

present, then multiple gender roles can develop – and it becomes possible to become a berdache. Conversely, I would hypothesize that, for a given society in which multiple genders were present, it would take not only the elimination of the economic dimension of such statuses but a lapse in the belief systems rationalizing them and the introduction of a dual-sex ideology to effect a full collapse of such roles.

The next step in berdache studies will be the recognition that gender diversity is not an isolated feature of North American societies but a worldwide phenomenon, represented in most culture areas as well as in certain historical periods of Western societies. Gender diversity will become one more part of the story of human culture and history that is anthropology's job to tell.<sup>102</sup>

From: Herat, G. (ed.) (1971) *Third gender*. Zone Books

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## Hijras: An Alternative Sex and Gender Role in India

Serena Nanda

The hijras of India pose a challenge to Western ideas of sex and gender. The cultural notions of hijras as “intersexed” and “eunuchs” emphasize that they are neither male nor female, man nor woman. At a more esoteric level, the hijras are also man *plus* woman, or erotic and sacred female men.<sup>1</sup> Hijras are devotees of Bahuchara Mata, one of the many versions of the Mother Goddess worshiped throughout India. It is by virtue of their sexual impotence (with women) that men are called on by Bahuchara Mata to dress and act like women and to undergo emasculation. This operation removes the male genitals, which are the main symbol of masculine sexuality, and endows hijras with the divine powers of the goddess (*shakti*) and of the ascetic (*tapas*). As vehicles of divine power, hijras engage in their traditional occupations of performing at the birth of a male child and at marriages and as servants of the goddess at her temple. Hijras also engage in prostitution with men, although this directly contradicts their culturally sanctioned ritual roles. Unlike other ascetics, hijras lead their daily lives within their own social communities, and their position in Indian society shares features of both a caste within society and renouncers outside it. As individuals, hijras exhibit a wide variety of personalities, abilities and gender characteristics and also vary widely in the relation of the private self to culturally defined roles.

In this essay, I approach an understanding of the hijra through both the public and private dimensions of the role. In the first part I look at the hijras as they are culturally conceptualized, par-

ticularly in relation to Hinduism, which provides a positive context for alternative sex and gender roles. In the second part, I discuss some individual dimensions of the hijra role, looking at variation among them in gender role and identity. Finally, I suggest two important factors that account for the maintenance of the hijra role over time and some directions of change in contemporary Indian society.

### *The Cultural Definition of the Hijras*

In India, "male" and "female" are seen as natural categories in complementary opposition. The model of this opposition is biological, but it includes criteria ascribed in the West to gender: males and females are born with different sexual characteristics and reproductive organs, have different sexual natures and take different, and complementary, roles in marriage, sexual relations and reproduction. The biological, or "essential," nature of the dichotomy between male and female and man and woman is amply demonstrated in both the medical and ritual texts of classical Hinduism, in which bodily fluids and sexual organs are presented as both the major sources of the sex and gender dichotomy and its major symbols.<sup>2</sup> Each sex has its essential, innate nature, consisting of physical and moral qualities, although these are alterable. The essential opposition between men and women that is most relevant to the hijras is the different sexual natures of the two.

In Hinduism, the female principle is the more immanent and active, animating the male principle, which is more inert and latent. This active female principle has a positive, creative, life-giving aspect and a destructive, life-destroying aspect. The erotic aspect of female power is dangerous unless it is controlled by the male principle. Powerful women, whether deities or humans, must be restrained by male authority. Thus, the Hindu goddess subordinated to her male consort is beneficent, but when dominant the goddess is aggressive, devouring and destructive. This view of the danger of unrestrained female sexuality characterizes a more down-to-earth sexual ideology as well. In India, both in Hinduism and in Islam, women are believed to be more sexually

voracious than men; to prevent their sexual appetites from causing social chaos and distracting men from their higher spiritual duties, women must be controlled. This opposition between male and female sexuality is joined to other oppositions in the Hindu classification system between hot and cold, erotic and ascetic. It is the hot, erotic, aspects of female sexuality that the hijras partake of and display and that transform them into "sacred, erotic, female men" embodying both the beneficent and destructive potential of the goddess.

In Hinduism, the complementary opposition of male and female, man and woman, represents the most important sex and gender roles in society but by no means the only ones. 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.

As eunuch-transvestites, a major identification is made between the hijras and Arjun, hero of the 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 to sing and dance. In this disguise, Arjun participates in weddings and births, providing legitimation for the ritual contexts in which the hijras perform.<sup>3</sup> The portrayal of Arjun in popular enactments of the Mahabharata in a vertically divided half-man, half-woman form highlights this identification.

This form of Arjun reiterates the sexually ambivalent Siva, who appears as Ardhanarisvara, also a vertically divided half-man, half-woman, representing Siva united with his shakti. Ardhanarisvara supports the identification of Arjun with Siva and of both with the hijras. Siva is an important sexually ambivalent figure 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Siva's body is another important point of identification between him and the hijras, as we will see.

Other Hindu deities are also sexually ambiguous or have dual gender manifestations. Vishnu and Krishna, an *avatar* or incarnation of Vishnu, are often presented as androgynous forms. In one myth, Vishnu transforms himself into Mohini, the most beautiful woman in the world, to take back the sacred nectar from the demons who have stolen it. In another well-known myth, Krishna takes on female form to destroy the demon, Araka, whose strength came from his chastity. Krishna is able to overcome Araka by transforming himself into a beautiful woman who seduces Araka into marriage and thus makes Araka vulnerable to destruction.

In yet another myth, the basis of a festival in South India attended by thousands of hijras, Krishna comes to earth as a woman to marry a king's son, who is, by this marriage, granted success in battle by the gods. The price the son must pay, however, is the sacrifice of his life when the battle is over. During the festival hijras enact the role of women who marry and later, as widows, mourn the death of their husbands, represented by the god Koothandavur, an incarnation of Krishna. And an important ritual at the Jagannatha temple in Orissa involves a sequence in which Balabhadra, the ascetic elder brother of the deity Jagannatha, who is identified with Siva, is seduced by a young man dressed as a female temple dancer.<sup>5</sup>

In some Hindu sects, worship involves male transvestism as a form of devotion. Among the Sakhibhava, a sect devoted to Krishna in which he may not be worshiped directly, the devotees impersonate Radha, Krishna's beloved, and through her devotion to Krishna indirectly worship him. In this impersonation, male devotees dress in women's clothing, simulate menstruation and have sexual relations with men, and some devotees even castrate themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The Hindu view that all persons contain within themselves both male and female principles is explicitly expressed in the Tantric sect, in which the Supreme Being is conceptualized as one complete sex, containing male and female sexual organs. Hermaphroditism is the ideal. In some of these sects, male transvestism is used as a way of transcending one's own sex, a prerequisite to achieving salvation. In other Tantric sects religious

exercises involve the male devotee imitating a woman to realize the woman in himself; only in this way does the sect believe that true love can be realized.<sup>7</sup>

Ancient Hindu texts refer to alternative sexes and genders among humans as well as deities. Ancient Hindu texts mention a third sex divided into four categories: the "waterless" male eunuch who has desiccated testes; the "testicle voided" male eunuch who has been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the "not woman," or female eunuch, that is, a woman who does not menstruate. The more feminine of these, whether male or female, wore false breasts and imitated the voice, gestures, dress, delicacy and timidity of women and provided alternative techniques of sexual gratification.<sup>8</sup> The Kama Sutra, the classical Hindu manual of love, also specifically refers to eunuchs and the particular sexual practices they should engage in.

