

## 10 *Shifting gender positions among Hindi-speaking hijras*<sup>1</sup>

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I was disowned by the Hindus and shunned by my own wife. I was exploited by the Muslims who disdained my company. Indeed I was like a *hijda* who was neither one thing nor another but could be misused by everyone.

(Singh 1989: 55)

### Introduction

The *hijras* occupy a marginalized position in the Indian social matrix, as their ambiguous gender identity provokes conflicting feelings of awe and contempt. Discussed variously in the anthropological literature as 'transvestites', 'eunuchs', 'hermaphrodites', and even 'a third gender',<sup>2</sup> most of India's hijras were raised as boys before taking up residence in one of the many hijra communities which exist in almost every region of India. Since the late 1980s, several European and American cultural theorists (e.g. Nanda 1985, 1990, 1993, 1994, Bullough and Bullough 1993) have pointed to the visibility of the hijra in Indian society in order to suggest the cultural possibility of a more liberating, non-dichotomous organization of gender. Indeed, the hijras' livelihood is contingent upon their inextricable position in the social structure; according to tradition, they are expected to sing and dance at births and weddings, where they are rewarded with gifts of clothes, jewellery, and money.

Yet the life-stories of the Hindi-speaking hijras we interviewed in Banaras during the spring and summer of 1993 reflect a very different reality from that suggested by these theorists – a reality based on familial rejection, cultural isolation and societal neglect. When the hijra lifestyle is discussed with respect to this contemporary reality instead of historical or mythical representation,<sup>3</sup> their identification as a uniquely situated third sex becomes much more complicated. In their narratives, the hijras view themselves not simply as ‘neither man nor woman’, as the title of Nanda’s (1990) ethnography on the hijras in a south central Indian city suggests, but also as ‘deficiently’ masculine and ‘incompletely’ feminine. Instead of occupying a position outside the female–male binary, the hijras have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. It may be liberating to believe in the possibility of an alternative gender which is not limited by societal expectations, but even the hijra must create self-identity by resisting and subverting a very real and oppressive gender dichotomy – a dichotomy that becomes very apparent in the hijras’ own use of feminine- and masculine-marked speech.

Although a number of anthropologists have been interested enough in the hijras’ language use to comment on it secondarily in their descriptions of the hijra lifestyle, not one of them, to our knowledge, has attempted to analyse the hijras’ speech patterns from any sort of linguistic perspective. Lynton and Rajan remark that the Hindi-speaking hijras they spoke with in Hyderabad ‘use “he” and “she”, “him” and “her”, indiscriminately’ (1974: 192) – a misleading statement since gender is marked not on pronouns, but on verbs and adjectives.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Nanda, in the introduction to her ground-breaking work published almost two decades later, explains somewhat simplistically that ‘Indian languages have three kinds of gender pronouns: masculine, feminine, and a formal, gender-neutral form’ (1990: xviii). Nanda, an American anthropologist, interviewed hijras from a variety of different linguistic communities, her conversations mediated by translators in Gujarati, Hindi and Panjabi. But in defining all ‘Indian languages’ as having three kinds of gender pronouns, she makes an inaccurate generalization, especially since India hosts well over 2,000 languages and dialects within its borders, from a variety of language families.

While Nanda does acknowledge that hijras in some parts of India have ‘a specialized, feminized language, which consists of the

use of feminine expressions and intonations' (1990: 17),<sup>5</sup> she asserts that the hijras in the communities she studied alternate between feminine and masculine forms for no apparent reason:

Hijras, in their conversations, use these [gender pronouns] randomly and indiscriminately to refer to individual hijras. They insist, however, that people outside their community refer to hijras in the feminine gender. When I am quoting a hijra verbatim, I use the gender pronoun used by that speaker if it is masculine or feminine. If it is the gender-neutral pronoun, I have translated it as a feminine gender pronoun. When I am referring to a hijra, I use the feminine gender pronoun to conform to hijra norms, unless I am referring to the hijra in the past, when he considered himself a male. (1990: xviii)

But Nanda's observation that the hijras 'insist ... that people outside their community refer to hijras in the feminine gender' – a statement completely consistent with the attitudes of the Hindi-speaking hijras we spoke with in Banaras – would suggest that the use of morphological gender is a salient issue in the hijra community, one that comes to symbolize their own acceptance in the society at large. Our reason for criticizing previous synopses of linguistic gender in research on the hijras is not to dismiss such studies as invalid, but rather to illustrate how anthropological fieldwork can be enhanced by an increased awareness of, and attentiveness to, linguistic phenomena. Nanda's work in particular, as one of the first ethnographies to take the hijras' own life-stories as primary, is an essential contribution to anthropological research. Yet her study would have been even more informative had she approached the hijras' life narratives from a linguistic perspective as well as an anthropological one.

Although the four Hindi-speaking communities we spent time with in Banaras are isolated from one another both physically and ideologically, patterns of gesture and speech occur and recur. Constrained by a linguistic system which allows for only two morphological genders, Hindi-speaking hijras, when uttering phrases that are self-referential, must gender themselves as either feminine or masculine. Their use of language reflects a lifestyle that is constantly self-defining as they study, imitate and parody binary constructions of gender in an effort to gender themselves. In contrast to assertions made by previous researchers, we found that the hijras alternate between feminine and masculine reference for identifiable reasons. Because certain verbs, adjectives and postpositions in Hindi are marked for feminine and masculine gender, with

verbs showing gender marking on all three persons, the hijras' attempts at alternating constructions of female and male selves become apparent in quite basic choices of feminine and masculine verbal, adjectival and postpositional forms. Critically aware of the cultural meaning attributed to their own use of feminine as opposed to masculine markers, the hijras 'code-switch' between morphological genders in their daily interactions in order to express relations of solidarity and power.

## Vocal deviance

Indian and Pakistani sociologists and journalists often make discussions of language central to their exposure of the hijra lifestyle. Naqvi and Mujtaba, for instance, in their article on Urdu-speaking hijras in Pakistan, assert emphatically that 'hijras challenge the very order of language' (1992: 81). Switching arbitrarily between 'he', 'she', 'his', 'her', and 'he/she' when referring to individual hijras, the authors articulate the inability of both Urdu and English to capture the intersexed essence of the hijra:

In Urdu the entire cosmos is divided into the masculine and feminine genders; the hijras are neither and both. In English, a neuter gender exists, but the use of the adjective 'it' dehumanises the hijra, strips this being of his/her very humanity. And despite the proliferation in English of categorisations related to sexuality – eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, *et al.* – not one completely defines the hijra. What is the hijra? The masculine and the feminine are two distinct principles, each possessing its distinct mode of being. But the hijra combines traits peculiar to both genders and yet is neither quite one nor the other. (1992: 81–2)

Yet Naqvi and Mujtaba's desire to protect the 'humanity' of the hijras linguistically is not shared by many Indian authors writing in English, who use the masculine gender unyieldingly in reference to the hijras (e.g. Mehta 1945, Mukherjee 1980, Bobb and Patel 1982, Patel 1988) or, at the very best, a qualified 'she' in quotation marks (e.g. Sinha 1967, Sethi 1970, Srinivas 1976), often in order to expose what they perceive to be a deviant or unacceptable lifestyle.<sup>6</sup>

These same authors frequently question the hijras' claims to femininity by remarking on the inappropriateness of their vocal presentations. While a number of researchers have commented on the hijras' 'high-pitched' voice (Rao 1955: 521, Mukherjee 1980:

63, Pimpley and Sharma 1985: 41, Jani and Rosenberg 1990: 103), others have suggested that it is the voice itself that acts as the betrayer of their masculinity. The nature of this betrayal is overtly narrated by Sethi (1970: 40) in his journalistic exposure of the hijras in Bombay, which he opens by recalling his first interaction with a hijra named Kumari:

Her name was Kumari. She was about 17. She rested her face on the edge of the charpoy on which I sat, a round face with a soft expression, somewhat prematurely sensuous for her age. The eyes held an eloquent appeal. Clean hair, oiled and tied in a knot. 'Must take her photograph,' I thought. 'Would look unusual in the midst of all the squalor.'

I asked if she would pose for one. Kumari nodded assent with delightful eagerness, her eyes suddenly sparkling with anticipation. As she stood in the sun, I asked her to untie her hair.

And then came the shock.

'*Acchaji, khol deti hun!*' – a thick strong male voice.

Yes, 'she' was a *hijra* in a colony of *hijras*. When I went closer to make 'her' stand in a particular manner, I noticed that there wasn't so much girlishness, after all, particularly the flat chest! Yet so authentic was the appearance that I was still ready to believe it was a girl.

Kumari symbolized the tragedy of the hermaphrodite world – treated as subject of bawdy jest and laughter, shunned by most, misunderstood by all.

The 'shock' which Sethi identifies in this passage is the sudden sound of a 'thick strong male voice' projected from a body characterized by roundness, softness, sensuality and eloquence. The author's inability to reconcile this physical contradiction prompts him to qualify all subsequent feminine references to Kumari with quotation marks, ultimately summarizing 'her' interactive performance as symbolic of 'the tragedy of the hermaphrodite world'. Indeed, a photograph of Kumari on a subsequent page sports the caption, 'To look at, Kumari 17, is a girl – until you hear her speak in her thick male voice' (1970: 42).<sup>7</sup>

The same conflict between a feminine physical appearance and a masculine vocality prompts Mondal to argue that even though the hijras he studied in West Bengal wear feminine clothes and jewellery, their 'masculine voice' makes them not only 'objects of ridicule' but also recipients of 'a very painful and pathetic experience from the conventional social environment' (1989: 244).

Similarly, Mohan, in his discussion of recent political moves by the hijras of Uttar Pradesh, claims that 'no one would mistake [the hijras] for women' since 'their faces, their limbs, and their voices have a masculine roughness' (1979: i). And Sharma, in support of his declaration that the hijras, of all those who defy linguistic categorization, are 'the most interesting and outlandish freaks of nature' (1984: 381), focuses on the community's 'ambivalent physical appearance'. Opening his article with the observation that 'certainly every society gives linguistic notice of the differential parts individuals are expected to play', he notes a marked exception in the case of 'individuals who do not belong to either sex' (p. 381). In Sharma's opinion, the fact that the hijras 'shave, smoke, and talk like men but dress and behave in a more feminine way in the society at large' (p. 381) points to their ambiguous status not only in the social structure, but in the linguistic gender system as well.

What is significant about Sethi's narrative, however, is that even though the author is critical of Kumari's masculine-sounding voice, he reports her speech entirely in the first-person feminine. After asking Kumari to let her hair down for a photograph, he quotes her as saying in Hindi, '*Acchaji, khol deti hun!*' – a response which translates into English as, 'Okay sir, I'll untie it.' But by employing the feminine-marked *khol detī* <sup>f</sup> *hū* instead of the masculine *khol detā* <sup>m</sup> *hū*,<sup>8</sup> Kumari identifies herself linguistically within the passage as female. Perhaps noticing similar employments of feminine self-reference among hijras in other communities, a number of scholars working with speakers of gendered Indo-Aryan languages have remarked that the hijras 'affect female speech and manners' (e.g. Patel 1983: 121) and 'become adept in feminine speech patterns and gait' (e.g. Mukherjee 1980: 61). The precise meaning of such statements is unclear, yet one thing is certain: the authors remain unconvinced of the hijra's ability to achieve fluency in such patterns. Jani and Rosenberg, displeased with the performances of the Hindi-speakers they interviewed in western India, comment on the hijras' 'largely exaggerated female mannerisms and gesturing' (1990: 103), and Patel, in his work among the hijras in Gujarat, argues that 'in spite of their efforts to look and act like females, their behavior is neither completely masculine nor feminine' (1983: 121).

