WHAT GIVES THEM THE RIGHT?

AN EXPLORATION OF FOLKLORE AND HIJRA IDENTITY

by

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We may learn even more about others by studying their stories.

-Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty

INTRODUCTION
HIJRA IDENTITY AND ITS CONNECTION TO FOLKLORE

Cultural forms (such as stories) make people what they are as much as people make culture (Ramanujan 1991: xxx).

Wherever there are gatherings of people living and working side by side, whether in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, there will also be many forms of folklore that are used and shared by the members of that society. Folklore exists where there are folk. As a fundamental system of culture unique to each community, folklore is created, recreated and employed by the people within that society. The folklore of a community can act as a catalyst for the creation of identity, both of the individual and the group, while at the same time existing as a repository referred to by that particular population for the maintenance of active personhoods, and a larger social cohesion within the community. People existing on the fringes of these groups use their own variants of this folklore as a means through which to legitimize the existence of their own identities and personhoods within the larger social structure. In India, the hijras are one such community living and functioning on the fringes. Theirs is a group that has learned to use the folklore of Hindu India to their advantage, thereby creating a legitimate, functioning social niche in north Indian society.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that folklore is a versatile tool through which the hijras express their social identity. I also assert that hijras not only call upon the existing folklore of Hindu India, but they also transform it, making it their own in order to maintain a sense of social legitimacy. Unfortunately I was unable to undertake original fieldwork, and so for the purposes of this work I narrow my focus to one group of hijra informants and their unique folklore repertoires of particular Hindu myths and tales in Serena Nanda's

ethnographic work, ***Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India.*** Drawing on Nanda's materials in dialogue with other works on hijras and Indian folklore, I hope to illuminate the value that folklore has in the lives of these individual hijras as they strive to carve out and maintain unique, functioning, and valuable social identities within the larger scheme of Hindu North India.

The Hijras of India

While there are Muslim and Christian hijras, my focus here is on hijras in Hindu social settings. Hijras function within the social and religious realm of the Hindu caste system. Traditionally the Hindu caste system organizes occupations, or *castes*, based on their relative levels of religious purity. Higher religious and social regard is given to those who belong to the purer of castes, such as Brahmans and Kshatriyas. Those who happen to be born into the lower castes (those whose occupations are more polluting) find themselves near the bottom of the social ladder. There are also people who exist outside the social and religious spheres, those whose level of pollution deems them unworthy of caste membership at all, the outcastes. While the government of India, and other organizations, have made concerted efforts to uplift those who exist at the lower end, or outside, of the social scale, caste still thrives as a way in which people situate themselves in the Hindu social world. It is important to understand this since, as Hindus, hijras are actively situating themselves in relation to this framework of caste. The difference in their case is that they are doing so as a

group whose very nature relegates them to the fringes[1]. As Nanda argues, the hijras, as individuals:

> left their families and renounced caste...transcend networks of social obligation and thereby threaten the social order on which established society depends (Nanda 1990: 23).

This very quality of transcendence automatically places them in a social category that is difficult for others to define, hence their unintentional threatening of the social order. Indeed, as I will demonstrate next, their very nature places them in a liminal space both inside and out of normal Hindu social categories. On account of their relegation to the periphery of the social sphere, they have learned to use folklore and mythology to their advantage so creating within the social framework of Hindu India a legitimate, functioning social niche in the face of ambivalence. In order to better comprehend the meanings and value of the stories I present in the remainder of this work, it is necessary to provide the defining characteristics of hijras and some background information on the storytellers themselves to better familiarize the reader with the social contexts in which the hijras exist.

"Hijra"

For the sake of clarity and consistency, and since I focus on Serena Nanda's ethnographic consultants as informants for my work here, it is only fitting that I primarily employ her definitions of *hijra*, supplementing them with commentary from a few more scholars to provide a well-rounded view. In her work, Nanda focuses on the issues of gender and sexual identity, and, using the testimonies of the hijras themselves, defines them as a

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[1] For more on caste in particular contexts, see Gloria Goodwin Raheja 1988 "Caste, Kingship, and Dominance Reconsidered," in ***Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 17.***; and Arjun Sharma 1993 ***Caste, Class and Politics in Rural India.***

religious community of men who dress as women and act like women, who eventually undergo an emasculation operation that defines them as an institutionalized third gender, neither man nor woman. They are a group who centers their culture on the worship of a version of the Mother Goddess, and whose relationship to this deity maintains their traditional role as ritual performers (Nanda 1990: xv). Since they are culturally defined as neither man nor woman, in being born male it is "through ritual surgical transformation" that they become an "alternative, third sex/gender category" in the cultural contexts of India (Nanda 1999 in Nanda 2000:29). The hijras are by far the most common socially recognized third gender in India, and are also believed to be a third sex. They are not male because they do not desire sexual relations with women, and not female because they do not have a womb.

What then, constitutes the categories of gender in India, and how are hijras situated into this scheme? In India there are several views on the concept of gender. One Hindu view describes the concept as being fluid and changing, something that transforms as the body moves through life (Doniger 1999: 268). To illustrate this fluidity of form, which mirrors the changes hijras experience within their lifetime, I turn to Sarah Lamb and her discussion of gender in relation to concepts of aging in a Bengali village. She explains that for her informants:

> gender was not a constant determined by dichotomous physical differences between women and men. The Bengalis I knew definitely used the body to define gender differences, but not in terms of a fixed, binary male/female distinction; instead they often explained the biologies of the two sexes in terms of differences in the relative amounts of qualities, such as 'heat' and 'openness,' that all bodies and persons possess...Gender was constructed ...through the unceasing work of everyday life, through daily social interactions and sexual relations, through the ways women and men adorned their bodies, and through people's movements within and beyond the home...Perceptions and experiences surrounding gender were complex, fluctuating, and multifaceted (Lamb 2000: 14, 181-82, 212).

The notion of a "fluctuating and multifaceted" sense of gender identity in Lamb's description is important because it relates to the multiple gender identities that at times coexist before and during the process of hijra identity formation. As one moves from existing as a biological male, through the initiation process of emasculation, to become a full-fledged hijra, one's gender identity also moves and is reworked depending on the context. Yet, this concept of gender does not provide a complete explanation of what is happening with the hijras and the formation of the self as a third-gendered person. For this, I turn again to Serena Nanda and her informants, and to Cecilia Busby and her work on gender in a fishing village in Kerala for more clarity.

Both of these scholars formulate gender definitions which center on anatomy and physiology, or sex, and the cultural, social and psychological constructions that are imposed upon biological differences between male and female. However, with cultural context as a factor, the authors do not confine their definitions to this dichotomy between sex and gender. The function, or physiology, of the biological apparati becomes important because it brings about the revelation of personal potency in the form of procreative ability. In India, the ability to produce offspring is the primary expression of one's masculinity or femininity. Put simply, gender in these instances finds its definitive basis in the bodily differences between men and women, and is focused on the capacity of each for procreation (Busby 1997: 261). Busby continues, saying that:

> gender then, I would argue, is unquestionably part of the fixed core of the person. It is an attribute which is reinforced or demonstrated by engaging in gendered acts and practices, but which is *grounded* in the capacities of the body, the gendered substance ultimately inherited from mother or father, and the consequent capacity for passing

> that substance on, through procreative acts...The importance of the body, and the links particularly between gender, substance and reproduction are ones that are made even clearer through a consideration of the Indian 'third gender,' the *hijra* (Busby 2000: 160-161).

Where then, does this leave the hijra? Nanda asserts that they are a gender of their own with the inability to reproduce acting as another defining feature of their existence as a "third" gender category, existing as neither man nor woman as her title suggests. Busby agrees pointing out that:

> the hijra is not a person that incorporates aspects of both male and female, but is someone who is excluded from the normal activities of men and women, and who occupies a particular, restricted niche of a concern with gender, it is the strong connection that appears to be made between gender identity, bodily difference, and the expression of gender through reproductive potential (Busby 2000: 161) or lack thereof, that is important here.

Hijras cannot reproduce one way or the other, much less both ways, which leaves them in a category that stands on the fringes of the social and biological norm in India. Their liminality as social and biological beings adds to the discussion of gender in general because they still maintain a unique *creative* power despite their "deficiencies". In reference to the hijras in her various works, Nanda uses the term sex/gender because "for many cultures, opposing the terms sex and gender overlooks the integration of biology and culture in human life, experience and behavior" (Nanda 2000: 2). Hijras receive their potency only through the power of the Goddess (Busby 1997: 266), but this potency does not yield procreative power to the hijra; instead this power is transferred to the patrons of the hijras' ritual performances. For the hijra, to whom "neither male or female reproductive action is a possibility, potency is achieved only through the power of the Devi"(Busby 2000: 163). Since these people are:

> unable to act efficaciously in either male or female ways, they become hijras and are therefore, able to be vehicles of the divine power of the Mother Goddess, which transforms their impotence into the power of generativity. Gender then appears to be bound up not only with a bodily difference, but also with the potential that this body implies for procreation, with the ability to be potent in particular ways (Busby 2000: 163).

In the case of the hijras, their potential for procreation lies in their ability, through the graces of the Goddess, to bestow powerful blessings of fertility at important life cycle events like weddings and birth ceremonies where future procreation and the continuation of the family lineage is of the utmost concern to their patrons.

The hijras are not just simply a third gender or a particular sexual orientation, but a well-defined social identity with a vital ritual and social function, and many in the Indian social mainstream often overlook this. To be a hijra, the crucial step is to take the vow of "hijrahood" and become part of the hijra community which functions much like a caste with its own specific inner workings, rules, rituals, and hierarchy (Pattanaik 2002: 11). They are a subculture existing on the fringes of the social realm, yet, thanks to their folklore and its connections to the larger society, they also carve out a ritual role that helps to assert the legitimacy of their religious and social identities.

Adding to this presentation of hijra identity, Busby describes the hijras as:

> ritual performers, who are particularly associated with dancing and performances at births and marriages, and who are found in small loosely defined groups and communities all over India, but mainly in the north. They are predominantly men, who have gone through a process of apprenticeship and ceremonial emasculation, and who dress and act as women: their ritual role is important because they are considered to have strong connections to the Devi, particularly the Bahuchara Mata, in Gujarat, through whom they have the power to give the blessing of fertility (Busby 2000: 161).

Their efficacy lies in this power and with it they are able to function in their social world and avoid being totally stigmatized and ostracized. However, not all hijras are ritual

performers with such a special relationship to the Goddess Bahuchara. Concentrating more on their sexual practices, Doniger briefly states in her work on gender in India and Greece, that the hijras as "bands of men whose sexuality is liminal in any of several different ways: they may be transvestites, male homosexual prostitutes, or eunuchs (or, indeed, several of these at once)" (Doniger 1999: 278). She brings up an interesting point about the variety of people included under the title *hijra* in India. While those who undergo the emasculation ritual are the epitome of hijrahood, those others mentioned by Doniger also fall into the general category of *hijra*, put there by both those outside of the hijra communities, and by the hijras themselves and their own communities. These particular groups allow for, and support, the varying degrees of sexual/gender identity existing under the term *hijra*. In support of this assertion, Nanda points out that:

> the difficulties in writing in a clear and accurate way about hijras [lie in] the disjunctions that exist between the cultural definition of the hijra role and the variety of individually experienced social roles, gender identities, sexual orientations, and life histories of the people who become hijras...[even though] hijras are culturally defined in terms of their traditional occupation as performers...many, if not most, hijras do not earn their living solely in this manner, indeed many do not perform at all (Nanda 1990: xxiii).

Instead, many turn to prostitution as a means for economic supplementation and stability. I want to point out here that because of this variety of occupation and resulting identities, the hijras who *do* perform their traditional ritual roles, now more than ever find it necessary to assert their legitimacy as "real" hijras. They make this assertion through the use of folklore, so maintaining a fragile hold on a position that is still accorded religious respect in the larger social sphere of Hindu India.

In this discussion of hijras as a diverse group, I want to include Satish Sharma's voice here as well, since he also has much to add from his own hijra informants. Sharma

interviews hijras in and around Chandigarh for his sociological research on their communities in Punjab. Sharma's enterprise is interesting because he not only adds to the discourses surrounding hijras, but he also provides an academic view of his hijra informants from his own perspective, that of an Indian man living in a similar social context as the hijras themselves. By adding his perspectives, and those of his non-hijra informants here, the ways in which folklore works in the lives of the hijras is further revealed. These comments illuminate just how the folklore told by the hijras pervades the lives and repertoires of those outside the community.

Sharma starts by suggesting that:

> it seems reasonable to define hijras as males or females who are sexually deformed. Being sexually deformed, they are not capable of reproducing. Inability to reproduce in view of the cultural traditions of Indian society, is socially disapproved of and...it is on account of their sexual deformity that the hijras become stigmatized (Sharma 1989: 5) in the first place.

On account of this stigmatization, and because:

> the society recognizes them to be socially and biologically incapable of performing the expected roles of the male or female gender they therefore, are not accepted as part of the mainstream and, thus, left to lead a life of their own...Not only that, they also, as stated in some studies, try to rationalize their existence in the society by citing historical figures who, they believe, were hijras (Sharma 1989: 5-6).

