CHAPTER 12 The Hijras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalized Third Gender Role

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The hijra, an institutionalized third gender role in India, is 'neither male or female', containing elements of both. The hijra are commonly believed by the larger society to be intersexed, impotent men, who undergo emasculation in which all or part of the genitals are removed. They adopt female dress and some other aspects of female behaviour. Hijras traditionally earn their living by collecting alms and receiving payment for performances at weddings, births and festivals. The central feature of their culture is their devotion to Bahuchara Mata, one of the many Mother Goddesses worshipped all over India, for whom emasculation is carried out. This identification with the Mother Goddess is the source both of the hijras’ claim for their special place in Indian society and the traditional belief in their power to curse or confer blessings on male infants.

The census of India does not enumerate hijras separately so their exact numbers are unknown. Estimates quoted in the press range from 50,000 (India Today, 1982) to 500,000 (Tribune, 1983). Hijras live predominantly in the cities of North India, where they find the greatest opportunity to perform their traditional roles, but small groups of hijras are found all over India, in the south as well as the north. Seven ‘houses’, or subgroups, comprise the hijra community; each of these has a guru or leader, all of whom live in Bombay. The houses have equal status, but one, Laskarwallah, has the special function of mediating disputes which arise among the others. Each house has its own history, as well as rules particular to it. For example, members of a particular house are not allowed to wear certain colours. Hijra houses appear to be patterned after the gharanas (literally, houses), or family lineages among classical musicians, each of which is identified with its own particular musical style. Though the culturally distinct features of the hijra houses have almost vanished, the structural feature remains. ¹

The most significant relationship in the hijra community is that of the guru (master, teacher) and chela (disciple). When an individual decides to (formally) join the hijra community, he is taken to Bombay to visit one of the seven major gurus, usually the guru of the person who has brought him there. At the initiation ritual, the guru gives
the novice a new, female name. The novice vows to obey the guru and the rules of the community. The guru then presents the new chela with some gifts. The chela, or more likely, someone on her behalf, pays an initiation fee and the guru writes the chela’s name in her record book. This guru–chela relationship is a lifelong bond of reciprocity in which the guru is obligated to help the chela and the chela is obliged to be loyal and obedient to the guru.²

Hijras live together in communes generally of about 5 to 15 members, and the heads of these local groups are also called guru. Hijras make no distinctions within their community based on caste origin or religion, although in some parts of India, Gujarat, for example, Muslim and Hindu hijras reportedly live apart (Salunkhe, 1976). In Bombay, Delhi, Chandigarh and Bangalore, hijras of Muslim, Christian, and Hindu origin live in the same houses. In addition to the hierarchical guru–chela relationship, there is fictive kinship by which hijras relate to each other. Rituals exist for ‘taking a daughter’ and the ‘daughters’ of one ‘mother’ consider themselves ‘sisters’ and relate on a reciprocal, affectionate basis. Other fictive kinship relations, such as ‘grandmother’ or ‘mother’s sister’ (aunt) are the basis of warm and reciprocal regard. Fictive kin exchange small amounts of money, clothing, jewelry and sweets to formalize their relationship. Such relationships connect hijras all over India, and there is a constant movement of individuals who visit their gurus and fictive kin in different cities. Various annual gatherings, both

religious and secular, attract thousands of hijras from all over India.³

The extant literature on the hijras is scant, confusing, misleading, contradictory, and judgmental. With few exceptions (Salunkhe, 1976; Sinha, 1967) it lacks a basis in fieldwork or intensive interviewing. A major dispute in that literature has been whether or not the hijra role encompasses homosexuality. In my view, the essential cultural aspect of the hijra role is its asexual nature. Yet, empirical evidence also indicates that many hijras do engage in homosexual activity. This difference between the cultural ideal and the real behaviour causes a certain amount of conflict within the community. The present paper, based on a year’s fieldwork among hijra communes in various parts of India, examines both the cultural ideal of asexuality and the behavioural dimension of homosexuality, and how the conflict is experienced and handled within the community.

Cultural Dimensions of the Hijra Role Hijras as Neither Man nor Woman

A commonly told story among hijras, which conceptualizes them as a separate, third gender, connects them to the Hindu epic, the Ramayana: In the time of the Ramayana, Ram . . . had to leave Ayodhya (his native city) and go into the forest for 14 years. As he was going, the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Ram came to . . . the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said,
'Ladies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away.' But these people who were not men and not women did not know what to do. So they stayed there because Ram did not ask them to go. They remained there 14 years and snake hills grew around them. When Ram returned from Lanka, he found many snake hills. Not knowing why they were there he removed them and found so many people with long beards and long nails, all meditating. And so they were blessed by Ram. And that is why we hijras are so respected in Ayodhya. Individual hijras also speak of themselves as being ‘separate’, being ‘neither man nor woman’, being ‘born as men, but not men’, or being ‘not perfect men’.

