

# The hijras and their gender role in india essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There are several third-gender group in India. Probably the best-known are the hijras of northern India. The word “ hijra” is of Hindi origin. The politically correct term to use is kinnar. Another acceptable term is mukhanni. An offensive term for hijra is chakka. In English, the equivalent is eunuch though this term is not precise since the majority of hijras no longer undergoes castration.

Across India, it is known by other equivalent terms as the sub-continent is linguistically diverse. Differences also lie in the deities that are worshipped as well as in its practice. In Tamil, Nadu, the term is aravanni or aruvani who are devotees of Kutandavar Aravan, god of Ali.. There is also the jogappa of South India who are devotees of the goddess Yellamma-devi, a popular Hindu deity of Durga. They are more of transvestites. They oversee the temple’s *devadasis* , maidservants of the goddess. Both the jogappas and the devadasis serve as dancers and courtesans. The *sakhi-bekhis* are few in number and can be found in normally in Bengal. They worship Sri Radha, the companion of Lord Krishna and typically dress as females to support the notion that they are girlfriends of Krishna. A Kothi is different from hijra as the former are men or boys who take on the feminine role in sex with men and do not belong to a community. It is worthy to note that though that none of the above practice castration (“ Hijra (South Asia)” in Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

The *hijra* is the only sect that practices castration. Hijras are devotees of the goddess Bahuchara Mata, the mother goddess worshipped all over India. In her name, as vehicles of her power to give blessings, the hijra traditionally

earn their living by receiving alms and performing at weddings, at temple festivals, and at homes where a child, especially a male, has been born.

The *dharma* (religious obligation) of the hijra is emasculation, and the term *eunuch* is the most frequent translation of the word hijra. The emasculation operation is called *nirvan* or rebirth; only after the operation can hijras become vehicles of the goddess's power. Connected to the obligation to undergo emasculation (for those who are not born intersexed) is the hijra claim that they are other-worldly people. Impotent as men, and unable to reproduce as women, the hijra are like ascetics ( *sanyasi* ) in their separation from normal family life ( *samsara* ) and in their dependence on alms for their livelihood. According to Serna Nanda, this ascetic ideal links the hijra to their goddess and to other figures in the Indian religious tradition, such as Arjun, hero of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* and through him Shiva; hijras also identify with Krishna and Ram (avatars, or incarnations, of Vishnu). These religiously sanctioned connections help legitimate the hijra role in Indian society (qtd in Freilich, Raybeck & Savishinsky 149).

Given that across India, hijras come in different forms and are called by different names, it is apparent that gender transgressions are widely common and tolerated. Ramaswami Mahalingam made a study of the aravanis and noted the following:

The cultural construction of gender in India differs from gender concepts in the United States. For instance, Feinman (1981) found that Americans tolerate feminine gender role transgressions but not masculine gender role transgressions. The fluidity of gender identity has apparently been granted

for women but not for men. Male identity is essential and associated with power, and the male gender transgression in the United States is associated with loss of status, whereas in India male gender transgression is viewed as a male prerogative (Trawick, 1990). In Indian culture, the belief in goddess worship is linked to an essential representation of female identity as pure, strong, and powerful. Evidence from Indian folklore and mythology also suggests that female identity is seen as the core essence of gender, from which male identity emerges. Instances of gender transformation are abundant in cultural and religious myths. In such popular representations, typically a male becomes a female (493).

As mentioned, hijras and other transgender Hindus commonly identify with and worship the various deities connected with gender diversity as related in the Hindu texts including the Vedas and Upanishads. Other major scriptures referred to is the epic Mahabharata and the treatise excerpt, Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana. According to Amara Das Wilhelm in his book *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex, Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Conditions Through Hinduism*, the sex or gender were clearly divided throughout the Vedic literature according to nature as “pums-prakriti” or male, “stri-prakriti” or female, and “tritiya-prakriti” or the third sex. The third sex or nature is analyzed in the Kama-sutra, another sacred text which emphasizes pleasure as the aim of intercourse. It categorizes men who desire other men as a “third nature,” further subdivides them into masculine and feminine types, and describes their lives and occupations (such as flower sellers, masseurs and hairdressers). It provides a detailed description (not necessarily its approval) of oral sex

between men, and also refers to long-term unions between men (qtd in Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association 2003).

Hijras usually belong in a community of five to twenty individuals who become their surrogate and extended family. They are organized according to seniority with a guru (seniors) and chelas (juniors) who are committed to loyalty and obedience to the guru. The traditional way for hijras to earn their living is by showering blessings after the wedding when the bride has been taken to the house of the groom. When a child is born, the hijras are called to the house or they can also just show up as they are merely practicing their prerogative of giving blessings for the fertility and prosperity of the child and the family. Hijras are said to be able to do this because, since they do not engage in sexual activities, they accumulate their sexual energy which they can use to either to bless or to curse.

