

# History of the Invisible: A People's History of the Transgendered Community of Lahore

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E. P. Thomson famously described people's history as being a historical narrative which attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of common people rather than political leaders (Thomson: 1966, 279-280). Keeping this in mind but at the same time moving on from major events and looking at them from a change of perspective this paper has attempted to highlight some everyday forms of lived experiences of the transgendered communities. James Scott in his influential work *Weapons of the Weak* claimed that:

"Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites". (Scott, 1985: 136)

The territory that Scott refers to is what the paper explores by stressing upon Levi-Strauss' notion that the simple opposition between mythology and history is not a clear cut one (Levi-Strauss, 1978). By incorporating folklore and myths along with what may be referred to as 'objective' history, the paper aims to show how history as subjective truth, inclusive of power relations and belief systems, is essentially made up of a series of discourses which lead to a phenomenological experience of the present. Three main things covered in this paper are 1) The manifestations of an important myth of the *Hijras* (transgender) and its connection with the present lived experiences of the community, 2) The State and hegemonic societies' creation of the *Hijra* identity and how it was seen affecting one of our informants and 3) A history of celibacy and its connection with the *Hijra* community and how the community uses it as a 'weapon of the weak'.

We begin with an origin myth of the *Hijra* community amongst the targeted sample during fieldwork. The main protagonist in the myth is Mai Nandi, also referred to as Bahuchara Mata and Murgi Mata in Indian society. The character of Mai Nandi has been described orally

during fieldwork in the Hira Mandi, Wahdat Road and Barkat Market area of Lahore along with a textual version of an origin myth narrated to Serena Nanda (Nanda, 1999) in Ahmedabad, Gujrat.

Mai Nandi, a *Khusra* (transgender) by birth was free from worldly desires; she was a *Faqir*, *Olia Allah* (holy person). People used to visit her and ask her to bring them peace and fulfill their desires. She used to sing and dance at public gatherings and wherever she went, people gave her offerings in the form of money. A man inspired, once approached her and asked if he could become her *Chela* (disciple), a request she accepted. After performing, upon returning home Mai Nandi used to give one third of her earnings to her *Chela* and kept two thirds herself. Feeling that the split was unfair, once the *Chela* demanded more money from Mai Nandi, over which she stood up and said “Should I reveal my genitals to show how different I am to you – This is why I deserve more money”. This silenced the man and the split continued as before. With the passage of time, as Mai Nandi became older, people started taking more interest in the *Chela's* dancing and singing which again led him to believe that he deserved more of the split. Upon raising this concern he was yet again met with the same response. Notably frustrated and distressed, he left Mai Nandi and went to another village and then after much anguish decided to castrate himself. He did this with *Akk / Kikar* tree leaf and due to heavy bleeding he fainted. Local villagers found him lying on the ground, and treated his wound with ash and with the passage of time he recovered. After 40 days, he put on make-up, dressed as a woman and went to meet his *Guru*. Upon seeing the *Chela* and inquiring about the reasons for his long absence, the time to split earnings came again. With the money laid down in front of her, Mai Nandi started towards making the same cut. The *Chela* declared with a confidence till now not expressed, that today the earnings shall be split equally. Again, the goddess revealed her genitals, however, was shocked by the *Chela's* response. The *Chela* took off his clothes and revealed his castrated genitals. “I am just like you now” he proclaimed. Upon witnessing that his penis and testicles had been castrated, the goddess went into turmoil and asked for the ground to open up and swallow her. As the goddess was being sucked into the earth she cursed the *Chela* and left him with some final words. “There will be millions of you around but there shall only be one in a thousand of me.”

A twist to the end of the myth was given by another informant in whose version, the last words of Mai Nandi to her *Chela* were, “Sing, dance and earn”.

