

**JESSICA HINCHY**

*GOVERNING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN  
COLONIAL INDIA: THE HIJRA, c.1850-1900*  
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In contemporary usage, the word ‘*hijra*’ refers to a group of eunuchs and transgender people in the Indian subcontinent, who are often street performers in ritual events such as weddings and birth ceremonies. These people are also known as the ‘third gender’.<sup>1</sup> For a very long time, the *Hijra* community in India was socially marginalised, and their culture and history remain a mystery to outsiders. Jessica Hinchy’s new book *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900* is the first book-length discussion of the history of the *Hijra* community in North India in the nineteenth century. Hinchy’s highly original work explores the colonial archives, especially the substantial volume of legal documents regarding discussions and decisions on *Hijra* cases produced by British authorities at the time. Utilising debates on gender, intimacy, and space in colonial India, Hinchy argues that the *Hijra* community in India was initially criminalised by the colonial authorities, and latterly systematically eliminated, or subjected to genocide, because the British colonisers simply viewed *Hijra*

as a group of ‘ungovernable’ people. The intersectionality of *Hijra* identity; the anxiety of the colonial officials in dealing with Indian cultures and society, which eventually led to the failure of the elimination project;<sup>2</sup> and multilayered narratives and attitudes towards *Hijra* from both British authorities and Indian subjects are all meticulously documented in Hinchy’s book.

The first part of the book (chapters 1-4) explains the reasons for the ‘*Hijra* panic’ under the colonial administration during the nineteenth century. It details how the community was gradually stigmatised by colonial officials due to the constant fear and frustration that the sexual and gender ‘disorder’ of *Hijra* could form a direct challenge to the colonial rule and order. Despite the cultural complexity of ‘eunuchs’ and ‘prostitutes’ (such as *tawa’if* and *randis*) in Indian society, elite and middle-class Indians also condemned the existence of *Hijra* practices in the same period. These factors finally resulted in a ‘gradual extirpation’ of the *Hijra* community. The second part of the book (chapters 5-6) focuses on the so called ‘*Hijra*

<sup>1</sup> Anuja Agrawal, ‘Gendered bodies: the case of the third gender’ in india’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 31, no. 2 (1997): 273-97.

<sup>2</sup> With the word ‘elimination’, Hinchy refers to a series of colonial governments’ legal moves targeting the *Hijra* community with the aim that *Hijra* would be extinct in Indian society: for example, the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act prohibited ‘performing or wearing women’s clothes’ of *Hijra* in public space, which subsequently criminalised *Hijras* and their community in colonial India (p. 63).

Archives', an attempt by the British authorities to collect and register *Hijra* personal information. In these analyses, Hinchy intertwined detailed accounts of *Hijra*, their lives, rituals, and domestic practices with discussion of how stereotypical colonial understandings of 'kidnapping', 'impotence', 'sodomy', and the sexuality of Indian men, have together signified a complex and multi-faceted image of the *Hijra* in colonial India. The third part (chapters 7-9) discusses how the colonial authorities intended to eliminate the culture of *Hijra* community through the practice of removing the (male-bodied) children from *Hijra* households or barring *Hijra* from street performances, and how the community coped with these policies and eventually survived colonial attempts to eliminate these communities and cultures.

Through this study, Hinchy has successfully developed her analysis on 'cultural genocide' (p. 95) with the study of British legal polices and regulations towards *Hijra* in the late nineteenth century. The Contagious Diseases Act (1860) and the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) were among the most well-known regulations and are well contextualised in this book. One of the most impressive points of Hinchy's study is the sheer amount of colonial archives regarding *Hijra* in North India that were recorded by the nineteenth century British officials

Yet even as the colonial government archived more and more information about *Hijras*, there was a continuing sense of anxiety in the NWP (North-Western Provinces) government that this information was inadequate and that the *Hijra* 'system' was incompletely known (p. 135).

This is impressive because the neglect of the history of *Hijras* until now is not due to the fact that there are not sufficient archives, but rather to a lack of scholarly interest in the subject. A shortcoming in this study, if any, is an over-reliance on British colonial sources. Utilising more sources from the Indian perspective would establish a deeper understanding of the attitude of the colonised at the time. For instance, Hinchy mentions a few Urdu-language newspaper reports regarding *Hijras* (p.85) but does not extend her analysis of these newspapers. Nevertheless, Hinchey's book will surely encourage a further investigation of this fascinating topic of gender and sexuality in colonial India.

**Reviewed by Luke Yin**