak. The second carried a bulbultara in her hand. The third was a beauty... the fourth appeared to be a seasoned rustic... the last one was lean. (187)

The dolak a two sided drum is an important part of their performance. When they see the head of the family:

The one with dolak rubbed it gently first and then beat it wildly. She then went towards the child, beat the dolak softly and once again went out and beat it wildly. At once, all of them whirled round. Those who didn't have any instrument in their hands, clapped them rhythmically. The first one then sang a song, to which all the others danced wildly...the faster she sang the faster they danced. All of a sudden, the singer ceased singing abruptly with a 'dok' sound on the dolak. At once, the dancers too stopped dancing... the synchronization of the singing and dancing was perfect". (188)

The performers adorn themselves and prepare thoroughly for a performance:

The singer,... dusted and cleaned the dolak...Nazeema adjusted her pallu and stood up elegantly... Margaret handed over a coil of wire to Nazeema who unwound it. There were two wires, on each of which hung tiny multi-coloured lights like lizards' eggs.

Nazeema took one of the wires and circled it round her Neck. She then bent the other and fixed it on top of her head lik an arch. She hung a square box fitted with two ordinary battery cells, round her neck and connected the wires to it. Immediately her face shone. Different coloured lights- blue, red, green and yellow- began to flicker round her neck and head. In additon to all this, she had stuck sequence here and there on her

face... Tapped her feet on the floor and let anklets tinkle. She jingled her bangles rhythmically. (196)

The payments for the performance in some areas are fixed and depend on the social status of the family. It will be in cash and in kind which includes grains, ghee and such items which are given to mothers who are in confinement. Mostly hijras do not accept payment without asking for more. “This is your first born and you are giving us Rs.5/-? Is your child worth only this? She puckered her lips holding it up for everyone to see and laughed derisively” (189) . In the marriage halls they mock at the families’ honour and demand hefty sums. If they are refused they shame the family with tirades and so the party gives the demanded amount. This negotiation over payment extortion and revealing their inner parts by lifting their skirt scare the people and make them yield to their demands.

The public who believe in the powers of the hijras to bless and curse have been the patrons of the traditional occupation of hijras. They believe that emasculation operation has given them generative powers just like that of Lord Shiva. The transgenders give the disembodiment of their sexual organs as evidence for their nonproductive nature and this sacrifice has earned them ritual powers. More over constant prayers to Bahuchar Mata before, during and after their surgery have made them vehicle of the goddess. This belief of the society sums up their ritual role:

“Hijras are really blessed by the goddess. It is very auspicious and lucky to have them come and bless your child. Every time there is a wedding or a birth in our family we always call hijras to bless the child because they have the power to do”. (Reddy 98)

Though the transgenders who perform badhai are called ascetics or real hijras and as people who are not interested in men and as renouncers, a basic truth about their earlier days cannot be hidden as one of them confides “we all used to be in prostitution before, but now go to the basti. Are we born knowing how to sing and dance or what? We have to learn gradually and only then we can do it. (Reddy 82).

In Tamil Nadu transgenders do not perform during weddings or child birth. But they perform during temple festivals. Revathi narrates her experience:

My Erode nani managed a dance troupe that performed at temple festivals in the nearby villages. A large troupe comprising nanis chelas and the chelas of chelas, they were of different ages. Troupe members danced the *karagam*, the peacock dance, the *subban-subbi* dance, the arohara doctor dance and also performed cycling feats. (27)

The performance in temples needed hard bargaining with the organisers. When they perform in functions like Ganesh Chaturthi they are booked for a select number of days and dates. On such occasions Revathi comments

The village elders would do this: they’d come, look at us and choose whoever they wanted to come and dance ...

‘What about breasts? Does she have to stuff her chest with cotton or’... ‘If you wish, you can inspect her’. My guru then asked me to show my breast. Rates were discussed afterwards.

