ISSN 1799-2591
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 15, No. 12, pp. 4134-4142, December 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1512.33

Navigating and Surpassing the Survival Works: The Relationship Between Occupations and Identity Construction in Hijra Life Writings

Sakthi Brinda D
Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

Gayathri N
Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract—**This paper argues that survival occupations function as a primary, yet paradoxical, site for identity construction in contemporary hijra life narratives. Moving beyond traditional ethnographic accounts, this study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of six key life writings, treating them not as mere chronicles of survival but as political interventions that document a conscious project of emancipation. The analysis first explores the "sacred stigma" of traditional roles, such as bhadai, demonstrating how the community's ritually sanctioned authority is a fragile and geographically contingent status that simultaneously confers reverence and enforces marginalisation. It then examines how begging and sex work are navigated as performative acts of survival in hostile public spaces. The narratives reveal how hijras must strategically deploy stereotypes to secure their livelihoods, a process that exposes them to systemic violence from both society and the state. Employing a framework that combines gender performativity and labelling theory, the analysis demonstrates how hijra identity is performed through labour, contested through resistance to debilitating social labels, and ultimately reimagined through the dual forces of professional achievement and political activism. The study concludes that the life writings themselves function as a form of emancipatory labour, seizing narrative control to articulate a new, rights-bearing trans woman identity rooted in professional aspiration and modern citizenship. This articulated shift from survival to self-determination demands affirmative state policies, such as reservations in education and employment, which move beyond mere legal recognition to enable tangible economic empowerment.**

Index Terms—**hijra, identity construction, life writing, occupation, resistance**

I. Introduction

The hijra community is socially marginalised, economically deprived, and politically underrepresented in India (Sopna, 2017; Saria, 2021). Among transgender individuals, hijras constitute a unique social group in South Asia, embedded with ritual significance and cultural practices. They are markedly distinct from other LGBT groups in many respects, ranging from outward appearances, such as highly feminine gestures, effeminate dressing, and characteristic clapping, to implicit factors including conjugal family setup, community arrangement, and observance of various rituals (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2010).

Rao (2015, p. 99) defined hijras as a distinct group of trans women, one of the most visible sexual minorities deeply rooted in the social, political, and cultural history of South Asia. The word "hijra" signifies being a eunuch, with its etymological root stemming from the Arabic word "Hijrah," which means "flight" or "departure" (Rao, 2015, p. 100). Presently, people identifying themselves as hijras are also known by other names, such as *thirunangais*, *aravanis*, *kojjas*, *jogappas*, *kusras*, *kinnars*, *napunsakas*, and *kothis,* in various parts of India (Brinda & Gayathri, 2023; Jayaprakash, 2022, p. 22). Hijras are interchangeably referred to as trans women in this paper because they invariably identify as such in their writings.

As Reddy (2010) established through her extensive ethnographic study, hijra identity encompasses aspects beyond gender and sexuality, including socio-religious practices, hierarchies of respect, kinship patterns, and class positions within and outside the community. Nanda (1999), Reddy (2010), and Sutradhar (2022) highlight that a significant aspect of hijra culture is the mythical founding of their revered position, as described in Hindu epics and Puranas, and the numerous references to their alternative sexuality in ancient treatises such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Literature on the hijra community and various other gender non-conforming identities in South Asia has established that these identities are intensely culture-specific and do not fall within the Western definitions of non-binary sexualities (Sanyal & Dhall, 2021; Hossain, 2012; Reddy, 2010; Nanda, 1999). Therefore, hijra identity involves various sociocultural and economic factors, of which occupations are arguably the most significant.

Survival occupations such as bhadai or ritual blessing, begging, and sex work carried out by hijras play a vital role in the formation of social perceptions of them, which are more often than not negative and stereotypical. Nevertheless,

existing historical records suggest that hijras were appointed to prestigious political, royal, and military positions in the history of the Muslim empires in South Asia, especially in the Mughal Empire (Sarwar & Pervaiz, 2023; Reddy, 2018). Hinchy (2020) highlights the steady marginalisation of hijras in terms of their occupation and social status, as well as the decline of their traditional importance during the colonial era. She illustrates that British officials, judges, and Indian elites of the late nineteenth century formed strong negative perceptions of the hijra community, terming them social outlaws, kidnappers of children, and a criminal group characterised by sexual promiscuity.

Hijras occupy a liminal position within the society and culture of both colonial and postcolonial India due to their revered status in Indian culture juxtaposed with the stigmatisation of their professions (Hinchy, 2020, p. 21). With the dwindling of professional venues as well as the criminalisation of their very existence, hijras find their means of survival amidst abject poverty, denial of access to employment opportunities, and lack of support from their natal or biological families. Existing literature has documented the occupations and economic conditions of hijras. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in analysing how hijras represent their occupational challenges and experiential problems, and construct their identity by contesting stigma and stereotyping.