Such criticism underscores a larger societal refusal to accept the hijras' femininity as genuine, and an accompanying disapproval of

what is perceived to be a 'superficially' feminine lifestyle. Mehta, reporting on the *pavaiyās* (a term he uses in reference to 'castrated eunuchs') in Gujarat, sets the stage for future research when he identifies the hijras' verbal femininity as 'bad imitations', 'ghastly mimicry' and 'caricature':

In the amateur and professional theatrical plays in Gujarat (and probably throughout India), many boys take the part of girls or women and they imitate the gait and gestures of women. As a rule, their attempt is a failure because they overact. Similarly the Pavaiyā's gait and gestures are bad imitations of the feminine gait and gestures. Their features are masculine, their limbs have a masculine shape, their hips are masculine, their voice and shape of the neck (Adam's Apple) are masculine, the chest and the gait are masculine. (1945: 44)

The speech and manners of Pavaiyās are said to be like those of women. I entirely disagree with this statement. Most of them have a male voice. Their gait is that of a man because of the shape of their pelvis, but Pavaiyās try to imitate the gait of a woman, and I would say that their gait, speech, and mannerisms are a ghastly mimicry or caricature. (1945: 47)

Mehta's equivalence of the hijras' behaviour with a theatrical performance is a revealing simile. While acknowledging the creative nature of the hijra's gait, speech and mannerisms by designating them as a kind of performance, Mehta simultaneously reduces these performances to a prescribed role-playing, thereby denying his social actors any 'essential' femininity. In the folk-dramas mentioned by Mehta, which most likely approximate what is currently referred to in Hindi as *sāṅg* (travelling dramas predominantly performed in rural areas) or *nautankī* (travelling dramas predominantly performed in urban areas), women's roles are frequently played by young boys, whose higher voices and smaller statures make them more suitable than older men to the performance of female characters.<sup>9</sup>

The connection between linguistic performance and effeminate behaviour is made explicit by Sinha in his psychological analysis of why a child might decide to join the hijra community. Sinha, who notes that over 20 per cent of the hijras he studied had performed *nautankī* in childhood, understands divergent linguistic behaviour to be a precursor to divergent sexuality. Sinha has definitive ideas of what kinds of behaviours constitute femininity and what kinds masculinity, not the least of which are linguistic in nature:

Such boys, due to constant impersonation of women and their habits, adopt quite a good amount of effeminate characteristics in their mannerism and habits ... [O]nce a boy has shown tendencies of girlish habits, effeminacy, and is initiated to homo-sexuality, under suitable circumstances and the 'right' kind of environment, the process of Sexual Inversion begins and there are chances of his ending up as a Hijra. (1967: 175)

Sinha continues this passage by overtly advising parents to keep a strict watch on their child's mannerisms and to correct any noted linguistic oddities: if necessary, parents should send their sons to the 'right type' of school, where they will be forced to interact with other boys, read boys' books, and engage in boys' games. Poorer children, according to Sinha, are particularly susceptible to effeminate behaviours, because their uneducated parents not only fail to realize 'the gravity of the situation' (p. 170), but also lack the money needed to finance corrective procedures.

A comparable opinion is voiced more recently by Patel, who lists 'speech' as one of several areas where a child might deviate from the 'sex-roles, norms, and values' expected of men in Indian society (1988: 73). Like Sinha, Patel lists what he calls 'changing speech' as one of the stepping-stones to girlishness. In his opinion, a young boy who has suffered repeated taunts of *baiylo* ['girlish'] from his peers will ultimately be left with no other choice but to abandon the world of men and women for the hijra community. The notion of vocal deviance, then, although defined rather vaguely in the above articles, is clearly an important concept in the minds of these researchers. The hijra's inability to produce an accurate feminine vocality (as in Sethi's narrative when Kumari speaks in a low, coarse voice), as well as an accurate masculine vocality (as in Sinha's and Patel's discussions of the hijra as an effeminate-sounding boy), symbolizes her own inability to exist in a gendered world.

## Gender marking in Hindi

The dissatisfaction articulated by South Asian researchers with respect to the hijras' vocal patterns may have much to do with the fact that many hijras alternate between feminine and masculine self-reference in order to convey certain social meanings. Such gender shifts are particularly evident among the Hindi-speaking hijras we interviewed in Banaras, who have at their disposal a linguistic playground of verbs, adjectives and postpositions awaiting feminine or masculine morphological marking. The alternation



between feminine and masculine self-reference in Hindi is quite easy to discern linguistically. The past tense of the verb *honā* ['to be'], for instance (Table 10.1), is realized as *thā* with masculine singular subjects, *the* with masculine plural subjects, *thī* with feminine singular subjects, and *thī* with feminine plural subjects:

Table 10.1 Past tense forms of *honā* ['to be']

	Masculine	Feminine	English translation
Sg. 1	<i>maī thā</i>	<i>maī thī</i>	I was
Sg. 2	<i>tū thā</i>	<i>tū thī</i>	you (intimate) were
Sg. 3	<i>vah thā</i>	<i>vah thī</i>	she/he was
Pl. 1	<i>ham the</i>	<i>ham thī</i>	we were
Pl. 2	<i>tum the</i>	<i>tum thī</i>	you (familiar) were
Pl. 3	<i>ve the, āp the</i>	<i>ve thī, āp thī</i>	they were, you (formal) were

The habitual, progressive, and intransitive perfective verb forms in Hindi similarly show gender concord with the subject. These three aspectual tenses are formed by the addition of suffixes and verbal auxiliaries to the verb stem: aspect is indicated through the addition of explicit markers of various kinds to the stem; tense is indicated through the presence of one of the basic forms of *honā* ['to be'] (i.e. present, past, presumptive, subjunctive). Again, the appearance of one of the vowels *-ā*, *-e*, *-ī* or *-ī* signals the number (singular vs plural) and gender (feminine vs masculine) of the subject of the verb. Selected examples of Hindi verbal agreement are included in Table 10.2.

Inflecting adjectives also agree with the nouns they modify in gender, number, and case, with *-ā* or *-e* agreeing with masculine nouns and *-ī* with feminine nouns. That is, masculine forms of inflecting adjectives end in *-ā* in the singular direct and *-e* in the singular oblique, plural direct and plural oblique cases; the feminine forms always end in *-ī*, whether singular or plural, direct or oblique. Moreover, inflecting postpositions agree with the gender of the head noun, so that, for example, the postposition translated into English as 'of' will appear as *kā* when modifying a singular masculine noun, *ke* when modifying a plural masculine noun, and *kī* when modifying a singular or plural feminine noun. The hijras' varied use of these forms, as well as their varied use of first-, second- and third-person verbal forms, reflects a unique dual-gender

Table 10.2 Selected examples of first person verbal marking with *jānā* ['to go']

Verb tense	1st person masculine	1st person feminine	English translation
Future	<i>maī jāũgā</i>	<i>maī jāũgī</i>	I will go
Past	<i>maī gayā</i>	<i>maī gayī</i>	I went
Present Habitual	<i>maī jātā hũ</i>	<i>maī jātī hũ</i>	I go
Past Habitual	<i>maī jātā thā</i>	<i>maī jātī thī</i>	I used to go
Present Progressive	<i>maī jā rahā hũ</i>	<i>maī jā rahī hũ</i>	I am going
Past Progressive	<i>maī jā rahā thā</i>	<i>maī jā rahī thī</i>	I was going
Simple Perfective	<i>maī gayā</i>	<i>maī gayī</i>	I went
Present Perfective	<i>maī gayā hũ</i>	<i>maī gayī hũ</i>	I have gone
Past Perfective	<i>maī gayā thā</i>	<i>maī gayī thī</i>	I had gone

position in a society that views them as neither fully feminine nor fully masculine.<sup>10</sup>

### 'Women's speech' and the notion of *ādat* ['habit']

Most of the hijras we spoke with related tragic stories from their youth, explaining how friends and family ostracized and evicted them from their own households. Whether this ostracism is precipitated by actual anatomical difference or by some sort of effeminate behaviour is unclear from the hijras' narratives, and they apparently feel a political imperative to insist that the designation is entirely physical. Although a number of Indian researchers (e.g. G. Singh 1982, Mitra 1983, Sayani 1986, Sharma 1989, Jani and Rosenberg 1990) have worked to dispel the cultural assumption that hijras are born as hermaphrodites, reporting in-depth about the life-threatening castrations and penectomies that hijras endure, a large portion of Indian society nevertheless believes that all hijras were born with ambiguous sex organs. This belief originates from a rather unyielding cultural connection of gender identity with anatomical appearance, a connection which overtly contradicts Jacobs and Cromwell's assumption that 'in societies that recognize [alternative-sex] variations within their culture, anatomy is *not* destiny in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender' (1992: 57). In fact, hijras have been performing such operations voluntarily within their communities for well over a century (cf. Ebden 1856, Davidson 1884, Faridi 1899), to such an extent that more than 75

per cent of the hijras living in India today have undergone genital surgery – according to the 1990 BBC documentary *Eunuchs: India's Third Gender* (Yorke and Prasad 1990), as well as to one of the more outspoken hijras we interviewed in Banaras.<sup>11</sup>

The hijras have organized their lives in resistance to a social structure that prevents their integration. Their marginalization often begins at a very early age when family members, neighbours, and peers respond negatively to their presence. Sulekha,<sup>12</sup> a 38-year-old hijra who lives with a male partner in a small village outside of Banaras, spoke with great sadness about her childhood, when she was informed because of physical reasons that she was a hijra. The child of a *halvāī*, or 'sweet-maker', Sulekha spoke proudly of her family and regularly alluded to their high social status as Kanya-Kubja Brahmans. Yet when only 7 years old, she was forced to realize that, in the eyes of Indian society, her existence as a gendered being was questionable, if not reprehensible. She recalls a particular moment when she realized that she was different from her peers, for neither boys nor girls would let her into their play-group:

- (1) There were a few boys at my school who I used to study with. When I sat with them, they used to tell me that I was a hijra. Then they started telling other people, 'This is a hijra! This is a hijra! Don't sit near him! Sit separately!' If I sat with the girls, the girls would say, 'This is a hijra! This is a hijra! Don't sit near him! Sit separately!' So I felt very ashamed. I thought, 'How is it that I've become a hijra? The girls don't talk to me; the boys don't talk to me. What terrible thing has happened to me?' I wanted to go and play with them, but nobody wanted to play with me. So life was going like that. Nobody would help me.

When we responded to her description of this incident by asking if there was anyone who had tried to help her, she replied, 'Who would ever help me with a problem like this one?'

