

Role of Family and Gharana System in the Third Gender Life

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Abstract:

In India, the third gender has long been the most demeaned community because they faced many forms of issues like rigid gender norms, social stigma, and widespread discrimination. In fact, their family, in which they were born, also becomes an area of elimination due to the ignorance of their gender non-conformity. To counter this marginalisation, they form their own kinship systems and families, known as the gharana system, as being the most prominent. This paper examines the role of gharanas as social institutions that enable the third gender to endure, find belonging, and develop uniqueness. Gharanas are substitute family arrangements based on identity rather than blood ties. In this family, there is a guru-chela relationship, one guru maa in every toli that offers many types of support, such as emotional support, cultural education support, maintaining social discipline, and providing economic aid. Along with this support, gharanas provide a sense of belonging, security, and stability that are often absent in traditional families. The paper also discusses the evolving nature of gharanas in modern India, especially regarding legalisation and increased social awareness. Some third-gender individuals are being reintegrated into family systems and mainstream institutions due to their Education, employment, and legal rights framed for them. The study uses primary sources and qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and informal interactions with third-gender community members, to capture their experiences and views on social survival and the changing recognition of third-gender communities in India, emphasising the role of families.

Keywords: Third Gender, Gharana, Families, Social Survival and Alternative Kinship.

Introduction

Family refers to groups of people who establish family bonds based on mutual support and care, rather than biological or legal ties. In queer studies, this concept is often seen as a way to cope with social exclusion and rejection from birth families. The hijra community, which is officially recognised as the third gender in India, has traditionally existed through Gharanas- family-like groups that serve social and survival roles similar to those of traditional families (Zayan and Naqvi, 2024). Hijra identities are culturally defined and provide a positive alternative to conventional sex and gender roles within the Indian context. Their origins can be traced to various mythological figures in Hinduism. Serena Nanda, in her ethnography "Neither Man nor Woman," categorises classical Hindu hijra concepts into four types: male eunuch, hermaphrodite, testicle-void, and female eunuch (Nanda 1990: 177). Zwilling and Sweet (1996) note that stories involving third-gender, transposed genders, and sexual masquerades are common in Hindu mythology and folklore.

The article "In or out?: by historian Shaun Tougher presents the historical context of the Court Eunuchs indicates that it was a common tendency among historians to concentrate on the nature and the location of the eunuch within the royal and imperial courts (Tougher 2002: 143) The inherent network of relationships within Gharana societies is one of the solid grounds on which the ancient Hijra societies rest. The multilayered system has robust lineage even when there are no blood connections and operates under an organised system where everybody gets their rights. The long-term family connection, relationships and interconnectedness to the community members are indications of the worship and the approval of the curated family system that is commonly done via word of mouth. The social networks that are formed outside the orientation family and kinship are called the gharana

system and this system provides emotional, economic, and cultural support that are essential for the survival of the third gender in surroundings where they reside, environments that are structurally intimidating and impede social constancy (Weston, 1991). In South Asia, the third gender populations are often referred to as hijra, kinnar, aravani, or thirunangai. The Gharana serves as a social institution, as it is traditionally linked to performance communities and ancestral systems. Gharana now functions as a family network that provides care, security to its members and helps prevent marginalization, stigma and structural exclusion (Reddy, 2005).

Literature Review

- **Third Gender and Social Peculiarity**

Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin (2011) In their book **The Lives of Transgender People**, explore the lives of transgender individuals in the United States. They conducted a field study focusing on gender development by interviewing transsexual women, transsexual men, crossdressers, and queer individuals across the country. Their study involved 400 respondents, with a total of 3500 participants included in the survey. They analysed when and how participants recognised their gender variance, any confusion about their gender identity, the factors that helped them acknowledge their transgender identity, and their efforts to connect with other transgender people. The authors also documented experiences of discrimination and harassment and their psychological impact. Their findings indicate that, despite societal recognition, transgender individuals still face violence and discrimination.

