

The Third Gender

Hijra Community in India

by
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My first encounter with the hijras was in 1971. While walking around Churchgate in Bombay with an Indian friend one day, we were confronted by two persons in female clothing, who stood before us, blocking our passage. They clapped their hands in a peculiar manner and then put out their upturned palms in the traditional Indian gesture of a request for alms. My friend hurriedly dropped a few rupees into the outstretched palms in front of us, and pulled me along at a quick pace, almost shoving me in front of her. Startled at her abrupt reaction, I took another look at the two people who had intercepted us. It was only then that I realised that they were not females at all, but men, dressed in women's clothing. Now curious, I asked my friend who these people were and why she had reacted so strongly to their presence, but she just shook her head and would not answer me. Sensing her discomfort, I let the subject drop but raised it with other friends at a latertime. In this way I found out a



Ahijra dancing at a college—Madras

little about the hijras, and became determined to learn more. For the next 10 years my professional interests as an anthropologist centered on culture and gender roles and during this time I did research on gay and lesbian

couples in the United States.¹ As part of my interest in sexual variation I read what little I could find on the hijras,² and also asked my Indian friends and relatives about them. I learned that the hijras performed on auspicious occasions such as births and marriages; from some male acquaintances I discovered that hijras may also be prostitutes. Hijras were called eunuchs, but also said to be born intersexed, a contradiction I could not untangle. I realised that without talking with hijras themselves, I could not distinguish fact from fiction, myth from reality. In 1981 I lived in India for a

year with my family and decided to learn more about the hijras. During this time I met and interviewed many hijras in several of the major cities in north and south India. I spent days with them in their homes, attended their performances, met their

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husbands and customers and also members of their families and formed some good friendships among them. As a result of one of these friendships, I was made a ritual younger sister to a hijra guru. I also visited the temple of Bahuchara Mataji, the special deity of the hijras, located close to Ahmedabad. In addition, I spoke at length with doctors and social scientists in India who had personal knowledge of individual hijras or had written about them. All of these investigators were males, however, and I think being a woman gave me a great advantage in getting to know individual hijras in a more personal and, therefore, deeper way.

New Insights

While hijras are regarded as deviant and even bizarre, perhaps, in Indian society, in my hundreds of conversations with them, I was most forcibly struck by them as individuals who share our common humanity. Like human beings everywhere, hijras are both shaped by their culture and the role they play in society, but are also individuals who vary in their emotions, behaviour and outlook on life. Some hijras were outgoing, flirtatious and jolly and loved to dress up, perform and have their photos taken. They met the difficulties of their lives with a good sense of humor, which they often turned on themselves. Kamladevi was one of these; she was my favourite friend because she was so amusing and she spoke fluent English, having graduated from a convent high school. She was a great gossip and imitated her hijra friends

and elders in funny and very insightful ways. In telling a story of how she and several other hijra prostitutes were picked up by the police one evening, she captured to perfection the intimidating attitude of the police, the arrogance of the magistrate and the combination of innocence and boldness she had used in telling them off. Like many hijra prostitutes, Kamladevi worked very hard under the watchful and demanding eye of the hijra "madam" who swallowed most of her earnings. Although she made a fair living as a prostitute, Kamladevi always spent more than she had, as she could not resist buying saris and jewellery. But in spite of her poverty and ill health, she always had an eye for the humorous side of things.

Other hijras I knew were very serious and even shy. They saw their life as fate "written on their forehead," and accepted with resignation whatever insults or abuses were meted out to them. They worked all day, every day, at whatever they did to earn a living, whether begging alms from shops, or serving in bath houses, or at various domestic chores within their households, which included cooking, cleaning, or small tasks such as grinding spices, which they did for outsiders to earn a few extra rupees. These hijras had few interests or social contacts; some were even relatively isolated within the hijra community itself.

