The Dera Heterotopia: Meaning of Home for the Hijra Community

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ABSTRACT

The *hijra* community, representative of third gender individuals, is one of the most deprived communities in Bangladesh. Not conforming to traditional gender binary identities, they do not embrace the conventional notion of family and home. In this context, the study is exploratory research that delves into the realm of *hijras*, observing their relationship with their dwelling spaces and seeking how they negotiate the meaning of home. By examining *hijra* dwellings called *deras*, it aims to understand the dynamics of the *hijra* lifestyle and ultimately uphold their lived experiences against a dehumanized image of them in the context of Dhaka. For this purpose, the study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on everyday narratives gathered through interviews, group discussions, and observations. Applying Rapoport's framework for linking the built environment with culture and lifestyle, the paper uncovers the meanings of *dera* at three levels: at the lower level, it finds that *dera* provides everyday shelter and a new purpose to these outcasts against the hostile world. At mid-level, the *deras* become a locus of fostering social relations and a spatial manifestation of *hijra* existence. And finally, the higher-level meanings reveal a constant juxtaposition of loss and belonging, colourful appearances with feelings of estrangement, and initiation of *hijra* life with the constant desire for a *normal* one, making *dera* a 'heterotopic space' a manifestation of the *otherness*, as per Foucault's concept of ano*ther* place. The findings of the paper deepen our understanding of how individuals navigate the oppression of stigma and marginality while actively shaping and transforming their identities in adverse circumstances. It uncovers important relationships between (marginal) community and (housing) environment that can contribute to potential future research within the discourse of spatial justice. The study, by upholding marginal voices of *hijra* population around everyday space, advocates for their right to the city.

1. INTRODUCTION

As members of the third-gender community, *Hijras* do not conform to the traditional male or female identities. They are perceived as biologically 'defective' (Podder & Shahidullah, 2023; Ghosh, 2018) and consequently, remain ostracized from mainstream society due to a lack of social acceptance. The paper aims to humanize the *hijra* population against the dehumanizing perception of them as 'undesirables', by upholding their lived experiences as outcasts navigating life in Dhaka City. The purpose of adopting the notion of dwelling or home is to enable an insight into their communal and personal space, which is largely overlooked under a stigmatized identity. Not only is home the most personal unit of the built environment and the richest source of personal meanings (Castillo & Corpuz-Mendoza, 2010), but it is also an 'expression of

social meanings and identities beyond the physical space that is lived (Wardhaugh, 1999; p 95; cited in Mallett, 2004). Hence, by examining their everyday spaces of dwelling, the *deras*, the study gathers narratives of individual aspirations and communal values amidst their collective struggle as one of the most marginalized groups.

In the scholarly world, the intersection of the built environment and the *hijra* realm remains a significantly unexplored area. Also, most academic research on *hijras* focuses on their socio-economic marginalization, largely influenced by external forces operating outside their dwelling environments (Podder & Shahidullah, 2023). But social relations around gender, class, and race get translated into domestic space, embodied in the home, and represented in the spatiality (Walker, 2002), and hence the relation of space and home is a significant milieu to inform

about a unique culture and marginalization. Researchers have stressed the importance of exploring the concept of home for the *hijras*, as a significant portion of *Hijra* activities takes place within the household environment (Hossain, 2021; Snigdha, 2021; Islam, 2016). Pointing out the significance of 'homemaking' in shaping the *hijra* identity, Podder & Shahidullah (2024; 2023) have shown that their (urban) homemaking can be viewed as a powerful socio-political tool to produce *hijra* identity. The study, building on the scholarship of the meaning of home, explores the personal, communal, and symbolic meanings of their dwelling spaces and uncovers the role of *dera* in the unique context of the everyday lives of *hijras*.

Traditionally, 'home' is imagined both materially and symbolically as belonging to a heterosexual couple who enact particular gendered roles and relationships (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982; cited in Mallett, 2004). However, such concepts leave the non-binary population excluded from the scholarly discourses of home. Feminist and queer theories have extensively criticized the traditional definition of home for its reliance on fixed notions of sex and gender (Mallett, 2004; Butler, 1990, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Young, 1990; Gatens, 1983). Also, concepts and representations of home differ and change over time and place (Walker, 2002). Home today is widely realized as a multidimensional concept and a multi-layered phenomenon (Bowlby et al., 1997; Wardaugh, 1999; Somerville, 1992), needing investigation from varied perspectives. Home, as a social experience, isn't defined by a specific place, but by the emotional meanings we attach to certain social and spatial environments (Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2020). Home as a domestic setting expresses a cultural regime where its members reside (Jackline, 2025). Home, from a cultural perspective, is thus defined by the inhabitants' cultural values and social practices (Ozaki, 2005; Rapoport, 1969). As a semiotic construction, the concept of home guides human meaning-making processes (Märtsin, 2023). Therefore, home is not just a physical dwelling (Mallett, 2004) nor a simple representation of a singular gender binary norm; it is a dynamic and relative phenomenon shaped by the experiences and meanings attached to it.

Furthermore, the experience of home is influenced by factors such as social position (exclusion) and marginalization, which are manifested in location, physical condition, modes of production, and activities that shape the identity and lives of the occupants (Somerville, 1997). Striving for a home in this sense could also mean reclaiming identity, inclusion, and agency in society (Kellett & Moore, 2003). Low-income residents often try to share broader housing norms and experiences, linking personal expressions of desire with collective ones (Kellett & Moore, 2003), and accordingly improve and personalize their spaces, aspiring for participation and belonging in society. Therefore, the concept of dwelling and home provides a significant framework to study the life of *hijras* as spaces representative of their social practices in severe marginalization.

Living outside their biological family, for the *hijras*, hence, the concept of home extends beyond the conventional

aspects of culture and the gender binary (Podder & Shahidullah, 2024; 2023). To better understand how the *hijra* individuals negotiate and produce meanings of 'home' out of *dera*, the study explores the realm of *dera* both as their everyday space and a marker of their identity. Toward this end, it seeks to answer the following questions: *What does the spatial and visual organization of dera reveal about the everyday activities of a home? What do their dwellings tell about their social position and relationships? And, what is the relationship between the hijra culture and lifestyle with dera?*

To uncover the complex interplay between the *hijra* realm and their dwelling spaces, the study thus adopts the notion of home as a 'socio-spatial system encompassing cultural norms' (Malett, 2004) and follows Rapoport's framework (1988) that explores the relationship between dwelling (space) and culture (lifestyle) at multiple levels. Both the terms "home" and "dwelling" are used throughout the write-up. The term "dwelling" refers to a physical place of stay, while "home" represents a broader perspective that encompasses the intangible aspects of living. The study, by referring to *dera* as a space of dwelling, explores its experiences as a home and a *hijra* entity. Through this as a whole, the study uncovers how the dwelling spaces of the *hijra* community shape their daily lives, social interactions, and sense of identity.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE *HIJRA* REALM

This section delineates the gendered understandings of the *hijra* population and a brief history of the formation of *hijra* identity and culture within the South Asian context. In this region, the concept of a third gender has existed for centuries (Aziz & Azhar, 2020). *Hijra* is a conglomeration of alternative gender identities ranging from hermaphrodite to eunuch (Hossain, 2010). In simple terms, *hijra* refers to a community of third-gender individuals and encompasses a group of gender-nonconforming or non-binary people (Aziz & Azhar, 2020). Hence, *hijra* represents a communal identity and is more of an 'umbrella term' (UNDP, 2010) for gender minority groups, primarily existing in the South Asian region.