It is like shopping at the vegetable market. You pinch, squeeze and satisfy yourself of the vegetables' quality before you buy. We were inspected likewise. One's self-respect had to be hawked thus to feed one's stomach. (211)

By coaxing, cajoling, blessing and haggling they settle their wages and finally when they go to the village they would be ogled up by men, women and children. They were sometimes forced to yield to the desires of the villagers. They had to dance from late night to early morning when the god went down the streets and finally reached the temple. Only numbers and unity amongst them saved them from trouble during these programmes.

Changes in the views of the society regarding traditions have altered the ritual role of the hijras. Their chances are now dwindling. Family planning, education, change of values, modernization and westernization have all had a role to play in effecting this change. Sophisticated citizens do not allow them to perform and even when they allow them they cut short their performance. Since they do not get to perform often, their costs have increased thereby making their earning dearer. So they have resorted to other jobs like performing during business start ups and opening of new shops. Suyambu in *The Third Gender* gives an example:

“It seems when this pithaji opened a new spare-parts shop, it was you who lit the camphor and inaugurated it. Now, I believe he has secured an agency for something. He thinks you are lucky. That is why he has come to reward you. (197)

The second traditional and public occupation of the transgenders is that of asking for alms from shops or people passing by; bring them into contact with mainstream society. Some sections of society, especially traders, believed it auspicious to start the day by seeing a hijra. According to Revathi “Those who run business, think that, the day will go well for them if they

give us money and earn our blessings” (45). Those who beg in shops are expected to behave in a manner worthy of respect. They are not expected to misbehave with men though occasional flirting is part of the game. The transgender people had their own schedule and calendar to cover select areas. Revathi narrates the schedule “... Monday Victoria Terminus and Churchgate... Tuesday: Bandra;... Wednesday: Mankur; Thursday: Sandoz Road; Friday: Masjid Bandar; Saturday: Sion Koliwada; Sunday: Chembur” (61).

The areas are earmarked for groups. Territorial disputes are usually settled by naiks and at times amongst themselves. Vidya adds “We passed a series of shopping areas. ‘You can’t beg in any of these shops, OK?’ Satya said to me. ‘Not just this bazaar. You can’t beg in any of the bazaars around our street. Do you understand?’” (89).

The alms seekers had their own superstitions too. They usually choose a shop, whose owner does not refuse them money. They felt that drawing a blank in the first shop would ruin their day. With their trademark clapping they coaxed the traders into giving at least a rupee. They covered entire streets collecting not only money but also fruits and vegetables. “We also clapped at autorickshaw drivers and many of them gave us money” (91) recalls Vidya. They exchanged the collection for higher denomination wherever possible and avoided paying commission for their exchanges. They learn quite early the tricks of the trade. They know the difficult customers and identify easy targets. They learn to be tactful but also to bully where necessary. Vidya further states the nuances of business, “Sometimes shop-owners would request us not to clap our hands and gather in groups and ask one of us to come in and get the money” (50). They bless the shopkeepers placing their palm on the shop keeper’s head.

Train begging is yet another profession through which transgenders relate with the public. Train begging is tougher than bazaar begging. They become friends with regular commuters, ticket clerks, traders, vendors, station master and even the autorickshaw drivers who frequent the station. Vidya's experiences in train begging in the auto biography sums up their method:

I approached my 'customers' in different ways- cajoling, pleading, and teasing. I appealed to their better nature, I blessed them, I addressed them as brother, uncle, sister, so on and so forth. 'You earn so much in a day, why can't you spare some of it happily for a transgender?' 'Give with love, happily. Think of your family, your children, and give with a generous heart'. 'You are such a big shot, but so miserly. Can't you do better than a rupee?' I tried every variation possible. I was making an art form of begging. (99)

Bazaar begging meant walking many miles every day. The watch men would not allow them inside until the whole lot of them made a ruckus. Constant clapping hurt their hands. Train begging was also an equal ordeal. They had to walk and balance in the constantly moving trains. They had to change platforms to board the trains. Apart from all these troubles, they have to face vicious questions and caustic comments from the public, sometimes the passengers pretend to be asleep or absorbed in a book, no matter what racket they make. At times they are beaten by the 'toughies' when they begged alone. But when they are in group of three or four, they support each other. Some of the passengers, who are offended by their very sight, try to drive them out. They have to be cautious and should react quickly and intelligently to escape from such passengers.

