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## Abstract

Through an 18-month ethnographic study conducted with *hijras* (gender non-conforming people assigned male at birth), newly emerging transwomen, and Dosti, a large NGO in Bangalore, India, this dissertation argues that transgender women claim citizenship by drawing distinct borders between themselves and *hijras* and positioning *hijras* as undeserving of the rights of citizenship, thus bolstering their own citizenship claims. This exploration of gender non-conforming people's citizenship claims in the global South responds to a call for queer studies scholars to consider how citizenship operates among sexual and gender variant people in global South contexts (Richardson 2017). While the identity rubric of transgender is increasingly adopted by individuals in the global South, there is limited research about the empowering and disempowering effects of these identity shifts (Dutta & Roy 2014: 498). By analyzing transwomen's citizenship claims, my research illustrates the ways that "publics are seduced into viewing some as less than human and come to consent to their banishment from this category and its benefits" (Haritaworn 2015: 129). Though this dissertation focuses primarily on transwomen's efforts to distinguish themselves from *hijras* as a way to claim citizenship, there are many other sexual minority groups who seek to distance themselves from *hijras*, including even *hijras*. Drawing on current debates about the concept and value of citizenship from scholars in queer studies and feminist studies, I argue that transgender women participate in forms of "murderous inclusions" in order to demand their citizenship rights (Haritaworn et al. 2013).

My research emphasizes the changing structures of *hijra* groups and other social transformations that have made it possible for transwomen to claim citizenship. For sexual minorities striving to claim the rights of citizenship, the possibility of obtaining citizenship compels the more privileged in the group to draw dividing lines between sexual minorities and gender non-conforming people who deserve citizenship and those who are undeserving of citizenship (Dutta 2012). As a newly emerging identity that is often confused with the *hijra* identity, transwomen are especially keen to emphasize the distinctions between their legitimate claims to citizenship and *hijras*, whom they position as unfeminine, disreputable and necessarily outside of the boundaries of legitimate citizenship. Transwomen's newfound chance to engage in office employment via NGOs offers them a salient way to position themselves in contradistinction to *hijras*, who engage in soliciting money and sex work. NGO characterizations of *guru/chela* relationships as "against human rights" further bolster transwomen's citizenship claims that operate via the exclusion of *hijras*. While I present evidence of a series of activist projects that do not necessarily seek inclusion into normative citizenship (West 2014) via the exclusion of others, this dissertation ultimately argues that by aspiring to become citizens, transwomen have reinforced the exclusion of *hijras*, thus, this form of inclusion is "murderous" (Haritaworn et al. 2013). My analysis is aligned with Brandzel (2016), Spade (2015) and Haritaworn (2013 & 2015), among others, who assert that citizenship operates as an exclusionary category and should therefore be understood as antithetical to social justice struggles.

***“I am Not a Hijra’: Transwomen Claiming Citizenship in South India”***

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Dissertation submitted in partial requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

In South India, historically recognized groups of *hijras* (gender non-conforming people assigned male at birth with ritual status in South Asia devotional traditions) are undergoing important changes as younger *hijras* curtail their participation in these groups and younger gender non-conforming people increasingly elect not to join the *hijras*, instead identifying themselves as “independent” transgender women. Despite the fact that the identity rubric of transgender is increasingly being adopted by individuals in the global South, there is limited research about the empowering and disempowering aspects of these identity shifts (Dutta & Roy 2014: 498). This dissertation examines the social processes that enabled the emergence of transgender women in South India and the ways that transgender women claim citizenship. This exploration of gender non-conforming people’s citizenship claims in the global South responds to a call for queer studies scholars to consider how citizenship operates among sexual and gender variant people in global South contexts (Richardson 2017). Key questions this work engages with are: What is the process that has enabled transwomen to emerge as a new identity? What kinds of identity work do transwomen engage in to make their citizenship claims? How is this process impacted by changes in *hijra* communities and how are these processes narrated by observers? What is the impact of NGO-led sexual rights activism on the emergence of the transwoman and on the transformation of *hijra* groups? While my argument focuses on the citizenship rights transwomen claim, as the foil to which transwomen favorably compare themselves, *hijras* feature prominently in this story. Drawing on current debates about the efficacy of employing citizenship as a concept in social justice struggles by feminist and queer studies scholars, this dissertation offers an ethnographically-grounded study demonstrating the process through which

emerging transwomen claim citizenship. I argue that transwomen claim citizenship by drawing clear boundaries between themselves and *hijras* and positioning *hijras* as undeserving of the rights of citizenship, thus bolstering their own claims to legitimate citizenship. Thus, transwomen stake their citizenship claims over and against the figure of the *hijra*, whose limited access to citizenship is unchallenged and thus implicitly supported. This dissertation speaks directly to current debates among feminist and queer studies scholars such as Brandzel (2016), Haritaworn (2015), Spade (2015) and West (2014), among others, who question the use of citizenship as a concept within social justice struggles, debating whether citizenship functions as a mechanism of exclusion that is antithetical to social justice or if it is a troubled concept that might usefully be rehabilitated. Through an ethnographically grounded account situated in the global South, this research highlights the exclusionary processes involved in claiming citizenship for gender and sexual non-conforming people, thus offering supporting evidence that citizenship claims for some operate alongside exclusion for others.

### *Transwomen Waiting for a Chance*

See, ever since I was five or six years old, I knew that I was something else, something *different*. I used to dress up as if I'm a female, in my sister's clothes. I used to put makeup on and all that; and I *knew* that I was different. So I was waiting for a chance. Actually, I didn't know that there is [the ability to get] castration or that you can grow up to be a woman one day. I used to pray to God every day, saying, "please, I'll go to sleep tonight and tomorrow morning, I want to wake up as a girl." And I got *lots* of beatings from my parents, asking, "Why do you dress up like this? Why do you behave like a girl? Why do you *do* this?!"...I was just waiting for a chance. [emphasis in original]

--Mariamma, transwoman in her 50s

In this excerpt from a conversation I had with Mariamma outside of the NGO office where she works part-time, she emphasizes her awareness of her gender non-conforming identity from a young age, which she understood as "different" from her peers. Perceiving no way to navigate



the incompatibility between her desire to dress in women's clothing and her parents' insistence that she present herself as a boy, Mariyamma resorted to prayer, hoping that she might wake up one day to find herself inhabiting a young woman's body. During this time in which she could only wish to express her gender identity, Mariyamma characterizes her younger self as "waiting for a chance."

Though Mariyamma speaks of her personal context, her sense of "waiting for a chance" speaks to an emerging framework of how the advent of the transgender woman is discussed. The chance transwomen have been waiting for is the ability to present themselves according to their gender identity while also claiming the rights of citizenship, which were previously denied to gender non-conforming people and often continue to be denied to *hijras*. Transwomen are certainly not the only sexual minorities who are waiting for a chance to claim citizenship rights. As this dissertation demonstrates, *hijras* also position themselves as waiting for this important chance and, like their transwomen counterparts, *hijras* often seek to distance themselves from the *hijra* identity, perceiving that it offers them a reduced chance to claim the rights associated with citizenship. This dissertation clarifies the social processes that have produced this chance that transwomen have been waiting for, enabling them to make citizenship claims as gender non-conforming people. These processes include: the efforts by NGOs to ensure civil citizenship rights for gender and sexual non-conforming people, the uneven incorporation of *hijras* into sexual minority groups and concomitant processes of distancing and exclusion, the narration of the transformation of *hijra* groups in terms of the "choice" now available to transwomen, transwomen's claims to legitimate social citizenship by differentiating themselves from *hijras*, whose status as undeserving of social citizenship rights remains unchallenged and NGOs' use of human rights discourses to construct *hijra* gurus as outside the boundaries of citizenship.

### ***Setting of the Project***

This dissertation is part of a larger project based upon ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for 18 months between 2009 and 2014 with groups of *hijras*, transgender woman, transgender men, lesbians, and staff members of Dosti, a large, internationally funded activist NGO in the South Indian city of Bangalore. Initially, I set out to understand how sexual rights advocacy (particularly via NGOs) was impacting identities and relationships within both newly emerging and more established sexual minority groups. I became interested in working with Dosti because they are one of the only sexual rights groups in India that specifically aligns itself with the struggles of working-class and Dalit (oppressed caste) people. During my first two summer-long stints of fieldwork, my attention was drawn to the major changes occurring within *hijra* groups, NGO characterizations of these changes, and to the hardening divisions between NGO-affiliated transgender women and *hijras*. I became increasingly curious about the emergence of the transwoman identity, particularly due to the overlaps between these groups, since people who take on this identity have often been part of *hijra* groups at one time and those who have not would very likely have joined the *hijras* before the advent of the transwoman. Questions that guided my investigation include: What makes the transwoman identity compelling and desirable to (particularly younger) gender non-conforming people? What social changes prompted the “chance” transwomen were waiting for? How has the emergence of the transwoman reconfigured understandings of *hijra* identity and practices? What is the relationship between the emergence of the transwoman and the major shifts occurring within *hijra* relationships and group organization? How are sexual rights NGOs implicated in these changing individual and group identities?

### *Sexual Minority Activism in India*

By the time I began my fieldwork in 2009, the sexual minority/LGBT movement in India had a strong and growing presence in media and rallies and protests connected to the movement were visible in major cities. While a smattering of activist and support-oriented organizations focusing on non-normative sexuality were active in India from the 1980s, a large amount of groups focusing on sexuality and queer rights emerged in the 1990s (Puri 2017; Shah 2014; Dave 2012; Dutta 2012; Gass 2012; Narrain & Bhan 2006; Elovarthi 2006; PUCL-K 2004). These groups wrote and circulated publications throughout India and internationally, and they created spaces in which participants could question heteronormativity and discuss non-heterosexual sexualities (Shah 2014; Dave 2012; Dutta 2012; Gass 2012; Narrain & Bhan 2006; Elovarthi 2006; PUCL-K 2004). These groups emerged partly as a result of economic reforms connected to liberalization that increased the amounts of international funding for development and social justice work and simultaneously prompted the Indian state to recede from service provision and advocacy, making way for the non-governmental sector (NGOs) to fill this void and advocate for marginalized groups. These funding flows connected to liberalization circulate through NGOs and offer important opportunities for a small subset of sexual minorities whose working class backgrounds would otherwise block them from accessing the benefits of neoliberal reforms. By the early 2000s, a large group of well-connected sexual rights-focused organizations ran help lines, wrote and circulated newsletters, provided health resources, and offered social spaces for sexual minorities in major metropolises and in some smaller cities as well (Shah 2014; Dave 2012; Dutta 2012; Gass 2012; Narrain & Bhan 2006; Elovarthi 2006; PUCL-K 2004).

Dosti staff members point out that there is a “class culture” that colonizes most spaces in urban India where non-heterosexual people congregate to socialize and access support systems. Because of anxieties around social class status within these spaces, working class people would not feel comfortable entering such places and it is expected that, likewise, middle class people would feel discomfort at the presence of working class people. An elite class status can also function as a buffer for discrimination due to sexuality, which working class people are less equipped to protect themselves from (Vanita 2005: 39-40). Working class people also have limited access to education, so they cannot usually speak English or Hindi, which are the languages that (middle class) LGBT magazines and newsletters are printed in, so these resources are usually unavailable to them. The inability to speak English fluently also means that working class people have less access to information about sexuality and gender identity issues through the internet, foreign media, books, etc. that middle class people can often access.

### *Dosti*

Dosti was initially started in 1999 as a resource center and archive space where people could go to learn about and discuss sexual minority issues in South India. The small group of middle-class activists who started Dosti initially knew very little about the experiences of *hijras* and other working class sexual minorities. As a report conducted on violence against transpeople in Bangalore explains, “Dosti’s support base was initially drawn from social activists and sexuality minorities from English-speaking backgrounds, and they hardly had any contacts with [working class] *kothis*, *hijras*, and transgender sex workers” (PUCL-K 2004: 61). In the process of documenting cases of abuse against sexual minorities, Dosti participants began to uncover and raise awareness about how discrimination due to sexuality is compounded by other axes of

identity such as class, caste, gender, religion, ability, etc. Dosti's middle class participants began to assert the importance of reaching out to working class sexual minorities. As one of Dosti's founding members, Manjunath, explains,

As we have started working, something has become very clear. Our focus shifted to working class people because we realized that if you're a local language-speaking, working class person, then the kind of violence you face, the kind of isolation you face is very different (Gender Talents 2013).

Since realizing that the experiences of working class sexual minorities deserve special attention and advocacy, Dosti made efforts to reach out to working class people, which meant that they were increasingly in contact with *hijras* and other feminine presenting gender non-conforming people. Part of these outreach efforts in the early 2000s included hiring two *hijra* staff members and a few *kothis* (working class men with “feminine characteristics” and a feminine gender presentation), in the hopes that these staff members might link the organization with working class groups of sexual minorities. Their efforts led to a small group of *kothis* and *hijras* who did not speak English meeting weekly in the Dosti office for what would later be known as the very popular and highly-attended “Sunday Meetings,” which began around February 2002. It was around this time that Dosti began to identify itself with the struggles of working class sexual minorities and the desire by Dosti participants to reach out to working class groups meant that they had increasing contacts with *hijra* groups. Dosti's advocacy for the citizenship rights of *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people is discussed in detail in chapter one.

### *Hijras*

*Hijras* are easily the most visible group of working class sexual and gender non-conforming people in India and there are records of their existence in South Asia from at least 300 years ago

(Reddy 2005; Nanda 1990). *Hijras* are most often male-assigned gender non-conforming people who leave their families in their teenage years (usually due to abuse for their gender expression and/or sexuality) and came to live and work with others “like them” in *hijra* groups that, as many people explained, existed “outside” (because they were excluded from) the “general society.” In some parts of North India, *hijras* earn respect for their supposed asexuality and they can expect to earn considerable sums of money by performing at special functions such as festivals, weddings, births of sons, and other important occasions. This option is less available to *hijra* groups in South India<sup>1</sup>, whose options for earning money tend to be restricted to soliciting money and sex work. Estimates on the numbers of *hijras* in India are highly varied. In Bangalore, the most reliable estimate of 2,000 *hijras* is also by now quite dated (PUCL-K 2004). Estimates of the amount of *hijras* and transpeople living in the state of Karnataka vary from 7,000 to 30,000 (Nagarajan 2014; *The Hindu* July 13, 2013). According to census data, there are 4.9 lakh (4,900,000) people identifying as “third gender” throughout India, though activists express reservations that the actual number is several times higher (Nagarajan 2014). While NGOs and their affiliated activists tend to collapse *hijras* into the sexual minority category, this is a group that is marginalized due to their gender presentation and identity as well as for their perceived sexuality. Overall, as chapter two explains, *hijras* tend to be disparaged within the “general society” due to their poverty, their supposed dirtiness (Hinchy 2014), their association with gender and sexual deviance and their generally marginal status.

The word *hijra* is an Urdu-Hindustani word that is used to describe this group of people throughout India (Opler 1960), though local and regional words to describe *hijras* are gaining currency, as chapter two details. Opler asserts that the predominant meaning of *hijra* is

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<sup>1</sup> with the exception of the South Indian city of Hyderabad, where some *hijras* earn money through ritual performances known as *badhai* (Reddy 2005).

“hermaphrodite” or someone born with ambiguous genitals; however, the word also has connotations of “impoten[ce]” and it generally “implies a physical defect impairing the sexual functions” (1960: 507). Especially in North India, there was a prevalent myth that children who were born with intersex variations belong with *hijra* groups, so some parents of children born with ambiguous genitals would take their children to the nearest *hijra* group to be raised and cared for by them. During my fieldwork, I heard stories about some older *hijras* in North India who had been part of the group since they were children and had recently undergone genetic testing in which they were diagnosed as having intersex variations. However, the number of intersex *hijras* is expected to be very low in comparison to the large numbers of male-assigned *hijras*.

Among non-*hijras* in India, *hijras* are often interpreted as embodying a multitude of sexual and gender non-normative characteristics. In terms of public opinion, they are “varyingly seen as eunuchs, transsexuals, [and] effeminate men” (Puri 2010: 40). During my fieldwork, two lesbian women explained that for their conservative elder family members, *hijras* still represent all people who transgress sexual and gender boundaries. As Sukshma explained, “when we first told [our family] that we're lesbians, we're living together, spend[ing] our lives together...the elder folks said, ‘is this similar to being a *hijra*?’”

As a result of their social exclusion and marginalization, *hijras* often live collectively in kinship-based group residences known in Bangalore as *hamams*. It is believed that *hijra* systems of collective living were collectively decided upon “out of a deep understanding of public violence, discrimination, and vulnerability” faced by gender non-conforming people (Semmalar 2014: 287). These systems of group living are organized around the relationships of *guru* (teacher or mother) and *chela* (disciple or daughter). Through their kinship relationships and

their collective social organization, *hijras* created a “strategy for survival” that enabled them to “live, work and occupy public space together” (Semmlar 2014: 287). *Hijra* life narratives indicate that even with the support of their communities, *hijras*’ financial stability, romantic relationships, and living conditions are often precarious (Reddy 2005). *Hijra* groups have traditionally been organized by the local *jamaat*, a council comprised of *hijra* elders. As Nanda explains, “[t]he *jamaat* is the coming together of the elders to make decisions for the group,” making the *jamaat* similar to a local village council (1990: 41). During the meeting of the *jamaat*, any disputes and other important matters within the group are settled. As this dissertation demonstrates, *hijra* relationships and systems of social organization are currently undergoing a major transition that has not yet been explored in the literature. I trace this process of transformation and its effects on *hijra* groups and transgender women in chapter three.

The first well-known ethnographic study of *hijras*’ life experiences was conducted by Serena Nanda and published in 1990. Nanda’s work was important because her monograph is the first piece of writing published in the United States that examined *hijras*’ life experiences through a lens that did not focus on their supposed “deviance,” instead presenting *hijras* in a sympathetic light. At the time, there was much scholarly attention being given to “third gender” non-Western characters, who were positioned as challengers to the Western binary gender system. Outside of India, *hijras* have been hailed as figures that “stand for ‘the Indian homosexual’ in compendia of cross-cultural sex” (Cohen 1995: 279) and they are “the most frequently encountered figures in the narrative linking of India with sexual difference” (Reddy 2005: 2). Nanda argues that *hijras* represent a third gender category that has no place in binary gender systems, thus the presence of *hijras* illustrates that binary gender systems do not exist in India (1990). Lawrence Cohen (1995) unequivocally calls for a more nuanced account of *hijra* experiences that “locates the



body within a multiplicity of differences” and does not reify *hijras* as third sex individuals (1995: 295). Cohen takes issue with the fact that “[h]ijra voices in Nanda’s ethnography present themselves as having always been essentially *hijra*” (Cohen 1995: 295), in order to point out that researchers must be attentive to the politics of representation when soliciting life stories from *hijras*.

Gayatri Reddy’s (2005) study is partly a response to these debates and it deals centrally with exploring the relation of *hijras* to the gender binary. She argues against analyses of *hijras* that reproduce *hijra* lives as “merely metonymic, non-Western figures for an analysis of gender fluidity,” instead asserting the importance of contextualizing *hijra* lives by focusing on “the embeddedness of sexuality within other arenas of everyday life” (Reddy 2005: 33). Reddy found that the *hijras* she interacted with “did not always identify themselves as third-sexed individuals in opposition to a binary framework” (Reddy 2005: 32). While her participants displayed various “accouterments of femininity,” they “did not unequivocally think of themselves as women” (Reddy 2005: 134). Her research indicates that *hijras* “sometimes adopted cultural symbols that were either feminine or a combination of masculine and feminine, rather than identifying themselves as ‘neither man nor woman’” (Reddy 2005: 32).

*Hijras* are often imagined within sexual rights activism under the global rubric of transgender popularized through HIV/AIDS interventions, though, as my research indicates, there are increased efforts to differentiate between transgender women and *hijras*. In official state and NGO documents, the term transgender is even often used primarily to refer to *hijras* (Dutta & Roy 2014: 329). Research by Aniruddha Dutta (2012; 2013; 2014) has explored the splintering of sexual minority identities and the increasingly hardening differences between these identities that are related to imperatives of HIV/AIDS projects in the context of West Bengal. Dutta’s

research emphasizes how, in practice, *hijra* groups have included a variety of male-assigned sexual minority and gender variant people, yet with the increasing imperative by NGOs to split these groups along the “MSM[Men who have Sex with Men]-transgender divide,” there are “wide-ranging and divisive effects on organizations and communities that in practice have been flexibly overlapping” (2012: 2). They note the emergence of the *hijra* category as a “seemingly consolidated, bounded and distinct identit[y]” that had previously been less rigid (2012: 829). The *hijra* thus “becomes a more bounded term” (Dutta 2012: 829) and “who can identify as a *hijra* becomes more circumscribed at the level of official [NGO and government] discourse, and potentially, lived reality” (Dutta 2012: 831). These contestations around male-assigned gender and sexual non-conforming identities are the backdrop in which *hijra* communities undergo major transformations and transwomen identities emerge to stake their claims for citizenship.

### *Transgender Women*

Throughout India, there are increasingly visible groups of male-assigned feminine-presenting individuals who identify themselves as “transgender” women. Transgender women position themselves as “independent” from *hijra* groups, meaning that they do not live in *hamams* with their *gurus* or mother figures, though they often have connections with *hijra* groups. Many transwomen over the age of 30 during my fieldwork period told me they had identified as *hijras* at some point in their lives. I even occasionally met “independent” transwomen who do not reside in *hamams*, yet they maintain relationships with their *gurus*, other members of their *hijra* families and consider themselves as part of *hijra* groups to some degree.

The term transgender was spread to gender and sexual non-conforming groups and then mainstream discourse only in the 1990s through HIV/AIDS interventions (Valentine 2007). As

Dutta and Roy (2014) argue, “[T]ransgender, in itself, need not be perceived as exogenous or foreign” to the Indian context (323). As is the case with “other seemingly foreign terms such as *lesbian* or *gay*, *transgender* has been found by many to be a suitable word for expressing who they are” (Dutta & Roy 2014: 323). Indeed, as a post colony, “hybrid postcoloniality” underlies much of “Indian culture,” thus, the identification with the term transgender should not be interpreted as “inauthentic” (Dutta & Roy 2014: 323). As Dutta notes, “existing literature in transgender studies has largely not explored the potentially both empowering and marginalizing effects of the adoption of ‘transgender’ in the global South” (Dutta 2013: 498), a challenge that this dissertation takes up in the context of South India.

Like other male-assigned sexual minorities, transwomen report harassment and abuse in educational institutions and workplaces, including, in many cases, multiple assailant sexual violence. It is therefore difficult for visibly gender non-conforming people to complete their education and secure employment in a job where they do not face harassment and abuse. These problems are evidenced in the fact that the majority of transpeople I interacted with had not completed 11<sup>th</sup> standard (a grade in high school). While it would be inaccurate to state that all visibly gender non-conforming people are working class, there are structural reasons that block transpeople from accessing the same opportunities that cisgender people can access. Indeed, while speaking to psychologists and physicians who are part of the medicalized process of obtaining gender affirmation surgery in hospitals, I learned that they have been performing surgeries and/or diagnoses of various kinds of “gender identity disorder” for “regular people” (meaning non-*hijras* and people from middle-class backgrounds) for at least 30 years. It is believed that gender non-conforming people from upper-middle class and elite backgrounds do

not visibly assert their identities due to concerns over losing access to inheritance and other forms of financial and familial support (Semmalar 2014: 287).

The majority of transgender women I interacted with are connected in some way to sexual rights NGOs and many have been NGO employees at some point. As this dissertation argues, a salient reason the (working class) transwoman identity emerges is through the opportunity for gender non-conforming people to obtain respectable employment through NGOs, as opposed to soliciting money and sex work. While the amount of people who obtain paid positions at NGOs is very small in relation to the estimated number of *hijras* (not to mention other gender non-conforming people) in Bangalore, these transwomen are highly visible through various kinds of media, where they often discuss their identities, thus impacting public perceptions about transgenderism and possibilities for gender non-conforming people in India.

As a newly emerging identity, transgender women undertake identity work to raise awareness and promote particular understandings of their identities. Indeed, as Valentine (2007) points out, the term transgender is a strikingly recent addition to the spectrum of sexual and gender non-conforming identities, even in countries like the US where it is now part of common parlance. In India, like in the US and other countries, the category of transgender is connected to HIV/AIDS interventions conducted through NGOs, as explained in chapter one. Transwomen are notably keen to distance themselves from their perceived association with *hijras*. A salient aspect of the identity work undertaken by transwomen involves articulating (and thus reifying) the differences between themselves and *hijras*, the group with whom they are most likely to be confused. Transwomen are often insistent on clarifying the boundaries between themselves and *hijras*, indicating that there are high stakes involved in being interpreted as a transwomen, as opposed to a *hijra*. Amidst claims for the rights of gender non-conforming people prevalent in

NGO-led sexual rights activism, transwomen seek to claim such rights for themselves. Considering the marginal status of *hijras*, transwomen's desire to differentiate themselves from this group is partly about avoiding the pervasive stigma associated with *hijras*. In spite of Dosti's efforts to ensure the civil citizenship rights that would offer gender non-conforming people (especially *hijras*) equal protection before the law discussed in chapter one, *hijras* continue to suffer social exclusion even within sexual minority groups, as discussed in chapter two. While NGO-led activism has made advances in the struggle for the civil citizenship rights of *hijras*, their claim to social citizenship is tenuous at best. In order to lay their claim to social citizenship rights, transwomen juxtapose themselves with *hijras*, thus positioning themselves as respectable legitimate citizens, while leaving unchallenged the assumption that *hijras* do not fall within the parameters of legitimate citizenship.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE: CITIZENSHIP**

Citizenship as a concept has roots in philosophical and political traditions emphasizing "individual rights and obligations" as well as "belonging and participation in political communities" (Siim 2000). Over the last 30 years, there has been a proliferation of scholarship on citizenship (Brandzel 2016; Erel 2010; Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010; Cossman 2007; Bell & Binnie 2000). This scholarly emphasis has moved the analysis of citizenship from political theorizing toward a broader, more interdisciplinary framework (Brandzel 2016: 16; Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010; Cossman 2007; Bell & Binnie 2000; Lister 1998). Citizenship has been studied through "scales as divergent as transnational, national, local/community-oriented, and even interpersonal practices" (Brandzel 2016: 16).

