Introduction

"Modern Girls"

*Conceptualizing the Trans Woman–*Hijra *Divide*

This project started with a mistake—a mistake I made while trying to understand the lives of gender nonconforming (GNC) people[1] in South India. What initially began as an awkward social blunder evolved into the focal point of my investigation, ultimately shaping the narrative of this book. Let me explain.

One warm, sunny morning, I sat in a small front room of a sexual rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Bangalore, India. In addition to the sunlight peeking in through the front windows, the room was lit by a flickering fluorescent "tube light," creating a maze of shadows. The workday was just beginning, so the office was abuzz with activity. There were people coming in and out, happily greeting one another. It was one of my first days visiting this office, so I did not know many people working there yet. Indeed, many looked my way quizzically, probably wondering why someone like me was there before hurrying off to begin their work.

Sexual rights NGOs first emerged in India in the early 1990s as a response to the global concern over the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These NGOs attracted increased international funding for advocacy targeting groups considered "high risk" for HIV transmission, like feminine-presenting GNC people. Through their advocacy, sexual rights NGOs also inadvertently shaped how both traditional and emerging groups of GNC people are understood in India—by themselves and others around them. That understanding is the subject of this book.

In the midst of this activity at the NGO office, I sat chatting casually with a fluctuating group of between four and six people. Most were paid employees of the NGO, so they would sit and listen or contribute to the conversation for

10–15 minutes before going to do some work, then return later on. As people added this or that idea to the conversation only to leave a moment later, I felt as if they were slowly painting a portrait for me of the larger picture about GNC identity in India—one that I had only the barest outlines of at the time. Looking back on this experience, I realize that the fragmented nature of our conversation reflected the different fragments I have pulled together in this book to explain the emergence of newer groups of transgender women and how ideas about these trans women impact the traditional GNC groups they are often contrasted with.

Since it was my first time meeting this group, I asked broad questions about the organization and the work they did. Deepa, who was in her thirties and identified as a transgender healthcare worker, was dressed in fitted jeans and a V-neck shirt with a bright scarf thrown over her shoulder. She expressed palpable excitement about the organization's work as she enthusiastically moderated the discussion. I was particularly interested in hearing more from Priya, a 20-something, slender, feminine-presenting GNC person who had not yet said much. That day, Priya was elegantly draped in a bright indigo-colored sari as she sat across from me with her legs demurely crossed at the ankles. I was curious about her perspective on the NGO's work, partly because I assumed from her clothing that Priya was a *hijra*. *Hijra*s are feminine-presenting GNC people with a long history and public presence in South Asia.[2]

During my fieldwork up to that point, I had heard a little about the differences between the newly emerging category of transgender women and their traditional *hijra* counterparts. I had recently attended an "Introduction to Gender and Sexuality" discussion at a local college led by a trans woman NGO worker in her thirties named Akrithi. One of the first items Akrithi discussed was the different types of gender identities within "the community" of GNC people in India. During this discussion, Akrithi highlighted the differences between trans women and *hijra*s. Part of this difference was about clothing and hairstyle: "See, *hijra*s must wear *sari*s and have long hair," she explained to the students. In contrast, trans women, she pointed out, wear any type of "women's clothing," including tunic tops and loose-fitting pants known as *salwar kameez* or even Western clothes like jeans and T-shirts. Unlike *hijra*s, trans women also wear their hair in different ways—"Like me," Akrithi said, smiling and motioning to her short, stylish coif.

Since this is how the trans woman–*hijra* distinction was initially presented to me, I interpreted Priya's long hair and *sari* as signals that she was

a *hijra*. I was eager to speak with *hijra*s because I had heard that many of them did not appreciate the work of sexual rights NGOs. This is partly because NGO interventions have exposed aspects of *hijra* groups that some would like to remain hidden, like the fact that many *hijra*s engage in sex work and the abuse that can occur within the families *hijra*s create. To find someone whom I thought was a *hijra* at an NGO was therefore striking, and I was interested to hear more about her thoughts on these matters.

