Neither Man nor Woman

The Hijras of India

SECOND EDITION

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CHAPTER ONE

Hijra Roles in Indian Society

HIJRAS AS CULTURAL PERFORMERS

The most important and best-known traditional role for the hijras in Indian society is that of performing at homes where a male child has been born. The birth of a son is the most significant event for an Indian family and a cause for great celebration. It is on this happy and auspicious occasion that the hijras bless the child and the family and provide entertainment for friends, relatives, and neighbors. The following is a description of one of the several performances I observed. It is typical in its major details, though somewhat more elaborate than usual because the family celebrating the birth was from the upper-middle class. The hijras call these performances *badhai,* which refers to the traditional gifts of cash and goods that they receive as payment on such occasions.

> The burning Panjab sun beat down on the crowd that was gathered that afternoon to celebrate the birth of the 6-week-old infant, Ram. At 2:30 the sound of clapping, drumming, and ankle bells announced that the hijras were arriving. Tossing their spangled scarves, flashing their heavy jewelry, and carrying with them the *dholak,* the two-sided drum that accompanies all of their performances, the group stood in the small courtyard in front of the house where Ram had been born.
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> The drummer and the harmonium (accordion) player settled themselves on the ground and began to play in a rousing rhythm. The dancers clapped their hands wildly in the special manner of hijras—with hollow palms—and began to sing and shout and dance, making comic gestures to the audience. Tamasha, the leader of the group, twirled in a grotesque, sexually suggestive parody of feminine behavior, which caused all of the older ladies to laugh loudly and all of the younger women to giggle with embarrassment behind their hands.
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> With boundless energy the performers danced and sang songs from popular films and from the folk music of the region. Then Tamasha took the infant Ram from his mother's arms and held him in her own. As she danced with him, she closely inspected his genitals. "Give money to bless this baby," she demanded of the baby's grandmother. Taking the proffered two-rupee note, Tamasha passed

it over the baby's head in a ritualized gesture that is a blessing and that wards off evil spirits. The other hijras in the group, Kokila, Manjula, and Shakuntala, continued their dancing, while the accompanists played loudly on the drum and harmonium. The hijras called on the Indian Mother Goddess, Parvati, and their own special goddess, Bahuchara Mata, to confer fertility, prosperity, and long life on the baby, as the ladies in the audience threw them one- and two-rupee notes.

Then Tamasha returned baby Ram to his mother. While the audience was watching the other hijras, Tamasha retired to a corner of the courtyard unobserved, where she stuffed a large pillow under her *sari* [women's dress]. She then returned to the group, clowning and imitating the slow, ungainly walk of a pregnant woman. Now with exaggerated gestures, which made the audience rock with laughter, she sang a traditional hijra song describing the time of a woman's pregnancy from beginning to childbirth:

Little kid, may you be healthy and live long.
Someone has brought you a ring.
In the house of your friends, the dholak is being played.
And your *bbabi* [sister-in-law] makes a lot of noise.
Little kid, may you be healthy and live long.
Mother of the child, yes, yes,
Grandmother of the child, yes, yes.
What will this first male child be when he grows up?
Headache, yes, yes,
Heartburn, yes,
I cannot stand up,
I cannot sit down.
How will the pregnancy be?
I'll throw up, yes, yes.
You'll have the desire to eat these sour things.
Bring me a lemon, bring me *tamarindo* [a sour fruit].
The kid says in the stomach, *dadi, dadi* [paternal grandmother].
Little kid, may you be healthy and live long.
What will the fourth month be like?
What will the fifth month be like?
In the fifth month you won't be able to walk.
You'll have a pain in the side.
Sixth month, yes, yes,
Seventh month, yes, yes.
How will it be?
I have difficulty walking, I cannot walk.
I have difficulty sitting.
And now the eighth month, what will it be?

Go to the hospital.
Have some tests done.
How will it be, how will it be?
Hot water, cold water.
The little kid in the stomach says *nani, nani* [maternal grandmother].
Little kid, may you be healthy and live long.
Ninth month, how will it be?
Pain in the waist, yes, yes.
Almost delivery time.
Heavy in the front, heavy in the back.
And how will it be?
Get the taxi.
Go to the hospital.
In the final month, how will it be?
In the jungle there's a tiger.
The tiger shouts, "The birth has taken place."
And the kid in the stomach says, "The birth has taken place."
Little kid, may you be healthy and live long.

