

## ARTICLE

**RESISTING MARGINALISATION AND NEGOTIATING LEGITIMACY: THE HIJRAS OF INDIA**

BY CHARLOTTE TROY

"IN MEMORY OF GEORGE ZELICHOWSKI"

**Abstract:** *Based on six weeks of research in Gujarat, India, this article examines how the hijras of India resist marginalisation and negotiate legitimacy within Indian society. I explore the aesthetic authenticity hijras are expected to uphold. I also analyse the extent to which these authenticating expectations cause legitimacy versus marginalisation in relation to how much choice and resistance is available to hijras. Finally, I examine how suffering can lead to solidarity which, this article will argue, forms a platform from which hijras can challenge marginalisation through participation in the media and politics.*

**A note on the gender pronouns used in this paper:** *Whilst hijras identify as neither man nor woman, they present as female and refer to each other using the feminine. Thus, I will use female pronouns throughout this paper.*

**A note on names used in this paper:** *The names of each of my informants have been replaced with pseudonyms with the exception of Laxmi Tripathi who has agreed to be named. When informants are quoted the pseudonym will be referenced in italics following the quote in order to differentiate from author references.*

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**Introduction**

Hijras have long fascinated anthropologists, many of whom have focused on the construction of gender, or the discrimination hijras face. Few have focused on how hijras resist marginalisation and negotiate legitimacy. Whilst Nanda and Reddy (2012) have argued that hijras have a place within Indian society, I will argue that this place is conditional and rests upon several measures of authenticity and legitimisation, which may marginalise hijras and reduce the degree of

choice afforded to them. I will demonstrate that, regardless of the marginalising expectations hijras are subjected to, they are still able to use their own agency to resist marginalisation to some extent. Hijras are beginning to mount a resistance and carve out their own space within society rather than being forced into a pre-determined space of society's choosing.

**Method**

Before my arrival in Gujarat, I had been in email contact with the director of an LGBT NGO who graciously agreed to assist me during my fieldwork. Whilst this NGO had not had an international student researching within the NGO before, they have conducted their own research, and helped to facilitate interviews

with many hijras for me. I was able to interview twenty-three informants in total: six gurus<sup>1</sup> (including one celebrity hijra), eleven *chelas*<sup>2</sup>, one transwoman and five *kothi*<sup>3</sup> in both *akharas*<sup>4</sup> and guru households<sup>5</sup>.

### 1: Authenticity of Saris and Castration

*'She is the leader of the hijras!' Says Tivra regarding Shakti (a transsexual NGO employee).*

*'Then where is your sari?!' I ask. We laugh, but the quip is not exactly a joke, at least not an untruthful one.*

*For what is a hijra without her sari?*

This section will explore how hijras attempt to attain legitimacy, by discussing what it means to be an "authentic" hijra. The issue of where exactly hijras fit within society, if they fit at all, has often come down to their physical appearance and the performance of this appearance in an authentic manner. The discussion of authenticity will focus on the use of saris as an indicator of tradition and spirituality and thus legitimacy, as well as the emasculation operation and the impact this has on the lives of hijras.

#### Conceptualising Authenticity

The anthropological definition of authenticity has been conceptualised as both a fluid continuum and an absolute binary. Lindholm (2008:9) regards Rousseau as 'the inventor of modern authenticity'; Rousseau believed true authenticity is akin to truthfulness with the self and society. In this manner, authenticity is seen as existing on a very rigid binary; the individual is either authentic or inauthentic based on their actions. However, Muršič (2013) argues stringently against this dichotomy; instead, he conceptualises authenticity as completely fluid to the point that he finds the concept to be entirely useless. Muršič explains that authenticity is wholly subjective and that 'authenticity is inseparable from culturalism (or nationalism) i.e the belief

that there is an authentic tradition of a people' (Muršič, 2013: 47). Whilst Muršič may be correct in describing authenticity as top-down form of nationalism, this does not mean that binary authenticity is not adhered to and endorsed by the public. For example, Modi's government is a stringently Hindu traditionalist organisation which reflects the public's belief that 'there is an authentic tradition of the people' (Muršič, 2013: 47). Whilst authenticity for the individual certainly can be subjective as Muršič suggests, binary authenticity is also often imposed by institutions and the wider public.

Although some hijras would view themselves as fully 'authentic', their authenticity may not be viewed as legitimate in the eyes of the Indian public. Considering the context of my research, as well as my informants' emphasis on public opinion, it seems pertinent to use the binary conceptualisation of authenticity evidenced by Indian public standards. Whilst Muršič regards authenticity as 'a building block of exclusion' and a 'tool of differentiation', it is also a useful concept from which to examine the ways in which hijras succumb to this image of authenticity set by the public, and how they resist it.

#### Saris and Spirituality

Hijras are expected to project a celibate, pious image by not appearing out of their households after six at night and not being seen to have boyfriends or partners. By projecting this image, they are able to embody a spiritual identity and closely associate themselves with Bahucharaji<sup>6</sup>, thereby authenticating themselves and their gurus as legitimate hijras. One of the most notable aesthetic performances of spiritual authenticity hijras spoke of was wearing the sari. All of the hijras I interviewed made it very clear that it is quite impossible to present oneself to the public in anything other than a sari and still be regarded as 'spiritual'. Three of my informants specifically mentioned that if they do not wear the sari, the public has no

respect or belief in the authenticity of their identity.

