GURU-CHELA RELATIONSHIP IN THE KHWAJASIRA CULTURE OF PAKISTAN: UNCOVERING THE DYNAMICS OF POWER AND HEGEMONY WITHIN

Saad Ali Khan
Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad

Abstract

The khwajasira community in Pakistan for the last few years has been actively pursuing a struggle to achieve their fundamental rights. With the promulgation of the Transgender Person’s Act of 2018, Pakistan has become among the few countries in the world considered to be extremely progressive in protecting the rights of these individuals. While praise and acclaim are levelled toward their struggle with problems and issues associated with the outside world (social world), there has been little if any work produced on their particular culture especially the dynamics of the guru-chela relationship in Pakistan. The khwajasira community’s existence in Pakistan, with its specific culture, predates the creation of the nation. Over a period of time, transformation and change have taken place within this community. While some of the traditions remained intact, others faced fundamental changes. The guru-chela relationship is considered to be the core/foundational aspect of khwajasira culture and community in Pakistan. The dominant discourse in Pakistan is that the transgender community is marginalized and discriminated against by society at large; however, there has been a scarcity of work that critically

1 Saad Ali Khan is lecturer at the Centre of Excellence in Gender Studies, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad (sakhan@qau.edu.pk).
question the “internal world” of the transgender community in Pakistan. In this regard, this article aims to unearth some of the dynamics of their living world. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 individuals (17 chelas and 3 gurus) residing in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, this article argues that transgender activism (for their rights) is entirely an engagement with the “outer world”, while within their own particular communities/groups the existence of discrimination, violation of rights and even violence are largely overlooked or have never been talked about, especially within the guru-chela relationship. It is revealed through this research that within the khwajasira community, especially with respect to the guru-chela relationship, there exist unchallenged/unrequited power and hegemony. This relationship, hierarchal in nature, not only gives rise to discrimination and violation of human rights, but also perpetuates violence on a day-to-day basis.

**Keywords:** Khwajasira, guru-chela, Pakistan, hegemony, transgender

**Introduction**

With the promulgation of the Transgender Persons (rights and protection) Act of 2018 in Pakistan, the state and society have been applauded for winning “half the battle.” Since 2009 when in a landmark decision of the Supreme Court recognized more rights of transgender individuals (also called khwajasiras) and allowed them to have national identity cards (CNIC) with the identity of “third gender”, the struggle for more rights has continued, culminating in 2018. These two historical events have earned huge praise for Pakistan not only nationally but also within global circles. The Transgender Person’s Act of 2018 is lauded internationally for being progressive, nuanced and comprehensive, and for opening up many opportunities and spaces for transgender individuals in Pakistan. The housing and population census of 2017 documented 10418 transgender individuals living in Pakistan, with more concentrated in urban centres than rural areas. These transgender individuals or khwajasiras have formed their own groups and networks across the country and live in their own particular way, constituting a unique culture known as khwajasira culture. They have struggled at many levels from their survival to their acceptance and from their rights to their freedom in Pakistan. Khwajasira/transgender activism in Pakistan is largely carried out against discrimination, stigmatization, exploitation and violence faced on a daily basis, starting from their families up to the level of society and state. However, over the last few years their politics and activism have
broadened exponentially and have broached themes like identity politics, rights-based activism, laws and reforms and community-based activism and mobilization (Khan 2014).

All of these efforts made by khwajasiras in Pakistan have been directed towards the larger society and state in order to achieve their due status and rights. Their engagement and struggle with the challenges posed by the society and state have transformed their communities in many regards. They have become more conscious of their own sensibilities, and through their politics and activism started taking up roles and responsibilities that otherwise were considered unachievable for individuals like them. Since they face discrimination, abuse, rejection and non-acceptance from a very early age of their lives, they are forced to flee their homes and families and find refuge and solace in communes of individuals of the same kind. These communes have a peculiar subculture and dynamics and are considered as a substitute for home and family in general.

While living together in communes, khwajasiras forms bonds of solidarity and amity, but they also face new challenges and remain vulnerable due to the dynamics within these communes. The particular culture within the communes is a reflection of power and hierarchy. While there are many unique aspects of this particular culture, the guru-chela relationship is considered to be the foundation of the community. This article is therefore an exploration and analysis of these internal spaces of the khwajasira’s world. It is interesting to note that while there is ample literature available that deals with the khwajasira community’s struggle and activism within society and the state at large, there is hardly any study that focuses on the internal dynamics of the khwajasira community, especially related to the guru-chela relationship.

The significance of this research lies in two areas: firstly, it has contributed to scarce knowledge about the unique culture of this community by introspecting closely their social world and analysing the dynamics of power and hegemony embedded in it. Therefore, this research is an exploration of the internal dynamics of their socio-cultural world that is either completely invisible or hidden to society. Secondly, the concepts of hegemony and power are always perceived by this community as prerogatives of society and state. There is hardly any denial in the claim that this community has been facing all sorts of challenges posed by the society and state; however, this is not the only reality of this community. While focusing just on the issues and problems posed by the outer world, they have managed to ignore or neglect their internal dynamics. Therefore, this article aims to analyse how hegemony and power are played out inside this community by different individuals, especially in
the *guru-chela* relationship. Concepts of power, as espoused by Foucault, and Hegemony by Gramsci, respectively, when applied to this community revealed the vulnerability of individuals within this community.

