

# Challenging the Dominant Monolithic Understanding of Hijra Communities in India and Bangladesh

## Introduction

Hijra communities and identities have had an “enduring presence in the South Asian imagination” (Saria, 2021, p.9), particularly in the realm of religious myths, texts, sex work, blessing rituals and royal courts. Hijra communities are most often represented as a “distinct transvestite socio-religious group” (Dutta, 2012, p.839) who neither identify as a man nor a woman. With diverse practices rooted in both Hindu and Muslim traditions, Hijra communities have played integral roles in preserving pre-colonial traditions and realities of gender and sexuality in both India and Bangladesh. These communities have also been able to revitalise indigenous regional understandings of devotion, worship and eroticism through their practices, kinship structures and labor. However, the impacts of colonialism, the HIV-AIDs epidemic and nation-building projects in the post-colonial era have highly politicised the representation of Hijra communities. This has led to a monolithic understanding of the Hijra identity which is often based on Gharanas and “asexual religiosity” (Dutta, 2012, p.832). This paper will challenge this dominant monolithic understanding of Hijra identities by showcasing how diverse practices have been preserved. This paper will also emphasize the agency of Hijra individuals to project the vast difference in practices and understandings of what Hijra-hood entails.

## Colonisation and erasure of Hijra identities

Through the arrival of British colonizers, Hijra bodies, lifestyles, and identities became a site of “spectacular abhorrence” (Pamment, 2021, p.266) as the Indian savagery was marked onto this “malformed and repulsive” (Dutta, 2012, p.826) identity. British colonizers also constructed a

“vilifying” narrative of Hijras as “unnatural prostitutes, beggars, kidnappers of young boys, and castrators” (Pamment, 2021, p.266), thus justifying their criminalization. Qwo-Li Driskill in “Stolen From Our Bodies” (2004) points to how colonizers continued to “enforce” the idea that “sexuality and non-dichotomous gender are a sin” (Driskill, 2004, p.54) thereby imposing the colonial gender binary. Paralleling “queer sexualities and genders” (Driskill, 2004, p.52) within Indigenous cultures in North America, Hijra identities were also “degraded, ignored, condemned and destroyed” (Driskill, 2004, p.54) through various forms of colonial legislation and violence. Specifically, under the guise of restoring moral order, the project of importing “gender and sexual regimes from England” (Pamment, 2021, p.266) became the foundation for “anti-Hijra” legislation.

Many accounts of “British interactions with” (Dutta, 2012, p.828) Hijra communities, indicate that prior to early settlement in 1817, Hijras, particularly within Western Indian regions, enjoyed various “hereditary rights” (Dutta, 2012, p.828) such as “revenue shares under the indigenous Maratha regime” (Dutta, 2012, p.828). They were also revered members of various royal courts, religious ceremonies, and dance communities. However, during the early settlement of British colonizers, the rights of the Hijra communities all over pre-colonial India were “curtailed” (Dutta, 2012, p.828). Communities were pushed toward destitution as major sources of their revenues were cut off and they were forced into the “expanding underworld of low caste workers, prostitutes, and beggars” (Dutta, 2012, p.828). Furthermore, the “Criminal Tribes Act” was implemented in 1871, which tried to systemically root out Hijra identities, alongside other gender variant communities that did not fit the colonial “heteronormative” ideals (Pamment, 2021, p.265).

Under this act, British colonizers tried to systemically “register” (Pamment, 2021, p.266) various communities under the derogatory label of “eunuchs” (Pamment, 2021, p.266). The purpose of this registration was so that police could further “prevent” traditional practices of castration, “remove” children from “hijra households”, eliminate “hijras performances and feminine dresses” (Pamment, 2021, p.266) and make Hijras completely “invisible” from “public spaces” (Pamment, 2021, p.267). This also parallel’s Driskill’s detailing of how various colonial institutions, such as the churches and “boarding schools”, were used to completely “root out” and police Indigenous gender identities and sexualities (Driskill, 2004, p.54). However, scholars argue that in contrast to Indigenous gender variant populations, who were targeted for assimilation, Hijra communities were subjected to violence and abuse so that they could just “die out”, “thus ending succession practices” (Pamment, 2021, p.266).