Exhausted by her performance, Tamasha then leaned back against the courtyard wall to rest, while the other hijras took turns dancing with each other and making advances to those in the audience, few of whom had the courage to move to the center. Then Kokila, who is so beautiful one cannot believe she was born a man, moved toward a group of small boys shyly hiding behind their mothers' saris as they peeked out to watch the fun. She danced before them in an outrageously inviting and sexual way, and winking salaciously at five-year-old Kishan, she bent down to touch his genitals. Embarrassed and a little panicky, he quickly retreated again behind his mother's sari, bringing the audience into gales of laughter.

After another few dances and songs, the hijras stopped their performance and demanded their traditional badhai: wheat flour, cane sugar, sweets, and cloth or a sari and a sum of money (which is relatively fixed for different social classes in different regions of the country) from the elders of the household. As the elder of the group, Tamasha was given the badhai and the hijras departed happily, tired but content that there are still people who respect their powers and call them to perform their traditional ritual of blessing male infants.

In a final gesture, Tamasha passed her hands over the head of the infant Ram to bless him, giving to him what she herself does not possess: the power of creating new life, of having many sons, and of carrying on the continuity of his family line. It is for this role that the hijras are given the greatest respect, and it is this role that defines their identity in relation to the world around them.

HIJRA PERFORMANCES AT MARRIAGES

Another aspect of the ritual role of the hijras is their performance at marriages. When the hijras find out that a marriage is going to take place, they come to the groom's family and arrange for a performance one or two days after the ceremony. The performance is planned for a time when the bride and groom are at the groom's house and when a number of neighbors, friends, and relatives can gather. The more people that form the audience, the greater will be the payment for the hijras. The hijras' function at this performance is to bless the married couple for fertility: The birth of a son to the couple is not only the desire of the family, but also means more work for the hijras who, upon the son's birth, will have another opportunity to perform. In many of the songs that the hijras sing at this time, they insert lines directed at various members of the family, such as "you will have a grandson, you will have a son."

Like the performance at a birth, the typical performing group at a marriage in a middle-class family consists of five to nine hijras; most of them dance, one plays the drums, and one plays the harmonium. The group is accompanied by their *guru,* or leader, who normally does not perform herself but rather supervises the proceedings in a dignified manner. The size of the group varies with the social class of the groom's family. The more elaborate performances described here occur in upper-middle-class families, and the money and gifts (similar to those given at a birth) demanded by the hijras correspond to that status. It is expected that elder members of the audience will bless the groom by circling his head with rupee notes and this money is also collected by the hijras.

The houses in North India typically have open courtyards, and it is here that the hijras perform. They call for the bride and the bridegroom and different members of the family to dance with them in the center of the audience, causing great hilarity. Some more orthodox families do not allow the bride to be present in the courtyard with the hijras, however, believing that the hijras' infertility will contaminate the girl and keep her from having a son. In this case, the bride watches the festivities from a window in the house. This belief does not affect the groom, however, and he participates in all of the entertainment. This prohibition on the bride is one of the many that reflect the ambivalence that Indian society has about the hijras. Even these orthodox families, nevertheless, take great care not to offend the hijras by refusing overtly to allow their new daughter-in-law to dance with them; some excuse for the girl's absence is made in a placating way.

Currently, much of the hijras' performance at marriages consists of film songs and well-known folk songs sung only for entertainment, along with verses giving blessings for a happy marriage, a long life, and many sons. But the performances at marriages also include improvised verses making fun of the groom and his family, suggesting perhaps that the groom was

born out of wedlock or casting aspersions on the family's social rank and pretensions to high status. The verses may criticize the groom's looks, saying that he is as thin as a scarecrow or that his skin is dark because his mother was so poor that she had to give birth to him outdoors, exposed to the sun. These verses are all received in fun, although there is a more serious undercurrent. In India the groom's family has a higher status than that of the bride's family, a relationship that lasts as long as the marriage and can be the occasion for resentment and conflict. Thus, the hijras' verbal play functions as a kind of "ritual of reversal," a phenomenon in many cultures in which those who are in high and mighty positions are brought lower and humbled.[1]

Some of these verbal "short takes" also comment on the tensions and conflicts that arise within marriage. Because a woman in North India moves into her husband's home after marriage, one of the greatest difficulties for a new bride is the process of adjusting to her husband's relatives. Thus, the songs the hijras sing at marriages deal not only with the tensions between husband and wife, but also those between a wife and her husband's relatives.

