In 2009, a few khawaja sira returning from a private wedding were arrested, maltreated, and harassed by some local policemen in Taxila, Pakistan. This incident, although no different from many others in a long history of violence and exclusion faced by the khawaja sira in Pakistan, proved momentous. Moved by their plight, Aslam Khaki, a local jurist filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court of Pakistan about the legal rights of the khawaja sira (Redding 2015). From 2009 to 2011, the Supreme Court of Pakistan gave multiple directives regarding the social position and legal identity of the khawaja sira, the most prominent of which was the creation of a new gender category to recognize their unique identity. In the final decision, the Supreme Court declared that the khawaja sira

in their own rights are citizens of this country and subject to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, their rights, obligations including right to life and dignity are equally protected. Thus, no discrimination, for any reason, is possible against them as far as their rights and obligations are concerned.1

This decision was the first time that the historically marginalized khawaja sira community of Pakistan was recognized by the legal and administrative apparatus of the country.

After the Supreme Court decision, the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA)—the public agency in Pakistan which issues legal IDs (known as Computerized National Identity Cards or simply CNIC)—created a third gender category, officially called ‘Khawaja Sira’, in its national registration system. Celebrated at the time as a watershed moment by human rights advocates, there were high hopes associated with the Supreme Court decision. It was assumed at the time that legal recognition would also result in better socioeconomic inclusion of the khawaja sira community of Pakistan. However, the subsequent limited impact of this case on the lives of the khawaja sira and the almost unanimous disavowal
of the legal third gender category by the *khawaja sira* community tells a completely different story.

In this story, legal recognition of marginalized groups like the *khawaja sira* community, especially when done on the basis of problematic discourses, represents a minor part of the socio-administrative apparatus that governs their lives. It is also an account of how the bodies, behaviours, and identities identified as ‘not-normal’ are meticulously categorized, disciplined, and governed in formal and informal institutions and spaces throughout their lives. Drawing on nine-month-long ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Lahore, Pakistan, and taking a broad view of governance—defined as ‘conduct of conduct’\(^2\) per Foucault—in this book I attempt to tell this story by providing an account of the multiple forms of governance of thirdness across legal, social, and administrative institutions in Pakistan. I also try to share the lived experiences of the *khawaja sira* as they attempt to live an unliveable life within an increasingly intrusive state and society.

**The *Khawaja Sira* of Pakistan**

The *khawaja sira* community of Pakistan is a group of heterogeneous individuals with contested identities. While most members of the *khawaja sira* community are biological males with a preference for the feminine gender, those born with intersex characteristics, impotent individuals, and victims of childhood sexual abuse also belong to this community. Other definitions of the community also exist in the literature. For example, Nanda (1990, 12), whose work focuses on *hijra* of India, simply defines them as ‘neither man nor woman’. Reddy (2005) whose thoughtful ethnographic work also captures the lives of *hijra* of India argues that ‘[f]or the most part, Hijras are phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire, and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation’ (2). As I discuss in detail at various points throughout this book, none of these definitions capture the complex nature of identities of the *khawaja sira* community of Pakistan. Perhaps Faris Khan’s (2014) term *identity potpourri* which is meant to communicate the ‘imbricated, fluid, situated and perceived’ identities of the *khawaja sira* comes closest to capturing the complex nature of the *khawaja sira* community.

In a society that has one of the highest numbers of missing women (M. A. Khan 2007; Sen 1992) and special privilege is accorded to the male child, the cardinal sin of the *khawaja sira*—who are generally labelled as ‘sons’ at their birth—is their insistence that they are ‘not men’. Through
their performative femininity, the *khawaja sira* community problematizes not just the naturalness of a binary gender system but also the social role expectations for men. Most members of the *khawaja sira* community are expelled from their homes in adolescence generally after repeated verbal and physical abuse. In response to their social exclusion from families and most other institutional spaces, the *khawaja sira* have created a counterpublic (Fraser 1990) through an elaborate kinship system founded on *guru–chela* relationships. After leaving home, such individuals typically join the *khawaja sira* community and, based on an elaborate kinship structure, become *chela* (student–child–protégé) of a *guru* (teacher–parent–master).