*'People will ask for your blessing and everything. Because automatically there is a respect from the people. Especially when in the sari.'* (Siri)

*'We cannot wear the clothes you are wearing, only saris. Because the public believe in us.'* (Raaida)

*'How can it be possible that I can ask for alms in normal clothes? They see the saris and they believe.'* (Alima)

perform or stage their authenticity and thus they meet the standards set by the public for legitimacy (MacCannel, 1973).



Figure 1: Three of my informants wearing the traditional sari (photo credit: the author)

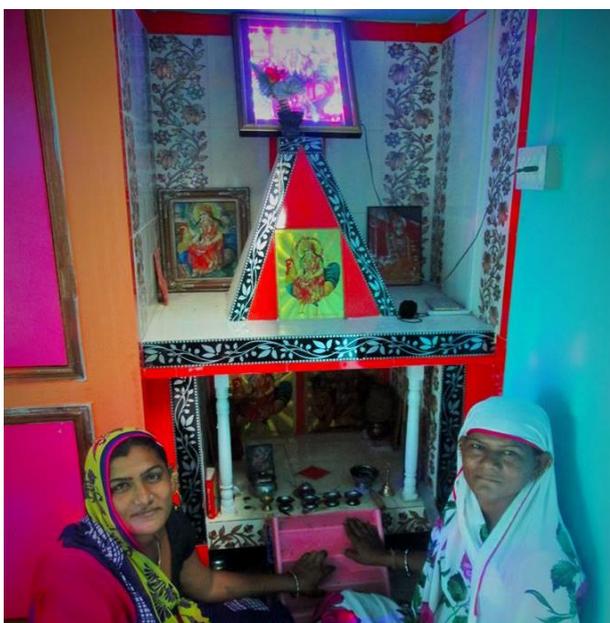
If hijras were to ask for alms<sup>7</sup> whilst dressed in the jeans they wear around the NGO office, their performance of authenticity would fail because belief in their spirituality would be undermined. The Indian public, if they are engaging with a hijra, may not entirely care for how closely the hijra feels their spirituality connects with Bahucharaji as long as they follow the religious protocol of dressing in a sari. Thus to be authentic, a hijra must be *visually* connected to the Bahucharaji through their appearance, as it is this goddess who bestows her power to bless and curse. By appearing visually as they should, hijras

The experience need not be entirely "true" as such but the public must *believe* it to be so (Cohen, 1988), for a successful performance is considered a perfect balance between 'performance of authenticity and practice of authenticity' (Muršič, 2013: 54). This is reflected in the lack of knowledge about the spiritual myths and connections the hijra community has with Bahucharaji; as Laxmi told me 'whether they are spiritual or not, they will show they are spiritual. That is the way they are earning their bread and butter'. Thus, the visual performance of aesthetic authenticity is far more important than the truthfulness of it

in order to be ascribed legitimacy by Indian society.

### Nirvan: "The Ultimate Proof"

This aesthetic performance of wearing the sari is, however, increasingly being challenged by the pervasiveness of *kothi* pretending to be hijras: 'They wear saris and collect alms' (*Maha*). The influx of "imposter" hijras has led to suspicion of hijra legitimacy in wider society, creating higher standards of authenticity.



**Figure 2: Two informants displaying their household shrine to Bahucharaji - note the traditional shrine also includes an electric, lit-up picture of Bahucharaji (Photo**

Therefore, when a hijra's performance fails during her rounds asking for alms, many will turn to their ultimate performance: they will lift their sari. This is done in order to reveal the undeniable, physical proof of their hijrahood, the evidence of the castration procedure: nirvan<sup>8</sup>. By displaying her mutilated genitalia, a hijra can create a physical performance of her liminality, a performance that cannot be questioned: 'the ultimate proof' of identity (Reddy, 2005: 226). This performance is exclusive to hijras. No other person can emulate emasculation since it is an irreversible operation. The *kothi* that pretend to be hijras

are thus caught out 'because they are not castrated so how can they ask them for the alms?' (*Maha*).

It is particularly important to note that a hijra who is castrated has begun a path that cannot be undone; once castrated there is no possibility to "fully" transition to female with gender reassignment surgery. There is also a perception amongst the hijra community that there is no turning back to "normal" life as a man either; as one of my informants asked rhetorically, 'Who will marry a eunuch?' (*Prachita*). Thus, a nirvan hijra cannot be denied; their castration is evidence of their identity as a hijra. Lifting the sari becomes a performance of frustrated proof: 'It is a frustration for us, because it is our right for asking the alms.' (*Mouna*).

Wilson (2006) has argued that this performance may have a reverse effect amongst "modern" Indians who see this traditional performance as "backwards". However, Sunny explained that the public 'know that we (hijras) are shameless', thus, those who witness the lifting of the sari 'will be scandalised because he will be in a market place or amongst relatives.' (*Kyna*). So, whilst the individual may not believe in the religious curse of lifting the sari, the performance rarely fails because of the ensuing experience of social embarrassment for the viewer.

