

## Voicing the Silence of “Taali” Through the Lens of Media: A Sociological Analysis

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### Abstract

Indian society is based on hierarchical structure. There are different kinds of socio-economic, politico-religious and cultural hierarchies. But the biological hierarchy based on sex that exists in India reflects only on two sexes i.e. male and female. The stereotypical gendered roles functionalize males and females according to the Indian cultural pattern. But apart from these two gendered categories there exists one more category called “hijras”. Who are also known as “transgender” or now called as “third gender” which is completely non-existent in Indian society. As a result of this unrecognized identity they are marginalized, forgotten and deprived of their basic rights as a human being. Hence the present paper makes sociological analysis of the various aspects of discrimination faced by the transgender people in India through the released web series “Taali”. It also gives insight to the remarkable journey of a Transgender Social Activist in India and her relentless fight that carved the way for the recognition of the third gender on all official documents in India. The paper also aims to pose some suggestions to improve the status of transgender people in India not limiting it to only official documents but recognizing them as humans.

**Keywords:-** Biological hierarchy, Transgender, Discrimination, Stereotypical, Deprived, Marginalized.

### Introduction

In the hierarchical structure of India “hijras” are placed in a differential position. Where their identity is recognized in the stereotypical gender biases of maleness and femaleness. Even after the landmark NALSA judgment in 2014 the condition of transgender community in India has not made much difference. There were around 4.88 Lakh trans-people in India (Census 2011). In spite of their large number, they are not recognized as human beings and are excluded from society up till now. They are often prey of hate crimes abuse. As it is interpreted that they do not fit in gender binary norms and stereotypes of our Indian society. They are completely ignored by the society except when they are considered auspicious during certain festivities and celebrations. Nevertheless few of them have taken a stand against this discrimination and made a mark for the transgender community. In this paper the researcher will take you through an insightful journey of one such personality named Shree Gauri Sawant, a Transgender Social Activist. This paper will make a sociological analysis of a web series “Taali” released on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2023, in the light of Indian social structure and its hegemonic systems. Also at the end of this research paper some suggestions will be posed for the betterment of transgender community at the policy making and implementation level.

### **Transgender in India: An Overview**

Hijra, in the Indian subcontinent is the generic term for trans women and may include eunuchs and intersex people. They live in communities that follow a kinship system known as guru-chela system (The Guardian, 2014). They are also known as aravani, aruvani, and jogappa. In Pakistan, they are known as khawaja sira, the equivalent of transgender in Urdu language (DAWN, 2017).

In the Indian subcontinent, throughout countries, “hijras” are officially recognized as a third gender (Shaw et al., 2017). Who are considered neither completely male nor female. The identity of “hijras” evolved during the Delhi Sultanate 1226-1526 and Mughal Empire 1526-1707 and today, many of them live in well-defined and organized all-hijra communities, which is led by their Guru (Iyer Nalini, 2009). These communities have consisted over generations of those who are in absolute poverty or who have been rejected by or fled from their family (Nanda Serena, 1999). Many of them work as sex workers (Nanda Serena, 1996).

The word hijra is a Hindu term (Reddy Gayatri, 2010). It has traditionally been translated into English as “eunuch” or “hermaphrodite”, where “the irregularity of the male genitalia is central to the definition (Nanda Serena, 1999). However, in general hijras have been born male, with only a few having been born with intersex variations (Nanda Serena, 1991). Some of them undergo an initiation rite into the hijra community called nirvaan, which involves the removal of the penis, scrotum and testicles (Nanda Serena, 1996). Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, some hijra activists and non-government organizations have lobbied for official recognition of the hijra as a kind of “third sex” or “third gender”, as neither man nor woman (Agrawal Anuja, 1997). Hijras have successfully gained this recognition in Bangladesh and are eligible for priority in education and certain kinds of low paid jobs (DNA, 2012). In India, the Supreme Court in April 2014 recognized hijras, transgender people, eunuchs, and intersex people as a “third gender” in law (The Guardian, 2014; Mc Coy Terrence, 2014; Times of India, 2014). Nepal, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh have all legally accepted the existence of a third gender, with India, Pakistan and Nepal including an option for them on passport and certain official documents (Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, 2015).