Against this backdrop, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the relationship between occupations and identity construction in contemporary India, as inferred from the life writings of hijras. It reveals how hijra life narrators navigate survival occupations to manifest resilience, assert their selfhood, and expose the inevitable circumstances that lead to their involvement in these endeavours. It also explores the formation of new, positive identities in relation to professions and career options, to which hijras have gained entry in recent years. The analysis also encompasses recent developments brought about by the legislation of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (TPPR Act), trans activism, and persisting challenges as a continuation of the identity construction process articulated in hijra life writings.

We conceptualise identity construction as an ongoing process through which individuals create an assertive selfhood that incorporates self-acceptance, social positioning, futuristic aspirations, and positive development at the individual and community levels. The focus of our analysis is to reveal the complex role of hijra occupations in identity construction, as evinced through their life narratives. We employ symbolic interactionism, labelling, and gender performativity theories to examine the process of identity construction, from internalised stigma to the assertion of trans subjectivity, through the agencies of life writing, activism, and new careers. As Butler (1993) posits, gender identity is shaped by a series of cultural and corporeal performances. Hijra occupations are inherently cultural navigations coupled with physical labour and gender performance. By analysing this interrelation, this paper illuminates the positionality of transgender identity foregrounded through hijra life narratives in the context of their occupations.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the intricate relationship between hijra occupations and the pursuit of a positive identity in contemporary India. It aims to decipher recent developments in constructing a new identity for hijras, overcoming the occupation-based stigma to which they are subjected. This paper argues that hijra life narratives function as critical sites of resistance, where authors navigate the stigma of traditional occupations to construct an assertive trans woman identity rooted in the modern language of emancipatory politics, civil rights, and professional aspirations. It further discusses the role of transgender activists in protecting hijra occupations and their advocacy efforts in promoting social awareness of hijra occupations, along with the tangible progress achieved so far in their pursuit. It also examines the challenges faced by hijras in securing their livelihood options, despite the introduction of India's first-ever transgender legislation.

II. Literature Review

The scholarly understanding of hijra identity and occupation in India is built upon foundational ethnographic work. Seminal studies by Nanda (1999) and Reddy (2010) introduced the complexities of hijra kinship, ritual practices, and social organisation to global academic audiences. These ethnographies expertly documented the community's liminal position, caught between sacredness and stigma, and detailed the economic life revolving around traditional occupations, such as bhadai (ritual blessing), begging, and sex work. While indispensable, this early scholarship primarily presented an external anthropological perspective on the community.

A significant shift has occurred with the emergence of hijra life writing as a powerful subgenre of subaltern literature. Inspired by the precedent of Dalit autobiographies, narratives by authors such as Revathi (2010), Tripathi (2015), and Vidya (2013) provided an unmediated, insider perspective on hijra life. This shift towards autotheory and personal testimony enabled a more nuanced exploration of identity. As life writing theorists Smith and Watson (2010) argue, autobiographies by marginalised subjects often function as "autobiographical manifestos" — not just personal stories, but political interventions designed to "talk back" to dominant, often pathologising discourses. Scholarship on these texts has analysed themes of cultural violence (Tanupriya & Pannikot, 2022) and the reclamation of cultural memory (Joseph & Gayathri, 2024), establishing them as vital sites of resistance.

The contemporary landscape of hijra life has been profoundly shaped by legal and political developments, most notably, the Supreme Court's NALSA judgment (2014) and the subsequent passage of the TPPR Act in 2019. While the TPPR Act was a landmark piece of legislation, it has been met with significant criticism from scholars and activists. Researchers such as Bhattacharya et al. (2022) have argued that the Act falls short of the progressive vision of the NALSA judgment by retaining medicalised, pathologising definitions of transgender identity and failing to adequately provide for reservations in employment and education. Further critiques highlight the Act's inadequacy in addressing systemic police

violence and its contradictions with the principle of self-determination (Kaur & Garg, 2024). This body of legal and social critique is essential for understanding the complex reality in which contemporary hijra identity is being negotiated: the reality of new rights on paper coexisting with persistent institutional barriers.

Recent studies on hijra livelihoods reflect this complex reality. Saria's (2021) ethnographic work, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, moves the focus to rural India, powerfully illustrating how poverty, intimacy, and caste intersect to shape the economic survival of hijras outside major urban centres. Other scholars have begun to explore the role of digital media in shaping new forms of livelihood and activism. The use of social media platforms for community building, crowdfunding, and advocacy represents a new, digital occupation that allows for the construction of trans identities outside the confines of traditional work (Chinnappan, 2021; Vivienne, 2016).

While this rich body of literature has expertly analysed the ethnographic realities, legal frameworks, and emerging digital practices shaping hijra life, a specific gap remains to be addressed. Less scholarly attention has been paid to how the complex interplay of legal rights, persistent stigma, and new professional aspirations is articulated within the literary space of the life narratives themselves. This study fills this gap by conducting a close textual analysis of how hijra life writings navigate the failures and promises of the contemporary moment, using the narrative form to resist occupational stigma and construct a modern identity rooted in the language of rights, activism, and professional dignity.

III. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design centred on an in-depth textual analysis of published hijra life narratives. The methodology is designed to be rigorous and transparent, comprising four key components: the research approach, selection criteria for the primary corpus, the analytical framework, and a statement on researcher positionality.