Mahendra Bhishma (2016) wrote a biography of Main Payal, focusing on her life as a transgender person who is now the Head of the Uttar Pradesh Kinnar Association. The book highlights her struggles with suffering, distress, abuse, and bullying. Payal, a transgender/hijra living in Behrajmau village in Unnao district but born in Lucknow, recalls her childhood, during which she wished to stay like a girl but was forced by her father to live as a boy. She faced numerous hardships and violence from her father, who wanted a son, but she was neither male nor female. According to Mahendra, she left her home, traveled to Unnao, and lived as a street beggar, facing harassment from people and police. To avoid evil eyes, she chose to live as a boy in society so she could find work. Additionally, Bhishma describes how she was lured by the Lucknow hijra community, started begging on the streets, and became involved in sex work. Today, she works to prevent others in her community from experiencing the same pain she endured.

- **Families as Social Survival**

The social activists of the Human Rights Law Network—**Sevati Soren, Sarita Barpanda, Smriti Minocha, and Sarah Crowe (2015)**—conducted a project titled "Issues Faced by Transgender Persons in Odisha: Fact-Finding Mission to Bhubaneswar and Cuttack." The purpose was to assess the current situation of transgender communities in these regions after a significant judgment. They interviewed members of these communities and discussed Odisha's background, definitions of transgender, various Indian terminology, and the challenges faced by transgender people. The report also covered laws on transgender rights, constitutional protections, relevant articles, and domestic case laws. It detailed instances of discrimination and social exclusion across areas like health, education, employment, housing, family, sanitation facilities, and civil status. A key focus was on the failure to implement NALSA, violations of basic human rights, and the inadequate actions of Central and State Governments concerning transgender issues.

- **Conventional Structures and Gharana**

Laci Jones (2009) in her article "**The Third Sex: Gender Identity Development of Intersex Persons.**" examined various works that deals with the expansion of gender identity, sex task in intersex entities and keep the sex labels along with this details she explores how gender identity starts in childhood, denoting the role of environmental influences during their upbringing. It deliberates social learning theory, cognitive-development theory and gender schema theory in their analysis of the study. Besides this, the article discovers intersex conditions, gender assignment, gender identity and cultural factors and the concept of the third sex among American Indian tribes. Previous debates included understandings into gender identity development in intersex individuals, denoting that gender identity is unsolidified and can evolve over time.

Michael Bochenek and Kyle Knight (2012) in their research article **Establishing a Third Gender Category in Nepal: Process and Prognosis**, focus on how the process and prognosis strategy led to the creation of the Third Gender category within Nepal's legal and political system. This development was influenced by the Supreme Court of Nepal's ruling in 2007, known as Nepal v. Pant. They also highlight the significance of the legal status, the court-defined definition of the Nepali third gender, and legal actions taken. The authors discuss the support and protection provided by international human rights frameworks and how these protections impact individuals. Additionally, they emphasise that the government should officially recognise the third gender through documents, starting with the registration of three citizens under this category. Although this step offers protection and access to rights, it appears to be a positive approach. They also examine the social hierarchy, networks, and economic systems within Gharana institutions (led by a Guru and comprising Chela or disciples), which serve as alternatives to rejected natal families, as discussed in Reddy's (2005) study on hijra communities.

Methodology

The study has a mixed-method approach that uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In-depth interviews were conducted with 200 respondents or third gender people via an interview schedule to capture their lived experiences and perspectives. The samples were taken from four districts of Uttar Pradesh i.e., Varanasi, Prayagraj, Ayodhya and Gorakhpur.

S.No.	District	Respondents
1	Varanasi	50
2	Prayagraj	50
3	Ayodhya	50
4	Gorakhpur	50
	Total	200

Source: Fieldwork

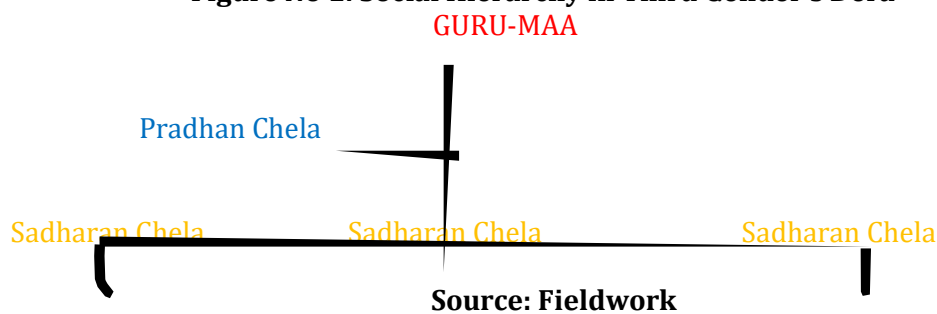
Meaning of Gharana

Gharana is often understood as lineage or school, especially in classical music, where it signifies a tradition believed to be handed down through generations. The word actually means household or family, with each having its own traditions and uniqueness. For the third gender, particularly the Hijra community, Gharana refers to a structured community that represents not only a physical house but also a social, cultural, and kinship system. This system encompasses identity, belonging, rules, roles, rites, and survival strategies that are learned and practiced.

