



Neither Man nor Woman  
*The Hijras of India*

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 Hijras as Neither Man Nor Woman

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

“And that is why we hijras are so respected in that part of India,” added Gopi, the hijra who told me this story. Gopi was about 40 years old, a Hindu from South India who had just returned to the hijra household I was visiting in Bastipore. She had recently spent several years telling fortunes outside a Hindu temple in another city and was well versed in Hindu religious lore. The story she told me, in response to my question, “What is a hijra?” expresses the most common view, held by both hijras and people in the larger society, that the hijras are an alternative gender, neither men or women. This story, and others like it, makes explicit both the cultural definition of this role in India, and for many (though not all) hijras, it defines a personally experienced gender identity as well.

The story is thus an origin myth, similar to those told by many Indian castes. Such myths “explain” the caste’s origin by linking the caste to Hindu deities, providing religious sanction for its claimed place in Indian society. The many myths, such as the one that opens this chapter, validate a positive identity for hijras by identifying their alternative gender role with deities and mythic figures of the Great Tradition of Hinduism.

The view of hijras as an alternative gender category is supported by linguistic evidence. The most widely used English translations of the word *hijra*, which is of Urdu origin, is either “eunuch” or “hermaphrodite” (intersexed). Both terms, as used in India, connote impotence—an inability to function in the male sexual role—and the word *hijra* primarily

implies a physical defect impairing the male sexual function (Opler, 1960:507). In both cases the irregularity of the male genitalia is central to the definition: *Eunuch* refers to an emasculated male and *intersexed* to a person whose genitals are ambiguously male-like at birth. When this is discovered, the child, previously assigned to the male sex, would be recategorized as intersexed—as a hijra. Although historically in North India a linguistic distinction was made between “born hijras” (hermaphrodites) and “made hijras” (eunuchs) (Ibbetson et al., 1911:331), the term *hijra* as it is currently used collapses both of these categories.

Impotence is the force behind both the words *eunuch* and *hermaphrodite* as they are used in India, and impotence is central to the definition of the hijra as not man. Some 19th century accounts report that impotence was an essential qualification for admission into the hijra community and that a newcomer initiated into the community was on probation for as long as a year. During this time his impotence was carefully tested, sometimes by making the person sleep four nights with a prostitute.<sup>1</sup> Only after impotence was established would the newcomer be permitted to undergo the emasculation operation and become a full member of the community (Bhimhai, 1901:506). Another 19th century account of the hijras also reports that “all state that they were incapable of copulation and that becoming [hijras] was on that account only.” (Preston, 1987: 375).

While in South India, where hijras do not have the cultural role that they do in North India, the terms used for hijra, such as *kojja* in Telegu (Anderson, 1977) or *pottai* in Tamil, are epithets that connote a derogatory meaning of a cowardly or feminine male, the term *hijra* itself is rarely used this way. Nor does hijra mean homosexual; I have never heard it given that English translation. Because it is widely believed in India that a man may become impotent through engaging in homosexual relations in the receiver role in anal intercourse, passive homosexuals who become impotent may identify themselves as hijras, not because they have sexual relations with men, but because they are impotent.

In parts of North India, effeminate males who are assumed to play the passive role in homosexual relationships are referred to as *zenana* (Ibbetson et al., 1911:332), literally meaning woman: By becoming a hijra, one removes oneself from this category (see Lynton & Rajan, 1974). *Zenana* are said to think of themselves in the male gender, generally wear male clothing, and sometimes may be married and have children. Some *zenana* may live with hijras (Ranade, 1983) and perform with them, but they are not “real” hijras (Sinha, 1967). Although hijras assert that such men are “fake” hijras, merely “men who impersonate hijras,” some *zenana* do go through the formal initiation into the hijra community. Whereas hijras are sometimes cited in the literature as transvestites (Kakar, 1981:35) or transvestite prostitutes (Freeman, 1979), it is clear, as we will see, that the role refers to much more than a man who dresses in women’s clothing.

HIJRAS AS "NOT MEN"

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].

