

**‘Izzat’, Intersectionality and Emerging Geographies;  
A Case Study of Covid-19 Experiences of the  
Hijra Community in Suri, Birbhum**

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**Abstract**

*The central question of the paper is how the caste and gender intersectionality within Hijra community translates into a differential geography. The paper has two methodological cascades. Firstly, to understand the caste dynamics within hijra community this study follows a comparative textual analysis of two autobiographies; ‘I am Vidya: a transgender journey’ written by a dalit transgender, Living Smile Vidya and ‘A gift of goddess Laxmi’ written by an upper caste transgender, Manobi Bandyopadhyay. The study has inferred that in spite of having similar gender identity, the lived experiences of discrimination in public spaces varies due to their differential caste identity. In the second step I have used ethnography as my tool on some gharanas in Birbhum, West Bengal. It is also very evident that within the Hijra community, there is also hierarchical superstructure and power relation between a Hijra guru and the members associated with him/her. The apparent status of any Hijra community (gharana) and the social status of that gharana is based on historical origin. It is interesting to observe that the division of work within a gharana follows the tyrannical division of labourer as followed in the main stream caste system. The ‘Badhai’ hijra (those who do the ceremonial blessings) have more ‘izzat’ and considered to be more pious than other two gharanas who earn by doing ‘alabatti’ (begging in red light of road/ trains) or sex work. I explored the production space through the process of their everyday mobility and the contested spatial rights. ‘Who can operate in which ‘ilakas?’ is a question that is being decided by the gharana which has more ‘izzat’ because they are considered to be more powerful in their intra-social rubrics. Thus, I have found such proxy indicators which clearly indicate the intersectionality of caste within hijra community and its socio-spatial interplay at inter/intra gharanas scale.*

*Keywords: Gendering the Caste, Geographies of ‘Intersectionality’, Hijra.*

**Introduction**

The pandemic is a portal (A. Roy, 2020). It has widened the fault lines of our society. Like other marginalized people this pandemic had led to the further marginalization of the Hijra community. Due to the lockdown the community have lost their livelihood, they had faced huge shortage of basic items like food, shelter. But does their experience during covid homogeneous at an intra-community level? Or are there differential stories at inter and intra *gharana scale*? Thus, this study is going to scroll down into the question of ‘izzat’(respect) and intersectionality in Hijra community; the differential experience in the pandemic. I am basically looking into how those identities are interplaying with each other and what are the spatial relations of such interplaying? The paper has two methodological cascades. To map the crisis of the *Hijra Community* during the nationwide lock down in general various secondary sources have been consulted. For a zoomed picture in the study area specifically I have used the action research method to grasp coping mechanism of the community members of

the study area. In the second step I have used ethnography as my tool on some gharanas in Birbhum, West Bengal. The central question of the paper is how the question of intersectionality between *izzat* (respectability) and gender within Hijra community translates into a differential spatiality. During the crisis like covid 19 pandemic when the question of existence should be the priority but, in this case, we found different narratives; some are more kin to retain their ascribed *gharana* identity or respectability by accepting the livelihood hurdles. Thus, we try to unfold the layers of identity/(un) respectability within already marginalized community. As a spatial implication this question we try to encapsulate the cartography of new geographies.

### **Pandemic and Crisis of the Hijra Community:**

The people in the power are trying to invoke a public discourse that the pandemic is a medium of equalizer as it does not consider the caste, creed and religion (Scroll, 2020). On the ground the picture is certainly different. Various studies have shown that the pandemic has widened the fault lines in our society; it has hit the hard to the section of the society. It has amplified the sufferings of the already-marginalised Transgender community. The crisis has been categorized broadly around the crisis of livelihood, food security, homelessness, inaccessibility to healthcare and alarming increase in vulnerability to violence and abuse at the hands of society and State (Hajra et al., 2020). It has been reported that due to the sudden lockdown the people from the hijra community got hardly any chance to gather food grains for upcoming days, thus they had left with food for few days only. Several members of the community became unemployed as due to the lockdown. According to recent data, 92% of the transgender population in India does not have access to regular employment (Hajra et al., 2020). They have less employment opportunities other than begging at *lalbati* (road crossing), *chakkiwali* (train), sex work and 'toli badhai' (blessing ceremony for the new born). Most of this work involves engagement with other people and public spaces and so trans persons found themselves without work as soon as the lockdown was announced. The physical distancing requirements, ban on weddings and gatherings and the complete lockdown, made these jobs untenable and unsafe, essentially cutting off the few sources of income available to transgender persons (Hajra et al., 2020). After 24<sup>th</sup> March they have lost all the opportunities to earn; 'They are in literal terms 'locked' inside their residence with no basic supplies or access to money' (Chakraborti, 2020). The people had little penny left with them when I visited. During interview, I have estimated the loss of the income for one person, before lockdown a Hijra person used to earn around 6000-8000 from begging, but during the complete lockdown till 17<sup>th</sup> September they have earned nothing. They were dependent upon the totally with their savings that they had. The case for the hijra guru were more critical, as due to the lockdown the *chelas* were stuck within the *khol*(room). *Shyamoli, the Hijra Guru* had shared her experience during the lockdown, '7 *chelas* were stuck within my house as there were no means of transportation'. The house is a rented one having only one room with a tin shed and one balcony within which is also shared for the cooking and only one dilapidated bathroom. The guru had to feed all her *chelas* despite having no income. Apart from the expenses of foods and other basic needs the *Guru* had to pay the rents for the room. When they were really running out of the resources several civil society groups have lent their support to these people. But I must say these persons here at Birbhum got a tiny support than other part of the country. From the field experience what I have realized that the civil society groups in the small town are skeptical about helping the transgender people, as they think that 'they are much richer than us', one of the secretaries of an NGO said when I proposed to extend support to the transgender people. This is because of the lack of the gender sensitization and this attitude is structural. For a long time, the society has always been maintaining a decent 'social distance' as well as 'physical distance' with these communities (Chakraborti, 2020).



