Sexology and Law

The Hijras of India

A Preliminary Report

Serena Nanda

Department of Anthropology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY), 445 West 59th Street, New York, NY 10019, USA

Historical Background and Cross-Cultural Comparisons

This paper is a preliminary report based on a year's fieldwork among the hijras¹ of Bastipore, India². The most common popular understanding of hijras is that they are a community whose members are impotent men who dress and live as women, undergo emasculation, and whose traditional way of earning a living is by collecting alms, and receiving payments for blessing newborn babies, especially males [16, 26]. Hijras are devotees of the goddess Bahuchara Mata and it is in connection with their worship of her that the emasculation operation is carried out, traditionally as part of the initiation into the community. The most frequent translation of the word hijra in English language publications [2, 16, 19, 22, 24] is either “cunch” or “hermaphrodite.” In both cases impotence is central to the definition and in the latter case, reference is specifically made to men whose genitals do not have an unambiguous male appearance either at infancy or in childhood. Impotence is supposed to be an indispensable criterion for hijra status and in the past was said to have been tested for by having the novice sleep for four nights with a prostitute [2]. Both in the past and currently, however, it seems that some men who were not impotent joined the hijra community, sometimes just for the purpose of earning a living with them [25]. Hijras identify themselves as “in-betweens,” using words indicating feminized males, or as women. Their collective, public stance is that they wish to be regarded legally and socially as women, though the degree to which individual hijras actively experience themselves as women varies. Also variable is the degree to which homosexual activity (prostitution) plays a role in the life of any particular hijra and what is its significance for the community as a whole. What is very clear is that some persons in India, born as males, and with a variety of gender identity/role disorders [20] or

¹ There are many spelling variants of hijra: hijara, hinjara, hidjra, and hijada are some of the more common. Hijra is an Urdu word, and while different words with similar meanings are used in South Indian languages, hijra is understood generally throughout India

² To protect the anonymity of my informants I have changed the name of the city where I worked
wide variety of cultures at all levels of socioeconomic complexity and in all parts of the world.

A culturally institutionalized role for those with a gender incongruity which involved cross dressing, and possibly homosexuality, is documented for several Native American cultures. Among the Mohave of California [6], boys who desired toys and clothing of females formally underwent an initiation ceremony which legitimized their change of sex status. Homosexual activity was a significant component, though not the sole criteria for this role, called alyha. Another similar role, the berdache, which was widespread in aboriginal North American referred to a person born as a male who publically took on the dress and role of women. There is little reliable data on the sexual activities of such persons and Kroeber [14] stresses their social status not their sexual activity. However, early French explorers, who first noted this institution, believed that the berdache role did include passive homosexuality and the word berdache is derived through the French from a Persian word meaning "male prostitute" [18]. Such persons were recruited by having had a "vision," and were believed to possess extraordinary spiritual powers. The connection of sex role transformation with heightened supernatural power and shamanism is also found among the Chuckchee of Siberia [3]. In India, too, the hijras are credited with extraordinary powers, both to bless and to curse, which are related to their male/female role. The emasculation ritual particularly is the source of their identification with Bahuchara Mata, and it is as conduits of her power that the hijras receive respect and awe in their society.

In Tahiti there exists a feminine role-playing male role called mahu which is found in most traditional villages [15]. Levy [15] suggests that the ambivalent sexuality of the mahu helps stabilize masculine identity in a society in which there is little sex segregation or differentiation, by providing a highly visible contrast between the effeminate homosexual mahu and the normal male.

Wiiken [31] describes what she calls a transsexual role, xanith, among the Muslim Arabs of Oman. She uses the term transsexual here to refer to "a socially acknowledged role pattern whereby a person acts and is classified as if he/she were a person of the opposite sex" although roles similar to the xanith have generally been called "transvestite" in the anthropological literature. The xanith are passive homosexual prostitutes, who are effeminate in their mannerisms, who wear clothing intermediate between that of men and women, and who mix freely with women in circumstances (such as weddings), where the sexes are otherwise segregated. Many xanith marry in later life. Once they have demonstrated that they can perform sexual intercourse in the male role with a woman (through the custom of handing over a bloodstained handkerchief on the morning after the wedding night), the they are socially accepted in their role as men. Wiiken [31] suggests that one possible explanation of the origin of the xanith, which may also hold true for the berdache, is that such roles can provide an escape from the demands of the male role which are very exacting in some cultures.