The identity and cultural prominence of the *hijra* community evolved considerably during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) and the Mughal Empire (1526– 1707), where they held esteemed positions as servants in elite households, manual laborers, military commanders, political advisors, and guardians of the royal harem (Shroff, 2020). More importantly, during the precolonial era, they were sometimes considered to be transcendental, spiritually powered to bless and curse people (Hossain, 2010), hence, sacred and divine beings (Ghosh, 2018), due to which they were both revered and feared.

However, during British colonial rule, *hijras* faced systematic legal and political oppression (Hamzić, 2019). According to Ahmed (2019; cited in Podder & Shahidullah, 2024), these legal tools meant to suppress the "cultural" identity of the 3rd gender community redefined *hijra* identity as a political construct. The colonial process contributed to the criminalization of *hijra* individuals (Hossain, 2020; Ahmed, 2019), eventually stripping them

of rights and forcing them to 'live outside of mainstream society' (Finzel, 2021).

In the face of social and familial rejection, *hijras* live as a community with those alike. This can be defined as a rudimentarily structured society led by a *guru* with a "relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals" (Turner, 1969). The place of dwelling for such a community, primarily a spiritual one, has been known as a *dera* for a long time in this region. "*Dera*" is derived from the Persian word *derah* or *dirah*, meaning a camp, abode, monastery, or convent. In South Asia, it came to denote a settlement or residence, or camp often associated with spiritual leaders or communal living spaces (Encyclopedia MDPI, 2021; Copeman, 2012; Singh, 2010). The term "*dera*" becoming associated with *hijra* communities is thus deeply rooted in South Asian socio-cultural and religious history, particularly within India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The *hijra* community has a unique social structure; according to Singh & Kumar (2020), the community is organized into hierarchical groups called gharanas, each led by a *Naayak*, who serves as the primary decision- maker. Under the *Naayak* are *guru(mas),* who oversee daily affairs and teach customs to their *chelas* (followers) in their *deras*. Throughout the history of the *hijra* community in this region, the *dera* became associated with their living dynamics within the *guru-chela* (teacher- disciple) organization, which takes place in a communal living environment. Within such a formation, *hijras* rely upon elaborate family structures that delegate various "feminine" roles to different members of the group, such as sister, *guru ma* (mother), *nani (maternal grandmother), and dadi* (paternal grandmother), representing *guru's guru*, etc. (Hall, 1996).

Within mainstream society, being considered an abnormal condition, *hijras* are perceived as 'inferior human beings' (Jami & Kamal, 2017), 'non-humans' (Finzel, 2021), or 'subhuman' (Hossain, 2010). They are mostly conceived as hostile creatures, engaging in anti-social activities that are commonly perceived as 'obscene' (Khan et al., 2009; Hinchy, 2019) by the mainstream urban resident due to the nature of their livelihood (collecting money, begging, or prostitution), appearances, and behavior adopted for survival, often referred to as "*hijragiri*" (Shawkat, 2016). Such *hijragiri*, *hijraness, or hijraism* have long been associated with *hijra* subjectivity and their performance of gender, visible through the entire set of bodily gestures, sounds, and sartorial choices (Hamzić, 2019). One of the most notable *hijra* expressions is their distinctive hand clapping (*taali*) and colorful female attire (Shawkat, 2016).

The "*hijraness*" not only sets them apart in public spaces but can also be seen as an extension of their physiological identity, reinforcing their visibility and presence in society (Roy, 2015). The community also uses a form of language (*Ulti bhasha*), which serves as a means of communication among *hijra* members (Snigdha, 2021). From a socio-cultural perspective of identity making, *hijraness* is thus essentially a social construct (Vinay, 2022; cited in Podder & Shahidullah, 2024). And, *"hijra"* becomes more of a

communal identity than a mere gender identity.

In 2013, Bangladesh officially recognized *hijras* as a third gender, allowing them to use this designation in identity documents and passports, as well as to vote and run for office (McNabb, 2018). However, due to policy gaps and in the face of wider social unacceptance, they face widespread social, economic, and cultural challenges and are among the most deprived communities in Bangladesh (Shuvo, 2018; Aziz &Azhar, 2019). Alienated within society, they have been surviving by supporting each other (Alamgir, A., Brown, S., Gray, E., & Kelly, P., 2025). The everyday narratives of their existence thus disclose the countless ways in which individuals under the most adverse circumstances act as agents in shaping their survival and identity, and negotiating the oppression of stigma, marginality, and poverty (Vanita, 2002).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"Meaning" is an important mechanism linking environments to people (Rapoport, 1988) and reflecting how people behave in their built environment (Castillo & Corpuz-Mendoza, 2010). Occupants attach meanings to dwelling spaces and features, which, when shared and recognized by others, communicate their identity, status, and values (Coolen & Ozaki 2004). Attached meanings also reflect people's lived experiences, communal identity, and perceptions of the world (Massey, 1994). As the *hijras* live scattered throughout the city, they do not have any designated type of housing; consequently, materiality alone cannot represent their complex realm. Additionally, as *hijras* do not conform to the traditional norms of a 'household' based on a conventional definition of family, their relationship with 'home' is undoubtedly unique. Therefore, for the *hijras,* the relationship between (dwelling) space and beings (individuals and communal) is complex, and the role of home is not straightforward either. By investigating the meanings it conveys, we can better understand the dynamics of *dera* as a home.

Rapoport's theory on the meaning of the built environment (1988) focuses on how individuals and communities assign cultural, social, and personal significance to their living environment. He highlighted that these meanings should be interpreted on multiple levels—from everyday context to cultural symbols and underlying ideologies (Coolen & Ozaki 2004). According to this perspective, a dwelling or house is not just a physical structure but a space that carries symbolic meanings shaped by factors such as tradition, identity, values, social norms, and external influences. It emphasizes that a dwelling serves as a reflection of the occupants' personal and collective identity, offering a sense of belonging and continuity. Overall, Rapoport's framework for studying the built environment helps researchers understand how individuals perceive and interpret the spaces they inhabit, revealing the complex interplay between the individual, community, and broader societal influences on their dwelling environment.