I was thus excited when the conversation turned to the organization's work with *hijra*s. In what was in retrospect a very clumsy segue, I attempted to bring Priya into the conversation by asking her if she identified as a *hijra*. Before Priya could answer, Deepa jumped in, her eyes wide. "The people who are … living in the *hammam*s, following the tradition of the *hammam*s—*they* are called *hijra*s [emphasis original]," Deepa informed me. "Priya's a modern girl; she's educated, she's literate." Then she looked me in the eye to ensure she had my full attention before continuing. "She's called *transgender*." Priya looked at me seriously as she furrowed her brow and nodded vigorously in agreement with Deepa.

I realized then the mistake I had made. I mistook Priya for a *hijra*, totally unaware of the tensions experienced by trans women when they are recognized by others as *hijra*s. When I reflected on this incident, I could not help but feel embarrassed to have essentially misgendered someone.

To someone like myself who did not know better (at the time), trans women and *hijra*s do appear similar on the surface. However, people familiar with the context would know that there is an important distinction at play, at least for trans women. Deepa claimed the differences between trans women and *hijra*s are about education (or lack thereof) and being "modern" versus following "tradition." These were not surface distinctions but signaled something deeper, as being "modern" and educated are both coded as middle-class signifiers in India. What I did not realize at the time is that the difference between who is a trans woman and who is a *hijra* is not simply about hairstyles and hemlines, but that it is actually all about class and respectability.

This mistake pushed me to explore the growing divide between trans women and *hijra*s. Given the recent global attention to trans identities, particularly trans women, the appearance of groups of feminine-presenting people who identify as trans women is not all that surprising. But in India, the trans woman identity is emerging within a historical context of other recognized GNC identities—particularly *hijra*s. I began to ask questions like: What kinds of economic and social changes have enabled some

feminine-presenting GNC people to identify themselves as transgender women? How do perceptions about *hijra*s shape the ways transgender people (and especially trans women) are understood—by themselves and by others? And why do so many trans women want to differentiate themselves from *hijra*s?

This book analyzes how new economic and social opportunities allow some GNC people to identify as trans women, but also how and why these trans women are often framed in opposition to *hijra*s. It also explores why many trans women disidentify with *hijra*s and how the rise of the trans woman identity impacts *hijra* groups. In doing so, it describes the deepening rift between trans women and *hijra*s. The trans woman–*hijra* distinction is important for many trans women I spoke to since they draw on this distinction to position themselves as more worthy and deserving of respect than *hijra*s. But most importantly, the distinction illuminates at a fundamental level the workings of intersectionality—how gender and class are simultaneously at work for this group of GNC people.

Trans Women and Middle-class Aspiration in India

Transgender is a relatively new identity category in India, emerging during a time of major economic and social changes that made new sexual and gender identity categories available.[3] These changes are partly due to NGO-led, internationally funded HIV/AIDS projects, where feminine-presenting GNC people are targeted because they are considered at "high risk" for sexually transmitted infections. NGOs initially conducted outreach with working-class feminine-presenting GNC people who identified with different and oftentimes more traditional identity categories such as *hijra*.[4] Through their programs, NGOs introduced new categories, broadening the kinds of identities that people believed were available to them.[5] Yet at the same time, prevention and outreach coordinators began to distinguish between "target groups"—different sexual and GNC identities—to identify which groups were most in need of intervention and to receive funding.[6] As a result, identity categories that were once considered malleable and accommodating became more rigid and inflexible.[7]

When they first began, HIV/AIDS projects classified all male-assigned sexual minorities and GNC people (including *hijra*s) as "men who have sex with men" (MSM)—a term that did not recognize this group's diverse gender

identities.[8] Activists soon started to demand that HIV/AIDS interventions recognize feminine-presenting people who did not identify as men.[9] Then, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the category of transgender began to circulate through international sexual health conferences. Some Indian GNC activists began to identify themselves as transgender and translated this new category into their own languages.[10]

