

## Preface

“You show me yours, I shall show you mine “ – this is an innocuous exploration that children begin at around 3 yrs of age. It is a part of the growing up process and nature has instilled in us an innate sense of gender identification, which allows us to classify and bond with people of the same gender – boys and girls form different groups and indulge in different play activities from those of each other. For example, boys tend to indulge much more in ‘rough and tumble’ physical activities and play games like cops and robbers, war games etc. while girls tend to prefer ‘thinking and feeling’ activities like doctor-patient, homemaker etc.

However, what of the child who is forced to form a part of one group, while identifying innately with the other group? The little boy, who prefers dancing to playing football, who likes to dress nicely and feels more comfortable indulging in ‘girl speak’ while hanging out with girls, rather than letting out war whoops, chasing down enemy soldiers or robbers and wrestling them to the ground is usually left out in the cold by both sides, since he is too effeminate for boys while looking incongruent for girls.

This child is forced into a sad state of withdrawal, since he is rejected not only by peer groups but also increasingly more so by adults, who cannot fathom what is wrong with the little boy. His parents encourage him to be a strong and assertive boy, often trampling his feelings in the process. Parents of other boys tend to make fun of the poor child who does not conform to other boys, while those of girls do not want a boy to form a part of their daughters’ group.

Life becomes increasingly more freakish for this little ‘girl’ trapped in a boy’s body, so to speak and this sense of isolation and deprivation becomes even more acute and intense as the child grows up. A turning point in his life often comes around the time of puberty between 8 – 14 years of age, when this child is plagued by malfunctional hormonal development and consequently cannot grow up to be either male or female. For some, this stress of abnormal physical and sexual development becomes too great

and they are forced to run away from home, in an attempt to discover the answer for themselves.

It is then that they are often thrown into the murky corridors of a parallel existence, where the community members lead a shadowy existence known only to us as 'hijras'. Very little is known about them and even lesser about their community, their adopted families, their lifestyles and rituals or even their death. No one ever wants to witness a hijra death, since they are a cursed lot. We have often heard the refrain when we were children that "one should never fight or argue with them ... *unka shraap hamesha such hota hai* ...etc." Tales of them abound, surrounded by all sorts of myth and folklore. Those of us familiar with mythology might have heard of 'Shikhandi' and 'Brihanala' from the Mahabharata but not much more is known about these stigmatized and discriminated folks.

We scarcely give them a second thought, save for those moments of irritation when we come across one of them with an outstretched palm thrust through the windows of our cars or cringe when we see one or more of them standing in our doorways on some days of the month, trying to eke out a living by either appealing to our mercy or offending our sensibilities.

This book aims to unearth the answers to some of the issues, while taking a dispassionate look at the issues that society at large tries to grapple with, when dealing with them. It addresses the fundamental issue of why this rather complex issue is caused in the first place, the physical causes that lie at the core of this problem, how to identify the existence of this problem as the first step towards acknowledging it and perhaps addressing it. The book proceeds to look at the different aspects of both male to female, as well as female to male transformations, the medical procedures involved, as well as the socio-economic ramifications of gender transformations. The book also traces the history of gender misfits, outlines the issues facing them in various countries and cites anecdotes of such people, in an effort to gain a better understanding of the often insurmountable problems faced by such people. The book is replete with

photographs which bring out the fact that these people are 'one of us', leading lives filled with hope and desire just like the rest of us and can play meaningful roles in society, if only the rest of us stop being hypocritical.

Contrary to public opinion, I found hijras to be nice people. Belying the oft quoted refrain that hijras are parasites, they are quite willing to work but nobody, including the author, is willing to employ one of them as a maid servant or a daily labourer at even half the regular wage. While sitting in judgement upon them, we need to remind ourselves that they too have mouths to feed. It is our callousness that drives them to begging or worse.

Like everyone else, I was also keen to know – What are they made of? What's inside them? After I met them, I learned that theirs is a different world, far removed from our 'regular' one but one which is deserving of being written about and understood by society at large. I decided to share my findings with everyone in the hope that we will gain a better understanding of them and hence this book.

This book will have achieved its objective if the next time we get irritated after being accosted at a traffic signal or shrink from their laughter at a marriage ceremony, birth of a child, opening of shop etc. we pause to give thought to what we can do to free ourselves from harbouring dogma and perpetrating such thoughtless persecution of people just like us.