

Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India

In 1865, the British rulers of north India resolved to bring about the gradual ‘extinction’ of transgender *Hijras*. This book, the first in-depth history of the *Hijra* community, illuminates the colonial and postcolonial governance of gender and sexuality and the production of colonial knowledge. From the 1850s, colonial officials and middle-class Indians increasingly expressed moral outrage at *Hijras*’ feminine gender expression, sexuality, bodies and public performances. To the British, *Hijras* were an ungovernable population that posed a danger to colonial rule. In 1871, the colonial government passed a law that criminalised *Hijras*, with the explicit aim of causing *Hijras*’ ‘extermination’. But *Hijras* evaded police, kept on the move, broke the law and kept their cultural traditions alive. Jessica Hinchy argues that *Hijras* were criminalised not simply because of imported British norms, but due to a complex set of local factors, including elite Indian attitudes.

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The Hijra, c. 1850–1900

Jessica Hinchy

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore



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For my hilarious, caring and enormously smart mother Tracey,
upon whose advice I depend,

my loving and supportive father Russell, a secret history
obsessive,

my dazzling, intelligent and gutsy sister Stefie, without whom
I would not be me,

and Hugh, my best friend and very funny husband, who makes
every day a whole lot better.

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Glossary

<i>ashraf</i>	People of aristocratic or eminent families.
<i>ayurveda</i>	The Sanskrit medical tradition.
<i>badhai</i>	A ‘congratulatory gift’, the payment made to <i>Hijras</i> performing at weddings and following births.
<i>Banjara</i>	A nomadic community of transporters.
<i>Bhagatiya</i>	A community of performers and entertainers; a male dancer or dancing boy.
<i>bhand</i>	Also <i>bhandela</i> , a comic performer, usually itinerant.
<i>Brahman</i>	The Hindu priestly caste.
<i>Chamar</i>	An ‘untouchable’ community typically engaged in cultivation and/or leatherwork.
<i>chaukidar</i>	A village or neighborhood watchman.
<i>chela</i>	A disciple in a monastic or <i>Hijra</i> community (also a common term for a slave).
<i>dai</i>	A midwife or a <i>Hijra</i> who performs the castration (<i>nirvan</i>) operation.
<i>dholak</i>	A small, two-sided drum.
<i>fakir</i>	A religious ascetic, particularly a Muslim ascetic.
<i>gorait</i>	A watchman (especially in the Benares region).
<i>guru</i>	A spiritual teacher or guide; a senior <i>Hijra</i> in superordinate position to a <i>chela</i> .
<i>Hijra</i>	A member of the <i>Hijra</i> community, usually a male-born person with a feminine gender identity; often a performer and collector of <i>badhai</i> at births, weddings and other occasions.
<i>inam</i>	A rent-free land grant, often hereditary.
<i>jati</i>	A caste group.
<i>Khoja</i>	A term for ‘eunuch’.
<i>Khwajasarai</i>	A eunuch-slave (literally ‘lord superintendent of the house’); often household servants, administrators, military commanders, intelligencers and diplomats.
<i>lambardar</i>	A village headman.

<i>majira</i>	Also <i>manjira</i> , a pair of small cymbals.
<i>mela</i>	A fair or religious festival.
<i>mukhannas</i>	A derogatory term, roughly meaning ‘passive sodomite’.
<i>mukhtar</i>	A lawyer, especially a district court ‘pleader’.
<i>munshi</i>	A writer, clerk, bureaucrat or language teacher.
<i>nirvan</i>	‘Spiritual rebirth’; the <i>Hijra</i> term for the castration operation.
<i>pargana</i>	A subdivision of a district.
<i>pir</i>	A spiritual teacher, especially in the Sufi tradition.
<i>rais</i>	A patron or magnate, frequently government informants.
<i>Sakhi</i>	Also termed <i>Rasik</i> , a ‘female companion’ of the Ramanandi monastic order; a male devotee who performs femininity in a ritual context.
<i>sakhi-bhav</i>	Religious devotion in which the devotee becomes a female companion of Sita.
<i>sati</i>	Widow-burning.
<i>taluqdar</i>	A landowner who leases his land to tenant farmers (in Oudh).
<i>tawa’if</i>	Skilled courtesan performers.
<i>thagi</i>	Or ‘thuggee’, crime by deception or a colonial category of highway crime.
<i>thana</i>	A police station.
<i>unani</i>	The South Asian Greco-Islamic medical tradition.
<i>zamindar</i>	A landowner who leases his land to tenant farmers.
<i>Zankha</i>	Also pronounced <i>Jankha</i> , an ‘effeminate’ or ‘impotent’ man or a dancing boy; appears to have been used interchangeably with <i>Zanana</i> .
<i>zanana</i>	The female quarters of a house.
<i>Zanana</i>	A man whose gender expression is effeminate or feminine, often a performer.

