

The Secret Language of the Hijras

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Hijra is a broad term which refers to both eunuchs, i.e. those who are born male but are emasculated or castrated, and to biological males who reject their masculine identity and adopt feminine gender roles and wear women's clothing.

The Hijras have a recorded history in the Indian subcontinent from antiquity onwards as suggested by the Kama Sutra period. However, only recently have Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh legally recognized the existence of a third gender on passports and other official documents.

Given the marginalization they face in South Asian society, hijras see the language as something that is truly theirs but most hijras tend not to admit the existence of such a language to a non-hijra. However, they are often found to resort to that tongue in the presence of outsiders.

They have two kinds of languages. Muslim Hijras speak mostly Farsi and Hindu Hijras speak Ulti Bhasa (also known as Gupti) with regional dialects.

1. Hijra Farsi

Despite its name, the language does not significantly overlap with Persian. No one seems to know when and how Hijra Farsi began, though some hijras say it started during Mughal rule over South Asia.

The language has no written script or textbook and the learning process is generally an informal one, helped along by gurus, who serve as parental figures.

According to Dr. Kira Anne Hall, the most precise way to describe Hijra Farsi is as a register, that is, a variation on a language used for a particular situation or context.

The study by Dr. Awan and Sheeraz challenges the assertions of Hall, Nagar and Munawar et al., and claims that hijras' Farsi is more than a mere code or mixture, and explores, identifies and describes its nature and status as a language.

Dr. Sheeraz estimated that Hijra Farsi has a vocabulary of around 10,000 words, including some absorbed from other languages spoken in South Asia. Much of the vocabulary centers on trade, money, hijra rituals, cursing, and sexuality.

Urdu, Punjabi and Siraiki languages have no separate words to refer to the clothes of men and women but Farsi does have firka and kotki. This seems to be so because unlike the men and women of the area who wear only one type of dress specifically designed for them, male and female hijras wear both types.

It is interesting to note that Farsi has its own counting but it is not perfect. This counting system is used just for money which is as follows:

Dasola/dasoli (ten rupees) , Adhi vadmi/adhi vadvi (fifty rupees) , Vadmi/vadvi (hundred rupees) , Panj vadmi/panj vadvi (five hundred rupees) , Katka (one thousand) , Nira patt (one hundred thousand)

Farsi does not have any equivalent for an amount more than this. This shows hijras' economic limitations and impoverishment.

Farsi has verbs of its own but, morphologically they are similar to those of the languages in contact.

Although it might be argued whether Farsi is a language or not, in terms of a speech community i.e a group of people who consider that they speak the same language, the hijras do form a separate speech community and have the right to consider what they speak – a separate language.

2. Ulti Bhasa (Gupti)

Ulti has remained an esoteric language till recently, as the Hijra community stonewalls attempts to probe.

It is primarily spoken in the western part of India in Kolkata, Nadia and Murshidabad etc. and in Bangladesh.

Ulti is better understood as a dialect with a specialized set of words. Hijra, however, deploy this term to specifically denote a language of communication that they claim is spoken by hijra all over the world.

While it is possible to use Ulti to have regular everyday conversations, hijra never really use it as an alternative to Bangla in that way. Rather hijra tend to pepper their mainstream use of Bangla with Ulti .

The language contains unique words that have no equivalents in other languages — for instance, chapti (the orifice left behind after castration), a feature found only in Hijras.

Ulti also has a wide range of amorously loaded lexemes ranging from sexual organs to various kinds of erotic acts. Ulti system expands the horizon of pleasure by eroticizing other bodily and most notably anal possibilities of pleasure. Thus, Ulti is designed to effectively capture the sexual desires of the hijras, something that is not possible through the mainstream languages.

Thus, the examples show how the languages of the hijra's have separately and secretly evolved to better express their feelings, their ideas, their world view and it is shocking how even in this era of mass knowledge transfer the hijra community has managed to keep their language secret from the rest of the world. Despite a lot of scholarly work in transgender languages of the West known as 'Lavender Linguistics', very little work has been done concerning the Hijra community and we can only hope that this field will attract the attention of scholars.

References

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