

From the Street to the Screen: Mapping the Structural Evolution of the Hijra Jamaat into the Digital Age through A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*

D. Janani

PhD Scholar (Part Time)

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Alagappa University

Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

jananidhanabal5@gmail.com

Dr. SP. M. Kanimozhi

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Alagappa University

Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

A. Revathi's seminal autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) stands as the most influential text in South Asian queer literature, providing a first-person account of socio-cultural, economic, and other realities in the hijra community of India in the later twentieth century. Revathi's narrative shows the structural tension between the biological family and integration into the highly institutional kinship network of the hijra community. This integration is historically facilitated by the jamaat—a traditional, physical assembly where elders of the hijra community resolve disputes and conduct socio-ritual initiations.

While Revathi's memoir talks about the physical migration and street-level survival of the 1990s, the experiences depicted in her work provide a baseline for understanding the emergence of digital jamaat.

This paper analyzes how modern technologies have reconstructed the hijra community by utilizing the concepts of Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theoretical formulation of the technoscape, mediascape, and ideoscape, along with contemporary theories of affective labor and digital kinship. It says that the digital jamaat does not replace the traditional jamaat and its kinship, but it transforms the "meeting place" from a localized, physical space into a decentralized and boundaryless virtual network. This redefines transgender motherhood and opens up new opportunities for the transgender people beyond street-level survival work.

Keywords: Digital Jamaat, Hijra Identity, Technoscape, Affective Labor, Digital Kinship, Subaltern Studies

A catalytic moment in A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* happens when the protagonist moves away from her natal home near Namakkal in Tamil Nadu. She escaped from her home because of the existence of heteronormative violence in her biological family. Revathi's early life is made by her psychological isolation and inability to express her gender variance. In the late twentieth century of India, the natal home exists as a primary site of surveillance and discipline where the gender-variant child is forcibly corrected through violence. For transgender people, leaving home has historically been an important step towards survival. Revathi's narrative brilliantly exposes the socio-spatial reality through fundamental necessity: "mobility is required for identity" (14). To survive, to acquire identity and self-realization, the individual has to migrate physically. This migration is often unidirectional; usually the transgender people migrate from rural and semi-urban areas to metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Chennai, and Bangalore, where the hijra community operates.

This mandatory mobility is fraught with extreme uncertainty. This physical mobility by runaway gender-variant individuals is subject to police brutality, physical violence, mental abuse, and prostitution. In the twentieth century, the rapid development of the internet and technology disrupted the historical mandate of physical mobility. While physical migration remains necessary for many, the contemporary digital landscape provides an alternative mode for physical mobility. Transgender people who live in isolated or rural regions can now access community and psychological support without taking a physical journey.

The paper proposes the concept of digital jamaat to theorize the technological shift required in today's world. The traditional, highly structured governance and kinship of the hijra community are now online. We can now observe how the fundamental principles of survival and mentorship have changed and are maintained within the virtual environment. The digital jamaat represents a profound transformation, but it also preserves the cultural paradigm of the hijra social organization while detaching from strict geographical displacement and localized physical assembly.

The present study's theorization of the structural transition from the physical jamaat to the digital jamaat is grounded in the seminal framework of global cultural flows conceptualized by Arjun Appadurai (1996) in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Appadurai argues that today's world is profoundly deterritorialized, due to the rapid, fluid movement of people and technology across historic boundaries. He divides these flows into five dimensions: ethnoscap, technoscap, financescap, mediascap, and ideoscap. In order to decode the digital turn in transgender culture, the concept of technoscap is important. Appadurai defines technoscap as a global configuration of technology, both high and low, mechanical and informational, that moves at high speed across boundaries that were once impervious.

Historically, the hijra culture is strictly bound to localized geographical spaces. The digital technoscape dismantled this monopoly. It enables these cultural practices and hierarchies to cross regional, linguistic, and national boundaries, which enables everyone with an internet connection to access them. But technoscape does not exist in a vacuum. It moves across mediascape and ideoscape. The mediascape is the distribution of the capacity to produce and spread information through the electronic media. The electronic media offer large and complex stories to individuals around the world.

The mediascape for the digital jamaat consists of user-generated content from transgender activists, vloggers, and community influencers on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These digital media productions provide a platform for marginalized subjects to come out and represent themselves on screen so that internal realities of marginalized subjects emerge. The ideoscape is an ideological and political discourse that travels through the same digital channel and is oriented toward the ideas of rights, recognition, and autonomy. It is produced in the digital forum by negotiating traditional hijra culture with global lexicons of human rights and queer liberation.