Family and kinship structures, subsystems and Gharanas

The family structure of the third gender differs from that of normal families in society. These relationships benefit everyone involved in this community. The dynamics between gurus and chelas have been found, and they are hierarchical in nature and often influenced by social class. Family structures of this community are also distinct from typical family setups. Before joining the third gender community, individuals are expected to leave and cut themselves off from their previous families. However, some principles within the community encourage breaking these familial connections. Conversely, other members view family through the guru-chela relationship, which becomes a crucial part of their kinship. In every third gender family that is formed for the protection has guru maa, forming an important guru-chela relationship that influences their sense of family. The third-gender community encompasses all third genders and incorporates elements from both Hindu and Muslim cultures. This community accept members from all castes and creeds. It does not follow caste-based rules of purity or pollution. Regardless of religious background, third gender also participates in festivals of every religion, whether it is Hindu, Muslim and others. They celebrate festivals like Holi, Diwali, Eid, and Christmas, with full enthusiasm.

Figure No 1: Social Hierarchy in Third Gender's Dera



The guru-chela relationship is crucial in many ways and goes beyond simple economics. It substitutes a two-way, multifaceted, mutually advantageous relationship for the traditional familial bond. For the chela, the guru can take on roles akin to those of a mother, father, husband, or sister. Chelas are referred to and regarded as daughters or children, and they are expected to take care of them as a parent would. Chelas are expected to be obedient and faithful in return. According to Reddy (2006), the guru-chela relationship is essential to the third gender community's identity and social acceptance. The Guru-mother is the leader of this hierarchy, which includes roles inside the dera or family. The Sadharan chela comes after the Pradhan chela, which is the main chela. In addition to supervising sadharan chelas and giving directives, the Pradhan chela frequently serves as a monitor.

Additionally, the Pradhan chela keeps an eye on the Sadharan chela's activities and reports to Guru-maa on their conduct both indoors and outdoors. Guru-maa is consulted only by the Pradhan chela, who asks her numerous questions and requests her advice. She serves as Guru-maa's undercover informant, sharing information covertly and keeping it a secret. She has a regal status among other sadharan chelas. She also serves as a khabari, or message-conveyor, occasionally sending messages between other dera. She is responsible for giving Guru-maa the money that the chelas have collected and settling disagreements among the sadharan chelas, particularly those involving money. The group, referred to as sadharan chelas, consists of students or learners who travel within specific regions in order to raise money. In addition to doing home tasks like cooking, cleaning, and washing, they also offer Guru-maa body, head, leg, and other massages. Throughout the history of the third gender, this social structure has remained constant. Geet, the Pradhan chela, is one of ten chelas in Krishna Nagar's toli, where Sudha is the Guru-maa, or head of the family. Geet helps Guru-maa with everyday duties and keeps an eye on the group.

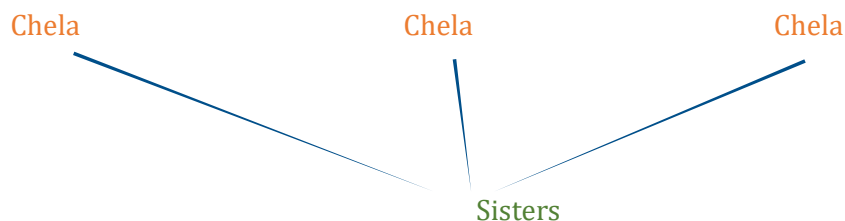
Fictive Kinship

In the family of the third gender, there aren't many other fictitious kinship links outside the guru-chela bond. Among them are:

- i. The connection between two Chelas
- ii. The bond between a Guru Maa and another Guru Maa;
- iii. The relationship between Nayak, or Guru Maa, and Chela;
- iv. The bond between a Chela and another Chela.