At approximately the same time NGOs identified male-assigned GNC groups as "high risk" for HIV transmission, a group of *hijra*s "colluded" with NGOs and media to position certain *hijra*s as "real" or "authentic" based on their participation in *hijra* family relationships.[11] Their efforts resulted in the notion that *hijra* kinship systems are the "bedrock" of authentic *hijra* identity. At this time, the idea that participating in *hijra* family systems determined whether or not someone was a *hijra* was yet another way that boundaries between groups of GNC people became increasingly defined and inflexible. These kinds of ideas were used to separate *hijra* and supposedly non-*hijra* identities in state, NGO, and media discourse.[12] So at the same time that "transgender" was embraced as an umbrella term that could accommodate gender variation among male-assigned people[13] (and, much less frequently, female-assigned people), the *hijra* identity became increasingly circumscribed. My research reveals that the characteristics determining whether or not someone is a *hijra* are once again changing.

Today, there are increasingly visible groups of working-class, feminine-presenting GNC people who identify themselves as transgender.[14] These trans women often position themselves as "independent" of *hijra* groups, though many have connections with them. In fact, the majority of trans women I met over age 30 had previously identified as *hijra*s. However, these trans women are eager to raise awareness and promote an understanding of their identities as separate from *hijra*s. As they claim transgender identities, the trans women I spoke with—the majority of whom were past or current employees of sexual rights NGOs—undertook identity work[15] to educate the public about their identities.

Recall Deepa's response to my mistaken assumption that Priya was a *hijra*. She explained that Priya was not a *hijra* because she was educated and modern, pointing to the ways that class (along with class aspirations) is central to trans women's identity work. This book focuses on how gender intersects with class aspirations for newly emerging trans women, who are now assumed to have new opportunities. To puzzle out the ways gender and class intersect for trans women, it is instructive to examine the public discourse

around another group of people once believed to have new opportunities—cisgender women. This book therefore asks: How are emerging trans women identities shaped by societal understandings about (cisgender) womanhood in India? More specifically, how do historical ideas about new opportunities for cis women shape how contemporary trans women are understood, both by themselves and by others? I argue that in their pursuit of respect and opportunity, the trans women I spoke with align themselves with historical constructions of "new" middle-class (cis) womanhood. I read this identity work as signaling a desire to merge transgender womanhood with an elevated class status. This desire is rooted in historical constructions of what it means to be an "ideal" woman in postcolonial India.

I suggest the analytical construct of the "new" transgender woman helps to understand how newer identities such as transgender are connected to older categories such as class. By examining how the trans woman category has become associated with middle-class-ness in urban India, we can grasp how preexisting social hierarchies shape emerging identities. These trans women are using the gender binary and the centrality of class for womanhood in India to gain acceptance—making transgender an attractive category for working-class GNC people seeking upward mobility.

Trans Women and the Class–Caste Nexus

The trans women I spoke with express their class aspirations through claims about gender as they navigate a society infused with multiple hierarchies. Scholars have pointed out that class is often tied to notions of morality, with distinctions between class groups creating and reinforcing "moral boundaries."[16] This leads to moralizing attitudes where the attributes of some class groups are understood as more or less ethical than others, serving to legitimate the inequalities produced by unequal class systems.[17]

In India, the moralizing of class is also tied to a form of social distinction specific to South Asia—caste.[18] Recent research shows that caste identities (and biases) have been "absorb[ed]" into *class* identities (and biases).[19] For example, the ideals of cleanliness, modesty, restraint, moderation, and "decency"—associated in the past with dominant-caste identities—are now key indicators of middle-class identities.[20] In urban India, these ideals have been adopted by people of all castes who can afford to maintain them.[21] Similarly, attributes

like a perceived lack of cleanliness, overt displays of emotion (including violence), and the purported disorder once associated with marginalized-caste identities are now associated (by people of all castes) with the working classes.[22] In this way, moralizing ideals previously connected to caste now manifest in the "attitudes, values, and practice[s]" associated with class, "rationalizing" the adoption of caste-based perspectives, stereotypes, and biases as class ones.[23] Thus, the meanings around class in India are inlaid with ideas connected to caste.[24]