By citing these prominent historical characters, the hijras are establishing a legitimate social history using variants of the same cultural tools and symbols from folklore that others in Hindu society are familiar with. I interpret this idea of the hijras reclaiming a social history, and therefore establishing a social identity through folklore, as a major theme in their lives as Hindus, and will return to it in each chapter as I examine the specific pieces of folklore that the hijras chose to tell. For now, however, Sharma wants us to understand that, for his informants, citing historical figures amounts to an act of social defense against the

stigmatization (Sharma 1989: 23). This stigmatization, which is based on their inability to procreate, acts as a social nemesis of the hijras, and is a barrier to their efforts to stake a legitimate claim in society. Their stories and ritual roles act as cultural weapons against such a social roadblock.

Sharma also recognizes that hijras in north India manage to exist with some amount of acknowledgement and acceptance from the larger culture despite their social and biological inadequacies. He shares that

> what one finds is that they are accepted by people in general especially because of two things...One, that they are the victims of nature, and two, that their custom is conceived as desirable among the people belonging to lower middle class (Sharma 1989: 90).

These people value the hijras in their ritual roles as vehicles of the Goddess and her power despite their inability to procreate. Sharma points to some of the more positive views of hijras that he encounters in his research. He shares that there are:

> a number of mythological beliefs existing about them in Indian society... According to some fieldwork notes based on my observations and discussions with people belonging to the lower strata, the following major beliefs can be stated as existing:
> a.) 'the hijras are very powerful people because of their asexuality. Normal males lose viriya (semen) which hijras do no lose, therefore all their energies are preserved and, therefore, they are physically powerful people';
> b.) 'a hijra is born as a symbol of [the Goddess], it is, therefore, advised that people should not trouble or tease them. The teasing amounts to hurting the feeling and sentiments of hijras. And following which, if a hijra curses a man then the man is likely to have a hijra child through his wife'
> c.) 'blessings given by hijra are a boon for the child and the family, for a child acquires great powers and, therefore, does not come under the influences of ghosts'
> d.) 'whenever a hijra comes to a house he should be given respect and should go back all pleased. A curse of a hijra can ruin the family'(Sharma 1989: 90-91).

These views, as expressed by Sharma's non-hijra informants, help to place the hijras in their social contexts. I include these comments here so that I can situate the hijras in their

social world appropriately. Their standing as liminal members of society, placed on the margins by others in Hindu society who function correctly (biologically) as either man or woman, helps the reader to understand the impetus behind the hijras' use of folklore to create and sustain a viable social identity. In their connection with the Goddess they gain a vital religious role that helps sanction their presence, but the fear associated with their unused shakti, or creative sexual powers, keeps them at the borders.

In order to strike such a fine balance between acceptance and stigmatization, the voices of the hijras must be heard by the other members of society. Learning what the hijras expect from their own society gives the reader a feel for their position within it. Sharma shares that what most of his informants say they want revolves around:

> one issue, that is, their recognition in the society as human beings, as citizens having rights to vote and government intervention to improve upon their status by integrating them with the mainstream society, and inherent in this is a want for a sympathetic and respectful response from society at large (Sharma 1989:93-94).

After all, they point out that "'we have also taken birth as any other human being on the earth...we do want to be respected. We respect people, their sentiments and we do help others" so why not expect the same in return (Sharma 1989: 92)? This want for respect and sympathy is one of the main driving forces behind the hijras use of folklore as a means to carve out a viable social niche in north Indian society. It is also the impetus for their recent political struggles for basic civil rights and representation locally and nationally. As storytellers, hijras employ the shared cultural symbols of their society in an effort to win recognition and respect in their social contexts[2].

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[2] See Trudy DeLong's Masters Thesis ***Politicians or Pariahs?: Changing Perceptions of Indian Third Gender Identity,*** Department of Anthropology at University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004, for more on the hijras' use of politics of mobilization to gain recognition in society.

Context: The Physical Location and Social Structure of Hijra Communities

I want to take a moment now to introduce the particular community of hijras who act as both Nanda's informants, as well as mine for the purposes of this work. This brief description will provide the reader with a physical context in which to situate the stories and the people themselves. This will help clarify the relationship that the hijras have with the folklore that works as a catalyst for creating and maintaining their social identity.

According to Nanda, many of the hijra enclaves she encounters in her work are located in the northern half of India with most of the members residing in the bigger cities such as Delhi, Bombay, Ahmedabad and Chandigarh, to name a few. These hijras, along with the groups that live in the smaller cities and villages, work together to maintain a network of relationships that provides a social structure and a government of sorts. Their hierarchical social structure is designed to help avoid situations that would cause divisiveness within their own larger hijra community, as well as to provide support to its members. After all, for hijras:

> being independent of the group means not freedom, but social suicide. In India, especially in such a marginal subculture as the hijras', the societal values of hierarchy, dependence on the group, and tight social networks built on reciprocity remain paramount. Group cohesion, not individualism, is adaptive (Nanda 1990: 48).

Within this larger community structure are more intimate groups, like those belonging to individual households, or communes. Living and working in these households are "families" of hijras who function not as a typical family, but rather in the vain of guru and chela, or teacher and disciple. Each family establishes their own lineage through seniority among the chelas and with the guru acting as their leader until she passes away. Each household is part of a larger lineage that links all of the households together in a relationship

that exists nationwide. There is a hierarchy within the larger hijra community that trickles down to the smallest of households. Here in these smaller communities is where I find the voices for this work.

In the beginning of her work, Serena Nanda offers the contexts for her fieldwork. Interestingly enough, she goes to the periphery of hijra territory to study a social group existing on the fringes of their own social world (Nanda 1990: xxii). In Bastipore (a pseudonym), a city in western/central India, Nanda finds her informants. These hijras belong to a larger community of close to two hundred hijras, but Nanda spends most of her time with members of the three largest households in Bastipore. Many of these people have connections, which lead Nanda to Bombay for fieldwork as well. She also consults with hijras in Ahmedabad who have ties to Bahuchara's temple a hundred kilometers away. The physical setting then for her informants lies mainly in Bastipore, and in the northwestern coastal states of Gujarat and Maharastra (Nanda 1990: xxii).

Most of Nanda's hijra informants are Hindu. However, there are Muslim members of the households as well who seem not to have conflicting interests when it comes to the hijra worship of a Hindu Goddess. Nanda explains that "what seems a great contradiction...[does] not seem to pose any problem for the hijras"(Nanda 1990: 42). She shares that beyond the organization of the hijras into households and into houses, there are no caste or other ascribed social differences that are formally significant in hijra social organization. In some places, such as Gujarat, Hindu and Muslims live in different communes, but today in most cities Hindu and Muslim hijras, and Christians as well, live together in the same households, typically without incident (Nanda 1990: 41-42).

On account of the general openness in the communes, some Gujarati households aside, it is not surprising to find that hijras in these households come from all over India to be welcomed into the hijra world. This openness is reflected in the languages that Nanda encounters in her fieldwork. Her informants speak a variety of languages including Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, and English, among others, which helps illustrate the level of acceptance in the hijra households. Most hijras, then, appear to live outside the social constraints of caste and religion, which are embedded in the mainstream culture. The freedom this affords them allows for the development and assertion of their unique position as ritual performers and devotees of the Bahuchara Mata, the goddess. It also allows them to use their unique social position to reframe Indian folklore to express the legitimacy of their social identities.

Important Folklore Concepts to Keep in Mind

Folklore is arguably the most important tool that the hijras use in the creation and legitimization of their own personhoods and social identities. By exploring the basic characteristics of folklore, and how these flourish in the unique contexts of India, I intend to give the reader a firm understanding of the cultural mindset which permeates the ways in which the hijras function as social beings themselves. Used in conjunction with one another, the discourses I present here illuminate the term and provide a well-rounded understanding of it and its connection to humans and their societies. More importantly though, the brief summaries I present help to demonstrate the value that folklore has for marginal communities in particular, of which the hijras are one.

In general, folklore can be described as a human creation which is shared by those people who live and communicate with one another through creative means. Folklore is a living aspect of human culture, and like any living entity it is constantly changing and readjusting according to the lives of the people to whom it belongs. Its vibrancy comes from the dynamic relationships people have with each other, and their environments, both of which are constantly in flux. Different people in each culture may use similar variants of a piece of folklore for different means. This versatility makes folklore a useful tool for all members of that particular culture. The hijras make certain pieces of folklore their own by adapting them to help them create and maintain their viable ritual function. They use shared symbols that are present in each story so that others in their society will recognize and relate to the story itself when they hear it. The general usefulness of folklore in providing a vehicle through which to both communicate with (affect), and commune with (evoke) its audiences (Rao in Doniger 1988: 148), becomes a tool that the hijras employ to establish a relationship with the public that helps them to legitimize their social existence.

The universal appeal of folklore makes it a cultural entity that is accessible to most, if not all, members of the society, which is why hijras find it such a valuable tool. In fact, as A. K. Ramanujan asserts, folklore:

> does express a whole community over a long time, forms its values and enacts its conflicts in a language of its own. Yet it transcends that community and belongs to anyone who wishes to work towards understanding and experiencing it (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 117).

When studying folklore in the contexts of India "we need to attend carefully both to the uniqueness of cultural expression as well as to the universal elements in it, both to its specificity and its accessibility, both to its otherness and its challenge to our ability to share

it" (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 117). On account of folklore's encompassing relationships with its communities he goes on to explain that:

> cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles, (*a*) context-sensitivity and (*b*) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones...They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions, they invert, subvert, and convert their neighbors (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 8).

The social existence of the hijras as ritual performers shows Ramanujan's cultural plurality in action. The hijras, as I share in the next chapters, respond to their social and cultural contexts by generating new forms of folklore that, while expressing the social legitimacy of the hijra role (which consequently subverts the social stigmatization of their gender), also stays true to the symbols and meanings that are relevant to the culture at large. In this manner, the hijras attempt to "convert" the views of their audiences. Hijras generate their own new forms of stories by placing themselves within the texts of the "old" versions, thereby producing a new form. The familiarity of the "old" themes to the larger audience helps to reduce the anxiety that others may feel toward the hijras and their liminal existence in a third gender role.

Indeed, folklore in India can take on many different forms and characteristics depending on the context in which it is being performed, which includes the storytellers/performers themselves, along with the location, and the audience. This is evident in the stories that the hijras chose to share in the following chapters. However, even though context plays a large part in the telling itself, the other aspect of folklore, that of text, when studied in combination with context, helps to constitute folklore as a cultural entity. Contexts

and texts are the characteristics of folklore that are reflexive of past tellings[3] and performances, and that are the most important to my work here. It is the texts' "fixity of form [which] confers authority and familiarity, while [their] variation allows [for] changes in content" based on the context (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 11). In the texts and contexts that hijras chose, they gain this authority by sticking closely to the "old" version to reap the benefits of the wealth of shared symbols within it, and use the new performance spaces to create their own way of telling the story that benefits their social identity. In fact, when one examines the context and reflexive characteristics of a body of folklore one becomes aware of what is going on in its community, both on a small scale as with the hijras, and on the large scale with the society that surrounds them. As Mazharul Islam, in his work on Indian folklore, points out, the lore/stories often acts as:

> the pulse of the people...A doctor can understand the health of a man through his pulse. In an almost similar manner a folklorist or an anthropologist can determine the health of a people and his society through the study of his folklore, which tells him who the people are, what are their likings and dislikes, their joys and sorrows, their beliefs and customs, the mechanism of livelihood, their love, emotions and passions their quality of adjustment and sense of protest, their actions and reactions and many other things, the combination of all of which makes the largest part of the body of a culture (Islam 1985, p. 420).

Folklore then can provide a depth to one's understanding of others and their culture. Together elements of folklore weave a web of understanding among the people who use them that is not present in the same capacity in other aspects of culture. In the case of the hijras, it also reveals the importance they place on the stories as a means of expressing their social identity. The relationships between any texts, oral or written, and the reflexivities present in

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[3] This is a term which A.K. Ramanujan prefers to use instead of *versions* or *variants* which "imply that an original or *Ur*-text" exists as the authoritative text (see Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 134, for more detail). I will use all three terms throughout this work, but will give preference to *tellings* based on this reasoning.

them "are crucial to the understanding of both the order and diversity, the openness and the closures of this civilization," (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 9) that is India.

The intricate relationships that exist between pieces of folklore in the contexts of India demonstrate what Ramanujan calls "intertextuality" (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 8). This refers to the conversations between texts that occur with each new telling. He explains that oral, nonverbal, and written texts each draw upon the characteristics of the others to create new combinations that are still representative and reflexive of the lives of those to whom the folklore belongs. Ramanujan points out that it is:

> Indian allusion, the common stock, that makes Indian intertextuality possible...when it is commonly held, knowledge, play, allusion, parody, inversion and nuance of every sort become possible (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 18).

It is also because of this intertextuality that the hijras' use of folklore to express and legitimize their social identity is so successful in carving out a viable niche in Hindu society. Without the intricate relationships that exist between folklore texts in India, and the resulting allusion or "common stock", the hijras would not be able to use folklore in such a way. It would not be as valuable a pool of symbols as it is for them to employ in their efforts against social stigmatization. The pluralism and diversity of Indian societies and cultures however, *does* allow for the existence of social groups such as that of the hijras, and it is in this context that folklore in India finds itself situated and ready for use by those who sense its social worth.

In order to really grasp the extent of India's pluralism, and the resulting adaptive quality of folkloric elements, one must approach the genre as a "context-sensitive system" (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 12). If one wants to understand the folk, it is essential to first grasp the fact that their folktales emerge in certain, situated interactions depending on

the relationships between the storyteller, audience and their environment (Narayan 1997: x.). This pluralism and diversity, or intertextuality and reflexivity, allows for the almost natural transmission and reconstruction of pieces of folklore across "regions, through time, between tellers and even among translators" (Narayan 1989: 27).