However, scholars suggest that “while attempting to register “criminal” and “sexually immoral” eunuchs” (Pamment, 2021, p.267), British colonizers were often faced with the constant problem of categorization as they met more communities of gender-variant people (Pamment, 2021, p.267). The collapsing of all gender variant communities into the idea of “impotent men” or “eunuchs” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.3) failed as colonizers were “unable to fix a true eunuch body or coherent ‘authentic’ category” (Dutta, 2012, p.829). This was mainly because they tried to collapse the diverse practices, occupations, bodies, and identities of Hijra, Kothi, and other gender-variant communities into one category. Even within the Hijra communities, there were vast differences, especially in “occupations” and therefore it was difficult for the “colonial officers” to recognize and point to an “authentic” category of the “eunuchs” (Pamment, 2021, p.267). Echoing Driskill’s argument about why it is critical to avoid “monolithic understandings” (Driskill, 2004, p.52) of gender variance within Indigenous communities, the categorization of

“eunuch” further provides the evidence for the collapsing of a multitude of identities and practices through colonial institutions and linguistics.

Despite the attempts at erasure, it is important to note that various gender-variant communities, including Hijras, had “learned how to evade the limited colonial categorization” (Pamment, 2021, p.267) and preserve their traditions and practices. The diversity of cultures within these communities was not completely erased but rather adapted in order to escape the policing by colonizers.

#### Recognition of the “Third Gender,” rights advocacy, and “authenticity”

It is also important to note that, while, primarily, British officers implemented anti-hijra legislations and policing, they also “worked in collusion with a small cohort of middle-class Indian men” (Pamment, 2021, p.266) in order to carry out the erasure of hijra practices. This was also followed by deepening class, caste, and religious divides as many community leaders like Muslim reformer Syed Ahmad Khan became “anti-hijra” advocates in order to appeal to respectability (Pamment, 2021, p.266). Furthermore, with the introduction of colonial laws against sodomy, hyper-masculinization of men during the colonial period, and the rise in “Hindu nationalism in the post-colonial period” (Roy, 2016, p.425), Hijra communities had to live through constant stigmatization, discrimination, and criminalization, even in the post-colonial era. “Gender-nonconforming” Hijra dance forms like “Lavani” (Roy, 2016, p.423) and practices during this time were not revitalized but pushed into “obscurity” (Roy, 2016, p.425). The most publicly visible Hijra representations across different regions in the countries became that of “asexual religiosity” (Dutta, 2012, p.832). Hijras were commonly known to the public as people

who demanded alms through “ritual blessing” (Dutta, 2012, p.826) in temples/mosques and houses or engaged in the much-disgraced profession of sex work.

However, with the “growing global awareness of the AIDs epidemic” (Dutta, 2012, p.841) in the 1980s, there was an increasing availability of funding for queer organizations and Hijra communities in both India and Bangladesh. The “HIV-AIDS prevention” (Dutta, 2012, p.841) funding included both “western and multilateral fundraising” (Dutta, 2012, p.841) as well as state-based funding. In order to acquire these funds, “Hijra leaders represented themselves to the national media as sexually underprivileged” (Dutta, 2012, p.839). This significantly strayed away from the popularised public image of “asexual religiosity” (?). However, with the rise of this representation, many Hijra communities have engaged in the discourse of “authenticity and respectability” (Dutta, 2012, p.839) by distinguishing the “real” from the “fake”. An “authentic” Hijra was constructed to be one who is based in a “Gharana” (household) and engages in the respectable practices of that “Gharana”. Snorton’s arguments about “genuine transvestism” and “good transexual” (Snorton, 2017, p.141) parallel these claims of Hijra’s “authenticity and respectability” (Dutta, 2012, p.839). To attain public sympathy and funding, Hijra communities had to embody an “acceptable subject position” (Snorton, 2017, p.141) and adopt the “norms” of “womanhood” (Snorton, 2017, p.141), particularly as it relates to promiscuity and kinship. By demarking a Hijra’s authenticity to “Gharana” affiliations, they construct an image that parallels the norms of Indian/ Bengali womanhood, whereby sex work is shunned, and practices are based on “domesticity” (Snorton, 2017, p.141), maintaining kinship and religiosity are encouraged. And even though, Hijras were represented in the “national AIDs policy” (Dutta, 2012, p.839) in India as a “distinct transvestite socio-religious group” (Dutta, 2012, p.839), their definition was based on “Gharanah” affiliations and excluded “non-Gharanah” Hijra communities who engaged