Sulekha's realization that she was unsuitable for either boyhood or girlhood hardly made her feel like a mystical third sex; on the contrary, she explains that her family was so disapproving that she ultimately had no other choice but to leave home:

- (2) What could the members of my family think, after all? They didn't think anything. Or they thought, 'Oh! What has he become? He became a hijra! Why doesn't he just die! Oh, why doesn't he just go away! Oh, the name of his father and mother has been

doomed!' It became a house of dishonour. They said, 'How can his life go on? It would have been better if he had just died!' I used to listen to all of that, and finally I just ran away.

The harsh response of Sulekha's parents, as well as her neighbours who taunted her with the designation *nacaniyā* ['little dancer'], reflects a pervasive 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, has led many parents to ask local hijra communities to take their child away from them.

Because the majority of hijras are raised as boys, they must learn how to perform a new gender identity when they join the hijra community – an identity which distances itself from masculine representations in its appropriation of feminine dress, social roles, gesture and language. Again, the rigidity of this socialization process has not been lost on South Asian scholars. Sharma, for instance, identifies not only how the hijras 'legitimiz[e] the normative order of the home', but also how they teach new recruits their mannerisms. After outlining the hierarchical nature of the hijras' affected kinship systems, Sharma focuses on the 'strictness' of the socialization process:

The family head's responsibilities consist of socialization of the eunuchs, giving continuity to the home by way of recruitment of new members. The socialization, besides legitimizing the normative order of the home, also consists of teaching dancing, clapping, begging, and passing of sexual overtures. The head of the family passes on strict instructions to the inmates of the home regarding their behaviour pattern. Love and affection are the two major allurements which add to the process of proper socialization. ... These tactics, however, do not rule out the use of strictest method, such as beatings etc., on the young eunuchs. (1984: 385)

While the acquirement of feminine speech is not necessarily central to Sharma's discussion, Sinha goes so far as to base his definition of the hijra on this very acquisition. Distinguishing between *jankhas* ['new entrants to the fraternity'] and *hijras* ['full members of the social group or fraternity of a hijra'], he explains that while the former will always wear masculine dress and refer to themselves in the masculine, the latter will always wear feminine dress and refer to themselves in the feminine (1967: 169). If we accept Sharma's and Sinha's observations as valid, we must also entertain

the suggestion that the Hindi-speaking hijra, at some point in her socialization process, makes a conscious shift from masculine to feminine self-reference – a shift alluded to by Pimpley and Sharma when they claim that the hijras are ‘exhorted to adopt an exaggeratedly feminine mode of attire, gait, speech, gestures, and facial expressions’ (1985: 43).

These adoptions often become self-conscious emblems of gender construction in the hijras’ narratives. Indeed, Sulekha views gender as something to be put on in the way one would put on a *sārī* (a dress traditionally worn by Indian women), an investiture which eventually leads to the acquisition of what she calls ‘*aurat kī bāt*’ [‘women’s speech’]:

- (3) Now that I’ve put on this *sārī*, I have to follow through with it. If I went along considering myself a man, what would be the use of wearing a woman’s *sārī*? Now that I’ve worn *sārīs*, I’ve worn blouses, I’ve grown out my hair, and I’ve pierced my ears, I’ve become a woman so I have to live like a woman. ... When hijras come to the community, when they know all about themselves, they start to dance and sing and everything falls into place. Whoever feels right in his heart becomes a hijra. Whoever doesn’t feel right in his heart won’t become a hijra. It’s not like, ‘Oh, when I’m a hijra I’ve become a woman and when I’m not a hijra I haven’t become a woman.’ It’s not like that. She’s put on a *sārī*, she’s entered the society of the hijras, so her language will become that of a woman’s. Finally, she has become a hijra.

In this passage, Sulekha offers her own understanding of the socialization process, one that affirms Sinha’s claim that feminine self-reference is a prerequisite to a complete hijra identity. The stepping stones to hijrahood, in Sulekha’s opinion, are clearly delineated: first, the initiate wears a sari; second, she joins a hijra community; and third, her language changes to the feminine.

Yet her language is not so invariably feminine as the above excerpt might suggest. Sulekha continues her discussion by explaining that when she looks like a woman, she correspondingly walks, laughs and talks like one, employing feminine-marked verb forms like those mentioned in excerpt (4) below, among them *khātī hū* [‘I eat<sup>f</sup>’] and *jātī hū* [‘I go<sup>f</sup>’]. Alternatively, if she were to wear a *kurtā* or *luṅgī*, a shirt and cloth-wrap traditionally worn by north Indian Muslim men, she would speak as a man, employing masculine-marked verb forms like *khātā<sup>m</sup> hū* [‘I eat<sup>m</sup>’] and *jātā<sup>m</sup> hū* [‘I go<sup>m</sup>’]<sup>13</sup>:

(4) S:

ādmī kā bāt karnā hogā, to maī sārī pahan nahī lūgī<sup>f</sup>, (0.5) jab sārī pahan lūgī<sup>f</sup>, ham mē se to aurat kā bāt hogā, - jab sārī \*nahī pahan lūgī<sup>f</sup>, tab mard kā bāt. (0.5) hā. (1.5) jaise maī luṅgī kurtā pahan lūgī<sup>f</sup>, - tab 'khātā<sup>m</sup> hū', 'jatā<sup>m</sup> hū', hote hai. ... kuch pareśānī nahī hotī hai. - sārī pahankar aurat vālā boltī<sup>f</sup> hū, 'khātī<sup>f</sup> hū', 'jātī<sup>f</sup> hū'. - kuch nahī diqqat hotī hai, ... to jo jāntā hai to jāntā hī hai na? - to jāntā hī hai, (1.0) ki hijrā hai. (1.0) abhī sārī pahan liyā abhī luṅgī kurtā pahan liyā to mard kī tarah mardānā ho gayā.

S:

If I have to use men's speech, I won't wear<sup>f</sup> a *sārī*. When I wear<sup>f</sup> a *sārī*, I'll of course use women's speech; when I \*don't wear<sup>f</sup> a *sārī*, then [I'll use] men's speech. For example, if I wear<sup>f</sup> a *luṅgī-kurtā*, then it's like, 'I eat<sup>m</sup>', 'I go<sup>m</sup>'. ... It's not a problem. When I wear a *sārī*, I speak<sup>f</sup> like a woman, 'I eat<sup>f</sup>', 'I go<sup>f</sup>'. It's not difficult at all. ... Whoever knows would surely know, right? He would surely know that [a person talking like this] is a hijra. First I put on a *sārī* but then I put on a *luṅgī-kurtā*, so [my conversation] became *mardānā* ['manly'] like a man.

Sulekha's clearly pronounced understanding of 'women's speech' (i.e. *zanānā bolī*) and 'men's speech' (i.e. *mardānā bolī*) as two mutually exclusive styles of dress, worn at non-intersecting times in order to enhance the performance of a gender role, points to a heightened awareness of the social meanings associated with the use of gendered speech. In Sulekha's opinion, a speaker will be identified as a hijra precisely because of this versatility, her alternations of femininity and masculinity signalling to outsiders that she is allied with neither camp.

Even though Sulekha describes feminine speech as a spontaneous activity which merely coincides with the decision to wear a *sārī*, she also details the difficulty involved in acquiring it. In particular, she describes a kind of second-language acquisition process that initiates must undergo after entering the community, a process guided and inspired by the behaviour of older community members:

(5) S:

uskā eksān badlā rahtā hai. (0.5) jo pahle pahle āyegā<sup>m</sup> na? - to uskā ādmī kā svabhāv rahegā, (1.0) is tarah bāt ho jāyegā, (1.0) kabhī ādmī kā bāt ho jāyegā, (2.5) tab hijre mē jab ā jāyegā<sup>m</sup> to rahegā<sup>m</sup>, - to dekhegā<sup>m</sup>, ki 'are maī- sab baṛī<sup>f</sup> ādmī<sup>m</sup> hai,' (1.5) ((whispering)) is tarah baiṭhī<sup>f</sup> hai to tarah baiṭhegā<sup>m</sup>- is tarah khātī<sup>f</sup> hai to is tarah khāyegā<sup>m</sup>.

S:

His/her actions remain changed. When someone first comes<sup>m</sup> here, you know, his/her nature will remain like that of a man's, so that's how his/her conversation will be. Sometimes it will be just like a man's conversation. But when he joins<sup>m</sup> the hijras and lives<sup>m</sup> among them, he'll see<sup>m</sup> [how they act], 'Hey! I- look at me. They're all senior<sup>f</sup> people<sup>m</sup>.' ((whispering)) She sits<sup>f</sup> like this, so he'll sit<sup>m</sup> in the same way. She eats<sup>f</sup> like this, so he'll eat<sup>m</sup> in the same way.

Like Sinha, Sulekha makes a linguistic distinction between newly joined hijras, referring to them throughout the passage in the masculine singular, and the more experienced hijra veterans, identifying them as feminine. This distinction becomes particularly clear when she reports the initiate's surprise at discovering that the older community members behave somewhat differently, and illuminates this disparity by referring to the initiate in the masculine but to his superiors in the feminine: 'She sits<sup>f</sup> like this, so he'll sit<sup>m</sup> in the same way. She eats<sup>f</sup> like this, so he'll eat<sup>m</sup> in the same way.'

Central to the hijras' discussions of feminine-language acquisition is the notion of *ādat*, or 'habit'. The hijras' repeated use of this term invites an interesting extension of Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus*, since speakers develop strategies for expression at an accelerated pace in this alternatively defined linguistic marketplace. The use of feminine speech in the hijra community is in many ways synonymous with the projection of a non-masculine identity, and there is a high value placed on its production. Through an intensive immersion in what Bourdieu would call 'positive and negative reinforcements' (1977: 654), the hijras quickly 'acquire durable dispositions' towards those behaviours deemed appropriate by community members, building them into their own linguistic repertoire. In the following excerpt, Sulekha explains how initiates are reprimanded for the use of masculine speech, physically as well as verbally:

(6) S:  
sikhāyā nahī jātā hai. - anubhav ho jātā hai. - dekhkar ke, - koi baccā to nahī hai, usko sikhlayā jāyegā. ... kaise kar rahe hai, - 'is tarah hamko bhī karnā cāhiye. - nahī karēge to hijrā log hamko hansegā.' - to kahegā ki 'are baṛī kudharīgā<sup>m</sup> hai, baṛī battamiz hai.' ((laughs)) hā. 'apne man se kah rahā<sup>m</sup> hai bhosrī vālā<sup>m</sup>' ((laughs)) sab mārne uṭh jātā hai cappel se. ((3.0)) hā. (5.0) dekhthe dekhthe ādat paṛ jātā hai, - tab vaisā svabhāv ho jātā hai.

S:  
It's not taught. It's experienced, by watching. After all, he's not a child who needs to be taught. ... [The new hijra will say,] 'I should also act just like they're acting. If I don't, hijra people will laugh at me.' [The hijra people] will say, 'Oh, he's very<sup>f</sup> ill-mannered<sup>m</sup>! He's very<sup>f</sup> ill-behaved.' ((laughs)) Yes! 'He's just saying<sup>m</sup> whatever comes to mind, the *bhosrī vālā<sup>m</sup>* ['vagina-owner']!' ((laughs)) Then everybody will get up to beat him with their sandals. ((laughs)) Really! So gradually, after watching for a long time, it becomes a habit. Then it just becomes his nature.