Hijras who earned a living performing at marriages and childbirth were the elite of their community. Although they also worked very hard,

they were better rewarded financially and gained status within the hijra community for earning a living in this traditional manner, rather than by practising prostitution or eking out a living begging for alms. Kamladevi, for example, one of the hijra performers I knew well, was determined to sing and dance whenever she got the opportunity. She not only performed at marriages and childbirth, but also in more contemporary settings, such as "stag parties" and college functions. Her energy in dancing for hours at a time, as well as her ability to "keep her cool" in the face of the teasing and rowdiness of large crowds of men was a well deserved source of pride to her.

While younger hijras are often playful and sometimes even outrageously bold in



A hijra blessing a baby —Chandigarh

public, hijra elders, or gurus, as they are called, most often maintain a great degree of dignity. They, like other middle aged and elderly Indian women, tend to wear simple clothing and little jewellery, though what they wear is often real gold. They are modest in their manner and also, like many middle class housewives, do not "roam about" but stay close to home. The supervise the households of which they are in charge. Hijra gurus are also the ones who are most familiar with the many myths about their goddess and the history and culture of their community and most of those I met were happy to share this information with me.

But whatever their personality, their age or social status within the hijra community, I almost always found a very courteous and even hospitable reception among the hijras I visited. Occasionally, hijras in the largest cities were hostile or even aggressive, an attitude undoubtedly fostered by the abuse or prurient curiosity they sometimes receive from the larger society, including foreigners. Given the many reasons hijras have to resent outsiders, I was overcome by the welcome I received and the several close relationships that I formed. But even when courteous and hospitable, not all the hijras I met were interested in being interviewed. Just as they varied in their personality and in their response to their position in society, so too did they vary in their willingness to tell me about themselves. Some hijras would reveal nothing about their lives before they joined the community, while others were more forthcoming.

My interviews convince me, however, that the common belief that all hijras are born intersexed (hermaphrodites) and are taken away from their parents and brought into the hijra community as infants, is not correct.³ Most hijras are physically normal men, whose effeminacy, sometimes accompanied by an interest in homosexual activity, led them to seek out the hijra community in their late childhood or adolescence. Their childhood, effeminacy, expressed in a wish to wear girl's clothing and imitate girl's behaviour, was the source of ridicule or abuse by their peers and family and the only solution appeared to be that of leaving their families and joining up with the hijras. While many hijras subsequently lose all contact with their families, others maintain a connection; they may occasionally visit their parents or siblings or these family members may visit them.

Rukhmini was a hijra whose break with her family was permanent and

complete. She came from a middle class family and her father was a high ranking police officer. In spite of the many attempts of her father and brothers to prevent her, she persisted in acting and dressing as a girl. When it became known to her father that Rukhmini had had sexual relations with the gardener's son, he almost killed her by holding her head down in a barrel of water and beating her with his cross belt. "My mother cried tears of blood," she said. After this incident, Rukhmini ran away from her home and never returned.

In Sushila's case, she lived at home until her late teens, in relative peace with her family, until one night an elder brother falsely accused her of stealing some money from him. In his anger he told her to "use your own money that you get from selling your anus." She was more outraged at the false accusation of theft than the insult about her homosexuality and then and there left her home to join a hijra commune in a nearby city.



A hijra getting ready for a performance — Bombay

Sushila keeps in touch with her family and sends them gifts on the occasion of her brothers' and sisters' marriage. Meera, a hijra guru, joined the hijra community by a different and less typical route. She had grown up with the desire to be like a female, but followed the conventions of society by having her family arrange her marriage. She was married for over 20 years and the father of several children, before she "upped one day and joined the hijras." She too keeps track of her family and occasionally sends them money when they need it.