To understand the relational work that takes place in these digital scapes, Appadurai's framework needs to be combined with the concept of affective labor. Affective labor is the labor that produces and manipulates affects, desires, and experiences of care, safety, and emotional well-being. It was developed by Marxist-feminist theorists such as Arlie Hochschild (1983) and further elaborated by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). It is the work of emotional preservation, of psychological processing, and community binding.

In the traditional hijra structure, affective labor takes place within the domestic physical space, performed by the guru who provides shelter, teaches rituals, holds the chela

through the emotional and physical trauma of transition, and instills a sense of pride in their identity.

Within the digital jamaat, this affective labor is re-spatialized. Transgender digital creators, activists, and elderly community members perform substantial, uncompensated affective labor online: they host multi-hour livestreams to answer questions from isolated youth and respond to direct messages regarding suicidal ideation or psychological trauma. They also provide full details on hormone replacement therapy and offer digital counseling. This digital affective labor forms digital kinship, a mode of relation that is based on electronic mediation to form deep, resilient, family-like bonds between individuals who have never shared physical space or a room but find themselves with a shared virtual matrix of care.

To appreciate the revolutionary nature of digital transformation, one must fully analyze and understand the traditional hijra culture, which is strict, disciplined, and follows a hierarchy. It is governed by kinship that mimics, yet radically configures, patriarchal family lineages. The community possesses its own history and localized variations in customs.

Throughout her text, Revathi uses the word jamaat as a highly specific institutional definition within the community that cannot be combined with a generic description of a household. Revathi states this with precision: “A jamaat is a meeting of sari-clad elders. They discuss matters of importance to them and others like them, agree to take on chelas and so on” (23). Here, *jamaat* is not just a passive structure but an active judicial assembly of the hijra culture. When internal conflicts arise, ranging from territorial boundary disputes between households to instances of domestic violence, financial theft, or a chela running away from her adopted guru, the elders of the hijra community assemble in this physical assembly called *jamaat*. These elders sit in *jamaat* to hear testimony, cross-examine parties,

and hand down binding verdicts. The punishment meted out by the physical *jamaat* includes financial penalties or may leave individuals entirely defenseless in the hostile world.

Within this governance structure, access to resources for survival is directly tied to entry into the guru-chela relationship. When a newcomer arrives in the hijra community, she cannot exist as an independent one; rather, she must find a guru who is willing to adopt her. The guru functions as a structural surrogate mother, provides her shelter, food, and clothing, and protects her from the violence of the external world. In return, the chela must pledge unquestioning loyalty to the guru. This loyalty is shown through physical labor—cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the household—and, most importantly, through financial tribute. The chela is required to hand over some percentage of her daily earnings to her guru. The economic reality of the hijra community is sobering. They are absolutely excluded from formal education and are subjected to systematic employment discrimination. So, the individuals in the physical *jamaat* are forced into highly stigmatized occupational paths: begging (*badhai* or street-level panhandling) and sex work.

Revathi says, “And if the newborn child is a male, they ask for more money. This is *doli-badaai*.” (47). These livelihoods are not chosen out of personal choice or desire. They are chosen because of marginalization and brutal exclusion from society. The physical *jamaat* prevents extreme physical hazards, yet it simultaneously reinforces deep financial dependence. The newcomer is protected, yet she must perform hazardous survival work to pay tribute to the structure that protects her from the violence directed against her in society.

Furthermore, entry into this hijra system follows irreversible physical initiation. The most sacred ritual that follows in this community is *nirvaanam* —the ritual of castration that involves the removal of the male organ and makes them feel completely mentally and physically pure and feminine. Revathi mentions,

“I was around fourteen or fifteen years of age. I was tall

and slim and had no facial hair, or even hair on my arms and legs. One of the elders exclaimed on seeing me, 'If this one were to undergo nirvaanam, she'd look like a real woman.' (22).

The physical jamaat ensures that the ritual is properly practiced. Therefore, the traditional physical jamaat in Revathi's text is a dual entity: it acts as a system of subaltern mutual aid and survival, but it is simultaneously a deeply disciplinary and rigid hierarchy that demands total physical, economic, and bodily compliance from its subjects.

The transition from the physical assembly to the digital network deconstructs the nature of authority, lineage, and care that characterize the traditional community. *The Truth About Me* by Revathi presents a deep description of her search for a guru who can validate her identity as a woman. The language used to describe this bond is familial. "I was to address my guru as I would my mother—I would have to call her Amma. My guru, in turn, announced that I was her daughter." (25).

