

Everyday Life
in
South
Asia

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When I first came to India, I was struck by the...
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At...
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Out...
Diane P. Mines and
Sarah Lamb



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established between women and men, even across Hindu-Muslim lines, through the tying of the *rakhi*.

9. The songs in *Tamanna* were composed by a team of poets, including the celebrated Kaifi Azmi.

10. See Serena Nanda's essay in this volume for an account of hijras.

11. Following Ashis Nandy's classic account in *The Intimate Enemy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), several scholars have explored colonial and nationalist attempts to rewrite Indian manhood as more "masculine," thereby disempowering androgynous forms of manhood, which resurfaced in resistance.



Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Story

Serena Nanda

Hijras in India are defined as an alternative gender role, neither man nor woman. The cultural sources for the hijras as a powerful and meaningful gender derive from both Hinduism and Islam (see Nanda 1999). Hijras are born males, and become hijras by adopting women's clothing and behavior, formally joining the hijra community, and (except in the case of born hermaphrodites) undergoing emasculation, or surgical removal of the genitals, as part of their identification with the Mother Goddess. This identification gives hijras the power to bless newlyweds and infants with prosperity and fertility, which is the basis of their traditional occupation as performers at marriages and births.

As devotees of the Mother Goddess, and vehicles of her power, hijras claim to be ascetics, a claim ambivalently regarded by the public. Sometimes, when hijras perform or beg for alms, someone will try to lift their skirts to see if they are truly hijras, or fakes, in which case they will be reviled and chased away.

Hijras are an organized social community with local, regional, and national structures. Basic elements of Indian society such as the extended joint family, the caste system, the hierarchical relationship in Hinduism between gurus (spiritual mentors) and *chelas* (disciples), and local caste and neighborhood councils are all part of hijra social structure. Hijras can be Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, and come from all castes and social classes. Within the community there are no castelike rules pertaining to purity and pollution.

The most important element of hijra social organization is the guru-chela relationship. The hijra guru is both mentor and parent; the chela's role is as a dependent and obedient child and student. Each recruit to the hijra community is sponsored by a guru, who pays the new member's initiation fee and takes responsibility for her material subsistence, receiving a portion of the chela's earnings in return. The gurus in each city form a *jamat*, or council of elders, who regulate the working conditions of the city,

act as a dispute resolution forum, and serve as the authorizing body of community membership and exclusion.

Hijra stories compellingly illustrate a basic anthropological theme, most prominently enlarged upon by Ruth Benedict (1934), that the margins of a culture are intimately related to its center and that understandings of the abnormal and the normal reciprocally reinforce each other. The hijra role, both as experienced and as conceptualized by others, also challenges us in many ways, demonstrating the construction of gender dichotomies but also the possibilities of gender diversities. And ultimately, the everyday lives of hijras inspire us, as they reveal the myriad ways that human beings, even under the most adverse conditions, become agents in shaping their own lives, creating meaningful identities and resisting, in small and large ways, the oppression of stigma, poverty, and marginality.

* * *

Salima is a Muslim, born in Byculla, a Muslim neighborhood in Mumbai, where she has lived her entire life. She is a "real" hijra, *born* intersexed, and not, as she says, "converts like those others." When I first met Salima, in November 1981, she was in her early thirties. She was living on the street, sleeping on a tattered bedroll with only a plastic lean-to to protect her from the monsoon rains that fall so heavily in Mumbai. Her clothes were dirty, as were her hands and feet, and she had a beard of several days' growth. We talked about her life over many weeks and, on my subsequent visits to Mumbai, over several years.