Another ancient reference to a third sex is a prostitute named Sukumarika, "good little girl," who appears in a Sanskrit play. Like the depiction of a hijra in a recent popular Indian novel, Sukumarika is accused of being sexually insatiable.<sup>9</sup> As an individual of the third sex, Sukumarika "has no breasts to get in the way of a tight embrace, no monthly period to interrupt the enjoyment of passion, and no pregnancy to mar her beauty."<sup>10</sup> Like the hijras, Sukumarika was ambivalently regarded: she inspired both fear and mockery, and it was considered inauspicious to look upon her.

The ancient Hindu depiction of alternative genders among humans and deities is reinforced by the historical role of the eunuch in ancient Hindu and, in particular, Muslim court culture, which has a five-hundred-year history in India. This historical role has merged with those described in Hindu texts as a source of contemporary hijra identification. It is the cultural flexibility so characteristic of Indian society that permits it to accommodate sexual ambiguity and even accord it a measure of power. Although sometimes ambivalently regarded, these mythological, dramatic and historical roles nonetheless give positive meaning to the lives of the many individuals with a variety of mixed gender identifications, physical conditions and erotic preferences who join the



FIGURE 8.1. (above) Bahuchara Mata in a popular poster.

FIGURE 8.2. (right) A hijra serves at the temple of Bahuchara Mata.



hijra community. Where Western culture strenuously attempts to resolve, repress or dismiss as jokes or trivia sexual contradictions and ambiguities, in India the cultural anxiety relating to transgenderism has not given way to a culturally institutionalized phobia and repression. Despite the criminalization of many kinds of transgender behavior by the British and, after independence, the Indian government, Hinduism still appears content, as it has been traditionally, to allow opposites to confront each other without resolution, "celebrating the idea that the universe is boundlessly various, and... that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other."<sup>11</sup>

#### *Hijras as a Third Sex and a Third Gender*

The popular understanding of the hijra as an alternative sex and gender role is based on the model of the hermaphrodite, a person biologically intersexed. The linguistic evidence suggests that hijras are mainly thought of as more male than female, although females who do not menstruate can also become hijras. The word *hijra* is a masculine noun, most widely translated into English as either "eunuch" or "hermaphrodite (intersexed)." Both these glosses emphasize sexual impotence, which is understood in India to mean a *physical* defect impairing the male sexual function, both in intercourse (in the inserter role) and in reproductive ability. *Hijra* sometimes implies, but is not culturally equivalent to, *zenanna*, a term that literally means woman, and connotes a man who has sex with other men in the receptor role. It is widely believed in India that a man who has continued sexual relations in the receiver role will lose sexual vitality in his genitals and become impotent. It is sexual impotence (with women), then, and not sexual relations with men that defines the potential hijra. As hijras say, "We go into the house of all, and never has a eunuch looked upon a woman with a bad eye; we are like bullocks (castrated male cattle)."<sup>12</sup>

Hijras identify themselves as incomplete men in that they do not have the desires for women that other men do. They attribute this lack of desire to a defective male sexual organ. A child initially assigned to the male sex whose genitals are later noticed

to be ambiguously male would be culturally defined as hijra, or potentially hijra. If a hijra is not born with a "defective" organ (and most are not), he must make it so by emasculation. Although all hijras say, "I was born this way," this cannot be taken literally to refer to a physical condition, although it is meant to refer to the innate essence of a person, which includes, as I noted previously and will discuss later, physical, psychological and moral qualities. Hijras differentiate between "real" or "born" hijras (a physical hermaphroditic condition) and "made hijras," namely, emasculated men. But, in both cases, the hijra role is defined biologically as a loss of virility, or as "man minus man."<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Indian emic sex and gender categories of hijra collapse the etic categories of (born) hermaphrodite and (made) eunuch. While ambiguous male genitalia serve as the most important culturally defined sign of the hijra, in practical terms any indication of a loss of masculinity, whether impotence, effeminate behavior or a desire for sexual relations with men in the receptor role, may be taken as a sign that one should join the hijras. Much less frequently, women who fail to menstruate take this as a sign that they should become hijras, but masculine (or nonfeminine) behavior in women is never to my knowledge associated with becoming a hijra.

The term *hijra* also collapses the two different analytical categories of sex and gender; the Western social scientific distinction between these two terms is not part of Indian discourse. While hijras talk about themselves as "neither man nor woman" in physical terms, defining themselves as "not men" because their male organ "does not work" and defining themselves as "not woman" because they cannot bear children, they go on to add criteria that are clearly also those of the feminine role in India, such as their preference for women's clothing and women's occupations, their liking for children, their gendered erotic fantasies and experiences, such as their desire for male sexual partners, their temperaments (i.e., they feel "shy" with men) and their gender identity, as either women or hijra.

The collapsing of the categories "intersexed" and "eunuch" as well as those of sex and gender is confusing to the Westerner

who makes a distinction between these categories. Furthermore, while sexual impotence with women is a culturally defined sign of the hijra, it is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being a hijra. The *dharma* of the hijras – their religious obligation – is emasculation: hijras who are not hermaphrodites are in almost all cases impotent men *who undergo emasculation*. It is this irrevocable renunciation of male sexuality and virility that is at the heart of hijra identity as ascetics. This is true both for hijras and for the larger society.

*Hijras as Woman and as Not Woman*

While hijras, as eunuchs or hermaphrodites, are “man minus man,” they are also, unlike eunuchs in other cultures, man *plus* woman. They imitate many aspects of the feminine gender role: they wear women’s dress, hairstyles and accessories; they imitate women’s walk, gestures, voice, facial expressions and language; they prefer male sexual partners and experience being sexual objects of men’s desires; and many identify themselves as women. Hijras take feminine names when they join the community and use feminine kinship terms for each other such as “sister,” “auntie” and “grandmother.” In public transport or accommodations, they request “ladies only” seating and they periodically demand to be counted as women in the census.

But although hijras are “like” women, they are also “not women.” Their feminine dress and manners are often exaggerations, particularly in their aggressive sexuality, and indeed are designed to contrast with the normative submissive demeanor of ordinary women. Hijra performances do not attempt a realistic imitation of women but rather a burlesque, and the very act of dancing in public is contrary to ordinary feminine behavior. Hijras use coarse and abusive speech, both among themselves and to their audiences, which is contrary to the ideal of womanhood in India. In Gujarat, hijras smoke the *hookah*, which is normally reserved only for men, and the many hijras who smoke cigarettes acknowledge this as masculine behavior.

The popular understanding of hijras as neither men nor women led to laws punishing their attempts to dress as women: some

Indian rulers in the eighteenth century required that hijras distinguish themselves by wearing a man’s turban with their female clothing. A century later, hijras were also noted as wearing “a medley of male and female clothing,” in this case wearing the female sari under the male coatlike, outer garment.<sup>14</sup>

The principal reason hijras are thought to be “not woman” is that they lack female reproductive organs and therefore cannot have children. One hijra story tells of a hijra who prayed for a child. Her wish was granted, but since she had not specifically prayed for the child to be born, she could not give birth. She remained pregnant until she could not stand the weight any more and slit her stomach open to deliver the baby. Both the hijra and the baby died. This story was told to me to illustrate that it is against the nature of hijras to reproduce like women, thereby denying them full identification as women. The small number of hijras who identify themselves as having been born as women, that is, assigned by sex as females at birth, joined the hijras only after it became clear that they would not menstruate and, consequently, could not bear children.

