



# < A Journey Of Pain And Beauty: On Becoming Transgender In India

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It's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Audie Cornish.

There was a landmark ruling in India this week on sexual identity. The country's supreme court declared that India's transgender population shall be considered neither male nor female but a third gender. The sweeping decision redefines the rights of and the state's obligations to one of India's most marginalized groups.

NPR's Julie McCarthy in New Delhi reports on an ancient transgender community, the Hijras, who are popularly referred to as eunuchs. She followed the journey of one young man who rejected his male identity.

JULIE MCCARTHY, BYLINE: The signs came early that Abhina Aher - biologically born a boy and given the male name Abhijit - was different growing up in a middle-class neighborhood of Mumbai. Abhina is the son of a single mother, a government clerk, who loved to dance and entertain.

ABHINA AHER: You know, I used to love to wear the clothes that my mother used to wear, you know, her jewelry, her makeup. And that is something which used to extremely fascinate me.

MCCARTHY: Draped in a bright sari, gold earrings and painted nails, Abhina is by outward appearance a female. This son of a working mother was raised by a maid who indulged the fantasies of an only child, including a fascination with a mother's jingling anklets.

AHER: I was mesmerized by that. And, you know, when I was - when I used to be at home, I used to have the grand performances where I'm calling all the neighbors and I'm dancing in front of

them and just putting up a show, you know, exactly replicating what my mother is doing on the stage. One fine day, she just found out, you know, and she got really mad about it. I was - I'd been asked to sit and make a pledge that I will never do this again.

MCCARTHY: Things grew more complicated as Abhina grew more effeminate and became the object of abuse - dragged into libraries, stripped and taunted by older boys at school. Abhina's teacher was no source of comfort. She declared the tormentors in the right.

AHER: She said to me, your friends are doing this to you because you are behaving in extremely feminine way. And that's what is an issue.

MCCARTHY: To resolve the deepening complexities revolving around the teenager's sexual identity, a psychiatrist prescribed sitting in a dark room and taking two Tylenol.

AHER: Which we tried for some time. And my mother took me to a lot of, you know, those saints and a lot of temples also to make sure that I sort of come back to what I should be.

MCCARTHY: Abhina did not want to shame his mother. And when he was told to behave more manly, sever contact with girls who were a feminizing influence, and wear male clothing, Abhina did.

What was that like for you? How long did you have to do that?

AHER: Oh, I had to do that almost for, I think, I don't know, maybe around 10 to 15 years. I used to watch myself - how I walk, how I talk, how I behave - just to fit into the heterosexual world. I did that. I finished my education. I finished my college, and I started working as a software engineer. There was a huge amount feeling of incompleteness all the time, having something wrong with your body all the time, not being able to connect with your soul all the time.

MCCARTHY: Confused about what was happening, Abhina attempted suicide - first by slitting a vein, then trying to walk into the sea, and then trying to jump off a cliff.

AHER: I could not die and that was a turning point in life because when I thought that - since I did not die, let me try to live now.

MCCARTHY: The strains with Abhina's mother became so serious that while they lived under the same roof, the two did not speak for nine years.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MCCARTHY: A sense of isolation drove Abhina into the arms of a guru, or mentor, within a community of like-minded souls known as Hijras. Hijras are a storied group, dressed in saris and enshrined in Indian literary epics. Regarded as auspicious, they are invited to bestow blessings at births and dance at weddings. I'm young again, goes this verse.

Today, Hijras can also be aggressive, especially when not handed money as they wend their way through traffic, begging. Though visible in public, their world is often shrouded in secrecy. They like the mystique, says Abhina, who adds that the initiation into the Hijra community is full of rituals. Firstly, a Hijra's earnings go to the guru. Then, there's the physical transformation. As you cast off the male gender for the female, you cannot cut your hair or shave your face.

AHER: You get a traditional plucker of Hijra (unintelligible), and you have to pluck all your hair from your face. You have to start going into the public as females.

MCCARTHY: Abhina says joining this group that traces its roots to antiquity is no joke. It can be psychologically and physically traumatic. There's body altering hormone treatment, often followed by operations to reassign body parts, including genitals.

AHER: It's a huge amount of cost. Breast augmentation operations itself can cost you around 60,000.

MCCARTHY: \$60,000? That's a lot of money.

AHER: Yeah, it's \$1,000. If you have to go for operations of - regarding castration, it could cost you a similar kind of money.

MCCARTHY: Castration?

AHER: Yeah. And afterwards, after the castration, you can't work for almost one and half month. It was not was an easy task. It was a journey of pain. I just wanted to become a beautiful butterfly.

MCCARTHY: Abhina became a sex worker to pay in part for her transformation. Castration is a dangerous business, and Abhina says many members of the Hijra community don't survive the procedure.

AHER: It happens in the dingy room, a 10 by 10 room probably. Immediately after the castration, two hours, the Hijras are asked to leave from that place because it is illegal. The operations are normally done by quacks, and a lot of Hijras dies because of that.

MCCARTHY: Up to 40 percent of Hijras are said to be infected with HIV in some states, as they resort to selling sex to survive. They have long been discriminated against in jobs, housing, health care, and education. The Supreme Court has now directed the government to set aside quotas for the transgender population to improve their socio-economic status.

This week's court ruling making a third gender for India's transgender community is a milestone for this conservative country that still regards homosexuality as a criminal offense. And Hijras, too, are vulnerable under the same colonial era law that prohibits any sexual activity that is not procreative in nature. Abhina says the fight is not over.

AHER: What we have done is that is we have put a foot inside a door, which is a door of hope, and we will open it very, very soon.

MCCARTHY: But as well-established as the Hijras may be, they are still regarded by many Indians with discomfort and derision. Ridding society of stigmas and superstitions will be the true test of the Hijras hard-fought recognition. Julie McCarthy, NPR News, New Delhi.

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