Figure 1 Empty Suri Railway Station, Date-15th September, 2020. Source: Author

On the other hand, the hijra persons were also inquisitive about the motif behind the help by the civil society groups as we faced hesitation from that end to receive any help by ‘us. With my further course of engagement, I have realized the cause of the hesitation. Hijra persons hardly can imagine people from the so-called mainstream society can contact them anything but for sex work or exploitation. Apart from the civil society groups central and various state governments have taken some measures to help the transgender community.

The studies have shown that access to food security schemes is another major problem that the transgender persons have faced during this pandemic. The *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana* was announced by the central government to provide free rations and food grains, to the poor, migrant workers and others but very a smaller number of *Hijra* persons actually could able to avail it. As *Dola* (changed name) one of my respondents said, “*Aamr ration card thakteo ami ration pai na, karon amar sekhane ‘korir nam’ kora ache ar ekhon amar sob kichu (aadhar, voter card) ‘satnar name’*”. (*Despite posing a ration card I can’t avail it due to the discrepancy in the name. The ration card is encrypted with my previous name and rest of the documents like aadhar card has my recent name*). Other studies have confirmed that the discrepancy in the names in the ration card is the major problem for the transgender to avail the *sarkari* ration. Besides many transgender even do not have any ration card (R. Roy, 2020). This is also because of the reluctant attitude by the family, as *Aayesha* (changed name) was sharing childhood story they said “*barir loke voi peto amake baire ber korte, eta vebe j loke ki bolbe. Tai amar ration card porjonto korai ni*” (*my family was shy about me, my feminine identity. Therefore, they never tried to make my ration card*). Responding to different PILs The Patna High Court, Jharkhand High Court and Kerala High Court passed very similar judgement directing that all welfare schemes framed either by the Central or State government should be implemented and no member of the trans community shall be deprived of Ration only on account of such status or not possessing the Ration Card (Hajra et al., 2020). The Government West Bengal is now giving free ration to the transgender people and promised to continue to do so till July 2021. In the order the Government has directed the local officials to issue food coupons for the transgender persons who don’t have ration card or have issue with the name in the card (Ghose, 2020). The hijra persons in Birbhum had no information about this scheme. During the fieldwork once I told them about this scheme, they started contacting the local authorities for the further process. The lack of awareness is the major problem for the transgender persons in Birbhum as compared to Kolkata.

Now I am coming to the issue of transgender person’s access to healthcare. As our institutional healthcare is not inclusive at all for the transgender community the community members rarely visit any institutional health care. Even in emergency cases such as accidents, medical attention is delayed due to confusion whether the patient should be admitted to the male or female ward (R. Roy, 2020). One of the

