Against Taxonomy and Subalternity: Reconsidering the Thirdness and Otherness of Hijras of Gujarat.

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Introduction

This paper aims to demonstrate how we may consider the non-normativity and externality of the people in India known as hijras. Because of their non-normativity, hijras have been regarded and described as deviants in colonial documents and later dubbed “alternative gender” or “third sex” and “third gender” by scholars to reveal a non-universal gender dichotomy. Although the academic concept of thirdness did not essentially imply oppression, hijras have recently become more visible as oppressed individuals under the official umbrella of the third gender introduced by the Supreme Court of India in 2014. That is, the third was at one time a symbol of breakthrough to overturn the mundane predictability of gender; however, it currently represents subaltern individuals who experience social inequality because they do not fit into the ideal gender binary.

In this paper, I first examine the collusion between academics and politics that established the pan-Indian image of the third gender that exists throughout the country. While doing so, I emphasize the numerical fate of thirdness to clarify why its meaning deviated from its initial definition. I also highlight an alternative way of understanding the non-normativity of hijras without representing them as deviants or the third gender, by foregrounding local narratives and practices of the embodiment of divinity, and the rules of incorporation of externality and otherness at the temple of the Mother-Goddess, named Bahucharā Mātā in Gujarat, the northern part of India. My goal is not only to provide an ethnographic account of devotees to Bahucharā Mātā. Rather, I also seek to illustrate how people, vested with the varied signs of non-normative gender, might live otherwise; or, considering anew what Weiss terms “a
provocation of queer anthropology depending on our desires to learn another way alongside others” (Weiss 2016:635; Manalansan IV 2016:596–97).

3 Although the strong commitment to Bahucharā Mātā is pivotal for hijras’ existence, it might lead to a misunderstanding in terms of their agency. For example, Charlotte Suthrell, in her comparative study of transvestism, regarded Indian hijras as subordinates because of their words, “I was born like this,” compared with UK transvestites, whose destinies are believed to be the result of their own volition (Suthrell 2004:171). Similar to Suthrell’s findings, I received passive responses from hijras about their castration. Hijras, who have already been emasculated, or nirvāṇī, commonly expressed that they received hukama (a call) from the Mother-Goddess. This sounds as though emasculation was not their choice; yet it does not mean that they were totally helpless. With the word hukama, they rather imply their strong identification with the Mother-Goddess to express their reason for being. That is, they foster their own agency through subordination to Mother-Goddess worship. As Judith Butler once discussed agency’s correlation with subordination (Butler 1997; Mahmood 2011), it is vital for their existence that they subordinate themselves to religion or the power of the Mother-Goddess. Depending on religious discourses, devotees of the Mother-Goddess can initiate their own agency and take on positions of power within the religious sphere.

4 Even akhvā hijras, who have not yet been emasculated but are future candidates for nirvāṇī, emphasize in public their strong links to the Mother-Goddess by wearing saris of the Mother-Goddess. Their performative embodiment of divinity is necessary to claim the legitimacy of their being. Otherwise, they could be stigmatized as deviants, as they were in the colonial period. Hijras, devotees of Bahucharā Mātā, may not speak in public, but they forcefully show their devotion to the Mother-Goddess to prove their eligibility to receive hospitable treatments provided by their host community, children of the Mother-Goddess. Only nirvāṇī can use a tactic of cursing through the exposure of castrated bodies if they are not treated well or are insulted. I consider that performative embodiment of divinity is a successful tactic or “metalanguage” by which to overcome subalternity (Zene 2010:91). Their metalanguage can “be heard” (Byrd & Rothenberg 2011:5) in their everyday life as their claim for their rights of being.

5 Individuals Mother-Goddess devotees in Gujarat are predominately individuals who were born and raised as sons and who have subsequently renounced the obligations incumbent upon them, i.e. perpetuating the patrilineal lines of their kin through marriage. In addition, they devote themselves to the Mother-Goddess. As a way of devotion, or identification with the Mother-Goddess, they are required to embody the feminine form of the deity through feminine dress and emasculation. Although they have forever given up being involved in their natal kin members’ prosperity, they are asked by laypeople to support the prosperity of descendants by bestowing the grace of Bahucharā Mātā.

6 Devotees of Bahucharā Mātā belong to a group called “pāvaiya samāji” (as distinct from “hijādā samāji”) who observe Islamic customs such as funeral ceremonies. It is said that hijādā used to perform dance and music called mujro at the gates of the walled city of Ahmedabad, founded by the Sultan Ahmed Shah. In contrast, pāvaiya were originally from a village at Saurashtra, in the north-west of Gujarat, where they have their own samādhī, a shrine constructed where their predecessors once buried themselves alive. Although the two groups are not of the same origin, nor do they beg in the same
territory, they acknowledge each other without any difficulty. They annually organize meetings to sit and eat together in one place, and their meetings last several days. They also allow their own members to transfer to the other group if bargaining over the transfer ends in agreement among those concerned. Although they set up clear boundaries amongst themselves, their belongings are not of concern to the public; they are seen as one group because they beg under the name of the Mother-Goddess.

While conducting my fieldwork, I had opportunities to talk with pāvaiya who transferred from hijādā samaj, as well as to some who belonged to hijādā (Kunihiro 2014); however, my field data primarily derived from dialogues with hijras of pāvaiya samaj and their neighbors. This is because the very beginning of my fieldwork in 2002 was scheduled at the temple of Bahucharā Mātā, which is a part of the pāvaiya’s territory. First, I conducted a preliminary inspection accompanied by local friends in 2000 with reference to Serena Nanda’s ethnography, addressing “the major hijra temple” where she met several hijras of Gujarat (Nanda 1999:xviii). Then, I decided to go there on my own. Between 2002 and 2004, I conducted fieldwork for approximately 280 days. From 2005 until 2014, I continued conducting fieldwork for in excess of one month every year.

