

Anthropology Book Forum

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VAIBHAV SARIA, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India*, Fordham University Press, 2021, 249pp., ISBN 9780192873767

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"Why do men have sex with men?"The answers further link the anxieties of pleasure with the substratum economy of semen as it is inherited and understood through the Hindu-Muslim cosmogony, offering reasons such as "anus is tighter than vagina and gives more pleasure" "protecting a girl's virginity, maintaining chastity" and "no commitment to marriage." Other reasons given are "play" and "curiosity." (pg. 10)

The book *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India* by Vaibhav Saria presents a profound ethnographic exploration of the lived realities of hijras. It delves into the nuanced connotations of the term *hijra*, often associated with transgender identities, and examines their complex social and cultural existence in India. Drawing on twenty-four months of ethnographic research conducted between 2008 and 2019—including sixteen uninterrupted months of cohabitation with a hijra community—the study focuses on two of India's most economically disadvantaged regions, Bhadrak and Kalahandi, in the eastern state of Odisha.

Bhadrak, the primary field site, provided a rich setting for understanding the economic strategies hijras employ for survival. They sustained themselves through various means, including selling goods near the shrine of a revered Muslim saint (*mazar*), soliciting alms aboard trains, participating in customary rituals related to childbirth and marriage, performing at religious festivities, and engaging in sex work.

Saria's investigation was driven by three primary objectives: to analyze the complex dynamics between hijras and their biological families, to examine how rural settings increasingly provided more sustainable opportunities for hijras compared to urban environments, and to explore the nature of sexual interactions and intimate relationships within rural communities, where limited anonymity shaped social and personal dynamics.

Conceptually, Saria frames hijra identity as a form of political theology that both exists within and transcends the liberal political framework. The ethnographic immersion becomes palpable from

page six, where the section *Desiring Men* vividly portrays the affirmation of sexuality. The text introduces specific linguistic expressions used within hijra communities, such as *batli* to denote the rectum, offering deeper insight into their lived realities. Expanding on these themes, the study further examines the politics of penetration in hijra relationships, emphasizing how semen is symbolically invoked as never being wasted. Saria weaves personal experiences into the narrative, detailing both moments of engagement and obstacles encountered in the field:

“It was not only my sexuality but also my long hair and feminine attire that identified me as a hijra, allowing me to remain among them by the highway, where we engaged in long conversations during their sex work” (pg. 16).

The book is structured into five chapters, beginning with an introduction that situates hijra sexuality within the framework of global public health and HIV prevention. The concluding chapter revisits this issue from the perspective of hijras themselves, while the intervening chapters provide an in-depth exploration of their daily lives, challenges, and moments of joy. The first chapter, *A Prodigious Birth of Love*, explores how hijras employ laughter, flirtation, and seduction (pg. 26) to validate their romantic inclinations toward men. Laughter, presented as an invitation, reveals two key dynamics: the moral influence of kinship on both social and bodily realms and the interplay of liberty and restriction within desires for anal intimacy, challenging kinship norms. The chapter then examines flirtation, illustrating it through a poignant episode. A particularly striking passage states:

“A hijra can never build a home with a man. He needs children, heirs, and society (dinduniya). With a hijra, he will have neither heirs nor a traditional household. Yet, on rare occasions, one in a million forsakes these conventions and marries a maichiya.” (pg. 30)

A conversational exchange follows (pg. 47), positioning hijra experiences within broader ethical frameworks of endurance and preservation. Saria identifies four key perspectives: first, ironic speech cultivates *sringara* (romantic love) through laughter while interwoven with melancholia, hope, sorrow, and elation. Second, recurring discussions of “babies” allow the articulation of an otherwise unattainable longing, even in the face of mortality. Third, sexual relationships disrupt yet ultimately reinforce male domestic obligations. Lastly, hijras embody a distinct form of caregiving, acknowledged individually and collectively, particularly through blessings believed to facilitate sexual and reproductive aspirations within societal structures.

Chapter 2, *In False Brothers, Evil Awakens*, examines hijras' fraternal ties, positioning them as pivotal in renegotiating kinship, given their transition from male identities. Saria contends that their presence within families, particularly regarding inheritance and property rights, necessitates a redefinition of kinship, care, and asceticism. While hijras claim ancestral property, their rejection of marriage and biological reproduction disrupts traditional lineage structures. However, some do marry, maintain wives, and raise children—whether biologically theirs or adopted—blurring the boundaries of domestic belonging. Despite societal suspicion, hijras actively engage in household

transactions, contributing emotional and nonreproductive affective labor that sustains familial and social structures. A particularly compelling section, *The Mahabharata of this World* (pg. 72), further explores these complexities.

