What Can Hijras Teach Us about Governance, Gender, and Wealth?

A Brief and Spectacular Graphic Narrative

Shakthi Nataraj and Gayatri Reddy

Abstract:

This is an illustrated social history of how hijras (a community of trans-feminine people) have long served as a linchpin in state regulations of social (dis)order in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The authors trace the social life of laws governing "unruly" communities in the Indian subcontinent, emphasizing how social regulation of gender often emerges from material regulation. Colonial constructions of the "public indecency of eunuchs" and "unnatural offenses" were the pretext for regulating hijra livelihoods, kinship structures, and wealth, allowing the state to acquire land and revenue. More broadly, such constructions of "criminal castes and tribes" also implicated communities beyond hijras, with lingering effects to this day. However, the lives of hijras and other communities exceeded the policies of containment, criminalization, and extermination imposed on them, showcasing their persistent ability to thrive in the face of these efforts to govern them. The authors have envisioned their graphic narrative as a teaching tool to engage wider audiences in discussions of how gender, sexuality, caste, labor, and kinship are regulated.

Keywords hijras, governance, gender, wealth, graphic narrative

This is an illustrated social history of how hijras (a community of trans-feminine people) were regulated in the Indian subcontinent. It draws on humanities and social science research to visualize how hijras have long served as a linchpin in state regulations of social (dis)order in colonial and postcolonial contexts. We trace the social life of laws governing "unruly" communities in the Indian subcontinent, emphasizing how social regulation of gender often emerges from material regulation. Colonial constructions of the "public indecency of eunuchs" and "unnatural offenses" were the pretext for regulating hijra livelihoods, kinship structures, and wealth, allowing the state to acquire land and revenue. More broadly, such constructions of "criminal castes and tribes" also implicated communities beyond hijras, with lingering effects to this day. However, the lives of hijras and other communities exceeded the policies of containment, criminalization, and extermination imposed on them, showcasing their persistent ability to thrive in the face of these efforts to govern them.

We have envisioned our graphic narrative as a teaching tool to engage with the broader questions of how material and social logics are related, and why arrangements of gender, sexuality, and kinship evoke such anxiety, necessitating an entire apparatus of state surveillance and management. Our graphic representation offers a multimodal lens through which to grapple with these questions, while also engaging wider audiences. We intend this narrative to complement other historical and ethnographic accounts of colonialism, gender, sexuality, caste, labor, kinship, and their regulations in the Indian subcontinent.

A few important caveats: (1) While we emphasize the role of colonial governance, we are not suggesting that precolonial India was free of social hierarchies or that caste and labor categories were conjured out of thin air by colonial codification. There are rich medieval histories of hijras and khwaja siras, but these were profoundly shaped by the colonial encounter. This is especially important to emphasize, when current-day right-wing movements seek to resurrect an unmediated hijra and kinnar "tradition" and link it to a glorious Hindu past; (2) We recognize that hijra is an overdetermined category that has often overshadowed the diversity of gendered identities in South Asia. We underscore the need to further explore how experiences of transmasculinity and of those assigned female at birth are constituted in relation to dynamics of caste, labor, and capital; (3) Our own ethnographic research is in South India and we draw largely on scholarship relating to India, though we recognize that a national framing is inadequate to capture both the regional identities that actively distinguish themselves from hijras and the transregional histories of hijras and khwaja siras; (4) Our characters are based on historical references, but we have taken some artistic license by occasionally sketching composite figures and staging imagined scenes, extending our arguments beyond the temporal and spatial limits of historical narrative.

Each figure one full page, beginning on page 3. Alt text for images provided below.

Fig. 1: An image of an elderly trans feminine person engaged in their distinctive hand-clapping gesture

Fig. 2: An image of a royal court with the Mughal emperor Jehangir sitting on a throne and receiving Sir Thomas Roe. In between the two figures stands a trans feminine khwaja sira in male attire reading a scroll. The backdrop, seen through an archway is a cityscape with typical Mughal architecture.

Fig. 3: The images on this page illustrate a range of hijra occupations from the top right figure of two hijra figures, one with a cloth purse tied around their waist ostensibly on their way to collect revenue, a middle hijra figure squatting on the ground in front of a boiling cauldron, cooking, and a third image on the bottom left depicting three hijras engaging in their ritual *badhai* performance, one playing the drum, another singing, and a third dancing.

