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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Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India

*The Hijra, c.1850–1900*

Jessica Hinchy

*Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*
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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Illustrations


Glossary

ashraf
People of aristocratic or eminent families.

ayurveda
The Sanskrit medical tradition.

badhai
A ‘congratulatory gift’, the payment made to Hijras performing at weddings and following births.

Banjara
A nomadic community of transporters.

Bhagatiya
A community of performers and entertainers; a male dancer or dancing boy.

bhand
Also bhandela, a comic performer, usually itinerant.

Brahman
The Hindu priestly caste.

Chamar
An ‘untouchable’ community typically engaged in cultivation and/or leatherwork.

dholak
A small, two-sided drum.

fakir
A religious ascetic, particularly a Muslim ascetic.

gorait
A watchman (especially in the Benares region).

guru
A spiritual teacher or guide; a senior Hijra in superordinate position to a chela.

Hijra
A member of the Hijra community, usually a male-born person with a feminine gender identity; often a performer and collector of badhai at births, weddings and other occasions.

inam
A rent-free land grant, often hereditary.

jati
A caste group.

Khoja
A term for ‘eunuch’.

Khwajasarai
A eunuch-slave (literally ‘lord superintendent of the house’); often household servants, administrators, military commanders, intelligencers and diplomats.

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

BL/OR 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

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.
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 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.
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 Khwajasari named Meah Sahub was photographed by Abbas Ali, an Indian photographer from Lucknow, in the 1870s.