



Sociological Briefing

Hijra community in Pakistan

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The social landscape in Pakistan is diverse and divided, where certain groups have greater power and privileges, while others have limited access to resources and experience pronounced marginalization. Religion, social class, and gender are some of the factors that form the foundation of these divisions. Islamic religious practices and rituals are an important part of social activities and also provide a means of socialization. One particular practice involves the performance of religious rituals at shrines dedicated to Sufi saints. A notable example is the singing of devotional songs by devotees, as an expression of reverence towards the saint.

The article "[Spiritualising marginality: Sufi concepts and the politics of identity in Pakistan](#)" by Amen Jafer published in the journal "Society and Culture in South Asia" highlights the participation of 'hijras' in religious rituals at Sufi shrines in Lahore. The typical understanding of the term 'hijra' within Pakistan and India is of a gender non-conforming individual, who is biologically male, but often dresses up in garish feminine attire. Many of them show a characteristic style of speaking and body language such as an exaggerated hand clap while speaking. The author explains that in the Pakistani community, these individuals are viewed as an anomaly. There is no clear reason for their rejection but it is often attributed to sexual promiscuity and noncompliance with traditional social practices. For example, hijras often choose not to

live in a traditional family system but instead live in groups with no clear family structure. Historically, hijras also referred to as khawaja saras, used to have important roles in performing religious rituals in the Indian sub-continent. Now, while they participate in some religious activities, they are mainly seen dancing at festivities such as weddings and blessing newborn babies.

There is a spiritual aspect to the identity of hijras, which is highlighted by the interpretation of Sufi texts. Hijras construct their spiritual identity through the Sufi philosophy. The Sufi philosophy is a dimension of Islam that emphasizes spirituality and oneness with God. For example, faqiri is a concept within Sufism that relates to freeing oneself from all worldly things to be able to connect with God. Those hijras who subscribe to the practice of faqiri, give up ties to their families and society and embark on a nomadic, spiritual journey. In a society where hijras often face ridicule and bullying for their gender identity, spiritual practices such as faqiri offers them a more legitimate identity and empowers them. Even within the general Pakistani society, hijras are believed to hold spiritual powers. This is the reason that people often invite hijras to weddings or childbirth celebrations to seek their blessings. At the same time, people are also scared of their curses, due to which they avoid them, resulting in social exclusion.

As hijras leave their families, to join the hijra

community, they have to adjust to the norms within this community. In the beginning, any person entering the community is assigned a teacher or 'guru' who would have other hijras as their followers also. The teacher teaches them the lifestyle, the way of speaking, and even alternative communication codes that would enable them to fit in. Those who are unaccepting of the hijra identity, see this living situation as a sign of their immorality. In a society where hijras constantly face social exclusion and maltreatment, the shrines prove to be inclusive spaces where they can join other groups of devotees in spiritual practice.

Finally, the author explains that although the Sufi philosophy provides legitimacy to the hijra identity, it provides a narrow lens to fully understand all that is part of their identity. Still, academic endeavors should try to clarify the connection between Sufism and the hijra identity. This is one of the ways that the hijra community in Pakistan can be empowered and be seen with more dignity.