Fig. 4: The image shows two sets of hands holding a glowing orb.

Fig. 5: An image of a giant parchment scroll from the top left of the page down to the bottom right with specific dates highlighted on it. Standing on top of the parchment at the top left is a British official standing in his uniform with a top coat and hat and looking quizzically, and at the bottom is an image of a seated British official in his uniform holding a pen and writing on the scroll while being schooled by a Hindu upper-caste man with his sacred thread and top knot standing with a pointer in his hand, gesturing toward a board.

Fig. 6: The parchment scroll continues from the previous page, winding its way down the page and ending in a pile of books with titles that capture some of the key colonial texts produced in the 19th century. In the middle of the page is a British colonial official holding the scroll and peering at it while speaking.

Fig. 7: On the top right, two hijras are collecting alms from a smiling young woman whose son clings to her leg. In the bottom left corner, a British officer stands at a podium, sputtering with outrage as he eyes the jingling money purse that one hijra slings around her hip. She looks at him with an angry expression. A stray dog in the foreground stares quizzically at the officer, its head cocked.

Fig. 8: The page depicts a courtroom. A bored-looking judge twiddles his thumbs while a doctor in the witness stand gestures to a medical chart. The medical chart, titled “Features of the Common Habitual Catamite,” features a curly-haired youth clothed in a wispy garment, wearing anklets. Scientific labels point out various incriminating features: “Flowers in hair”, “Lackluster eyes”, “Wearing women’s clothes”, “Distended anus”, “Sallow countenance” and “Likes to

dance". In the foreground, four hijras whisper jokes to themselves while watching the proceedings. Outside the panel looking in is a back view of Khairati, a figure clothed in a tunic and skirt, with long hair adorned with flowers.

Fig. 9: Under a sign reading "Hardoi Police Station", a bored-looking British official sits at a desk with a pile of papers. Before him is a constable holding a rope tied around the neck of a Chamar man taken prisoner and forced to kneel. In the foreground, two other Chamar men comment on the scene they are witnessing.

Fig. 10: A British officer, Col. William Sleeman, supervises while a photographer trains an old-fashioned on an Indian man posing uncomfortably under a tree. The subject of their photograph is Tantia Bhil, dressed in tattered garments, with ammunition, a revolver, and a large sickle slung on leather belts about his torso.

Fig. 11: In the top half of the page, the elderly Saguni hijra sits with dignity, her legs apart, with one hand to her chest, declaring her family's claim to the land. At the bottom of the page, an upper-caste clerk dressed in a turban and tunic translates her words for a British officer hunched over a long scroll.

Fig. 12 and cover page: The image shows a scene from a protest related to queer and transgender rights in contemporary India, with colourful figures set against a splash on pink and purple ink. Such protests are vibrant and often marked by sharply opposing currents.

On the top right of the image, saffron-clad members of the Kinnar Akhada align themselves with the Hindu religious right, holding a sign supporting the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. They are scowling at a protestor in a lavender salwar suit who holds a sign criticizing the "saffronization" of the trans movement, aligning herself with the pink, white, and blue of the international transgender rights flag. Near her right elbow is another sign that says "Dalit Queer Nepal", alluding to a specific organization in Nepal while also highlighting the wider intersection of caste and queerness.

Some placards call for the repeal of colonial-era laws such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized homosexual intercourse, as well as a regional example of such laws such as the Telengana Eunuchs Act. Another reads "Stop Attacking Our Livelihoods!".

One sign criticizes recent Indian legal efforts such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 and the National Registry of Citizens (NRC) that discriminate against specific minority communities, saying "Kaagaz nahin dikhayenge!" (We won't show our papers/documents!) This placard refers to a widely circulated 2019 poem by Varun Grover.

In the center of the scene is a group of friends with varying gender presentation, one of whom holds a small rainbow flag. Another holds a playful sign, offering a cheeky take on a classic song from the Bollywood film *Mughal E-Azam* (1960): *jab pyar kiya tho darna kya?* (What is there to fear is the face of love?). The protestor's sign substitutes the word "gender" for "fear," and reads *jab pyar kiya tho gender kya?* (What does gender matter in the face of love?) In the foreground, a laughing woman dances along to the music.

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