Badhai and shop begging transgenders derive their power from transcending the networks of social obligation. They do not conform to established social practices. That makes the other socially bound people fear them. They know that they can be shameless in public if they are provoked. They know that they derive a protective insulation by not adhering to social norms or decent behavior. They are not worried about social control since they are scoffed at from the very early days of their lives. This hardens their attitude. They put this stigma to the best economic use to earn their livelihood. They use their bad reputation as a means of protection, though they are warned by their gurus against lifting skirts and exhibiting their private parts, when they are fighting. They do resort to this extreme step, when their patience is tested too far. Revathi was advised by her guru, “No annoyance to be displayed! We do allow this because we want to live like women. Not because we want to flaunt it in front of the world and shame ourselves there by” (90). What is implied by this display, probably, is a potential curse that the onlooker may also be subjected to a similar fate. This action along with the hijra clap, threaten the public and embarrass them. This is how they retaliate against people who cast aspersions on them.

In a hijra society having a husband is considered superior to being a prostitute. It is a source of hijra self esteem. This relationship is considered important as the hijras think themselves as women. If you are a woman in Hindu society, you are expected to marry and be a mother. It is almost a religious obligation. Indian culture expects women to be submissive and respectful to their husbands. These find representation in *The Truth about Me* where Revathi expresses her feeling towards her male colleague, “I am afraid to stand in front of you, to talk to you... I keep thinking of you, I find it hard to sleep. I feel haunted. I have become a mad woman” (267). When they lived together she felt as if she was ‘leading a normal family life’.

She was protective and possessive. If it got very late and he was still at work she would phone him. Though he did not believe in tying a 'thali' around near neck, for practical reasons, she tied one around her neck herself. For the three long months they lived together Revathi was, "his mother, companion, office assistant and good wife" (274). Her lessons from Sangama, the NGO where she worked, had taught her to respect others' right. After a long discussion about their expectations, they agreed to give up certain things for each other. Her partners insisted that she should not shy away from aravaani community, but abstain from sex work. She told her friends that he would be her partner but to her community, her husband. After a simple marriage ceremony at the hamam they became man and wife. She was elated that "No one ever would possibly have a husband" like hers (282).

The fairy tale wedding did not last long. The man who had the courage to inform his friends about the wedding, did not have the confidence to relate it to his parents. As days passed, the initial interest began to wane because she "expected what all women expected from their husband, but suffered because I could not bring myself to ask for it" (286). Their marriage too began to come to such a pass, that they began to feel the itch. He began to burst out often. "I've lost my freedom because of you. Because of you I've lost my peace of mind" (289). The proverbial last straw that broke their marriage was when Revathi presented her testimony in the World Social Forum. He who encouraged people like her in the organization, could not tolerate when his wife spoke her mind out. "From now on we have nothing to do with each other", he declared and he walked out of the marriage. What made Revathi heavy hearted was that he was no different from a man in the street and the inconsistency between his words and actions. Though husbands are a source of psychological satisfaction to the likes of her, they don't however supplant the ties of the community. When normal women struggle to get the much

needed respect from marriage relationships, one can imagine the plight of transgenders, however informed the partner is.

