The quotation that begins this essay, a well-known Hindi proverb, is used by contemporary Hindi speakers to indicate that the completely unexpected, even the miraculous, has occurred. The hijras, most of whom undergo a castration and penectomy operation after joining a hijra community and adopting the feminine dress and mannerisms associated with membership, are marginalized in Indian society for their inability to have children. Perceived as outside the reproducing heterosexual mainstream and ostracized because of it, the hijras have created an elaborate network that spans all of India, establishing a divergent social space that both parallels and opposes organizations of gender in the dichotomous system that excludes them.

The marginalized nature of this network has led to the development of a specialized in-group vocabulary, created by the hijras in order to identify concepts unique to their lifestyle. In this essay, I explore how the hijras, ridiculed by society for their "barrenness," have altered the semantics of mainstream vocabulary in order to redefine themselves as a self-sufficient, even childbearing, community.

The term hijra literally means "impotent" and is used more generally as a derogatory epithet to denote the ineffectiveness of the referent in question. Most telling in this respect are recent employments of the term by Hindu extremists in reference to the minority Muslim community. The term, deriving its performative effect from a cultural fear of impotence, has been employed by ethnic and religious groups in a variety of contexts as a means of establishing political superiority. Vijayraje Scindia, Uma Bharati, and Sadhvi Rithambara, for example, three Indian women who have, in the words of South Asian scholar Amrita Basu, "emerged as the most powerful orators of Hindu nationalism" (1995:159), regularly employ the term in their speeches as a means of criticizing Muslim or Muslim-friendly political leaders. Anand Patwardhan, producer of a number of progressive documentaries on the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, captured one such instance in his 1994 film Father, Son, and Holy War, in which Uma Bharati says scathingly of the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav: "ek hijra par goli kyö bekár kī jīye" 'Why would you want to waste a bullet on a hijra?' With this...
phrase, Bharati succinctly criticizes her opponent for his inability to influence the future of the state.

Hindi poets and novelists have likewise exploited the term for metaphorical reasons. Hindi poet Ved Prakash 'Vatuk,' for example, in his poems "Today I Saw Jesus Dying" (1977) and "Like the Hijras" (1987), offers two extended 'hijra' similes that suggest political and creative impotence, respectively. In the former poem he incorporates the phrase paçpan karog hijre '550 million hijras' in reference to India's citizens in order to portray them as politically ineffectual; in the latter he compares 'literary critics' to hijras in order to suggest their lack of creativity:

hijrā kī tarah
ve nāçege
pīṅge jāh
bājāyēge gāl
unāh na prasv kī pīṅa hotī hai
na paśaṅā kā sakh

Like the hijras,
they dance,
they slap their thighs,
they blubber.

They have neither the agony of labor
nor the joy of childbirth.

-Ved Prakash 'Vatuk' (1987)

Vatuk's poem suggests that literary critics, like hijras, suffer from a kind of impotence that prevents them from creating 'children' (or in this case, literary works) of their own. Having experienced "neither the agony of labor nor the joy of childbirth," critics produce little more than pretension.

These varying uses of the term hijra originate from a societal belief that the hijra, by virtue of her own impotence, will prevent family members within the household from marrying. This belief, coupled with a social intolerance for the integration of such figures, often leads to the ostracization of boys who are born with ambiguous genitalia or somehow exhibit behavior considered to be "too feminine." Such children are frequently left with no choice but to leave their homes and join one of the many hijra communities that exist in almost every region of India. Charu, one of the hijras I spoke with in Banaras during my year of fieldwork there in 1992 and 1993, explains how difficult it is for a hijra to return home to her family after joining a hijra community, encapsulating society's disgust in the final two lines by referring to their use of the epithet "Hey Hijra!":

(1.5) hamārā betā hai; - yā hamārā laṛā hai; - yā hamārā bhāi hai; ā gayā royēge. - magar ek ciz kā nārāgī ñēygē, duniyā vāiē bolēgī kī "upahā, ye hiji jā gayā. (1.5) iske ghar hijrā ātu jātā hai. - isse hijra kā rīṣā hai. - isse ghar sāī mohā kāreēge." (3.0) to ye duniyā ne asamājīk bānā diyā. (2.5) duniyā būri nazar se dekhne lagā. (2.5) "E HIJRA, (2.0) e hijrā.