In the lead-up to the fieldwork of 2002, I realized I had no choice but to conduct fieldwork without anyone’s help. Local friends in Ahmedabad talked about hijras positively; yet they saw hijras as untrustworthy because of the non-normativeness of their way of thinking. These friends even suspected that hijras were sexually available to men, so preferred not to be involved deeply with hijras for the sake of their own reputation. I thought I had thereby found the subalternity that hijras experienced in the perceptions of others.

During my fieldwork, although initially seen as an annoyance, I had been forgiven by members of pāvaiya for my trespassing; furthermore, I was allowed to stay with them at the temple and to reside in their houses at night. I was usually surrounded by approximately 10 pāvaiya who lived near the temple, and I also enjoyed in-depth conversations with them as well as their neighbors. In each house, a senior guru and one or more disciples live together. They usually hire women in their neighborhood for housekeeping. These housekeepers and other neighbors also helped me to formulate my questions and shared their local knowledge with me.

Who are Hijras? Third Gender or Zero

Since the colonial period, hijras in general have been represented as sexually abnormal or anomalous. For example, James Forbes, who obtained the appointment of writer to Bombay before the age of sixteen, depicted them as hermaphrodites and wrote that he found them disgusting (Forbes 1834:359). Later, hijras appeared in the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency as impotent eunuchs: “Impotence is the indispensable qualification for admission into the caste” (Kirparam 1901:506–07). According to Jessica Hinchy, the British government wanted to “restore the binary division of gender,” which they believed hijras challenged. Therefore, they intentionally categorized hijras as “eunuchs,” who were impotent men (Hinchy 2014:275).

In the post-colonial context, before the advent of gender studies, hijras were represented as sexually different subjects, namely as institutionalized homosexuals (Carstairs 1958), a eunuch community (Mukherjee 1980), and transvestite eunuchs (Jani
and Rosenberg 1990). However, gender studies literature has praised the deviant aspects of hijras, regarding them as the embodiment of the “third sex” or “third gender,” positioned as counterparts to Western sexual minorities.

12 Serena Nanda is a prominent contributor to the scholarly literature on the third gender. The ethnography in her book focuses on the life stories of hijras living as a de-humanized group; her approach has been highly appreciated in academia (e.g. Reddy 2005). Moreover, Nanda defines hijras as individuals who have “alternative gender roles” in traditional Indian culture, thereby synthesizing an image of the pan-Indian phenomenon. Nanda asserts the necessity of discarding the Western binary gender in favor of gender diversity.

13 The academic term “third gender” first appeared in Nanda’s works in the book titled Third Sex Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History, edited by Gilbert Herdt, who explained the reason for focusing on the aforementioned three entities as follows:

The code of “thirdness” should not be taken literally to mean that in all times and places there are only three categories possible in human classification; ... the third is emblematic of other possible combinations that transcend dimorphism. (Herdt 1996:19–20)

14 As Herdt mentions clearly, the term “thirdness” is adopted as a symbol for multiplicity to transcend dimorphism. I completely agree with Herdt’s idea regarding the necessity of intersecting plural elements to transcend dimorphism; however, I question whether the traditional gender forms can be eluded by focusing on the third. In fact, despite Herdt’s intention, the code of “thirdness” is taken literally as a consecutive number, parallel to the first and second sex and gender in Nanda’s paper, which describes hijras as defining “themselves as ‘not men’ because their male organ ‘does not work’ and defining themselves as ‘not woman’ because they cannot bear children” (Nanda 1996:381). Moreover, she interprets historical roles of the third sex and gender with reference to ancient Hindu texts (Nanda 1996:377), which seems to claim the authenticity of hijras and the historical legitimacy of three categories of sex and gender within the Hindu tradition.

15 Later, the “third gender” category as discussed among academics was indeed established by the Supreme Court of India in 2014 as an official alternative for those who are ill-adapted to the dictates of dimorphism. The court judgement, as in Nanda’s interpretation, may support the historical authenticity of hijras with reference to Hindu myths and classical texts concerning ambiguous gender, which were agreeable to the neoliberal Hindutva contexts (Jennifer 2018:51). Further, citations of ethnographic studies by Nanda (1991) and Gayatri Reddy (2005) might have also affected the declaration of hijras’ legitimacy in South Asia (Saria 2019:3). This does not mean that the third gender was crafted by academic writings, but as in the discussion of Virginie Dutoya (2017), “academic representation can be said to participate in a process of fixing and assigning” (p. 256) the non-normative gender identities.

16 In contrast, the new official designation was independent of academic concerns in terms of the subaltern status of the position of third. According to the judgement of 2014, people of the third gender are regarded as oppressed and should be given access to rights for the Other Backward classes (OBC; Goel 2016:536). Yet, in the final version of the bill in 2016, the government discarded the OBC provision without specifying the third gender’s class. Sayan Bhattacharya criticized such an irresponsible attitude of the
government, saying that issues of gender and caste should be discussed conjointly because many transgender individuals belong to an upper caste class (Bhattacharya 2021:13, 18–19). As Bhattacharya’s critics reveal, hijras or transgender individuals have been given a monolithic image and their oppression therefore only has one single status in the legal process of demarcation. As such, the third category plays the function of demarcating non-normativity and fails to overturn the mundane predictability of gender that academics previously noted.

It is worth mentioning anthropologists who presented skeptical views of thirdness from the outset. For example, nearly two decades prior to the court judgement of 2014, Lawrence Cohen problematized the easy reading of hijras as the third gender (Cohen 1995:293). Instead of reifying the third gender, he emphasized the importance of analyzing the body within “a multiplicity of differences,” sexual, racial, economic, generational, national, and other forms of differences (Cohen 1995:295). Under the influence of Cohen’s statements, Gayatri Reddy developed her own ethnography, articulating axes of gender and sexuality with the other social domains of South Asia (Reddy 2005:33). Based on her fieldwork in Hyderabad, she explored and unpacked the wider community of koti, “effeminate” men as opposed to “masculine” pantis; she then contested the common understanding of third-sexed individuals (Reddy 2005: Chapter 3). Unfortunately, their insightful criticism may not have been heard during the public discussions; therefore, the categorical distinction of the third gender has shaped public opinion in India.