respondents had shared the hospital story. Once that person had been admitted to the hospital, it was an indoor case and she has been kept in the female ward initially. After few days gradually *jok & doroshon* (*beard and mustache*) appeared in her face. So, the fellow patients had complained that a male patient has been admitted to the female ward. It was a ruckus. After this experience she became reluctant to seek medical help and in extreme situation she prefers to visit the quack doctors and their clinics rather going to a government hospital. Access to general healthcare has further worsened with Covid-19, as many are unable to seek emergency medical assistance. Despite the failing health of the elderly hijra, there is presently no provision for routine health check-up which they can avail. The reluctance to consult a healthcare service provider has increased due to the added risk of infection (R. Roy, 2020). Though in Kolkata with the constant negotiation with the government Ranjita Sinha, a notable trans person right activist has managed to arrange separate beds for the transgender patients (Ghosh, 2020). This pandemic had caused a serious health problem to the patients who are under the sex change therapy. Due to this lockdown, the restrictions on travel and closure of public transport have made the city-centric, SRS-related healthcare systems inaccessible to the transgender persons in smaller towns and villages. “*Asansol theke sostai pill, injection niye astam, ei lockdown e pachi na. Sarir valo thakche na aajkal*” (*we used to arrange the cheap pill and injection from Asansol, due to this lockdown I failed to get it. I am not physically fit now*), while sharing her experience Munni (*changed name*) has told me about her ‘*dikkat*’ (*problem*). Though mental health is another problem for the transgender persons, but in Birbhum nobody talks about it. The Hijra persons has taken the often faced social stigma and physical abuse as destiny of their fate, ‘*hijre hoye jonmale eisob toh sojhyo kortei hobe*’ (*we have to bear all these as we have been born as hijra*). The people in power are using ‘Social distance’ which could be a new vocabulary for the community. But the trans persons have been facing ‘social distance’ and ‘physical distance’. On any normal day, this would not have mattered much to the community, but in these helpless times, as the virus tightens its grip each passing day, the actual distance between the society and the community widens further. Elected government being a part of this society is reluctant to include them in the mainstream. Public health care, education, work has always been inaccessible and unattainable for them (Ckkraborti, 2020). With no access to friends, lovers and internet; many trans persons found themselves particularly lonely (Hajra et al., 2020). Social stigma attached to the transgender people is huge in our society. In this Covid-19 crisis the hijra body has been perceived as a vector of the disease by the so called ‘main stream society. In some parts of the country police brutality has also been recorded against the transgender people (Sen, 2020; Hajra et al., 2020)

The story has been presented till now is a macro picture. The studies and reporting in the newspapers have made the *hijra* as a collective identity, thus ‘we’, the learned researcher is trying to portray the covid experiences as uniform. As per the ‘grounded theory’ epistemology the experiences are dependent on the social location of the self. But there is a gap in understanding the differential and intersectional social location of the hijra community. Therefore, the covid experiences are also diversified as per the social location of the hijra person. In this paper I am trying to bring Hijra person’s intersectional experience of the Covid-19. The first objective is to unpack the *hijra* community with the intersectionality framework and to bring the differential inter-community and intra-community experiences. My second objective is to depict the subversion of the *Hijra community* rule due to cope up this unprecedented situation and to navigate the emerging new geographies. I do follow the qualitative methodology for the entire project. I have used some of the qualitative methods like semi structured interview, in-depth interview. To substantiate my arguments, I took the help of photography. The study is based on a small district town called Suri in Birbhum, West Bengal. Thus, this study is going to scroll down into the question of ‘*izzat*’ (*respect*) and intersectionality in Hijra community; the differential experience in the pandemic. I am basically looking into how those intersectional identities are interplaying with each other and what are the spatial relations of such interplaying?

### 'Izzat' and Intersectional Hijra Identity

The Hijra community is a unique group of people having distinct gendered identities that have a socio-religious underpinning to their existence in India. The portraits of Hijra characters playing significant roles in Indian mythology as *ardhanarishawar* and the rebirth of *Hijra* through the act of castration gave them the position to give bless or curse. The less explored intersections in the Hijra's internal social structure gave rise to the notion as Hijras as a homogenous entity (Goel, 2014). The internal structure is highly hierarchical in nature and it is like a pyramid. At the bottom, the hijra persons form a smaller unit under one hijra guru is called '*gharana*'. In the next order there are several smaller gharans under the supervision of one '*nayak*'. The third tier is comprising of several nayaks under the leadership of one person called '*kundir malik*'. In a state there may be several '*kundir malik*'. Due to the less employment opportunities, there are three main avenues from which they earn their livelihood- begging at *lalbati* (*road crossing*), *chalkiwali* (*train*), sex work and '*tolibandhai*' (*blessing ceremony for the new born*). As per the norms of the community one can do the job what her guru is permitted by the *nayak*. So, if your guru is a '*chalkiwali guru*' then you are not allowed to perform the '*tolibandhai*'. If one chela who is a member of a '*lalbati*' family may be found in performing '*tolibandhai*' then the guru of that *chela* has to pay '*don (fine)*'. The rule is very strict other way also, if any '*tolibandhai*' hijra is found to be associated with the sex work and *lalbatti*, then the individual would be ostracized from the gharana and she would lose her '*izzat*'. So, each category is highly sectarian and has less chance of fluidity or mobility. These three categories of work are also paramedical like their intra-community structure. The works are not only separated as per the skill rather the work division is divided as per the lineage of your guru. Besides the '*tolibandhai*' is considered to have more '*izzat*' than other two. Even they consider sex work to have more '*izzat*' than '*lalbatti*' and '*chalkiwali*'. Thus, those who are associated with the '*tolibandhai*' is considered to be more '*izzatdar*' than other two. This *izzat* is highly associated with anyone's status at the intra-community level. If we see it economically, the '*tolibandhai*' hijra earns more than '*lalbatti*' hijra. Therefore, we can argue the notion of '*izzat*' is directly associated with the social, economic capital of an individual. The apparently looking uniformity in the *hijra* gendered identity is highly intersectional in nature. The notion of '*izzat*' associated with the hijra identity thus makes it a multiple marginalised subject within one intersectional identity. Therefore we must unpack the covid story while remembering these background story (Menon, 2015).

