

Self as an Interpreter of Stigma: The Everyday Life Agony of the *Hijras* of North Bengal

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Abstract: *Social stigma is ubiquitous and characteristic of almost all human societies. Any supposed “anomalous” behaviour is often deemed as socially “reprehensible” eliciting in the process, social proscriptions to impose conformity and enforce consensus. The hijras of India constitute one such stigmatised ilk wherein they routinely experience social opprobrium and censure for irregularities vis-a-vis their gender and sexual identities that diverges from the heteronormative straitjackets normalised by society. Centring on “social stigma”, the present paper attempts to qualitatively apprehend the meanings that arise as and when the hijras interact/encounter “normal” in mainstream or hijra household settings. Drawing on the life story method and Goffman’s work on stigma, the paper seeks to foreground individuals as interpreters of stigma who consciously formulate meanings in their everyday lived social and interactional contexts.*

Keywords: Life stories, social stigma, self as an interpreter, extreme discredit, *hijra*.

Introduction

Heteronormativity establishes institutionalised practices of heterosexuality as “normal” thereby othering and policing other sexualities that negatively depart from heterosexuality (Marston 2019). Because of their non-conformity to heteronormativity, the *hijras* are often subjected to social opprobrium and stigma (Chakrapani et. al. 2018; Menon 2012). The *hijras* are a marginalised community and are subjected to social stigma, persecution and violence due to their divergence from the traditional standards of gender and sexuality (Saxena 2011; Mal 2018; Chettiar 2015; Menon 2012; Chakrapani 2010). The processes of legitimising the “othering” of the *hijra* ilk can be traced back to colonial mandates such as section 377 and the

Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Arondekar 2006; Hinchy 2019). The *hijras* express themselves in ways contrary to the archetypes of masculinity and femininity. Their conspicuous effeminacy in terms of dress, comportment, speech and their atypical sexualities problematise heteronormative gender identities (Yang 2020).

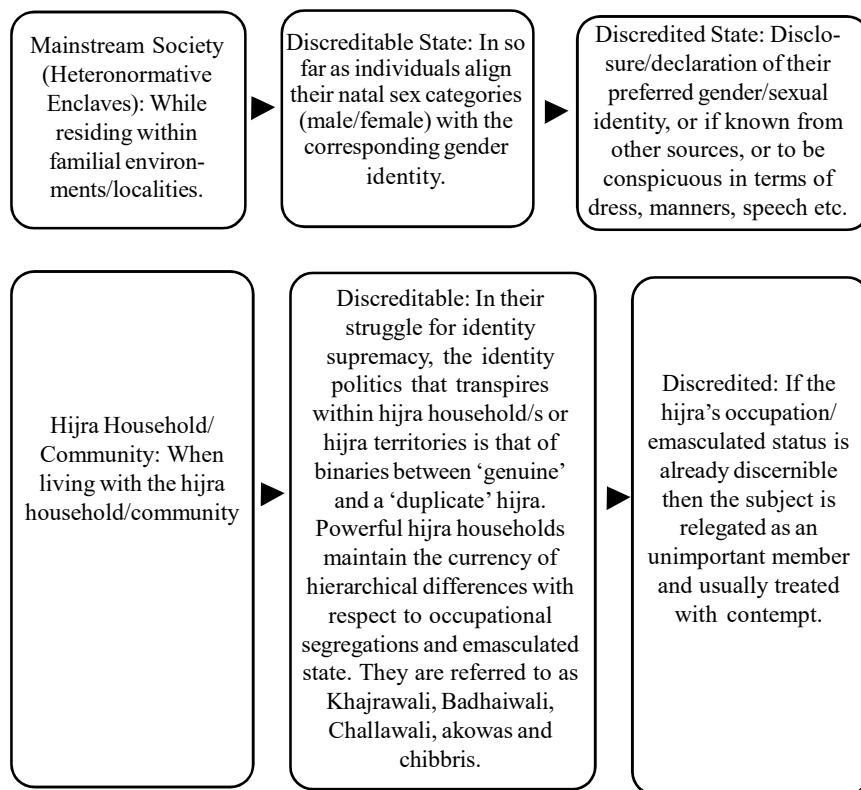
By drawing on the experiences of social stigma and employing the seminal theory of Erving Goffman, the paper examines episodes of stigma when *hijras* interact with “normal” and their ways of coping or managing their stigma. Additionally, the paper also focuses on a second cycle of stigma which they experience in their interactions within the *hijra* households. Interestingly, the experiences of social stigma are not limited to the “heteronormative milieus” but also extend to the *hijra* household spaces wherein some are labelled as a “duplicate” *hijra* while some are accepted as an “authentic” *hijra*. While extant literature speaks of general social stigma experienced by the *hijras* and stigma experienced within *hijra* households, none examine the cycles of stigma wherein they transition from the “discreditable” to the “discredited” state (Saxena 2011; Chakrapani 2010; Chettiar 2015; Jaffrey 1996). The present paper examines the cycles of stigma occurring amidst heteronormative and *hijra* household spaces as the *hijras* transition from a discreditable to a visibly discredited state.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Social stigma can be operationalised as a mark of shame or deviance that produces unequal differences between conforming and non-conforming groups wherein the latter is subject to persecution and suppression to maintain compliance (Erikson 2003; Goffman 1986). Goffman’s work on stigma proffers an incisive analysis defining it as a relative attribute that needs to be examined by situating it within certain contexts or sociocultural matrices (Goffman 1986). Goffman whilst defining stigma observes that stigma per se does not reside in the individual or the audience but rather the relationship between the “stigmatising attribute” and the “audience” (Goffman 1986). For Goffman, therefore, stigma is not an immutable principle that binds people and societies across time and space but rather is predicated on how societies view what is to be desired and undesired which too transmutes from one period to the next (Ibid). The paper attempts to examine stigma from an interpretive stance. It problematises the straightforward characterisation of stigma and foregrounds the interpretive and meaning-making agencies of stigmatised subjects. By employing the life story method and Goffman’s theoretical framework, the study underscores the salience