Living in communities dispersed in different parts of Pakistan, *khwajasir*as have constituted a peculiar sub-culture. A glimpse into their world reveals diverse aspects and facets of this culture. They have performed various roles and responsibilities in society. Historically, they have been associated with the world of courts (Mughal in India) and elite homes, appointed as guards of harems, and served as courtiers in the Mughal Empire (Hinchy 2014; Manucci 1906; Lal 2005; Chatterjee 2000). They were highly esteemed as individuals with capabilities of administrating worlds of men and women alike. However, with the waning of the Mughal Empire, the social status of these individuals also started to fade, pushing them into the margins and forcing them to choose begging, sex work, dance and folk entertainment (*bhand*) as their livelihood (Hambly 1974; Kidwai 1985; Lal 1994).

Their status and position deteriorated under the colonial regime and they were pushed to the margins of the society. After the creation of Pakistan, they remained marginal and underprivileged. As a community they were unable to create a mass movement for their rights. *Khwajasira* individuals in Pakistan mostly lacked social, material, cultural and other resources to secure better positions in society. Above all, due to lack of education and jobs opportunities, they took on occupations and activities that were considered less by the rest of society.

**Khwajasira** Culture: A Glimpse into their Social World

There are many aspects of *khwajasira* culture based on traditions that were passed on from one generation to another since ancient times. One significant aspect of their culture is the language they speak, known as *farsi kalam* or language developed over a period of time; similarly, they have made rules and regulations related to their day-to-day life and living together in the same space. They formed bonds of affinity and affiliation with each other in their respective spaces. Many aspects of their culture are not known to the public at large, however. Faced with violence, discrimination, exploitation and oppression from the rest of the society, including their families, these communities are sources of refugee, solace and survival. Living among individuals of the same identity provides them with confidence and consolation. Marginal and peripheral to the mainstream culture of the society, the socio-cultural world of *khwajasiras* has its own features and characteristics.
Dera: the living shared space or “new home” of transgender individuals

Khwajasiras reside in spaces with varying numbers of individuals, depending upon the size of the residence, but normally ranging from 3 to 6 individuals in a particular place. The space they occupy functions as “home” for these individuals who have either been expelled from their natal families or otherwise fled in order to secure themselves from violence and persecution. Expelled from their homes and considered as outcastes by society, they find shelter, refuge and a new sense of belongingness in these new spaces. Dera, as it is commonly called in their farsi language, this new home or residence is considered as the only place where they can openly exercise their selves and identities. It has been observed that they join these deras at a very young age; however, this is not a fixed rule and admission to a khwajasira family can take place at any time in the life of the khwajasira. Within each dera, every resident or occupant is bound by the rules and regulations agreed upon by all of them. These include respecting the elders and maintaining harmony and peace within the home. Similarly, home chores are also divided among all the occupants to ensure that no one is burdened.

Interestingly many studies have been conducted in the South Asian region and also in Pakistan on the khwajasira community, but there has been little if any work done to explore and analyse this dynamic relation between guru and chela. This present article is an endeavour to explore and analyse this relationship and unearth the dynamics working in it. The guru-chela relationship is formed on mutual trust between individuals. Through initiation, novices are given the roles and responsibilities of a chela. Any understanding of khwajasira culture without understanding the guru-chela relationship is neither inclusive or comprehensive, nor holistic. The power dynamics of this relationship within a dera contribute to more marginalization of individuals who are already marginal and vulnerable.

Review of the Literature

Literature produced on the khwajasira/transgender community in Pakistan largely revolves around understanding their plight and struggle with the social world. These studies have contributed to understanding how, as a marginal and sexual/gender minority, they have coped with oppressive structures, exploitative behaviours and the presence of violence in the society. This previous research, therefore, can be classified into the following themes.
First, there are research studies, reports, situational analysis works, and policy briefs produced by the NGO/INGO sector in Pakistan. These studies have employed a particular vantage point and presented their findings for the development world. The dominant discourse that stems from NGO/INGO reports and research work on the transgender community in Pakistan revolves around issues of stigmatization, violence, societal discrimination, and is more frequently related to sexual and reproductive health issues and rights including, but not limited to, HIV and STDs. These reports and research documents inform a developmental perspective arguing that the transgender community is largely marginalized in Pakistan. Moreover, they are facing stigmatization and rejection by society and state alike. Based on such findings and analysis, these organizations lobby for the inclusion of *khwajasiras* in society, as well as protection of their fundamental human rights, especially their health and reproductive rights. These works appear more frequently and constitute the largest part of the literature available on this issue.

Secondly there are academic studies from different disciplines, including anthropology, medical sciences, law and policy, developmental studies, media studies, gender studies, history and sociology, that form a significant part of the literature. There is, however, a scarcity of these resources, and the likelihood of gathering more information about the community through these resources is minimal. Scholars like Faris A. Khan (2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2016, 2014, and 2011) have extensively worked on the issues of identity politics and activism of the *khwajasira* community in Pakistan. Producing several articles on this theme, the author positioned his analysis on how the *khwajasira* community has been able to play out identity politics in Pakistan. He explored ways in which these gender-ambiguous communities in Pakistan construct, negotiate and represent themselves in their own social groups and in the larger society. Based on ethnographic field research, his writings document the political struggle of the *khwajasira* community in Pakistan over the years. Other ethnographic works on the transgender community in Pakistan include an exploration of their social world, their occupations and their world views related to different aspects of life. Thirdly, a large number of articles and reports have been published on medical and psychological aspects of the transgender community. Most of these studies are produced by individuals associated with the fields of psychology, medicine, public health or disease management. These studies explored themes like the issue of sex work/HIV prevention, gender dysphorics, psychological morbidity, prevalence of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and HIV among the transgender community.