In Oman the transsexual role is "sinful but not illegal" and in spite of Islamic religious injunctions against it, male homosexuality is fairly openly practiced not only in Oman but also in other Muslim societies (see [27]). Wiiken [31] reports that in Oman no social stigma attaches to the male who uses xanith for sexual
partly due to the existence of legal sanctions against it. Yet, although
homosexuality has been dropped as a mental disorder by the American
Psychiatric Association (in 1974) and although the law in nine states in the United
States no longer consider it a punishable offense between consenting adults, most
Americans still view it as a sin, a form of mental illness, and/or a crime [11].

Carstairs' contention that the hijra community constitutes primarily an
institutionalization of passive homosexuality has been hotly contested by other
anthropologists ([22], Shah, personal communication). The connection between
“eunuchs” and homosexuality is mentioned in the Indian classic literature,
however, and in the earliest accounts of the hijras in the Indian gazetteers, they
are reported to have engaged in this activity [9]. By contrast with Oman, where
the male customers of the xanith are not stigmatized, social stigma does attach to
homosexuality in India, and it is this that accounts for the lack of data on the
subject. Nonetheless, in India, like Oman, the man that plays the male role in
homosexual intercourse is less stigmatized than the man who plays the female, or
passive, role. Thus, the hijra are more stigmatized that their customers, who are
not linguistically identified as homosexuals. In this sense, there appears to be a
basic similarity in role between the hijra and the xanith, in spite of some of the
important differences.

Finally, because the hijra are also considered intersexed persons, we may look
at the cross cultural data on this phenomenon, which is, unfortunately, scanty.
Among the Pokot of Kenya, an intersexed person is called sererr, which means
“neither male nor female”. Their genitals are too underdeveloped to be
circumcised in either the male or female manner and a Pokot’s failure to be
circumcised denies that person any adult gender status. Sererr are sometimes
killed at birth, but, when allowed to live may receive some respect in society if
they are economically successful; socially they always live on the margins [7].
Among the Navaho, there are persons born with a genital appearance that is
different from either males or females, who are called nadle. Nadle may dress, act
and live as either men or women, and generally do not marry. They have certain
privileges in Navaho society and are well respected [13]. The hijra, like sererr and
nadle, are identified as intersexed persons, “neither men nor women”, or
“eunuchs”, that is, impotent men, who can therefore never fulfill their adult male
roles as husbands and fathers. In both instances the condition is believed to be one
growing out of a physical inadequacy present at birth. It is this perception of their
condition as one originating in a physical anomaly that wins them whatever
sympathy they have from the public. Whether or not hijras are truly intersexed
and/or impotent can only be demonstrated by medical evidence and none is
presently available. Money (personal communication) suggests, and my
fieldwork seems to bear this out, that many hijras, like their transvestite and
transsexual counterparts in the West, give themselves a courtesy diagnosis of
“hermaphrodite”, or intersex, because it is considered more respectable to have a
syndrome with a physical anomaly, than one which is psychological. Further, the
concept of a psychologically compelling desire that motivates a man to live as a
woman is not well understood in India generally, and certainly not among the
lower middle and lower classes from which the hijras are mostly recruited.
happened with some regularity [9] and it is given as the explanation as to why the hijras closely inspect the genitals of a male infant when they come to bless him. As part of the “myth” that hijras are taken away from their families it is also believed that they have no contact with their kin and have lost all memory of them. Some hijras perpetuate this view when talking about themselves in order to win the sympathy of the public (and the anthropologist). Subsequent data on life histories absolutely contradicts this “presentation of self” and most hijras vehemently deny it.