Following Rapoport's theory, this paper investigates the space of dwelling or home of the *hijras* at three different levels. The lower-level meaning conveys every day and instrumental meanings (Coolen & Ozaki 2004); it pertains

to the personal, subjective, and experiential aspects of how individuals perceive and use their immediate living spaces. This includes emotional responses, personal attachments, and day-to-day practices involving their spaces within their homes and neighborhoods. Thus, for the *hijras*, lower-level meanings uncover their everyday lived experiences as they form new families and identities. The middle-level meanings, according to the theory, convey identity, status, power, etc. (Coolen & Ozaki 2004). More precisely, they reflect the lived and shared understandings of a space within a community. This involves collective practices, norms, and the social roles that people enact in their homes and neighborhoods. This level, hence, helps identify the communal interactions and positions of the *hijras* within their locality.

The higher-level meanings relate to the abstract and deeper aspects, such as worldviews and philosophies (Coolen & Ozaki 2004). They pertain to overarching social structures and collective beliefs, including values, ideologies, and cultural symbols that influence perceptions of space. The *hijras* typically find homes by renting whatever is available to them in the face of exclusion; thus, decoding the physical shelter through spatial layout alone may rarely express the complex dynamics of their lifestyle. Therefore, it is crucial to uncover the symbolic meaning "*dera*" holds as their space of dwelling and home while they live in their unique realm under the label of *hijras*. This level helps us envision an altered notion of family formed among strangers living under the same roof. Overall, the study examines the meanings of spaces at different levels, uncovering the dynamics of the hijra lifestyle and upholding individuals' lived experiences as they navigate the everyday challenges of exclusion in the heart of the city.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study is exploratory research intended to shed light on an unexplored area —the intersection of space and the *hijra* realm. Hence, it is a qualitative study relying on participants' narratives and our observational understanding. For this purpose, the study relies purely on findings that emerged from the field; hence, it is built on grounded theory- a research methodology that is grounded in data to produce new hypotheses or theory (Strauss, 1994; Glaser, 1967), which is useful to uncover social processes- social relationships, and behaviours of groups (Crooks, 2001).

Based on this, an inductive approach was used for data collection and analysis to investigate the experiences of *hijra* individuals around their dwellings and accordingly interpret their perceptions and the meanings of the spaces. The data collection, through multiple field visits from June 2023 to August 2024, involves participant observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. It also involved observing the interior and exterior of their housing conditions and spatial arrangements. Photographs of the interiors were taken with the verbal consent of the participants.

A total of six *deras* were visited from Dhaka city's North and South municipality, including four *deras* in Mirpur 12 (Duaripara, Alupotti, Jhutpotti), and Mirpur 10 (Muslim camp), and two others in Old Dhaka and Mugda (see Fig.1).
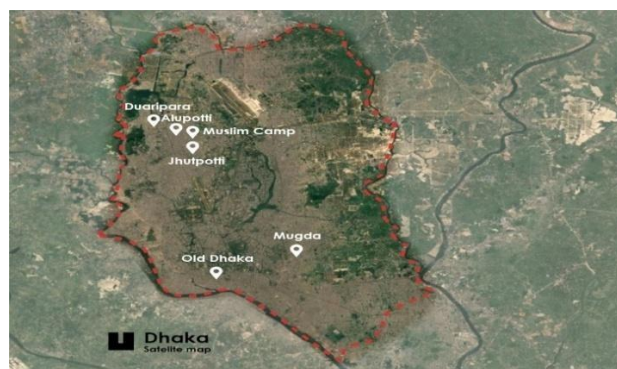

Figure 1: Map showing the location of the sites

Each *dera* consists of a *guruma* and their *chelas,* the number of whom varies per *dera* (see Table 1). The areas were selected based on a higher concentration of the *hijra* population and to have a broader range of perspectives.

The field-level data were collected from 23 hijra individuals using guiding questions that explored their daily activities, use of spaces, and individual experiences as *hijras* at home and beyond. Among these, 18 were one- to-one interviews, including four in-depth interviews with *gurumas* from Duaripara, Jhutpotti, Old Dhaka, and Mugda area. Additionally, 4 FGDs were conducted at Duaripara (4 members), the Muslim camp (4 members), Old Dhaka (5 members), and Mugda (5 members). Additionally, informal conversations were conducted with other *dera* members, as well as neighbors and social workers. Table 1 summarizes the number of participants per survey location.

Table 1: Participants' information as per locations

Location	Members per *dera* (Nos)	Nos & role of Participants	Age (approx. range)
Alupotti	5	Two (2) *chelas*	One between 15 and 18 years
			One between 18 and early 20s
Jhutpotti	20	*Guruma* (1)	Late 40s
Duaripara	30	*Guruma* (1)	Early 40s
		Three (3) *chelas*	Early to mid-30s
Muslim Camp	6	Four (4) *chelas*	Early to mid-30s
Mugda	45	*Guruma* (1)	Late 40s to early 50s
		Four (4) *chelas*	Early to mid-30s
Old Dhaka	30	*Guruma* (1)	Late 40s to early 50s
		Six (6) *chelas*	Early to mid-30s

For this write-up, the findings are primarily based on the narratives of *hijra* individuals (anonymously) and are presented as direct quotes. The verbal responses were transcribed and translated from Bangla into English. Major themes and patterns were identified within the narratives following the framework of Rappoport using thematic analysis. The data were organized into subgroups based on inductive codes, including daily activities, estrangement, belonging, and others that emerged from the data.

The research is not only an attempt to shed light on an unexplored area, but it is also significant in terms of an academic co-production. It is an outcome of a collaborative project involving faculty (primary investigator and first author) and students from the Department of Architecture at the MIST. Data collection was primarily conducted by the students, followed by extensive discussions within the team and multiple validations with the community. The findings and discussions based on field-level observations are laid out in the following sections.