Lastly, there are some studies that focus on issues and problems faced by the *khwajasira* community in Pakistan, ranging from social stigmatization, educational issues, and social
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issues, to employment problems, occupational challenges, social status and human security. These studies have employed different discplinary backgrounds to understand the issues and problems faced by the transgender community in Pakistan. Scholars like (Alizai, Doneys, & Doane, 2017; de Lind van Wijngaarden, Schunter, & Iqbal, 2012; Redding, 2015, Saeed, Mughal, & Farooqi, 2017) have researched various aspects of the transgender community in Pakistan. Moreover, scholars like Amen Jaffer (2017), Azam Chahdhry (2010) and Omar Kasmai (2009) have analyzed the transgender community’s religious and spiritual dimensions. They have explored the ideas of khwaja sira visitation of shrine spaces, performativity of their gender identity through spirituality and the association of khwaja sira with Sufism in Pakistan.

Research Methods and Sources

The present research is qualitative research based on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the khwajasira community in the locales of Bari Imam and Mehrabadi (Islamabad) and Bakra Mandi (Rawalpindi), conducted during February-March 2019 and July-September 2019. Through purposive sampling, 20 individuals were identified; out of those 12 were chelas while 3 were gurus in their respective communities. Each guru was living with 4 of her chelas. The remaining 5 individuals were chelas, who had left their gurus and were now living independently, were also included. Their names and identities were kept confidential and anonymity was ensured at every stage of the research. I have used pseudonyms for these respondents in this research. The aim and objectives of the research were shared with the interlocutors after formal introductions. Consent was taken by each individual orally after they had agreed to be a part of the research. Chelas were interviewed separately in the absence of their gurus and vice versa.

The interviews were conducted in the local language, Urdu. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used and the responses of the participants guided further questions. The responses were analysed and categorized into different themes. The interview duration spanned from 40 to 90 minutes’ maximum for a single day. Most of the interviews were conducted in their deras; however, some respondents were hesitant to speak in front of their gurus, so they were interviewed in a separate place. The interviews were not recorded in order to avoid any suspicion or mistrust. Notes were taken meticulously during each interview to document minute details shared by the respondents. During the research, several challenges were faced and successfully resolved: for instance, some of the chelas were hesitant to answer questions related to their gurus because of the fear that the guru would expel them from their families. Moreover, the gurus mostly considered that this relationship is a huge responsibility.
for them and avoided describing any challenges faced by them in this relationship. Other limitations of the research were related to availability and willingness of transgender individuals and suitable places for conducting interviews. Initially, rapport building was done with most of the community members through informal discussion. Some of them were hesitant because they had been facing issues related to their privacy and security, while others showed apprehension because they already had encountered problems due to the development world’s frequent intervention in their community. Throughout the research, I was conscious of my own position as a researcher and the power of representation I have as an academician. I was aware of these dynamics in my research, and to minimize the power dynamics of researcher and researched, I have actively voiced their responses exactly as they have shared them with me. While conducting interviews I also felt an emotional attachment to the respondents because during interviews they shared their experiences living in society. The discrimination and violence they were experiencing on the basis of their gender were difficult to ignore. At that time, I felt sad and irritated that they had experienced these acts of violence and that so much negativity had been directed towards them. As already mentioned, all ethical considerations were observed in the process of research. Since most of these individuals were from not well-to-do backgrounds, and were marginalized and stigmatized, special attention was given to keep their self-respect and integrity.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data in the research. It assisted in uncovering the experiences of individuals, their perceptions and ideas/opinions about the research topic. Thematic analysis not only helped in arranging the data in broad categories, it also assisted in identifying patterns within the collected data. It helped in getting in-depth understanding of transgender individuals living in the same space within the guru-chela relationship.

Theoretical Underpinning: Hegemony and Power

The concept of hegemony was presented by Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in order to understand the social world and the politics of a ruling elite. While his ideas of cultural and political hegemony were the basis to understand capitalist dominance, they are applicable to social situations where one group dominates the other. This dominance, otherwise known as hegemony, is a result of what Gramsci analysed: when particular sets of ideas have the tendency to become commonsensical and intuitive, thereby inhibiting the dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas (Rosamond 2016). Hegemony of ideas, or any actor or individual becoming a hegemon, requires unquestioned authority and power over others. The power to create silence and absence of any alternatives is how hegemony is functional
in any society. Hegemony, though perceived and accepted by the society as the normal order of the day, actually results due to unbridled power of certain individuals over others. The process of hegemony builds on display of power, manipulation, deception and exploitation of individuals.

Michael Foucault (1926-1984) has forwarded the ground-breaking concept of power through his writings. His ideas radically changed the notion of power and the traditional imagination attached to this particular concept. According to Foucault, power, as traditionally understood, is not fixed and always moves from top to bottom in a society; rather, it is more diffused and present in day-to-day relations. It is not embedded in the physical strength of individuals but perpetuates discursively through discourse and narratives. According to him, power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with. Rather, it is the name that one attributes to a strategically complex situation in a particular society. Interestingly, he argues that power does not allow itself to be fixed but is dispersed in everyday relations in our society. He also sees it as disciplinary power through which individuals in a society are regimented and disciplined to behave in a certain desired way. Power, therefore, is everywhere and expressed from micro levels to macro levels in society.