*The Making of a Hijra: Emasculation*

While the born hermaphrodite is the paradigm for the alternative sex, most hijras are “made” through emasculation, the surgical removal of the male genitals. This operation transforms an impotent man, a “useless creature,” into a powerful person, a hijra, who now becomes a vehicle of the power of the Mother Goddess to bless and to curse. Emasculation links the hijras to two powerful procreative figures in Hinduism, Siva and the Mother Goddess; and it sanctions the hijras’ ritual roles as performers at births and marriages. Emasculation is explicitly identified with the worship of Bahuchara Mata, whose main temple is near Ahmedabad, in Gujarat. Bahuchara is widely worshiped in Gujarat, particularly by women who wish to conceive a son. She is particularly associated with male transvestism and transgenderism and thus has a special relationship to the hijras, several of whom are always present at her temple to bless devotees and tell them of the power of the goddess. Many myths attest to

Bahuchara's special connection to the hijras. In one story, a king prayed to Bahuchara for a son. She granted him his wish, but his son, named Jetho, was born impotent. One night Bahuchara appeared in a dream and commanded Jetho to cut off his genitals, dress in women's clothing and become her servant. Jetho obeyed the goddess, and from that time on, it is said, impotent men get a call in their dreams from the goddess who commands them to undergo emasculation. It is said that an impotent man who resists this call will be born impotent for seven future births.

Hijras call the emasculation operation *nirvan*, defined in Hinduism as liberation from finite human consciousness and the dawn of a higher consciousness. The Hindu scriptures call the beginning of this experience the "opening of the eye of wisdom," or second birth. The hijras, too, translate *nirvan* as rebirth, and emasculation for them is a rite of passage containing many symbolic elements of childbirth. Through emasculation, the former impotent male person dies, and a new person, endowed with the sacred (female) power of the goddess, is reborn. Despite legal proscriptions against it, the emasculation operation continues among hijras throughout contemporary India, although it is done in secret, hidden from the public and the police.<sup>15</sup>

The operation is (ideally) performed by a hijra, called a "midwife," and includes the stages of a classic rite of passage. In the preparatory stage, the goddess is asked for permission to perform the operation, a sign that is conveyed by various omens. This stage allows for the resolution of ambivalence; that ambivalence exists is suggested by the fact that many hijras must try several times for the omens to be favorable. In the operation itself, all or part of the genitals (penis and testicles) are severed from the body with two diagonal cuts with a sharp knife. They are later buried in the earth under a living tree. In the liminal stage, after the operation, the *nirvan*, as the initiate is called, is subject to many of the same restrictions as a woman after childbirth. In the reintegration stage, the *nirvan* is dressed as a bride, signifying the active sexual potential in the marriage relationship. She wears *lac* (a red resinous substance) on her feet and hands and red powder on her forehead and is adorned with a fancy sari and jewelry (here the identifica-

tion is made with another set of Hindu symbols: red-hot-erotic-feminine). She is taken by a group of hijras in procession to a nearby body of water and performs a final ritual that completes the transformation from impotent man to hijra, or sacred, erotic, female man.

Hijras testify that only emasculation can transform an impotent man, who is "useless, an empty vessel, and fit for nothing" because he is unable to procreate, into a powerful figure. In Hinduism, impotence can be transformed into generative power through the ideal of *tapasya*, that is, the practice of asceticism, or the renunciation of sex. *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, and of these, Siva is the greatest creative ascetic. In one Hindu creation myth, Siva carries out an extreme, but legitimate, form of *tapasya*, that of self-castration. Brahma and Vishnu had asked Siva to create the world. Siva agreed and plunged into the water for a thousand years. Brahma and Vishnu became worried and Vishnu told Brahma that he, Brahma, must create, and gave him the female power to do so. So Brahma created all the gods and other beings. When Siva emerged from the water and was about to begin creation, he saw that the universe was already full. So Siva broke off his *linga*, saying "there is no use for this *linga*," and threw it into the earth. This act resulted in the fertility cult of *linga* worship, which expresses the paradoxical theme of creative asceticism.<sup>16</sup>

Consistent with the paradox of creative asceticism, it is the severed phallus that is the embodiment of *tapas* and is associated with Siva. The falling to earth of Siva's severed *linga* does not render him asexual but rather extends his sexual power to the universe. O'Flaherty's comment that Siva's *linga* "becomes a source of universal fertility as soon as it has ceased to be a source of individual fertility" bears directly on the status of the hijras, who as emasculated men (whose sex organs are buried in the earth) nevertheless have the power to bless others for fertility.<sup>17</sup>

The widespread association of the powers of asceticism with

self-castration in Hindu mythology, particularly as associated with Siva, provides the legitimacy for hijra emasculation, often conceptualized as self-castration. The identification of the hijras with the power of generativity concentrated on the male genitals separated from the body is clearly related to their ritual importance on "occasions when reproduction is manifest – at the birth of a child – or imminent – at marriages."<sup>18</sup> It is in these roles that the hijras are most well known, and for which they receive "respect" from society. It is also in these roles that they display the hot, erotic, female sexuality, which, rather than mere sexual ambiguity, is the source of their power.

#### *Hijras as Ritual Performers*

The most well-known role of the hijras is that of performing at a house where a male child has been born. The birth of a son is a cause for great celebration in India and, indeed, is viewed as the major purpose of marriage. On this happy and auspicious occasion hijras bless the child and the family and provide entertainment for friends, relatives and neighbors. The performances consist of both a traditional hijra dance and song repertoire and contemporary Indian folk and film music. These performances have comic aspects that mainly derive from the hijras' caricaturing of women's behavior, especially that of an aggressive sexuality. At some point in the performance, one hijra inspects the genitals of the newborn to ascertain its sex. Hijras claim that any baby born intersexed belongs to their community, and it is widely believed in India that this claim cannot be resisted. They then use their power as vehicles of the Mother Goddess to bless the child for what they themselves do not possess – the power of creating new life, of having many sons and of carrying on the continuity of a family line. When the performance is completed, the hijras claim their *badhai*, a traditional presentation of gifts of wheat flour, cane sugar, sweets, cloth and a sum of money.

Hijras also perform at marriages, before the ceremony at the home of the bride and afterward at the home of the groom. In these performances they bless the couple with fertility: the birth of a son is not only the desire of the family but also means more

work for the hijras. These performances, like those for the birth of a son, are comic and contain flamboyant sexual displays and references to sexuality that break all rules of normal social intercourse in gender-mixed company. The humor is based on the ambivalence toward sexuality in India and parallels the ambivalence toward the hijras themselves. This is particularly true in North India, which has been influenced by Islamic sexual ideology. In this ideology, people (women in particular) are believed to have very strong sexual impulses that must be controlled to prevent social anarchy. Yet sexual impulses and activity are obviously necessary for the most important purpose in marriage, that of having a male child and continuing the lineage.<sup>19</sup>

This view of sexuality contributes to the North Indian cultural definition of the family of the bride as subordinate to the family of the groom: in giving the bride away, her family, specifically her male elders, is making her partake of sexual activity, which demeans her, and by extension, the family itself. In addition, there is a North Indian preference for the bride to "marry up," that is, into a family considered to be of a higher social and economic status than her own. This superiority of the groom's family is a lifelong aspect of the connections made by marriage and is expressed by a one-sided and perpetual gift giving.

Hijra performances comment on both the sexual and social aspects of the unequal relationship between the bride's and groom's families. The sexual innuendos, expressed both verbally and in dance, break the cardinal rule of North Indian culture in which reference to sexuality is avoided between people of unequal status. Much of the hilarity of these performances is contained in little skits and jokes in which the hijras make critical comments on various characteristics of the groom's family and on the relationships engendered by marriage that are a source of potential conflict, such as those between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, or between sisters-in-law. Here the hijras fulfill a common role of liminal figures, that of identifying and diffusing tensions arising from social hierarchy.<sup>20</sup>

Hijra performances are surrounded by ambivalence, which parallels the ambivalence toward hijras themselves. The treat-





FIGURE 8.3. (above) A guru at a hijra gathering.

FIGURE 8.4. (right) Hijras bless a male child.