These moralizing attitudes have far-reaching implications. For example, people from marginalized castes experience low levels of upward mobility (especially as compared to poor people in other countries) that are often attributed to caste hierarchies. Research has found that people from marginalized castes are more likely to engage in manual labor, while those from dominant castes are more likely to engage in "white-collar" work.[25] As a result of the connection between caste and class, working-class people in urban areas are generally from marginalized-caste backgrounds, while middle- and elite-class people in urban areas are generally from dominant-caste backgrounds.

The changing meanings of class and caste are also intimately linked to gender, with all three of these categories "interact[ing] with and shap[ing] each other."[26] For example, upholding caste requires marriage (and childbearing) to occur only within one's caste group; since cisgender women bear children, control of their sexuality is crucial to maintain caste boundaries.[27] In Chapter 1, we willhear about how practices once about maintaining caste through controlling the bodies of cis women (especially those of dominant castes) have morphed into practices for maintaining middle-class respectability through controlling middle-class cis women's bodies.

These connections between caste, class, and gender lead to consequences that are not limited to dominant-caste groups or middle-class cis women. For many trans women aspiring to join the middle classes, it means rising above their caste. Although caste was not something I asked trans women about specifically, many trans women spoke about caste, and everyone who brought up caste identified themselves as coming from a marginalized caste. These trans women seek to fulfil their class aspirations by aligning themselves with middle-class womanhood. As middle-class attributes in urban India are now based upon what were once considered respectable dominant-caste attributes,[28] the construction of middle-class womanhood these trans

women align themselves with is based upon the ideals of dominant-caste womanhood.[29]

*Hijra*s Past and Present

Like Priya and Deepa, many feminine-presenting GNC people I met during my fieldwork identified themselves as transgender.[30] I initially found this intriguing, given the context of GNC identity in India. That was because while in many countries people identify as either cisgender or a variation of newer non-cis identities like transgender, nonbinary, and so on, India is unique due to the historical presence of *hijra*s.

*Hijra*s are the most prominent, publicly recognized group of GNC people in India.[31] They are most often feminine-presenting GNC persons who leave their families in their teenage years (usually due to abuse) and run away to urban areas[32] to live and work with others "like them" in communities organized around the *hijra* families they create. Historical archives show that *hijra*s have lived in South Asia for at least 300 years,[33] while popular and mythological accounts place them in the region for the past several millennia. Because of this history, I assumed that at least some of the feminine-presenting GNC people who identified as transgender were using the term "transgender" for my benefit, perhaps thinking that a white, middle-class, cisgender woman from the United States would not know about *hijra*s. I thought if they were speaking to another Indian who was familiar with the term, then they would identify themselves as *hijra*s.

Scholars regularly emphasize that *hijra*s have shaped popular and scholarly understandings about gender and sexual nonconformity in India.[34] Outside of India, *hijra*s have been hailed as figures that "stand for 'the Indian homosexual'"[35] and remain "the most frequently encountered figures in the narrative linking of India with sexual difference."[36] Looking back on the incident where I called Priya a *hijra*, I realized I had fallen prey to exactly these kinds of assumptions.

