

# **The Masculinity of Sons and the Preference for Sons:**

A study on the *Hijras* of Gujarat, India.

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# The Masculinity of Sons and the Preference for Sons:

A study on the Hijras of Gujarat, India.

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## I. Introduction

This paper focuses on Indian youth who renounce men's social status in order to live as hijras. Hijras are those who emasculate themselves by castration, dedicating their lives to the Hindu Goddess *Bahucharā*. They have no obligations to play parts as kin men in generating their own genealogies. As such, they are regarded as neither men nor women, hence, beings in — between. At the sacred temple of *Bahucharā* in Gujarat, hijras are categorized as neither deviants or marginalized beings, rather, they are implored to give graces by those who desire to be blessed with sons.

On the basis of my fieldwork in Gujarat, I will examine the role of hijras in Gujarat where a higher degree of importance is placed on sons or male descendants. Moreover, I will illustrate how hijras differ from non-hijra through a case study of a young man's attempt to renounce his obligation as a son, and become a hijra. Although they are named in various indigenous terms of Gujarat, Such as *vyāndhala* and *fātada*, I use the term 'hijra' so as to present this paper as a critique of studies on hijras.

## II. Hijras, not a pan — Indian phenomena

Hijras of India have been depicted differently according to the colonial / post — colonial contexts. In the official documents of the colonial period, hijras were described as hermaphrodites or disgusting objects [Forbes1834, 359], and eunuchs who were formally impotent men [Kirparam 1901, 506—7]. Conversely, they are represented as institutionalized homosexuals [Carstairs 1956], the eunuch community [Mukherjee 1980], and eunuch — transvestites [Jani & Rosenberg 1990] in the post — colonial contexts. Within the current context of gender studies, however, hijras embody 'the third Gender' of the non — western societies, in other words, a counterpart to sexual minorities in the west. The best known contributor to this topic is Serena Nanda who published "Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India" in 1990. Her ethnography illuminated the individual lives of a de — humanized group of hijras, which was highly appreciated by academics [e.g., Reddy 2005]. Moreover, her ethnography established hijras as those who take "the alternative gender roles" of the traditional Indian culture, and discard the Western belief of the gender dichotomy.

Although Nanda's categorized hijras as the pan — Indian phenomena in opposition to the Western societies, there is no such consistent social niche within the whole India. Hijras in Gujarat, for example, are regarded rather ambivalently in the local context; they are deviant

in terms that they are neither men nor women according to kin's norm as well as social one prescribed in dress and behavior, whereas they are sacred beings in the religious sphere as they devoted themselves to the Goddess *Bahucharā*. Through castration, hijras renounced men's gender status as well as their own positions as kin members. They dress like women covering their mutilated bodies in saris worn by women, however, this new appearance doesn't guarantee them the same status as women. They are standing on the boundary of gender, and their ambiguity is acceptable and understandable in the sacred sphere.

At the Goddess's temple of Gujarat, pilgrims willingly go and meet Hijras to receive the Goddess's grace. Through the physical contact with one of the Hijras, pilgrims long to receive precious grace from the Goddess's devotees and in return leave some token money for them. This religious gift — giving is usually called '*dāna*,' a charitable gift with no return in Sanskrit, whereas some might call it '*daksina*,' a payback, based on the capitalist interpretation. Although *dāna* is an ancient Sanskrit word, it doesn't mean a static Indian cultural practice; it's meanings and intentions were transformed in colonial India [Kasturi 2010]. This paper does not seek to analyze the meaning of *dāna* in depth.

In my opinion, hijras' ambiguity would lose its meaning if it were fixed into the niche of 'the Third Gender' category. Instead, we need to embrace the ambiguous and marginal subject and investigate the interdependence of hijras with non — hijras, or the rest of the Indian society.

### III. A Field Work with Hijras in Gujarat

#### 1. The Hindu rite of tonsure at the temple

I have worked and lived with the hijras of Hindu Goddess *Bahucharā* in Gujarat since 2002. The temple of *Bahucharā* is located in the northern part of Gujarat state in India. Every full-moon day, thousands of people make a pilgrimage to this temple, where inevitably they come across *Bahucharā*'s devotees, hijras. At the temple of *Bahucharā*, hijras practice religious rites that can confer blessings on the pilgrims who are in need of the divine power of the goddess.