The characteristic of oral communication inherent in folklore in India, and its pervasive quality, is important to this work because the hijra informants I call upon for this project are mostly illiterate. Since "folklore has a pan-Indian network" and tales, etc., "share motifs, ideas, forms, and poetics across regions and language" (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 26) the hijras' knowledge of a larger Hindu mythology is not hampered by the fact that many cannot read. In my work I demonstrate how, by verbally communicating their own hijra folklore texts, members of the hijra communities show their connection to this web of intertextuality and communion with the larger social world, which in turn, allows them to establish the vital relationships with others that help to legitimize their own social existences. This point is key to my argument that hijras find folklore to be a highly useful tool in expressing their social identity as a group, and as individuals within that group.

Meanings gleaned from the stories, like folklore and human relationships themselves, are always transforming. Each version of a tale relates new and different nuances of meaning to the audience on account of their intertextuality and reflexivity. There are layers of these meanings existing in each tale and with each telling (Narayan 1997 : 216). The existence of these layers illustrates the variety of meanings that the audience can assemble from each tale. When examining a piece of folklore such as a myth or epic, one should be aware of the fact that the "storyteller reshapes the story to the particular situation at hand and in interaction with particular listeners. Listeners shape the story by their responses and queries" (Narayan

1997: 221). Both gather their individual understandings from the one particular telling and its specific context, and often these understandings overlap, but this is not a requirement. Indeed, the meanings found within each telling of a piece of folklore make it a vital, creative, and malleable element of culture. This inherently dynamic cultural force that is folklore endows the storyteller with a certain amount of power and control, and it is to these qualities that I now turn in order to give a basis for the hijras' own strategies.

The agency afforded the position of storyteller in oral folklore traditions provides him/her with the power to imbue their stories with specific meanings available then for their audiences to do with what they will (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 426). The power associated with the position of storyteller therefore, provides people who are otherwise unable to assert power elsewhere, with a voice and a platform on which to bring their concerns to light. Folklore allows for alternative views on life and multiple existences in a culture's social sphere. The strength and power found in the vehicle of folklore allows for opportunities to create, maintain and legitimize social identities and roles that would in other contexts and situations be deemed unacceptable by the mainstream society. The intertextuality of Indian folklore elements aids in this task of asserting the legitimacy of particular social identities as well. It serves to connect both the teller and the audience through the presence of familiar themes, characters, and situations, despite the new meanings that occur with each new variant. Ramanujan elaborates on this idea, saying that:

> parts of different tales are combined to make a new tale which expresses a new aesthetic and moral form characteristic of the culture. When the same tale is told again in a different time or place, it may come to say fresh and appropriate things, often without any change in the story line (Ramanujan 1991: xx.).

The dynamic and evolving nature of folklore as a cultural entity makes it a useful tool for those existing on the periphery of their society who feel the need to reinforce the legitimacy and viability of their social niche. The hijras whom Nanda establishes a working relationship with in her ethnography use stories that are familiar to those in the mainstream of society, yet they manage to put their own unique spin on them as Ramanujan describes above. They imbue each carefully chosen story with particular meanings which highlight their divinely sanctioned right to exist as members of society commanding respect.

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate, through specific examples, how hijra communities call upon the folklore, particularly the mythology and epics of Hindu India, as a way to create, maintain, and legitimize their personal and group identities. By first addressing the specific examples of folklore that are designated by the hijras as fundamental to their identity formation, I provide the material needed to move forward into my interpretations of how each tale functions as a means by which the identities, social roles and structures of hijra communities are formed and legitimized. At the same time, I will also focus on the connections between the examples of folklore, and the hijras' ritual roles, as well as those connections between the stories and the critical initiation ritual of emasculation. In this ritual practice, the simultaneous destruction of the old identity, as well as the creation of the authentic hijra personhood as neither male nor female is accomplished; indeed it is the birth of a new social existence.

CHAPTER ONE
BAHUCHARA MATA: GODDESS EXTRAORDINAIRE
An Exploration of Hijra Myth and Ritual

> *Bahuchara was a pretty, young maiden in a party of travelers passing through the forest in Gujarat. The party was attacked by thieves, and, fearing that they would outrage her modesty, Bahuchara drew her dagger and cut off her breast, offering it to the outlaws in place of her virtue* (Nanda 1990:25).[4]

In the northern part of the Indian state of Gujarat, there is a temple complex in the town of Bahucharaji that is dedicated to the deified woman, Bahuchara. Bahuchara acquires her position in the Hindu pantheon by securing her chastity through suicide. Following a pattern of goddesses elsewhere in India, "virginity is crucial for a woman's status as a powerful goddess," and her self-castration then makes her "capable of cursing and blessing" (Narayana Rao in Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 158-159). In her new form she is worshipped as Bahuchara Mata, and the temple complex is the main site of Hindu worship of this version of the Mother Goddess. Bahuchara Mata is one of the most important goddesses in the region and is worshipped by a large part of the Gujarati Hindu population (Nanda 1990: 25). The temple in Bahucharaji receives close to a million devotees each year, particularly during the festival of Navratri, and on all full moon days throughout the year—Bahuchara's special day of worship. Her devotees come from many different communities and castes including, alongside the hijras, Brahmins, Harijans, Rajputs, and Sonis, among others[5].

Bahuchara is a virgin goddess and her vehicle, the rooster, symbolizes her sexual innocence (Jai Mata Ji website). When pictured, Bahuchara sits upon her rooster and carries

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[4] I use italics to distinguish the folklore texts from other quotes throughout my work.

[5] The Shri Bahucharaji Mataji Temple Trust website (see bibliography) provides detailed information on the devotees, the temple festivals, and the temple architecture, as well as information about future projects on the grounds.

with her a sword in her upper right hand, a text of scriptures in her top left, in her bottom left hand she holds a trident, and with her bottom right hand she gives the *abhay hasta mudra* showering blessings on those who worship her. In many contemporary images she is often wearing a red sari with a green blouse (Jai Mata Ji website). Green is the color hijras associate with their patron deity, since for them, as well as for other Hindus, it is the color of fertility and creative power. One hijra informant elaborates on this association later in this chapter as it pertains to the Goddess's presence during the hijra rite of passage and I continue my discussion of it among that narrative. For now, I assert that the color green, and its prominence in the hijra collective repertoire as the color of their Goddess, reflects the power and potency that Bahuchara bestows on the hijras during their ritual performances.

The temple complex at Bahucharaji consists of three mandirs. The main center of worship takes place in the smallest of the three temples, and the structure itself follows an architectural pattern of intersecting triangles which signify the yantra, a sacred diagram representing female creative power. In fact, the physical site of the complex is located on one of the three most important Shakti Piths, or holy places of the Supreme Cosmic Power, in Gujarat (Shri Bahucharaji Mataji Temple Trust website). This quality adds to its religious appeal in general, and makes it a popular pilgrimage destination not just for the hijras, but for many other devotees as well.

Since Bahuchara Mata is the hijras' primary divine patron, she is closely associated by the larger social communities in the area with the hijras and their powers. This association, however, is an ambivalent one. Even though the larger community sanctions their powerful relationship with Bahuchara, they harbor feelings of fear since the hijras also represent the inauspicious potential of the impotent male, in their inability to procreate.

These feelings often manifest themselves in the forms of mockery, ridicule, abuse and pity for the hijras (Nanda 1990: 6, 8-9 & 23). It is in their connection to the Goddess that the hijras find a haven in society. The establishment of this significant relationship between the goddess and the third-gendered is illuminated in the folklore, particularly the mythology around Bahuchara Mata, that Nanda's informants call upon when faced with questions about, and ridicule of their identities. In fact, Nanda points out that, like other castes, the hijras use such myths to:

> explain the caste's origin by linking the caste to Hindu deities, providing religious sanction for its claimed place in Indian society...[and they] validate a positive identity for hijras by identifying their alternative gender role with deities and mythical figures...of Hinduism (Nanda 1990:13).

The mythology surrounding the Goddess aids in the projection of the hijras as sacred beings created through ritual transformation. At this point I want to briefly distinguish mythology from other types of folklore, such as folktale, epic and legend[6], which I will address in the following chapters as they pertain to the specific pieces of folklore that hijras tell. Myths typically deal with events that take place at the beginning of time. These events are generally sacred, setting a precedent for human behavior through the actions of the supernatural characters that appear in the texts. The main characteristics of myth are best summarized by Mircea Eliade when he describes it saying:

> in general it can be said that myth, as experienced by...societies: (1) constitutes the History of the Acts of the Supernaturals; (2) that this History is considered to be absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of the Supernaturals); (3) myth is always related to a "creation," it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established; this is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts; (4) that by knowing the myth one knows the 'origin' of things

[6] The descriptions that follow are based on W.A. Bascom article found in ***Sacred Narrative: Readings on the Theory of Myth***, Alan Dundes, ed., 1984.

> and hence can control and manipulate them at will; this is not an 'external,' 'abstract' knowledge but a knowledge that one "experiences ritually, either by ceremonially recounting the myth or by performing the ritual for which it is the justification; (5) that in one way or another one 'lives' the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or re-enacted (Eliade in Beane and Doty 1975: 6).

As a true story, myth provides the hijras with the story of their creation, and the subsequent endowment of their important and potent ritual role in Hindu society by their patron Goddess, Bahuchara Mata. The hijras use this genre of folklore to "manipulate" the ways in which their audiences view them as social entities. This will become evident as I introduce their own voices and stories in this chapter. Through their ritual performances and rite of passage the hijras illustrate this relationship between myth and ritual as it thrives in a specific Indian context.

Epics and legends are set in historic time, are more recent, and are also told as true stories. These narratives however, are typically used by their folk for the purposes of reclaiming a history, rather than a mythological origin. In Chapter Three, I highlight how epic is employed by the hijras to do just that. What is important here though, along with an understanding of myth as its own entity, is the recognition that often times myth, legend, and epic overlap in their characteristics. Like most folklore genres in India, they share themes, motifs, and symbols that interconnect them; Ramanujan's intertextuality and reflexivity is at work in India specifically in the contexts of hijra storytelling as I demonstrate here in this chapter.

Folktales, while taking from the same pool of symbols, are often regarded as not true. They typically occur out of time, and included in this category are such things as jokes and proverbs, which are generally not situated in a specific historical timeframe. The lines I draw

between these folklore genres in this brief discussion are tenuous, and rather than concentrate solely on them, I want instead to stress that each type of story, and its qualities listed above, can and do overlap with the others. Folklore, like its folk, is constantly changing and adapting, which means that the genres are as well. For now, the guidelines above will give some idea of why I chose to call one story a myth while referring to those in the next chapter as epic. All of these types of folklore are important to the hijras, otherwise they would not chose to use them to help create and assert the authenticity of their social identities. Like all humans, hijras engage in the interpretation and construction of their culture so that they can instill meaning into their lives even as they exist on the fringes of the mainstream (Nanda 1990: xxv). These different folklore genres help them to do just that.

In this chapter I also explore and interpret the hijra rite of passage, the emasculation ceremony, as it relates to the hijra expression of identity through folklore. The specific ties that this rite has to hijra social identity are evident in the narratives I share here, and are valuable to my goal in this work. These narratives are vital to this endeavor simply because they are the best illustrator of how:

> individuals, each in a slightly different way, draw together threads from the larger culture to create a viable subculture which, while stigmatized, nevertheless provides their lives with significant meaning [and they demonstrate how these individuals] incorporate cultural meaning in constructing and presenting their 'selves' in and to society (Nanda xvi-xvii & xxiii).

The pervasiveness of myth, and folklore in general, remains one of its most important qualities, and this is evident in the ways in which the hijra communities employ myth to sustain their social and ritual roles. In fact, one of myth's most important functions, in the case of the hijras in particular, is in its "connection with religious ritual...and this function, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with greater value and prestige by tracing it

back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality" (Malinowski in Strenski 1992: 114). The hijras' own words are the most significant source of insight into both the hijras' personal, spiritual, and social existences, as well as their ritual role, and it is through this commentary that the hijra community's indispensable relationship with folklore is revealed.

Bahuchara Mata: Indispensable Benefactor

The story of Bahuchara Mata that begins this chapter is not only a part of hijra folklore, but in its life as oral literature, it also exists as part of the repertoire of the larger Hindu community. It expresses themes that are familiar and that exist as part of the common cultural world. For instance, the threat to a young woman's chastity, the preservation of virginity at all costs on the part of the woman herself, and her physical sacrifice for the sake of this preservation are all themes that are part of the greater Hindu folklore repertoire. These themes strike a cord with the audiences who hear the hijras tell this story, and they help to establish a relationship that promotes understanding and empathy rather than fear of deviant behavior. Sharing themes and motifs such as these levels the social playing field making the hijras' struggle for recognition and respect that much easier. This story then, is understood and shared by many, and its connection to the wider social landscape makes this narrative, and others about Bahuchara, appealing and useful to the hijras. Despite the fact that Serena Nanda keeps the identity of the teller of this tale anonymous, one is still able to glean these motifs which resonate in the lives of the hijra community, as well as that of the larger society. Here, one sees Ramanujan's idea of intertextuality clearly at work.