Her claim that 'gradually, after watching for a long time, it becomes a habit' (*dekhthe dekhthe ādat paṛ jātā hai*) points to the

interactive nature of the learning process; the *kuḍhaṅgā* or *bat-tamīz* initiate (which translate into English as 'ill-mannered' and 'ill-behaved', respectively) is punished for acting without forethought, his behaviour rebuked through the utterance of a *gālī* ['obscenity'] or the slap of a sandal. The older hijras' employment of the masculine curse *bhosrī vālā*<sup>m</sup> ['vagina-owner'] is particularly telling in this respect, as it reflects their dissatisfaction with the initiate's attempts at discursive femininity. The term *bhosrī vālā*, when used among non-hijras, is generally used between men and implies that the referent, although male, has somehow been demasculinized.<sup>14</sup> When used among hijras, the insult lies not in the accusation of demasculation, since the very definition of *hijrā* depends on the notion of impotence, but in the suggestion of maleness.

The acquisition of a feminine persona is not an easy transition for all hijras, nor is the female/male gender construction as clearly delineated for everyone as it is for Sulekha in her narratives. Rupa, a hijra associated with one of the hijra communities in Banaras, wrestles with the symbolic import of feminine and masculine speech in her everyday interactions. Unlike the other hijras we interviewed, Rupa leads a quiet and secluded life away from her group, seeing her fellow hijras only during their daily song and dance performances. In the home she shares with a small family, she dresses and speaks as a man so that her housemates will feel comfortable with her presence, her femininity visible only in her topknot, earrings, nose ring and understated eye make-up. Rupa spent the first 18 years of her life as a boy, yet never felt wholly comfortable with this role; ultimately, she decided to move to Banaras and adopt the hijra lifestyle. Since she spent most of her boyhood adhering to male roles and representations, this transition was not an easy or fluid one. She explains in excerpt (7) that the acquisition of women's speech in particular was a long and laborious process, so much so that it eventually interfered with her status in the hijra community.

(7) R:

ghar mẽ, to - mardānā rahate<sup>m</sup> the<sup>m</sup>, to  
mardānā bolī bolte-bolte<sup>m</sup> haī. jab hijre  
ko jānā partā hai to parivartan karnā  
partā hai. ... vahī to bolā, na beṭā?<sup>15</sup> -  
jab ghar se cale<sup>m</sup>, - jab ghar se āye<sup>m</sup>, to  
ghar kī bolī mardānā to mẽ, to mardānā  
bolī bolā<sup>m</sup>. (3.0) bhaivā<sup>m</sup> ko 'bhaivā<sup>m</sup>'

R:

They were<sup>m</sup> living<sup>m</sup> in a *mardānā*  
['manly'] way at home, so they're always  
speaking<sup>m</sup> *mardānā* speech. When a  
hijra has to leave [home], s/he has to  
make a change. ... That's exactly what I  
told you, right dear?<sup>15</sup> When I left<sup>m</sup>  
home- when I came<sup>m</sup> from home, the



bol rahe<sup>m</sup> hai, - cācā<sup>m</sup> ko 'cācā<sup>m</sup>' bol  
rahe<sup>m</sup> hai, - aise bol rahe<sup>m</sup> hai. (2.0) to  
usko parivartan karne mē to tām lagta hī  
hai. (2.0) to usko parivartan karne mē tām  
lagta hai. - bolte-bolte bolte-bolte, ādat  
ho gayī (1.5) sat-chah mahīne mē.

speech I used at home was *mardānā*  
speech, so I of course spoke<sup>m</sup> men's  
speech. [At home] they're all calling<sup>m</sup>  
their *bhaiyā<sup>m</sup>* ['brothers'] '*bhāiyā<sup>m</sup>*'.  
They're calling<sup>m</sup> their *cācā<sup>m</sup>* ['paternal  
uncles'] '*cācā<sup>m</sup>*'. They're speaking<sup>m</sup> like  
that. So it does take time to change from  
that to this. It takes time to make a  
change. But gradually, after speaking and  
speaking continuously, it became a habit.  
In about six or seven months.

in about

Rupa's transition from what she refers to as *mardānā* ['manly'] speech to a more feminine variety was a highly conscious process, one that required several months of practice – or in Rupa's own words *bolte-bolte bolte-bolte* ['speaking and speaking continuously'] before it *ādat ho gayī* ['became a habit']. Like Sulekha, Rupa is aware of the social meanings attached to her language use, so much so that she hides her feminine speech while at home with her landlord's family. In contrast to Sulekha, who primarily refers to herself in the first-person feminine, Rupa consistently employs the masculine first-person plural when in her home, as in the previous passage when she uses masculine-marked verbs like *cale<sup>m</sup>* ['left'] and *āye<sup>m</sup>* ['came']. Yet throughout her conversations with us, Rupa also emphasized how necessary it is for hijras to achieve fluency in women's speech, since group members 'always and only speak as women when together'. This necessity, precipitated by a community desire to distance itself from masculine representation, has encouraged a kind of gendered bilingualism among the hijras. When asked how she became so adept at switching back and forth between these linguistic realms, Rupa again attributed her proficiency to *ādat* ['habit']: 'Gradually, after leading this life,' she explains, 'you just get used to it' (*rahate-rahate ādat par jātā hai*).

## Feminine solidarity and masculine power

Sulekha almost always spoke in the first-person feminine in her conversations with us, but she insisted that her choice of linguistic gender is variable, and moreover, that this choice is dependent on the context of the interaction. It is when she talks with a man, she elaborates, that she speaks softly and uses polite forms of the imperative. This style of speaking is at odds with the self she presents when she cooks breakfast or dinner in the kitchen, an activity

which prompts her to chat casually with other hijras and neighbourhood women in feminine speech, using intimate and familiar forms of the imperative. Sulekha's choice of language, then, is contingent not only upon the social role she is performing at the moment, but also upon the addressee, whose gender calls for an appropriate level of politeness. She is highly aware of the fact that her pragmatics change with the gender of the hearer, explaining in excerpt (8) that when she converses with a woman she speaks as a woman; when she converses with a man she speaks as a man:

(8) S:

mujh ko koī bāt nahī rahatā hai, māī aurāt jaisī boltī hū, - ādmī se ādmī jaisā bāt kartī hū, - jo jaisā miltā hai us se bāt kartī hū, ... jaise ab ham- hai na? - ab- ab- aurātō mē hai, (0.5) to - aurāt ā gayī to aurāt vālā hī bolūgī, 'didī bahan' kahūgī. - ādmī ā jātā hai to ((softly)) 'kyā khātē hai. (1.0) kyā bāt hai āpko. (1.0) kyā kām hai.'

S:

It's just not a big deal to me. [Normally] I speak<sup>f</sup> like a woman, [but] with a man I speak<sup>f</sup> like a man. I use<sup>f</sup> the same speech as the person I meet. ... For example, take my case, okay? Now- now- if I'm socializing with women and another woman comes by, I'll just speak<sup>f</sup> like a woman. I'll say, 'Didī! Bahan!' If a man comes by [I'll say] ((softly)), 'What are you eating? What's the matter, sir? What brings you here?'

Towards the end of the passage, however, it becomes clear that when Sulekha claims, 'I use the same speech as the person I meet', she actually means that she makes her speech correspond to the level of familiarity she feels with the addressee. Her insistence that she uses familiar address terminology with women but the respectful *āp* ['you'] and third-person plural verb form with men suggests that she sees 'women's speech' and 'men's speech' as serving two mutually exclusive functions: the former solidarity, the latter distance. According to Sulekha, the distance which characterizes her speech with men is necessary for the pursuit of her own romantic interests: she employs polite verb, adjective and pronominal forms in order to heighten the gender polarity between herself and a potential male partner. By assuming a submissive and coquettish posture, she is able to have what she refers to as *hā hā hī hī* – an interjection which connotes pleasure, laughter and flirtation.<sup>16</sup>

In light of both Rupa's and Sulekha's clearly articulated reflections on their alternating uses of feminine and masculine speech, it is interesting that Megha, a member of another Banaras community, adamantly insists that hijras *never* speak as men in any circumstances. Like Rupa, Megha creates a number of feminine-marked phrases as examples of hijra speech, together with a

number of intimate second-person imperatives, such as *tū khā le* 'you [intimate] eat!' and *tū pakā le* 'you [intimate] cook!':

(9) M:

hā hameśā auratō kī bolī boltī<sup>f</sup> hāī  
kabhī bhī ādmī ke jaisā nahī boltī<sup>f</sup> hāī,  
- jaise, 'maī jā rahī<sup>f</sup> hū jī', 'jā rahī<sup>f</sup>  
bahan', 'tū khā le', 'tū pakā le', 'maī  
abhī ā rahī<sup>f</sup> hū.'

M:

Yes, we always speak<sup>f</sup> women's speech.  
We never ever speak<sup>f</sup> like a man. It's  
like, 'I'm going<sup>f</sup> sir/ma'am', 'Sister is  
going<sup>f</sup>, 'You [intimate] eat!' 'You  
[intimate] cook!' 'I'm coming<sup>f</sup> now.'

Since imperatives in Hindi are not marked for gender, Megha's inclusion of these forms in the above excerpt as examples of feminine speech works to support Sulekha's claim that familiarity is normally associated with women's language. Her conflation of feminine speech with the use of intimate imperatives is indeed not so surprising given the larger system of honorific address in Hindi. Central to the use of this system is the age and social status of the referent compared to that of the speaker. A speaker's senior, for instance, is normally addressed with the third-person plural pronoun *āp* ['you' (3rd person plural)] and referred to with the plural pronoun *ve* ['they' (3rd person plural)] and a plural verb; any declinable adjectives or postpositions used in reference to one's senior will be pluralized. Conversely, close friends, relatives (especially those not senior to the speaker), and those of lower social status (such as servants or rickshaw drivers) are normally addressed with the second-person plural pronoun *tum* ['you' (2nd person plural)] and referred to with the singular pronoun *vah* ['he/she/it' (3rd person singular)] and a singular verb. A third pronoun of address *tu* ['you' (2nd person singular)], which Megha employs twice in excerpt (9), is used for extreme divergences from high honorific reference, whether it be to signal heightened intimacy and informality with the addressee (such as with a deity, a young child, or one's husband or wife), or, alternatively, to express feelings of contempt or disgust. While the hijras' use of this honorific system is consistent with the larger Hindi-speaking community, they additionally indicate many of these same distinctions through the gender system. By superimposing gender distinctions onto honorific distinctions, the hijras have at their disposal a tool of expression unavailable to the more rigidly gendered non-hijra world.

Megha usually makes linguistic claims like those in (9), however, only after issuing a stream of assertions which might be said to constitute the hijra 'party line': namely, that hijras never have

castration and penectomy operations, never have relations with men, never take on new feminine names, and never speak as men. Megha, who has a high profile in her district of Banaras, is very aware of how her own self-presentation affects societal opinion, especially in light of the recent increase of anti-hijra violence in northern India; she is more interested than the other hijras in projecting a self that conforms to societal expectations – a self that is determined by both ascetic and anatomical considerations. Megha's insistence that the hijras were not only given feminine names at birth but have also never spoken in the masculine serves to support the claim that the hijras' femininity is innate, affirming a larger cultural belief that the hijra lifestyle is not socially constructed, but rather something that begins at (or even before) birth.

