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## Hijras: An "Alternative" Sex/Gender in India

Gayatri Reddy and Serena Nanda

In much of the current literature on sexual difference, hijras are represented as the principal "alternative" sex/gender identity in India—the

so-called "third sex," "eunuch-transvestite," or "intersexed" identity—a cultural definition that emphasizes hijras' status as "neither men nor women," as the title of Serena Nanda's (1999) book indicates. For the most part, hijras

are phenotypic men who wear female clothing, and ideally renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a physical emasculation known as the *nirvan* or rebirth operation. This operation entails the sacrifice of male genitalia to the goddess Bahuchara or Bedhraj Mata, one of the many incarnations of Devi [Goddess] worshipped throughout India, in return for the divine power to bless or curse with fertility/infertility. As vehicles of this divine power, hijras engage in their "traditional" occupations of performing at the birth of a child, at marriages, and as servants of the goddess at Bedhraj Mata's temple (Vyas and Shingala 1987; Sharma 1989; Nanda 1999; Hall, 1997; Reddy 2000, 2003).

In addition to this idealized asexual role and in apparent contradiction to it, hijras also engage in prostitution or sex work with men. Those who engage in this activity, however, legitimize it through a life-cycle trajectory; according to them, all hijras start out as sex workers and it is only when their bodies and/or desires change that they become sexual renouncers and ritual performers. Whatever their occupation, unlike the commonly understood ascetic ideal, hijras lead their daily lives as a social group, inexorably tied to the [person]-in-the-world, to paraphrase Louis Dumont (1960). Hijras' position in Indian society thus shares features of both a caste within society, complete with rules of comportment, exchange, and hierarchies of moral value, as well as of (marginal) renouncers outside it. As individuals however, it is important to note that hijras represent a wide variety of desires, abilities, identities, and gender characteristics, and also vary widely in their constructions of self in relation to their culturally defined identity.

Since Serena Nanda's work, first published in 1990, much has been written about hijras in the context of sexual difference. Drawing on the anthropological fieldwork of both authors among hijras in South India, this article traces the construction of this category through three different lenses—sex/gender, religion, and politics. It challenges existing accounts of hijras that see them solely as a "traditional" sexual category, rather than a

contemporary, politically engaged identity that is crosscut by a range of axes that shape their lives. As such, this article introduces readers to hijras with a descriptive account of them as the so-called "third sex" of India, as well as provides an introduction to the theoretical and methodological issues in the analysis of gender, sexuality, and identity construction in India.

### HIJRAS AS A "THIRD" SEX AND GENDER

The popular understanding of hijras as an alternative sex and gender is predicated on a model of intersexuality—most typically, a *male* model of physical or functional anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system, although theoretically, women who do not menstruate can also become hijras. The word "hijra" is a masculine noun, widely translated into English as either "eunuch" or "hermaphrodite" (intersexed). Both these terms emphasize sexual impotence and are commonly understood in India to mean a physical defect impairing sexual function, both in the act of intercourse and in reproductive ability.

In much of the predominant literature, hijras are represented as sexually anomalous or impotent men who lack desire for women, an attribute often ascribed to their impaired reproductive capacity, or more specifically, their sexual organ. If a hijra is not born with a "defective" organ (and most are not), s/he must ideally make it so by emasculation, an act that is interpreted as a "rebirth"—from male to hijra. Whether hijras are "born" or "made," their identity is primarily envisioned in terms of a loss of virility, or as Wendy O'Flaherty (1973) puts it, they are "men minus men." But importantly, they are "men minus men" who perform many aspects of a female-gendered identity: they wear women's clothes, embody "feminine" gestures, movements and performative attributes, and adopt women's names. Importantly, this understanding is accompanied by the significant corollary that hijras are also 'not women,' their inability to bear

children being the most significant marker of this construct. Hijras, in this scenario are therefore both 'not-women' and 'not-men,' often, though not always, identifying as an identity outside of the binary frame of gender (see Cohen (1995) for an alternative view that troubles the desire to locate hijras as an undeniably "third" category).