Due to abuse and mistreatment by family, teachers, and peers, very few members of the *khawaja sira* community are literate as most of them drop out of schools because of social and sexual stigmatization. Living in extreme poverty, most members of the *khawaja sira* community resort to begging, dancing at private parties, and sex work to make their ends meet. Overall, the *khawaja sira* community is considered a pariah in the Pakistani society and until recently had no formal protection of their legal rights. No reliable demographic statistics exist about the total number of *khawaja sira* in Pakistan and the estimates of their population range from 80,000 to 300,000 (Baig 2012).

Owing to the multiple social, legal, and institutional biases faced by the *khawaja sira*, hardly any systematic investigation of the experiences of the *khawaja sira* in Pakistan has so far been done. With a few exceptions, almost all scientific research on *khawaja sira* has been done with a focus on their genitals, sexual practices, or HIV prevalence and control (for example, Baqi et al. 1999; Bokhari et al. 2012; Rehan, Chaudhary, and Shah 2009; Rehan 2011; Hawkes et al. 2009). Among the notable exceptions are studies done on the ambivalence of the justice system about policing *khawaja sira* (Redding 2015), their residential patterns (Ahmad 2010), and an investigation of the consequences of their systematic exclusion (Abdullah et al. 2012). The most notable exception in this regard is the excellent ethnographic work of Faris Khan (2014, 2019a) which focuses on identity and activism of the *khawaja sira* community. There are multiple original contributions made by Khan's work, the most important of which concerns the strategic role of the term *‘khawaja sira’* for activism within Pakistan. His nuanced insights about the dilemmas and dynamics of *khawaja sira* activism also make important advances to the understanding of the *khawaja sira* community of Pakistan. I engage with and rely on this insightful work throughout the book. As a counterpoint to Khan's primary focus on activism, my primary emphasis
is on providing a comprehensive understanding of the different ways in which the lives of the khawaja sira are governed in ways that remain largely unnoticed, uncontested, and undocumented by previous scholarship. Given the ethnographic context of Khan's work in Karachi, my fieldwork, which took place in Lahore, also provides a useful comparative context to understand the similarities and differences among the khawaja sira residing in different areas of Pakistan.

Finally, it is important to briefly note the reasons for using the term ‘thirdness’ to characterize the khawaja sira identity, especially within the context of an analytical framework focused on governance. Thirdness, as used in this book, is meant to communicate the ordinal status of gender identities for the sociopolitical governing regimes of Pakistan where a man is considered the most desirable identity and serves as the ideal for how rules, routines, and norms are constructed in formal and informal institutions. Women come next in this fabricated hierarchy of valuation and are considered the unavoidable second. The khawaja sira identity is distinct in its thirdness as it problematizes the fabricated normality, desirability, and stability of both the first and the second. A major reason their thirdness is considered so threatening is because many of them forego the masculine identity the society considers the most stable and desirable. This cardinal sin sees their lives transformed into an unliveable quagmire through the dominant governance regimes in society.

Thirdness is also meant to communicate the critical notion that khawaja sira identity is not captured by the term third gender. Instead, as I discuss throughout the book, their thirdness exists along multiple axes of identity related to gender, sex, potence, and desire. For example, their desire for men fits no clear narrative of heterosexuality or homosexuality and can only be captured in its distinct and unique thirdness. Hence, the term ‘thirdness’ captures the way their identity stands apart from almost all other identities in society and defies simplistic explanations. Finally, thirdness is also meant to convey a limited sense of agency inherent in the term as captured by phrases like third space (Bhabha 1994), third place (Oldenburg 1999), and third culture individuals (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009). In all these contexts, thirdness refers to a state of in-betweenness, flux, and possibility where the stability of taken-for-granted ideas about culture, space, and society are problematized. Hence, thirdness also communicates the (limited) space of agency and potentiality that the khawaja sira community holds in opening up new ways of conceptualizing human identity and relationships. As I discuss in the book, however, the dominant governance regimes in society make sure that this potential remains limited and hugely circumscribed.
Meeting the *Khawaja Sira* of Lahore