This myth outlines some important factors leading towards *Hijra* identity formation of the present: 1) Like the majority of origin myths, this myth has an etiological function, that is, it explains a puzzling phenomenon, 2) It creates two types of hierarchies – one relating to the biological features of the *Hijras* and the other relating to the *Guru-Chela* relationship and 3) It determines division of labor in society. This myth explains the social order and organization of Pakistani *Hijra* community. Firstly, they live in tightly knitted *Hijra* groups. The individuals living outside are “pulled” or “pushed” towards the community due to several socio-economic factors. These communal groups are their safety and survival places from discrimination, hate and hostility. As far as hierarchy is concerned two types are pointed towards: biological features and *guru-chela* relationship. Our informant described three kinds of *Hijras*:

- 1) The first place belongs to people who are *khusras* by birth and have deformed genitals,
- 2) Second are those who have a penis and male body but have feminine souls, that is, their “souls are trapped in the wrong body”.
- 3) Third type of *khusras* are males but have disguised themselves as *Hijras* (for several reasons the foremost being the economic one.)

In her ethnographic study on Pakistani *Khusras*, Pamment (2010:30) also finds the first type as “true” *Khusras* as portrayed by her interviewee and Hahm (2010) also refers to them as “*asli*” (real). The ones that castrate themselves are considered infidels as they go against the will of God. This is the popular perception amongst *Hijras* in Pakistani society.

Secondly, all *Hijras* live in a *Guru Chela* structure. One *Guru* can have many *Chelas* but a *Chela* can have only one *Guru* at a time. *Chelas* can change their *Guru* but this is not considered a respectful act. A ritual is performed for *Guru-Chela* binding – a sum of Rs 125 is given to the *Guru* by the *Chela*. The *Guru* does not work but teaches *Chelas* the necessary skills needed to earn a livelihood through singing, dancing and *vadhai*

(alms) collection whilst providing them with a roof over their head, food and other such necessities. In this way the *Guru* creates an alternative family. It is the duty of *Chelas* to work and give a proper share of their income to the *Guru*. All *Hijra* community members interacted with were seen to have been part of this particular social structure.

The second version of the myth also sets the nature of the work of *Hijras* that is “sing, dance and earn”. Singing and dancing at birth and wedding ceremonies is a widely practiced work of *Hijras*. In contemporary times, they also perform at other private functions and celebrations and are indulged in prostitution and begging as well. The marginalization of *Hijras* at the hands of modernity and the moral terror of Islamized society are the reasons behind prostitution and begging (Frembgen 2011). Further details on this particular issue can be seen in the works of Pamment (2010), Frembgen (2011) and Taparia (2011).

In Indian mythology, the character of Mai Nandi has been replaced by Bahuchara Mata or Murghi Mata (Figure 1) who is the virgin goddess for both Hindu and Muslim *Hijras*. For *Hijras* the “goddess is patron and protector” (Shah 1961:1327, cited in Sheikh 2010:84). There are several versions of myths associated with Bahuchara Mata, yet nearly all of them depict gender transformation and/or bodily mutilation.

According to one myth she became a goddess as a result of protecting herself from rape. She cut off her breasts when a bandit named Bapaiya attacked her while she was traveling with her two sisters. She cursed him resulting in him becoming a eunuch. Hearing this, the bandit begged for mercy, which she granted, ordering him to build a shrine (*sthanak*) for her at the spot. He would then be blessed, and if a naturally emasculated man arrived at her shrine and lived in women’s clothing and sang her praises, he would certainly reach her favor. She [Bahuchara] then died (Sheikh 2010:89). In another version of the myth a king requested the goddess for a son; a wish she granted. However, the prince born as a result was impotent. Through a dream, the goddess ordered the prince to remove his genitals, wear women’s attire and be her devotee, which he did. Following the myth, *Hijras* in India emasculate themselves in order to identify themselves with the goddess and become her devotees for life. In one story, Bahuchara Mata blesses a princess with a male body that saves her lineage (Sheikh 2010:94).

Another version states that there was a prince whose parents married him to a beautiful goddess (namely Bahuchara). However, the couple never had sex and the prince would disappear every night. His wife followed him one evening and witnessed him having sex with men. Enraged, she castrated him and declared that such men as her husband had to be emasculated as a condition for a better rebirth but she also said that if those same cursed men worshipped her, she would protect them (Qualia Folk 2011).




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 Figure 1
 

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Depiction of Bahuchara Mata or Murghi Mata.