### HIJRAS AND OTHER "NOT-MEN"

While hijras are clearly the most visible "alternative" sex/gender, they locate themselves within a larger spectrum of sexual and gender configurations in India. This spectrum, with its own social categories, lexicon, and criteria of membership, is indexed at the broadest level by the labels *kothi*, *panthi* and *naran* (cf. Hall, 1995; see Reddy, forthcoming, for an elaboration of this complex spectrum). In this conceptualization of sex/gender, *narans* are an undifferentiated category based primarily on gendered practice and the patriarchal naturalization of femaleness as reproductive capacity—that is, *all* women, in other words; *kothis* are those men who "like to do women's work" and desire the receptive position in same-sex encounters with other men; and *panthis* (or *giryas* as they are referred to in north India) are the partners of *kothis* and/or *narans*, bounded both by their desire for penetrative sexuality, as well as their lack of desire for the constellation of "female" practices typically embodied by *kothis* and *narans*. In other words, the gender system in India appears to be divided on the basis of practice rather than anatomy, into "men" [*panthis*] and to use Don Kulick's phrase, "not-men" [*kothis* and *narans*] (Kulick 1998; Reddy forthcoming).

Within this sex/gender system, hijras identify themselves as one 'category' or branch of a broader spectrum of identities they refer to as their *kothi* "family." Hijras rank themselves as the most authentic of *kothis*, deserving of the most respect (*izzat*) in the community. They base this ranking on their formal kinship affiliation with hijra lineages and houses,

their absence of sexual desire, their modes of self-presentation including the kind of dress they wear, and their religious practice (Reddy 2001).

Perhaps one of the most important of these authenticating criteria for hijras is kinship. In this context, kinship is the affiliation and social obligation to one of the hijra houses or lineages in the community.<sup>1</sup> By engaging in a specific hijra kinship ritual, individuals not only acquire a *guru* or teacher within the community, but also signify their membership in the particular house/lineage to which the teacher belongs. This ritual not only denotes formal membership in the community, but also hierarchizes *kothis* along this axis of kinship. There are *kothis* (such as hijras) who are "official" kin—those who have engaged in this ritual kinship act—and those *kothis* who have not undertaken this formal ritual and therefore are only informally or unofficially related. While this does not prevent the latter from identifying/being identified as *kothis*, it places them lower in the *kothi* prestige hierarchy, according to hijras.

In addition to kinship, hijras' claim to asexuality—lacking sexual desire for either women or men—is another key element in their definition of themselves in relation to other *kothis* and *gandus* (a pejorative label applied to men who enjoy anal [*gand*] sex, a category which includes self-identified 'gay' men). Such *gandus* are defined not only by the *form* of their sexual desire, but more importantly, by its *excess*. Excessive sexual desire is a marker of inauthenticity that apparently defines *gandus* and by that token, separates them from the supposedly asexual hijras. An active symbol of hijras' essential asexuality that is deployed for this purpose is the physical excision of their reproductive organs or the nirvan operation. One becomes resolutely and irrevocably a "real hijra" following this operation, serving by this

<sup>1</sup>Hijras are organized into formal groupings or lineages, each with its own leader (or *nayak*). Kinship obligations within these lineages are built on hierarchical principles of seniority, similar in some respects to that of Indian joint families (see Nanda 1999; Reddy forthcoming for elaborations on hijra kinship rules and obligations).

token to separate hijras from their libidinous fellow—*kothis*.

As mentioned earlier, hijras serve as the most strikingly visible dimension of *kothi* identity. For the most part, they are identifiable as "men" who grow their hair long, are clean-shaven, often adopt exaggerated "feminine" gestures and styles of self-presentation, and most importantly, wear saris, the most common dress worn by women in India. So important is this criteria that some hijras refer to themselves, in their own terminology, as sari-wearing *kothis* (*challa kothi*) as opposed to other, non-sari-wearing (or *kada-challa*) *kothis*.

Finally, in addition to sexual desire, kinship and sartorial presentation, religious practice is also a key dimension of hijras' self-image as the *kothis* most deserving of respect. Whether they identify as Hindu or Muslim (see below), most hijras claim to be blessed by (Hindu) gods/goddesses. Thereby, as vehicles of divine authority, hijras see themselves as having more respect (or *izzat*) than some of the other *kothi* identities, who they see as motivated solely by sexual desire rather than religious authenticity.