The multiple dimensions of citizenship range from “civic participation to legal protections to broader notions of cultural citizenship emphasizing the importance of belonging and recognition” (Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010: 16). Belonging is a salient part of the affective experience of citizenship, as it implies a sense that one enjoys “full membership” in the group and the opportunity to affect “basic decisions” impacting the group, thus enabling an “ability to influence one’s destiny” (Rosaldo 1994: 402). Thus, citizenship comprises “more than a single legal status; it is a richer mix of legal status, the ability to have access to formal protections in daily life, and inclusion in civic and social life” (Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010: 14). Access to these varied dimensions of citizenship are thought to encourage a “sense of belonging and active participation” in the group or society (Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010: 16). The diverse array of literature on citizenship offers varying approaches to conceptualizing the many dimensions of citizenship and how they impact lived experiences, ranging from analyzing social policy to finding a balance between individualism and communalism to assertions of group rights and belonging (The Gender and Cultural Citizenship Working Group 2008: 6; see also Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010).

Despite this growing attention, citizenship as a concept remains contested (Brandzel 2016; Balibar 2015; Landolt & Goldring 2013; Siim 2000; Lister 1998). Scholars caution that conceptions of citizenship are forged within particular social and political contexts and are dependent upon specific historical legacies (Turner 1992 cited in Siim 2000: 1). Beginning with the scholarship written in the 1990s, there was an increasing recognition and questioning of the efficacy of a category that relied on the nation-state in a time when national borders were becoming increasingly permeable (Lister 1997; Siim 2000). While there is fundamental disagreement on “the nature of citizenship” in the citizenship literature, in a broad sense, it

generally refers to a sense of “membership” (Cossman 2007: 5). Bryan Turner has helpfully defined citizenship as “a set of practices which constitute individuals as competent members of a community” (Cossman 2007: 5). In this dissertation, I understand citizenship as a social and legal status that enables access to tangible things like rights and protection and to access less tangible (but equally important) things like social acceptance and belonging, both of which can enable disenfranchised groups to live more liveable lives.

In order to trace the ways that transwomen’s citizenship claims have been advanced, I draw on the influential work of T.H. Marshall, a British sociologist writing in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marshall conceived of citizenship as comprised of three key elements: “political citizenship,” referring to the ability to participate in political systems through practices such as voting, “civil citizenship,” which refers to the protection of the rights conferred on citizens and emphasizes the rule of law and equality before the law, and finally, “social citizenship,” which refers to the idea that all citizens should have access to a basic level of socio-economic well-being that would enable their full and equal participation in the society of which they are citizens (Marshall 1950 cited in Gordon-Zolov & Rogers 2010: 14). As Siim (2000) has pointed out, the ability to access civil and political citizenship and the degree to which one can access social citizenship are related, particularly for marginalized groups. Breaking citizenship into these three key elements allows for a more specific understanding of how and why transwomen have made citizenship claims premised on the exclusion of *hijras*. Due to space constraints, I do not discuss *hijras*’ and transwomen’s struggles for political citizenship<sup>2</sup>. I interpret Dosti’s efforts to

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<sup>2</sup> The struggles of *hijras* and transpeople to obtain voters cards that would enable them to exercise voting rights, as well as other legal documents (such as ration cards, driving licenses, passports, etc.) with their correct names and gender identities are ongoing. However, in 2014, transgender rights advocates won a major victory when the Supreme Court created a new “transgender” category that would be available alongside the categories of female and male for

ensure the civil citizenship of *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people as enabling transwomen to see themselves as deserving of the rights of citizenship. Transwomen's increased access to respectable employment enables them to lay claim to social citizenship, yet their perceived association with *hijras* blocks them from the forms of belonging that social citizenship should enable. Therefore, transwomen emphasize their characteristics that make them legitimate social citizens, while leaving unchallenged the notion that *hijras* are (and perhaps should be) excluded from social citizenship.

### ***Citizenship in India***

Citizenship in the Indian context can best be characterized as “complex and shifting” (Desai & Sanyal 2012: 7). After the formation of independent India, a specific arrangement of civil, political and social rights was codified into the constitution with the goal of creating a secular, socialist and democratic India (Desai & Sanyal 2012: 7). Included are seven “fundamental rights” subject to enforcement by law, which are the rights to: equality, freedom, property, self-determination of religious practice, constitutional and legal remedies, rights against being exploited, as well as cultural and educational rights (Desai & Sanyal 2012: 7). Due to the influence of colonial legacies and more recent economic liberalization programs, among other important transformations since Independence, these fundamental rights are guaranteed in theory more than in practice for most citizens (Desai & Sanyal 2012: 7). Since

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all legal documents. (For a critical perspective on this judgement, please see Dutta 2015.) In 2013, the Election Commission offered an “other” category alongside male and female for the first time and approximately 28,000 people registered themselves as “other” in the 2014 elections (Roberts 2014: 2). In the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, transgender women and *hijras* have gained impressive legal victories, which are detailed in several doctoral theses and dissertations, the most cogent of which is Aaron Samuel's 2015 dissertation entitled *Performing Thirunangai: Activism, Development and Normative Citizenship in Tamil Transgender Performances*.



the 1980s, public-interest litigation and the practice of re-interpreting the Constitution from a perspective emphasizing social justice have increased, making the courts important sites of struggle for marginalized groups (Cassels 1989 cited in Desai & Sanyal 2012: 7). Though these struggles have instituted important legal precedents, they have had less impact on the rights that marginalized groups can actually exercise, causing a disconnect between the formal aspects of citizenship and the degree to which formal citizenship translates to enhanced rights in people's lives (Desai & Sanyal 2012: 7). Like in other countries, while formal citizenship claims to extend the same rights to all citizens, the ability to realize such rights are often predicated on privileges along the axes of class, gender, caste, ethnicity, ability, etc. (Desai & Sanyal 2012: 8).

### *The Influence of Hindu Nationalism*

The rise of Hindu nationalism has impacted notions about who qualifies as an Indian citizen. Hindu nationalism can be considered as a type of cultural nationalism in which religious values and traditions are salient features (Flaten 2016: 4). In its formative stages, Hindu nationalism was influenced by revivalist movements in the late nineteenth century responding to British colonization. Current forms of Hindu nationalism are particularly indebted to the thinking of V.D. Savarkar, a pro-Independence activist who conceived of the ideological scaffolding known as "Hindutva" that is central to current renditions of Hindu nationalism (Katju 2011: 5). In the text *Hindutva*, written in 1923, Savarkar emphasized that "Hindutva" entailed a broader system of practices and beliefs than simply Hinduism, explaining, "Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race" (Savarkar 1923 quoted in Flaten 2016: 4). The ability to construct a "Hindu race" was realized by "continuously

positing a conflict between the ‘Hindu’ and ‘others,’ most notably, the ‘Muslim invader’” (Kapur & Cossman 1996: 2616).

The text *Hindutva* is fundamentally focused on clarifying the characteristics of Hindu-ness and specifically “who a Hindu is” (Flaten 2016: 4). Savarkar proposed three key criteria to differentiate Hindus and non-Hindus, which are: “Rashtra” (common land), “Jati” (common blood) and “Sanskriti” (common culture/civilization) (Savarkar 1923 cited in Wolf 2016: 2). Essentially, to be recognized as a Hindu, a person must be born in India, of Indian (Hindu) parents and they need to have fully accepted and inculcated the supposed culture of Hindus (Wolf 2016: 2). Indian Muslims and Christians who satisfied all other criteria were not included in this definition as part of the nation, since they are necessarily situated outside of Hindu civilization and culture (Flaten 2016: 4; see also Chandoke 1999). As Chandhoke (1999) argues, “if the nation is defined by the fact that the majority belong to the Hindu religion, those who do not subscribe to the religion are not a part of the nation. This is the clear and unambiguous message of Hindutva” (1042). As Wolf (2016) argues, “the puzzle of who is a Hindu must be understood in the context of the definition of which person is a legitimate citizen” (Wolf 2016: 2). Therefore, Indians who are not Hindus are also not legitimate citizens of India.

A recent indication of the connection between being a Hindu and being an Indian citizen involves an amendment proposed in 2016 to India’s citizenship bill, referred to as the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill of 2016, which was one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s promises prior to the 2014 election. This bill would grant citizenship rights to all Hindus fleeing nearby countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Kapur 2017: 1). In 2014, Modi’s BJP claimed itself the “natural home for persecuted Indians” and since then, has granted long-term visas and citizenship to Hindus from Pakistan and Afghanistan (Kapur 2017: 2). While this strategy is

seen by some as an indication that the BJP government is trying to “increase its Hindu voter count” in several key states, as Kapur explains, “the underlying issue [is] clear: the bill is meant to address the BJP’s stated objective of making India the ‘Hindu Homeland’” (Kapur 2017: 2).

Hindu nationalism is also tied to recent economic processes in India, evidenced by the connections between the trajectory of liberalization and the “simultaneous” reinvigoration of Hindutva (Gopalakrishnan 2006: 2803). Following the euphoric optimism of the first 20 years or so of India’s Independence, the country faced harsh economic conditions in which it had to “modify and sometimes abdicate” ideas for projects that had been agreed upon “through historically constituted debates” about the future of the country (Chandoke 1999: 1042). In July 1991, following four decades of protectionist fiscal policy since India gained Independence and in the midst of a “severe fiscal crisis,” Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao announced that the Indian economy would be subjected to reforms (Pandit 2012: 2) that had already begun on a smaller scale in the 1980s. Due to what appeared as an ever-expanding deficit, the Rao administration consented to a loan from the International Monetary Fund, joining many other countries in the global South hoping to take advantage of the opportunities available through neoliberal globalization (Pandit 2012: 2). The liberalization of the Indian economy beginning in the 1980s and formalized in 1991 “intensified India’s encounter with global capital” (Oza 2006: 2) and brought “dramatic social and cultural change that has swept across India” since that time (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2008: 1). Intriguingly, the period leading up to liberalization reforms “was precisely the moment when the project of Hindutva...made its [renewed] appearance on the political stage” (Chandoke 1999: 1042).

In the mid-1990s, a time when the Indian state was consolidating its liberalization programs, the Supreme Court of India delivered a series of judgements in support of the

ideological project of Hindu nationalism. The court ruled that the concept of Hindutva is not necessarily associated with Hindu religious practices, but is instead “a way of life in the subcontinent” (Kapur & Cossman 1996: 2613). Such a ruling is problematic since it “obscure[s] the historical background” and current “political context within which the term has acquired meaning” (Kapur & Cossman 1996: 2616). Critics of these decisions argue that Hindutva is inseparable from its reliance on right-wing interpretations of Hindu religion and from its attack on other religions (Kapur & Cossman 1996: 2615; see also Chandhoke 1999). Indeed, in the courts’ opinion, the term “Hinduism” is understood to reflect “the way of life of the Indian people” (Kapur & Cossman 1996: 2615), thereby equating Hinduism with “the Indian people” as though all Indians are necessarily Hindus. In these rulings, there appears to be legal agreement with the notion that citizens of India are necessarily Hindus.

### *Economic Liberalization and Consumer Citizenship*

In liberalized economies such as such as post-1980s India, scholars emphasize the growing link between the consumer and the citizen (Lukose 2009: 8). In India, nationalist struggles were connected to ideas about consumption since at least the late 1800s (Lukose 2009: 8). For example, the anticolonial *Swadeshi* movement instilled a new nationalist consciousness through “politicizing” the purchase of foreign commodities (Deshpande 2003 cited in Lukose 2009: 8). This movement encouraged the consumption of Indian-made goods, creating an image of “the economy as a locus of production in the service of the nation” (Lukose 2009: 8 citing Deshpande 2003). The reformist and elite middle class, who were the leaders of independent India, promoted the virtues of Indian-made consumption, linking consumption to the project of

independence, and thus connecting consumption to understandings about citizenship within India (Deshpande 2003 cited in Lukose 2009: 8).

In the wake of liberalization, the Indian economy is imagined as “a marketplace of commodities for consumption” that are available for a “cosmopolitan consumer” citizen (Mazarella 2003 cited in Lukose 2009). The notion of consumer citizenship in the context of India has thus shifted from a discourse in which producing and/or consuming Indian-made goods was a marker of patriotism to one in which the citizen is frequently understood “through the notion of a right to consume [from a range of options], a right that must be protected through state action” (Lukose 2009: 8). As Lukose argues, the increasingly tight links between consumption and citizenship have “implications for how citizens negotiate public life within and beyond the boundaries of the elite, nationalist, middle class” (Lukose 2009: 10). Mainstream film industries have also participated in intertwining the projects of liberalization and Hindutva. In the 1990s, a new generation of films appeared that “glorify[ed] consumerism even as they made (Hindu) religion...the core of the definition of Indianness” (Therwath 2010: 9). This view of Indian identity was then “projected and imposed more or less forcefully in order to comply as much with the current governmental ideology as with the market” (Therwath 2010: 9). By examining the ways that changes in *hijra* groups and the emergence of the transwoman are discussed in terms of “choice,” I demonstrate how transwomen are incorporated into the progress narrative of liberalization while they are simultaneously constructed as competent consumer citizens by virtue of their newfound freedom to make choices about their identities and lives.

### ***Citizenship: Feminist and Queer Perspectives***

This dissertation traces the process through which transwomen have come to claim citizenship, yet I am also interested in understanding the effects of transwomen's citizenship claims. I argue that the figure of the *hijra* is central to transwomen's claims for legitimate citizenship, as they juxtapose themselves to her in order to prove their worthiness as citizens. The *hijra* is (purposely) excluded from these citizenship claims, yet she constitutes a central trope through which transwomen claim citizenship. Without such a disreputable figure to favorably compare themselves to, transwomen may face considerably more obstacles in claiming legitimate citizenship.

This evidence that transwomen's ability to claim citizenship is centrally predicated on the exclusion of *hijras* led me to explore feminist and queer studies scholars' reservations about citizenship as an ideological construct and a theoretical concept (Lister 1998; Bell & Binnie 2000; Cossman 2007; Richardson 2015; Brandzel 2016). Many feminist and queer studies scholars have aligned their work with a group of scholars that examines citizenship through a critical lens. Inspired by Michel Foucault's theories of governmentality, these scholars interpret citizenship as "a discourse of self-governance" that "should be interrogated for the way it constitutes its subjects" (Cossman 2007: 4). These scholars do not interpret citizenship as a potentially liberatory ideal so much as "a technology of governance" (Cossman 2007: 5). This dissertation intervenes in recent critical debates on the efficacy of citizenship claims among feminists and queer studies scholars through a nuanced ethnographic study examining the emergence of the transgender woman identity and the related transformation of *hijra* groups in South India.

David Bell and John Binnie (2000), scholars of a field of study termed sexual citizenship, a concept exploring the connection between sexuality (especially non-normative sexuality) and

citizenship, express reservations about the normalizing imperatives of citizenship. They explain, “the twinning of rights with responsibilities in the logic of citizenship is another way of expressing compromise—we will grant you certain rights if (and only if) you match these by taking on certain responsibilities” [emphasis in original] (2000: 3). Like other queer studies scholars after them, Bell and Binnie point to the ways in which “rights claims articulated through appeals to citizenship...demand[] the circumscription of ‘acceptable’ modes of being a sexual citizen,” which in turn “forecloses or denies aspects of sexuality written off as ‘unacceptable’” (2000: 3). Thus, the debate over sexual citizenship recognizes that inclusion into citizenship has often been granted to sexual and gender non-normative people based upon their approximation to heteronormative behaviors and practices (Brandzel 2016: 14; see also Bell & Binnie 2000; Richardson 2015). Bell and Binnie (2000) argue that the normalizing impetus of citizenship means that people are subjected to making “hard choices” to either be incorporated into citizenship through normalizing and disciplining demands for equality and inclusion, or to reject aligning themselves with heteronormativity, which opens them up to discrimination and exclusion as a result of remaining outside of the boundaries of citizenship. Almost two decades later, the most debated aspect of sexual citizenship remains centered around “the potential benefits and burdens of recognition” for people who would identity as non-normative in terms of sexuality and gender (Brandzel 2016: 14).

Despite their suspicion of citizenship, many of these scholars assert that the concept can be rehabilitated in the service of social justice projects. Ultimately, Lister (1998) argues that “as an idea [citizenship] can also provide a potent weapon in the hands of disadvantaged and oppressed groups” (4). Lister argues for “[a] feminist project to (re) appropriate citizenship,” pointing out that participation in such a project does not “imply an uncritical acceptance of its

value as a concept” (Lister 1998: 3). Bell and Binnie (2000) emphasize that “as dangerous as citizenship’s normalizing and disciplining impulses can be, we must leave room for the way power produces and allows for contested spaces, identities, and modes of resistance” (cited in Brandzel 2016: 7).

Other scholars have expressed stronger reservations about the recuperation of citizenship.

As Keating (2015) explains,

As a concept, citizenship is grounded in the assumptions of people’s right to collective self-determination under conditions of freedom and equality. Given the ways that democracy has been imbricated in systems of domination and inequality, however, citizenship as a model of egalitarian political interaction has been deeply restricted and constrained in multiple ways...the subset of people who are understood to be equal before the law and to have the right to participate in decision making has often been limited, either formally or informally, to a select few (Keating 2015: 296).

Here, Keating’s reservations about citizenship center around the presumption of “freedom and equality” for all people, while at the same time, it is clear that these people must operate within unequal and decidedly unfree systems. Similarly, Brandzel (2016) cautions scholars to be mindful of “the complex nature of the violence of normative citizenship” (4).

Unlike earlier feminist and queer studies scholars who have sought to “rehabilitate” citizenship in the service of social justice, Brandzel (2016) interprets citizenship as a concept that is necessarily based on, and bolstered by, inequality, arguing that citizenship cannot exist within conditions of “freedom and equality.” For Brandzel, citizenship is best understood as “an external and internal system of sorting and distributing rights, resources, and most importantly, value, to various types of bodies throughout and across nation-states” (2016: 10). As a social construct and an ideological concept, citizenship “works to create, retain and imbue [itself] with meaning at the direct expense of the noncitizen” (Brandzel 2016: 5). From this perspective, the discriminatory treatment of noncitizens in a given nation-state “is often justified as a means to



safeguard the rights and benefits of citizenship as the exclusive property of recognized citizens” (Brandzel 2016: 10). While Brandzel acknowledges that critical race scholars, feminists and other radical theorists have earnestly articulated the problems with citizenship, she takes issue with the implicit assumption that “citizenship as a practice, ideal, or politics is actually recuperable for social justice projects” (Brandzel 2016: 7). Arguing that “acts of inclusion always work to reify the boundaries and borders of exclusion,” Brandzel points out that anytime a group “argue[s] for their inclusion or social value, they inadvertently and advertently capitalize on discourses that claim some people are legitimately excluded and devalued” (Brandzel 2016: 15).

Writing in agreement with scholars such as Bell and Binnie (2000), Brandzel (2016) argues that “[c]itizenship is, inherently, a normativizing project” (5). Citizenship can thus be characterized as “a project that regulates and disciplines the social body in order to produce model identities” to which all people who wish to be citizens must aspire (Brandzel 2016: 5). Thus, Brandzel (2016) argues that citizenship “set[s] up nonnormative subjects to compete against each other in order to gain the privileged access to citizenship” (Brandzel 2016: 4). While citizenship makes the claim of being “aspirational—to include the excluded eventually,” this can only occur “once they are marked as deserving or human enough” (Brandzel 2016: 4). However, this distinction between those deserving and undeserving of citizenship “is nothing less than an illusion, because according to citizenship, there will always be, *there must be*, (an)Other who experiences the full force of the exclusionary technologies of citizenship” (Brandzel 2016: 6). Since the premise of inclusion “harms many different types of nonnormative citizen-subjects and noncitizen-subjects” (Brandzel 2016: 15), Brandzel cogently asserts that “whenever we work on behalf of citizenship, whenever we strive to including more

types of people under its reign, we inevitably reify the violence of citizenship against nonnormative others” (2016: 5-6).

This questioning of the logics of citizenship follows a recent turn among a group of queer theorists who are aiming to “queer the collective faith in citizenship, belonging, and inclusion” (Brandzel 2016: 27). In a similar vein, Dean Spade (2015) seeks to “expos[e] the limits of formal legal equality” for marginalized groups and particularly for trans communities by emphasizing “the larger question of whether legal recognition and inclusion are felicitous goals” (12). Spade ultimately argues that strategies seeking inclusion (into citizenship) and recognition “threaten to provide nothing more than adjustments to the window-dressing of neoliberal violence that ultimately disserve and further marginalize the most vulnerable” (Spade 2015: 12). Moreover, he argues the language of “universal rights often actually mask and perpetuate the structured conditions of harm and disparity” perpetuated toward groups who ironically employ this language for liberatory purposes (Spade 2015: 10).

Similarly, Jin Haritaworn argues that the process in which sexual minorities and LGBT people are made into citizens “requires an ascent from madness and criminality that is best performed as expertise over those who properly belong segregated” and excluded (2015: 127). In order to secure their place as citizens in need of protection instead of as the kind of people from which respectable citizens must be protected, LGBT and sexual rights groups increasingly rely on a “perpetual (re)invention of a dangerous Other,” who is recognizable through standard characterizations of criminality (Haritaworn 2010). In parts of Europe, this criminalized person is characterized as: “the ‘homophobic Muslim,’ the ‘working-class yob’ or the ‘backward immigrant,’” all of whom are presumed to be homophobic based on their class, religious and/or immigrant status and their homophobic sentiments are assured to manifest through violent and

humiliating acts, from which LGBT people and sexual minorities must be protected (Haritaworn 2010). It is through this characterization of certain people marginalized by their race and/or class as unambiguously “backward” and homophobic that certain race and/or class privileged LGBT people garner state recognition as “respectable, enlightened and worthy sexual citizen[s]” (Lamble 2013: 246; see also Haritaworn 2015 and 2010). The figure of the “dangerous Other” has enabled “the dual emergence of a respectable queer subject who is innocent and worthy of inclusion and recognition, and of a gay-friendly community that is willing to protect it” from dangerous others (Haritaworn 2015: 130). Thus, the respectable sexual minority and/or LGBT citizen can only be produced and recognized via the (re)production of this dangerous other who serves as “a scapegoat for the insecurities and vulnerabilities produced by the contemporary political economic order” (Lamble 2013: 246; see also Haritaworn 2015 & 2010).

Instead of implicitly reifying the logics of inclusion into citizenship, Haritaworn and his coauthors urge scholars to “[m]ov[e] beyond an analysis of citizenship as limited to some and not others,” and instead to “debunk the very move of inclusion—into citizenship, rights and political subjecthood” (Haritaworn et al. 2013). They encourage scholars to ask, “how inclusion can be murderous” by shifting the critical gaze from the promises of inclusion to its necessary violences, as opposed to “taking for granted the incorporation of sexual minorities as a certain pathway to progressive politics” (Haritaworn et al. 2013). Haritaworn and his co-authors argue,

a range of murderous inclusions shape contemporary formations of queer citizenship in various geopolitical locations across the world. By withdrawing the gaze from inclusion’s seductive promises and looking at the deadly outcomes of some forms of inclusion, [we] return[] the focus on those lives and deaths (queer or otherwise) that fall outside of inclusive citizenships and into erasure, violence and abandonment, and subsequently appear not to matter (Haritaworn et al. 2013: 446).

I am especially interested in this emphasis on inclusion as murderous, as a process that often necessitates murder. I understand this “murderous” metaphor to include the murder of

“dangerous others” who were called into being so that respectable sexual minorities and queers could effectively claim citizenship by pointing to the supposed failings of these dangerous others. I also interpret this to mean the murder of those parts of ourselves that must be hidden, silenced and covered up if they do not coincide with the expectations of legitimate citizenship. The inclusion of transwomen into legitimate citizenship has relied centrally on juxtaposing transwomen’s respectability, which marks them as deserving of citizenship, with the disreputability of *hijras*, which rightfully positions them outside of citizenship. I therefore interpret this process as one of murderous inclusion. In differentiating themselves from *hijras*, transwomen must also murder those parts of themselves that are likely to open them up to misrecognition as *hijras*. This impetus to murder parts of themselves that could be associated with *hijras* is evidenced in publicly voiced anxieties about the participation of *hijras* and those who behave in ways marked as *hijra*-like in Queer Pride events and it also includes the murder of those parts of themselves that found solace, companionship and family among *hijra* groups, since their connections to *hijras* are often elided.

This recent turn toward questioning the logics of citizenship and processes of inclusion for sexual minority and LGBT groups has been challenged by other queer studies scholars, such as Isaac West (2014), who argues against the dismissal of citizenship for sexual and gender dissidents. While acknowledging that authors such as Brandzel “are correct in the sense that there are some LGBTs who employ discourses of normalcy without any reflection on what that means and/or they want to assimilate into the dominant norms of citizenship,” he points out that “it does not follow that *all* LGBTs necessarily align themselves with assimilationist attitudes” (West 2014: 32). West argues that scholars “cannot make sweeping generalizations about the experience of citizenship” (2014: 28), instead suggesting that scholars be attentive to “the fact

that the use of rhetorics of normalcy employed in citizenship claims, as in ‘I’m a citizen just like you,’ does not carry the same connotations for all people in all situations” (2014: 27). West argues that many studies have taken articulations of citizenship from marginalized LGBT and/or sexual minority groups “at face value” and therefore “strip[ped] it of its nuance” (West 2014: 27). The result of such studies is an implicit assumption that citizenship claims are “tied to an intention of denying one’s differences” (West 2014: 27). West argues that if scholars “refrain from immediately trying to position demands for recognition within a framework of assimilation,” it is possible to “hear how individuals may be making more robust claims” that may advocate for “the acceptance and accommodation of difference, not its denial or erasure” (West 2014: 26). Situating his work in opposition to Brandzel’s (2016), West explains that he seeks to “begin to recuperate citizenship from its queer dismissal” by “align[ing] ourselves with more generous interpretations of the intersections of queer identities and citizenship” (2014: 27).