**Indicators of Transgenderism-** The term Transgender denotes a wide range of identities and expressions of people contrary to their biological sex. And not limiting it to trans-sexual people only. There are four types of people categorized in the umbrella definition they are-

- (1) People whose gender identity or expression or behaviour does not conform to their biological sex.
- (2) Transgender persons are considered neither completely male nor female. In hijras, there are castrated, nirvaan (emasculated men) and hermaphrodites (non-emasculated men and intersected).
- (3) Transgender also includes person who intend to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS) or have undergone SRS to align their biological sex with their gender. They are called as “Trans-sexual persons”.
- (4) There are persons who wear clothes designed for opposite sex or cross-dress in contrast to their gender. They are called transvestites. They are not usually transgender but just feels comfortable to wear opposite sex clothes. They prefer to be described as ‘Cross-dressers’ (Delvin David, 2015).

**Objectives of the paper-** The present paper aims to highlight the following objectives:

1. To understand the stereotypical ideologies about “maleness” and “femaleness” in Indian Society.
2. To have insight of family response towards a transgender member within family.
3. To study the marginalization of transgender on the basis of sexuality.
4. To learn the extent of deprivation of socio-economic and political rights of transgender people.

## “Taali” - A Sociological Analysis

“Taali – Season 1” is a three hours four minutes biographical drama web series on Jio Cinema, released on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2023. The series is comprised of six episodes and is directed by Ravi Jadhav. The web series starring Sushmita Sen in the lead role playing the Transgender Activist Shree Gauri Sawant. Who is located in Mumbai and covers her key life moments. She is currently serving as the Director of an NGO named “Sakhi Char Chowghi. “Taali” means “Clap”, which demonstrates the transgender people in India who are often stereotyped as a community that claps near people while asking money. And she has broken that stereotype and emerged as an inspiration for people.

### **Episode 1: Teesri Ladai**

This episode witnesses the transformative journey from a 10 year boy Ganesh to Shree Gauri Sawant, a dedicated transgender activist. When she prepares herself for the three important battles of life i.e. identity, survival, equality. She reflects on her past struggles of identity and survival. Where she narrates her journey tracing back to her school days when the teacher asks in her class, “what is your ambition in future”? Some say doctor, engineer, teacher etc. But as a young boy Ganesh shares his unique idea of embracing motherhood. And then in a stereotypical binary gendered society his classmates make fun of him. The teacher also punishes Ganesh out of classroom. As a young child the scene reflects on the dilemma in understanding this situation. Later his mother finds Ganesh groomed like a girl in the house in front of a mirror. His mother gets frightened and scolds him to act like a boy. Again the young child is found in dilemma of his emotions and the comments of his mother. In another situation in this episode Ganesh was found dancing on a female item number at the Society Mitra Mandal by his father who is an inspector. And his father drags him home and says this feminine attribute in a boy is not accepted in Indian society. Still at this tender age Ganesh fails to understand the depth of his sexual orientation. Later in the episode it is shown that his mother dies when Ganesh is too young. Now he loses his complete support in family. He starts living with father and sister. Where the father constantly instructs him to “Never become a girl”. The family completely fails to understand his sexual orientation as they were also part of the binary gendered societal norms. Now as a child he begins to sense that his unique feeling and behavior is not acceptable by the family. In one incidence she is also called by various names i.e hijra, social worker, dramatic, game changer then she says call me “mother”. And she proclaims here this journey as “Gaali se Taali Tak”. Which means she is highlighting on the marginalized identity of trans-genders in India. In one more incidence she is shown as a foster mother of twelve orphan children in her home. And as a responsible mother provides for the needs of these children for which even she has to sell her gold bangles at the jewellery shop for Rs. 1,10,000. Here she reflects her sacrificial and nurturing nature as a mother. This also illustrates her as a responsible human being. In one situation as she is travelling in a car with Amanda, a journalist there comes one transgender asking for money. But she asks him do you need job or money and gives her visiting card. But the Transgender refuses to take it and says I need money. Then in the rapid fire round of asking her personal questions Shree Gauri asks, “What is your wife’s name?” and the transgender answers “Payal”. Here she reflects that there are men acting as trans-genders to earn money and this spoils the name of transgender community. As these males misbehave with the people of society. However she says the battle for identity as a citizen has begun but my battle for the identity of mother is still pending.

### **Episode 2: Two In One**

After the death of Ganesh's Mother, as a young boy having a transgender orientation his battle for survival begins. Later his sister also gets married. And the child is left alone to survive with his father after lot of adjustment. The father kept on trying to fit in the attribute of "maleness". As being a teenager now the chapter of "Different Feeling" began in the life of Ganesh. Where his father takes him to the medical practitioner to fix his trans-sexual orientation. The Medical Practitioner tries to emphasize on the concept of "being different is not accepted by society". But Ganesh remains firm on his feelings of his motherhood/femininity. Later, his father being a police officer comes across with the dead body of a transgender in the transgender basti. Which is shown stinking for past two days lying down. This pitiable situation disturb Ganesh's father to the core of his soul as he was experiencing the same transgender traits in his son. It reflects the worries of a father for his son due to the normative social structure of Indian society.