The hijras I interviewed in Bastipore and Bombay come from lower class, middle caste families from small cities in Karnataka or from nearby Tamil Nadu. All were able to talk in great detail about their childhood, about the ways in which they came to join the hijra community, and about their present relations with their families, some of whom I met. All informants reported having the desire to dress and act as women from early childhood. In most cases their parents actively discouraged their cross dressing by scolding and beating them until they left home; in a few cases they reported that their parents eventually resigned themselves to the situation, but that they left home anyway because of the difficulties their behavior caused for their parents and especially for their siblings, whose marriages would be adversely affected. Half my informants specifically referred to having had homosexual experiences in their adolescence which “spoiled” them for normal sexual desires and thus for accepting their roles as normal males – husbands and fathers – in society. In only one case did the informant report that her parents had sought medical treatment for her as a child. In this case the individual described herself as having “a very small penis” from birth. After repeated visits to doctors with no positive results, the informant’s mother took her to a nearby hijra house where she has lived since the age of 10 years. The informant still keeps close contact with her family and attends all the family celebrations.

More typically the individual voluntarily joined the hijra community in the teen age years (15–19). While living with their families during the early teens, informants first “hung around” groups of hijras who came through their city, sometimes joining them in dancing in public. The next step was for the individual to leave the family’s house, most often without telling where they were going, or why, and coming to Bastipore, the nearest big city which is known to have fairly large numbers of hijras, and seeking out hijra houses there. Most commonly a hijra household will accept new recruits hospitably, but also will keep their options open and ask them to leave if they prove dishonest, disruptive, or unwilling to work and contribute to the household income. If the new recruit stays past a few days, one of the elders in the house will become her “guru”, pierce her nose and ears, give her some used clothing and a few pieces of jewelry and generally look after her welfare. During this time the new recruit makes up her mind about how committed she is to staying. If she decides to stay, she will be taken to Bombay to undergo the formal initiation ceremony, to choose a new, female name, and to choose a formal guru by joining one of the seven “houses” of which the hijra community is made up. After several weeks or at the most, months, in Bombay, the initiate typically returned to Bastipore, living in the house she first joined. After several more months, or sometimes years, most of the
incongruities join this community for a variety of economic, social and psychological reasons. It is thus as members of the community, adhering to its rituals, living together, interacting socially, and earning their living in traditional ways, that hijras are identified in this paper. There are other persons in India, born as males, who may share the physical and/or psychological characteristics of hijras, but who do not, for various reasons, join the community.

Very little has been written about the hijras; their rituals are held in secret and their large organizational or religious gatherings, while noticed by the public and noted in the local press, are otherwise closed to outsiders. Because of the hijras' marginal position in Indian society, and society's ambivalence toward their powers — to bless and to curse — hijras are largely avoided by the average person, except in the specific contexts, cultural or sexual, in which their presence is desired. The census of India does not list hijras separately (the most recent census of 1970 counts them as women); it is impossible to say with any certainty how many members the community has. Sethi [25] says there are 5,000 in Bombay alone, and figures of several thousand are quoted in the press notices of their nationwide meetings [30]. Most of the hijras are found in the large cities of North India as it is primarily North Indian cultural groups such as Gujeratis, Panjabis, Sindhis and Marwaris who have the custom of seeking the hijras' blessings and respecting their powers to curse. Smaller groups and individuals do sometimes live in villages or small towns.

Bastipore, a large city in South India is estimated by hijras living there to have about 100-200 hijras. My fieldwork consisted of participation-observation and intensive interviews with thirty hijras spread over five houses in the city.

The hijras living in Bastipore see Bombay as their main cultural center and as part of this research I traced out some of their networks to this city and conducted interviews there as well. The present paper is offered as a preliminary report of the results of this fieldwork. It attempts to place the hijras both in a transcultural framework of persons with gender incongruities, as well as within the specific traditional and contemporary culture and law of India.