As physically normal men, Kamladevi, Rukhmini, Sushila and Meera had to undergo an "operation" which removed their male genitals and transformed them into eunuchs, or hijras. But for the small percentage of hijras who are born intersexed, no such operation is necessary. Salima, for example, a hijra from Bombay, told me that from a very early age she had "an organ that was very small." Her mother thought it would grow as she grew older, but when this did not happen her mother took her to many doctors, all to no avail. When Salima was about 10 years old, a doctor told her mother, "nothing can be done, your child is neither a man nor a woman," and so Salima's mother gave her to a household of hijras who lived nearby. Salima lived with this group very happily and reported that they treated her with great kindness when she was a child.

But whatever their former lives had been, whether they had joined the hijras voluntarily, or been given to the community in despair by their parents, once an individual joins the community, she becomes subject to its rules and must adapt to its restrictions. This is not easy. In return for the emotional and economic security provided by the hijra community, an individual must give

up some freedom, although probably not more than what a young woman gives up when she becomes a bride living in a joint family. Unlike similar persons in the United States, who primarily live and work on their own, the hijras, shaped as they are by Indian culture in spite of their defiance, seem to prefer, like most Indians, to live in groups.

Internal Functioning

The hijra community in India has the qualities of both a religious cult and a caste and takes its customs, social organisation and history from both Hinduism and Islam. The central organising feature of their religion is their devotion to the goddess, Bahucharaji, a version of the Mother Goddess, closely identified with Durga. The temple of Bahucharaji, near Ahmedabad, always has several hijra attendants present who for a few rupees bless visitors and tell them the stories of the goddess, which have specific references to transgenderism. It is in the name of the goddess that the hijras undergo their emasculation operation, which to them is a ritual of rebirth, and it is in the name of the goddess that hijras bestow their blessings at marriages and childbirth." Hindu, Muslim and even Christian hijras revere the goddess and non-Hindu hijras I met did not seem to find it difficult to be part of a community centered on the worship of a Hindu deity. The Indian tradition among both Hindus and Muslims in India of seeking blessings from saint-like figures whose personal power and charisma supersede their ascribed religion permits the hijras to find some respect in both these religious communities. In pre-Independence India, for example, Muslim rulers gave land grants and special rights to hijras in their kingdoms. And while the hijra role is definitely rooted in early Hinduism, the use of eunuchs in the Mughal courts undoubtedly strengthened its emergence as a distinct sub-culture.

As a caste (*jati*) or community (*gawn*), hijras have a highly structured social organisation of which the dominant feature is a hierarchical relationship between the elders, or gurus and the juniors, or *chelas*. Each hijra joins the community under the sponsorship of a guru and the *guru-chela* relationship ideally lasts a lifetime. *Chelas* of the same guru consider themselves "sisters" and adopt fictive kinship relations, such as "aunty" and "grand-mother" with hijra elders. As *chelas* get older, they may become gurus by recruiting *chelas* for themselves. This process both offers scope for social mobility within the hijra community and also helps maintain the community over time.⁵ Hijra social organisation, particularly in the *guru-chela* relationship, thus attempts to substitute for the family life which hijras have abandoned: the guru offers protection, care and security to the *chela* and receives in return obedience, loyalty and a portion of her earnings. Another important advantage of belonging to the hijra community is that it provides a haven when a hijra becomes aged or ill and can no longer work. A hijra guru with many *chelas* will be taken care of, but even a hijra with no *chelas* will be taken care of by the members of community. The typical effective working group of hijras is a communal household, consisting of 5-15 people, headed by a guru. The household members contribute part or all of their earnings to the household and share household chores. In return they get a roof over their heads, food, protection from the police for those who engage in prostitution and a place from which to carry on their business. Most importantly, since all of the work hijras do, whether begging, entertaining, or prostitution, is strictly divided up among all the hijra households in a city, joining a

hijra commune is practically the only way a hijra can get work. The hijra household is thus both an economic and a residential unit, as well as a family life group which provides emotional satisfaction and a network of social relationships.