Lexicon Subversion in the Hijra Community

The family is, after all, what distinguishes the hijra from most other members of Indian society, who are intimately involved in the extended families so instrumental to social organization. But since the hijra is thought to act as a curse on this very family structure—a belief based on the idea that her impotence will spread to her siblings and prohibit procreation (see, for example, Mehta 1945: 27; Vyas & Shingala 1987:75; Pimpley & Sharma 1985:42; Sharma 1989:51-59)—she is, in the words of Charu, a "black spot," an existence that brings shame to the family's potency. It is perhaps this fact that leads Charu to describe the hijras as occupying the dividing line between society and non-society: if they were to cross this line by returning home, their appearance would be met with anger, fear, even hatred.

Somewhat ironically, the hijras gain their livelihood by dancing and singing at birth celebrations, where their blessing is thought to insure the future potency of a newborn son. In many of these celebrations, the hijras perform a lively dance in which the guru, or head of the hijra community, pretends to give birth to a baby boy. In a celebration recorded in the BBC documentary Eunuchs: India's Third Gender (1990), for example, the guru of a Gujarat hijra community, in front of a crowd of laughing women and children, stuffs a cloth under her sari to make herself look pregnant. Her fellow hijras support her by singing, "Oh yes, oh yes, see how her back hurts! Her womb is full of water and the baby is crying out!"

After the hijras collaboratively construct a series of jokes about the origins of their guru's pregnancy (e.g., "What's happened to you?" "It's my stomach. The British gave it to me!"). one of them acts as a midwife and 'delivers' her guru's baby as the guru lies on the ground cries out with pain. The guru then wraps the 'child' in her sari, holds it next to her breast, and exclaims:

It's a boy!
He looks just like his father.
His tummy is like his father's sister.
As the crowd breaks into laughter upon hearing the final insult, the guru takes the real newborn baby from his mother, holds him high, and begins to dance. “Oh, Allah, please bless and protect this child,” she cries, demanding rupees in exchange for her blessings. “May he be blessed with success and a long life.”

In this birth celebration, then, it is indeed “the hijra here who has had a child,” in contrast to the sentiment on which the proverb that opens this essay gains its meaning. The hijras, marginalized by heterosexual society for their inability to have sons, have subverted the outside identification of their community as barren, throwing back to mainstream culture a very creative, and procreative, image of the hijra. In similar fashion, the hijras have altered the semantics of mainstream vocabulary in order to redefine themselves as a self-sufficient and self-perpetuating community. The notion that the hijras have a dialect of sorts is not new: Since the 1970s a number of South Asian journalists and sociologists have made allusions to the hijras’ khās bolt ‘special dialect’ or kośṭhāsī ‘code language’, pointing to the hijras’ use of secret lexical items in their business dealings with non-hijras (see, for example, Mallik 1976; Mehrotra 1977; Singh 1982; Mondal 1989; Lowe 1983). Likewise, the hijras I spent time with in Banaras, when demanding payment for their song and dance, employ a monetary numbering system that is unintelligible to the general public. An alternative vocabulary for the numbers 1, 25, 50, 100, 500, together with a secret system of lexical items and claps for different kinds of customers (i.e., ‘stingy’, ‘poor’, ‘dishonest’, ‘unemployed’, ‘exploitable’), allow them to conduct business dealings covertly in front of their clients.