In India, *hijra*s are associated by the non-*hijra* general public[37] with a variety of gender and sexual nonconforming practices and characteristics.[38] Despite being historically recognized in South Asia, today they are extremely marginalized as a group. *Hijra*s are often "constructed in the popular imaginary as 'dirty'" and maligned for their poverty, which results in their

being treated as social "outcasts"[39] who are excluded based upon their perceived "other"-ness.[40]

As a result of their perception as sexual deviants, *hijra*s have experienced intense scrutiny both politically and in the media.[41] In Indian and international news, there are frequent reports about the injustices faced by *hijra*s as well as documentary-style exposés centering on the troubling behaviors that can occur within *hijra* family systems. Yet despite what would seem to be their "hyper visibility,"[42] there have to date only been three book-length ethnographic studies focusing on *hijra*s. Two of these[43] were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, before many of the changes this book addresses had taken hold, and the third was conducted more recently in the 2010s in rural eastern India[44]—a very different setting than the urban context of Bangalore. Comparing my analysis about how *hijra* groups in Bangalore are changing to this study reveals the uniquely urban context this book chronicles.

A key reason for the emergence of transgender women in India is the ability of visibly GNC people to live outside of *hijra* groups. As we will hear more about in the coming chapters, *hijra* communities formed at least several centuries (and possibly millennia) ago to combat their societal exclusion. At that time, visibly GNC persons could not access necessary resources like housing and employment, but through family relationships, *hijra* groups, led by a powerful "head," provided these resources. In the past 25 years, media and political attention about gender nonconformity has led to incremental but important shifts in societal acceptance. Now that they face relatively less exclusion, some GNC people in urban areas who might have formerly joined a *hijra* family can live "independently" as transgender women. This book explores the social changes that have enabled groups of (primarily younger) feminine-presenting GNC persons to claim transgender identities, describing how these changes have impacted not just them but traditional *hijra* families.

One effect of these changes is that they have undermined the countercultural institutions painstakingly created by *hijra*s. When GNC people were excluded from dominant institutions, *hijra*s created their own families where they could live together by their own rules. Now that new opportunities enable some visibly GNC people to participate in dominant institutions (to a degree), they also enable them to live outside of *hijra* groups. On the one hand, we can think about these changes encouraging GNC people to embrace conformity to dominant ideas and institutions—bringing

transgender women "back into the fold," so to speak. But on the other hand, now that certain GNC people can survive outside of *hijra* groups, *hijra* relationships have shifted in ways that disempower those remaining *hijra*s who depend on them for survival.

Recognition and Respect: Diverging Stories for Trans Women and *Hijra*s

Although India has a long history of recognizing feminine-presenting GNC people, it was striking to meet so many of them who, like Priya, identified as transgender and insisted they were not *hijra*s. However, during my fieldwork, there was not much awareness among "mainstream" society of the differences between *hijra*s and trans women. Among many cisgender people at that time, the terms "transgender" and "hijra" were used almost interchangeably, with *hijra* falling under an all-encompassing transgender "umbrella" within LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer+) and gender rights activism. At public events like protests, rallies, and Pride parades, *hijra*s were referred to as transgender people. Official state reports, Indian publications, and NGO documents referred to *hijra*s as transgender.[45] News reporters, community activists, and even the organizers of NGO-led sexual health programs used *hijra* and transgender interchangeably. I came to realize that the only people who actively resisted equating the two identities were trans women themselves.

As my fieldwork continued, I noticed a visible (and vocal) group of feminine-presenting GNC people who wanted to claim transgender identities separate from *hijra*s. Many of these trans women had links to *hijra* groups, yet they sought to raise awareness and promote an understanding of themselves as transgender. In doing so, they emphasized (and also reified) the differences between themselves and *hijra*s. The more I heard trans women explaining how and why their identities are different from *hijra*s, the more I became intrigued by this distinction. I came to realize that the desire of these trans women to differentiate themselves from *hijra*s revolved around garnering respect, implying that the respect they sought was not available to *hijra*s.

One way to capture this idea is to recognize that trans women are emerging in India at a time when issues impacting GNC people have vaulted to the forefront of global media and public visibility. Across the world, GNC persons and their allies have come together to demand a diverse array of