Sexuality in general, and gender incongruities in particular are not well developed topics in the anthropological literature. The limited data available do indicate however, that persons with gender incongruities, sometimes associated with homosexual behavior and sometimes not, have, and do currently exist in a

3 I would like to thank Dr. John Money for suggesting this term to me, as well as for the many other helpful insights he passed on to me in our correspondence while I was working in India

4 Social class factors are a partial explanation of this. Boys who are born with indeterminate sex organs (I came across three such cases in my fieldwork) to families of upper middle class do not live in the kind of social environment where becoming a hijra would seem to be an option. In two of these cases the men in question were grown up; one was sent abroad to further develop his career in science with the expectation that although he would never marry, he would have at least the satisfaction of a successful and prestigious career. The other was married to a girl who, it was known, could not have children. The third case is still a toddler, and is being brought up as a boy. I also had the opportunity to interview a middle aged man who desperately was trying, without success, so far, to find a doctor to perform the transexual operation on him. He chose not to join the hijras because of their "reputation" but envied them their group life and ability to live openly as women.
use female kinship terms to relate themselves to other hijras, such as grandmother, or mother's sister. In institutionalizing these fictive kinship relations, money, clothes, small pieces of jewelry and sweets are presented to the participants by each other and by the other hijras present. This constant reciprocity in social relations, expressed in the exchange of small gifts, cash and service, that characterizes the relations between elder and younger "kin" among the hijras is obviously influenced by the importance of such relationships in the larger Indian social landscape. This widespread network of fictive kin means that a hijra can enjoy hospitality in many cities besides her own, and many hijras travel all over India, staying for days, weeks, or months at a time in different places. Hijras, like other Indians, pride themselves on their hospitality.

Hijras live in groups; in larger cities such as Hyderabad a hijra house may contain as many as forty people. In Bastipore the hijras live in groups of between five to ten members. This number is the central core as there is a revolving number of people that come from other places to stay for variable periods of time. The hijra houses in Bastipore are in working class and lower class neighborhoods and in no way are distinguishable from their neighbors who are both Moslems and Hindus. Most of the hijras have friendly relations with their neighbors and are not harassed by them. Children of the surrounding houses run in and out and sometimes perform small errands in return for sweets or a few pennies. The hijras sometimes do small services for their neighbors as a way of making a little extra money, for example making woven purses or grinding spices.

In Bastipore several of the hijra domestic groups are attached to the bathhouses which they run for the public. These bathhouses are very busy, and at least five people are needed to run one. Most of the bathhouses are owned (that is, the building is owned) by a hijra, or at least managed by one. The hijras who work for the bathhouse get a free place to stay and food out of the common pot. The owner or manager of the bathhouse sometimes lives with the group, but may live nearby. The manager of the bathhouse also functions as head of the household, collecting fees from the customers, supervising the cleanliness and efficiency of the establishment, allocating tasks, collecting money from the hijras who do other things on the side, allocating funds for rent, food, house upkeep, and occasionally small personal allowances. The manager is called "guru" out of respect, but not all members of the house have a ritual relationship of guru/chela with her. For individuals who live in a hijra house and earn on their own through prostitution, for example, and who use the household space for this activity, they must pay the house manager a portion (usually 50%) of their earnings.

The hijras living in a hijra house are subject to its rules, which are imposed more or less rigidly depending on the city. In Bombay, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, these rules are rigidly kept; in Bastipore it is admitted that the rules are not so strictly adhered to. The most important rules of a hijra house involve sanctions on stealing; with so much mobility it is necessary that individuals be honest, for if something is missing, the accusations that follow are very disruptive to the household. Drinking is not specifically outlawed but is not done generally by "respectable" hijras, and drunken, abusive behavior is not tolerated in a "good" house. There are various sanctions imposed for deviance. Fining, branding the forehead with a hot coin, cutting the hair, and, if the offense is serious enough
activity. Wikan's detailed description of the xanith allows for an interesting comparison with the hijras. Xanith are apparently likely to get married, and it is assumed that they are potentially, at least, potent. Hijras, on the other hand, are assumed to be impotent and not expected to marry. It also appears that xanith do not undergo an emasculation operation, while this is central to the definition of hijra. Also, unlike the hijra, the xanith do not appear to be regarded by society as having any special powers. The point at which the xanith and hijra seem to be most similar is in their practice of homosexual prostitution. In Oman, however, it is apparently very openly acknowledged that xanith do engage in homosexual prostitution and that activity is the core of their identity. In India homosexual prostitution is a "deviant" activity of hijras and a practice that causes them to lose respect in the society. At the same time, the ability of hijras to make a more than adequate living at this occupation testifies to the demand for it and provides a major connection between the hijras and the larger society. It is this aspect of hijra life that is most contentiously discussed in the literature [4, 22].