I reached Lahore in late September 2015 with the hopes of diving into fieldwork right away. I was able to get in touch with a group of six *khawaja sira* living close to my residence within a couple of weeks. This group of *khawaja sira* consisted of two older *guru* and four younger *khawaja sira* living in a small house in a lower middle-class residential neighbourhood. While I could not develop a long-term relationship with this group, these initial conversations were very helpful in establishing a baseline understanding of the *khawaja sira* community and made me aware of some access-related issues I would face in my fieldwork. This initial struggle was because this group of *khawaja sira* was very sceptical of being interviewed by an outsider owing to previous bad experiences with a couple of journalists. My little understanding of the unique vernacular of the *khawaja sira* also did not help. I was full of self-doubt during and after these initial interactions with the *khawaja sira* community and was apprehensive about my ability to develop trust and meaningful relations with them. However, my luck changed when a frontline worker of a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was working for *khawaja sira* inclusion recommended that I get in touch with Salma, a *khawaja sira* rights activist who had helped that NGO recruit many *khawaja sira* in their welfare programme. When I contacted Salma, she was forthcoming and invited me to her home in University Town, Lahore.

Salma had given me rough directions about her place of residence. Since I had never been to University Town before, I had to stop when I was close to her place and ask a rickshaw driver if a *khawaja sira* by the name of Salma lived nearby. ‘Which *khawaja sira’s* house are you looking for?’ the guy from behind the rickshaw driver asked. ‘Salma’, I replied. ‘Are you talking about Saleem?’ he asked. Fortunately, I knew that Saleem was the masculine given name of Salma. It is quite common for the *khawaja sira* to be known by their masculine names among outsiders and by their feminine names within the *khawaja sira* community. So, taking directions from that man, I went a couple of blocks further on the road. When a couple of turns later I needed further directions, I asked a young girl about 10–12 years old about Salma’s house. She directed her younger brother who was about 3–4 years old, ‘take them to Saleem Khusra’s home.’ The young boy complied accordingly and ran in front of the car for about 50 feet where Salma’s home was situated. When I rang the bell, there was no answer for quite a while and when I was about to turn back, a young man in his early twenties came and asked me if I was looking for Saleem Bhai (brother). It seemed that this was Salma’s home. When I nodded yes, he told me that Salma was not at home and then
called Salma on his mobile phone and said, ‘Saleem Bhai there are people here to meet you.’ Eventually I ended up meeting Salma the next day and came to know that the young man was her younger brother who along with his wife lived with Salma. The purpose of narrating this incident in detail is to show that without knowing Salma’s masculine name, I would not have been able to reach her home. Even though she, like most other *khawaja sira*, prefers to be known by her feminine name, most cis-gendered individuals still prefer to address her by her masculine name.

Salma, now a prominent member of the *khawaja sira* community of Lahore, faced a lot of resistance from her family (especially her mother) over her performative femininity. She recounts multiple beatings at the hands of her mother whenever she was caught playing with her make-up while growing up. In stark contrast to most of her peers, Salma was lucky that her parents eventually understood that her feminine preference was not a ‘phase’ but an integral part of her identity. She not only was accepted but also continued to live at her parents’ house during her transition. As both of her parents are now dead, being the eldest in the family, Salma is now head of her household, which also includes cis-gendered individuals like her younger brother and his family.

The meeting with Salma proved to be a godsend. She is part of the new leadership of the *khawaja sira* community, which is emerging in response to the increasing need for the *khawaja sira* to interact with state functionaries. As a result, she has cultivated many social and administrative contacts during her efforts to help her fellow *khawaja sira*. Due to Salma’s social connections and her position in the *khawaja sira* community, many *khawaja sira* used to visit her house regularly. Because of the extremely welcoming attitude of Salma and the ease of access to other *khawaja sira*, in the coming months, her home became my primary research site. Later on, she helped me in connecting with the wider *khawaja sira* community, navigating through multiple research sites, and in understanding the everyday language of the *khawaja sira*. She was extremely valuable in helping me gain access to and confidence of many *khawaja sira*. I was not only able to observe and take part in many discussions between the *khawaja sira* at her home but was also able to observe many guru–chela interactions at Salma’s home as many chelay used to visit her.

