CHAPTER

# From The Fringes to Center Stage: Hijṛās and Fertility Rituals in Kāmākhyā 🔓

Sravana Borkataky-Varma

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on an understudied group of individuals called the hijṛās within the larger world of Hindu Śākta tantra. Hijṛās in India is a collective term used for a group of people with a variety of temperaments, personalities, sexual needs, gender identities, cross–gender behaviors, and levels of commitment. Since 2016, there has been a concerted effort by the hijṛās to rebrand themselves as Kinnars. And with this new identity, they are taking on more of an authoritarian role, especially in the space of fertility rituals. This is a significant shift from being part of private ritual spaces to becoming ritual specialists. This transfer of power and authority will be brought to light by mapping the shifting currents in Kāmākhyā, a temple in the Indian state of Assam.

**Keywords:**   Akhāṛā, Assam, fertility, Hijṛā, Kāmākhyā, Kinnar, Śākta, Tantra

**Subject:**   Interfaith Relations, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Religion

**Series:**   Oxford Handbooks

## Introduction

Hijṛās are also known today as kinnars, but they are not homogeneous. This chapter addresses the shift in the nomenclature of this heterogeneous group of individuals—from hijṛās to kinnars. This group has been hardly studied in such fields as Hindu traditions and tantra and has garnered less attention in the larger context of *Śākta* tantra. At the moment, hijṛās, specifically as an organized group under the banner of Kinnar *Akhāṛā* (Hindu religious renunciant group), are rapidly taking center stage in certain Hindu ritual spaces. They are coming from the fringes to becoming mainstream ritual specialists; in this shift, they are claiming—I would argue *reclaiming*—their space, especially in fertility rituals.[1] In order for them to bless people with a successful pregnancy, their own physical bodies must undergo significant transformation. This shift from the fringes to becoming the ritual specialists is observed in the temple setting of Kāmākhyā in the Indian state of Assam.[2]

## Position and Method

It is imperative to situate my positionality: I am a scholar-practitioner. I was initially initiated into the goddess Kāmākhyā lineage at the age of eight or nine, and then at fifteen years of age, I received the fourth stage of consecration (*abhiṣeka*). I continue to practice, study, and teach Śākta tantra as understood within the Kāmākhyā lineage, and I do so inside and outside the academy.

Being an initiate presents difficulties. How do I write about my tradition in a way where I critique certain ritual practices, codes, and rules? How do I do this without being reductive or apologetic? How can I respond to the phallocentric nature of this material? What will I make public and what will remain private? I swore to secrecy. I continue to keep my vows but not at the cost of subverting voices, especially ones that are marginalized. This productive tension is present throughout my standing as a scholar-practitioner in academia when observing and performing rituals, and by my presence in public spaces.

In this chapter, I use research methodology that is a blend of social anthropology "from the outside" with elements of reflexive autoethnography "from the inside." I have come to define this method as '*AND* methodology,' that is, both etic and emic. The combined approach is necessary considering the complicated topic I present, the spaces I enter, and the liminal people I engage. My ethnographic methods include conversations with devotees and ritual specialists, participant observation, recorded face-to-face interactions in person and remotely (i.e., using WhatsApp). The boundary between participants and the observer was not rigidly dichotomous. Great care was taken to sift through and separate the disclosed religious world of the kinnars and devotees and critically reflect upon how I experienced these very religious worlds.

Most of the interviews cited were conducted during the annual Ambubachi (a three-day, monsoon season festival celebrating the yearly menstruation of the goddess in Kāmākhyā) *Melā* in 2019. Approximately two million visitors (Bhattacharya 2019) attended this festival. Data were collected by conducting structured interviews using a questionnaire to interview people in-person during the festival. The questionnaire included these questions:

1. Do you identify yourself as a hijṟā or a kinnar?

2. If yes, have you been part of any fertility rituals for conception, during pregnancy, and/or after birth?

3. How do people contact you to contract ritual services?

4. Where was the *pūjā* performed (temple, house, or community center)?

In 2020 and 2021, I conducted research through three brief visits to India and video calls using WhatsApp and Facebook messenger. The increase in social media use worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic made access to my research communities through WhatsApp and Facebook messenger rather convenient. I continue to use social media not only to gather new information but to communicate my ongoing interpretations and report my resulting research. It is important not only to my academic but to my personal ways of being that I present my intentions, methods, findings, and interpretations of those findings both to the people I encounter in my research and to my scholarly readers.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I will explain the historical background of hijṟās and why hijṟās today are choosing the name kinnar. Next, I will explore the significance of fertility rituals in Kāmākhyā. In the third section, I focus on the hijṟās in Kāmākhyā. I conclude by speculating about what the future holds for these figures because history is currently in the making in the larger world of Śākta tantra.

## Hijṛās to Kinnars

Hijṛās are a heterogeneous group. The LGBTQ + and the twenty-six various gender identities are not being currently used by the majority in the community.[3] Community members in question self-identify as hijṛā, so the larger society refers to them with the homogeneous umbrella term hijṛā; the term is used in the same fashion in this chapter. In urban centers—Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, and so forth—where gender identities are part of the upwardly mobile social milieu conversations, metropolitan hijṛās are starting to identify themselves as trans women (Roy 2016), a term not indigenous to South Asia. Furthermore, there is currently a rising awareness of the LGBTQ + identities in India, leading to the innovative reframing of hijṛās as legitimate historical figures of queerness (Saria 2021: 11). Irrespective of the metro or the nonmetro localities, unlike the transgender identity conversations in the modern West, hijṛās seldom consider themselves men before they take on the hijṛā identity. This too is complicated because a majority of the hijṛās go through a castration ritual to remove their vestigial maleness, which we will return to later in this chapter. Hijṛās' religious identities are in flux, for historically they engaged a combined Hindu and Muslim ritual cosmogony, but this too is changing rapidly. Islamic elements are fast being shed in the formation of the new identity known as kinnar. We will return to this shift shortly as well.

Other identity terms are grouped together with hijṛā too, especially in Hindi-English code-switching. For example, we find taxonomies of effeminate men, *catla* (who wear saris), *kada-catla* (non-sari-wearing), *zenana* (women-men identifying as Muslims), *jogtas* or *jogappas* (keeper of the Goddess Renuka-Yellamma), and so forth (Reddy 2005: 53).