In her criticism of the collection Third Sex, Third Gender, edited by Herdt, Kath Weston noted the tendency of ethnographies to reify Third Genders abroad. She claimed that ethnographic essays “tend to participate in the trophy sport of bringing ‘back’ (from where, to where?) a Third,” and conceive a Third “in static, ‘species,’ terms” (Weston 2002:43). To avoid the risk of fixing a Third, she presents the concept of zero that is qualitatively different from a number because it does not denote a value; moreover, she asserts that zero “holds open a place for—represents the potential for—signification” (Weston 2002:39). Like zero, she further adds that “unsexed” is seen as a contingent phenomenon through which one could investigate the absence of gendered signification, and the new possibilities of combining gender and other criteria (Weston 2002:33, 40). This is quite equivalent to the contingent “thirdness” that Herdt aspires to explore in his collection, while the numerical third has become an alternative gender category of Indian society in the ontological sense. In short, “unsexed” tells us about the necessity of leaving behind the ontological meanings of gender and sex and opening up the possibility of avoiding the process of “subalternisation” (Sarker 2016).

Regarding the everyday life of hijras at the pilgrimage of Bahucharā Mātā, the concept of zero or “unsexed” is relevant when describing how hijras and pilgrims interact with each other. Even though they are neither women nor men in the phenomenal world, hijras at the temple are never labelled as Third in the ontological sense. Instead, they can manifest their transcendence as devotees of the Mother-Goddess; they identify themselves with the feminine form of divinity through their clothing and emasculation. In that femininity, pilgrims find the metaphor of the fertility of the Mother-Goddess. Therefore, hijras are required to bestow the grace of Bahucharā Mātā through physical contact with many and unspecified pilgrims as the devotees of the Mother-Goddess.
Regarding physical contact, caste and gender classifications generally are a matter of great concern in Indian society. However, pilgrims do not care about the caste and gender of individuals whom they are touched by within the realm of devotion to the Mother-Goddess. Regarding devotion, or bhakti, Hawley, Novetzke, and Sharma indicate the importance of devotee practices in overcoming socio-cultural interruptions; devotees of different statuses could share a realm “to which the downtrodden, subaltern, disenfranchised, excluded, and rejected have just as much access as do the rich, the educated, and those who exert control over others in the populations to which they belong” (Hawley et al. 2019:6). If gender, caste, and social status do not hinder the devotion, then the non-normativity of hijras would never be the reason for their exclusion. Their externality is incorporated within the context of bhakti and their otherness is relativized by idioms of kinship.

Any member of pāvaiya at the temple is called a “māśī,” meaning an aunt or elder lady, even though they are younger than the pilgrims. Regarding the term māśī, A. M. Shah mentioned the use of the address māśī to hijras: “māshi [as in the original] is a kinship term indicating an affectionate relationship” (Shah 1961:1328). I agree with this up to a certain point; generally speaking, the relation between māśī (mother’s sister) and niece/nephew is seen as simply affectionate. This is because a māśī has no socio-culturally expected obligations such as arranging marriage towards her niece/nephew at any family occasion; there is nothing but familial affection between them. Technically speaking, māśī or a mother’s sister is an affine who belongs to another patrilineal family; she is one of the others.

Moreover, I wish to make a point regarding the affinal alterity of māśī, using the discussion of “The Stranger-King” by Marshall Sahlins. Sahlins argues that the otherness of stranger-kings, or foreign rulers, is incorporated into native people by making them affinal relatives through marriage. Furthermore, Sahlins says the acquisition of alterity fosters fertility and identity, which is the principle of a fruitful marriage (Sahlins 2008:184). Drawing from Sahlins’ work, Candea and Col emphasize that “alterity is affinal, generative, and dangerous and is encompassed after being transformed, domesticated, and mastered” (Candea and Col 2012:57). Regarding the site of the Mother-Goddess, hijras obviously would never become anyone’s relatives, yet they cannot be external strangers for pilgrims. Having/giving a temporary position of affinity is a necessity to be accessible to each other within the transient realm of devotion, whereby the non-normativity of gender gives way to the divinity. I will discuss alterity in affinity again in a later section.

Local Narratives and Mother-Goddess

The pilgrimage of Bahucharā Mātā is located in Mahesana district, in the northern part of Gujarat. There are three temples to Bahucharā Mātā, the largest of which was built in 1779 by Maharaja Manajrao of the princely state of Gāekwād, which was headquartered in Baroda, south Gujarat, although the final installation of the Mother-Goddess took place in 1791 (Campbell 1883:610). The marvelous architecture of the largest temple was reconstructed and enlarged in white marble by the Gujarat State Government in the 21st century. The renovation project caused some senior staff members and laborers to lose their residence within the temple yard. In addition, beggars who used to beg for money from pilgrims have been permanently driven away from the temple yard by
order. This order was given by the collector of the Becharaji sub-district, named HR Modi in 2004. However, the collector’s order did not affect the presence of hijras at the temple, even though they beg for money from pilgrims.

There are always circa ten members of pāvaiya who regularly visit the temple from nearby villages. When I first approached them at the temple, I presented myself to pāvaiya hijras as a pilgrim from Ahmedabad, yet originally from Japan. Having a room near the temple, I spent my time at the temple yard to make myself visible to them without talking to (or bothering) them; I waited for them to ask about me. Once they got to know me, they warned me against spending nights alone at the guesthouse where coincidentally, I had always felt insecure, especially at night. Following their advice, I quit the guesthouse and shifted to one of the pāvaiya’s houses from whence I made regular visits to the temple along with other residents. During the day, I waited for pilgrims, sat around, and chatted with hijras, and sometimes was taken to the market and around their neighborhood.