As I was trying to maximize exposure by meeting *khawaja sira* with heterogeneous identities and experiences, I would often discuss with Salma what theoretical questions I had (for example, including participants who had undergone surgery to match their body with what is deemed socially
appropriate for the feminine gender), and she would recommend the *khawaja sira* who either fulfilled that criteria or had some information that I thought was important. Salma and I also visited many other *khawaja sira* places of residence and institutional sites during the course of my fieldwork. I cannot emphasize how much help Salma was during my fieldwork in providing not only access to the *khawaja sira* community but also a safe place where the *khawaja sira* felt comfortable talking about their personal experiences. My wife and kids also met her a few times and we continue to stay in touch to this day. I do not think this book could have been completed without her help, for which I am eternally grateful to her.

As noted by Angrostino and Rosenberg (2013), the role of an ethnographer continues to change at different points during ethnographic fieldwork. My role also continued to evolve during fieldwork. The initial conversations and interviews can best be characterized as ‘descriptive observation’ (Angrostino and Rosenberg 2013) where my primary focus was to develop a basic understanding of the norms and routines of the *khawaja sira* community. This initial phase also allowed me to gain the trust of the *khawaja sira* community and to improve my interviewing skills. While I am a native speaker of Punjabi and Urdu, the primary languages spoken by the *khawaja sira* of Lahore, I was unfamiliar with the vernacular used by the *khawaja sira* called ‘Farsi’.² Developed over hundreds of years, Farsi is known only to the *khawaja sira* (and those few outsiders who interact with them regularly) and allows them to privately discuss issues related to their everyday life in public. Many *khawaja sira* whom I met often used words like *khoktki* (masculine dress), *firqa* (feminine dress), and *girya* (adult male, usually refers to a love interest) while talking among themselves in my presence. Salma was helpful in teaching me many commonly used words of *khawaja sira* Farsi.

Once I learnt some of the *khawaja sira* Farsi and developed a basic understanding of the norms and typical narratives within the *khawaja sira* community, it was relatively easier for me to gain the confidence of the *khawaja sira* I met. Phrasing questions in their own vernacular was helpful because that was an indication that I had not only met other *khawaja sira* but that they trusted me enough to teach me some of their commonly used Farsi words. It was during this phase that I realized that a programme about beggars’ welfare by the Social Welfare and Baitul Maal department of the Punjab government (discussed in detail in Chapter 10) was an important aspect of the *khawaja sira* interactions with the government frontline workers. This was also the most exciting and interesting phase of fieldwork,
as I became quite comfortable in my field setting, and those *khawaja sira* who frequently came to Salma's place also became used to my presence.

I also interacted with many frontline government workers during my fieldwork, specifically from the NADRA, police, and social workers. This included informal conversations and direct observation in frontline offices. These interactions were warranted because of multiple reasons. First, as Linda Williams (2015) notes, 'administration of law and policy toward subordinate and marginalized groups varies considerably, and these variations shape peoples’ understanding of their place in society' (434). Interactions with frontline workers helped me identify these variations and attitudes in implementation of public policies relevant to the *khawaja sira*. Second, frontline workers represent part of the state machinery with which publics are most likely to interact. This interaction is likely to influence how marginalized groups in society experience public policies. Since I was getting information about the experience of the *khawaja sira* in their interactions with street-level bureaucracy (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Lipsky 1980; Oberfield 2014; Brehm and Gates 1997), it proved helpful to get the perspective of the frontline workers about significant aspects of those experiences. Doing so also helped me analyse street-level bureaucracy as a 'third space' where policies are implemented, realized, and contested at the same time. Third, the attitude of frontline workers towards public policy can influence the way in which these policies actually get implemented (Keiser 2010; L. Williams 2015). Therefore, getting information about the bureaucrats’ perception of public policies relevant to the *khawaja sira* and recent changes in those policies proved to be extremely helpful in analysing how these policies actually get implemented.

**Accounting for Self**

Throughout my fieldwork, I tried to exercise self-reflexivity by giving 'active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which [my] own sensemaking and the particular circumstances that might have affected it, throughout all phases of the research process, relate to the knowledge claims [I] ultimately advance in written form' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 100). To do this, I tried to remain cognizant of my own biases, perceptions, and suppositions throughout fieldwork. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 6, initially I did not understand the choice of the *khawaja sira* to legally register and to perform religious rituals as men. To me it seemed a paradoxical choice. However, I never contested this choice. It was only gradually that I
started to understand that, for the khawaja sira, the primary significance was of what they called their ‘feminine soul’ and not of governing categories like sex and gender. However, to make transparent my own suppositions, I have clarified this point in Chapter 6.