Abbreviations

BL/IOR	British Library, India Office Records (London)
CGGI	Council of the Governor-General of India
CDA	Contagious Diseases Act
CTA	Criminal Tribes Act
DC	Divisional Commissioner
DM	District Magistrate
DNA	Decisions of the Nizamat Adalat
DSIP	District Superintendent of Police
GGI	Governor-General of India
GI Secretary	Secretary to the Governor-General, Government of India
GI	Government of India
IPC	Indian Penal Code
NAI	National Archives of India (New Delhi)
NWP DIGP	Deputy Inspector-General of Police, North-Western Provinces
NWP IGP	Inspector-General of Police, North-Western Provinces
NWP MLC	Member of the Legislative Council of India for the North-Western Provinces
NWP NA	Nizamat Adalat, North-Western Provinces
NWP Secretary	Secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, North-Western Provinces
NWP&O DIGP	Deputy Inspector-General of Police, North-Western Provinces and Oudh
NWP&O IGP	Inspector-General of Police, North-Western Provinces and Oudh
NWP&O Secretary	Secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, North-Western Provinces and Oudh
OJ	Officiating Judge
PA	Personal Assistant

List of Abbreviations

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SJ	Sessions Judge
SVN	Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers
UP	United Provinces
UPSA/A	Uttar Pradesh State Archives (Allahabad Branch)
UPSA/L	Uttar Pradesh State Archives (Lucknow Branch)



Figure 1 In his 1808 etching of a ‘Hidjera’, Anglophone Flemish artist Balthazar Solvyns depicted the *Hijra* in a picturesque mode. However, his accompanying written account lambasted *Hijras* as immoral people.

