

Narrating Identity: the Employment of Mythological and Literary Narratives in Identity Formation Among the *Hijras* of India

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Abstract

This article explores how the *hijras* and *kinnars* of India use mythological narratives in identity-formation. In contemporary India, the *hijras* are a minority group who are ostracised from mainstream society as a result of their non-heteronormative gender performances and anatomical presentations. *Hijras* suffer discrimination and marginalisation in their daily lives, forming their own social groups outside of natal families and kinship structures. Mythological and literary narratives play a significant role in explaining and legitimising behavioural patterns, ritual practices, and anatomical forms that are specific to *hijras*, and alleviating some of the stigma surrounding this identity. In this article, I focus on certain narratives that *hijras* employ in making sense of and giving meaning to their lives, including mythological stories concerning people of ambiguous gender and myths associated with Bahuchara Mata. I argue that these ontological narratives serve to bring *hijra* identity into being and play a crucial role in constructing and authenticating *hijra* identity in modern India.

Keywords

Hijras; *kinnars*; myth; narrativity; identity.

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Two childless couples wanted a blessing from Bahuchara. One couple got the blessing and the wife became pregnant. The other then desired the blessing; his wife fell pregnant too. The couples planned for the children to marry, to link their families. But both of them had baby girls, and when these girls grew up, they loved one other and got married. This angered the local king. One day he was in the forest, with his horse and dog. He came across a lake and his dog drank from the waters. Instantly its sex changed. The king was amazed and led his horse to the water to drink. When it drank, it too became a female. He realised the power of the water and took one of the girls there to drink: she too became a boy.

This lake became the well at Becharaji, and it is said that any who enter the well come out as a *kinnar*;¹ their body changes, as does their face, voice, and sex.

Amma *guru*, Ahmedabad

The power of the goddess Bahuchara, the potential to change sex, the importance of oral myth traditions: Amma *guru's* story highlights several themes that are significant for a discussion concerning narrative and *hijra*² identity in contemporary India. In this article, I focus specifically on mythological and literary narratives that are employed in the construction of *hijra* identity and look at the role that narratives play in authenticating *hijra* identity, insofar as they appear to grant historical or religious sanction for *hijras'* 'alternative' gender roles and particular ritual identities. *Hijras* in contemporary India exist outside of mainstream society due to their perceived 'deviancy' in relation to their sexual orientation or anatomical presentation, by failing to fulfil heteronormative female and male gender roles. It is therefore important for *hijras* to draw upon and use particular narratives to legitimise their behavioural patterns and bodies, with respect to the sanction that sacred texts and narratives grant to *hijra* existence or to alleviate their subordinate position in society. These narratives are particularly concerned with the power, actions, or devotion of ambiguously sexed figures of the past, or explain the development of *hijras'* particular ritual powers and anatomical forms. Myths of gender changing individuals, stories associated with Bahuchara Mata (the main goddess with whom the *hijras* identify), and discussion of people of a 'third' nature in ancient texts form part of a cultural canon, through which both *hijras* and non-*hijras* conceptualise the *hijra* subject

¹ An alternative word for *hijra*, used commonly in Gujarat and other states in Northern and Central India. I use '*kinnar*' to refer to individuals in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, mirroring their terms of self-identification, and '*hijra*' when referring to individuals in India more widely.

² All Hindi words have been transliterated using the English Roman script and are consistently italicised, based on the modern form of transliteration used in R. S. McGregor's *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (1993). Spellings of deity names and names of individuals from classical Hindi texts have been obtained from W. J. Johnson's *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (2009). Words from Tamil have been transliterated according to the scheme adopted in the Syndicate of the University of Madras' *Tamil Lexicon* (1982). According to transliteration conventions, the correct spelling is '*hijrā*'; for this article, I use '*hijra*' (without diacritics) for easier reading. Individuals might prefer different terms, such as *aravaṇi* or *tirunaṅkai* in Tamil Nadu, or '*kinnar*' in certain states in northern India. Unless indicated otherwise, emphasis within quotations is found in the original and when referring to specific authors, I adopt their transliterations and spellings.

in modern India. These narratives function to bring *hijra* identity into being and to legitimise and gain a measure of respect for this identity in contemporary society. In this way, *hijras* create an identity through narrative that justifies their place, bodies, and status in the world.

Based upon research among *hijra* and *kinnar* groups in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat conducted in 2011, in this article I focus upon certain narratives that *hijras* employ in constructing a sense of a unique *hijra* identity in modern India. I argue that these narratives function ontologically, bringing *hijra* identity into being and authenticating such an identity, which is often perceived by mainstream society as 'deviant' and 'different', both sexually and socially. I begin this article by discussing the spaces that *hijras* occupy in the Indian context, in terms of gender performance and ritual role. I explore the variation that the identity category '*hijra*' encompasses and what it is to belong to a *hijra* group, which entails, in the majority of cases, leaving one's natal family and a failure to fulfil heteronormative practices of marriage and procreation. *Hijras'* perceived deviancy in relation to normative gender roles explains the discrimination that they face in mainstream society. In the face of such ostracisation, *hijras* draw upon particular narratives, such as those provided through sacred texts and myths, in order to explain their unique identity and status. Through a theorisation of narratives as fulfilling an ontological function, which provide a measure of explanation and coherence to *hijras'* lives, I explore the role that such narratives have in identity formation among *hijra* subjects. I will reflect upon the ways narratives are employed in identity construction through a discussion of ethnographic encounters, considering the role of both narrators and audience. In particular, I focus upon narratives associated with ancient texts and sacred history, specifically looking at myths associated with Bahuchara Mata, the patron goddess of the *hijras*. These narratives are used in particular ways to construct what *hijra* identity is and to give meaning and explanation to *hijras'* lives.

