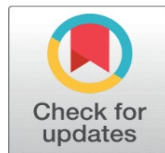
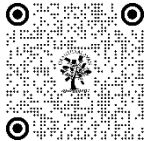


VOICES OF RESILIENCE: THE LANGUAGE AND ORAL TRADITIONS OF THE HIJRA COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate relationship between language, performance, and identity within the Hijra community, a marginalized group in South Asia known for its rich oral traditions. Through a detailed examination of the community's songs, rituals, and social practices, the study highlights how language serves as both a means of communication and a powerful symbol of cultural identity. The Hijra community primarily relies on oral narratives, utilizing regional scripts to document their songs while maintaining a vibrant oral culture. Interviews with community members reveal their daily lives, the challenges they face, and their unique role in performing blessings during significant life events. This research further investigates the performative aspects of their existence, illustrating how Hijras navigate societal norms and assert their identities through artistic expression. By categorizing their songs into distinct forms, such as Badhai and Banna-Banni Geet, the paper emphasizes the significance of these musical practices in preserving cultural heritage. Ultimately, the findings underscore the resilience of the Hijra community and the importance of language as a living expression of identity, history, and community.

Keywords: Hijra Community, Marginalized Communities, Identity Expression, Orature, Social Practices

Language serves as a powerful symbol of imagery, acting as a key that unlocks deeper meanings within a cultural context. It is not just a means of communication; it shapes our thoughts and facilitates the acquisition of knowledge. Words are intricately linked, allowing for a nuanced understanding of concepts and relationships. In this regard, language can exist in both oral and written forms, each playing a crucial role in the transmission of culture and tradition.

The Hijra community, known for its rich oral traditions, does not possess a standardized written language. Instead, it utilizes the scripts of the regions where its members reside. For instance, in Rajasthan, they rely on the Rajasthani script, while Gujarati is used in Gujarat, and Bengali in Tripura and West Bengal. Notably, many of the songs associated with this community are documented in Devanagari script, often accompanied by translations and interpretations. This illustrates the importance of oral narratives in preserving cultural identity.

The Stories of Genesis, a significant part of the community's cultural heritage, too. These stories highlight the community's reliance on orality, showcasing how the songs and tales have endured through generations. While many songs celebrating figures like Ramchandra Ji, Lord Krishna, and various goddesses—including Bahuchara Mata—have

faded from memory, remnants persist through the recollections of older members of the community. These elders, often referred to as Gurus, play a vital role in preserving and transmitting this oral heritage, albeit with challenges.

Interviews with members of the Hijra community reveal the dynamics of their daily lives. Engaging with both older and younger individuals present challenges, as many Hijras spend their mornings in the Basti, collecting alms. Beyond this, they gather information about new marriages and births, important social events within their culture. They also monitor community developments, such as new houses or businesses opening, as part of their role in performing blessings, known as Badhais, during these life events.

However, the task of conducting interviews is not without its difficulties. Many of the older Guru's struggle with physical limitations that hinder their ability to perform and sing traditional songs. The consumption of liquor and tobacco among older members contributes to their declining capacity to engage fully in musical practices. Often, they provide cues for the younger generation, who carry on the performance with energy and enthusiasm. One participant, Maangi from the Bhindar Gharana, succinctly illustrates this dynamic: "I sing and Kajri dances in the Basti. The guru is incapable of bringing enough oil for the Gharana." This statement encapsulates the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and performance within the community.

Substance use among Hijras, particularly among male members, is prevalent in both Gharanas and personal spaces where they reside. Alcohol consumption is common, but not uniformly accepted within the community. For example, Bhanvri Bai, guru of Bhindar Gharana adheres to the belief in Joganiya Mataji, which influences her stance against alcohol use in the Gharana. Despite this, members often find ways to indulge discreetly, such as drinking on rooftops after the matriarch has gone to sleep. Interestingly, this culture of drinking provides researchers with unique access to insider perspectives, as songs often serve as a medium for sharing personal stories and insights.

HIJRA SONGS: The songs sung by the Hijra community reflect their historical and cultural background. They are distinct from other communities, largely due to their unique societal role and the ways in which they navigate their identities. The Hijras utilize their gendered appearance as a means of livelihood, blending artistry with their performances to earn a living. This is not an isolated phenomenon; other communities in Rajasthan also engage in cross-dressing for economic purposes, particularly during cultural performances.