Publicly displayed transvestism involving homosexuality (and prostitution) is rather openly practiced in some countries, such as Singapore and Japan. It also exists in the United States, even where cross dressing in public is against the law [21], and where individuals who engage in it may be arrested or harassed by the police. In New York, the police tend to consider transvestites who solicit in localities known for prostitution as prostitutes, and may not harass or arrest them unless they are creating an obvious public disturbance [5]. Newton's study of female impersonation in the United States suggests that economic exploitation, social stigma and public ridicule, and a disorganized life style is more significant than the weight of legal sanctions in the lives of transvestites who flaunt themselves in public [21]. In some ways, the life style of the hijras in India seems parallel to the "street fairies" described by Newton, in that they are frequently exploited — by their customers and sometimes by members of their own community — and seem to experience less distress at the hands of the police even though both homosexuality and prostitution are against the law in India.

According to Carstairs, the major role of the hijras in India is that of institutionalized homosexuality [4]. Widely diverse attitudes toward homosexuality are amply documented. In some tribes of New Guinea, for example, homosexuality is a culturally valued type of relationship during certain periods of a boy's life and every young boy and adolescent must go through an obligatory period of homosexual activity as part of the initiation process. After the birth of two children the males in this society are expected, and most apparently do, to give up homosexuality and engage only in heterosexuality [12]. Among the Azande where young adult men lived in military barracks separately from the rest of society, male homosexuality was permitted and older men could make temporary marriages with young boys [8]. At the other extreme of these cultures, are those, like the United States, which may be said to be homophobic, though this attitude has softened somewhat in the last fifteen years. It is now recognized among professionals, for example, that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not polar concepts, that homosexuality has a variety of forms as a clinical condition and a variety of life styles in which it is manifested, and that the sense of distinct boundaries which Americans attach to homosexuality is
hijras admit that they do not have the talent to sing or dance or play the dholak. However, any hijra who accompanies a performing party will share in the money given by the onlookers and divided up evenly among the hijra group if they "stay awake and keep clapping" as long as the performance goes on. But some hijras do not like to go out in public and expose themselves to attention, teasing, and even ridicule which is the risk one takes, when dancing. Also, it can be physically exhausting to perform as many celebrations go on all through the night. When a hijra joins the community she is asked whether she wants to earn through singing and dancing.

A second well known and public occupation of hijras is asking for alms, either from people on the streets, or more commonly, from shops. Usually they go in a small group of two or three, with one person playing the drum, and simply stop in front of a shop, make their traditional and unique handclap as a way of announcing themselves, and wait to receive some money. If a shopkeeper or person on the street does not give, the hijra may make some insulting or even abusive retort. Every city is divided up into areas, each of which is visited on a different day by a different group of hijras. Shopkeepers usually do give a few cents, and in any case, the hijras in Bastipore are less likely to be abusive than those in larger cities such as Bombay and Delhi.

Earning a living in this manner is not considered particularly pleasant. In Bastipore those who do it earn about ten to twenty rupees a day (divided among a
Viewed from a cross cultural perspective, then, hijras appear to have some similarities with gender incongruities described for other cultures. From this perspective, the present paper can contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the range of variation in societies with respect to institutionalizing roles for persons who physically, or psychologically, are not considered completely men or women. The attitudes of the aforesaid non-Western societies contrast vividly, for example, with the attitude in the United States toward such incongruities of gender identity/role. Western culture generally does not admit of a role for an "in-between" person but rather regards sex and gender as totally dichotomous – one is either a male or a female. The boundaries between the sexual divisions are rigidly maintained by religious, social, and legal sanctions, despite the reality of the existence of many persons who cannot be said to fit easily into either of these two categories.