FIGURE 8.5. (over) A chela arranges the hair of her guru.

ment of the hijras rests on a combination of mockery, fear and respect. Although hijras have an auspicious presence, they also have an inauspicious potential. The loss of virility the hijras represent is a major specific source of the fear they inspire. The power of hijras to bless a family with fertility and fortune has an obverse side: they are also believed to have the power to curse a family with infertility and misfortune. And while their entertainments and requests for alms include praise, a refusal to pay leads to insults and curses. The ultimate weapon of a hijra is to raise her skirt and display her mutilated genitals, which is a source both of shame and insult for the audience, as well as a curse by which the hijras contaminate the potentially fertile with a loss of reproductivity.

As figures who serve and represent the goddess in her erotic aspects, hijras are both endowed with power and are also a focus of cultural anxiety. In India, eroticism and asceticism are regarded ambivalently: both have divine power, yet both can lead to social chaos. Hijras express this paradox with their bodies and their behavior. As "eunuchs" they embody the "cool," ascetic male quality of the renunciation of desire, while in their behavior, they display "hot," uncontrolled feminine sexuality. They are thus very much "creatures of the outside," powerful though they may be.<sup>21</sup> As persons who do not marry and who renounce family life (*samskara*), hijras are outside the social roles and relationships of caste and kinship that define the person in Hindu culture.<sup>22</sup> As individuals apart from these pervasive networks of social dependence and social control, hijras, like other ascetics, are regarded as potential threats to the social order.<sup>23</sup>

Hijras use this sexual and social liminality to manipulate and exploit the public to their own advantage. Having no social position to maintain *within* the hierarchy of caste and kinship, hijras are freed from the constraints of respectable behavior and nearly invulnerable to social control by those outside their community. Their audiences sense this and it makes them vulnerable to economic extortion, as they weigh the cost of giving in to the hijras' coercive demands for payment against the likelihood that, if they do not pay, they will be publicly abused, humiliated and cursed.

But just as hijras challenge their audiences, audiences, too, challenge the hijras. Ascetics have always been regarded with skepticism in Indian society, and the notion of the "false ascetic" — one who pretends to be an ascetic to satisfy his lust — abounds in Hinduism. Sometimes, people in the audience of a hijra performance will challenge the performers' authenticity by lifting their skirts to see whether they are emasculated and thus "real" hijras, or "fake hijras," men who have male genitals and are thus only impersonating hijras. If the performers are found to be "fakes" they are abused and chased away without payment.

The power of the hijras' performance lies in the potentiality of female sexuality, not in its actuality. Their power is compromised by the fact that hijras engage in prostitution, despite their many protestations to the contrary. Prostitution, which is not part of the cultural definition of the hijra role but which is widely, if covertly, acknowledged, undermines hijra credibility by running counter to the power they derive from *tapasya*, the ascetic practices that include the renunciation of sexual desire. Hijras recognize that their activities as sexual partners for men undermine their already tenuous hold on legitimacy as ritual performers and go contrary to the wish of Bahuchara Mata, who requires chastity from her hijra devotees. For this reason, hijras go to some length to distinguish themselves from male prostitutes. Despite the stigma on prostitution within the hijra community, it is important economically and the hijra community accommodates prostitutes rather easily.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Hijra Role and the Private Self*

In Western society, in which sex and gender are viewed as dichotomous, anomalies, whether biological hermaphrodites, individuals whose erotic preferences are directed toward members of their own sex or persons with mixed psychological gender identifications, are made to fit into the category of either male or female, man or woman. Unless they fit into these dichotomous sex and gender categories, there is no place for them in society. In India, as we have seen, multiple sexes and genders are acknowledged as possibilities, albeit ambivalently regarded possibilities,

among both human beings and deities. Individuals who do not fit into society's major categories may indeed be stigmatized (as the hijras are) but may also find a meaningful and positive way to pursue their life course because of the particular Hindu concept of the person.

In Hinduism, personhood is linked to participation in relations of caste and kinship, through which individuals become dependent on, and subject to, the control of others. It is through these group affiliations that human beings become persons, and it is the sacraments, or mandatory life-passage rites, that confer on human beings the cultural qualities of personhood.<sup>25</sup> Thus, being human is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a person. Eligibility for full personhood is not equal for all: it is more available for men than for women, and for the three twice-born castes, who undergo a second birth, than for *shudras* (previously called untouchables), who cannot perform this rite.

Full personhood is built on the oppositional categories of male and female, who, through sexual intercourse in marriage, produce progeny, especially sons. Thus marriage, based on the expectation of fertile sexuality, is central to full personhood. An individual who dies without being married is considered an incomplete person. A man who is impotent, or a woman who does not menstruate, is thus disqualified from achieving full personhood.

But for the individual who is incapable of reproduction, as either a man or a woman, or does not wish to marry, there is a meaningful role available that transcends the categories of (married) man and (married) woman. This is the role of the ascetic, or renouncer. In identifying with the ascetic role, individuals who are sexually "betwixt and between" for any number of biological reasons or personal choices are able to transform an incomplete personhood into a transcendent one.<sup>26</sup>

This possibility is tied to the Hindu concept of the person as context specific and relational and the notion of *dharma*, or right action, as relative. All human beings are regarded as possessing different and unequal attributes of humanity. For all persons, depending on the specific historical and cultural context, the particular life stage and the innate traits carried over from previ-

ous lives, there is a particular moral obligation or life task that is right *for them*. As long as individuals follow their own particular life path, their *svadharma*, they are on the road to self-realization. In this philosophy, no action is right or wrong in itself, but only so in relation to the traditional patterns of the group to which individuals belong and their own nature. As the Bhagavad Gita says: Better one's own duty, even imperfect, than another's duty well performed.

The concept of *svadharma* leads to a tolerance of a wide diversity of occupations, behaviors and personal styles, as long as these are seen as the working out of a life path. This is particularly so when the behavior is sanctified by tradition, formalized in ritual and practiced within a group. Hinduism recognizes that human beings achieve their ultimate goals by following many different paths, because they differ in their innate essences, moral qualities and special abilities. Hinduism thus affords the individual personality much latitude in behavior, including that which Western society might label "criminal" or "pathological" and attempt to punish and cure.

The ethical relativism embodied in *svadharma* means that even impotent men, denied the possibility of full personhood through marriage and reproduction, nevertheless have their own life path, which is to undergo emasculation and become hijras, devotees of the Mother Goddess, when she calls them. Were these individuals to remain merely impotent men who could not marry and beget children, they would be nonpersons and, for failing to carry out their *svadharma* in response to the call of the goddess, would suffer the additional consequence of being born impotent for seven future births. But the concept of *svadharma* gives individuals a framework within which to find positive meaning in their lives. In their identification with ascetics, hijras – emasculated men, devotees of the goddess, renouncers of family and caste and the material concerns of this world – transform the dross of lost virility into the gold of divine power.

#### *Hijra Gender Identity*

Gender identity has been defined as the private experience of

gender role: the experience of one's sameness, unity and the persistence of one's individuality as male, female or androgynous, expressed in both self-awareness and in behavior. Gender role is everything that a person says and does to indicate to others or to the self the degree to which one is either male, female or androgynous. Gender role would thus include public presentations of self in dress and verbal and nonverbal communication; the economic and family roles one plays; the sexual feelings (desires) one has and the persons to whom such feelings are directed; the sexual roles one plays and emotions one experiences and displays; and the experiencing of one's body, as it is defined as masculine or feminine in any particular society. Gender identity and gender role are said to have a unity, like two sides of a coin.<sup>27</sup>

While gender identity, like all aspects of individuality, is shaped by an interaction of both prenatal and postnatal factors, Western psychologists generally hold that gender identity is generated primarily by sex assignment as male or female at birth, that it is established in a critical period in early childhood (from about eighteen months to three years) and that it is not subject to change after that point, or at least not very easily and without great psychic cost.<sup>28</sup> Displays of a mixed-gender role, an ambivalent gender identity or a gender identity that fluctuates over the life span would be generally regarded as problematic, if not pathological, in Western society.