To take this a step further, the fact that Bahuchara's act of self-castration, and her ensuing death, leads to her deification, and that her practice of self-mutilation, and sexual

abstinence (Nanda 1990: 25) are tolerated by those in the larger Hindu community that actively listen to her stories as they are told by the hijras, illustrates how the power of allusion and the common stock of themes in Indian folklore leads not only to the propagation of this tale, but also to the religious and social sanctioning of the hijras' roles in society. This includes both their ritual roles as devotees to Bahuchara, as well as their social identities as castrated men "reborn" as hijras. Since her story "is well known throughout this area" (Nanda 1990: 25) in India, it is not surprising that a telling exists that is not part of the hijras' repertoires. I include it here to show the similarities, and therefore, the connections between hijras and their larger social world, those very connections that hijras try to stress in their quest for recognition and respect.

Bahuchara Cuts Her Breasts

> *Bahuchara and her two sisters were on their way to a fair when a marauder called Bapiya attacked their caravan. To escape rape and abduction, the sisters killed themselves. Bahuchara cut her breasts. As she bled to death, she cursed Bapiya that he would become impotent. When Bapiya begged for mercy, Bahuchara said he would be forgiven only if he wore women's clothes and worshipped her as a goddess* (Jayakar 1989 in Pattanaik 2002: 13).

The themes of impotency and castration are evident in this version and the one that begins the chapter, yet even more explicitly in this telling. The difference here is that Bahuchara is not the only character who resembles the hijras in their impotence. Her assailant, after threatening her chastity, thereby forcing Bahuchara to castrate herself in defense of his attack, is ordered to become impotent like her, and to worship her as a powerful, virginal goddess. Bapiya is an outlaw, much as the hijras are liminal members of their own society. While the hijras do not threaten their patron goddess as Bapiya does in this tale, this slight similarity of existing on the periphery is worth mentioning. Since this

particular version comes not from the hijra repertoire, but from that of their larger community, it reflects more honestly the ambivalence felt by the larger society for the hijras as they exist on the fringes of the norm.

Devdutt Pattanaik asserts that, in this version, which is found in his work on "queer" folklore in India, "impotency is, in effect, an act of castration," (Pattanaik 2002: 101), and so the connection between these two themes and the Goddess is firmly established in the second telling, as well as in that from the hijra community. Here, however, the power of the goddess is more explicit, which could reflect the larger community's understanding of, and respect for, the potency of Bahuchara as a contemporary deity.

In this myth, the impotent male is called to don women's clothes and worship Bahuchara Mata. The hijras define themselves outwardly by doing just that. Nanda explains that "wearing women's clothing is an essential characteristic of the hijra...[and] is absolutely required for their performances, when asking for alms, and when they visit the temple of their goddess...long hair is [also] a must" (Nanda 1990: 17). By fashioning oneself as a woman in these contexts a hijra claims the social and ritual role associated with their community, while at the same time asserting her[7] validity as a "real" hijra. This is an important issue for the hijras. Equally significant is the fact that the associations between hijras and Bahuchara Mata are not just being made by the hijras themselves, but also by other Hindus, which is reflected by the very presence of this myth in the larger cultural repertoire.

[7] I chose the feminine pronoun here, and in the remainder of my work, in order to remain consistent with the way Nanda's informants refer to themselves and others in their hijra communities.

Bahuchara's Devotees: The Connections Between Myth and Ritual

The ritual context of the hijras' lives offers a wealth of information regarding their relationship with the rest of Hindu society. Not only this, but it also offers a space in which the world of myth becomes the reality; a space where the power of Bahuchara Mata transfers to the ritual performers, and through them, onto the larger community in the form of blessings, or curses. This is the context in which the folklore specific to the hijras and Bahuchara is invoked in the minds of all present, most importantly, those belonging to the mainstream of Hindu society. It is also in their ritual role that the hijras form the "core of their self-definition and the basis of their positive collective image" (Nanda 1990: 12). The rituals, the actions that sustain the myth, also, by virtue of Ramanujan's intertextuality, sustain the identity of the hijra performers and their communities. The texts of the myths above, and those that follow, are recalled during the rituals on account of their common themes, and because the rituals by their very nature allude to them. Often, given the limited social interaction between those in the larger society and the hijras, the ritual contexts are the only spaces where the two groups join together, and it is here that the hijras convey their power reinforcing what all know from the myths that exist in the larger folklore repertoire. These "performances are the most respectable and prestigious" for hijras and they are "the major source of [their] claim to respect from the larger society" (Nanda 1990: 6). They are also spaces for great celebration which advances a positive relationship between the hijras and their patrons.

Hijras are called upon to bestow blessings at two auspicious life cycle events in India: at births and following weddings. Their performances at these two events include singing, dancing, and storytelling. No other time is the power of creation more in the minds of

Hindus than during these celebrations. For instance, at the time of a child's birth, typically only when a male child is born, the hijra community is called upon by the child's family to confer blessings that will secure for the child the power to create new life and continue the family line as he grows into adulthood and enters married life. Through the ritual performances and blessings their shakti is transferred to the child in the hopes that one day he will be able to realize its potency.

In the case of the married couple, the intention is the same, only this time both the bride and groom are blessed with the creative power of Bahuchara Mata through the hijra performers. In return for these blessings of "fertility, prosperity, and long life" (Nanda 1990: 2) the hijras expect not only respect, but also financial compensation. Often throughout the performance they are given money and gifts of saris, food, and the like. Only if the hijras feel slighted by the families do they confer curses in lieu of the anticipated blessings. In fact, "hijras are infamous for insulting and cursing families who do not meet their demands of money and gifts" (Nanda 1990: 6). Therefore, they exert the power inherent in their ritual position in order to secure their economic livelihood, as well as their social viability.

The larger Hindu society views the hijras who perform under the auspices of Bahuchara Mata, as powerful vehicles who can make a difference in the lives of the newborns and newlyweds. These critical life events, while times of great joy and celebration, are also times of transition for the infant and couple, which can evoke feelings of uncertainty in the parents of the newborn, and in the bride and groom as they begin their lives together. In calling on the hijras, as culturally sanctioned performers, to come and bless the occasion with their auspicious presence, the larger community, while cultivating a sense of

their own security, is also publicly recognizing the efficacy and importance of the hijras to the maintenance of stability in the society in general. Nanda elaborates:

> as ritual performers, they are viewed as vehicles of the divine power of the Mother Goddess, which transforms their impotence in the power of generativity. It is this power...of the hijras' performances, that legitimates, even demands, their presence on such occasions. The faith in the powers of the hijras rests on the Hindu belief in shakti—the potency of the dynamic female forces of creation that the hijras, as vehicles of the Mother Goddess, represent (Nanda 1990: 5).

In their celebratory role as vehicles of Bahuchara, the hijras, through their songs, dances, and stories, work together with their patrons to create a positive context in which they can both interact and reestablish vital social relationships. The folklore, particularly the myths that set the precedent for the rituals, becomes the common ground on which the hijras as marginal members of society can subvert the negative images that surround them by asserting the positive roles present in the stories themselves. Common themes and allusions to other familiar motifs within the folklore act as the triggers for communion and communication between the hijras and their audiences.

Emasculation: The Sign of A "True" Hijra

> *A king prayed to Bahuchara for a son. She granted him his wish, but his son, named Jetho, was impotent. One night Bahuchara appeared in a dream and commanded Jetho to cut off his genitals, dress in female clothing, and become her servant. Jetho obeyed the goddess and from that time on, it is said, impotent men get a call from the goddess in their dreams to be emasculated* (Nanda 1990:25)

I find it useful to share this anonymous voice from Nanda's work to further illuminate the intimate relationship that exists between Bahuchara and the hijras, and as a means of introducing the ways in which one might come to lead the life of a hijra. Here again is the theme of impotence. In this story it is present in combination with the call to service of the

Goddess. The hijras share this story because it demonstrates their unique and direct connection to Bahuchara. This connection in turn supplies them with a way in which to gain more respect from those in their audience. Bahuchara's call might seem a bit drastic, but as Nanda reminds her readers, "it is only after the emasculation operation that hijras become vehicles of the Mother Goddess's power" (Nanda 1990: 24-25). Therefore, to become a *real* and efficacious member of the hijra community, one must sacrifice just as Bahuchara did in her human life, and as Jetho does here in this story.

Besides, as the storyteller elaborates on the tale above, if a person disregards the call of the Goddess, he will suffer the unfortunate consequence of being reborn impotent for not one but seven future births (Nanda 1990: 25)! The extent of Bahuchara's power is reflected in this commentary, and it mirrors the seriousness with which the hijra community views the ceremony of emasculation as a means of the divine transfer of power. The transmission of shakti from the Goddess to the hijra devotee through ritual castration is illustrated in yet another myth told by the hijras. It is perhaps the most important piece of folklore in defining the goddess and her relationship with the hijras, as well as in defining the hijras themselves. Pattanaik includes a version from his own hijra informant in his work on queer tales from Hindu mythology. His source lives in Ahmedabad and is also a devotee of Bahuchara Mata. I will include her words following a version told to Nanda by one of her informants. It is my hope that this juxtaposition will further illuminate just how hijras use this myth in their encounters with the larger mainstream society:

> *Once there was a prince whose parents wanted to get him married. The boy did not want to get married, but his parents insisted. They selected this goddess as his wife, and the marriage took place. He was a very handsome boy, but the Mata was also a very beautiful lady. But after the marriage the husband and wife never joined together. On the first night, leaving the*

goddess alone in the nuptial room, the prince rode away into the forest. The goddess waited till dawn and felt very angry that her husband had left her. This went on for some months. The goddess felt very hurt and decided to investigate. So one night she followed him on a path to the forest clearing where the prince had been acting like the hijras. She was puzzled by what she had seen and returned home. When her husband returned, she said to him, "I want to ask you something, do not get angry at me. Don't you feel that you must have your wife by you?" Then the prince fell at her feet and told her, "Mother, if I had the urge for a wife and children I wouldn't have left you and gone away. I am neither man nor woman, and that is the truth." The goddess got very angry and said, "They have spoiled my life by hiding the facts, and therefore your life will also be spoiled. Hereafter, people like you should be nirvan [undergo emasculation in order to be reborn]." So saying, she cut off his genitals. After cutting off his genitals she said, "People like you, who are going to have this nirvan, should call me at that time." After this the prince took the form of a woman (Nanda 1990: 25-26).

Keeping Nanda's version in mind, I now share Pattanaik's hijra informant's telling of the same story for comparison:

Bahuchara Emasculates Her Husband

Bahuchara's husband never came to her at night. Instead he would mount his white stallion and ride out into the forest. Determined to unravel this mystery, on night Bahuchara decided to follow him. But she had no horse. A giant jungle fowl, witness to her plight, offered himself as her mount. Bahuchara mounted the fowl, scoured through the forest, and finally found her husband in a clearing behaving like a woman. "If you were like this, why did you marry me and ruin my life?" asked Bahuchara. Her husband explained that he was forced into marriage so that he could father children and continue the family name. Feeling cheated, yet sorry for her husband, Bahuchara declared, "Men like you should castrate themselves, dress as women, and worship me as a goddess" (Pattanaik 2002: 99-100).

In both of these versions the themes of unfulfilled marriage obligations and their connection, brought on by the actions of the frustrated Goddess, to emasculation are evident. Here also lies the mention of ritual castration as a requirement for the proper worship of the Goddess. It is a reflection of sorts of society and the importance put on the procreative space that marriage creates. The obligation to continue one's lineage that is inherent in marriage

cannot be fulfilled by the husbands in each telling. Therefore, these men are made useful to the Goddess in a different capacity, as her devotees. Bahuchara Mata is portrayed in these folktales as a powerful and virtuous woman who is transformed by her frustrations, feelings of betrayal, and resulting outrage at her situation, into a goddess that must be appeased, a manifestation of Mahadevi, the supreme mother-goddess (Pattanaik 2002: 102). This is not surprising since, as Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty says, "in Hindu mythology, to reject a woman, particularly a goddess, is especially fraught with danger" (O'Flaherty 1980: 278-279). This danger, and fear it inspires, is often the catalyst for worship. On account of this relationship, one can see the compulsory nature of the connection between Bahuchara Mata and the hijras that exists in the stories above. In fact, as Nanda's informant remarks after sharing her story above, this special relationship "is why whenever there is an (emasculation) operation to be performed, we call the Mata. During the operation she is with us and afterwards we live in her power" (Nanda 1990: 25-26). These myths establish hijra origins and supply the requirements for the correct worship of the Goddess herself—emasculation, and performance in women's dress—from which the hijras gain their own creative power, and therefore, their sanctioned ritual role.

In her folktales, Bahuchara Mata is linked with the emasculated male in fundamental ways, as is seen above. She is the catalyst for emasculation, as well as the means through which the new person adopts a new and functioning social position as her devotee. The hijras, as a distinct social community in India, turn to this goddess and her mythology as a way in which to justify both their existence as ritual performers enhanced with her power, and their ability to bestow blessings on those who validate their social function by employing them at births and marriages. The connection with Bahuchara Mata as her ritual performers

helps the hijras carve out and maintain a social niche for themselves in their larger community.

