



Hijras

by Ruth M. Pettis

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The Hijras--men who dress and act like women--have been a presence in India for generations. Within South Asian society they maintain a third-gender role that has become institutionalized through tradition.

Hijras are often defined as eunuchs (castrated males) and acknowledged both in Hindu and Muslim cultures. Numerous references to eunuchs in the royal courts of India's Muslim rulers are cited as the Hijras' legacy. The fact that many don't consider themselves *true* Hijras until they have undergone the "emasculatation operation" links them to this tradition, as do elements of Islamic practice that they observe, such as burying rather than cremating their dead.

Dual-gender figures in Hinduism provide other sources of identification in a religious context. The deity Shiva sometimes assumes the form of a woman; Arjuna in the Mahabharata epic lived as a eunuch during his exile. Both Hindu and Muslim Hijras are devotees of the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata; her temple in the state of Gujarat is one of their cultural centers.

Traditional Social Organization

Hijras refer to themselves using feminine pronouns and expect others to do so. They typically live together in the traditional commune arrangement of five or more "chelas" (disciples), supervised by a "guru." When a new chela is accepted into a Hijra household, she assumes not only the guru's surname but also membership in the guru's "house," one of seven fictive lineages that confer a sense of kinship and identity, each house having its own history and rules of behavior. She receives training in singing, dancing, and other activities to enable her to earn a livelihood.

Chelas are expected to turn their earnings over to the guru, who manages the funds for household upkeep. Gurus are expected to meet chelas' needs for food, clothing, and pocket allowance. Sources of livelihood include performing at marriage and birth celebrations, begging for alms, and prostitution.

The Hijras' conduct at wedding and birth celebrations has won them a colorful (and licentious) reputation. At the news of a wedding or birth of a male child in the neighborhood, a troupe of Hijras will show up unannounced--and uninvited--to bless the event by singing, drumming, and dancing. The ostensible purpose of the performance is a ritual entreaty for fertility on behalf of the bridegroom or newborn son. Their dancing and behavior are sexually suggestive, a deliberate attempt to perturb the party's decorum, with the implication that if appropriate recompense is not forthcoming they will escalate their outrageousness to more shocking extremes.

Payment, or "badhai," consists of flour, sugar, sweets, cloth or a sari, or money. If the hosts are stingy or refuse to pay, the Hijras retaliate by exposing their genital areas, loudly ridiculing the family to the neighbors, or cursing the hosts. The emasculation ordeal is thought to confer special powers to the Hijras, and to incur their curse is considered particularly unlucky.



A hijra in Goa, India.
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Contemporary Issues

An estimated 50,000 Hijras lived in India as of 1990 but census data on them does not exist, making accurate enumeration impossible. They persist as a marginalized and secretive subculture in poorer urban districts of Bombay, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, and Delhi; there are also Hijra communities in southern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Available information varies considerably. Anthropological accounts focus on Hijras' role in traditional society, with an emphasis on conditions prior to modern Western or Asian influences. At the other extreme, myths and stereotypes about Hijras are constantly recycled as attention-grabbing headlines. South Asian tabloids exploit the belief that Hijras kidnap male children to increase their membership and recount lurid descriptions of castration.

Modernization of Indian society threatens to curtail opportunities for Hijras to practice traditional occupations and may be increasing their dependence on prostitution. Nowadays they also dance at college functions and stag parties.

In recent years organizations such as the Dai Welfare Society and Hijra Kalyan Sabha have been formed to address HIV/AIDS awareness and human rights issues. Some Hijras have become involved in politics--in 2000 "Aunt" Shabnam Mausi was elected to her state legislature, and Kamla Jaan and Asha Devi were elected mayors of their towns.

Hijras have been likened to transsexuals but the label is problematic given that most Hijras don't attempt to "pass" as the opposite sex (they are unmistakably visible as Hijras), and engage in behaviors considered inappropriate for ordinary women. However, writer Zia Jaffrey did meet one American male-to-female transsexual who had been accepted into a Hijra household.

To anthropologist Serena Nanda, Hijras described themselves simply as "neither man nor woman." Nanda argues that Hindu thinking allows for overlapping--even contradictory--categories, thus accommodating flexibility in gender roles. Regardless of one's analytical perspective, for those interested in cross-cultural perspectives on sex and gender, the Hijras will likely always inspire fascination.

[Court rulings in Pakistan and India in 2009 and 2010 have significantly improved the legal status of Hijras in those countries, according them a measure of legal rights and more accurate documentation. These developments are particularly important since the marginalization of the Hijras has contributed to their mistreatment. The hope is that legal recognition of their status as a "third sex" will improve their social status.]

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