

Gender Roles in India

(from *"Hijras: An alternative Sex and Gender Roles in India"* by Serena Nanda)

In India, "male" and "female" are seen as natural categories in complimentary opposition. The model of this opposition is biological, but includes criteria ascribed to gender; males and females are born with different sexual natures and take different, and complimentary roles in marriage, sexual relations and reproduction. The biological, or "essential", nature of the dichotomy between male and female and between man and woman is amply demonstrated in both the medical and ritual texts of classical Hinduism, in which bodily fluids and sexual organs are presented as both the major sources of the sex and gender dichotomy and its major symbols. Each sex has its essential, innate nature, consisting of physical and moral qualities, although these are alterable.

In Hinduism, the female principle is the more immanent and active, animating the male principle, which is more inert and latent. This active female principle has a positive, creative, life-giving aspect and a destructive, life-destroying aspect. The erotic aspect of female power is dangerous unless it is controlled by the male principle. Powerful women, whether deities or humans, must be restrained by male authority. Thus, the Hindu goddess subordinated to her male consort is beneficent, but when dominant the goddess is aggressive, devouring and destructive. This view of the danger of unrestrained female sexuality characterises a more down-to-earth sexual ideology as well. In Indian both in Hinduism and Islam, women are believed to be more sexually voracious than men; to prevent their sexual appetites from causing social chaos and distracting men from their higher spiritual duties, women must be controlled. This opposition between male and female sexuality is joined to other oppositions in the Hindu classification system between hot and cold, erotic and ascetic.

In Hinduism, the complimentary opposition of male and female, man and woman, represents the most important sex and gender roles in society but by no means the only ones. The interchange of male and female qualities, transformation of sex and gender and alternative sex and gender roles, both among deities and humans,, are meaningful and positive themes in Hindu mythologies, ritual and art.

As "eunuch-transvestites" - hijras - a major identification is made between hijras and Arjun, hero of the Mahabharata, who lives for a year in the guise of a eunuch, wearing bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire and teaching the women of the king's court to sing and dance. In this disguise, Arjun participates in weddings and births, providing legitimation for the ritual contexts in which hijras perform. The portrayal of Arjun in popular enactments of the Mahabharata in a vertically divided

half-man, half-woman form highlights this identification.

This form of Arjun reiterates the sexually ambivalent Siva who appears as Ardhanarisvara, also a vertically divided half-man, half-woman, representing Siva united with his shakti. Ardhanarisvara supports the identification of Arjun with Siva and of both with hijras. Siva is an important sexually ambivalent figure in Hinduism, incorporating both male and female characteristics. He is an ascetic - one who renounces sex - and yet appears in many erotic and procreative roles. His most powerful symbol and object of worship is the linga, or phallus is almost always set in the yoni, the symbol of the female genitals.

Other Hindu deities are also sexually ambiguous or have dual gender manifestations. Vishnu and Krishna, an avatar or incarnation of Vishnu, are often presented as androgynous forms. In one myth, Vishnu transforms himself into Mohini, the most beautiful woman in the world, to take back the sacred nectar from the demons who have stolen it. In another well-known myth, Krishna takes on female form to destroy the demon, Araka, whose strength came from his chastity. Krishna is able to overcome Araka by transforming himself into a beautiful woman who seduces Araka into marriage and thus makes Araka vulnerable to destruction.

In yet another myth, the basis of a festival in South India attended by thousands of hijras, Krishna comes to earth as a woman to marry a King's son, who is, by this marriage, granted success in battle by the gods. The price the son must pay, however, is the sacrifice of his life when the battle is over. During the festival hijras enact the role of women who marry and later, as widows, mourn the death of their husbands, represented by the god Koothandavur, an incarnation of Krishna. An important ritual at the Jagannatha temple in Orissa involves a sequence in which Balabhadra, the ascetic elder brother of the deity Jagannatha, who is identified with Siva, is seduced by a young man dressed as a female temple dancer.

In some Hindu sects, worship involves male transvestism as a form of devotion. Among the Sakhibhava, a sect devoted to Krishna in which he may not be worshipped directly, the devotees impersonate Radha, Krishna's beloved, and through her devotion to Krishna indirectly worship him. In this impersonation, male devotees dress in women's clothing, simulate menstruation and have sexual relations with men, and some devotees even castrate themselves.

The Hindu view that all persons contain within themselves both male and female principles is explicitly expressed in the Tantric sect, in which the Supreme Being is conceptualised as one complete sex, containing male and female sex organs. Hermaphroditism is the ideal. In some of these sects male transvestism is used as a way of

transcending one's own sex, a pre-requisite to achieving salvation. In other Tantric sects religious exercises involve the male devotees imitating a woman to realise the woman in himself; only in this way does the sect believe that true love can be realised.