Most of the hijras we interviewed, with the exception of Rupa who became a hijra as an adult, primarily employ feminine-marked verbs when speaking in the first person or when addressing other hijras in the second person. When using the third person to refer to other hijras, however, the hijras are much less consistent, their choice of marking dependent on the relative social status of the referent in question. When the hijras speak in the third person and express distance from the referent, specifically when the referent is perceived to be either a superior or a subordinate, they tend to make greater use of the masculine; in contrast, when the hijras express solidarity or familiarity with a referent of equal status, they tend to make greater use of the feminine. Hijras rely not only upon their own internal systems of law and order, but also upon elaborate familial structures which delegate various feminine roles to different members of the group, among them *dādī* ['paternal grandmother'], *nānī* ['maternal grandmother'], *mā* ['mother'], *mausi* ['mother's sister'], *cācī* ['uncle's wife'], *dīdī* ['older sister'] and *bahin* ['younger sister']. Fundamental to this system 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 affected kinship situation created by the hijras is unique, in that the guru acts symbolically as both *sās* ['mother-in-law'] and *suhāg* ['state of being in a husband's protection']. Having abandoned all worldly ties upon entry into the community, the hijras appear to transfer every auspicious life-relationship to their guru, regardless of the fact that such a transferral, in the eyes of society at least, results in a superficially incestuous system.<sup>17</sup>

The hierarchical nature of the community becomes transparent

in the hijras' use of feminine and masculine reference. When Rupa explains the import of the guru-disciple relationship, she frames her discussion in terms of a father-son relationship; in particular, she compares the leader of the group to a father and its members to his sons. 'It's just like the relationship of a *bāp larḳā*' ['father and son'], she remarks, later using the Sanskrit-derived phrase *pitā putra* ['father and son'] to imbue the relationship with even more prestige. She similarly explains the structure of the hijra lineage by using masculine terms of reference, among them *dādā guru* ['paternal grandfather guru'], *guru bhāi* ['brother disciple'], *baṛe bāp* ['older father'], and *cācā guru bhāi* ['paternal uncle fellow disciple']. She maintains this use of masculine kinship terms, however, only when speaking in the third person about other hijras from the adopted standpoint of an outsider. When Rupa mimics her own interactions with other hijras in the community, using first- and second-person forms to do so, as in excerpt (10), she shifts from the masculine to the feminine:

(10) R:

to apne logō mē 'cācā<sup>m</sup>' vagairah nahī  
kahte<sup>m</sup> hāi na? ki- jaise 'mausi<sup>f</sup>', (1.5)  
'mausi<sup>f</sup>' kahēge<sup>m</sup> (2.0) 'mausi<sup>f</sup>' kahēge<sup>m</sup>,  
(1.5) apne guru<sup>m</sup> ko 'guru<sup>m</sup>' bolēge<sup>m</sup>,  
(1.5) musalmān log rahēge<sup>m</sup> to  
bolēge<sup>m</sup> - 'khālā<sup>f</sup>', - 'khālā<sup>f</sup> guru<sup>m</sup>', - aise  
ham hī bāt kartī<sup>f</sup> hāī. (3.0) zyādātar se  
strilīg calta hai is mē. (2.0) strilīg, (2.5)  
auratō kī bātciṭ is mē calti hai. ...  
abhī ki vo ā jāēngī<sup>f</sup>, - to ham isī kapre mē  
hāī, - magar bāt vahī hogā, - 'kyō gayī<sup>f</sup>  
nahī', 'kahā thī<sup>f</sup>', 'kya kar rahī<sup>f</sup> thī<sup>f</sup>,  
'kahā gayī<sup>f</sup> thī<sup>f</sup>', - 'badhāī kyū  
nahī āyī<sup>f</sup>, - 'khānā khāogī<sup>f</sup>.

R:

But among ourselves we don't say<sup>m</sup>  
'cācā<sup>m</sup>' ['paternal uncle'], etc., right?  
It's like 'mausi<sup>f</sup>' ['maternal aunt'],  
we'll say<sup>m</sup> 'mausi<sup>f</sup>', we'll say<sup>m</sup>  
'mausi<sup>f</sup>'. We'll call<sup>m</sup> our guru<sup>m</sup> 'guru<sup>m</sup>'.  
If Muslim people are present<sup>m</sup>, they'll  
say<sup>m</sup> 'khālā<sup>f</sup>' ['maternal aunt'], 'khālā<sup>f</sup>  
guru<sup>m</sup>'. This is the way we talk<sup>f</sup>. Mostly  
it's in the feminine - in the feminine.  
It's like women's conversation. ...  
If someone [a fellow hijra] would come<sup>f</sup>  
here right now, even if I were in these  
clothes [*luṅgi-kurtā*], our  
conversation would be like this: 'Why  
didn't you go<sup>f</sup>?' 'Where were<sup>f</sup> you?' 'What  
were<sup>f</sup> you doing<sup>f</sup>?' 'Where had<sup>f</sup> you  
gone<sup>f</sup>?' 'Why didn't you come<sup>f</sup> to the  
*badhāī* ['congratulations ceremony']?'  
'Will you eat<sup>f</sup>?'

Significant in Rupa's discussion is the stream of feminine-marked verbs she produces in the final five lines as an example of what might occur in group interaction, a digression which stands in sharp contrast to her usual employments of the masculine singular and plural when referring to herself. And while she refers to herself and other hijras collectively in the first-person masculine plural at

the start of this passage, she later constructs herself as feminine when viewing herself as part of the larger community, a community which aggressively identifies itself as non-masculine. When explaining how she and the other hijras in her community curse, for example, she employs feminine first-person plural verb forms, among them *jhaḡrā kar lēḡī*<sup>f</sup> ['we will fight<sup>f</sup>'], *bolēḡī*<sup>f</sup> ['we will speak<sup>f</sup>'], *gālī bhī dēḡī*<sup>f</sup> ['we will also give<sup>f</sup> curses'], *kaḡēḡī*<sup>f</sup> ['we will say<sup>f</sup>']. Similarly, what she earlier defined as *cācā*<sup>m</sup> ['paternal uncle'] becomes *mausi*<sup>f</sup> or *khālā*<sup>f</sup> ['maternal aunt'] in this passage, a switch which is consistent with the other hijras' use of *mā*<sup>f</sup> ['mother'] when addressing their guru and *dādī*<sup>f</sup> ['paternal grandmother'] when addressing their guru's guru. It is perhaps this same distinction between terms of reference and terms of address which explains why Rupa refers to her guru as *dādā*<sup>m</sup> in the discussion directly preceding this passage, but as *dādī*<sup>f</sup> when reconstructing a group interaction that revolves around her.

A similar sort of shift is enacted by Sulekha in excerpt (11) below, when she explains how the most well-known hijras in Banaras, namely Channu, Idu, and Chanda, came to be so important within the hijra community. When describing how hijras reach positions of power in the hijra network, and how she herself will someday acquire such a position, Sulekha switches back and forth between feminine and masculine reference. Like Rupa, Sulekha describes the development of the hijra lineage in Banaras by using primarily masculine terminology: *dādā*<sup>m</sup> ['paternal grandfather'], *nātī*<sup>m</sup> ['grandson'], *parnātī*<sup>m</sup> ['great grandson'], and *celā*<sup>m</sup> ['male disciple'].

S:

ye log banāras kā<sup>m</sup>- pahle-pahle banāras  
mē yahī log the<sup>m</sup>. (1.0) ve log thī<sup>f</sup>, ve log  
māḡtī<sup>f</sup> thī<sup>f</sup>, khātī<sup>f</sup> thī<sup>f</sup> (0.5) to (0.2) uske  
bād, jab jitnā hijrā āyā<sup>m</sup>, vo celā<sup>m</sup>  
banātī<sup>f</sup> gayī<sup>f</sup>, vo uskā celā<sup>m</sup> vo uskā  
celā<sup>m</sup> vo uskā celā<sup>m</sup> vo uskā celā<sup>m</sup>, tar par  
tar tar par tar, (0.5) ātā<sup>m</sup> gayā<sup>m</sup>. (1.0) tab  
nān[ā]<sup>m</sup> guru ban gaye<sup>m</sup>,  
dād[ā]<sup>m</sup> guru ban gayī<sup>f</sup>, (1.0) isī tarah.  
ham log kā ek koṭhe<sup>18</sup> sā hotā hai. ham  
log kā bātchit alag hotā hai. (2.0) hā, jaise  
(softly) celā<sup>m</sup>. (0.5) nātī<sup>m</sup>  
parnātī<sup>m</sup>, ((unclear)) kyā bolālā sabhī log  
kahte<sup>m</sup> hāī, ham logō mē celā<sup>m</sup> hotā hai.  
dād[ā]<sup>m</sup> guru hotā hai, pardād[ā]<sup>m</sup> guru  
hotā hai. (0.5) maivā<sup>f</sup> hotī hāī.

S:

These people [were] inhabitants of<sup>m</sup>  
Banaras, those people were<sup>m</sup> the first  
people in Banaras a long, long time ago  
Those people were<sup>f</sup> here, they were<sup>f</sup>  
demanding<sup>f</sup> their due, they were<sup>f</sup> eating<sup>f</sup>  
And from then on, they kept<sup>f</sup> making<sup>f</sup>  
any other hijras who came<sup>m</sup> [to Banaras]  
their own celā<sup>m</sup> ['disciple']. That one had  
her celā<sup>m</sup>, that one had her celā<sup>m</sup>, that  
one had her celā<sup>m</sup>, that one had her  
celā<sup>m</sup>, one right after the other, they  
kept<sup>m</sup> coming<sup>m</sup>. Then they became<sup>m</sup> a  
nān[ā]<sup>m</sup> ['maternal grandfather'] guru, or  
they became<sup>f</sup> a dād[ā]<sup>m</sup> ['paternal  
grandfather'] guru - like that. We have a  
sort of household<sup>18</sup> here. We have a

- (1.0) is tarah kā hotā hai. jo aksar baṛā<sup>m</sup> different way of talking, yes, like  
admi<sup>m</sup> rahtā<sup>m</sup> hai, isī tarah kahā jātā hai. ((softly)) celā<sup>m</sup> ['disciple'], nāt<sup>m</sup>  
['grandson'], parnāt<sup>m</sup> ['great grandson']  
- ((unclear)) you know, everybody says<sup>m</sup>  
these [words]. Among us it's celā<sup>m</sup>, it's  
dād[ā]<sup>m</sup> guru, it's pardād[ā]<sup>m</sup> ['paternal  
great grandfather'] guru, it's maīyā<sup>f</sup>  
['mother'] - it's like that, that's how  
someone who is<sup>m</sup> a senior<sup>m</sup> person<sup>m</sup> is  
called.

