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Bahuchara Mata

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Kunal Kanodia

BAHUCHARA MATA:
LIBERATOR, PROTECTOR AND MOTHER OF
HIJRAS IN GUJARAT

INTRODUCTION

The most prominent of myths surrounding the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata is that she belonged to the Charan caste, members of the Brahman class in Gujarat associated with divinity.¹ As the narrative proceeds, one day Bahuchara Mata and her sisters were travelling when a looter named Bapiya attacked their caravan. This was considered a heinous sin.² Bahuchara Mata cursed Bapiya with impotency and according to legend, self-immolated and cut off her own breasts. She vowed that the only way for the curse to be lifted was if Bapiya “worshipped Bahuchara Mata by

¹ For a detailed discussion on the Charans, please refer to: Shah A. M. and Shroff R. G. (1958). "The Vahivanca Barots of Gujarat: A Caste of Genealogists and Mythographers". *J. American Folk Lore*, p. 71.

² "Bahucharaji Temple." Web. 30 Apr. 2016. <http://bahucharajitemple.org/>.

dressing and acting like a woman.”³ There are distinct implications of this myth for how the image of the Goddess is constructed. The aspect of caste is particularly significant. The Charans—to which Bahuchara Mata belongs—are esteemed within the caste hierarchy. Charan women are often thought of as “divine” goddesses; apart from Bahuchara Mata, a range of other localized Charan Mother Goddess figures exist including Hinglaj Mata, Aavad Mata and Karni Mata.⁴

The *hijras*, on the other hand, are a marginalized social group within the Gujarati context. In fact, their position within the caste hierarchy itself is not clear. They have even been termed as a pseudo-caste.⁵ In India, *hijras* comprise what is legally recognized as the “third gender” and specifically refer to male-to-female transgender persons who identify as female, trans female, gender non-conforming, or simply, the third sex (i.e. neither male nor female).⁶ This subaltern community has chosen a distinctively

³ Ibid.

⁴ Shah A. M. and Shroff R. G. (1958). "The Vahivanca Barots of Gujarat: A Caste of Genealogists and Mythographers". *J. American Folk Lore*, p. 250.

⁵ For a detailed discussion on the place of Hijras in the caste system, please refer to: Belkin, Erica. "Creating Groups outside the caste system: the Devadasis and Hijras of India", p. 70-71.

⁶ Choksi, Mansi (19 December 2013). "The Ties that Bind Transgendered Communities". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 7 February 2014.

Brahmanical Goddess as their patron. It is interesting to note that many hijras do not find this to be problematic. In this essay, I argue that the worship of an upper caste, Brahmanical Goddess helps to include *hijras* within the larger Hindu social context from which they are already largely excluded. This means that the image of Bahuchara Mata is both conceived and represented differently between the hijra community and the Brahmanical context.

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE GODDESS

As a Sanskrit Goddess⁷ who is revered by a group on the fringes of society, it comes as no surprise that there are competing depictions of Bahuchara Mata. While there is a consistent depiction of Bahuchara holding a *trishul* (or trident) while seated on a rooster, this is where the similarities in her iconography end. In this section, I will explore the differences in these representations, and their implications for the *hijras*. Figures 1 and 2 represent two distinct versions of Bahuchara iconography, which is not surprising given their distinctive sources.

⁷ In this context, “Sanskritic Goddess” means a Hindu Goddess who is worshipped in Sanskrit hymns, and whose worship is often under the care of Brahman priests.



Figure 1

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The first image is the type of iconography of Hindu deity found in calendar art that is commonplace throughout India. It was produced by ArcheStudio, which is an architecture and design studio. ArcheStudio is designing a Bahuchara Mata temple for a Hijra Utthan Kendra that would cater to the needs of the *hijra* experience.⁹ This ArcheStudio image depicts Bahuchara Mata as a distinctively feminine deity who carries a sword in her upper right hand, a book of scripture on the upper left, an open palm in the form of the *abhaya hasta mudra* in her lower right, and a *trishul* in her lower left.

^{8c} *Archie Studio*, Accessed April 30, 2016.

http://www.archiestudio.in/tips_for_branch_thesis/hijra_unthan_kendra.