of interpretations adopted when transitioning from the “discreditable state” to a “discredited one”. To account for meanings and strategies used to cope with social stigma within the Goffmanian framework, it is imperative to employ qualitative methods to better apprehend the variances of experiences and ways of encountering stigma. With the application of Goffman’s conceptualisation of the “discreditable” (wherein the stigma is inconspicuous or not known to the “normal”) and the “discredited” (wherein the stigma is known/visible to the “normal”) states, the study examines the phases when the stigmatised subject transitions from the discreditable state to a discredited one within the contexts of the heteronormative enclaves (the mainstream society) and the *hijra* communes (Goffman 1986).

When embedded within the heteronormative matrices, the *hijras* experience stigma if they do not conform to heteronormative identities and gender roles.



The flowchart illustrates the states of discreditable and discredited experienced by the *hijras* when living in a *hijra* household.

The aforementioned flowcharts demonstrate the differences in experiences of stigma segregated into two phases. To effectively understand individual interpretations of stigma, the study traces the trajectories from the discreditable to the discredited phases and employs the “life story” method that allows for a subjective elucidation of one’s life experiences (Atkinson, 1998). Additionally, it also affords an apprehension of meanings whilst affording an understanding of such interpretations as articulated by the *hijras* (Adorjan and Kelly 2017).

Sample Size and Sites

Given the qualitative nature of the life story method, the sample size is limited to 21 interviewees representing seven districts of North Bengal (viz. Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, Cooch-Bihar, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri). The interviews were conducted in *Hindi, Bengali, English* and *Nepali* and the same was digitally recorded and transcribed in English. Prior permission to record their answers was sought and all other research ethics were complied with. Respondent names are not disclosed to maintain privacy and anonymity. The narratives also contain certain local words as used by the respondents.

Findings

The following segment illustrates the findings obtained using the life story method. The findings will be divided into two phases viz. one’s familial/locality spaces and one’s household/*hijra* community space. Following Braun and Clarke’s work on qualitative research, the section will be presented thematically which will be subsumed under familial experiences and the *hijra* communes (Braun and Clarke 2013). The generated themes will then be elucidated descriptively while foregrounding the interpretations of the respondents. Furthermore, the interpretations of the respondents when situated in familial and *hijra* communes will be divided into two segments:

1. Disavowal/Rejection of stigma or Acceptance of one’s stigma.
The segment enumerates and elaborates on the stigma experiences of those respondents who did not employ stigma-concealing

strategies in their interactions with the “normal” or even when censured by other *hijras* in their communes.

2. Acceptance/Internalisation of Stigma. The segment includes narratives of respondents who have espoused stratagems as they have avowed their stigma stemming from familial milieus or the *hijra* communes.

In some of the narratives, respondents did not employ any stratagems to evade or conceal their stigma. In tracing their trajectory from being a “discreditable” (within their familial/locality spaces towards being a “discredited” state (within *hijra* communes), it becomes evident that they have reclaimed and avowed their state of stigma without managing/concealing it.

Disavowal/Rejection of Stigma or Acceptance of One’s “Difference”

A. Experiences within Heteronormative Enclaves/Mainstream Milieus

.... I used to feel different from others and I loathed behaving like a boy. It was probably around the age of 13-14 years that people around started taking notice of me and hence started to behave differently with me.

Respondent one from Uttar Dinajpur district mentions coming to terms with one’s desired gender identity which because of being within heteronormative matrices engendered feelings of anguish, sadness and confusion. Gender stereotypes normalised and practised in heteronormative spaces ensures the compliance of approved correspondence of gender with one’s sex (Ellemers 2018; Peake 2016). The phenomena of “othering” entails recalling the concept of gender stereotypes existent in a given social milieu.

Similarly, respondent two from Uttar Dinajpur district avows her “difference” and gender identity:

... I never saw myself as a man. I identified myself as a girl/woman. I liked the company of girls over boys and liked to engage myself in all sorts of girly activities. I used to request my friends to get me a saree and lend me their accessories so I could wear them and look like a pretty girl. Despite my

gender expression, choice of clothes and feminine behaviour my parents never complained and were supportive of whatever I did.