By spending time around the temple town of Becharaji for a couple of months, I found that the devotees of Bahucharā Mātā were not regarded as beggars by either pilgrims or workers at the temple. Their flashy dresses and gold accessories acted as signs to differentiate devotees from vulnerable beggars. In addition, hijras never beg for money with a word of punya (good deeds) like beggars do at the temple gate. According to the local philosophy of punya, people may live a happier life in their future incarnations if they accumulate punya or good deeds in their current life. Temples are suitable places for practicing punyas, and unknown beggars are suitable recipients of donations.

On the contrary, hijras claim a special right to receive money and gifts from pilgrims as intermediaries between pilgrims and the Mother-Goddess. They call this hakk (right) in Gujarati. According to the record of the Bombay Gazetteer, their claim to hakk is rooted in the pre-British period (Campbell 1883:613).

The Pavyas or eunuchs, often persons naturally impotent and therefore chosen, have only a small right. They levy small fees from pilgrims on particular occasions. Recently, Gāikwār’s government has very properly interfered with these people, to their own great sorrow, but to the advantage of humanity. (Campbell 1883:613)

Though it is not clearly stated what the indigenous state did with hijras, these people were apparently supported by the local government in the pre-British period. As for the hijras’ rights, Laurence W. Preston claims that indigenous states of western India recognized hijras’ right to beg, and that states also bestowed public revenues upon hijras (1987:372, 381). However, the successor to indigenous states did not want to maintain a well-defined relationship between the state and some of the lowest of its subjects (Preston 1987:372; Hinchy 2019:30). With respect to the British, Preston even made a definite statement: “the British thus created a history of the hijdūs” (372). As Preston demonstrates, hijras’ right to beg is no longer legitimate, because of the British reformation, yet it is still claimed by hijras themselves. Moreover, temple administrators do not counter their claims. In fact, they even provide legitimacy to the hijras’ presence at the temple through the narrative of the temple booklet.

The temple booklet, published in 1980, informs the reader that Shikhandi, one of the characters of Mahābhāratam, was a eunuch, and he could not fulfil his duty to kill Bhishma without virility. It was a yaksha, a caretaker of the deity’s wealth, who helped Shikhandi by giving him a bath of animate water at the temple to make him a man. Later, finding out about the incident, the yaksha’s guru became cross with the yaksha.
and turned him into a eunuch. The yaksha begged for forgiveness, and his guru replied as follows:

I cannot take back my words. Yet, I promise that you will be legitimatized as a bhekh of eunuch at this temple, and you will be worshipped as bhekh of the temple of Bahucharā Mātā (Anon. 1980:38, translated by the author).

According to the Gujarati dictionary, a bhekh means an ascetic who maintains himself by begging (Mehta and Mehta 1989:1147). This specific word is still used by hijras of the temple when they claim their collective identities. Moreover, this story of Shikhandi is shared by hijras of the temple in case they need to claim the legitimacy of their presence at the temple.

There is also another story that has a similar pattern, yet is linked to the popular folklore. This local story of Bahucharā Mātā was once recounted by Alexander Kinloch Forbes, a British officer and a founder of the Gujarat Vernacular Society, in his book Râs Mâlâ or Hindu annals of the province of Gujarat, originally published in 1857. At the beginning of the chapter of “Boucherâjee—the Choonwâl,” Forbes briefly refers to the “Shree Boucherâjee” as follows:

Some Chârun women, say the tradition, travelled from Sulunkpoor, to a neighbouring village, when the Koolees attacked and plundered them. One of the women, whose name was Boucherâ, snatched a sword from a boy who attended her, and cut off both her breasts. The patient was immediately perished. Her sisters, Boot and Bulâl also committed suicide, and they, as well as Boucherâ, became Devees. Shree Boucherâjee is worshipped in Choonwâl, Boot Mother, Urnej, near Kot, and Bulâl Devee, at Bâkulko, about fifteen miles south of Seehore. (Forbes 1857:90)

As mentioned above, Bahucharā and her two sisters were women of Chârun caste, and they were cherished and worshipped in certain places. Bahucharā’s place is now known as Becharaji or Bahuchārājī instead of Choonwâl. These three sisters’ stories are presented in detail by a man of Chârana caste, named Gadhavī Samarthadāna Shivdanji Mahiya. This full version explains why hijras devoted themselves to Bahucharā Mātā, and why they wear feminine dress at the temple.

In his book, written in Gujarati, Gadhavī claims that Bahucharā Mātā was a lady born in the family of the Chârana who lived in the 14th century. Her father, Bāpala Bhai, was conducting business in Kathiawar, the western part of Gujarat, while his three daughters, Butaya, Balâlā, and Bahucharā, and five sons lived in the north with their mother, Devala Bāi. After her death, the children decided to move to their father’s village, Bāpalakun, by horse and carriage. While the travelers spent a night near the village of Sankhalapura, a burglar named Mepobaraiyo and his fellows attacked their carriage. Looking at the dreadful site of the burglary, Bahucharā became exceedingly furious, and just after shouting out, “Glory to Mother-Goddess,” she stabbed herself in the chest. Subsequently, her two sisters sacrificed themselves by stabbing themselves in the throat. They spat out a curse, saying, “It’s nasty of you. You have done it just like hijadā does. So, you should be turned into pāvaiyol!” Vyāndala (a eunuch) went down on his knees and said beseechingly, “It was not my fault. I lived out of robbery, but I never targeted Brahman and Chârana. I unfortunately happened to target Chârana’s carriage without knowing it.” Then, the Mother-Goddess replied, “I do not undo a curse, but I stick to my words. If you establish a temple for me here, you may surely come to my place after your death. Moreover, effeminate people like you may come to my place if they worship me here while in women’s clothes” (Gadhavī 1935:16–23).
As stated above, the narrative of Bahucharā Mātā elucidates the genesis of Bahucharā Mātā and hijras' devotion to her. Moreover, it explains that becoming a hijra is a consequence of the curse of the Mother-Goddess. This narrative is well-known among locals, but not among temple administrators and official priests who come from outside for work. This might be because outsiders usually avoid mingling with locals, who lost hereditary authority over temple management. Although outsiders do not know much about the relationship between Bahucharā Mātā and hijras, her words to hijras remain true. Candidates hoping to become hijras often appear at the temple and are recruited after discussions with senior members.