A Guru-maa's single dwelling typically contains multiple chelas. The size of the guru-maa's household and the revenue from particular sites determine the number of chelas. Gurus in the same tradition regard one another as behen, or sisters. Since they are not linked by blood or marriage, this is a fictitious kinship. The diagram below illustrates these relationships among chelas.

Figure No 2: Correlation between one Chela and the other Chela.

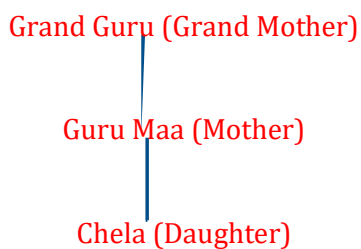


Source: Fieldwork

Connection of Chela and Guru Maa and Grand Guru:

Along with Chela's relationship with her Guru-Maa, there's another connection involving her Guru, who is also called the Grand Guru. The Guru-Maa, too, has her own Guru, known as the theleka, which refers to her. In this context, if we consider the Guru as a mother figure, then Chela is like a daughter, and her Guru is like a mother to her. Consequently, the Guru of the Guru becomes a grandmother figure to Chela, often called 'Nani-Maa' or 'Grandmother.' This creates a form of fictive kinship, which was illustrated earlier with a diagram.

Figure No 3: The correlation of Chela, Guru Maa and Nayak.

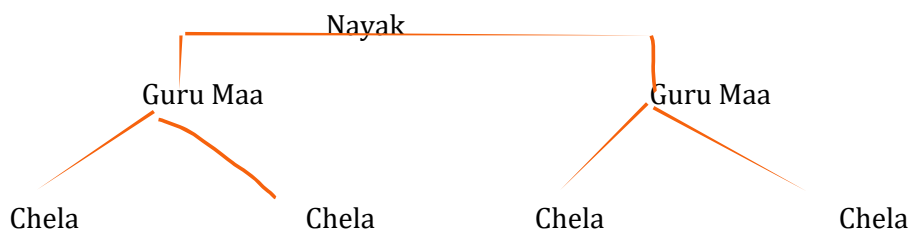


Source: Fieldwork

Achieved Status:

In addition to these social hierarchies, an achieved position is a rank or position that is superior to all others. When a Guru maa reaches the Grand Guru's location, she is exalted to a rank known as Nayak. Under her guidance, the Guru maa is referred to as a Nayak. A Nayak's association with the Grand Guru indicates her rank or position rather than a familial relationship. A Nayak is in charge of several Guru maas, each of whom has various deras, whereas a Guru maa normally manages just one. In addition to being in charge of her own dera and the areas to which she has been allocated, a Nayak has jurisdiction over other Guru maa deras.

Figure No 4: Position of Nayak.



Source: Fieldwork

In Indian civilisation, this is the third gender family structure. The third gender community's family structure is different from other traditional Indian family kinds, according to research. Three types of families are often recognised in Indian society: nuclear, joint, and extended. The third gender's family structure, however, does not fit these since they are not related by marriage (affinal kinship) or blood ties (consanguineal kinship). On the basis of biological similarities, third gender people instead establish familial ties. They continue to exist in spite of ongoing social and familial injustice. Owing to their seclusion, they form families based on common interests, experiences, jobs, and viewpoints—often because they are of the same sex. These families are fictional since they are self-formed and founded on shared interests and connections. These families are self-formed, based on mutual interests and relationships, making them fictive kinships, which can be called Families of Interest.

Other types of Family

- **Family of Gurulocal or Guru maa:** All hijras who live together under the direction of their Guru maa are part of this family structure. A senior third gender, or hijra, known as Guru-maa, is in charge of their home, known as "Dera." Overseeing property, social ties, and family matters, the leader, or malkin, is also referred to as Guru-maa or mukhiya. When new members from the third gender join the family, Guru Maa trains them as Guru maa is regarded as the supreme head and chelas must accept her orders or punishment. Assigning responsibilities, upholding family peace, and cultivating positive relationships with neighbors are all under her purview.
- **Family or Family of Chela local or Chela:** In the past, chelas were required to reside with Guru Maa and were not permitted to live independently. Chelas are now living freely without guru maa, although this tendency is currently reversing. Guru Maa allows her chelas to relocate when there isn't enough room in her home for everyone to live happily. Chelas occasionally ask her permission to live independently in order to have privacy. In certain instances, guru maa themselves would rather not have chelas reside with them. This is frequently due to worries about privacy, safety, or trust, or because they would prefer to live with family or a partner. Chelas in this family are free to do activities and have equal status, respect, and obligations. In spite of living alone, chelas maintain contact with guru maas, who continue to direct their work and actions.