Although Sulekha frequently employs feminine marking on the verb when referring to Channu, Idu and Chanda, particularly in the second through sixth lines of excerpt (11) when the three of them act as subjects of a particular action, she consistently employs the masculine kinship term *dādā*<sup>m</sup> when relating their social status. At the end of her discussion, however, when she imagines herself in the same position of power as these three elders, she refers to her future self with the feminine terms *malkin*<sup>f</sup> ['female boss', 'landlady'] and *dādī*<sup>f</sup> ['paternal grandmother']:

- (12) S: ab maī yahā kā<sup>m</sup> mālkin<sup>f</sup> hū, (0.5) ab  
ham- koī āyegā<sup>m</sup> to uskā celā<sup>m</sup> to  
hamārā celā<sup>m</sup> ho jāyegā<sup>m</sup>, (0.5) ab  
phir dūsrā<sup>m</sup> āyegā<sup>m</sup>, to usko uskā celā<sup>m</sup>  
kā<sup>m</sup> dūgī<sup>f</sup>, to maī dādī<sup>f</sup> ban jāūgī<sup>f</sup>, (2.0)  
tab merā hī nām na rahegā, purānī<sup>f</sup> to  
maī ho gayī<sup>f</sup>, to merā nām usī tarah  
vahā purānī<sup>f</sup> ho gayī<sup>f</sup>. to un logō kā nām  
hai, (0.5) 'mālkin<sup>f</sup> hai.'  
S:  
Now I'm the *mālkin*<sup>f</sup> ['female boss'] of<sup>m</sup>  
this place. Now I- whoever comes<sup>m</sup> here  
will become<sup>m</sup> my *celā*<sup>m</sup>. Whenever  
another one<sup>m</sup> comes<sup>m</sup>, I'll make<sup>f</sup> him his  
*celā*<sup>m</sup> and then I'll become<sup>f</sup> the *dādī*<sup>f</sup>.  
That way my name will surely continue,  
because I'll have become<sup>f</sup> elderly<sup>f</sup>. That's  
how I'll have a name when I've become<sup>f</sup>  
elderly<sup>f</sup>. So they'll have a name too [as  
part of my lineage]. [They'll say], 'She's  
the *mālkin*!'

Even though Sulekha portrays herself as a superior in the above excerpt, she continues to self-identify as feminine, reserving masculine terms like *dādā* and *mālīk* for third-person reference only. Sulekha uses the masculine for hijras she perceives to be superior or subordinate, an employment which is irrelevant to her own self-identification.

The age of the referent is central to the choice of feminine or masculine terminology in the hijra community, as it is to the choice of either an *āp*, *tum* or *tu* pronoun of address in the larger system of Hindi honourifics. In excerpts (13) and (14) below, both Rupa and Sulekha make a gendered distinction between the younger and older members of their respective communities when speaking

about them in the third person, marking younger members as feminine and older members as masculine:

(13) R:

jo *baṛāṁ* *hotāṁ* hai to ((softly)) guru.  
(2.0) guru. jo *choṭīḥ* *hotīḥ* hai, to *kā*  
*bolalā nām* se *bulāte* hai.

R:

We'll call someone who is<sup>m</sup> elderly<sup>m</sup>  
((softly)) guru- guru. But we'll call  
someone who is<sup>f</sup> younger<sup>f</sup> by their name.

(14) S:

sabse *choṭīḥ* ek to hai *hamāre mē* vah  
sabse kam *umra kīḥ* hai. *uskī umra*  
*lagbhag* 18 *varṣ* hai. aur 20 *varṣ kāṁ*  
hai, 25 *varṣ kāṁ* hai. *maṭ* 38 *varṣ kīḥ*  
*hū*.

S:

There's one in our group who's the  
youngest<sup>f</sup>-she's<sup>f</sup> the youngest of all. Her  
age is about 18 or so. Another one is<sup>m</sup>  
20 years old, another one is<sup>m</sup> 25 years  
old. I'm<sup>f</sup> 38 years old.

Rupa, in her opposing uses of the masculine adjective *baṛāṁ* ['elderly', 'big'] and the feminine adjective *choṭīḥ* ['young', 'small'] makes this distinction especially clear, her gendered choices echoing the use of the honourific *āp* for one's senior relatives and the familiar *tum* for one's junior relatives. Similarly, Sulekha's use of the feminine adjective *choṭī* and feminine postposition *kī* ['of'] in reference to the 'youngest' member of her group in excerpt (14), but the masculine postposition *kā* ['of'] in reference to older members in her group, would indicate that extreme youthfulness in the hijra community is indicated through the feminine.

## Contempt and the use of the masculine

The use of feminine address is so expected from fellow hijras as a sign of solidarity that the use of inappropriate masculine reference will often provoke angry retaliation. An antipathy towards masculine linguistic forms is reflected in the hijras' naming system. When a new member enters the hijra community, she is given a woman's name to replace the name of her former, more male self. The hijras are strongly discouraged from referring to each other by these remnants of their previous lives, yet tellingly, they often employ them in disputes. If a hijra is in a fierce argument with another member of her community, one of the most incisive insults she can give is to question her addressee's femininity by using her male name; as Sulekha explains, 'We use them especially when we fight with each other. We'll tell everybody what the person's real name was, "Oh, so and so was such and such a name!" Then we'll call them by that name.' The strategy Sulekha identifies here is elaborated upon by



Rupa in excerpt (15) below, when she explains that the use of masculine address will be met with strong disapproval in Banaras. Rupa notes that because all of the hijras living in Banaras identify as feminine (in contrast to the hijras living in Panjab who, according to Rupa, adopt masculine as well as feminine identities), they expect, indeed demand, the use of feminine address:

(15) R:

banāras mẽ mardānā janānā koi pasand nahī kartā hai. (5.0) ((laughs)) mardānā kah do to jhagrā kar lēgī<sup>f</sup>. ... apne logō mẽ to bolēgī<sup>f</sup> to aurat jaisā. (3.0) aurat jaisā.

R:

In Banaras, no one likes to be known as *mardānā* ['manly']. ((laughs)) Address someone as *mardānā* and they'll quarrel<sup>f</sup> [with you]! When we're together in our own group, we'll speak<sup>f</sup> like women. Like women.

Rupa goes on to explain that hijras '*gālī bhī dēgī, to aurat jaisā*' ['even give curses like women'], meaning that they refrain from using those curses that involve insulting sexual reference to the addressee's mother or sister. According to Rupa, the hijras, infamous throughout northern India for their use of sexualized obscenities, attempt to model even their cursing strategies after women; if they were to invoke curses which were derogatory to women, they would, in essence, be cursing against themselves (see Hall 1996).

The negative connotations which Rupa and Sulekha both associate with masculine reference may very well explain Megha's repeated use of the masculine when referring to Sulekha. Sulekha was previously a member of Megha's community in Banaras, but after having a number of serious arguments with the other hijras who lived there, went to live with a male partner in a neighbouring village outside the city. Megha, in a manner consistent with the claims she makes in excerpt (9), almost always uses feminine forms when referring to other hijras; yet when she refers to Sulekha, who apparently insulted her guru's authority as *mālik* ['master'] of the community, Megha uses the masculine. Two examples of this employment are reproduced in excerpt (16):

(16) M:

bacpan se yahī kām hai, - ab jākar [place name] mẽ rah rahām hai, - merā jajmānī hai, to māi un logō ko de detī hū.

M:

[Sulekha] belonged<sup>m</sup> to this household since childhood, [but] now he left and is living<sup>m</sup> in [place name]. I had *jajmāns* ['clients'] there, but I transferred those people to him/her.

Through the use of masculine-marked postpositions like *kām* ['of<sup>m</sup>] and masculine-marked verb forms like *rah rahām hai* ['he is living<sup>m</sup>'], Megha is perhaps signalling that Sulekha is not only estranged from her, but also inferior to her. Her use of the masculine singular, then, approximates in Hindi the use of the pronoun *tu*, which can signal contempt for an inferior as well as heightened intimacy. (Although comparatively infrequent, Megha sometimes refers to her guru affectionately in the masculine singular instead of the more respectful feminine or masculine plural, such as when she at one point turned to us, paused, and emphatically pronounced *merām Channu* ['my<sup>m</sup> Channu'].)

A similar sort of distancing by use of the masculine gender occurs whenever Sulekha refers to Muslim hijras, with whom, as a Hindu, she feels somewhat at odds. Although Muslims and Hindu hijras often live together harmoniously in the same communities – an arrangement rarely found in mainstream Banaras where the tension between Muslims and Hindus is quite pervasive – Sulekha seems to feel threatened by Muslim hijras, since they hold powerful positions within the Banaras hijra network, and indeed, throughout all of northern India. The contempt Sulekha feels towards Muslim hijras is reflected in her employment of third-person masculine-marked verb forms when Muslim hijras act as subjects, as in the short narrative reproduced in (17):

(17) M:

apnā upar hai. (1.0) māi hindū hū (1.0)  
to apnā hindū kā kām kartī<sup>f</sup> hū, jo  
musalmān hai vah apnā musalmān kā  
kām kartā<sup>m</sup> hai, (0.5) apnā dharm  
nibhātā<sup>m</sup> hai (0.2) māi apnā dharm  
nibhātī<sup>f</sup> hū, (2.0) ab khāne pine kā- to āj  
kal- (0.5) *ḍom*-camār ke yahā bhī khā  
letā hai.

M:

It's up to the individual. I'm Hindu so I do<sup>f</sup>  
the work of Hindus, but whoever is  
Muslim does<sup>m</sup> the work of Muslims. He  
fulfils<sup>m</sup> his own *dharm* faithfully. I  
fulfil<sup>f</sup> my own *dharm* faithfully. As far as  
eating and drinking is concerned, people  
nowadays even go and eat with *ḍom-camār*  
['corpse burners' and 'shoe-makers']!

Sulekha's use of the masculine in the impersonal relative-correlative constructions above would not be so remarkable if she did not regularly overcompensate towards the feminine when talking about Hindu hijras. Her use of the third-person masculine in (17), in sharp contrast to her use of the third-person feminine in comparable constructions in which Hindu hijras act as subjects, reflects her own opinion that Muslims are below her on the social hierarchy; this is evidenced in her insistence throughout her conversations with us that Hindu hijras existed long before Muslim hijras, and,

what is more, that it is only hijras from low-caste backgrounds who convert to Islam. Moreover, she angrily complained that non-hijra Muslims are much less generous than Hindus when it comes to paying hijras for their song and dance performances: 'Muslims will never give to Hindus. If a hijra goes to their door, then they'll say, "Our door is polluted for forty days!" (i.e. there has been a death in the family).'