⁹ "Hijra Utthan Kendra." Archiestudio. Accessed April 30, 2016.

http://www.archiestudio.in/tips_for_barch_thesis/hijra_utthan_kendra.

There is a balance in this iconography between the violent (the sword), the trinities of creation, which depict preservation and destruction (the *trishul*), learning and knowledge (the Shri scripture), and blessing (the *abhaya hasta mudra*). This representation has deep roots in her mythology. The sword, for instance, is the weapon used by Mata Bahuchara to excise her own breasts. Again, the *trishul* represents the balance between the principles of creation, preservation and destruction. When Bahuchara was attacked, the divine principle of balance was violated. The violation of the balance of the trinities was one of the impetuses for her seemingly brash reaction to Bapiya. This imagery, however, neglects the issue of gender and the transition to transgenderism, which each experienced — Bahuchara who literally and metaphorically excised her femininity and for Bapiya who was forced to take on the identity of a woman as an act of worship. This depiction of gender does not reflect who Bahuchara Mata is to the *hijra* community or how she is distinctly associated with their experience as conforming to neither male nor female stereotypes. The scripture in her hand reinforces Bahuchara's legitimacy as belonging to the Charan caste, and places her strictly within the Brahmanical framework. This portrayal of

her might seem to be an attempt to Sanskritize¹⁰ this Goddess, but we should not presume that the *hijras* would reject this attempt. It is important to recognize that the pseudo-divine status of the Charan community meant that Bahuchara's curse was legitimized by virtue of her being a Charan and not, in fact, because she was a Goddess.

While Sanskritization might mean an erasure to Bahuchara Mata's mythological identity, there is the distinct possibility that it may provide legitimacy for the hijra community as well. A parallel can be seen here in the incorporation of Kali into the mainstream, which occurs through the lens of Sanskritization as a gradual progression from "the peripheries of settled culture, where she was probably a tribal deity who answered pragmatic concerns, to the center of a popular urban and rural cult, where her priests are Brahman and her sphere of operation transcendental."¹¹ While the origins of Bahuchara Mata remain unclear, an argument could certainly be

¹⁰ In this context, attempts to Sanskritize the Goddess follow the definition introduced by M.N. Srinivas. The transformation of Bahuchara Mata from a *hijra* Goddess into a mainstream deity follows how a "low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently *twice-born* caste". For more details, please refer to: Srinivas, M. N. "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization." *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1956): 481. doi:10.2307/2941919.

¹¹ McDermott, Rachel Fell. *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 296.

made that the Sanskritization of Bahuchara mirrors the process that Kali went through. As a mainstream Gujarati Goddess whose priests are Brahmin at the popular temples, she continues to answer the “pragmatic concerns” of the *hijras*. This was directly addressed in email correspondence with Maneka Chaturthi, a member of the *hijra* community who has been a devotee of Bahuchara since her initiation at the age of seventeen. As Chaturthi explained,

Any attempts to incorporate Bahuchara Mata into the larger Hindu framework are to be celebrated. I underwent castration believing in the religious imperative that it had for me, and for my position as a *hijra*. People say *hijras* are so irritating, they beg, they don't work. They don't sympathize with us. If they see Bahuchara Mata as a *hijra* Goddess who is also a Hindu Goddess to be revered, they will sympathize with us more.¹²

Just like the incorporation of Kali into the Sanskritic tradition resulted in greater acceptance for overtly violent aspects of the tradition, Chaturthi hopes that the incorporation of Bahuchara Mata into mainstream discourse will result in greater acceptance for her as well. But does Sanskritization create a more balanced image of the Goddess—one that incorporates both its origins and the Brahmanical tradition—or does it create

¹² See Appendix II for the Hindi transcription of the interview.

two separate images of the Goddess, in which one is clearly more accepted than the other?

In order to answer this question, it is important to consider *hijra* representations of Bahuchara Mata. The fact that these representations are not as readily accessible as calendar art or photographs of temple idols speaks volumes about the probable outcome of Sanskritization. The more “sanitized” version of Bahuchara Mata surfaces in a simple Google Image search for instance, rather than the earthier image in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Bahuchara Mata, a version of the Mother Goddess, is the special object of devotion for the *hijras* (Photograph by Serena Nanda). *Gender Diversity, cross-cultural variations*, 32.