Although there is some variation in hijra performances, depending on the region of India, the talent of the group, the size and preferences of the audience, and the economic status of the family celebrating the event, there are also some core elements obligatory in all but the most perfunctory performance. The performers must be "real" hijras, that is, they must be emasculated or intersexed, and the hijra dancers must be dressed in women's clothing. The dances always involve an aggressively displayed female sexuality. In all cases the hijras bestow blessings in the name of the Mata, the Mother Goddess. In a badhai for a birth, the hijras always examine the genitals of the infant, reinforcing the belief that hijras have a legitimate claim on infants whom they observe to be intersexed; they say that "these children belong to us because they are like us, neither man nor woman."

It would seem to be a paradox that the hijras, impotent and emasculated men, have this traditional ritual role of conferring blessings of fertility on newborn males and on newlyweds. But the hijras are not merely ordinary, impotent men. As ritual performers, they are viewed as vehicles of the divine power of the Mother Goddess, which transforms their impotence into the power of generativity.[2] It is this power, which is displayed in the shameless, aggressive feminine sexuality of the hijras' performances, that legitimates, even demands, their presence on such occasions. The faith in the powers of the hijras rests on the Hindu belief in *shakti*—the potency of the dynamic female forces of creation that the hijras, as vehicles of the Mother Goddess, represent. As we shall see later, the hijras are also identified with the creative power of ascetics, particularly with Shiva, who simultaneously, and paradoxically, contains the power of both the erotic and the ascetic.

Wherever a child has been burn or a wedding has taken place, the hijras demand their right to perform, as they have from time immemorial. These performances are the sanctioned cultural function of the hijras and the major legitimization of their existence. When I asked hijras, "What work do hijras do?" I invariably received the answer "We perform at a house where a baby is born," even when it turned out, as was often the case, that the hijra I was speaking with did not earn her living in that way. Most Indians also define hijras as people who perform on these auspicious occasions. These performances are the most respectable and prestigious way to earn a living within the hijra community and the major source of the hijras' claim to respect from the larger society.

HIJRAS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

Hindu society, as we have seen, accords the hijras, as sexually ambiguous figures, a measure of power and requires (or at least accepts) their presence on auspicious occasions. But Hindu society's attitude toward the hijras is ambivalent. Although hijras have an auspicious presence, they also have an inauspicious potential. The sexual ambiguity of the hijras as impotent men—eunuchs—represents a loss of virility, and this undoubtedly is the major cause of the fear that they inspire. Thus, the stout, middle-class matrons who are so amused by the hijras' performances, and who may even pity them as tragic, hermaphroditic figures, also have an underlying anxiety about them. As mentioned earlier, this is translated into a taboo of orthodox Hindus that the hijras should not touch, or even see, a new bride, so that their impotence will not contaminate her reproductive potential.

The belief in the hijras' abilities to confer blessings in the name of the Mother Goddess is a double-edged sword for their audiences. The hijras can praise the good qualities of families, but they also can insult them; they can bless one's house with prosperity and fertility, but they also can curse it with infertility and other kinds of misfortunes. Hijras are infamous for insulting and cursing families who do not meet their demands of money and gifts. They may start with mild verbal abuse in the form of ridicule: "Hey, when you got married and enjoyed yourself with your bride, didn't you think then that there would be expenses connected with this later on?" They gradually move on to stronger insults: "OK, then, we will perform for free since you are so poor and such lowlife and will not give us our due." The act that is most feared is the threat that the hijras will expose their mutilated genitals to public gaze. If at the end of a performance, the hijras' demands are not met, one hijra, more aggressive than the others, will lift up her skirt and shout, "See, if you don't give us any cloth, or money to buy cloth, then we must go naked. Here, take this dress. As you are too poor to give us anything, then we will have nothing to wear." At this gesture all the women present cover their eyes to prevent themselves from seeing this shameless, shocking, and threatening exposure, which in itself is a curse for causing impotence. This hijra behavior is usually enough for someone in the audience to persuade the family to give the hijras what they want just to get rid of them.