Etymologically, the term *hijṛā* comes from the Arabic term *Hegira*. Sibsankar Mal argues the Urdu word hijṛā is derived from the Arabic root *hjr* which means leaving one's tribe (Mal and Bahalen Mundu 2018: 7). *Hegira* is a medieval Latin transliteration of the Arabic word meaning "departure" or "migration," among other definitions. Alternative transliterations of the word include Hijra or Hijrah. The term is frequently used to refer to the journey of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in the year 622 (Sheikh 2010: 51–51). Laxminarayan Tripathi, a prominent hijṛā leader and activist, states that the word *hijṛā* comes from *hij* which refers to the "soul," a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called "hijra" (Tripathi 2015: 39). While Tripathi does not provide the source from where and how she came to define the term as "the vessel for the holy soul," her interpretation is significant in the context of new identity-making, especially the shift from hijṛā to kinnar. These etymologies signify a gender shift, from being born as a male to *becoming* a female. According to Serena Nanda,

> the hijra role is a magnet that attracts people with many different kinds of cross-gender identities, attributes, and behaviors—people whom we in the West would differentiate as eunuchs, homosexuals, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and transvestites. Such individuals, of course, exist in our own and perhaps all societies. What is noteworthy about the hijras is that the role is so deeply rooted in Indian culture that it can accommodate a wide variety of temperaments, personalities, sexual needs, gender identities, cross-gender behaviors, and levels of commitment without losing its cultural meaning. The ability of the hijra role to succeed as a symbolic reference point giving significant meaning to the lives of the many different kinds of people who make up the hijra community is undoubtedly related to the variety and significance of alternative gender roles and gender transformations in Indian mythology and traditional culture.

(Nanda 1999: 19–20)

Compared to Western gender identity narratives—which are largely uncomfortable with any sorts of ambiguities, especially regarding ambiguous gender—the Hindu traditional culture is not only comfortable with ambiguities but treats such opacities as meaningful, even powerful. Here one is reminded of Clifford

Geertz: "Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives" (Geertz 1973: 13).

Hijṛā identity is not just about individual and communal identity but also about *hijṛā* kinship. Citing Ina Goel, Daniela Bevilacqua states, "today, *hijṛās*' households are spread all over India and are organized around seven *gharāṇā* (literally houses, clans)." (Bevilacqua forthcoming). The term *gharāṇā* comes from the Hindi word *ghar*, derived from the Sanskrit word *Gṛha* (house). *Gharāṇā* is used broadly within the traditional communities of musicians, dancers, and prostitutes. Since hijrās are associated with and engage in music and dance as well as sex work—the activities of those aforementioned *gharāṇā*s—it is possible that as a collective whole they call their social organization *gharāṇā* due to their professions (Goel 2016: 540). The term *hijṛā* is currently being replaced by kinnar, and, likewise, the term *gharāṇā* has been replaced by the term *akhāṛā*.

A hijṛā household is best understood as a commune "generally composed of individuals from a diverse range of religious, caste, class, ethnic, linguistic, gender and sex backgrounds" (Roy 2016: 12). Hijṛās take a female name when they join the community, and they use female kinship terms for each other: "sister," "aunty," and "grandmother" (mother's mother). In some parts of India, they have a special, feminized language, which consists of the use of feminine expressions and intonations (Freeman 1979: 295). However, there are some inconsistencies. Some sources—namely, Ibbetson, MacLagen, and Rose (1911)—report that hijṛās "affect the names of men," but Laurence Preston (1987) say that hijṛās take women's names. In my fieldwork, the hijṛās referred to their male names in the past tense. If they were born a male, they were given a male name, but since becoming a hijṛā, they only use the female name.

The communes are residential and economic units (Nanda 1999: 39). They are governed under an elaborate and rigid structure with set codes of expected behavior. Some rules may be different depending on the geographic region and primary livelihood of the commune. Each member is expected to contribute a percentage of her earnings. In addition, each member has a defined role either to maintain the building, cook, clean, and so forth. Further, all communes have a head or a leader akin to a guru (Hall 1995: 42).

How does one become a hijṛā? What entails becoming part of the hijṛā household? My informants state that at a fairly early age, they as individuals and their respective birth family members recognized they were *different* (effeminate, wanting to dress in girl clothes, put on lipstick and nail polish, dance, identify as a girl, and not a boy, etc.). Some were brought to the commune by a family member because the birth family did not have the means to support the needs of their *different* child, or the family member worried for the safety of the child, or the safety of other children in the family because of the hate and violence meted to this child, or social stigma, or poverty, or the child joined the hijṛā household as a young adult.[4]

The future hijṛā must find a guru and be formally initiated in the commune. "Theoretically, in order to become a 'true' hijṛā, if the individual is not a eunuch by birth, he should undergo through a ritual called *nirvāṇ*, during which the penis and testicles are removed,[5] but this ritual is not compulsory and remains an individual choice" (Bevilacqua forthcoming). But today this too is contested. Specifically, to the issue of *nirvāṇ*, Tripathi states:

> It is believed that all hijras are castrated. We call it *nirvan*. In the eyes of the public, we are castrated males. But that is not always the case. Castration is strictly optional, and every hijra decides for himself whether or not to undertake it. Castration cannot be forced upon a hijra. 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* are also uncastrated like me. But yes, many of us have had breast implants. The surgery is expensive, but without it our transformation is incomplete. However, unlike many other hijras, I haven't gone in for hormone

> therapy in my desire to look feminine. Though I am not castrated, the hijras regard me as one of them.

> (Rao and Joshi 2013)

Tripathi may very well be part of the *new* hij̱rā group wherein more and more hij̱rā will choose not to undergo the procedure. Time will tell. In the absence of *nirvāṇ*, Tripathi refers to her entry into the community with the *haldi-kumkum* (turmeric-vermilion) ceremony (Tripathi 2015: 11), where turmeric and vermilion are applied to the body. During this ceremony, two green saris are gifted, known as *jogjanam* (one who is born on an auspicious moment) saris, and she is crowned with the community-owned *dupatta* (long traditional scarf mostly worn by women but occasionally by men as well, popular in South Asia) (Tripathi 2015: 42). My research findings align with Nanda (1999: 28) and Reddy (2005: 97), concluding that the majority of the hij̱rās are castrated. Most castrated hij̱rās questioned the sacrality of those who chose not to do it.