The respondent asserts her “difference” early on and expresses no qualms in embodying it. Because of her gender expressions, her friends, family and her teachers were already aware about her “difference”. However, unlike the usual instances of stigma and ostracization, the respondent recalls positive experiences of sympathy and social support despite her “discredited state”. Kornblatt deems social support as a crucial aspect in people’s lives as it provides important appraisals and guidance to facilitate improving lives (Kornblatt 1984: 40)

They used to tease me by calling names like ‘girly boy’ or ‘ladies. I had befriended some girls in the village and I sometimes used to borrow their toys, dresses and creams. Having no financial support, I decided to try my hands at doing odd jobs. This continued for some time and then a village fellow told me that I should try launda dancing. He complimented me that I had the looks for laundagiri. My family gradually reconciled with my line of work.

Quite clearly, respondent three from Malda never resorted to stigma management or coping mechanisms to reform her discredited state. To support her family, she engaged in manual labour for a brief period and then later becoming a *launda* dancer. The respondent mentions her family’s gradual reconciliation vis-a-vis her profession as they are financially dependent on her. The word reconciliation signals an earlier disagreement with her family over her occupational choices but due to the lack of other viable alternatives, the respondent’s family gradually came to terms with her ways of earning a living.

Respondent four from Cooch Behar district also narrates a similar experience:

I knew right from the beginning that I did not wish to be like other village boys playing in the dirt and wearing loose clothes. I wanted to be a fashion queen. I aspired to be like one of those Bollywood actresses. I stood out from the rest, that I couldn’t be like a man or marry a woman.

The respondent continually deflects the conventional gender expectations approved by society. Such deviations create the possibility of transitioning from the discreditable to the discredited state, but the respondent rejects

the imposition of the discredited state and instead challenges the same. Similarly, Goffman explains such a stance espoused by stigmatised individuals or groups in which they do not appear to express guilt or remorse for their devalued attribute (Goffman 1986). She does not internalise the strictures of society and defends her position by embodying the socially devalued attribute (Ibid).

Similarly, a respondent from Alipurduar district “disavows” the stigma associated with non-conforming gender identity and chooses to express her real identity:

... At first, I felt a deep sense of shame for my sexuality but eventually, when I met others like me, I accepted my identity. I had a long relationship with a local boy. We got involved physically and had made plans to elope and marry. But my parents came to know about it and that was the end of our relationship.

Because of her socialisation into the heteronormative matrices, the respondent initially expresses remorse for her “difference” but later revises her response vis-à-vis, her devalued attribute. Her interactions with others like her afford a different perspective to her “denigrated status”. Such interactions and perceptions of her stigma emboldened her to assert her identity at public spaces while also providing an impetus to embrace her difference as an immutable aspect of her ‘selfhood’.

Also, respondent five expresses unwillingness to conform to the heteronormative gender roles:

I have the soul of a woman and no matter how hard I tried; I just couldn't identify as a man. ...regardless of what happens, my identity would never change because it was something that I felt within me.

The respondent does not attempt to use a strategy to conceal her “stigmatised attribute” in the presence of “normal”. Instead, she acknowledges and accepts her stigma affirmatively and refuses to conform to the standards of her heteronormative social milieu. In Goffman’s terms, the respondent does not internalise her stigma as she chooses not to reform her socially “devalued attribute” to fit into the masculine mould (Goffman 1986).

Respondent Six from the Darjeeling district speaks of her early experiences of stigma as she chose to render visible her gender difference. She recounts:

... I was very much like a girl in terms of walking gait, speech and mannerisms. I knew that it was something so natural in me that just couldn't be changed. My father tried everything to cure me. I had spoken with some counsellors and they said that it was not a disease to be afraid of. I also learned about words like gays, homosexuals, and transgenders from them. I tried to explain to my parents about sexuality, but they were unwilling to listen to anything.

The respondent acknowledges her gender difference as innate and invariable. Furthermore, because of her interactions with the local NGOs and CBOs, the respondent learns about new gender identity/sexuality terminologies which enables her to view her “difference” affirmatively. Quite clearly, the respondent’s subjective interpretation of her discredited state changes from internalisation of stigma towards self-acceptance and positive interpretation of her “difference”. The respondent, therefore, transitions from the discreditable to the discredited state.

Similarly, for respondent seven from Malda, the discrediting attribute is instantaneously known to her immediate family members as she was born intersexed. The family, in their attempt to conceal the same coerces the respondent to identify as a male. The respondent narrates:

They knew that I was born intersexed and used to discourage me from behaving differently and used to pressurise me to act like a man. I could not be like a man and used to loathe dressing or acting like one. Out of frustration, I left my home and decided to join the hijra community. I had befriended some hijras and yearned to experience community feeling, more earnings and expression of my identity.