A. Research Approach and Analytical Procedure

The core method of this study was qualitative textual analysis. The main focus was on a close reading of the primary sources. The researchers conducted the textual analysis manually. A manual approach was deliberately chosen over qualitative data analysis software to establish deep, interpretive engagement with the literary and narrative nuances of the texts. This method allows for a close reading that is sensitive to thematic complexity, emotional tone, and authors' stylistic choices in constructing their identities.

The analytical procedure involved multiple readings for each narrative. The initial reading focused on identifying all segments related to occupation, work, and economic survival. Subsequent readings involved a process of thematic coding, where these segments were categorised based on recurring concepts, such as stigma, violence, community, resistance, and professional aspiration. These manually derived codes formed the basis for the thematic structure presented in the “Results and Discussion” section.

B. Primary Corpus and Selection Criteria

The study analyses the following six life narratives by prominent trans activists who self-identify as hijras: A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me* (2010), collection of hijra life narratives *Our Words, Our Lives: Telling Aravani Life Stories* (Revathi, 2012), Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya* (2013), Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* (2015), Revathi’s second life narrative *A Life in Trans Activism* (2016), and Manobi Bandopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017). These narratives were selected for their detailed accounts of occupational experiences and identity construction by hijra-trans women in contemporary India. The period of their publication, between 2010 and 2017, also marks the height of trans activism and the demand for new legislation to protect their civil and political rights.

There are several advantages to using life narratives as source material. Hijra life narratives, like those of other marginalised communities, offer an unmediated representation of occupations and their sense of self (Vivienne, 2016; Mondal, 2014). This temporal narration of subjective experience provides a more insightful understanding of the identity-construction process, taking into account intersectional nuances, regional specificities, and occupational realities. Furthermore, as Smith and Watson (2010) posit, life narratives provide the liberty of choice to represent selective episodes of their lives, thereby becoming one of the most effective manifestations of their hijra identity. A close reading of hijra life narratives through sociological theories provides deeper insights into occupational experiences, offering emotional depth that may not be captured in quantitative studies.

C. Theoretical Framework

We developed a multilayered theoretical framework to analyse the complex relationship between occupation and identity in hijra life narratives. It includes three important sociological and gender studies theories that are significant for understanding the hijra identity construction process: symbolic interactionism, labelling theory, and gender performativity. These theories provide an effective working framework for understanding how identity is constructed, negotiated, and contested through the lived experiences of hijra occupations.

(a). Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-sociological theory developed from Mead’s foundational ideas (1934). This theory focuses on how individuals create and interpret the meanings of social symbols through face-to-face interactions (Blumer, 1969). In this paper, we apply this theory, along with Goffman's (1959) ideas of social performance and his (1963) seminal

concept of stigma, to analyse the daily interactions that are part of hijra occupations. For instance, the characteristic clap, specific styles of dress, and ritualised language of bhadai are not merely actions; they are deeper symbolic acts for navigating identity within occupations carried out for survival. This theoretical concept enables us to examine how these symbols are used to construct a shared hijra identity, negotiate power in public spaces such as streets and markets, and create a sense of community and belonging, as depicted in life narratives.

(b). Labelling Theory

Labelling theory, most famously articulated by Becker (1963), posits that an individual's identity and behaviour can be shaped or influenced by the terms (labels) used to describe them. It is largely influenced by symbolic interactionism and is particularly useful for understanding deviance and stigma (Lemert, 1967). This paper uses labelling theory to analyse how external societal labels—such as "beggar", "sex worker", or "criminal"—are applied to the hijra community and the profound consequences of this labelling. We use this theory to infer how the authors depict their struggles against these stigmatising labels, the impact on their self-perception, and their efforts to resist a "master status" of deviance by asserting a more complex identity.

(c). Gender Performativity

Butler's (1993) theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not an internal essence or a stable identity, but rather a series of repeated, stylised, and socially compelled performances. This framework is central to our analysis as hijra occupations are inherently performative. We analyse bhadai (ritual blessing), begging, and even sex work not just as labour but as corporeal performances that produce and solidify a public hijra gender identity. This theory allows us to move beyond seeing these occupations as simple expressions of a pre-existing identity and instead analyse them as the very acts that constitute what it means to be a hijra in the social world.

D. Researcher Positionality

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, we acknowledge its importance. We are aware that we conducted this research as cisgender academic researchers, and our nature of engagement in this field is observational and not representative. This positionality affords a degree of analytical distance but also necessitates a conscious and critical approach to interpreting the lived experiences of hijra trans women. We are not members of the hijra community and approach these narratives with a commitment to centring the authors' voices and perspectives without appropriation.