Findings and Discussion

Qualitative Findings

The family structure of the third gender was shown to be distinct from the other types and to have a lower socioeconomic position. The third-gender society was composed of many kinship relationships, such as guru-chela, mother-daughter, brother-sister, etc., but these relationships were fictitious. One term for such a family might be Family of Interest. During fieldwork, it was discovered that the housing pattern had changed. Chelas used to stay with their guru and were unable to contact their biological family, but now that they have permission to do so, they may enjoy their solitude, earn extra money, and be near their original family. Based on the evidence that is now accessible, it can be determined that the third gender's family structure has undergone some modifications that were partially brought about by the influence of media, education, and ideals.

Quantitative Findings

1. Gharana Admission as a Survival Strategy

Table No 1: Gharana as a Survival Strategy

When did you become part of a Gharana?	Frequency	Percentage
During childhood	38	19%
During adolescence	82	41%
After leaving biological Family	54	27%
Not part of any Gharana	26	13%
Total	200	100%

Source: Fieldwork

The data presented in **Table no. 1** indicate that many respondents had joined a Gharana when they were teenagers (41%), followed by those who had joined after their original families rejected them (27%). Few respondents entered during childhood (19%), while 13% reported not being part of any Gharana. This emphasises the fact that adolescence is a significant time when people of non-conforming gender experience more conflict with their families and society. Entry into a Gharana system is not purely a cultural choice but an uninvited existence, particularly without the family's consent.

2. Rejection and Emotion

Table No 2: Reasons for Joining a Gharana (Chosen Family)

Reason for Joining Gharana	Frequency	Percentage
Rejection by biological Family	76	38%
Need for emotional support and belonging	58	29%
Economic survival	34	17%
Cultural identity and Tradition	22	11%
Peer influence	10	5%
Total	200	100%

Source: Fieldwork

As mentioned in **Table no. 2**, these are the primary reasons for joining a Gharana. The gharana system, which is an organized kinship system, is motivated by the two elements of need, feeling and rejection. Rejection from one's original family (38%) and the desire for emotional support and a sense of belonging (29%) were the most frequent reasons for joining a Gharana. Economic survival (17%), cultural identity (11%), and peer influence (5%) were relatively less significant factors. This is the outcome of the family's heteronormative structure, which cannot tolerate gender variety. Thus, the Gharana is a different form of kinship that considers social, psychological, and emotional demands that are not met by biological families. These results are consistent with sociological studies of the chosen kinship, in which emotional ties take the place of biological ties. This has been corroborated by the fact that the Guru-Chela relationship was present in every single Gharana, indicating that Gharanas are a genuine social group rather than an informal one. Our support system is effective but hierarchical, as

seen by the responsibilities of peer members and senior chelas. The Guru is in charge, and peer networks are emotionally stable, indicating a balance between hierarchy and group care. This refutes the notion that Gharanas are haphazard or unorganized.

3. Multifunctional Role of Gharana

Table No 3: Functions of Gharana in Third Gender Life

Function of Gharana in Third Gender Life	Frequency	Percentage
Emotional support	64	32%
Economic support	42	21%
Protection from violence	18	9%
Cultural training (rituals)	26	13%
Social identity and belonging	72	36%
Total	200	100%

Source: Fieldwork

The functional importance of Gharanas is evident from **Table no. 3**. Most respondents agreed that Gharanas have social identity (36%), economic support (21%), and emotional support (32%). Along with that, they offer cultural training (13%) and protection from violence (9%) also. As a result, Gharanas become comprehensive support systems that replace welfare systems that are inclined to marginalise people of the third gender. Training in culture and participation in rituals that suggest Gharanas guarantee both material survival and cultural continuation, also encourage identity building.

4. Comparison with Biological Families

Table No 4: Comparison between Biological Family and Gharana

Aspect	Biological Family	Gharana
Acceptance	Low	High
Emotional support	Inconsistent	Strong
Gender identity respect	Rare	Always
Economic cooperation	Limited	Shared
Sense of belonging	Weak	Strong

Source: Fieldwork

A comparative perspective presented in **Table no. 4** reveals that the comparison between biological families and Gharanas presents a depressing scenario. The degree of acceptance, respect for gender identity, and emotional support were found to be consistent in Gharanas. Conditional or restricted assistance was the main characteristic of biological families. This strengthens the thesis statement that family may be understood as a caring and accepting environment compared to biological ties, especially where gender identities are suppressed.