What I want to focus on in the pages remaining is the terminology used by the hijras to designate affected kinship relations, terms which ultimately work to reposition the hijras as a procreative community. Fundamental to hijra kinship is the guru/disciple relationship; the initiate pledges life-long devotion to an older, more experienced hijra, who in turn gives her a share of the community’s earnings. The system of kin developed around this relationship is extensive, built on the designation of the guru as mother-in-law and the disciple as daughter-in-law. The employment of affected kinship in India among neighbors, especially among villagers or city residents living in close proximity, is well attested in the sociological literature (e.g. Freed 1963; Vatsy 1969a), but the choice of such designations tends to be somewhat haphazard and dependent on individual preference. The hijras, on the other hand, have a well-planned system of kinship designation, the nature of which, for the most part, remains constant across communities. Hijras rely upon elaborate family structures which delegate various feminine roles to different members of the group, some of which are reported in Table 1, among them dādī ‘paternal grandmother’, nānī ‘maternal grandmother’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term of address</th>
<th>Meaning in the hijra community</th>
<th>Parallel term of address in standard Hindi</th>
<th>Meaning in standard Hindi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mā or mā guru</td>
<td>guru’s older fellow disciple (i.e., guru’s older guru)</td>
<td>ṭāḍī or ṭāḍī mā (‘older mother’)</td>
<td>father’s older brother’s wife (paternal uncle’s wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baṭi mā</td>
<td>guru’s younger fellow disciple (i.e., guru’s younger guru)</td>
<td>caćī or caćī mā (‘younger mother’)</td>
<td>father’s younger brother’s wife (paternal uncle’s wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mausi</td>
<td>a general term denoting a hijra elder to one’s guru (Nanda 1990:88 identifies this term as used for “an elder hijra who is not one’s guru”)</td>
<td>nānī</td>
<td>mother’s mother (i.e., paternal grandmother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dādī or dādī guru</td>
<td>guru’s guru (i.e., grandguru)</td>
<td>dādī</td>
<td>father’s mother (i.e., paternal grandmother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nānī or nānī guru</td>
<td>a general term denoting a hijra elder to one’s guru (Nanda 1990:88 identifies this term as used for “an elder hijra who is not one’s guru”)</td>
<td>nānī</td>
<td>mother’s mother (i.e., paternal grandmother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jījī/ḍīḍī/hahan</td>
<td>fellow disciple/friend in another hijra household</td>
<td>jījī/ḍīḍī/hahan</td>
<td>sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>betī</td>
<td>disciple</td>
<td>betī</td>
<td>daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>potī or potī cēlā</td>
<td>disciple’s disciple (i.e., granddisciple)</td>
<td>potī</td>
<td>son’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nāṭīna or nāṭīna cēlā</td>
<td>disciple’s disciple (i.e., granddisciple)</td>
<td>nāṭī</td>
<td>daughter’s daughter (i.e., granddaughter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pārṇāṭin cēlā</td>
<td>disciple’s disciple’s disciple (i.e., great granddisciple)</td>
<td>pārṇāṭin</td>
<td>daughter’s daughter’s daughter (i.e., granddaughter)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But what is extraordinary about the guru/disciple relationship is that the guru accepts the hijra initiate not merely as her daughter, but as her daughter-in-law, and that the rites of passage that accompany this acceptance correspond to that of a newly married Hindu woman leaving her father’s house (referred to in Hindi as pilhar) and moving into her father-in-law’s house (referred to in Hindi as sasurāl). The interesting fact about this parallel, of course, is that there is no husband
involved in the exchange per se since the hijras identify in the feminine; the guru therefore assumes the role of husband in theory and mother-in-law in practice.

The dual role of the guru is overtly identified in excerpt (2) by Rupa, a hijra who considers herself to be the pandit (or 'priest') of the hijras in Banaras. She explains that the guru is not only the sās 'mother-in-law' but also the provider of subhāg, a term used in reference to a woman's married state, or more literally, to 'the state of being in a husband's protection'.

(2) Suppose one guru has four celā 'disciples'. First of all, there's the oldest celā, and then there's the next oldest celā. So the second celā will call the first celā jījī 'older sister'. ... But among us jījī means jetānī 'husband's older brother's wife' because the position of our guru is like a sās 'mother-in-law'. We apply the subhāg 'vermillion' in our guru's name, in order to indicate that we have come to the guru's household and are like daughters-in-law to him. We consider our guru to be our subhāg [the state of being in a husband's protection]; otherwise, of course, she's our sās 'mother-in-law'. When she is no longer alive, we won't put a bindi on our forehead anymore [i.e., the decorative colored dot that Indian women, except for widows, wear on their foreheads]. We won't use subhāg anymore; we won't wear ettri 'glass bangles' anymore. We'll wear the gold and silver bangles that widows wear. And we'll wear simple clothes.