As indicated by this quote (Ibbetson et al., 1911:331), the view of hijras as an "in-between" gender begins with their being men who are impotent, therefore not men, or as Wendy O'Flaherty aptly puts it, "As eunuchs, hijras are man minus man" (1980:297). But being impotent is only a necessary and not sufficient condition for being a hijra. Hijras are men who are impotent for one reason or another and only become hijras by having their genitals cut off. Emasculation is the *dharm* (religious obligation) of the hijras, and it is this renunciation of male sexuality through the surgical removal of the organ of male sexuality that is at the heart of the definition of the hijra social identity. This understanding is true for both hijras and their audiences.

That the core meaning of the hijra role centers on the aberrant male genitals was brought home to me many times by hijras, who in response to my question, "What is a hijra?" would offer to show me their ambiguous or mutilated genitals. In some cases, a hijra I was talking with would jump to her feet, lift up her skirt, and, displaying her altered genitals, would say, "See, we are neither men nor women!"

Hijras' expressions of what they are often take the form of stating that they are in-between, neither men nor women, but the term *hijra* itself is a masculine noun suggesting, as does the word *eunuch*, a man that is less than a perfect man. In fact, however, several hijras I met were raised from birth as females; only as they failed to develop secondary female sexual characteristics (breast development and menarche) at puberty, did they change their gender role to hijra (see also Anderson, 1977; Mehta, 1947).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, hijras claim that one of their founders was "a woman, but not a normal woman, she did not menstruate," a point about which I shall have more to say later.

The primary cultural definition of hijras, however, is that they begin life as men, albeit incomplete men; this is consistent with my observations that those hijras who exclaim that they are neither man nor woman always begin with an explanation of how they are *not men*.

The hijra view of themselves as "not men" as it occurred in my conversations with them focused primarily on their anatomy—the imperfection or absence of a penis—but also implicated their physiology and their sexual capacities, feelings, and preferences. These definitions incorporated both the ascribed status of "being born this way" and the achieved status of renouncing sexual desire and sexual activity.

Lakshmi, a beautiful young hijra dancer, who had undergone the emasculation operation a year before I met her, said, "I was born a man, but not a perfect man." Neelam, a transvestite homosexual who had not yet had the emasculation operation, told me, "I was born a man, but my male

organ did not work properly so I became a hijra.” Shabnam, a hijra elder who now only wears women’s clothing, showed me some photographs of her youth. Pointing to one in which she appears dressed as a man, with a mustache, she said, most casually, “See, that is when I was a boy. In those days I lived and worked for a Christian family.” Sonya, a middle-aged hijra who had not had the emasculation operation and who looked very masculine, but who otherwise had adopted all of the clothing and gestures of a woman, explained, “We are not like men, we do not have the sexual desires men have.” Krishna, a slim young man who mainly dressed in men’s clothes, except for important hijra social occasions, when he put on female attire, said, “We are not men with the ordinary desires of men to get married and have families. Otherwise, why would we choose to live this life?” Bellama, a hijra elder, told me, “We hijra are like sannyasis (ascetics), we have renounced all sexual desire and family life.”

But Kamladevi, a hijra prostitute, is skeptical: “Of course we have the sexual desires,” she said. “Older hijras like Bellama and Gopi, now they say they don’t have the sexual desires and all, they have become very religious minded and don’t do all that. But when they were young, I can tell you, they were just like me. We hijras are born as boys, but then we ‘get spoiled’ and have sexual desires only for men.”

Lalitha, a hijra whose sexual relationships with her “man” dominated her life, told me:

See, we are all men, born as men, but when we look at women, we don’t have any desire for them. When we see men, we like them, we feel shy, we feel some excitement. We want to live and die as women. We have the same feelings you have, Serena, just as you women fall in love and are ready to sacrifice your life for a man, so we are also like that. Just like you, whenever a man touches us, we get an excitement out of it.

Shakuntala is a hijra who had once been a dancer and a prostitute, but who now has a husband and only does domestic chores for a hijra household. She had the emasculation operation in 1978, 3 years prior to my meeting her. One day, as we were talking about what a hijra is, she burst out in anger:

In many places men who are perfect men have joined this community only for the sake of earning a living. This is not good. Only men who have not spoiled any lady or got any children should come into the hijra company. You should not have had any affairs with ladies, not have loved ladies, or done any sexual thing with them or have married a lady. We true hijras are like this from childhood. From a small age we like to dance and dress as women. Even when we go away from this world, in our death, we must wear the sari. That is our desire.

