

# A blessing in disguise

Bangladeshis once believed that hijras brought good luck. But with traditional beliefs waning, hijras face growing stigma and a struggle to survive, **Morshed Ali Khan** writes

**W**HEN Moushumi was born 22 years ago, the entire village of Nurullapur, 150 kilometres south-east of Dhaka, came to bless with Ali Hossain Gazi and Fulbanu well. They had been blessed with their eleventh child, a boy. Sweets were distributed and the local *imam* was called to recite from the Quran. The boy was named Masud. But as he grew up, Fulbanu and Gazi had to guard a terrible secret from the villagers: Masud was born neither a boy nor a girl. Instead of genitals, nature had equipped him with a tiny lump that served as a urinary tract.

From an early age, Masud acted more like a girl. His friends teased him about his femininity. When his father enrolled Masud at the local primary school, his behaviour did not go unnoticed. But no one questioned his sexuality. It was not until five years later that visitors to the village changed Masud's life.

In a shack in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area, Moushumi, as she now calls herself, recalls that day five years ago. "I was helping my father chop some firewood when a group of *hijras* arrived and pointed their fingers at me," she says. "Terrified, I ran to my mother." The *hijras*, Bangladesh's transgender community, had come to Nurullapur on their annual tour to collect money. They immediately announced that Masud was a *hijra*: he should leave his family and join his "own people," they said. Gazi and Fulbanu vehemently refused to hand over their son. By now the *hijras*, dressed in colourful saris, were dancing and singing around Gazi's house.

The leader of the group told my father to consider their invitation until they returned to the village the following year," Moushumi said, carefully applying red lipstick. As the *hijras* left Nurullapur, a dark cloud descended on Masud, who was now in Class five at school. Everywhere he went, Masud was subjected to laughter and teasing. His friends stopped playing with him and the school authorities made it clear that his presence was disrupting other pupils. "Soon after, I stopped going to school, but became very lonely. Even my sisters and

brothers looked upon me as a nuisance, I looked at my mother only to find her wiping away her tears," says Moushumi.

The following year, Masud bade goodbye to his family and joined Anora Hijra, the leader of a group of five *hijras*. Anora assured Gazi and Fulbanu that their son would be trained to lead a *hijra* life and that they could come and see him in Dhaka any time they wanted. With their child rejected by society, Masud's parents felt helpless to resist. They believed that he would be better off with other *hijras* rather than leading an isolated life in Nurullapur. Within the *hijra* community bonds are strong. From ancient times in Bengal, babies born of indeterminate sex were called *hijras* or hermaphrodites and handed over to travelling groups, who toured villages, offering blessings and collecting money or food in return.

Today, Masud has become Moushumi named after a popular female film star in Bangladesh and learnt to sing and dance in traditional *hijra* fashion. Though now separated, she remains extremely loyal to her 'guru' or mother, Anora, a relationship observed by all *hijras* towards their gurus. Moushumi wears a bright sari and leads a group of three *hijras*. Together they rent a small, dilapidated house in the city. Her parents and home village of Nurullapur are a forgotten chapter of her life. "I will never return to my village. I am happy with my new family," said Moushumi, pointing to her young followers sitting on the earthen floor of the house.

The life-story of most *hijras* is similar to that of Moushumi. So little is known about the community that estimates of the total number of *hijras* in Bangladesh vary from 20,000 to 100,000. Whatever the population size, most prefer to live in Dhaka, to which they are drawn by its economic potential. In the city's run-down areas, *hijras* live in small groups, each headed by a senior leader.

Shajadi Hijra, 36, leads a large group in the Mirpur area of Dhaka. She explained that *hijras* earn their living from street collections and blessing newborn babies. Traditionally, *hijras* took on female dramatic



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roles at a time when women were prohibited from public life. They moved from village to village, especially during the harvest, when farmers would be generous. Senior leaders of each group designate a zone for collections; this area is jealously guarded and trespassing *hijras* are severely dealt with. Before making the daily sortie for collection, members dress in their best saris and liberally apply make-up. In a bazaar, the presence of a group of *hijras*, clapping, singing and dancing, soon attracts a crowd. Abdul Kalam, a shopkeeper in Mirpur bazaar, remembers his mother offering food to *hijras* because she believed that they brought luck. He and his fellow shopkeepers often offered a few takas to *hijras*. "After all they are also human beings," said Kalam.

Leaders keep an account of the day's earnings, which can range from 200 to 1,000 takas. It is also their responsibility to arrange food, accommodation and medical treatment for the group. Most importantly, the leader must keep something for her guru; this is the *hijra* social security, providing support in sickness and old age.