In her talk about her childhood Salima emphasized the sad fate of her birth:

I don't remember much of my early days and only remember the days after my mother married her second husband. I consider this man my father. My parents felt sad about my birth, but they realized it was their fate to have me born "neither here nor there." From my birth, my [male] organ was very small. My mother felt it would grow as I grew up, but it didn't. She took me to doctors and all, but the doctors said, "No, it won't grow. Your child is not a man and not a woman. This is God's gift." My mother also took me to various holy places and made many vows but nothing turned out fruitful. It is God's will—some women give birth to lame children, some to blind children, it is God's will, even the gift of God. My father also made many vows but it was all futile. If I were a boy, I would have had a good job and brought a daughter-in-law into the house, but like this I have been of no use to my parents. They did what they could for me; the rest is my *kismet* [fate].

From the beginning I only used to dress and behave as a girl. I would run off to Chowpatty and beg and fool around. I only enjoyed playing with the girls, even though I got my hair pulled and thrashed for it. I never thought of myself as a boy or that I should behave like a boy or dress like a boy. I would sit with the girls [in school], playing with them, playing with

girls' toys, sweeping the house, cooking, doing all these female activities. My parents gave me a boy's name, but if anyone called me by that name, I would say, "Get lost! Don't call me that! Call me by any girl's name and only then I will come; otherwise, I won't listen to you." I would put on girls' clothes and do up my hair nicely and put on *kajal* [eyeliner] and rouge. People thought of me as a girl and would give me girls' clothes. Even today, my neighbors still laugh and joke with me and the childhood bond is still there. They say about me, "We are childhood friends. It is not her fault—God made her that way."

In school I would never talk to the boys, but only to the girls. The neighborhood boys would tease me and I used to abuse them, as a girl would, and complain to their mothers. Their mothers would say, "Don't complain to us; when these boys tease you, thrash them yourself." So I would abuse and beat them, and these boys stopped teasing me. These boys would call me, "Hijra! Hijra!" My mother would tell them, "Why do you tease like this? God made him like this, and if you tease him, he can make your food go bad. So just leave him alone."

I was sent to my mother's womb by God, like any child; I am a gift for her. When I got older and the children would tease me, I would tell them, "See, today you are doing like this; tomorrow God will punish you for this." When the children would throw stones at me, I would tell them, "This is not good, God will punish you." I would want to abuse them more harshly, but my mother would calm me down, saying, "Never utter anything bad from your mouth, just let it go. Judgment will be given by God."

At around the age of ten or eleven, Salima joined the hijras:

The hijras already knew me and they used to take me along with them when they went begging. At that time my family was in financial trouble, and I helped them by giving them the money that I got on my begging trips with the hijras. One day the hijras came to beg for food at my house. They inspected my body and said, "You're neither a man nor a woman, but you are born this way." So they started accepting me; they would come to see me, bring with them various foodstuffs and other things. They wanted me to come with them, to be a chela (disciple) of their guru. My mother said, "All right, since you are born this way, go wherever you want to go, do whatever makes you happy."

In the beginning I was very scared of the hijras, but they used to talk to me so kindly and gently. I used to run away and hide sometimes, and I never used to listen, but then they were so kind to me, and they didn't beat me or ill-treat me, like I had heard they do, so whenever they called me, I would go running to them. The pain in my heart was lessened and my heart opened up to them.

They took me to live with their guru at Factory Compound and treated me very well. In the beginning they never let me go out; I only worked in the house, like sweeping, cleaning, and cooking. Sometimes I would miss my parents, and even when I was working I would sit and start to cry. I

would say, "I'm missing my parents. I want to see my mother." They would take me to meet my mother and would give me 100 or 150 rupees to give her, along with a sari. Like this they looked after me. They kept me like a girl, protected.

Until my initiation, they didn't want me to go out of the house. I wasn't allowed to talk to men or other people. When I first went to the hijras my hair was very short. When my hair grew long enough for it to be tied into a small braid, then the *jamat* [council of elders] came and sat for my [initiation] ceremony. My guru distributed cardamom in my name. Everyone was to know that my guru Sona was taking Salima—that was the name my guru gave me—for her disciple. On a Sunday everyone collected—all the hijras and *naiks* [chiefs or elders]. My nose and ears were pierced. I wore a sari, and they applied turmeric and mehndi [auspicious henna designs] to my hair and hands and feet. They dressed me up just like a bride, gave me a name, and pierced my nose and ears.