in sex work. “Middle-class” Hijra led organizations such as “Dancing Queens” (Roy, 2016, p.) also exclude “lower-class hijra and Kothi values” (Roy, 2016, p.) to be more respectable to not only the “mainstream Indian” (Roy, 2016, p.) public but also the global transgender movement.

The “authentic” and “pan-Indian” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.4) image of the Hijra was further solidified through the advocacy and activism surrounding “the official umbrella of the third gender introduced by the Supreme Court of India in 2014” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.1). The official designation of “third gender” was indicative of the “alternative gender roles” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.4) embodied by Hijra communities in India. Many also justified the designation of “third gender” within the “historical legitimacy of three categories of sex and gender within Hindu traditions” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.4). However, this legal designation, alongside its justification within Hinduism has been criticized for projecting a monolithic “pan-Indian” and Hindu-normative definition of the Hijra that is based on essentialist ideas. The term “third gender” is highly problematic because it demarks the “subaltern status” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.4) of Hijra identities. The legislation also does not identify how Hijra communities can face struggles in relation to their caste, class, and religious backgrounds within India. It fixes Hijra oppressions and subalternate to gender-related discriminations and further pushes a “monolithic image” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.5) of Hijras and “their oppressions” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.5).

The term “third” also uses the baseline assumption of the gender binary and adds to its essentialist ideologies. Kunihiro argues that “thirdness”, as a consecutive number, parallels the “first and second sex and gender” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.4) and constructs an image of incompleteness. She argues that many have interpreted this “thirdness” as the Hijra identity failing to be “completely” male or female in accordance with biologically essentialist ideas

rooted in the gender binary (Kunihiro, 2022, p.4). Furthermore, as Bangladesh also went on to adopt the official “third gender” designation in their legislature, Hijra communities were officially deemed to be “sexually and genitally handicapped” (Hossain, 2017, p.1425). Thus, within the Bangladeshi legislature, Hijra people are recognized as “disabled” (Hossain, 2017, p.1424) due to the non-normativity of their gender identity. However, in contrast to Indian understandings of a non-normative Hijra body, Bangladeshi legislature does not consider “castrated” Hijras as “real” and pins “authenticity” and “disability” onto a Hijra body that exhibits “genital ambiguity or indeterminacy” (Hossain, 2017, p.1427). This institutional policing of an “authentic” Hijra category fails to account for the diverse communities, identities, and practices.

The “autobiographies” (Sequeira, 2022, p.452) of famous Hijra activists like A.Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi also strengthen essentialist ideas about the Hijra identity, playing into the idea of an “authentic Hijra” (Sequeira, 2022, p.451). A.Revathi’s book, “The Truth About Me” (2010) sheds light on how, only by joining a Hijra Gharana in Delhi, after running away from South India, was she more able to not only escape abusive situations but also gain respect. Her story is “told as a narrative of aspiration to respectability and to normative bourgeois goods, services, and social structures as empowerment” (Sequeira, 2022, p.460). She often distinguishes between the respectable practices of the Gharanas like participating in “badhais” and sex work. She also “frequently analogizes hijra kinship structures with mainstream (upper-caste Hindu) familial relations to minimize the gap between them” (Sequeira, 2022, p.460). Similarly, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s “Me Hijra, Me Laxmi” (2015) also projects respectability politics by showcasing how Laxmi put her “disreputable past behind” (Sequeira, 2022, p.465) to become an activist. Both A.Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi project a linear progression from having a

“disreputable” and “violent” past as sex workers to becoming reputable community leaders and activists (Sequeira, 2022, p.461).