During the *nirvāṇ* ritual, the penis and testicles are removed from the body: "the dai ma takes the knife from her sari and makes two quick opposite diagonal cuts. The organs–both penis and testicles–are completely separated from the body. A small stick is put into the urethra to keep it open. [...] When the cut is made, the blood gushes out, and nothing is done to stem the flow [...]" (Nanda 1999: 28). The severed organs are secretly put in an earthen pot and buried under a living tree. The blood that pours out is understood to be the masculine *tattva* (elements). The blood must flow out and no stitches may be placed on the wound, for the hij̱rās believe it is only by complete flushing of the male blood that a person transforms into becoming not only a female but a receptacle for the goddess Bahucarā Mātā (mother goddess).

The *nirvāṇ* rituals are accompanied by a forty-day recovery and care period, which includes eating special foods like ghee, pure sugar, rice (eastern and southern India), and *rotis* (northern and western India), similar to what women eat and how women are cared for after childbirth. This *nirvāṇ* ritual is a symbolic identification of childbirth, and emasculation is rebirth. Castration also marks an entrance into celibacy, but celibacy is not necessarily understood as no sex because many hij̱rās are involved in sex work.[6] At the end of the forty days, the hij̱rā is perceived as a vessel of divine power. In other words, the repressed hij̱rā's sexual desire is transformed into sacred power.

Western audiences balk at the *nirvāṇ* ritual and dismiss it as barbaric. I am compelled to refer to Jonathan Haidt. Whereas Haidt is referring to Richard Schweder's "three ethics theory," and not going anywhere close to gender let alone hij̱rās, his theory on the "ethic of divinity" is useful to understand the relevance of the *nirvāṇ* ritual and concept of celibacy. Haidt's understanding may help the reader shift from a reductionist perspective of considering the *nirvāṇ* ritual brutal. Haidt states, "people are, first and foremost, temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted. [...] The body is a temple, not a playground [...]. Many societies, therefore, develop moral concepts such as sanctity and sin, purity and pollution, elevation and degradation. In such societies, the personal liberty of secular Western nations looks like libertinism, hedonism, and a celebration of humanity's baser instincts" (Haidt 2012: 119).

It is also believed that *nirvāṇ* bestows "fertility power." Hij̱rās are believed to have the power to confer fertility on others: sacrificing their fertility to bestow universal procreative power (Reddy 2005: 97). Another significant and not well-known aspect of this *birth* into becoming a hij̱rā is that in the past it could include conversion into Islam.[7] In my 2021 interview with Mausi, I particularly probed whether the head of a hij̱rā commune is indeed Muslim. She hesitated for the longest time and would not give me a straightforward answer. After much probing, she said "Yes! Historically the leader of the commune was a Muslim and when one becomes a hij̱rā, one simultaneously converts to Islam while parallelly becomes the receptacle of Bahucarā Mātā, a [Hindu *devī*]. But that is changing now. New leaders are and can be "purely *Hindu*" (interview with the author March 2021).[8] Mausi's response to commune leaders being Muslims was

also documented by Reddy (2005) and Hossain (2020). So, what is changing? Why is it changing? And what is it changing to?

## Hijṛā Gharāṇā to the Formation of Kinnar Akhāṛā

Under the leadership of Laxminarayan Tripathi, in 2019 the hijṛās formed the Kinnar Akhāṛā. The two terms, *kinnar* and *akhāṛā*, need some unpacking. The word *kinnar(a)* has a range of meanings in different religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism) and languages (Sanskrit, Hindi, Pali, and Prakrit), and that meaning can vary from a type of person to a type of semi-divinity. The Monier-Williams dictionary provides the following meaning, echoed in the related term *kiṃpuruṣa,* for *kiṃnara*, "what sort of man?" "[He] is a mythical being with a human figure and the head of a horse (or with a horse's body and the head of a man; originally perhaps a kind of monkey cf. *vānara*; in later times (like the Naras) reckoned among the Gandharvas or celestial choristers, and celebrated as musicians."[9] Other meanings include a "mixed up" or "mongrel person." Furthermore, *kinnarakara* is a slave, following *kiṃkara* meaning slave.[10] Other definitions in Monier-Williams set forth a class of heavenly beings who in early sources resemble a bird with a man's head and in later texts resemble centaurs. They act as *gandharva* musicians in *Śakra's* (Indra's) heaven. Hence, we can comfortably state that the term *Kiṃnara* refers to celestial half-man entities with heads of creatures possessing superhuman powers.[11] But here is a twist. In my fieldwork, I am yet to find hijṛās who understand these different historical meanings of the term. If we assume that the identity shift from hijṛā to *kiṃnara* is positive, then in this present usage "kinnar" connotes a blend of man who becomes a woman and divinity.

But the flip side to the term is reading *kiṃnara* as, "Is this (*kiṃ*) a man (*nara*)?" In other words, is this a human being? This reading is completely derogatory. Since the term was proposed and adopted by the Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh hijṛās and in these geographical regions the term is understood in a respectful manner (Loh 2014: 14).[12] I maintain the former interpretation, and I consider the hijṛās, aka kinnars, and from here on referred to as kinnars, as celestial beings who possess special qualities in music and dance.

Kinnars are mentioned in the Vedas, Purāṇas, and other literary sources. In the *Manusmṛti* kinnars are placed together with sādhus (religious ascetics), yakṣas,[13] and gandharvas (celestial beings).[14] They are understood to not reincarnate. Following this, present-day kinnars believe they themselves (i.e., the individual kinnars on earth) are demigods, and this makes their role in fertility rituals pivotal. Tripathi also recalls a passage in the Tulsidas *Rāmcaritmānas*, where the term *kinnar* is used to describe the third gender when she says: "*dev danuj kinnar nar sreni sādar majjahin sakal trivenī* (deities, demons, kinnars, men, women, all went to Trivenī, i.e., the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers with the mythological Sarasvati)" (Bevilacqua forthcoming).

The Hindi term *akhāṛā* means "wrestling arena," from which *akhāṛiyā* is derived, meaning "master fighter," "skilled maneuverer," or "strategist." There is a network of *akhāṛā*s throughout India, particularly in the North, where men train in wrestling and other methods of fighting" (Clark 2020). But the term *akhāṛā* has a long history within Hindu traditions (see Lorenzen 1978; Ghurye 1964; Alter 1992; Pinch 2006). In short, an *akhāṛā* can be a place of practice with facilities for boarding, lodging, and training, both in the context of Indian martial artists or a monastery. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Hindu tradition recognizes thirteen *akhāṛā*s, which are in some fashion *gatekeepers* of the Hindu dharma. It is important to note that until 2019, although some *akhāṛā*s have female sections they were controlled and run by men. Further, many believe that the thirteen *akhāṛā*s are set in stone, and a fourteenth cannot be created. If approved people may join one of the thirteen. But all that changed, and we now have a fourteenth *akhāṛā*: the Kinnar Akhāṛā.