A Muslim association with Bahuchara Mata is narrated through a story in which once the Muslim army of Sultan Allodin II while destroying the temples in Gujrat came to Bahuchara's temple. They saw many chickens (as pets) at a temple. The Muslim soldiers ate them. At this Mata cursed the soldiers and the chickens tore apart the bellies of soldiers and came out alive. (Desai 1937:21 cited in Sheikh 2010:92). The army was destroyed which worried the Sultan, who came to Mata to seek her forgiveness. The Sultan promised not to destroy the temple. Upon which the Mata raised the dead soldiers from the ground, bringing them back to life but asked them to keep a mustache on one side and wear bangles on one arm (Bookseller 1919:9 cited in Sheikh 2010:93). The leader of the army, Kamal was put into the personal service of Bahuchara.

In all these versions of the story, the concept of celibacy, particularly male celibacy achieved through removal of genitalia and the transformation of gender are repeated. However, this cannot be generalized since the Mata herself in one version of the myth diminishes her sexuality by cutting off her breasts and blessed a princess with a male body (Qualia Folk 2011).

Bahuchara Mata is the patron deity of *Hijras* in India. She provides them spiritual legitimacy in Indian society. *Hijras* hold powers to bless male children and curse people by making them impotent. They draw those powers from Bahuchara Mata after having gone through a rite of passage, that is, a ritual of emasculation which proves that they are her

true devotees and authentic *Hijras*. (Nanda 1999; Jaffery 1998; Sheikh 2010). This ritual of emasculation is called “Nirvan” meaning “re-birth” (Ibid). In India, the individuals who do not undergo *Nirvan* are looked down upon (Taparia 2011:180). The concepts of intersexuality and male-female characteristics in one person are not unusual in Hindu mythology, though different interpretations can be contested (Hahm 2010:11). Ram (acknowledged and blessed intersexual), Vishnu and Krishna (share male-female elements) and Shiva even after self-castration not only possessed male-female features but became the symbol of fertility and eroticism (Jaffery 1998:31, Nanda 1999:13-20 cited in Hahm 2010:11).

At the level of celibacy, the myth of Bahuchara has similarities with the myth of Mai Nandi; however the difference is the self-initiated act of the removal of genitals. In the Pakistani version, the authentic *khusra* is the one who is born “this way” (by God’s will). The removal of genitals is considered a sin amongst Pakistani *Hijras*. The foremost reason is that in Islam castration is forbidden. It is also against the state law. There is evidence that some *Hijras* pass through the process of emasculation in Pakistan as well (Pamment 2010:30) but it is kept secret. In their struggle to survive, Indian *Hijras* (both Hindu and Muslims) take refuge in religion by identifying with Bahuchara Mata, Shiva, Rama and Arjuna. Similarly Pakistani *Hijras* associate themselves with *Harimain Sharifain*, Islamic Mughal Courts and celibacy tradition among Sufis which will be discussed in detail in later sections.

One of our informants, after narrating the Mai Nandi Myth, spoke out on the idea of what a *Hijra* was. Surprisingly, however, there was a complete rejection from the informant’s point of view of having anything to do with the *Hijras*. “I am not one of them”, she exclaimed. At one level she clearly was one of them to an outsider, however, she explicitly claimed that she was not. The question then arises, what does “one of them” really mean? What is the identity of “them”, which was being overtly rejected by our informant? This is different from what is normally noticed when a member of a misrepresented group is asked about who they are. The more common response is that “yes, I am one of them; now you see how misinformed you were”. Anecdotally speaking, responses of the latter type have been given by transgendered personnel from the upper classes, as well as the few that still work as domestic servants in households. However, all responses, whether they revolve around not being “one of

them”, that is, rejection or “public misrepresentation” revolve around a set identity of what a *Hijra* is, either you embrace it, or reject it. The space to change it seems is missing.

In order to unpack this issue, the *Hijra* identity construct has to be studied; or rather the *Hijra* label which then attaches a sense of identity which has to be studied together with the psychological impact that this has on the *Hijras*. We find ourselves in a situation that the *Hijras* lifestyle, just like everyone else's is being formulated through the social, cultural and economic capital they acquire. However, the space that society provides them obviously shapes their values, dispositions and lifestyles (Bourdieu: 1987). Historically speaking, the Mai Nandi/Bahuchara Mata myth, along with State and societal patronage/marginalization (depending on the way you look at it) of *Hijras* as artists, artisans, dancers or even beggars has manifested the common labels associated with the *Hijras*.