The bond of motherhood is crucial because it gives the subaltern subject their first experience of familial love and social legitimacy after natal rejection. The chela's new reality is the guru as Amma. Revathi's memoir does not romanticise this relationship or kinship, which are full of contradictions, limitations, and suffering. Soon after her adoption, she asked her guru to accompany her to Delhi, but her Amma flatly refused her request with a shattering warning that speaks to the trauma and violence shared in society. "My child, you don't have to do the sort of work pottais do. You have a family; go back to your father and mother, study well and find a nice job" (25). Note : (pottai is a vernacular term used in Tamil Nadu to describe gender-variant individuals before their formal initiations into the hijra community)

In this moment, the physical guru-mother recognizes that her own matrix of survival is a site of suffering, social degradation, and violence. So, she urges her chosen daughter

(chela) to return to the very heteronormative system that rejected her, as the physical jamaat cannot offer paths toward formal education or dignified social integration. The physical guru can give protection to the chela but cannot give institutional mobility, as she is trapped within her own structural hierarchy. In the digital age, transgender mentorship and motherhood undergo a fundamental transformation. Transgender activists, scholars, and community influencers use the digital mediascape to be virtual mothers to an expansive, geographically unbound, unseen collective of daughters. These digital mothers utilize platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to broadcast their systemic oppression, their own rejection, and paths toward de-stigmatized transgender existence.

The technology intervention alters the linear progression. In the twentieth century, Revathi, as an individual, could discover the language and culture of transness only after physically running away and entering the hijra community. Today, the digital jamaat allows primary realization and self-recognition to occur safely in the private space of an individual's bedroom. When a young person begins the search for answers regarding their gender variance online, platform algorithms act as non-human intermediaries, directing them toward community-generated videos and digital kinship circles.

This shift alters the mechanisms of care and obligation across several ways. In the traditional physical model, a chela is bound to a singular guru, whose authority is centralized. When the guru is neglectful or structurally limited, the chela's options are severely limited. The digital jamaat enables a model of plural, distributed motherhood. One can have multiple mentors at once and receive emotional care from an activist in Delhi and medical transition advice from a trans creator in Bangalore. This network model decentralizes authority, moving from rigid hierarchy to a democratic archive of shared experience.

As documented by Revathi, the physical jamaat operates on a system of mandatory financial tribute where the daughter must surrender her earnings to the guru (mother) under the framework of ritual and hierarchy that exists within the community.

“I would have to agree to be a chela to a guru and do whatever work I'm given... If I stayed for one or two years with the guru and earned for her, then she would agree to help me become a woman” (22).

In the digital jamaat, financial restrictions do not apply to the relationships formed within the community. Digital mothers dispense affective labor, survival techniques, and medical guidance as a form of communal mutual aid without the requirement for a financial contribution or ritual compliance.

This system allows young transgender individuals to get mentorship without being forced to engage in the street-level begging or sex work. If Revathi's guru (mother) could only helplessly suggest that she leave the community if she wanted to study, present-day digital mothers actively use their platforms to advocate for educational retention and vocational literacy. They set up online scholarship funds, amplify NGO training efforts, and provide digital safety nets that encourage young transgender individuals to stay in school, complete their degrees, and develop high-skill digital proficiencies. Digital mentorship, therefore, directly answers the prayer of Revathi's guru, albeit in a different framework of community solidarity, ensuring that the acquisition of education doesn't necessitate the erasure of one's transgender identity.

The digital space acts as an incubation chamber. One of the most terrifying sides of the traditional hijra experience is captured in *The Truth About Me*, which is the immense risk associated with the beginning phase of visibility. For Revathi, seeking the physical jamaat was like an extreme exposure. To walk into the known hijra settlement or to approach visible community members on the street, one needed someone to help take the first step away from

a heteronormative life. This phase of exploration was often met with family violence, public mockery, and sexual assault. This physical landscape offers no space for an individual to test their identity or ask questions without facing physical and social pressure and consequences. The digital jamaat serves as a highly secure, virtual incubation chamber for identity exploration. Through online platforms such as pseudonymous profiles, burner accounts, avatar-based virtual worlds, and encrypted messaging channels, individuals can navigate the hijra and broader transgender culture under a complete cover of anonymity. A user can lurk within trans-led Facebook groups, participate in anonymous WhatsApp groups or question - and- answer sessions, and communicate with digital mothers without ever revealing their legal name, geographical location, or face.

This anonymous exploration prevents critical harm during the fragile early stages of self-discovery. It acts as a psychological buffer that allows one to become resilient and acquire medical and educational knowledge before making any irreversible shift in the physical or social sphere. It also enables individuals who are trapped in highly conservative environments to become active participants in the global network of trans kinship. By replacing the physical street exposure with the digital navigation, this digital technology transforms the traumatic journey of self-realization and identity described by Revathi into a planned and profoundly empowered transition process.