The two people who must be given credit for this historic turn of events are Laxminarayan Tripathi, head of the Kinnar Akhāṛā, and Hari Girī Mahārāj, head of the Jūnā Akhāṛā. "On Tuesday, [January 15, 2019] her [Laxminarayan Tripathi] religious movement, called the Kinnar Akhada, became the first transgender group to bathe [in the Kumbh Melā] at the confluence of the holy Ganges and the Yamuna rivers on the first day of the ancient festival, traditionally reserved for reclusive Hindu priests, almost all of whom are men" (Pal 2019).

The Kumbh Melā is believed to have been founded by the eighth-century Hindu philosopher and saint Adi Shankara, aiming to start major Hindu gatherings for philosophical discussions and debates among representatives from Hindu monasteries across the Indian subcontinent.[15] Fast forward thirteen hundred years to 2019: now a nonmale ascetic order is allowed to take the ritual bath on the first day and can be recognized and organized as a legitimate ascetic group. With this new identity, the kinnars are rapidly moving away from the historic Islamic roots and Muslim identity. Here, Sanskritization—the process by which lower status groups adopt higher-status behavior and language, namely, emulating Brahmins and using the Sanskrit language (Srinivas 1966)—has come to fruition. Their new greeting is *Jai Śrī Mahākāla* (fierce manifestation of both Śiva and Viṣṇu) and the Kinnar Akhāṛā *tilak* (sectarian mark on the forehead) is made of three horizontal lines, typical of Śaiva followers, with a vertical red line at center, symbolizing the *Śrī* (feminine) and a large red *bindi* (dot). The leaders today are called *maṇḍaleśvara* (provincial heads) or *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* (great provincial chiefs).[16] They now show up in large religious gatherings, dressed in bright colors, *reclaiming* the ritual spaces they believe belong to them. One such area is the space of fertility rituals.

## Kāmākhyā, Kinnars, and Fertility Rituals

Kāmākhyā is a temple complex in the Nilachal hills in the northeastern state of Assam, India. This temple complex epitomizes the retention of many ancient practices. Kāmākhyā is also one of the Śākta *pīṭhas* (sacred seat of the *devī*). Before we get into the topic of kinnars and rituals, two terms should be defined: *tantra* and *Śākta tantra*. A range of scholars—including Douglas Brooks (1990), David Kinsley (1997), David Gordon White (2000), André Padoux (2002, 2017), Hillary Peter Rodrigues (2003), Prem Saran (2008), and Hugh B. Urban (2009)—have proposed academic definitions of tantra. Drawing upon these definitions, I consider a ritual space, philosophical thought, and/or texts to be tantric, if that space/thought/text engages the following features:

1. Mantra-*maṇḍalas*-yantra that help to transcend the divide between the microcosm and macrocosm. The divine macrocosm resides within the microcosm of beings. So, we are the divine as much as the divine is us.

2. Activation of subtle esoteric anatomies so that *cakras, naḍis*, and *kuṇḍalinī* energy become the catalyst to engage with the divine in the vertical plane and dissolve the binaries, such as sacred and profane, birth and death, beautiful and ugly, and so forth.

3. The human body including the bodily fluids are not rejected; in fact, these are essential.

4. All the above features may be put into the service of liberation, which is to be achieved while living, *jīvanmukti* (Borkataky-Varma 2020: 190–191).[17]

Śāktism and tantra are closely associated. I use the definition of Śākta tantra proposed by Brooks (1990):

> Worship of Śakti … i.e., the universal and all-embracing dynamics which manifest itself in human experiences as a female divinity. To this should be added that inseparably connected with her is an inactive male partner as whose power of action and movement the Śakti functions. … It is therefore

> not enough to say that a Śākta worships the female as ultimate principle; nor is it correct categorically to state that Śāktism is characterized by the use of the five ["prohibited substance" known as] makāras. … Although Śāktism is often defined also by means of typical ritual practices, it is advisable to restrict the use of this term for a world view oriented towards Śakti.

(Brooks 1990: 47–48)

Brooks's definition is simple and encompasses almost all aspects of Śāktism, but not all Śāktas are tantrics. Similarly, there is no single understanding of the Devī, the Goddess.[18] Regarding Kāmākhyā and the varied Śākta *pīṭhas*, while the list of fifty-one *pīṭhas* differs based on the compendium to which one is referring, all lists include Kāmākhyā. Further, almost all Śākta *pīṭhas* negotiate a complex integration of Brahmanical and indigenous practices (Cakrabartī 1992; Urban 2011). Having said that, three features are unique to Kāmākhyā.

1. All ten wisdom goddesses (*dasa mahāvidyā*) have their temples on this hilltop.

2. None of the *devīs* are portrayed in any kind of imagery. They are aniconic, and the worship of the ten *mahāvidyās* happens over holy rocks and streams. Although there is an exception. There is one *mūrti* of Tripurasundarī in Kāmākhyā, popularly known as Kamakhi.[19]

3. It is the *yonī*, the vulva, of Satī that fell on this site, and this makes Kāmākhyā an epicenter of fertility rituals.

Devī Tripurasundarī is conceptualized to be the supreme deity in texts like *Lalitopākhyāna* (Tagare 1958) and in part of the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* (Shastri, Bhatt, and Tagare 2003), and Saundaryalaharī (Sankaracarya 1958). She is a beautiful and auspicious manifestation of the great female divinity, and Ṣoḍaśī (the girl of sixteen), Lalitā (the one who is elegant and graceful), Kāmeśvarī (goddess lording over desires), and Śrividyā (goddess of auspicious knowledge) are some other names she goes by. In Kāmākhyā, Tripurasundarī is popularly known as Ṣoḍaśī and/or Tripurabālā, envisioned as a beautiful young girl of sixteen. She is also recognized by the name Rājarājeśvarī, in the following specific ritual context (Borkataky-Varma 2020: 193). The central and exoteric, public ritual in Kāmākhyā for Ṣoḍaśī is the *kumārī pūjā*, *pūjā* offered to prepubescent girls (*kumārī*) from as young as one to as old as sixteen years of age.[20] The esoteric *pūjā* performed in Kāmākhyā is the Rājarājeśvarī *pūjā*, done during Chaitra Navarātri (March–April, based on the lunar calendar). Rājarājeśvarī is understood as in the realm of *Kamakalā-vilāsa* where the meaning of Tripurasundarī is explained within the context of sexual fluids: "red being the female sexual fluid; white, semen, [and] the union of the two" (Kinsley 1997: 121). Also, "offerings of the *pañcamakāra*[21] or the *pañca tattva* ritual is central and essential" (*deo* Sarma in conversation with the author, in Kāmākhyā, November 2018). Before turning to the growing prominence of the kinnars being involved in fertility rituals, let us explore why the *word* (blessing or curse) of the kinnar is considered to be powerful and how deeply entrenched is this belief. Speaking of historic kinnars I will return to the term *hijṛā*, appropriate for the context.