This section has demonstrated how public expectation can impact upon hijra identity and legitimacy. Whilst some scholars, such as Nanda and Reddy (2012), have argued that hijras have a space afforded to them in Indian society, this space is rigid and imposing. Hijras are able to make use of some of these public expectations, such as that of castration in order to collect alms. However, it is argued here that spirituality should be qualification enough to collect alms, rather than the requirement of castration as 'Nirvan is only for the public, Bahucharaji does not ask this' (*Kyna*).

## 2: Choice and Resistance: Setting the Frontstage, Hiding the Backstage

*I once asked an informant how difficult her choice to become nirvan was. Her eyebrows knitted and she asked me 'What choice?' (Kyna)*

Throughout this section I will explore the thin line between legitimisation and marginalisation by examining the decision-making process behind becoming nirvan, and the degree of choice available when making this decision. I will also analyse how the backstage and frontstage<sup>9</sup> performances of hijras are beginning to tease a new type of authenticity into existence through quiet resistance.

### Acceptance or Marginalisation?

There is considerable debate over whether being nirvan enables acceptance and legitimacy for hijras or if it is, in fact, a very clear demonstration of non-acceptance and marginalisation. Denny (1997) argues that Indian society creates a place in which the third gender can fit; it does not force people into a gender binary as in the West. Nanda (1999: 32) agrees, noting that, 'hijras transform their impotent maleness and associated lack of status into generative power through emasculation'. However, Cohen (1995) and Agrawal (1997) argue very clearly that to view emasculation as powerful acceptance in Indian society is to ignore the level of bloody violence society expects of a hijra in order to be viewed as legitimate.

Out of the seventeen interviews I conducted (with those who identified specifically as hijra), only one person I spoke to identified as neither man nor woman; all of the other informants described their identity as feminine, despite sixteen having been (or planning to be) castrated. It is important to note that castration is entirely different from sexual

reassignment; castration leaves the individual without genitals whilst male to female reassignment surgery includes constructing female genitalia. I was surprised that so many hijras chose nirvan despite feeling female. Why did they not choose sexual reassignment surgery? When I asked my informants this, two responses were given. Firstly, hijras wanted to undergo the operation in order to provide physical proof to the public (and to other hijras) of their authentic identity. Secondly, they underwent nirvan in order to appear more feminine *without* transitioning<sup>10</sup>.

**'So, just to prove ourselves, we get castrated.'** (*Fiza*).

All of the nirvan hijras I interviewed told me that that they had become nirvan in order to show that they 'are not duplicates, [they] are real' (*Siri*). These participants stressed that a non-nirvan hijra is a 'fake' and she is cheating society by tricking them since they don't consider a hijra "real" unless castrated. Kyna made it distinctly clear that she considers castration as purely practical, as 'something to scare the public (into giving alms) other than that there is no religious purpose' (*Kyna*). Whilst Anvy noted, 'It's a very practical reason, we need to lift our saris sometimes. To show that we are not man or woman. It has practical value'. Therefore, I refute Taparia's (2011) claim that emasculation is a part of a hijra's inherent identity; it is instead a way to prove themselves to society. To support this position, Maisa tells me 'society won't believe if you are not castrated. The people believe that the castrated people are the only real hijras.'

However, non-nirvan hijras are also afraid of the hijra community itself, for if other hijras catch someone who is not castrated asking for alms, they are likely to perceive this person as encroaching upon their livelihood and thus react violently. 'People identify between an original and a duplicate [hijra]. Even hijras. So, every day I have a fear that they recognise that I am still not castrated when I am asking for alms.' (*Sadia*). The hijra community has

succumbed to the public expectation of nirvan, as they are willing to impose these expectations upon other hijras.

There are few options for non-nirvan hijras other than undergoing nirvan, turning to sex work or taking the risk of being found out and beaten. When an individual joins the hijras, they are 'ejected from their families and the society' (*Laxmi*). So, when a hijra experiences violence there is rarely anywhere else to turn. In agreement with Abdullah et al (2012), some of my informants described emasculation as optional, in the sense that their gurus had not forced them to undergo it. However, on a practical level it is nerve-wracking for a hijra to ask for alms as non-nirvan, due to the lack of legitimacy they feel and the potential danger they face. Many of my informants described emasculation as 'compulsory' (*Mouna*) or 'not optional' (*Smaya*) due to the necessity of being able to prove their identity as a "real" or "original" hijra to the public. Emasculation is a defence and proof mechanism; a non-nirvan hijra may be mistaken for *kothi* and beaten while a nirvan hijra has a visual defence in the physical claim to her hijrahood. Therefore, the hijra community may be using emasculation as a means of legitimisation, but it is in response to harassment rather than through a personal preference.

