



## Community Gatherings of Hijras at Chintpurni Temple, Himachal Pradesh

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**Abstract.** This study is based on the exploration of the religious gatherings of the Hijra community at Chintpurni temple of Himachal Pradesh. This study focuses on the understanding of the cultural and emotional importance of the temple in the lives of Hijras. It also throws light on how these gatherings help Hijras in building their identity and coping with their challenges. Though many researchers have discussed the marginalization of the Hijras, few have focused on their community gathering and how these impact their identity. The objective of the study is to examine the cultural significance of Chintpurni temple in the lives of the Hijras. This study also focuses on the role of community gatherings in shaping Hijra identity and their sense of belonging. By shedding light on what kind of social and economic challenges they face. This study highlights the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by Hijra people. This study uses a mixed method approach to study the lived experiences of the people of the Hijra community. It highlights many challenges faced by the community members and it also shows how they deal with these problems. This study highlights that the religious gatherings at Chintpurni temple are not only about worship, but it is a place where the people of the Hijra community find their inner peace, identity, strength and hope. It has also been observed that these gatherings give them courage to live their life with dignity.

**Index Terms-** Significance of temple, access to temple, Support system, preservation of tradition, discrimination, marginalization, strength and empowerment, mental peace.

### I. Introduction

People who are born intersex or with mixed genitalia, who are neither male nor female, who have a unique body form, which is sometimes socially stigmatized, and who lack sexual sensibility are often referred to as Hijra, third gender, transgender, intersex, eunuch, and hermaphrodite (Rahman et al., 2024). "The origin of the word 'Hijra' can be traced back from its Arabic root 'Hijr' which means departure or exodus from one's tribe" (Chauhan, 2024). By talking about the Indian subcontinent, the term "Hijra" was coined a century ago and is frequently used to refer to transvestites, transgender, intersex, eunuch, and hermaphrodite males (Chakrapani, 2010). Transgender people have been a vital part of Indian civilization for generations, but they continue to confront systemic discrimination and social isolation. Despite legal recognition and court rulings in their favor, they are frequently excluded in politics, society, and the economy. Because of limited access to school and employment, many transgender people wind up begging, doing sex work, or working in other informal jobs. Harassment at educational institutions, businesses, and public areas reduces their possibilities for advancement. In addition, they face violence, inadequate healthcare, and police brutality (S Goswami & S Karmakar, 2018). In India, the total population of transgender is around 4.88 Lakh as per census 2011 (Kumar & Singh, 2020). There are just less than two million eunuchs and transgender in India, and many of whom live in groups controlled by a eunuch guru



(Show & Kanta, 2016). Compared to other states of India, this community is less noticeable in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Despite their historical significance in Indian culture, they deal with serious economical challenges. Especially in small towns like Chintpurni (in the Una region of Himachal Pradesh). According to census of India 2011, the total number of other gender people in Himachal Pradesh is 2051, from which 1818 live in rural areas whereas 233 live in urban areas. They live in separate communities and form their own world. They have their own Gods and follow their own laws, and every person belonging to this community has to abide by these laws (Jayant, 2020). Chintpurni, a small town in Amb tehsil of Una district (Himachal Pradesh), has been home to a small but growing number of Hijras. Despite their marginalized status, these individuals often form tight-knit communities that participate in religious, social, and cultural events, which help maintain a sense of belonging and identity. Hijras in India have virtually nowhere to feel safe or free from discrimination; they don't even feel comfortable in their own family or home. Hijras are not accepted in mainstream labor markets and because of societal stereotypes, their employment options are usually reduced. Folk call them 'Mahant', which means a 'religious superior' (Omissi, 1999, p. xi). This shows that people respect and worship them. While many people worship and respect them, there are also individuals who do not wish to accept their existence in society. This temple provides a unique setting for many to discover spiritual fulfillment, a sense of community, and a sense of belonging. There is very little known about why they get together and what they do in community gatherings. Using a qualitative approach, this study will explore the lived experiences of people of the Hijra community who participate in Chintpurni Temple gatherings.