Hijṛās are mentioned in both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Mahābhārata*, the nymph Urvaśi fell in love with Arjuna, but he clapped his hands over his ears when she propositioned him, for he said she was like a mother to him. Furious, she cursed him to be a dancer among women, devoid of honor, regarded as a nonman, a eunuch. But Indra, the father of Arjuna, softened the curse and made it valid for only a year. Years later, when it was time for Arjuna and his brothers to hide in disguise, Arjuna put on woman's clothing (though he failed to disguise his hairy, brawny arms) and told his brothers, "I will be a eunuch." 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 eunuch, but he then ascertained that "her" lack of manhood was indeed firm and so let "her" teach his daughters to dance (MBh 3, 1.6. 36–162).

Another oft-narrated story is that of Caitanya. Caitanya was regarded by some as an avatar of Kṛṣṇa but by others (including himself) as an avatar of Rādhā. Thus, it is said that Kṛṣṇa became Rādhā in the form of Caitanya in order to experience what it was like to be Rādhā (and to make love with Kṛṣṇa), and he became Kṛṣṇa in Caitanya's body in order to make love to Rādhā (Hayes 2006). But the mention and treatment of hijṛās in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is especially relevant. The power of the hijṛā's words can be traced to the Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇa.* As Rāma was leaving to serve fourteen years in exile, the people of Ayodhya were heartbroken, and they followed him to the edges of the kingdom, all in tears. When they reached the borders of Ayodhya, Rāma addressed the people of Ayodhya, and asked the male and female citizens to go back to their houses, saying he would see them after fourteen years. Upon his return, he found the hijṛās waiting in exactly the same place where he instructed people to go back. Rāma realized he had said male and female people: he did not include hijṛās. Realizing his mistake, he bestowed upon them the power that whatever they say will come true. While such stories are well known, the fact is there is an ontological difference between saying God is androgynous versus God is androgyne (Doniger 1982: 283). Ellen Goldberg argues, in the context of Ardhanārīśvara, "the status of male Śiva half, is privileged by the title "*iśvara*" (god, lord, master), whereas the female Pārvatī half with whom Śiva shares his body, is simply designated by "*nārī*" (woman)." (Goldberg 2002).

Historically and into present times, it is believed the words of a hijṛā invariably become real. Due to this power, people fear their curses and seek their blessings. In the past, tracing hijṛā history and lore to the epics was common, and it becomes more and more common currently. Once, hijṛās would simply state that they have a history as long as Hinduism and assert they are mentioned in several ancient texts. But in 2019, Sonal, a kinnar, was chastised in the Bengali language by another member of her *akhāṛā* when I asked Sonal which ancient texts she was referring to. She said, "Oh! Many ancient texts." To which one of her friends lashed out: "How ignorant are you? Don't you know the specific story?" (Sonal in conversation with the author, in Kāmākhyā, July 2019). The power that a kinnar embodies the power of speech leads to ambivalence and fear. It is the same power a kinnar often uses to her advantage and makes a livelihood from.

Kinnars are most often part of the *badhāī*. While the term *badhāī* means "happy greetings," in the context of the kinnars, it has an added layer of "blessings," particularly blessings bestowed after the culmination of a happy life event like marriage or the birth of a child. The *badhāī* is usually performed via singing and dancing. Within this larger context of *badhaī,* it is believed the kinnar bestows fertility to the married couple (Nanda 1999: 2–4). In another important fertility ritual, a kinnar officiates when a couple has not been able to have a child and/or they want a male offspring.

Kinnars increasingly are taking on more public-ritual spaces and officiate fertility rituals in large religious festivals where devotees congregate in one location. The year 2016 marked the first time a large congregation of kinnars visited Kāmākhyā for the Ambubachi festival.[22] The congregation grew manyfold in 2019, in which at sunset, the kinnar members emerged in procession, dressed in beautiful silks, and perfect makeup. The crowds (a mixture of onlookers and devotees) grew every day, seeking to get pictures and witness the procession. While the crowds loved it, there were palpable tensions between the Kāmākhyā *deos,* priests who are mediators between the devotees and the goddess, and the kinnars. One Mr. Sarma called them charlatans and claimed several of them were involved in sexual and criminal activities. Another Mr. Sarma was certain that the *Kāmākhyā* board of trustees would act to ban them from coming to future Ambubachi *Melā.* A third priest, not named Mr. Sarma, chimed in and openly mocked them. He resented their popularity that directly translated into monetary gains (in conversations with the author, in Kāmākhyā, June 2019).

During 2019 fieldwork at *Kāmākhyā*, while most devotees sought *kinnars* for general blessings (not for any particular outcome), I noticed some patrons seeking and requesting kinnars to perform fertility *pūjā* rituals, a fascinating and new phenomenon in Kāmākhyā. As I have written about rituals in Kāmākhyā broadly and

alluded to fertility in several articles (Borkataky-Varma 2017, 2018, 2020), fertility is central to *Kāmākhyā*, but the kinnar-led fertility rituals were a rather new phenomenon, an innovation. During the fertility ritual commissioned by a couple who either is seeking to be blessed by a healthy child or, specifically, a male child, the kinnar performing the ritual invokes Bahucarā Mātā. It is believed that the goddess gives a boon to the couple via the body of the kinnar as a conduit. So, who is Bahucarā Mātā and how is she embodied?

