

The Etiquette of *Dāna*—Unreciprocal Gift Giving—at the Temple of a Hindu Goddess^{i ii}

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the moral and religious significance of unreciprocal gift giving, referred to as *dāna*, by illustrating gift-giving interactions between laypeople and the goddess's devotees, known as hijras, at the temple of the Hindu goddess Bahucharā in Gujarat, India.

Hijras of Gujarat are born and raised as males and, subsequently, break with their kin relationships and abandon obligations attached to them. Moreover, they renounce their masculinity through castration so as to live as devotees of goddesses. Because of their unusual appearances, hijras have often been represented as sexually abnormal, disgusting objects [Forbs 1834], institutionalised homosexuals [Carstairs 1958], or transvestite eunuchs [Jani and Rosenberg 1990]. Their deviant aspects have also been praised in gender studies as 'an alternative gender' or the embodiment of non-Western societies' 'third sex' or 'third gender' [Nanda 1996].

In this paper, I will not highlight sexual aspects of hijras, but I would like to focus on their special position to receive gifts from pilgrims at the temple of Bahucharā.



Figure 1. A wall painting of Goddess Bahucharā at the temple (13 March 2014)

II. Goddess Bahucharā and her devotees

The holy land of Bahucharā is located in the northern part of Gujarat, once known as

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chunvāla (*chunvalis* in Gujarati) derived from 44 villages. In the 14th century, a lady named Bahucharā was travelling with her sisters and brothers; they stopped overnight at chunvāla. There, she sacrificed herself as a lesson to a burglar and placed a curse on him. The burglar was turned into a hijra. The hijra asked for forgiveness, and Bahucharā gave her word that he would be able to come to her place after his death if he set up a temple to praise her [Gadhavī 1935: 16-23]. This story explains the reason for the location of the temple of Bahucharā and its attraction as a meeting place for hijras.

In the 18th century, Maharaja Manajrao-of the princely state (*Gāekwād*)-built a huge temple for Bahucharā when his carbuncle was cured, presumably because of grace extended by Bahucharā (see Figure 2). That magnificent architecture existed until the state government replaced it with white, clean, and commonplace buildings a couple of years ago (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. Old architecture (11 March 2009)



Figure 3. New architecture (13 March 2014)

The Gāekwād headquarters was situated in Baroda in the southern part of Gujarat, far away from chunvāla (see Figure 4) ; therefore, management of the temple was left to local people of the Garāshiya and Kamāliya castes. Their job was to collect peanut oil, called *diveliya*, to turn on lights (*diva*). When people had no cash income, they offered peanut oil at the temple. People of the Kamāliya caste used to dress as half female/half male and work with hijras at chunvāla. Although they have given up rights they used to have at the temple, they still refer to themselves as caretakers of Goddess Bahucharā.

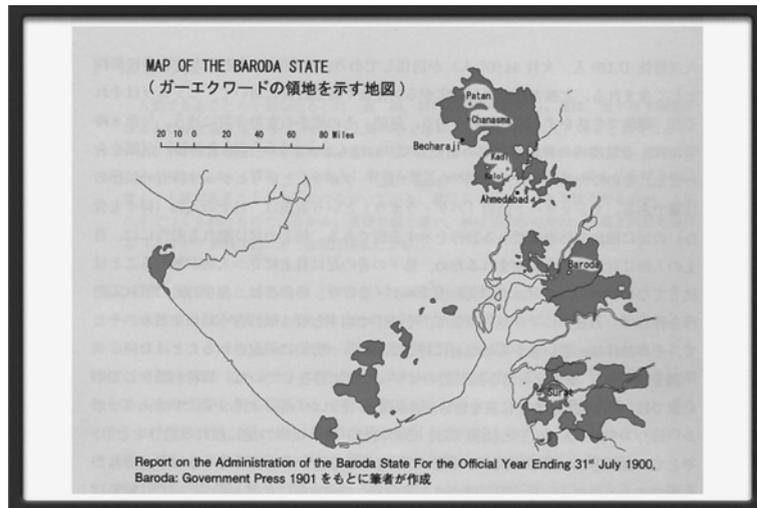


Figure 4. The territories of the princely state *Gāekwād* in 1901.



Figure 5. A descendant of Kamāliya (15 March 2014)

This man sells silver plates to pilgrims at the temple. A pilgrim chooses a particular plate design, such as a boy's shape, a house, or body part, and offers it to the goddess when praying for help in fulfilling wishes or overcoming difficulties.

