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Gender in India

An Exploration of Experiences of Hijras in India in Comparison with Two-Spirited Peoples
in Canada

European colonial exploits were largely religiously motivated in their pursuits. Among these pursuits, specific groups, namely the Two-Spirited peoples of present-day North America were persecuted. In both Canada and India, indigenous peoples were targeted specifically for Christian conversion with intergeneration impacts and cultural shifts which have endured to this day. This maintained colonial structure reinforces patriarchal, heterosexist power which continues to discriminate against Two-Spirited peoples of Canada and hijras of India in areas such as media, politics, and healthcare.

Colonial Roots

Prior to colonization in present-day North America, two thirds of the two hundred native languages of North America had a word to describe community members who were neither male nor female. The most prominent of these terms is “Two-Spirited”, and these people held distinguished roles within the communities, most notably as knowledge-keepers. Colonial powers such as the Spanish conquistadors were largely religiously motivated in their pursuits, and thus identified Two-Spirited people as a threat as they held influential positions in their communities. Explorers such as Antonio de la Calancha notes the “honourable catholic actions” of Vasco Nuftez de Balboa in killing men dressed as women.

Though originally a colonial and religious pursuit as spirituality was equated with wealth, with the influence of Columbus’ association of gold possession with getting into heaven, this quickly became about more than spirituality: “this ideology when transported to

the Americas created a clash of cultures, a conquest of wealth and division of spirit". Thus, traditional knowledge was eliminated in Indigenous communities in attempt to Christianize. Not only did colonizers bring a different religion but a multitude of deliberately spread diseases, values, technology and material culture. This new worldview dramatically impacted the traditional community dynamics of North American Indigenous peoples. Teachings were lost, specifically those pertaining to sexuality and gender at puberty. This was especially true in the experience of Residential Schools, where Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their homes in attempt to take the "Indian out of the child", enacting hundreds of years of cultural genocide at pivotal developmental stages of the children's lives.

Given that Two Spirited people were specifically targeted by the colonizers, sexuality and gender became silenced topics within Indigenous communities as any gender expression that threatened the binary views of gender from the colonizer would result in death.

In the case of Hijras of India, colonial powers specifically targeted "eunuchs", a colonial category which refers to many social roles. The hijra community in these terms would be "born eunuchs"[Ref2]. Characteristic of hijras is the wearing of feminine clothing, feminine names, power to bless and curse fertility. Children were proposed to be removed from hijra households due to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 [Ref2]. British colonial officials believed this was necessary as the children were being "corrupted" by the hijra community, and it also supported their goal to eliminate hijras all together [Ref2]. This effort was largely evangelically influenced through the provincial government of the North-Western Provinces [Ref2]. However, in reality, it was a failed plan that highlighted the tensions between colonial government and evangelical efforts. Policy stated neutrality regarding religious issues, however, evangelical efforts could be labelled for "moral improvement". Despite this, many British administrators were not as influenced by evangelical efforts to rescue these children [Ref2]. However, British colonial administrators felt that hijra

households were areas where children were “sexually corrupted and taught gender deviant behaviours” [Ref2]. In 1897, the British colonial government passed a law that classed eunuchs as criminals, which has contributed significantly to their continued societal disenfranchisement to this day [Ref 7].

Current Realities for Two-Spirited Peoples and Hijras

Hijras occupy a unique space in Indian society. They are often met with fear, repulsion and fascination, and thus often turn to begging and prostitution to make a living and survive [Ref 3]. Like in colonial times, they are sometimes asked to bless events such as births and weddings [Ref3]. Their social position is largely marginalized, and thus they experience high levels of violence and discrimination. Hijras undergo castration, which is regarded as a spiritual process and is done outside the medical sphere [Ref3]. For many, the transition to hijra life is similar to a transition to “nirvana” as they have “fully embraced the feminine which he has identified with since he was a young boy” [Ref 3]. Ironically, given their current social rejection, hijras have roots in ancient elements of Hindu Indian culture such as the Ramayana [Ref 3]. In this text, a third gender is mentioned, and in the Mahabharata there are examples of male deities taking female forms [Ref 3]. Hijras devote themselves to the Hindu Mother Goddess Bahuchara Mata. Given this deep rooted history, hijra existence is necessarily spiritual in their connection with their feminine identity [Ref 3].