Sulekha's distaste for the hijras in Banaras who have converted to Islam is further instantiated by her insistence that such individuals are not true hijras, but 'men'. This proclamation is premised on her belief that the majority of Muslim hijras in Banaras have not undergone castration operations. For Sulekha, it is this event alone that serves as the defining moment of the hijra's entry into femininity – an event which, in her opinion, should be rewarded with a more consistent use of feminine reference. In excerpt (18), she is clearly hesitant to give this consistency to Channu, one of the oldest and most prestigious hijras in Banaras, as well as to the Muslim hijras living under Channu's jurisdiction:

- (18) S: hā, channū hai, (0.5) [place name] mē jo channū hai, to vah bhī ādmī<sup>m</sup> hai. hijrā to hai nahī. ... vo buzurg hai. vah sab se mālik<sup>m</sup> vahī hai. (1.0) sab se mālik<sup>m</sup> vahī hai. [place name] kā<sup>m</sup>. (0.2) ye vo channū iske sab ādmī<sup>m</sup> hāī, sab āte<sup>m</sup> hāī jāte<sup>m</sup> hāī. kurtā luṅgī pahan lete<sup>m</sup> hāī, nācne samay sārī pahan lete<sup>m</sup> hāī, (0.2) sabhī jānte<sup>m</sup> hāī, (2.0) māī hamko kahne se kyā?
- V:  
*lekin vo sab āpreśan karāye hue hāī?*
- S:  
nahī
- V:  
*kuch nahī <hai?>*
- S:  
                    <nahī.>
- V:  
*tabhī aisi <hai?>*
- S:  
                    <hā.>
- V:  
*o:::h. (1.0) acchā?*
- S:  
Yes, Channu is – that Channu who lives in [place name] is a man<sup>m</sup>. He's not a hijra. ... He's very old – he's the chief master<sup>m</sup> over there. He's the chief master<sup>m</sup> over there of<sup>m</sup> [place name]. All of the ones under Channu are men<sup>m</sup>, all of them who come<sup>m</sup> and go<sup>m</sup> over there. They wear<sup>m</sup> *kurtās* and *luṅgīs*, but when they dance they wear<sup>m</sup> *sārīs*. Everybody knows<sup>m</sup> it, so what's the use of my saying so?
- V:  
*But haven't they all had operations?*
- S:  
No.
- V:  
*Nothing at all?*
- S:  
No.
- V:  
*So they're just that way?*
- S:  
Yes.
- V:  
*O:::h. Really?*

S:

usko- unko māī kaise kahū? usko kahūgī<sup>f</sup> to merā bāt kāt dēge<sup>m</sup>. ... māī kah dūgī<sup>f</sup> (0.5) to ((softly)) māī choṭe mūh baṛī bāt, hamko isī mē rahnā hai. (0.5) sab māregā<sup>m</sup> pīregā<sup>m</sup> bāl kāt degā<sup>m</sup>.

S:

How can I say anything about them? If I'd say<sup>f</sup> anything, they'd of course just contradict<sup>m</sup> me anyway. ... If I'd give<sup>f</sup> anything away, then ((softly)) I [would be like] a small mouth with big talk. I have to live in this community, after all. They'd all hit<sup>m</sup> me, beat<sup>m</sup> me up, cut<sup>m</sup> my hair.

Sulekha's use of the third-person masculine singular to describe the 78-year-old Channu stands in opposition to comparable descriptions by both Rupa and Megha, who, depending on the immediate context, refer to Channu by using either the respectful third-person masculine plural or feminine-marked adjectival forms, such as when they affectionately call her *moṭī<sup>f</sup> vālī<sup>f</sup>* ['big<sup>f</sup> one<sup>f</sup>] and *būḍhī<sup>f</sup> vālī<sup>f</sup>* ['senior/superior<sup>f</sup> one<sup>f</sup>]. Since Rupa and Megha are both related to Channu in the hijra family tree (Rupa as her disciple and Megha as her grand-disciple), they are perhaps more keen than Sulekha to show Channu both respect and solidarity, granting the other Muslims under her jurisdiction feminine reference as well. Sulekha, on the other hand, displeased with her own 'smallness' relative to these Muslim hijras, refuses the entire community any acknowledgement of femininity, whether it be linguistic or anatomical.

## Emphatic masculinity

Hijra speakers sometimes refer to themselves in the masculine for emphatic purposes, such as in Sulekha's use of the term *mālik* ['master', 'landlord'] in examples (19) through (21). Although Sulekha normally refers to herself as a *mālkin* ['female boss', 'landlady'], as she did earlier in example (12) when she was explaining the structure of the hijra family lineage, she refers to herself in examples (19) and (20) as a *mālik*. Proud of the fact that she is a homeowner – an accomplishment shared by few hijras in India – Sulekha underscores the import of her position by portraying herself as a landlord instead of a landlady, using the masculine-marked adjective *akelā<sup>m</sup>* ['alone'] instead of its feminine counterpart *akelī*:

(19) V:

to kyū āp grup mē nahī rahi hāī?

S:

ham log erun mē hāī

V:

So why aren't you in a group?

S:

But we are in a group!

- to *grup* ke *sāth* *nāctī* *hai*, *gātī* *hai*?  
 S:  
*hā*, *sab* *hai*. (1.0) *maī* *ab-* *apnā* *ghar* *lekar* *akelā<sup>m</sup>* *rahtī<sup>f</sup>* *hū*. *yahā* *apnā* *ghar* *apne* *nām* *se* *akelā<sup>m</sup>* *banvāī<sup>f</sup>* *hū*. to *maī* *iskā* *mālik<sup>m</sup>* *hū* to *maī* *is* *mē* *rahtī<sup>f</sup>* *hū*, (1.0) to *hamāre* *yahā* 4 *tho* 5 *tho* *āyegī<sup>f</sup>* *nāckar*, (1.0) *apnā* *hisāb* *lekar* *calī<sup>f</sup>* *jāyegī<sup>f</sup>*.  
 S: So you dance and sing with a group?  
 S: Sure, everything! Now I just bought my own house and live<sup>f</sup> alone<sup>m</sup>. I've registered<sup>f</sup> my house here in my name alone<sup>m</sup>, so I'm its *mālik<sup>m</sup>* and I live<sup>f</sup> in it. So four or five people will come<sup>f</sup> to my house, they'll dance, take their share, and leave<sup>f</sup>.
- (20) S:  
*dūsre* *mē* *jāūngī<sup>f</sup>* *gāūngī<sup>f</sup>* *nācūngī<sup>f</sup>*.  
*hamko* *mazdūri* *milegā*. (1.0) *vahā* *kā* *mālik<sup>m</sup>* *maī* *nahī* *ban* *saktī<sup>f</sup>*. *maī* *mālik<sup>m</sup>* *banūgī<sup>f</sup>* *yahī* *kā*.  
 V:  
*keval* *isi* *ilāke* *kā*?  
 S:  
*hā*. *ilāke-ilāke* *kā*. (2.0) *thāne* *kā*.  
 S: I'll go<sup>f</sup> and sing<sup>f</sup> and dance<sup>f</sup> in other places. I'll get wages. I just can't<sup>f</sup> become the *mālik<sup>m</sup>* there. I can only become<sup>f</sup> the *mālik<sup>m</sup>* here.  
 V:  
*Only in this area*?  
 S:  
*Only in this area right here. In this police district.*

Sulekha's use of the masculine in the above examples seems to be influenced by a local understanding of home ownership as a man's activity. When she refers to herself as a *mālkin* in excerpt (12), she is talking about herself not as a homeowner, as in these two passages, but as a member of the hijra lineage. The issue of home ownership becomes especially salient in example (20), when she explains that even though she can work and collect wages in a district designated as belonging to another hijra community, she can never buy a house in a district other than her own.

First-person masculine verb forms, which occur much more rarely in the hijras' conversations than do third-person forms, occasionally surface in highly emphatic moments. Sulekha, when overtly contradicting claims made by Megha, adds extra weight to her words by speaking in the masculine first person, as in examples (21) and (22). Megha had stated in an earlier conversation that hijras are asexual and lead ascetic lifestyles; Sulekha, wanting to give us what she perceives to be a more accurate account of the hijra community, refutes all of Megha's assertions by speaking in the masculine:

- (21) V:  
*kaise* *kah* *rahī* *thī* 'ham log ko *dukh* *hotā* *bai*, ham log *kā* *parivār* *nahī* *rahtā*, ham log *kā* *sambandh* *nahī* *rahtā*. ham log  
 V: Then why was [Megha] saying, 'We have a lot of sadness. We no longer have a family. We no longer have relationships.

*bhī sote uṭhte baiṭhte.*<sup>9</sup>

S:

nahī. ye galat bāt hai. - galat bāt hai.  
maī isko nahī māntā<sup>m</sup>. - galat bāt hai.

*All we do is sleep, get up, sit around?*

S:

No, that's wrong. That's wrong. I don't believe<sup>m</sup> that. That's wrong.

(22) S:

ādmī ke sāth kartā hai sab. - jaise aurat  
\*mard sambandh hota hai, - usī tarah  
\*hijre - mard ke sāth sambandh hotā hai.  
- kitne \*hijre- kitne hijre rakh lete hāī  
ādmī ko, - kitnā peśāvar hotā hai, (1.0)  
peśā kartī, tab (1.0) \*sau, pacās, do sau,  
cār sau, \*sabkā peśā kartī hāī. - maī  
jhūṭh kahtā<sup>m</sup> hū? nahī kahtā<sup>m</sup> hū.

S:

They all have relationships with men.  
Just like women have relationships with  
\*men, \*hijras have relationships with  
men. A lot of \*hijras- a lot of hijras  
keep men. A lot of them are  
professionals. Those who do it as a  
profession charge a \*hundred, fifty, two  
hundred, four hundred rupees, \*anything  
they can get. Do I tell<sup>m</sup> lies? No, I don't  
tell<sup>m</sup> lies.

The latter example is particularly telling, since Sulekha colours her commentary with a series of flat-handed claps for added emphasis, a gesture so much a part of the hijras' interactional style that we have chosen to represent it in the transcription system with an asterisk. With five claps occurring in seven short sentences, Sulekha's commentary stands in sharp contrast to the other passages quoted in this chapter; the import of her words is further underscored by her use of masculine self-reference in the final two lines: *maī jhūṭh kahtā<sup>m</sup> hū? nahī kahtā<sup>m</sup> hū* ['Do I tell<sup>m</sup> lies? No, I don't tell<sup>m</sup> lies!'].<sup>9</sup>

A final example of first person masculinity comes from an interaction that took place among members of a third community in Banaras. All born into Hindu families who ostracized them, the hijras belonging to this community have adopted the religious practices of the Muslim families they live with – families who in many ways suffer a similar marginalization as residents of a city that is thought of throughout North India as the 'holy Hindu city'. The 80-year-old Shashi is the leader of the group, and after 69 years of speaking like a woman, we rarely heard her use any masculine speech. The third time we visited her, however, Shashi's favourite disciple had fled back to her own village after a serious financial scuffle with another community member. Shashi was feeling intense rage at the cause of this dispute, as well as deep grief for her loss. Wailing *merā beṭā, merā beṭā* ['my son, my son'] and clapping in anger, Shashi screamed about the punishment that the hijra who precipitated the fight would receive, venting her anger entirely through use of the masculine first and third person. It would seem

that for the hijras, as both Rupa and Sulekha suggest, anger is an emotion which is best expressed in the masculine. Perhaps rage is a gut-level reaction that recalls the masculine forms that the hijra produced prior to her entry into the community, or perhaps masculine forms are simply a dramatic and forceful tool for venting such rage. Regardless of the reason, the hijra is clearly aware of the social meanings such forms convey.