The centralised type of power is exemplified by the fact that the majority of Gurus make decisions relating to housing and economic activity, which is indispensable for survival in hostile social

environments. Nonetheless, in interpersonal relationships, the individual's choice signifies the agency of bargaining. Such duality entails control and protection, which is also a feature of survival-based social development.

5. Gharana as a "Real Family"

Table No 5: Perception of Gharana as Family

Do you consider your Gharana as your real family?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	156	78%
No	22	11%
Sometimes	18	9%
No response	4	2%
Total	200	100%

Source: Fieldwork

The emotional legitimacy of the Gharana was shown in the table no. 5, where a vast majority of people (78%) consider their Gharana as a real family. Only 11% disagreed, while a very few (9%) expressed ambivalence. This is a potent argument against the traditional conceptions of families, which are based on blood ties. Gharana is a lived experience rather than a symbolic affiliation because it is a way for third gender individuals to maintain emotional stability, respect, and perseverance.

6. Roles within Gharana

Table No 6: Role of Gharanas in Third gender life

Role in Gharana	Description
Guru	Head, authority, caretaker
Chela	Disciple/member
Senior Chelas	Assist guru, mentors
Peer Members	Emotional & social Support

The internal structure of Gharanas is illustrated in **Table no. 6**, which explains the roles within the system. The Guru functions as the head and authority figure, while Chelas act as disciples or members. Senior Chelas assist the Guru and mentor others, and peer members provide emotional and social support. This suggests that Gharanas function as organized social institutions with clearly defined hierarchies and responsibilities, rather than informal or unstructured groups.

7. Challenges

Table No 7: Challenges Within Gharana System

Challenges Faced in Gharana	Frequency	Percentage
Strict control by Guru	62	31%
Economic exploitation	46	23%
Internal conflicts	38	19%
No major challenges	54	27%
Total	200	100%

Despite the Gharana system being supportive, it yet presents certain difficulties. Of them, almost 23% had experienced financial abuse, 31% had a strict guru, and 19% reported internal conflicts. As a result, there are power disparities in the kinship systems' hierarchies

7. Gharana Role in Social Survival.

Overall, the data clearly demonstrates that Gharanas play a crucial role in the social survival of third gender individuals. Gharanas are important in preventing homelessness, meeting basic needs and fostering social identity. Gharanas have been used as informal ways of welfare in the society where third gender persons have been largely marginalised in terms of institutional support, since the state and mainstream society have been unable to accord them support.

Discussion

When taken as a whole, the results demonstrate that Gharanas are need-based households founded on cultural survival and endurance. In addition to recapitulating internal hierarchies and control systems, they provide social, emotional, and financial security. The Gharana system may then be viewed as a complicated social structure that grants authority to individuals of the third gender, but it is an institution that needs to be changed, acknowledged, and upheld by official social institutions. Gharana is a type of third-gender person's social survival. Although it was based on the cultural development of the South Asian region, it is similar to gay chosen family theories (Weston, 1991). Gharānā's worth is found in: Emotional strength, Economic survival, Cultural affirmation.

Conclusion

Gharana extends beyond customs to third-gender groups and the voluntary family model of social survival. It is a compilation of the benefits of resisting systematic marginalization and represents the tactics used by gendered individuals to survive in uncomfortable situations. Policy, social work, and human rights advocacy consequences result from defining Gharana as cultural institutions and survival networks. Gharanas continue to sustain their members through complex social, economic, and emotional behaviours that do not fit into the current traditional kinship, even though this type of legal treatment is still in its infancy and has a narrow scope. In addition to discriminating against society, they also denied equal opportunities to families. Excessive disparity has been observed in a number of areas, including education, work, housing, health, bureaucracy, and the media. The government has taken a number of actions, such as granting the right to vote in 1994 and conducting the 2011 census. In a similar vein, the court has occasionally helped them register as government officials under the third gender category. The United States Supreme Court's 2014 decision led to the official recognition of a third gender. As a result, the official records have placed them in the third group. These laws and policy formulations are a key step towards achieving social inclusion and equality.

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