The customs that Rupa describes in this passage as performed by the initiate parallel those performed by a married woman. After a Hindu bride moves into her father-in-law's home, she begins to apply vermillion powder down the part of her hair in the name of her husband so as to symbolize the state of being in his protection; she will also wear a number of other symbols of marriage, like glass bangles. The traditional Hindu woman continues these customs as long as her husband is still alive. If he dies before she does, she will mourn the misfortune of her widowed state by shaving her head, substituting gold and silver bangles for glass ones, and wearing simple, colorless clothes. According to Rupa, the same is true of the hijras.

Moreover, Rupa's insistence that the address term jījī 'older sister' actually means jetānī 'husband's older brother's wife' merits further consideration. Because the hijra initiate moves into her in-laws' home, all of her relationships with hijras in her new home must parallel in-law relationships. Even though the hijras address each other with terms denoting natal kinship (as is normally the case in standard Hindi), they actually conceptualize these relations as in-law kinship. Through this double construction, the hijras get the best of both fictive worlds, enlarging their families horizontally as well as vertically. By designating the disciple as a unit of marital exchange, the hijras are able to extend their families outward and develop kinship ties across groups, ultimately creating an expansive, interwoven network of cross-community relationships. As Sulekha, a hijra who lives outside Banaras in a small village with a male companion, so aptly explains: "It's just like all the doll games that children play. Hijras play these games with each other, too. That's how we're related to each other—in these kinds of games. That's how we complete our kinship circles. And we carry them out faithfully."

The idea that the initiate's entry into the hijra community parallels a woman's entry into the in-law's home has also resulted in a number of subversions of vocabulary items traditionally associated with sanctioned kinship in nonhijra society, reproduced in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Etymology or related terms</th>
<th>Meaning in community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baṣṭhā</td>
<td>Hall 1993</td>
<td>Banaras</td>
<td>literally: 'to sit down (with)'; figuratively: 'to marry without proper ceremony'</td>
<td>v., to join the hijra community; to become the disciple of a guru (as in the expression: ma si apne guru ko yahā pandeh sāl be baṣṭhā hāī 'I've been sitting at my guru's house for fifteen years')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chādar ughna</td>
<td>Ibbetson, MacLagan, and H.A. Rose 1911:v, 332</td>
<td>Panipat</td>
<td>'to cover oneself with the sheet'; 'to marry without proper ceremony'</td>
<td>v., to be initiated into the hijra community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dahej</td>
<td>Singh 1982-48</td>
<td>Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>dowry</td>
<td>n., gift given to a guru at the time of initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>god bharāyī</td>
<td>Shrivastav 1986</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>a celebration in which an engaged woman is given auspicious gifts by her inlaws as a wish for prosperity</td>
<td>n., the process of becoming a hijra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rīt</td>
<td>Shrivastav 1986</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>custom</td>
<td>n., relationship-giving ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tel</td>
<td>Saksena 1980</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>break-up price, separation price; from tomaī ['to break']; the concluding line of a stanzā in a song; the crux of a matter</td>
<td>n., a payment made to a guru in exchange for a celā</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|TABLE 2. Selected terms used to denote aspects of the guru/disciple relationship|

That the act of designating such affected relationships is called rīt 'custom' in certain hijra communities (Shrivastav 1986) is itself telling. In standard Hindi, the
term riśi is conceptualized in opposition to the term sanskār, with the former term used in reference to worldly customs and the latter to divine ones. It is perhaps for a similar reason that the hijras in Banaras use the verb bāihānā ‘to sit down’ when they speak of their own initiation into the hijra community, a term normally used by non-hijras when referring to a union performed without any formal recognition or ritual, as in the case of an elopement. The verb bāihānā points to a kind of illegitimacy when used in this context, denoting a worldly union instead of divinely sanctioned one. The terms reproduced in Table 2, then, all point to the notion of the hijra as bride; indeed, in the Delhi community commented on by V. K. Shrivastav (1986), the monetary gift that the initiate offers to her guru when she becomes his disciple is called dahej, the Hindi term for ‘dowry’.

The hijras’ use of the term god bharāyī, as reported by Shrivastav, is also revealing. This term normally refers to a premarital ceremony in which the bridegroom’s family fills the lap of the bride with auspicious presents, an action that expresses a wish for prosperity. Shrivastav remarks that Delhi hijras use this term in reference to the process of becoming a hijra, a semantic extension that again underscores the notion of the initiate as bride. In the case of the hijras, the wish for prosperity involves disciples, not sons, but the parallel is clear: The prosperous hijra will “give birth” to as many disciples as possible, who will in turn carry on the lineage by giving their guru granddisciples and greatgranddisciples.