Furthermore, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s representation of Hijras in “international conventions” (Sequeira, 2022, p.467) is highly politicized by the right-wing Hindu nationalist government of India. Tripathi attends these “international conferences” (Sequeira, 2022, p.467) as the primary ambassador from India and the representative of the Hijra people. However, during these visits, she roots the Hijra identity within primarily Hindu traditions (Sequeira, 2022, p.468). For example, during a “dance festival in Amsterdam” (Sequeira, 2022, p.467), she performed only Hindu-based dances from most regions across India. By representing the “Hijra identity” within only “selective Hindu religious traditions” (Sequeira, 2022, p.468), Tripathi not only erases the “pluralistic” (Sequeira, 2022, p.468) and secular nature of this community and its practices but also, partakes in the political right wing’s “Brahmanical nationalist projects” (Sequeira, 2022, p.468). Similarly, the government of Bangladesh also has used the “legal recognition” of “third gender” Hijra communities to project itself as a “progressive-minded” (Hossain, 2017, p.1425) and “pro-minority” (Hossain, 2017, p.1425) nation. The monolithic and “authentic” Hijra identity has been highly politicized and folded into nation-building projects in both India and Bangladesh.

#### Agency, kinship, preservation of practices and networks

Although A.Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s autobiographies play into the respectability politics of the “good transexual” (Snorton, 2017, p.141), they also project how Hijra identities can differ “by class, caste, ability, gender, religion, linguistic, regional, and national affiliations, which are complexly positioned at different times and spaces” (Sequeira, 2022, p.469). They also



project the differences in the ways one embodies their Hijra identity. A.Revathi expresses her journey as someone who was “born in the wrong body” (Sequeira, 2022, p.456) and undergoes surgery to better embrace her Hijra identity. Undergoing surgery also makes her more comfortable in engaging in intimate relationships, even though it is discouraged by her Hijra Gharana. She also leaves her “Hijra Parivar” (family) (Sequeira, 2022, p.457) and engages in sex work as an “individual choice” (Sequeira, 2022, p.461) that is driven by her “agency” outside the Gharana (household). Furthermore, when she joins activism, she solidifies coalitions between caste-based organizing and those related to sexuality and gender. Her story shines a light on Hijra's individualism and agency (Sequeira, 2022, p.462). Unlike A.Revathi, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi bases her Hijra identity on being “neither man nor woman” (Sequeira, 2022, p.464). She understands the “primacy of her experiences” (Sequeira, 2022, p.464) as central to her Hijra identity and loves displaying her desires through the theatrics of Bollywood. Both A.Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s “life story” concretizes a sense of agency (Sequeira, 2022, p.469).

Even though most Hijras, across India and Bangladesh, join Gharanas (households) that have identical kinship hierarchies, these households vary greatly in their practices, customs, and understanding of hijra-hood. These practices have been largely preserved and adapted from pre-colonial eras wherein Hijra communities within “indigenous” regions would aid worship, blessing rituals, and royal ceremonies. And while many of the Gharanas have similar kinship hierarchies comprising of “guru-ma (mother gurus)”, “chelas (disciples)” and “nati chelas (chela of chelas)” (Dutta, 2012, p.832), these relationships work in very different ways based on locality, caste, and religion. For example, Hijras who are devotees of “Bahucharā Mātā” in Gujarat, primarily engage in the practice of claiming their “hakk (right)” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.7) outside of temples. This practice was banned by the British during the colonial era but is being reclaimed

by different Gharanas in Gujarat. Hijras distinguish this practice from begging by wearing dressing up in “flashy dresses and gold accessories” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.7) and shouting curses at worshippers if they choose to ignore them. Hijras of “Bahucharā Mātā” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.7) often also opt to undergo castration as a central part of their devotion and are often placed in isolation for a varied amount of time afterward (Kunihiro, 2022, p.9). This often parallels how “mothers and babies are kept isolated after birth” (Kunihiro, 2022, p.9) and therefore marks their new life as devotees.