## HIJRA RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION/PRACTICE

In addition to constructing identity through sex/gender difference, hijras also emphasize religious mythology and practice as an integral aspect of their identity-formation. Contrary to popular opinion, which identifies hijras as devotees of Bedhraj Mata and therefore as Hindus, many hijras in India also identify as Muslim. They do not see these identities as necessarily mutually contradictory, each identification in their eyes, providing different, contextually specific referents.

### Hinduism and Hijra Mythology

In Hinduism, the complementary opposition of male and female, man and woman, represents a key symbolic referent. The interchange of male and female qualities,

transformations of sex and gender, and alternative sex and gender roles, both among deities and humans, are meaningful and positive themes in Hindu mythology, ritual and art, and are often drawn on in everyday constructions of self in India.

Hijras also draw on these mythological and divine themes and images to construct and present themselves, identifying with various gods and goddesses in this process. As "eunuch-transvestites" (Vyas and Shingala 1987), hijras identify most closely with Arjun, hero of the epic Mahabharata, who lives for a year in the guise of a "eunuch," wearing bangles, braiding [his] hair like a woman, dressing in female attire, and teaching the women of the King's court singing and dancing. In this gendered performance as a "eunuch-transvestite," Arjun participates in weddings and births, providing legitimacy for the ritual contexts in which hijras perform (Hiltelbeitel 1980). The portrayal of Arjun in popular enactments of the Mahabharata in a vertically divided half-man/half-woman form highlights this identification.

This representation of Arjun resonates with the 'creative ascetic' Shiva, another key mythological/divine figure hijras identify with, especially in his appearance as Ardhanarisvara, a vertically divided half-man/half-woman (representing Shiva united with his female power or shakti). Shiva is one of the most important sexual/asexual figures in Hinduism, incorporating both male and female characteristics. He is an ascetic—one who renounces sex—and yet he appears in many erotic and procreative roles (O'Flaherty 1973). His most powerful symbol and object of worship is the *linga*, or phallus, but the phallus is almost always set in the *yoni*, the symbol of the female genitals. The generative power of the phallus severed from the body is another important point of identification between Shiva and hijras, highlighting the latter's self-identification as ascetics or *sannyasis*; those who renounce sexuality and yet have the power to confer fertility.

Other Hindu deities, such as Vishnu, also have dual gender representations that are drawn on in public enactments of (hijra) self.

In one myth, the basis of a festival in South India attended by thousands of hijras, Vishnu comes to earth as a woman to marry a prince, who is, by this marriage, granted success in battle by the gods. However, although the prince is destined to win the battle against his enemies, it is also well known that he will be martyred in this process, rendering marriage to the prince undesirable for would-be brides, thereby necessitating Vishnu's performance of this role. During the festival, hijras enact the role of women who marry, and later, as widows, mourn the death of their husband, represented by the prince/god Koothandavur. Similarly, an important ceremony at the Jagannatha temple in Orissa involves a ritual in which Balabhadra, the ascetic older brother of the deity Jagannatha (commonly identified with Shiva), is seduced by a young man dressed as a female temple dancer (Marglin 1985). Ancient Hindu texts and origin myths likewise refer to androgynous, intersexed or "alternative" sexes and genders both among humans as well as deities (Bullough 1976; O'Flaherty 1980). The Kama Sutra, the classic Hindu 'treatise on love,' also specifically refers to those of a "third nature" and the particular sexual practices prescribed for them. In fact, as some authors contend, Hinduism is sometimes characterized as having a "propensity towards androgynous thinking" (Zwilling and Sweet 2000).