Serena Nanda’s photograph of a *hijra* Bahuchara Mata is a major departure from the representation by ArcheStudio. One of the most striking features is the fact that the rooster is much bigger than the Goddess herself.

Rarely are *vahanas* depicted as larger than the Hindu deity (with the notable exception of Vishnu's *vahana* Garuda). This serves to accentuate the serene innocence that the rooster espouses, versus the more violent sword and *trishul* imagery that is prominent in the first figure. It may be that the first image was an attempt by the artist to place Bahuchara within the framework of Maha Shakti, as we would see in a representation of Durga or Kali (refer to appendix I for an image of Durga). The *hijra* depiction, on the other hand, is not as much concerned with placing her within the Shakta narrative, as it is with claiming legitimacy for its own gender positioning. British colonial accounts claimed that the *hijras* also worship Bahuchara Mata with a *yonis* instead of a rooster as her vehicle. According to a late nineteenth century British colonial account by F.A.H. Elliot, this use of a conventional symbol for the vagina points to a desire among *hijras* to reclaim their femininity.¹³ I disagree with this idea that the *hijras* would like to reclaim a distinctively feminine position (since that would threaten their own inherent identity as non-binary), although the use of the vagina as a symbol could be interpreted as a desire to claim a sort of "monopoly", as it were, over

¹³ *In Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, James M. Campbell, ed., Volume VII, Baroda: 610. Bombay, Government Central Press 1883. F.A.H., Elliott

fertility. This being said, there are no other accounts that I am aware of that depict the *hijras* as worshipping Bahuchara Mata with a *yonī* as her vehicle. However, whether this is a result of Sanskritization of the Goddess's *vahana* into a more "acceptable" animal, or a colonial orientalist imagery that may have misrepresented the vehicle remains unclear.

While Bahuchara Mata holds the sword, *trishul* and scripture as in the first figure, in this image she is depicted as holding a five-edged leaf of the mango tree in place of the *abhaya hasta mudra*. The mango leaf is often used with vermillion in the *sindoor* ceremony during marriages.¹⁴ Incidentally, one of the major social functions of the *hijras* is to dance during and after Hindu marriage ceremonies. Because they are themselves excluded from marriage themselves, *hijras* are believed to have the power to bless newly married couples with a happy and fertile married life.¹⁵ While the *abhaya hasta mudra* of Figure 1 is often seen in depictions of Hindu deities (see Figure 4 in the appendix, which is a representation of Durga), the depiction of a societal role as with the *hijra* Bahuchara Mata is not as common. Perhaps this is because the *hijra* depiction is aimed at

¹⁴ Chatterjee, Gautum. *Sacred Hindu Symbols* 1996, p. 106

¹⁵ *Moorat Aka Eunuch's Wedding*, IMDb, August 2004, retrieved June 2015.

emphasizing the “*hijra*-ness” of Bahuchara Mata, while the Sanskritic depiction is focused on locating her within the larger Shakta framework.

Makhana Chootto, an uncastrated *hijra* who lives within the temple complex of the Sri Bahucharji Temple in Rajkot, Rajasthan echoes this sentiment.

When I was in the [*hijra*] village on the outskirts of the district, I never saw Bahuchara Mata as Durga or Kali. I saw her as my own goddess, a *hijra* goddess. Even though she looks like Durga here, she is still the same Bahuchara—we *hijras* already have her blessings so we do not need the *abhay hasta mudra* that you people require.¹⁶

Chootto makes the claim that the Brahmanical representation of Bahuchara is necessary for “you people,” (or the lay person who is not a *hijra*) because they have not been accorded the blessings of the Devi that the *hijras* already received. It is for this reason that the Sanskritic representation comprises a more general *abhay hasta mudra* that would be applicable to all worshippers, while the *hijra* representation comprises a socially specific, ritualistically important mango leaf that carries particular significance for the *hijras*. *Hijras* play an important social role in commemorating marriages, even though they are themselves impotent and by definition lie outside of that domestic sphere. Why is it that a social

¹⁶ See appendix II for transcription of the full interview in Hindi.

