A group of hijra in Bangladesh in 2010, by USAID Bangladesh, Wikimedia Commons: http://bit.ly/2w0PlNe

Note on this Case Study:

When considering this case study, remember that every major world religion originated and has grown in patriarchal societies—that is, societies where men hold most of the culture's power, and people of any other gender are largely excluded from power. In this patriarchal context, religions have responded in very different ways, sometimes upholding and supporting misogyny, and sometimes subverting and rejecting it in favor of gender equality. Powerful women, feminists, and members of the LGBTQ community have played major roles in all faith traditions, in diverse ways across different times and cultures.

As always, when thinking about religion and gender, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

The Third Gender and Hijras

While recognition of genders outside male and female has only recently been discussed in Western societies, in Hindu society, people of non-binary gender expression have played important roles for over 2000 years. Called the third gender, evidence for their existence in Hindu society can be found in Hindu holy texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, where Hindu hero Arjuna becomes the third gender. Third gender people have often been revered throughout South Asian history; for example, Muslim rulers of the Mughal Empire in the 15th to 19th centuries were generous patrons of third gender Indians.[1] Many rose to significant positions of power under both Hindu and Muslim rulers.[2] In 2014, it was estimated that around 3 million third gender people live in India alone.[3]

While the third gender includes a few different groups in South Asia, the most common are the hijras. Hijras are often born male but look and dress in traditionally feminine ways. Many, but not all, choose to undergo a castration ceremony, removing their male genitalia as an offering to Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata. Other hijras are born intersex. Often called transgender by outsiders, Indian society and most hijras consider themselves to be third gender—neither male nor female, not transitioning. They are a different gender altogether.[4] However, hijra identity is complex, and recently, some have identified as transgender and sought gender reassignment procedures.[5]

Regardless, most hijras' defining characteristic is leaving home to become a part of the hijra community, a community which removes itself from wider society and teaches its lessons in secret. A young person is initiated by following a *guru*, or teacher, who will teach the *chela*, or disciple, in the hijra ways of life. This includes leaving their home to live in community with other hijras, to learn the ritual roles that they perform in Hindu households.[6] Hijra are expected to perform dances, songs, and blessings at both births and weddings of Hindus. To many Hindus, a hijra's blessings of a baby will confer fertility,

[1] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1999), 13, 23, 30-31, 41, 144.
[2] Geeta Pandey, "India court recognizes transgender people as third gender," *BBC News*, Apr. 15, 2014. http://bbc.in/1kWHmGG
[3] Terence McCoy, "India Now Recognizes Transgender Citizens as 'Third Gender,'" *The Washington Post*, Apr. 15, 2014. http://wapo.st/2vt4S7O
[4] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, xx, 15-19, 24-26.
[5] Max Bearak, "Why terms like 'transgender' don't work for India's 'third gender' communities,' *The Washington Post*, Apr. 23, 2016. http://wapo.st/2wFcWAL
[6] Ibid.

prosperity, and long life on the child. One to two days after a marriage ceremony—hijras will perform to bless the couple for fertility. To many Hindus, it is the third gender nature of hijras—including their sacrifice of their procreative ability to the goddess—that grants hijras this incredible religious power. In fact, hijras also can curse a family if they are disrespectful or refuse to pay for the blessings. Many Hindus, and the hijras themselves, take these blessings and curses very seriously; hijras say they only curse in extreme circumstances. While hijras are often invited to perform these rituals, they will also attend births and marriages unannounced, claiming their right to attend as their sacred religious duty. Fearful of receiving a curse from hijras, Hindu families often welcome them in and pay them for their services, even when uninvited. However, sometimes Hindu families refuse them entry or refuse to pay, even going as far as calling the police. Still, the cultural authority of the hijra is so powerful, that the police will often do nothing to remove them.[7] Hijras are often treated with both respect and fear.