**Devotion to the Divinity: Castration**

There is an issue of kidnapping among hijras concerning the castration ritual. During her journey from Delhi to Hyderabad, Zia Jaffrey often heard about kidnapping stories, such as small boys, only six or seven, made into eunuchs (Jaffrey 1996:21). She admits that many hijras underwent the ritual by choice; at the same time, she blames them for their silence, which created credibility issues for them (Jaffrey 1996:279). It is true that the castration ritual in Gujarat is kept secret publicly; most locals do not know how and where the rituals are practiced. The reason for this secrecy is partly linked to the guidelines for medical surgery in India. Neither the Indian Council for Medical Research nor the Medical Council of India has defined any specific guidelines for performing such a surgery (Goel 2016:538). Moreover, the secrecy is also related to the fact that the castration ritual itself is a prominent part of their devotion to the divinity who gives them new lives as devotees of Bahucharā Mātā.

According to A. M. Shah, the castration hijra rituals derive from a particular form of Mother-Goddess worship, namely identifying with the object of worship, which is quite common among several Hindu sects (Shah 1961:1326, 1330). Although Shah does not mention in detail the similarity between hijras and other ascetics, Jessica Hinchy illustrates this using an example from the Ramanandi monastic order that crosses gender boundaries, as in the case of hijras. As a way of devotion to Ram and his wife Sita, male Ramanandis “perform feminine behaviours, dress as women and even observe the taboos of the menstruation period” (Hinchy 2014:278). Yet, castration is never practiced among them. Regarding the male’s performative identification of the female figure for devotion purposes, Ram-rasik bhakti is another example. In their tradition, devotees assume the role of one of the intimate companions of Kṛṣṇa, such as his lover Radha, and imaginatively participate in the divine play of their beloved Kṛṣṇa (Burchett 2019:197). This was more often cited when locals explained the significance of hijras’ clothing to me. In either case of devotion, clothing is essential for their performativity, devotion, or bhakti.

There is no doubt about the significance of hijras’ clothing. They are required to wear saris while at the temple, to reach out to Bahucharā Mātā according to the narrative of Chārnā sisters, as I stated above. Their colorful saris and gold jewelry also serve as borders, demarcating bekhu and ascetics from worldly beggars sitting at the gate. However, the performativity of everyday clothing is not sufficient to live as hijras. To ensure the legitimacy of the devotees of Bahucharā Mātā, they experience the ceremony of bodily modification or castration.
During my fieldwork, I met one akhvā hijra, or a quasi-member, who refused to be emasculated because he said he was well-educated. One day at the temple and in front of other members, he even claimed he would never go through a non-reversible operation. Nobody around him responded to his statement; they remained silent. Moreover, but he confessed to me that he had a desire to have sex with a woman, by saying he still had an erection. Just after his confession, he told me not to tell anyone, especially the elderly members. He knew that he would not have such a desire for women if he stayed in the house; a few months later, he left the house himself. No one tried to stop him; they believed that he was not qualified to be a member of that house.

Whether the person is qualified as a member or not is determined by hukama (receiving a call) from the Mother-Goddess. One night, I asked Tini, a member who always looked after me, about how and when the hukama from the Mother-Goddess came. Then, Tini’s Guru answered my question by gesture—the five fingers of one hand folded downward. Tini explained the meaning of that gesture to me: erectile dysfunction. That is, physical conditions seem to be important factors in deciding whether to go through castration. When candidates confessed that they had no erection at all, seniors would give a green light for the emasculation ritual. Once emasculated, they claim that they are chosen because they have passed through dangerous rituals of castration with the help of the Mother-Goddess. To convince others of their right to exist, they also declare in public that the order comes from the Mother-Goddess.

As mentioned above, emasculation rituals at pāvaiya’s houses are no longer currently practiced, which is why only senior members have detailed knowledge about the process. Tini was one of the members who talked to me about the emasculation rituals. When other members were not at the temple, Tini started to explain the process of the ritual by scribbling in my field notes. According to Tini’s illustration made on February 26, 2005, the process of emasculation is as follows:

Betel nuts and pan (leaves) are placed in front of the picture of the Mother-Goddess and kept wet for 6 days. Divā (lamps) are also offered to the Mother-Goddess for six days. If the coconut held a good shape when it was cracked open, then the ritual would proceed. I had to consume rice, ginger powder, gulabi (or red-coloured rose) powder, and abir (white-coloured) powder. I was kept in a standing position and held tightly by two people from behind. When I repeated the name of Bahucharā Mātā, the deity came in. The penis and scrotums were fastened and cut down with one sword. The mutilated parts were buried in the ground with a red cloth and salt.

After castration, patients of pāvaiya must be placed in confinement for 37 days, just as mothers and babies are kept isolated after the birth. In West India, having conducted research interviews with hijras in Pune and Mumbai, Mathieu Boisvert found a similar practice, observing a convalescence period after castration; yet it was explained as a parallel to the menstruation ritual (Boisvert 2021:104). In Gujarat, it is interesting to note that menstrual blood and lochia after the birth are regarded alike. Women are kept isolated while having either one or the other, yet the isolation period differs according to the duration of bleeding: 37 days for childbirth and a few days for menstruation. Regarding convalescence after castration, it is always compared to childbirth to explain the reason for the duration of 37 days. Some ex-patients also confessed that they enjoyed receiving full care and love from the guru during those days.