group that intrinsically does not participate in the very same social institution it blesses, has the ability to be an important aspect of it? I would argue that it has to do with Bahuchara Mata's unique positioning as a Goddess who achieved deification *through* self-sacrifice.¹⁷

MYTHS AND INTERVENTIONS IN THE LIVES OF HIJRAS

The worship of Bahuchara Mata plays an important role in the initiation, sustenance and even the livelihood of the *hijras*. There is a clear link between Bahuchara deification through self-sacrifice and the devotion of the *hijras* who self-castrate. After all, the transition from one gendered state to another in each respective case is significant. In Bahuchara Mata's case, she sacrifices her femininity (her breasts) while in the *hijras*' case there is a transition from the male to the third sex (which sometimes involves physical castration of male genitalia). The mirroring of the lives of Bahuchara and those of the *hijras* is key to understanding the active role that Bahuchara plays in the lives of her devotees. For instance, *hijras* believe that they were ordained to worship Bahuchara Mata in changing

¹⁷ This is a peculiar positioning for a Hindu Goddess since Bahuchara Mata was *not* a Goddess until she had undergone the transformation of cutting of her breasts by sacrificing herself.

their sex or else face the consequence of impotency in their next seven lives.¹⁸

What does it mean for *hijras* to worship a Goddess whose power to bless is simultaneously celebrated with her curse? This paradox is based on the myth of Prince Jetho who was impotent. In this narrative, Bahuchara singles out Prince Jetho and commands him to worship her through taking upon himself the identity of a woman by way of castration. There are two major implications of this myth for the relationship that *hijras* share with Bahuchara Mata. First, the origin of the devotion was not out of the voluntary *shraddha* or faith, but because obedience resulted in seven life times of potency. Secondly, Bahuchara's insistence that Jetho chop off his own genitals and dress as a woman is her way of rescuing him from the restrictive masculinity rooted in his impotency. This transition to the male is inherently violent—including, of course, the physical act of castration itself.

It is also important to note that fear was a major motivation for Jetho to chop off his genitals. After all, if he refused, he would be cursed to live as an impotent for seven lifetimes. How does this fear translate into the lives of the *hijra*? Bahuchara offers them complete protection in exchange for

¹⁸ Abbott, Elizabeth. *History of Celibacy: From Athena to Elizabeth I, Leonardo Da Vinci, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi..* S.l.: Diane Pub, 2000, p. 329.

submission, but does so by capitalizing on their fear. Interestingly, it is in the contrasting relationship that the *hijras* share with Bahuchara Mata that they gain legitimacy in social functions (which will be explored shortly). As Serena Nanda holds, “this dual nature of the goddess provides the powerful symbolic and psychological context in which the *hijras* become culturally meaningful as an alternative sex/gender.”¹⁹ This peculiar relationship—where Bahuchara’s protection is contingent on devotion—creates different modalities of worship, particularly as it relates to castration. One of the interviewees mentioned earlier, Maneka Chaturthi, believes that castration is important not only for recognition as a *hijra*, but also for a constant reminder of the special protection that Bahuchara Mata accords to her as a member of the *hijra* community. She explained,

I underwent castration not so that they would recognize me as a woman, or even so that they would think of me as a *hijra*. After all, there are many uncastrated *hijras*. I was castrated to remind myself of Mata’s desire to be worshipped. If she could chop off her own breasts, she can give me the strength to live my life.²⁰

For Chaturthi, the act of castration itself is critical in remembering the myth that surrounds Prince Jetho. It is therefore more of a spiritual, rather than a social choice that is made by *hijras*. Interestingly, a similar

¹⁹ Nanda, Serena. *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations*. 1999, p. 32

²⁰ See appendix II for transcription of the full interview in Hindi.

opinion is voiced by those *hijras* that chose to not undergo castration.