Hijras are most clearly ‘not men’ in relation to their claimed inability and lack of desire to engage in the sexual act as men with women, a consequence of their claimed biological intersexuality and their subsequent castration. Thus, hijras are unable to reproduce children, especially sons, an essential element in the Hindu concept of the normal, masculine role for males. But if hijras are ‘not men’, neither are they women, in spite of several aspects of feminine behaviour associated with the role. These behaviours include dressing as women, wearing their hair long, plucking (rather than shaving) their facial hair, adopting feminine mannerisms, taking on women’s names, and using female kinship terms, and a special, feminized vocabulary. Hijras also identify with a female goddess or as wives of certain male deities in ritual contexts. They claim seating reserved for ‘ladies only’ in public conveyances. On one occasion, they demanded to be counted as women in the census.4

Although their role requires hijras to dress like women, few make any real attempt to imitate or to ‘pass’ as women. Their female dress and mannerisms are exaggerated to the point of caricature, expressing sexual overtones that would be considered inappropriate for ordinary women in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Hijra performances are burlesques of female behaviour. Much of the comedy of their behaviour derives from the incongruities between their behaviour and that of traditional women. They use coarse and abusive speech and gestures in opposition to the Hindu ideal of demure and restrained femininity. Further, it is not at all uncommon to see hijras in female clothing sporting several days’ growth of beard, or exposing hairy, muscular arms. The ultimate sanction of hijras to an abusive or unresponsive public is to lift their skirts and expose the mutilated genitals. The implicit threat of this shameless, and thoroughly unfeminine, behaviour is enough to make most people give them a few cents so they will go away. Most centrally, as hijras themselves acknowledge, they are not born as women, and cannot reproduce. Their impotence and barrenness, due to a deficient or absent male organ, ultimately precludes their being considered fully male; yet their lack of female reproductive organs or female sexual organs precludes their being considered fully female.
Indian belief and the hijra’s own claims commonly attribute the impotence of the hijra as male to a hermaphroditic morphology and psychology. Many informants insisted ‘I was born this way’, implying hermaphroditism; such a condition is the standard reason given for joining the community. Only one of 30 informants, however, was probably born intersexed. Her words clearly indicate how central this status is to the hijra role, and make explicit that hijras are not males because they have no male reproductive organ: From my childhood I am like this. From birth my organ was very small. My brother tried taking me to doctors and all but the doctors said, ‘No, it won’t grow, your child is not a man and not a woman, this is God’s gift and all . . .’ From that time my mother would dress me in girl’s clothes. But then she saw it was no use, so she sent me to live with the hijras. I am a real hijra, not like those others who are converts; they are men and can have children, so they have the (emasculcation) operation, but I was born this way. (Field notes, 1981–2)

**Hijra Impotence and Creative Asceticism**

If, in Indian reality, the impotent male is considered useless as a man because he is unable to procreate, in Indian mythology, impotence can be transformed into generativity through the ideal of tapasya, or the practice of asceticism. Tapas, the power that results from ascetic practices and sexual abstinence, becomes an essential feature in the process of creation. Ascetics appear throughout Hindu mythology in procreative roles. In one version of the Hindu creation myth, Siva carries out an extreme, but legitimate form of tapasya, that of self-castration. Because the act of creation he was about to undertake had already been accomplished by Brahma, Siva breaks off his linga (phallus), saying, ‘there is no use for this linga . . .’ and throws it into the earth. His act results in the fertility cult of linga-worship, which expresses the paradoxical theme of creative asceticism (O’Flaherty, 1973). This theme provides one explanation of the positive role given the hijras in Indian society. Born intersexed and impotent, unable themselves to reproduce, hijras can, through the emasculation operation, transform their liability into a source of creative power which enables them to confer blessings of fertility on others.

The link between the Hindu theme of creative asceticism and the role and power of the hijras is explicitly articulated in the myths connecting them to their major point of religious identification – their worship of Bahuchara Mata, and her requirement that they undergo emasculation. Bahuchara was a pretty, young maiden in a party of travellers passing through the forest in Gujarat. The party was attacked by thieves, and, fearing they would outrage her modesty, Bahuchara drew her dagger and cut off her breast, offering it to the outlaws in place of her body. This act, and her ensuing death, led to Bahuchara’s deification and the practice of self-mutilation and sexual abstinence by her devotees to secure her favour. Bahuchara has a special connection to the hijras because they are impotent men who undergo emasculation. This connection derives special
significance from the story of King Baria of Gujerat. Baria was a devout follower of Bahucharaji, but was unhappy because he had no son. Through the goddess’ favour a son, Jetho, was born to him. The son, however, was impotent. The King, out of respect to the goddess, set him apart for her service. Bahucharaji appeared to Jetho in a dream and told him to cut off his genitalia and dress himself as a woman, which he did. This practice has been followed by all who join the hijra cult (Metha, 1945–6).