When hijras insult a family for not giving in to their demands, they do not limit themselves to insults for the family's ears only, but shout their abuse up and down the lanes for all to hear. In one case, for example, when a hijra group came to a house to perform for a wedding, the woman of the house told them to go away, as another hijra group had already performed there. The hijra troupe claimed that this house was in their exclusive territory and proceeded to perform anyway. When they finished, the woman adamantly refused to pay, threatening to call the police. The hijras invited her to do so and remained on her doorstep, shouting obscenities and curses. At this point the police arrived and the woman complained to them, with the hijras shouting their side of the story. The police refused to do anything, and the woman finally had to meet the hijras' demands in order to get them to leave. Several hijras I spoke with expressed full confidence that the police would always back them up on such occasions. As one hijra told me:

> There are always those people who try to send us away; they tell us, "We don't want this singing and dancing, we will call the police." We tell them, "Call the police, the police also love us, they also have children and we have good relations with them." The police understand that this is our profession. We also give blessings to them, we ask God to give them a promotion, to give them a male child, to give them 10 children. This is how we get our business, we get our happiness only from our work. We go to the house of the newborn or the wedding couple and dance and sing and feel happy. By making others happy, we also feel happy. So why should we be afraid of the police?

All of the hijras I met professed to take their powers to curse very seriously; all insisted such powers were never carelessly used and many had never used them at all. Prema, a hijra performer in Delhi who considered herself generally a gentle soul, once used these powers with such disastrous results she vowed she would never curse anyone again:

> See, whatever we say, Serena, for good or for bad, will come true. Just as we bless with such intensity so also we curse with such power that if we curse any person the food in their house will get spoiled. I know this is so because I have done it myself After that I felt so bad that I made a vow never to curse anyone again, even if he shows me his shoe [showing someone a shoe, or touching someone with a shoe, is a grave insult to Hindus].

What happened was that in this one locality where we had gone dancing there was an important man who never permitted the hijras to entertain in front of him. When his daughter-in-law gave birth to a son and we came to know of this, we went to his house to give the blessing, but he insulted us so badly, I could not stand it. He practically threw us down the stairs. So I made this wish to the *Mata* [Mother Goddess], "The way you have sent us down, so your son's child's bier will go the same way."

This curse just slipped from my tongue, I was so angry. The day after this that small boy fell sick. They treated him with many medicines, but the child never got better and then he died.

A year later, when we were again roaming in that vicinity, this same man was sitting in his house. He said to me, "Mataji, mataji [literally, mother; used here as a respectful form of address], you people came to my house and I did not give you permission to dance. I should have let you go away happily. Instead I sent you away with kicks and today my daughter-in-law's lap is empty, she is childless. I had a gift from heaven and now God has taken that gift away."

He asked us to listen to him, but we told him we would not listen because he had sent us away like that. We told him, "We are not going to listen to anything you say; you insulted us so badly. You thought we were nothing. You did not have to insult us, you could have given us five rupees or even two—any small sum of money—and said, 'Mataji, we don't allow this dancing to take place, you take these two rupees and enjoy some tea with them, just bless my grandson before you go.'"

"Our hearts would have swelled up so much and we would have said, 'Never mind, he never let us dance but at least he gave us money for our tea, 10 rupees or 2 rupees. God keep him happy and instead of one son give him two sons.' But you pushed us away with insults."

See, Serena, what we felt in our minds at this time was that our respect was at stake. After all, we are neither men nor women. If we were men we would have a good job, be working in some factory. We would also get married and bring a daughter-in-law into the home and our parents would have some satisfaction and some hope.

But God has made us this way, neither man nor woman, and all we are left with is to go wherever a child is born or a wedding is performed and sing a couple of songs so that we can sell our art or talent and make a little money and fill our stomachs. We don't rob or steal from anyone's house, we don't go to burgle anyone's house—this man should have at least thought this much. If I had been on my own, I could have calmed myself down, but I had my troupe of hijras with me. If I had not said anything to him, these hijras would have said, "See how he has insulted us and you have not said anything to him."