From three days before the ceremony they made me sit in the house; they wouldn't let me go out or do any work at all. Everything was brought to me; my movements were restricted. I was not allowed anything salty or too spicy to eat; only I could eat milk, curds, yogurt. On the appointed day they made me wear a green sari, green blouse, and glass bangles. The Marwari jeweler himself came for my piercing ceremony. They made a paste out of rice, and in front of the rice they put plantains, betel nut leaves, betel nuts, and some flowers on a silver plate. Then on another silver plate, they kept one needle made out of gold and some gold wire. I sat on a low stool just like a bride. All the hijras who were there gave some money—five or ten rupees. Whatever people feel like giving they put on the rice. After this was over, the rice was taken by the jeweler along with the coins. The next night all the rich, important people came and gave presents, which were all given in my name, but I must give them to my guru. They garlanded me and all the naiks gave something; one gave silver anklets, others gave a sari, bangles, or eight anna coins, whatever they felt like. In this way they celebrated with so much pomp and show. After this I started going out for the singing and dancing and everyone came to know that I was Sona's disciple.

This was a good period in Salima's life. Along with her "sister" hijras, they went out to beg and to perform. Salima played the *dholak* (two-sided drum), a prestigious role in the group. All day, every day, the group went to Byculla Market to beg cash and kind from the stall keepers or roam their exclusive territories in Mumbai, seeking out weddings or births where they could perform. They made good money, all of which went to the guru, but they were given everything they needed by their guru, "so what need was there for money?" Salima was her guru's favorite because she was a "real" hijra and had been with her guru since childhood.

This was Salima's life for about ten years. During those years she found herself a husband, Ibrahim, a man who was Muslim, like herself.

Only after leaving my house and joining the hijras did I meet Ibrahim. It was at the market where I used to go to beg vegetables and things that my eyes and those of Ibrahim got locked with each other. He used to run a fruit stall. As soon as my eye caught his, he started to give me things— oranges one day, sweet lime the next, one or two kilos of apples, or sometimes a grapefruit. In that same bag that he put the fruit, he would also put twenty or twenty-five rupees. He put it in the bag so that no one would know he gave so much. He did not want me to go from shop to shop. He would say, "In going from shop to shop no man should tease you; you are very young." We would sit together in a tea shop. I would tell the hijras to take the things for the guru so she would think I also was at the market. I told Ibrahim, "If you don't let me beg, then when I go home and the shares are divided up, then won't my guru ask me, 'Where is Salima's share? What did you bring?' I will be caught in my dishonesty."

So, initially, Salima saw Ibrahim on the sly. Gurus disapprove of hijras having boyfriends or "husbands," who compete for a hijra's earnings. Salima's guru did soon discover the relationship, but Salima was able to convince her that the relationship with Ibrahim was no threat to her earnings for the hijra group. The guru then arranged a "marriage" ceremony for Salima and Ibrahim and gave her blessings for them to live together in a separate house. Salima continued to work with the hijras and earn for them.

Ibrahim had told me, "Even when you die, I will pay for your shroud. Don't think that I have taken a young person just to fool around; I'll stay with you until the end." But I used to say, "You're saying all this, but your mother and father will never let you abide by your words." So Ibrahim used to say, "Even if my parents force me to leave you, I won't listen to them." So everywhere they tried to fix a marriage for him, he used to go and attempt to break off the marriage arrangements. But then his brother, that bastard, and his parents, they came and took him away. They told him, "You are not giving us money to run the house; all these years you have spent in Bombay, you never sent any money and we had no news of you." His parents had come from his native place to check on him. When they learned that he got married to me they took him away. Our house was sold, along with everything else. I just took my household belongings and tied them up and brought them back to my guru's house. Again I had to do all the singing and dancing, as well as looking after the *dholak* and looking after my guru's house. I did all that—I settled down in my guru's house.