### Islam and Hijra Practice

The Hindu religious context of alternative genders that provides a positive meaning for hijras is reinforced by the historical role of the 'eunuch' in the five hundred year history of Muslim court culture in India. This historical role has merged with those described in Hindu texts as a source of contemporary hijra identification. Indeed, while identifying with religious figures in Hinduism, hijras also identify as Muslims. The apparent paradox of hijras identifying with Hindu religious figures while also identifying as Muslim, is partly resolved by context, with claims to Muslim religious identity being constructed mainly through practice: through the acts that hijras employ, the prescriptions they are subject to, and the festivals that they celebrate. Although some hijras maintain that "religion does not matter for us,

all can join," many of them also say that when hijras join the community they "become Muslims." In many regions of India, hijras approximate the Islamic ideal in their custom of praying, using prescriptive Muslim greetings such as 'salam aleikhum,' undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca, celebrating Muslim festivals, as well as engaging in certain commensal practices, sartorial prescriptions, circumcision rites, and (Muslim) burial practices. Clearly, however, hijras are not strictly "orthodox" religious practitioners. Apart from their worship of a Hindu goddess, hijras also blur the gender boundary in their practice of Islam, following rules of comportment specified by the shari'at for *both men and women*. Sometimes, in addition to the female names they choose at initiation, they may also choose male Muslim names. Hijra leaders (or *nayaks*) almost invariably are called by their Muslim names. Further, although not all hijras go on the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca, those who do, go unescorted by male relatives, a prescription for post-pubescent and pre-menopausal women. In addition to these so-called "male" practices, hijras also follow Islamic practices enjoined on women, such as wearing the *burqa* on occasion (a garment that covers the entire body except for parts of the face), though they never wear this item of clothing when performing or entertaining. Though hijras also wear saris like all Indian women, for special occasions they wear green saris, as green is the color of Islam. Also, like some orthodox Muslim women, hijras are not permitted to wear *bindis* (the dot Hindu women wear on their foreheads).

Hijra practice reveals a pluralistic form of religion, which is arguably typical rather than unusual in Indian religious practice. Both Hindus and Muslims in India are characterized by an enormous diversity of communities, traditions, and customs, and religious pluralism has a long history in India. This pluralistic tradition, along with the ability to "compartmentalize" potentially conflictual beliefs and practices (Ramanujam 1990; Shweder and Bourne 1984), allows for a continuum rather than a dichotomy of religious thought, empowering hijras, amongst others, to practice their religion(s) without experiencing significant cognitive dissonance.

## HIJRAS AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

The association of hijras with the power of (dis)embodied generativity is clearly related to their cultural identity as ritual performers at marriages and the birth of a child. It is these "traditional" roles for which they gain their respect or *izzat* in society. But recently, hijras have also gained visibility in another role, one that on the surface would seem to be in contrast to their marginalization in Indian society and culture.

This "new" role for hijras is in contemporary Indian politics. As one hijra stated during recent fieldwork, "Within this *kaliyug* (current cosmic period), hijras will become kings and rule the world. That is what [the god] Rama decreed thousands of years ago when he blessed us." Although hijras have not become kings, they have achieved notable political success. In recent years, hijras have been standing for and winning public election to local, state and even national office, and have been actively courted by mainstream political parties for these positions. Significantly, they are entering these new spheres as hijras, explicitly highlighting their identity as gender-neutral, asexual figures.

In the past few years, at least six hijras have been elected to public office at the local and state level, defeating more prominent candidates from national political parties such as Congress (I) and the Bharatiya Janata Party, and it is their transcendent morality as hijras that has been central to their success at the polls. Explicitly constructing themselves as individuals without the encumbrances of a family, gender, or caste affiliation, hijras emphasize that they are free from the impetus for nepotism, and therefore are the perfect antidotes to the rampant corruption and immorality of Indian politics. And indeed, the election of hijras can be viewed, at the most obvious level, as a revolt against upper-caste privilege, nepotism and corruption. In one of these elections, the hijra candidate was enthusiastically supported by an emerging political party formed to protect lower-caste and Dalit (formerly untouchable caste) interests, with her victory being hailed by the lower castes

and Dalits as a victory over the corrupt and exploitative upper castes. Hijras are also viewed as being more sensitive to issues of poverty and social stigma, and the electorate does seem to perceive hijras as more approachable and effective than other politicians. However, in the past year, the election of at least one hijra has been overturned by the lower courts in the north Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, on the grounds that hijras are in fact *men* (masquerading as women), and therefore cannot stand for election from seats reserved for women. This case is currently being appealed in the Supreme Court.