Therefore, our analysis is grounded in a deep respect for the authority of the narratives themselves. We seek to amplify the authors' articulations of their own lives without imposing external interpretations. Hence, we clarify that this study is an act of scholarly engagement, not an attempt to speak on behalf of the hijra community.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. The Paradox of Sacred Stigma: Ritual, Reverence, and Marginalisation

The life narratives reveal that bhadai—the ritualistic performance of singing, dancing, and blessing at births and weddings—is not merely an occupation, but a foundational performative act that constructs the central paradox of hijra identity: a sacred status that simultaneously enforces marginalisation. This occupation is consistently framed as the most traditional and sanctified work, rightfully designated to hijras (Revathi, 2010; Vidya, 2013; Tripathi, 2015). Viewed through Butler's theoretical lens, these collective acts in specific social contexts become fundamental to hijra gender categorisation as trans women. The social sanction for these performative acts is anchored in mythological and historical references that legitimise the hijras' unique spiritual authority. Two primary mythological foundations are consistently cited from Hinduism in support of this sacred identity:

1. According to a prevalent narrative, when Lord Rama was banished, he ordered all "men and women" to return home. The hijras, being "neither men nor women," remained steadfastly at the forest entrance. Moved by their devotion upon his return, Rama granted them divine power to make their pronouncements—blessings or curses—come true (Vidya, 2013; Pattanaik, 2014; Michelraj, 2015).

2. Another account traces Krishna's transformation into Mohini, affirming that people embodying this liminal form would exist and that their words would hold divine power (Revathi, 2010; Tiwari, 2014).

Crucially, this sacred status is not inherent but is a carefully policed social category, demonstrating how hijra communities use internal regulations to protect their most valued source of izzat (respect). Occupation, through its association with Hindu religious myths, serves as a primary source of sacred identity, particularly in North India (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2010). To protect this positive label and restrict access, the community enforces strict rules. Revathi's (2010) narrative details the mechanics of "doli-badaai," framing it as a professional service rather than begging:

> Hijras find out where there's been a birth and send word to the family, saying that they would arrive on such-and-such a day to bless the newborn and they must be given badaai. And so they go to these homes and sing songs teasing the child's parents, thus making them happy. (Revathi, 2010, p. 47)

This performance obligates families to offer gifts and money in return for the benevolence of the blessings. To maintain this system, some gharanas (hijra houses) have created a monopoly. For instance, in Delhi, a hijra must become the chela (disciple) of gharanas already established in this profession to participate in bhadai. Revathi (2010) notes, "In my guru's

family they don't go for badaai... If I or anyone wanted to go for badaai, then we would have to become chelas to these Hindi-speaking hijras and go and live with them" (p. 48).

Viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism and labelling theory, internal gatekeeping is a deliberate act of self-categorisation designed to create a hierarchy of purity within the hijra community itself. Certain gharanas distinguish themselves by claiming sacred status nurtured through differentiated engagement with society. This often involves creating a moral boundary between the "pure" work of bhadai and the "impure" work of sex. As Revathi (2010) states, "Generally speaking, those who went for badaai did not get involved in sex work" (p. 61). This distinction allows one group to resort to labels of moral superiority, reinforcing their exclusive right to perform sacred rituals. However, this claim of a sublime social identity is fragile and geographically contingent, revealing the limits of its power. The practice is almost entirely absent in South India, a prominent regional variation noted in the narratives (Revathi, 2010; Vidya, 2013), proving that this sacred identity is not a universal hijra trait, but a localised construction specific to North Indian regions (Saria, 2021).

Furthermore, the narratives suggest that the socio-economic foundation of bhadai is eroding in post-independence India, intensifying the paradox of an identity built on precarious practice. Although the ritual maintains its symbolic significance, its economic viability has declined with urbanisation and shifting social attitudes (Revathi, 2010; Reddy, 2010; Tripathi, 2015). All claims of sacredness notwithstanding, hijra families involved in the bhadai struggle to earn a decent living from it due to its seasonal nature and dwindling social support. This places hijra trans women in a precarious position, caught between a revered tradition and harsh economic reality.

This complex interplay of revered performance, internal policing, and economic precarity culminates in a paradoxical social identity that traps the hijras in a state of liminality. While granting ritualistic respect, the sacred status simultaneously positions hijras outside the norms of society. Their reverence rests on shaky beliefs, with stigmatisation often occurring immediately after the ritual is complete. As Reddy (2010) and Sutradhar (2022) observe, hijras occupy a liminal position in which their perceived power to bless others with fertility is predicated on their infertility, making them conduits of social reproduction rather than full participants within it. Significantly, the absence of detailed, personal accounts of performing bhadai in the analysed narratives suggests that bhadai may function more as a powerful, collective myth of origin and a symbolic role than as a fulfilling individual occupation in the contemporary era.

B. Performing Identity in Public Space: Survival, Violence, and Resistance

Beyond the sanctified space of bhadai, life narratives reveal that the public sphere—streets, shops, and trains—becomes the primary stage where hijra identity is performed, contested, and negotiated. This multifarious navigation is affected by the fraught occupations of begging and sex work. In these secular spaces, hijra trans women must leverage their unique cultural status to ensure their daily survival. This process exposes them to perpetual violence while fostering powerful resistance strategies. Although often categorised separately, begging (dhanda) and sex work function as two sides of the same coin. Both occupations remain the prime survival economies for the hijra community, dictated by their social exclusion (Saria, 2021).