However, the hijras believe that the powers they receive from Bahuchara Mata can only be obtained through the ritual castration ceremony that acts as the initiation and rebirth of the male-born person into the life of a hijra (Nanda 1990: 24). To fully understand the interconnected nature of the relationship between the goddess and the hijra community, this ritual must be given special attention. The emasculation that takes place in the folklore mentioned above has become a defining characteristic of the *true* hijra identity not only in their own communities, but in the minds of the larger community as well. In fact, in order to properly perform their ritual function in society they must not only dress in women's clothing, but they must also be "'real' hijras, that is, they must be emasculated or intersexed" (Nanda 1990: 5). These impositions come from the inside of the community as well as from outside from their patrons since both groups are familiar with the folklore and the motifs included in them. In becoming a nirvan, or emasculated person, the hijra and her community maintain a grasp on their monopoly of their ritual role that garners a fragile level of respect from the society at large. By "denouncing the 'frauds' and 'fakes' who imitate them...they reinforce in the public mind their own sole right to their traditional occupations and also increase their credibility" (Nanda 1990: 52). The division between "real" and "fake" is an immediate concern for the hijras as they struggle to survive economically in the face of changes in the rituals of Hindu society.

The ritual role accorded the hijras, while recognized and respected by many, is not regarded as legitimate by others because of their own personal distance from the Hindu traditions that value this ritual role. Modernization in general in India is responsible for the

loss of many traditional practices, and for the hijras it poses a serious threat to their socially sanctioned religious role, and therefore, to their livelihood. This social factor leaves some hijras in danger of not being able to survive economically, which is a real concern for many in their communities. Prostitution often becomes a means by which the households either supplement their meager ritual earnings, or rely on solely for their financial security. Unfortunately, this occupation only "accelerates the loss of respect accorded them in society" and because "it is considered a low calling, offensive to the Mother Goddess" it presents "the hijra community with a conflict," (Nanda 1990: 52 & 54). Bahuchara herself is celibate and any sexual activity is counter to her proper worship, and goes against the societal view of the hijra as a sannyasi, an ascetic whose power lies in the stored sexual energy only a celibate person could have (Nanda 1990: 53). Nanda's informants are well aware of this conflict and one of her main contacts, Meera, addresses the issue of prostitution directly saying that "those hijras who do that have endless difficulties because it's not nice and it's not the wish of the Mata" (Nanda 1990: 75-76). Bahuchara Mata is the source of hijra ritual power and cultural sanction as ritual performers. If one loses the respect accorded that position, then one loses part of one's identity, and this fact is also part of the internal struggle of the hijras as they find ways to survive in their changing social world. For those who are able to make a living out of the traditional roles, the folklore and myth surrounding their ritual power becomes a tool with which the hijras can reassert the importance of their function as ritual performers to the larger society in the hopes of maintaining their legitimacy.

Hijra Nirvan

The operation as a rite of passage has a long history in the lives of the hijras. In the past, the temple of Bahuchara in Gujarat served as the site for the ritual castration, but in 1888, the rite was outlawed (Nanda 1990: 26). Now a ritual specialist known as a *dai ma*[8] performs the operation in secret. One of Nanda's informants, Meera, "had a dream in which the Mata gave her the call to perform the operation. She like other dai mas, had no medical training, she believes that she operates with the power of the Mata so that the result is not in her hands" (Nanda 1990: 27). Meera comments on becoming a ritual practitioner saying:

> See, the Mata's power came to me in a dream. The Mata was wearing green bangles, green blouse, and a green sari. The Mata asked me, "Give back my nose ring. Where is my nose ring?" This dream came on a Tuesday and a Friday [the special days of the hijras' Goddess], for three consecutive days. That is the call we get from the Mata which gives the sanction to perform this operation. This dream also signifies that someone is coming to get the operation done. It is essential that we received the permission from the Mata to operate; otherwise, the operation will not turn out well (Nanda 1990: 80).

Kamladevi, another of Nanda's main contacts in the hijra community of Bastipore, had her operation done by Meera. Kamladevi strongly believes that "it is the Mata that comes upon the dai ma who gives her the courage and the moral support. All the persons Meera operated on were operated on properly...The Mata's power comes on them. It will come in their dreams. The Mata will appear wearing everything green—green bangles, green blouse, green sari. The Mata will ask that person, 'Give me back my nose ring, where is my nose ring?' If that happens it means you have the sanction to operate" (Nanda 1990: 67) under the watchful guidance of Bahuchara. Through her words, and Meera's observations, one can see how the mythology surrounding the power of the Goddess, and her hijra

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[8] Literally, the midwife, but here the term refers to the hijra who is sanctioned by the community to perform the castration (Nanda 1990: 26-27).

connections, penetrates the lives of the hijras themselves. Working through the able hands of the dai ma, Bahuchara has the ability to create a new being, and the hijra nirvans are well-aware of the capability and skill that the Goddess can bestow on the chosen hijra dai ma, as Kamladevi explains above. Even the knowledge of the colors Bahuchara wears in the dai mas' dreams shows how ingrained the Mata's powers are with shakti in the minds of the hijras. Green is a color intimately associated with growth and fertility in India (Narayan 1989: 207), particularly in the regions where Kamladevi and Meera reside. This element of folklore shared by Kamladevi adds to a better understanding of the power with which the hijras are endowed.

Bahuchara Mata's presence is first invoked for a blessing before the ritual castration can take place[9], and the Goddess's constant attendance throughout the ceremonial operation provides the person undergoing the operation with a sense of security as they move from their old identity to their new life as a hijra. In fact, the hijras believe that the Goddess guides them through this process of nirvan[10] in which "the former, impotent male person dies, and a new person, endowed with sacred power (shakti) is reborn" (Nanda 1990: 26). The hijras describe nirvan as:

> a condition of calm and absence of desire; it is liberation from the finite human consciousness. The Hindu scriptures call the beginning of this experience the second birth, [and] the hijras too translate nirvan as rebirth. [In this rebirth, the individual becomes] a 'real' hijra [with] the curse of impotence removed [to become most importantly] a vehicle of the Mata's power (Nanda 1990: 26).

One moves from being an "empty vessel...into a powerful figure who inspires both awe and fear...emasculation is not only a religious obligation, but it also distinguishes true

[9] For a detailed description of the emasculation ceremony see summary in Nanda (Nanda 1990: 27-29).
[10] Here this refers to the second birth of the hijra through emasculation (Nanda 1990: 26).

hijras from 'fake' hijras," (Nanda 1990: 36-37) as mentioned earlier. This gives the hijra community a way to protect its economic monopoly over its sanctioned ritual occasions as I discussed before. This "is an extremely important consideration in a society where such economic niches are crucial for survival" (Nanda 1990: 36-37). Their rite of passage and its connection to myth helps the hijras to express the legitimacy and necessity of their social existence.

One can see this protection in action through the voice of Kamladevi. She tells Nanda:

> when you go for a dance, some people may ask, 'Are you a hijra or a man?' So that way, if you have had the operation you can show them. Only those who have had the operation are real hijras...If you want to be a *pukka* (pure) hijra, you must have the operation (Nanda 1990: 67).

Perhaps, some of the importance of this rite of passage and its association with the *real* and the *pure* forms of hijrahood lies in the fact that through this self-sacrifice, the nirvan is touched by the Goddess through the dai ma, and truly *given* the shakti she possesses in order to bestow blessings, or curses, in the ritual contexts described above. Given the relationship that is established between Bahuchara Mata and the hijras through their narratives and commentary I include here, this is worth mentioning in light of the discussion of the power of folklore in a social community.

Along with the figure of Bahuchara Mata, one might expect the figure of the castrated male, and the notion of the power gained through emasculation to be present in hijra folklore. I include once again the voice of Kamladevi as she comments on the pervasive effectiveness of hijra power through the telling of this tale:

> *There once was a king who asked a hijra to show him her power. The hijra clapped her hands three times and immediately the door of the king's palace*

> *opened automatically, without anyone touching it. Then the king said, "Show me your power in some other way." By the side of the road there was a thorny cactus. The hijra just took the thorn of the cactus and emasculated himself. He showed the king that he had the power. The hijra just stood there with the blood oozing out and raised his hand with the penis in it. Then the king realized the power of the hijras* (Nanda 1990: 24).

This folktale demonstrates the importance of emasculation to the identity of the hijra as a powerful entity. In fact, the ritual of castration is to most hijra communities, but not all, the "source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a hijra" (Nanda 1990: 24). It also links the hijras to two of the most powerful figures in the Hindu religion, Bahuchara Mata, as I demonstrate in this chapter, and Shiva, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter. In this chapter I show that the acceptance of hijras is based on the acknowledgement of their efficacy as a religious community which is made apparent to all through their specific use of particular stories that aid them in their efforts toward social validation, and the maintenance of their tenuous social/religious role. Their ties to the Mother Goddess, Bahuchara Mata, allow for them to gain power through ritual, and therefore, cultural traditions and beliefs are built up around them by their larger society. The hijras use folklore to help invoke a sense of sacredness, value, and legitimacy around their social identity, and this becomes more evident in the next chapter as I shift the focus of my exploration from the tales surrounding Bahuchara Mata to those involving other, more prominent, personalities in Hindu folklore.

Hijras have found multiple ways in which to use folklore and mythology to change their impotent maleness into a powerful existence following emasculation. In this next story, a version of the narrative above, one of Nanda's informants, a hijra elder, uses the themes of generative energy and power associated with emasculation in a modern context, thereby

demonstrating how, as hijra nirvans, they transform their impotent maleness and its resulting lack of social status (Nanda 1990: 32) into creative energy they can access on account of their new identity as ascetics. The informant provides this tale in her discussion with Nanda of hijra power:

> Do you know why we hijras travel free on the trains from Poona northward? There is no rule to ask us for the train fare. Not even the Central Government can ask us. What happened was that:
>
> *There was a hijra who had just got operated on, she had become nirvan. The people, after the operation, put her on a train. It was just the seventh day after the operation. The people traveling in the train were making fun of her and bullying her. The ticket collector and the others made her get down from the train. On top of this, the ticket collector kicked her.*
>
> *"Mata," she prayed, "if you're true, and it is true that you've given me back my life, and if my procession is to be done after 30 days, if you want to save my life, this train must not start from here. Then only will I realize you are the truth."*
>
> *Then the signal was given and the train had to start, but it could not start. There was a big crowd around the hijra and the people asked her what happened. She said, "I'm an old hijra and I've just got the operation done under the name of the Mata. If you want the train to start, put me back on the train." Then they made her sit in the train, but still the train would not start. Then she realized that she had prayed wrong, so she put a cloth on her head and prayed to Mata: "I want this train to start. Then only I can reach my place and also the other passengers can go without difficulty." Then the train immediately started.*
>
> From this time on there was no rule to ask a ticket from the hijras on any train. We can even dance in the train, beg in the train, nobody will say anything. From Poona onward, the whole of North India we can travel (Nanda 1990: 31-32).

According to this story, the power bestowed on the hijras by Bahuchara Mata, and that which is garnered from their connection with Shiva as fellow creative ascetics, the hijras can use this creative energy beyond the realms of the ritual spaces of their performances. As liminal beings inhabiting liminal spaces in society, the hijras find their power useful in situations where other members of society doubt their capabilities as ascetics. The hijra in this story inhabits the special liminal space that follows the emasculation ceremony and constitutes the recovery period, and is in direct connection with the Mata and her power.

This story illuminates that intimate relationship between Goddess and hijra devotee, and serves as a reminder to those outside the hijra community that the hijras have the ear of the Goddess, and that she will protect them.

This new, resulting identity that comes from the hijra rite of passage takes the form of the creative ascetic, a form which draws the hijras closer to the god Shiva, and gives them further legitimacy within the social fabric of India. Along with their connections to Shiva, in the next two chapters I will also explore how the hijras use other characters from the folklore of Hindu India to assert their position as powerful individuals and communities. This will further highlight how hijras go about identity formation as a third gender existing on the periphery of society.

CHAPTER TWO
SHIVA AND VISHNU: THE GODS IN HIJRAS' LIVES

Indian myths constitute a cultural idiom that aids in the construction and integration of [each person's] inner world...popular and well-known myths are isomorphic constellations of the culture and are constantly renewed and validated by the nature of subjective experience (Obeysekere 1981 in Kakar 1989: 135).

Myth has the vital characteristic of being a living cultural entity that actively provides examples to its communities of acceptable social and ritual behavior, and models for the social constructions of religion, ritual, and morality. It is vested with the authority needed to make it a valuable tool for the people who count it among their folklore repertoire as hijras do. Like its folk, all folklore is alive and constantly changing as it is expressed by people through their unique tellings. In this chapter, I will explore how mythological male figures are called upon by the hijras to reinforce the legitimacy of their social position as ritual performers and ascetic beings. There are two specific gods that I focus on to do this: Shiva and Vishnu. By presenting them individually within the contexts of their own stories, these divine male figures will enlighten my argument that they, like Bahuchara Mata, are valuable folkloric figures in the lives of the hijras. Often these contexts add more to the cause of the hijras than do the characters alone, and they too deserve attention. I begin with the figure from whom the hijras garner their example for true creative asceticism, Shiva.