Historically and culturally hijras are based in Hinduism and they perform solely for Hindus. However, hijras are not all Hindu themselves. Many are Muslim and a few are Christian. In fact, some hijras follow the beliefs and practices of both Hinduism and Islam. For example, some hijras center their community around the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata while also taking a Muslim name and observing Islamic traditions such as Ramadan.[8] Just as hijra are not limited by binary views of gender, some are not limited by a single religious tradition.

While hijras have been treated with both fear and respect for thousands of years, much of this respect did not survive Hinduism's encounter with colonialism. The British colonized most of South Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries, and were shocked by third gender people. Based in Christian beliefs about gender at the time, the British named all hijras criminals in 1871, and instructed colonial authorities to arrest them on sight. However, because of their important religious functions for Hindus, hijras persisted without significant interruption. Still, nearly 200 years of stigmatization by the British eventually took a toll. While hijras have maintained their traditional rights and responsibilities at births and marriages and the 1871 law was repealed shortly after independence, today, hijra are often treated with contempt. They are almost always excluded from employment and education outside of their ritual roles. As a result, they are often stricken by poverty and forced to resort to begging and prostitution to survive. They are often victims of violence and abuse, harassed by police and refused treatment at hospitals.[9]

Recently, hijra have regained some of the rights and freedoms which they have been denied. By 2014, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh had all officially recognized third gender people as citizens deserving of equal rights. The Supreme Court of India stated, "it is the right of every human being to choose their gender," and that recognition of the group, "is not a social or medical issue, but a human rights issue." They directed the government to open education and job opportunities to all third gender groups. While progress has been slow, in 2015 the first hijra mayor in India was elected in the city of Raigarh, and in 2017 the city of Kochi hired 23 hijra to work for their public transit system.[10] Still progress is slow, and most third gender people remain in poverty, even as they continue to bless Hindu families with prosperity.

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[7] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 2-12,
[8] Ibid., 41-43; Adnan Hossain, "Beyond Emasculation: Being Muslim and Becoming Hijra …," *Asian Studies Review*, 36 no. 4, (2012): 498.
[9] Dedutt Pattanaik, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*, (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002), 10; Geeta Pandey, "India court recognises transgender…"; Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 50.
[10] Geeta Pandey, "India court recognises transgender,"; Vidhi Doshi, "Indian train network makes history by employing transgender workers," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2017. http://bit.ly/2q9Q4sr ; Eesha Patkar, "India's transgender mayor—is the country finally overcoming prejudice?" *The Guardian*, Mar. 3, 2015. http://bit.ly/2vzupuu

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Hijra and transgender rights advocate Laxmi Narayan Tripathi speaks about challenges in the hijra community with the Guardian (2015): http://bit.ly/2fxSKuA

Secondary Sources:

- India's NDTV short documentary on hijras (2013): http://bit.ly/2vZkkKy
- NPR radio story on third gender in India (2014): http://n.pr/2hUWxF1
- Indian hijras and academics speaking about the third gender with NBC News (2015): http://bit.ly/2vx6FqL
- Short documentary about the third gender in India by Zainab Salbi (2016): http://bit.ly/2k6gAh3

Discussion Questions

- How do views of hijras among Hindus show how Hinduism has changed over time? What are some of the reasons for that change?
- Many people in the West have never encountered people who follow multiple religious traditions, but it is far more common in other parts of the world. What do you imagine being multi-religious would look like?
- How do Hindu reactions to hijra performances illustrate the internal diversity of Hinduism?
- Watch Zainab Salbi's documentary in the sources above. What do the lives of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Madhu Kinnar say about gender and Hinduism in an Indian context? What is similar about their stories and what is different?
- In what ways do hijras have power in South Asian cultures? In what ways do they lack power? How does this affect their lives?
- How have some Christians impacted some Hindus in their relations with third gender people? Why?

Hijra and transgender rights advocate Laxmi Narayan Tripathi speaking at a conference in Australia in 2017. Photo by Timothy Herbert, Wikimedia Commons: http://bit.ly/2vxqSww