Living in a hijra household puts many restrictions on behaviour. Just as an Indian bride must make adjustments to her in-laws when she moves into a joint family, so a new hijra must make many accommodations to her new "family" in a hijra commune. Kumari, an independent sort of person, who, with her guru's permission, eventually moved out to her own place, told me that "living with the hijras was very difficult. There were so many jobs to do... like cooking and house work. After coming home from a whole day of dancing, I then had to cook and do other chores. If I did the household chores during the day, I wouldn't have time to go out and the whole day would be lost. Gurus are very strict. If you don't keep your hair covered with your sari, if you don't cook properly, if the house is not spotlessly clean, for all these things they give you trouble. You can't just throw your dirty clothes down anywhere, you have to hang them up. If you don't serve food on the proper dishes, they will shout, 'What, are you a man that you cannot do these things properly!' I got tired of all that and so asked my guru permission to live on my own."

But even for hijras like Kumari, who prefer to live on their own, the



A hijra at a *jamaat*—Madras

idea of living as a hijra without the support of a guru is unthinkable. "You can never be without a guru," says Kumari, "any more than you people (non-hijras) can be without a mother. Just as a daughter is known by her mother, so we are known by our guru. To belong to the hijra community, to live in a sari like this, you must have a guru, otherwise you will have no respect in society."

An individual can only join the hijra community under the sponsorship of a guru and as a member of her guru's "house" (*gharana*). The "houses" into which the hijra community is divided are similar to symbolic descent groups, like clans or lineages. Although there are few meaningful distinctions

between these "houses", each has its own founder and history. Hijras say the "houses" are like several brothers from the same mother, or two countries, like England and America, which have a common origin. A hijra remains in the "house" of her guru even if she moves her residence to some other household or even some other city. When a hijra dies, it is the elders of her "house" rather than her household, who arrange for her funeral and a guru will pass her property to *chelas* belonging to her "house" when she dies.

Each "house" has a *naik*, or chief and it is the *naiks* who get together locally and also nationally to decide on major policy issues for the hijra community, or to celebrate some event within the community, such as the death anniversary of a famous guru. At the local level, it is the *naiks* who get together in a *jamaat* (meeting of the elders) to resolve a conflict among hijra individuals or households within a city or region. One of the most important tasks of the *jamaat* is to make sure that hijras do not violate the rules of their community. Honesty is one of the unshakable hijra norms. Hijras frequently change their residence, both within and between cities and a hijra who has been found guilty of stealing someone's property will not be accepted in any hijra household. Without a household, a hijra will find herself without friends, and more important, without access to work. In respectable hijra households, individuals are expected to behave with some propriety and

hijras who drink heavily, or who are quarrelsome, or cannot control their aggression, will find themselves out on the street. The punishment for misbehaviour varies with the crime: in some cases fines are levied; in more, serious cases a hijra's hair will be cut as a way of stigmatising her within the community, since hijras are obliged to wear their hair long like women. For the most serious offences, such as abusing or assaulting one's guru, a hijra may be cast out of the community altogether and have to pay a very heavy fine to reenter.

Powerful Arbiters

This had happened to Rehka. Rehka had been in the hijra community for the last 15 years, earning her keep by playing the *dholak* which always accompanies hijra performances. Several years ago, provoked by an argument over men and money, Rehka insulted her guru and struck her. A meeting of the *naiks* determined that she should be cast out of the hijra community. From living very comfortably and with her future secure, Rehka now found herself, literally, on the street. Her sister *chelas* would no longer talk to her, not even, she said, "give me a drink of water." There was no place within walking distance she could work that was not already part of another hijra group's territory. If she tried to perform or even beg, she would be chased away by other hijras. With no money and no work, Rehka took up residence on the street, earning a few rupees caring for some neighbor's children, or sometimes walking miles to a suburb to beg for alms. When it rained she slept under a bus. Living in the open, her clothes became tattered, her appearance and her health deteriorated and she was constantly insulted by neighbourhood rowdies. It was a vicious cycle: Rehka was cast out of the community until she could raise the substantial fine of over Rs

1,000 that the *naiks* determined as the price of her reentry into the community and apart from the community it was hopeless to even think of earning that sum, never mind saving it. Rehka's transformation was not lost on the hijras in her city. For all who knew her, it acted as a powerful incentive to maintain their own obedience and loyalty to their gurus.