Understandably, the respondent’s family expects her to conform to the binaries of sex and gender. And despite her stratagems for stigma concealment, she transitions from a discreditable to a discredited state. However, the stigma internalisation does not last long as the respondent transitions to a state of “stigma disavowal” thereby repudiating the discrediting attribute. The repudiation of the stigma was bolstered by her interactions with other *hijras* who enabled her to understand the meanings of gender and sexual identities. Her encounters and engagement with

similar communities of people emboldened her to make affirmative decisions while repudiating conventional gender norms.

Similarly, respondent eight from Jalpaiguri district experiences stigma because of her perceivable difference but despite her discredited state, the respondent does not manage her stigma. Instead, she asserts her identity as a *kothi*². She narrates:

... we used to identify simply as kothi. After initial resistance, my mother and my brother came to terms with my identity and accepted me the way I am. Despite familial support, I experienced locality censure and name-calling. One of our neighbour's sons used to make fun of me... called me a "sister"/ "girl" of the family.

Because of her conspicuous non-conformance and her state of discredit, the respondent experiences societal ridicule for her gender identity. Being called names such as “sister” or a “girl” is representative of society’s intolerance towards gender transgressions. Within the matrices of patriarchy, attributes like “virility” and “masculinity” are honoured while anything opposite is considered “weak” and “powerless” (Dutt 2018). But such experiences of stigma notwithstanding, the respondent continues to assert her identity as a *kothi hijra*.

B. Experiences within the *Hijra* communities

Respondent Nine from Jalpaiguri narrates:

... to be a hijra requires a certain mental attitude, my guru was supportive, but I disliked their practices of castration and did not want to castrate myself. I could not continue as a hijra for long as I was not willing to castrate myself just to increase my income. After a few years there, I left the community and continued my studies. Now I have a master's in social work and a small business. My mother continues to support me, and things are more or less sorted on the family front.

In her transition from one state of discredit to another i.e., when she chooses to join the *hijra* community, she continues to encounter episodes of stigma because of her unwillingness to conform to the identity strictures of her *hijra* household. The respondent also does not fully accept her role as a *hijra* because of the differences between gender identity,

emasculatation practice and the willingness to engage in multiple *hijra* professions. Thus, she experiences difficulties in internalising the *hijra* role and occupation due to which she abandons the community after a few years of engagement.

Respondent Ten Malda recalling her experience in the *hijra* community narrates-

... I decided to flee from home to join the hijra community only to dislike their line of work. So currently, I am a hijra as well as a businesswoman engaging local women and unemployed persons by teaching them how to sew. I also encourage underprivileged people to work with me in my business. I am a hijra myself but hijragiri is not something that I look forward to doing in the future.

The respondent deviates from her usual line of work to engage in a regular profession (small-scale business). She disrupts the occupational stereotype of the *hijras* by empowering the deprived sections of society. Having identified as a *hijra* the respondent attempts to cope with her socially discredited state by attempting to form alliances with other economically deprived women of the society and working towards collective financial empowerment.

Acceptance/Internalisation of Stigma

A. Experiences within Heteronormative Enclaves/Mainstream Milieus

Respondent eleven from Jalpaiguri district recalls her experiences of stigma when living with her family:

I just knew that I was different, but I couldn't quite make complete sense of it. I was coerced by my relatives to marry and a bride was arranged. Perhaps, it was post-marriage and my unsatisfactory physical relationship with my wife that made me acknowledge my sexuality. Our relationship is only namesake, but I appreciate her because she is responsible and understanding. She bore me two sons and being a dutiful wife, she shouldered all the responsibilities of a housewife.

The respondent expresses her uncertainty and her inhibition concerning her gender identity and sexuality. She does not assert her identity with

conviction, nor does she contest the heteronormative norms governing her social milieu. The respondent comes to terms with her “difference” as opposed to a delineated identity. The respondent further mentions that being in a discreditable state, she couldn’t express her difference fearing stigma. The respondent conformed to her “virtual social identity” as opposed to her “actual social identity” to pass as a “normal” (Goffman 1986). She further adds:

... I was admitted to their dera³, however, I made sure that my family and local people remained unaware of my outings to the hijra community. It was with my earnings as a hijra that greatly helped my family, especially in securing the future of my sons. However, for my sons and society, I wear the guise of a man to avoid any stigma.

The respondent is conscious of the societal implications of her visibility which includes socio-structural ramifications of her family being deprived of education, societal equity and future opportunities or life chances. However, what remains striking is her differing rationales for deploying her “strategies of concealment” for different contexts. Fearing ostracization and stigma, she represses her differences to adjust to the normal.

Respondent Twelve from Alipurduar speaks of “instantaneous visibility” when living with the “normal”. She recalls:

... people in my locality used to constantly tease me for my femininity. They used to call me names like “half ladies and chakka”. My parents too were worried about my behaviour. For the sake of my parents, I tried my best to be like a boy. I wore clothes and acted like the village boys but I failed. I preferred the company of girls, liked playing with them and leaving my hair long.