Like many sexually ambivalent figures in Indian mythology, the hijras are treated with a combination of mockery and fear. When they move about in public, they are always vulnerable to teasing; sometimes they are called *kaurika* (literally refers to an old penny coin with a hole in the middle that is no longer used; now connotes an "empty shell," or something that is absolutely useless). This teasing is usually done by small or adolescent boys. Some hijras have trained themselves to ignore it; other hijras respond indignantly with the kind of abuse they are famous for. Madhu, a hijra whose somewhat dirty and disreputable appearance often brings her insults, combines her abuse with an attempt to educate the public:

> If someone insults me, or teases me as I pass, I feel so small in my mind, I say to God, why did you make us in this way, you should have made us in such a way that no one would have the guts or the opportunity to tease us in passing. In this manner I try to placate myself. Then I abuse those who insult me; I say, "Go away, may your mother or your daughter or your wife or your sister give birth to a hijra like me, let a hijra be born in your house as well. Then God will tell you, this is the result of your teasing a hijra, that is why you have a hijra born in your house. You can finish him off, or bury him as soon as he is born, or smother him. . . . Will you try that or will you try to make him grow up? And when he grows up he will wear a sari like us, and one day he will be standing on the road and your friend who is with you, not knowing, will tease him and call him hijra. What will you say then? What will you feel? This is how we feel, this is what our minds are saying, this is how we have suffered. So now, before you tease us, just think how we suffer from this."

Part of the teasing of hijras derives from their often blatant and bawdy flirting with men and their aggressive caricatures of feminine sexuality. Because many hijras are homosexuals, this decreases their respect in society and leaves them vulnerable to public mockery.

HIJRAS AND INSTITUTIONALIZED HOMOSEXUALITY

The dominant cultural role of the hijras, as we have seen, is that of ritual performers. It is also true, however, that hijras often engage in homosexual prostitution, a subject about which I will have more to say later. The importance of the social role of the hijras as institutionalized homosexuals is a controversy that has been the focus of the scant anthropological literature that discusses them. In a psychoanalytical study of high castes in a village in Rajasthan, G. Morris Carstairs (1957) asserted that the hijra role is primarily a form of institutionalized homosexuality developed in response to tendencies toward latent homosexuality in the Indian

national character. This view was challenged by anthropologist Morris Opler (1960), who claimed that hijras were not thought of as homosexuals, and further, denied that they engaged in any sexual activity, saying they were "dancers only." Opler traced the use of hijras as dancers at life-cycle rituals to the Indian disinclination to allow women of good name to dance publicly. In an attempt to mediate between these opposing views, A. M. Shah, an Indian sociologist, agreed that the main business of the hijras was to dance at births and marriages, but he also noted that some hijras, who lived alone outside the organized hijra communes, might well earn a living through homosexual prostitution (1961).

There is absolutely no question that at least some hijras—perhaps even the majority—are homosexual prostitutes (see Ranade, 1983). Sinha's (1967) study of hijras in Lucknow, in North India, acknowledges the hijra role as performers, but views the major motivation for recruitment to the hijra community as the satisfaction of the individual's homosexual urges, a satisfaction related to their engaging in prostitution.

More recently, Freeman (1979) describes a group of transvestite prostitutes in the state of Orissa, in eastern India, who are men who dress as women, who have a specialized feminized vocabulary, who live singly or in small groups, and who seek out and are sought out by men in the surrounding area for sexual relations. Freeman does not use the term *hijra* for these people nor does he describe the organized or religious aspect of their community, but it seems fairly clear that he is indeed writing of hijras. So in Orissa, too, hijras are both performers and prostitutes. Historical sources also support the view that homosexual prostitution is important, if not central, to the maintenance of the hijra community, at the very least, economically. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographic accounts of hijras in the Indian census claim that hijras kidnap small boys for the purposes of sodomy or prostitution (Bhimbhai, 1901; Faridi, 1899; Ibbetson, MacLagen, & Rose, 1911). A historical account of Poona, in western India, also notes that a particular section of the city was known for hijra prostitution (Preston, 1987).

In drawing a composite portrait of hijras in Hyderabad, one of the major traditional centers of their culture, Lynton and Rajan (1974) indicate that whereas recruitment to the hijra role may grow out of a period of homosexual activity by young men with effeminate characteristics who are harassed in public, once they join the hijra community they cease these sexual activities in order to conform to community rules, which, as Lynton's informants told her, specifically forbid them. The hijra leaders told Lynton that this restriction is necessary if the hijras are to maintain the respect for themselves as *sannyasis*—"other-worldly" people—ascetics and religious mendicants. This illustrates the thesis, central in this book, that it is the conception of hijras as ascetics and neither man nor woman that gives the role its institutionalized character. That hijras, at least in modern historical times, engage in widespread homosexual activity, undermines their respect in society but does not negate their ritual function.

