

The Hijras of India

I hope to send “through the thickets of our separateness” the very human voices of individuals who seem, at first glance, very different from most people, exotic, perhaps even bizarre, but who share in our common humanity (Nanda 1999:xxi).

The hijras are a religious community of men who dress and act like women and whose culture centers on the worship of Bahuchara Mata, one of the many versions of the Mother Goddess worshiped throughout India (Nanda 1999:ix). There are many myths, legends, rituals, religious roles and themes in Hinduism which entertain the notion of “sexually ambiguous or dual gender manifestations” (Nanda 1999:20).

A true hijra is born intersex, that is, an individual displaying both male and female sexual characteristics and organs. While being intersex is rare, true hijras are also considered individuals that have had an emasculation operation, referred to as *nirvana* (cessation of rebirth) by hijras. During this operation, their genitals are removed to “become vehicles of the Mother Goddess’s power” (Nanda 1999:25). The emasculation ritual is considered a rite of passage for hijras as they are reborn from an impotent male into a hijra, an individual endowed with *sakti* (power).

In India, the emasculation operation is illegal, but it is still performed secretly in spite of potential urological consequences and operative mortality [Master and Santucci (2003) report on a case of male genital self-mutilation in America related to the desire to become a hijra]. A hijra, called a *dai ma* (midwife), performs the operation. The *dai ma* has no medical training, but believes that Bahuchara Mata gives them the power to perform the operation. Bahuchara Mata’s blessing is always sought prior to the operation by way of a *puja* (devotional worship). In

addition, positive omens are sought after. For instance, the *dai ma* breaks a coconut; if it breaks evenly in half, the operation can take place, and if it breaks unevenly, the operation will be postponed (Nanda 1999:27).

The relationship between hijras, emasculation and Bahuchara Mata is told in the following legend of the origin of Bahuchara Mata's worship.

Bahuchara was a pretty, young maiden in a party of travelers passing through the forest in Gujarat. The party was attacked by thieves, and, fearing that they would outrage her modesty, Bahuchara drew her dagger and cut off her breast, offering it to the outlaws in place of her virtue. 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 (Nanda 1999:25).

Hijras also refer to Indian epic literature in order to legitimize their existence and to gain respect in Indian society. From the *Ramayana*, hijras often allude to the following story.

In the time of the Ramayana, Rama fought with the demon Ravana and went to Sri Lanka to bring his wife, Sita, back to India. Before this, his father commanded Rama to leave Ayodhya [his native city] and go into the forest for 14 years. As he went, the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Rama came to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said, 'Ladies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away.' But those people who were not men and not women did not know what to do. So they stayed there because Rama did not ask them to go. They remained there 14 years and when Rama

returned from Lanka he found those people there, all meditating. And so they were blessed by Rama (Nanda 1999:13).

Within the *Mahabharata*, hijras point to the following story involving Arjuna as the story of their origin.

Yudhisthira, one of the Pandava brothers, is seduced by his enemies into a game of dice in which the stake is that the defeated party should go with his brothers into exile for 12 years and remain incognito for the 13th year. The Pandavas lose and go into exile as required. When the 13th year comes around, Yudhisthira asks Arjuna what disguise he will take up for the 13th year in order to remain undiscovered. Arjuna answers that he will hide himself in the guise of a eunuch and serve the ladies of the court. He describes how he will spend the year, wearing white conch shell bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire, engaging in menial works in the inner apartments of the queens, and teaching the women of the court singing and dancing (Nanda 1999:30) [See Lal (1999) for more accounts on the mythic dimensions of hijra origin stories].

Just as Arjuna participated in births and weddings as a eunuch (castrated man), hijras fulfill their traditional ritual roles by dancing and singing at auspicious occasions and by “conferring blessings of fertility on newborn males and on newlyweds” (Nanda 1999:5). In the process of conferring blessings in the name of Bahuchara Mata, hijras are able to give what they do not have, that is, “the power of creating new life, of having many sons, and of carrying on the continuity of [the] family line” (Nanda 1999:3). The faith in the powers of the hijras rests on the Hindu belief in *sakti* (Nanda 1999:5).

In addition to having the power to bless, hijras are also known to have the power to curse. If hijras feel that they have not been compensated (*badhai*) fully for their performance their audiences may face some extremely outrageous behaviour. The effectiveness of extortion through public shaming by hijras is legendary (Nanda 1999:49) [See Hall (1997) for a discussion on hijras and their use of insults].

As in Indian society, a hierarchical system is also evident in hijra communities. The relationships of *gurus* (teachers) and *chelas* (disciples) not only support social and family needs, but economic needs as well. In order to become part of a hijra community, one must be sponsored by a *guru* and a *dand* (fee) must be paid. For the most part, hijras live together in a household that is run by a particular *guru*. They are expected to contribute part or all of their earnings to the household as well as assist with household chores. In return they get a roof over their heads, food, protection from the police, and a place to carry on their business, whether this is performing, begging, or prostitution (Nanda 1999:39).

In addition to hijra households, hijras are also organized into seven houses, which are in essence symbolic descent groups. For each house within a region there is a leader called a *naik* (chief). These leaders get together in a *jamat* (meeting of the elders – modeled after the Muslim *jamat*) when there are new initiations as well as important decisions to be made, such as, “sanctioning hijras who violate community rules” (Nanda 1999:40). One of the most important norms in every hijra commune is honesty with respect to property (Nanda 1999:40) [Bockrath (2003) further explores the code and structure that hijras adhere to].

Considering hijras are unable to reproduce they engage in various patterns of recruitment in order to sustain their lineage. For instance, parents themselves may give a child to the hijras (especially one that is intersex), or upon growing up, individuals themselves may join the hijras,

or in rare cases hijras may claim an intersex child as their right [Agrawal (1997) analyzes various recruitment practices of hijras as discussed in colonial literature].

As mentioned above, in addition to performing at auspicious occasions, hijras also earn a living by begging or prostitution [See Reddy (2003) for a discussion regarding hijras rapidly gaining visibility in contemporary Indian politics]. Hijras who earn a living performing at births and weddings are the elite of their community (Nanda 1992:10). Unfortunately the opportunities for these traditional ritual roles are declining, especially in light of the family planning programs the Indian government has been supporting, as such hijras have been required to find other means to support themselves. Hijras commonly view themselves as *samnyasins* (renouncers) since they have renounced all sexual desire and family life, and as such a second traditional and public occupation of hijras is that of asking for alms either from passersby on the streets or, more commonly, from shopkeepers (Nanda 1999:50).

Prostitution has also become a means of supporting hijras even though it contravenes the cultural ideal of the hijra as a *samnyasin* and it goes against the wishes of the hijra Mother Goddess, who is herself celibate (Nanda 1999:53). Hijras who are forced into prostitution as a way to earn a living are not only looked down upon by Indian society in general, but by their own hijra community as well. As one of the most marginalized groups in Indian society, “whether as performers or as prostitutes, hijras have effectively adapted to the society that surrounds them” (Nanda 1999:54), and in effect, they have created a place for themselves and will continue to survive as they fight to legitimize their existence and to gain respect [Bakshi (2004) further explores the possibilities and limits of the gendered performances that hijras undertake, including ritualistic and religious aspects].

References and Further Recommended Reading

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.pbase.com/maciekda/hijras>

<http://www.thewe.cc/contents/more/archive/aruvani.html>

<http://www.glbqt.com/social-sciences/hijras.html>

<http://www.librarygirl.org/portfolio/hijra/hijras.html>

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