The respondent faces criticism for her demeanour and attempts to emulate masculinity as expected by her family and society. Because of not coming to terms with her identity and sexuality, she does not initially acknowledge her differences and struggles to maintain a semblance of normalcy. This phase can be referred to as the discreditable state wherein individuals try to sustain the facade of social conformity. Her attempts at performing and enacting the masculine role therefore are a way to camouflage her socially discrediting attribute of being “girly” or “effeminate”. However, because of her intrinsic feminine orientation, she is unable to express herself authentically under the guise of masculinity.

I was born male but inwardly harboured feminine propensities. I was aware of my femininity and expressed it more in the company of other girls.

Here the respondent is cognisant of her incongruous corporality, gender identity and sexuality. She embodies her difference and only discloses her “real self” in the presence of her female peers.

Respondent thirteen from Dakshin Dinajpur recalls receiving support, sympathy and acceptance from her family members for her gender difference. She recounts:

My mother would purchase sarees for my sisters and me. I used to love spending time with my sisters, listening to their talks, playing with their toys and makeup and trying on their clothes. Despite familial support, I realised that I wouldn't be accepted by the society because they would never understand me. I therefore transitioned into the hijra community.

Despite having received familial support for her “difference”, the respondent expresses her inability to cope with the matrices of the heteronormative society. She becomes cognisant of her “gender difference” when she interacts with the ‘normal others or her peers at school. Subsequently, the respondent chose to join the *hijra* community to seek support, and sympathy and to live amongst her “own kind”.

Respondent fourteen from Cooch Behar district immediately experiences social stigma when interacting with the “normal” in society. Her presence is instantly perceived as discreditable to “normal” and is labelled as the deviant “other”. The respondent narrates:

When staying with my parents, I secluded myself from local people because they did not treat me well and called me a mauga⁴ and a hijra. Even in school, they used to call me, hijra/ladies because of which I felt isolated.... Then gradually I befriended a hijra who told me to join the community. She advised me that I would be financially independent and have community social support.

Because of her speech, mannerisms and body language difference, the respondent is instantaneously labelled as a *hijra*. The respondent, therefore, in her attempts to avoid or minimise interaction with the “normal” chose to seclude herself at her home. Understandably, the respondent because of stigma internalisation deemed her attribute to be deeply discrediting

due to which she decided to join the *hijra* community as a coping mechanism to avoid the direct presence of “normal” for social support and financial security.

Respondent fifteen from Dakshin Dinajpur district recalls:

I realized that I was different. People in my locality made some derogatory comments on my appearance but I did not let that affect me. My mother and brother did not want me to be like a woman and sometimes pressured me to settle down. Later I realized that my family and relatives planned to marry me off as they had already chosen a girl for me. I tried to reason with them but to no avail, despite this, I have settled down in this union to provide financial support.

The respondent acknowledges her gender identity quite early on and internalises the stigma associated with it. But gradually, she transitions to the phase of visibility wherein she does not attempt to conceal her “discrediting attribute” despite knowing about the consequences viz. social stigma and disrepute. As the respondent grew older, she chose not to conceal her gender difference as she gradually came to terms with her gender identity and sexuality. Here, it can be inferred that the respondent internalises her stigma to a certain degree as she agreed to a heterosexual union. The respondent succumbs to the double pressures of patriarchy and heteronormativity wherein she is expected to father children and provide financial support to her family and parents.

B. Experiences within the *Hijra* communities

Respondent sixteen from Uttar Dinajpur introduces schisms of normative and non-normative categories relevant to the *hijra* identity and culture. She reminisces:

...I continued leading the dera with the principles and morals my guru had taught me. In terms of occupational choice, I disapprove hijras who engage in chakra/challa mangtai. I have always taught my chelas⁵ the right way to earn and that is to practice toli-badhai and to have faith in our principal deity, Besraji Mata. I also do not encourage my chelas to befriend hijras who pursue immoral occupations. Since we are already stigmatised for being a hijra, I think it would do

good for us to follow our cultural and traditional roles of singing, dancing and blessing in auspicious ceremonies.

The respondent here mentions her acceptance and positive adjustment in the *hijra* household. She quickly learns and adjusts to the customs, traditions and culture from her predecessors. This indicates an affirmative transition to the *hijra* community from her earlier discredited state. The respondent now as a guru of the *hijra* household introduces further schisms of differentiation to maintain the traditional patterns of the *hijra* community and culture. The respondent creates divisions of “accepted” and “unaccepted” categories within the *hijra* community. She therefore lays down the strictures for her *chelas* to follow to make them conform to the accepted *hijra* identity and culture. Noticeably, she creates binaries of morality and immorality within her commune engendering stigma and hierarchies in the process. Recent literature mentions the occupational gradings and the real/duplicate identity schisms existent within the *hijra* community of West Bengal (Dey et. al. 2016; Dukpa 2016). Such intra-divisions create supplementary chasms of the approved and the stigmatised ilk within the *hijra* community. The respondent further recollects:

... in the past few years, I have experienced multiple disputes with the gurus of Uttar Dinajpur for they forcibly claimed ownership over our areas. They also create a lot of misunderstandings between our dera members causing some to leave and join their dera. I believe that they migrated from Bangladesh and by using power and money, they've bribed the police as well as some local goons. The Bangladeshi hijras are attempting to overpower us with their power and money...this inter-household war between the hijras is further exacerbating the stigma problem by making us seem as lower in the public gaze.