The temple of *Bahucharā* is especially known as the place for the rite of boy's tonsure. It's said that boys are not allowed to cut their hair from their birth until they undergo the rite of tonsure at the temple of the Goddess. There is a divergence of opinion about the reason for boys' tonsure. According to the local people in the temple city, the rite of tonsure is a part of a vow to the Goddess *Bahucharā*. Since boys are *Bahucharā*'s heave — sent ones, their guardian are obliged to leave bits of hairs as a token of boys to the Goddess in order to make the boys their own kin. In other people's opinion, babies' hair contains some negative substances of their previous lives; therefore, they should be shaved completely, and boys should be cleaned and purified with the grace of the goddess. Hijras' presence is also an essential part of the tonsure rite for boys. Boys are supposed to be held and blessed by hijras in order to take away all negative substances.

When it comes to female babies, people often say that girls don't go through the rite of tonsure because they don't look nice with shaved heads. However, there is a local phrase about a daughter: *ṅāarakā ghar ni vasatī*, which means a person who belongs to other house/kin.

As daughters are supposed to marry out to other kin from the beginning, it's not necessary for them to go through the rite so as to be a member of kin.

At the site of the temple, the hijras hold a marked presence in contrast to other people. Younger hijras usually put on bright and loud color saris. Elders wear simple ones with valuable gold jewelry. Moreover, they often clap their hands to make themselves noticed by pilgrims, and receive *dāna* from them. Their striking looks and gestures have a significance so as to be recognized by pilgrims as sacred beings near to the Goddess.

## 2. A family — like relationship

In their everyday lives, however, hijras never give off their sacred otherness, but they rather observe values of the profane world. As they usually prefer to associate with people around them as neighbors, they often visit their neighbors' houses and vice versa. Moreover, within their houses, they build a family — like relations with their own members. Two hijras named as Diviya and Sunita (false names), for example, have lived together since I met them for the first time in 2002. Diviya was a guru who had a right to make orders to a disciple and Sunita was '*chelo*,' a disciple, of Diviya. According to their rules, '*guru — chelo*' relationship is equivalent to that of father and son, a relationship which implies the succession to the line and inheritance of Diviya's property. Moreover, Sunita, like a son of Diviya, is expected to hold a funeral of Diviya in a proper way.

Diviya used to have three other disciples, but all of them left the house because of the quarrel with Sunita. In 2007, two new members joined Diviya's house, and both of them were made as Sunita's '*chela*,' disciples, not Diviya's. These disciples referred to Diviya as 'dadi', a grandmother in Gujarati. As I've been on good terms with Diviya and Sunita, I stay at their house when visiting the *Bahucharā's* temple. In order to make this intimate relation permanent and official, Diviya sees me as a Sunita's sister, therefore, Sunita's new disciples call me as '*fai*,' a father's sister or their *guru's* sister.

Like Diviya and Sunita, two other hijras lived together in the residential area adjacent to the temple, whereas three other hijras lived not in that area, but villages near to the temple at the time of August 2007. Every morning, these eight hijras would gather at the ground of the temple, and commence their duties until evening. Occasionally, other hijras, who lived in other parts of Gujarat, far away from the temple, also gathered at the temple, particularly on high pilgrim days. As I stayed at Diviya's house, I followed Diviya to the temple in the morning, and sat with other hijras on the ground of the temple so as to observe interactions between hijras and pilgrims at the temple — compound.

## 3. A man who could not become a hijra

On 14<sup>th</sup> August in 2007, when I was sitting at the steps of the temple storage rooms with Diviya and Sunita's disciples, one young man came close to us and stayed standing for a while with no words. He was wearing a shirt and a pair of trousers. Although he didn't say anything, I sensed that it was not the first time for him to visit Diviya granted that Diviya ignored him for some time. After a while, Diviya brought the subject and urged him to go to other hijras' house. However, he insisted not to go, but to stay with Diviya. Then, Diviya

started to explain clearly the reason not to accept him as a disciple:

Nowadays, we never give our dresses to anyone on the spot. Our disciples came to us followed by their brothers. If your father or uncles come with you, then I would think of giving you our dresses.