The most important conflicts that *naiks* resolve are those that occur when the rigid territorial allotment of work within a city is violated. *Naiks* reach agreement about which hijra groups may work — whether begging alms from shop owners or in traditional performances — in particular areas of a city. When a hijra group finds others encroaching on its assigned territory, there may be arguments or even fist fights, and the *naiks* must negotiate new allotments of territory or maintain traditional boundaries. Because hijras can hardly go to the police or courts to settle their disputes — nor would they wish to give up such power to outsiders — disputes are settled within the community.

In spite of hijra complaints that successful family planning in India has meant less work for them, the hijras are an example of a highly successful cultural adaptation. Their structured social organisation, the use of the guru-chela relationship as a recruitment strategy, the willingness to move into new economic niches, and the effective control over economic rights exercised within the community, provide hijras with both the flexibility and control needed to succeed in today's complex and highly competitive society. Imitating the qualities of a family and a caste (*jati*), the hijras have managed to create a viable mode of life. In the face of dwindling opportunities for their traditional performances, they have expanded other economic avenues, in prostitution, for example, an always

lucrative profession. They have also successfully weathered the attempts of the Indian government to outlaw their emasculation operation, which serves as the definitive symbol of their identity and connects them, in their own eyes, to the powers of their goddess.

The organisation of the hijras and their ability to maintain some place in Indian society, however marginal, strongly contrasts with the position of similar persons in the West. Western philosophy and religion relies on dualistic conceptions and categories, like male and female, which admit no variation, and thus has no place for individuals whose gender identity is neither male nor female. Hinduism, on the other hand, has always been more accommodative of gender variation, ambiguity and contradictions. Indeed, the hijras find great pride in citing their identification with many of the great male figures of Hindu mythology, who take on female forms in various situations. Familiar to all Hindus is Arjun's disguise as a eunuch in *the Mahabharata* and Shiva's form as *Ardhanarisvara*, half man/half woman, to give only two examples of men who act or dress as women or who partake of feminine qualities.

Many Hindu festivals include male transvestism. In Tamil Nadu an important festival takes place in the month of *Cheat*, in which hijras, identifying with Krishna, become wives, and then widows, of the male deity, Koothandavar. This festival is based on a story of a king, who, in order to avert defeat in a war, promised to sacrifice his eldest son to the gods, asking only that he first be allowed to arrange his son's marriage. Because no woman could be found who would marry a man about to be sacrificed, Krishna came to earth as a woman to marry the king's son and the king won the battle, as the gods had promised. For the festival, men who have made

vows to Koothandavar dress as women and go through a marriage ceremony with him. The priest performs the mar-riage, tying on the traditional wedding necklace. The next day the deity is carried to a burial ground and all of those who have "married" him remove their wedding necklaces, cry and beat their breasts, break their bangles and remove the flowers from their hair, as a widow does in mourning. Hijras by the thousands come from all over India to participate in this festival. Here they ritually re-affirm their identification with Krishna, who changed his form from male to female.

The identification of males with female deities, expressed by the hijras through their cross dressing and emasculation, is a traditional part of Hinduism. This identification reinforces the legitimacy of the hijras as devotees of the Mother Goddess and vehicles of her power, which they use to confer blessings of fertility and prosperity at the births and weddings where they perform. The importance of the mother goddess in India is thus critical to understanding the role of the hijras.

