

# Voices from the Margins: Understanding Hijra Lives Through A. Revathi's Story

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## Abstract

Hijras, a unique socio-cultural group in South Asia, have a complicated place in society; they are ostracised in daily life but venerated in other customs. The majority of mainstream narratives continue to misinterpret or misrepresent the identities, hardships, and daily experiences of A. Revathi, one of the most significant transgender writers and activists in India. This article explores the hijra of hijras. Her books, *Truth About Me* and *A Life in Trans Activism*, offer a close-up view of hijra experiences, including the pursuit of dignity, institutional abuse, gender identity, community dynamics, family rejection, and economic adversity. This paper contends that Revathi's voice functions as a potent narrative of resistance and a vital source of information on hijra identities by examining her experience within a larger socio-cultural and theoretical framework. Through her storytelling, Revathi humanizes the lives of hijras and challenges the structural inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization. Her life narrative functions as a form of activism that broadens public understanding of gender, identity, and social justice in India.

**Keywords:** Hijra, Transgender, A. Revathi, Marginalization, Gender Identity, Autobiography, Queer Studies, South Asia, Activism, Lived Experience.

## Introduction

Hijras have been around for centuries in South Asian culture, serving as performers, ritual specialists, caregivers, spiritual figures, and fertility symbols. Nonetheless, in modern India, they remain among the most marginalized communities. They are both visible and invisible: visible at traffic lights, train stations, ceremonies, and street corners, but invisible as citizens with rights, dreams, identities, and histories. Stereotypes cast a pall over their daily lives, reducing them to caricatures rather than recognising them as whole people.

A. Revathi stands forth as a groundbreaking voice in this complicated social environment. One of the first and most potent first-person accounts of the hijra experience in India may be found in her autobiographical works, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* and *A Life in Trans Activism*. Through her work, she shares with readers the collective challenges and tenacity of hijra communities in addition to chronicling her own path.

This article examines Hijra lives from the inside out by using Revathi's life as a starting point. The article emphasizes how Revathi's story subverts prevailing notions about gender and marginalisation by examining key topics such as identity formation, community relations, violence, employment, activism, and storytelling. Her narrative develops into a political intervention, a social critique, and a demand for acknowledgement rather than just a personal memoir.

### **Hijra Identity in South Asia: Between Modernity and Tradition**

The hijra community embodies a distinct gender identity that interacts with religious beliefs, cultural customs, and socioeconomic realities. In earlier times, hijras were revered in religious rites and royal courts, especially in North India. Particularly during childbirth and marriage, their blessings were seen as auspicious.

However, their status was steadily changed by colonial legislation, postcolonial gender standards, and contemporary social prejudices. According to Serena Nanda (2014) and Jessica Hinchy (2019), hijras were pushed into poverty and disgrace by Victorian morality and British prosecution. Hijras continue to be deliberately excluded from family structures, work, healthcare, and education.

Recognising the dual nature of hijra identity is necessary to comprehend it: First, a cultural identity encompassing customs, family ties, and local government. Two, a gender identity that emphasises femininity in individuals who were assigned masculine at birth. The tale of Revathi exemplifies both aspects. Growing up, she felt both the exterior constraints of a culture that rejected her identity and the inner conviction of being a woman. Her story turns into a little representation of hijra identity, balanced between acceptance and exclusion, tradition and modernity.

### **Early Life: Seeking Belonging and Perceptions of Gender**

Revathi was born in Tamil Nadu and was assigned male at birth. Her early years were characterised by a struggle between her inner self and the expectations placed on her. She was drawn to feminine roles, attire, and gestures from a young age. But her family responded with punishment, denial, and terror. She learned to repress her feelings to live, just like many other transgender kids.

Her scholastic life was similar to her home life in that she was often teased, bullied, and alone. The earliest level of gender policing and marginalisation in the family is revealed by Revathi's early experiences. Even though she didn't yet have the words to express who she was, she was aware that the world didn't accept it.

These early experiences are significant because they show how rigorous gender norms are enforced by families, how self-awareness frequently precedes social identities, and how gender nonconformity is punished in childhood.

Revathi's final decision to move away from home was motivated by a desperate need for community, safety, and self-expression rather than an act of rebellion.

### **Entering the Hijra Community: Sanctuary and Struggle**

For Revathi, the hijra community served as a haven and a place of metamorphosis. She found a society where her femininity was accepted rather than ridiculed when she met hijras. Entering the community meant being a part of a structured system run by a leader-disciple relationship, or guru-chela. While chelas offer allegiance, respect, and labour, gurus offer protection, training, direction, and emotional support. Revathi's story of becoming a member of the hijra household highlights the intricacy and power of this familial structure. Being acknowledged as a woman at last brought her great relief. However, the community also enforced regulations on behaviour, attire, household duties, and involvement in community-based enterprises, such as Badai (ritual performances at weddings and births). Mangalam (seeking blessings or donations in public places) and sex work for people who can't make money any other way Her story refutes the oversimplified notion that hijras "choose" these careers. Rather, she demonstrates how hijras are forced into stigmatised and informal labour due to economic exclusion

rather than cultural inclination. Revathi portrays the hijra community as neither a place of perpetual misery nor an idealized haven. People in this complicated social environment strive for dignity in the face of social rejection.