At this time the guru was living with a husband of her own. At some point the guru fell ill and went to her native village, leaving Salima living in her guru's house with the guru's husband. Not surprisingly, difficulties developed. Salima's story was that the guru's husband made improper

sexual advances toward her, while spreading the story that Salima seduced him. His intention, Salima said, was to undermine her credibility among the hijras and to replace her in her guru's affections so that he could eventually inherit the guru's considerable material assets. He was evidently successful, as on the guru's return, Salima was thrown out of the house and cast out of the hijra community.

This was a serious business: any hijra who would work with Salima, talk to her, or even so much as give her a drink of water, would be exiled from the community herself. In order to gain reentry, Salima had to pay a 500-rupee fine to the council of elders (*jamat*). Unable to earn, much less save, this amount, Salima lived on the streets, where I first met her. Occasionally she begged in Victoria Railway Station but was chased away if other hijras saw her. Sometimes Salima joined a group of *jankhas* (non-hijra female impersonators), looking for work performing or begging alms. This meant long hours traveling on buses or walking to the outer suburbs of Mumbai in the extreme heat and rain of the monsoon season, for the most meager income. As a real hijra Salima was useful to these *jankhas* because she legitimated their performances. But then she came to owe them money that she could not repay, so she began to avoid them also.

Salima now lived on a street corner under a makeshift tent in the Mumbai Muslim neighborhood of Byculla. She occasionally earned a few rupees caring for some neighborhood children and was given some food by her neighbors. In the monsoon season, she slept under a bus or truck. She sometimes borrowed money from her parents but more often had to lend them money. As a hijra, Salima was the target of harassment from local rowdies. She considered prostitution, but as she so pathetically told me, "No customers are coming." Her general dishevelment, three days' growth of beard and dirty hands, feet, and clothes, made this easy to believe. Salima now talked bitterly about Ibrahim's abandonment, and she was also still hoping to raise the 500 rupees she needed to pay her way back into the hijra community.

These days I am begging and earning these small sums of money; when the hijras pass by and see me, they turn their face away. I ask Allah, "Have I come to this condition that I am like an insect in a dirty gutter?" Nobody wants me. I don't want to live such a cruel life. If I get a little money, then I can lead a proper life. I can't go on leading this cruel life. Just last night I was sleeping out and at three in the morning four urchins came to harass me. I was fast asleep, and this boy woke me up. He said, "We've been watching you for years. We want to know what your price is—what is the price of your virtue?" I said, "So you want to play with my virtue, do you? Well, while I have breath in my body, you people cannot touch my virtue. If you want to play with my virtue then you will have to kill me."

I have not been feeling well and had to go to the government hospital. If my guru were here, or if I had a protector, I would not have had to go to

this hospital; I could have gone to a private one instead. Never mind, that is life; one minute it's like this, the next minute it's different. So I still pray only to Allah, "If this is the way you want me to live, it's all right, but never put me in such a condition where I'll have to go to the hijras for help. Even if I die on the road, the municipality people will pick me up and take me away." It's all right. . . . I've run my life and it's through.

Salima was at a loss as to what to do to make her life more bearable. It was in this condition that I left her when I departed from Mumbai. When I returned to visit her again about four years later, in the winter of 1986, Salima's life had taken yet another turn. I found her in her usual place on the street, along with a small group of people, which included one hijra and two men. She was dressed nicely, much better than when I had seen her on my previous visits, and she looked in much better health. She gave me a big smile, and very shyly turned to the handsome young man behind her and said, "This is Ibrahim." Salima told me that she had written Ibrahim a letter calling him back to Mumbai and he came.