But even before they reach retirement, *hijras* are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Declining traditional beliefs, particularly in cities, means that the blessing of babies or new houses is on the wane. Many shopkeepers are less generous than Kalam and refuse donations. Rehana Samdani is director of the Theatre Centre for Social Development (TCSD). "They cannot queer with other people in public places and they have no access to proper medical care or education. There are reports of physical assaults on *hijras* during their collections", says Samdani. As a result, *hijras* tend to keep themselves to themselves. So strong is their distrust of outsiders that when the TCSD launched a drama project, it took development workers a month to persuade any *hijras* to participate. When the *hijras* discovered that the aim of the project was to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, the whole project nearly collapsed. Moushumi, Shajadi and Bhanu vehemently deny prostitution and Samdani says that many *hijras* deny any sexual desire let alone sex work. But police and development workers acknowledge that it does go on, raising concerns about the spread of

HIV/AIDS.

After discussions with the *hijras*, during which it became clear they faced increasing stigmatization, TCSD changed the programme to focus on discrimination and prejudice. "Once they knew we meant no harm they shared lots of their experiences with us," says Samdani. Through drama, the *hijras* acted out typical scenes from their lives. Each drama was performed twice, with the audience invited to intervene and challenge oppressive behaviour. "The effect of this transformation was extremely powerful: the citizen transforming herself into an artist," explained Samdani.

While the drama project raised awareness about the plight of the *hijra* community, the issue of HIV/AIDS remains taboo. Moushumi, Shajadi and Bhanu blame 'fake' *hijras* for ruining their reputation and trespassing on their territory to collect money. "Some of them even indulge in prostitution, I tell you, all these are homosexual men, disguised in women's clothing," said Shajadi.

"To be born *hijra* is a freak of nature and it happens once in several thousand births," says Mukta Begum, a midwife at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Sex change operations are legal in Bangladesh when a physical need is demonstrated. Surgery assigns a distinct sexual identity something that *hijras* lack. "Through an operation it is possible to reassign the sex of a *hijra* who seems to be neither male nor female, but most parents are ignorant about it and many cannot afford the operation," says Begum.

*Hijras* believe they were powerful people in another world, but in 21st century Bangladesh times are hard. According to legend, *hijras* were expelled to planet earth after their gurus sinned and here they must suffer. "My guru who died told me during those times people respected them and offered them whatever they could, but now we have to fight to survive and God knows what will happen in the future," said Shajadi.

Courtesy: Orbit.

## Can they vote?

**T**HE transgender community -- *hijras* -- may at long last have some good news to cheer about. Shahjahan Khan, an Awami League Member of Parliament from Madaripur-2, in his deliberation in the parliamentary session on September 10, defended the rights of *hijras* and appealed to the government to enrol them in the voters' list. He said the government should ensure their medical care and social status. And the community must receive benefits as in the case of other people with physical handicap.

In response, the State Minister for Social Welfare Dr Mozammel Hossain assured the Madaripur lawmaker that his ministry would not only act to enlist the *hijras* as voters but also take steps to rehabilitate them. Accordingly, Dr Hossain sent a letter to the Chief Election Commissioner urging him to enlist transvestites as voters. The Election Commission officials, however, said they were yet to respond to the minister's letter.

"Most of the country's *hijras* who have a proper address are enlisted as voters with either male or female sexual identity, now we will have to see if the law needs to be changed to officially recognise them as *hijras*," said Farhad Ahmed Khan, an official of the Election Commission secretariat.

Other officials said that voter registration is a continual process and it stops only at a specific time before the election. The next parliamentary election in the country is due in mid 2001. Anyone can register as voter any time if the person qualifies for it.

The offbeat move by the lawmaker, the first of its kind in the country, had followed years of sufferings of the *hijra* community. No government hospital allows the *hijras* in as none knows in which of the two wards they should be registered with.

"For opening a bank account or obtaining a passport *hijras* are identified as male or female whereas we are *hijras*, we are happy that the government is doing something for us," said Anora *hijra* of Dhaka's Mirpur area.

If the *hijras* are categorised as "gender handicaps", the government will be able to offer them some medical benefits which include going through the expensive sex-change operation free of cost.

With the slow progress in implementing directives, it is clear that bringing *hijras* under the handicap category is a far cry. The immediate focus remains on the Election Commission, which is yet to say whether they were ready to recognise *hijras* as *hijras*.