## II. Review of Literature

The Hijra community, which is recognized as the third gender all over South Asia, has rich historical significance and unique communal togetherness (Chaturvedi et al., 2018; Show et al., 2016; Nanda, 1999).  
Historical and Cultural Significance:

Starting from the beginning, we come to know that several scholars have highlighted the historical base related to Hijras. Mishra et al. (2023) in their study, "Study of Welfare of Transgender of India with Special Reference to State of Chhattisgarh" states that, how transgender identities were recognized in India early on, going back to the vedic era when they were recognized by tritiya prakriti and mentioned in epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. As a reflection of their high social status, Hijras were regarded as advisors and protectors during the Mughal era.

### Religious Practice

Talking about the religious practice, Taparia (2011), in their study "Emasculate Bodies of Hijra: Sites of Imposed, Resisted and Negotiated Identities" found that it is impossible to call oneself a Hijra without undergoing the operation that focuses the core of their identity. In contemporary times the primary motive for Nirvana has undergone a shift for religious obligation consideration. Loh (2011) in their study 'Borrowing Religious Identifications': A Study of Religious Practices



among the Hijras of India mention that, Hijras use a combination of Muslim and Hindu customs to establish their identities. They do this in order to be recognized and validate their individuality, which goes beyond simple categorization. Since religious rituals are frequently at the heart of community meetings, this theme has a direct bearing on comprehending how these events contribute to the formation of Hijra identity and a sense of belonging.

### **Social Structure**

Coming to the social structure, Bockrath (2003), in a study “Bhartia Hijro Ka Dharma: The Code of India's Hijra”, explores the unique social, cultural, and legal aspects of the Hijra group in India. By examining Hijra identity, it draws attention to the community's complex relationships with both traditional Indian society and the judicial system. The finding of the study describes how to overcome social and legal obstacles, create communal living arrangements for support, and uphold social order through a formal hierarchy of chelas and gurus.

### **Preservation of Cultural Identity**

The study by Pervaiz (2024), “Beyond the binary: Exploring the cultural identity and practices of the Hijra community in Lahore”, explores the customs and cultural identity of the Hijra minority in Lahore, Pakistan. It investigates the customs, rituals, and social structure that aid Hijras in navigating their marginalized way of life. The study emphasizes the ways in which Hijras preserve their distinctive society through traditions including the guru-chela bond, unusual family arrangements, and roles in customary rituals. Due to colonial sentiments, Hijras, who are descended from Khawaja Saras during the Mughal era, still experience discrimination. Mal & Mundu (2024), in the article, “The Rhythm of Hidden Religious Heritage: Dhol Puja of India's Hijra Community”, examines the distinctive religious practice of "Dhol Puja," a devotional ritual that the Hijra people perform with drums. Dhol Puja gives a sense of spiritual identity and connection by expressing their secret religious past, as this study shows. The writers stress how crucial these customs are to maintaining cultural customs and strengthening Hijra community ties. Through an analysis of the social and symbolic meaning of Dhol Puja, this article offers important new perspectives on how identity, tradition, and spirituality interact in the Hijra community.

The majority of the research concentrates on Hijras in major cities. This offers a chance to investigate Hijra community customs. Studies on the mobility of marginalized groups, such as migrants or roaming communities, also shed light on how Hijras' travel between events and what socio economic challenges they have to face.

## **III. Methodology**

This study is based on primary as well as secondary data which includes 19 participants from the hijra community. Data was collected through in-depth-interviews and a structured questionnaire was designed to get the responses of the respondents. Available data on the community was also gathered through literature. The used methodology sought to understand the socio-cultural importance of these gatherings, challenges faced by the Hijras during these gatherings and the resilience



strategies employed by them.

### Sample/Research Design

A mixed-method approach is applied in this study to explore the lived experiences of the Hijra community's gathering at Chintpurni temple of Himachal Pradesh. When both the elements of qualitative research and quantitative research are combined together in order to answer our research questions, it is said to be mixed methods (George, 2024). Data was collected using questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 members of the Hijra community. The interview schedule prepared by the researcher included a mix of open-ended questions and structured questions as well, covering respondents' demographic information, personal experiences, and their feeling of being socially accepted. The open-ended questions allowed participants to share their narratives and experiences in detail.

### Objectives

- To examine the cultural significance of Chintpurni Temple for Hijras.
- To investigate the role of community gatherings in shaping Hijra identity and sense of belonging.
- To identify and analyze the social and economic challenges faced by them during their gatherings.
- To understand the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by them.