Locating the *Hijra* Subject

The terms '*hijra*' and '*kinnar*' are used to describe people who embody a wide variety of anatomical forms and perform a diverse number of gender and sexual practices and orientations. Individuals might identify, or be identified, as transsexual, transgender, transvestite, homosexual, and asexual individuals, MSMs (males who have sex with males), intersex people, and eunuchs. Some *hijras* call themselves 'female', but others identify as '*hijra*', '*kinnar*', a 'third sex', or, more recently, 'transgender', particularly individuals involved in or with knowledge of contemporary LGBT politics, in tandem with current government initiatives to identify and rectify inequalities faced by the 'transgender community'. Many *hijras* perform stereotypically feminine gender roles in regards to dress, gendered behaviour, and speech patterns,³ although others behave 'as men', but might wear cosmetics, jewellery, and keep their hair long, transgressing normative gender presentations. Often *hijras* adopt patterns of behaviour

³ *Hijras* also adopt male patterns of speech; for an excellent discussion of *hijra* language use and gendered speech patterns, see Hall 1995.

viewed as unacceptable for women, such as deliberately engaging with men and spending considerable time in public spaces. They inhabit spaces openly, often drawing attention to themselves with loud speech and hand gestures, including their unique hand clap, *'tālī'*, a 'cultural signifier' that circulates outside *hijra* communities to signify doubt about virility or homosexuality (Nair 2000: 50–1). Although their behaviour is seen as distinct from heteronormative female and male gender roles, *hijras* tend to perceive themselves as distinctly male or female, depending on an individual's preferences. However, there is confusion as to their gender status in mainstream society. In the 2011 census, the Indian State identified *hijras'* gender as 'other', which only met the approval of some *hijras*. A 2014 Supreme Court verdict ruled that *hijras* should be recognised under a separate 'third gender' category. *Hijras*, despite performing a gender identity that shores up the normative categories of male and female, nonetheless are constrained through inhabiting a positionality that is fixed in relation to those categories. Kira Hall argues that *hijras* do not occupy a position 'outside the male-female binary', but instead 'have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity' (1995: 13). Hall explains that most *hijras* during her fieldwork saw themselves as 'deficiently' masculine and 'incompletely' feminine (*ibid.*: 31). During fieldwork in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, the majority of *kinnars* I encountered identified as female. This gender identification references Hall's statement regarding the formation of gender identity within an existing male-female binary. Although *kinnars* did not see themselves as 'deficiently' masculine or 'incompletely' feminine, they had a clear notion of what it meant to have and perform a specific gender, especially femininity, and emphasised particular gendered behaviours.

Despite the variability of '*hijra*' identifications, *hijras* have been portrayed within academic literature as a 'third sex', an archetypal gender role that can be compared to various cross-cultural third sex groups (see Herdt 1994). Scholarship that portrays 'alternative' genders as plural and liberating (in relation to binary, heteronormative gender categorisation) is problematic, Hall notes, by leading to a 'false impression of the status allotted to these ambiguously sexed figures' (1995: 30). This portrayal suggests that *hijras* might enjoy a position of relative privilege in society, contradicting their narratives of marginalisation. Gayatri Reddy adds that literature that heralds a 'third sex' can be critiqued for disregarding the anatomical, psychological, and behavioural differentiations among individuals, as well as ignoring how sexuality and sexual identity interact with other modes of difference, such as class, caste, region, location, and religion (2005). *Hijras* face discrimination in mainstream society based on the perception that their gender behaviour, sexual practices, and bodily forms are 'abnormal'. Moreover, by joining the *hijra* community, individuals are perceived as failing to fulfil conventional gender norms, such as marriage and bearing children.

Although the phrase '*hijra* community' suggests a singular group, the term 'communities' might be more applicable given the regional and contextual differentiation between different groups across the Indian subcontinent. Households and communities are found throughout the country, due to the territorial division based on *hijras'* traditional ritual work of performing and giving blessings at weddings and birth ceremonies, known as *badhāī*. Each household

contains a few to around twenty members, all of whom contribute to the daily running of the house. Individuals join groups in various ways: babies or children are often given to *hijra* groups; pre-pubescent adolescents might join upon realising they do not fill normative gender roles and facing familial rejection as to their sexual or gender preferences; others join as adults and even after marriage and rearing children. Individuals must be initiated by a *guru* as her *celā* (a disciple); in turn, they initiate their own *celās*. The *guru-celā* relationship dictates certain behaviour: the *guru* provides a home, food, clothes, opportunities for work, and teaches them about membership of the household and wider community. In return, the *celā* brings in extra income, performs chores, and helps to look after their *guru*. Joining a community allows *hijras* to form relationships of support and affection with one another, alongside providing security and protection from social violence, which many *hijras* experience due to the severance of ties with their natal families. Moreover, a sense of shared group identity is developed through membership of a community, through shared practices, rituals, and performances unique to *hijras*.

Hijras claim ritual power through their ascetic practices and sexual purity, which produces creative or generative power. These ascetic practices are often more theoretical than practical but are necessary to legitimise their traditional blessing work. Although some *hijras* practice asceticism, others engage in sexual relationships with men or perform sex work, due to sexual desire, desire for a relationship, or economic necessity. Such practices also have a contextual aspect: many *hijras* who have sex live in metropolitan cities, though this does not mean that *hijras* in rural locations abstain from having sex. Moreover, hierarchical status can affect belief and practice. Higher status individuals tend to practice abstinence, or espouse discourses of asceticism, perhaps to set an example. One *guru* from a small city complained that younger *hijras*, especially from metropolitan cities, were acting in a way that was 'not of their culture' in regards to sexual customs. Their 'sexualised' behaviour was seen as unacceptable to elder *hijras* and *hijras* from rural areas. Evidently, there are elements of contradiction and tension between individuals, as an example here, in relation to sexual practices.