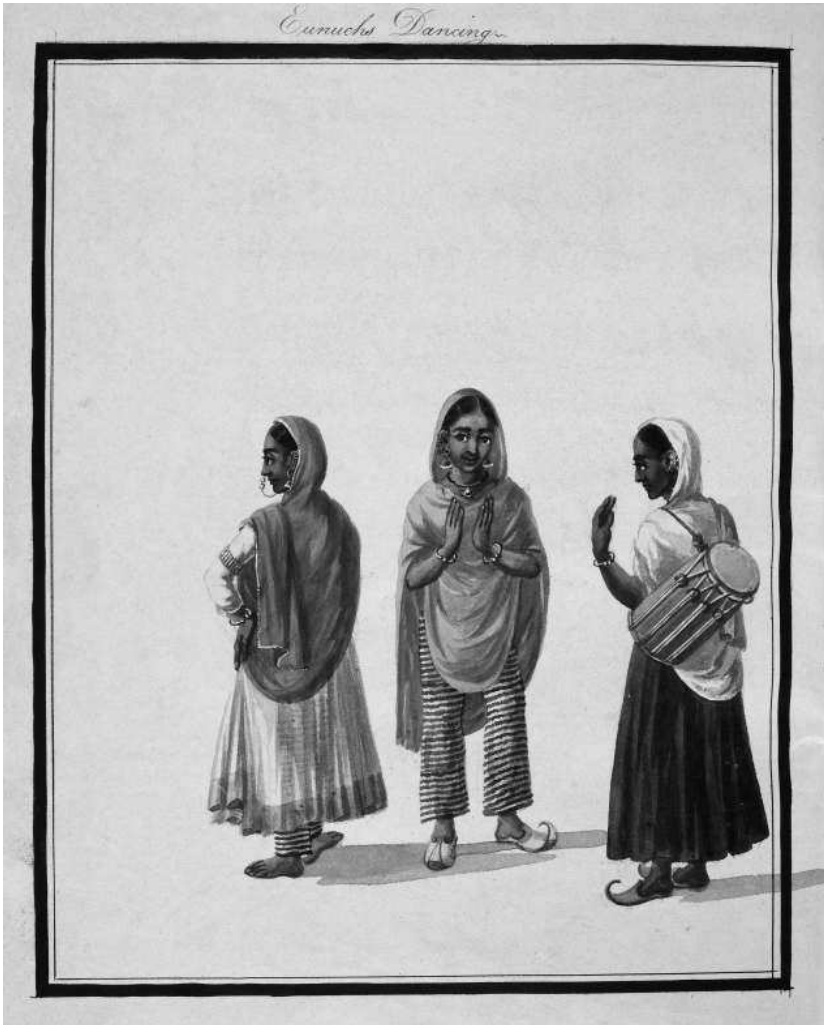


Figure 2 'Eunuchs Dancing', by an anonymous Indian artist from Patna (c.1820). This gouache painting of three *Hijras* was collected by Governor-General Francis Rawdon-Hastings and his wife.

xvi Figure



Figure 3 As these *Hijras* danced in 1860, the colonial government in north India was discussing how to suppress the *Hijra* community, eventually leading to their criminalisation under Part II of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act. This photograph of a ‘Group of Hijra Dancers and Musicians, Delhi’ was probably taken by a British photographer of the Shepherd and Robertson commercial photography firm.

Figure

xvii

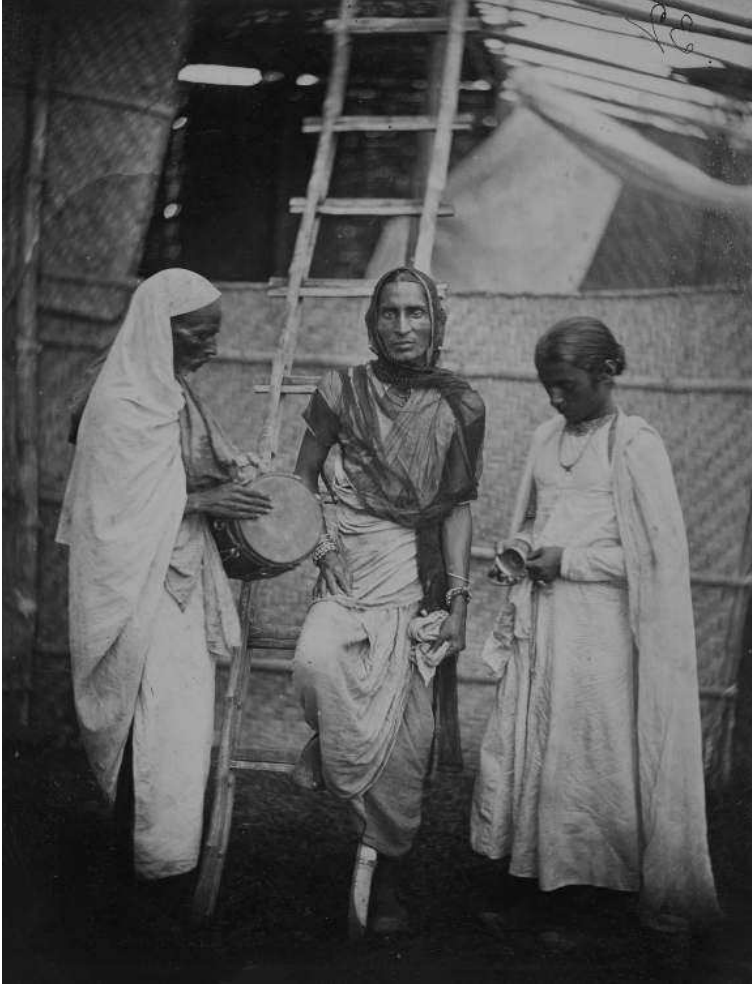


Figure 4 ‘Gurmah, Khunsa, or Hijra, reputed hermaphrodite, Eastern Bengal’, c.1860s. This photograph is part of a collection of racial and caste ‘types’ from modern-day Bangladesh and Assam and was probably taken by a British commercial photographer.

xviii Figure



Figure 5 *Khwajasarais* were eunuch-slaves who were employed in elite households and Indian states. They had a masculine gender identity, in contrast to feminine-identifying *Hijras*. Although the colonial government did not apply Part II of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act to *Khwajasarais*, they were sometimes caught up in the policing of *Hijras*. This young *Khwajasarai* named Meah Sahub was photographed by Abbas Ali, an Indian photographer from Lucknow, in the 1870s.