Indeed, Banaras hijras refer to a prosperous disciple as a murg ‘cock’, a term that not only underscores the hijras’ identification with the goddess Bahucara Mata, who rides a murg as her vehicle, but also points to the disciple’s indispensable position as progenitor of future generations. This point is made clear by Sulekha in excerpt (3), when she describes the animosity that would result if a guru of one house was to take over the murg of another house without proper permission:

(3) S: apas mē sambandh mē rahatā hai. (1.0) ab koi jvar-par jātā hai, jaise ham-uske uske mē ke hijra āsre go mē caṇā jayeγa. āsre ke hijra āske go mē caṇā jayeγa to apne mē jagadā hāri ko jātā hai. (0.5) ki ṣhamārā ko- hamārā ghar kā caṇā ko tum kūbh rakhy rakhā haiγ? (0.5) ṣhamāre ghar ke murg ko tum kūbh bādhi rakhā haiγ. (0.5) to iske liye apne mē hāri hoti jagadā sab- ve hijra ek jagah bāihārā ukā pāncāyitī kartā hai sab, ki us par rok bāgātā hai, ki ṣhamā ṣhamāre ghar ko naḥ kalā hai, to māt ghar kā naḥ kalāγ. (0.5) to māt bhikhe S: We have restrictions. If we have a fight, for example, if a hijra of one group moves to another group, or if a hijra of another group moves into that group, then of course there’ll be a quartet: “Why have you kept the caṇā ‘disciple’ of my house? Why did you tie down/take the murg ‘cock’ of our house?” For this reason, there are fights among us, quarrels—everything. All of the hijras sit down in one place and call a pāncāyit ‘council’. Then they set down restrictions, “You don’t have to destroy our house if I won’t destroy your house. I’ll die of hunger, when your house will be—when you’ll die of hunger too. If you take your caṇā—my caṇā today, then I’ll take your caṇā too. Our [house] will be increased too. For this reason, the hijras place restrictions on this kind of behavior.

The apparent contradiction in Sulekha’s use of feminine verbal address when quoting the speech of other hijras and a masculine term like murg in reference to the valued disciple is rectified only when the dual nature of the hijra as both bride and provider of subhāg is taken into consideration. As a potential husband (and alternatively mother-in-law) for a new hijra bride, the disciple is instrumental to the future of her guru’s lineage, and hence to her guru’s welfare in old age.

The understanding of the hijra initiate as procurator is also responsible for the designation of a newly castrated hijra as lāl in some communities (Singh 1982), a term used in standard Hindi for a new-born son as well as a precious ruby. Even though the hijras tend to use feminine address for the hijra who has undergone the emasculation operation, as I have discussed in greater detail in other articles (see Hall & O’Donovan 1996 in particular), it is the lāl ‘son’ and not the lālī ‘daughter’ that is valued in Hindi culture, specifically because of his ability to carry on the family name. So too with the hijra initiate, except that she will do so by conflating the roles of both mother and son. This conflation becomes strikingly apparent in a castration narrative recorded by Govind Singh (1982:21-30). The initiate Jamuna, after losing one of his testicles in a childhood accident, is ultimately left with no choice but to join the hijra community and go to the city of Agra for a castration operation. While participating in the ceremony at the home of Shahjahi (the hijra overseeing the operation), the hijras sing the words “ayā re ayā, hunārā lāl ayā, ayā re ayā, hunārā lāl āyā,” a phrase that translates into English as ‘He came, oh he came, our lāl came; he came, he came, our lāl came!’