This dissertation takes seriously West’s contention that theorizing about citizenship needs to be “properly contextualized” (West 2014: 27). This text begins by contextualizing the claims to civil citizenship for gender non-conforming people made by Dosti during the first several years of the organization’s history. Dosti’s legal interventions to secure civil citizenship for gender non-conforming people can be understood as encouraging “the acceptance and accommodation of difference” and need not necessarily be interpreted as an attempt to assimilate gender non-conforming people into normative citizenship (West 2014: 26). I interpret Dosti’s advocacy for gender non-conforming people’s civil citizenship rights as paving the way for transgender women to stake their claim to social citizenship rights, which is the focus of this dissertation.

As a socially stigmatized and (usually) economically marginalized group, *hijras* have long been denied the rights of social citizenship. As a result, they have been unevenly incorporated into the sexual minority fold through NGO-led activism by organizations such as Dosti. An important aspect of difference between transwomen and *hijras* is that of employment, since *hijras* often lack employment rights, whereas many transwomen have benefitted from being employed as sexual minority “community” staff at NGOs. Transwomen’s newfound opportunity to engage in office employment offers them a salient way to position themselves in contradistinction to *hijras*, whose options for employment are usually limited to soliciting money and sex work. I read transwomen’s articulations of difference from *hijras* and their insistence on being recognized as a discrete group and identity deserving of the kinds of rights that are frequently denied to *hijras* as claims to legitimate citizenship. In order to bolster their claims to citizenship, transwomen emphasize the distinctions between their legitimate claims to citizenship and *hijras*, whom they position as unfeminine, disreputable and necessarily outside of the boundaries of legitimate citizenship. These claims rely on a construction of transgender womanhood that posits transwomen as respectable citizens through and against the construction of the necessarily disreputable *hijra*.

As this dissertation demonstrates, a select few transwomen have access to respectable employment and other opportunities that should ensure their access to legitimate citizenship. However, because they are likely to be misrecognized as *hijras*, they cannot access a sense of acceptance and belonging that would otherwise be available to them. To counteract their misrecognition as *hijras*, transwomen stake their claim to citizenship by actively constructing themselves as legitimate citizens over and against the figure of the illegitimate and uncivil *hijra* who is necessarily excluded from citizenship. Thus, while I can agree with West that

proclamations about citizenship should be specific to their context, the bulk of my research supports the claims of Brandzel (2016), Haritaworn (2015) and Spade (2015), who urge sexual and gender dissidents to exercise caution about the exclusionary technologies that inclusion into citizenship necessarily relies upon.

### *Dissertation Plan*

The process of claiming citizenship for transwomen has occurred over several years and the events traced in these chapters are often interlinked. While I have tried to organize them into a meaningful order for clarity, the steps or facets of this process are not discrete and, in reality, should not be contained, as they overlap with one another.

The first chapter, “Dosti and Early Citizenship Claims for Gender Non-conforming People,” explores the claims of citizenship for gender non-conforming people (especially *hijras*) that Dosti advocated in the organization’s first several years. During this time, advocacy for the rights of gender non-conforming people not to regularly face violence and discrimination from state authorities, particularly police and the courts, was a crucial part of Dosti’s work. By demonstrating how Dosti activists envision *hijra* and transpeople’s oppression through the language of rights, I show that the organization contributed to the sense (among gender non-conforming people and the “general society”) that these groups are (and should be recognized as) rights-bearing citizens. In claiming that gender non-conforming people deserve civil citizenship rights, I consider that, in this case, Dosti is making claims for transpeople’s citizenship that are not reducible to assimilation (West 2014).

Chapter two, “Citizenship Aspirations and Sexual Minority Disidentifications with *Hijras*,” examines the desires of various sexual minority groups (including *hijras* themselves) to distance

themselves from the stigmatized identity of the *hijra*. As a result of their non-citizen status, *hijras* have been uneasily incorporated into the sexual minority fold. While NGO-led activism makes claims for the rights of gender non-conforming people, including *hijras*, thus placing them within the ambit of the sexual minority “community,” many sexual minority groups seek to distance themselves from any associations with *hijras*. Within the context of a group of people striving to claim the rights of citizenship, the possibility of obtaining citizenship compels more privileged sexual minorities to draw dividing lines between those sexual minorities classified as deserving of citizenship and those who are undeserving of citizenship, a distinction that most often operates along class/caste and gendered lines (Dutta 2012). I read these tactics of distancing and exclusion as being central to the process of sexual minorities (especially transwomen, but also including *hijras* themselves) seeking “murderous inclusions” into citizenship (Haritaworn et al. 2013).

In chapter three, “*Hijra* Group Transformations, ‘Choice,’ and Consumer Citizenship for Transwomen,” I trace the multiple recent social changes that have altered *hijra* group relationships and enabled gender non-conforming people to imagine living outside of *hijra* groups. While these changes are varied and complex, the transformations in *hijra* relationships and the ability for transwomen to live “independent” of *hijra* groups is most often narrated as transwomen’s (and, to some degree, *chelas*’) ability to exercise individual “choice” about their lives. Previously, my participants argue, there were no alternate options for gender non-conforming people to access employment options, social support, and belonging, thus, if they wanted the support and protection of a community, they had to join the *hijras* and to abide by the dictates of their social structure. Increasingly, joining the *hijra* community has become a “choice” (as opposed to a necessity) and more people are opting not to become part of this



community at all. I argue that narrating these transformations through the language of “choice” recruits transgender women into the progress narrative of liberalization and constructs them as empowered consumer citizens who can effectively participate in globalized marketplaces as evidenced by their ability to make competent individual choices. This discursive form of transwomen’s inclusion into citizenship naturalizes the connection between consumer choice and citizenship and therefore constitutes a normalizing force.

Chapter four, “Modern Girls: Identity, Livelihood and Transwomen’s Citizenship Aspirations,” explores the co-constitution of class, gender and citizenship, arguing that access to office employment via NGOs serves as an important precursor for transwomen’s claims to legitimate citizenship. Respectable office employment is constructed as “empowering” and enabling “independence” for middle-class women in postcolonial India, thus offering possibilities for working-class transgender women to fulfill their middle-class aspirations while simultaneously confirming the propriety of their gender identities. Transwomen’s newfound chance to engage in office employment offers them a salient way to position themselves in contradistinction to *hijras*, whose options to earn an income tend to be limited to soliciting money and sex work. As a newly emerging identity, transwomen emphasize the distinctions between their legitimate claims to citizenship and *hijras*, whom they position as unfeminine, disreputable and necessarily outside of the boundaries of legitimate citizenship. This chapter draws on my fieldwork experiences, including transwomen’s narratives about their identities, as well as an analysis of a media campaign that circulated widely online entitled “I am Not a Hijra.” I argue that transwomen claim citizenship by drawing distinct borders between themselves and *hijras* and positioning *hijras* as undeserving of the rights of citizenship, thus bolstering their own claims to legitimate citizenship. This chapter presents a clear example of the ways in which

marginalized groups seek inclusion into citizenship can be “murderous” (Haritaworn et al. 2013).

In chapter five, “Human Rights, *Hijra* Relationships, and the Boundaries of Citizenship,” I explore how institutions such as NGOs may also participate in “murderous inclusions.”

Alongside transwomen’s claims to legitimate citizenship by reinforcing *hijras*’ non-citizen status, Dosti uses human rights frameworks to critique *hijra* relationships as “against human rights,” encouraging *chelas* to withdraw their participation from *hijra* relationships and encouraging younger gender non-conforming people not to join the *hijras*. This characterization of *guru/chela* relationships as “against human rights” sets into motion a process intended to reform *gurus* and to teach them the kinds of behaviors that would make them worthy of citizenship. Human rights frameworks cannot recognize the reciprocal nature of *guru/chela* relationships and the complex ways that power and vulnerabilities operate in this context. This educational process ultimately builds resistance from *gurus* who are unwilling to incorporate human rights into their behavior and self-understanding, producing them as unworthy of rights and thus outside of the boundaries of citizenship. *Hijras* resist these processes by implicitly contesting the validity of using human rights discourses to frame their group. By positing elder *hijras* and the relationships they protect as incompatible with human rights, Dosti bolsters transwomen’s citizenship claims that operate via the exclusion of *hijras*, thus participating in the “murderous inclusions” through which transwomen claim citizenship (Haritaworn et al. 2013).

## *Methods*

### *The Ethnographic Setting*

My key interest when I was determining a field site for this project lay in what participants described as the “class culture” (mentioned in the introduction) of the sexual minority/LGBT rights organizations emerging in India. I was thus intrigued when I heard of an NGO that worked with multiple sexual minority groups located in the city of Bangalore. I first contacted Dosti through a mutual acquaintance who reached out to his friends who were active in the sexual rights movement in Tamil Nadu and they connected me with a legal advocate who gave me the phone numbers of two Dosti staff members. During my first visit to Bangalore, I was intrigued to hear from people connected to Dosti and independent activists that the organization had created a space for working-class self-identified sexual minorities from Bangalore City and other parts of South India to come together and ultimately create some semblance of a working-class sexual minority community. Indeed, sexual minorities who moved to Bangalore from other parts of South India were partly enticed to come to Bangalore because they had heard about this form of support.

During the first phase of my fieldwork, I spent my time at the Dosti office interacting with staff and “community” members and observing day-to-day activities, from which I wrote copious field notes. At this time, I quickly realized that there were many employees in the office who were assigned very little work. For a researcher wanting to casually chat with people without being too much of an imposition on their time, this was an ideal scenario. While hanging around the office, I would often ask general, casual questions to get a sense of what kinds of issues were salient in people’s lives. I also helped staff members write emails in English, located grants the organization could apply for, taught conversational English classes to

a small group of female sex workers, and compiled a lengthy report documenting current projects. I also attended and participated in all sexual rights focused events, rallies and protests, where I met other activists (including many *hijras*) whom I started meeting with regularly.

My preliminary research also led me to decide that greater proficiency in Kannada, the local language of Bangalore, was an essential commitment for someone working with working class people. My ability to understand and Kannada enabled my active participation in NGO and other sexual rights-focused meetings that are mostly conducted in Kannada and allowed me to interact with a greater number of participants from working class backgrounds that I would otherwise be unable to speak with. My ability to converse in Kannada has also significantly bolstered my “street cred” with my participants, including the few who speak English, as they report that my commitment to learning the language sets me apart from previous foreign researchers.

Later, as Dosti’s 10-year funding package came to a close, Dosti sponsored fewer community programs and cut back on the number of staff. Less employees and less projects to organize initially worked in my favor, as the few people there had ample time to chat, but I soon felt that daily visits to the office were no longer an effective use of my time. Around this time, I also developed chronic pain as a result of a herniated disc in my neck. Interestingly, my doctor explained that in Bangalore, this is not uncommon for people who travel frequently around the city since the roads are filled with enormous potholes and constantly riding on these kinds of roads can cause spinal discs to herniate. This injury is related to broader structural changes that I am studying in the context of *hijra* group transformations, since the poor quality of the roads in Bangalore is a direct result of urbanization and an increase in vehicles driving on the road combined with a receding municipal government that does not make road maintenance a priority.

Especially in the first several months after I was diagnosed, this injury made it difficult to be away from my bed and my icepack for more than a few hours at a time, much less travel long distances around the city. Due to this combination of Dosti's decreased programs, employees and activities, combined with my physical limitations, it made sense to transition to an interview-based approach.

After intensive fieldwork enabled me to hone in on key issues, I conducted over 75 semi-structured interviews with Dosti staff and former staff, independent activists and *hijra* community members. These interviews ranged from 35 minutes to five hours in length and I conducted approximately half the interviews in English, the other half in Kannada, the local language of Bangalore, and three additional interviews in Hindi. After obtaining their consent, I tape recorded each interview and after it was finished, I wrote detailed notes about the overall experience. The first approximately 15 interviews are broadly focused on my participants' life experiences and involvement in activism. The following interviews were more focused, touching on how NGOs have impacted advocacy for sexual rights in India, how NGOs affect relationships among sexual minorities, and how *hijra* groups have transformed in the past twenty years. Most of my participants are people I have met during fieldwork over the years and occasionally, they will arrange for me to interview someone that I have not previously met. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the participant's flat or in a friend's flat, though I also met some people in their workplaces, *hijra* communal residences called *hamams*, and I met a few people at coffee shops.

As in other geographical spaces, movements for sexual rights in India developed their "infrastructure" in urban areas (Shah 2014: 9). Cosmopolitan cities have served as "physical or virtual nodes for dispersed networks of people" who felt called upon to join others in movements

demanding citizenship rights for sexual and gender non-conforming groups (Shah 2014: 9). The result, as Shah (2014) argues, is that “the largest and increasingly most class-segregated cities of Mumbai, New Delhi and Bangalore are also the places that have spawned some of the oldest and most foundational organizations of Indian LGBT movements” (8). Thus, cities that have faced increased urbanization and rising inequality have also been important places for sexual rights activism in India.

### *Bangalore*

Like other large and growing cities in India, Bangalore is a site that has witnessed and is indicative of the tensions and contradictions of liberalization in the lives of the increasing numbers of people who live in such cities. In the decades following liberalization, India has witnessed a shift from “state-directed development strategies” toward market-driven and *laissez faire* development policies, which demand that national, state and local governments recede into the background (Shaw 2012: 45). Even as processes of urbanization have intensified, bringing increased numbers of people to reside in cities (Shaw 2012), city planners and municipal governments have faced increased constraints, as they witness: the privatization of basic services, the withdrawal of state support from urban development, a fervent embrace of “public-private partnerships” in which accountability is limited, and increased gentrification seeking to “expand space for elitist consumption” (Bannerjee-Guha 2009: 95). Through such processes, Indian cities are being reshaped as “world class cities” intended to “function as nodes of circulation of global finance and hi-tech activities” (Bannerjee-Guha 2009: 96).

Perhaps no city in India has been subjected to these processes more so than Bangalore in its avatar as “The Silicon Valley of India.” Bangalore gained this designation due to the wide

circulation of images of spotlessly manicured lawns and gleaming glass offices that “boast[] illusions of a futuristic city that may one day be Bangalore” (Ghosh 2005: 4914), but for the time being, mirror the actual environment of a small section of the city. Nevertheless, images of “The Silicon Valley of India” are circulated by media, corporations and state and national government entities to create the impression that Bangalore’s economy orbits around the IT sector (Ghosh 2005: 4914). In order to catch up with these images in circulation, projects of “remapping the ‘urban’” via “intense gentrification of the urban space” have been undertaken in Bangalore (Ghosh 2005: 4914). This dissertation discusses the impacts of gentrification on *hijra* groups in chapter three.

Apart from its global reputation as a center for IT work, Bangalore is the capital city of the state of Karnataka, which sits atop the Deccan Plateau. Due to the city’s mild climate, a network of lakes, and the many public parks dotted around the city which earned Bangalore a reputation as the “Garden City” of India, Bangalore was once known as one of the nicest cities to live and visit in India (Times of India 2017). However, the city has dramatically transformed since becoming a destination for high-tech multinational companies and corporations starting in the 1990s. Since that time, the population has increased from approximately 3 million inhabitants (Times of India 2017) to 9.6 million, according to the 2011 census (Ray 2013).

This accelerated process of urbanization has transformed Bangalore, leaving behind its “Garden City” reputation. The city’s green spaces are rapidly shrinking as roads are widened to accommodate increased traffic and additional buildings and metro stations are constructed. Between 1973 and 2016, urbanization led to a 1005% increase in newly paved surfaces in the city and a concomitant 88% decline in vegetation (Ramachandra 2016). Between 2000 and 2016, there was an 85% decrease in the city’s water bodies (Ramachandra 2016). Researchers at

the prestigious Indian Institute of Science have warned that as a result of frequent water shortages and severe water pollution leading to lakes catching fire and the death of thousands of fish at a time, the city may be uninhabitable as early as the year 2025 unless appropriate measures are taken (Bhasthi 2017). Residents of poor neighborhoods are those most likely to face daily exposure to these problems. A 2004 survey of four slums in Bangalore found high dissatisfaction with water availability from public water taps, toilets, and underground drainage as well as concerns about the availability and efficiency of garbage removal (Shaw 2012: 59). In a recent Times of India article, the accusations that Bangalore's municipal government has mismanaged the large amounts of waste in the city as a result of accelerated urbanization is summed up by the title "How India's 'Garden City' Became a Garbage City" (2017).

While it is often assumed that the people moving to Bangalore over the past 25 years are primarily highly-educated and middle class IT workers, migration of working class and (formerly) rural-based groups has risen dramatically in this time ("Urbanization in Bangalore"). People moving from rural areas can expect a higher income, better educational opportunities for themselves and family members, and they often perceive that moving to the city offers enhanced "business prospects" ("Urbanization in Bangalore"). However, Bangalore has also gained a reputation for its high cost of living (Kumar 2012) and many working class people who move to the city struggle to find sustainable employment. Because Bangalore is home to a large group of highly-paid IT professionals, the prices for all goods (including basic foodstuffs) and services have risen, which adversely affects the poor (Kumar 2012). While the amount of Bangalore's population living in poverty is difficult to calculate (Shaw 2012), government statistics indicate that 25% of Bangalore residents live in "official" slums (Kumar 2012).



### *Writing and Ethnographic Protagonists*

The characters animating this ethnographic story are largely working class people who identify as sexual and/or gender non-conforming, many (but not all) of whom live in places that could be characterized as slums. Ethnographic researchers often conduct projects in which their participants occupy lower positions than themselves in social hierarchies. In order that researchers might remain mindful of the disparities in power between themselves and their participants (Geertz 1986) and how these disparities can shape their findings and arguments, increased “reflexivity” about how the author’s positionality impacted her work was suggested (Visweswaran 1994). The turn towards reflexivity is a response to important critiques articulated by feminist and postcolonial scholars that emphasize ethnography’s implication in colonial projects (Dirks 2001) and, therefore, the key methods of ethnographic research and inquiry as methods of domination. While acknowledging the importance of debates about power in fieldwork, sociologists who use ethnographic methods to study working class and other disenfranchised groups are increasingly voicing critique about the turn towards reflexivity in ethnographic research.

Ethnographers have emphasized power relationships not only in the field, but also, and particularly, in the writing of research findings. As Ralph argues, ethnography “sprouted its wings from [what were essentially] nineteenth century travel diaries in which bold adventurers embarked on a perilous journey, straight into ‘the heart of darkness,’ and emerged to tell the tale” (Ralph 2015: 441). Accordingly, the tales they told spoke of exotic, dangerous, almost impenetrable lands populated with odd peoples and customs, which served to construct the readers and their respective cultures as normal and safe. As Ralph argues, “the idea of the ‘savage’ helped constitute the notion of ‘civilization’ that these adventurers took for granted”

(2015: 441). Despite the different locations and cultures that early ethnographies focus on, the moral of the stories they produced are surprisingly similar: “the adventurer realizes that the exotic inhabitants are more similar to people in the West than different, and therefore argues that their culture should be seen as legitimate” (Ralph 2011: 441). The result of these kinds of ethnographic tropes is that the researcher “mak[es] the essence of their work a project of normalizing and humanizing the other” (Rios 2011: 259). In the best-case scenario, the end product represents “a pandering to mass (white) audiences in an attempt to normalize foreign worlds (people of color” (Rios 2011: 259).

Contained within these stories are archetypes that helped to reproduce and reify the kinds of ideologies that made imperial conquest possible and even positioned it as necessary. Particularly in these early ethnographies, knowledge production, political economy and empire intersected such that “[t]here is a direct relationship between the expansion of knowledge, the expansion of trade, and the expansion of empire,” meaning that all three of these “expansion[s]” interlock with and enable the others (Smith 1999: 88). Moreover, these ethnographers’ “authenticity” as researchers whose knowledge should be trusted “was vested in the whole structure of colonialism” and their anecdotal and ethnocentric accounts were positioned and understood as “knowledgeable, informed and relatively ‘objective’” (Smith 1999: 82).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the validity of ethnographic methods was challenged by postcolonial and feminist scholars, who “analyzed the various ways in which ethnography had been implicated in colonization, racialization, ‘othering,’ and placing non-Western populations, who lived in the present, in the past” (Rios 2011: 173). These critiques suggested new conceptions of research and narrating research that centered “[c]ritical ethnography, reflexivity, feminist ethnography, and indigenous methodologies” for studying social processes (Rios 2011:

173). Due to these important critiques of ethnography's colonial history and a recognition of the power relations that continue to structure ethnography's present, ethnographers are often "compelled to position their project against antiquated tropes of the lone ethnographer, making his or her way amongst 'savages'" (Ralph 2015: 441). While researchers must keep in mind that "[t]here is nothing inherently exploitative in writing about the poor, just as there is nothing inherently liberating—more often than not, their lives will continue precisely as they were" (Small 2015 draft), scholars argue that ethnographers have an ethical obligation to depict their participants with sensitivity and nuance instead of relying on one-dimensional colonial ethnographic tropes (Small 2015 draft; Rios 2011; Ralph 2015).

Despite the importance of feminist and postcolonial critiques of the premise of the ethnographic enterprise, urban ethnographers increasingly point out that even when researchers claim to mitigate against these tactics through employing reflexivity, ethnographic tropes and ways of narrating "the field" continue to fall into many of these traps. Several recently-published ethnographies that have been widely read outside of the academy, particularly Alice Goffman's (2015) monograph, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* and Matthew Desmond's (2017) *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in an American City*, have been criticized for "feed[ing] into the colonial fantasy that an adventurous researcher 'got lost in the wild,' and was taken in by people from a strange land who bestowed lessons that [the researcher] will now share with the world" (Ralph 2015: 450). Indeed, it is partly because these books rely on such familiar tropes that they have garnered public attention and appeared on bestseller lists (Ralph 2015; Small 2015 draft; Rios 2011). Such widely-read ethnographies are important enough to warrant critique and investigation because, as Small argues, these representations "come to

inform the public consciousness” about the groups of people who are the research subjects (Small 2015 draft).

As a potential way out of reproducing these kinds of ethnographies, the notion of being reflexive about the researcher’s positionality in relation to her participants and how their different positions structure their interactions was suggested as a mode of “reflexive” approach to ethnography. In their writing, ethnographers were encouraged to interrogate “the consequences of sensationalizing ‘other’ places and people” (Cobb & Huang 2015: 348). These new frameworks also questioned the naturalized relationship between researcher and research participants in which the researcher alone was a “legitimate agent of knowledge” (Harding 1988: 3 quoted in Cobb & Huang 2015: 348). However, the turn towards reflexivity has been criticized for “fus[ing] objectivity and subjectivity into a kind of *scholar-centered* ethnography” in which “scholars establish their legitimacy by focusing on their difference from the communities of study” (Cobb & Huang 2015: 348-349). These ethnographies often “discover” a world positioned as “impenetrable, exoticized, and other, reproducing the very problem that self-reflexivity was intended to resolve” (Cobb & Huang 2015: 349). The problematic outcome of such a focus, which Cobb and Huang (2015) call scholar-driven ethnography, is a form of narrating ethnographic inquiry such that “[t]he researcher’s journey into the field dominates the narrative,” instead of “describing and theorizing an extant set of relationships and ideas” that are the focus of the study (Hogg & Huang 2015: 349). The assumptions structuring such research and the narratives that come out of these projects can cause researchers to become “blind to our various privileges and [to] place [ourselves] at the center of the universe that we are studying; our subjects simply revolve around us” (Rios 2011: 259). Thus, as Cobb and Huang (2015) argue, the turn toward reflexive ethnography “inadvertently shifted the ethnographic objective

away from theorizing social phenomena and toward describing the researcher's relationship to the field" (2015: 349).

As a possible solution to the problems surrounding reflexivity in ethnography, Cobb and Huang (2015) suggest utilizing "protagonist-driven" ethnography, in which scholars would "place the lived experiences of research participants at the center of their research and writing" (349). Likewise, Lamont interprets "the craft of interviewing" as "the ability to put oneself in parenthesis" since the interview is necessarily "about the other" (2004: 165). However, Lamont argues for a "recogni[tion]" "that [our] own identity would be 'read' very differently," and participants will react and respond to researchers differently, depending upon which social group(s) they are associated with (2004: 163). In this way, the interview represents an encounter in which the researcher is "a template against which the [interviewee] can bounce [her or] his identity and worldview" (Lamont 2004: 165). Similarly, part of engaging protagonist-driven ethnography is the idea that "reflexivity is a method, not an objective," meaning that researchers must consider how their own subjectivity interacts with that of their participants as a way to gain access to effective data and as a method that assists the researcher in accurately analyzing that data, instead of as the key objective of the study (Cobb & Huang 2015: 349). In this formulation, the scholar's objective is "neither to become like the research subjects nor to maintain distance from them; the goal is to *understand* those subjects" (Cobb & Huang 2015: 350). Understanding one's research subjects would then enable the researcher to develop "connections" that can become "themes" of the research; these "themes" can be developed into "concepts" that the research addresses (Cobb & Huang 2015). These concepts may finally become "theories," which are the "generalizable contributions" of the research (Cobb & Huang 2015). Using this "protagonist-centered" approach to ethnography, ethnographers produce

theoretical contributions, while preserving their “locally grounded stance” as long as they keep the research subjects (as opposed to themselves) at the forefront of the story (Cobb & Huang 2015: 350).