This should not be taken as a claim that I was able to exercise reflexivity perfectly and at all times. I do not claim to have had a perfect wall between my personality, suppositions, and my conversations with the khawaja sira community. Naturally, my questions and interpretations were influenced by my experiences in the field. I understand my fieldwork as the co-production of meaning-making with the khawaja sira community and I was naturally an important part of this process. An obvious example of my failure to do bracketing is in case of painful memories (for example, being raped). There were many instances in which some members of the community shared some deeply personal memories and experiences. While this could be of theoretical interest especially in understanding better the different origins of individuals joining the khawaja sira community, I found myself not exploring those painful memories in detail because I just could not. I understand that as an academic interested in identity, perhaps I should have asked follow-up questions during those conversations (or afterwards). However, I honestly did not think it was worth it. To me the ethical thing seemed to just listen respectfully to whatever details about such incidents members of the community were willing to share and not ask too many probing questions about such incidents. So, if that part of Chapter 4 lacks the requisite theoretical depth in the eyes of some discerning readers, it is because of precisely this failure on my part.

Another important clarification regarding ‘suspending judgement’ is accepting khawaja sira’s narratives as their valid view of the world. While there were many aspects of their opinions that I could not verify independently, I have still included them in the book because they were influential in shaping how the khawaja sira made sense of their lives. For example, as I mention in Chapter 6, most khawaja sira think that they will legally get less share in their parents’ inheritance if they legally identify as khawaja sira as compared to what they will get if they register as men. My independent research suggested that this was probably a misconception on the part of the khawaja sira and that, both religiously and legally, the khawaja sira are entitled to the same share in inheritance as that of a man. However, I have reported this perception of the khawaja sira because this is an important internal discourse about their choice of legal gender. This is also in line with the idea of ‘constitutive causality’ in interpretive fieldwork.
where the focus of the ethnographer is on understanding ‘how humans conceive of their worlds, the language they use to describe them, and other elements constituting that social world, which make possible or impossible the interactions they pursue’ (Schwartz–Shea and Yanow 2013, 52).

While my narrative is based primarily on how most of the *khawaja sira* responded to a certain theme, it does not mean that I have ignored minority voices and opinions. Thus, instead of presenting homogenous narratives, I have tried to clarify in all chapters that, instead of consensus, heterogeneity in experiences and attitude should be considered the norm. I have also tried to suspend my own judgement on most issues where there was disagreement among the *khawaja sira*. For example, as I note in Chapter 6 in the context of choosing the third gender legally, in Chapter 3 about experiences in family, and in Chapter 11 about responses to frontline bureaucrats, there are significant differences in how the *khawaja sira* experience and respond to their social and personal world.

There are some points in the book where my interpretation of some institutions and their associated practices differs from that of the members of the *khawaja sira* community with whom I interacted during my fieldwork. For example, the disciplinary interpretation of the role of the institution of the *guru* in the *khawaja sira* community in Chapter 4 is the one substantial place in this book where my interpretation differs significantly from the majority of the *khawaja sira*. While privately some *khawaja sira* shared their unease with the institution of the *guru* because of their economic dependence and the disciplinary nature of the relationships, most of them contested this interpretation. For them, many of whom were *guru* themselves, the overwhelmingly positive qualities of the institution of the *guru–chela* relationship. Similarly, I did not share my interpretation of the role of the *khawaja sira* community as a homogenizing institution (in terms of subject formation) with members of the community, and that part of Chapter 4 is based only on my interpretation of the governing role of the *khawaja sira* community. Most *khawaja sira* consider the *khawaja sira* community to be a place of refuge for themselves and, though I have stated that in Chapter 4, I reiterate it here for clarity. While they do characterize it as a broad umbrella under which individuals of different origins and identities find refuge, they will probably not agree with my interpretation of the homogenizing influence of their community on the identity formation of its members. The dominant narrative, as I mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4 about the *khawaja sira*, is that most of them were born with a preference for the feminine identity and