I have discussed various aspects of *hijra* identity to explain, in part, what it is to be a *hijra* and to belong to a *hijra* group in modern India. *Hijras* are commonly perceived as 'deviant' by mainstream society, due to their choice or inability to adhere to heteronormative practices of marriage and procreation and remain within their natal families, coupled with their 'abnormal' status in terms of anatomy and/or gender and sexual practice. Thus, *hijras* suffer extreme discrimination, forming marginalised communities, who remain separate from mainstream social communities in terms of lives, experiences, and narratives. Narratives thus serve an important function in the formation of *hijra* identity, particularly those that counter mainstream viewpoints that posit *hijra* identity as 'deviant' and 'abnormal'. *Hijras* use narratives in innovative ways in order to explain and justify their status and ritual role in contemporary Indian society, despite such narratives performing a double role. The use of 'sacred' or 'ancient' narratives defends the legitimacy of *hijra* identity, at the same time as it serves to fix and sanction the importance of such narratives, which themselves might correspond to heteronormative and stereotypically gendered discourses, in the construction of *hijra* identity. *Hijra* identity might not necessarily be legitimated

exclusively through the use of sacred and ancient narratives, given that such narratives themselves posit *hijra* identity in relation to heteronormative gender presentations, explaining away 'abnormality' or 'deviancy'. However, despite the limitations of such narratives, *hijras* do actively employ and interpret them in the construction of their identity, as a mode through which to explain and sanction their existence. Before embarking on a discussion of the narratives that negotiate and authorise *hijras'* unique sense of identity, a few theoretical considerations are necessary regarding the use of narrative in identity-formation.

Narrativity and Identity

The concept of 'narrative' can greatly aid a study of identity formation by taking into account the multiple narratives and identifications by which people frame their lives. I employ the theoretical approach advocated by Margaret R. Somers in her article 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach' (1994), who argues that studies of identity formation can be advanced through the concept of narrative, where narrative is no longer conceptualised as a representative mode but as a device that brings identity into being. Narrative here, as Somers theorises, is an 'ontological condition to social life', through which people define who they are and make sense of the world and their lives (p. 613). Somers states that:

...stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

(1994: 614)

By listening to an individual's narrative account of their identity, which may change over time and in different circumstances, we specify our approach to identity by considering how an individual is constructed and reconstructed in the intersecting spaces between time and place and power, all of which are continually shifting. This avoids a rigid categorisation of identity and allows multiple identifications across a variety of narratives. Therefore, narratives are fundamentally ontological in the sense that they do not just represent social or historical knowledge but help individuals become themselves. By considering ontological narratives as the stories through which individuals define and construct their lives, we can better understand how individuals and groups form a sense of social being and understand things that happen. This is performed within the various ontological and public narratives in which individuals are situated, and these are mediated by various institutions and not by individual will, where different narratives prevail in different situations. Somers writes that individuals only understand their experiences through the stories that are used to account for events around them (1994:

625): narrativity is thus a crucial marker of understanding in a world where things happen to people by converting the incomprehensible into coherent and understandable events.

In addition, Hayden White argues for the value of narrativity in representing real events. He suggests that this value arises out of a desire to have events display 'the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary' (1980: 27). Despite a desire for coherence and closure, identity – as presented through ontological narrativity – is not fixed. Rather, narrativity determines something that one 'becomes', where the individual is continually brought into being by the narrative itself. This mutability is necessary, given the multiple identifications made and variety of narratives one could assume, influenced by time, space, relational factors, and power constraints upon a given actor at a given time.

If use of narratives brings identity into being, it is important to consider how, and to what ends, *hijras* tell narratives about themselves, in response to mainstream discourses that maintain their marginalisation in society. White writes that narrative truth claims and the right to narrate are dependent upon a relationship to authority (*ibid.*: 25), but here we should note that it is *hijras'* lack of authority that makes their narratives crucial to their sense of identity. In a sense, *hijras* use their own narratives to produce a counter-discourse to the mainstream narrative, which portrays them as deviant subjects. This counter-narrative seeks to alleviate their place in society and legitimise their actions. An overall narrative is performed in constructing their sense of identity, as much as it is for mainstream society. Thus the question of prospective audience also comes to be important when considering why *hijras* narrate, which includes both *hijra* groups themselves and non-*hijras*.

Employing Myths and Narratives

The narratives discussed below are those that I encountered during fieldwork in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, supplemented by discussion of narratives found in scholarship on *hijra* identity. Whilst scholarship on *hijras* contains important discussions of narratives that can be used in legitimating the *hijra* subject (including excellent work by Nanda 1999; Reddy 2005), in this article I seek to extend such work by reflecting upon the specific ways in which narratives are adapted and used. I do so through the discussion of ethnographic encounters from Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, including a consideration of ways in which such 'counter-narratives' are used in reaction to mainstream narratives and how they, in turn, are viewed by non-*hijras* who form part of the audience for whom such narratives are employed. The majority of my research examined *kinnars'* political participation in state democratic processes in Madhya Pradesh, particularly in the eastern part of the state. However, how *kinnars* construct a sense of identity – in relation to mainstream discourses focusing on their marginality – was key to my project, and various narratives were exchanged with me from which this article, focusing on identity and narrativity, was developed. I interviewed individuals and groups of *kinnars* from different households in various towns and cities in eastern and central Madhya Pradesh. My research in Gujarat was focused on Ahmedabad

and Becharaji, the latter being the site where the only temple dedicated to the goddess Bahuchara Mata is located. Several *kinnars* live within or near the temple complex, serving as devotees to the goddess, an important household goddess in Gujarat (see Sheikh 2010). While unable to interview the *kinnars* in the temple, because their group leader was not present to give her permission, I interviewed lay devotees at the temple and in Becharaji, and interviewed *kinnars* from four groups in Ahmedabad. I found that narratives would change according to the individual telling each story and it was uncommon to hear a narrative being told in a similar way to another; however *kinnar* and *hijra* individuals primarily focused upon the status of mythological figures or sacred texts, using both individuals and texts in order to explore and explain *kinnar* subjectivity in modern Indian society. I have noted above that both listening and audience are important facets in the practice of the narrative constitution of identity and explore both in the discussion of myth that follows. When most myths and narratives were told to me, *kinnars* did not tell whole stories or link different versions of the same myth, instead working on the assumption that these are established stories, drawing upon a stock of myths which *kinnars* believe are well known. Thus, tellings varied according to different narrators. Moreover, the veracity of myths or accuracy of recording the words of a text were not stressed; instead, individuals preferred to tell stories in their own way and emphasise particularities that they (as individuals) saw as important. In some cases, there were no primary texts or sources to which *kinnars* referred, since many are oral myths which form part of a cultural canon.⁴ In fact, a lack of textual sources regarding the narratives employed by *kinnars* thus bolsters an argument focused on the importance of oral narrative traditions for this particular social group, which may be explained, to an extent, by the low literacy levels found among *kinnars*. With this in mind, I want to emphasise that it is how and why narratives are used that is the focus of the discussion here, rather than attesting to the veracity with which *kinnars* use specific sources. In most interviews, *kinnars* did not reference texts, more than the mere mention of the name for emphasis, for example, by saying, 'it is a story in the *Mahābhārata*', without expanding further upon where the story is found or what the text states. *Kinnars* did not seem to be interested in recounting myths or texts precisely, which will become clear in the discussion that follows. Rather,