A prominent historical example of State level marginalization took place in the British colonial era. In a recent interview given to Dawn News (May, 2015), Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a prominent transgender activist and the first transgendered person to represent the Asia Pacific region at the UN in 2008 states, “The community has been marginalized by the British; we’ve had 250 years of complete non-existence”. She goes on to state that “Before the Britishers came, we were at least treated with dignity and respect in society and we were discriminated against Tribes Act”. Laxmi is referring here to the Criminals Tribes Act of 1871 which categorized the *Khawaja Sara* (transgender) community with the “habitually criminal” groups such as thugs and additionally the British criminalized revelation of genitals publically (Ibid). This marginalization took another turn when over the suspicion of kidnapping or castrating children, *Hijras* were marked as “dangerous outlaws” in the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 (Hahm 2010: 13-4). Even public appearances in female clothing or the possibility of being seen in a woman's dress from a public place and acts of their public singing, dancing and exhibition were liable to arrest and imprisonment for two years or fine or both (Ibid; Pamment 2010:35). They were not allowed to share gifts, making testaments or adopting a child and *Chelas* (Jaffrey 1998: 231-3, Reddy 2005:26-7 cited in Hahm 2010). The transfer of land from *Guru* to *Chela* was not allowed. Provision of food and other things by households to them was also banned in certain areas (Nanda 1999:50-1). The criminalization of *Hijras*

and the removal of benefits and squeezing of cultural performance space at the hands of British effects the present day marginalization of this community. *Hijras* were deprived legislatively from the lands which they did not inherit through blood relations (Reddy 2005:27 cited in Hahm 2010:13-4). Furthermore, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, criminalized sexual activities “against the order of nature”, that is, any form of homosexual activity. Once formalized and made into laws, there came a perpetual decline in the *Khawaja Sara* communities’ existence within the public domain leading towards being marginalized and led in many ways to the invisibility that this paper refers to.

Examples such as this fundamentally shape what people are at present and can be in the future. Society historically has always acted as the normative agent through which all of us are not merely expected to act but by and large do act. Due to this, our informant uses the *Hijras*’ stereotype, for example, begging on the streets, entertaining for money, indulging in prostitution and such other acts as a frame of reference.

A rejection of identity solidifies the societal identity construct. This is due to the fact that one automatically claims that the particular identity exists but one is not part of it; there is no space to appropriate that identity. What we feel is at play here is the Lacanian notion of the “Big Other” (Lacan 1962). What is seen in the informant’s case is a rejection of the “Big Other”. A “Big Other” in Lacanian psychoanalysis is a product of self-consciousness. According to Lacan, a “misunderstanding” takes places (*méconnaissance*) which constitutes the Ego, that is, the “me” (*moi*) becoming alienated from itself through the introduction of an imaginary dimension to the subject (Ibid). What this means, is that we are in a constant state of reflexivity, that is, relentlessly self-conscious of who we are – analyzing our moves. However, at one level there is an object-label that we have to live up to, on the other resides our agency. This is something that we all find ourselves doing, for instance, we find ourselves constantly thinking of ourselves in terms of objects, for instance, “What should an Anthropologist do?” to get some footing rather than merely thinking along the lines of “What should I do?”. Similarly, our informant fights for agency in her rejection of the society’s imposed *Hijra*-construct, which is passive and does not resist the categorization of transgendered people. However, using this as a frame of reference is something she cannot escape.

## History of Celibacy in Islamic Tradition and its Connection with the *Hijras*

Another important feature of the *Hijra* identity construct is the notion of celibacy. When asked about their origin and connection with Islam, Pakistani Muslim *Hijras* proudly explain that no one is allowed to enter the *Ka'aba* except them. They also connect themselves with the Mughal courts where they were treated as honorable members while performing several duties. According to one of our informants, the reason for this is that *Hijras* have transcended from worldly desires, making them pure and allowing them to enter the *Ka'aba*. The same query was put forward to a *Mutawali* on a shrine in Kallar Kahar who replied that *Hijras* are pure and *paak* as God Himself has created them in a way that they have no worldly desires at all. They are actually *Faqirs* and *Walis*.