## Conclusion

We would like to suggest that the kind of gendered negotiations discussed in this chapter, while particularly overt in the Hindi-speaking hijra community, are not unique to alternative gender identities; rather, women and men of many communities manipulate linguistic expectations of femininity and masculinity in order to establish varying positions of solidarity and power. That speaking styles recognized culturally as 'women's speech' or 'men's speech' are not determined by the sex of the speaker, but rather constructed collaboratively in social interaction, is a point made salient by linguists working at the intersection of linguistics and queer theory: Barrett (1994, 1996) in his exposition of discursive style-shifting among a community of African American drag queens; Gaudio (1996) in his discussions of the appropriation of feminine speech styles by Hausa-speaking *'yan daudu*; Ogawa and Smith (1996) in their work on appropriations of Japanese 'women's language' by gay men in Tokyo and Osaka; and Livia (1995, 1996) in her articles on the varying uses made of the French linguistic gender system by male-to-female transsexuals, hermaphrodites and gay drag queens. In the interactions described in these articles (which report on four very different linguistic communities on four separate continents), the speech ideologically associated with masculinity and femininity, and indeed sometimes the linguistic gender system itself, is used to express much more than mere gender differentiation. Linguistic gender, in its close association with one of the most basic divisions in social organization, is used as a tool for evoking a wide range of societal discourses on power and solidarity, difference and dominance.

Moreover, the structure of linguistic evocations is not arbitrary, but influenced by societal ideologies of femininity and masculinity. Although Banaras hijras challenge such ideologies in their conflicting employments of masculine and feminine speech, often subverting the gender system in innovative and unexpected ways,

their employment of linguistic gender is still constrained by a traditional and dichotomous notion of gender. While the hijra tends to make greater use of the masculine when signalling social distance from the referent, whether it be respect for a superior or contempt for an inferior, she is more likely to employ the feminine when expressing solidarity, particularly when addressing other hijras directly. Occupying an ambiguous position in a society that has marginalized them, hijras are more attentive than their non-hijra peers to the cultural meanings evoked by feminine and masculine markings, enacting and contesting them in their everyday projections of self.

### *Acknowledgements*

We conducted this field research jointly after concluding an advanced language programme sponsored by the American Institute of Indian Studies in Banaras, India, during the 1992–1993 academic year. Earlier versions of this chapter, authored independently by Hall (1994, 1995), appear in the *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* and in *Hijra/Hijrin: Language and Gender Identity*, respectively. In addition to the editors of the present volume, who offered insightful commentary on the original manuscript, we are grateful to the many people who helped us with this project in both India and America, among them Nancy Chodorow, Penny Eckert, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Linda Hess, Leanne Hinton, Robin Lakoff, Anna Livia, Vinita Sharma, our teachers at the AIIS Hindi Language Institute in Banaras, and above all, the hijras who participated in these discussions. We are especially indebted to Ved Prakash Vatuk, whose knowledge of the folklore and linguistic traditions of northern India were instrumental to the writing of this chapter.

### *Notes*

1. The correct English spelling for the Hindi हिजड़ा, according to the transliteration conventions adopted throughout the remainder of this chapter, would be *hijṛā*; we have chosen to use the spelling *hijra*, however, for easier reading.
2. The choice of terminology used to identify the hijras in Indian, European and American scholarship merits a full article in its own right. While contemporary sociologists and journalists living in India and writing in English generally refer to the hijras as ‘eunuchs’ (e.g.



- Sinha 1967, Sethi 1970, Mohan 1979, Bobb and Patel 1982, Patel 1983, 1988, Mitra 1983, 1984, Sharma 1984, Sayani 1986, Vyas and Shingala 1987, Mondal 1989, Shetty 1990, Raghuramaiah 1991, Allabadia and Shah 1992, Lakshmi and Kumar 1994), European and American researchers refer to them variously as 'transvestites' (e.g. Ross 1968, Freeman 1979, Preston 1987), 'an institutionalized third gender role' (Nanda 1985, 1990, Bullough and Bullough 1993), 'hermaphrodites' (Opler 1960, Ross 1968), 'passive homosexuals' (Carstairs 1956) and 'male prostitutes' (Carstairs 1956). The inconsistency of these translations underscores the inherent difficulty of translating the concept *hijrā* into Western scholarship. Other English terms besides that of 'eunuch' occasionally employed by South Asian writers are 'abominable aberrations' (Raghuramaiah 1991), 'ambiguous sex' (Mohan 1979), 'hermaphrodites' (Singh 1956, Sethi 1970, Srinivas 1976, Mohan 1979, Pimpley and Sharma 1985), 'castrated human male' (Mohan 1979), 'hermaphrodite prostitutes' (Sanghvi 1984), 'labelled deviants' (Sharma 1989), 'male-homosexual transvestites' (Rao 1955), 'sex perverted male, castrated or uncastrated' (Sinha 1967), 'sexo-aesthetic inverts coupled with homosexual habits' (Sinha 1967), 'sexual inverts' or 'sexual perverts' (Rao 1955) and 'third sex' (Mondal 1989).
3. For discussions of eunuchs in Indian history, see Saletore (1974, 1978) and Sharma (1984); for discussions of transsexuality or 'dual' sexuality in Indian tradition and mythology, see O'Flaherty (1973, 1981), Nanda (1990), AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (1991) and Goldman (1993).
  4. Lynton and Rajan frequently allude to the hijras' idiosyncratic language use in their short introduction to the hijras of Hyderabad; they explain, for example, that the hijras they interviewed speak Hindustani 'with many archaic expressions and constructions' and that their speech, while 'often ungrammatical', is 'full of imagery and sometimes has a rather poetic quality' (1974: 193). The authors provide very little linguistic detail in support of these compelling remarks, however, stating only that the hijras' 'manner of speech suggests a yearning for identity and identification with a social group', and moreover, that 'the confusion of their terminology is a constant reminder of the sexual confusion which brought them into the group' (p. 192).
  5. Nanda refers specifically to Freeman's research in the 1970s, who noted that certain Oriya-speaking hijras (whom he calls 'transvestites') use 'women's expressions and feminine forms of address' (1979: 294). Freeman quotes the speech of a hijra named Kula in great detail, explaining that he 'delighted in using peculiar and distinctive expressions that called attention to himself' (295).
  6. Indeed, an anonymous article in the political gossip paper *Bombay*

*Blitz*, entitled 'Wipe Out the Hijra Menace' (1981), refers to the hijra scathingly as 'it'. Because the hijras prefer to be referred to and addressed in the feminine, we have chosen to use the feminine pronouns 'her' and 'she' when referring to them.

7. The finality of the linguistic evidence in Sethi's narrative invites comparison with Lowe's (1983: 32) account of her first meeting with a hijra in Bombay named Lata:

Lata was a surprise. If it hadn't been for Navalkar's keen eye, I would never have thought her a *hijra* at all. Her face was smooth and hairless and with eyebrows plucked to a fine arch, she was really quite pretty. Her sari hid any masculinity of build and her gestures were entirely feminine. She would use her arms and hands with the effectiveness of an actress. But Navalkar said the swaying walk was a dead giveaway. They all walked like cancan girls at rehearsals. And once they spoke, their masculine tones left no doubt. [emphasis ours].

A similar sentiment is expressed in Moses Manoharan's (1984: 27) brief introduction to the hijras in New Delhi: 'They dress in saris, have exotic hairstyles and wear heavy make-up, but their voices give them away – they're India's eunuchs. Now the eunuchs are raising their voices for a better deal after centuries as a despised and downtrodden community' [emphasis ours].

8. Throughout this chapter, we have used the transliteration system adopted by Snell and Weightman (1989: 7). The superscripted 'f' and 'm' represent feminine and masculine morphological marking, respectively.
9. While both men and women participate in *nautanki*, all of the actors performing in *sāng* are men. The women who do participate in *nautanki*, however, are frequently stereotyped as prostitutes, and women viewers are normally not welcomed in the audience. For more information on the Nautanki theatre in northern India, see Hansen (1992).
10. We have considerably simplified the complexity of gender marking in Hindi for the purposes of this chapter.
11. One of the hijras we spoke with, in order to indicate that three-fourths of all hijras have had operations, explained that 'rupayā mē bārah ānā' ['in one rupee 12 annas']. (In Indian currency, 16 annas make up one rupee.) This estimate suggests that only a minority of hijras are actually intersexed in the way Epstein (1990) and Kessler (1990) describe when they discuss the surgical reconstruction of new-born infants in America and Europe.
12. To preserve the hijras' anonymity, we have chosen pseudonyms for all of the hijras appearing in this chapter and have avoided giving the names of the four hijra communities we visited.
13. We have tried to transcribe each of the Hindi passages *as spoken*, maintaining any anomalies in gender agreement which occurred in the

tape-recorded conversations. In excerpt (4), for instance, there are a number of markings which are inconsistent with standard Hindi, such as when Sulekha treats the feminine noun *bāt* ['conversation'] as masculine, modifying it with the postposition *kā<sup>m</sup>* instead of *kī<sup>f</sup>*. These agreement inconsistencies are related to the fact that the Hindi of most of the hijras referred to in this article was influenced by various regional dialects, particularly Bhojpuri. The transcription conventions we have used in the transliterated Hindi passages are adapted from Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984: ix-xvi); they include the notable additions of a superscripted 'f' or 'm' to designate feminine and masculine morphological marking, and an asterisk to designate the flat-palmed clap used by the hijras for emphasis. (We have not used these same conventions in the English translations, since extralinguistic features like intonation and emphasis are not parallel.) Other transcription conventions include the following:

- (0.4) indicates length of pause within and between utterances, timed in tenths of a second
- a - a hyphen with spaces before and after indicates a short pause, less than 0.2 seconds
- but- a hyphen immediately following a letter indicates an abrupt cutoff in speaking (interruption or self-interruption)
- (( )) double parentheses enclose non-verbal 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
- what** bold face indicates syllabic stress
- : a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound (the more colons, the longer the sound)
- . a period indicates falling intonation
- , 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
- <> triangular brackets indicate beginning and end of conversational overlap

14. We should add that this insult is so offensive to middle-class Hindi speakers that the Banaras resident who typed our transcripts refused to include this word, typing an ellipsis in its place. The word is used differently from the American insult 'cunt'; it is primarily used in reference to men in order to indicate that they are somehow emasculated. The term *bhosī vālā* is itself masculine; its feminine counterpart *bhosī vālī* does not exist in contemporary usage. Ved Prakash Vatuk (personal communication) offers a succinct explanation as to why this curse is never used in reference to a woman: 'A

woman already has one, so why would it be a curse to tell her so?’

15. Rupa addresses our research assistant Vinita with the masculine term *beṭā* [‘son’] instead of the feminine *beṭī* [‘daughter’] throughout this passage. Hindi-speakers (especially parents) sometimes address younger women or children by *beṭā* in order to show affection, a reversal clearly derived from the value given to sons in Indian culture.
16. Sulekha later expands on this distinction:

Everyone talks to their girlfriends and women companions. Everyone becomes girlfriends and talks with each other about what they feel inside. We need to have that kind of conversation, of course. But when you talk with your own man, it’s a different thing altogether, and that’s what I enjoy most. For example, I can easily sit around with other women and say, ‘Eat *didi*, drink *didi*.’ We’ll sit together, we’ll go for a walk together, we’ll go to the cinema together, we’ll see a movie together, we’ll do everything together. But there’s something more that goes on with a man. It’s a lot more fun to talk to a man.

17. We owe this insight to Ved Prakash Vatak (personal communication).
18. Sulekha uses the term *koṭha* [‘room’] when referring to her hijra-family lineage, a term frequently used by Hindi speakers in reference to the room of a prostitute.

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