⁴ 'Original' sources to which *hijras* and non-*hijras* might – but not necessarily – refer to include the *Mahābhārata*, the *Kāma Sūtra*, the *Manusmṛti*, and the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, as a means through which to establish *hijras*' gender. For example, a court judgment which attempted to establish the gender of a particular *hijra* quoted from the above texts and 'other historical sources' (Narain 2009: 460), drawing upon a diachronic body of relevant narratives through which a sense of *hijras*' gender could be conceptualised. Below, I consider how *hijras* might reference such texts, including the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (among others that might discuss gender ambiguity but are not employed) but in specific ways that do not place importance on detailed knowledge of the texts themselves, rather than trading in on the cultural capital that the names of such texts invoke. Several scholars have focused on the importance of textual narratives in establishing ambiguous gender identity (including Goldman 1993; Doniger 1999) but here I intend to consider the role that narrativity and oral traditions play in identity construction as these are more directly relevant to the focus of my discussion in this article.

kinnars, in the process of telling these stories, affirmed their identities to me as a researcher, people listening to the interviews, and themselves as *kinnars*. Moreover, *kinnars* wanted their tellings recorded, by tape recorder or written down, in order to reach a wider audience. I interpret these practices as part of the way in which *hijras* are taking part in their identity formation, based on how *hijras* themselves tell – and understand why they tell – these stories.

Ancient Texts and Sacred History

References to individuals with varying gender presentations occur throughout Indian narrative traditions, alluding to the existence of '*hijras*' throughout India's past, although the term '*hijra*' is often not used specifically in these texts or myths. Literary texts tend to reference individuals of ambiguous gender, including 'unmales', 'eunuchs' or '*klibas*' (perhaps from the adjective '*klīv*', 'impotent'); a third – and fourth – gender referred to as '*napuṃsak*'; those of a 'third sex', '*tritīya prakṛti*'; and people who might be categorised as 'transvestites', 'transgender', and those who undergo 'transsexual' transformations. These terms are not interchangeable and are problematic for failing adequately to include variations of materiality, sexual object choices, and sexual roles.⁵ A further example of individuals of ambiguous gender in Indian history is the eunuchs of Islamic courtly traditions. Scholars have focused on their roles as political advisors, administrators, and harem guardians (see Ayalon 1999; Scholtz 2001); the privilege enjoyed by these eunuchs suggests that *hijras* might be granted a form of historical legitimacy insofar as they can identify with 'Islamic' eunuchs, who enjoyed positions of power and prestige. Evidently there is a measure of respect in India for *hijra* identity based upon these historical and mythological figures. As a social group who are viewed as marginal because of their sexual and social status, *hijras* strive to maintain an association with the gender variant individuals of history and literature. By maintaining that they enjoyed a position of privilege 'in the past' or 'in history', *hijras* make a comparison with their relatively low respect in modern society. By linking themselves to historical individuals, who enjoyed higher social status, *hijras* sanction their own identity as ambiguously gendered individuals. Moreover, *hijras* tended to name particular historical figures who served important mythological or historical purposes, in order to derive legitimacy from such narratives which stressed the prominent role these individuals played in sacred history.

Using narratives and developing an association with historical figures is an ongoing 'mythmaking' process, as *hijras* claim non-biogenetic descent from such individuals to explain and authorise their unique bodily form, their 'role' in society, and their ability to bless or curse. These narratives establish group identity and allow *hijras* a way in which to define, explore, and accept their non-normative gender status. It is thus crucial to consider the narratives that *hijras* tell, which include representations of people 'of a third nature' (*tritīya prakṛti*) in ancient texts, myths about figures from literature and mythology

⁵ A problem also faced in using the term '*hijra*'. See Doniger 1999, pp. 279–80 for limitations of the terms regarding individuals of ambiguous gender status; also Zwilling and Sweet 1993, pp. 592–4 for terms used in ancient texts.

(such as Arjuna as Brhannadā, Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin, and Lord Rāma's blessing), and myths associated with Bahuchara Mata, the patron goddess of the *hijras*.

Hijras and *kinnars* often emphasise that their gender presentation is sanctioned through 'ancient texts and myths', referencing texts to which they did not specifically point or name. A lack of specific naming might point to the fact that *hijras* are unaware of such literature, or that they place emphasis on the possibility for ambiguity which is present in such references, rather than recalling the text accurately. References to ambiguous gender in texts such as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* confirms the existence of individuals who do not fit into 'male' or 'female' categories; it is the very fact that such beings are included in these ancient and sacred texts that *hijras* refer to, as an identity that in some way has been sanctioned in ancient history by being referenced and worthy of study. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* is thus an example of the sort of text to which *hijras* refer, despite not knowing the specifics of this particular text.