The loss of traditional occupations due to westernization, urbanization and social changes have hastened to push the transgenders into their practice of prostitution, an occupation that is totally dependent on the mainstream society especially on men, rowdies and police. Though this occupation is against their religious sentiments and their image as ascetics who have renounced their sexual desires, most of the transgenders seem to have resorted to this occupation at some point of time in their lives. Though they could earn quite a lot through this, the beneficiary in most cases was their guru “My gurubais would collect money from customers and hand it over to our guru who sat out side” (105) says Revathi. They have to take on all sorts of men, drunkards, local rowdies and sadists. The bitter experiences of Revathi is presented in these words:

I felt trapped and not knowing what to do, I had to accede to his demands. I held on to his legs and pleaded when he wanted me to do things that I did not like doing... he spat abuse at me and forced me into the act. When I screamed in pain and yelled for my guru, he shut my mouth with one of his hands, whipped out a knife with the other and threatened to take it to my throat. I was hurting all over and yet had to give in and do as he told me. The skin down there felt abraded and I was bleeding. Unmindful, he left, but only after he had snatched my purse away from me. (108)

It was a demanding work, probably not as tiring as train begging but it was more lucrative.

Transgender prostitutes carried on their prostitution work attached to houses run by hijras, who hired hijras for sex work and tried to pass them off as women. Sex trade was carried out along busy streets meant for their profession. They solicited persons in crowded and noisy

lanes. Only those hijras who looked like women were allowed to do sex work. Hijra's sex trade is known as danda. The house where sex work was carried out is called a danda kantra. The difficulties faced by the transgenders practicing prostitution is best explained by Revathi who experienced it personally:

hijras who had been deceived by men who praised their beauty and enslaved them, who stole their hard-earned money and spend it all, leaving the hijras with scarred faces, bruised by knives, who were little better than servants, going to the shops, washing vessels; those who had yearned in thousands for their mistresses were yet cheated by them and had to go to other places for work; those who suffered from sexually transmitted diseases and ...those who had to put up with the capricious demands of clients who paid them a mere fifteen or fifty rupees and who used them as they wished, brutally, and left them with bite marks, ... as if they had been bitten and abandoned by mad dogs;... those who were carried away by the police for no fault of their own, who were beaten with whips and lathis and stamped up on by police boots, had electric current run through their bodies, who could only leave after paying the police a hefty bribe. (133)

Prostitution is a profession that has a low calling even amongst transgenders because it offends their deity Mata who is celibate. Moreover it undermines the ritual role of a real hijra who is considered a performer or a mendicant. But most households do not denounce it, as it is the most lucrative job that could earn fairly large amounts. In most big cities the households of badhai hijras and sex workers are located in different places. In small cities both the performers and prostitutes live side by side and at times one individual performs both the functions. Even the naiks of the household and respectable gurus turn a blind eye to their profession and enlist

hijras as members of their household. They maintain their kinship and extend invitations to all the social functions.

Transgenders have effectively adapted to the society that is around them. They have carved a niche for them in this society by involving themselves with the mainstream society through their profession. Out of the world presented to them, they have created a world of their own with their own set of rituals and practices. Despite being marginalized they have struggled to survive and have maintained their own social structure so far. They may be deviant personalities but still are part of this society. The society has no right to cast them away. Homophobic hatred of all but heterosexual forms of identity harkens back to very early times in the western world. India had caught on the infection, after colonial rule and has naturalized the western views. It has internalized male dominance and has started denigrating anything associated with the feminine. From the younger days socialization processes impress upon the boys that being 'a sissy' is bad. That is why when they face boys who act differently they call them as number nine even from the school days. The society does not permit people to pursue their sexual interest and that is why Revathi says "We must then reconcile ourselves to a life that is neither here nor there" (21).

The family wherein the transgender people are born cannot understand their plight and do not accept them because of the social stigma attached. They are afraid of how the society would scoff at them which is reflected by Revathi: "Will anyone accept you? Do you think we can walk with our heads held high in the village anymore?... we have to live here, have our marriages and our funerals here" (115). Doraisamy's mother wails her feelings out, she is worried about the society which would ask of her, "What sort of woman is that who has raised her son this way?"(115).