## Euthanasia: The License to Kill

by Mohammad Zulfiqer Hossain

**W**ITH its magic wand, science has done wonders in recent times. Scientific discoveries are assuring us of a more and more comfortable life everyday. Yet, science has not been able to provide humankind with freedom from the bondage of sufferings and distress. There are still a considerable number of fatal diseases that are not curable right now. Therefore, people suffering from such terminal diseases are often tempted to resort to euthanasia to get rid of their unbearable sufferings. Euthanasia is the act of inducing a gentle, painless death. More specifically, the term refers to deliberately terminating life to prevent unavoidable suffering. But can it be wise to cut off the head to relieve the headache?

Euthanasia (Greek for 'easy death'), in both theory and practice, owes its origins to ancient Greece. According to Plutarch, infanticide was commonly practiced in Sparta on children who were considered ill suited from birth for health and vigor. Even Aristotle in his *Politics* endorses this inhuman practice that infringes on the children's divine right to live in this wonderful world. In *The Republic*, Plato advocates suicide as a remedy for unbearable pain. Socrates also sanctioned euthanasia in extreme cases. Euthanasia, especially for the aged and infirm, won the support of scholars like Pythagoras, Epictetus, Seneca and Cicero.

Euthanasia was widely practised in several other ancient societies as well. In India, for instance, it was once customary to throw old people into the Ganges. In ancient Sardinia, their own sons clubbed old men to death. It is an unfortunate aspect of our contemporary existence that female infanticide continues unabated in India. As a result, the sex ratio of its population remains seriously cut.

Even newborns are unlikely to be spared in such a situation. In the early 1980s, for instance, the US Justice Department had to intervene in the "Baby Doe" cases to save newly born children after parents and doctors had decided not to pursue drastic life-saving measures for children born with severe birth defects. The increasing success that doctors have had in transplanting human organs may lead to further abuse of euthanasia. Alliances of surgeons and traffickers in human organs are now common knowledge in many parts of the world.

With the progress of civilization, human societies began to appreciate the value of human life. Monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam viewed life itself as sacred and developed ethical traditions vehemently opposed to suicide and euthanasia. St. Thomas Aquinas rightly criticized euthanasia as "usurpation of God's power over life and death." Since man cannot create life, he should not have the right to end life as well. Guided by the same principle, western laws generally considered euthanasia as a form of homicide subject to legal sanctions.

In the twentieth century, however, supporters of euthanasia have again started gaining ground. The revised penal codes of Germany, Switzerland and Holland no longer treat a mercy killer as a murderer. The Norwegian

"Euthanasia for the disabled" has long been one of the lofty slogans of the pro-euthanasia movement, but those who chant this slogan conveniently ignore the fact that disability cannot deny a person his fundamental right to live in this beautiful world. Physical handicap cannot rule out the existence of a brilliant mind, capable of delivering wonderful gifts to this world. Helen Keller provides a perfect example.

Penal Code of 1902 regards mercy killing as a special crime, and its punishment is left to the discretion of the trial judge. In other countries, like Poland, perpetrators of active euthanasia face lighter penalties than murderers.

Nonetheless, the "right to die" movement has not been as successful in the United Kingdom and the United States as in continental Europe. The Voluntary Euthanasia Legalization Society, founded in England in 1935, and the Euthanasia Society of America, formed in 1938, pressed for legalization of euthanasia, but failed to muster enough public support to achieve their goal. In 1977, however, "living will" bills were passed in several state legislatures in the US; by 1990, forty states followed suit. These laws authorize legally competent individuals to withdraw life support from a terminally ill patient. Thus, passive euthanasia is gaining some legitimacy in the US, although active euthanasia is still considered a serious crime under the law of scholars like Pythagoras, Epictetus, Seneca and Cicero.

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In spite of its success in acquiring legitimacy at different points in history, the practice of euthanasia has always been in direct conflict with the established principles of medical ethics. The most widely accepted code of conduct for physicians, the Hippocratic oath, includes both a promise to relieve suffering and a promise to prolong and protect life. To relieve pain by killing not only defies common sense but also violates the sacred promise to prolong and protect life.

The most important objection to euthanasia is that the choice to end someone's life will depend on the diagnosis of diseases by physicians. But physicians are also human beings. "To err is human" goes the adage. In the words of Allama Iqbal, the famous Urdu poet, "Only by mistake can a man avoid mistake." It is highly unlikely that doctors will always be correct in their analysis. Misdiagnosis continues to be rampant: In 1989, fourteen patients admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital were diagnosed as suffering from advanced cancer but were later found to have no cancer at all or the cancer was in such an early stage that it was still amenable to treatment. What if these patients underwent euthanasia!