Here the respondent mentions inter-household disputes that have led to the deprivation of earnings because of area usurpation by “powerful *hijras*”. Given their numerical preponderance, power and monetary clout, the Bangladeshi *hijras* have allegedly created differences in terms of *hijra* identity and occupation.

The respondent manages to control her discredited state by disassociating herself and her *gharana* from the Bangladeshi *hijras*, their culture and their conception of the *hijra* identity. She intends to circumvent the possibility of “extreme discredit” by strictly implementing the rules taught

by her predecessors pertaining to *hijra* culture, occupation and identity. The concept of “extreme discredit”⁶ can be further illustrated by referring to Goffman’s work wherein he mentions the difference between virtual social identity and actual social identity (Goffman 1986). The former refers to the “expected” attributes that an audience demands from an individual and the latter refers to the attribute/s that the respondent may be said to possess (Ibid). In the case of the respondent, she attempts to reinforce the notion that the *hijras* occupy the niche of the third gender following traditional occupations such as singers and dancers. The respondent thus reasons that the resistance to such societal expectations could further push them into a liminal existence exacerbating their “discredited state” into a state of “extreme discredit”.

Respondent seventeen from Darjeeling district, with her visibly discredited state of being a *hijra* recounts their experiences when inducted into the *hijra* community:

... my hijra guru was generous to chelas regardless of their caste and class backgrounds. Our household maintains a scruple that regardless of caste or ethnic background, all members are hijras and identify as one and that is our unity. There are members here who belong to multiple ethnicities and yet we all live by this principle.

Once admitted into the community, the respondent recounts experiencing a feeling of oneness with one’s members within the community. Although labelled as a *hijra*, the respondent managed to transition from the state of discredit and social stigma towards that of support, solidarity and security within the enclaves of the *hijra* community. With the disavowal of the heteronormative matrices and corresponding gender expectations, the respondent assimilates herself into the *hijra* community embracing its culture and identity.

She further adds:

We were taught by our guru that it was best to avoid being a khajrawali⁷ as it would bring social stigma and taint the reputation preserved by the predecessors of the household. We were advised to emasculate as “penis” was deemed as useless. My guru made me realise the traditional role of the hijras, the powers of Shakti conferred to us and our customary place in the society of issuing blessings and curses.

Here the respondent is further introduced into the second circle of strictures and constraints imposed upon by the *hijra* culture about identity, emasculation, occupation and one's role in the society. Such requisites consist of emasculation, choosing traditional occupations and adhering to the culture of the *hijra* community. The respondent readily conformed to the strictures mandated by her commune thereby eschewing experiences of stigma within her community. In the case of the respondent, self-disclosure of her identity, embracing oneself along acceptance of the *hijra* culture constitute ways to encounter and interact with the "normal".

Respondent eighteen from Darjeeling district further narrates her experiences of stigma experienced within the *hijra* community. She speaks of exploitation, discrimination and acts of coercion:

My guru wanted me to castrate so that I could earn more. I was personally not in favour of it but money was my concern too. My guru wanted me to look more feminine and attractive and therefore urged me to castrate. I was already engaged in launda dance, but she also told me to do gaari maagna⁸. I have to pay my roz-hissa⁹ to my guru as I live in her dera.

The respondent experiences the second level of stigma and discrimination within the *hijra* communes. Because of the power relations existent within the community wherein *gurus* expect their *chelas* to work under them and share their incomes with them, the respondent expresses her consternation when her guru monetarily exploits and demands her to increase her income by engaging in other kinds of work. An element of coercion also exists between the respondent and her *guru* as they attempt to discipline the bodies of her *chelas* by enforcing upon them the templates of femininity. The respondent adds:

The Hijra profession is fraught with greed, power and violence. There are some chelas I know in North Bengal who were fortunate enough to have gurus who didn't force them to undergo castration. They also share a warm relationship with their gurus, and it is more of a parent-child sort of relationship. To identify as a hijra has its painful consequences, castration being one of them. I had to risk my health and even possible death to become a chibbri hijra.

The respondent counters the stigma experienced within the *hijra* community by adhering to the parameters of identity advanced by her *guru* for which she experiences perilous consequences. Even post-transition

to the *hijra* community, she continues to view the *hijra* profession negatively as she considers it to be embroiled in identity politics and exertion of dominance over other weaker *hijras*. The internalisation of stigma therefore causes her to adhere to the community norms of emasculation to circumvent her descent into a further state of discredit.

Post transition to the *hijra* community, respondent nineteen from Dakshin Dinajpur experienced stigma within her community. She recalls:

...initially I was scared of them but I followed a group of hijras one day back to their dera and asked them to take me as their member. I was told by my guru-maa that I had to castrate myself if I was to live with them. I was reluctant at first to castrate but slowly I gave in to the pressure of my guru and other chelas who had recently castrated."