This view is beginning to change, particularly among anthropologists. Although some anthropologists have been open to the idea that ambivalent and nonstable gender roles and identities are not necessarily pathological, and indeed, can be culturally patterned, the serious study of alternatives to dichotomous and stable gender role/identities, and how these alternatives are related to socialization in a variety of cultures, has only recently begun.

In this regard, Gilbert Herdt's work on gender role/identity among pseudohermaphrodites in the Dominican Republic and New Guinea raises interesting questions and suggestions for a new research agenda.<sup>29</sup> His reinterpretation of the *guevedoche* of the Dominican Republic and his study of some hermaphrodites among the Sambia suggest that, in certain cultural situations,

ambiguous gender socialization in childhood does occur and results in ambivalent gender identity, or a gender identity that can be transformed at certain stages in the individual's life, as new social and sexual roles are adopted.

These insights are directly relevant for exploring gender identity among hijras. They confirm my own view that gender identity is neither so tied to sex assignment as psychologists seem to think nor so unchanging over a lifetime. On the contrary, my study of the hijras suggests that gender identity can continue to undergo change after childhood, even in some dramatic ways.

The possibility of changing gender identities is not immediately apparent from hijra personal narratives. Without exception, these narratives include assertions that the informant experienced a desire to be like a female since early childhood, engaging in such feminine role behavior as playing only with girls, dressing in girl's clothing, preferring domestic chores to boys' play, assuming a girl's name and later, as they got older, acting as sexual receptors for older boys and men. At first blush, hijra personal narratives seem to have the same insistence on the continuity of feminine gender identity as do narratives of transsexuals in the West.

Despite these common, even stereotypic, narrative elements, however, a deeper look indicates much variation among hijras in all aspects of their sex and gender identities and variable relationships between their gender roles and gender identities. With some hijras there seemed to be a strong and explicitly verbalized fit between their gender role and their expressed gender identity, as indicated above. This was most noticeable in the hijras who identified themselves as women. They experienced themselves as women, psychologically and emotionally, and, in all aspects of gender role, made strong efforts to present themselves as much like conventional Indian women as possible. They dressed modestly and imitated housewifish respectability, they had strong emotional attachments to their long-term male sexual partners whom they called their "husbands," they expressed strong desires to conceive and raise children, they underwent emasculation primarily to change their bodies to those approximating women's and they related the positive experience of emasculation to being able to

"have sex like a woman," that is, sexual intercourse in a face-to-face position. Some of them took hormones to feminize their bodies, and had the medical technology of India permitted reconstructive surgery to create a vagina, they would probably wish to have it done. These hijra narratives show no sign of a faltering or ambivalent gender identity, like those of Western transsexual narratives.

Other hijras, who may currently define themselves as women or as "neither man nor woman," cite some of the common narrative themes of feminine childhood behavior, but display mixed-gender-role signals in clothing, public behavior, acceptance of emasculation, sexual interests and practices, talk about the self and reflections on the stages in their lives.

How can one explain the variation in gender role and gender identities among the hijras? It is impossible for me to know the extent to which ambivalent gender-role and identity in hijras I met is a result of ambivalent early-childhood socialization, taking on new gender roles, a lack of practice in feminine behavior or pressure and socialization from the hijra community.

The socialization of new hijras by community elders reinforces the gender-role contrasts between men and women. New hijras who act inappropriately in their new feminine roles are frequently admonished, "What, are you a man that you're behaving in such a way!" Despite many hijra complaints that the elders are "too strict," however, the process of gender transformation after joining the community is necessarily gradual and mixed gender-role behavior is accommodated. Some hijras, for example, continue to dress in men's clothing, have not adopted feminine names and keep delaying the emasculation operation. It is the ability of the hijra community to tolerate a wide range of gender-role behavior and gender identities, without losing its cultural meaning, that is one of its great strengths, accounting for the community's persistence over time.

The degree to which the hijra community recruits new members who already have a mixed-gender identity and the role that membership in the hijra community plays in either intensifying or creating such a gender identity are also only a matter for spec-

ulation. Certainly in the cases of the small number of hijras who were anatomically ambiguous at birth, it seems likely that they experienced socialization for a mixed-gender identity, although not necessarily at a conscious level. The personal narrative of one "born" hijra, Salima, suggests that ambivalent socialization in childhood does occur and that this may result in ambivalent gender role and identity reinforced by joining the hijra community (see figure 8.7).

Salima exhibited many aspects of the Indian feminine role: she had a long-term sexual relationship with a man she called her husband, and she had actually gone through a marriage ceremony with him. As both Salima and her husband were Muslims, she wore a *burkha* (a head-to-toe covering), as Muslim women do. While many elements of her personal narrative stressed feminine behavior in childhood, it seemed to me that Salima's gender identity was ambiguous. She always referred to herself as "neither man nor woman" and took pride in being a "born hijra." Although she always dressed in women's clothing when I knew her, she often, unlike any other hijra I met, had a several days' growth of beard. In addition, my taped interviews demonstrated that she always used grammatical terms indicating a masculine speaker when she spoke about herself, although she vociferously denied this.

Salima appears to have been assigned as a male at birth, although her genitals were ambiguous. Salima's mother tried many medical and religious methods to help them grow, without success. When Salima was about eight years old, a doctor told her mother, "There is nothing that can be done, your child is neither a male nor a female." Soon after this, her mother gave Salima permission to live with the hijras, who had been visiting her frequently. In remembering her childhood, Salima indicated what to me could be interpreted as ambivalent gender-role socialization. To begin with, Salima's condition was a source of tension between her mother and father, with her mother acting as an intermediary to protect Salima from her father's anger. But Salima's mother as well appeared to alternate between beating Salima for her feminine behavior and "letting her do as she liked," between trying everything to get her to be a boy and defending her against



FIGURE 8.6. (above) An elder conducts a hijra initiation.

FIGURE 8.7. (right) Salima, a born hijra.



ridicule from peers and neighbors. Ultimately Salima's mother resigned herself to Salima's ambiguous sex and let her go live with the hijras, a solution quite to Salima's satisfaction.

While ambivalent gender-role socialization in childhood might be most clear for those born visibly intersexed, like Salima, it may also operate in other, nonintersexed hijras as well, although at a less conscious level. Since most hijras are not, despite the widespread and deeply held belief to the contrary, identified as hijras at birth or in infancy, or even early childhood (up to two or three years old), and claimed and brought up by hijras, family and peer socialization must play a role in their gender ambivalence. The hijras I met and interviewed were brought up with their families and left their homes to join the hijras in early or late adolescence. In the absence of physically ambiguous genitals, they would have been assigned to the male sex and, given the importance of sons in India, raised as males. How then can their taking on an alternative gender role and their present ambivalent gender identity be explained?

Unconsciously ambivalent socialization may be one answer, joined in a seemingly large number of cases by early experience of acting as sexual receptors for men. Sushila, for example, is a hijra who displays a mixed-gender role and gives indications of a mixed identity. She dresses consistently as a woman, has long hair and always has a "husband." Indeed, at one point she adopted one of her husbands as her son, arranged his marriage and became a mother-in-law and later, when her son's wife gave birth, a grandmother. Despite this, however, Sushila has persistently delayed getting the emasculation operation, she is constantly getting into fistfights, with both men and hijras, and she smokes and drinks, sometimes to excess. She criticizes other hijras who are too attached to their husbands or too submissive to them and is vocal about her refusal to buckle under to a man. When she talks about sex, it is almost always in connection with earning a living as a prostitute rather than any emotional feelings.