The bleeding of the castrated body is stopped by using boiled oil or medical treatments, yet patients are required to stay at home as in childbirth. During the period, the patient
observes the same diet as women after childbirth, such as not consuming milk, which makes the body cooler. However, unlike women after childbirth, castrated patients must consume one kilogram of dried ginger powder, which causes the body to heat up and supposedly burns out body hair.

Moreover, they say that suttak (ritual pollution) comes to the patient's house, just like suvavada, or confinement for childbirth. The local term suttak is used for the time of birth and death as well, which symbolizes an analogy between the two phenomena. In the case of suttak for castration, both meanings could be possible; the patient needs to experience death before being reborn. Some might die because of the mutilation of body parts, but some do not. Therefore, survivors claim that they have succeeded in going through the Bahucharā Mātā's test. In addition, as newly born beings selected by Bahucharā Mātā, they are equipped with the special power to bless and curse laypeople.

**Encounters with strangers at the temple**

In this section, I focus on the rules of etiquette regarding how pilgrims should behave in front of hijras to receive the grace of the Mother-Goddess from them, and how their externality can be incorporated tactically under the sovereignty of the Mother-Goddess. Since the temple is known as a gathering spot for hijras, pilgrims usually do not object to their presence. They willingly, albeit fearfully, come in close contact and interact with hijras. During this physical contact with hijras, pilgrims receive the grace of the Mother-Goddess, which is called āśīrvād in Gujarati. With this grace of the Mother-Goddess, it is believed that people can overcome the most severe difficulties. Although they are not officially recognized as priests at the temple, hijras are expected to play an important role in passing on the grace of Mother-Goddess at the temple. They have their own place outside the orthodox Brahmanical ideology as devotees of the Mother-Goddess.

Notably, upon receiving āśīrvād, the grace of the Mother-Goddess is of great significance for all rites of passage, such as childbirth and marriage. For the ceremony of the boy’s tonsure, one of the rites of passage, people make a pilgrimage to the temple in a group to receive āśīrvād from the Mother-Goddess. The local belief in Gujarat is that boys are sent to earth by the Mother-Goddess; therefore, family guardians are obliged to leave a strand of boy’s hair as a token to welcome them into their own family. Regardless of this belief, the tonsure ceremony for boys is quite popular and inevitable among the people of Gujarat. Of course, they can visit any other temple of the Mother-Goddess for that ceremony, but if they choose the temple of Bahucharā Mātā, they are sure to encounter hijras in the middle of the ceremony procession.

For the tonsure ceremony, guardians are first required to buy a ticket at the counter of the administration office. They then pass the ticket to a Brahman priest, who is usually standing in front of the statue of Bahucharā Mātā. The priest is supposed to cut a piece of the boy’s hair for Bahucharā Mātā and pass on the āśīrvād to the boy by touching his forehead. Thereafter, they leave the temple yard through the west-side gate to shave off the boy’s hair. Before leaving, they are usually stopped by hijras and asked whether they have provided a strand of hair to Bahucharā Mātā. If they have done so, it is then time for the hijras to pass on an āśīrvād even though the boy has already received it through the Brahman priest.
It is said that having physical contact with hijras proves greatly beneficial. Hijras have the special power to remove negative elements from young boys by passing on the grace of the Mother-Goddess. Since young boys are believed to carry over negative substances called bhāl from their previous life, they need to remove them properly during the tonsure ceremony. If not, they might suffer great misfortune in the future. Therefore, guardians will bring their son to the hijras and ask them to pass on an āśīrvād to the boy and foretell his good fortune. Since hijras’ power is also believed to turn into a curse, guardians need to accept the demands of the hijras out of fear, and complete the tonsure ceremony without any mishaps.

Since overt acts of begging have been prohibited by the collector HR Modi since 2004, hijras have become careful not to be offensive towards pilgrims. Yet, they often make demands vociferously by saying, “wishing all the pain and sickness of this world may fall on you,” when the pilgrims try to move away from hijras. Furthermore, hijras sometimes strip their clothes to make their castrated bodies visible. As per lore, upon seeing the mutilated bodies, the pilgrim witnesses could be turned into hijras. It is an act of cursing, of which pilgrims are afraid. They surely fear the inauspicious vulgar words and curses, especially if they are standing at a vulnerable liminal stage, such as childbirth or marriage. Therefore, they accept hijras’ demands out of fear and treat them with high esteem, as devotees of the Mother-Goddess.

The monetary token given to anyone at the temple is regarded as punya-dan, meaning the accumulation of good deeds. It is believed that laypeople should give money to the appropriate people, at a suitable time and place. Hijras at the temple are seen as appropriate people because they are devotees of the Mother-Goddess. Some might see this from a market exchange perspective as payback for the āśīrvād. However, hijras may refuse the same. Rather, they claim that the Mother-Goddess delivers money to them through pilgrims, which is why they receive it. That is, they do not regard it as a direct and personal reciprocal transaction with pilgrims. Thus, it is their right, or hakk, to receive money given by the Mother-Goddess, and not that given by laypeople.

At the temple, there is another group of people, Kamāliya, who claim their hakk (right) as caretakers of the Mother-Goddess. They declared that they were formerly renouncers, placing female signs on one side and men’s signs on the other, like ardhanaśivara. Formally, Kamāliyas had an authorized position in the temple for revenue management under the authority of the princely state of Gaekwād, which is recorded in the temple booklet (Anon. 1980:142). In addition to Kamāliya, Garāshiyā, a Rajput caste, was also in charge of management; they shared the temple revenue surplus at the rate of 10 and 6 ana respectively. This exclusive right system called ijara continued until 1954 when the system was abolished (Anon.1980:141-42). Kamāliyas used to visit several villages once a year to receive part of the harvest, and pāvaiyas followed them to help carry the harvest to their homes. This boss-subordinate relationship has now dissolved. According to the descendants of Kamāliyas, they personally decided to renounce the special right to the harvest as well as the adornment of special, showy dresses. In contrast, hijras continue to wear special outfits and are always present within the temple grounds.