The practice of dhanda-begging is presented not as a simple plea for charity, but as a complex performance rooted in the same mythical authority as bhadai. As Revathi (2010) explains, the belief that a hijra's blessing brings prosperity obligates shopkeepers to give alms (p. 45). This interaction is a direct extension of the Ramayana and Krishna-Mohini myths into the marketplace, where the characteristic clap and verbal blessing transform into performative acts designed to command respect and payment. However, this performance was enacted on a stage historically tainted by the influence of colonial powers. Hinchy (2020) documents how British administrators criminalised hijra mobility and alms-collection, reframing traditional practices as evidence of criminality (p. 28). This colonial labelling endures, transforming a ritually sanctioned act into one that is perpetually contested and stigmatised in public perception.

This collision between sacred claims and social stigma creates a profound internal conflict for the individual, a core theme analysed through the lens of symbolic interactionism. The theory posits that identity is shaped through social interactions and the perception of how others see us. For educated individuals such as Vidya, the transition to begging precipitates an identity crisis. Despite joining the community to live authentically and save for gender-affirmation surgery, she regrets her plight of having plummeted to the level of a street-based beggar (Vidya, 2013, p. 110). This shock to her self-esteem illustrates the painful dissonance between her internal self-concept and the stigmatised "beggar" label imposed on her by society. Both Revathi (2010) and Vidya (2013) narrate this initial perplexity, highlighting the universal struggle to reconcile a positive in-group identity with a negative public identity.

Hijra life writings exemplify the sophisticated and agentic performance strategies developed by their communities to navigate this hostile environment. The act of begging performed by hijras is not a passive supplication but an active, skilled negotiation of public space. Vidya (2013) details learning the "tricks of the trade," becoming an expert who knew "who gave, who did not, who the difficult customers were, who was likely to get into a fight with you, where you had to be tactful and where you had to be a bully" (pp. 86-87). This demonstrates a conscious manipulation of their stereotypical image, using intimidation and fear as tools of resistance to secure their livelihood. The performance is a double-edged sword: it ensures survival, but also reinforces the stereotypes of aggression and otherness that marginalise them.

The rigidity of this social labelling is powerfully illustrated when hijras attempt to step outside their prescribed occupational role. In a telling experiment, Vidya (2013) attempted to sell goods on trains only to face an utter failure. She notes,

> people were not interested in buying anything from us—even those who used to give us alms would turn the other way when we passed them with our products and pitches. The gentlemen who exhorted us to work hard for a living whenever we begged were suddenly oddly absent. (p. 109)

This incident is a stark demonstration of labelling theory in action. Society does not merely criticise hijras for begging; it actively polices their economic roles and resists any attempt to engage in mainstream professions. They are trapped by a label that is condemned and enforced simultaneously.

This negotiation between survival, stigma, and violence intensifies dramatically in the context of sex work (Rushdie, 2008). The narratives frame entry into sex work not as a choice, but as a consequence of systemic exclusion from all other viable employment. As Aruna, one of Revathi's informants, admits, "I realized that for hijras there was not much of an option" (Revathi, 2012, p. 43). Here, identity performance is fraught with the highest degree of physical peril. The body itself becomes the site of extreme violence, often contingent on conformity with client expectations. Those who have not undergone gender-affirmation surgery (nirvana) face a brutal assault if their male genitalia are discovered (Revathi, 2012, p. 44). This reality underscores how violence is used as a tool of social punishment for gender nonconformity.

The state, far from being a protector, is depicted as the primary perpetrator of this violence. Revathi's (2010) harrowing account of custodial torture reveals the institutionalised nature of this abuse. She concludes grimly, "from our perspective there was no difference between a police and a rowdy. They both behaved in a similar way" (p. 210). This illustrates a key intersectional challenge: hijra sex workers are targeted not just as sex workers but as transgender individuals whose existence is criminalised by proxy. Their vulnerability is compounded by the intersection of their gender identity, occupation, and often their caste.

In response to this systemic violence, resistance has evolved from individual survival tactics to organised, collective action. The narratives document a crucial shift over the last two decades driven by NGO interventions and activist movements (Semmalar, 2014). Organisations like Sangama provided much-needed respite from police brutality, media stereotyping, and public apathy (Revathi & Murali, 2016). This collective endeavour focused on legal reform, particularly the decriminalisation of Section 377, and reframing sex work within the discourse of rights and dignity (Tripathi, 2015; Chakrapani et al., 2018). These sustained efforts, culminating in legal victories such as the NALSA judgment (2014) and the TPPR Act, represent a conscious struggle to negate negative stereotypes and assert a new, emancipated identity (Brinda & Gayathri, 2021). However, the narratives also suggest that this is an ongoing battle against defects in new legislation and persistent social apathy, highlighting that legal recognition alone cannot erase deeply entrenched stigma.