Ancient Hindu texts refer to alternative sexes and genders among humans as well as deities. Ancient Hindu texts mention a third sex. Whilst the Kama Sutra mentions a variety of sexual acts between men and between men and eunuchs.

It is the cultural flexibility so characteristic of Indian society that permits it to accommodate sexual ambiguity and even accord it a measure of power. Although sometimes ambivalently regarded, these mythological, dramatic and historical roles nonetheless give positive meaning to the lives of the many individuals with a variety of mixed gender identifications, physical conditions and erotic preferences who join the hijra community.

NOTE: the hijra model is the only visible model for those with differing erotic possibilities to identify with.....

".... celebrating the idea that the universe is boundlessly various and.... that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other.."

Hijras as a Third Sex and a Third Gender

The popular understanding of the hijra as an alternative sex and gender role is based on the model of the hermaphrodite, a person biologically intersexed. The linguistic evidence suggests that hijras are mainly thought of as more male than female. The word hijra is a masculine noun, most widely translated into English as eunuch or hermaphrodite. Both these glosses emphasise sexual impotence, which is understood in India to mean a physical defect impairing sexual function, both intercourse (in the inserter) role and in reproductive ability. Hijra sometimes implies, but is not culturally equivalent to, zennana, a term that literally means woman, and connotes a man who has sex with other men in the receptor role. It is widely believed in India that a man who has continued sexual relations in the receiver role will lose sexual vitality in his genitals and become impotent. It is sexual impotence (with women), then, and not sexual relations with men that defines the potential hijra.

Hijras identify themselves as incomplete men in that they do not have desires for women that other men do. They attribute this lack of desire to a defective male sexual organ..... Hijra role is defined biologically as a loss of virility, or as "man minus man".

Thus, Indian emic sex and gender categories of hijra collapse the categories of (born) hermaphrodites and (made) eunuch. While ambiguous male genitalia serve as the most important culturally defined sign of the hijra, in practical terms any indication of a loss of

masculinity, whether impotence, effeminate behaviour or desire for sexual relations with men in the receptor role, may be taken as a sign that one should join the hijras.

In India, multiple sexes and genders are acknowledged as possibilities, albeit ambivalently regarded possibilities, among both humans and deities. Individuals who do not fit into society's major categories may indeed be stigmatised, but may also find a meaningful and positive way to pursue their life course because of the particular Hindu concept of the person.

In Hinduism, personhood is linked to participation in relations of caste and kinship, through which individuals become dependent on, and subject to, the control of others. It is through these group affiliations that human beings become persons, and it is the sacraments, or mandatory life-passage rite, that confer on human beings the cultural qualities of personhood. Thus, being human is a necessary but not sufficient condition being a person. Eligibility for full personhood is not equal for all: it is more available for men than for women, and for the twice-born castes, who undergo a second birth, than for shudras, who cannot perform this rite.

Full personhood is built on the oppositional categories of male and female, who, through sexual intercourse in marriage, produce progeny, especially sons. Thus marriage, based on the expectation of fertile sexuality, is central to full personhood. An individual who dies without being married is considered an incomplete person. A man who is impotent or a woman who does not menstruate, is thus disqualified from achieving full personhood.

For the individual who is incapable of reproduction, as either a man or woman, or does not wish to marry, there is a meaningful role available that transcends the categories of (married) man and (married) woman. This is the role of the ascetic, or renouncer. In identifying with the ascetic role, individuals who are sexually "betwixt and between" for any number of biological or personal choices are able to transform an incomplete personhood into a transcendent one.

This possibility is tied to the Hindu concept of the person as context specific and relational and the notion of dharma, or right action, as relative. All human beings are regarded as possessing different and unequal attributes of humanity. For all persons, depending upon the specific historical and cultural context, the particular life stage and innate traits carried over from previous lives, there is a particular moral obligation or life task that is right for them. As long as individuals follow their own particular life path, their svadharma, they are on the road to self-realisation. In this philosophy, no action is right or wrong in itself, but only so in relation to the traditional patterns of the group to which individuals belong and their own nature. As the Bhavagad Gita says: Better one's own duty, even imperfect, than

another's duty well performed.

The concept of svadharma leads to a tolerance of a wide diversity of occupations, behaviours and personal styles, as long as these are seen as the working out of a life path. This is particularly so when the behaviour is sanctified by tradition, formalised in ritual and practised within a group. Hinduism recognises that human beings achieve their ultimate goals by following many different paths, because they differ in their innate essences, moral qualities and special abilities. Hinduism thus afford the individual personality much latitude in behaviour...

For many hijras, a key point in changing gender identity may well be the self-acknowledgement of the pleasure they experience from being sexual receptors for men. This gradual recognition of the desires of the self may lead to interpreting oneself as an effeminate man, no longer capable of having sex with a woman.