To give dresses, in this case, means to give a sari, a blouse, and an underskirt to a new comer in order to accept him as a disciple. That is to say that Diviya explained to him that what was missing for his request was his guardian's permission to become a hijra. The young man understood Diviya's statement and left the temple. After a while, he came back with a mobile in his hand, and asked Diviya to talk to his mother. Diviya told his mother on the phone to change her son's mind:

What kinds of problems does your son have? He is a man. He hasn't received an order from the Goddess to become a hijra. Don't you feel guilty about what you are going to do? Do you want to make your son useless? You should come to me in person, and I'll make you understand.

The young man stayed the night at Diviya's house, with his three male guardians coming to Diviya's house the following day. As soon as they entered the room and took their seats, they started to talk about their son's problems. They said that their son didn't contribute at all to their farm work, and requested Diviya allow him to stay in this house only for one month. However, Diviya declined it by saying that it was not allowed for those who didn't wear saris. In response to their interactions, the young man raised his voice while clasping his palms:

I'll put on an underskirt. I'll live in this house. I'll become a disciple of Diviya. I've already received a message from the Goddess.

Clasping ones palms is a symbolic action of hijras. He learnt that from one of Sunita's disciples the previous night. After shouting against Diviya and his guardians, the man went into another room to weep alone. For the second time, his guardians requested Diviya to keep their son in this house. As Diviya went on to warn them and claim the meaning of becoming a hijra, and pulled the edge of 'the sari' tightly,

(If your son has become a hijra), he would no more be your son, but ours.  
(We are) the *bekhu* of the Goddess. The *bekhu* of the Goddess.

The word of '*bekhu*' in Gujarati means clothes of renouncers or renouncers themselves. Putting another way, Diviya demonstrated that the sari was not just clothes, but the boundary between renouncers and ordinary people. Therefore, according to Diviya's statement, their son would not be allowed to go back to his kin's place if he starts to put on saris. Guardians of the young man seemed to take Diviya's speech and conduct seriously, and they decided to

leave with their son. Not to make him disappointed, Diviya and guardians repeatedly said that they would keep in touch with each other.

Although the young man couldn't become a hijra after all, Diviya's words and deeds in this incident reveal the meaning of becoming / being a hijra. In order to become a hijra, men have to renounce obligatory ties with their own kin and demarcate themselves from other worldly people by wearing saris. Although sari is usually seen as a signifier for women, hijras' practice of wearing saris is not to take on women's practice, but for differentiation from men. It's a symbolic conduct for renouncers. In short, hijras' clothing is not 'the citation of gender norm,' but a demarcation 'in order for a visible subject' as renouncers [Butler 1993: 177].

#### IV. Conclusion

In the post — colonial writings, hijras used to be represented as transvestites, men who wear women's dresses, however, they are no more men. Since hijras of Gujarat renounced men's obligations to perpetuate their family lines as well as men's positions among their kin, they are living as un — sexed beings outside the given kin norms. Moreover, their clothes or saris are not sex / gender signifiers, instead, symbolizing the divine to whom they dedicate themselves. Through the rite of castration, they make a determine distance from the worldly domain.

As devotees of the Goddess *Bahucharā*, hijras of Gujarat give blessings to those who wish to perpetuate their own family lines. In Gujarat, as well as other states of India, the birth of a son is more desired than that of a daughter, which is shown by the operation of the custom of boy's tonsure. Although hijras are those who didn't live up to their kin's expectations as sons, they willingly give their supports to other people's perpetuation through the grace of the goddess *Bahucharā*. As Nanda represents them as 'neither men nor women,' they are living outside the binary of gender. However, 'the third gender' category or the alternative gender roles are not applicable to hijras because they never intend to discredit the legitimacy of worldly gender norms. Instead, they are actively involved in the pre — existing gender norms from a sacred positioning so as to support laymen as well as to survive themselves in this world.

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