C. Economic Precarity and the Ambivalence of the Guru-Chela System

Life narratives argue that the hijra community structure, or the gharana system, is a deeply ambivalent institution born from necessity. It functions as an essential sanctuary from societal hostility but simultaneously replicates exploitative economic hierarchies that trap its members. This system arises as a direct response to the socio-economic vacuum created by mainstream society. Most hijras are forced to leave their biological families at a young age because of their gender identity, which cuts them off from education and conventional employment opportunities (Aasaavari et al., 2016). In this context, the gharana becomes the sole provider of shelter, community, and access to traditional occupations that ensure their survival.

However, this sanctuary comes at the cost of individual autonomy, operating on the logic of economic extraction that the narratives critique with striking clarity. The relationship between a guru (master) and a chela (disciple) is not merely a mentorship, but is fundamentally an economic contract. Revathi (2010) specifies the rigid rule of sharing earnings: "If I had earned 500 rupees, I'd take half and she would take the other half" (p. 134). This system effectively places the chela in a state of indentured servitude, where leaving begging or sex work is not an individual choice, but a decision controlled by the guru's economic interests. Revathi and Murali (2016) offer a powerful analysis of this dynamic, comparing exploitative gurus to politicians who view their initial support for a chela as an investment to be recouped with profit: "It's like politicians spending money for elections, in the hope that they can recover and more than make up for what they have spent themselves!" (p. 38).

Viewed through this lens, the gharana system, while providing a crucial buffer against external violence, is itself a site of structural inequality. Young hijras remain at the bottom of this internal hierarchy, and their economic dependence reinforces their vulnerability. The narratives thus frame the ultimate act of agency not as reforming the system from within but as escaping it entirely. Revathi (2010) and Vidya (2013) describe the thrilling moments of their escape from their respective hijra families. This act is not merely a personal departure, but a profound form of resistance against an oppressive internal economy, highlighting the central paradox of a community that offers survival but often at the price of freedom.

D. From Survival to Emancipation: Activism, Agency, and the New Hijra Identity

The final argument emerging from life narratives is one of transformation, detailing a conscious and collective project to construct a new, emancipated hijra identity. This project moves beyond traditional economies of survival, built on two interconnected pillars: the assertion of individual agency through professional achievement and the mobilisation of collective power through political activism. This represents a direct challenge to the historically imposed labels of "beggar" and "sex worker".

First, narratives champion the power of individual visibility as a tool for social change. By entering and excelling in mainstream professions, a new generation of transgender women is actively rewriting the cultural script of what it means to be hijra (Bandopadhyay, 2017). Revathi and Murali (2016) provide a powerful catalogue of these pioneers, listing individuals who have distinguished themselves in fields as diverse as classical dance (Narthaki Nataraj), engineering (Grace Banu), media (Padmini Prakash), and literature (Priya Babu, Living Smile Vidya) (p. 128). Furthermore, Manobi has reinvented herself as an indispensable voice in Bengali literary circles (Bandopadhyay, 2017), whereas Revathi and Vidya have become revered contributors to South Asian literature and theatre.

The act of transforming a life story into a public performance is a conscious political strategy, which Revathi describes as using art 'to move hearts and spark a change' (Srinivasaraghavan, 2025). This visibility has earned her international recognition, including from institutions such as Columbia University. She notes that her work is now studied in hundreds of university courses (Fausett, 2024). Each of these individuals functions as a symbolic counter-narrative, and their professional success serves as tangible proof of potential beyond the confines of traditional occupations. Their visibility creates new role models and forces a reevaluation of public perception, one career at a time.

This assertion of individual agency is amplified and fortified by the parallel movement toward collective political activism. Life narratives document a strategic shift towards demanding rights, rather than begging for alms. This movement has achieved a series of landmark legal victories that have begun to dismantle the structures of discrimination, including the NALSA judgment of 2014, decriminalisation of Section 377 in 2018, and the TPPR Act of 2019. These legal milestones are not abstract political gains; they are pragmatic tools that provide the foundation for a new rights-bearing identity (Brinda & Gayathri, 2021). As Tripathi (2015) noted, even in states where traditional occupations persist, improved access to medical, legal, and employment opportunities signifies a tangible shift in the state's relationship with its community.

Ultimately, life writings are presented as a central form of this new activism. By authoring their own stories and creating powerful artistic expressions, individuals such as Revathi, Laxmi, Vidya, and Manobi transform personal experiences into powerful political testimony (Srinivasaraghavan, 2025). The act of writing becomes an act of emancipation, allowing them to seize control of their narrative and emerge as “strong voices for the community” (Revathi & Murali, 2016, p. 128). While the struggle against social apathy and legislative defects continues, these combined efforts signify a fundamental reshaping of hijra identity—a deliberate and ongoing movement from marginalised status defined by survival to empowered status defined by citizenship, professionalism, and self-determination.

V. Conclusions

This study argues that hijra life narratives function as critical political documents, wherein authors strategically navigate the stigma associated with their survival occupations to construct a resilient and forward-looking trans woman identity. The analysis reveals that occupations are not merely a backdrop to hijra life, but are the very stage upon which identity is performed, contested, and ultimately reimagined. Our close reading traced this process from the foundational paradox of bhadai, where sacred status reinforces marginalisation, through agentic yet perilous performances of begging and sex work in the public sphere, to the critique of the ambivalent sanctuary offered by the gharana system.