The religious performances of Ramleela and Gavri are traditionally enacted by males from the Bhil, Meena, and Gameti castes. In Mewar, the Meena community and the Bhil or Gameti communities exclusively perform Gavri dance. Additionally, the Bhaand community plays a significant role in social gatherings, portraying themselves as women during performances. However, despite their contributions to cultural festivities, the Bhaands do not identify with the Hijras, leading to tensions between the two groups, which are explored further in Chapter III.

The performativity within the Hijra community is complex. Kothis, often seen as novices, participate in Hijra Gharanas during festive seasons, contributing to their economic stability. They frequently work as dancers in urban areas at night, providing them with an advantage over those who remain solely within the Gharanas. Interestingly, they do not perform in the same localities where they solicit Badhais, particularly in smaller towns or villages. However, this barrier often dissolves in larger cities like Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Kota, where the dynamics of performance shift.

The distinction between sacred and non-sacred spaces of performance often emerges in discussions about the Hijra community. Sacred performances are intimately connected to rites and rituals specific to Hijra culture, either through the roles of a Hijra guru or a novice. Conversely, non-sacred performances are typically focused on economic gain and may include sexual undertones. The sacred spaces of performance encompass those associated with a Hijra Gharana, where traditional songs are performed.

The songs within the Hijra community are categorized into five parts, reflecting the various contexts in which they are performed. The first category consists of Badhai Songs, which are further divided into three subcategories: Marriage songs (eight songs), Songs of Birth (seven songs), and Budhaapa Songs (two songs). Additionally, there are Deity songs (four), Maera and Jalwa Songs (two), and Sammelan Songs (three).

Badhai Geet, or greeting songs, are integral to the community's celebrations, sung during significant occasions such as marriages, births, and other life events. These songs are not confined to specific moments; they form a continuous thread woven into the fabric of Hijra life, paying homage to deities and acknowledging the people whose homes are blessed by these performances. The importance of these songs cannot be overstated, as they serve as a cultural touchstone, linking the community to their spiritual beliefs and social practices.

However, Badhai Songs can also carry negative implications. During Badhai collection, if community members find themselves met with resistance from the *jajmaan*—those expected to provide offerings—they may shift their tone. In moments of frustration or refusal, the Hijras may resort to singing Budhaapa songs, expressing their displeasure through these musical outlets. This progression from positive to negative reflects the emotional landscape of the community, where songs serve as a vehicle for negotiation and expression.

In extreme cases of rejection, the Hijras may escalate their responses to verbal insults, culminating in the shocking display of their castrated state. This reaction is not merely a form of intimidation; it reflects a deep-seated history of abusive treatment directed at Hijras, as documented in various scholarly works. For instance, Kira Hall's research provides historical context, referencing Niccolo Manucci's observations of eunuchs in the court of Prince Shah Alam. Such insights illuminate the complex interplay of power dynamics and social status within the community.

The Banna-Banni Geet, specifically marriage songs, further exemplify the unique practices of the Hijra community. When participating in marriage ceremonies, Hijras tend to sing a limited number of songs, often moving quickly from one event to another. The bustling nature of the wedding season presents them with numerous opportunities to perform, leading to a pragmatic approach in their singing. As noted by Maangi at Bhindar Gharana, "We keep everything short because a single badhai does not suffice. We make the people happy by singing either two or three songs. Sometimes they ask us to take the badhai without singing; sometimes someone asks us to sing seven (7) songs."

The usage of filler words in the Badhai Songs, such as "haay," serves to create a sense of camaraderie and familiarity among the performers. These linguistic choices mirror the everyday conversations among community members, reinforcing their social bonds and shared cultural practices. The interplay of language, performance, and social identity within the Hijra community is a rich tapestry that illustrates the complexity of their experiences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the language and songs of the Hijra community reflect a vibrant oral culture that is deeply intertwined with their social practices and identity. Through interviews and observations, we gain insights into their daily lives, struggles, and triumphs. The performative nature of their existence challenges societal norms and sheds light on the complexities of gender and community dynamics. The resilience of the Hijra community, as seen through their music and oral traditions, underscores their enduring cultural heritage. As we continue to explore their narratives, it becomes clear that language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a living expression of identity, history, and community. Through the songs, rituals, and performances, the Hijras articulate their experiences, assert their identity, and navigate the socio-economic challenges they face. Ultimately, the language of their texts—through songs and oral narratives—serves as a powerful medium for communication, preservation, and expression within this vibrant community.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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