If hijras, as eunuchs, are man minus maleness, they are also, in their outward appearance and behavior, man plus woman.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious expression of hijras as women is in their dress. Although some hijras do

wear male clothing—sometimes because they work outside their traditional occupations or for other reasons—wearing female attire is an essential and defining characteristic of the hijra. It is absolutely required for their performances, when asking for alms, and when they visit the temple of their goddess Bahuchara. Hijra prostitutes also invariably wear women's clothes. This clothing may follow the custom of the region: In South India, hijras wear saris, whereas in North India they may wear *salwar-kameez* (the loose shirt and pants worn by women in North India) or even Western fashions. All hijras who dress in women's clothes wear a bra, which may be padded or, more likely, stuffed, as padded bras are expensive; sometimes it just is there, empty, on the flat male chest.

Hijras enjoy dressing in women's clothing, and their female dress is typically accompanied by traditionally feminine jewelry, such as wrist bangles, nose rings, and toe rings, as well as *bindi*—the colored dot applied to the forehead of all Hindu women who are not widows. Long hair is a must for a hijra. One of the punishments meted out by the elders to a hijra who has misbehaved is to cut her hair. This is considered a disgrace and an insult; even hijras who normally dress in men's clothing keep their hair long. Some wear it merely pulled back in a ponytail or tied up and covered with a male head covering; others wear it openly in a woman's hairstyle. Arjun, the hero of one of the two great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata, is required to live for 1 year as a eunuch, and he specifically refers to how he shall wear his hair like a woman and adorn himself with bangles. Hijras are forbidden to shave but rather must pluck out their facial hair so that their skin remains smooth like a woman's.<sup>4</sup>

Hijras also adopt female behavior: They imitate, even exaggerate, a woman's "swaying walk," sit and stand like women, and carry pots on their hips, which men do not. But hijras may engage in male occupations: One hijra I knew delivered milk on a bicycle and another was an electrician; some work on construction, which in India is a woman's as well as a man's job. Nevertheless, most hijras who work outside traditional hijra occupations take jobs that are generally held by both men and women, for example, as household servants and cooks.

Hijras also take female names when they join the community, and they use female kinship terms for each other, such as "sister," "aunty," and "grandmother" (mother's mother).<sup>5</sup> In some parts of India they also have a special, feminized language, which consists of the use of feminine expressions and intonations (Freeman, 1979:295). In public transport or other public accommodations, hijras request "ladies only" seating, and they periodically demand to be counted as females in the census.

#### HIJRAS AS "NOT WOMEN"

If hijras are clearly not men by virtue of anatomy, appearance, and psychology, they are also not women, though they are "like" women. Their female

dress and mannerisms are often exaggerations, almost to the point of caricature, and they act in sexually suggestive ways that would be considered inappropriate, and even outrageous, for ordinary women in their significant and traditional female roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Hijra performances are most often burlesques of female behavior, and much of the fun of the performance derives from the incongruities between their behavior and that of women of the larger society whom they pretend to imitate. Their very act of dancing in public is contrary to what ordinary women would do. They also use coarse and abusive speech and gestures, again in opposition to the Hindu ideal of demure and restrained femininity. The act of a hijra who lifts up her skirt and exposes her mutilated genitals is considered shameless and thoroughly unfeminine. In Gujarat, an important center of hijra culture, hijras smoke the *hookah* (water pipe), which is normally done only by men; and in Panjab, hijras are noted for smoking cigarettes, which is ordinarily done only by men. Although some emasculated hijras do experience bodily feminization, for example, in the rounding of the hips, hijras who have not been emasculated may retain a heavy male facial structure and body muscularity and facial hair (Rao, 1955).

The “not woman” aspect of the hijra role is attested to by 18th century reports which note that hijras were required by native governments to distinguish themselves by wearing a man’s turban with their female clothing. A century later hijras were also noted to wear “a medley of male and female clothing”, in this case wearing the female sari under the male coatlike outer garment (Preston, 1987:373). However, today, this mixture of clothing is not required, and hijras who wear any female clothing at all wear completely female attire.