Shiva: The God Every Hijra Ascetic Strives to Emulate

In Hindu mythology, impotence is often transformed into the creative power of generativity through the practice of asceticism, and these ascetics appear in procreative roles within the folklore (Nanda 1990: 29). Since Shiva is the greatest of these ascetics in Hindu folklore (O'Flaherty 1973: 1), various hijra communities find it useful to call upon him as a

legitimizing force for their social role and existence. O'Flaherty asserts that "Siva embodies *all* of life, in *all* of its detail, at every minute," (O'Flaherty 1973: 315) including the hijras. It is the:

> renunciation of sex and the repression of sexual desire that are, in the Hindu belief system, associated with the powers of the ascetic and...the hijras' emasculation is their culturally defined 'proof' that they do not experience sexual desire or sexual release as men. This proof of renunciation is the basis of the hijras' claim on society...it is the most powerful idea that legitimates their ritual functions in Indian society (Nanda 1990: 29).

The hijra rite of emasculation not only results in the formation of new individuals endowed with generative power, but it also intimately connects them to the divine mythological world in which creative ascetics find their origin in the god Shiva. One of the main ways in which the hijras identify themselves with Shiva the ascetic is through their telling of the following version of a Hindu creation myth. This version, from one of Nanda's informants who remains anonymous, tells of Shiva's own self-castration at the beginning of time, and it is in this sacrifice of the phallus that the hijras really find their bond with the god (Nanda 1990: 32):

> *Brahma and Vishnu had asked Shiva to create the world. Shiva agreed and plunged into the water for a thousand years. Brahma and Vishnu began to worry and Vishnu told Brahma that he, Brahma, must create and gave him the female power to do so. So Brahma created all of the gods and other beings. When Shiva emerged from the water, and was about to begin the creation, he saw that the universe was already full. So Shiva broke off his linga saying that "there is no use for this linga" and threw it into the earth* (Nanda 1990: 30).

Discussing this particular myth in her work, ***Siva: The Erotic Ascetic,*** Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty gives a clear and concise explanation of how Shiva is creative in his self-castration. She says:

> this paradox is justified both by the ascetic character of Siva's creation and by the implications of fertility in the act of castration...the act of castration is both the cause and the result of asceticism. Yet even here it is a creative asceticism, and as such it is part of the mythology of the fertility god whose personal sexuality must be sacrificed for the sake of the fertility of the universe...the *linga* falls into the earth when it has been cut off, an indication of the fertility inherent in the act...the falling of the *linga* is often equated with the falling of the seed" onto the earth (O'Flaherty 1973: 131 & 135-36).

Before moving on to a discussion of this tale, I want to present another, mainstream version found in Pattanaik's work. The two tellings are quite similar, expressing the same themes of ascetic creation through the sacrifice of the penis. This is Pattanaik's version, which is based on those found in the *Mahabharata*, *Shiva Purana, Varaha Purana,* and *Linga Purana* (c. 600-1000 C.E.):

Shiva Castrates Himself

> *Brahma asked Shiva to create the world. To do so, Shiva hid in the waters and began to meditate. Eons passed. When he did not emerge, Vishnu asked Brahma to create to world and populate the world with various creatures. Eventually Shiva rose from the waters. When he saw the world was already created he was furious. He opened his mouth and spat out fire. Brahma begged him to stop. Shiva controlled his rage and wondered, "What is the use of my seed since creation has already been achieved?" He tore out his manhood and hurled it into the air. It transformed into a pillar of fire, rising above the skies, and descending below the foundations of earth. Brahma took the form of a swan but failed to find its top. Vishnu took the form of a boar, burrowed deep into the earth, but failed to find its base. Acknowledging Shiva's supremacy, Brahma and Vishnu worshipped his magnificent symbol—the fiery pillar* (Pattanaik 2002: 103-104)

In this telling, as well as the one provided by Nanda's informant, we find Shiva's phallus reverberating with unused divine creative energy (Pattanaik: 2002: 104). This energy is powerful enough to overwhelm Brahma and Vishnu, which does not go unnoticed by the audience when these stories are shared. According to both tellings, from the beginning of time unused creative energy has resulted in a different type of potency that comes with great powers as Shiva's actions demonstrate. The hijras share this story because it exhibits without

a doubt the dynamic creative power associated with castration. The hijras highlight their connection to Shiva in order to co-opt some of this extraordinary power in their own ascetic lives. This power, along with that which they gain from Bahuchara Mata, allows the hijras to maintain their ritual roles within the Hindu community, and therefore, a valuable social existence in society. No one can deny the power vested in Shiva as the creative ascetic. Therefore, by way of mythological association, the power the hijras possess as nirvans remains mostly unquestioned, and is why:

> this identification with the powers of generativity is clearly associated with the ritual importance of hijras on occasions when reproduction is manifest—at the birth of a child—or imminent—at marriages (Nanda 1990: 30).

However, if the hijras are to maintain this level of respect they have to "cease all sexual activities...once they join the hijra community," otherwise they may lose their "tenuous hold on legitimacy in Indian society" (Nanda 1990: 11). Hence, their general concern over the issue of prostitution in pockets of their larger community. Their association with Shiva is an influential and significant one; one that accords them both respect and legitimacy, and it would make life difficult for the hijras as a social and religious community if they were to lose their authority to bestow the blessings of procreative power. It is to this connection that Shiva, and the hijras, have with fertility that I now turn.

Shiva is worshiped as the source of universal fertility (O'Flaherty 1973: 85 & 108). The myths I include above show how the act of self-castration yet again results in creative power and fertility (much as it does in the mythology surrounding Bahuchara Mata). This lies in the fact that now, because of the castration, Shiva's efforts of procreativity can extend beyond himself as an individual, to the entire universe just as the hijras, in their ritual performances, extend their powers of fertility beyond themselves and onto those they bless

(Nanda 1990: 30). Through Shiva's own self-castration in these myths, one "can understand the legitimacy of hijra emasculation" in the formation of hijra social and religious identity (Nanda 1990: 31). The hijras use these myths as tools to calm any anxieties their larger social community may have over the issues of male impotence and castration. The hijras recognize that there are concerns in the minds of the general public, and by calling upon the familiar Hindu God Shiva, they address these fears with stories that are familiar to their audiences. In this familiarity, lies a level of comfort that allows the hijras to advance a positive relationship with their larger community, rather than one based on fear of their social and biological deviance.

Another example of the hijra as this Shiva-like creative ascetic in Indian folklore comes from their association with the power to bring the rains in Hindu folklore. This tale is one that the hijras tell about the powers of creativity resulting from their own asceticism. While it is not technically a myth, this story helps to substantiate the usefulness of the other stories in the hijras' quest to carve out and maintain a valuable identity. It begins:

> *One time there was a king in Hyderabad. There was a great drought during his reign. There were two hijras sitting in the road...The people of the country went and told the king. "Do something about the drought, the whole country is famished and the people are dying." The king said, "What can I do? I can't do anything, you people must approach those two hijras who are sitting there by the roadside." The people spoke to the king with contempt and said, "Why should we ask them instead of you?" The kind said, " If anything at all can be done, only they can do it, not me." So then the king himself went to the hijras and told them, "There is a drought, people are dying, and the city wants rain. If you make rain, you can live here; if the rain doesn't come you must go outside the city to live." The two hijras who were sitting together were mother and daughter [elder and junior]. The daughter said, "Look, mother, so many people have come, let us tell some lies and run away." But the mother said, "Wait, please, I'll do something. God will look after me." So she took the cloth from the upper part of her body and dipped it in a cup of water and gave it to the people to take with them. Then, she said, the rain will come. Immediately the lightning and thunder came and rain started pouring*

> *down; everyone was neck deep in water, it was such a heavy downpour. Then the mother said "enough" and the rain stopped. The people came back to see the hijras but they were gone, and the place they had been sitting in was submerged in water. So the king ordered that wherever hijras were seen in that city they should be respected and that is why that city is full of hijras* (Nanda 1990: 31-32).

This example of folklore shows another way in which the hijras use their power to bestow creative, life-producing energy in the form of blessings on those around them. O'Flaherty tells us that "in Hindu mythology, the production and cessation of rain is a form of creation that results from tapas and chastity," (O'Flaherty 1973 in Nanda 1990: 31) which illustrates the connections between the themes in hijra folklore and those in the larger body of myth. In their connections to the Goddess and Shiva the hijras are considered chaste beings who through certain spiritual practices, or tapas, gain the ability to transform the world. The connections between rain and creation that O'Flaherty asserts is a common theme in Hindu mythology is also recognized by the hijras as pertinent to their lives as ascetics. By co-opting these themes and employing them in their own stories, again the hijras are putting forth an effort to maintain the necessary level of familiarity in the text which both appeals to the larger community, and provides them with a sense of comfort. In this particular tale, the hijras place themselves on the periphery of the kingdom by situating the hijra characters on the road. This reflects the reality of their social situation on the borders of Indian society, and avoids any disruption in the flow of the story that may occur if they placed the mother and daughter hijras elsewhere physically. In doing so they continue to maintain that same level of familiarity so that their audiences will continue to listen to the rest of the story uninterrupted by incongruities. This way the audience comes away with the

greater message which is an acknowledgement of the hijras' creative power as reaching beyond even that of a king's.

Also reflected in this particular story is the relationship that exists between hijra gurus and their chelas, or disciples. By including this relationship, the hijras are reinforcing the idea that their households function like much like any other family in Hindu society, with their close ties mimicking that of a "normal" mother and daughter relationship. In using these terms, the hijra storytellers allude to institutions that are recognizable to their audiences, thereby making themselves into more familiar, and less threatening, members of society.

The hijras' ties to Shiva and his creative ascetic powers described in the myths I present in this chapter drive their efforts for social legitimacy. Hijras, through their ritual castration ceremony, experience, much like other ascetics in Hindu society who model their lives in the vein of Shiva's, taking "*sannyas* [which] involves a symbolic death" whereby they "renounce all personal ties...defined by kinship and caste," (Narayan 1989: 68 & 74) and move from their former lives as impotent males, into their new ones as vessels of creative power. This similarity with other renouncers, alongside their bond with Shiva as the epitome of the ascetic, helps to further legitimize their social niche in the minds of other Hindus.

Shiva, in the form of Ardhanarisvara, a well-know image of the God, represents a culmination of what it means to be a hijra. Ardhanarisvara is Shiva as half-man, half-woman, split vertically down the middle of his/her body and possessing the creative powers of both sexes. The hijras, as neither strictly men nor strictly women, also possess a unique combination of these two creative powers. In fact, the "hijras say that worshippers of Shiva give them special respect because of this close identification" (Nanda 1990: 20) to

Ardhanarisvara. This powerful ambiguity is important to hijras as they seek out an appropriate and purposeful social identity in the world through folklore. While there are no hijra stories linked with this manifestation of Shiva, Ardhanarisvara is present in Hindu cosmology, and is a familiar character to the larger community.

Shiva exists in Hindu mythology not only as the creative ascetic, but also as the outsider "residing...in the highest Himalayan Mountains," (Lopez 1995: 26). Here he lives an ascetic life on the periphery of the world, much as the hijras exist on the fringes of the social world. It is quite fitting then, that as a community they should employ the folklore that surrounds him to maintain their own roles as creative ascetic outsiders.

Vishnu

In my discussion of male deities and their relationship to the hijras as they form and express their personhoods through folklore, the figure of Vishnu, through his avatar as Krishna, cannot be overlooked. He is a deity who is prolific within Hindu mythology, and in his manifestation as the god Krishna, he exhibits characteristics that are similar to those of Shiva in his form Ardhanarisvara, and who demonstrates a type of gender ambiguity in much of the folklore that surrounds him. Often, hijras will refer to this playful deity in the stories that involve his feminine manifestations, such as that of the lovely Mohini. When the demons steal the sacred nectar, Vishnu, as Krishna, transforms himself into the most beautiful woman in the world, Mohini, to get it back (Nanda 1990: 20). In another bout with a demon, Vishnu, in the form of Krishna, again changes into a woman in a well-known myth told by hijras where he:

> *...destroys a demon called Araka. Araka's strength came from his chasteness. He had never set eyes on a woman, so Krishna took on the form of a beautiful woman and married him. After three days of the marriage, there was a battle and Krishna killed the demon. He then revealed himself to the other gods in his true form...saying that there will be more like me, neither man nor woman, and whatever words come from the mouths of these people, whether good [blessings] or bad [curses] will come true* (Nanda 1990: 20-21).

In this short myth, one sees how the hijras have made it their own and use it to give legitimacy to their place in Indian society. This myth offers a prime example of the ways in which folklore can be adapted by certain communities, such as the hijras'. This telling illuminates the ability of folklore to confer authority and familiarity through its fixity of form while its inherent variability allows for changes in content (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 11) such as those made by the hijras in the story above. Many times hijras find themselves in positions that require them to assert their legitimacy as viable social beings, and myth is a valuable tool for accomplishing such a task, as their inclusion of Krishna's divine sanction of their ritual role above can attest to. In their particular use of the story of Araka to assert their claim on this role, the hijras are also subtly pushing for social change which will eventually afford them a place in society that commands more respect. Bruce Lincoln offers an interesting theoretical look into how this is done by groups like the hijras. He claims that:

> among the ways in which those agitating for sociopolitical change can make use of myth, the following are some of the most common: (1)They can construct the authority or credibility of a given myth, reducing it to the status of history or legend and thereby deprive it of the capacity to continually reconstruct accustomed social forms. (2)They can attempt to invest a history, legend, or even a fable with authority and credibility, thus elevating it to the status of myth and thereby make it an instrument with which to construct novel social forms. (3)They can advance novel lines of interpretation for an established myth or modify details in its narration and thereby change the nature of the sentiments (and the society) it evokes...Obviously these strategies can be combined, for instance, when a group seeks to deprive one narrative of authority while claiming authoritative status for another or when a new line of interpretation is advanced for a familiar story and is then used to justify a change in its status. Further, should any of these gambits succeed, the consequences

> are major and can amount to nothing less than the deconstruction of established social forms and the emergence of new formations (Lincoln 1989: 25-26).