III. Interactions between *pāvaiya* and pilgrims

Hijras who gather at the temple call themselves *pāvaiya* ; therefore, I refer to them as *pāvaiya* (plural) or *pāvaiyo* (singular) throughout the rest of this paper. About 10 *pāvaiya* get together every morning at the temple. At the west side of the temple yard, they wait for pilgrims as they sit cross - legged on the ground. Pilgrims willingly approach them and leave small monetary tokens in return for grace through physical contact. When pilgrims come close to *pāvaiya*, they initially hang their heads and reach with their hands to touch the feet of *pāvaiya*. In return, *pāvaiya* touch the heads of pilgrims with their hands.



Figure 6. *Pāvaiya* and pilgrims (21 March 2014)

This picture shows a lady coming close to *pāvaiya* to receive grace by touching their feet.



Figure 7. *Pāvaiya* and pilgrims (17 March 2014)

This lady hangs her head before a *pāvaiyo* as she holds her son. In this way, she believes she is sharing the blessing from the *pāvaiyo* with her son.



Figure 8. The rite of a boy's tonsure (15 August 2010)

This temple is especially known as the place for the rite of a boy's tonsure. According to local people, boys are heaven-sent by goddesses ; therefore, guardians are obliged to leave bits of boys' hair as tokens so as to make the boys their own kin.



Figure 9. The rite of a boy's tonsure (16 August 2010)

In the middle of the rite of tonsure, boys are supposed to be held and blessed by *pāvaiya* to take away all negative elements of their previous lives.



Figure 10. Making a good luck charm (16 March 2014)

This *pāvaiyo* in red sari was asked to make a good luck charm to ward off calamities, so he is making knots in the string. This scene indicates that *pāvaiya* are believed to have magical powers to solve problems.



Figure 11. Distribution (16 March 2014)

Every one or two hours, *pāvaiya* distribute equally whatever they receive from pilgrims.

IV. Gift giving to *pāvaiya*

When *pāvaiya* receive monetary gifts from laypeople, they never consider them as personal. In other words, *pāvaiya* do not regard gifts as reciprocal transactions. Rather, they claim that the goddess uses laypeople as vehicles to deliver money to *pāvaiya*.

A gift given to a *pāvaiyo* is called *dan* in the local language, or *Dāna* in Sanskrit. The practice is believed to contribute to an accumulation of good deeds that can lead to happiness in future incarnation. For that purpose, laypeople look for someone to give to, and *pāvaiya* seem to be the right ones to give to at the temple of Bahucharā.

Regarding *dāna* of India, there are thousands of previous studies and controversial debates. I will not discuss all of them, but I would like to address a distinguishing feature of gift giving in India – a hierarchy of gift-giving relationships. According to the ethnographies of Banaras written by anthropologist Jonathan Parry, a gift conveys sins from the superior donor to the inferior recipient. On the other hand, Maria Heim, who researched medieval texts, asserts that the donor gives a gift to the recipient out of esteem, which means that the recipient is superior to the donor.

Based on my fieldwork with *pāvaiya* of Gujarat, the donor recognises the excellence of the recipient. Pilgrims at the temple are gifting out of esteem to devotees of the goddess. They are not donating to the needy or the poor with sentiments of compassion and pity. Unlike Judeo-Christian charity, practicing *dāna* at the temple of Bahucharā gives a superior position to anonymous strangers who identify themselves as the goddess's devotees.

V. Conclusion

Before summing up, I must emphasise that there is no single uniform group of hijras across all of India ; each region uses different indigenous terms, such as *pāvaiya*. Just as the names of these groups vary by region, so do their individual circumstances.

Hijras of Gujarat-*pāvaiya*, in particular, at the temple of the Hindu goddess-have a privileged position to receive unreciprocal gifts called *dāna*. Since they do not view *dāna* as personal gifts from pilgrims, they have no obligations to give them back. Further, they are not in danger of receiving donors' personal sins or evils.

Mauss allocated moral value to mutual obligations to give, receive, and give back. Furthermore, he mentioned that 'the unreciprocal gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it' [Mauss 1990 : 65].

From his point of view, *pāvaiya* who receive unreciprocal gifts from pilgrims could be regarded as inferior. However, *dāna* is not just a matter of exchange, but a ritual or indigenous custom for having contacts with unknown others within local contexts. To have an encounter with *pāvaiya*, pilgrims willingly practice *dāna* out of respect and the belief that they may be taking a shorter route to reach the goddess according to Indic ethics.



Figure 12. A rooster and a *pāvaiyo* (18 March 2014)

Bahucharā rides on a rooster ; therefore, *pāvaiya* do not ride on two-wheeled vehicles.

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