As I suggested, it is the absence of menstruation that is the most important signal that a person who has been assigned to the female sex at birth and raised as a female, is a hijra. This sign—the absence of the onset of a female’s reproductive ability—points to the essential criterion of the feminine gender that hijras themselves make explicit: They do not have female reproductive organs, and because they cannot have children they cannot be considered real women.

To help me understand this, a hijra told me this story:

See, two people got into a fight, a man and a hijra. The hijra said, “I am a lady,” and the man said, “No, you are not.” The fight went so long that they went to the magistrate. The magistrate said, “I agree, you look like a woman, you act like a woman, but I’ll ask you a simple question—can you give birth to a baby? If that is not possible, then you don’t win.” The hijra answered, no, she could not give birth to a baby, so the magistrate said, “You are only a hijra, you are not a woman.”

The hijras I was sitting with nodded vigorously in assent to the tale’s conclusion. This story was immediately followed by another, which is



further testimony to the hijra view of themselves as “not women,” at least not real women:

In Ajmer, in North India, there is a holy place that belongs to the hijras. It is called Baba Darga, and it is on top of a hill. One time, during Urs [a Muslim festival], many people were going up the hill to pay respects to Baba. One hijra was also there. She saw a lady with four children and offered to carry one or two of them. The lady became very angry and told the hijra, “You are a hijra, so don’t touch my children.”

This made the hijra feel very sad, so she asked Baba for his blessings for a child of her own. But she only asked for a child and didn’t ask Baba to bring the child out. The pregnancy went on for ten months, and her stomach became very bloated. She went to the doctors but they didn’t want to perform an operation [Caesarean section] on her. Eventually she couldn’t stand the weight any longer so she prayed to the Baba to redeem her from this situation. But Baba could only grant her the boon, he could not reverse it.

When the hijra felt she could stand it no more, she found a sword at the *darga* [Muslim shrine] and slit herself open. She removed the child and placed in on the ground. The child died and the hijra also died. Now at this darga prayers are performed to this hijra and the child and then to the Baba.

This story reveals an ambivalence: On the one hand, it expresses the wish of some hijras to have a child, yet on the other hand acknowledges its impossibility. The death of the hijra and the child suggests that hijras cannot become women—in the most fundamental sense of being able to bear a child—and that they are courting disaster to attempt something so contrary to their nature. Meera, the hijra who told me this story, was convinced it was true. She had many times expressed to me her wish for a child and said that she had read in a magazine that in America doctors would help people like her have babies. The other hijras sitting with us laughed at this suggestion.<sup>6</sup>

#### ALTERNATIVE GENDERS IN INDIAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY

The hijra role is a magnet that attracts people with many different kinds of cross-gender identities, attributes, and behaviors—people whom we in the West would differentiate as eunuchs, homosexuals, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and transvestites. Such individuals, of course, exist in our own and perhaps all societies. What is noteworthy about the hijras is that the role is so deeply rooted in Indian culture that it can accommodate a wide variety of temperaments, personalities, sexual needs, gender identities, cross-gender behaviors, and levels of commitment without losing its cultural meaning. The ability of the hijra role to succeed as a symbolic

reference point giving significant meaning to the lives of the many different kinds of people who make up the hijra community, is undoubtedly related to the variety and significance of alternative gender roles and gender transformations in Indian mythology and traditional culture.

Whereas Westerners feel uncomfortable with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such in-between categories as transvestism, homosexuality, hermaphroditism, and transgenderism, and make strenuous attempts to resolve them, Hinduism not only accommodates such ambiguities, but also views them as meaningful and even powerful.

In Hindu mythology, ritual, and art—important vehicles for transmitting the Hindu world view—the power of the combined man/woman is a frequent and significant theme. Indian mythology contains numerous examples of androgynes, impersonators of the opposite sex, and individuals who undergo sex changes, both among deities and humans. These mythical figures are well known as part of Indian popular culture, which helps explain the ability of the hijras to maintain a meaningful place for themselves within Indian society in an institutionalized third gender role.