## IV. Results and Discussion

After collecting the data, the gathered information has been classified, tabulated and interpreted in simple frequency distribution and percentage was taken out accordingly. The detailed examination, discussion and results are presented below:

Table 1: Socio Demographic profile of the respondents

Age group	No. of respondents	Percentage
15-25	3	15.8%
26-35	11	57.9%
36-45	5	26.3%
Education		
Illiterate	1	5.27%
Primary education	9	47.36%
Secondary education	4	21.05%
Higher secondary education	3	15.78%
Diploma	1	5.27%
Graduation	1	5.27%
Designation		
Guru	4	21.06%
Chela	15	78.94%
Monthly income		



Less than 5000	2	10.53%
10000-20000	3	15.78%
20000-50000	1	5.27%
More than 50000	13	68.42%
Type of residence		
Shared house	8	42.10%
Rented house	5	26.32%
Own house	4	21.05%
Live with their guru	2	10.53%
Total	19	100%

Presented above, table1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents in the study area. The table shows the age group of 19 Hijra respondents, where the majority (57.9%) are aged between 26-35 showing the most represented age group. 26.3% fall in the age group of 36-45, while 15.8% are aged between 15-25, which are least represented. This shows that most respondents are in their twenties to mid thirties. This table also throws light on the educational background of the respondents, where 9 (47.36%) respondents have completed their primary education, 4 (21.05%) having passed secondary education, and 3 (15.78%) having completed higher secondary education. A smaller proportion have achieved higher education, with 1 (5.27%) being a graduate and 1 (5.27%) holding a diploma. Notably, rest 1 (5.27%) from the respondents is illiterate. This distribution highlights the varied educational attainment among the respondents. Coming towards their designation or hierarchy within the community, the results show that 78.94% of respondents identified as Chelas, while 21.06% identified as Gurus. (Note: the word designation is used here to show hierarchy among the people of the hijra community.) Among the respondents, a maximum of 13 (68.42%) respondents earn more than 50000 per month, 3 (15.78%) respondents earn between 10 to 20000 per month, one (5.27%) between 20 to 50000 per month and the rest 2 (10.53%) earn less than 5000 per month. The distribution of the types of residence among the respondents denotes that 8 (42.10%) respondents live in a shared house, 5 (26.32%) live in a rented house, 4 (21.05%) own their house, and the other 2 (10.53%) live with their guru. The collected data and the gathered information has also been classified into various themes which are described below with thorough discussions and findings:

**Significance of Chintpurni Temple:** The research shows that Chintpurni temple plays a crucial role in the lives of the people of marginalized communities like hijras as they come there to vent their grief, sorrow, and take courage. It is not just a temple for them but a place where they meet with their friends and share their thoughts with the deity and the fellow ones freely.

**Respondent Insight:** "Mujhe yahan aake bahut acha lagta hai, aisa lagta hai ki maano sab mil gaya ho, ye to mata rani ki kripa hai jo hum yahan tak pahunch pate hai." (Translation: I feel very good coming here; it feels like I've found everything. It's Mata Rani's grace that allows us to reach here).

**Expression of Identity through Rituals:** The way they show their gratitude or devotions in the temple makes them different from the other people. They always



wear beautiful clothes to look attractive. The main part of their expression is 'taali', they do it during blessing as well as during cursing someone. People believe that every word uttered from their mouth comes true, so no one here messes with them and treats them as normal as other people. One of the respondents said "Main kehndi mainu Mata de darbar matha tek ke te taali maar ke sukoon milda" (Translation: I find solace in touching Mata's feet and receiving applause).

**Emotional Support and Sense of Belonging:** The best part of their gatherings is that they meet with their friends and share their thoughts to find emotional support and sense of belonging. The research has found that they gather to find someone like them so that they can share their feelings, thoughts and overcome their stress. One of the respondents said that "hamri guru maa bahut hi achhi hai, main jabse inse mili hu na mujhe kisi bat ki koi tension nahi hoti, esa lagta hai mere sath koi hai jo mera apna hai." (our guru maa is a nice person, since I have met her I feel out of tension, it feels like someone is with me who is my own.)