Vaishali Raode, a Pune-based Marathi writer who is also a *hijra*, writes,

“Though the world believes that a castrated *hijra* alone is a real *hijra*, we do not endorse this. I am not castrated. I did not opt for it and my guru did not pressure me into it. Most of my *chelas*²¹ are also uncastrated like me”²²

Again, while this underscores the spiritual importance of castration within the cult of the Goddess, it does not seem to be necessary for someone to undergo it in order to be considered a *hijra* by society. It is, in fact, to remind them of the story of Bahuchara Mata that *hijras* like Chaturthi choose castration, while those like Raode believe that castration has nothing to do with being a “real *hijra*.” Both narratives, although divergent, maintain a strong belief in Bahuchara Mata’s story.²³

As Lawrence Cohen notes, “being a *hijra* seems rooted both in this narrative of having always been *hijra* and in a continual reenactment of the

²¹ One of the most important *hijra* social institutions is the guru-chela relationship. The chela’s role is that of an obedient student. Raode is a guru, and has many *chela hijras* under her care. For more details, please refer to: Mines, Diane P., and Sarah Lamb. *Everyday Life in South Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. Print, p. 124

²² “Lakshmi’s Story” *World Without Borders*
<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/lakshmis-story#ixzz47058W1xU>

²³ I had emailed Vaishali Raode, and got a response in which she categorically stated that “I do believe that Bahuchara Mata is our special goddess. She does not call for castration, but asks for *hijras* to dress up and worship her as women. She does not care about your genitalia, but about your shraddha.”

moment of becoming—the gesture of castration.”²⁴ What are the implications of emasculation, which results in gender ambiguity? The answer to this lies in the ritualistic blessings that Bahuchara Mata places on *hijras* during and after castration.²⁵ It is not surprising therefore that Bahuchara’s blessings are imperative for the ceremony to take place—after all, “[the *hijras*] impotence, emasculation, and commitment to sexual abstinence combine to create a vehicle for Bahuchara Mata’s powers, an anomaly whereby she and her sexually mutilated acolytes confer fertility and other blessings on mortal humans.”²⁶

The fact that *hijra* castration is carried out in the name of the Goddess means that the ritual unites the *hijra* with the Goddess, transforming her into a *bhagat* (a devotee) in a process called nirvana.²⁷ Being a *bhagat* means that *hijras* can now claim potency through the Goddess. In this vein, it is important to remember that *hijras* are thought of

²⁴ Cohen, Lawrence. *The pleasures of castration: The postoperative status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics*. Abramson, P. R. , Pinkerton, S. D. *Chicago Series On Sexuality, History, And Society; Sexual Nature Sexual Culture*, p. 297

²⁵ Abbott, Elizabeth. *History of Celibacy: From Athena to Elizabeth I, Leonardo Da Vinci, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi.*. S.l.: Diane Pub, 2000, p. 329.

²⁶ Abbott, Elizabeth. *History of Celibacy: From Athena to Elizabeth I, Leonardo Da Vinci, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi.*. S.l.: Diane Pub, 2000, p. 331.

²⁷ Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002, p.100.

as being capable of blessing or cursing—a core aspect of Bahuchara mythology, she curses Bapiya, but blesses Jetho. Bahuchara provides the *hijras* with the medium through which they can earn their livelihood—the ability of the *hijras* to bless weddings, births and other occasions of festivity, and the threat of their possible curses ensures their participation in such occasions.

The core of *hijra* identity is not merely located in the act of Bahuchara's transformation, although it is certainly an important aspect. For instance, *hijra* also claim power “through Shiva's ritual sacrifice of the phallus.”²⁸ The physical sacrifice of male genitalia during the process of castration mirrors the castration of the Hindu god Shiva (seeing that Shiva had been denied his role in creating the world). This has a major implication for the symbolism associated with the phallus itself—it being a symbol of universal fertility.²⁹ It is fitting, perhaps, that the *hijras* would identify with a symbol of fertility, as they no longer physically embody the symbol itself. Drawing on the narrative of Bahuchara Mata enables the *hijras* to bless and curse. In this way, they take part in ceremonies associated with fertility—

²⁸ Nanda, Serena. *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations*. 1999, p. 31

²⁹ Doniger, Wendy. *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981.

weddings and birth—while never receiving the personal blessing of fertility themselves.

In conclusion, the manner in which *hijras* interact with their Goddess in personal, social and ritualistic spaces means that it is not just a lack of masculinity that shape their identity. The particular “operation [of castration and/or biological sex transformation] is explicitly identified with the *hijras*’ devotion to Bahuchara Mata, who is particularly associated with male transvestism and transgenderism.”³⁰ These interactions with Bahuchara that exist on a spiritual and personal level for the *hijras* (while providing legitimacy to their social context), also mean a distinct form of worship of the Goddess.