One of the most important sexually ambivalent figures in Hinduism with whom hijras identify is Shiva, a deity who incorporates both male and female characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Shiva is an ascetic—one who renounces sex—and yet he appears in many erotic and procreative roles. His most powerful symbol and object of worship is the phallus—but the phallus is almost always set in the *yoni*, the symbol of the female genitals. One of the most popular forms of Shiva is that of *Ardhanarisvara*, or half-man/half-woman, which represents Shiva united with his shakti (female creative power). Hijras say that worshipers of Shiva give them special respect because of this close identification, and hijras often worship at Shiva temples. In the next chapter, I look more closely at the identification of the hijras with Shiva, particularly in connection with the ritual of emasculation.

Other deities also take on sexually ambiguous or dual gender manifestations. Vishnu and Krishna (an *avatar*, or incarnation, of Vishnu) are sometimes pictured in androgynous ways. In one myth, Vishnu transforms himself into Mohini, the most beautiful woman in the world, in order to take back the sacred nectar from the demons who have stolen it. In another well-known myth, Krishna takes on the form of a female to destroy a demon called Araka. Araka's strength came from his chasteness. He had never set eyes on a woman, so Krishna took on the form of a beautiful woman and married him. After 3 days of the marriage, there was a battle and Krishna killed the demon. He then revealed himself to the other gods in his true form. Hijras, when they tell this story, say that when Krishna revealed himself he told the other gods that "there will be more like me, neither man nor woman, and whatever words come from the mouths of these people, whether good [blessings] or bad [curses], will come true."

In Tamil Nadu, in South India, an important festival takes place in which

hijras, identifying with Krishna, become wives, and then widows, of the male deity Koothandavar. The story behind this festival is that there were once two warring kingdoms. To avert defeat, one of the kings agreed to sacrifice his eldest son to the gods, asking only that he first be allowed to arrange his son's marriage. Because no woman could be found who would marry a man about to be sacrificed, Krishna came to earth as a woman to marry the king's son, and the king won the battle as the gods promised.

For this festival, men who have made vows to Koothandavar dress as women and go through a marriage ceremony with him. The priest performs the marriage, tying on the traditional wedding necklace. After 1 day, the deity is carried to a burial ground. There, all of those who have "married" him remove their wedding necklaces, cry and beat their breasts, and remove the flowers from their hair, as a widow does in mourning for her husband. Hijras participate by the thousands in this festival, coming from all over India. They dress in their best clothes and jewelry and ritually reaffirm their identification with Krishna, who changes his form from male to female.

Several esoteric Hindu ritual practices involve male transvestism as a form of devotion. Among the Sakhibhava (a sect that worships Vishnu) Krishna may not be worshiped directly. The devotees in this sect worship Radha, Krishna's beloved, with the aim of becoming her attendant: It is through her, as Krishna's consort, that Krishna is indirectly worshiped. The male devotees imitate feminine behavior, including simulated menstruation; they also may engage in sexual acts with men as acts of devotion, and some devotees even castrate themselves in order to more nearly approximate a female identification with Radha (Bullough, 1976:267–268; Kakar, 1981; Spratt, 1966:315).

Hinduism in general holds that all persons contain within themselves both male and female principles. In the Tantric school of Hinduism, 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 (never female) 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 in order to realize the woman in himself: Only in this way do they believe that true love can be realized (Bullough, 1976:260).

Traditional Hinduism makes many specific references to alternative sexes and sexual ambiguity among humans as well as among gods. Ancient Hinduism, for example, taught that there was a third sex, which itself was divided into four categories: the male eunuch, called the "waterless" because he had desiccated testes; the "testicle voided," so called because he had been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the "not woman," or female eunuch (which usually refers to a woman who does not menstruate). Those who were more feminine (whether males or females) wore false breasts and imitated the voice, gestures, dress, delicacy, and timidity

of women (Bullough, 1976:268). All of these categories of persons had the function of providing alternative techniques of sexual gratification, some of which are mentioned in the classical Hindu sex manual, the *Kamasutra*.