**'Look at my breasts, I look like a woman, no? I am.'** Siri

As noted earlier, emasculation holds many hijras back from sexual reassignment surgery. Most of my informants said that they would prefer a sex change and often spoke of their wish to appear more feminine. For example, Sunny told me that she underwent emasculation to become more feminine as 'step by step you get the women's hormones'. When I asked Sunny, and other informants, why they did not undergo a full sex change, they told me that it would be impossible to ask for alms. Transwomen are expected to behave like anyone else in Indian society, since they are not accepted as the disciples of

Bahucharaji. The perception of transsexuals includes associations with sex work due to a lack of other skills: 'transgenders<sup>11</sup> go for sex only' (*Sunny*). Sunny told me that she chose to become a hijra because 'it's more respectful than being transgender (meaning transsexual)'. While she admitted that if given the chance, she would rather be transsexual and work 'in some NGO, some better place' but, she felt limited in that she only has one skill: 'asking for alms for blessing babies'.

Another of my informants, a particularly feminine-presenting individual, told me that she has considered becoming transsexual but plans to return to the hijra community because she is 'alone, [and does not] have immediate family. I don't feel secure enough if I continue to stay as TG<sup>12</sup>.' (*Sajala*). My informants' reliance on asking for alms for a living, and the necessity of being nirvan in order to do this, held many informants back from becoming transsexual. Fully transitioning to female makes the individual vulnerable as there may not be a livelihood available for them after their transition is complete. In addition, there is no going back as transsexuals cannot ask for alms and the sex reassignment operation cannot be undone. Therefore, whilst emasculation may legitimise hijras in the eyes of the general public, it constrains hijras who are subjected to this societal expectation. Sajala and Sunny may be able to choose whether or not they want to undergo castration instead of a sex change, but when one choice likely leads to poverty, is this really any choice at all?



For both

Figure 3: Informant relaxing at home, away from the public and the "front stage" (photo credit: George Zelichowski).

### Staging a Resistance

My research demonstrates a lacuna in the literature. There is a newly emerging type of hijra identity constructed by "independent" hijras<sup>13</sup>. Independent hijras do not live in a hijra household and, although they usually have gurus, they are subjected to fewer rules and expectations in their daily lives than their fellow *chelas*, who live in guru households and *akharas* (Sahaja and Lakshya Trust, 2012: 29). These hijras often retain links with their families (who are usually supportive), and have a very modern, western lifestyle. They are slowly, and quietly, beginning to resist the public expectation of the "traditional" hijra.

Goffman (1959) identifies the frontstage as what the performer presents to the public, the image with which they can garner authenticity and accumulate social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In contrast, the backstage is where the performer may relax with fellow performers, revealing in this case the "unofficial" life of hijras.

independent and traditional hijras the frontstage is for conforming to aesthetic practices when they are in public asking for alms. As noted previously, this includes wearing a sari and keeping an asexual and "proper" identity within the community. Sunny describes the difference: 'when I ask for alms I am a goddess. When I go home, I am me.'

The backstage lives of independent and traditional hijras differ. For example, traditional hijras, such as *chelas* within *akharas*, are expected to continue their front stage performance whilst backstage to some degree, in order to retain a sense of legitimacy amongst the public. For example, they will not be allowed to leave the household after 6pm in order to retain the image of celibacy expected of a hijra, whereas many independent hijras will have boyfriends, wear Western clothing and stay out late. Overall though, the backstage lives of many hijras are becoming increasingly modern, especially for the next generation. This was reflected on my very first day of fieldwork in which I was invited to a disco held by the NGO with which I worked. The disco included a dancing

competition in which *kothi*, transwomen and hijras took part. The distinction between the “old school”, traditional hijras and the younger hijras was palpable. The younger hijras danced sexily on the dance floor, whilst the elder hijras sat on the side-lines in their saris chatting and clapping for the dancers.

I interviewed eight hijras whom I class as “independent”. These hijras would come to be interviewed in Western clothing, have boyfriends and spend their evenings socialising and sometimes participating in sex work. This is in direct opposition to the spiritual, chaste, and religious performance expected of hijras. Since these hijras do not live with their gurus they are not subjected to the same policing as others; they are able to challenge the expectations of society that gurus often enforce. This is because they cannot ruin the image of a guru household or *akhara* if they are not part of one; there is no image to uphold. This is unlike the *akharas* where gurus endeavour to make their *chelas* good “ambassadors” for their household.

Cohen (1988) notes that all versions of authenticity are social constructs and therefore negotiable. Independent hijras are in a safer place to negotiate these societal constructs of authenticity. Scott (1987) argues that the backstage area can also be a space for resistance. Independent hijras are certainly resisting societal expectations by living the life of a transwoman backstage. They are able to embrace their “true” identity by dropping the aesthetic performance discussed in section one, they dress as they like and do not have to observe the chastity expectations found within hijra households.

Even on the frontstage, hijras have been somewhat successful in forcing tradition to move along with modernity, as many of my informants had undergone breast surgery, most having implants if they could afford it. Siri was very proud of her breasts and commented that people had mistaken her for a woman on her recent flight to Delhi. She was delighted

that she had been able to “fool” people; ‘they didn’t even know! I saw the men looking.’ Breast implants are a new development for hijras. At one time, hijras would have had flat chests covered by their saris, however, they have been able to edit the image of authenticity over the years, simply by huge numbers of the community having breast implants, thus normalising the practice (Cohen, 1988). In this way, hijras have been able to invent tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) by reinventing what an “authentic hijra” should look like.