### *Citizenship as a Framework*

As my fieldwork progressed, I began to realize that the ability to assert themselves was a key connection that recurred across various interactions with my protagonists. It was months and then years later as I analyzed my notes and interview transcript when I realized that many of the dynamics I had been interested in with these groups could be conceptualized (Cobb and Huang’s “concepts”) and theorized (made into Cobb and Huang’s “theories”) through the concept of citizenship. I thus employ the concept of citizenship to effectively understand the struggles that I witnessed between and among transwomen and *hijras*. As Gordon-Zolov & Rogers (2010) argue, citizenship is not only a formal status since “the experiences of social protection and vulnerability, and of social inclusion and isolation, are patterned by law and politics, but they are taken in through the senses. They are understood as a part of larger life narratives” (2010: 16). This dissertation thus seeks to understand how citizenship struggles for transwomen and their effects on *hijras* are articulated and negotiated in the everyday interactions that comprise their life experiences.

My analysis highlights the different forms that inclusion into citizenship can take and it pays special attention to the many forms of inclusion I witnessed that are “murderous” (Haritaworn et al. 2015). In seeking to tell a protagonist-centered ethnographic story, this dissertation reveals how these (sometimes murderous) tactics of inclusion into citizenship operate and what, in this particular social context, makes inclusion appear as an important and achievable goal for

transgender women and other non-*hijra* groups. Likewise, what makes inclusion into citizenship appear irrelevant to resistant *hijras* and what are the consequences of transwomen's claims to citizenship that do not challenge the non-citizen status of *hijras*? My analysis seeks to foreground how my research protagonists "define and assert their political, cultural, personal, and collective rights from de facto second-class citizenship positions" (The Gender and Cultural Citizenship Working Group 2008: 6) while also holding them accountable to the ways that their tactics can be harmful to other groups.

By examining the ways that citizenship as a concept and even as a kind of logic constructs certain kinds of people as necessarily excluded, my investigation emphasizes the "macro processes of power and domination" that fill out the contours of the lives of my research participants (Rios 2011: 172). As Rios argues, researchers "must connect the habitus of [their] participants to larger social forces shaping social action" to reach an accurate understanding of their lives (Rios 2011: 172). This was often an especially difficult task since I wanted to understand my research participants' struggles on their own terms, yet they were very focused on how individual actions and personalities (especially of Dosti leaders) have negatively impacted "the community" and advocacy for sexual rights in Bangalore generally. As Rios argues, the important aspect that ethnographers need to hone in on is the ability to connect individual perspectives with larger forces. Researchers cannot understand macro-level processes without understanding "how the local 'on the ground' context shapes and is shaped by these macro processes;" likewise, this 'on the ground' context cannot be fully understood in the absence of a global lens (Rios 2011: 172). To better understand the social context they research, ethnographers "must have a clear sense of the macro processes of power and domination that shape the everyday lives of social subjects" (Rios 2011: 172).

However, even when using “protagonist-centered ethnography” as a way of narrating ethnographic findings, ethnographers must be mindful about how they depict their participants, while also remaining cognizant of the relationship between their subjects’ representation and the representation of themselves. As Small argues,

All ethnographies provide at once two representations, one of the observed and one of the observer. And though the ethnographer controls the writing, both have an interest in the product. The observed have an interest in being depicted fairly, revealing not too much, and coming across as reasonable; the ethnographer, in representing herself as an acute observer, a thoughtful writer, and a reliable reporter (Small 2015 draft).

Small emphasizes the power dynamics that operate in the writing process since the writing is “control[led]” by the ethnographer, but both the researcher and the researched “have an interest in the product.” Due partly to the colonial history of ethnography and its legacy of ethnographic tropes and conventions, the representation of the research subjects tends to be read through and against the reader’s imagination of the ethnographer. If and when an ethnographer “either purposely or unwittingly improves her representation of herself by worsening the representation of the observed,” this constitutes “rhetorical exploitation” of the research participants who gave of their time and energy and yet they cannot exert control over the representations of themselves in the writing (Small 2015 draft). Thus, even as an ethnographer places her participants’ experiences and voices at the forefront of the analysis, as Cobb and Huang (2015) suggest, they must be mindful of the representation they create and how that representation reflects on their research subjects and themselves. Here, Small calls attention to the ways that even a “protagonist-centered ethnography” can actually take as its subject the representation of the ethnographer if the writer is not attuned to these dynamics.

*Overlapping Hierarchies in Research*



Paying attention to power dynamics between researchers and researched also demands that researchers are mindful of the fact that they are entering fields of power, usually from a privileged position. There was an intriguing moment in my fieldwork when the hierarchies of white American researcher/Indian research participant overlapped with and echoed the hierarchy within the *guru/chela* relationship. I was conducting an interview with Lawrence, a self-identified MSM (man who has sex with men) who once thought of joining the *hijras* and wearing women's clothing, but his desire so shocked and embarrassed his mother that he decided to continue wearing "pant-shirt" and present himself as a man out of respect for his mother. However, he is associated with a *hijra* group and he has his own guru, whom I met with the last few times I had visited someone in his neighborhood. When I asked Lawrence about the expectations inherent in the *guru/chela* relationship and whether he feels inconvenienced by these expectations, he replied by alluding to an earlier topic in our conversation regarding his work, saying that everyday, he has to travel long distances by bus to get there. I was initially puzzled by this response until he went on to explain,

Even today I had work to do. This woman [his guru] called me and asked me where I was. I told her that I had work to do so I was getting ready. She told me not to leave home till 10 because you wanted to write stuff about me...she is elder to me. I must listen to her and obey her. We must show respect to elders. If I had gone away then she would have thought that I was arrogant and that I had ignored our guest and had left even though she had asked me to stay. By staying I am showing respect to her.

Here, Lawrence indicates a conflict between his need to go to work and my desire to speak with him, mediated by someone he must obey, his guru. He effectively answered my question by telling me that, in fact, doing this interview presents an inconvenience that he would not have agreed to if not to show respect for his guru by, in turn, showing respect to me as their guest and abiding to cultural practices of honoring guests. Lawrence positioned waiting to do the interview with me as demonstrating respect for a guest, which ultimately is a sign of respect for his guru's

wishes. However, there are important power dynamics that affect whose wishes get respected when one person is a white American researcher with higher education credentials and the other person is a marginalized Indian sex worker. This incident served as a reminder to me that, in spite of the IRB-mandated practices designed to ensure the voluntary consent of my participants, there are power hierarchies not only between myself and my participants, but also among my participants that could overlap and reinforce each other in complex ways that I may be unaware of.

### *“Dreaded Doubles” and Negotiations in Research*

During colonial encounters, “[r]esearch could not be disconnected from other European activities” and indeed, many “researchers” held multiple roles as colonial officials, missionaries, etc. (Smith 1999: 81). Ethnographic methods remain haunted by these histories, as evidenced by a widespread fear of one’s “dreaded doubles” that “work beside all field researchers” (Orsi 2005: 166). These doubles often show up in the form of missionaries, law enforcement and government officials, who appear “close enough in education, class and style and in the specific nature of their concerns and interests” to resemble the researcher (Orsi 2005: 166). This resemblance “make[s] them particularly vexing figures, since we need to distinguish ourselves from them in order to get work done” (Orsi 2005: 166). These “dreaded doubles” are also in the business of gathering information about participants’ social worlds, but their purpose is often explicitly in the service of domination and control, which are aims that many researchers want to position themselves and their work against (Orsi 2005: 166).

In my fieldsite, my “dreaded double” turned out to be another white American researcher whom I call Janice. She was an undergraduate from an Ivy League school working partly with

Dosti and partly with a university on the outskirts of Bangalore where she was analyzing a dataset from which she would write a paper for her summer independent study. She was working with Dosti to collect qualitative research about NGOs, development funding and queer activism from which she wrote her senior thesis. Dosti often worked with local students and interns and, occasionally, might agree to connect a foreign researcher or reporter with a group of constituents. I was also asked to sign a “visitors’ book” on several occasions and noted that while I did not see other foreign faces apart from Janice’s in the office, they seemed to get several foreigners per year visiting the organization. Indeed, I was initially surprised to find Dosti’s contact details listed in the back of the *Lonely Planet India* travel guidebook under the “Gay and Lesbian Travelers” section, which suggested that the organization could provide helpful information about the conditions of LGBT Indians.

In the summer of 2011, I kept hearing about another white American woman researching something similar to my topic and we finally met one day in the Dosti office. She was incredibly friendly and offered to share any contacts that I hadn’t already spoken to and we eventually even conducted an interview together. Our research topics were similar enough that we had a lot to talk about the several times we met over tea and snacks, but different enough not to be too threatening to one another, since she was explicitly coming from a development-focused background and was focusing on the variety and complexities of different types of NGO funding and how they impact LGBT activism.

The more I interacted with Janice, the more I became mildly wary of her. This was largely because I had become highly invested in keeping this particular project as my dissertation research over the next several years. I had carefully cultivated relationships with Dosti and “community people” over a period of three years at this point, while learning two Indian

languages and working to understand the specifics of South Indian cultural practices. I also attempted to show my respect for local customs by wearing *salwar kameez* (tunic top and loose pants) and speaking in Kannada when I could. In short, I was very invested in my field site and in gaining continued access for the next few years. By contrast, Janice was in Bangalore for a short time, spoke to people who could speak English, had a limited cultural understanding of South India and wore skirts and T-shirts. I also perceived her as having little long-term interest in Bangalore and Dosti, as compared to my careful cultivation of my study as a multi-year project. My initial anxieties stemmed from the fact that she might do something to upset someone and they may then associate all white women researchers with that incident, which could harm my access in the future.

However, Janice ultimately posed a problem for me for an entirely different reason. When we first met, we found out that we were, coincidentally enough, from the same area of the US. I grew up in a small town turned urban sprawl-y suburb an hour outside of Dallas and she is from and currently lives in a highly elite neighborhood in Dallas that people most often referred to when I was growing up as “old money.” As it turned out, Janice’s connection to capital was clearly demonstrated in the field, since she often expressed interest in connecting people and organizations in Bangalore to her personal network of philanthropists and donors. By contrast, my personal network was, admittedly, middle- to upper-middle class, yet clearly much farther down in the class hierarchy than her network, which appeared to have an established history of large philanthropic donations characteristic of elite class families. Moreover, as a researcher interested in the power dynamics between North and South flows of capital, I was mildly appalled to hear her speak of orchestrating monetary transactions that were apparently superfluous amounts of money to the donors but, as she explained earnestly, “could make a real

difference here.” Indeed, I began to interpret her role in a similar way that I interpret the role of wealthy donors who support progressive causes in ways that also protect their privileges, despite the fact that I can now recognize that she was very likely trying to use her privilege for good.

Though Janice was only in Bangalore for two of the 18 months of my fieldwork, I often felt haunted by her ghost long after she left. For example, one day while I was in the head office of an emerging NGO called Ekate, Rishabh, one of the founders of the organization and a former staff member of Dosti, mentioned to me that what would really help the organization if they could get some “small donations” from individual funders and, he explained, “even just some 15-20 thousand dollars would really help.” While he mentioned these numbers very casually, I’m sure my expression was one of shock, as this figure was more than my graduate school yearly stipend at the time.

While characterizing Janice as my “dreaded double,” I recognize that she occupies a very different position than the government agents and law enforcement officers that Orsi (2005) concentrates on, as she is not collecting information for the express purpose of enabling relationships of dominance on marginalized groups. Moreover, it is not only the fact that Janice and I are white Americans that produces the idea that we have connections to wealth. As the previous sections have indicated, ethnography has historically and even now is often undertaken in areas where the researcher occupies a higher social status than her participants. While being mindful of these power imbalances, I have tried to consider Pachirat’s notion that researchers must explore not only *why* they may be misrecognized as Goffman’s “finks,” but also what this power differential means for the research encounter (2009: 147), since “[t]he larger issue at stake in all this is not *whether* power is operating but *what kind* of power is operating, how it is wielded, and to what use it is put” (Grindstaff 2006: 288).

### *Conclusion*

The analysis and writing of this dissertation has been shaped by recent debates among ethnographers critiquing the dominance of “reflexivity” as a goal, instead of considering the ways that reflexivity can be used as a method. When using reflexivity as a method, the researcher is prodded to dig deeper when she experiences moments of uncertainty, instead of writing about this uncertainty from her perspective as a “juicy anecdote” (Cobb & Huang 2015). Based upon my observations that the ability to assert themselves was salient for this group, I made the decision to narrate and theorize their struggles using the concept of citizenship, which is an important and foundational concept for groups attempting to assert themselves, even if they do not often refer to the concept as such (Lister 1998). Throughout my fieldwork and the ethnographic writing process, I strove to be attentive to power differentials between myself and participants, among my participants and between myself and a fellow researcher, while keeping my protagonists and their own stories at the forefront of the investigation. As Cobb & Huang (2015) suggest, I have made all attempts to narrate the ethnographic findings such that the protagonists “are responsible for animating that frame” since these kinds of “situated insights are best provided by the people who actually live them” (350).

***Chapter 1: “Beginnings: Early Citizenship Claims for the Gender Non-conforming”***

This chapter details Dosti’s advocacy for the citizenship rights of *hijras* and transgender people, which has raised awareness of transpeople’s and *hijras* lack of rights and demanded that the state extend these rights of citizenship to this group. At this time, advocating for the rights of gender non-conforming people not to be subjected to violence and discrimination from state authorities, particularly police and the courts, was a salient part of Dosti’s activism. Dosti activists fundamentally approach issues of *hijra* and transpeople’s oppression through the language of rights, thus implicitly positioning these groups as rights-bearing citizens. In resisting police and the courts’ interpretations of *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people as non-citizens who do not have access to rights, Dosti makes public claims that *hijras* and gender non-conforming people are, and should be recognized as, rights-bearing citizens. The public protests and programs that Dosti organized were oriented specifically around the notion that gender non-conforming people should have the rights and protections offered to all citizens by the state. By demonstrating how Dosti activists envision *hijra* and transpeople’s oppression through the language of rights, I show that the organization contributed to the sense (among gender non-conforming people and the “general society”) that these groups are (and should be recognized as) rights-bearing citizens. I thus interpret these demands for citizenship for *hijra* and transgender people as paving the way for transwomen to make their own citizenship claims. I also consider the ways that in claiming that gender non-conforming people deserve civil citizenship rights, Dosti is making claims for transpeople’s citizenship that are not reducible to assimilation (West 2014).

Any discussion of sexual rights activism in India would be incomplete without an understanding of how the global concern around HIV/AIDS has simultaneously constructed

male-assigned sexual and gender non-conforming people through a framework of disease and risk prevention, while also providing important opportunities for rights advocacy. The chapter begins by discussing HIV/AIDS interventions and Dosti's insistence to perform HIV/AIDS work through a perspective that emphasizes rights. I then turn to a consideration of colonial era restrictions on *hijras*' rights through which *hijras* were also interpreted via a framework of contagion and disease. This brief foray into colonial history is important, as the ideas about *hijras* and their lack of rights that were codified into law at the time continue to shape state and public perceptions about *hijras*. The next several sections detail the various ways in which Dosti has sought to counter police and public perceptions of *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people as non-citizens by insisting that they are rights-bearing people who should be recognized and treated as citizens.

By providing a contextualized picture of Dosti's work for the rights of gender non-conforming people, this chapter takes seriously West's (2014) contention that theorizing about citizenship as a concept needs to be grounded in situated contexts. West argues that "the outright dismissal of citizenship as inherently normative and normalizing must be resisted as a critical impulse and deferred until the articulation is properly contextualized" (West 2014: 27). I interpret Dosti's legal interventions to secure civil citizenship for gender non-conforming people as encouraging "the acceptance and accommodation of difference" and not necessarily as an attempt to assimilate gender non-conforming people into normative citizenship (West 2014: 26). Indeed, this chapter offers examples of potential citizens (and the organizations advocating for them) "making more robust claims" on the concept of civil citizenship, thus broadening it to include the rights of gender non-conforming people (West 2014: 26).



*The HIV/AIDS Crisis and Opportunities for Advocacy*

Sexual rights activism in India is indelibly shaped by the global concern over HIV/AIDS, which was the impetus for the proliferation of sexual rights NGOs. Male-to-Female transgender people along with men who have sex with men (MSM) have been understood within a transnational discourse of risk and risk management as a group “at risk” for HIV/AIDS transmission, a discourse which shifted non-normative sexual practices “out of the realm of moral disagreement and toward the cold facts of immunology and risk management” (Dave 2012: 40). While HIV/AIDS work constructs sexual minorities through a particular understanding of risk and disease, the fusing of male-assigned sexual non-conformity and pandemic risk at the same time as India’s economy was liberalizing meant that there were ample opportunities for these groups to receive funding for programs attempting to mitigate this risk (Dave 2012: 40). The funding and awareness generated by the HIV/AIDS crisis has also offered sexual minority groups a platform through which to advocate for their rights and demand citizenship in ways that were previously possible.

Sexual rights activism in India began on a large scale in the 1990s and it was indelibly shaped by the global anxiety generated by HIV/AIDS, which was first recognized by medical scientists in 1981 (Ingram 2009: 607). While the first case of HIV in India was detected among sex workers in the southern city of Chennai in 1986, the Indian state positioned HIV as a “Western disease” that was spread as a result of the encroachment of “Western attitudes towards sexuality” and denied the existence of “homosexuals” in India (Lakimsetti 2014: 209; see also Cohen 2005). The first law that dealt with HIV/AIDS passed by the Indian state was the 1989 AIDS Prevention Bill, which empowered the state to undertake “invasive policing powers” such as forced testing, isolating people defined as “high-risk,” and requiring doctors to report the

identities of patients who tested positive for HIV (Lakimsetti 2014: 209). In the 1990s, there was a rapid increase of responses to the pandemic, including the creation of governmental agencies such as the National AIDS Control Organizations as well as state-levels AIDS Control Organizations and a plethora of NGOs working on HIV/AIDS projects and related issues around sexuality, reproductive health and drug use (Misra 2006: 38).

The practices of surveillance, information gathering and administering HIV/AIDS-related services were soon restructured and the Indian state outsourced these duties to the realm of the non-governmental (Misra 2006: 64). As a result, the NGO sector in India, bolstered by technological and monetary support from state and international agencies, became the medium through which particular kinds of “knowledge and expertise” about HIV/AIDS was created and circulated (Misra 2006: 38). Lawrence Cohen (2005) refers to this sector and the effects generated by its work as “AIDS cosmopolitanism,” in which HIV/AIDS and the concern, funding, knowledge and expertise it generates enables global capital to circulate through formerly marginal areas. While class-privileged gay men were able to tap into such funding to create and manage their own groups, *hijras* (and later, emerging groups of working-class transwomen) often had less access to the kinds of cultural capital that would enable them to apply for, be granted and then successfully manage NGO projects.

In the years leading up to 2000, the US and the UN underwent an important change in how these institutions conceived of HIV/AIDS. The understanding of the disease shifted from conceiving HIV/AIDS as a public health issue to an understanding of HIV/AIDS as central to the salient issue of security (Ingram 2009: 607), with the UN and other organizations “consistently highlight[ing]” the impacts of HIV/AIDS “on economies and on governance” as “potentially destabilizing” (McInnis 2006: 316). Many states where HIV transmission was high had been

classified as “failing states,” and the further “destabilizing” threat of HIV outbreaks was believed to have the potential to spill over to those states not classified as “failing” (Ingram 2009: 607). Emphasizing the need for unilateral action to curb the spread of HIV, the UN passed a resolution emphasizing that HIV/AIDS “may pose a risk to stability and security” (McInnis 2006: 315).

It was around this time that India began to be considered a central place to combat the virus, as health statistics compiled by Indian and international organizations indicated that the country was soon to become “the new epicenter of the pandemic” (Misra 2006: 38). The activist and advocacy work undertaken as a result of India’s perceived susceptibility to spreading HIV produced NGOs that engaged in the provision of health and preventive services, as well as demands for legal, social, and cultural change for the marginalized groups brought into their ambit due to their exposure and vulnerability to infection (Misra 2006; Lakkimsetti 2014). Crucially, work around HIV/AIDS “introduced new technologies and discourses around sexuality, bodies, and populations” that necessitated the “active participation” of the groups that are susceptible to infection (Lakkimsetti 2014: 202). The requirement of “active participation” from marginalized groups shifted their relationship to the state and enabled these groups to make successful claims on the state (Lakkimsetti 2014: 202). As Kamil, a longtime NGO leader and activist, explained to me,

HIV is the one weapon we have. Really, we all should say thanks to HIV and all the [statewide] AIDS Control Societies also, because to protect our rights, we didn't have any other weapon in those times [before HIV]...On the one hand, we lost so many people because of HIV, but on the other hand, we gained a major weapon to fight for our rights. See, HIV is a major weapon for us. See, because of HIV, we met so many political leaders, we know so many people at the police station, and we have sensitized them about sex and sexuality.

Here, Kamil emphasizes that the concern over HIV/AIDS as a global pandemic and the funding that flowed from that concern enabled activists and public health workers to create a platform to

not only educate people about sexuality and gender non-conformity, but also to advocate for the rights of gender and sexual minorities. Like the sex workers in Lakimsetti's (2014) analysis, sexual rights activists and NGO workers position HIV as offering them crucial opportunities for rights advocacy.

*HIV/AIDS Projects and Rights Work: Dosti's Perspective*

Dosti became involved in HIV/AIDS programs around 2005. At that time, Johan, a former Dosti leader, explained, the organization accepted funding for "a huge, ambitious program." With funding for 20 million Indian rupees, which is approximately 300,000 US dollars, Dosti opened seven drop-in centers that provided STI and HIV/AIDS-related healthcare and support such as counseling and group counseling throughout different parts of Bangalore. The increase in the number of staff this funding enabled was more than tenfold; Dosti went from 11 staff members to approximately 170 staff members. Many of the new staff worked in the drop-in centers or clinics throughout Bangalore and others worked at the community-based organization (CBO) that was created as Dosti's partner CBO for implementing HIV/AIDS projects, Swakriti. Johan explains that upon accepting the funding,

we were looking at immediate scale up, reaching out to the maximum number of people in a short period of time. We were able to prove that it was possible [to do this]. Within the first year, we were able to achieve targets: we reached around 5,000 people, 1,500 people were coming to the clinics regularly.

Due to its size, ambition and eventual success, Johan explains that this program was

seen as a very unique program, one of the biggest programs in India. We were able to achieve a program of that size and scale. Later, it became a site that was a place where people could come and learn [how to conduct such a program]. It went to that level [of success].

However, taking HIV/AIDS funding was a contested decision that was often discussed among leaders and group members of Dosti in the early 2000s. Critics of HIV/AIDS programs and funding argued that the experience of other groups indicates that getting involved in HIV/AIDS programs often entails that the programs eventually overtake the rights-based work the organization is engaged in and the funders begin to dictate the work of the organization. However, there were lots of Dosti participants who were suffering as a result of their exposure to the infection, so other people pointed out that taking on HIV/AIDS programs was a matter of helping their fellow sexual minorities. As Johan explains, the eventual outcome decided was that

Health is also a human rights issue, access to health, especially by people from the economically weaker sections of society. People already experience stigma because of their gender expression and sexuality, so for them to access the government healthcare system was very difficult...if we took up that project [funding], we could make the service more accessible to the community.

As Johan explains, after so many heated debates about whether to prioritize rights work or HIV/AIDS work, Dosti eventually decided that they would take up the HIV/AIDS project, but they would do so in a way that kept the organization's focus on rights at the forefront of their work. Johan further emphasizes,

we were clear that we're doing [this HIV/AIDS project] as a human rights issue, not merely as a health issue. We were looking more at the social aspect of the epidemic, as opposed to the medical aspect of the epidemic, how the social marginalization impacts the epidemic.

Dosti's position on HIV/AIDS projects indicates the salience of rights work and rights-based discourses that are a central part of the organization's work. Even while working in a realm that is primarily focused on health as a service that NGOs provide, Dosti infused that work with a rights-based focus.

*Histories of Hijras and "Contagion"*

Understandings of *hijras* and other male-assigned gender non-conforming people that center non-normative sexual practices and possibilities of spreading contaminating disease have a history in South Asia dating back at least to the colonial period. Based on their gender presentation and suspected sexual practices, British rulers characterized *hijras* as “agents of sexual contagion,” believing that *hijras* represented “persons who physically infected others with the ‘disease’ of ‘unnatural’ sexual behavior” (Hinchy 2014: 281). In the eyes of the colonizers, *hijras*’ public dance performances were linked with sex work and colonial officials believed that “preventing *hijra* performance would therefore suppress sodomy” (Hinchy 2014: 281). Colonial officers thus attempted to “eras[e] *hijras* as a visible social category and public presence” by enforcing laws prohibiting the public performance of *hijras* and punishing *hijras* who dressed in clothing that did not confirm their (male) gender assignation (Hinchy 2014: 281). To colonial officials, “the feminine embodiment of *hijras* was evidence of innate sexual and gender deviance” (Hinchy 2014: 279). As Hinchy argues,

According to many colonial officials, it was not the bawdy content of *hijras*’ performances that required regulation, but the spectacle of *hijras*—figures of failed masculinity—dressed as women...that femininity needed to be entirely erased from the bodies of *hijras*, who should ‘uniformly wear men’s clothes’ (Hinchy 2014: 284).

Due to this anxiety around *hijras*’ association with “contagion” of a sexual nature, *hijras* have been subjected to state-sponsored curtailments of their rights since at least the colonial era, when the policing and surveillance of *hijras* was codified into colonial law. While citizenship as “a universal rights-bearing category” was not codified until the drafting of the constitution in independent India, subjects of British India articulated understandings of the relationship between themselves and the colonial state that we can now read as articulations of citizenship (Banerjee 2010: 4). However, such understandings of citizenship would not have been available to *hijras* since *hijras* received different treatment and held a distinct political status vis-à-vis non-

*hijras*. In the eyes of the colonial state, *hijras* were constructed as dangerous colonial subjects threatening to subvert the social order, a construction with which *hijras* are associated with to this day.