Because of the gradings of the *hijra* identity into *akowas*¹⁰ and *chibbris*¹¹ the respondent encounters stigma because of the non-severance of her organ. The guru of the household exhorts her to castrate and warns of annulling her as a *chela* if she does not comply with the identity parameters delimited by her. The genitalia therefore become a primary site for generating stigma and ascertaining power relations between *hijras* of multiple households. Contrary to the norms harboured by the mainstream heteronormative and patriarchal society wherein the primacy was accorded to the potent male organ and its agreement with masculinity, the *hijra* households on the other consider the absence of the male genitalia as a determiner of a real *hijra* identity. The discrediting attribute shifts from approving the potent phallus towards viewing it as an undesirable appendage because of which the *hijra* would be labelled as a duplicate *hijra*.

Respondent Twenty from Alipurduar district reasons that she joined the community to support her family and to seek refuge in the community. She narrates:

I felt a sense of belonging when I was with them, I could be like myself and wear what I wanted. But my guru Maa expected me to emasculate and she was willing to fund my operation. Also, being a castrated hijra would ensure more earnings with which I could also support my family. After castration, I was warmly welcomed by my guru as a new bride and member.

Unlike other respondents, the interviewee does not experience any episodes of stigma when inducted as a *hijra*. Conversely, the respondent

felt at ease and experienced belongingness when living with other *hijras*. The respondent also adhered to the household norm of emasculation during the induction ceremony. In the second phase, therefore, the respondent transitioned from a discreditable state towards a state of acceptance within her community as she adhered to the norms of the household. For most *hijra* households, “emasculation” is a primary determiner of authentic and inauthentic *hijra* identity whereas retaining one’s genitalia is often deemed as undesirable.

Because of her acquaintance with local NGOs and other *hijras* from the area respondent twenty-one from the Cooch Behar district could easily transition into a *hijra* community. The respondent recalls:

...I did not experience discrimination within my household or elsewhere because I readily agreed to transition. Also, I was privileged to be working under a kind and considerate guru. I was however called chapti¹² by some hijras in the region referring to my transitioned state. These hijras were mostly akowas and they used to despise me and my household members for emasculating us in the name of hijra identity. However, their labelling did not affect me much because I was happy with my body post-surgery.

Conforming to the identity ideology of most *hijras* of the region, the respondent agreed to undergo sex transition surgery to maintain the honour of her guru and the household. Also, the respondent took recourse to the *hijra* community for financial empowerment which would enable her to be independent from her family and the normative society. Such a transition can be read as a coping mechanism and also as a process of “coming out” (Vaughn et. al. 2015). The progression of “coming out” begins with confusion about one’s gender/sexual identity and resolves with the synthesis and the resolution of identity (Ibid). Such a progression was facilitated by interacting with NGOs and *hijra* communities, the entry and acceptance into the *hijra* community.

Conclusion

By placing primacy on individual experiences of social stigma and their interpretations of it, the paper underscores on the multiplicities of individual stances, coping strategies and management of one’s stigma. Goffman’s theoretical framework outlines multiple terminologies such as coping with

stigma, managing one's stigma, the transition from the discreditable to the discredited state and other bifurcations of identity such as the differences between virtual and actual social identity (Goffman 1986). Goffman's theory of stigma, therefore, is germane when tracing the points of transition from the "discreditable" to the "discredited" state in heteronormative milieus and the *hijra* communes. Furthermore, the paper's findings demonstrate that the ways of viewing and deeming something as "normal" and "discredited" transmutes from one site to another, in this case, the "heteronormative enclaves" and the *hijra* communities. The act of deeming a behaviour or identity as "normal" can be attributed to the contextual spaces and the people who reside in such sites. The respondents included in the study continually experience episodes of stigma albeit at varying levels and with differing standards of what is considered "accepted" or "unaccepted" when interacting amidst varying sites of "heteronormative enclaves" and the "*hijra* communities". In the heteronormative enclaves, any irregularity in terms of gender (masculinity and femininity) and sexuality (male and female) elicits a "stigma" response. The deviation from the approved "norms of masculinity" (wherein the respondents realise early on about their gender difference) disrupts the congruence between the virtual social identity and actual social identity thereby rendering respondents to experience instances of stigma whilst interacting within familial and locality spaces consequently leading to the descent from a "discreditable" to a "discredited" state. Interestingly, the deviation from the masculinity norm which was deemed as a determiner of stigma is supplanted by the need to sever the "masculine insignia" or the male genitalia to redeem one's stigma when living amidst the *hijra* community. Conversely, the male genitalia therefore produces further stigmatisation as it represents the devalued attribute of being a "duplicate" or an "imposter *hijra*". Additionally, occupational choices too constitute as another significant determiner to identify a "real" or a "fake" *hijra*. The ideology of the "real *hijra*" is often perpetuated and sustained by a particular faction within the *hijra* community, especially those having connections with the local authorities, access to capital, and a preponderance of *chibbri hijras* among others. But such standards of determining stigma notwithstanding in heteronormative societies and *hijra* communities, not all respondents expressed a typical knee-jerk response to stigma experiences, i.e., avowing, accepting and internalising their stigma. Counter-intuitive to what is generally expected, some respondents have 'disavowed' their stigma and have accepted their differences. The paper underscores individuals and their agencies as "meaning-making beings"