With the recognition that this life path is denied them, the hijra community provides an opportunity for an alternative identity and an environment that is more emotionally and economically satisfying than life on the streets. It is at this point, perhaps around the time their parents are thinking of arranging their marriage, that they join the hijra community. Once there strong pressure to drop masculine behaviour and take on more feminine behaviour would logically be accompanied, in varying degrees, by a gradual change in gender identity.

Hijra personal narratives cast doubt on Western ideas that gender identity is always permanent over a lifetime. They also suggest that gender identities may vary among people occupying the same gender role.

Success and salvation in Hindu India is equated with submission, particularly in regard to the Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess is compelled to offer help when confronted with complete surrender of the devotee, but those who deny her wishes endanger themselves. Thus, underlying the surrender is fear. This simultaneous beneficent and destructive aspect, expressed in myth and ritual, represents the ambivalence towards the real mother....

Hindu mythology abound in images of the aggressive Mother Goddess as she devours, beheads and castrates, destructive acts that nevertheless contain symbolism of rebirth and initiation. A common expression of this theme is the many myths portraying the Mother Goddess as angry castrator of her mortal consort, who attempts to evade her sexual advances by explaining that she is like a mother to him. These myths suggest that the consort experiences

the offering of the goddess's love as an incestuous confrontation, one from which he must free himself by transforming himself into a child, a form of emasculation.

While some myths the goddess does the castrating, in others the devotee - son, consort, worshipper - castrates himself as a way of resolving the conflict presented by his anxiety over his inadequacy to fulfil the sexual needs of the mother.

....In India, it is the seductive, provocative presence that the mother extends, because of her own unsatisfied erotic needs....

Several social factors in India combine to dispose a young mother to turn the full force of her eroticism towards an infant son, including the culturally acquired repression of a woman's erotic needs, her distance from her husband in the joint family, her increase in status and respect when she bears a son and the closeness between mother and son for a prolonged period that is abruptly discontinued around the sixth or seventh year.

The young boy's ego cannot cope with the sexual demands of the mother, nor can he happily accept the separation from his mother that his rejection of her entails. The son's response to the mother's overpowering demands and his simultaneous desire to retain her protection results in a fear of the "devouring mother". This fear leads to a "vicious circle that spirals inward in the Indian unconscious: mature women are experienced as sexually threatening to men; this contributes to 'avoidance behaviour' in marital sexual relations; this in turn causes women to extend a provocative sexual presence towards their sons, and this eventually produces adult men who fear the sexuality of mature women".

The mother's overpowering incestuous demands on the son lead him to want to avoid them at all costs, even at the cost of his manhood. But although the rejected mother becomes dangerous, her presence is so necessary that abandonment by her is unthinkable - hence the worship of the goddess as mother. For it is the goddess, dangerous though she is, who nevertheless brings blessings, salvation and rebirth - just as it is the mother, potentially dangerous as she is in the possibility of abandoning her son, who nevertheless is the object of the son's deepest longings for reconciliation.

The devotee's attempts at reconciliation with the mother through the worship of the goddess are expressed in many Hindu myths and rituals involving transgenderism. In these myths and rituals, the male's attempt to remove his masculinity, which he vaguely perceives to be the basis of his conflict with his mother, is supreme. Longing for fusion with the mother that brings salvation, the male devotee - in rituals ranging from transvestism to emasculation - proves his submission and is thereby assured of the nurturing and life-giving

presence of the desired mother.

xThe hijra conceptualisation of the emasculation ritual as rebirth illuminates the ritual as part of the struggle against death, which, because of the Hindu family drama, takes a characteristically Hindu form of a desire for fusion with the mother...

Through emasculation, hijras, as devotees of the goddess achieve the ultimate identification with the mother, thereby reducing their anxiety about separation from her.

Note: other routes not involving emasculation.... involving relationships between son/mother/sexualities...i.e. having sex with a woman is having sex with a mother.... desiring a woman is desiring a motherfear of the sexuality of women...

Cultural patterns of Hindu India are not merely a background hospitable to various kinds of gender ambiguities; they also generate psychodynamic processes strongly implicated in the maintenance of various forms of transgenderism, including extremes such as hijras. These psychodynamic forces have helped enable the role to continue over time, attracting a wide variety of persons - those called transvestites, homosexuals (passive) and transsexuals in the West - without losing its cultural meaning.

An important explanatory key is the importance of the Mother Goddess in Hinduism. In India, the devotion to the Mother Goddess, and the corresponding significance of feminine creative powers, is still strong.... Although this devotion is combined with ambivalence about the untamed sexuality of women, it nevertheless provides a context in which gender transpositions -from male to female - remain valid and meaningful.

The cultural significance of the feminine, when joined to the distinctive Hindu concept of svadharma, gives wide latitude to individuals whose gender roles and identities vary from the cultural norm.... Hinduism allows for so many different ways of being human.

Models of cultural diversity strong testimony that Western sex and gender dichotomies are not universal