5. DERA AS AN EVERYDAY SPACE FOR HIJRA INDIVIDUALS: LOWER-LEVEL MEANINGS

The lower-level readings of dwelling reveal the role of home in the *hijras'* everyday life. The daily lives of *hijras* involve specific duties such as collecting money from local shops, begging, and seeking out houses with newborns or wedding ceremonies etc. Some also work with social workers as volunteers. After preparing themselves according to *hijra* attire and makeup, for example, *chelas* go out to their assigned areas of work in the morning. The nature of work and public presence is typically predetermined. For example, they never accept food during their work. It has been found that their *guruma* assigns everyday tasks. The *chelas* contribute most of their daily earnings to their *guru ma*, keeping only a small portion for themselves. In connection to the daily activities, a participant stated, *"The collection starts at 11 am. In 'Ulti Bhasha', this is called 'Challa Manga'. The collection time is from 11am to 5 pm. While collecting money, it is not allowed to eat from somewhere or take food from anyone. We go out in small groups in selected spots. After finishing collecting money, we come back to have lunch together in our guru ma's dera."*

Exceptions to this are the young ones who are still under training for *hijra* jobs and customs who stay at home and do household work. *"The young ones do not go out; it takes time to get used to the life around here; they do household chores like mopping, cleaning, and cooking. We don't send them outside to work until they are ready and willing to perform the hijra jobs"*, says one *guru ma*. Joining the *deras*, young individuals aged between 11 and 20 years undergo training by their *guru mas* or seniors in *hijra* customs, dancing, singing, etc. The houses we visited had collections of musical instruments and music systems. Besides the young ones, *hijras* who earn through paid sex work have different routines as well as locations of work. Sometimes, some *deras* provide such services, like the one in Old Dhaka, and maintain restrictions on sharing information.
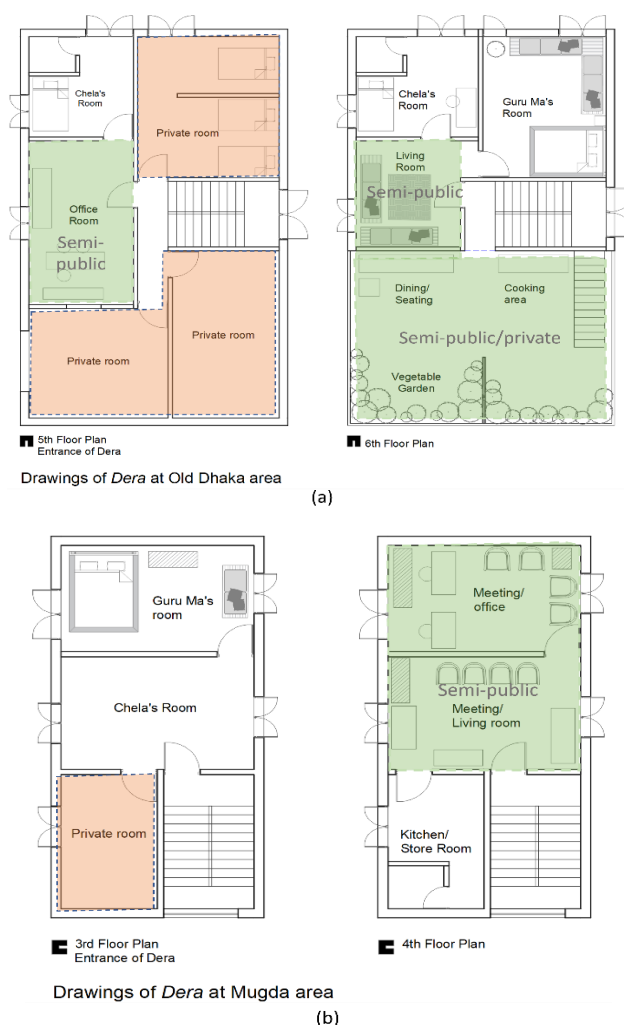

Drawings of *Dera* at Old Dhaka area

(a)

Drawings of *Dera* at Mugda area

(b)

Figure 2: Schematic representation of the *deras* of Old Dhaka (a) and Mugda (b) demarcating the private and semi-public zones.

Such everydayness is reflected in their spatial dynamics. In the slum areas of Mirpur, houses are usually arranged as single rooms, which are often shared by several individuals, typically ranging from 5 to 10. During our visits, we observed one bed in each room and essential items stored in small wardrobes or cabinets. In more stable and *semi-pucca* settlements, like Duaripara, space is utilized more efficiently with shared kitchens and toilet services among neighbors. The young members were seen cooking in the alleys during the day, while most elders were away for work. In the afternoon, we found that most of the members were available for discussions.

In Old Dhaka and Mugda, the *deras* are situated in multistorey (4-5 storeys) buildings where the *hijras* live on rent, occupying two to three floors. Some *chelas* live in separate houses as they cannot accommodate all; however, these *deras* serve as their focal point. It has been found that they tend to appropriate the upper stories, having access to the rooftop where they frequently hold meetings and cultural performances. The overall spatial arrangements, illustrated through schematic plans in Figure 2, reflect a division of semi-public (meeting rooms, living rooms) and private (bedrooms). All kinds of social meetings and gatherings take place in the semi-public zone. Members of these *deras* are affiliated with various social works and different exhibits, including certificates, mementos (Fig. 3), etc, are displayed in the semi-public rooms. In both of the cases, the semi-public zone extends into the semi/open spaces (mainly the roof, also the terrace in the case of Old Dhaka), serving as the semi-private zone for all the socio- cultural trainings of the *dera members* to take place. Such spaces are also the locus of the *dera* members to interact and celebrate their *hijraness* and togetherness.

The spatial manipulation of the physical settings is tailored to serve the needs of the *hijra* lifestyle and hierarchy. The boundary between semi-public and semi-private is blurred as this area is used for socialization with both insiders and outsiders. No distinct dining area could be found, which usually acts as the semi-private zone for a typical urban home. The *chelas* usually dine in their living units on the floor or in the gathering areas. Sometimes they also dine with their *guru ma* in her room. Some rooms in the dwelling units were entirely private, inaccessible to visitors. It mainly exists in *deras* that provide sex work services. The houses seemed to remain introverted overall, with most of the windows sealed from the inside. Such layouts deviate from the usual sequence from a formal living room (semi-public) to the dining area (semi-private) and then to the bedrooms (private), as well as the gender binary norm that often assigns the semi-public space as the male and the private space as the female domain. This way, the *hijra* home diverges from the spatial norms of traditional South Asian homes (Podder & Shahidullah, 2024).

Additionally, the visuals of the interior were found to be different from a typical home in the city. No matter how shabby the exterior was, in most cases reflecting poverty, the interiors were commonly found to be quite colorful with green, orange, and red walls (Fig. 3). Colorful photographs, paintings, and decorative plaques were all over the walls, particularly in the semi-public spaces where they can showcase their vibrant lifestyle. Remaining colorful and vibrant inside the home, they create personal spaces that help them thrive despite external challenges. In addition to the photos and paintings in the common rooms, items such as a fish aquarium, plants, and photo frames were found in their *dera*, including the ones in Mirpur. Most of the houses also contained Arabic calligraphy and pictures of the Kaaba Sharif. Among all the rooms, the *guru mas'* rooms were found to be more attractive due to luxurious furniture, which reveals the internal hierarchy as well. Such territorial behaviors that involve placing objects

with special significance or specific aesthetic qualities are commonly known as *personalization* (Becker, 1977; cited in Despres, 1991). Through personalization, the residents of *deras* nurture a sense of belonging and cultivate a sense of ownership while showcasing a brighter side of their lives altogether.

