

## Means of Livelihood

Becoming hijra in India exacts a high price in terms of living forever in between the genders in group communes in this lowly, despised caste and mainly working as prostitutes and beggars.

Their public behavior and mannerisms are high camp, highly exaggerated feminine gestures but they make no effort to mask their male voices. Most hijras are good singers and dancers and entertainers. Their presence at weddings is thought to bring good luck.

### **Hijrahood: An economic necessity**

Hijras in India drag a dire existence being unable to eke out a minimal living. Most hijras are found to live in dilapidated shanties. In a socio-cultural context where hijras are denied access to jobs, hijras resort to singing and dancing to make their ends meet. Besides, these livelihood strategies have been cascaded down to hijras from past generations of hijra societies. Hijra livelihood revolves around singing, dancing, begging and selling of sex. They work as entertainers in social gatherings and bewitch people to extract money from them.

Traditionally hijras are summoned to render songs and perform dance at the domicile of a new-born child. When not asked, they drop in at the house of a newborn uninvited and dance with tomtom. They are also found to sing and dance at marriages and other social gatherings in exchange for a few rupees.

Hijras are also regular collectors of alms from market places and shops. When denied or refused they coerce the shopkeepers to hand over money. Such coercion sometimes amounts to a mild form of extortion.

Besides, hijras work as sex workers. While they support themselves to an extent by begging, their major source of income apparently is prostitution, for which purpose they are in much demand. Hijras are invariably the passive partner, taking their customers anally or between the thighs. They are often found to sell their bodies to homosexual and bisexual males at a pretty cheap price. The frequency of selling sex is pretty high

among the young hijras as they work almost six days a week. Usually they throng at different designated places like parks in search of clients.

However, in recent times their demand as entertainers is on the wane. They are no longer called upon to celebrate the arrival of the new-born or perform at marital functions. Previously singing and dancing supplemented their income quite substantially. However, their declining popularity as entertainers has left them with no option but prostitution and begging.

In fact, hijrahood has grown into a culture for these socially disadvantaged and ostracized people, a sort of an adaptive mechanism, a potential style of livelihood. Hijras in India earn pretty little as the popularity of such practice is mostly restricted to only lower middle class households of the bucolic areas.

Interestingly unlike many other least advantaged groups, hijras are not found to have diversified their livelihood strategies. The unwillingness of the larger mainstream society to accept them as normal humans has also debarred hijras from seeking new sources of income. This is largely true of a typical hijra community anywhere in India.

### **Hijra's used as outsourced labor for transgendered clothing manufacturing**

Transgendered Voices, Inc has decided to outsource the manufacturing of transgender clothing to India. They want the hijra community to make the clothing. To see a company reaching out to the hijras to do something for people in similar situation and allowing them to make more money makes one happy. The logic behind offering them work goes like this: *'Once they start working, they will earn the respect they deserve and merge into the social fold'*. However, it makes assumptions about Indian culture that are not true. In America, people who contribute to society are given respect. However, Indian society is still highly caste based (if not entirely) and while politically and legally this may not be the case, socially this is more true than not. No matter what they contribute to their society they will probably remain outcasts. It seems that their role has been placed on them because of their caste. The only good to come out of such 'regular' is that the quality of a hijra's life may improve and this may help curb the prostitution that is responsible for causing the large number of AIDS victims within the community. Of course, all the money a chela makes could go to the guru who will reap the benefits of the income more than her chelas.