Samira Sheikh (2010) traces reports of Bahucarā Mātā in the Gujrati press media during the 1930s. A published booklet asserted that Bahucarā was a Charan deity.[23] This was supported by references from manuscript literature of the community in which a Charan virgin was worshipped as Bahucarā:

> Bahuchara was born in Ujala village of Marvad in the Detha branch of the Maru Charans. Her parents were Bapal and Deval. Deval was an *avatar* of Jagadamba (World-Mother). She lived *c.* 1309 (CE). Bapal had three daughters: Butay, Balal and Bahuchara, apart from sons. [...] On the way, they reached Chunval and camped near Sankhalpur for the night when a bandit named Bapaiya attacked them. Seeing this, the youngest daughter Bahuchara cut off her breasts and did *tragu*.[24] Her sisters did the same. Then she cursed the bandit: "You will become a eunuch (Pavaiyo)"[25] Hearing this, the bandit begged for mercy, which she granted, ordering him to build a shrine (*sthanak*) for her at the spot. He would then be blessed, and if a naturally emasculated man arrived at her shrine and lived in women's clothing and sang her praises, he would certainly reach her favour. She [Bahuchara] then died.
>
> (Sheikh 2010: 89)

A long history on the origin and kinship of Bahucarā Mātā continued. The details are not important here, but the deity is important. Bahucarā Mātā rides on a rooster. Her association with chickens led to a popular legend in which she humbles the Muslim invader Sultan Alauddin II, known as *khuni*. It is the eighteenth-century poet Vallabh Bhatt's (1640–1751 C.E.) composition that did most to "re-invent" or 'engender' the goddess as a respectable, Puranic manifestation of "trans-regional Shakti" (Sheikh 2010: 95). In sum, Bahucarā Mātā's ability to transform gender and to protect people with ambiguous gender was brought to the forefront.

Returning to the fertility ritual performed by kinnar in 2019, the kinnar officiating the *pūjā* placed one coconut, wheat, and Rs. 1.25 in the *jholī* (a pouch bag made from a *dupatta* or saree) on the lap of the aspirant mother while reciting the Bahucarā Mātā mantra. The kinnar then placed her right palm over the larger area of the womb of the aspirant mother and said "Go now! Enjoy [there was a crackling of laughter because "enjoy" meant having sex]. You will have the desired child" (this ritual was performed by one Priyanka, during Ambubachi Melā, July 2019). In return, the couple promised to make the goddess happy, and thereby make the *kinnars* happy, by offering *pūjā* and giving gifts, mostly material and monetary offerings after their wish is fulfilled.

While fertility rituals performed by kinnars are well-known and steadily on the rise in the early twenty-first century, they have primarily been private affairs. This is about to change. In March 2021, one of the *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* said plans were made to perform a large public event where the *putrakāmeṣṭi yajña* (ritual sacrifice with a specific objective) would be performed on April 22 in Ujjain. *Putrakāmeṣṭi yajña* is performed for the sake of having a child, especially a healthy male child. My informants stated that this rite had not been performed in this *yuga*, age.[26] Mausi, the informant said that *putrakameshti yajña* was last performed in the ancient time, during the age of the Rāmāyana, when, upon the recommendation of Sage Vasiṣṭha, King Daśaratha of Ayodhya performed the *putrakāmeṣṭi yajña.* After its successful completion, the Lord of Fire, *Agni devā* appeared and gave a bowl of sweets to the King of Ayodhya, which was then consumed by his three queens to generate his famous sons Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata, and Śatrughna. This event was planned and

would be led by the Ujjain *Kinnar Akhāṛā*. However, due to certain unforeseen circumstances arising from the pandemic, it was rescheduled for 2022.[27]

Further conversations with Mausi on the relevance of *putrakāmeṣṭi yajna* yielded that the presence of a Kinnar in the *yajña* is essential, "without a kinnar the *yajña* cannot be performed.[28] In addition, Mausi also mentioned that extensive plans were in place to lay the foundation of what she called the "largest and most magnificent Bahucarā Mātā temple" (in conversation with the author, over WhatsApp video call, March 2021). When the kinnar *Akhāṛā* performs the *putrakameshti yajña* in the public arena and lays the foundation to the temple, they will establish their role in fertility rituals, pivotal and mainstream.

## Conclusion

The *hijᵣās* have shifted their status within the larger world of *Śākta* tantra. Under the newly formed identity of kinnar, organized under the kinship of Kinnar Akhāṛā, congregating in large groups during important Hindu religious festivals such at the Ambubachi *Melā*, Kumbh *Melā*, and so forth, the kinnars strategically reorient their identities to focus on how, by the virtue of sacrificing their fertility, they can give procreative powers. As ritual specialists, they are moving from the fringes, from begging in street corners and/or providing sexual services to being acknowledged and being honored, thereby moving to the Hindu ritual center of authority, respect, and reverence.

The field of Tantric Studies has addressed gender and sexuality, but it has largely done so from the lens of heterosexuality. Gender fluidity and gender identification within this field of study have largely been missing. There are dynamic social-religious-cultural developments at play. Kinnars by the virtue of the allegorical embodiment of the interworld can generate a spiritual gender identity. This religious discourse allows the kinnars—whom Salman Rushdie (2008: 109) calls "contemporary gender benders" (Rushdie 2008: 109)—to fashion their spiritual self within a nonbinary religious context. This uncommon spiritual path "beyond the binary" on the socioreligious margins of society entails a liminal social position that imbues kinnars with an ambiguous status. This ambiguity has positive connotations in that it suggests great sanctity and power.

# References

Alter, Joseph S.  1992. *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*. London: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Bernier, Ronald M.  1997. *Himalayan Architecture*. Madison, NJ: Dickinson University Press.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Bevilacqua, Daniela. Forthcoming. "From the Margins to Demi-God: The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhāṛā in India." *Asian Ethnologies*.

