



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Hijras

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Hijras are communities of male-assigned individuals on the Indian subcontinent (including Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan) who take on many traditionally feminine attributes. While hijras' origins can be traced to ancient religious texts and practices, in recent decades, they have received notable public and scholarly attention and are arguably the most well-known example of a nonmale/nonfemale gender role in the world today. However, this visibility has not always resulted in greater acceptance and, in some cases, seems to have had the opposite effect. Hijras continue to experience high rates of harassment and violence, even though many of the countries in the region granted them legal recognition and some political rights in the 2010s.

Defining Hijras

Hijras have commonly been misunderstood by researchers, government officials, and the popular media, as reflected in the many inaccurate terms used locally and internationally to label them. Historically, these descriptors have included eunuchs, hermaphrodites, intersex people, transsexuals, and transvestites. Hijras are most widely referred to today as a “third gender, neither man nor woman,” but, as noted by anthropologists Adnan Hossain and Serena Nanda, this description fails to encompass the understanding that hijras have multiple identities, some of which contradict each other. Hijras do not always identify themselves as a third gender and may adopt cultural markers that are considered feminine or that combine traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics. Similarly, contemporary scholars and activists often subsume hijras under a universalizing “transgender” framework, which erases the specificities and inconsistencies of hijras identifying as both women and “not women.”

Hijras see themselves as “like women” because they assume many stereotypically feminine characteristics; they wear traditionally women’s clothing and accessories, shave their body and facial hair, grow their hair long, use mannerisms that are read as female, and adopt conventionally feminine names, and some undergo feminizing hormonal treatments. Yet, even though hijras typically seek to sit in the women’s section on public transportation and may obtain official female identification documents, they do not look to socially “pass” as women and in some contexts deliberately disrupt the idea that they are female. For instance, they engage in behaviors that are not traditionally considered proper for South Asian women, such as using vulgar language and dancing in public, and employ nonverbal gestures, such as the thikri (a loud clap), that are associated with hijras. At times, hijras also tend to dress in customarily male ways; in Bangladesh, for example, hijras present as men on some special occasions and when they undertake the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage. The most noted way that hijras are “not women” is that they may decide to undergo a penectomy and castration (orchietomy) but do not seek a vaginoplasty to present physically as more traditionally female.

Although hijras are commonly known for being emasculated (i.e., having their genitals removed), this practice is not universal and not always a requirement to be a hijra. In India, hijras consider having their genitals removed to be a sacrifice to the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata, who then grants them the power to confer fertility to others, which is central to the traditional hijra role in India of singing and dancing at marriages and the births of male children for compensation. However, in Bangladesh, hijra status does not derive from being emasculated but from their ability to conduct hijragiri, the traditional occupations of hijras, which include conferring blessings on newborns and mastering ulti, the secret hijra language. In fact, Bangladeshi people consider hijras who undergo emasculation to be inauthentic or fake, as they define “real” hijras as men born with missing or ambiguous genitals.

In recent decades, hijras in India have seen their status as sacred figures wane and have faced greater difficulties earning money from giving blessings. As a result, hijras have increasingly turned to sex work, where they take the passive role in sex with male clients. This sexual role is central to the identity of many hijras.

Oppression and Legal Recognition

Under British colonial rule, hijras in South Asia were labeled as a deviant, criminal caste and experienced persecution, and this state-sponsored hostility and mistreatment carried over into the newly independent

South Asian countries. For example, the Indian constitution denied hijras the ability to vote, own property, marry, have a passport and driver's license, and other citizenship rights. Hijras also experience high rates of physical and sexual violence and harassment, including from the police; have limited access to appropriate housing and medical care; and are frequently subject to economic discrimination, theft, and extortion.

Acknowledging the longstanding marginalization of hijras, the supreme courts of Pakistan (2009), Nepal (2011), and India (2014) and the government of Bangladesh (2013) granted legal recognition to hijras as a third gender. Such decisions have led to various types of official acknowledgment, including the addition of a third-gender category on Indian voting lists, Nepali census forms, Pakistani national identification cards, and Bangladeshi and Nepali passports.

Although the legal recognition of hijras as a third gender has been acclaimed in South Asia and internationally as a positive step forward, the change has also been criticized for imposing a singular status on hijras and contributing to misunderstandings about them. The latter issue is particularly the case in Bangladesh, where the state recognizes hijras as a group that is *jouno o lingo protibondhi*, literally “sexually and genitally handicapped.” In this way, hijras are erroneously defined as having been born with missing or ambiguous genitals, which reinforces popular local beliefs that hijras have something wrong with them and formally sets them apart from other people, turning their peripheral status into government policy. Moreover, under this framework, hijras who have a penis or undergo emasculation surgery are not “real” hijras, and thus hijra legal recognition in Bangladesh excludes most of the individuals who identify as such and ignores the basis by which they define group membership. This situation forces many hijras to say that they are genitally disabled to qualify for legal and economic rights that would otherwise be denied to them. Elsewhere in South Asia, some hijras today are indicating that they are transgender, as this identity is more intelligible to others because of the effects of globalization.

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See also [Indigenous People](#); [Muslim People](#); [News Media Representations](#); [Nonbinary Genders](#); [South Asian Trans People](#); [Third and Fourth Gender Roles](#)

Further Readings

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