Through the combined theoretical lenses of performativity, symbolic interactionism, and labelling theory, this study demonstrated that hijra identity construction is a dynamic process of negotiation rather than a static state. Life writings show how hijras actively use the symbolic power of their traditional roles while simultaneously exposing the violence and social apathy that make these roles an inevitability. The shift towards new careers, celebrated in the narratives, is thus portrayed not just as individual success but as a collective, political act of resisting the debilitating labels that have historically been forced upon the community. The act of writing thus emerges as a paramount form of this new emancipatory labour, marking a significant discursive shift.

These findings have significant policy implications, underscoring the urgent necessity for the state to move beyond mere legal recognition towards robust affirmative action that ensures equitable access to education and employment. Affirmative measures, such as reservations and targeted welfare schemes, are not merely economic interventions; they are crucial mechanisms for dismantling the very occupational labels that this study has shown to be so confining. Furthermore, our analysis calls for an inclusive mindset among private employers and the corporate sector to create genuine opportunities for hijras as employees and entrepreneurs. Such transformative gestures are essential for fulfilling the mandate of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities) and translating the aspirations articulated in life narratives into lived reality.

While this study has centred on the unparalleled value of life narratives in understanding the subjective experience of identity construction, its textual focus necessitates future research. Ethnographic fieldwork employing methodologies from social work and anthropology is required to validate and compare the realities articulated in these narratives—published largely over the last decade—with the contemporary, on-the-ground experiences of hijras today. Such research could explore how recent legal and social changes are impacting occupational choices and identities in real time, thereby building upon the foundational insights provided by these powerful life writings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, for the institutional support provided for the writing of this research article.

REFERENCES

[1] Aasaavari, A., Mohapatra, S., & Sharma, A. (2016). Families they choose: Examining the hijra family and relations. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, *77*(4), 459-478.
[2] Bandopadhyay, M., & Pandey, J. M. (2017). *A gift of goddess Lakshmi*. Penguin Random House India.
[3] Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. The Free Press.
[4] Bhattacharya, S., Ghosh, D., & Purkayastha, B. (2022). 'Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act' of India: An analysis of substantive access to rights of a transgender community. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *14*(2), 676–697. https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huac004
[5] Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice-Hall.
[6] Brinda, D. S., & Gayathri, N. (2023). Performing (trans)woman identity through nirvana: A study of hijra life narratives. *World Journal of English Language*, *13*(8), 532-542. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n8p532
[7] Brinda, D. S., & Gayathri, N. (2021). Towards becoming truly rights-bearing citizens: Twenty years of trans activism in India. *Psychology and Education Journal*, *58*(5), Article 5. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from http://psychologyandeducation.net/pae/index.php/pae/article/view/6272
[8] Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.
[9] Chakrapani, V., Newman, P. A., & Noronha, E. (2018). Hijras/transwomen and sex work in India: From marginalization to social protection. In A. Gupta & V. Merchant (Eds.), *Transgender sex work and society* (pp. 97-114). Routledge.
[10] Chinnappan, D. (2021). *Digital media and hijra identity: Understanding community-building and self-representations among hijra community-based organisations in India*. PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology.
[11] Fausett, G. (2024, June 11). *A. Revathi: A life in trans activism: A hijra life story*. Alturi. Retrieved June 29, 2025, from https://www.alturi.org/feature_items/a-revathi-a-life-in-trans-activism-a-hijra-life-story/
[12] Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
[13] Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.
[14] Hinchy, J. (2020). *Governing gender and sexuality in colonial India: The hijra, c. 1850-1900*. Cambridge University Press.
[15] Hossain, A. (2012). Beyond emasculation: Being Muslim and becoming hijra in South Asia. *Asian Studies Review*, *36*(4), 495–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.739994
[16] Jayaprakash, S. (2022). Rewriting the subject and the self: A study of hijra life writings. In D. A. Vakoch (Ed.), *Transgender India: Understanding Third Gender Identities and Experiences* (pp. 19–35). Springer.
[17] Joseph, J., & Gayathri, N. (2024). Tracing hijra ethnicity in Indian transgender autobiographies: Revisiting the erased hijra legacy through trans self-memory. *World Journal of English Language*, *14*(1), 440-447. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n1p440
[18] Kaur, S., & Garg, M. (2024). An analysis of the rights of transgender persons under Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019: Gaps and challenges. *Panjab University Law Review*, *62*(2). Retrieved July 17, 2025, from https://pulr.puchd.ac.in/index.php/pulr/article/view/195
[19] Lemert, E. M. (1967). *Human deviance, social problems, and social control*. Prentice-Hall.
[20] Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. University of Chicago Press.
[21] Michelraj, M. (2015). Historical evolution of transgender community in India. *Asian Review of Social Sciences*, *4*(1), 17-19. Retrieved June 19, 2025, from https://www.arseam.com/content/2-arsoc/36-v4-i1-january-2015/340-historical-evolution-of-transgender-community-in-india
[22] Mondal, M. (2014). Gender geometry: A study of A. Revathi's autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. *Lapis Lazuli-An International Literary Journal*, *4*(1), 125–131. Retrieved May 21, 2025, from https://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Mousim-Mondal-11.pdf
[23] Nanda, S. (1999). *Neither man nor woman: The hijras of India*. Wadsworth Publishing Co. Inc.
[24] Pattanaik, D. (2014). *Shikhandi*. Penguin Books India.
[25] Rao, R. (2015). Hijra. In G. Dharampal-Frick, M. Kirloskar-Steinbach, R. Dwyer, & J. Phalkey (Eds.), *Key concepts in modern Indian studies* (pp. 99-101). ABC-CLIO.
[26] Reddy, G. (2010). *With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*. University of Chicago Press.
[27] Reddy, G. (2018). Paradigms of thirdness: Analyzing the past, present, and potential futures of gender and sexual meaning in India. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *5*(3), 48–60. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/qed.5.3.0048
[28] Revathi, A. (2010*). The truth about me: A hijra life story* (V. Geetha, Trans.). Penguin India.
[29] Revathi, A. (2012). *Our lives our words: Telling aravani life stories*. Yoda Press.
[30] Revathi, A., & Murali, N. (2016). *A life in trans activism*. Zubaan.
[31] Rushdie, S. (2008). Half-woman god. In N. Akhavi (Ed.), *AIDS Sutra: Untold Stories from India* (pp. 175-186). Anchor Books.
[32] Sanyal, D., & Dhall, P. (2021). Beyond rhetoric: Transgender persons and socio-economic inclusion. *India International Centre Quarterly*, *48*(3/4), 281–295. Retrieved May 29, 2025, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/27281617
[33] Saria, V. (2021). *Hijras, lovers, brothers: Surviving sex and poverty in rural India*. Fordham University Press.
[34] Sarwar, W., & Pervaiz, H. (2023). The unlikely elite: Eunuchs as power players in medieval India. *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, *36*(1), 61–75. Retrieved April 28, 2025, from https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/HistoryPStudies/PDF_Files/05-v36_1_2023.pdf
[35] Semmalar, G. I. (2014). Unpacking solidarities of the oppressed: Notes on trans struggles in India. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *42*(3/4), 286–291. Retrieved June 15, 2025, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/24365012