Bhattacharya, Rajeev. 2019. "The Faces of India's Ambubachi Mela." *The Diplomat*, July 2. https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/the-faces-of-indias-ambubachi-mela/

Borkataky-Varma, Sravana.  2017. "The Dead Speak: A Case Study from the Tiwa Tribe Highlighting the Hybrid World of Śākta Tantra in Assam." *Religions* 8, no. 10: 221. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8100221.
Google Scholar     WorldCat

Borkataky-Varma, Sravana.  2018. "Menstruation: Pollutant to Potent." In *Hinduism and Tribal Religions. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, edited by Long, Jeffery D., Sherma, Rita D., Jain, Pankaj, and Khanna, Madhu. Springer,147–175.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Borkataky-Varma, Sravana.  2020. "Taming Hindu Śakta Tantra on the Internet: Online Pūjās for the Goddess Tripurasundarī." In *Digital Hinduism*, edited by Zeiler, Xenia, 186–206. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Brooks, Douglas Renfrew.  1990. *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Cakrabartī, Sudhīr.  1992. *Brātya Lokāẏat Lālan*. Kolkata: Pustak Bipani.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Clark, Matthew.  2020. "Akhāṛās: Warrior Ascetics." In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, edited by Jacobsen, Knut A., Basu, Helene, Malinar, Angelika, and Narayanan, Vasudha.  http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_BEH_COM_9000000002.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Doniger, Wendy.  1982. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Freeman, James M.  1979. *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Garigliano, Irene M.  2015. *Les Brahmanes du complexe de temples de Kāmākhyā (Assam). Droits héréditaires, relation avec les pèlerins et pouvoir administratif*. Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique [French National Centre for Scientific Research].
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretations of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Ghurye, G. S.  1964. *Indian Sadhus*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
Google Scholar     Google Preview     WorldCat     COPAC

Goel, Ina.  2016. "Hijra Communities of Delhi." *Sexualities* 19, no. 5–6: 535–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460715616946.
Google Scholar        WorldCat

Goldberg, Ellen.  2002. *The Lord Who Is Half Woman: Ardhanarisvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Haidt, Jonathan.  2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Hall, Kira. 1995. "Hijra/Hijrin: Language and Gender Identity." Berkeley: University of California Press. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6m5744jx.
WorldCat

Hayes, Glen.  2006. "Contemporary Metaphor Theory and Alternative Views of Krishna and Rādhā in Vaishnava Sahajiyā Tantric Traditions." In *Alternative Krishnas Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, edited by Beck, Guy L. New York: State University of New York Press, 125–138.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Hossain, Adnan.  2020. "Hijras in South Asia: Rethinking the Dominant Representation." In *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities*, edited by Davy, Zowie, and Cristina, Santos Ana, 404–21. London: SAGE.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Hurwitt, Sundari J. 2019. "The Voracious Virgin: The Concept and Worship of the Kumārī in Kaula Tantrism." PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Ibbetson, D. C. J., M. E. Mac Lagen, and H. A. Rose. 1911. *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Panjab and North-West Frontier Province*. Vol. 2. Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Kinsley, David.  1997. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Loh, Jennifer U.  2014. "Narrating Identity: The Employment of Mythological and Literary Narratives in Identity Formation among the Hijras of India." *Religion & Gender* 4, no. 1: 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-00401003.
Google Scholar        WorldCat

Lorenzen, David N.  1978. "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98, no. 1: 61–75.
Google Scholar        WorldCat

Mal, Sibsankar, and G. Bahalen Mundu. 2018. "Hidden Truth about Ethnic Lifestyle of Indian Hijras." *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (September): 620–28. https://doi.org/10.5958/2321-5828.2018.00104.3.
WorldCat

Mukherjee, C. B.  2016. *Kūmarī Pūjā: A Religious Custom*. Kolkata: Jadavpur University.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Nanda, Serena.  1999. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Padoux, Andre.  2002. *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Padoux, André. 2017. *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Pal, Alasdair. 2019. "From Pariah to Demi-God: Transgender Leader a Star at Kumbh." https://www.reuters.com/article/india-religion-kumbh-transgender-idINKCN1PE04J.
WorldCat

Pinch, W. R. 2006. *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Preston, Laurence W. 1987. "A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth-Century India." *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 2: 371–87.
Google Scholar   WorldCat

Rabitoy, Neil. 1974. "Administrative Organisation and the Bhats of British Gujarat." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 11, no. 1: 46–73.
Google Scholar   WorldCat

Rao, R. Raj, and P. G. Joshi. 2013. "Lakshmi's Story." *Words without Borders*, June.
https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/lakshmis-story.

Reddy, Gayatri. 2005. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226707549.001.0001.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Rodrigues, Hillary. 2003. *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durga Puja with Interpretations*. New York: State University of New York Press.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Rosati, Paolo E. 2020. "*Religions of South Asia.*" *Religions of South Asia* 14, nos. 1–10: 1–2. https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.19632.
Google Scholar   WorldCat

Roy, Jeffrey. 2016. "Translating Hijra into Transgender: Performance and Pehchān in India's Trans-Hijra Communities." *Duke University Press*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3–4: 412–32.
WorldCat

Rushdie, S. 2008. "The Half-Woman God." In *AIDS Sutra: Hidden Stories from India*, edited by Akhavi, N., 109–17. Anchor: Random.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Sankaracarya. 1958. *The Saundaryalahari or Flood of Beauty*. Trans. William Norman Brown. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Saran, Prem. 2008. *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanariswara: Individuality, Wellbeing and Gender in Tantra*. London: Routledge.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Saria, Vaibhav. 2021. *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Shastri, J. L., G. P. Bhatt, and G. V. Tagare. 2003. *The Brahmananda Purana: V. 22, Pt. 1: Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Sheikh, Samira. 2010. *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders, and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200–1500*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar   Google Preview   WorldCat   COPAC

Shin, Jae Yun.  2016. "Searching for Kāmrūpa: Historiography of the Early Brahmaputra Valley in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Period." *Journal of the Directorate of Archaeology & Museums* 1: 115–32.
Google Scholar        WorldCat

Srinivas, M. Narasimhachar.  1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Tagare, G. V.  1958. *Lalitopakhyana*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Tambs-Lyche, Harald.  1997. *Power, Profit and Poetry: Traditional Society in Kathiawar, Western India*. Delhi: Monohar.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan.  2015. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Urban, Hugh B.  2009. *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*. London: I.B. Tauris.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

Urban, Hugh B.  2011. "The Womb of Tantra: Goddesses, Tribals, and Kings in Assam." *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 4, no. 3: 231–47. https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hir034.
Google Scholar        WorldCat

White, David Gordon.  1995. "The Ocean of Mercury: An Eleventh-Century Alchemical Text." In *Religions of India in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr., 281–87. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

White, David Gordon.  2000. *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Google Scholar        Google Preview        WorldCat        COPAC

# Notes

1    The notion of *reclaiming* was first brought in a casual conversation during fieldwork. Over the years of my research, I have come to agree with the kinnars.