who resist/disavow or acquiesce to the labelling as “stigmatised individuals”. As the findings demonstrate, not all *hijras* actively attempt to manage or control their stigma in the presence of the “normal”. Findings also show that some respondents disagree with the interpretation that transitioning from the discreditable state to the discredited is to be construed as a descent from a better space towards a more reprehensible one. For example, some *hijras* positively view their entry into the *hijra* community because they have access to social support and financial security. Although, objectively, such a transition would not be socially approved, some *hijras* would not view the transition as a descent to disrepute but as something that guarantees personal freedom and financial empowerment. The findings also mention instances wherein individuals have resisted the labels imposed by the heteronormative societies and the *hijra* commune and have instead maintained their understanding of identity. Conversely, the findings also reveal many instances wherein respondents have experienced social isolation, alienation and lack of support because of the internalisation of social stigma. The respondent experiences disrepute and declines into what can be called the state of “extreme discredit”. The term, “extreme discredit” was conceptualized to analyse the present findings that trace the transition of discreditable to discredited states in heteronormative and the *hijra* communities. The terminology of “extreme discredit” implies the fear of further relegating to the discredited state when encountering the “normal”. For example, some *hijras* may (out of fear) impose regulations on their community *hijras* to emasculate and conform to the traditional occupational roles to be in alignment with the societal perception and expectations of mainstream society. The findings further reveal that most *hijras* transition from the heteronormative milieu towards *hijra* communities to seek refuge and support, as an act of resistance against the mainstream society or as a coping mechanism to deflect stigma. Typically, it is assumed that the *hijra* communities are safe havens for new *hijra* members as they all identify in the same category, but it is here precisely, that some *hijras* experience another level of discredit even when living within the *hijra* communes. As per findings, some respondents were stigmatised by their *gurus* and other community members because of their non-castrated status. A non-castrated *hijra* is often deemed to be an inauthentic *hijra* that is sometimes compared with an “imposter *hijra*”. The concept of stigma and the strategies employed by the *hijras* to cope with the same is an extremely relevant field of research wherein, as per findings, the attributes deemed discrediting and shameful are not fixed in a normative space such as the

heteronormative milieu but transcend to other spaces to create its normativity. As a case in point, some *hijras* maintain *hijra-normativity* and continue to uphold schisms of emasculated and non-emasculated *hijra* to prevent extreme discredit (Dukpa 2016). The concept of ‘extreme discredit’ also indicates the changeability of the attributes of being “normal” or “accepted” in a sub-cultural setting. In the process of delineating “authentic” (read approved) and ‘inauthentic’ (read disapproved) *hijra* identities, the definition of what constitutes a “normal” and an “accepted” *hijra* is produced, thereby perpetuating the stigma equation of “normal” and their encounters with “stigmatised” individuals.

Consequently, the determinants of stigma transmute across cultures and sub-cultures but such an understanding of the mutability of stigma should be coupled with personal interpretations of their stigma experiences in their interactions with the “normal” others. The ‘life story method’ allowed for a nuanced appreciation of subjective meanings harboured by individuals in their everyday interactions with the “normal others”. These subjective meanings are integral in so far as they afford “stigmatised” individuals to view and respond to their discrediting attribute in ways that depart from the typical stigma responses of “accepting” and “fully avowing” their difference as one that elicits discredit and disrepute.

Notes

1. The term “normal” is to be interpreted within the Goffmanian context referring to individuals whose sense of identity conforms to the socially institutionalised standards of accepted or approved ways of being.
2. As a category, *kothi* refers to those natal men who are sexually attracted to other men (Stief 2017).
3. In local parlance, *dera* refers to the *hijra* household or a place of residence.
4. In the lingo spoken in the *hijra* household, *mauga* means being “like a woman”.
5. *Chelas* denote young recruits or recently inducted members of the *hijra* household who typically work under their *gurus* who rank in superiority in terms of their age, experience or the power they wield.

6. The term- extreme discredit was first operationalised while analysing the stigma experiences of *hijras* for the present paper. It denotes a third of the cycle of “discredit” when “normal” in their interactions with the *hijras* further stigmatises them for non-conformity to sub-cultural norms.
7. To engage as a sex worker.
8. To beg on trains or other modes of public transportation (e.g., buses).
9. The *hijra chelas* are obligated to pay a portion of their daily earnings to their *guru-maa*.
10. In the language spoken by the *hijras*, *akowas* refer to the non-castrated *hijras*.
11. The term *chibbris* refers to the castrated or emasculated *hijras*.
12. Chapti is colloquially referred to those *hijras* who have undergone complete SRS or in some cases, have crudely severed their male genitalia.

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