In the research under consideration, these concepts of hegemony and disciplinary power are operationalised in the khwajasira community in order to understand the dynamics of the guru-chela relationship. While the khwajasira community faced oppression by the state and society for most of their life cycle, the presence of power and hegemony within their community demonstrates veiled levels of exploitation and vulnerability for these individuals. In their struggle to eradicate oppression, violence, discrimination and injustice directed towards them by the state and society, they have either ignored or otherwise intuitively accepted the problematic power and hegemonic dynamics present inside their community.

The guru-chela relationship, as analysed through Gramsci’s point of view, reveals “hegemonic order” embedded in this relationship and sustained by notions of power or disciplinary power. This hegemonic order is premised on an idealized notion that in order to live and survive, the khwajasiras have to adopt this particular culture and comply with this relationship. The guru-chela relationship, presented as an inevitable part of their culture and highly idealized, is accepted as “common sense” by the khwajasiras, consequently resulting in this hegemonic order. Within the khwajasira culture, this kinship structure (guru-chela) is dominating and pervasive, denying the possibilities of alternatives or substitutes, and thus producing a hegemonic order. The individuals who are initiated into this relationship (chelas) are
supposed to comply with its dynamics. Rules and regulations are formulated by the dominant group (gurus), and the subordinate group (chelas) are re-socialized (disciplined) in such a way that they have to follow those rules and regulations.

This relationship, when viewed and analysed through concepts of hegemony and disciplinary power, also demonstrates the internal dynamics of the khwajasira culture. Gurus wield power and hegemony over the chelas in a way that is never challenged or questioned, creating silence and obedience. As argued by Reddy (2005), this relationship is a “hierarchical obligatory relationship” based on unequal power distribution between gurus and chelas. The power to maintain this hegemony is embedded in the discursive level rather than physical, social, cultural or economic levels. Gurus have the power of decision-making and absolute authority over the chelas, almost like a hegemon. Moreover, their hegemony, seniority and authority are wielded through repressive disciplinary practices that are marked by masculine power and privilege.

Findings

This section of the article is based on primary data generated by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with khwajasiras in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The guru-chela relationship is a dynamic power relation between individuals of this community. It puts guru and chela in different positions vis-à-vis each other. While a guru undoubtedly has more power over the chela, the chela can gain influence through her contribution to the family. Nevertheless, this relationship, as observed, is hierarchical in nature and builds on power differentiation between individuals. Within this relationship, the guru has the tendency to exercise her hegemony over other individuals (her chelas), and this hegemony is hardly questioned by the chelas, who were already in a vulnerable position and dependent on the guru. While the chelas also have substantial power in this relationship, they seldom use that power against their gurus. In the discussion below, gurus have been represented by X, Y and Z pseudonyms, while the rest of the alphabet letters represent the respondents, i.e. chelas.

The Guru-Chela Relationship: formation and dynamics

The residents of a particular khwajasira community living together in a dera constitute a “family” with a core relationship of guru-chela. Typically, in a dera the Guru (the head of the family) is considered as the Mother/Father who is responsible for the rest of the family, mainly comprised of chelas (considered as students, daughters, disciples). Sometimes in a home there can be more than one guru, known as dada guru
The relationship of a guru with their chela is considered the strongest defining aspect of khwajasira culture. A khwajasira without a guru is considered less honourable, less valued and more vulnerable in their social world of transgender. This guru-chela relationship is considered to be mutually beneficial for the individuals.

The khwajasira family is headed by a guru while the chelas are an essential part of this kinship. Since these individuals come from different parts of society, they mostly contribute to constituting a diverse culture of the family. Each family is a closely-knit social structure, where the admission of any new member is strictly according to traditions of the culture. One of the rituals required to become part of the family is called chittai (initiation); that is done when a new khwajasira takes an oath in the hand of the existing guru and becomes a part of the family by paying 125 rupees. Once the chela takes this oath, she is bound by the instructions of the guru and has to comply with the guru's wishes. Chelas, once becoming part of the culture, are re-socialized and instructed by their guru.

Within the guru-chela relationship each individual is given a particular role and responsibility. In order to take the role of a guru, one must fulfill the criteria as understood in the culture. Typically, a khwajasira who aspires to become a guru must be experienced and of elderly age. Apart from this, she is not only respected among her own community but also by other fellow gurus and their communities too. She yields unbridled power and expects respect and obedience from her chelas. She is responsible not only for settling issues between her chelas but also for helping to solve intra-community conflicts. A chela is someone who is initiated within a particular community and who is ready to take the role of a novice. On her part, compliance and obedience are expected. Within one family, after the demise of the guru, the senior most chela takes the role of the guru. As shared by the respondents, there is also a prevalent trend within the transgender community that when a guru receives information that an intersex baby has been born in their vicinity, they visit the house and demand the baby from the family. According to the gurus, that baby actually belongs to their community so they are the legitimate caretakers. When asked, the gurus said that the baby is eventually disowned by the family so in any case it belongs to the khwajasiras.