Emasculation is the dharm (caste duty) of the hijras, and the chief source of their uniqueness. The hijras carry it out in a ritual context, in which the client sits in front of a picture of the goddess Bahucharaji and repeats her name while the operation is being performed. A person who survives the operation becomes one of Bahucharaji Mata’s favourites, serving as a vehicle of her power through their symbolic rebirth. While the most popular image of Bahucharaji is that of the goddess riding on a cock, Shah (1961) suggests that her original form of worship was the yantra, a conventional symbol for the vulva. A relation between this representation of the goddess and emasculation may exist: emasculation certainly brings the hijra devotee in to a closer identification with the female object of devotion. Identification of the hijras with Bahucharaji specifically and through her, with the creative powers of the Mother Goddess worshipped in many different forms in India, is clearly related to their major cultural function, that of performing at homes where a male child has been born. During these performances the hijras, using sexual innuendos, inspect the genitals of the infant whom they hold in their arms as they dance. The hijras confer fertility, prosperity, and health on the infant and family. At both weddings and births, hijras hold the power to bless and to curse, and families regard them ambivalently. They have both auspicious functions and inauspicious potential. In regard to the latter, charms are used during pregnancy against eunuchs, both to protect against stillbirth, and a transformation of the embryo from male to female. Hiltebeitel (1980) suggests that the presence of eunuchs at births and weddings: . . . marks the ambiguity of those moments when the nondifferentiation of male and female is most filled with uncertainty and promise – in the mystery that surrounds the sexual identity of the still unborn child and on that [occasion] which anticipates the reunion of male and female in marital sex. (Hiltebeitel, 1980, p. 168) Thus, it is fitting that the eunuch-transvestites, themselves characterized by sexual ambiguity, have ritual functions at moments that involve sexual ambiguity.

The eunuch-transvestite role of the hijras links them not only to the Mother Goddess, but also to Siva, through their identification with Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata. One origin myth of the is the story of Arjuna’s exile. He lives incognito for one year as part of the price he must pay for losing a game of dice, and also for rejecting the advances of one of the celestial nymphs. Arjuna decides to hide himself in the guise of a eunuch-transvestite, wearing bangles made of white conch, braiding his hair like a woman, clothing
himself in female attire, and serving the ladies of the King’s court (Rajagopalchari, 1980). Some hijras say that whoever is born on Arjuna’s day, no matter where in the world, will become a hijra. Hiltebeitel (1980) makes a persuasive case for the identification of Arjuna with Siva, especially in his singer/dancer/eunuch/transvestite role. The theme of the eunuch state is elaborated in a number of ways in the Mahabharata, and it is Arjuna who is the theme’s central character. Arjuna, in the disguise of eunuch-transvestite, participates in weddings and births, and thus provides a further legitimization for the ritual contexts in which the hijras perform. At one point, for example, Arjuna in this disguise helps prepare the King’s daughter for her marriage and her future role as mother-to-be. In doing this, he refuses to marry the princess himself, thus renouncing not only his sovereignty, but also the issue of an heir. His feigned impotence paves the way for the birth of the princess’ child, just as the presence of the impotent hijras at the home of a male child paves the way for the child’s fertility and the continuation of the family line. This evidence suggests that intersexuality, impotence, emasculation and transvestism are all variously believed to be part of the hijra role, accounting for their inability to reproduce and the lack of desire (or the renunciation of the desire) to do so.

In any event, sexual abstinence, which Hindu mythology associates with the powers of the ascetic, is in fact, the very source of the hijras’ powers. The hijras themselves recognize this connection: they frequently refer to themselves as sannyasin, the person who renounces his role in society for the life of a holy wanderer and beggar. This vocation requires renunciation of material possessions, the duties of caste, the life of the householder and family man, and, most particularly, the renunciation of sexual desire (kama). In claiming this vocation, hijras point out how they have abandoned their families, live in material poverty, live off the charity of the others, and ‘do not have sexual desires as other men do’. Hijras understand that their ‘other-worldliness’ brings them respect in society, and that if they do not live up to these ideals, they will damage that respect. But just as Hindu mythology contains many stories of ascetics who renounce desire but nevertheless are moved by desire to engage in sexual acts, so, too, the hijra community experiences the tension between their religious, ascetic ideal community and the reality of the individual human’s desire and sensuality.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Veena Oldenburg for calling this to my attention. A similar pattern exists among the courtesans in North India (Oldenburg, 1984).
2. Alan Roland (1982) has insightfully examined some of the emotional and psychological aspects of hierarchy within the Hindu joint family, and many of his conclusions could well be applied to the hijra hierarchy.
3. Some of these religious occasions are participated in by non-hijras as well, while others celebrate events specific to
the hijra community, such as the anniversary of the deaths of important gurus.
4. More recently, hijras have been issued ration cards for food in New Delhi, but must apply only under the male names.