BECHARAJI, THE TEMPLE TOWN OF BAHUCHARA MATA

Bahuchara Mata is an important Goddess in the Gujarat region in general and has numerous temples dedicated to her worship across the state. In this section, I will explore the manner in which Bahuchara Mata is

³⁰ Nanda, Serena. *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations*. 1999, p. 33

worshipped as a version of the “Indian Mother Goddess”³¹ in temple rituals, while retaining many of her unique *hijra* associations. One of the most important temples dedicated to Bahuchara Mata is located in the temple town of Becharaji. Becharaji is also associated with many myths of Bahuchara Mata, including that of a lake where one dip can transform a person’s gender. Prerna Laxmi Chaudhary, a *hijra* devotee who has lived near the temple grounds for around two decades, shared his thoughts about the legend of the lake:

Of course, not everyone who bathes in the lake becomes a *hijra*. You become a *hijra* when you have true faith in serving Bahuchara Mata. Most of the devotees here are infertile women or men who want to have children. They are not mediums of the Goddess like we are. When a *hijra* bathes in the lake, she has already been castrated, or become a *bhagat* through true devotion. The temple is important for us, but more important is the appropriate worship of the Goddess herself through devotion.³²

Chaudhary insists that being a *hijra* provides a special connection with Bahuchara Mata that other devotees cannot hope to achieve. There are two annual fairs at the temple where over 100,000 *hijras* gather. They

³¹ Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub., 1990, p. 24

³² See appendix II for interview

also have separate guesthouses near the temple.³³ There seems to be ambivalence among the general public as to the relationship that the *hijras* share with Bahuchara Mata. In a video interview with locals, one man explained that one of the reasons why boys' hair is shaved off at the age of five is so that the Goddess "does not ask for the penis."³⁴ In this same video, we find the transformation of *hijras* apparent.³⁵ Given the difficult social, economic and even legal hurdles that *hijras* might deal with, it is not surprising that it is undesirable to become one. However, it is *because* of these hurdles that they have come to privilege a special relationship with Bahuchara Mata.

While the locals might not wish to become *hijras* themselves, they have come to admire the unique position that the *hijras* occupy at Becharaji. What does this emphasis on the power of *hijras* to bless (or conversely, to curse) mean for their social status in Becharaji, even as a marginalized social group? According to a local quoted by Hans Plomb, "the *hijras* are the richest people around here. They own huge properties

³³ Yagnik, Bharat. "Driving through the queer legends of Bahucharaji". November 05, 2011 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/Driving-through-the-queer-legends-of-Bahucharaji/articleshow/10612670.cms>

³⁴ "Blessed by A Eunuch in Bahucharaji Temple, Gujarat", see 2:45

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME9KzuJIKrY>

³⁵ *Ibid*, see 1:16

and nobody dares refuse them anything because it is known that a *hijra* can bless or curse.”³⁶ This particular account might be a little exaggerated, given that all five *hijras* who I interviewed did not own any property of their own, but instead lived in guesthouses near the temple. That being said, this account does underscore the importance that the *hijras* are given at Becharaji by the local populace.

It is interesting to note that while *hijras* are heavily involved in the intricacies of the public worship of Bahuchara Mata at Becharaji, the priests within the temples are all upper caste Brahmin men. A cursory glance at the website of the main Becharaji temple³⁷ reveals the dominance of Brahmins in worshipping Bahuchara Mata. In a phone conversation with Parvathi Tripathi, a *hijra* who has been living in the temple complex for the better part of a decade, it became clear that she recognizes the worship of Bahuchara Mata by Brahmin priests as advantageous to the *hijras*’ community.³⁸ She explained, “This is good for us. Why not? Now everyone knows Bahuchara Mata as the transgender goddess of Gujarat. They still come to Becharaji for our blessings as well.” It seems that worship of Bahuchara Mata by Brahmin

³⁶ Plomb, Hans. *Tantric Picnic: Tales of India*, 2008 p. 63

³⁷ "Bahucharaji Temple." Web. 30 Apr. 2016. <http://bahucharajitemple.org/>.