*Hijras* were classified as a “criminal tribe” by their nature, and positioned as in need of surveillance to protect the masculine public space they threatened with their feminine dress and performance style (Reddy 2005: 26; see also Puri 2016; Narrain 2009; Pandian 2009). Notions of hereditary criminality formed the basis for the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which initially included caste groups, but was amended in 1897 to include groups of *hijras* as hereditary criminals (Reddy 2005: 26). People designated as belonging to criminal groups had access to even fewer rights than other colonial subjects since they were assumed to be prone to criminal activity and thus in need of surveillance and punishment. In keeping with the demands of the Criminal Tribes Act, all local government officials were required to maintain a registry of names of eunuchs; registered eunuchs were prohibited from dancing, playing music, participating in a public exhibition and/or appearing “dressed or ornamented like a woman” in public places (Narrain 2009: 459). These restrictions indicate that the colonial state conceived of gender non-conforming people such as *hijras* as illegitimate subjects whose rights were necessarily more restricted than other colonial subjects.

Evidence from the case of the first person who was arrested for the crime of “unnatural sex” indicates the kinds of impacts that state surveillance had on *hijra* lives. In 1884, British colonial records in North India indicate that a eunuch named Khairati was taken in for observation by police after being found dressed in an “ornamentative” fashion and singing in the supposed manner of a woman (Gupta 2006: 4816). Khairati was already registered under the local government’s notation of eunuchs and when police arrived at her village, they found her “singing

dressed as a woman,” though Khairati denied that she was “dressed as a woman” at that time (Narain 2009: 459). After bringing Khairati to the police station, subjecting her to what must have been a degrading medical examination, the police concluded she suffered from a “distortion of the orifice of the anus into the shape of a trumpet,” which was interpreted as the “mark of a habitual sodomite” (Gupta 2006: 4816; see also Narain 2009). The police booked Khairati for the presumption of “unnatural” intercourse under the colonial Indian Penal Code 377, which forbids sexual acts “against the order of nature” (Narain 2009: 459). However, having no further evidence to prove Khairati’s participation in “unnatural offences,” she was later released without charge (Narain 2009: 459; Gupta 2006).

Prosecution for gender non-conformity under the Criminal Tribes Act was not only directed at “known eunuchs.” By prohibiting “cross-dressing” and any performance deemed inappropriate according to one’s gender assignation, this gave colonial Indian subjects and officials the impression that “*any* person who appeared to be a eunuch...could be prosecuted for public performance and transvestism” under this act (Hinchy 2014: 283). The result was that police believed that the Act effectively allowed them to abuse and harass a variety of people who “behaved in public space in a manner deemed ‘obscene’ or ‘deviant,’” thus giving police and officials broad powers to prosecute gender and sexual non-conformity (Hinchy 2014: 283).

In contemporary India, *hijras* continue to be maligned for their vexed relationship to hegemonic masculinity and their association with sex work, characteristics that make their citizenship status tenuous at best. *Hijras* are generally considered to be “emasculated men” (Nanda 1990: 52), so the notion of *hijras* as symbolic of “failed masculinity” (Hinchy 2014) continues to impact public perceptions about *hijras*. Even today, *hijras* are generally “constructed in the popular imaginary as ‘dirty,’ socially marginal outcasts” (Reddy 2005: 257).



*Police Violence and Hijras as Non-citizens*

Today, perceptions of state authorities towards *hijras* and other sexual and gender non-conforming people appear very similar to the attitudes circulating during the colonial era. There are many reports in Bangalore and other parts of India documenting the violent and disturbing effects of police interactions with sexual minorities. One of the first coalitions of sexual minority advocates' groups formed in Bangalore to resist an "alarming increase" in police violations against gay/bisexual men and feminine-identified transgender people in public spaces such as parks (PUCL-K 2001: 21). This group, the Coalition for Sexual Minorities' Rights, raised awareness of this issue through interviews with media, in which they drew attention to the fact that police officers "are actively harassing, blackmailing, physically and verbally abusing gay and homosexual people" (PUCL-K 2001: 21).

During this time, "clean-up drives" against (almost always male-assigned) sexual minorities were reported as a common practice. One inspector explained that "the police under his jurisdiction periodically round up a number of people whom they identify as gays and release these people only after ensuring that they don't reappear in the area; *hijras* whose sex work makes them 'a public nuisance' face a similar eviction" (PUCL-K 2004: 25). During the "clean-up drives," there are no legal charges made, police do not follow legal procedures, leading the PUCL-K report writers to conclude that "obviously, the police are aware that their actions are untenable as they violate the rights of free association and assembly guaranteed to all citizens under the constitution of India" (PUCL-K 2004: 25). Here, the accusation is that people caught up in these clean up drives are not treated as rights-bearing citizens. Unfortunately, while all Indians are guaranteed rights on paper, police appeared to face few demands for accountability in

recognizing this group as citizens with rights. As the report argues, “in operating entirely outside the ambit of law, the police are confident that they have the support of the dominant culture” (PUCL-K 2004: 25).

In the past, when asked about police harassment and abuse of sexual minorities, police officials have displayed a deeply ambivalent attitude. The Coalition for Sexual Minority Rights met with several police officers in the higher ranks of the police, who listened to their concerns and said they would look into the matter; one inspector even reported that as a result of these meetings, several police officers had been charged. However, the Joint Commissioner of Police at the time, Dr. Ajai Kumar Singh, vehemently asserted to the Bangalore Weekly, a newspaper, that sexual minorities have no rights to protect, saying

Homosexuality is an offence under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and it is the duty of the police to prevent any kind of offence from happening. If the cop on duty questions or prevents any form of crime, he is only doing his job. Where is the question of harassment or atrocity? These are not cases of human rights violation because these groups are not legally recognized (PUCL-K 2001: 22).

In her research on police enforcement of the colonial law against homosexual acts (IPC 377), Puri (2012) found that police adamantly deny abusing gay and *kothi* men in public places, but they willingly admit that *hijras* are often subjected to police force. The police officers “openly admitted that police will threaten Kinnars [a North Indian term for *hijras*] in anticipation of sex work and to prevent them from committing petty and serious crime” (Puri 2012: 33; see also PUCL-K 2003).

From the perspective of law enforcement, *hijra* options for livelihood serve to mark them and their behavior as criminal. While soliciting money and extortion are considered punishable offences, the difference between soliciting for money as one’s livelihood and extortion is not as accurately defined as police often claim (Narain 2009: 461). The most common charges

against *hijras* are filed for “extortion, begging, theft, robbery and nuisance” as well as arrest for performing sex work (Narain 2009: 461). In media reporting, *hijras* “are often targeted for their occupations of begging and ‘extortion’ and seen as violators of civic space” (Datta 2012: 125). *Hijra* livelihood options are positioned as an “encroachment into private middle class spaces and condemned as disruptive, aggressive or (at best) comical” (Datta 2012: 125-126). Accordingly, police told Puri that there are a number of reasons that *hijras* are subjected to police harassment and violence. She explains,

They [police] said vehemently: “Kinnars [*hijras*] have sex in public places; they do it for money; they are doing wrong by having sex for money in a public place. Kinnars will take someone into a car and rob them of his clothes and money”...The necessary qualifier is that violence against Kinnars is committed under the aegis of laws against public nuisance (Puri 2012: 33).

Toward the beginning of Dosti’s work, the organization encountered a situation in which the perception of *hijras* as non-citizens by the state was made explicit. Noncitizens are part of a group of “the poor, the unskilled, the exploited or the unequal” who “lack the resources to act and, thus, miss out on the benefits of citizenship in their everyday life where meaningful access to citizenship matters the most” (Tambakaki 2016: 927). This interaction with police occurred in 2002, when police attempted to stop *hijras* from participating in Dosti meetings in the city, claiming that the city was a place for citizens, thus explicitly positioning *hijras* as outside the boundaries of citizenship. It was only after a protracted campaign to raise awareness of this practice that Dosti was able to call attention to and change police behavior toward *hijras* and the organization.

Beginning in February 2002, Dosti started offering its office as a space for community members, including many *hijras*, to meet and interact with each other over tea and light refreshments. These “Sunday meetings” occurred every Sunday from 3 PM to 6 PM, when the

office was officially closed. One of the few residential flats in the building Dosti was housed in was occupied by an ex-MLA government official, who claimed that *hijras* should not be allowed to enter the building since there were families living there. This person contacted the police with complaints and seven police officers came to the office to prevent the meeting from occurring. Mohan, a former leader and longtime member of Dosti, explains that the police told the community members gathered there, “You can’t have meetings with *hijras*. The city is meant for citizens. If you want to work with [*hijras*], go outside the city,” indicating the police officers’ presumption that *hijras* are not citizens.

Representatives from various human rights organizations joined Dosti for a meeting about this incident with the Deputy Commissioner of Police in Bangalore City. Upon hearing about the situation, the Deputy Commissioner called the local police station the officers were employed by and ordered them to stop preventing Dosti’s meetings. However, the following Sunday, the police again barred several people, including human rights activists, *hijras*, and other sexual minorities, from entering the Dosti office, even restricting entry to employees of the organization. When a group of activists and lawyers met with the Chief Inspector of Police, he explained that *hijras* would not be permitted to meet within the Dosti office premises, but they were free to hold their meetings anywhere “outside Bangalore city.” He refused to answer any questions about the legality of this action, and said that such queries may be directed to higher officials. Meanwhile, the flat owners’ association in Dosti’s building had met to speak about this issue and passed a resolution indicating that no one is allowed to meet or congregate in any part of the building, though Dosti insisted that this resolution was not legally binding. When activists approached the Deputy Commissioner of Police, he indicated that the flat owners had approached him regarding the Sunday meetings. While this official claimed that Dosti is “doing

good work,” he explained that “the society is not ready” to accept *hijras* meeting near their homes, instructing Dosti to move the Sunday meetings to another place.

During all the interactions with various officials high up in the police hierarchy, Dosti staff and participants were prohibited from attending the Sunday meetings for four weeks, so the meetings were moved to another location in the city. Each Sunday afternoon, Mohan explains, the police “prevented us from entering our own office!” Upon hearing about this, he says, “most people advised us [to] leave that place and shift. We said no, we will not shift. We will only shift if a court orders us to shift out.” To call attention to this issue, Dosti and the organization’s supporters started an email signature campaign that received a significant amount of international support from organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the International Lesbian and Gay Association. After Dosti sent out an informative email about the police actions and a call for support, Mohan explains, “within a few days, letters started pouring into the chief minister’s office in all languages of the world.” Dosti also garnered positive media support during the reporting of the police actions. Mohan explains, “We would try to enter the office every Sunday along with other human rights activists, [and] police would prevent us. Media [people] would take the picture, [then] it would come in the newspaper the next day,” which helped to raise awareness about this issue among the public.

Initially, the Chief Minister of Karnataka responded to Dosti’s complaints in the form of a letter, in which he condemned the police action. However, after the campaign gained increased media support in India and international support through the email campaign, the Chief Minister addressed this issue in a way that reflected Dosti’s insistence that this incident is an issue of the human rights of *hijras*. Mohan explains that, “initially, he wrote back saying that I will take steps to check this police excess—that was the language he used. Later, he said I will take all the

steps to defend the human rights of *hijras* or something like that.” At this point, Mohan says, “finally, we got back our office. It was a huge, huge, huge step for the community.”

### *Dosti and Transgender Rights*

Dosti’s efforts to fight for transgender people’s rights have had a salient impact on the organization and its reputation. However, Dosti leaders emphasize that they do not focus solely on any particular identity with the sexual minority category. As Swathi, a longtime leader and founding member of Dosti, explained to me, throughout Dosti’s work, “we’ve kept that transgenders are a part and it’s not just LGB,” a perspective which “is something unique because most other places [organizations] deal only with one [identity] or the other, like you’ll have a group for lesbians or you’ll have a group for MSM,” whereas Dosti works with sexual minorities who claim various identities.

In the early 2000s, Dosti organized several public events calling for recognition and rights for sexual minorities that also included the concerns of gender non-conforming people, which was unusual at the time. When Dosti formed as an organization, most rallies that addressed issues of sexuality were focused on the repeal of the Indian Penal Code 377, a colonial era injunction that criminalizes same-sex sexual acts. These mobilizations implicitly pointed out how the IPC 377 is discriminatory to gay men and they would occasionally mention lesbians, but there was usually no mention of transgender people at that time. However, one of the first rallies that Dosti organized dealt with IPC 377, but the flyer of demands that was circulated specifically pointed out that this law is discriminatory to gay men, lesbians and transgender people. As Swathi explains,

it’s in some sense unique that Dosti always worked with all sexual minorities...but at the same time, we have kept in mind that within the group, there are various needs and

demands... We've [understood] that transgenders are a part [of the group] and it's not just LGB... that is something which is unique because most other places deal only with one or the other. Like you'll have a group for lesbians or you'll have a group for what they call MSM [and transpeople will not be part of either group].

By contrast, Dosti's work focused on working-class people of varying sexual and gender identities and, because they are extremely marginalized, a considerable amount of their activist work focused on the struggles faced by *hijras* and later, transgender women.

As a result, the struggles of gender non-conforming people have been part of the discussion on sexual rights since at least the time of the first public event about sexuality in Bangalore. That first public event addressing non-heterosexuality and gender non-conformity in Bangalore was called "Breaking the Silence: Sexual Minorities Speak Out." Five sexual minorities, one of whom was a transgender woman who was not part of hijra groups, spoke publicly about their experiences. Mohan, another founding member and longtime leader at Dosti, explains the significance of having a transwoman speak at this event, saying, "one of the first public expressions of sexual minorities in Bangalore city, *public* expressions, included transgenders, very early on." He further explains that for the core group of activists that supported Dosti,

The idea of transgenders being most marginalized among sexual minorities was established even for ourselves pretty early, by 2001-2002. That is not the case in most cities, in most states in India. Transgenders have been a central part of the activism here. [The idea of transpeople being particularly marginalized] had been established and also the demand [for their rights and inclusion] has been a very consistent one.

Dosti has framed its activist work for transgender people using the language of rights, which implies a claim to citizenship for transpeople. Mohan explains,

We framed it as a citizen rights issue, a gender identity issue, an issue of human rights... we always argued using a lot of evidence, a lot of data, scientific information to show that how systematically, transgenders are denied opportunities, discriminated against. [We emphasized] their economic situation, their educational situation, their social situation, health situation, stigma they face in the society, housing, addiction, mental health... unemployment, the kind of employment choice [available to them], workplace harassment. So we always framed it very much in the citizen rights, human

rights framework...And so [we argued that] because of our gender identity, we are denied education, we are denied housing, we are denied inheritance, we are denied right to marriage, we are denied the right to adoption, we are denied the right to food. We framed it like that. Because of our gender identity, our rights are denied...so that is the language we used.

Here, Mohan characterizes Dosti's strategy as framing the struggles faced by transgender people as an issue of citizen's rights and human rights that are being denied to transpeople on the basis of their identity. Thus, Dosti is arguing that *hijras* deserve access to these rights from the state because they should be recognized as citizens of the state. An implicit goal of Dosti's rights-based activism is to enable transgender people and *hijras* to claim citizenship.

In a 2014 Ted Talk video that circulated widely online, Akriithi, a transgender woman and longtime staff member of Dosti, began her presentation by talking about the kinds of actions working class gender non-conforming people face. In an authoritative, confident voice, she said,

What we are facing? The rejection of your identity, *no* education, *no* school, yeah? No family acceptance, no housing, no ration cards, no passports, no voter IDs. People are not getting their bread and butter [livelihood]. Why is that? It is the moral responsibility of the state. It is the moral responsibility of each and every citizen of this country to recognize this oppressed community and start giving opportunities.

Here, Akriithi points out that transpeople cannot often access the kinds of rights (education, housing, livelihood) that have been enshrined for all people in India's constitution. She also emphasizes that transpeople are often denied the kind of belonging and recognition that would enable them to participate actively in society, such as family acceptance and state identification cards. Akriithi's characterization of this problem as an issue of transpeople being denied their rights implicitly posits transpeople as rights-baring individuals who are deserving of citizenship.

### *Media Advocacy*

An important part of Dosti's outreach and advocacy for sexual minority rights has involved



working with the media. This has meant that Dosti has taken on a role of educating the people that produce media, reporters and writers, and Dosti has also used the media as a platform to educate the public about sexuality and gender non-conformity. As Dosti educated reporters about the injustices faced by sexual minorities and gender non-conforming people, they began to report sexual minority issues in a more sensitive light and to emphasize that sexual non-conformity is more prevalent than is often recognized by the “mainstream.” As Mohan explains, “a lot of people who won’t talk about this before, they’re talking for the first time, in the last two-three years. They have been impacted” by the activism raising awareness of these issues. Furthermore, the impact of media representation has “played an extremely positive role,” Mohan says, since reporters are now more educated about these issues and they have been schooled by Dosti in how to write and report about the issues in a respectful manner. Previously, “the ways they used to talk about transgender was to say just ‘eunuchs’—it was the one word used for all transgenders, even sexual minorities who were not transgenders,” Mohan explains, and “very often they would just use blanket sort of statements and confused gender and sexuality issues very badly.”

However, Dosti has worked with reporters to change their representations of transgender issues. Now, Mohan proudly explains, “the media is very sharp...we’ve worked with the media, from day one. See, we educated them because whenever something happened, we went [to the media] with evidence, we went with details, they saw [the kind of violations that occur].” The effect of working with the media in this manner is that, “as individuals, they changed. Then, it became easier” to work with them because the evidence that Dosti presented convinced them that these were salient issues. He explains, “it was very difficult, initially” and Dosti’s strategy was, “if violence happens, we’ll take [injured] people [to the media]. We’ll give them evidence, we’ll

show them everything. Then, they realize that yes, violations happen” and report this information accordingly.

The impact of their efforts at education through media representation has “played an extremely positive role” in the public perception of sexuality in Bangalore, Manjunath explained to me. Now, as a result of the education that Dosti has offered to people who produce media, reporters in Bangalore demonstrate an enhanced understanding about issues of sexuality and gender and the ways they write about sexual minority issues has changed markedly in the past 15 years. Previously, he explains,

the ways they used to talk about transgender was to say just ‘eunuchs’—it was the one word used for all transgenders, even sexual minorities who were not transgender...very often they would just use blanket sort of statements and confuse gender and sexuality issues very badly.

However, he explains, now “the media is very sharp” in representing these issues and that is because “we’ve worked with the media, from day one; we educated them.” Much of this education revolved around the reporting of abuse of sexual minorities, thus framing issues of sexuality around the injustice of violence toward sexual minorities. Manjunath explained, “whenever something [attacks, violence] happened, we went [to the media] with evidence, we went with details, they saw it...as individuals, they changed. Then, it became easier [to work with them]...it was very difficult, initially.” In the beginning stages of working with the media, he explains, “Dosti’s strategy was if violence happens, we’ll take [injured] people [to the media]. We’ll give them evidence, we’ll show them everything. Then, they realize that yes, violations happen.” After media reporters were “convinced” that violence and abuse were salient and unjust issues, they became more sensitive in their reporting on the lives of sexual minorities. This kind of reporting has lessened (but certainly not eradicated) the stigma associated with identifying as a sexual minority. Moreover, these kinds of media programs have also offered

people who might not have previously identified as sexual minorities examples of groups that they can locate and join. By calling attention to the rights and recognition of sexual minorities, more people have joined various sexual minority subgroups, including *hijras*, making groups of *hijras* a highly visible presence in major cities.

### *Demanding Civil Citizenship for Hijras*

Much of Dosti's initial work focused on gender non-conforming people's rights to civil citizenship, as these campaigns focused on their rights to equal protection before the law. Because *hijras* and transwomen face violence and discrimination at the hands of state representatives like police and the court system, Dosti worked with JK Sundaram, a former corporate lawyer who now provides pro bono legal assistance to sexual minorities and transgender people associated with Dosti.

The first case that Sundaram worked on with Dosti was a case involving five *hijras* who were accused of extortion around the year 2000. The police arrested them, physically and verbally abused them in custody and forcefully cut their long hair. When they were brought before the magistrate, the magistrate also verbally abused them, asking, as Sundaram explains, "how can you come [wearing] a sari if you are a man? You were born a man! Next time I see you in the court, you must come wearing shirts and trousers, *not* a sari." Through taking steps to police their gender presentation, the judge implies that gender non-conforming people do not have rights before the law, denying their access to civil citizenship. By inviting them to come to the court dressed as men, his orders imply that they can access rights as citizens only if their dress aligns with their assigned gender. When the five accused *hijras* appeared in court the following day wearing pants and collared shirts, their names were not called and the court administrators

recorded them as being absent, presumably in the hope of extracting an additional fine from them. Sundaram sighs as he speaks of this incident, runs his hand through his hair and characterizes the behavior of court officials as “the kind of thing which is *impossible!*” It was then that Dosti asked Sundaram for help and he agreed to take the case. He explains,

When we took up this case, it was a landmark case because we made the court sit up and observe [their behavior towards *hijras*]. What we did was I told all my clients, ‘next day during the hearing, you come in the *best* possible dress, [wearing] the *finest* perfume, you put on the *best* makeup possible. I don't mind paying you money [for this]—go and get your makeup done in a parlor, come to court *so* well dressed, [be] half an hour early, before anybody gets into the court hall.’ So I made them [do this], went along with them, sat in the first row of the court and told my clients, ‘your case is going to be called three hours late. Not a problem. For three hours, very seriously, keep staring at the judge. I'm [here] sitting next to you.’ It was an *embarrassment* for the judge because that same judge had earlier abused them, [saying], ‘you come in trousers, [or else] I'll put you behind bars, you will face lots of trouble.’ He had intimidated them in the court, which he was not supposed to do. Still, the judge, [chuckles with amusement] that judge was looking at me, I was looking at him very seriously, with earnestness. [He was suffering from] *embarrassment!* And the case was called. I said ‘pass it over. We will hear this case in the afternoon session.’ I did not move out of the court hall. I made them [my clients] sit. It was an embarrassment for the judge for *four and a half hours!* He had to look at them and they were very silent... The moment the case was called, the judge knew he was in for trouble. He asked me, ‘Mr. Sundaram, is it necessary that your clients should come in such a dress, with this degree of makeup? I told the judge that, ‘What you're trying is a crime... They're not on trial for their dress! If you find it offensive, all of them are wearing very nice saris. Most women who are in the court don't wear such kind of nice dresses—you must appreciate that! They [*hijras*] have very nice makeup on, none of them [women in the court] are wearing makeup!’ My claim is they [my *hijra* clients] have lots of respect for the court. They come in a well-appointed way, they look very decent. It should be pleasant and the courts should be excited.”

In this instance, Sundaram's tactic was to directly challenge the judge's refusal to recognize the rights of his clients before the law. The judge's instructions to the accused *hijras* implies that gender non-conforming people do not have rights before the law and to access the rights of citizenship, they must display a gender identity that matches their assigned gender. By asking his clients to instead accentuate their feminine appearance, Sundaram makes an opposing claim that, in approximating feminine standards of beauty better than the ciswomen in the court, they

are showing “lots of respect for the court” and thus should be entitled to the right to appear and defend themselves before the court, thus actively producing *hijras* as respectful citizens through their attention to feminine beauty norms. Sundaram explains, “This was the first case where we started pushing the judicial system that they had to accept [*hijras*].” Because he is referencing the rights of *hijras* to appear before the court and be treated equally, the implication is that the judicial system must accept *hijras* as citizens deserving of the rights available to all citizens.

In addition to formally claiming the citizenship rights of gender non-conforming people before the court, Sundaram explains that he has also had conversations with court officials in which he stresses the rights of gender non-conforming people. After his success with the first case, he explains,

we started explaining to the judge what this community is about. What exactly is the kind of violence they face, how [the society] has been insensitive towards them, what is the sex trade, why these people beg, why these people [display a] noisy presence when they beg. I explained to the judge why I fight for their cause. *I also explained to the judge what is the duty of the court, how the court needs to be sensitive towards them [emphasis mine].* You would not believe [it]—that judge was a reformed soul! In fact, many of the people who come, who are facing trial in that court, would say to me, ‘Mr. Sundaram, your clients are privileged in this court,’ in the sense that whenever [that magistrate judge] used to adjourn the case for a purpose, he would explain for what purpose he was adjourning the case and he would inquire which date would be convenient for *them* [laughing] to come to court [which does not often happen].

Here, Sundaram details the process of educating the judge not only about the condition of *hijras*, but also about the “duty” of the court to recognize *hijras* as citizens deserving of rights. He was so successful in this effort that his clients were eventually treated better than the majority of cispeople who came to the court.

Many of the cases that Dosti and Sundaram intervened in, especially in the early stages, involved abuses of *hijras* and other sexual minorities in police custody. Because *hijras* are often not considered to have rights and positioned as non-citizens, they are especially vulnerable to

police abuse. Sundaram explains,

see, most cases of [police] crime, the police do it with absolute [impunity]; they don't care. They [arrest and abuse people,] file a case, and they forget about it. The person gets acquitted, they [police] get off scot free. Even if they [police] commit a crime and file a false case [against a civilian], they get away with it. By and large, they get away with it. Now suddenly, we started demanding compliance [with the law from police].

In order to change the treatment of hijras in police custody, Sundaram in partnership with Dosti realized that they would need a system in place. Because sexual minorities (particularly *hijras*) were not considered as rights-bearing citizens by police at that time, Sundaram realized that they would have to involve middle class, highly educated people, because their citizenship claims are uncontested and they are therefore in a better position to advocate for the rights of *hijras*.