To elaborate his answer he gave an example of a peacock. The peacock is the only animal/bird whose feathers are placed in the Quran, as the peacock is considered *paak* (pure). Similarly, *Hijras* are *paak* and only they have access to the *Roza Paak* (Prophet's Tomb) in Madina. *Hijras* used to clean the *Roza* from inside and put water there.

In this context, *Hijras* in Pakistan identify themselves with the *Mukhanath* (Arabic word which is used for a man who shares the characteristics of a woman; an effeminate man) of *Harimain Sharifain* (The Two Sanctuaries – Mecca and Madina) (Jami 2005:7) which gives them a status of piety and holiness among people and grants them spiritual powers of blessings and curses. The fact of *Hijras* being custodians of Prophet's Tomb and the *Ka'aba* has been validated by several academics including Bashir (2007:135-145), Pamment (2010) and Scholz (2001). From the mid of 12th century, the tomb of Prophet was guarded by 40 eunuchs. Through affiliation to the Prophets 'shrine, they became members of the venerated family (Bashir 2007). Eunuchs are still found at both sites (Scholz 2001: 200, cited in Hahm 2010:13). Marmon provides two reasons of appointing eunuchs to religious sanctuaries: closeness of eunuchs with royal powers and maintaining order in sanctuaries by being able to cross the boundaries between male and female.

*Hijras* largely identify themselves with *Sufis* and *Faqirs*. In his anthropological research on *Hijras*, Frembgen (2011) also states that

“*Khusre* classify themselves explicitly as *Faqirs*”. They regularly visit shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalander, Bari Imam, Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah and others (Ibid). During fieldwork when contacting an informant from Heera Mandi, once she was at the *Urs* of Shahbaz Qalander and at another time she was attending the *Urs* of Baba Farid.

There might be diverse reasons behind the identification of *Hijras* with *Sufis* and *Faqirs*; however, the foremost is the practice of celibacy among various *Sufis* in denying all the worldly things. Bashir (2007:134), exploring the celibacy tradition in Islamic thought identifies three streams of celibacy practice: first “celibacy as a component of ascetic practice among *Sufis*”, second “celibacy as a form of religious and social protest among antinomian *Sufi* groups in the later medieval period”, and thirdly, forced celibacy to gain political power in medieval Islamic societies. The first type of celibacy is a norm based on personal choice among *Sufis* and other Muslims and is practiced on temporary basis to renounce material concerns, curbing sexual desires and avoiding family. For example, whilst fasting during *Ramzan* and *Hajj*, temporary celibacy is practiced.

The second type of celibacy was practiced by antinomian *Sufi* groups from the lands of North Africa to India as a radical critique of other Muslims and *Sufis*' lifestyles who devoted their life to material gains by becoming power brokers in the religious, political and economic life of societies throughout Islamic lands; they strived for a metaphoric death of the material world before their physical demise. In doing so, they rejected all social practices and gave up bodily as well as other material desires. Celibacy tradition has influenced people throughout the world. Some of Haydari *Sufis* even castrate themselves or pierce their penises with irons to stop the possibility of intercourse. In the sub-continent, there has been a strong *Sufi* tradition and most of the radical *Sufis* and *Faqirs* have been celibate. Mushtaq Soofi writes that Madhu Lal Hussain, Bulleh Shah, Mian Muhammad Baksh and Warish Shah all share the feature of celibacy. Soofi argues that the reason for celibacy and avoiding the family was their philosophical position against the unjust and biased social order. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Sachal Sarmast and Shah Abdul Latif also lived as celibates. Data Sahib also preferred celibacy over marriage in his book *Kashf ul Mahjub*. (Bashir 2007:138). By practising celibacy and taking a position against the social order,

these classical poets of *Sufi* and *Faqiri* tradition stand in the same row as antinomian *Sufis*. Due to this very practice, *Hijras* of contemporary times identify with these *Sufis* and *Faqirs*. This identification elevates their status in a hostile socio-political and religious environment.