In the following, I illustrate two cases of interactions between hijras and pilgrims to elucidate how “unsexed” strangers, pāvaiya, are involved in worldly gender and sexual matters; furthermore, I elucidate how their externality can be incorporated through kinship idioms of aunt and nephew/niece within the contingent context of bhakti. On
March 13, 2014, a man approached pāvaiya with a one hundred-rupee note in his hand. He asked whether they had change. By saying this, he meant that he wanted to give a small amount of money as a token. When he was asked how much he wanted to give, he answered that he would give them as much as they wanted. Finally, he was returned fifty rupees, while the remainder entered the pāvaiya’s common wallet. As a rule, pāvaiya who gather at the temple are not allowed to personally receive anything from the pilgrims. As soon as the man received the change, he requested the grace of the Mother-Goddess by saying that his wife was pregnant. As a response, one pāvaiyo simply uttered a few auspicious words, saying that “the Mother-Goddess would make your wish realized.”

The man may have been obligated to return to the temple if the grace of the Mother-Goddess or her āśīrvād produced the expected effect. He and his wife would bring their baby to the temple and contact pāvaiya once again. Then, pāvaiya would then demand a large sum of money when they saw a baby boy, who would be the successor to his father’s family line. In 2007, the monetary demand for boys was 50 rupees; however, it increased to circa 500 rupees in 2014.

On March 21, two young men in their 20s arrived and asked for a charm. They had travelled from distant Udaipur, in the state of Rajasthan. One of them was only an attender, standing behind as if he was an onlooker. The man in front had a visibly strained look on his face and came closer, asking for a good-luck amulet. Subsequently, one pāvaiyo stood up and escorted them into the corner of the temple yard, to tie a black string on his wrist. When they came back to our circle, the amulet practitioner said loudly that it would be solved in a month. The visitor then asked for the practitioner’s name and contact number. However, the practitioner did not provide a contact number or even a name but instead said, “I do not have a mobile phone. If your problem is solved, you can come here again and give gifts to any of us.”

In fact, almost all members of pāvaiya have their own mobile phones. They may freely keep in touch with anyone by mobile phone if they so choose, yet they do not build personal relationships with pilgrims. Moreover, they do not reveal their names to pilgrims; they refuse to be identified by their names at pilgrimage. Their names, given by their guardians, are primarily used only among members to identify each other. Therefore, they prefer to be addressed using an anonymous term applicable to anyone, such as māśī.

As mentioned earlier, māśī in Gujarati means a mother’s sister, and pāvaiya are usually addressed using this term. The term māśī is also commonly used for any women to whom one wishes to show respect and affection in the form of address, but not when other kinship terms, such as fai (a father’s sister) would apply. That is, māśī, the term of affinal alterity, is applicable to any situation in which one wishes to peacefully interact with someone. Although hijras, pāvaiya are not recognized as women in the phenomenal world; their identification with a feminine form of divinity could be a trigger to use such local knowledge and practice of kinship. Under the sovereignty of the Mother-Goddess, pilgrims take the place of children of the Mother-Goddess and show their respect to pāvaiya by addressing them as māśī; at the same time, they show their intention to avoid any dangerous situations, such as being cursed.

Additionally, by contributing money, persons may request pāvaiya to bestow the power of fertility. This tactic of addressing and giving can be considered a type of mechanism of Maussian hospitality,12 the mechanism for stabilizing the relationship between the
dangerous stranger and the host community (Candea and Col 2012; Pitt-Rivers 1968). Upon doing so, the contributor is supposed to receive the Mother-Goddess’ grace through mediators. Even for pāvaiya, being in the position of affine is also a requisite tactic. While maintaining their alterity, they can negotiate with pilgrims, yet their interactions are always contingent. They would not necessarily use their own name when involved in such a transient interaction; they simply take the money as their right, without any obligations to have any contact with pilgrims in the future.

Once the client from Udaipur had left, the practitioner pāvaiyo blurted out his whole story; the client had difficulty having a sex with a woman because of erectile dysfunction. Furthermore, the practitioner added that it was easy to guess his problem, even though he did not say so explicitly. This was because he was not the first person to ask for help in solving erectile dysfunction. No members of pāvaiya are specialized in medicine, yet pāvaiya seem to be credited with the power of fertility and sexuality. Due to their devotion to the Mother-Goddess, pāvaiya may be regarded as a source of fertility in the eyes of pilgrims, even though they lose their own fertility through castration.

Conclusion

As I illustrated in the genealogy of representation of hijras, non-normative gender and sexuality of hijras have been a center of attention since the colonial period. Furthermore, hijras have been depicted both negatively and positively according to context. While hijras’ castrated bodies appeared offensive according to colonial documents, their non-normative gender and sex has been praised in gender studies as a symbol of gender diversity that helps discard the “taken-for-granted” gender dichotomy in Western societies.

Serena Nanda is a prominent contributor to scholarly literature on hijras and the third gender. Until the publication of Nanda’s important work (1990), there was no single uniform group called “hijras” across India. Each scholar adopted different notations based on regional languages, such as hinjra (Carstairs 1960), hjadā (Shah 1961), and hijdās (Preston 1987). Moreover, Nanda’s work prompted public attention towards hijras as the third gender or the third sex in non-Western societies. Later, repetitive quoting of Nanda’s ethnography and the “third” impinged on the Indian Government, and the term itself was officially employed to demarcate this specific population from well-off urban citizens who can claim their identities with globally recognized categories such as gays, lesbians, and LGBTQIA.