**Guru-Chela Relationship: A multidimensional relationship**

First, the relationship of guru-chela is multidimensional in nature. It is not fixed or static and can be formed on the mutual consent of both guru and chela. Moreover, it has been considered the most significant aspect of the khwajasira culture. According to one guru, this relationship is the foundation of the khwajasira community in
Pakistan. For her, “this relationship distinguishes our community from the rest of the world especially the West. Our culture is peculiar to the sub-continent and we are proud of this” (X, 2019). All gurus agreed that there can be no substitute for this relationship; it is mutually beneficial for gurus and chelas. One of the respondents who had been recently initiated as a chela exclaimed, “For me I have been expelled from my family and I took refuge with my present guru. I missed my home very much but I feel my guru is my mother now. I feel at home in this place now” (B, 2019). Another chela who has been living with her guru for the last 10 years shared her experience of this relationship in these words, “I still remember when I was initiated by my guru. I was 15 years old. Since then the guru has taken care of me and I feel happier here. This is my family. This relationship is precious” (C, 2019). However, there were two chelas who had been exploited by their previous gurus and they have left those relationships. Sharing the experience, one khwajasira said, “I lived with my guru for more than 5 years, but there had not been a single day when I was not exploited by the guru. I find this relationship based on hierarchy, it is for me like slavery. I was unable to live according to my choice. My freedom was at stake all the time. I left my guru and now live independently” (F, 2019). While the other khwajasira who had been exploited by a previous guru and now joined another guru, said, “My previous guru was harsh and strict. She used to threaten me and sometimes became violent. One day I decided to leave and I left her place. She is still after me” (K, 2019).

Guru-Chela relationship: Economic dimensions

Primarily, the guru-chela relationship is economic in nature and thus mutually beneficial for both guru and chela. It has been observed that the guru is more dependent economically and financially on her chelas. The chelas are considered as individuals who are responsible for the income generation of the family; the gurus are supposed to run the affairs of the home. For the purpose of income generation, the chelas were occupied in three different activities including, but not limited to, begging, performance at functions (for instance, marriage ceremonies, birthday parties, inaugural ceremonies) and sex-work. The income generated through these activities by the chelas is handed over to the gurus for appropriation among the family members. One of the chelas, who has not been able to generate income, shared her experience of doing all the domestic chores in her guru’s home. “I do all the domestic chores every day in order to live in this home. The guru commands me for this work as a substitute for my income generation abilities” (A, 2019). Some of the chelas also shared the fact that they not only worked outside but also inside their homes in order to survive.
The income generated by the chelas is handed over to the guru, and she is responsible for managing the affairs of the home. It is the sole prerogative of the guru to appropriate the money as she deems right between the individuals. No chela can question the authority of her guru about this appropriation of money. Gurus, through their social contacts, experience and abilities, make sure that their chelas get maximum/good profitable work to do. This economic bond between the guru and chela makes them dependent on one another. However, in certain instances, individuals become more vulnerable and can be exploited more frequently. In one instance a guru shared the fact that she was deceived by her chela regarding financial transactions. “She kept all the money with her and only shared a little amount with me. I later found out that she was using my name and reputation to earn more than other chelas. I felt cheated and expelled her from my home” (Y, 2019). In some cases, chelas were exploited by their gurus for economic and financial benefits. As shared by three chelas, they have been exploited by their guru for money and were unable to cope with it. One chela shared her experience: “When I was initiated in the family I was told by the guru to earn. Since I was illiterate and had no skills I was forced to do begging. I felt really bad and humiliated in the beginning but soon realized that in order to survive I had to comply with the instructions of my guru. Moreover, my guru used to take all the money from me and I had to ask for her permission even for my petty needs” (G, 2019).

Within the khwajasira community strict rules and regulations exist related to the guru-chela relationship. If there is violation of those rules, a special kind of penalty/fine is given to the chelas by the guru. This penalty, known as dand in their vernacular, is of a financial nature and must be given by the chela to the guru as monetary compensation. As shared by the chelas, this penalty serves the purpose of teaching them a lesson, but sometimes it is a burden and exploitation of the chelas. The amount of the fine, though petty still, puts chelas in a compromising position. Some of them also shared the idea that this is a mechanism of control devised by the gurus. On the contrary, all three gurus opined that this dand is actually imposed on the chelas to discipline them and in reality has no financial value for them. Nevertheless, imposition of such fines reveals the asymmetrical nature of the relation between the chelas and gurus. The gurus have sometimes used this fine as a controlling mechanism to ensure that their hegemony remains intact in this relationship. One of the chela shared an instance where the guru imposed more than 10,000 rupees as a fine on a chela who was not obeying her instructions. Sometimes this fine can even range up to 100,000 rupees, as shared many chela respondents. Failing to pay this fine can result in many different outcomes including, but not limited to, social boycott.
In short, chelas are the primary source of income for gurus in a family. The chelas’ income contributes toward running the affairs of the home. The income is used to pay the rent and bills for the home they are residing in. Moreover, all chelas collect seniority allowance for their guru other than this income. This allowance is meant to show respect and maintain dominance and order in the family by the guru. This seniority allowance, as shared by one guru, “is our right as we are the elders of the home and it is due because we are taking care of the chelas” (X, 2019). It also symbolizes the power differential between a guru and her chela in this relationship. There is no fixed rule of how much and when these allowances can be collected from the chelas. If any chela is unable to pay this allowance, or otherwise shows non-compliance, it is considered a breach of trust.

Another aspect of this relationship is the transfer or selling of chelas from one family to another family by a guru. During the interviews, it became apparent that three of the 12 chelas were purchased by their gurus from other families. The amount paid varied according to the chelas, who were traded between gurus for many different reasons. Sharing her experience one chela (who has been traded) said, “I was living with my guru in another city. There had been some clashes between me and my former guru. One day I came to know that I had been sold to another guru and she took me with her. Now I am her property. I am not sure if I will be traded again or not” (C, 2019). This transfer when made with consent also required the paying of money. For instance, if a chela wants to change gurus, a price has to be paid by the latter to the former guru as a transfer fee known as pesha. Chelas, therefore, have been often treated as investments too by the gurus.