Indian society, in custom, if not in current law, does recognize an in-between category of persons and the hijra role does attract a variety of persons with gender identity/role incongruities. The law, however, is less tolerant than custom, and specifically imposes penalties for emasculation, the central ritual of hijra tradition. Section 337 of the Indian Penal Code [28] makes it illegal to "cause hurt by endangering the life or personal safety of others". This includes emasculation which is defined as "depriving a man of his virility by castration or by cutting off his private parts". Castration had previously been outlawed, in 1880 by the Gaekwar of the state of Baroda, in what is now Gujerat, where the emasculation operation had been reported to have been carried out in or near the precincts of the major hijra temple dedicated to their goddess. This law against emasculation, as well as the current one, has not prevented this operation from being carried out, although it is now done in secret at a hijra house, in order to keep the police from intervening. Today the "operation" is carried out by a hijra elder; in the past barbers often performed the surgery in Muslim hijra communities, and in some cases the initiate performed the operation himself. It is with respect to the emasculation operation that the hijra culture comes into greatest potential conflict with the law in India today. Although customary law among both Muslims and Hindus appears to have accepted the institutionalization of some gender incongruity as the toleration and even patronage, of the hijras suggests, the contemporary Indian Penal Code unequivocally imposes sanctions for the emasculation ritual which is central to hijra culture. That the law is not vigorously enforced may be one way of reconciling the opposition between custom and statute.

The Hijras of Bastipore

Recruitment

There is a widespread belief in Indian society that hijras recruit their membership by carrying off infants and small children who they observe to be intersexed. The popular press reinforces this belief with sensationalist disclosures about young boys captured by hijras and forcibly emasculated, and used for purposes of homosexual prostitution. Nineteenth century accounts state this as having
that one of the important reasons for joining the hijra community is to be able to live openly as women, and attract male clients, while having the social, emotional and financial support of the group. Hijra prostitutes engage in anal intercourse, fellatio, and intercourse between the thighs, all of which are specified as "unnatural acts" in the Indian Penal Code [28]. Generally speaking, however, homosexual behavior between consenting adults is not prosecuted in India and none of my informants had ever been accosted by the police on this account.

Six of my Bastipore informants are involved in long-term relationships with a man; others have been so in the past. The man visits the hijra at her place, if there is some opportunity for privacy. In other cases the hijra and her partner live together, with other hijras staying with them for variable periods of time. Most frequently the man's family knows of his hijra "keep"; in one case, in which the man was to be married, his family took the hijra to court to make sure that she kept away from him after his marriage. The hijras refer to these men as their "husbands", even when the man has another wife. The men in these six cases were good earners and had regular jobs — in factories or shops — and gave part of their income to their hijra partner outright or bought her frequent gifts. The hijras also spend some of their money on their "husbands". All my informants who were prostitutes not only had joined the hijra community after having had homosexual experience in adolescence, but give the explanation, aforementioned, that this experience had spoiled them for any other life.

In different parts of India, hijras do other kinds of work: it is common to find them as cooks in North India and household servants in Bombay. They also work on construction sites and tell fortunes. One of the common hijra complaints, which they occasionally make in public appeals to the government, is that they cannot get decent jobs and therefore have no recourse but to earn their living through prostitution. The supportive ideals of the hijra community provide some economic security for all hijras, especially aging ones. As long as she is willing to help out in some way, and has honest habits and is not quarrelsome, a hijra can always find haven in some hijra house. Some of the hijras are quite financially well off — those who have singing and dancing talents and who save their money have invested in property and do not worry about their old age. Some of those who work as prostitutes also earn good money, but admit having a tendency to squander it. The ambition of some prostitutes is to save enough money to buy a flat or house of their own, and eventually have other hijras earning for them. Thus, while ideally there is no system of social hierarchy among hijras, in reality there are wide differences in material security and life style.