### **Violent Experiences: The Harsh Truths of Hijra Life**

One of the most important contributions of Revathi's writing is her candid documentation of violence. She reveals the layers of mistreatment that hijras frequently endure:

1. Violence within families Because she expressed femininity, Revathi was subjected to emotional abuse, threats, and beatings.
2. Violence in public She was attacked, harassed, and insulted by strangers in the workplace, on buses, and on the streets.
3. Violence by police Revathi recounts numerous incidents of police making arbitrary arrests of hijras.
4. Sexual violence Many hijras, particularly young recruits, experience sexual coercion or assault both inside and outside the community. These experiences are not isolated incidents but rather reflect systemic discrimination.

Revathi's story shows how violence becomes normalised in hijras' everyday lives and forces readers to face difficult realities about how society treats people who don't fit its gender norms. demanding money, or abusing them physically and sexually.

### **Economic Survival and the Search for Dignity**

Revathi's vocational trajectory is crucial to understanding hijra marginalisation. Despite her intelligence, passion, and desire for secure employment, she was continually denied jobs due to her identification. Her attempts to work in offices, factories, or small stores were met with rejection or ridicule. These events led her—like many hijras—into begging and occasional sex work to live. Instead of romanticising these types of work, Revathi highlights their risks, hazards, and psychological costs.

When she joined Bengaluru's Sangama NGO, her life completely altered. For the first time, she had a steady income, respected coworkers, chances to write, consult, and advocate, and the ability to live with dignity.

Her story illustrates that hijras are excluded not because they lack ability but because society refuses to treat them as equal human beings. Economic inclusion becomes a central theme in her activism.

### **Revathi's Literary Intervention: Writing as Empowerment**

In Indian gay writing, Revathi's autobiographies mark turning points. She became one of the first hijras to write openly about her life in Tamil, asserting her agency in a society that regularly speaks about hijras but rarely with them.

### **Her writing fulfils several purposes:**

1. Storytelling as resistance: She challenges the inaccurate depictions of hijras in popular culture, media, and folklore.
2. Personal narrative as political: She argues for structural change and exposes systemic inequality by chronicling her daily experiences.
3. Language as empowerment—Writing in Tamil enabled her to reach audiences in her own community and beyond, making hijra stories accessible to the broader public.

4. Humanising hijra lives—Her narrative reveals hijra emotions—love, fear, hurt, joy—breaking the stereotype that hijras are merely “performers” or “beggars.”

Her writings have influenced scholars, activists, and younger transgender people, demonstrating the transformative power of storytelling.

### **From Margins to Movement: A Life in Activism**

Beyond writing, Revathi became a notable transgender activist. She was employed at Sangama as a public speaker, community organiser, outreach worker, peer educator, and counsellor. She advocated for transgender inclusion in employment, legal recognition of gender identity, healthcare rights, anti-discrimination laws, protection from police assault, and social welfare projects. Through seminars, public presentations, and advocacy, she formed a bridge between hijra communities and greater society. Her activism highlights a transition in Indian LGBTQ+ politics—from being metropolitan, elite, and English-speaking to including grassroots hijra leadership.

### **Themes Revealed Through Revathi’s Story**

Revathi’s story provides some key insights about hijra lives:

1. Gender as lived experience Her sentiments and expressions from childhood reveal that gender identification is deeply internal and emotional.
2. Community as a means of survival Hijra kinship arrangements establish spaces of belonging in a harsh world.
3. Violence as everyday reality Her story demonstrates how hijra existence is shaped by institutional, sexual, and social violence.
4. Structural inequality Revathi's life demonstrates how hijras are routinely excluded from healthcare, work, education, and the legal system.
5. Resilience and self-definition Her courage to live freely, write publicly, and advocate for justice highlights the resilience of hijra communities.

Through these themes, Revathi’s voice becomes a vital lens for understanding hijra identity from the inside.

### **Conclusion**

A. Revathi’s story is not merely a personal memoir; it is a collective narrative of hijra existence in India. Her writing dismantles misconceptions, challenges structural injustices, and amplifies the voices of those pushed to the margins. Through her journey—from a misunderstood child to a respected writer and activist—Revathi reveals the complexities, pains, joys, and strengths of hijra life.

Understanding hijra experiences through Revathi’s narrative allows us to move beyond stereotypes and engage with the humanity that lies beneath. Her voice stands as a powerful reminder that marginalised communities possess deep histories, rich cultures, and immense resilience. As long as voices like Revathi’s are heard, the struggle for dignity, equality, and recognition will continue to gain strength.

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