In contrast to the Hijras who are devotees of “Bahucharā Mātā” in Gujarat, Hijra Gharanas in West Bengal, most often undertake practices of “badhai” (“offering blessings in return for money and gifts at houses with newborn children, and sometimes, visiting local shops for donations as well”) (Dutta, 2012, p.832) and have rare practices of castration. Hijras in West Bengal are particularly territorial about the practices of “badhai” (Dutta, 2012, p.832) as that is their main source of generating income as well as consolidating ties of religiosity and respect with the larger community. Furthermore, scholars also point to the diversity in non-Gharana Hijra communities, who typically engage in sex work, and their kinship practices. Particularly in West Bengal, even if Hijras do not belong to a particular Gharana, they still maintain a respectful relationship with the seniors and other members of all the Gharanas (Dutta, 2012, p.835). Even without undergoing a “full initiation” (Dutta, 2012, p.835) within a household, non-Gharana Hijras exist in a dynamic relationship with others. The lines between Gharana and non-Gharana Hijras within Bangladesh are a little bit more blurred because of the high levels of class divide and segregation in the country. However, Hijra communities in Bangladesh work alongside other working-class communities, which also heavily informs their practices (Hossain, 2017, p.1421).

It is critical to therefore recognize the agency of Hijra individuals and the diversity of Hijra communities across India and Bangladesh to challenge the monolithic image of these communities.

### Sex, sex work and erotic desires

Hijra communities across India and Bangladesh are highly involved in the sex work industry. And while many scholars have drawn a “logical connection between trans abjection and trans sex work” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.118), Rev and Geist argue that this argument erases the agency and diversity of trans individuals engaging in sex work by primarily painting a picture of “victimhood” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.121). A similar understanding can be applied to Hijra communities who are always victimised for engaging in this “criminalised labour” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.118) due to poverty, “institutional rejection” and abjection (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.118). Rev and Geist also argue that trans “hypersexuality” “starkly contrasts” the “representations of trans normativity such as those of Christine Jorgensen” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.115). It has been discussed how many Hijra Gharanas prohibit sex work to preserve respectability and also appeal to “trans normativity” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.115). However, despite this prohibition and stigmatisation of sex work, Hijra communities who are also closely tied with other gender variant communities through “informal networks” (Dutta, 2012, p.840) occasionally engage in sex work. And while sex work occurs within an informal, underground setting, especially in poverty-stricken arenas, Rev and Geist argue that it is important to reject the “poverty porn narrative” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.125) and acknowledge the “variegated experiences of sex work” (Rev & Geist, 2017, p.125).

Furthermore, Vaibhav Saria in “Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India” (2021) challenges the common rhetoric of “irresponsibility” (Saria, 2021, p.145) that is connected to Hijras sexuality (including those who choose to engage in sex work or not), especially in the rise of the HIV/AIDs epidemic. This notion is commonly attached to Hijra practices of intimacy which seemingly do not fit into the model of “safe sex” (Saria, 2021, p.145). Saria dispels common misconceptions about Hijra communities engaging in “irresponsible sex” by showcasing that the “unpredictability of desire makes sure that the topography of marriage, sexuality, and gender do not always match up with each other” (Saria, 2021, p.148). Especially within the cases of Hijra communities, wherein kinships are expansive and do not parallel western normative structures of relationships. Saria also projects how “safe sex” education, primarily emphasizes “genitals and identities rather than invitations of desire” (Saria, 2021, p.152) and therefore excludes Hijra communities and practices from the conversation. They also point to how “ideas of condom fatigue are folded into” (Saria, 2021, p.149) the everyday lives of Hijra people as they navigate the “aesthetics of living” (Saria, 2021, p.148) which includes exploring eroticism and intimacies in many forms.

Paralleling Driskill’s conception of a “Sovereign Erotic” (Driskill, 2004, p.51), Hijra peoples practices with erotics and intimacies are complex and nuanced. They also shed light on the “realities of gender and sexuality” (Driskill, 2004, p.56) that are ever present in both “human and more-than-human world” (Driskill, 2004, p.56). The diverse practices of Hijra communities allow them to reclaim this erotic that has been subjected to erasure in colonial and post-colonial regimes. As Saria suggests, Hijra erotics are very closely linked to the “labour of their loving” (Saria, 2021, p.149), alongside the reclamation of their body, agency, community, and kinships. It

is therefore critical to acknowledge and understand the complex Hijra practices of intimacy in order to challenge the dominant monolithic understanding of these communities.

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