Later Ganesh is followed by two boys in the market, who were eve-teasing him because of his sexuality. His father beats those two boys in the market and is shown helpless. In one situation Ganesh locates a "transgender" and keeps following him. So the transgender catches attention of this sight and asks Ganesh a teenager boy, "what he wants?" Then Ganesh replies that he wants to be like her. So she narrates the humiliation that transgender had to go through in the Indian Society i.e. sexual harassment by men and beaten by people when asking money, abused by men. And stops Ganesh to enter this intimidated life. But he agrees to it all. And becomes part of this transgender community group unofficially. After which he had begun enjoying his life. Later his father finds positive change in Ganesh. But to clarify the doubt his father checks his school bag and finds all evidences of Ganesh's association with transgender community. In a great silence his father denies the transgender sexual orientation of Ganesh which forces him to leave the house.

### Episode 3: Rahi Chal Raha

Ganesh leaves his house and comes to Mumbai in this episode. Then faces some survival problems. Then finds a transgender there and joins their community. For a fresh start in Mumbai begins enjoying the life with community having same feelings. But soon he realizes the challenges of the "transgender" life. And decides to come back to his home and family. By the time he reaches home the family i.e. father and sister had given up on him. Because as he reaches home his sister talks to him in the corridor, and denies him to go inside. She says, "We have accepted you leaving house and do not disturb father's peace". And tells him to go back to the transgender community. Hence Ganesh goes back to the transgender community as he realizes that the family has completely rejected him. The fear of social stigma and society forces the family deny and disown their son. Because as Ganesh leaves his father comes out and asks his sister who had come just now. And the sister denies about it. But the father sees tape recorder of Ganesh which he forgets there while leaving which the father recognizes it and is in tears. This shows that the fear of stigma is so much that it overpowers the love feeling of one's own family.

Then Ganesh comes to Mumbai again and his struggle for survival continues outside his home. Where he meets a Gay Activist Naveen running an NGO "RAHI". And Naveen helps Ganesh to find a job as a servant in one of his elite friend's house. But Ganesh experiences sexual assault from this owner of house. And escapes from his house. Hence he finds a work in a hotel as a male waiter. And also works for sensitizing the transgender community through volunteering in the "RAHI" NGO. But in a common meeting of the NGO with Gay and transgender there arises an ideological and methodical

warfare between these two groups. And Nargis, a transgender confronts Ganesh of his identity. Here it can be understood that Ganesh is not part of his family as well as he is different for the transgender community. Hence he undergoes a sex reassignment surgery (SRS).

### Episode 4: Gauri Aa Gayi

As Ganesh undergoes the sex reassignment surgery then the Nirvaan ceremony takes place for Ganesh amongst the transgender community. And this is the transformation from Ganesh to Gauri. Where now Ganesh becomes an official member of the transgender community as “Gauri”. And in one incidence she rescues a transgender from the police who was caught during act of sexual intercourse. As she was beaten like animals by the police. This is for the first time Gauri is called “Amma” by the rescued transgender. And this transgender joins Gauri for work. Later Gauri rescues a 4 year old girl from the clutches of prostitution. And challenges the system and becomes a teacher in school on part time basis. Then she turns out to be a breaking news all over. Which is not liked and appreciated by her own transgender community and particularly her “Guru”. Now Gauri starts breaking the clutches of Indian societal norms which were for the transgender people. She evolves as a symbol of hope and known as a dedicated social worker by people. And for some even as a perceived threat.

### Episode 5: Gharaunda

Gauri now begins to reach heights. She is invited for a lecture and felicitation at USA. Now this groundbreaking efforts of Gauri lead to both exaltation and resentment for the transgender community. Her challenges as a transgender also increases. She begins to sensitize the transgender community for education and their rights as a human being. She begins teaching them in the transgender basti itself. But she is criticized by her own community and some of them leave her classes i.e. by commenting that we earn Rs. 8000-9000 per month in our profession then why to take loss in income by getting educated. Then a conspiracy is made against Gauri to kill her but Nargis rescues her on time. Gauri gets shattered by this act and then Nargis consoles her. Later Nargis introduces her to a man (Muththu) whom she wishes to marry. And leaves the group to live a new married life with Muththu.