Religion

There are two religious contexts in which to understand the hijras — Hindu and Muslim. The two contexts overlap at certain points, and the resulting anaigam is somewhat confusing to the Western mind with its concepts of exclusive religious categories. The deity which is the object of devotion for all hijras, whether Hindu or Muslim, is Bahuchara Mata, one of the many mother-goddess figures worshipped all over India. The shrines of Bahuchara Mata are found all over Gujerat and her main shrine or temple is about 100 km. outside of Ahemdabad.
(such as beating one’s guru), outcaste are the most common sanctions. Some hijras who have been outcaste, or who have fallen into disgrace because of constant drinking are no longer welcome in hijra houses in Bastipore and live on the streets, begging for food and something to wear from the more kindhearted members of their company. A few hijras prefer to live on their own; some who make a very good living singing and dancing appear to see no reason to share their good fortune with others. Some older hijras also live on their own but come daily to cook in a hijra house and earn a few rupees a day in that manner. One of the most important attractions the company of hijras offers is that no aging person will ever be allowed to grow old on their own; if they desire it, the security of the group is always offered to them, either in a place to stay, or a daily chore that can help them earn.

_Earning a Living_

As previously mentioned, the traditional occupation of the hijras is singing and dancing. When a marriage takes place, the hijras find out about it and show up at the wedding, or at the home of the groom, and sing songs which generally mock the groom and his family. They are given money for this by the onlookers according to their whim. When a male child is born (and these days, a female child as well), the hijras show up at the home, sing and dance, bless the baby, and collect a fixed amount of money and goods — including sweets, and cloth — from the head of the household, as well as being given small, unfixed amounts of money by the onlookers. They carry with them to all these performances, the dholak, or sacred drum. This is generally the only accompaniment, though they may wear bells on their ankles. In every city each group of hijras tends to have its own area where it works. They constantly roam around the neighborhood trying to find out what events are taking place that will give them the opportunity to perform. When they come to a house where such an event is to take place, they put their special sign on the door and no other hijra group may come and perform there. In North India, where the custom of paying them is well established, some hijras who are famous for their dancing and singing may earn thousands of rupees for one dance. Occasionally hijras also get parts singing and dancing in films.

Singing and dancing has the highest status in the hijra community, and is their main “cultural” function. It establishes them as powerful in their own eyes, for by asking them to come and sing, or allowing them to come and sing when a baby is born, the public is showing respect for their powers. Dancing is also personally enjoyed by many hijras, and some in Bastipore will perform at male stag parties, college functions, temple openings, fairs and on any occasion to which they are asked. Often these dances are sexually suggestive, and “filmi”; sometimes they are also comic.

In Bastipore it is much harder to make a living singing and dancing than it is in North India, where the “powers” of the hijras are more traditional and more respected. Since Bastipore does have a sizable number of North Indian families however, there are some opportunities for hijras to play their traditional cultural roles. Most of the hijras in Bastipore do not, in fact, make their living from this traditional employment. There is simply not enough work. Furthermore, many
together, in other cities in India, they live separately [24]. I should also point out that several of my informants were brought up Christian but had no difficulty incorporating both the Hindu and Muslim aspects of hijra culture into their lives.

_Emasculating_

The central ritual of the hijras is the “operation” whereby part or all of the male genitals are removed. Traditionally, as mentioned previously, this operation was part of the initiation ceremony, and was, and still is, viewed as “taking on a new life, being reborn”. It certainly does, in the minds of the hijras themselves, complete the transformation from the status of male to hijra, although some of my informants talked about it rather as completing the transformation from male to female. The “operation” (the English word is frequently used here even by hijras who do not otherwise speak English) is the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a hijra. Hijras are not allowed to marry, and one way of pressuring a hijra to undergo the operation is to accuse them of later wanting to change their mind and marry a woman. This is only one kind of pressure. In hijra mythology, an impotent man who does not undergo emasculation will be reborn impotent for seven generations. This belief was the source of the distress expressed by hijras to the state when in 1880, emasculation was outlawed in the then State of Baroda by the king. Hijras also indicate that since they dance in public, they must have the operation to “prove” they are hijras if they are teased by their audiences that they are only men, after all. Another motivation is that the operation brings them closer in identification to their major source of power, a female figure. Still another reason given by some informants was that their male customers, or “husbands” desired that they undergo the operation in order to be more like women. Those hijras who live by serving the goddess at her main shrine in Gujerat claim that they have received a call from the goddess to undergo the emasculation, and several of my informants who had the operation only after many years in the hijra community, also said that they saw the goddess in a dream telling them to have the operation done. Not all hijras do undergo the operation; it is expensive, and since it is done under conditions in which death is a real possibility, fear and finances provide two strong motivations for not undergoing it. In any case, most of my informants had waited for between 5-15 years before having it done.