In suri there are two *gharans*, one is associated with a '*chalkiwali*' guru and another one is associated with a guru who can perform the *tolibandhai*. Therefore the chelas of the second gharan claims that they have more '*izzat*' than other. During the interview I understood that the chelas from the second gharans takes pride to be associated with the *tolibandhai*. When I asked her about the how they have survived in the covid crisis, they replied, '*amra na khye mara jabo tobu tolibadhahi hijra hoye lalbati korte parbo na, kosto hoyeche, jetuku jomano chilo seta diyai kaj chaliyechi*' (*We are the tolibadhahi hijra, we will bear the pain but will never opt for lalbati, this is against our pride. There was certainly crisis but we had some savings from the income, so we have survived any ways*). The *tolibandhai* hijra earn more than a *lalbati* or *chalkiwali*, so certainly they faced fewer difficulties than others. Even in the *tolibandhai* one hijra is exposed to the family members of the house where they go for the ceremony but one who is begging in the road or train come to the much larger people. Thus, the *lalbati* hijra is much more vulnerable than the *tolibandhai*. While interviewing the chelas from the '*chalkiwali*' gharanas they were describing their sufferings. In Suri this particular gharana has a demarcated area whining which they can beg, they are allowed to beg in the loop line which connects the Saithia Junction with the Andal Junction. In this line the traffic is less. There are only two up and two down passenger trains run on a daily basis. They were saying from the passenger train they get very little as most the commuters are '*daily passengers*', so they hardly offer. There are two more express trains, but those are out of reach. Because the *Bananchal Express* passes suri station at midnight another train *Kamakhyapuri Express* do stop at Suri but does not have a stoppage

at Andal Junction, its next stoppage is Durgapur where these hijra chelas can't even enter. If they do so they have to pay fine. So, they only major income source is Dibrugarh Jhajha express which passes Suri station on Tuesday and Thursday during noon. After the announcement of the lockdown, they have left with no other option. Since they earn less so they had nothing as their savings. The situation for these hijra persons were much engraved than the '*tolī badhai*' hijra. As these hijra are considered to be less izzatdar so they have fewer networks with the civil society groups and local administration. Though some of the civil society groups have extended their supports in terms of rations, cash transfer the support first reached to the *tolī badhai* hijra. The second groups thus denied of every support.

### The Cartography of New Geographies

As I proceed with my field experience, I have realized new geographies are emerging out the subversion of the community rules. The *lalbati* gharana was suffering the most as they were left with no income opportunity due to the nationwide lockdown, not a single penny was left at the end of May and hardly any substantial relief package was reaching to them. The group opened a site for begging. The chelas started begging on the Panagarh-Margram National Highway at the railway crossing. In Birbhum it had never happened before. The road is called Suri Bypass and the physical condition of that particular stretch of that bypass is not good. Therefore, it causes traffic jam for hours. Since the train service has not resumed, they are earning from the bypass only. Thus, the space of their earning has changed, along with that the timing of work has also been shifted. Earlier they used to beg in the trains during day time and used to return to their *khol* at least by evening. But the working hours have shifted to from 6pm to 6am. This is the time when the road is packed with the traffic mostly the trucks. Thus, the pandemic and associated lockdown caused the emergence of the new space and time for *lalbati hijra*. New geographies also bring new challenges. As the *chelas* were describing to me, she said, "*rat manei toh bujhte parcho, truck driverra nana rokom ongovongi, ishara kore. Ki korbo, peter daye sob e sojhyo korte hoi*" (You can understand, as we are working at night truck drives often do taunt us, try to abuse us. but what can we do, we have to lose our izzat for livelihood



Figure 2 Begging at the National High way, 16th September 5.30am. Source: Author



Figure 3&4: A hijra Person is doing *lalbatti* at the National High way, 16th September,2020 5.30am. Source:Author

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