### Breaking the Fourth Wall

The extent to which this backstage performance resists the expectations of society and affords the hijra some self-legitimation is tempered by two key issues. Firstly, if the identity of the hijra’s backstage was to bleed into the frontstage, their identity as a spiritual expert would be questioned, they would be



Figure 4: Siri's casual “backstage” outfit (photo)

assumed to be a transsexual and therefore they would not have a right to ask for alms. If they were to “break the fourth wall” and acknowledge to the public that their front stage performance was not as authentic as it seemed, their identity would be questioned and they would lose their legitimacy. The dynamics of the backstage are never fully brought forward to the frontstage, and thus never directly challenge the public perception of what a traditional hijra is.

The second issue preventing full resistance of societal expectations by hijras is that of emasculation, few hijras resist this particular expectation. Of the eight independent hijras I interviewed, only two were not nirvan and only one intended to never undergo the operation. This is because most of the hijras I interviewed (and hijras in general) are uneducated and thus unable to support themselves as anything but hijras; their only skill is that of blessing the public. It is the hijras' dependency on spirituality in order to make a living which traps them in a performance of religiosity. Sunny explains it succinctly: 'When you're going to the hijra community it is the only source of income, look at me, look!' She doesn't believe anyone else will employ her, and she is likely correct for there is no equal opportunity law for hijras in India. Only recently were equal opportunity laws made for lower castes.

I interviewed one transwoman during my research; she had spent one month with the hijras but she felt 'embarrassed because [she is] educated' (*Mananya*). Mananya explained that, as an educated person, she could fully transition (to female) and attain a good level of employment. She was applying for an opportunity to become an air hostess at the time of the interview, and thus felt there was no need to remain as a hijra who 'begged' for a living. Deciding to become transsexual leaves many hijras vulnerable as their only job opportunities may be sex work or very low paid work. Few are willing to risk this to challenge the general public's perception of authentic hijras as castrated.

As is by now becoming evident, there are clear limits to the amount of resistance hijras are able to pose to the violent standards of authenticity Indian society sets in order to attain legitimacy. Many hijras, independent and traditional, are still undergoing nirvan and hiding their backstage practices from the public, instead of living their lives in the way they would like to, out of fear of losing their

livelihood and respectability. However, hijras have been able to resist marginalisation for thousands of years (Hinchy: 2014) and continue doing so by using their numbers to authenticate certain aesthetics of being hijra, such as having breasts, but also by using their backstage to live as their "true selves". The lines between back and front stage may still be somewhat rigid, but some hijras are beginning to set a new backstage. The independent hijras who refuse to become part of traditional *akharas* and refuse to bend to all of the guidelines set by the public and enforced by the gurus are beginning to recreate what it is to be a hijra. Over time we can expect the number of independent hijras to rise once the younger generations of hijras realise that *akharas* are not the only option, that guru households are available as well as independent gurus. Hijras are beginning to learn that they need not be subjected to such strict rules in order to make a living as a hijra. Independent hijras are paving the way for the next generation to begin resisting the measures of authenticity that the Indian public imposes upon the hijra community. The backstage is changing, it is only a matter of time before frontstage will follow.

### 3: Suffering towards Solidarity

*'She knows what it's like, you know? She's felt it. The pain of being hijra'*

*Siri smiles as she describes the similar experiences of suffering she has with a hijra activist in Kolkata.*

Hijras are still marginalised on a daily basis, despite meeting Indian societal expectations of authenticity. This discrimination is evidenced in the lack of specific equal employment law; poor healthcare (Khan et al, 2009) and education; the incorrect, often offensive, terms used to describe them in the media (The Humsafar Trust, 2015: 15); and the 'derisive comedy or disgust' with which they

are viewed on a daily basis (Summers, 2005: 35).

As a result of this pejorative conceptualisation of the hijra community, hijras have begun to engage with the media in order to resist this marginalisation. Perhaps one of the most well-known hijras within the media sphere is Laxmi Tripathi. Laxmi has campaigned tirelessly for many years for the rights of hijras. She has also appeared on Indian reality TV shows and has written a book about her experience of being hijra: *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Ironically, it is the hijra community's best-known member that finds herself the least liked in that same community, according to my informants. This section will argue that this lack of enthusiasm for Laxmi is a result of her perceived lack of suffering, due to which there is no sense of *communitas* or solidarity between her and "normal" hijras.

This final section will also highlight the importance of the shared experience of suffering in order to create solidarity from which a public platform can be built. It will demonstrate how public platforms, such as the media and politics, are used by hijras in order to resist marginalisation and reshape the image of hijras in the public.

### **Suffering and Forming Solidarity**

Suffering can be considered a rite of passage within the hijra community. All hijras go through a 'separation' phase from society to some extent (Gennep, 1960: 11); Laxmi describes this as being 'ejected from mainstream society when [hijras] come out'. They then go through a period of suffering, which can be through disownment from family or violence. During this liminal period a sense of *communitas*<sup>14</sup> is formed (Turner, 1969) as each hijra acknowledges that all "true" hijras have been through a similarly difficult experience. Thus, they create a new 'community... of equal individuals' (Turner, 1969: 96). Finally, they re-emerge as "authentic" hijras and their suffering legitimises their identity; they have earned it.