In order to understand the association of *Hijras* with the *Harimain Sharifain* and Mughal courts, the third type of celibacy needs to be discussed. Forced celibacy was used for political arrangements of Islamic states starting from 8th century to the Mughal period. The Islamic empires forcefully castrated slaves mostly with African backgrounds and employed them on various administrative and other posts including the protection of *Harems*. Castration and making them eunuchs was a way to gain more loyalty by disconnecting them from any form of present or future family ties.

“It is noted already that there was widespread castration of slaves in Bengal during Mughal Emperor Jahangir, which had become a widespread practice across India. It appears that since Bakhtiyar Khilji’s conquest of Bengal in 1205, it had become a leading source of enslavement and castration for supplying eunuchs. On his way back to Venice from Kublai Khan’s Court, Marco Polo visited India in the late 13th century; he found Bengal as a major source of eunuchs. Duarte Barbosa in the late sultanate period (1206 - 1526) and Francois Pyrard in the Mughal period (1526 - 1799) also found Bengal as the leading supplier of castrated slaves. Ain-i-Akbari (compiled in 1590s) also affirms the same. Some 22,000 individuals were emasculated in 1659 in Golkunda during Aurangzeb. Said Khan Chaghtai of Jahangir’s reign owned 1,200 eunuchs. Even kind-hearted Akbar employed eunuchs in large numbers. .... Marco Polo (1280s) and Duarte Barbosa (1500s) witnessed large-scale castrations in India; the same was occurring in the reign of Abkar (d. 1605), Jahangir (d. 1628) and Aurangzeb (d. 1707)”. (© 2013. Secular African Society)

Castrated slaves or eunuchs have remained on key posts of various dynasties such as Iranian Safavids (1501 – 1722), Ottoman *Harems* and Indian Mughal courts (1526-1857). Eunuchs had been given high education and training to serve the elite families (Bashir 2007:144). At the price of their service, they received material privileges and comfortable life. Some of these eunuchs received high ranks in the court.

As described earlier, Pakistani *Hijras* connect with their times in Mughal courts and refer to the period as a golden era. It is also a popular perception even among academics that today's *Hijras* are descendants of those eunuchs (Hahm 2010:12). In India, eunuch slaves were brought by the masters who built Islamic Empires, namely Delhi Sultanate (13th century) and the Mughal Empire (Taparia 2011:170). European travelers have also witnessed the eunuchs among the ruling families of medieval India (Bernier 1989; Tavernier 1977 in Taparia 2011:170). The rulers castrated young slaves to eliminate their reproductive capacities and ensure their unconditional loyalty to masters. In Mughal courts, they were called *Khawja Sara* (today's eunuchs also want to be called *Khawja Saras*) and wore male clothes and turbans and served and guarded the ladies in the courts (Ibid, Nanda 1999). They performed prestigious roles and the chief eunuchs linked to queens were very influential (Knighton 1790 cited in Jaffrey 1998:144). Being the lovers of kings and princes, some of them received enormous gifts and money and "were buried in lavish bejeweled tombs" (Bernier 1656-68 cited in Jaffrey 1998:56, Hahm 2010). Malik Kafur, a general in the army of Alauddin Khilji (1296-1316) who won many riches for the kingdom was a Persian eunuch (Lal 1995 cited in Pamment 2010:37). Ikhtiar Khan, a lawyer in the service of Jahangir and Firoz Khan, founder of Firozabad in Akbar's era were also eunuchs (Sharma 2000:31 in Pamment 2010:37). However, with the decline of the Mughal nobility, their esteemed positions also weakened.

In this context, it can be understood that the association of eunuchs with *Harimain Sharifain* and to quote Nietzsche (1988) their 'monumental history'/golden past in the Mughal courts was arguably a product of political arrangements. However, these historic associations grant them a sacred position in contemporary Pakistani society and provide them with what James Scott refers to as "Weapons of the Weak". These everyday forms of resistance, manifested through myths, stories, singing and dancing provides the *Hijras* with space, allowing them to critique the present society in a much more visceral and palpable way than any ideological discourse has till now.

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