The official “third” denotes deviance from normative gender roles as well as backwardness in comparison with those who intentionally follow global standards. Individuals of the third are not only non-normative men or women, but they also do not fit into global standards. That is, the third gender can be seen as located in a dually oppressive position with abnormality and backwardness. This process of configuration is described as “subalternisation,” which forms an image of hijras as those who suffer from the permanent condition of subalternity (Sarker 2016:818–19). Thirdness, once a symbol of gender diversity, now symbolizes a subaltern position in the current political and global configuration.

However, beneath such a hegemonic movement or “subalternization” different activities are still being practiced in the local socio-religious contexts. As illustrated
thus far, the hijras of Gujarat, particularly pāvaiya, who come to the place of Mother-Goddess regularly, never demarcate themselves as third-gender individuals in front of pilgrims. Instead, they stress the boundaries of the worldly and non-worldly through outward and inward appearances as well as the word bhekh, namely ascetics. Wearing showy saris and disclosing their emasculated bodies are non-verbal practices to show their commitment to the Mother-Goddess. Further, they also call themselves bhekh in the presence of sansārī, or laypeople. Although there is no universal agreement on criteria for distinguishing ascetics from non-ascetics in South Asia, Richard Burghart makes a general statement that “all ascetics see themselves as followers of some path which releases them from the transient world (not the social world) and all ascetics distinguish themselves from non-ascetics who do not seek such release” (Burghart 1983:643). With reference to Burghart’s definition, pāvaiya of Gujarat are certainly ascetics who follow the path to reach Bahucharā Mātā, as written in Gujarati folklore.

It is important to note here that pāvaiya of Gujarat collectively identify with a feminine deity through devotional means. Their collective subordination to Bahucharā Mātā initiates their own agency to bring about their presence as devotees in the realm of religion. I avoid thinking of agency as a synonym for resistance to social norms, as in Mahmood’s reading of agency. Their devotional actions and renunciation of gendered bodies never intend to subvert the worldly perception of binary sex and gender. Rather, they depend on socio-cultural norms of sex and gender in the manner of bhakti, which contributes to the construction of their own subject (Mahmood 2011:32, 157, 175).

Moreover, their agency may also destabilize a monolithic image of the hijras as existing all over the country. As Preston (1987) disclosed, hijras have been placed in an oppressed position since the advent of British rule; however, Gujarat pāvaiya in particular have kept their special role as devotees of Bahucharā Mātā, as written in the temple booklet (1980) and A. M. Shah’s notes on same (Shah 1961). Under the supervision of the Mother-Goddess, pāvaiya of Gujarat are still being asked to share the Mother-Goddess’ fertility, or āśīrvād, by pilgrims who want to overcome their vulnerabilities related to worldly reproduction. In such a situation, non-normative gender may not be a hinderance to interaction and physical contact among devotees and pilgrims. If pāvaiya can initiate their agency properly during the transient opportunity of pilgrimage, they would not necessarily be identified as the third gender or subalterns politically for the sake of survival. Their agency alongside the plot of ethnographic writing indicates to us how we can “think otherwise, think anew” (Weiss 2016:635).

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**NOTES**

1. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers JP18820036, JP20720243, JP24520916 and Gujarat Pavitra Yatradham Vikas Board, Gandhinagar.
2. Concerning metalanguage, Zene gives examples such as “folklore, popular religiosity, so-called superstitions, tales and myths, proverbs, music, dance, theater, figurative arts” (2010:91).
3. Byrd & Rothberg assert the importance of shifting the focus from the inability “to speak” to the inability “to hear” that would open up wider discussions across the different fields of studies (Byrd & Rothberg 2011:5).
4. As a master’s graduate in social anthropology at the Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad, under the exchange program between the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the Japanese Ministry of Education, I had a certain amount of confidence in my ability to communicate with local people in Gujarati without requiring interpreters.
5. This newly established category of “third gender” excludes rich urban citizens who identify themselves using English terms, such as gay or lesbian (Shah 2014).
6. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016, introduced by the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Thaawar Chand Gehlot in Lok Sabha, does not mention the reservation quota, which is due to protests by OBC groups who feared this would reduce their share of the resources (Nair 2016).
7. Here, several terms indicating hijras are used interchangeably by *Gadhavī*.
8. Hinchy claims that only hijras were the target for criticism of obscenity during the British period, although hijras and Ramanandis have in common feminine embodiment in their way of worshipping deities (Hinchy 2014:278).
9. *Tīni* is a name for a female, used here as a pseudonym. Newcomers are given female names by their guru.
10. The period of confinement is one month, plus a quarter. According to the local calendar, one month consists of 30 days: 15 days of wax and 15 days of wane of the moon; therefore, a quarter is 7 days.
11. *Ana* is a type of currency; 16 *ana* = 1 rupee.
12. Here, I use the phrase “Maussian hospitality” (Candea and Col 2012:s1) so as not to reduce the scope of hospitality into that of tourism.
ABSTRACTS

This paper aims to demonstrate how we may consider the non-normativity of the people in India known as hijras. Because of their non-normative gender, hijras have been regarded and described as deviants in colonial documents and later dubbed “alternative gender,” “third sex,” and “third gender” by scholars. Nowadays, under the official umbrella of the “third gender” category, hijras have become more visible as subaltern individuals who do not fit into normative gender divisions. In this paper, I highlight an alternative way of understanding their non-normativity to destabilize a monolithic image of the hijra community, which extends throughout, the country by foregrounding local narratives and rules of incorporation of externality at the temple of the Mother-Goddess in Gujarat. Hijras of Gujarat, particularly those who belong to pāvaiya, collectively identify themselves with a feminine deity through their devotional practices. Their collective subordination to Bahucharā Mātā encourages their own agency to enhance their presence in the realm of religion. If they can set up their agency properly during the transient opportunity of pilgrimage, pāvaiya need not be politically identified as the third gender or a subaltern group for the sake of survival.

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Keywords: hijras, externality, divinity, identification, agency

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