Now he wants to do some kind of business, maybe selling fruits, as he did before. But for the past couple of months he is not well; his leg is troubling him so he is not able to go out and do any business and he is not able to earn. He doesn't have any money to start some business. I manage by borrowing a little money, two rupees here, two rupees there. If Ibrahim has earned a little money, he gives it to me to buy food. And now, why hide it, I comb my hair and get ready and go out for business [prostitution]. I have to try for something because my husband is ill and I have to look after him. I ask the customers for twelve rupees; some nights I get two or three customers, but sometimes I just stand there without any business. Thieves and prostitutes, you'll never know what you make in a day. Sometimes in the end I have to borrow money from someone. For the place itself, I have to pay two rupees to do business, even my clothes, I borrow from my friend. I make a little money also from begging, but mostly I stay and pass my day here only. People say to me, "This guy doesn't work, he just sits and eats your earnings. Why doesn't he work for a living?" But how can he? How can my husband go and work? His life is in trouble; do you think he likes to just sit and eat? He would earn money for me himself; how could he just sit and eat but for this trouble? He has a problem, so I have to consider that, too. How can I neglect his trouble? If, by the grace of Allah, he gets some money, to start some sort of business and earns enough money to support us, it will be good. For now, I earn enough to fill our stomachs.

In 1992, six years later, I again returned to India, looking forward to seeing Salima. When I met her I found that her luck had again changed for the worse. Ibrahim had again abandoned her to marry a "real woman," and her health had deteriorated. Because of the Hindu-Muslim riots in Byculla at this time, I did not stay long in Mumbai. When I returned to

Mumbai in 1995, I immediately went to look for Salima but could not find her in any of her usual places. I inquired among the neighbors and they informed me that she had died!

When I tried to find out more details I was told to look for her good friend, Rekha, who lived nearby. Rekha was one of Salima's "sister-chelas," that is, they were both chelas (disciples) of the same guru. Rekha was an older hijra who herself was living outside the hijra community. When I tracked her down, Rekha told me that Salima had died "of a broken heart" after Ibrahim left her. She had started to drink heavily and that, combined with her extreme poverty and depression, "led to her end." Rekha spoke warmly of Salima's character, describing how Salima had "saved her" from the streets, taking her under her wing. Her guru, whom I met the next day, also spoke of Salima's kindness to everyone, the help she had provided to Ibrahim, and his callousness in leaving her. The guru, who was very elderly, was now depending for support on Rekha, who, although lame, was full of vitality and hope.

It was a sad visit for me. I liked Salima very much and had great admiration for her strength in trying to fashion a meaningful life out of the barest of resources. But even with all of her survival skills, Salima was ultimately no match for the hurdles of poverty and marginality of life on the streets of Mumbai.

PART THREE



Social Distinctions of Caste and Class

"Caste" is a term of European origin that is used to describe the social groupings that many South Asians recognize as distinguishing different kinds of human beings from others. The term "*jāti*," which is the Sanskrit-derived term that most South Asian languages use to refer to these groupings, in fact means "kind" and is applied not only to kinds of humans but also to kinds of other things as well: animals, minerals, vegetables, genders, seasons, etc. Human *jātis*, or castes, are endogamous, that is, people tend to marry only within the caste to which they were born. Many people also prefer to eat only with others of their same caste for reasons that will be addressed below. Caste names sometimes, but not always, correspond to occupational groupings, too. That is, people may be born into a Barber or Potter or Blacksmith caste and *may* follow that profession as well. Often, however, people engage in occupations other than that suggested by the name of their caste, and often caste names do not designate a particular occupation at all. Caste is sometimes confused with *varna*, which is a common term used to describe an ancient textual—and for north Indians at least a contemporary practical—four-class division of humans into Brahmins (priests and scholars), Ksatriyas (warriors and kings), Vaisyas (commoners, including merchants and farmers), and Sudras (servants of the other three). While there are four *varnas*, castes number in the thousands, with different ones in different parts of the subcontinent.

Probably the first word that comes to mind for most readers when they see or hear the word "caste" is "hierarchy." Indeed social rank is an important aspect of caste distinctions. It is not, however, the only aspect of caste recognized by South Asians. Here we will outline some of the main as-