Other Cultures

The assumption by a man of a woman's character, role and identity in a spiritual or religious context and even as a means of salvation, which has long been part of the Hindu tradition, is found in many other cultural traditions as well.⁶ For thousands of years, with evidence from as long as 25,000 years ago, the divine was conceived and worshipped as a mother and a woman. In the great agricultural civilisations of the ancient



world, arising around 10,000 years ago, in Crete and Egypt and Mesopotamia, as well as in pre-Christian Rome and Greece, mother goddess cults were prominent. Many of these goddesses were attended by a priesthood that included men who acted and dressed as women, either specifically during religious rituals, or even permanently. Such priests served Artemis-Diana in Ephesus, Cybele in Rome, and the Syrian goddess Astarte at Hierapolis. Some of these mother goddess cults, such as those of Cybele, involved male priests who castrated themselves while in ecstasy, in a gesture of renunciation and identification with her. And the numerous images of Hermaphroditus (from which the English term hermaphrodite derives) found in Greek mythology and statuary, make it clear that androgyny and sex change also had special meaning for the ancient Greeks. By the end of the fourth century, B.C., however, male deities began to dominate in Europe. With the spread of Christianity and Islam, both male oriented religions, by the eighth century A.D. mother goddess worship had virtually disappeared, and with it, of course, the sexually ambiguous priesthoods.⁷

Where woman's powers were valued, in the New World as well as

the old, men who dressed and acted as women and engaged in women's work, were also very important. These persons, called "*berdache*" by the Europeans, had a special place in well over 100 Native American (Indian) societies.⁸ The *berdache* were similar to the hijras in that their mixed gender gave them a special role in their culture. In

some tribes, the *berdache* was seen as uniting male and female within himself and thus acted as a go between in marriages. In many of the Native American societies supernatural powers were attributed to the *berdache* and they acted as shamans (religious leaders) and healers. Among the Zuni Indians of the American south-west, the man-woman, or third gender, were represented by a mythological figure, Kolhamana, who was a mysterious and powerful being who reconciled social differences and thereby contributed to the balance of the whole community.⁹ Among the native peoples of Siberia, too, shamans were frequently men who took on the temporary or permanent persona of women. Called "soft men," the sex transformation of the shaman, usually ordered by a spirit in a dream, took place in stages. The "soft man" is supposed to have had a special protector in the spirit world and was both feared and looked up to by the tribe.¹⁰ Just as the spread of Christianity resulted in the decline and finally the disappearance of the transvestite priesthoods of the mother goddess cults in Europe, so did the contact of the Europeans with the Native American tribes spell the doom

of the *berdache*, which was both ridiculed and outlawed. With few exceptions, only the hijras in India remain today as a functioning third gender role.

In the United States and Europe today, no such gender alternatives are permitted to exist. One must be either a man or a woman and those who cannot conform to one category or the other are stigmatised and persecuted. Unlike the ambiguous and alternative gender role of the hijra, the trans-sexual in American culture is not viewed as a third sex or gender, but rather defined as only temporarily in-between. Transsexuals in the West are on their way to becoming women; unlike hijras, whose identity and role depends on their being "neither man nor woman," the aim of western male to female transsexuals is to totally pass as women.¹¹ And neither transsexuals, nor other gender mixed roles, such as "drag queens" (street transvestites) or female impersonators, are believed to have any sacred power whatsoever. As a source of cultural anxiety, they are viewed as pathological, or at best, figures of scorn or pity.¹² While the gay liberation movement in the United States is helping society become more humane and egalitarian in its response to sex and gender variations, culture has not yet been able to incorporate the tolerance for gender difference and ambiguity that exists in Indian culture. In this respect, the West has a great deal to learn from the East. The antiquity and maintenance of the hijra role in India over thousands of years is strong and vivid testimony to the fact that gender roles are not necessarily limited to man and woman. As the West becomes more aware of alternatives and variations in gender roles in other cultures, both past and present, it can perhaps also become more accommodating of those individuals who do not fit into its traditionally prescribed and limited

— gender categories.

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