Indian society often refers to hijras as a “third gender”, which under Western categories would be defined as “transgender” [Ref3]. They are gaining some space in the political sphere in India; the first elected to the public office was Shabnam “Mausi” Bano [Ref4]. Hijras have been quoted as the “new emerging force in Indian politics” according to Hindustan Times, 2000 [Ref4]. Despite this, their political presence has been problematized given the nature of their campaigning. For example, a campaign slogan “you don’t need genitals for politics; you need brains and integrity” [Ref 4]. This highlights their “otherness”

and according to Reddy, “re-inscribes their hegemonic importance” and serves to “re-marginalize them within the new social order” [Ref 4].

The experience of Two-Spirited peoples in Canada today is informed by historical colonial exploits which have persistently shaped worldviews within the colonial nation. Despite this, in light of reconciliatory efforts in Canada, many Indigenous peoples continue to claim this identity in rejecting the colonial cultural genocide and subsequent heterosexism. For example, a young woman named Kiley May describes the current experience as “more about your gender identity and places emphasis on your gender role and contributions to your community” with cultural and spiritual aspects. [Ref 5]. This colonialism is re-inscribed with media and popular culture. The control of the media is corporate and informed by a small pocket of mainly white males [Ref1]. Therefore, the filters that control the media are necessarily patriarchal and colonial and thus constitutes a manipulation of power as media is heavily influential on people [Ref 1]. Alongside the patriarchal colonial power is heterosexism, which is exemplified in the fact that many representations of homosexual people on TV usually only reinforce stereotypes such as being “comical or highly dysfunctional... always in some sort of dilemma” [Ref 1]. Needless to say, Two-Spirited peoples are given next to no space in dominant Western media and culture. This is problematic given the negative stereotypes which surround both queer people and Indigenous peoples – having little to no positive and accurate self-determined representation in dominant media continues to support a narrative where these people don’t exist as real people, and allows dehumanization and stereotypes to be perpetuated.

Medical Barriers

In Canada, the passing of Bill C-16 has allowed transgender rights to be recognized at a legal level, but these legal realities rarely translate to lived realities. One area where this manifests is in the medical system. Genital reconstruction surgery has many barriers in its

accessibility and cost [Ref 5]. In addition to this, HIV/AIDS has affected many First Nations peoples, in particular Two-Spirited peoples in levels that mirror historical instances of disease such as smallpox [Ref1]. It is thus evident that legal efforts do not translate to accessibility especially in terms of healthcare.

In the hijra community, HIV/AIDS is a prominent issue. This is due largely to their discrimination and thus being forced into sex work as the only means to support themselves. Many hijras don't access medical services due to the stigma that surrounds their lifestyle, thus their human rights are not addressed adequately by the legal system [Ref 3]. The colonial patriarchal heteronormative system is thus persistent in both India and Canada and continues to negatively impact lives of both Two-Spirited and hijra individuals.

Current Movements

Given that dominant media is filtered through a patriarchal, heteronormative and colonial lens, Two-Spirited people remain excluded. Accurate representation is required, and for this to occur control of the media is required. Thus, many Two-Spirited peoples turn to art to create this controlled image, message and representation [Ref 1]. Examples of this include art films such as *The Red Paper* by Dana Claxton, which includes an aboriginal worldview [Ref 1]. Despite the minimal public visibility that small-scale art films get, they have “the potential to interrupt paradigms and create new spaces for people to consider” [Ref1]. The internet also provides a space in which Indigenous peoples can speak out and create community and resistance. Self-determination is paramount in representation, but this rarely happens within the dominant media.

Film has also been a medium in which the Queer movement in India has found self-expression and controlled representation. The Hyderabad Queer community has organized a film festival in 2012, 2014 and 2017 and has grown despite some resistance from societal homophobia [Ref 6]. In 2014, the Indian supreme court ruled that “transgender people would

be recognized on official documents under a separate ‘third gender’ category” [Ref 7]. This may seem like a big step forward, but many hijras continue to be disenfranchised, and the naming of their identity as a “third gender” inherently sets up a gender hierarchy. In fact, it may serve to reinforce the existing patriarchal hierarchy. In regard to HIV/AIDS related issues, many NGOs have been attempting to educate sexual minorities such as hijras about sexual health issues and safe sex practices [Ref 3]. This increase in education and information has aided the hijra community in combatting police brutality and gender violence [Ref 3].

Conclusion

In conclusion, both hijras and Two-Spirited peoples have faced discrimination due to colonial powers historically and to this day. Colonialism specifically targeted each of these groups in both Canada and India due to their threatening the evangelical efforts that bolstered colonial exploits. The colonial system has largely remained in place in each of these areas with its patriarchal, heterosexist power which continues to influence culture and thus perpetuate discrimination for queer, marginalized groups such as Two-Spirited peoples and hijras on the basis of media, politics, and healthcare.

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