Figure 3: Photographs of the interiors of *Deras* showing vibrant semi-public and private (bedrooms) spaces.

Throughout the process of personalization, the home becomes a repository for memories of the lived experiences (Jackline, 2025; Malett, 2004), hence, spaces. However, the *deras* exhibited more of a collection of memories of their past and original families. Items such as framed photos of some of their parents and wall hangings with written "blessings of parents" in Bangla not only reflect spaces of *dera* as an act of personalization but also manifest their everyday cherishing of memories of their past. Their memoirs reflect emotional dilemmas: they assimilate with a new family while reminiscing about their original one. As one *hijra* participant said, *"Most of the nights I think of my parents and siblings".* Although the majority of them do not look back and reconcile with their original families, they reflect on their past to find comfort in feeling part of a *real* family while navigating their current lives as *hijras*.

Besides living the duality of past and present selves, the everyday life of the *hijras* is also marked by dual identities (Podder & Shahidullah, 2024). In the outside world, they

must carry their *hijra* identity by embodying the acts of *hijraness*. They have learned to utilize their differences to create unease and manipulate others to give them money. *"There are people in the city living luxurious lives, not worrying about money. But we have to work on the streets and yet earn very little. We have to interact with people, sometimes deceive them, what options do we have anyway?"*, one participant indicated their frustration and lack of scope to enter decent job markets, reflecting their self-awareness of the nature of their work. Sometimes, they adopt the appearances of performers; at other times, they instill fear or act as *mastaans* to extort money from local shops. However, during our visit to the *deras* for the study, the *hijras* were hospitable and friendly; they even offered us snacks. At home, these *hijras* can be themselves and are not required to adopt any tertiary identity to express themselves.

This way, beneath a disguise of duality, the *deras* become an everyday space for *self-expression*. It is the domain where *Hijras* can express their gender identity. They can embrace whichever traits from the gender spectrum they identify themselves with. Often, by singing and dancing together at home, they observe their shared sense of identity. The vibrant and colorful homes are an expression of their resilient *self* that they tend to celebrate. The *dera* is thus a place to celebrate their femininity that made them pariahs in the first place.

For these pariahs, the *deras* this way become an 'everyday space of refuge' from the humiliation and alienation of the outside world (Despres, 1991). *"Once, I was coming back from a marriage ceremony, and I was alone on the road. While I was walking down a road, some guys were calling me names. They were on a truck together. Suddenly, I felt something on my head. They threw stones at me, and my head got cut. I fell and became unconscious. That was a very humiliating night for me. We are always humiliated by people,"* said one study participant, describing the everyday hassle they have to face when they are out. According to a younger one, *"I do not like to go out, 'normal' people like you keep staring at me"*. Within the *dera,* the cohort becomes emotional support toward each other: *"We understand each other"*, as stated by a respondent. Hence, *dera* provides a (safe) haven for *hijra* individuals against the eyes of the outside world.

As a whole, examining the everyday lives of *hijras* through their dwelling spaces reflects their resilience and determination to continue living by embracing their *dera* as a personal space. *Dera* offers them shelter from external hostility and allows them to celebrate their identity. The everyday spatiality of the *deras* as homes reveals a distinct realm that differs from traditional norms. It also reflects the emotional dilemmas that *hijra* individuals endure in their adoption of *hijraness* while safeguarding their own aspirations. Their everyday lives and spaces are thus a blend of communal and individual efforts, as each strives to balance personal needs with the collective well-being of the group.

6. *DERA* AS A SPACE OF HUMANIZATION: MID-LEVEL MEANINGS

The mid-level meanings enable an understanding of identity, status, and power of a community through the reading of their dwelling space in relation to the surroundings and society. Considering home as a vital interface between society and individuals (Saunders & Williams, 1988), this section therefore explores the communal position of the *hijra* individuals within their neighborhood setting. This primarily includes discussion regarding the nature of their interactions with neighbors, where the spaces of *deras* serve as the 'locale'- a spatial and social unit of interaction through which basic forms of social relations are produced (Saunders & Williams, 1988; Giddens, 1984).

As discussed earlier, to society's eyes, *hijras* are unwanted company; people find them either fearful, hostile, or annoying. As a result, they share multiple levels of marginalization (social, economic, political, etc.) within mainstream society. Hence, their collective position in society is clearly at the very bottom. Legally, they don't have ownership of any lands or houses, nor can they claim inheritance, as families don't own them. They have no other choice but to live in rented houses. *"There are numerous deras in Bangladesh; everyone lives in rented dwellings"*, according to one study participant.

However, based on their positionality and relationship with the mainstream population, securing a decent living in the city is quite a predicament. In this sense, getting access to housing can be said to be more of a social struggle than a legal or economic one. Because landlords refuse to sell or rent houses or properties to the *hijras*, even if they can afford it. Apart from that, there is resistance from neighbors as well. As per one *guru ma* from our study, *"No one really wants to rent us a home in apartments. Who doesn't want a life of convenience? Does anyone want to live on the streets? But not everybody wants to rent to us or share space with us. Especially in apartment flats"*. She highlighted the complexities of getting access to any neighborhoods: *"Many fear that we will create a hassle about the rent, or will create chaos in the house. Sometimes, the landlord fears that we won't be able to mix with his other tenants or will make them uncomfortable. Other renters say they will leave if we move in."* As a result, with restricted rental opportunities, they end up living in hardship and poor conditions, mostly located within the urban fringes and slum areas.

Among the six *deras* in which the study was conducted, the *deras* in Old Dhaka and Mugda were in *pucca* (multistorey) buildings and good condition. However, the other *deras* contained *semi-pucca* and *kacha* makeshift settlements, mostly with substandard living spaces prone to overcrowding, poor ventilation, and frequent waterlogging incidents. From the outside, the environment looked unhygienic, unclean, and dark. One of the participants who was a visitor at the time of our visit to Duaripara, refused to take us to her original *dera,* saying, *"Where we live now is very unclean and in a slum. I guess you will feel uncomfortable there"*, ashamed.

While they don't have control over which neighborhood they get access to, the interiority displays their urge to live

a decent, colorful life, as described in the earlier section. Groups that have comparatively better income tend to live in better conditions, such as in *semi-pucca* or *pucca* houses, which is also, of course, after getting access to that very neighborhood. In this connection, the *guru ma* from Duaripara emphasized their relationship with the neighbors in availing the current living conditions in *semi-pucca* house: *"Previously in this locality, people looked at us very differently. Most of us had to live in 'tong' (makeshift) houses inside the slum. Now, look at this house. Although we can afford to rent better than this house, we are now living in a better environment".*

Hence, the relationship between the *hijra* community and the local population is a critical aspect in deciding their position and living standards within the locality. It has been observed that with time, the *hijra* community can get along well with their neighbors. It is particularly evident in low-income neighborhoods, where poverty is a shared struggle. As our observation suggests, in the old Dhaka area, neighborly interactions are generally weak. The community is in a mixed-income area where families prefer not to interact with them. Neighbors, mostly from middle-income families, tend to avoid them. Whereas, in the Mugda area, interactions are significantly better. Neighbors know and show respect to the *hijra* community. Whenever the *hijras* receive aid from NGOs or other organizations, they share it with those around them. They even join local festivals and events, strengthening their bond with neighbors.