Sushila's narrative has some clues about ambivalent socialization. She recalls that her mother often supported her when she fought with some schoolmates who had ridiculed her for her fem-

inine behavior (dressing like a girl in school) and also said that her mother "liked my swaying [feminine] walk." Prominent in her narrative was acting as a sexual receptor for men (for which she received money) in her adolescence. I think it was only in retrospect that Sushila linked her effeminate behavior in childhood to becoming a hijra, and she was not knowledgeable about hijras until after her childhood. It was not until she ran away from home in her teens because her brother was harassing her for her sexual activities that she thought of joining the hijras. Her narrative suggests that joining the hijras may have provided her with a supportive environment and rationale for her sexual preferences and that only gradually, as she continued to stay with the hijras, did she reinterpret her feminine behavior as a sign that she was "neither man nor woman." Still another hijra, now in her mid-forties, who displays a completely feminine role, once pointed out to me a photograph of herself as a young adult dressed in male clothing. "That was when I was a boy," she said, "when I lived with a Christian family."

For many hijras like Sushila a key point in a changing gender identity may well be the self-acknowledgment of the pleasure they experience from being sexual receptors for men. This gradual recognition of the desires of the self may lead to interpreting oneself as an effeminate man, no longer capable of having sex with a woman. Thus, many hijras refer to these early sexual experiences as having "spoiled" them, in the sense of denying them the ability to take on the most important male roles in India, those of husband and father. With the recognition that this life path is denied them, the hijra community provides an opportunity for an alternative identity and an environment that is more emotionally and economically satisfying than life on the streets. It is at this point, perhaps around the time their parents are thinking of arranging their marriage, that they join the hijra community. Once there, strong pressure to drop masculine behavior and take on more aspects of feminine behavior would logically be accompanied, in varying degrees, by a gradual change in gender identity.

Membership in the hijra community means that individuals intensify their social interaction with other hijras and simultane-

ously distance themselves from their former friends and relatives. This effect adds to the explicit and informal socialization within the community to make a commitment to a hijra gender role and identity. Entry into the community through formal initiation is only the first step; a second significant point of transformation – or for some, a symbol of the completion of the gender identity transformation – is the decision to undergo emasculation.

Unlike transsexuals in the West, who must convince the medical establishment that they are indeed “a woman in a man’s body” and have felt so since childhood, hijras express various motives for undergoing this sexual surgery, as well as ambivalence toward it. Some hijras view emasculation as transforming them into women (contrary to the hijra cultural definition) and wax enthusiastic on that account; other hijras, however, mention motivations unrelated to the gender transformation: as a way of “changing their luck,” as primarily a religious experience or as a way to increase their prestige and their earnings. Several hijras I knew talked of the operation almost with indifference: they told me that the nerve in their male organ “has broken and it is no good for anything [i.e., having sex in the inserter role] anyway, so why not get rid of the useless thing.”

It seems then that not all of those who undergo the sexual surgery wish to be, or feel themselves to be, transformed into women, at least at a level they are aware of. The cultural meaning of the emasculation operation is after all transformation into a hijra, not a woman. After the operation, however, it may be that an individual’s gender identity might move more in the direction of the feminine. To the extent that gender identity even partially depends on how we experience our bodies, it would seem difficult to experience one’s self as a man, without male genitals. Conversely, it would appear difficult to experience one’s body as that of a woman merely because there are no male genitals. Those hijras for whom a feminine gender identity was very strong went beyond the operation, in the use of hormones, to make their bodies more feminine. Most hijras, even those who know about hormones, do not take them, however, and their masculine bodies are (perhaps must be) an important factor in their ambiguous gender identity.

Hijra personal narratives cast doubt on the Western idea that gender identity is always permanent over a lifetime. They also suggest that gender identities may vary among people occupying the same gender role. Hijras exhibited variety in the salience of different aspects of a feminine gender role for the individual’s gender identity. Some hijras, when talking about themselves as women or as “neither man nor woman,” emphasized their body image, others emphasized their role as mothers in adopting children, others emphasized their sexual desires for men, or their previous sexual experience with men, and still others emphasized the hijra identification with (male) ascetics.

The hijra role is remarkably successful in its capacity to incorporate individuals with a wide variety of gender characteristics, behaviors and identities. Supported by Hindu mythology and notions of *svadharma*, the hijra as an alternative sex and gender role has been maintained for well over a thousand years. In the next section I focus on two factors that may help explain the extraordinary continuity of this role: the psychodynamics of the Indian family and the socioeconomic adaptation the hijras have made within the Indian caste system.

#### *The Hijra Role in Indian Society: Continuity and Change*

*Hindu Family Structure, the Mother Goddess Cult and the Hijra Role*  
The maintenance of the hijra role in Indian society may be explained in part by the interaction of the Indian cult of the Mother Goddess with psychodynamic factors in the Hindu family. Whereas at one level the hijras’ claim to power is through the ritual sacrifice of the phallus, which identifies them with Siva, at a more conscious and culturally elaborated level it is the Mother Goddess that is the focus of hijra religious devotion and the most explicitly acknowledged source of their powers. Thus, the Mother Goddess cult is critical in understanding the hijras.

Success and salvation in Hindu India is equated with submission, particularly in regard to the Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess is compelled to offer help when confronted with complete surrender of the devotee, but those who deny her wishes



endanger themselves. Thus, underlying the surrender is fear. This simultaneously beneficent and destructive aspect, expressed in myth and ritual, represents the ambivalence toward the real mother that is perhaps universal. But the Hindu Mother Goddess is singularly intense in her destructive aspects, which, nevertheless, contain the seeds of salvation. This dual nature provides the powerful symbolic and psychological context necessary to understanding the continuity of the hijra role over time.

Hindu mythology and its hijra variants abound in images of the aggressive Mother Goddess as she devours, beheads and castrates, destructive acts that nevertheless contain symbolism of rebirth and initiation, as in the hijra emasculation ritual. A common expression of this theme is the many myths portraying the Mother Goddess as angry castrator of her mortal consort, who attempts to evade her sexual advances by explaining that she is like a mother to him. These myths suggest that the consort experiences the offering of the goddess's love as an incestuous confrontation, one from which he must free himself by transforming himself into a child, a form of emasculation, but one less severe than castration.<sup>30</sup>

While in some myths the goddess does the castrating, in others the devotee – son, consort, worshiper – castrates himself as a way of resolving the conflict presented by his anxiety over his inadequacy to fulfill the sexual needs of the mother. As noted earlier, self-castration is considered a sign of intense devotion to the goddess and elicits the highest respect among hijras.

The salience of these themes in varying forms in Hinduism suggests that the hijra cult, with its associated emasculation, is perhaps only one extreme of a more general continuum of ritual practices that derive their psychological effectiveness from the particular cultural and social context of Hindu India. Kakar sees the many mythopoetic and ritual manifestations of “bisexuality” (read sexual ambivalence or transgenderism) in India as “express[ing] powerful living forces in the individual unconscious – dark, ambivalent forces, repressed by most . . . that only the deviant, [because] of . . . intense mental anguish, dares to act out.”<sup>31</sup>

Kakar locates these “ambivalent forces” in the particular form

of the Indian “family drama.” While in all societies the image of the “bad mother” combines aggressive destruction and a demanding sexuality, in India it is in the seductive, provocative presence that the mother extends, because of her own unsatisfied erotic needs, that the possibility of transgenderism most centrally lies. Several social factors in India combine to dispose a young mother to turn the full force of her eroticism toward an infant son, including the culturally required repression of a woman's erotic needs, her distance from her husband in the joint family, her increase in status and respect when she bears a son and the closeness between the mother and son for a prolonged period that is abruptly discontinued around the sixth or seventh year.