A careful examination of the major arguments in support of euthanasia also establishes their futility. Proponents of euthanasia assert that euthanasia relieves suffering and provides comfort to patients, but is that the case with passive euthanasia? What comfort does passive euthanasia provide to a terminally ill patient by stopping his medication? Passive euthanasia allows a patient to die without any external intervention, positive or negative.

Neither does it actively expedite death nor does it allow the treatment to continue. Is it not, therefore, obvious that, by definition, passive euthanasia compounds the suffering of patients through deliberate inaction? Advocates of euthanasia go on to argue that euthanasia reduces medical expenses of the family and the burden on society. Since human life is priceless, such a selfish argument is hardly tenable either.

Over and above, legalization of euthanasia will certainly open up windows of opportunities for abuse. Homicides will rise invariably. Corrupt, unscrupulous physicians might take mercy killing as an opportunity to eliminate

rivals. They may even collude with enemies of their patients to manipulate their diagnosis. Such practices may put the lives of many, especially wealthy, old people, at risk. Dr. Norris of Liverpool claims that in Holland, where euthanasia is widely practiced, elderly people avoid hospital-visits for fear of being "put down." Even newborns are unlikely to be spared in such a situation. In the early 1980s, for instance, the US Justice Department had to intervene in the "Baby Doe" cases to save newly born children after parents and doctors had decided not to pursue drastic life-saving measures for children born with severe birth defects.

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Similarly, euthanasia may well become an easy weapon of ruthless oppression in the hands of a totalitarian regime. The Nazi atrocities in Germany during Adolf Hitler's Third Reich are a case in point. Compulsory euthanasia clinics were set up throughout the country. Euthanasia committees, comprising physicians and government officials, selected for death those citizens who were supposedly suffering from incurable diseases, or who, for various reasons, were considered a burden on the state. In reality, however, most of the victims were chosen for political and other reasons.

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Even someone helplessly awaiting death in a hospital bed will have nothing to gain from euthanasia, if we set ourselves the task of making his last days as enjoyable as possible. Moreover, his predicament will strongly motivate him to sacrifice his personal interests and devote the rest of his life to the most satisfying of human pursuits - selfless service to humanity - through prayer or charity. Terry Fox did just that. Clearly, every single individual, no matter how sick he is, is an asset to society, and therefore, nobody has a reason to lose hope. In the words of a poet,

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast."

As evident in this short, abstract poem, optimism is what keeps life going in this difficult world, but euthanasia, if legalized, will have optimism as its first casualty. Euthanasia will then appear to be an easy way out for pessimists and cowards.

Because of spectacular developments in the field of medical science, humankind has already scored a resounding triumph over a large number of previously incurable diseases. The march is still on. But even before medical science eliminates the need for euthanasia, we can do the same simply by discharging our responsibility to the sick.

## No time to stand and stare

by A Husnain

**T**HE BBC radio recently described an IT person watching two birds on a tree merrily chirping away while he was worrying about the 18-hour working daily cycle, thanks to the rapid penetration of Internet and e-mail services trickling into the lower strata of the society in the developed world.

It means that the natural and traditional way of human lifestyle is changing and the working-slots are fast eroding, and professional and personal lives are becoming seamless. Another aspect is the deprivation of the right to individual privacy and other social advantages and privileges. We have some idea of what the term 'doing nothing' means; but the new technological ability to be able to do different things at any hour of the day or night is an entirely different psychological approach to life. It upsets the normal rhythm of life, calling on the psychologists and psychiatrists to explore these new areas in the years ahead. Neurotics might take a new turn during this millennium year, and pose more social problems than the hanging clouds of nuclear warfare, political violence, epidemics and pestilence.

The advantages of new technology have a high indirect price, to be paid for or compensated in other areas during the period of a normal lifecycle. When the very art of living and thinking are intruded upon, new meanings of life need to be explored. The philosophical question is: How to be in tune with Nature, and not incur its wrath later (greenhouse effect, over-population, nuclear warfare, under-population and negative birth rates in the industrialised countries, etc)? Religion continues to spark off civil disobedience, genocide, and other distortions in many areas of contemporary civilisations.

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Adults are aware of some of the implications, but what about children, and the integrated effect on family life (the family in the West is already breaking down)? How man's character and nature will change? The telephone has already established the remote social-interface, which has reduced physical movement and transportation to a large extent. On the other hand, the global village advantage has introduced new trends in regional and global real-time physical contacts, resulting in reduction of social and cultural communication gaps in various societies separated geographically by continents and sub-continents.

One big problem is the constant onslaught,