Similarly, in Duaripara, Mirpur, the *hijra* community has good relationships with their neighbors, who are mostly from lower-income groups. They help and know each other well. However, the relationship does not build in days but rather over years. According to the *guru ma* from Duaripara, the *hijras* constantly have to prove themselves to their neighbors: *"We have to assure them a lot that we are good people".* She further described the development of their relationship with time: *"When we first came here, little kids would run behind us saying 'hijra, hijra,' as if we were some sort of creatures in a zoo. Over 20 years, our relationship with the local people has developed. They even send us meat during Qurbani Eid festivals. They do it out of respect or fear, I don't know. But I like to assume that they love and respect us as neighbors. "* Her statements reveal that they have been living in the area for a couple of decades and like to believe they have a strong bond with their neighbors, despite their resistance at first.

Thus, in an urban slum, the *hijras* need to gain respect to be able to 'belong' and ensure survival (Hamzić 2019*).* To achieve this, the *hijra* community engages in income-generating activities strategically, taking care not to disrupt their relationships with neighbors. They choose spots for their money collection that are close enough for ease of work yet far enough to avoid interfering with their neighbors' lives. Not all members of the community engage in sex work at their *dera,* as they strive to maintain peaceful coexistence with those living around them. This coexistence, therefore, involves careful negotiations on their part. Through positive interactions, the *hijras* and their neighbors humanize each other and see beyond

hostility and alienation.

During our visit to the *deras* in Mirpur, a positive relationship between the *hijras* and their neighbors could be observed. In Duaripara, we found dolls on the beds belonging to a neighboring child whom they babysat. Additionally, a teenage boy served us snacks, and upon noticing our confusion, the guru ma explained that he was a neighbor from the mainstream community. We also saw a *moulavi* teaching the Quran to a couple of local children in one of their rooms in the *dera* of Jhutpotti. These experiences highlight the prevalence of a decent neighborly relationship between the *hijras* and the mainstream residents in the neighborhood.

Besides, it has been observed that the *hijras* have to constantly negotiate community protection from the police (Hamzić, 2019) and against any threats of eviction and other forms of violence within the neighborhood. They also maintain liaisons with local political leaders, particularly the *gurus*, which ensures their stability within the locality to a great extent. The *gurus* with such connections hold greater power among their cohorts, and the *deras* in this process become a crucial site of negotiation, offering an economic and social model of co-existence that is united and strong enough to earn the *hijras* some substantial bargaining power (Hamzić, 2019). This way, *dera* becomes a space for negotiation of power and the spatial manifest of their existence.

Overall, the middle-level meanings suggest that *hijras* struggle to access adequate housing and encounter challenges when trying to enter neighborhoods due to residents' lack of acceptance. In slum settlements, they lead a marginal life shared with other marginal communities, where the *hijras* constantly have to negotiate social (co)existence through daily interactions with their surroundings. Throughout this process, *dera* becomes both a space of cultivating social relations and a demarcation of the *hijras'* existence on the ground. *Dera* provides the setting where mainstream society, unlike their typical encounters with hijras on the streets performing *hijraness,* interacts with them as neighbors and ultimately connects with them on a 'human' level. To ensure stability and security, the *hijras* have to maintain liaisons and negotiate with powerful institutions. Consequently, through the process of regular interaction with the surroundings, the *deras* becomes a space that fosters a sense of broader acceptance, contributing to a recognition of their identity as humans. This way, at the interface of home and neighborhood, a process of humanization begins.

7. *DERA* AS A SPACE OF DEFIANCE AND DUALITY: HIGHER-LEVEL MEANINGS

The higher-level meanings explore *dera* as a "home" to *hijras'* unique family in comparison to the conventional notion of family, as well as a space associated with the unique realm of *hijras*. Our imagination of home refers to the dwelling space of a family consisting of members connected by bloodline. For the *hijras,* such a conceptualization of 'family' naturally does not comply. Yet, a *dera* represents a home for the *hijras*, where they dwell in groups with a certain sense of belonging and

hierarchy, forming a family-like unit within each *dera*. Hence, to understand *dera* as a space of home, it is crucial to understand the formation of such families.

The notion of family for the *hijras* is the unit consisting of a *guru ma* and her *chelas*. The cohorts for each *dera* are formed in varied yet similar ways. As per our findings, many members of the community were cast out by their families after coming to know about their gender identities. Also, failing to manage a safe space inside their original families (Sharma, 2014), a majority of others left on their own. In this connection, a participant said, *"My parents used to torture me. Getting beaten by my parents was a regular thing for me. They used to beat me until my nose bled. I couldn't finish my studies and came here as soon as I got the chance"*. Thus, a hostile attitude from their own families forces them to leave and join the *hijra* community.

Also, *w*hen a child with gender-atypical features is born, members of the *hijra* community approach them. *"My guru took me from my family, who were very poor, and brought me to Dhaka"*, says another participant. Sometimes, after realizing their differences from their surroundings, they leave their family on their own and look for people with similarities. *"I came here very long ago when I was merely a teenager. My anomalies were not physical, but when puberty hit, I knew I was different from others. Then I left my family"*, said one participant, uttering the pain of the feeling of *otherness*. Her story mirrors the experiences of many others in the community, who leave their birth families to find belongingness and security in the *deras*.

It is also commonly observed that persons with gender atypical features or opposite gender traits find a connection with the *hijra* community in terms of such 'belongingness.' As a participant stated in this regard, *"When I lived with my family, I used to spend so much time with the hijra community at various places such as Hatirjheel. I didn't stay at home most of the time"*. *"Even when I was not a part of the community, I used to attend them. That's how I got merged with the community"*, says another. This connection often surpasses the relation with the original family, primarily due to the humiliation they face from outside the family. In each case, the shared struggle of *otherness* ties the third gender people together beyond blood relations. *"I was loved by my parents. Right after they both died, my siblings started to make me leave my home. I also left my school. I found the community through someone from my school. She took me to celebrate 'Jalsha', where I saw people like me. After that, my guru ma took me in"*, described one participant, emphasizing her connection to the community since long before she was even a part of it.