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* contains one of the earliest literary references to grammatical gender (roughly 8th to 6th century B.C.E). Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet analyse the text's discussion of three grammatical genders, as '*pumlinga*' (masculine), '*strilinga*' (feminine), and '*napumsakalinga*' (neuter), although they note that applying the neutral gender to humans is problematic.⁶ '*Napumsaka*' (literally 'not being a male') is taken to mean the possession of characteristics of both sexes but is ambiguous, referring to males who did not conform to gender-role expectations, including those who were impotent, effeminate, or transvestite (1996: 372, 362). '*Napumsaka*', taken as the term for the third grammatical gender, assumes that the 'unmale' is the true third sex, but by the beginning of the Common Era, Zwilling and Sweet argue that among schools of traditional medicine, a term actually translated as 'third sex' was introduced', '*tritiya prakriti*' (1996: 362–3). By the 4th century, this term was used as an equivalent for *napumsaka*, although it is unclear whether it refers to defective males, a recognised 'third sex', or a variation of gender identity. Zwilling and Sweet posit that that the 'third sex' term refers to 'feminised males' or transvestites, who are distinct from women (2000: 112). They explicitly link ancient 'third sex' identity and the modern-day *hijras*, who they call 'contemporary representatives' of the ancient third sex (1996: 363). Maintaining such an association between ancient and modern identities is therefore significant to contemporary *hijras* in order to authorise a modern identity that has its conceptual origins in antiquity.

In my interviews, *hijras* did not reference texts such as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, perhaps remaining unaware of such literature. However, *hijras* did refer to what they called 'ancient texts', saying that references to '*hijras*' existed in these texts, claiming that their identity was one that was both ancient and verified through 'textual references' to such an identity. Such references, in texts such as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, points to individuals of an ambiguous gender status who existed in the past, and who were referenced in ancient and sacred texts. This discussion therefore points to an example of the sort of texts *hijras* refer to, despite not recalling the text's specifics. Thus, it is general, rather than specific, knowledge to which *hijras* primarily refer, drawing upon a cultural canon to which such concepts belong. There was no importance placed

⁶ In this discussion, I adopt Zwilling and Sweet's transliterations and spellings.

on what actual texts narratives or concepts came from; *hijras* did not seem to be concerned that they could not name particular references, but rather, emphasis was placed on the notion that references existed, even if no-one knew what those references were. Unfamiliarity with ancient textual sources might not be uncommon for a group which is, on the whole, relatively illiterate, due to many *hijras* failing to complete formal education. It was, however, much more common for *hijras* to reference by name specific individuals who were famous for their ambiguous gender, or those who had played a prominent role in sacred history. These myths are part of a greater theme in ancient Hindu sources concerned with sexual ambiguity, transvestism, and sex and gender transsexualism (see Goldman 1993; Doniger 1999).

The regional location of *hijras* might determine the centrality of particular narratives. In Tamil Nadu, for example, a myth concerned with Aravāṇ, who married Viṣṇu in an incarnation of the maiden Mohinī, has particular importance, due to the annual festival at Koovagam. At the festival, *tirunaṅkais* give themselves in marriage to Aravāṇ and mourn his death, as widows, on the following day. The myth thus maintains a central role in the construction of *hijra* identity in this state (see Hildebeitel 1995; Craddock 2012). In Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, *hijras* interviewed drew upon three myths in particular: Arjuna as the 'eunuch' Bṛhannadā; the story of Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin; and Lord Rāma's blessing upon his return from exile. The first two myths are concerned with the gender ambiguity of two individuals who are significant in mythology more generally. In the myth of Bṛhannadā, Arjuna, one of the Pāṇḍava heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, spends a year at King Virāta's court, disguised as a 'eunuch', during the Pāṇḍava brothers' thirteenth year of exile. The brothers assume disguises: Arjuna is 'transformed' as a punishment due to his previous spurning of the nymph Urvaśī. Andrea Custodi notes that it is unclear whether he undergoes a physiological transformation or is just 'cross-dressing', but this transformation indicates the disguise's convincingness, as well as affirming the hero's masculinity (2007: 211–2). The story never confirms his gender in this disguise, but his transformation into a 'eunuch' allows *hijras* to identify with Arjuna, and in so doing, project their own identities onto one of the greatest warriors and virtuous individuals in Sanskrit epic poetry. *Hijras* referred to his ambiguous gender status, by means of explaining the fact of their own gender ambiguity, as well as pointing to the great virtue and heroic nature of his character. Arjuna is a noble hero, who plays an essential role in sacred history; association with this figure therefore reflects well upon *hijras*, if they too can demonstrate that they have similar characteristics. *Hijras* referred to Arjuna as an example of a virtuous character who had attained gender ambiguity, but his temporary status is not reflective of their permanent embodiment. However, allusion to a connection with Arjuna serves to gain a measure of respect for gender liminality, here mirrored in the figure of the *hijra*.

Hijras also refer to Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin, a female character in the *Mahābhārata* who attains physical and psychological masculinity through rebirth in order to aid Arjuna in killing Bhīṣma,⁷ the forefather of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas (van Buitenen 1978: 493, 532; Doniger 1999: 281–3). After being abducted by

⁷ Bhīṣma himself is a figure of ambiguous gender since he renounced his 'sexuality' and right to procreate as a vow to his brother (see Flood 1996; Fitzgerald 2007).

Bhīṣma, Ambā curses him and is promised by the god Śiva that she will be reborn as a man. She is reborn as Śikhaṇḍin, 'a male child who is a female',⁸ and plays a crucial role in aiding the Pāṇḍavas to kill Bhīṣma, since he had resolved not to shoot at anyone who was 'made of a woman', a 'former' woman, or one who appeared to be a woman. Whilst Śikhaṇḍin's female-to-male transformation does not fit the model of *hijras*' usually male-to-'female' transformations, this story is significant insofar as it highlights the role played by the 'ambiguous' Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin in one of India's most revered epics. Śikhaṇḍin is important in providing an example of the role that someone of ambiguous gender might play, and also embodies characteristics with which *hijras*, as a stigmatised group, might wish to associate. Śikhaṇḍin is a well-known character from the epic: *hijras* would cite his name as someone who had played a prominent role in sacred history, perhaps suggesting that *hijras* too can be important figures if they were given a chance. However, when I asked non-*hijras* about Śikhaṇḍin, a common reaction was to laugh, dismissing it as 'only a story'. Therefore, despite the possibility that Śikhaṇḍin might provide for *hijras*, other non-*hijras* were quick to reject this narrative and its potential for *hijras*.

