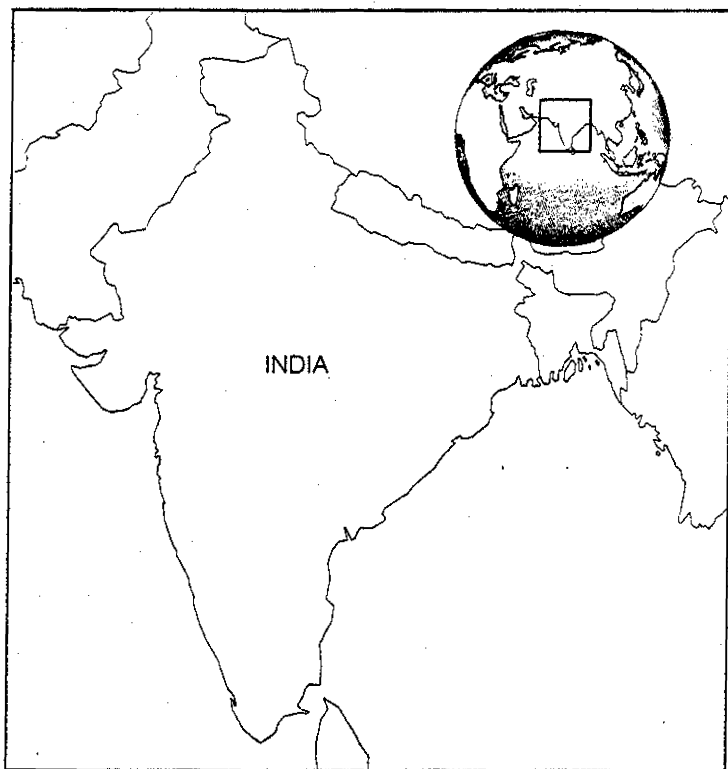


Serena Nanda

Neither Man nor Woman, Wadsworth, 1990

ETHNOGRAPHY THE HIJRAS: A THIRD GENDER IN INDIA



Nothing seems more natural, unchangeable, or desirable to us than that human beings are divided without remainder into two biological sexes, male and female, and into two genders, masculine and feminine. This division of humans into two sexes takes place at birth, when sex assignment is made; such sex assignment is assumed to be permanent. The concept of sex and gender as a system of two opposing and non-changeable categories — male and female; masculine and feminine — is so strong that it is taken for granted by both common sense and most social science. It is difficult for most of us to even think about any alternative to this view of sex and gender.

And yet, a cross-cultural perspective indicates that some cultures include more than two genders. Such alternative, or third, gender roles, which are neither man nor woman, have been described among the Omanis of the Saudi Arabian peninsula (Wikan 1977); among many native American tribes (Williams 1986); in Tahiti (Levy 1973); and in New Guinea and the Dominican Republic (Herdt 1993). I have done fieldwork among one such group in India, called the hijras.

The hijras are viewed as “neither man nor woman.” They are born as men, but they dress and live as women. The hijras undergo an operation in which their genitals are surgically removed, but unlike transsexuals in our own culture, this operation turns men into hijras, not into women. Hijras are followers of a Hindu goddess, Bahuchara Mata, and the hijra subculture is partly a religious cult centered on the worship of this goddess. By dressing as women, and especially by having the emasculation operation, which is a ritual expression of their devotion to Bahuchara Mata, the hijras attempt to completely identify with the goddess. Through this operation, the hijras believe that the procreative powers of the goddess are transferred to them.

Traditionally, the hijras earn their living by performing at life-cycle ceremonies, such as the birth of a child — formerly, only for male children, who are much desired in India, but today, sometimes for female children as well — and at marriages, and they also serve the goddess in her temple. It is because the



Hijras performing at a marriage. Note their feminine dress, hairstyles, and gestures.
(Serena Nanda)

hijras are vehicles of the goddess' powers of procreation that their presence is necessary on these occasions, when they ask the goddess to bless the newborn or the married couple with prosperity and fertility.

The word *hijra* may be translated as either eunuch or hermaphrodite; in both cases, male sexual impotence is emphasized. In fact, few hijras are born hermaphrodites, and as there are many causes for male impotence, there are many reasons that men may choose to join the hijras. In some parts of India, there is a belief that an impotent man who does not become a hijra, in deference to the wishes of the hijra goddess, will be reborn impotent for seven future lives.

The concept of the hijra as neither man nor woman emphasizes that they are not men because they cannot function sexually as men, though they were assigned to the male sex at birth. Hijras also claim that they do not have sexual

feelings for women, and a real hijra is not supposed to have ever had sexual relations with women.

But if hijras, as a third gender, are "man minus man" they are also "man plus woman." The most obvious aspect of hijras as women is in their dress. Wearing female attire is a defining characteristic of hijras. It is required that they be dressed as women when they perform their traditional roles of singing and dancing at births and weddings and whenever they are in the temple of their goddess. Hijras enjoy dressing as women, and their feminine dress is accompanied by traditionally feminine jewelry and body decoration. Hijras must also wear their hair long like women.

Hijras also adopt female behavior: They imitate a woman's walk, they sit and stand like women, and they carry pots on their hips, as women do. Hijras have female names, which they adopt when they join the community, and they use female kinship terms for each other such as "aunty" or "sister." They also have a special linguistic dialect, which includes feminine expressions and intonations. In public accommodations, such as the movies, or in buses and trains, hijras often request "ladies only" seating. They also request that they be counted as females in the census.

But, although hijras are like women in the ways just described, they are clearly not women. Their female dress and mannerisms are often exaggerations, almost to the point of caricature, especially when they act in a sexually suggestive manner. Their sexual aggressiveness is considered outrageous and very much in opposition to the expected demure behavior of ordinary Indian women in their roles of wives, mothers, and daughters. Hijra performances are essentially burlesques of women, and the entertainment value comes from the difference between themselves, acting as women, and the real women they imitate. Hijras often use obscene and abusive language, which again is considered contrary to acceptable feminine behavior. In some parts of India, hijras smoke the hookah (water pipe) and cigarettes, which is normally done only by men.

The major reason hijras are considered not women, however, is that they cannot give birth. There are many hijras who wish to be women so that they could give birth, and there are many stories within the community that express this wish. But all hijras acknowledge that this can never be — that is why they are neither man nor woman.

As neither man nor woman, the hijras identify themselves with many figures in Hindu mythology and Indian culture who are also third-gender figures: male deities who change into females temporarily, deities who have both male and female characteristics, religious roles in which male devotees dress and act as women, male historical figures who temporarily take on the disguise of eunuchs, and also the real class of eunuchs who served in the Muslim courts. Unlike our own society, Indian culture not only accommodates such sexually ambiguous and androgynous figures but also views them as meaningful and even powerful. It is in this cultural context that an institutionalized third-gender role like the hijras "makes sense" in India.

The hijras, and the other third-gender roles such as the *xanith* of Oman, the *mahu* of Tahiti, and the North American *berdache*, force us to rethink our own culture's assumption that there are only two sexes and two genders. Knowledge about intermediate, or third, gender roles also calls attention to both the culturally defined criteria of masculine and feminine and the cultural construction of gender categories. Thinking about sex and gender in its cultural context leads to an awareness that there is no one way of "doing what comes naturally."