The young boy's ego cannot cope with the sexual demands of the mother, nor can he happily accept the separation from his mother that his rejection of her entails. The son's response to the mother's overpowering demands and his simultaneous desire to retain her protection result in a fear of the “devouring mother.” This fear leads to a “vicious circle that spirals inward in the Indian unconscious: mature women are experienced as sexually threatening to men; this contributes to ‘avoidance behavior’ in marital sexual relations; this in turn causes women to extend a provocative sexual presence towards their sons, and this eventually produces adult men who fear the sexuality of mature women.”<sup>32</sup>

The mother's overpowering incestuous demands on the son lead him to want to avoid them at all costs, even at the cost of his manhood. But although the rejected mother becomes dangerous, her presence is so necessary that abandonment by her is unthinkable – hence, the worship of the goddess as mother. For it is the goddess, dangerous though she is, who nevertheless brings blessings, salvation and rebirth – just as it is the mother, potentially dangerous as she is in the possibility of abandoning her son, who nevertheless is the object of the son's deepest longings for reconciliation. This fear of the devouring mother is an important psychodynamic factor in explaining the most extreme devotion and abject submission of the male devotee to the Mother Goddess – a devotion that prominently includes symbolic and, as with the hijras, actual castration.

The devotee's attempts at reconciliation with the mother through the worship of the goddess are expressed in many Hindu myths and rituals involving transgenderism, some of which I have noted earlier. In these myths and rituals, the male's attempt to remove his masculinity, which he vaguely perceives to be the basis of his conflict with his mother, is supreme. Longing for fusion with the mother that brings salvation, the male devotee – in rituals ranging from transvestism to emasculation – proves his submission and is thereby assured of the nurturing and life-giving presence of the desired mother. In the castration ritual, the hijra *nirvan* finds a way both to flee the sexually demanding mother and to be reconciled with her.

The hijra conceptualization of the emasculation ritual as rebirth illuminates the ritual as part of the struggle against death, which, because of the Hindu family drama, takes a characteristically Hindu form of a desire for fusion with the mother. It is this desire that gives Mother Goddess worship its power. As the hijras say, "The Mata gives us life and we live only in her power." Through emasculation, hijras, as devotees of the goddess, achieve the ultimate identification with the mother, thereby reducing their anxiety about separation from her. "The only unbearable harm that the Goddess can inflict on the worshiper is to abandon him. This, not mutilation, is the source of devastating grief."<sup>33</sup> The hijras' identification with the goddess through the sacrifice of their genitals assures them of her life-giving power, warding off death. In the particular sociocultural context of India the Mother Goddess cult resolves, by culturally patterned acting out, the culturally generated conflicts over the incestuous mother.

Cultural patterns of Hindu India are not merely a background hospitable to various kinds of gender ambiguities; they also generate psychodynamic processes strongly implicated in the maintenance of various forms of transgenderism, including extremes such as the hijra. These psychodynamic forces have helped enable the role to continue over time, attracting a wide variety of persons – those called transvestites, homosexuals and transsexuals in the West – without losing its cultural meaning.

### *Social Structure and Economics*

The socioeconomic system of caste joins the psychodynamics of the Mother Goddess cult as the key factors supporting the maintenance of the hijra role over time. The caste system of India, with its corporate social units, occupational exclusivity, control over its members and hierarchically based group allocation of rights and privileges, accommodates many different kinds of peoples, such as Muslims and indigenous tribal peoples, who, though originally outside the Hindu system, become incorporated into it as castes or castelike groups. Although hijras claim to be ascetics, and thus outside the caste system, they are organized into a community which has many features of a caste (*jati*) or ethnic group (*quom*) and can therefore be incorporated into Indian social structure. References to hijras as "half a *quom*" indicate their somewhat anomalous position as both inside and outside caste society.

Hijras are drawn from many castes and from the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious communities. Most hijras appear to be drawn from the lower, though not unclean, castes. I never met a hijra who claimed to come from a Brahman family, and the taint of disreputableness that attaches to them suggests that this is not an attractive option for upper-caste persons.<sup>34</sup> When a person joins the hijras, however, all former caste identities are disregarded, and no distinctions of purity and pollution are made within the community. Like other renouncers, their hijra identity transcends caste and kinship affiliations.

At the same time, it is the caste- and kinship-like features of the hijra community that are adaptive and have contributed to its social reproduction. Hijras function like a caste in their claim to a monopoly over their occupation as ritual performers on specific occasions. They also exercise control over their members like a caste, with outcasting the ultimate sanction. Also, like other castes, hijras have origin myths that justify their claimed place in society. The hijra community, like other *jatis*, successfully reproduce themselves, although through social rather than biological processes.

Hijra social organization also has the structural and psychological features of an (ideal) Hindu extended, joint family.<sup>35</sup> Hijras

typically – and ideally – live in communes organized around a relatively permanent group of up to twenty individuals. Members contribute their earnings, whether from performing, begging for alms or prostitution, to the household, in return for which they are given clothes, shelter, food, perhaps jewelry and pocket money by the household leader. The household is the effective organization at the local level and may even hold property collectively, although property is more likely to be in the name of one elder.

Crosscutting the distribution of hijra households in space is a division of the hijra community into “houses.” These are not local, domestic groups but rather symbolic descent groups, functionally equivalent to lineages. Each house has a *naik*, or chief, who is the leader of that house in a particular city or region. The *naiks* of a city collectively form a *jamat*, or meeting of the elders, which handles intracommunity disputes, sanctions hijras who violate community norms, including expulsion from the community, stakes out the territories within which each hijra household may work, makes decisions for the group, acts as the audience for the initiation of new recruits and mediates whenever necessary between the hijras and the larger society, such as in police cases brought against them.

Seniority is the major principle of social organization in the hijra community, expressed in a hierarchy of *gurus* (teachers) and *chelas* (disciples). Every hijra initiate must be sponsored by a particular *guru*. The *guru-chela* relationship combines aspects of those between parents and children, husbands and wives, and religious *gurus* and their disciples and thus has economic, affective and spiritual dimensions. *Gurus* provide guidance, work and support for their *chelas*, and *chelas* owe obedience and loyalty, and part or all of their earnings, to their *gurus*. This relationship is also the basis for a network of fictive kin, as a *guru's* *guru* becomes a “grandmother” and *chelas* of the same *guru* are “like sisters.”

The *guru-chela* organization is a very effective recruitment device, directly contributing to the persistence and expansion of the hijra community. Any hijra who wishes and can afford it (since the *guru* rather than the initiate usually pays the initiation fee) can become a *guru*, which immediately increases her prestige in

the community, as well as her income, as *chelas* always give something – either cash or gifts – to their *gurus*. Thus, hijras are always on the lookout for new recruits. While most hijras join voluntarily under the sponsorship of a particular *guru*, there is a coercive nature also to the *guru-chela* relationship. *Gurus* are always trying to maintain their investments – economic and perhaps affective as well – in *chelas* that they have financially supported, and thus they pressure likely candidates to make a permanent commitment to the group.

Through adopting many features of castes and kin, particularly control over members through control over work, hijra community organization effectively adapts to the socioeconomic context in India. This castelike status of the hijras was recognized in the edicts of Indian states, which granted one hijra in each district hereditary rights to a parcel of land and rights to collect food and small sums of money from each agricultural household in a stipulated area. These rights were protected against other hijras and legitimately passed from *guru* to *chela*. This granting of rights was consistent with the Indian concept of the king's duty to ensure the ancient rights of his subjects.<sup>36</sup> Even today, although in a vague and somewhat confused way, hijras refer back to these rights as part of their claims to legitimacy; they insisted to me that the Indian government respected these rights as well, reserving certain housing blocks especially for hijras.