³⁸ See Appendix II for interview.

priests provides legitimacy to *hijras* that they both recognize and appreciate. According to Lalitha Kumari, another member of the community who is Tripathi's *chela*, this legitimacy is not just social or religious, but also legal.³⁹

BAHUCHARA MATA AND LEGAL RIGHTS OF THE HIJARA COMMUNITY

On April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court of India officially recognized the *hijras* as a legal third gender. The Court quoted a variety of sources in its reasoning, including Hindu, Jain, and Muslim traditions, and foreign verdicts on transgender rights. Bahuchara Mata's absence was conspicuous in the verdict; however, there were multiple references to well known male deities such as Ram and Aravan.⁴⁰ Ram and Aravan retain their cisgender identities as heterosexual men who are supported by the *hijras* as it relates to their respective mythologies. On the other hand, Bahuchara Mata is a deity who undergoes a transformation that mirrors that of the *hijras*. Does this subtle difference exhibit a bias in understanding the experience of the *hijra* community by blatantly

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Judgment of the *National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India* in the Supreme Court of India. April 15, 2014 <http://supremecourtindia.nic.in/outtoday/wc40012.pdf>

ignoring their primary goddess (who is also a mainstream Gujarati goddess)? After all, even Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been documented doing *aarti* at the Becharaji Temple.⁴¹ I suspect that the reason for this omission may be the specific Gujarati context of the goddess, rather than her close association with the *hijra* experience. It was surprising to me that many of the members of the community that I interviewed did not find the omission of Bahuchara Mata problematic at all. Shalini Singh, another *chela* of Tripathi, explained this to me:

The Supreme Court judgment opened up a new door for us. Of course, there is much to be done still. But today, I can go and ask for an identification card, a ration card. I can sit for examinations, become a doctor or engineer. I am legally allowed to do so. If they had acknowledged Bahuchara Mata, it would have been good. But I am happy with my legal rights, and I do not care otherwise. Bahuchara Mata would be happy for us, she would not care either.⁴²

Many of the *hijras* I spoke to echoed Singh's sentiments. While the worship of Bahuchara Mata is important for their social and religious context, it is ironic that the *hijras*' relationship with deities like Ram and Aravan were taken to legitimize their legal rights.

CONCLUSION

⁴¹ "Shree Karni Mata – Deshnok", 2009
<https://deviputra.wordpress.com/2009/03/24/bahuchara-mata/>

⁴² See appendix II for interview

The role that Bahuchara Mata plays in the life of the *hijra* is manifold. She is their source of initiation into being a *hijra* and sustains their lifestyle while continuing to live as one. While her worship at Becharaji takes place in what could be described as Brahmanization, the *hijras* themselves do not seem to mind this. In this paper, I found the lack of research on Bahuchara Mata to be challenging, fascinating and troubling at the same time. I found many of my assumptions about Sanskritization, marginalization and the *hijra* experience itself being challenged through the course of this research. What does it mean to be a transgender devotee of a Goddess who is worshipped in the mainstream Gujarati context? Who decides who the “real” Bahuchara is? These questions are especially relevant in the current debate surrounding LGBTQ rights in India. There is a desire to find indigenous stories, myths and legends that can validate LGBTQ experiences in non-Western terms. Bahuchara Mata’s stories, and the importance given to *hijras* in her worship in Becharaji could be important references in the fight for equal rights.

APENDIX I (IMAGES)

Figure 3 A picture of the murti of Bahuchara Mata at Shree Bahucharji Temple in Rajkot
<http://bahucharajitemple.org>



Figure 4 A typical calendar at representation of Durga
http://adishakti.org/meeting_his_messengers/shri_durga.htm

APPENDIX II (INTERVIEWS)

Interview with Maneka Chaturthi

प्रश्न: ब्राह्मणों द्वारा बहुचरा माता को पूजन के बारे में आपका क्या खयाल है?