Kleinman and Kleinman (1997: 2) suggest that 'collective modes of experience shape individual perceptions and expressions' which, this paper argues, leads to solidarity amongst those who share these experiences. In the case of hijras the most commonly shared experience can be said to be that of suffering. Many of my informants told harrowing tales of their "coming out" as hijras in which their family disowned them or, in the case of Fiza, 'sometimes beat [her]'. They would go on to describe the fear they felt at becoming a social outcast and of 'being teased by society' (*Sadia*). The very identity of a hijra is based on some form of suffering; Prachita explains that 'it is the lot of a hijra to suffer'. Even the origin stories of hijras are based on suffering; the Hindu tales of Ram<sup>15</sup> and Bahucharaji<sup>16</sup> both include pain and suffering on the part of hijras, in return for which they are blessed by Bahucharaji (Ung Loh, 2014: 32). Experiences of suffering are shared in some way by most hijras and it is this shared experience that leads to an 'identification with a collectivity that includes a sense of mutuality and solidarity' (Hunt and Benford, 2007: 434). This is reflected in my informant's negative thoughts on Laxmi.

### Lack of Solidarity with Laxmi

Laxmi Tripathi was the first hijra to represent the Asia Pacific region at the UN, and has campaigned diligently for the rights of hijras for many years. And yet, when I asked each of my informants what they thought of her, most seemed unimpressed. 'Laxmi fights for the rights but... What Laxmi is doing, it's just for her own publicity... not for the community' (*Maisa*). Maisa acknowledges the work Laxmi does for the hijra community and yet she still doubts her intentions. Why is this? There is a lack of solidarity; hijras believe that Laxmi has not been through the hijra rite of passage of suffering.

For example, Laxmi never underwent nirvan. 'She doesn't know the pain [of the procedure]' (*Kyna*) or the fear usually associated with being non-nirvan as she has never had to ask for alms. Laxmi has not experienced the violence of public expectations. Due to this she was able to retain some male rights when her father passed away. She was able to perform his funeral rites, as eldest son, since she was uncastrated (Tripathi, 2015: 150). Most hijras lose their rights as males within the family once they become hijra. Laxmi has not had to sacrifice her identity as a son as so many hijras do. Interestingly, some of my informants were also trying to re-establish themselves as sons by sending money back to their families. My interpreter told me 'whatever [Siri] is getting in money she is giving it to his family to survive'; note the change in pronoun when referring to Siri in relation to sending money to her family, she is able to re-attain her role as male, as a son. In fact, some informants had been able to repair family ties as a result of their financial support: 'that's the reason [my parents] have been sensitised. Because [my alms are] the only source of income for them' (*Nyru dhya*). However, they have had to fight for their rights as sons by sending their money home whilst, in their opinion, Laxmi has retained her role as eldest son effortlessly: 'She has never had to fight' (*Kyna*). Laxmi

always received familial support: 'I am a hijra and have been accepted by my family. This is rare... they never stopped me from expressing myself.' (Tripathi, 2015: 168).

In addition to this, Laxmi has never struggled financially, she is Brahman caste<sup>17</sup>. She has not been faced with the decision that many independent hijras face between transsexuality and hijrahood. She has never known the fear of choosing between making enough to survive and her identity. Since she has never feared destitution she can afford to '[Reveal] some secrets ... you know, very close traditions' (*Kyna*) and ruin the spiritual image of hijrahood by having a partner for all the public to see. She will not suffer the backlash from removing the mystery surrounding the hijra community, as she is economically and socially stable enough not to be affected.

Although it is undeniable that Laxmi has suffered throughout her life, experiencing sexual abuse when younger (Tripathi, 2015: 5),



Figure 5: Laxmi  
(photo credit:  
George



Figure 6: Madhu Bai Kinnar  
(photo credit: Khabar)

suffering is a 'social status we extend or withhold depending largely on whether the sufferer falls within our moral community' (Morris, 2007: 40). Thus, those who simply see her glamorous figure in the news or on the television believe she has not suffered enough in their opinion and thus, they do not recognise her as a "normal" hijra. Due to this conceptualisation of Laxmi as an outsider, someone who does not know the suffering of a "true" hijra, other hijras express no solidarity with her as 'Solidarity is a commitment to the human person, to the otherness of the sufferer' (Regan, 2010: 123). None of my informants believed she had suffered and are thus unwilling to commit to Laxmi.