Sundaram explains,

So what we did was I would provide 24/7 litigation and legal assistance advice to the community. It's 24/7, pro bono, anyone can get my number. My cell was printed along with five other numbers. These five other numbers are not members of the community [not known to be sexual minorities]. One of them is a professor in the department of English in a university and there is an astro-physicist and there is the head of the department of English in a very prestigious college. And there is a physicist from the Institute of Science. So the kind of persons who come from very highly qualified and educated sections of the society in Bangalore. We made a list of them, each of them living in some part of Bangalore. We had the numbers, the landline and mobile numbers of these persons printed, given through peer educators in Dosti who distributed these numbers where ever they went. So anybody who has the number, if they come across some crime against the community or someone from the community is being implicated, they call any one of these numbers...the moment we get [a notification of arrest], one call would be made to the nearest person who will go and talk to the police there and I would also get a call that such a thing has happened. Immediately, I will call a couple of my colleagues. One of the colleagues would take his bike and go down to that particular police station. He says, 'I am the lawyer here, give me the details'...Then, he would demand compliance with the DK Basu Judgement [similar to Miranda Rights]. [For example, the person would ask,] 'If you have arrested, sir, have you informed the person the reasons for his arrest? Have you informed the person that the person is entitled to legal advice? The assistance of a practitioner? Have you informed the nearest relative to whom you have to send a telegram? Have you sent a telegram?' Now, this is something police will never be asked. Forget sexual minorities, *no one* asks these questions to police! They take it for granted. Now (claps) we started making them comply!

This procedure enabled an advocate whose citizenship was uncontested to demand that the police recognize the rights of *hijras* and other sexual minorities to be treated as citizens. However, because the police are often not held accountable for their actions, Dosti encountered resistance. Sometimes this meant physically or verbally assaulting the advocate and often it meant refusing to release the accused person and keeping them in custody illegally. When that happened, Sundaram explains,

we said that I'll file a petition for *habeas corpus*<sup>3</sup>. 24/7...What we did was we bought a fax machine, housed it in Dosti, and someone would sleep in the office of Dosti every night, someone who knows how to fax. So I take my cell phone or landline, call the fellow [in Dosti], dictate. He will type the petition, take a print out, fax it to the Chief Justice of the court, so the *habeas corpus* petition has already been filed. The next day in the morning, ten o'clock, [the petition] is in the court, I am also there in the court. So this [tenacity] police found *extremely* difficult! For them, it was a shocker! A community which begs in the street, a community which does sex work with hardly any money...such kind of a community, how can they engage a lawyer and file a *habeas corpus* petition? It's a very expensive kind of an affair. And how can they get it? For them it was kind of impossible to relate. A professor, head of the department of a university, he comes seeking compliance for violence committed against a *hijra*. It's impossible for the police to understand it!"

Here, Sundaram describes the elaborate plan that enables respected citizens to demand that police recognize *hijras* as rights-bearing citizens, which means that they must comply with normal procedures for the arrest and detention of *hijras*. The effectiveness of this method mocks the stereotypes that police hold of *hijras*, who (as people who lack citizenship rights) are presumed to be without influence and too poor to hire someone to defend their rights.

With the help of Sundaram, Dosti worked toward educating its participants so that they could advocate on behalf of the citizenship claims made by any sexual minorities that approach the group for assistance. As Sundaram explains,

We told Dosti that the best way to help the rights of this community is to train them...what we did was that periodically, we give training programs to the staff of Dosti. [We address issues such as] 'What exactly is this human rights? What exactly is arrest

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<sup>3</sup> Unlawful detention of someone who has not been charged with a crime.

and detention? What are the constitutional guarantees of rights? *How do we need to exercise them?* What are the answers *you are entitled* to from police? What are the procedures to which *you are entitled* to be followed by the police and the court?’ We have trained them on all these aspects... Today I don't have to give any trainings at all. Dosti does the training by itself. So Dosti's staff, a great number of staff who have been trained from us, they do the training among themselves. Today, a good number of community members know this. Many of them are illiterate, but they know the procedure... This is something which over a period of time, in Dosti, we have institutionalized. For legal assistance, it is very structured. We don't have to worry regarding this, it won't fall away. [emphasis mine]

Here, Sundaram details the kind of training about rights and constitutional guarantees of rights that enable Dosti workers and participants to advocate for their own rights and access to citizenship, a process that no longer requires the intervention of middle-class recognized citizens. These trainings emphasized that sexual minorities (including *hijras*) “are entitled to” rights and trained people on “[h]ow...to exercise them.”

All of the Dosti workers and participants I spoke with said that if there should be a situation involving abuse of someone in police custody, they would be very comfortable going to the police station and following the process of investigating this abuse. People were able to explicitly detail the process they would follow when going to the police station, illustrating Sundaram’s point that now Dosti staff and participants know the process of demanding that police recognize the citizenship rights of *hijras* and sexual minorities and they are able to follow it on their own. Suchithra, a Dosti worker, explained that when she goes to investigate a complaint of police abuse,

We first need to understand the situation concerning the people of the community... We go and ask, “Why, What, Where, When and Who?” We can ask the “five Ws.” After asking those questions, we [have enough information to] get involved... First, we enquire how it happened. After that we will decide how to support them [and] how to resolve this.

Here, Suchithra demonstrates with confidence her knowledge of how to assess a situation involving sexual minority community members and the police. By asking the “five Ws,” she and



her team can ascertain whether can get involved and what course of action can best support the person and hold the police accountable to upholding their rights as a citizen. Because they have been trained in the legal process, they feel empowered to speak up about police abuse, and Dosti staff and participants are systematically equipped to handle situations involving police abuse.

Because this process is now known to many Dosti staff and participants, they can now defend their rights so well that the middle class advocates who were essential to the process at first are no longer needed. As Sundaram explains,

Earlier, it used to be my colleague who used to go there to the police station. Now my colleagues don't go; [they] don't have to. The community is so [well] trained, whenever there is some crime, someone arrested, 20-30 of them [staff and participants] just go to the police station. They also start asking questions to police. That is something which has never happened [before this]. In fact, the resistance is so much that one police officer was not able to leave his chamber until I arrived to the police station [laughing]. The police officer called me and said, "please come, sir." I said, "I am busy, I'll come [later]." [He replied,] "No sir, if you don't come, I am unable to get out of my office. These people have just held me ransom until I listen to you. Until I talk to you, I cannot get out of my office. And I can't take action against them, sir. I am already in deep shit with these kind of allegations. Please come rescue me!" So [laughing] sometimes, I still have to go to the police station.

This example indicates the success of Dosti's program to instill in its staff and participants a sense of their own rights as citizens, even before powerful individuals within the police force.

The processes that Dosti has put into place have fundamentally changed the way that sexual minorities are regarded and treated by police in Bangalore. Referencing the story he told of his first time defending Dosti's community members, Sundaram tells me,

If a hijra wants to come in a sari *now*, no court would even *dream* of saying, "come in trousers." No chance. It has changed. No member of the community gets scared to get into the court hall. All of them go in, happily, and sit like anybody else. They don't get scared. They just sit. They stare at the judge happily, [it's] not a problem. This is possible because of a kind of sustained activity of legal intervention, very sustained.

Here, Sundaram points to an important shift in how *hijras* and other sexual minorities interact with the court system and the police. Following their legal interventions, *hijras* and other sexual

minorities come to the court dressed in clothing that reflects their gender identity and court officials are no longer empowered to deny them their citizenship rights because they are visibly gender non-conforming. At least in the courts, *hijras* are now treated “like anybody else,” meaning that they are treated as citizens whose rights should be upheld. Echoing these sentiments, a 2003 report to Dosti’s funding agency details how the organization’s legal interventions combined with the outreach campaigns affected their perceptions of the police.

The report notes,

The *hijra*, *kothi* and other homosexual/bisexual male sex workers are now facing the police with more confidence...Earlier, rape and physical violence on *kothi/hijra* sex workers who were (mostly illegally) detained in police stations was common. More recently, there has been a drastic reduction in such action by the police.

Sundaram explained that one of the most gratifying moments for him was when he asked a well-known transwoman who identified as a *hijra* at one time, Kalpana, how she thinks their legal interventions have changed the relationship between sexual minorities and police. Kalpana said that when she came to Bangalore ten years ago, the sight of a man wearing khaki (the color of police uniforms) used to terrify her, even if it was not a police officer, but an autorickshaw driver, who also wear khaki as their work attire. She explained, “At the very sight of [someone wearing] khaki...I used to get scared because he may be police. Today, when I see [someone wearing] khaki, I go up to him, tap him on the shoulder and say, ‘give me way’ [excuse me],” and Kalpana walks on to her destination, without fear of being harassed. This story speaks to a change in the way that police treat *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people as well as a change in the ways that *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people view themselves, as rights-bearing subjects who deserve to be treated as citizens. Sundaram explains that this is evidence of a “major degree of change” in the power relations between *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people and the police as a result of Dosti’s activism and outreach.

### *Publicized Legal Interventions*

Dosti has been involved in several highly-publicized court cases involving police abuse. As part of their outreach and activism, Dosti used these cases as a way to publicly raise the important issue of police violence against *hijras* and the rights of *hijras* not to be subjected to violence from police. The first widely-publicized case was in 2003 and involved a transgender woman named Rajna. She went with her partner to a shop near MG Road to have ice cream, where both of them were arrested because the police alleged that the couple was engaged in sex work. While in police custody, both Rajna and her partner were tortured. Rajna managed to escape and her partner was produced in court, where he told the judge that he had been subjected to torture. Then, the judge “sent him for a physical examination and doctors certified the torture, there *was* evidence found,” Mohan explains, and a case was then brought against the police. Throughout the process, Mohan explains, “Rajna was amazing, she really fought back the case. She stood her ground. She was harassed, multiple cases booked against her, various things [happened], but she and her partner refused to take back the complaint.” At this time, the police inspector had a promotion coming up, but because of the couple’s unwavering public accusations against police, he was not promoted until two years later, as Mohan explains, “because of this.” The publicity around this event ensured that the “whole [of] Bangalore came to know that transgenders are not taking it laying down anymore,” Mohan explains, which “made a huge difference” in how transgender people were perceived people as rights-bearing individuals by the public. Moreover, this incident caused other transpeople to realize that they also possess the rights not be subjected to these kinds of violations and that if these rights are violated, they have social and legal recourse.

Another important incident involved Dosti's mobilization on behalf of a *hijra* who was abused in police custody. In June 2004, Prisha, a *hijra* sex worker, was looking for clients when she was attacked by 10 men, who forcibly took her to another area and sexually assaulted her. While the attack was taking place, two police officers interrupted the attackers and managed to catch only two of the 10 men. Prisha was explaining what had happened, but instead of registering a case against her attackers, the police officers began verbally harassing her and took her to the police station with the two men who had raped her. At the police station, Prisha was subjected to brutal torture by six police officers. She sustained severe bodily injuries and suffered severe verbal and psychological abuse.

This incident was reported widely in the press and Dosti quickly began to strategize about how best to organize in support of Prisha. Mohan explains that “[a]t that time, our capacity was to mobilize 200 people. We are seen as this small group, you know, one small group in the corner.” However, when the Prisha case was reported in the press, “there was *so* much anger” from community members and the public alike. Fifteen Dosti participants “started a hunger fast” in protest. Due to Dosti's size at the time, “to manage a hunger fast for one week was an impossible task,” Mohan explains, and the staff was incredibly busy. Furthermore, the police did not agree to their request for official permission to occupy public space during this fast. “Every night, they threatened to pull down our *pandav* [tent],” Mohan explains. Dosti reacted by writing daily letters to the High Court, the police and the media and “every night, some 20, 30 [people] used to sleep there, just to guard it. We managed one week of protest like that. There was so much support.” Other organizations, such as the Women's Commission and two political parties joined Dosti in this struggle. Dosti also organized a rally where, Mohan explains,

We must have had 2000 people. We never expected that kind of support. So many transgender [people], so many Dalits, [people from] political parties, suddenly

everybody joined in with us...it almost was like we [went from] one very small group to a mainstream big movement. That was really a change.

All of these efforts point to a process of instilling incremental change in the perceptions about transgender people's rights and about shifting the public perception of transgender people and recognizing them as citizens with a legitimate claim to rights.

### *Hijra Habba*

Dosti also organized public events around the rights of transgender people that received media attention and were influential in making a case for the rights of gender non-conforming people. In the early 2000s, there was an individual in the police force whose overt transphobia was negatively affecting the political climate towards gender non-conforming people, particularly *hijras*. He was a high-ranking police commissioner who was a fundamentalist Christian and he believed all *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people assigned male at birth needed to cut their hair short and wear attire associated with men. The commissioner felt so strongly that this group should wear male-identified attire that, Mohan reports, "he offered to fund that process." Such statements indicate that this commissioner does not consider *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people as citizens who have the right to express their gender identity.

Among Dosti staff, Mohan explains, "We didn't know how to deal with him. See, the police commissioner is a pretty powerful person in Bangalore City. He's the second most powerful police officer in the state. And we didn't know how to deal with him." After considering various options, Dosti got together with the Lion's Club and the YMCA to organize an event for *hijras*. Dosti suggested that they invite the police commissioner as the chief guest for the event as well as Nandita Das, a well-known film actress from Karnataka and they decided to call it "*Hijra Habba*," meaning a festival for *hijras*. Because of the political climate surrounding

*hijras*, Swathi explains, “at that point, it was important to claim the space, putting *hijras* in a positive light,” to try and counter the negative portrayals of *hijras* in mainstream media. The event “was a huge hit,” Swathi reports, and several transwomen and *hijras* I spoke with also specifically mentioned *Hijra Habba* as an important and meaningful event.

The festival consisted of a sports competition followed by a fashion show, after which the police commissioner arrived to distribute prizes to the winners of both competitions. During his closing remarks, the commissioner alleged that, as Mohan explains, “You people [*hijras*] are indulging in theft, extortion, prostitution, [and] you should not do that,” remarks which were clearly intended to “blame the whole community” for the actions of a few individuals. The crowd was angered by these remarks and, Mohan explains,

immediately after his speech, activist after activist—transgender, sexual minority, human rights, feminist—countered him, saying ‘how can a police commissioner say something like this? It is prejudiced.’ Then, [the commissioner] said he has some other important program to go...he got down [from the stage] and women’s activists and cultural activists, they prevented him from leaving, for half an hour. And then, Nandita Das took the mike, and she gave it back to him.

Nandita Das, a well-known film actress who supports progressive causes, was present for the event and she challenged the commissioner for his statements, bluntly asking “how can you say this sort of thing?” The next day, every mainstream newspaper in the city reported on this event and the two invited speakers, the police commissioner and Nandita Das, were featured side by side, with a commentary on their reactions to the festival.

Interestingly, the police commissioners’ speech had what was very likely an unintended effect on the police perception of *hijras*. After the first *Hijra Habba*, “police violence just dropped against transgenders. It was very historical,” Mohan explains. Swathi believes that violence dropped because “[t]he other officers who came with [the police commissioner], they didn’t hear his speech, so they thought he was supporting this [cause/festival].” So among the

police officers present, she explains, “the general impression was that he’s supporting this thing, so the police violence also decreased after that.”

Through their intention to recognize and celebrate *hijras*, Dosti implies that *hijras* are worthy of recognition and celebration, even by the well-known speakers that they invited. When the police commissioner expressed motives other than recognition and celebration, instead stereotyping and blaming *hijras* as a group, many in the audience challenged his statements. Their insistence that *hijras* should not be subjected to negative stereotypes is a claim for *hijras*’ rights to be judged on the basis of their own actions, instead of being associated with stereotypes of their group. This event and the arguments taken up at it were thus a claim to the rights of *hijras* to be treated as equal citizens before the law.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has contextualized Dosti’s activism and advocacy for the rights of gender non-conforming people and *hijras*, which comprised a salient part of Dosti’s activism in its first several years as an organization. Throughout the chapter, I have shown that Dosti’s interpretation of the plight of *hijras* and transpeople is centrally framed around a discourse of rights and claims to citizenship. Even while conducting HIV/AIDS outreach and programs, which are generally understood as service-oriented activities as opposed to rights advocacy and activism, Dosti framed these interventions as rights-based. Through their many publicly articulated demands that the state and the “general society” recognize *hijras* and gender non-conforming people as rights-bearing citizens, I argue that this type of NGO-led activism paved the way for transwomen to consider themselves as the bearers of rights and demand citizenship.

In exploring the beginnings of articulating citizenship for transwomen in light of the critical turn towards citizenship in queer studies (see Brandzel 2016; Spade 2015 and Haritaworn 2015, among others), this chapter also engages with West's (2014) contention that not all demands for citizenship are necessarily normalizing. While I find compelling the arguments by scholars such as Brandzel (2016), Spade (2015) and Haritaworn (2015) that demands for marginalized groups' inclusion into citizenship necessarily presuppose and support the notion that there are some people who are legitimately excluded from citizenship, the evidence presented in this chapter does not necessarily support the argument that all citizenship claims are normalizing and/or predicated on exclusion. Dosti's initial demands for the citizenship rights of *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people not to be subjected to violence by state authorities does not necessarily imply that violence toward other marginalized groups (including non-citizens) is permissible. If we were to consider the ways that gender non-conforming people's civil citizenship claims operate only within the context of the material presented in this chapter, I would have to agree with West (2014) that it would be inaccurate to state that all citizenship claims are inherently normalizing and involve processes of exclusion. However, the citizenship claims made more recently by transwomen and Dosti staff are framed around normalizing discourses of consumer citizenship (as demonstrated in chapter three) and, most saliently, around the exclusion of *hijras* from citizenship (as demonstrated in chapters four and five). The following chapter further examines *hijras*' status as non-citizens by exploring how sexual minorities (even *hijras* themselves) seek to distance themselves from the *hijra* category, thus implying that *hijras* do not experience the belonging associated with citizenship even within groups of sexual minorities.



## ***Chapter 2: “Citizenship Aspirations and Sexual Minority Disidentifications with Hijras”***

While the previous chapter argues that claiming citizenship for *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people need not necessarily involve processes of normalization and exclusion, this chapter (and the rest of this dissertation) focuses on how citizenship claims can operate as mechanisms for normalizing tendencies and the exclusion of those who are designated as falling outside of legitimate citizenship. Within the current Indian LGBT and sexual rights movement, there are notable tendencies to police behaviors associated with feminine-identified working class participants such as *hijras* (Dutta 2012). This is a result of the desire by class-privileged sexual minorities to claim the rights of legitimate citizenship, which must be protected from encroachment by groups positioned as undeserving, who tend to hail from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dutta 2012).

As a result of their non-citizen status, *hijras* have been uneasily incorporated into the sexual minority fold. On the one hand, NGO-led activism makes claims for the rights of gender non-conforming people, including *hijras*, and places them within the ambit of the sexual minority “community,” while on the other hand, many sexual minority groups seek to distance themselves from the stigmatized identity of the *hijra*. This chapter explores how multiple groups of sexual minorities seek to distance themselves from the *hijra* category and its negative connotations. Those seeking to differentiate themselves from the *hijra* identity include even *hijras* themselves, indicating that it is not only transwomen who want others to know that “I am not a *hijra*.”

The implicit interpretation of *hijras* as both contaminated and contaminating (discussed in the previous chapter) are still present in popular conceptions about *hijras*, causing anxiety among sexual minority groups who are likely to be associated with *hijras*. The desire to distance themselves from *hijras* is pronounced for middle-class gay men who are privileged along

class/caste lines. As a group that is denied access to employment rights, *hijras* must work in the informal economy through soliciting money and sex work, which contributes to their social marginalization and stigmatization. Thus, *hijras*' lack of employment rights means that they must engage in disreputable professions in order to earn an income, which is part of the reason more privileged sexual minority groups emphasize their difference from *hijras*. Because they face marginalization for their sexuality and are in the process of claiming their citizenship rights, gay men do not want to further jeopardize their social standing by being associated with a group of people known as impoverished sex workers. Moreover, this is a group whose perceived gender non-conformity as children was often policed through referred to them as *hijras*.

Within the larger group of sexual minorities who come together for events like Queer Habba (or LGBT Pride), several groups (including transwomen) seek to distance themselves from the *hijra* category and to police other participants' behaviors to ensure that they do not engage in behaviors commonly associated with *hijras*. Increasingly, *hijras* themselves are also seeking distance from the stereotypes to which they are subjected. Throughout India, *hijras* have begun to claim alternate terms of identification that are believed to be more respectful alternatives than local slang terms that can be used in a derogatory way. These newer terms gain particular salience and importance when they are suggested or recognized by state authorities, as these actions imply a claim to citizenship for a group whose citizenship rights have long been denied.

### *Legitimate Citizenship and Sexual Minority Struggles*

As the sexual minority/LGBT movement in India has gained increased interest from scholars, there is evidence that the concept of citizenship serves as a dividing line between those respectable sexual minorities who are worthy of rights and those whose classed and gendered

behavior produce them as unworthy of rights. As Aniruddha Dutta (2012) argues,

at the very moment when ‘sexual minorities,’ the ‘LGBT community,’ and/or their constituent identities are constructed as intelligible and legitimate citizen-subjects deserving equal rights, a range of practices and subject positions at the intersections of class/caste and gender marginality—particularly manifested in gestures of public assertion and gendered flamboyance by lower class subjects—are sought to be excluded or disciplined (Dutta 2012: 112).

Here, Dutta points to a process in which sexual minorities, on the verge of becoming rights-bearing citizens, face surveillance intended to foreclose identities and modes of behavior deemed not worthy of this opportunity for citizenship. While sexual rights and LGBT activism seeks to counter dominant narratives that restrict depictions of sexual and gender non-normativity as incongruous with “Indian culture,” the same types of activism “might re-inscribe a normative relationality between socio-cultural hierarchies of respectability and exclusive forms of civility and citizenship” (Dutta 2012: 113). Processes of claiming citizenship through rights-based appeals thus tend to produce certain sexual minority subjects as worthy of citizenship while “it might further entrench or reiterate extant social stigma against lower class/caste groups and subject positions” (Dutta 2012: 113).

*Class and Respectability: Gay Men and Anxiety Around Hijras*

Within sexual minority groups, “hierarchies of civility and respectability fuel identitarian splits” (Dutta 2013: 112) that are especially evident in gay men’s anxiety over being misrecognized as *hijras*. During my fieldwork, many people who are active in the wider “community” of sexual minorities reported that gay men often voice their desire to avoid being in the presence of *hijras*. When I asked Shruti, a middle-class queer activist, if she witnessed tension between middle-class LGBT-identified people and *hijras*, she said,

Yes. Very much. Very, very much, especially for the gay men because I have seen a lot

of gay men refusing to go to meetings because there are gonna be *hijras* there, [saying] ‘I will not come. Like, I’m not comfortable’...because they do not want to be associated with them, for the fear that they would be considered one of them because being gay is, uh, it has a more—what would you say? It’s cooler to be gay than to be a *hijra*...definitely a class/caste [issue]...like sex worker vs. I’m a working professional...and [I come from the] educated class.

Here, Shruti connects some gay men’s expressed discomfort with attending meetings where *hijras* will be present to their class/caste status. She specifically links some gay men’s fear of “be[ing] considered one of them” to a fear of being misrecognized as someone from a lower occupational and educational status, which also falls along class/caste lines. Suparna, a queer feminist activist and former staff member of Dosti, also explained that,

Middle-class gay men have serious problems about *hijras* begging on the streets, [they say things] like, ‘they harass us, they do this, they do that.’ Silly. [mocking voice] ‘We need to educate them,’ is the latest thing, from these gays...[they say] ‘General education, we should give them.’ [laughing] Try educating them, then you’ll know [who really needs the education].

Here, Suparna points out that gay men express fear of the *hijras* that solicit money, claiming that their behavior is akin to “harass[ment].” Their stated solution is to educate *hijras*, which indicates not only their lack of understanding of the structural reasons that *hijras* solicit money, but, as Suparna argues, it is in fact the gay men advocating for education themselves who would benefit from education in this case. Suparna’s contention aligns with Dutta’s (2012) argument that

disparate tendencies within the dominant culture of civil society, while contradictory in themselves, unite to delegitimize certain subjects...especially those identified with disreputability, irrationality, or aggression, exacerbating forms of stigma and fueling identitarian divides within minoritized communities. On the other side of such exclusion, forms of middle class cultural expression...are used to assimilate and include unruly subjects through a pedagogical process of disciplining and containment (Dutta 2012: 117).

Here, Datta suggests that some gay men justify their fear of and anxiety around *hijras* based on their purportedly (and from a perspective concerned with middle-class propriety) aggressive and

disreputable behavior, which then serves to justify *hijras*' exclusion. The gay men Suparna has interacted with suggest that middle-class values of cultural capital such as education can be used to "assimilate and include unruly subjects" perhaps because they presume that education will "discipline[] and contain[]" *hijras*. However, even the suggestion of education, which many gender non-conforming people have been and still are excluded from, further indicates a lack of understanding of the structural issues that *hijras* face.

In India, the category of *hijra* has circulated as a catch-all term for a range of behaviors and practices associated with gender and sexual variance (Reddy 2005; see also Nanda 1990). Because *hijras* have become associated with gender and sexual non-conformity in the Indian context, sexual and gender non-conformers of varying stripes have faced questions about the relationship between their sexual and gendered behavior and *hijra*-ness. As Manayath (2009) explains, "[m]any a coming out as L,G,B or T or Queer in the Indian context has necessarily brought with it the question 'Are you a *hijra*?,' which always seems to necessitate an exhaustive clarification of difference" (1).