While Lincoln specifically points to myth in his explanation, the hijras apply these ideas to folklore in general, which is their tool of choice for eliciting changes in their own social world. Keeping in line with Lincoln's assertions, the hijras find that they can reinterpret stories from a common Hindu repertoire in such a way that allows them to both subvert the social institutions that keep them on the periphery, while at the same time safely asserting a new view of their social identity. It is the hope then of the hijras that their subversion and changes will eventually lead to the changes that hijras feel are necessary to place them in a position that garners greater respect and representation. The familiarity of myths to the people in the cultures where they thrive, works in many interesting ways to both comfort those who know them in a time of social change, and to allow for others of the community working to make the change find a means by which to do so with as little upheaval and chaos as possible.

Indeed, we learn that:

> a myth is a story in which many people have come to find their meanings...this might be expanded to suggest that such a story is, in some sense, true...it is regarded as true not literally, but in its meanings...there *is* no myth devoid of interpretation...as the culture retells the myth over time, it constantly reinterprets it...a myth becomes newly perceived as true either by inspiring people to change the way things are or by enabling people to project their new view of reality over the world, even when the world remains the same (O'Flaherty 1988: 31-32).

We see this reinterpretation happening in some of the stories that hijras choose to tell. As a community, the hijras use folklore as a space in which to "project their new view of reality" and therefore to change their audiences' perceptions of them from deviant pariahs to valuable members of society. By adding Vishnu's voice, through his avatar Krishna, to

their telling of the story of Araka, and by sharing their unique versions of the other tales I include in my work, the hijras are adding legitimacy to their lives.

With the sanctioning power of the god Vishnu in his reincarnation as Krishna, the hijras in this tale are given their ritual role and the powers associated with it. In all of the stories mentioned in this chapter, there is a close and vital bond created by the hijras to both of the gods through their unique tellings. While their voices are not as prevalent in this chapter, it is somewhat understandable since these tales are so clear and concise in their intended meaning, and function in Hindu society. In calling upon such popular folk and religious figures, the hijras place themselves in a realm of dialogue that exists between the texts that surround each character, and that are linked "in a chain of oral storytelling" connecting narratives throughout the country and the culture (Narayan 1989: 35-36). Through these myths the hijras link themselves to the sacred figures in an effort to further assert their efficacy and authenticity as a religiously sanctioned community in Hindu society.

CHAPTER THREE
EPIC ORIGINS: CONGRATULATIONS! IT'S A HIJRA?

Documented historical evidence...is not necessary for a community to claim a particular narrative as "its own," that is, to believe that it tells the history of its caste or region. Whether Indian oral epics chronicle the rise or fall of a kingdom or they document less dramatic changes, all are vital to a community's vision of its past (Blackburn and Flueckiger in Blackburn, Claus, Flueckiger, and Wadley 1989: 5-6).

The epic as folklore offers a wealth of cultural information and tools for the folk to whom it belongs. This folk includes even those who are relegated to the periphery, like the hijras. I demonstrate in the previous two chapters how mythology becomes a valuable means through which the hijras can express their social identity. The Indian epics work in much the same way since they too allude to the same pool of symbols that resonates in the lives of the larger Hindu community in which the hijras find themselves. What makes the epics different and uniquely important to the hijras is the fact that, through them, the hijras are able to substantiate and solidify an undeniable history for themselves, and as Blackburn and Flueckiger indicate, documented proof is not necessary. Instead, the hijras' mere presence within the oral texts in one capacity or other, serves to highlight their social origins and give them a place in the epic history of the larger social community to which they belong. Epics in India hold a special place in the culture; the characters are so widely known that they are part of peoples' everyday lives. In this chapter I present tales from the epics specifically selected by the hijras as valuable assets to their struggle for a respectable place in society. I begin with an exploration into the character of Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, and continue with a presentation of the hijras' versions of stories from the *Ramayana*, before concluding with a brief discussion of the epic tradition in India and its general relationship to the hijra communities. I use this chapter as a space in which to further explore the hijras'

folklore repertoire and their use of specific stories to carve out and maintain a valuable social existence in India.

Arjuna: Every Hijra's Hero

For many hijra communities one of the most important links to the folklore of India is that which they have to Arjuna. This connection exists because the hijras, in associating themselves with Arjuna, both rationalize and manage their lives and the continuity of their role effectively by citing his exploits in the *Mahabharata*, particularly those in the fourth book, The Book of Virata[11]. As part of the Pandavas' thirteenth, and final, year the brothers are expected to disguise themselves, or be relegated to yet another period of exile. Arjuna chooses to take on the challenging role of court dancer, requiring him to dress and act as a woman (van Buitenen 1978: 29), much as the hijras do, particularly in their performance contexts. Given this experience, the hijras assert that their hero knows and understands what it is like to exist as one of them. Gopi, one of Nanda's informants, shares with her a tale that many hijras tell when discussing their origins. Gopi is a middle-aged hijra from the south of India who lives in one of the households in Bastipore and Nanda writes that "she had recently spent several years telling fortunes outside a Hindu temple in another city and [is] well versed in Hindu religious lore" (Nanda 1990: 13). Gopi begins her story saying:

> *Yudhistira, one of the Pandava brothers, is seduced by his enemies into a game of dice in which the stake is that the defeated party should go with his brothers into exile for twelve years and remain incognito for the thirteenth year. The Pandavas lose and go into exile as required. When the thirteenth year comes around, Yudhistira asks Arjuna what disguise he will take up for the thirteenth year in order to remain undiscovered. Arjuna answers that he will hide himself in the guise of a eunuch and serve the ladies of the court. He describes how he will spend the year, wearing white*

[11] See J.A.B. van Buitenen's translation of the *Mahabharata* (1978).

> *conch shell bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire, engaging in menial works in the inner apartments of the queens, and teaching the women of the court singing and dancing* (Nanda 1990: 30).

Indeed, in disguise, the hero Arjuna:

> helps prepare the king's daughter for her marriage and her future role as mother-to-be...his feigned impotence paves the way for the birth of the princess's child, just as it is the presence of the emasculated hijras at the home of a male child that paves the way for the child's virility and the continuation of the family line (Hiltebeitel 1980 in Nanda 1990: 30-31).

Here in Alf Hiltebeitel's interpretation lies a direct connection between the hijras' ritual roles and the life of the hero of the *Mahabharata*, a pan-Indian epic story that pervades the culture at large. Arjuna not only learns how to dress and act as a hijra, he also becomes familiar with their religious duties as ritual performers. The hijras gain much force behind their assertion of legitimacy in their social lives by employing this tale.

During this year of exile, Arjuna is the only one of the five brothers that disguises himself through a change in gender identity and role (Pattanaik 2002: 96). On account of this, he is looked upon by the hijras as a representative of themselves within the epic. In his refusal to engage sexual relations with Urvasi in this next episode, also from the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna, as a desexualized epic character takes on the airs of an ascetic similar to the hijras:

Arjuna the Androgyne

> *The celestial courtesan Urvasi fell in love with Arjuna and propositioned him, but he said she was like a mother to him and clapped his hands over his ears. Furious, the spurned nymph gave him a curse to be a dancer among women, devoid of honor, regarded as an impotent man (kliba). But Indra, the father of Arjuna, softened the curse and promised Arjuna that he would spend only a year as a dancer and then would be a man again. Years later when it was time for Arjuna and his brothers to go into exile in disguise, Arjuna put on women's clothing (barely managing to disguise his hairy, brawny arms) and told his brothers: 'I will be a kliba.' He offered his services as a dancing master to the women in the harem of a king. The king was*

> *suspicious at first, remarking that Arjuna certainly did not look like a kliba, but then he ascertained that 'her' lack of manhood was firm [sic] and so let 'her' teach his daughters to dance.* (Mahabharata 3 appendix 1.6.36-162; then 4.2.20 and 4.10 in Doniger 1999: 280-281).

Arjuna's sexual disinterest in women demonstrated in his encounter with Urvasi above equates him with the highly valued position of ascetic in Indian society. Shiva is the epitome of this role, but it is Arjuna in this folk epic who helps to bring this role to a level of appropriateness in the lives of humans, most importantly in the lives of hijras as they call upon him to be a representative of their legitimate, functioning social existence. Indeed, "a remarkable feature of the *Mahabharata*" in general "from an anthropological angle is that it presents in its present form a grand assembly of all ethnic groups and of the peoples of all territories constituting almost the whole Bharat," (Singh in Singh 1993: 4) and it is only appropriate that the hijras would employ its main hero as their own representative.

An elaboration of the story Gopi shares is offered by Pattanaik, and reflects the presence of Arjuna's role as a hijra in a wider mythology. As a eunuch dancer/hijra, Arjuna does become desexualized, and for this reason cannot be a true husband to Uttaraa. Arjuna then, in this role can also be associated with the creative ascetic manifestation of Shiva because of his refusal to marry Uttaraa and secure himself an heir:

Brihanalla: The Eunuch Dancer

> *When the Pandavas lost their kingdom to the Kauravas in a game of dice, they were obliged by the terms of the wager to live in the forest for twelve years and spend the thirteenth year incognito. There was also a clause that should their true identities be discovered during the final year of the exile, they would return to the forest for another twelve years. After enduring the harsh wilderness stoically for twelve years, the five Pandavas hid their weapons, disguised themselves as servants, and sought refuge in the court of King Virata. Arjuna disguised himself as a eunuch transvestite, introduced himself as Brihanalla, the dance teacher, and gained employment in the royal women's quarters, where he taught dance to the Princess Uttaraa. As the year drew to a close the*

Kauravas—whose spies had informed them of the Pandavas' whereabouts—invaded the Virata's kingdom to smoke out their cousins while the king and his soldiers were away chasing cattle thieves. Terrified, the women turned to Virata's younger son Uttar, who boasted he would single-handedly drive the invaders away. As there were no charioteers around, Brihanalla offered to take up the reins of the war chariot. This cause great mirth until the prince realized he had no other option. As the two rode toward enemy lines, Uttar caught sight of the formidable formations of the invading army—the shining spears, the array of trumpeting elephants—and panicked. He leapt out of the chariot and ran toward the city. Brihanalla ran after him, caught him by the scruff of his neck, and
dragged him back. Those who witnessed this scene roared in laughter. Unable to bear his public humiliation, Uttar decided to end his life, but was stopped by Brihanalla who said he could drive the enemy away provided Uttar served as his charioteer. The prince did not like the idea of serving a eunuch until Brihanalla then took the prince to the forest, collected a massive bow from a secret place, strung it, and ordered Uttar to take the chariot straight toward the enemy. There, to Uttar's astonishment, the effeminate eunuch—now transformed into a fierce warrior—shot lethal arrows and in no time drove the invaders away. When the duo returned to the city, Brihanalla resumed his position as charioteer and the palace women—who had not witnessed the scenes in the battlefield—hailed the prince as their savior. Uttar enjoyed the attention for some time, but later confessed the truth. When Brihanalla's true identity was revealed, [and] King Virata was so overcome with gratitude that he offered Arjuna the hand of Princess Uttaraa in marriage. Arjuna politely refused since in his role as dance-teacher he looked upon Uttaraa as his daughter (Pattanaik 2002: 95-96).

In this particular story from the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna moves back and forth between his feminine and masculine roles, using the powerful energy from both as the situation deems necessary. This power, the power of the creative ascetic, is reflective of that which the hijras are endowed with in their ritual roles. While not exactly identical, the role Arjuna plays in the stories told by the hijras from the *Mahabharata*, carries with it connotations which draw him close to the hijras in the minds of their audiences. The hijras are aware of the potential this hero has in aiding their efforts to gain a more respectable place in their society, and they do not hesitate to call on him for just that.

On the Banks of the River: The Hijras of the Ramayana

Like the *Mahabharata,* the *Ramayana* provides the hijra community with a means of asserting their origins through tales that reveal a divine sanctioning of their social and ritual roles. These stories, as a result, depict the hijras as a viable and functioning social group. There is a specific tale associated with the *Ramayana* that is often employed by hijras as a way to assert this legitimacy and I include it here, along with a variation from a non-hijra source for the sake of comparison. In the contexts of India, the epics offer significant insight into the functions folklore can perform when used as a tool for forming, expressing and maintaining identities, both personal and communal, within the larger social sphere. In light of this, I introduce the familiar voice of Gopi, who offers Nanda this story associated with the epic:

> *In the time of the Ramayana, Ram fought with the demon Ravana and went to Sri Lanka to bring his wife, Sita, back to India. Before this, his father commanded Ram to leave Ayodhya (his native city) and go into the forest for fourteen years. As he went, the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Ram came to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said, "Ladies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away." But those people who were not men and not women did not know what to do. So they stayed there because Ram did not ask them to go. They remained there fourteen years and when Ram returned from Lanka he found those people there, all meditating. And so they were blessed by Ram* (Nanda 1990: 13).