**Guru-Chela relationship: Socio-cultural dimensions**

Apart from its economic dimension, the guru-chela relationship has a significant socio-cultural dimension. The guru, being senior and experienced among the khwajasiras, has more social capital in this relationship. She not only has her own social circle but also influences other community members. The authority and power of gurus extend beyond their own immediate circles to larger sections. Especially in case of intra-community conflicts, the gurus are supposed to intervene and adjudicate matters. Similarly, they have their own demarcated territories and orbits of influence. All respondent gurus shared the fact that they have fixed areas where they have authority and where no outsider transgender individual can intervene or work. Initially, a chela derives her power through the guru’s name and reputation. Chelas thrive on her social capital, but with the passage of time they start to build their own circles of influence. Being part of a khwajasira family gives privilege and opportunities to an individual who otherwise would not have those. For a guru, chelas are considered as individuals
who will carry her name and legacy in the community. The guru also derives her social capital through her chelas. As shared by one guru, “I am proud of my chelas, especially those who take care of me and the home and manage things in a good way. Among these I will pass on my authority to the one who will be the most obedient to me” (Z, 2019).

Another significant aspect is re-socialization of chelas by the gurus in their respective families. Once the chela is initiated in this relationship, she is supposed to follow the instructions of her guru. She is considered as a novice, and guru’s knowledge and experience of the field guides her in every possible way. Chelas are also supposed to follow in the footsteps of the guru and are expected to emulate her behaviour. Some of the chelas shared the fact that they found it very difficult initially to follow in the footsteps of their guru, but with time they were able to emulate them. Gurus can be very strict, controlling and authoritative in their training and socialization. They not only financially penalized the chelas but also gave them physical punishments. Verbal abuse and psychological torture more often become part of this process of socialization. One chela who was now living independently shared her experience, “I was too afraid of my guru, she used to torture me and also threatens me. I never dared to reply back to her face. If I had been in her place I would have never been so strict with my students/chelas” (F, 2019). An important part of this socialization is learning the vernacular language, i.e. farsi, and how to clasp hands (tali bajana). When the question was asked as to why this process is so harsh, one guru replied, “It has to be like this. We also have faced such training. We want to make them stronger. The world outside is very cruel. We are preparing them for the real world” (Y, 2019). This socialization process is also a kind of disciplining mechanism for the chelas employed by the gurus. “They (gurus) expect and demand strict obedience and respect from all of us,” one chela expressed. “We are supposed to follow and obey our guru” (C, 2019).

Social protection and safety are extended by the gurus to the chelas in this relationship. In conflicts between the chelas of their respective families or intra-community conflicts, the gurus are supposed to intervene. Gurus also vie for chelas, which could lead to many conflicts between individuals of the community. Accumulated power and resources eventually determine the status of a guru in a conflict. Interestingly, more chelas joining a particular family lends more support to the guru, not only socially but more so economically. However, this view also results in diminishing the value of the chela from an individual human being to just an asset that can be utilized when needed. Much of the name, fame and value of chelas are derived from the lineage and reputation of the guru. Commenting on this aspect, one guru opined, “Chelas have no name of their own. When they come to us we train
them and prepare them for the world. They are known by our names. They identify through us in our social gatherings” (Z, 2019).

Within this relationship, chelas are taught many skills that would be helpful for their survival in the world. They are supposed to learn the intricate and detailed aspects of their culture. Chelas are not only supposed to learn how to survive in this heteronormative oppressive world as gender-nonconformist individuals but also to emulate the deceptive nature of their elders, i.e. gurus. Sharing her experience about this, one chela said, “I was very innocent when I came to my guru. I knew nothing about this cruel world. By observing my guru, I have been able to carry on with my life. My guru is very cunning (taiz) and no one can deceive her” (D, 2019). Living with the gurus, the chelas develop the intuition or sixth sense required for survival.

**Guru-Chela relationship:** Chela’s perspectives

Most of the chelas opined that the guru-chela relationship is hierarchal in nature where one individual dominates others. The guru wields power and authority over the chelas within a family. This power of the gurus is unparalleled, while the chelas feel powerless in most instances. While some gurus are caring, nurturing and friendly, others routinely scold their chelas and compel them to follow instructions. According to the chelas, this relationship is inevitably for their survival in society. “We are expelled from our homes and rejected by the society. We have been taken care of by our gurus; even if they hurt us or harm us we have no issue”, (T, 2019) one chela shared.

All respondent chelas agreed on the fact that the guru-chela relationship put them in a more disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the guru. Some of them shared openly that they feel less protected with their gurus. Due to the social capital gurus have in khwajasira circles, the chelas are bound to obey or comply with this association. A guru can punish the chelas who are disobedient by exercising authority. Known as hukapani band karna (to stop using financial benefits) entails a temporary ban on the chelas and social boycott. This kind of penalty has repercussions that extend beyond one immediate circle or family. Six chelas have shared that they had faced such penalties and felt extremely helpless and more vulnerable. Some of the chelas also opined that since they are already vulnerable, there is no other option for them left than to join a guru and become a chela. In order to survive in the world, they need the support, help and assistance that are extended by this relationship even though the cost of it is very high. “It is like choosing a lesser difficult path from other paths”, said one chela.
**Guru-Chela relationship: Guru’s perspectives**

According to the *gurus*, this relationship is a foundation of their community and universe. It is a tradition that has been followed by their ancestors and they are bound by it. Through this tradition, they believe, the *khwajasira* culture is still visible in our society. They have also been *chelas* in the initial period of their journey into this world. “This is not something new that we are practicing. This relationship has existed for ages”, shared one *guru*. However, for them this relationship is a huge responsibility. One *guru* said, “We provide everything to the *chelas* and only expect their loyalty. We trust strangers and make them part of our families. We feel responsible for them” (X, 2019).