To completely understand how digital platforms provide economic transformation, one must look closely at the economic traps that are mentioned in *The Truth About Me*. Revathi writes with clarity about the economic claustrophobia experienced by her fellow hijra members. Even when an individual possessed basic formal education or acquired vocational skills, their transgender identity during a job interview was immediately rejected. Society locked the door to formal employment, leaving the physical jamaat to organize survival through badhai (ritual blessings) at weddings and births and sex work for survival. These

modes of labor are physically exhausting, which lead to street violence, disease, and criminalization by the state. This isolates them and causes society to see hijras as objects of fear and illicit desire.

The digital technoscape provides opportunities for digital entrepreneurship and independent content monetization by shifting the economic activity from the physical street corner to the digital sphere. Thus, transgender people can overcome the traditional means of earning a livelihood through sex work or begging.

Transgender creators use platforms like YouTube and Instagram to produce independent media that generate income directly by sharing their lived experience, cultural knowledge, and artistic talents. Through ad revenue and brand sponsorship, these creators build sustainable, independent incomes. In doing so, they convert their affective labor and personal narratives into literal financial capital entirely free from traditional work.

The internet allows transgender artisans, fashion designers, and small business owners to start independent digital stores or sell using platforms like Amazon and Flipkart. By using social commerce, selling directly through Instagram, Facebook, or WhatsApp, one can establish their goods and services to expand their customer base. This e-commerce protects them from physical discrimination and allows them to become financially independent.

For transgender individuals who are good at digital literacy, global remote work offers an invaluable sanctuary. Freelance platforms provide work to an individual purely based on the quality of their digital output and neutralize the visual or auditory prejudice that historically disqualified them for a long period based on their physical appearance.

However, the digital shift is not a total remedy because it has accessibility challenges. As Revathi points out, transgender people are often forced to drop out of school at an early age, which leads to a lack of literacy. Therefore, access to the digital economy will reach all the spaces of transgender people only when NGOs conduct programs and provide state-

sponsored technical training. The digital landscape offers a historic rupture in the cycle of economic marginalization.

The digital jamaat should not be romanticized in techno-utopian terms as a transformative alternative to the physical topographies of violence mentioned by Revathi. The digital turn does not erase the systemic oppressions faced by transgender people in the society; rather, it moves those oppressions into cyberspace, changing their mechanics and extending their reach. The hijra subject's dangers in the physical world are localized and bodily, consisting of street harassment and police violence. The architecture of risk in the digital landscape is defined by cyberbullying, digital surveillance, and algorithmic violence.

That visibility—which allows digital mothers to reach millions of questioning youth simultaneously—also makes them prime targets for mass harassment campaigns. Transgender activists and creators are constantly violated with hate speech and death threats in their comment sections and direct messages. In addition, doxing- the act of revealing private information such as a person's legal birth name (deadnaming), family address, or phone number- is a serious threat to individuals who want to conceal their identities. For a transgender person who is anonymously exploring their identity from a conservative family or within a restricted space, a single act of doxing can expose their identity and lead to family violence or even expulsion from their community.

Thus, the digital landscape is shown as a battleground. To make this digital landscape safe, the contemporary digital network must engage in continuous security training. Therefore in this modern context of survival, one must have fluency in digital operational security, which shields vulnerable members in the global network.

From the document of A. Revathi's "*Truth About Me*", it is clear that when her biological family and society completely rejected her, it was the traditional, physical system of hijra community that opened the door, provided her with a roof, a maternal lineage,

and restored her dignity. Her memoir says that physical assembly and bodily movement are the things that help resist this disownment from the biological family and civil society.

The emergence of the digital jamaat is not a clean break from, or erasure of, this foundational hijra legacy; rather, it is its structural relocation and expansion across Appadurai's global technoscape. The central values that characterized the traditional community are largely the same: the deep need for alternative kinship, the rejection of heteronormative family constraints, the crucial use of affective labor, and the establishment of alternative safety networks. What has changed is the medium of assembly. The traditional "meeting of sari-clad elders" has expanded its parameters and is now a global, borderless, decentralized virtual forum.

By migrating online, this communal structure gives access to life-saving mentorship, prevents physical danger during identity exploration, and provides financial independence without sacrificing trans identity. It ensures that transgender people are no longer isolated on the physical margin of society but are deeply interconnected with the global, resilient narratives of individual survival that contribute to the collective movement for absolute freedom.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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