Another ancient reference to a third sex, one that sounds similar to the hijras, is a prostitute named Sukumarika (“good little girl”), who appears in a Sanskrit play. Sukumarika is accused of being sexually insatiable. As a third sex, she has some characteristics advantageous in her profession: “She 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” (O’Flaherty, 1980:299).

As just suggested, ancient Hindus, like contemporary ones, appeared to be ambivalent about such third gender roles and the associated alternative sexual practices. The figure of Sukumarika, for example, was considered inauspicious to look upon and, not coincidentally, similar to the hijras today, inspired both fear and mockery. Historically, both eunuchism and castration were looked down on in ancient India, and armed women and old men were preferred to eunuchs for guarding court ladies (Basham, 1954:172). Whereas homosexuality was generally not highly regarded in ancient India, such classic texts as the *Kamasutra*, however, did describe, even prescribe, sexual practices for eunuchs, for example, “mouth congress.”<sup>8</sup>

Homosexuality was condemned in the ancient lawbooks. The *Laws of Manu*, the first formulation of the Hindu moral code, held that men who engaged in anal sex lost their caste. Other medieval writers held that men who engaged in oral sex with other men were reborn impotent. But homosexuals were apparently tolerated in reality. Consistent with the generally “sex positive” attitude of Hinduism, Vatsyayana, author of the *Kamasutra*, responded to critics of oral and anal sex by saying that “in all things connected with love, everybody should act according to the custom of his country, and his own inclination,” asking a man to consider only whether the act “is agreeable to his nature and himself” (Burton, 1964:127).

Even the gods were implicated in such activities: Krishna’s son Samba was notorious for his homosexuality and dressed as female, often a pregnant woman. As Sambali, Samba’s name became a synonym for eunuch (Bullough, 1976:267). 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 Shiva, is homosexually seduced by a transvestite (a young man dressed as a female temple dancer) (Marglin, 1985:53). In some Hindu myths a male deity takes on a female form specifically to experience sexual relations with another male deity.

Islam also provides a model of an in-between gender—not a mythological one, but a true historical figure—in the traditional role of the eunuch who guarded the ladies of the harem, under Moghul rule. Hijras often mention this role as the source of their prestige in Indian society. In spite

of the clear connection of hijras with Hinduism, Islam not only provides a powerful positive model of an alternative gender, but also contributes many elements to the social organization of the hijra community. Hijras today make many references to the glorious, preindependence Indian past when the Muslim rulers of princely states were exceedingly generous and reknowned for their patronage of the hijras (see Lynton & Rajan, 1974).

Today the religious role of the hijras, derived from Hinduism, and the historical role of the eunuchs in the Muslim courts have become inextricably entwined in spite of the differences between them. Hijras are distinguished from the eunuchs in Muslim courts by their transvestism and their association with men. Muslim eunuchs dressed as males and associated with women and, unlike the hijras, were sexually inactive. More importantly, the role of hijras as ritual performers is linked to their sexual ambiguity as this incorporates the elements of the erotic and the ascetic; Muslim eunuchs had no such powers or roles. Today, the collapsing of the role of the hijra and that of the Muslim eunuchs leads to certain contradictions, but these seem easily incorporated into the hijra culture by hijras themselves; only the Western observer seems to feel the need to separate them conceptually.

The hijras, as human beings who are neither man nor woman, call into question the basic social categories of gender on which Indian society is built. This makes the hijras objects of fear, abuse, ridicule, and sometimes pity. But hijras are not merely ordinary human beings: As we shall see more clearly in the next chapter, they are also conceptualized as special, sacred beings, through a ritual transformation. The many examples that I have cited above indicate that both Indian society and Hindu mythology provide some positive, or at least accommodating, roles for such sexually ambiguous figures. Within the context of Indian social roles, sexually ambiguous figures are associated with sexual specializations; in myth and through ritual, such figures become powerful symbols of the divine and of generativity.

Thus, where Western culture strenuously attempts to resolve sexual contradictions and ambiguities, by denial or segregation, Hinduism appears content 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" (O'Flaherty, 1973:318). It is this characteristically Indian ability to tolerate, even embrace, contradictions and variation at the social, cultural, and personality levels that provides the context in which the hijras cannot only be accommodated, but even granted a measure of power.