### Change through Solidarity

On the other hand, there are hijras in the media on a local level who are shown considerable solidarity by my informants and the wider hijra community. For example, Manabi Bandyopadhyay recently became India's first hijra college principle (Dasgupta, 2015) and Madhu Bai Kinnar recently became the first hijra to 'win civic polls and be declared mayor' in Chhattisgarh (France-Presse, 2015). When I asked my informants about these individuals they responded by announcing their pride that someone 'from the community' had achieved such prestigious positions. When my informants talked about regular local hijras they'd seen in the news who were getting jobs or gaining political positions, they were full of admiration and called it 'a triumph' for the hijra community. Madhu is Dalit caste<sup>18</sup> (Deep Singh, 2015) and had been expelled from her family, in a similar manner to many of the hijras who support her, (although, notably, she has been "reclaimed" by her family since she was voted in) (Bhardwaj, 2015). Madhu is relatable, as she has been through the same experience of suffering as the rest of the hijra community. This feeling of solidarity and pride in other members of their community results in marches and communal initiatives. For

example, when Madhu Bai Kinnar was running for election she 'did [a] door-to-door campaign with [her] sisters' (Bhardwaj, 2015). Shabnam Mausi<sup>19</sup> also received similar support from the hijra community in her area who contested 'the November civic polls' and raised between 60-70,000 rupees for her campaign (Sheena, 2015). The hijra community makes sure to support those they believe truly understand their own subjective situations rather than those, who like Laxmi, are not perceived to have had the same lived experience of shared suffering.

My informants were also very supportive of Shakti, a transwoman who works for the NGO I researched within. Most of my informants knew Shakti, many very well. Shakti is fighting for the rights of hijras and transsexuals to use government hospitals for castration and sex reassignment procedures. Though the fight was still ongoing when I concluded my fieldwork, Shakti had already had some success in creating acceptance for trans people in Vadodara. One of the journalists, who covered her fight for her sex reassignment operation in 2013, started the year by referring to Shakti as a 'man who prefers to call himself [Shakti]' (Sharma, 2013a) and ended the year by referring to her as a transsexual person who 'may play a key role' in changing sex reassignment government policy (Sharma, 2013b). This is a positive change for Shakti, and the trans community in general in Baroda, as the media sets the tone for wider society and disseminates the language the public will use when referring to the trans community.

Many informants told me that they 'feel a bit proud' when they see Shakti in the newspapers. 'She is fighting for us. If she will fight, after that I will come [and] many people like me, will also benefit' (*Mananya*). Despite the fact Shakti is transsexual rather than third gender, hijras support her because she is making changes that will affect these hijras in their lifetime. The Third Gender Law <sup>20</sup> (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of

India & Ors, 2014) is regarded as irrelevant to modern hijras as it unlikely to result in change during their lifetime and some of my informants even regarded this law as creating more inequality for hijras. Laxmi herself had worked closely with those trying to have this law passed, she is even mentioned in the legal text regarding it, yet every hijra I interviewed told me they had seen 'no difference' since the ruling in favour of recognising hijras as third gender. This demonstrates that whilst Laxmi is having an impact on a larger, structural scale, the hijra community places more emphasis on local scale change such as the work Shakti is doing.

### **The Limits of the Local**

Focusing on individual, small projects may reflect many hijras' negative attitudes towards "mainstream society". It has become clear in the previous two sections that hijras remove themselves somewhat from the mainstream either through living in *akharas* or guru households<sup>21</sup> or by not taking part fully in "mainstream" life in order to maintain a spiritual, authentic, image. Some of my informants even told me that they did not want to be given the opportunity for equal employment as this would "force their hand". They would not be able to say 'we cannot be part of your society therefore it is our right to ask for alms' (*Alima and Pummy*) as they would, at least at a legal level, have a right to work and be part of society and would be expected to do so. They would lose their claim to their livelihood as it is their marginality that allows them to assert their claim to alms so aggressively. Their acquisition of legal employment equality would, in this case, create more inequality. For hijras, their lack of education means many would not be qualified enough to be employed well. Laxmi argues that many hijras are also scared of re-joining the mainstream because it 'has ostracised them totally.'

There is a lack of long-term, national initiatives on behalf of the hijra community due to a lack of solidarity with well-known hijras who have not, perhaps, suffered to the same extent as the rest of the community. The focus on smaller, community-based change as opposed to change brought about by more influential individuals who do not share the same experiences of suffering may prolong marginalisation. My informants may display some short sightedness in terms of what is best for the hijra community in the long-term by focusing on local housing initiatives rather than longer term goals such as education and employment equality for the next generation.

However, this paper argues that hijras fight back on their own, locality based, terms. It is crucial to listen to the voices of the hijra community, for it would be impossible to reduce marginality 'without listening to the victims' subjected to it (Regan, 2010: 129). So, whilst Laxmi is doing useful things for hijras, it is the "grassroots" hijras' voices which matter most in order to understand the basic issues they face on a daily basis.

This section has demonstrated the importance of solidarity amongst hijras in order to challenge marginalisation through the use of political campaigning. The necessity of suffering in order to create solidarity has also been critiqued as it has effectively reduced the support given to a useful member of the community (Laxmi). However, suffering towards solidarity has also given hijras the support network they need to campaign together on their own terms. It has prevented victim labelling of hijras as, by choosing their own advocates, they are able to use their own subjective agency to shape the way in which they resist marginalisation. Hijras *do* resist marginalisation by fighting back in a way that allows them to remain financially secure whilst attempting to bring change to the community slowly by focusing on "bottom up" change.