This phrase reveals one of the most developed metaphorical extensions used in the hijra community, which is based on the equation of castration with rebirth. This equation has been conceptualized in the hijra community for at least 150 years; a number of early British officials writing on the hijras have noted the belief, among them R. D. Luard in 1836 (quoted in Preston 1987:374-375) and R. E. Enthoven in 1901.9 The hijra who comes into the community as a bride is transformed through this ceremony into a new-born hijra, with the detachment of her penis paralleling the cutting off of an umbilical cord. In effect, she is both mother and child, the baurī ‘bride’ and the lāl ‘newborn son’; and the terms used in a variety of linguistic and geographical communities for the emasculation ceremony reflect this idea. Selected terms expressing the notion of hijra rebirth are included in Table 3.
### KIRA HALL

**TABLE 1. Terms expressing the notion of hijra rebirth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Etymology or related terms</th>
<th>Meaning in community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nirvan:</td>
<td>Lowe (1983:37); Nanda</td>
<td>Bombay; South Indian city; village of Bombay; Baroda; Banaras</td>
<td>salvation; rebirth (derived from Old Persian ārman, ‘hermaphrodite’, ‘half-man half-woman’)</td>
<td>n., rite of emasculation; emasculation operation; n., one who has undergone the emasculation operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nirvan:</td>
<td>Nanda 1990:26-37; Yorke/ Prasad 1990; Hall 1993</td>
<td>Bombay; South Indian city; village of Bombay; Baroda; Banaras</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banī</td>
<td>Singh 1982:26</td>
<td>Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh; Banaras</td>
<td>gem, ruby; new-born son</td>
<td>n., the ‘reborn’ hijra (i.e., after castration operation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chhāte;</td>
<td>Mitra 1983 (from Salarke); Mehta 1945</td>
<td>Baroda and Indore; Gujarat</td>
<td>standard Hindi chhāti, a ceremony celebrated by both Hindus and Muslims that takes place on the sixth day after the birth of a child, in which the mother who has given birth comes out of the pollution chamber; the child is fed milk by another family member as a sign of acceptance</td>
<td>n., celebration that takes place on the sixth day after the castration operation, when the patient is bathed; “this is an occasion for meritment; the hijras assemble and eat a mixture of coarse wheat-flour, jaggery, and ghee” (Mitra 1983:24-25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suvāna</td>
<td>Vyas and Shingala 1987</td>
<td>Baroda</td>
<td>delivery of a child (?)</td>
<td>n., care for postoperative hijra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bānī</td>
<td>Singh 1982:26</td>
<td>Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>bride</td>
<td>n., the hijra about to undergo the emasculation operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>murg</td>
<td>Hall 1993</td>
<td>Banaras</td>
<td>cock</td>
<td>n., a valued disciple; a potentially prosperous disciple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dāi ma;</td>
<td>Nanda 1990:26; Singh 1982:25-26; Preston 1987:37 (reporting on early 19th century)</td>
<td>Umarward South Indian city; Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh; Pune</td>
<td>midwife</td>
<td>n., the hijra who conducts the emasculation operation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### LEXICAL SUBVERSION IN THE HIJRA COMMUNITY

The most commonly reported term for the emasculation operation, as well as for the hijra who has undergone the operation, is nirvāṇa ‘salvation’, the use of which is identified by Serena Nanda (1990:26-37) in her research in South India, by Sunaina Lowe (1983:37) in her account of the hijras in Bombay, and by Michael Yorke and Aruna Har Prasad (1990) in their documentary on the hijras in Bombay and Gujarat. The fact that the hijra who performs the operation is referred to as dāi, a term that means ‘midwife’ in standard Hindi, again points to the metaphor of castration as birth, only that the hijra midwife severs the newborn not from the umbilical cord but from the penis. The conceptualization of the hijra doctor as dāi was evident even in the 1830s; Lawrence W. Preston (1987) reports on a number of letters written in 1836 by the Subcollector of Pune that offered this and other “birth” details of the initiation rite: “All the reported life histories point to the conclusion that castration was a ceremonial occasion marking the transition from one state of life to another. Although not wishing to belabour this point without possessing much independent testimony of the hijfās themselves, it is surely significant that the senior of the community who performed the operation was called the dāi, literally midwife” (374-75).

Moreover, Nirmal Mitra (1983) and Sumant Mehta (1945) report that chhāti is celebrated on the sixth day after the operation, a ceremony performed in mainstream culture on the sixth day after childbirth. With this lexical extension, the conflation of the hijra as both mother and child comes full circle. The hijra, as the initiator of her own childbirth, is bathed to symbolize her own exit from the pollution chamber; as a newborn child, she is fed not milk but wheat-flour, jaggery, and ghee, foods thought to increase potency and normally given to a new mother in postdelivery confinement. M. D. Vyas and Yogesh Shingala (1987:91) report that the hijras they studied give the castrated hijra a new name on this day as well, an activity consistent with the local Muslim custom of naming a newborn child on the sixth day after birth. As with the designation of the hijra doctor as dāi, the celebration of chhāti has been a hijra tradition for a number of generations, its realization noted as early as 1922 by Enthoven.