Moreover, the *hijra* community acts as a shelter for such uprooted and homeless persons. *"People like us, when they leave their family, they search for known people"*, says one *guru ma,* depicting their empathy and stating their role toward each other based on the shared struggle. *"Some leave their home and contact us; we take them in. If we see anyone on the streets alone, we take them in"*, she adds. *"They are like us; we all have similar stories"*. It appears

that they instantly identify with each other for being on the same gender spectrum, which is at odds with the 'normal' and share a similar experience of familial or social rejection.

Hence, the journeys from their original homes to the *deras,* although individual anecdotes, are alike in their state of abandonment and estrangement. These experiences often begin with a feeling of *otherness*, stemming from the inability to fit into what is considered 'normal'. The cohorts work as a 'found family' for each member, who gradually accepts them as their own and gets used to the unique way of living. Thus, the formation of these groups constituting the unit of the *deras* is significant and crucial to understanding the dynamics of *hijra* families. Podder & Shahidullah (2023) define this family as a 'fictive family'. The '*dera*' is, therefore, a home that shelters fictive families consisting of strangers who connect through both rejection from society due to otherness and a sense of belonging among the *hijras* by *sameness*.

In these fictive relationships. *Guru ma* embraces the role of a mother who takes the other members (*chelas*) as underlings under her protection. She provides not only protection and guidance but also emotional care and mentorship. The relationship between *guru ma* and her *chelas* is also one of control. The *guru ma* dictates the types of jobs and the share of income and works as the head of the household overall. In this connection, Podder & Shahidullah (2023) have shown that, besides belongingness, such an act of control also enables the fictive family to sustain itself. The *chelas*, on the other hand, consider each other sisters. *"We are sisters"*, one of the participants emphasized while describing their relationships among the cohort. This shows the community's re-interpretation of familial terms within their social context. And, this way, through everyday interactions and mutual understandings over shared struggles, they form a sense of family with each other.

Yet, the homeliness of a *dera* is rather gradually acquired through hardship and struggle (Hamzić, 2019). The journey of establishing a place among a new cohort and developing a sense of ownership through cultivating belongingness is not an easy, straightforward road. The words of one of our participants in this connection seem quite significant: *"Here, people come from different families. Nor can everyone accept all these wholeheartedly. Some want this, others want that. Even siblings fight, and we are ten children from ten different mothers; we ought to have our differences"*. Pointing to the interviewees, she added, *"You are five different people from five mothers; don't you have your differences? No matter how close you are, can you move freely in your friend's house? You must feel hesitation. We were no different"*. Her statements illustrate the challenges of adapting to a new life, highlighting feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in an unfamiliar place among unknown people.

In addition, adverse experiences within the *deras*, primarily during earlier days, make *dera* not always an ideal space. A participant commented about her early days

in *dera* in this regard: *"They beat me a lot, I suffered many tortures".* Such experiences are quite common for most individuals, as our study suggests. Yet, they consider these incidents to be a part of regular family dynamics: *"They loved me like their child, punished me like their child. Don't your parents punish you? Do you leave your home because of that?"* says one participant. Her statement reveals the family hierarchy, where *guru mas* or other senior individuals (holding power in their groups, such as parents or elder siblings) can control and punish the underlings. The junior members, on the other hand, seek emotional support through a sisterhood among individuals at the same level, and, through all the good and the bad, they build a sense of family among their cohort. *"All of us are the same here, we don't judge each other",* stated a participant; *w*hile another reassured the bond of their cohort as a family: *"I want to live together with my family, which is this people,"*- through this statement, an utterance of acceptance of the community as their own, of their cohort as their family, and their *dera* as their 'home' can be imagined.

At the same time, *dera* is also the manifestation of their loss of a prescriptive form of family and home (Hamzić, 2019). It is evident in their yearning for a regular family and a regular home: "*Even if I want a family and a good home, it will never be possible, so I have accepted my fate the way it is".* Another participant added, "*Who doesn't want to live in their own place? All want a beautiful home, but I have accepted my fate".* Their statements reveal their desire for a home of their own. It also indicates that these individuals have learned to surrender to their reality. However, dwelling on the idea of one's own family is inscribed in their everyday life. *"I was once with my parents and siblings"*- during the interviews, a feeling of loss and estrangement was evident in their address of adoption of the *hijra* life.

In addition, *dera* also serves a crucial role beyond mere dwelling—it is the space where the process of becoming a *hijra* begins. Upon joining a *dera*, new members undergo training in hijra customs and traditions, as well as livelihood techniques, before they begin performing *hijra pesha.* In addition to being a home, this *dera* serves as a school where many vital skills are learned (Hamzić, 2019), ultimately helping individuals become part of the *hijra* community. Therefore, *dera* not only offers a place of dwelling but can also be understood as a space where third gender persons transform into *hijras.* Moreover, quite frequently, there are events of *jalshas* (dancing and singing performances) held in the *deras*, such as on the roofs of the *deras* at Old Dhaka and Mugda area. Therefore, in some cases, *dera* becomes the locus of their jobs, for performers (and also for sex workers) in particular. This way, the meaning of *dera* resonates more with the *hijra* identity than that of a simple dwelling space. *Dera*, as a space, becomes a 'symbol' of *hijraness* beyond its utility as a home.

Based on this particular incident, on the other hand, *dera* symbolizes fear and mystery from an outsider's perspective. Even persons of the third gender hold adverse ideas about *deras* before joining the community, which is

evident in one of the study participants' statements: *"Being a hijra, I also feared them (the hijra community) at first. When I came to the dera, it was terrifying. But then I got used to it. Naturally, other people fear us."* While *dera* serves as a *haven* for the *hijras*, it carries a sense of discomfort to the outside world. People tend to identify *dera* as an unsafe space because of the perceived image of the *hijras* as *other* beings and *unfamiliar* creatures, and also the prevalent negative stereotypes. Thus, *dera*, as a discursive space, creates a fear of the unknown in our imagination.

Reading the meanings of *dera* at this level reveals a space that defies norms and reflects juxtaposition between the *hijra* realm and mainstream world, where dwells a duality of loss and belonging, past and present, and the loss of a dignified place in society with the creation of a new collective identity.

8. *DERA* AS A SOCIO-SPATIAL SYMBOL OF THE *HIJRA* REALM: DISCUSSION

Studying the *dera* through three levels of meanings uncovers the unseen spaces and unheard voices. The lower-level meanings reveal *dera* as a 'joyful centre' (Hamzić, 2019), characterized by its vibrant and flamboyant everyday spaces, beneath which the *hijras* seek refuge from the hostile world. Their everyday space reflects their acceptance of the new reality while negotiating with personal trauma and the predicaments of embracing the *hijra* life. Furthermore, the semi-fixed features (Coolen & Ozaki 2004; Rapoport, 1981) in some of their dwelling spaces, such as heavy or decorative furniture, vibrant interiors, etc., clearly demonstrate their desire to establish a place in society by showcasing their worth through wealth. This discussion, overall, enables insight into the unnoticed realm of *hijra* individuals and humanizes them before the eyes of the readers. It also reveals an altered notion of dwelling that counters the typical spatial norms and accommodates the *hijra* lifestyle, containing distinct (daily) activities. Such a notion of dwelling enables us to imagine a home beyond its conventional spatial setting within Dhaka and can add to the dialogues of home beyond a space (Mallett, 2004).