Before deciding to do the operation, the operator looks for auspicious signs. One method of doing this is to break a coconut. If the coconut breaks in half evenly, the signs are good – if not, the operation will be put off. If it is decided to go forward, the client is woken up about three in the morning. She takes a bath and washes her hair. She is led into the place where the operation will occur and all her clothes and jewelry are removed. A picture of the goddess is placed in the room and the patient is told to stare at it und repeat the name of the Mata. When the actual surgery is imminent, the operator takes the long hair of the client and crosses it over her face and makes her bite it in order to help her bear the pain. There is no anesthetic. The operator then ties a black string around the penis and testicles so that she can get a clean cut. An ordinary, but sharp surgical knife, which can be bought at any medical store, is used.
near Viramgam in north Gujerat. The popular image of Bahuchara is that of a goddess riding on a cock and all the hijra households in Baghpore have this very colorful print framed and hanging on the wall. It is an object of daily worship, garlanded with flowers and treated in precisely the way such objects are treated in other Hindu houses. Some Hindus worship Bahuchara Mata in the form of a yantra, a conventional symbol for the vulva, and it is suggested that there is a relation between this representation of the goddess and the emasculation ritual of the hijras [26]. Emasculation would more exactly complete the identification of the hijra devotee with the object of worship. Although it is reported that the emasculation ritual formerly took place at the main shrine of the Mata, this is no longer the case. In fact, most of my informants in Bastipore had not even been to this shrine. Shiva is also sometimes worshipped by hijras because of his manifestation in the half-man, half-woman form called Ardhanarisvara representing Siva united with his sakti.

The religious connection of Hinduism with the hijras is reinforced by a well known story in the Mahabharata which many hijras point to as the story of their origin. Yudhisthira, one of the Pandava brothers is seduced by his enemies into a game of dice in which the stake is that the defeated party should go with his brothers into exile for twelve years and remain for the thirteenth year incognito. The Pandavas lose and do go into exile as required. When the thirteenth year comes round, Yudhisthira asks Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata and one of the Pandava brothers, what disguise and profession he will take up for the thirteenth year in order to remain undiscovered. Arjuna answered that he would hide himself in the guise of a eunuch and serve the ladies of the court. Arjuna had been cursed with the loss of manhood in a previous encounter with the goddess Urvasi, but through the grace of the God Indra the curse would only hold for one year. So Arjuna, by living for one year as a eunuch would be fulfilling two duties at once. He describes how he shall spend the year, "... wearing bangles made of white conchs, braiding my hair like a woman, and clothing myself in female attire. I shall engage myself in menial work in the inner apartments of [the] queen. I shall teach the women dancing and singing" [23].

In spite of the clear connection of the hijras with Hinduism, however, Islam also plays an important role in their culture and history. The founders of the seven "houses" are all said to have been Muslim, and each of the present gurus of the seven houses is a Muslim. Hindu as well as Muslim hijras say that they keep a fast during the three day fasting period of Ramadan but in fact only my Muslim informants did this. Mostly it is the egalitarianism of Islam (at least its ideal) that is mentioned as one of its attractive qualities, compared to the divisiveness of caste among the Hindus. In hijra culture there are no castes and the inappropriateness of such beliefs for a community of deviants such as the hijras recognize themselves to be is frequently mentioned. Although in the past, the Muslim Nizams of Hyderabad were famous for their patronage of the hijras, today the main patrons of their performances are Hindus. As one hijra said, "we earn our income from the Hindus, but we are Muslims". The Muslim rulers in India did also, like the Hindu courts mentioned in the epics, use eunuchs to protect the court ladies and teach them singing and dancing; this may be another, parallel source from which the hijras historically originated. While in Bastipore Hindu and Muslim hijras live