Institutional discrimination hurts the transgenders more than the ones committed by bigoted individual members of the society. The denial of opportunities and rights to individuals and groups is woven into the fabric of culture so subtly that it goes unnoticed. Normative structures, customs and attitudes are so internalized that the society does not recognize them as partial. The rules, practices and policies by the state are also incriminating and discriminating. The prevailing situation is portrayed vividly by Revathi:

...looking for work, in STD booths, in grocery stores, textile shops... But no one wanted to give me work. Their response hurt me as if they were so many spears aimed at my heart. 'If we're to employ you, you'd be the ruin of all the boys here'. 'If you worked for us, we'd have to shut shop,... We can't employ people like you... Get lost, go to Mumbai or Delhi and be with those like you. You're all fit only for dancing on the roads, and having cheap, riotous fun! (161)

They are scorned by the society thus and Guruvakka's wails in *The Third Gender* attest to this:

... Nobody is prepared to employ us as domestic help... If we try our hands at petty trade, loafers tease us... We also have to live... The government has all kinds of welfare schemes for the handicapped and destitute women. But what has the government done for people like us who are neither male nor female?... at least book...on a real charge. (175)

Government institutions do not recognize them as human beings. They do not accept their transition, when you need to submit your ration card as a valid identity the name change cannot be effected easily. Vidya states "My request was forwarded to the Tamil Nadu Stationery and Printing Department... the department demanded a medical certificate" (139). No department is

ready to accept the sex change operation which has no legal sanction. They do not recognize an operation that is performed without government approval and hence do not accede to the request for change of name. Even a court order could not move the government machinery into action. To enjoy their moral, legal rights they have to fight hard and “suffer barbs, ignore insults and brush aside hurts” (139) says Vidya. When a transgender wants to own a scooter or a property, registering them is no easy task. Revathi’s plight explains the situation. Her name was recorded as Doraisamy in the ration card but now she is Revathi. The RC book for the scooter could not have Revathi’s name when she applied for it. The reaction of the officer was, “We’ve never had such a case before. I can’t grant a license to this person and flung the papers at me.” (225) Any amount of insinuation could not get through the officer. A letter from the village administrative officer and a bribe of five hundred rupees earned her the license but without any specification of sex but as “Revathi who is Doraisamy” (226).

Most of the transgenders lose their rights to property when they change their sex. The few who have managed have to slog it out with their family members and officials. When Revathi’s father wanted to divide the property her brothers taunted her to restrain from asking for a share. They were ready to kill her also, “If not we will finish you off and there’ll only be charred ash the morning after (166). When she approached a lawyer, his suggestion was “Why can’t you be a man for a day?” Revathi could only silently think, “Would the lawyer like it, if I tell him to appear in court in woman’s clothes?” (169). Ultimately the matter was settled by giving power of attorney to her father to execute the document on her behalf.

The worst suffering the transgenders face are from the keepers of law-the police. They know very well about these people and about their defenselessness. The very sight of transgenders irritates police men. Revathi’s outpour brings out her experiences when she was

arrested “A police man brought his lathi down my legs and hands. Another one kicked me with a booted foot” (207). They are ordered to do all menial jobs in the station. The treatment meted out to them by the police deserves death punishment but they are the enforcers of law and they go unpunished. The experience of Revathi in the police station will make a stone bleed.

He kicked me with his boots. He then asked me to take my clothes off-right there, while the prisoner was watching. I pleaded with him and wept but he forcibly stripped me. When I was standing naked, he stuck his lathi where I’d my operation and demanded that I stand with my legs apart... He repeatedly stuck at that part with his lathi and said, ‘So can it go in there? Or is it a field one can’t enter? How do you have sex then?’ (206).