When the question about power and hegemony was asked, all of the *gurus* denied that they have more power than the *chelas*. However, they agreed that there is implicit hierarchy in the relationship. For them hierarchy and power are not bad concepts. It depends on the usage of these concepts. They felt that disciplining or socializing *chelas* in the *khwajasira* circle requires authority or domination. This is how they have learnt to be *gurus*, and they want to pass on this tradition to the *chelas*. All three of them have denied that *chelas* faced violence and abuse by their *gurus*. Similarly, they also denied that a *chela* can be sold from one *guru* to another. One senior *guru* among the three respondents said that this tradition had now almost ended. For all *gurus* this *guru-chela* relationship is significant and has many merits. It is not only a distinctive feature of their culture but also a source of strength. According to them *khwajasira* culture is distinguished by this prominent feature of the *guru-chela* relationship.

**Discussion and Analysis**

It is clearly demonstrated through this research that there are elements of hegemony and power between *gurus* and *chelas* living and sharing the same space. Analogous to family and home, the relationship of *guru-chela* and *dera* respectively, constitute space where some individuals (*gurus*) have more power while others (*chelas*) were considered to be less powerful. As observed in the guru-chela relationship, *gurus* wield more power and hegemony over the *chelas*. This power and hegemony is considered to be, and accepted as, part of their culture and community. While most of the individuals accept this relationship, some have been able to live independently without complying with this relationship. The aim of this research was to explore the hidden aspects, i.e. power and hegemony, embedded in the transgender *guru-chela* relationship.
From Protection to Exploitation

As reflected above in the findings, transgender individuals who are either expelled from or otherwise fled their homes find shelter and protection within the deras. Due to their gender non-conformist lives, transgender individuals are considered an “anomaly” in the society. These individuals have to comply with the guru-chela relationship in order to live together. A chela’s admission to this new family provides immediate relief from societal pressures and problems. However, she is exposed to new forms of exploitation and oppression within the guru-chela relationship. While chelas find shelter in these spaces, they face new challenges; they are exploited in multiple ways but mostly financially and economically. They are not only required to earn for the household, for themselves and for the guru, but also to face different financial penalties and fines imposed frequently on them. As shared by many chela respondents, these financial liabilities not only limit their independence but also compel them to find illegal ways of earning money. Sometimes chelas are so pressured that they even consider committing suicide. While they find protection from societal discrimination and stigmatization, they experience various forms of exploitation within the guru-chela relationship, including financial, physical and psychological abuse.

Chelas have to follow the instructions of the guru in order to survive in the family and also in the community. Since gurus have status and privilege in the community, they can extend their power and influence beyond their immediate family. The chelas are well aware of this circle of influence and therefore take any step accordingly. There were many instances, shared by the chela respondents, when gurus have intimidated them with their power and influence in the community. It is evident through this research that there is a greater possibility of exploitation of chelas by the gurus. The findings demonstrate clearly that in most of the cases the chelas experienced layers of vulnerability living in a family with their gurus. Some of the chelas have also been able to live separately and independently, but most of them are still living in this relationship. For the chelas, this relationship has drawbacks, but there is no substitute available for them. As reflected in this research, these individuals have already been disowned by their families and have faced exploitation, violence and discrimination in society, so this relationship still provides them with some benefits too.

From Hierarchy to Hegemony

The findings of the research demonstrated that this relationship is clearly hierarchical in nature, placing and classifying individuals in ranks. Guru and chela are
Guru-chela relationship in the khwajasira culture

not considered equals in terms of their status and position within a family. Chelas are supposed to obey the commands of the guru if they want to remain within the family. They also have to follow the rules and regulations set mostly by the guru, and non-compliance is dealt with seriously. In most of the cases, the hierarchy augments the vulnerability of chelas in this relationship.

They feel powerless and at the mercy of their gurus. This embedded hierarchy also has a consequence of hegemony in many instances. Gurus not only demand strict obedience they also take away the right of individuals for any differences. As a hegemon, the guru yields unlimited power over her chelas. This power is visible not only inside a particular family but also extends outside the families. Within larger networks of the transgender community, the gurus of respective families are representatives. The chela has no identity of her own; she is always represented and known by her guru. Dominance and authority are also considered as legitimate tools by the guru to socialize their chelas according to their own wishes. A guru’s hegemonic status is part of the guru-chela relationship and extends beyond the immediate family. She is considered to be responsible for her demarcated territory; her power and influence are intrinsic to that territory. Within the home, she mostly takes the decisions related to the chelas. Even if these decisions are not liked by the chelas, if the guru has made up her mind, it will be implemented at any cost. As observed in this research, some of the chelas shared that they were not willing to accept certain decisions of the guru, but they were forced to comply. The decision of sex work or castration is sometimes forced on chelas by the gurus.

Power, Abuse and Violence

The unchecked power of the gurus within this relationship has caused in many instances abuse and violence. For instance, babies who have been adopted by the gurus, in some cases, have encountered sexual abuse. Chelas are supposed to be re-socialized within the dera, but those chelas who are unable to comply with the khwajasira culture face torture and violence. Some of the participants hesitantly shared their experiences of facing abuse and violence perpetuated by their gurus.