The association of gay men and *hijras* touches a nerve for many gay men who, as young boys, were taunted for their perceived effeminacy by being called a *hijra*. As Nikhil, a gay man in his thirties, explained, many middle-class gay men grow up "in some sense protected from the world of *hijras*," and they often do not "even register the fact that they never thought to identify as a *hijra*." He explains, "as soon I heard the word gay, I was happy with that as anything else" and this is largely because a "recognition of effeminacy of any kind would be [punished by being called] a *hijra*, [and I] fought against that." So actually, he explains, "gay-ness seemed to provide a more respectable route out of that." These kinds of struggles around identification among middle-class men can be observed today in meetings for gay men. Manayath (2009)

explains, “[s]upport meetings of gay identified men witness, at regular intervals, a naïve curiosity into what or who a *hijra* is. The question and the clean definitional responses that ensue assert difference from the *hijra*...in framing the gay identity” (1), which serve to reinforce the differences between gay men and *hijras*. As Nikhil explains, at these meetings, “there is almost this curiosity what the *hijra* is, but then you were called a *hijra* for the longest period of time [so how can you not know what it is?]. So [these actions serve to] bring this identity of gay-ness in opposition to *hijra*-ness.”

### *Hijras and Sex Work*

As a socially marginalized and (usually) economically disempowered group, *hijras* face discrimination in finding employment, reflecting their lack of employment rights and citizenship status. Throughout India, *hijras* are highly visible when conducting *basti*, which is soliciting money in groups, which usually occurs in crowded markets and at traffic signals. While *hijras* in certain areas of North India may engage in ritual singing and dancing during festivals, marriages and the births of sons, known as *badhai*, as an important source of income, the ability to earn a livelihood through *badhai* appears to be decreasing due to the shrinking size of urban Indian families (Nanda 1990: 52) and the changing living arrangements of urban upper-middle class people, who now often reside behind guarded gates where *hijras* are not permitted. The ability for *hijras* to earn income through *badhai* is significantly reduced in South India, outside of the city of Hyderabad in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh.

The association between *hijras* and sex work is increasingly becoming more explicit. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted in the 1980s, Nanda suggests that “there is no question that *hijras* widely engage in prostitution; indeed, it may be their major source of

income” (Nanda 1990: 54). Reddy reports that at least half of the *hijras* she was in contact with in Hyderabad in the 1990s engage in sex work (2005), so there is evidence that *hijras* have supported themselves through sex work for at least the past three decades and probably before that. Some *hijra* groups in North India have expressed animosity toward health care workers and researchers for emphasizing their groups’ participation in sex work, as they perceive it to contradict *hijras*’ ritual status and authority as supposedly asexual beings. Indeed, sexual rights NGOs have been accused of spreading information that links *hijras* and sex work through their HIV/AIDS interventions, causing some *hijras* (especially in North India, where there is still the possibility of earning money through *badhai*) to express resentment towards all sexual rights NGOs. In Bangalore, perhaps as a result of NGO activism and outreach for sexual health programs combined with *hijras*’ lack of employment rights and the basically nonexistent chance of earning an income through *badhai*, the *hijra* identity is increasingly associated with sex work, enhancing the disreputability of *hijras*.

*“We Will Not Do Like Hijras Do”: Fears of Hijra Association in LGBT Spaces*

October 10, 2013

*At the first Queer Habba week organizing meeting for 2013, held at a well-known civil society organization on a small road near the main commercial area of Bangalore, there were people associated with all of the main NGO and autonomous sexual rights and LGBT groups in Bangalore, making the meeting a mix of people from various backgrounds and social classes. Sunitha, who identifies as a Mangalmukhi, was there, but she sat with the staff members of the NGO she works for and introduced herself as a staffperson associated with that NGO. There were no other Mangalmukhis or hijras there.*

*The most salient discussion involved how to fund the Pride celebrations. When the topic initially came up, someone suggested collecting individual contributions. Suparna excitedly agreed, saying that Divali was coming up, so everyone would be going to lots of parties and playing card games. So at that time, she said, individuals can just ask people if they will donate. Playing off of the idea of asking people to donate, a middle-class gay man excitedly suggested that groups of people get together and go around the city to collect donations in areas where there are a lot of people. This suggestion solicited a lot of indistinct murmuring amongst the*

*crowd. Sultana, a working-class transwoman NGO employee seated near me, sat up straight and widened her eyes, saying, in a mix of Kannada and English, “but we shouldn’t force anyone to donate, like if they say no, they don’t want to donate, we should not push them to.” Then, Roshan, a middle-class gay man who was moderating the discussion, said in English, “Yes, of course. All donations should be voluntary and if people do not want to donate, then we should leave them alone.” By this time, there was a lot of discussion going on, so in order to make sure everyone understood, Roshan held up his hands and repeated that the donations will be voluntary and no one is permitted to harass anyone who may be unwilling to donate. In case the meaning of the conversation was not entirely clear, he concluded, “We will not do like hijras do.”*

*February 19, 2014*

*At a Queer Pride meeting in a different South Indian city, about twenty people who attended the first organizing meeting in the courtyard of a large mall were discussing the rally and performance that would occur after the march was complete. A working-class transwoman NGO worker, Leena, suggested that the skits and dance performances must include a message, they can’t be for entertainment’s sake alone, so it’s important to explain this to people who want to participate. Then, Leena got a thoughtful look in her eyes and asked, “Should we regulate the speeches that people can make? Because someone will come and start doing (mimicking the loud clapping associated with hijras and talking loudly in a high-pitch voice) and we can’t have that.” A middle-class man who looked to be in his thirties, Tahir, frowned and said he’s very uncomfortable with that and also if they make too many regulations, they might not get anyone actually wanting to perform, so that’s something to be careful about.*

*Another person across the table pointed out that the vast majority of people at this Pride will probably be hijras and transwomen and last year 70% of people in attendance were hijras. Ravindra, a middle-class university-aged man at the end of the table said “we fear talking to them,” referring to hijras, his eyes widened for emphasis. Tahir interrupted him to say that is a “class pride” issue. Shalini, a middle-class woman, said that’s true and so they should tell all of the hijras to come up to the middle-class people and start talking to them. Then, someone further down the table suggested that there should be icebreakers planned, but someone else quickly pointed out that people will segregate themselves into their own class groups even to do the icebreakers, so that won’t work. Soon after this discussion, a second meeting time was decided on and the meeting was adjourned without having reached a plan of action on how to bridge these rifts in the group.*

These excerpts indicate the kinds of tensions around identity that I often witnessed in cross-class sexual minority/LGBT spaces. The first incident is illustrative of the tensions surrounding the perceived popular association of all sexual minorities with *hijras*. When discussing how to fund the Pride week, the suggestion that groups of people could collect donations in public places was met with anxious murmuring from everyone at the meeting, though the distress at the



thought of their group being misrecognized as *hijras* who solicit money as their livelihood was first voiced by Sultana, a working-class transwoman. The fact that Sultana voiced her anxiety over this issue is significant, since she is likely interpreted as a *hijra* by many of the people she interacts with. Thus, for her, it may be especially important to ensure that the distinction between *hijras* and other working-class transwomen like herself is clear. The moment that asking for donations was suggested as a strategy, people began anxiously speaking to those around them, indicating that the naturalized association of *hijras* with aggressive behavior when soliciting for money in public places was a subtext of the discussion long before Roshan clarified that they were not to replicate the presumed behavior of *hijras*.

Similarly, in the second excerpt, it is notable that a working-class transwoman suggested that behavior during the skits and dance performances following the Pride march should be “regulated,” specifically so that people do not engage in behaviors associated with *hijras*. Like Sultana, Leena did not directly state that this was an issue about distinguishing themselves from *hijras*, perhaps because she did not need to. She only needed to invoke the *thikri*, the loud clapping strongly associated with *hijras*, and everyone would understand that she was referencing behaviors associated with *hijras*. As many scholars have pointed out, “[m]ore than any other gesture or movement, this loud clapping of hands is indelibly associated with *hijras*. Any parodic imitation of *hijras* would need to include only this gesture to be recognizable as such” (Reddy 2005: 137; see also Dutta 2012). Working-class transwomen’s desire to distinguish themselves from *hijras* is similar to Dutta’s finding that working class, feminine-identified *kothis* in West Bengal voice disagreement with public behavior that is deemed “excessive or aggressively campy” and this disapproval is “especially evident during pride meetings where there have been repeated complaints against disruptive practices such as *thikri*”

(Dutta 2012: 129). Working class transwomen, like *kothis*, occupy subordinate positions in class/caste hierarchies, yet they also want to distinguish themselves from the more marginalized position of *hijras*, so they condemn behaviors associated with *hijras*, emphasizing their lack of participation in such behaviors.

These characterizations of *hijra*-like behavior as threatening the propriety of a respectable LGBT gathering are in contrast to characterizations of middle-class LGBT people who are positioned as token “markers of transforming urban culture” (Dutta 2012: 125). Indeed, the middle-class university-aged man who remarked, wide-eyed, “we fear talking to them” seemed to place himself in an entirely separate category from the fearsome *hijras*, though his remark was quickly challenged by Tahir, who pointed to the role of class status and distinctions as constituting this fear. In an effort to increase interaction between middle-class people and *hijras*, someone suggested that *hijras* should make a point of attempting to interact with the middle-class people who are afraid of them, a suggestion which unfortunately places the responsibility of making middle-class people feel at ease on *hijras*. The severity of the problem was highlighted after someone suggested icebreakers, games that encourage interaction within a small group, but another person pointed out that these kinds of games allow the sort of self-segregation that people already engage in. After realizing that this problem is complex, multi-faceted and would require more than one meeting to effectively address, the meeting was adjourned, and to the best of my knowledge, the issue was unresolved.

These instances indicate that NGO-led activism that claims to advocate for the citizenship of sexual minorities “invoke[s] constitutional rights to enter mainstream civil society and in turn seek[s] to regulate the participation of lower class ‘target groups’ in this expanded civic space” (Dutta 2012: 116). In order to make convincing claims for sexual minority citizenship,

behaviors associated with working class feminine-presenting people such as *hijras* must be scrutinized and regulated, perhaps even “murdered” (Haritaworn et al. 2015) to enable those sexual minorities who are decidedly not *hijras* to effectively claim their rights to citizenship. Intriguingly, the desire to distance themselves from associations with *hijras* is increasingly articulated even by *hijras*, many of whom seek to dis-identify with the *hijra* category, instead seeking alternate words in local languages to describe themselves.

### *Alternate Identities as Routes to Citizenship*

Increasingly, *hijras* in different parts of India navigate their marginalization and lack of citizenship by re-claiming different names and identities for themselves. Because the words used to describe *hijras* in local languages (such as *pottai*, *ani*, *chakka* and *ombatu*) may be used in an insulting manner by non-*hijras* (Nanda 1999: 14), certain regional terms (such as *Aravani* and *Mangalmukhi* in the South and *Kinnar* in the North) have come into circulation, as alternative and more respectful terms of address (Puri 2010: 40). People who prefer these newer names explained that they do not identify themselves as *hijras* because this term has the possibility of being used as an abusive and derogatory term. Deepa, a transgender woman and NGO staff member, explained that people who do not identify as *hijras*

don't like the term *hijra*, actually. That is a discriminatory [term] for us. If somebody [upon seeing my group of friends] says, ‘the *hijras* are coming,’ I will feel very bad. They don't know the relationship between transgender, transwoman, *hijras*. If it is man to woman [transperson], they will call them *hijras* only.

Deepa’s distress at being interpreted as a *hijra* is compounded by the fact that most people do not realize (or do not care about) the difference between a transwoman and a *hijra*, and thus lump all transfeminine people into the same stigmatized identity of the *hijra*, despite the differences between these groups, which are salient for Deepa. Veena, a transwoman and former Dosti staff

member, explained that it upsets her when “people think of us as lowly persons and they use abusive words like *chakka*, *ombattu* and *hijra*.” Nidhu, a transwoman who was once part of hijra groups and now works at Dosti, concurs with these sentiments, as she explains, “they use it to tease, like an abusive word, ‘oh, you *hijra*,’ like that. Other words like *chakka*, *ombattu*, they say. Those are the teasing words of local languages.” However, everyone agreed that using the word *hijra* to speak in a general way about that group of people is not seen as insulting. As Sunitha, a Mangalmukhi-identified NGO worker, patiently explained,

I consider the word *hijra* in two ways. When we just speak and mention the word *hijra* during the conversation then I have no problems with it. But when one is angry and uses the word *hijra* as an abusive word then it implies that I am useless and/or incapable. So the word gives two meanings: one while talking calmly and another while expressing emotionally. While doing that, people use the word to bad mouth someone or to imply that the person is useless. That hurts a lot.

In South India, state recognition of these newer identifications for *hijras* has propelled more people to identify themselves with these terms. In Tamil Nadu, many *hijras* now identify themselves as Aravanis, a reference to a gender-morphing situation told in the epic story The Mahabharatha. Intriguingly, the use of this term was actually suggested by someone who was not part of the group. In 1998, at the annual festival in Koovagam in eastern Tamil Nadu attended by many *hijras* from all over South India, Mr. Ravi, the Deputy Superintendent of Police was invited to give a speech. In this speech, Ravi suggested that, as a group that faces societal discrimination, perhaps they should start identifying themselves in a different way to gain more respect, suggesting the term Aravani. Shanthi, a transwoman living in Chennai who is also part of a *hijra* group, proudly explained,

This name gave us dignity and from that time, we are addressed as Aravani. *This is the first dignified name given to our community in the whole of India.* This was done in Tamil Nadu. Now people from all over India, both inside the *hijra* community and outside, know and use the term. [emphasis mine]

Here, Shanthi emphasizes the fact that the use of Aravani was suggested from outside, “given” to *hijras* as a new way of identifying themselves. The fact that the term was suggested by a high-ranking police officer offers those who use it access to a kind of legitimacy and recognition from the state. This recognition from a respected state agent thus entails an acknowledgement of Aravanis’ inclusion as legitimate citizens.

Similarly, in Karnataka, a large group of *hijras* also felt they were in need of a name that is more respectful and more dignified than local names, claiming the term Mangalmukhi in 2011. Mangalmukhi means “auspicious face,” referencing the belief that if one sees the face of a *hijra*, they should consider it as a blessing. This term was used (though rarely) by Bangalore-based *hijras* to identify themselves prior to 2011, when it was suggested by group members. Around this time, a large group of *hijras* in Haryana, a North Indian state, had also claimed the term Mangalmukhi, so this identity has been taken on by *hijras* outside of Karnataka as well (The Tribune 2010).

Giving further credence to the identity of Mangalamukhi, the Government of Karnataka used this term in reference to *hijras* in a government order (GO) issued in 2011<sup>4</sup> that offers benefits for transgender people. Similar to the case in neighboring Tamil Nadu with the term Aravani, the Karnataka government’s recognition and legitimization of Mangalmukhi has impacted how people respond to this identity. When I asked Ritu, a self-identified Mangalmukhi, why her identity as a Mangalmukhi is important to her, she replied, “because the government has recognized. The government of Karnataka has recognized [this term/identity] in the GO. So all over Karnataka, the Mangalmukhi command respect.” Here, Ritu draws a direct link between

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the GO has, to this day, not been implemented, so the benefits conferred in this document share the same status as the “fundamental rights” guaranteed for all people in the Constitution of India, in that they are available in theory but have not materialized in practice.

government recognition of the term Mangalmukhi and the amount of “respect” that Mangalmukhis garner throughout the state. Especially because Mangalmukhi is recognized in a government document offering financial and social benefits for gender non-conforming people, this recognition is an indication that the government recognizes Mangalmukhis as legitimate citizens deserving of the benefits of citizenship.

### *Conclusion*

Given their marginality and association with disreputability, it is perhaps not surprising that *hijras* have been uneasily and unevenly incorporated into sexual minority and LGBT sexual rights activism, despite being key representatives in “the narrative linking of India with sexual difference” (Reddy 2005: 2). Ironically the widespread desire among sexual minorities to distance themselves from *hijras* includes even *hijra* groups themselves, which have increasingly claimed alternate terms of identification as more respectful terms of address. These newer terms gain salience and importance when they are suggested or recognized by state authorities, as these actions imply a claim to citizenship for a group whose citizenship rights have long been denied.

While the following three chapters focus on transwomen’s citizenship claims, which are predicated on their differences from *hijras*, it is crucial to note that several sexual minority groups are keen to distance themselves from *hijras*. Within the context of a group of people striving to claim the rights of citizenship, the possibility of obtaining citizenship compels more privileged sexual minorities to draw dividing lines between those sexual minorities classified as deserving of citizenship and those who are undeserving of citizenship, a distinction that most often operates along class/caste and gendered lines. Through an examination of the ways that gay men and transwomen seek to distance and differentiate themselves from *hijras*, this chapter

indicates that groups with varying levels of privilege who are part of the broader sexual minority group are interested in protecting the boundaries between themselves and *hijras*. This includes gay men's insistence on clear and distinct differences between themselves and *hijras* (differences that also parallel class and employment hierarchies) as well as desires articulated by transwomen to police participants' behavior at "community" events to ensure that they are not in alignment with the stereotypical behaviors of *hijras*.

I read these tactics of distancing and exclusion as being central to the process of sexual minorities (especially transwomen) seeking inclusion into citizenship. As Spade (2015) argues, rights frameworks and appeals to citizenship for marginalized groups "often actually mask and perpetuate the structured conditions of harm and disparity" that groups who employ this language for liberatory purposes are attempting to struggle against (Spade 2015: 10). Therefore, these sexual minority struggles for inclusion into citizenship constitute a form of "murderous" inclusion (Haritaworn 2013) and the targets of these murderous tendencies that enable certain groups to claim citizenship are *hijras* and any "dangerous Others" whose behavior could be interpreted as *hijra*-like. Despite the fact that these murderous inclusions seek to exclude them, some *hijras* are also participants in the metaphorical murder of the figure of the *hijra* in their efforts to distance themselves from this disreputable figure who is undeserving of citizenship.

### ***Chapter 3: “Hijra Group Transformations, ‘Choice’ and Stories of Consumer Citizenship”***

#### ***Introduction***

An analysis of the emergence of the transwoman and the ways that she claims citizenship would be incomplete without a discussion of the major changes that *hijra* groups have undergone in the last 20 years or so. This chapter explores the multiple social changes that have led to major transformations of *hijra* groups in Bangalore and other parts of South India. These changes are related to the shifts felt throughout urban India as a result of processes connected to economic liberalization, increased urbanization and gentrification, increased (though not total) acceptance of gender non-conformity by the “general society,” and perceived changes in power relationships within non-*hijra* families. Curiously, when people discuss these shifts, they most often subsume these complex reasons under the language of “choice,” emphasizing the fact that transwomen (and to some degree, *hijra chelas*) have newfound choices to make regarding their living situation and this is a necessarily positive change that enables them to live more “freely” outside or (in the case of *chelas*) inside of the *hijra* system. I argue that narrating these multiple and complex changes in terms of “emerging consumer discourses of a woman exercising choice” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81) positions transgender women as competent consumer citizens who are incorporated within the progress narrative of liberalization. This chapter argues that the framework of consumer choice merges with the importance of consumption in liberalized economies to position transwomen as legitimate consumer citizens via their increased ability to make decisions.

The first section of this chapter addresses the social changes that have contributed to the emergence of the transwoman and the transformation of *hijra* groups. I begin with an exploration of research conducted with *hijras* in the 1980s and 1990s and the next several



sections draw upon my own research in order to demonstrate the important changes that have led to shifts in *hijra* group living and relationships. While some *hijras* continue to reside with their *hijra* families, gentrification and the increased ability for transpeople to rent their own flats has led to a shrinking of the amount of *hamams*, where *hijras* formerly resided. *Chelas* have started moving away from living with their *gurus* in large numbers, instead residing with small groups of their peers, their partners, or (in rare but significant cases) continuing to live with their natal families, due to increased levels of acceptance of gender non-conformity. These shifts have profoundly altered the power dynamics between *gurus* and *chelas*, such that many *gurus* can no longer stake a claim on their *chelas*' income as they once did, leaving them impoverished and struggling to make an income, and new *chelas* who decide to join the *hijra* system are doing so on their own terms. In the final section, I argue that by subsuming these interrelated social changes leading to *hijra* group transformations under the broad rhetoric of choice, my participants position transwomen (and some *chelas*) as empowered citizens who can effectively participate in globalized marketplaces as evidenced by their ability to make competent individual choices, thus connecting the shifts in *hijra* groups to transwomen's claims to citizenship via their increased ability to exercise choice. This discursive form of transwomen's inclusion into citizenship naturalizes the connection between consumer choice and citizenship and is therefore a normalizing form of inclusion into citizenship.

### *Hijra Group Relationships in the 1980s and 1990s*

*Hijras* have resided in communal households throughout India for at least the past 300 years (Reddy 2005; Nanda 1990). These households can be interpreted as a collective poverty management systems since they provide not only housing, but also financial and social support,

as well as employment opportunities for members, many of whom were forced to leave their families as teenagers due to their gender expression and/or sexuality. These systems were created during a time when the notion of extending citizenship rights to *hijras* would have been unheard of and perhaps even unimaginable since they were excluded from “the mainstream,” apart from brief interactions while soliciting money or engaging in sex work.

*Hijra* systems of communal living are organized around the kinship relationships most *hijras* were compelled to give up. Within *hijra* groups, the primary relationships are between *gurus* (teachers) and their *chelas* (disciples) (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005; Khan 2012), with the *guru* playing the role of parent and the *chela* as her child. If they receive permission from their *gurus*, *chelas* can also take their own *chelas*, extending the lineage and making someone both a *guru* and a *chela* simultaneously (Reddy 2005). These households can be understood as replacement kinship structures as well as collective poverty and care management systems that offer a way for the economically marginalized and socially excluded to survive.

The *guru/chela* affiliation is central to *hijra* community formations such that every *hijra* must have a *guru*, thus, a *hijra*’s acceptance and initiation into a *hijra* group can only occur if a *hijra* has a *guru* to sponsor her (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005). If a *hijra* does not have a *guru* and has not taken part in the ritual that denotes kinship relations, according to Reddy’s participants, “that person is not considered a *hijra*” (2005: 157). The organization of *hijra* groups is orchestrated by the local *jamaat*, a board composed of *hijra* elders. During meetings of the *jamaat*, *hijra* elders convene to make important decisions for the group, making the *jamaat* similar to a local village council (Nanda 1990: 41). It is during the meeting of the *jamaat* that any disputes and other important matters within the community are settled.

The *guru-chela* relationship also entails a crucial economic component. When new *chelas* are initiated as *hijras*, they must contribute to their new family, both socially and economically, by paying an initiation fee to their *gurus*. Many *chelas*, especially those who engage in sex work and seeking alms, are required to pay their *gurus* a set amount of their earnings each day as well as attending to the cooking, cleaning, and other household duties for their *gurus* (Reddy 2005: 157); if they neglect these duties, they are liable to be used verbally or physically. As *hijras* age, the occupations open to *hijras*, sex work and soliciting money become less lucrative, so an option to continue earning an income is to have multiple *chelas* whose income they are required to give to their *guru*. Thus, as Serena Nanda explains, “[b]eing a *guru* must certainly be considered a vocation” because *gurus* can earn an income from their *chelas* (1990: 48).

When new *chelas* join the *hijra* community, they are required to undergo an initiation ceremony, for which they must pay a sum of money to their chosen *guru*. If they are dissatisfied with their treatment from their *guru*, *chelas* can change their *gurus*, but each time they do this, they must pay their new *guru* at least twice the amount they originally paid for their initiation, so this option quickly becomes a very expensive one. Reddy heard of a *hijra* in Bombay who had recently paid 80,000 rupees, an enormous sum, to change her *guru* once again (2005). When Reddy asked why anyone would want to risk that kind of debt in order to continue again become a *chela* who is obligated to follow the orders of a different *guru*, her participants were wide-eyed with shock that she would ask such a question, and they explained, “[i]t is because we need our *gurus*, our people,” referencing the importance of this relationship for *hijra* groups. The *guru/chela* relationship is a crucial component of *hijra* identity, and as Reddy explains, in the 1990s, “one almost never hears of a *hijra* who works and lives alone” (Reddy 2005: 143).

Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s indicate that the importance of “the societal values of hierarchy, dependence on the group and tight social networks built on reciprocity” means that independence from the *hijra* group would have constituted “social suicide” because *hijras* do not have access to citizenship rights or social belonging from any other part of society (Nanda 1990: 48). Nanda highlights the importance of being surrounded by a group for *hijras*, explaining, “[g]roup cohesion, not individualism, is adaptive,” which contextualizes *chelas*’ decision to seek other *gurus* when they decide that their own *guru*’s behavior is unacceptable, instead of eschewing the strictures inherent within these relationships (Nanda 1999: 48; see also Reddy 2005). Reddy explains that she often heard “incessant complaining” regarding the “burdensome obligations” that *chelas* were required to perform and the physical and verbal abuse that the *gurus* would dispense if their *chelas* did not follow their orders (2005: 143). However, not a single *hijra* Reddy spoke with told her that she would rather live independent of her *guru* or the *hijra* group (143).

This ethnographic research that was conducted as little as twenty years ago reveals the major changes that have occurred within *hijra* groups since that time, since the reported amount of *gurus* and *chelas* who live together is decreasing. Moreover, there are a large number of people who are opting not to join the *hijras*, instead living independently as transgender women, a move that would have been implausible in the time that Reddy and Nanda conducted their research. However, there are some people who continue to live with their *hijra* families in *hamams* and aspire to fulfill the roles associated with *gurus* and *chelas*.