The pain inflicted by the lathi was doubled by the heartburn caused by the crude words. The physical examination of all her body parts petrified her, “He then asked me to hold my buttocks apart so that he could see my anal passage. When I did he thrust his lathi in there and asked, ‘So you get it there?’ (207). Apart from these tortures they implicate them in false cases and produce them before magistrates with severe warning not to speak of the treatment in the station and to accept the fine imposed by the court. They use them as baits to entice customers and they surround these unknowing victims and foist false cases on them. So for people like them “to live was to struggle and fight” (219) against society.

Transgenders are easy targets for rowdies, hooligans and musclemen. When they are not protected by the state they become easy victims to the law breakers’ atrocities. Since transgenders lived in unprotected shelters near railway lines, parks and other public places they torment them throwing lighted match sticks and they “would be jolted awake by the heat of the

flame on our bodies get up shrieking and put the fire out” (107). The drunk ruffians force them to part with their money and also to yield to their wily ways. Revathi further continues

He spat abuse at me and forced me into the act. When I screamed in pain and yelled for my guru, he shut my mouth with one of his hands, whipped out a knife with the other and threatened to take it to my throat. I was hurting all over, and yet had to give in. (108)

These men came back after a few days claiming that their gold watch and five hundred rupees had gone missing in their place. He was ready to slash her face and burn her hut down if the money was not paid back.

As they grow old, transgenders who are unable to earn money through sex trade looked to other professions like working in a bath house – hamam to meet their basic needs. Even when they do a job of maintaining a hamam without involving in flesh trade they are not rewarded. They help their customers get warm water, provide soap and clean the place but they are not spared by the society. At night people threw stones at their door and yelled at them. Not only that Revathi explained, “The hamam was pointed out with incredulity, as if we spelt danger, as if we were oddities. So much so that husbands and wives, friend and others pointed out to their ignorant companions, as if we were a spectacle, something to be gawked at” (193).

Adding insult to injury the political and administrative institutions use their ‘dubious’ image to shame defaulters of taxes in Tamil Nadu. When some of the tenants failed to pay the property tax, the Corporation of Chennai hired some transgenders to gyrate to drum beats before the shops to embarrass the shopkeepers. The article in Times of India states that the Corporation reduced them to caricatures and used them as tools to extort money showing the conception of the image of transgenders of being capable of intimidation.

The agonizing account of the experiences of the transgenders, their thorny path during adolescence and eventual evolution into an unconventional human being in a patriarchal, misogynistic culture is a revelation to the society. By pioneering to voice the angst of the marginalized, the writers have spoken up for their community's rights to survival and dignity. They have shed light on the hitherto unknown social life of hijras. They have established beyond doubt the partisan treatment of the state which is jolted into awakening by these accounts. The educated members of the society, through these expressions are informed about the plight of these individuals who are driven by their families and government into gutters and ghettos. The authors demand and establish beyond doubt the rights that are due from a sane society which has so far failed to understand, that only if these 'shameless' people are internalized in the community as its members, it cannot hold its head high shamelessly. Treated by the main stream society as scum, ignored by their families, denied opportunities by the State, the transgenders have forged together a society of their own. Out of the choice given to them they have carved out a unique world with its own culture. Taking moral and physical strength from their social structure and culture they have so far managed to swim against the current. Though theirs is a world outside the bounds of norms, they are not outside the Indian society. They have to be taken care of both by the state and society and must be incorporated into the mainstream society.

The transgenders' claim to be a part of the mainstream society or in fact as a role model to the society is substantiated by the fact, that unlike the mainstream society, they lead a cohesive life, transcending the barriers of caste, race, religion and geographical boundaries. This all encompassing attitude is what Hinduism insists upon through its dictum, 'Vasudeivam Kudumbagam' which means the world is one family. Hijras of India are living proof of this and that is why the transgender poet Kalki rightly questions the mainstream society in her verse:

Forgetting religion

Giving up caste

The deprived

Binding together

Lead a life

Is one such feasible

For you? (40)