[36] Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2010). *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives*. University of Minnesota Press.
[37] Sopna, A. M. (2017). *A voiced cry of transgenders*. Educreation Publishing.
[38] Srinivasaraghavan, N. C. (2025, June 13). How trans woman activist A. Revathi uses art as a tool of protest and change. *The Hindu*. Retrieved April 17, 2025, from https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/theatre/trans-woman-activist-a-revathi-talks-about-her-life-and-significance-of-pride-month/article69677410.ece
[39] Sutradhar, R. (2022). Contradiction and concurrence of castration and the fertile phallus: A transgender reading of ancient Indian literature and contemporary hijra experience. In D. A. Vakoch (Ed.), *Transgender India: Understanding Third Gender Identities and Experiences* (pp. 65-76). Springer.
[40] Tanupriya, & Pannikot, D. (2022). Cultural violence, violent gendering, and abjection: Discourses on sites of violence through trans women's narratives from India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *24*(6), Article 8. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss6/8
[41] Tiwari, E. (2014). Distortion of "tritya prakriti" (Third nature) by colonial ideology in India. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, *2*, 19-24. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail?DocID=P20150611006-201411-201508050018-201508050018-19-24
[42] Tripathi, L. N. (2015). *Me Laxmi, me hijra* (R. R. Rao & P. G. Joshi, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
[43] Vidya, L. S. (2013). *I am Vidya: A transgender's journey*. Rupa Publications India.
[44] Vivienne, S. (2016). *Digital identity and everyday activism: Sharing transgender stories through social media*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sakthi Brinda D is a research scholar at the Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore. She completed her BA in English at Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu; her MA in English and Comparative Literature at Pondicherry University, Puducherry; and her MPhil at Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. She is currently pursuing her doctoral research in English literary studies. Her areas of interest include transgender studies, life writing, literary theory, drama, and translation. She has published three articles in acclaimed journals, five papers in conference proceedings, and has contributed chapters in two edited books in the areas of her research interest. She can be reached at sakthibrinda.d2017@vitstudent.ac.in

Gayathri N is an Assistant Professor (Senior Grade 2) at the Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore. She completed her doctoral research in emotional intelligence. Her areas of specialisation include emotional intelligence, *the Mahabharata*, Indian literature and literary theory, and English language teaching. She has published more than ten research articles and several book chapters, and has authored three books, including two General English textbooks for colleges affiliated to the University of Madras. She has also completed a consultancy project in Communicative English for B&B Builders, Vellore. Dr. Gayathri N has held various academic and administrative responsibilities at VIT University. She has received several awards in recognition of her contributions to teaching and research. She can be reached at ngayathri@vit.ac.in