A third myth concerns Lord Rāma and is told by *hijras* to justify their position in society and allude to possible rewards for their suffering. *Hijras* in Madhya Pradesh particularly referenced this narrative, which was said by many (*hijras* and non-*hijras*) to be associated with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, although it does not appear in the text. In the myth, Lord Rāma returns from exile and finds those who are 'neither man nor woman' waiting on the banks of the river, from which he had left the city of Ayodhya to go into exile, fourteen years previously. When he left the city, he told the 'men and women' to go home, but these individuals, being neither, remained there. As a result, Rāma is touched by their devotion and he blesses them, saying they will rule the world in the 'future' (see Reddy 2003: 190). The future is given as the age of *Kaliyuga*, the last of four world ages that comprise a cyclical schema of time.

I found that this was the most popular myth told in Madhya Pradesh concerning *kinnar* identity, particularly in relation to the success of *kinnars* in local democratic elections in this particular state (seven *kinnars* were elected in local and state elections between 1998 and 2010, for example, as town councillors or mayors). When narrated, the word '*hijra*' was always used to refer to these individuals who were not men or women, who waited on the riverbanks. The myth is used to explain the phenomena of *kinnar* 'politicians' and the success of their elections, as both the reason for why they amassed popular support (in an explanatory sense), as well as providing a deterministic reason for their success. One *kinnar* politician, when asked about her success, said 'Rāma blessed us', using the narrative to explain her remarkable but unlikely victory, given her position of relative marginality, with little formal education and no prior political experience. Similarly, as an exploration of various ways in which the same narrative might be employed, a local journalist laughed when I asked about the

⁸ Although raised as a son by King Drupada and his wife, his betrothed discovers Śikhaṇḍin is female, and her father declares war on Drupada's kingdom. Śikhaṇḍin persuades a *yakṣa* (goblin) to give her his 'own sign of manhood' in exchange for her 'womanhood'. Śikhaṇḍin returns and is declared male.

importance of this myth in explaining *kinnars'* electoral victories. I explained that a young man working in one of the municipal corporations had given this myth as the reason why *kinnars* had won elections, saying it was 'because of this story' that they had been elected. The journalist mocked this interpretation, saying it was 'only a mythological story'. He qualified this by saying: 'this is a public saying, like a joke'. In this example, the multiple functions of a particular narrative are highlighted by those who use and react to it: as a way to discredit electoral success, by the journalist; as an explanation for *kinnars'* victories, by the young man; and to attest to *kinnars'* special relationship with Rāma and his blessings for the group, by the *kinnar* herself. Moreover, in the *kinnar's* employment of this narrative, she emphasises *kinnars'* devotion to Rāma and his specific blessing upon them and uses the myth to project her own hope for better treatment, success, and blessings in the future, which has started with the electoral victory.

Each of these narratives serves as an example of the sort of mythological narratives used by *hijras* in the construction of their identity. By referring to individuals of an ambiguous gender status, temporarily or constantly, or to Rāma, who had a special relationship with the gender ambiguous individuals of the past, *hijras* point to the existence of gender variant individuals in ancient times and within sacred texts and claim an authentic identity that has existed throughout history. Moreover, by claiming association with significant individuals in history and mythology (Arjuna, Ambā/Sikhandīn, and Rāma) *hijras* make a claim regarding their nature and character, perhaps in an attempt to challenge some of the derogatory, contemporary stereotypes. The story of Rāma's blessing is employed to ameliorate some of the inequitable treatment they face in modern society, by alluding to rewards in the future. It also speaks to the devotion and loyalty of the community. By claiming this connection, *hijras* project an image of how they want themselves to be seen, as individuals who have existed throughout history, but who are also important within sacred history for their actions.

Fertility, Curses, and the Goddess

A further group of myths utilised by *hijras* in identity formation are those associated with the goddess Bahuchara Mata. This goddess is worshipped by *hijras* as their protector and spiritual guide. One *kinnar* noted that 'a *kinnar* becomes a *kinnar* because of her blessings', describing the strong link between the goddess and the *hijra* community. This same *kinnar* said that *kinnars* believe they should not forget the Mata, and if so, then 'anything bad could happen'. Bahuchara serves as a protector for *kinnars* and is worshipped by many *hijras*, regardless of their individual religious identifications,⁹ particularly due to her association with transgenderism. Bahuchara is also an important household goddess in Gujarat and is worshipped for her ability to give blessings associated with fertility to

⁹ Although beyond the scope of this article, *hijras'* religious practices are amalgamative: they tend to identify as Muslim or Hindu in the context of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, although they simultaneously performed practices and rituals that could be associated with both traditions. For discussion of religious practices, see Preston 1987; Reddy 2005, Chapter 5.

newlyweds and childless couples. There are a variety of myths linking Bahuchara Mata with the *hijras*. Hall notes that these myths are significant in recognising how, to a certain degree, the respect paid to *hijras* is dependent upon that paid to the goddess herself (1995: 114–5). As the principal goddess with whom the *hijras* associate, these myths are essential for constructing *hijras'* sense of identity and explaining aspects of their lives, including anatomical form, devotion to the goddess, and their ritual power and ability to give blessings.

Hijras employ multiple myths about Bahuchara, but tend to identify certain narratives as being key to understanding *hijra* identity, including explaining Bahuchara's gender transformations, ability to curse, and special connection to the *hijras*. At the same time, I found that other *hijras* interviewed did not know any particular myths about the goddess, particularly in Madhya Pradesh. One *kinnar*, who took the time to show me her framed portrait of the Mata, could not identify why she was important to *kinnars*. When asked why she was a special goddess and about *kinnars'* relationship with her, she replied that she did not know about Bahuchara's qualities, but only knew that they worship her and she protects them. She could not recount any stories or myths (or perhaps, did not wish to share any), but noted that *kinnars* are fully devoted to her. In contrast, many *kinnars* in Gujarat shared long and elaborate stories about her, particularly focusing on her spiritual power as the reason for her transgenderism. Bahuchara's popularity within Gujarat might provide a reason for the common knowledge of her myths in the state, compared to the relative lack of knowledge of her myths among *kinnars* in Madhya Pradesh. Her popularity in Gujarat also ensures that her myths are well known among non-*hijras* in the state, since many worship her as a household goddess.