In sum, then, the hijra enters the hijra community as a bride to her guru, who acts symbolically as both husband and mother-in-law. Through the castration ceremony, the hijra is transformed into a newborn child, yet despite the fact that this transformation wins her a more consistent use of feminine address, she is designated referentially as ‘son’ instead of ‘daughter’ because it is the son, not the daughter, who is valued in the larger culture as the progenitor of future generations. Through these kinds of lexical extensions, the hijras affect the customs of heterosexual society while at the same time recognizing their own illegitimacy within it.

**NOTES**

1. The correct English spelling for the Hindi फर्र, according to the transliteration conventions adopted throughout the remainder of this chapter, would be hijra; I have chosen to use the spelling "hijra" throughout this work for consistency.
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hijar, however, for easier reading. (Throughout this chapter, I use the transliteration system adopted by Snell & Weightman 1989:7)

2. The transcription conventions I have used in the transliterated Hindi passages are adapted from Atkinson and Heritage 1984: ix-xvi; they include the notable additions of a superscripted $f$ or $m$ to designate feminine and masculine morphological marking. Other transcription conventions include the following:

- ( ) double parentheses enclose nonverbal movements and extralinguistic commentary
- ( ) single parentheses enclose words which are not clearly audible (i.e., best guesses)
- [ ] brackets enclose words added to clarify the meaning of the text
- ____ bold indicates syllabic stress
- CAPS small caps indicate louder or shouted talk
- : a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound (the more colons, the longer the sound)
- , a comma indicates continuing intonation
- ? a question mark indicates rising intonation at the end of a syllable or word
- ... deletion of some portion of the original text
- 'a" quotation marks enclose quoted or reported speech

(I have not used these same conventions in the English translations, since extralinguistic features like intonation and emphasis are not parallel.)

3. Freed (1963), in a study of kinship relations in the North Indian village Shanti Nagar, found that the use of kinship terms was extended to almost all members of the village, with the noted exception of recent immigrants. S. Vatuk (1990a) finds a similar situation occurring in an urban mohalla, in which most of the residents had established some kind of fictive kinship with the other residents.

4. This seems to be true of the urban residents in the newer mohallahs studied by Sylvia Vatuk, at any rate, whose living situation more closely approximates the hijras than that of the villagers studied by Freed. Vatuk explains: "An analysis of fictive kinship usages in the urban mohalla shows that there exists no internally consistent fictive genealogical system comparable to that described by Freed and recognized by urban residents to have existed in their home village" (1990a: 255). For a more general discussion on Hindi kinship terminology, see S. Vatuk (1996b).

5. Early reports of the hijras affected kinship system include a brief comment made by Ibbetson, MacLagan, and H. A. Rose in their entry on the "hijra." "The eunuchs of the Punjab have divided the Province into regular beats from which bart or dials are collected. Panipat contains a typical Hijra fraternity. In that town they live in a palla house in the street of the Muhammadan Bawls and, though retaining men's names, dress like women and call one another by such names as masi, 'mother's sister', phuphi, 'aunt', and so on." (1911: 331).

6. I am grateful to Ved Prakash Vatuk (personal communication) for this insight.

7. Although Nanda (1990b) does not discuss the parallel with in-law relationships directly, she succinctly explains how the hijras' extended network promotes geographic mobility: These social networks are the foundation for the geographic mobility that is so characteristic in the hijra community, especially among its younger members, and so useful as an element of economic adaptation. This ever-expanding network of fictive kin permits a hijra to move from place to place, because it provides a welcoming environment and a base from which to earn a living wherever she goes" (1990: 47).

8. In his entry on the pavana (a synonym for hijra used primarily in Gujarat) for the Tribes and Castes of Bombay, Enthoven (1901: 227) explains: "Behind a screen set up for the purpose the

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cutting is performed with a razor by the person himself without any assistance. This is held to correspond to a birth ceremony which makes the patient a member of the caste."

**REFERENCES**