In addition to a culture hospitable to gender variance, culturally patterned psychodynamics that generate conflicts and resolutions open to transgenderism and an internal social structure that is economically adaptive and provides for social reproduction, demographic factors also play a role in the maintenance of the hijras as a community. India's large population provides the “critical mass” that is important in transforming any cultural category into a group and thereby leading to the development of a subculture. In the much smaller societies of Native America or New Guinea, where alternative sexes and/or gender roles appear, the relatively small populations would seem to preclude a community such as the hijras from developing.



FIGURE 8.8. (above) A hijra dances at a college event.

FIGURE 8.9. (right) A hijra prostitute dances at a party.



### Change

With the advent of British rule, the position of the hijras began to lose traditional formal legitimacy. While the British initially recognized some of the traditional entitlements awarded the hijras as they assumed control over Indian states, ultimately the British government refused to lend its legal support to the hijras' "right of begging or extorting money, whether authorized by former governments or not."<sup>37</sup> They thereby hoped to discourage what they found to be "the abominable practices of the wretches." Through a law disallowing any land grant or entitlement from the state that "breach[ed] the laws of public decency," the British finally were able to remove the hijras' state protection.<sup>38</sup> In some British-influenced Indian states, such as the state of Baroda (in present-day Gujarat), laws criminalizing emasculation, aimed specifically at the hijras, were passed, and these laws were incorporated into the criminal code of independent India.

These laws appear to have had no deterrent effect.<sup>39</sup> Hijras continue to become emasculated, and few prosecutions are brought, partly because the practice is carried out secretly and partly perhaps because of the still-strong traditional Indian recognition of the validity of the many different ways of being human. Even a largely unenforced criminalization does, however, delegitimize the ritual practice central to the hijra cult, and in a recent case, several hijras were charged and punished under the section of the Indian penal code that makes emasculation a criminal offense.<sup>40</sup> These cases add the stigmatization of modern government authority to the traditional ambivalence toward the hijras.

In addition to government hostility, hijras complain that opportunities for their traditional work are declining as Indians are having fewer children under the pressure of family-planning programs and propaganda. In addition, new life-styles inhibit hijra performances. In modern blocks of apartments there are usually security guards, who increasingly act as gatekeepers to prohibit entry to various traditional street performers, including hijras. It is also likely that, as a result of increasing Westernization of values and culture, the role of many traditional ritual performers like the hijras becomes less compelling. Life-cycle ceremonies in India

generally are becoming shorter, even when they continue to be performed, and many nonessential ritual features are dropping off.

In response to these changes and to the economically competitive marketplace of contemporary India, the hijras seem to have successfully adapted through the exploitation of some new economic opportunities, such as establishing territories of shops from whose proprietors they ask for alms, and the expansion of some historical occupations, such as prostitution, which has become an increasingly important source of income. Although prostitution is stigmatized within the hijra community, it is widely engaged in. Historical sources have always associated hijras with prostitution, although these same sources cite hijra protestations to the contrary.<sup>41</sup> All the hijra prostitutes I met claimed they engaged in prostitution only because the decline in demand for their traditional occupations leaves them no alternative way to make a living. The survey of one hundred hijras in Delhi indicated clearly that the earnings of hijras from prostitution are far higher than the earnings of their families of origin, who mainly fell into the category of the economically impoverished.<sup>42</sup>

The expansion of prostitution is of major benefit to *gurus*, who can therefore be expected to encourage it. Individual prostitutes always work under the control of a hijra *guru* to whom they must give part or all of their earnings. Indeed, some *gurus* seem no different from "madams," living in style off the earnings of a household of hard-working hijra prostitutes, who in addition to giving their earnings to the *guru* are closely supervised by them to make sure they do not run off with the customers and thus deprive the *guru* of her income. In spite of this situation, however, few prostitutes work on their own. The community of *gurus* and prostitutes provides a working space, a steady source of customers, a minimum assurance of physical security in case customers get rowdy and someone to pay off the police so that they are not arrested, because prostitution is illegal in India. Not unimportantly, the group milieu also provides prostitutes with a social life.

But because prostitution is considered a low calling, offends the goddess and undermines the legitimacy of the hijra ritual role, special accommodations have to be made to incorporate it within

the community. This is achieved by organizing prostitution in a structure parallel to that through which more traditional hijra work is organized but separating it in space. Thus, in large cities of more traditional hijra culture, such as Bombay or Delhi, hijra prostitutes live together in apartments separate from those hijras who maintain more respectable occupations. Hijra prostitutes do, however, maintain social ties with the community, and they participate in the networks of fictive kinship and the organization by "houses." Hijra prostitutes appear to be recruited from the *zenanna* class and pay an initiation fee to join the hijra community. In this way, the hijra community absorbs some of its own competition and benefits financially. While some of these hijras may have originally joined only to earn a living, they may be persuaded, by pressure from their *gurus*, to undergo emasculation and make a stronger commitment to the group, in time seeking their own *chelas* from whom they may earn.

In addition to prostitution, hijras have also tried to increase their earnings by broadening the definition of occasions on which they claim their performances are necessary or at least appropriate, for example, at the birth of a girl as well as a boy or at the opening of a public building or business. Certainly, the numbers of poor and emotionally lost children and teenagers who venture alone into the cities provide an ongoing source of recruits who can beg for alms and engage in prostitution, even if they cannot carry out ritual performances. For these persons, the economic security and the emotional comfort of the group life of the hijras can prove seductive, particularly if the individual has been rejected by his family for cross-dressing or engaging in sexual experimentation with men.

For the present, whatever the constraints operating on the hijras as a community, there seems to be no indication of the role dying out. Despite the stigma that may be attached to individual hijras, the power in the role still commands respect, or at least fear. The powerful psychological factors, joined with economic motivations, against a background in which culture and religion can still be marshaled to give meaning to alternative sex and gender roles, seems to indicate that the hijras, unlike alternative

gender roles in many other societies, will be around for a long time to come.

Few systematic attempts have been made to correlate alternative gender roles with other aspects of culture, and this volume makes an important contribution to that effort. The continued salience of the alternative gender role of the hijra in contemporary Indian society raises questions about this relationship in a particularly insistent way. Although it has been suggested that gender differentiation may be a key factor in explaining the presence of alternative gender roles, the Indian context does not bear this out; for in India the hijra role functions in a culture in which male and female sex and gender roles are viewed as essential, sharply differentiated and hierarchical.<sup>43</sup>

What does seem to be an important explanatory key is the importance of the Mother Goddess in Hinduism. In India, the devotion to the Mother Goddess, and the corresponding significance of feminine creative powers, is still strong, unlike other cultures where Mother Goddess cults were submerged or effaced by the introduction and subsequent dominance of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although this devotion is combined with ambivalence about the untamed sexuality of women, it nevertheless provides a context in which gender transpositions – from male to female – remain valid and meaningful.

The cultural significance of the feminine, when joined to the distinctive Hindu concept of *svadharma*, gives wide latitude to individuals whose gender roles and identities vary from the cultural norm. It is the genius of Hinduism that it allows for so many different ways of being human. The hijras will undoubtedly be viewed by many in the West as bizarre and pathological; yet their role becomes comprehensible when understood within the context of Indian culture. The hijra role is strong testimony that Western sex and gender dichotomies are not universal. As such, it provides a model of cultural diversity that may help Westerners reflect anew on their own culture and become more flexible in accommodating those individuals who do not fit into traditionally prescribed sex and gender categories.