In their political campaigns, hijras selectively highlighted their resonance with the traditional *sannyasi* or ascetic identity, emphasizing religious and sexual renunciation as the source of their authenticity and *izzat* (Reddy 2003), even as this image marginalizes them in Indian society. This emphasis—on the connection between sexual renunciation and politics—has a long history in India, most prominently expressed by early Indian nationalists, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi, but also by many contemporary Hindu politicians (cf. Basu 1995). The hijra political candidates also remained conspicuously silent in public on their Muslim identity, a seemingly paradoxical silence, given their articulated embrace of Islam.

An important question raised by the success of hijras in contemporary politics is what it heralds for the transformation of hijras from a culturally and socially marginalized community to a new position in Indian society (Reddy 2003). Indeed, we may look at this as part of the larger question of whether—or to what extent—gender ambiguous roles in all societies are a form of resistance that disrupts the gender and cultural status quo (Nanda 2000). Does this new role for hijras herald a "new chapter of enfranchisement in the history of India's eunuchs" as one news columnist claimed (Jacinto 2000)? Will it reformulate not only hijras' place in Indian society, but also prevailing constructions of Indian citizenship, sexuality, gender, and politics?

The answers are perhaps more ambiguous than the initial media enthusiasm suggests.

Not only has the recent legal verdict located hijras as inexorably *male*, a position that precludes the possibility of a more fluid identity and presentation of self, but a closer analysis suggests that rather than remaking normative institutions, hijra political campaigns and their subsequent election appear to have subtly played with "traditional" cultural values, thereby re-inscribing the dominant status quo. Indeed, contrary to popular representations, it seems to us that hijras were elected precisely because they did not disrupt the status quo, and in fact reinforced the prevailing politics of Hindu nationalism. This not only questions the emancipatory and subversive potential of the hijras, but in fact might actually reinforce the majoritarian (Hindu) view of politics and society. If, as one hijra campaign slogan contends, "you don't need genitals for politics," incorporating those without genitals in the "new" political order might not necessarily herald a radically new or liberal social and moral order in India (Reddy 2003).

Certainly at the most basic level, the initial mandate of the hijras did not emphasize their radical potential, but rather the public's denigration of their sexual ambiguity, viewing them as symbols of politicians' impotence and the public's disillusionment with existing (male) politicians (who are often referred to as "eunuchs"). Their election therefore might have highlighted precisely the hijras' marginality—as a caricature of virile masculinity and the lack of political capability that this apparently symbolizes. By emphasizing the renunciate aspect of their identity, hijras are complicit in this construction—a construction that equates virile (hetero)masculinity with political competence—ultimately reinforcing rather than undercutting their marginalization in society (Reddy 2003).

### HIJRAS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Despite their marginalization, hijras have demonstrated a remarkable ability to survive throughout their long history in India. With the advent of British rule, the position of the

hijras not only began to lose its traditional royal patronage, with the British ultimately removing this community from any state protection (Preston 1987), but hijras were also classified in the colonial hierarchy along with other "criminal castes," resulting in the confiscation of much of their property and the vilification of their status in society (Ayres, 1992; Reddy, forthcoming). Building on this colonial history, laws criminalizing sodomy and emasculation, specifically targeting hijras, were incorporated into the criminal code of independent India. While these state policies appear to have had little deterrent effect, combined with the declining opportunities and cultural interest in traditional performances of many kinds, hijras have had to creatively adapt to new situations to maintain their visibility and legitimacy in Indian society. Their entry into contemporary politics is perhaps one such creative re-crafting of themselves in response to changing historical and political circumstances. Despite the ambivalent feelings toward hijras, and the stigma, fear and ridicule that continues to surround them, their survival and vibrant identity is perhaps yet another powerful recognition of the *multiplicity* of differences and the complex history that goes to construct humanity, including, and perhaps especially, hijra identity.

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## Measuring Up to Barbie: Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture

Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund

It is no secret that thousands of healthy women in the United States perceive their bodies as

defective. The signs are everywhere: from potentially lethal cosmetic surgery and drugs,

Adapted for this text from Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund, "The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture", *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular*

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