Now the four year girl which she rescued has been shown as a grown up. And a fisherman finds a baby at the seashore. He gets it to Gauri. Now Gauri becomes “Unofficial Mother” of two children. Hence she decides to build a home for “Rescued or Sex Workers Children”. When she enters a government office for permission, she learns that no right for transgender for such activity. As being a transgender, do not exist for the country like India. If not a male or female then Article 14, 19 and 21 of the Indian Constitution does not apply. Now she begins with her fight for equality. And files NALSA petition to Supreme Court for transgender rights. Later she establishes an NGO “Sakhi Char Chowghi” for the Rescued or Sex Workers Children, Transgender and HIV/AIDS people. So people began to call on the NGO helpline if an abandoned child is found in any area. She would go with her team and rescue the child. By this time she became a mother of twelve children. As she files a petition she is invited on a TV channel for discussion on “Transgender Rights”. And people deny her identity and arguments develop against the behavior of transgender. Where she puts a strong defense for her fellow transgender by sharing their challenges. After the show on the TV channel the interviewer said, “I will keep two seats for transgender people in my company, keep my card and send your best people”. Also people began to appreciate her and ask for autograph. This signifies the half won battle of equality



by Gauri against the societal norms. Now her efforts have taken ground in form of a movement. In the same situation she receives a call from her fellow transgender giving information on the suicide of “Nargis” who is cheated by her boyfriend “Muththu”. She leaves in rage from the programme.

### Episode 6: Taali Ki Gunj

As she reaches the government hospital to collect the dead body of “Nargis” with other fellow transgender. She is shown completely broken and shattered. Later two ward boys come to the spot expecting some money from Gauri and began to narrate how they extended the helping hand in holding the dead body etc. In rage she asks them, “why they have kept the dead body near toilet”? Then an assistant doctor who is on duty comes to the spot and tries to give excuses. But when she denies to accept any tries to threaten her. Then she asks for the dean of the hospital and a written apology letter from the hospital. Then the assistant doctor calls the dean and narrates the incidence. So the dean tells him not to disturb in party. And when the municipality van arrives next morning send the dead body in it. But Gauri does not heed to any and meets the dean next morning. And takes the apology letter from the dean after lot of arguments and struggles with the societal norms. This marks for her name as “Shree Gauri Sawant”. Finally takes charge of the dead body. Where is looks completely shaken and shattered. It shows that to break the shackles of inequality it always call for sacrifices of near and dear ones. And the movement continues.

Then the day arrives for the verdict from Supreme Court of India. And it was followed on throughout media in the country. There were mixed feelings of resentment and elation. And finally the Supreme Court of India passes a historic verdict to abolish cruelty against transgender on the basis of gender discrimination. The Supreme Court acknowledged them as the “Third Gender” applying them fundamental rights granted by the Constitution of India, right to self-identification of their gender i.e. male, female or third gender. Allowing basic rights like voter ID, passport and driving license etc. Which brings jubilation to her transgender community and it is shown that her father also celebrates the victory. At the end she narrates her intense and high-stakes battle, where she and her community boldly defy the forces that seek their surrender.

**Concluding Remarks-** The above discussed web series “Taali” has given a close insight in to lives of transgender in India. It is indeed stirring and at times electrifying experience for a male or female in India to watch this web series. It is really a shattering experience for a transgender person to go through such heinous treatment as a human being. Even though the judiciary has taken a huge step for the identity and equality of the transgender people. Still there is lack of awareness and loopholes in the implementation of policies. Only specific legislations are not enough to cope up the transgender issues. We need to work from grassroots to really help transgender to reach their goal of identity, survival and equality. The researcher would like to suggest some alterations to improve the condition of transgender in India:

1. Awareness and sensitization of the transgender community through media, campaigns, workshops to access their rights as human beings.
2. Introducing a course on transgender in curriculum at higher studies and university level.
3. Establishing a separate department for transgender studies at the educational institutions and universities.

4. Unifying the civil society along with the government organizations to sensitize the people about transgender.
5. Special schools or night schools for transgender people which will make them comfortable to access education.
6. Free and compulsory education for transgender people in India.
7. Reservation policy in education, jobs, politics, health etc. for the transgender people.
8. Special internship and placement opportunities after education has to be introduced.
9. Providing them basic amenities and housing facility in the common locality.
10. Government loans at a low rate of interest to start their own business which will make them economic sufficiency.
11. Separate cell for transgender people in police station or commissioner office which will help them access legal services with confidence.
12. Introducing new labour laws for work related issues and sexual harassment at work place for a bias free work environment.
13. To undertake National Sample Surveys in the transgender basti's every six months to keep a check on their development.
14. Celebrating transgender week or transgender day to mark their identity in Indian society.

It is very important to understand at this juncture that we will have to take collective actions along with legal reforms to uplift the lives of transgender people. And it is their right to live in dignity and respect.

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