On the other hand, the middle-level meanings depict their communal interaction and position with the localities. It is understood that securing a house is more dictated by external forces than one's abilities. They require continuous negotiation on their part to access any neighborhood and ensure stability by carefully maintaining their relationships with the neighbors. Thus, there exists a constant negotiation of power and social contact between the *dera* and the neighborhoods, through which the *hijras* reinforce their presence and make their existence visible. Through a neighborhood-level interaction, *hijras* gain greater acceptance among mainstream communities. With better social position acquired through political and social liaisons, they can avail better living conditions. However, as the findings suggest, *hijras* may appropriate a place among the lower-end population, but even with power and economic position, they are rarely recognized among the higher-end society. In connection to this, the study believes

that a place-based inquiry into the *hijra* community's marginality can reveal a broader spectrum of (intersected) spheres that shape their positionality (e.g., class, gender, politics, etc.), and can be significant for future exploration in the conversations of enhancing social acceptance towards *hijras*.

Finally, at the higher level*, dera* is found to represent a space of "home" that defies the definition of family and disrupts the norms based on the gender binary. It is a space that is rather symbolic of the *hijra* identity. According to Hamzić (2019), *dera* functions as a 'post-home' that provides refuge from an unfavorable natal home and serves as a setting for the creation of a collective identity of 'thereness.' Podder & Shahidullah (2024) define these spaces as counter-homes that challenge the institutionalized notion of abnormality. In addition to these statements, the study finds *dera* to be a heterotopic space, a space that embraces the *otherness*.

A heterotopic home, according to Foucault's (1967) concept of heterotopia, can be imagined as a spatial context that juxtaposes or disrupts the ordinary, creating an 'other place' that exists outside the norms of everyday life, potentially representing alternatives to dominant social and cultural norms (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1984). Heterotopias are real places that act as "counter-sites," symbolizing, opposing, and transforming traditional sites, standing in contrast to utopias (Jadhav, n.d.). *Dera,* in relation to this*,* shelters the individuals rejected by society on the grounds of non-typical gender identity while defying the norm of a traditional home. It operates through 'fictivity' (Podder & Shahidullah, 2023) while adopting familial roles and hierarchy. *Dera* is a space that embraces everyday duality; beneath the colorful display of *hijraness*, individuals constantly negotiate their trauma and sense of identity, perform sisterhood while yearning for a regular family. For newcomers, *dera* serves as a space of 'liminality'; an ambiguous phase where the liminal personae are neither here nor there (Turner, 1969; cited in Wels et al., 2011). It offers both the negative and positive aspects of loss and belonging, as well as a space of ultimate transformation into a *hijra*. The meaning of *dera*, thus, surpasses the very idea of settlement, enabling inhabitants to experience home more as a journey than a destination (Hamzić, 2019). Through an image of fear, *dera* additionally becomes a spatial manifestation of *otherness*— the unique, mysterious, yet vibrant world of the *hijras*.

In addition, joining a *dera* does not guarantee overcoming the ill-treatment of *hijras* by the world*,* as it may offer limited protection while imposing its own hierarchies (Hamzić, 2019). On one hand, *dera* as a symbol of the *hijra* realm provides purpose to its members and attaches identities. On the other hand, it exploits their labor and compels them to adopt certain lifestyles and traits. While people recognized as a third gender are ostracized from their families, individuals with the label of *hijras* are not welcome in mainstream society either. Nonetheless, the community provides them with food and shelter, as well as purpose and identity. In connection to this, a participant's quote is significant: *"I don't want to go back to the mainstream as people don't value us"*. Hence, *hijraness and dera* provide them a certain level of dignity by making them 'visible' to the world.

Hijraness, in this regard, is found to be a journey of transformation of culture and identity. It is a collective identity through which the *hijras* appropriate their rights and place within the city. The realm of *hijra*, thus, can be understood as the 'infrapolitics of the powerless' (Scott, 1990) and 'tactics' (De Certeau, 1984) of the pariah to reclaim their space within the state and protect their communal self. In this process, *dera,* as both a symbolic and spatial hijra entity that transcends its physicality, becomes a powerful manifestation of the hijra existence as a locus for their daily negotiations with the personal self and society. In the face of societal marginalization, the *dera* stands as a testament to the *hijra* community's resilience. It embodies their collectiveness, offering a space where cultural practices are preserved and members find acceptance and purpose.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The paper, as a whole, attempted to delve into the lives of *hijra* individuals and uncover everyday narratives about how dera is shaped as a home. Toward this end, it analyzed what meanings the realm of *dera* holds at three levels- in terms of everyday space, a home, social position, and a symbolic space. Throughout the study, the personal and emotional experiences of *hijra* individuals have been explored. The findings presented in this paper offer a more humanized perspective on *hijras*, who face challenges at every level as they strive to establish their place in society as a minority. Uncovering the relationship between their *hijra* lifestyles and marginal living spaces in the city, the study advocates for their right to the city.

From within the field of the built environment, it invites dialogues around the inclusion of the largely neglected *hijra* population into the discourse of spatial justice. Special emphasis needs to be given to them within the broader category of the marginalized and destitute population within national housing policies (i.e., Ashrayan). However, despite the government. initiatives, the *hijras* are unable to come out of their ill fate mainly due to resistance from society on the ground. In connection to this, the study has shown that social acceptance of *hijra* individuals can be fostered through regular, human-level interactions, facilitating an understanding of *hijra*s as humans. Based on this idea, more humanized portrayals through television and media could be significant. It is essential to give special consideration to the inclusion of *hijra* individuals in schools, as fostering humanization begins in childhood. To support this, quotas could be established for *hijra* students in public schools and colleges. Additionally, incentives could be offered for mainstream students, along with organized programs that promote interaction among all students through cultural events and other activities. Inclusion is a complex process; however, it needs to start somewhere. The study embeds that "*hijra*" as an identity is a social construct rather than a natural fact, and thus believes that mass perceptions can be shifted to more "humane" terms.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: S. Sameen - Research design, data analysis, and conceptual framework development.

Author 2: A. R. Hossain - Data collection and transcriptions.

Author 3: F. Jerin - Data collection and transcriptions.

Author 4: S. Shreya - Data collection and transcriptions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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