The shower of blessings is usually performed in the form of song, dance, clowning and drum playing. However, as India is becoming Westernized, the rituals are no longer as elaborate and the hijras' opportunities for traditional work is declining. Asking for alms either from passers-by or the shopkeepers is another way to make a living. Territories are established and controlled by the local guru. At times, in order to secure alms, they resort to cursing and shaming their target by exposing to them their mutilated genitalia. A third source of earning is prostitution. While this contradicts the ideal of being, the practice is now tolerated because of the income that they bring in (Freilich, Raybeck & Savishinsky 149-150).

The hijra world is a deviant world but one that is not outside, but incorporated into, Indian society. Although becoming a hijra means making a commitment to a deviant and stigmatized social role, it is a role that is nonetheless given religious meaning and social support. Hijras view their lives as “ an unhappy fate God has chosen for us” and “ one we wouldn’t wish on our worst enemies.” It is a fate, however, that includes a dimension of power—and provides a cultural and social niche that gives shape and meaning to sexual ambiguity, linking persons with variant gender identities to a larger world, rather than isolating them (Freilich, Raybeck & Savishinsky 153).

A major difference of the hijra with the other transgender sects is their belief in castration. It is believed that the goddess, Bahuchara Mata appears to impotent men, commanding them to chop off their genitals and become their servant. If they do not, they will be impotent for their next seven incarnations. Before the castration, an *hijra* “ midwife” ( *dai ma* ) may slice a coconut to see if she ought to proceed. If Bahuchara Mata wills the castration to happen, the coconut halves will separate cleanly. The castration process, incidentally, is called *nirvan* , meaning “ a total calmness devoid of desire.” The ritual is usually done during the most favorable time of early morning after doing puja, a Hindu ritual for cleansing. Castration calls for the penis and scrotum to be tied around with a thread and all other clothes and jewelry removed, to symbolise the nakedness of the new born. When the operation is performed, the initiate stands with hands behind head, pelvis slightly forward and at the appropriate moment, two diagonal cuts are made, separating the penis and scrotum completely. The *hijra* is allowed to bleed to

purify herself of the male element. The healing process is seen as a battle between Bahuchara Mata, the life-giver, and her sister Chamundeswari, the destroyer (Suthrell 84).

During the British rule, hijras were seen as indecent and laws were passed to eliminate them. Now, we read news stories of hijras finding success in politics. Kamla Jaan Kamla Jaan was elected mayor of Katni in January 2000. However, she was unseated two years later for having been judged a man when the seat was reserved for a woman candidate. Regardless, during the same election year, four other eunuchs were elected including Shabnam Mausli into congress.

While the culture of India is more accepting of the third sex, hijras are still generally marginalized and live stigmatized existence. They may cling to myths passed on as historical facts and cite religious dogma, their world remains a deviant world. It is a fate that includes a dimension of power albeit in the form of fear and mockery. Their effeminate ways are ridiculed and abused. Their birth is a source of sorrow for their parents, and their presence at home is generally considered a burden by their families. To sum up, allow me to cite a comment given by Z. Jaffery in her book entitled *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* :

They were like the shadows and the critics of society. Everything about them suggested paradox; they were not men, nor were they women; they were not invited to perform, but neither were they uninvited; they carried the instruments of song, but made no pretence of being able to sing; they blessed the bride and groom, but through a stream of insults; they were

considered a nuisance, even extortionists, and yet they were deemed lucky; they were not paid to perform, but to leave everyone in peace; they partook of the rites of passage that they themselves were incapable of — marriage and birth. They were clearly outcasts, yet were able, through a comedy of manners, to transcend the barriers of rank, caste and class, and reduce everyone to ridiculous equals (qtd. in Suthrell 81).

### Works Cited

Freilich, Morris, Raybeck, Douglas & Savishinsky, Joel. *Deviance: Anthropological Perspectives*. Bergin & Garvey: New York, 1991.

“Hijra.” Lieberman, Tucker. 11 August 2003. Uppity-Eunuch, Biz. 20 August 2007

“Hijra (South Asia).” 03 November 2007. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 09 November 2007. < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra\\_\(India\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra_(India)) >

“Hindu Deities and the Third Sex.” Amara Das Wilhelm. 2004. Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association. 25 August 2007.

Kidwai, Rasheed. “Women seat topples genderless Kamla – Jabalpur High Court asks eunuch mayor to step down immediately.” *The Telegraph* [Calcutta] 04 February 2003.

Mahalingam, Ramaswami. “Essentialism, Culture and Beliefs about Gender among the Aravanis of Tamil Nadu, India.” *A Journal of Research*. 49. 9-10 (2003): 489-500.



*Rasaily, S M.* "Eunuchs can Teach Politicians a Lesson or Two." Rediff. com [Bhopal] 08 December 2000.

Suthrell, Charlotte. *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing and Culture* . Berg. Place: New York, 2004.