2    Kāmākhyā's history surpasses most of the shrines in eastern India. It is difficult to date the temple's historical origins, but, based on sculptures and the oldest architectural stratum, there must have been temples at this cite in the seventh century, with a larger temple complex from the Pāla dynasty (c. 750–1162) (Bernier 1997: 23). This chapter exclusively focuses on the Hijṛās. Historic and present-day scholarship on the rituals, tantric traditions, and politics of power surrounding the Kāmākhyā temple is not included in this chapter. The work of scholars like Hugh Urban (2009), Irene Majo Garigliano (2015), Jae Yun Shin (2016), Sundari Johansen Hurwitt (2019), and Paolo E. Rosati (2020), should be consulted to arrive at a better understanding of the place and its relevance in the larger space of Śākta tantra.

3    Agender, androgyne, bigender, butch, cisgender, genderfluid, gender queer, nonbinary, omnigender, transgender, and so on.

4    Not every family gives up their children, the same way not every gender fluid individual joins the hijṛā household.

5    Hossain (2020: 36) highlights that in Bangladesh, instead, people view the hijṛā practice of emasculation as a fraud, since a real hijṛā is an individual who is born with missing or ambiguous genitals (i.e., intersex).

6    It is celibacy in the sense the hijṛā having removed the penis will no longer use the organ for any kind of penetration.

7    Hybrid identities are not new to the subcontinent. David White writes about Nath siddhas having Persian names when interacting with Muslims or in Muslim areas and Sanskrit names when around Hindus (Donald Lopez 1995).

8    "Purely Hindu" is a relatively new and particularly problematic especially in the rise of Hindu nationalism and bolderization of Hindu identities in present-day India.

9

10

11   I appreciate Aaron Ullrey for providing deeper insights into the term, especially the slave aspects.

12   Vallabha Bhatta in the eighteenth century authored *Anand No Garbo,* "Song of the Bliss" in Gujrati. He uses the term *vyandhal*, which may be translated as impotent or the one who's neither a man nor woman. Present-day hijṛās in the state of Gujrat often cite the poet and his representation of the term.

13   Yaksha, also spelled yakṣa, Sanskrit masculine singular yakṣa, Sanskrit feminine singular yakṣī or yakṣīnī, in the mythology of India, a class of generally benevolent but sometimes mischievous, capricious, sexually rapacious, or even murderous nature spirits who are the custodians of treasures that are hidden in the earth and in the roots of trees. They are powerful magicians and shape shifters.

14   Males are singers and females are dancers.

15   It is worth noting that followers of Adi Shankara over time become proponents of a more traditional view of the Hindu religion and the Hindu *way of life*, which is becoming politicized at a rapid pace.

16   *Maṇḍaleśvara* or *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara in Sanskrit* are masculine terms. But in the context of the Kinnar Akhāṛā, the terms are being used by and for transwomen. While they take on female pronouns, with regard to the term the kinnars are not using long ending of ā or ī or even inī. This too possibly is indicative of lack of knowledge of Sanskrit as was seen with the term *Kinnar*.

17   The author also acknowledges that some of the practices may be used for certain predesired outcomes and not necessarily liberation. For example, the *ṣaṭkarman* rituals. The "six results" (*ṣaṭkarman*) in Hindu magic rituals are *śānti* (tranquilizing), *vaśīkaraṇa* (subjugating), *stambhana* (immobilizing), *mohana* (bewildering), *vidveṣana* (dissent), *uccāṭana* (eradicating), *ākarṣaṇa* (attracting), and *mārana* (murder). These too fall in the larger arch of Tantra.

18   There is not a singular all-encompassing devī. There is a divine female energy, many big goddesses, and innumerable small goddesses.

19   There is some ambiguity around who brought the *mūrti*. Some people believe that someone from Kāmākhyā went to the South of India and brought the *mūrti* and others state that someone from South India brought the *mūrti* sometime between 1996 and 2000. There are no records of this *mūrti* being donated. Having said that, several temple records for some unknown reason are missing, especially in the 2015–2016-time frame. There are all kinds of speculations around the reasons for the missing documents.

20   The *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* also gives different names to girls of different age: two-year-old is Kumārī, three-year-old is Trimurti, four-year-old Kalyāṇī, five-year-old is Rohiṇī, and so forth. Girls above the age of ten are "not allowed in all ceremonies" (Mukherjee 2016: 152). In Kāmākhyā, however, the names are different, and the *kumārī pūjā* can be performed until the age of sixteen, as long as the girl is prepubescent. In Kāmākhyā, the names used from one- to sixteen-year-old are (1) Sandhyā, (2) Sarasvatī, (3) Tridhāmūrtī, (4) Kālīkā, (5) Subhagā, (6) Umā, (7) Mālinī, (8) Kubjikā, (9) Kālasaundarbhā, (10) Aparājitā, (11) Rudrāṇī, (12) Bhairavī, (13) Mahālakṣmī, (14) Pīṭhanāyikā, (15) Kṣetrajñā, and (16) Ambikā.

21   *Pañcamakāra* or *pañca tattva* are the five essentials of the left-hand Tantra ritual: *madya* (wine), *māṃsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (sacred hand gestures), and *maithuna* (ritualized sexual union).

22   Kinnars would visit the temple during various festivals before 2016. But they kept a low-key profile and were not seen in a large organized group and/or made their presence felt.

23   A group who are traditional genealogists and recordkeepers all over Gujarat and Rajasthan.

24   *Tragu* is the ritual self-mutilation or suicide practiced by Charans to place the curse of the goddess on someone. On the importance of *tragu* in Saurashtra see Tambs-Lyche (1997). The sacral power of genealogist groups such as the Charans

and Bhats to guarantee transactions continued to be used in the early nineteenth century (see Rabitoy 1974: 46–73).

25    Sheikh tells us that "Pavaiya" is a Gujarati word for eunuchs, and that it is synonymous with "hijada" in Hindi. The traditional link between Pavaiyas and the shrine of Bahucarā is recorded in the 1961 census We also know that the king of Champaner's son was impotent, and that the king dedicated his son to the worship of Bahucarā (Sheikh 2010: 98).

26    *Yuga* is the cycle of four world ages, *catur-yuga*: *Krita (Satya) Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dvapara Yuga*, or *Kali Yuga*. *Kali Yuga* began 5,122 years ago and has 426,878 years left as of 2021 C.E. By this calculation *Kali Yuga* will end in the year 428,899 C.E.

27    The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had created a havoc in India. As of January 2022, the Ujjain *Kinnar Akhāṛā* are hopeful of the *yajña* taking place in 2022.

28    This claim needs to be further researched and, possibly, ritual texts and other ritual specialists should be consulted.