In some cases, the chelas were asked by the gurus to do sex work and earn for the family livelihood. Being subject to frequent sexual activities, they are exposed to sex-related ailments (commonly HIV and other STDs) and also face abuse and violence from outsider sex partners. Within the guru-chela relationship they are unable to say no to the guru for this work; doing so can also cause violence and communal rejection. Guru-generated violence and torture can range from physical to psychological abuse and from verbal to sexual violence in nature. As reflected by
some participants, they are forced into surgical and chemical castration by their gurus, even if they are not willing to do that. These procedures not only cause physical, mental and emotional setbacks, but in some cases are also life-threatening. The surgical procedure is kept secret and performed in a safe place (within the dera) to avoid any interventions of state law enforcement agencies like police. Gurus have power and authority over the chelas, and also the power of decision-making. They express their power by suppressing the voices of the chelas, preventing them from expressing their decisions and overriding their choices.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly the khwajasira community in Pakistan has achieved many victories in their struggle for attainment of their fundamental human rights. They have been able to work at the grass roots level while mobilizing their fellow community members. While their struggle is testimony to their strength as a community, they also have strong differences and conflicts among themselves. These intra-community conflicts are not only frequent but also extreme in their nature and scope. Some of these conflicts have impeded the formation of any strong, cohesive, unified collective social movement for the rights of the transgender community in Pakistan. All these facts are well documented and have produced a dominant discourse that the khwajasira community in Pakistan is faced with challenges posed by the state and society, and is in perpetual struggle.

However, this struggle with the larger society for attainment of their rights has overshadowed the internal dynamics of their communities. Living in and sharing a mutual space (deras), khwajasira individuals have pursued the guru-chela relationship. This relationship, inherently hierarchical in nature, is not only a source of protection, care and support for the individuals involved, but also tends to create discrimination, give rise to exploitation and perpetuate violence in extreme cases. While the dominant discourse related to the khwajasira community in Pakistan tends to portray their marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination vis-à-vis society at large, it never questions the power dynamics and hegemonic structures present inside their communities.

As demonstrated in this article, the structures of oppression, discrimination and violence are conditions that do not always exist outside in the external world. Through introspection, it has been revealed that these structures can exist anywhere even where they are not expected to exist. Scholars like Foucault and Gramsci have suggested that power and hegemony can be observed in many different sites. In the case of the khwajasira community in Pakistan, while they have been able to identify
their enemies in society and the state, there has been ample space for them to also look inside their community and identify problematic elements that have been internalized and accepted for ages. They have to fight and struggle on two fronts, with the society and state “outside” and with their community and its dynamics “inside or within”. In the case of the guru-chela relationship, hegemony and power are embedded in the structure of this association, creating hierarchy between individuals. While this relationship is still considered as the core of the khwajasira community, there should be more internal accountability and introspection related to its formation, working and termination. Like the old saying, charity begins at home; the khwajasira community should take the first step and critically analyse these dynamic relationships manifested in their community.

The guru-chela relationship has many dimensions as observed in this article. While some of these dimensions would appear to be beneficial, many have the tendency to affect the individuals in more drastic ways. As revealed through this research the asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in this relationship damage the whole concept of an individual’s freedom and independence. Moreover, in many instances, such power dynamics have yielded authoritarian, hegemonic, controlling and oppressed circumstances that put individuals into dilemma. Both guru and chela have their own interests embedded in this relationship. The guru is supposed to give protection and shelter to her chelas; however, this relationship is also oppressive in nature where the guru exercises her power to maintain the hierarchal relationship and dominance. The guru-chela relationship is also one of the sources of conflict within the Khwajasira community.

Interestingly, within the transgender community there is a widespread belief and perception that the guru-chela relationship (even if it has drawbacks) is inevitable for the khwajasira culture and for the survival of transgender individuals. On the contrary, individuals like Nadeem Kashish, an active transgender individual of Pakistan, has openly condemned this aspect of khwajasira culture, demanding abolition of the guru-chela relationship. She also opened a space (khwajasira shelter home for transgender persons) as a substitute for the dera by providing facilities for vulnerable transgender individuals. Though she has faced a strong backlash and resistance from the community, she is determined and committed to voice her concerns related to the guru-chela relationship in the transgender community of Pakistan.
Endnotes


2 Khwajasira is a term used interchangeably with transgender in Pakistan. However, this is an umbrella term and there are other terms also used for transgender persons in Pakistan, including Hijra, Khusra, Murat, Khadra, Zankha, Zenana.


4 Equivalent to Master-Disciple, Student-teacher, Guide-novice relationship.

5 This is very different from the farsi language also known as Persian spoken in different parts of the world especially in Iran, Iraq and other states.

6 Many National and International organizations (NGOs/INGOs) working on human rights in Pakistan also work with the transgender community. Moreover, some organizations are dedicated solely to work with the transgender community in Pakistan. Some of the NGOs are also administrated and run by khwajasiras like the Wajood society in Rawalpindi. They publish reports on a periodic basis and on diverse issues. Some NGOs and INGOs working on the transgender community in Pakistan include the Aurat foundation, USAID, Wajood Society, Blue Veins, FDI, Naz Foundation, Naz Male Health Alliance, Gender Interactive Alliance Pakistan, Pakistan Transgender Empowerment, Khwajasira Society Pakistan, Itehad bara-e-haqooq-e-khwajasira Pakistan, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International.

7 Mostly these studies are published by the Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association. https://jpma.org.pk/supplement-article-details/95 accessed on 15 April, 2020.


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