**Strict Rules and Punishments:** The research found that sometimes they also gather to make laws to control the problematic people of their own society and to punish them. A respondent claimed that "yha jab bhi koi galt kam krta hai, jaise paise udhar leta hai aur bhag jata hai, ya kuchh bhi ghotala krta hai uske jaane ke bad uske guru ko uska karz bharna pdta hai, agr mano kisi ki maut ho jati hai tb bhi." (Here, whenever someone does something wrong, like borrowing money and running away, or committing any fraud, even after his death his Guru has to pay for his debt.) According to them this will make a clean structure of the community and the rules and regulations will help the members to stay within the limits and follow the sequence.

**Discrimination and Marginalisation:** The collected data shows that most hijra people go through various kinds of discrimination during their lives. They experience rejection in almost all the stages in their lives such as: discrimination in family, in school, in colleges, at the workplace, in the society and marginalization during gatherings etc.

**Respondent Insight:** "Pata chalte hi mujhe mara gaya. peeta gaya, mere sath bahut galat bartaav kiya gaya or yahi nahi mujhe jaan se marne ki koshish bhi kayi bar ki gayi, pareshan hokar khud kayi baar maine atmhaya karne ki koshish ki lekin mere ek friend ne mujhe bahut samjhaya or bola tere jaise or bhi hai, tu yahan se bhag ja unke pass ja, tab itni samjh nhi thi ki complaint karu to mai bhag gayi." (Translation: As soon as my identity was known, I was beaten, mistreated terribly, and attempts were even made to kill me. Frustrated, I tried to end my life several times, but a friend convinced me, saying 'there are others like you.' I didn't know how to complain, so I ran away).

**Informal Support System:** The collected data shows that due to lack of education and information related to the laws and policies related to them, the people of hijra community create their own informal network to support each other. They start doing gatherings, meeting people like them, join family-like structures led by a



guru which provide them emotional support, guidance and sometimes freedoms. The traditional kinship systems they follow provides them a space to survive.

**Economic Struggles:** The study found that the hijra do go through the economic struggle. They live in an environment where there is no one that can be trusted. They face economic struggles when their trusted one runs away with their money. Many of them have livelihood options like to beg, perform at birth or marriage ceremonies etc., but to show their unity during gatherings they save their money to reach the temples and to ensure their presence there.

**Tools of Resilience:** The study found that the people of this community have made their own way or tools to condition the other people of the community to believe in cooperation with each other to live a secure and even life. These tools include: faith, friendship, community support and ritual practices etc.

Despite going through constant rejection, the people of the hijra community show great strength, they find hope in their faith and support each other like a family. The expression of their identity through ritual practices and the system of their living together like a close-knit group makes them self empowered. These little things like gatherings help them to cope with the difficult situations and stay strong against being marginalized or treated unfairly.

### Other Findings

The study found that many people of the Hijras community feel lonely and disconnected from mainstream society because they are rejected by their own families and society too. Some researcher have reported that many Hijra people suffers from neglection, depression, addiction and suicidal thoughts. Though no suicides were reported during this study but participants spoke about the deep pain they went through. Some of them said that after meeting the rejection from their parents and isolation, they tried to attempt suicide. During the research one of the respondents shared, “Pata chalte hi mujhe mara gaya. peeta gaya, mere sath bahut galat bartaav kiya gaya or yahi nahi mujhe jaan se marne ki koshish bhi kayi bar ki gayi, pareshan hokar khud kayi baar maine aatmhatya karne ki koshish ki lekin mere ek friend ne mujhe bahut samjhaya or bola tere jaise or bhi hai, tu yahan se bhag ja unke pass ja, tab itni samjh nhi thi ki complaint karu to mai bhag gayi.” (Translation: As soon as my identity was known, I was beaten, mistreated terribly, and attempts were even made to kill me. Frustrated, I tried to end my life several times, but a friend convinced me, saying 'there are others like you.' I didn't know how to complain, so I ran away). They also talked about the loneliness and emotional pain they go through. However their gatherings at Chintpurni temple offered them some healing. There they found peace and comfort in ritual practices, and spiritual beliefs. These gatherings, according to them, may help them to maintain their mental health and give them a sense of belonging.