This section has also covered some of the achievements hijras have attained through

political and media campaigning. As these achievements continue, perhaps the frontstage discussed in section two will begin to intertwine with the backstage, thanks to Shakti and others like her such as Mayor Madhu Kinnar in Chhattisgarh, and Principle Manabi Bandyopadhyay in Kolkata. Over the years, as these mayoral and media campaigns slowly change public opinion and ease hijras into a new era of employment and support, we can expect a shift towards power for the independent hijras since more options will be open to them.

**Conclusion**

This paper has focused on the authenticating standards hijras are subjected to by the wider Indian public, the extent to which these standards marginalise or promote acceptance of hijras, and the extent to which these standards are adhered to or resisted by hijras. Of particular importance is the newly emerging independent hijra identity. This paper has illustrated the attempt by independent hijras to blur the line between their front and backstage lives in an effort to reimagine what an 'authentic' hijra is conceptualised as. This is assisted through shared solidarity amongst hijras due to the *communitas* formed as a result of similar experiences of suffering. Ironically, it is the suffering and marginalisation hijras are subjected to by the Indian public that creates solidarity and allows hijras to challenge this marginalisation and social stigma in turn.

At the end of my fieldwork Laxmi told me "hijras do not fight back, they are happy in their own pretty little world". But I have met seventeen hijras that do fight back. Whilst conformance to standards of authenticity continues, this is increasingly challenged by hijras in many different, and deliberate, ways. Laxmi does not believe that other hijras "fight back", however, there are many types of resistance, and whilst Laxmi's is loud and noticeable, it can often be the quiet local movements that make the most difference. The hijra community is able to challenge marginalisation subtly, this allows them to protect themselves whilst they resist. If Laxmi has failed to notice other hijras' resistance, this suggests that hijras are managing to resist safely and effectively as it is unlikely the Indian public will have noticed their quiet, but undeniable, resistance either. And yet, resistance is present and growing. Thus, hijras do resist marginalisation and negotiate legitimacy and they do so in a manner that allows them to safeguard their livelihood and

thus create a stable platform from which to negotiate equality.

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<sup>1</sup> A guru is a senior hijra who has more capital and, some say, more spiritual knowledge. Gurus run households and teach chelas the ways of hijrahood. They also make the rules of the household which their chelas must follow.

<sup>2</sup> A *chela* is the disciple of a guru.

<sup>3</sup> *Kothi* are effeminate gay men.

<sup>4</sup> An *Akhara* is a traditional hijra household. This household is usually run by one guru and includes roughly 8-10 *chelas*, although this varies. These households often have strict rules and the *chelas* feed their income directly back to the guru of the household. The structure is hierarchical; the *chelas* are subordinate to the guru and will do all of the cooking and cleaning of the house.

<sup>5</sup> The term guru household refers to hijra households that are not strict enough with their rules to be considered *akharas*.

<sup>6</sup> Bahucharaji, also known as Bahuchata Mata, is the Hindu patron deity of the hijras, whilst some hijras are Muslim they still worship this Hindu goddess. There are many mythological stories regarding her relatedness to the hijras of which only a few of my informants knew. However, all described their power to bless and curse as coming from the Bahuchara Mata who they described as protecting them.

<sup>7</sup> Alms are the main and usually only source of income for hijras. Hijras spend their days walking the streets (or trains) asking for money

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in exchange for blessings. The money collected is referred to as alms.

<sup>8</sup> Nirvan refers to the emasculation operation (castration).

<sup>9</sup> Front and backstage practices will be examined through different lenses. They will first be conceptualised as Goffman (1959) outlines; in this sense, frontstage refers to practices that are performed for others while backstage refers to contexts in which performance is dropped so that the individual can be themselves. Next, the backstage will be conceptualised as Scott (1987) describes it, as a place for resistance.

<sup>10</sup> Transitioning refers to transitioning to become a woman rather than third gender.

<sup>11</sup> Hijras use the term “transgender” to refer to transsexuals.

<sup>12</sup> TG is short for transgender, again referring to transsexual status.

<sup>13</sup> The author’s term for hijras who often dress and behave in a more “modern” or “western” manner than their traditional counterparts, when they are not asking for alms.

<sup>14</sup> *Communitas* is used here in the sense that Turner uses the term: A shared experience which creates a sense of equality within the

group of people who go through the experience (Turner, 1969: 96).

<sup>15</sup> Hijras spent 14 years in waiting for Ram.

<sup>16</sup> There are many stories associated with Bahucharaji; all include men being castrated by her for various reasons.

<sup>17</sup> Brahman is a high ranking “middle to upper class” caste.

<sup>18</sup> Very low caste, also referred to as “untouchable” due to the pollution they are associated with. Dalits have been systematically discriminated against in India for years, and many hijras come from this background.

<sup>19</sup> Shabnam Mausi is the first Hijra to be elected to public office.

<sup>20</sup> The Third Gender Law was brought into effect in 2014. It allows those in the transgender community to self-identify their gender on legal documentation. It has had little effect at a grassroots level thus the Indian Supreme Court is now considering affirmative action measures (FRSN, July 10 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Both *akharas* and guru households are usually situated on the geographical and social margins of society.