Hijras are well aware that they have only a tenuous hold on legitimacy in Indian society and that this hold is compromised by even covertly engaging in sexual relations and practicing prostitution. The idea of hijras as "wives" (of ordinary men) and prostitutes obviously runs counter to their claims to be ascetics or other-worldly religious mendicants, that is, people who have renounced sexual activity. In an early 20th-century account of the hijras, they speak tauntingly of those men called *zenana,* who "are given to sodomy. . . . They are prostitutes; if we acted like them how could our [patrons] allow us to come near them? They have deprived prostitutes of their living—we are not such" (Ibbetson et al., 1911:332).

In this conflict between the respect due ascetics and the reality of lust and sexual relations occurring among ascetics, the hijras are not alone. Ascetics have always been regarded with skepticism in Indian society, and the notion of the "false ascetic"—those who pretend to be ascetics in order to satisfy their lust—abounds in Hindu mythology. This explains the behavior of some members of the audience at hijra performances who challenge the hijras' authenticity by lifting their skirts to see whether they are emasculated and real hijras or "fake hijras," men who are only impersonating women. There are other female impersonators who do not have the religious powers ascribed to hijras but who sometimes try to perform on the occasions where it is the hijras' right to do so. Emasculation distinguishes real hijras from the fakes, and if a challenge reveals that a performer's genitals have not been removed, the whole group will be reviled and driven away without payment as impostors. Hijras themselves constantly deride those "men who are men and can have children" who join their community only to earn a living or out of the desire to have sexual relations with men. As one hijra vehemently protested to me:

> There are other people who imitate us, who dress up in women's clothing and go where a baby is born, but only we have the power of giving it the blessing. This is because we are neither men nor women and have been separated from God, so that God grants our special prayers in every place, to us only. A hijra is born from the stomach of a woman, but can be counted neither among the men nor the women. This is why we are called hijras and why we have a right to nothing except singing and dancing.
>
> These other people, who imitate us, they are real men, with wives and children. They come to join us only for the purpose of making a living. How do we know what a person is when he comes to join us? Just recently there was a case in our group. This man's name was Hari. He was the father of four children and he dressed up as a

woman and put on a woman's hairstyle. He behaved like a hijra and danced at people's houses, disguised as a hijra. One day we caught him red handed. We beat him up bodily and handed him over to the police. It cannot be allowed for someone to take our place as it deprives us of our right and our income.

One time, when I myself left my group after a quarrel, out of desperation I also joined a group of these zenana and went to dance and sing with them. One day we went to dance for a family where a man had a son after having five daughters. We came to the house and one of these impostors said, "I will dance today, give me the ankle bells." So she started dancing, and while she was dancing, her skirt flew up and all the people said, "This is not a hijra, this is a man." They chased us away, and we lost all respect. I also lost respect. So I thought to myself, I am so different from them, like the earth and the sky; these people are men, whereas I am neither a man nor a woman. From that day on I stopped dancing with them and went back to my troupe.

The special powers that the hijras derive from their alternative gender role legitimate their function as ritual performers, and it is this role that forms the core of their self-definition and the basis of their positive, collective self-image. Only the hijras—those who are "neither man nor woman"—are given the power by God to make their words—whether blessings or curses—come true.

Hijras who act as homosexual prostitutes cloud the clear-cut distinction described earlier: They may be "real" hijras (in that they are emasculated), but they are also engaging in an activity that is contrary to the hijra ideal as ritual performers who have renounced sexual desire and activity. Many Indians are not aware, or at least do not acknowledge publicly, that many hijras are homosexual prostitutes. Even some social science research has overlooked this role (e.g., Opler, 1960; Sharma, 1983) though the sexual activities of hijras are often emphasized in the popular press (Raghuvanshi & Navalkar, 1980). In spite of the undeniable fact that many hijras earn a living from homosexual prostitution, to view their social place as one of institutionalized homosexuality is to overlook the important cultural role the hijras play as ritual performers, a position linked to their definition as an ambiguous gender category—neither man nor woman.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hijra 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.[1] Only after impotence was established would the newcomer be permitted to undergo the emasculation operation and become a full member of the community (Bhimbhai, 1901:586). 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).[2] 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 relationship 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, three 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.[3] 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 a 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.[4]

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).[5] 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 *hookab* (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 noting 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 it 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.[6]

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.[7] 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 three 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. One day later, 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 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."[8]

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 a 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 renowned 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 men nor women, 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 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.