The social structures made within the Hijra community, discussed as guru-chela hierarchy and its role in shaping the community as described in the work of Bockrath (2003), and the work of Krishnasamy and Asafu-Adjay (2024) which shows how the mainstream system silences the voices of the Hijras. My field work resonated





these findings to an extent. I noticed that religious gatherings like those at Chintpurni temple sometimes soften these guru-chela power structures. Without thinking about the position, they share food, pray together, dance, enjoy, and do shopping together. It seems like they temporarily skip the rigid hierarchy and suggest that these religious gatherings serve as equalizing the spaces. One of the respondents shared about their guru that “Saadi maa peyo-pyo, te is sansar ch jinne bhi rishte ne, oho sab sannu ek insan, saadi guru maa to mil jande ne, ae sannu aajadi dinde guman firn di, sanu pyar kerde, khyal rakhde, maa de wangu sadi galti te daant vi dinde ne, je sanu ae kdde kutt vi de taan vi assi bura ni mannange, kyon ki maa di kutt har kisi de naaseeb ch ni hundi.” (Our mother-father, and all the relations present in this world is our guru maa for us, they give us freedom to wander around, love us, provide care, scold us on our mistakes like our mother, we will not mind if they even beat us, because it is not everyones’ luck to be beaten by their mother.)

While much of the literature is based on the lives of the Hijra people who live in the major cities. My study which took place in rural areas like Chintpurni adds a temple based dimension to our understanding towards the lives of the Hijras. Which when asked by the researcher that what they want from the mainstream society, one of from them answered that, “Hume kuchh khas nahi chahiye kisi se, ab pet diya hai bhagwan ne to usko kaise na kaise to bharna hi hai vo hum bhar lenge, ‘bs thodi si jagaah chahiye’ is samaj mai aur kuchh nahi chahiye.” (We don't need anything special from anyone, now God has given us a belly, so we have to fill it somehow or the other, we will fill it, 'we just need a little space', in this understanding we don't need anything else.)

### Recommendations

- Improve government support by letting them choose their identity freely on government documents.
- Build a system or scheme to make sure they get the actual benefits related to their education , healthcare and fetching jobs.
- Take strict action against the people who fake their identity as being a Hijra for fame and money because it can manipulate the feelings of real Hijra people.
- Teach the public about gender equality and to respect Hijras and treat them equally.
- Offer free and compulsory education inside their community homes (deras) and temples.
- Try to provide mobile education for the people who can't go to school on a regular basis.
- Make scholarship programs to attract the people of the Hijra community.
- Include lessons related to gender equality in the school curriculum to teach children about gender diversity and to stop bullying other genders and to stop misbehaving with them.
- Encourage different companies to hire the people from the Hijra community.
- Make it easy to get small loans so that they can start their own business.
- Recognise their important roles in weddings, births and festivals.
- Provide them a platform to express themselves.





- Provide them free health counsellings to understand which kind of trauma they have gone from.
- Build safe places for them, where they can feel free to talk about them and to complain about people who have misbehaved with them.
- The complaints they fill in public stations should be taken seriously.

## VI. Conclusions

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the people of the hijra community who gathered at Chintpurni temple. Through in-depth interviews and non-participant observations the research brings to light the difficulties they go through. One of the most important things we found from this research is that their gender identity is not fixed. It changes according to the situation and time. For example some people of this community may identify as a woman to take benefits from the government even if they feel a different personality. This shows that they make smart choices sometimes, within a structure that does not always stay in their favour.

Their gatherings at Chintpurni temple is just only a spiritual event but it is that time when they organise their community roles, make their bonds strong with the other people of their community, and earn money. These gatherings show their well organised community as they handle everything perfectly, whether they are practicing rituals, giving blessings or doing other jobs.

When it comes to their earning not every person in their community is depending upon begging. While that begging thing still happens, some people of their community have started doing small business in their own homes, and are learning new skills. This shows that the people of the community despite many difficulties have started updating themselves.

The community is very much alert with respect to outsiders, because they have been treated in the wrong way in history. Gaining trust of the respondents was a little difficult during this study. Even with stigmatization and limited access to the resources and many other social rejections, the people of the Hijra community show great strength, believe in teamwork and have the ability to face any situation.

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