Bahuchara's 'transgenderism' remains a key reason for her significance to *kinnars*. The origin of her worship emphasises her spiritual power and ability to change bodily form. Multiple versions were narrated by both *kinnars* in private interviews and by non-*kinnars* at the temple complex at Becharaji. A common version of the myth begins when the maiden Bahuchara is passing through the forest in Gujarat. Thieves attack Bahuchara and to ensure that they do not rape her, she cuts off her breasts. This act secures her deification for her virtue and purity. In another variation, the thieves rape her and she curses them: the thieves then realise she has turned them into *hijras*. In a further version, Bahuchara is a powerful man or prince. When threatened by thieves, he transforms himself into a woman through his 'spiritual power'. The thieves try to rape her and in her defence she cuts off her breasts so she no longer appears feminine, saying 'I am no longer a woman nor a man'. This act fails to stop them, so she prays to the god Vishnu to give her a hiding place. The earth splits open and she jumps inside. She curses the thieves and they become *hijras*.

Pictures at the temple at Becharaji portray Bahuchara in various gendered forms. The most common image shows the goddess in the centre, sitting upon a cockerel (her vehicle), but smaller images in the picture depict Bahuchara as a noble man or prince riding a horse, near a palace wall (top right), as a beautiful maiden among a group of women (bottom left), and as a meditating figure, near a shrine (top left). Her ability to change her original bodily state is of significance to *hijras*, as individuals who transcend their own bodily state. The ability for the goddess to transform reflects their own desire and ability to transform. Moreover, Bahuchara is said to have transformed through her

'spiritual purity' and *hijras* can gain from using this rhetoric of 'spiritual power' to explain their transformations and stress their own spirituality. One influential *guru* narrated that Bahuchara was important to *kinnars* because she had first been a lady, who had become a man 'through her spiritual power', who then finally became a *kinnar*, emphasising the spiritual power which enabled her gender transformation.

Another significant aspect of these stories is that Bahuchara's creation of *hijras* is seen as a 'curse': a price to be paid for harming Bahuchara Mata. In fact, *hijras* narrate that Bahuchara created the very first *hijra*, and the following myth explains their devotion to the goddess: a prince is forced to marry the goddess Bahuchara, but he does not desire a wife and children, believing himself to be neither a man nor a woman. The goddess curses him for ruining her life and cuts off his genitals, saying that he, and others like him, will require the removal of their genitals in order to be reborn.¹⁰ This *nirvan* (literally 'rebirth') operation is theoretically obligatory for those who enter the *hijra* community, even today. Serena Nanda notes that 'the practice of self-mutilation (that is, castration) and sexual abstinence by her devotees [is] to secure her favour' (1999: 25). Initiates must sacrifice themselves to the goddess through the dangerous operation; often devotees believe that one cannot become a *hijra* without the goddess' blessing. Nanda writes that *hijras* will only undergo the emasculation operation if they have signs that the goddess is 'ready' to help them, including a 'smile' from a picture of the goddess and a coconut breaking in half evenly (*ibid.*: 25–6, 33). Reddy states that it is imperative to ask for the goddess' blessings, especially if she did not 'call you' for the operation (2005: 108).

The goddess' ability to curse men and make them *hijras* speaks to her powerful control over fertility and sexuality. As above, Hall writes that there is a link, to a certain degree, between the respect paid to *hijras* and the respect paid towards Bahuchara Mata. By associating themselves with the goddess, *hijras* confirm their own 'powers'. As the Mata can curse individuals, so too can *hijras* claim to curse those who have wronged them, by channelling the goddess' power and creating new *hijras*. This claim is significant since it legitimises their *badhāī* work at weddings and birth ceremonies by giving or denying their blessings for fertility. People who receive them into their homes try to keep them happy with the 'price' they pay for such blessings. A couple in Madhya Pradesh recently had a baby girl and some weeks after her birth, the *hijras* came to their house to give their blessings. The father, said that he had to meet what he saw as 'an extortionate demand' in paying for these blessings. He told me about the negotiation involved over the amount. Explaining his lack of salary, based upon his work as a freelance journalist, he said that he had to pay 5000 Rupees, a sari, and several kilos of rice, because 'it is important to keep the *hijras* happy'. Although Sanjay himself claimed not to believe that *hijras* had the power to control fertility, he nonetheless paid them for the blessing, performing a role within a cultural context in which *hijra* blessings are given, legitimated by their

¹⁰ The themes of revenge and reverence to the goddess coincide with general ideas in 'mother-goddess worship', where the mother-goddess figure expresses notions of power, autonomy, and primacy; see Ganesh 1990. The concepts of reverence and submission are illustrated in a variety of goddess myths, for example, the cursing of Arjuna by Urvaśī; see Goldman 1993; Doniger 1999; Pattanaik 2002.

connection to the goddess Bahuchara and maintained through narratives that reiterate their own power.

Two points should be discussed: the conception of *hijra* identity as a 'curse', as well as the potential for Bahuchara and the *hijras* to have control over others' fertility. Evidently the conception of *hijra* identity as a 'curse' can be seen as derogatory, in the sense that if *hijra* identity is read as a curse or punishment, it could justify their inequitable treatment in society and explain the fear and prejudice that surrounds the group. Some *hijras* themselves believe this identity 'curse' explains their exceptionally low social status and lamented their social status and ostracisation. Conversely, the ability to curse as a by-product of *hijra* identity might provide relief from the belief that *hijra* identity is a curse, where individuals channel the goddess' own power to punish those who act improperly towards them with the curse of *hijra* identity. The power to curse encourages people not to upset *hijras*, giving them a small measure of power in dealings with people who treat them improperly. Their potential to grant or remove fertility gives *hijras* a unique ritual role in and a form of power over society, which is negotiated through the use of narratives that maintain and legitimate their ritual practices. Evidently, narratives concerning the goddess perform an important function for *hijras* in constructing a sense of identity in modern India, as a mode through which they might make sense of an identity that can be read as a curse. At the same time, these narratives posit *hijra* identity as that which must be made sense of in relation to heteronormative gender roles and religious norms, such that despite providing a measure of relief for *hijras* in explaining their ritual role and anatomical forms, such narratives still posit *hijra* identity as a curse to be borne for harming the goddess.