This folk telling from the *Ramayana* epic is given by Gopi as an answer to Nanda's question, "What is a hijra?" telling her that this story illustrates the reasons "why we hijras are so respected in that part of India" (Nanda 1990: 13). In the story above, Doniger points out that the hijras "are so feminized...and so liminal that they slip between the prohibited categories" making them unique entities existing within a familiar myth (Doniger 1999: 279). Their presence in the text affords them a certain amount of legitimacy, and Rama's

recognition of them furthers their cause. Indeed, they "validate themselves by filling in, in Rama's injunction to his followers, the unspoken category between men and women (Doniger 1999: 285). This "filling in" also supplies present-day hijras with community ancestors and a community history that dates back to the time of Rama's exile. The hijras' connections with the god in the episode, and their unwavering sense of duty toward him, also demonstrates to their audiences the commonalities that exist between them all as Hindu devotees.

This particular myth is not only used by the hijras, but by others as an illustration of how the non-hijra folk incorporate the Indian epics into their daily lives. Even in the mythology of the *Ramayana* invoked by the wider public for their own uses, one finds the hijra, the non-man, non-woman, functioning as a separate social identity. Pattanaik includes one such telling of the same episode in his work, and I include it as a means of juxtaposing the two versions, the hijras' and the mainstream's:

Rama's Return

King Dasharatha decided to crown his eldest son Rama king and retire into the forest for a life of contemplation. However, on the eve of the coronation, his junior wife Kaikeyi summoned him to her quarters and demanded the two boons he had promised her years ago, on the day she had saved his life on the battlefield. "Let my son Bharata be crowned king instead and let Rama live in the forest as a hermit for fourteen years." Bound by his word, Dasharatha ordered Rama into exile. When the residents of Ayodhya heard of the happenings in the palace, they were heartbroken. They decided to follow Rama into exile, for they loved him so. When Rama reached the river that separated his father's kingdom from the forest, he turned around and said, "Men and women of Ayodhya, if you truly love me, wipe your tears and return to my brother's kingdom. I have to go into the jungle alone. We shall meet again in fourteen years." The men and women of Ayodhya obeyed Rama and returned to the city. But those people who were neither men nor women did not know what to do. They could neither follow Rama nor return to Ayodhya. They remained on the banks

> *of the river until Rama returned. Rama blessed them and decreed they would be kings in the age of darkness, Kali Yuga* (Pattanaik 2002: 121).

I find it interesting that in these two tellings, while the hijras are praised by Rama for their loyalty and obedience through tapasya (the deliberate practice of austerities) and given special recognition and sanction in society, they still remain at the periphery of the mythical society, much as they do in reality. They reside for fourteen years at the riverside, the border of the kingdom and the separation between civilization and the unknown frontier of the forest. Their situation on the margins most likely has to do with the fact that the general public sees hijras as a threat to social order in their existence as a gender outside the norm. This is reflected in the commentary Pattanaik includes following this above version, and I include it here as well in order to give voice to the general public among whom he hijras live and function. He tells the reader "when the story was narrated on a television talk show, many in the audience dismissed the tale on grounds that it does not form part of the 'original' *Ramayana*" (Pattanaik 2002: 120). Even though there is no "original" text of the epic, many in the social and religious mainstream use this excuse when faced with versions that sanction social existences, such as that of the hijras', which threaten their understanding of what is normal in the culture. While this particular version presented on the talk show was not told by a hijra, the point I make by sharing this is that the hijras are present in folklore versions that are told by non-hijras. They are included because their presence within the text does not cause chaos and disorder in the epic society, and they remain as I mentioned above, safely at the periphery on the banks of the river. The hijras want to make changes to their allotted position in society, but I assert that they understand the value of subtlety, which is why they employ folklore as their means for bringing about a new understanding of their community.

As in all folk narratives, particularly in the various tellings of the epics, certain groups like the hijra community:

> do not deviate from the grand subtext...[but] by remaining true to the spirit of the epic, the retellings empowers the hijra community. Rama, divine upholder of social laws, not only acknowledges their existence, but also grants them a boon to make up for his earlier oversight (Pattanaik 2002: 120-121).

These tales, despite the controversy that surrounds the different tellings, offer the hijra community a source of information regarding their social origins. In light of my discussion of social change in the lives of the hijra community, perhaps what Pattanaik's informant is implying by having Rama call the hijras the kings of the Kali Yuga, is that in this present age, through their political struggles for proper representation, the hijras will make great strides and reach social and governmental positions that will afford them the respect they so desire. Regardless, within all of these tales the hijra community finds and employs a wealth of symbols and allusions inherent in folklore to call upon when battling questions of their social and biological status and legitimacy. In order to fully illuminate the value of folklore as a means of social change and maintenance of social identities in their lives, I want to turn back briefly to a discussion of epic. By highlighting a few more characteristics of this genre, I intend to draw the hijras' folklore repertoire into dialogue with Indian folklore in general as a way of bringing my work here to a close.

Epic Traditions in India

In Chapter One, I mention the genre of epic in my brief discussion of myth, epic, legend, and folktale. Epic, like myth and legend is told by its folk as a true event, but unlike myth, it is situated in historical time and becomes for many, as I demonstrate with the hijras, a history of their origins. What makes this genre appealing to groups like the hijras, is its accessibility, and prolific presence in their society. The epic, as a folkloric entity, is so familiar to the wider society because, as Ramanujan explains:

> the main, complex, many-storied plot of this enormous epic is remembered and recalled in great detail by most traditional Hindus. Such recall is possible because it is a *structured* work. In a largely oral tradition, one learns one's major literary works as one learns a language—in bits and pieces that fit together and make a whole in the learner's mind, because they are parts that reflect an underlying structure (Ramanujan in Dharwadkar 1999: 162-163).

Indian epics share themes, motifs and symbols with other forms of folklore that interconnect it intimately, and situate it firmly, within the larger folklore repertoire. It is this repertoire that is familiar, accessible, and useful to the hijras. Epic reflects these important shared characteristics while also reflecting the society to which it belongs. This is what makes it a valuable asset to the social lives of the hijras as I demonstrate in this chapter.

Epic as a separate folklore genre has some distinctive qualities that make it unique. Simply put, epic is characterized by three main features, "epic is narrative, it is poetic, and it is heroic" (Oinas 1972 in Blackburn, Claus, Flueckiger, and Wadley 1989: 2-3). Yet, in the contexts of India, epic is not defined by these three general qualities alone. Its uniqueness lies in its relationship with the community in which it thrives. It is:

> a relationship acknowledged by performers and audiences in many parts of India when they call an epic "our story". Epics stand apart from other "songs" and "stories" in the extent and intensity of a folklore community's identification with them; they help to shape a community's self-identity...the oral epic is the most

> geographically widespread form that still preserves a community's identity (see Roghair 1982; Narayana Rao 1986). It also frequently represents a more diverse social group than do other genres. Given their geographical and social spread, oral epics are able to present regional worldviews; oral epics thus make a statement that other genres do not (Blackburn and Flueckiger in Blackburn, Claus, Flueckiger, and Wadley 1989: 5-6).

In this chapter, I demonstrate this very pervasiveness by sharing not only the stories from the hijras themselves but also the non-hijra versions. Through these examples, one can see just how epic works on many different levels in the community. Not only do the *Mahabharata* and *Ramanyana* help to form and maintain the identity of the larger community, but they also shape the social identity of the hijras as members of a subculture within that very community.

As I have shown in this chapter, even when the story is about a group existing on the fringes of the "normal" social order, that story maintains a life in the mainstream repertoires as well, making it a useful agent of legitimacy for the hijras. In fact:

> the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*...have given due importance to each and every part of the subcontinent encompassing lands, forests, mountains, rivers and peoples of different castes and races...these two epics form the nucleus of Indian culture [and] have had a great influence on the network of regional and subregional cultures irrespective of castes and tribes (Mishra in K.S. Singh 1993: 157).

On account of their popularity, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* become powerful and useful cultural entities for the hijras in their quest to express and maintain their social and ritual identity as a community. The support that the epics provide in their ability to legitimize the way of life of a community such as that of the hijras, illuminates the way the whole of folklore can function to sustain the social existences of people on the periphery. By invoking the epic traditions, they forge a relationship with the characters that resonates positively in the minds of those with whom the hijras come in contact, and with whom they

share their stories. We see that in its ability to aid in the creation and maintenance of identity, epic also helps to carve out legitimate social identities.

AFTERWARD
DHARMA AND SOME CONCLUSIONS

We should remember that we are journeying not through a maze of falsehood but into the essential human story: the story of the relationship between the known and unknown, both around and within us, the story of the search for identity in the context of the universal struggle between order and chaos (Leeming 1990: 8).

Rama, Arjuna, Vishnu, Shiva, and Bahuchara Mata—the stars of hijra folklore—are more than just characters in the tales. They are the exemplars of, and endorsers for, one of the most recognizable fringe communities in India. They are the familiar role models within the folklore texts whose dynamic relationships with the hijras are responsible for the creation and preservation of the community's ritual roles and social lives. The tales where these personalities exist and thrive are also the cultural tools that hijras share when establishing and reestablishing their own relationships with their patrons, the members of the larger Hindu society. In the last three chapters, I shared the examples of folklore that the hijras specifically employ themselves, and I have supplemented these stories with the contexts in which they are performed. These contexts included the larger setting of the hijra communities in Bastipore, their sanctioned ritual space and the audiences present for the rituals, and Nanda and Pattanaik. It was my intention in including their analyses to add to an understanding of the hijras and their folklore, and from their work I shared the most important elements of the contexts when available: the hijras' own voices, as they share their stories and commentaries. The texts of each unique telling, combined with their contexts, present the power inherent in folklore as a cultural tool. From my discussions of the pieces of folklore to my presentation of the valuable discourses surrounding folklore, myth and epic in particular, it is my hope that I have provided an insightful exploration into the life of

folklore as it exists as an important means by which the hijras express, maintain and legitimize their social identity. The example of the hijras offers a stepping-stone to a broader understanding of the cultures existing in India.

In an effort to bring my work to a close, I present one more important concept here that will help to fuse together the material presented throughout this work. It is the Hindu notion of *dharma*. The basic characteristics of this concept will help further orient the reader to a more well-rounded understanding of the hijras as cultural beings. The term dharma is a complex and intricate concept, and by no means do I present an exhaustive explanation here. Instead, I highlight some of its defining characteristics as they pertain to the lives of the hijras whose voices are present throughout this thesis.

In her work, Nanda explains the importance of dharma to the overall understanding of hijras and their social identities with this summary:

> rightful action is seen as unique to each individual, depending on the historical era and group into which he or she is born, the particular life stage he or she is in, and the innate traits in the individual carried over from previous lives. The concept of dharma leads to a tolerance, in India, of an enormous diversity of occupations, behaviors, and personal styles as long as these are seen as the working out of a life path; this is particularly so when the behavior is sanctified by tradition, formalized in ritual, and practiced within a group...Hinduism explicitly recognizes that humans achieve their ultimate goals—salvation, bliss, and pleasure—by following many different paths, because it is recognized that humans differ in their special abilities and competencies...This results in a greater tolerance for individual diversity, especially in matters of sexuality...[and] it is within this framework of the Indian concept of the person that hijras can find meaning in their ambiguous gender identity (Nanda 1990: 141-42).

Based on the tolerance Nanda speaks of above, one can see how the establishment of hijra dharma is aided by the referencing of these Hindu tales, and how it has allowed for the hijras' functioning as a legitimate social group in north Indian society. Since the hijras

inhabit a unique niche in Hindu society, and follow a path that allows them to function as ritual performers, their dharma is somewhat sanctioned by their larger society. Their audiences can situate the hijras in their social world because they can rationalize their existence through their own understanding of dharma. When the hijras reinforce their legitimacy through storytelling they encourage a positive relationship with their audiences that comfortably allows the larger community to accept the hijras a viable members of society. Indeed the hijras, like many other communities in India, tell their stories to both validate and:

> revise their past histories and to express their imaginative view of possible futures. They tell them to celebrate the infinite variety of ways in which people have used storytelling to storm the oppressive barricades of gender and culture (Doniger 1999: 309).

The purpose in telling these tales also lies in the hijras desire to "be...equal" which is "rooted in human nature; this...requires a mythology to defend its position. In this manner a myth legitimizes caste or class...[Stories] also maintain the *need* for a certain group" (Cuthbertson 1975: 174) thus assuring their future in the society. Although Cuthbertson's work deals with myth in general, his comment on its usefulness is relevant and descriptive of the way it, and folklore in general, works in the lives of the hijras. The hijra communities examined for this paper call upon the folklore and mythology of Hindu India as a way to create, maintain, and legitimize their personal and group identities. Working in conjunction with the "characteristically Indian ability to tolerate, even embrace contradictions and variation at the social, cultural, and personality levels,"(Nanda 1990: 23) there exist ritual and social contexts in which the hijras are not only accommodated, but are also granted a measure of power as a result of their mythological relationships to a popular Gujarati

goddess, the epitome of the creative ascetic, a determined god, a cross-dressing hero, and an appreciative lord. All of these characters, and their tales which I present here in this work, help to demonstrate how the folklore of the hijras does indeed act as a catalyst for the creation of identities, while at the same time existing as repositories referred to by their communities for the maintenance of active personhoods, and a larger social cohesion.

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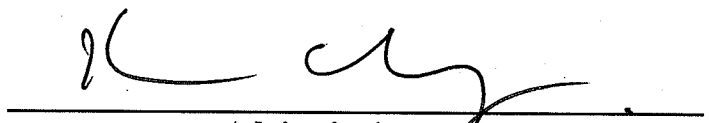

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April 22, 2005

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