The interlude (pg. 100) critically examines hijras' placement within the male-female binary, challenging conventional classifications such as the third gender or transgender. Saria proposes alternative frameworks—asceticism and eroticism—that move beyond gender-based contradictions. The discourse revolves around authenticity, where being *asli* (real) or *nakli* (false) is context-dependent, shaping gender and sexual expression. Additionally, the chapter explores hijras' engagement in sex work, highlighting its intersection with ascetic practices. The fluidity between clients, friends, and lovers complicates distinctions, reflecting the economic entanglements that define hijras' social world, a theme further explored in the subsequent chapters.

The next chapter examines the financial practices of hijras, challenging conventional moral-religious exchanges such as *daan*, *dakshina*, *bhiksha*, *dalaali*, and *haq* (pg. 109–110). The intersection of poverty and sexuality has hindered broader social change, as hijras sustain livelihoods through begging and prostitution. Efforts to address these stigmatized roles through legal reforms have largely failed in Odisha, as such interventions strip hijras of agency and impose a bourgeois ideal rooted in colonial legacies. Additionally, the chapter highlights the overlooked presence of hijra politicians, whose participation at local levels contrasts with their exclusion from mainstream LGBT advocacy. Saria argues that reducing hijras to mere beggars ignores their political agency and calls for a reevaluation of the ethical frameworks surrounding their societal role.

Chapter 4 explores the complexities of romantic and sexual relationships between hijras and their male partners, illustrating how sexual encounters transcend fixed notions of time, space, and experience. Saria argues that intimacy cannot be confined to physical acts alone, which contributes to the reluctance to use condoms. Despite efforts to destigmatize HIV, the existential threat it poses does not deter the pursuit of love, as relationships in South Asia intertwine physical and spiritual dimensions. Love and financial exchange, though seemingly oppositional, serve a shared function of valuation (pg. 169). By mapping hijra narratives onto medieval Sufi-Hindavi romances like *Madhumalati* and *Mrigyavati*, Saria highlights a sacred geometry in love that dissolves rigid boundaries of sex, attachment, and temporality. Rejecting identity-based classifications such as "high risk" or "MSM," they instead portray hijra intimacy as a profound, life-defining force. Drawing from literary criticism, queer theory, and anthropology, Saria demonstrates how sexuality, shaped by class disparities, reconfigures poverty's perceived marginalization through the transformative potential of desire.

Chapter 5 concludes the book by revisiting the discourse on HIV through the lens of the preceding chapters, examining the inherent risks hijras navigate within their socio-moral landscapes. Saria

contrasts these lived risks with the risk-averse framework of public health, highlighting the dissonance between HIV prevention narratives and the realities of rural Odisha. The chapter critiques both public health policies and contemporary queer theory's emphasis on temporality and futurity. By framing love affairs not merely as expressions of queer desire but as temporal experiences, Saria argues that sexual encounters function as events rather than discrete acts, resisting linear notions of the future. Instead of being confined to an inevitable trajectory of marginalization, relationships with hijras reframe time itself—transforming it from an oppressive continuum of hardship into a vibrant, immediate present.

This work will undoubtedly be remembered as a landmark in the history of queer ethnographic writing. Saria's meticulous documentation offers an immersive journey into the lives of hijras—one that moved me deeply. I laughed, I cried, and I felt every moment come alive through their words. This ethnography is not only a valuable addition to existing anthropological studies on hijras but also bridges critical gaps in the discourse. Through compelling first-hand narratives, seamlessly interwoven with theory and rich connections to Indian mythology, Saria crafts a vivid and multifaceted portrait of hijras. A truly remarkable and necessary contribution!

Abhijeet Singh Dewari is a young researcher, writer, and anthropologist pursuing postgraduate studies at the University of Delhi. He authored a novel at 13, published in 2019, and has contributed research to high-impact journals like *Ageing Research Reviews*. His ethnographic work among the Jaad Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi has gained recognition. A Cultural Ambassador for Kumaon and a Kathak representative at national and international forums, his research spans kinanthropometry, physiological anthropology, dance aesthetics, spirituality, and Himalayan studies. He has been affiliated with CARTA, USA, and has published book reviews in esteemed journals, including the *Anthropology Book Forum* of the AAA. His work explores the cognitive benefits of Kathak, biocultural aging, and Himalayan ethnography.



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