Narrating Hijra Identities

It is evident that gender identity, or indeed any identity, may not necessarily be constructed through 'sacred' or ancient texts and narratives, given that such narratives, at least in the case of the *hijras*, perform a double function in both sanctioning, and solidifying, a particular identity that can remain ostracised and deviant from heteronormative gender roles. Yet, such narratives do function to explain *hijra* identity in modern India, as well as sanction their ritual practices and anatomical form, establishing the role of narrativity in the construction of contemporary *hijra* identity. Myths and narratives thus do not appear as apolitical, timeless stories, but serve a real and necessary function as a type of ontological narrative, which bring identity into being and can cope with different challenges depending on the need of the group or individuals. In the *hijras'* case, these narratives serve multiple functions, from sanctioning their ritual behaviour to explaining their unique gender. This is done through constant retelling in contemporary arenas, which in turn secures their meaning and influence. Narratives thereby come to be instruments of self-definition and identity transfer, bringing *hijra* identity into being (in line with the concept of ontological narrative) and providing other identifications to which *hijras* aspire. They are significant to defining identity, but also indicate the ongoing nature of this process and its dependence upon external factors, that affect how and why certain identifications may be preferential at different times.

The narratives discussed above are significant in exploring how *hijra* identity is negotiated and defined in modern India. For this marginalised group, separated from mainstream society due to societal perceptions of their 'abnormal' gender practices, narratives that link them to important historical individuals or deities help *hijras* construct a sense of identity that is, crucially, not reliant on mainstream narratives. *Hijras'* narratives provide a way to challenge how they are viewed in mainstream society by alluding to qualities or virtues that they might and can exhibit. These narratives define and explain community practices, ritual power, and anatomical form in a way that is not demonstrated by mainstream narratives about the *hijras*. Thus, *hijras* clearly contest how *hijra* subjectivity is perceived in contemporary discourses and this is crucial in light of the discrimination that *hijras* face on a daily basis. These myths describe the beliefs that members of the community hold about themselves and are propagated in order to explain their place in Indian society.

There is much at stake in the construction of group identity by a subordinate community who are actively seeking to authorise their identity and social role, as well as alleviate their place in society. Myths are therefore part of an ongoing narrative process. As Russell T. McCutcheon writes about the use of 'myth':

Let us entertain the possibility that myths are not things akin to nouns, but *active processes* akin to verbs...[we can then] suggest (1) that myths are not special (or 'sacred') but ordinary human means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and believed-in 'worlds,' (2) that myth as an ordinary rhetorical device in social construction and maintenance makes *this* rather than *that* social identity possible in the first place and (3) that a people's use of the *label* 'myth' reflects, expresses, explores, and legitimizes their own self-image.

(2000: 200)

Myth here is interpreted as an active rhetorical device, employed to explore, construct, and legitimate specific self-images and actions. This interpretation is useful for considering how *hijras* attempt to negotiate and authorise their social identity, by taking part in an activity that gives their lives and experiences meaning and explanation. McCutcheon writes that people '*actively work to selectively make*' some things true and meaningful (*ibid.*: 201–2); this is certainly the case when *hijras* construct their identities through a variety of narratives to explain who they are and why they behave in a certain way. By fashioning certain aspects of their identity as 'sacred' and 'sanctioned', *hijras* explicitly create a meaningful and intelligible identity. Through narratives, *hijras* define, make sense of, and give coherence to their lives and their experience of the world. Moreover, such narratives allow for the multiplicity in individual's lives, by explaining various and sometimes conflicting aspects, such as *hijras'* ritual powers and their social marginalisation.

I have argued that the narratives discussed above perform three roles, in allowing *hijras* to construct and maintain a sense of a specific *hijra* identity and define key community attributes. First, certain narratives allude to a long-standing tradition of gender ambiguity to which *hijras* claim to belong. These references to gender ambiguous individuals help to sanction an identity that is marginalised in contemporary mainstream society due to their position in sacred and ancient texts. These references help to authorise *hijras'* 'non-normative' position in terms of gender performance and embodied status.

Second, these narratives explain 'who' the *hijras* are. They are instruments of 'self-definition', especially in creating ways for *hijras* to make sense of their 'non-normative' bodily experience and challenge some of the mainstream narratives that proclaim their 'abnormality'. In so doing, *hijras* claim power over their bodies by explaining their transgender transformation as an act of reverence to the goddess and by explaining how their 'abnormal' gender serves their ritual function. This is important in contemporary society where *hijras* are seen as socially marginalised and sexually deviant. These self-defining narratives also explain their devotion and service to Bahuchara, how their community was formed, why they perform traditional *badhāi* work, and how this behaviour has been sanctioned. In the face of daily marginalisation, these myths give meaning to, legitimise, and, to a degree, elevate their practices and beliefs. Although *hijra* identity is seen as a curse, these narratives also portray it as a powerful and unique identity through the potential to bless or curse and serve the goddess.

Third, these narratives function as vessels for projection, or of 'identity-transfer'. By stressing their connection to virtuous or brave individuals, *hijras* claim to embody the characteristics these individuals display. This is done to challenge and refuse some of the pejorative stereotypes held about them. By stressing purity, demonstrated by Bahuchara, or virtue, as Arjuna, or their devotion, as they gave to Lord Rāma, *hijras* choose and project certain characteristics and qualities to counteract the way in which they are seen, actively working to improve how others see the *hijras*.

As Margaret Somers writes, it 'is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities' (1994: 606). Within and through retelling these narratives, *hijras* reflect and negotiate their own self-image. It is therefore important to consider how the use of these narratives and the mythmaking activity that *hijras* undertake allows them to state their significance and place within society and to demonstrate how crucial this activity is in constructing and maintaining their identity and world-view.

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