

Hijra Guru

Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi is one of India's Big Brother show stars, beautiful, Well-educated and outgoing, Lakshmi is not just another up and coming starlet, she is the most famous and admired Hijra in India. Not only is she well educated but she made her life goal educating Hijras about HIV and AIDS and helping those already infected.

In India, Hijra girls usually live in marginalized communities and their status is very low, below the untouchable's caste. Hijra girls adopt a feminine appearance, but unlike trans-sexual women in the western part of the world, they do not conceal male physiological characteristics. The word "Hijra" is said often in disparaging way. They have very limited employment opportunities and are forced to make their living from prostitution, and therefore suffer from violence in public places.

In the western culture, they are usually perceived as third gender (men and women), But Hijra girls perceive themselves as women. Hijra communities led by gurus like Lakshmi can be seen all over India and have existed for many generations .Many Hijra girls turn to prostitution to survive, their social status does not keep the customers away.

The Hijra Guru

When I asked to meet Lakshmi, she agreed to conduct an interview at her place. When I arrived, she kept me waiting for three hours, and when she finally received me, her phone kept ringing the whole time, I thought she might be testing me or trying to see if I will pay for her time. Needless to say, money is an essential factor in the hijra reality.

Lakshmi's apartment is a tiny room always filled with people moving in and out while she steers, shouts and gives orders as expected from a guru. She lies most of the time in bed, and without her makeup, it is difficult to notice that she is a transgender. Only when the evening arrives and she prepares herself for her meetings, she puts on her makeup and transforms completely

According to Lakshmi, her family supported her since childhood, since she discovered her homosexuality and until she became a Hijra. It is quite an unusual story; most of the families of the boys who chose to become Hijras ostracized and expelled them from their homes because of the shame and damage to the reputation.

Lakshmi's mother and brothers live on the same floor along with Lakshmi's four students ("cheala") .In order to become a part of her community, Chealas must cook for Lakshmi and manage her household chores. In the evenings, the Chealas work as prostitutes like all other trans-genders in Lakshmi's community. Lakshmi claims she had never worked as a prostitute as other Hijra girls. When she was young, she tells me, she made her living by dancing in bars in Bombay and later as a choreographer in Bollywood.

Since Lakshmi became famous, many trans-genders in India made her their guru. It means they pay her a monthly fee for 'protection', an amount Lakshmi would not reveal. "Students" are not permitted to touch her head or her hair, or walk ahead of her. They cannot do anything without her approval. Those who dare to disobey or upset Lakshmi must pay a large amount of money as punishment. Those who will not pay, will be banned from the community be left without protection and in immediate mortal danger by the hand of the other girls in the community who might try to avenge their Guru's insult.

Lakshmi's publicity is the cause for envy of the other Hijra communities, which occasionally leads to violence. Recently one of Lakshmi's girls was injured in Kamtifora, a notorious area in Bombay. Despite the rivalry and envy, when anyone turns to Lakshmi for help, she immediately responds positively even if the seeker comes from another community.

If the Hijra is interested in breast surgery and Penis removal, as many trans-genders in India are, Lakshmi will help her in finding a doctor to perform the surgery, but will offer no financial help. Not all of trans-genders have the complete surgery; many will only have breast augmentation because of complications related to the penis removal. All of the Hijras I met, except Lakshmi, had full sex reassignment surgery in order to increase the amount of their street customers.

Buying acceptance

Muskaan is one of the Hijra girls living in Lakshmi's building. She is 27 years old. At age 14, when she was still a boy named Pramod, she realized that something was wrong with her body. She was attracted to boys and wore the clothes of her little sister. She was teased on the street and at school, and at the age of 15 she left home.

Muskaan went to Thane train station, near Bombay, where she met trans-genders and male prostitutes who worked there in the evenings. Then she learned about Lakshmi who at that time was the guru of a small community. Shortly after that, she became her student (Cheala). She had a full sex reassignment surgery paid by money she earned, and became a Hijra in her new name -Muskaan. Then she began to work as a prostitute in the same place where her journey began at a train station in Thane.

In the early years when Muskaan left home, her family cut off all contacts and forced her to leave their village, she lives alone with no one in her life other than Lakshmi and the community that supported her. As the years passed her family realized Muskaan potential as a provider, now they come once a week to visit and help her around the house a bit. But the real reason for their visit and partial acceptance of Muskaan's lifestyle is the money and Muskaan hands over a part of her prostitution income to buy her return to family circle.

Muskaan is an experienced Cheala, she turned the old train station into her office and works there at nights. She functions as a sub-guru in the station for 12 trans-genders

and lesbian prostitutes who seek her help in resolving internal conflicts. Occasionally she helps them find a solution to conflicts with the local police because prostitution is illegal in India. The policemen will occasionally ask for bribes and in other cases for sex services in turn for turning a blind eye.

HIV in the community

Of the total population of India infected with AIDS, 18.1 percent are from the Hijra community. Since most girls are engaged in prostitution, the risk of spreading HIV in the community is a major issue to deal with. Many women infected with HIV still continue to work in prostitution without the knowledge of customers.

Many Hijras and trans-genders in India die of AIDS. The last victim in the Bombay community died only a few days before I arrived.

While The Hijras are in the community, they are committed to practicing protected sex, although some are tempted to break the community rules when offered large sums of money for un-protected sex.

Another Hijra from Laxmi's community is Pooja. She lives in Kalwa, about 3 km from Thane suburb, and is known for being a gracious woman who is always offering help to her neighbors. About 10 years ago, she was infected with HIV as a result of unprotected sex; she doesn't even know who infected her.

She is 27 years old and works as a prostitute in a tiny room on the main road. Occasionally, she rents a bed for other prostitutes for about 150 rupees. She makes sure to use protection but she does not reveal her condition to her customers. She is under medical supervision.

At the age of 15, when Pooja realized she was gay, she left her family home and came to Bombay where she met Lakshmi and joined her community. After a short time, she had full sex reassignment surgery with money she saved, and started working as a prostitute. Today, she is a sub-guru for Hijra named Salooni. Her clients are mostly truck drivers passing through, husbands and students. Every now and then, she is forced to bribe and give police officers sex services so they will look the other way. "I'm proud of my work, as work is work" Pooja tells me

While Lakshmi might be perceived as a tough Guru living off the prostitution wages of other Hijras in her community, she genuinely cares for them and offers them protection and assistance they will not find outside the community, she established her own organization (ASTITVA) which assists HIV positive Hijras in finding clinics and supportive medical care. In her community, she also emphasizes the importance of safe sex thru sex education workshops. In the community and tradition that surrounds the Hijras, this is perhaps their only way to survive.