उत्तर: मेरे विहाब से बड़े विहं दू ढांचे में बहुचरा माता को शांमिल करना एक बहुत खुशी की बात है। जब मैंने बधिया कराया, मुझे मालूम था की वो धामि क रूप से अविवायर् था, और साथ ही साथ, मेरे एक विहजड़े होने के नाते भी। लोग कहते हैं कि विहजड़े उन्हें इतना परेशान कर रहे हैं, वे भीख मांगते हैं, वे काम नहीं करते। आम आदमी हमारे साथ सहानुभूति नहीं विभाता है। अगर लोग बहुचरा माता जैसी विहजरा देवी को एक श्रद्धय विहन्दू देवी मानें, तो वे

हमें बेहतर समझेंगे।

प्रश्न: बिधया को लेकर आपका क्या खयाल है? क्या बहुचरा मात आपकी बिधया चाहती हैं?

उत्तर: मैंने बिधया इस विलये नहीं कराई की आदमी मुझे एक औरत के रूप में पहचाने या

यह की वो मुझे एक विहजड़े के रूप में देखे। आखिरकार, बहुत सारे विहजड़ों ने बिधया नहीं कराई है। मैं बिधया इस विलये कराइ ताकि मैं अपने आप को माता की इच्छा के बारे में याद विदलाती रह सकूँ। यदि वह अपने खुद के स्तन काट सकती हैं, तो वह जीवन जीने के विलए शिक्त भी दे सकती हैं।

Interview with Makhana Chootto

प्रश्न: विहजड़े और ब्राह्मण बहुचरा मात को अलग-अलग रूपों में क्यों शरते हैं?

उत्तर: जब मैं विले के बाहरी इलाके में गांव में थी, मैंने कभी भी दुगार या काली माता के रूप में बहुचरा माता देखा। मैंने उन्हें अपने आप की देवी, एक विहजरा देवी के रूप में देखा। हालांकि वह दुगार की तरह यहाँ लग रही है, वह अभी भी एक ही बहुचरा ही है - हम विहजड़ों पर उनका आशीर्वाद पहले से ही है तो

आप लोगोँ की तरह हमेँ अभय हस्त मुद्रा की आवश्यकता
नहीँ है।

Interview with Purna Laxmi Chaudhary

प्रश्न: झील का क्या महत्व है?

उत्तर: बेशक, हर कोई जो झील में नहाता हिजरा नहीं हो जाता है। जब आप एक

हिजरा हो तुम बहुचरा माता की सेवा में सच्चा विश्वास किया है। श्रद्धालु यहां के अधिकांश बांझ महिलाओं या पुरुषों के लिए जो बच्चे हैं करना चाहते हैं। उन्होंने देवी के माध्यमों की तरह हम कर रहे हैं नहीं कर रहे हैं। एक हिजरा झील में नहाता है, वह पहले से ही बिधिया कर दिया गया है, या सच्ची भिक्त के माध्यम से एक भगत हो जाते हैं। मंदिर हमारे लिए महत्वपूर्ण है, लेकिन अधिक महत्वपूर्ण भिक्त के माध्यम से देवी खुद की उचित पूजा है।

Interview with Parvathi Tripathi

प्रश्न: क्या ब्राह्मणों द्वारा माँ का पूजन गलत है?

उत्तर: यह हमारे लिये अच्छा है। क्यों नहीं? सबको बहुचरा माता एक हिजरा देवी के नाम से पता है। सब हमारे आशीर्वाद के लिये भी आते हैं।

Interview with Shalini Singh

प्रश्न: सुप्रीम कोर्ट के फैसले में बहुचरा माता का कोई जिक्र नहीं था। इस पर आप की क्या राय है?

उत्तर: सुप्रीम कोर्ट के फैसले ने हमारे लिए एक नया द्वार खोल दिया। बेशक, वहाँ अभी भी किया जा करने के लिए काफी है। लेकिन आज, मैं जाने के लिए और एक पहचान कार्ड, राशन कार्ड के लिए पूछ सकते हैं। मैं परीक्षाओं के लिए बैठते हैं, एक डॉक्टर या इंजीनियर बन सकता है। मैं कानूनी तौर पर हमें ऐसा करने की अनुमति दी है। अगर वे बहुचरा माता को स्वीकार किया था, यह अच्छा हो गया होता। लेकिन मैं अपने कानूनी अधिकारों के साथ खुश हूँ, और मैं नहीं तो कोई

परवाह नहीं है। बहुचरा माता हमारे िलए खुशी होगी, वह या तो परवाह नहीं होती।

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