#### *Hamam-based Hijras and Guru/Chela Relationships*

*February 5, 2014*

*I arrived to the Banashankari Hamam, located slightly outside of Bangalore City in a working-class residential area of white cement single-story buildings and small shops advertised by colorful signs in Kannada, around 10:30. At a tea stall across the small dirt road from the hamam, several middle-aged men watched curiously as I paid my autorickshaw driver and walked up to the doorway of the hamam. The door was open, but there was a faded white cloth covering it, so I knocked on the wall and called out "Namaskaara!" A voice from inside asked "who is it?," and I replied "Liz, from USA." Soon, an arm reached out to pull the curtain aside, revealing Vandana, a tall hijra in her mid-twenties with an open face and a glowing smile. As it was morning, she was wearing a dark green nightgown and had not yet applied makeup. She greeted me and motioned me inside, so I walked into the front room, past the three small partitioned areas, not larger than about 2 square feet, on the left side of the room, where men come for sex work or to take a bath using the large buckets of water provided by the hamam. Inside one of the bathing areas, there was a fully clothed man with his jeans rolled far up his legs, intently scrubbing his soapy feet.*

*Vandana led me into the next room, a small kitchen area, where she motioned for me to sit down on a straw mat covering the cement floor. Meanwhile, she went to the other room to finish filling up all the available buckets with water since water is only available from the tap in this neighborhood between 10am and 12pm each day. After I sat, I said hello to a middle-aged hijra standing near the stove on the other side of the room, who was carefully forming pleats to drape herself in a dark green sari. She carefully applied her makeup in front of a small mirror framed in green plastic on the small gas stove. In between filling up the buckets with water, Vandana took a taali (necklace worn by married women) from around her neck and gave it to the hijra in the green sari, who carefully put it on. Catching her eye in the reflection of the mirror, I asked if she's married and she smiled and said yes. She chatted with me briefly about what I'd had for breakfast, where in Bangalore I live and how long it took me to get here, then said she had to go out for basti (soliciting money) and left. Vandana, noticing I was alone in the room, poked her head in, saying she had to finish getting water into the jugs because the water will stop running, so she'd be another five minutes.*

*As I was sitting there, a hijra who looked to be about 18 dressed in a green churidar (tunic shirt and loose pants) with dark skin, toned arms and a small build came in. She removed her dupatta (long scarf), which had been covering her head, to reveal short, curly hair, the length of her hair perhaps indicating that she was new to the community and she might even still wear "pant-shirt" (men's attire) on occasion. Noticing me sitting there, she greeted me and breathlessly explained that she'd just returned from basti and I noticed large beads of sweat from the heat on her upper lip and cheeks. She pulled out a small plastic bag and opened the newspaper-wrapped parcel inside, revealing a small stack of set dosas (breakfast food, similar to pancakes), and asked if I'd had breakfast yet. I said yes, I just ate my breakfast and she smiled as she placed the dosas on a white ceramic plate for Vandana, which she set near me on the mat. Then, she pulled aside a curtain covering a doorway in the back of the kitchen to reveal a closet-sized room that she entered, followed by a man dressed in jeans and a white collar shirt who had just appeared.*

*Vandana soon returned and sat down in a cross-legged position near me, chatting with me as she hungrily ate her set dosas. She was saying that the young hijra in the*

*green churidar is one of her chelas. Soon, Vandana's chela came back into the room, sat down near us and silently removed 10 to 15 10-rupee notes from her purse and probably 80 rupees in coins, for a total of what appeared to be over 200 rupees. With her eyes slightly downcast, she handed the money to Vandana. Vandana counted it very carefully, checking each note to make sure none were stuck together, then gave her chela not more than ten rupees in coins, putting the rest of the money into a pouch that she then deposited in her pocket. Then, her chela said she'll continue with her basti, smiled at me, and abruptly left.*

After Vandana finished her breakfast, I initiated a conversation about the relationships between *gurus* and *chelas*. I have included a portion of our conversation that is especially relevant below:

Vandana: The *guru/chela* relationship is just like any mother/daughter relationship. Just like how you talk to your mother and say nice things, in the same way we also talk. When the daughter [motioning to me] gets married, it is the mother who gets you married, no?

Liz: [laughing] In the US, rules of marriage are very different. It is not like in India.

V: But when you get married you ask your mother, don't you? [I look at her, doubtfully. Irritated, she replies:] I have asked you a question, answer that!...what will you do if your mother asks you to get married?

LM: I will tell her that I don't want to get married. [laughing] Probably there will be a fight.

V [wide-eyed with surprise]: Is that so? But with my *guru*, it is not like that. We must obey our *guru*. I am the *chela* of my *guru* and I must obey my *guru*. If my *guru* asks me not to cross the road, I will not.

LM: What happens if you insist on crossing the road?

V: I should not cross the road. The *guru* is very important to us.

LM: Why is the *guru* so important to you?

V: Because she would have taken care of me since when I was young. That is why she is like a mother and we must obey her. If I run into problems she will support me. That is why she is very important to us. That is the *guru/chela* relationship. We must follow her and obey her. If we disobey her, she will not help us. This is the reason that relationship is very important.

LM: What happens if the *guru* and *chela* fight?

V: *Guru* will beat us. She will get angry and shout at us. And beat us...

LM: Do you need to give money to your *guru* everyday?

V: Yes.

LM: Why?

V: She is old and she can not go anywhere [to work]. I have to take care of her. We are young.

LM: Is it necessary that your *chela* pay money to you [since you are not old]?

V: Yes. And I pay my *guru*.

Vandana's expectations regarding the *guru/chela* relationship follow closely the traditional model of *guru/chela* relationships. She emphasizes the obedience, loyalty and kindness that *chelas* must show to their *gurus* as well as the reciprocal care and protection that a *guru* should offer her *chela*. Her matter-of-fact answers indicate that these commitments are non-negotiable and necessary for all parties to abide by. It is especially interesting that she claims *chelas'* financial obligations toward their *gurus* must be kept because the *gurus* are old and can no longer work, since she is also a *guru* and she is only in her twenties. When I point out that she is young and able-bodied, asking whether or not her *chela* still is obliged to give her money, she positions the obligation to give money as reciprocal; her *chela* must give her money and Vandana, in turn, gives money to her own *guru*, who will give money to her *guru* if she is still alive and so on. Throughout the conversation, Vandana emphasizes the central aspect of reciprocity in *hijra* community relationships (Nanda 1990).

The kinds of relationships I witnessed at this *hamam* are becoming more unique in Bangalore and other parts of South India as *hijras* increasingly live in smaller households. Younger transfeminine people are also less likely to join the *hijras*, instead living as transpeople on their

own or (in rare but significant cases) continuing to live with their natal families. Vandana and members of her hijra family are some of the few individuals I spoke to in Bangalore who aspire to and defend these types of *guru/chela* responsibilities and ideals.

*“Cleaning Up” Bangalore: Hijras and Shifting Geographies of Wealth and Respectability*

The word *hamam* is an Arabic word that is used in Bangalore to mean bathhouse, implying a space where men can go to bathe, though the *hamam* is most often associated with sex work. *Hamams* as places for bathing and engaging in sex work are specific to the South Karnataka region. Whereas people told me there used to be well over twenty *hamams* in Bangalore, people estimated that there were between eight and twelve *hamams* in operation during the period when I conducted my fieldwork; of these, I visited four.

Today, the majority of *hijras* in Bangalore do not reside in *hamams*, a change which has occurred very recently, at least within the past 15 years; one person claimed this trend began on a large scale in 2007. *Hijra* communal living spaces have morphed from large households in *hamams* where *gurus* and *chelas* would live together and younger *hijras* would perform sex work into smaller households where three or four *hijras* live. In these newer households, one person pays most of the rent and she invites two or three others to live there and most often, they engage in sex work. These households are still linked with *hijras* in most cases and household members use terms that identify themselves with the group. However, unlike the case with *hamams*, these households do not have a long history in their particular localities, thus, the newer *hijra* households are not socially connected to the neighborhoods where they are located and the inhabitants have fewer connections with the surrounding locality.



The changes in *hijra* communal living as well as the changing geographies of Bangalore mean that *hijras*' relationships with the surrounding communities in the areas where they live have shifted. *Hamams* were generally located in working-class neighborhoods and the relationships between the *hijras* living in *hamams* and their neighbors were long-standing and interpreted as largely positive and supportive. One *hamam* was located near a temple to the goddess Yellamma and the *hijras* who lived there were entrusted with caretaking responsibilities for the temple and they would also perform daily rituals in the temple grounds, which indicates the level of respect that they garnered in these areas. Now that real estate prices across Bangalore are increasing, inhabitants of many formerly working-class and newly gentrifying areas are selling their homes for a profit and moving to less expensive areas. While the areas where *hamams* were located were largely in working-class, oppressed caste and Christian neighborhoods, it is middle-class and largely upper-caste Hindus who are now buying homes there. These new inhabitants have often not had sustained contact with *hijras* prior to moving to the area and consider themselves "respectable" people, thus, they have little desire to cultivate relationships with *hijras*.

There is also evidence of a state-sponsored displacement of *hijra* housing based on their perceived effects on real estate prices in certain areas of Bangalore. In 2008, there was an instance of police evicting *hijras* from a neighborhood in Bangalore that had an old *hamam* and many *hijra* communal households that were located near the *hamam*. Though their neighbors reported having positive relationships with the *hijras* there, the police ordered the landlords to evict all *hijras* from the area as part of an effort to "clean up" Bangalore (*Let the Butterflies Fly* 2012). The complaints that the police officers reported to the *hijras* they evicted was that due to

their “anti-social activities,” they were “bringing down” the real estate prices of the area, so they were forced to leave the area.

This incident illustrates the ways that shifting geographies of wealth in a growing metropolitan city such as Bangalore can affect *hijra* household arrangements. As certain areas of Bangalore “modernize” and gentrify, the perception of what is acceptable in certain neighborhoods also changes. Though there is more publicity around *hijra* lives and experiences and an arguably greater acceptance of sexual and gender non-conformity, as people from largely working-class and poor backgrounds, *hijras* continue to be a maligned community that “so-called decent folks” (as one of my respondents sarcastically characterized them) do not want to be associated with. When there is an opportunity for an area to gentrify that was believed to be hindered by the presence of *hijras*, the state intervened, forcing the *hijras* to leave so that space was made available for “elitist consumption” (Bannerjee-Guha 2009: 95). Thus, there is increasingly less opportunity for large *hijra* communal households to remain in their localities as the local government seeks to “clean up” these areas to attract wealthier residents.

#### *Acceptance and Transwomen’s Ability to Live “Independently”*

The changing geographies of *hijra* residences are also related to a greater perceived acceptance of gender non-conforming people, lives and experiences by the “general society.” Prior to public advocacy and media publicity for the plight of gender and sexual minorities, finding accommodation on rent for a gender non-conforming person was extremely difficult, as the landlords were often unwilling to rent to them or they would charge prohibitively high rates for deposit and rent to gender non-conforming people. As a result, Shanti, a self-identified transwoman, explains, “earlier [*chelas*] had to live wherever the guru lived. They could not get

houses of their own. No one would rent them houses.” In recent years in Bangalore (and other cities in South India), it has become somewhat easier for gender non-conforming people to find accommodation on rent. Though everyone said that it is still difficult to find a rental flat as a visibly gender non-conforming person, it is no longer completely impossible. Unfortunately, many flat owners still demand higher rent rates for gender non-conforming people than they would for cisgender people, but many transwomen and gender non-conforming people who want to live outside of *hijra* households are willing and increasingly able to bear this cost.

Even for those who are able to obtain houses on rent, as a gender non-conforming person, safety is an important concern. Seema, who lives with her male-identified partner in a rented flat, relates an incident that happened a month before I spoke to her during the Deepavali festival, when people light firecrackers outside. As she was walking back to her apartment at night, Seema noticed three or four teenage boys gathered together and the next thing she knew, there was a firecracker coming straight toward her from that direction. Luckily, the boys had not aimed correctly, or the firecracker would have hit her. It was very dark and there were also other people outside on the street, so Seema had a hard time understanding what was happening. She felt relieved when she noticed an older man who had also witnessed this incident. However, as Seema explains, “he saw everything, but he's telling me, ‘go, no? go!’ Like, to *me*. He didn't even ask, ‘why are you doing this, boys?!’” As her account suggests, despite her ability to obtain a flat on rent, as a transwoman, Seema is vulnerable to abuse from her neighbors when she is in the public space near her home. Even more troubling is the reaction from a bystander, who did not reprimand the boys responsible for this act, instead encouraging Seema to leave that space in order to avoid such violence.

*Guru/Chela Reciprocal Relationships and Financial Obligations*

One of the most common complaints about *gurus* from the *chelas* I spoke to is that the *gurus* hold them to expectations of financial support that are too high. Former *chelas* emphasized how little of their income they were allowed to keep when they had *gurus* and how difficult this lack of control over their incomes made their lives. Nayana, a transwoman in her 40s and current Dosti staff member, joined a group of *hijras* as a teenager and went to live with her *guru*, earning a livelihood through soliciting money in Mumbai. She shakes her head, explaining, “hardly we used to earn 300, 400 rupees [5-7 USD per day] from begging in Bombay. That also, we had to give. Nothing was given to us, they only used to give us [allow us to keep] twenty rupees, thirty rupees, [approx. 0.50 USD] that's it.” Moreover, the problem with giving the *guru* a portion of one's income, as I heard from several former *chelas*, is that *gurus* will collect money from their *chelas* and not spend that money only on household expenses or necessities, which is what they are expected to do, but some *gurus* may also spend their *chelas'* money on expenses for their natal families or even on their own partners. In such situations, the *chela* does not have access to income of her own, which enhances her reliance on her *guru*, and does not allow her to insist that the *guru* put a stop to such practices.

Senior *gurus* I spoke to are more likely to characterize *chelas'* obligation to give their income to their *gurus* as part of a system of reciprocal care. Sunitha, a senior *hijra* and NGO worker, explained that she interprets *chelas* giving money to their *gurus* as not only a duty, but the foundation that holds the *guru/chela* relationship together. She explains, “a *chela* has to take care of her *guru*. That is the culture. If not, how can the relationship between *guru* and *chela* exist? It will get broken up.” She explains that *chelas* are and should be expected to contribute financially for household expenses such as food and rent, but even more importantly, the act of

giving money to their *gurus* enables *chelas* to “get adapted to the system” of caring for one another in a reciprocal manner that is beneficial for the relationship and serves to enhance group cohesion. Similarly, scholars of Indian family systems emphasize the importance of financial support and obligations within non-*hijra* families in which money is shared between parents and adult children and even among siblings (Singh & Bhandari 2012). Ethnographic research indicates that “[t]his is a key family practice,” based on “[a] two-way flow of money between parents and children” (Singh & Bhandari 2012: 53). Thus, *gurus*’ financial expectations of their *chelas* are similar to the financial support that children are expected to provide for their parents.

*Chelas* positioned *gurus*’ monetary expectations as contributing to and perpetuating controlling and abusive behaviors from their *gurus*. *Gurus* often carefully monitor the movements of their *chelas* to ensure that they are handing over all of their money instead of keeping a portion for themselves. Several *chelas* report they do not participate in *guru/chela* living situations because the financial demands of *gurus* from their *chelas* are high and if the *chelas* do not give enough of their money, the *gurus* become violent. Sunitha explained that violence should be understood as a result of not abiding by the rules of the *jamaat* system, since those who do not follow these rules must incur punishment. She explains, “when people live within a system or within a framework, then there would be violence against those who do not follow those parameters.” For example, she explained that when *chelas* initially join the *hijras*, they are very young and they often seek out romantic partners. These partners will see that the *chelas* are earning money and soon, the *chela* will begin to spend money that she should hand over to her *guru* on her partner instead. Since the *gurus* carefully monitor their *chelas*, they will find out that she is not giving all of her earnings to the *guru* and then, the *guru* will become violent believing that her behavior will teach the *chela* an important lesson about the

expectations within the *guru/chela* relationship. Considering the existence of *hammams* and *guru/chela* relationships as collective income-generating and poverty management systems, the *gurus*' behavior could be interpreted as reinforcing the emphasis on reciprocity between group members to the exclusion of all others. As Sunitha explains, "among the community that is not considered as violence. This is the way a *guru* would teach her *chelas*, but because of the young age of the *chelas* it seems like violence to them." Here, Sunitha implies that the *chelas* are unable to fully understand the importance of protecting group relationships and enforcing obligations, which is why they object to the violence exercised by their *gurus*.

Suma, a transwoman activist and writer, argues that there are aspects to the more controlling side of the *guru/chela* relationship that can be positive. She explains, "it's good too because people earn money from begging and sexwork, but they fall in love with some stupid man and they give all their money to him!" This is a serious problem because these men then receive a lot of financial assistance from their *hijra* or transwoman partner and the relationships almost always end with the *hijra* or transperson heartbroken and wishing that she had saved that money instead of giving it to him. Suma points out, "after all, you are a transwoman, you are working hard to get this money, why do you have to waste it on some asshole?" As Suma explains, the *gurus* may have good reason to monitor their *chelas*. However, she positions their concern as largely about their own self-interest and not about their *chelas*' potential to be heartbroken and regretful. She explained, laughing, "their worry is like, 'oh my god, my income is going to someone else!'"

A key reason that *gurus* would want to ensure that their *chelas*' money comes only to themselves is because they struggle to earn an income on their own. As Mousami, one of only five elder *hijras* (above the age of 50) I was able to speak with, explains, "I cannot earn [from

sex work] like the earlier times. Even if I sit there the whole day, I will not earn even 200-300 rupees [4-5 USD].” As an elder *hijra*, Mousami is unable to sustain the client base that she could when she was younger, making it much harder for her to make her living through sex work. Within the *hijra* system, this problem was taken care of through the *guru/chela* relationship, in which elder *hijras* were dependent on the income generated by younger *hijras*.

### *Gurus, Chelas and Changing Non-hijra Families*

Depending on their age, *hijras* (and transwomen who are loosely part of *hijra* communities) that I spoke to held very different conceptions of kinship and the salience of supportive relationships. Senior *hijras* often emphasize the importance of personal relationships and highlight the fact that *hijras* are denied relationships with their natal families, making relationships within the group salient. When older *hijras* spoke about their lives, many emphasized that part of being a *hijra* is that you have lost the support of your natal family. Sunitha emphasizes that *hijras* differ from other marginalized groups because

[*Hijras*] are the *most* marginalized community. They have been rejected by their families. We do not *at all* have the acceptance of our families. That is how we are different from the other communities. Take for example a boy who marries a girl of another caste. The parents will throw him out [of the home] for some time. But later when they have grandchildren, they will compromise and accept the couple back into their home. But if a son has thoughts of becoming a woman, then they will label him as being mentally ill. More importantly, the family gets a bad name or a stigma...nobody will give their daughters in marriage to the brothers of a *hijra*. So the family looks at us with disgust and...they will throw us out of the family and announce to everyone what they have done so the family will be accepted by society...Sometimes, some families do accept us, but that could be because of the money we earn. Yet, there is no general and overall acceptance from the families. One brother or sister might accept. That is all.

Here, Sunitha emphasizes that *hijras* are often forced out of their natal homes for good, meaning they must go through life without the support of their families. This scenario would have been especially true when Sunitha came to live with *hijras*, over 20 years ago, as it was unheard of for

families even in major urban areas at that time to accept gender-nonconforming children. Senior *hijras* like Sunitha tend to emphasize the importance of supportive relationships within the *hijra* community, perhaps because when she joined the group, *hijras* could not maintain relationships with their natal families.

From the perspective of senior *gurus*, Sunitha explained as we sat together on mats in the NGO office where she works, tension within the *guru/chela* relationship is unavoidable at times and thus should be expected. She compares *guru/chela* relationships to family relationships, explaining that the problems that sometimes occur between *gurus* and *chelas* are the same problems that may occur in any family. She explains, “on some occasions the *guru* could get angry with the *chela* and, on other occasions, the *chela* could get angry with the *guru*. That is only natural. This happens in the same manner that such things happen in a family. That happens among us too.” She emphasized the importance of understanding *guru/chela* relationships as part of a larger culture that should continue for generations to come, explaining that, “to take the culture forward, one must understand it.” As a *guru*, she explains,

if I fall ill, my *chelas* will care of me and also they share [their experiences] with me. I also share about myself, my life, my family, etc. with my *chelas*. I also care for them if they have health problems, family problems or police problems when they beg. I protect them on such occasions. *We adapt ourselves to the guru/chela system*. That provides security.

Here, Sunitha emphasizes that for those who are able and willing to “adapt” themselves to live within the dictates of the *guru/chela* system, they will have access to the benefits of connection, support and protection. However, the process of adapting oneself to the *guru/chela* system presents more of a task for *chelas*, since *chelas* are expected to obey without question all requests from their *gurus*, whereas *gurus* are not expected to obey their *chelas* in this way. As Sunitha was explaining her point about how the system offers security, one of the other NGO staff



members who was listening in on our conversation looked over at us and asked doubtfully, “*what* security?,” referencing the disdain with which NGO staff members often interpret the social organization of *hijra* groups. Sunitha paused, took a deep breath and pursed her lips, then she responded by looking directly at me and emphatically explaining,

There is security inside the system. This is similar to the security provided by parents to their children. Also, there is friction among the people of the community in a way similar to the frictions that sometimes happen between father and children, but those are very few. Only very rarely some violence or oppression takes place. Mostly the persons of the community live in harmony.

Here, Sunitha emphasizes that within non-*hijra* familial relationships, tension, which may include oppression and violence, is expected and tolerated. Claiming that it may “rarely” occur, there are similarities between this kind of violence and the violence that gurus occasionally feel is necessary to exercise.

Younger transwomen also link *guru/chela* relationships to heteronormative familial relationships, but many point out that these family relationships are also in a state of flux. Deepa, a transwoman who works in an NGO, likens the control of a guru over her chela to the control exercised by parents over their children, which she posits as dwindling. When I asked why she did not want to have a *guru*, she referenced changing heterosexual family roles, explaining,

See, I’m not under the control of my parents. Then how can I be under the control of my *guru*? See, [when I thought about if] I want to [become] a transgender or a *hijra*, I’m not listening to [what] my parents [suggest to me]. So how can I listen to my guru? This means things are changing now. I want to be independent.

Here, Deepa references the perception that parental control over children and the hierarchical family structure is shifting. When considering relationships based on kinship, she suggests, it makes sense that if children are less likely to be controlled by their parents, they would also be less likely to elect to be under the control of another parent-like figure such as a *guru*. Her desire

for independence from parents and gurus thus means that she identifies as a transwoman instead of joining the *hijras*.

### *Shifting Expectations for Gurus and Chelas*

Almost everyone I spoke with agreed that expectations from *chelas* toward their *gurus* have dramatically transformed, which has entailed a drastic reduction in responsibilities in most cases. This is partly because *chelas* are now less likely to live with their *gurus* in *hamams*, though very small *guru/chela* households (usually in rented flats) can be found. However, the *chelas* in these households are less likely to be responsible for all of the household chores and to be expected to obey their *gurus*. If *chelas* give part of their earnings to their *gurus*, the amount is either up to the *chela* to decide based on her income and her *guru*'s needs or it is decided by the *guru*, but the amount is significantly less than the *guru* would have previously asked for. Many people characterized the changes in *hijra* groups as stemming from the enhanced autonomy of *chelas*. While *chelas* were previously obliged to obey their gurus, Neelima, a hijra activist and person living with HIV/AIDS in her 60s, explains, that now,

The *chelas* question their *gurus* a lot. Earlier the *chela* had to live within the parameters of the system and had to live under the *guru*. Now *gurus* and *chelas* lead their separate lives. They are independent. Now the *guru/chela* relationship is friendly and close. Earlier there was the authority of the *guru* and she would order the *chela* to do what she was asked. But now there is a good coordination between the *guru* and the *chela*.

Here, Neelima suggests that the *chelas* are enjoying their newfound freedom from the perceived strictures of the *guru/chela* system. Since she mentioned a “good coordination” between *gurus* and *chelas*, I asked her how she thinks *gurus* specifically are feeling about these changes. She paused for a moment and then thoughtfully replied, “now the society is growing large and also it is changing. So *gurus* have understood that if they accept those changes, then the *chelas* would

choose to be with them. If they do not accept these changes, then the *chelas* will leave their *gurus* and go away. So the *gurus* know that they have to accept these changes.”

The shifting expectations around the *guru/chela* relationship have also led to changes in which kind of *gurus* are considered as desirable to potential *chelas*. Since the number of *chelas* a *guru* has affects her social status within the community (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005), there has been a profound shift in the types of behaviors that earn *gurus* higher social status. As Neelima suggests above, the *gurus* who have changed their expectations regarding the *guru/chela* relationship are more likely to have many people that approach them and ask to be their *chelas*. This new trend indicates a reversal of the system prevalent before these changes. As Manjunath, a Dosti leader, explains,

the dominant *hijras* used to have more *chelas*. They're big, tough. Nowadays, a lot of what you call independent *hijras* are linked to what they call 'weak *gurus*' who are more liberal, who don't take money from you. So suddenly, now you see all these *gurus* who don't exploit their *chelas* have a lot of *chelas*.

This shift in behavior for more powerful *gurus* indicates for Manjunath that “people are shifting” their expectations about the *guru/chela* relationship in a significant way. Now that the *chelas* question their *gurus* and become *chelas* of “liberal” *gurus* who “don’t exploit their *chelas*,” he explains, they are the people who have the most *chelas* and those *gurus* who continue to hold more traditional expectations of their *chelas* are less likely to obtain many *chelas*, which negatively affects their social status within the community.

Many people explained that now, the respect that *chelas* are expected to demonstrate to their *gurus* is at a more symbolic level. Shanthi, a transwoman-identified NGO worker who also participates in *hijra* groups, explains that previously, *gurus* held a lot of power over their *chelas* and they would use that power to “torture” their *chelas* when they didn’t obey their *gurus*. Now, she says, “the power is still there but there is less torture...actually, the power is just superficial.

The *guru* has to sit at a higher level and we [*chelas*] have to sit at a lower level. We have to say ‘*Paam padti*,’<sup>5</sup> we have to respect them. On the days of the festival we have to either give money or jewelry to them.” Apart from these largely symbolic expectations that indicate respect and a degree of subservience, she explains, many *chelas* now have few obligations to their *gurus*.

Increasingly, *chelas* are becoming more empowered to place demands on their *gurus*, which would have been impossible before these major changes in *hijra* relationships. Before she agreed to be the chela of her guru, Shanti explained that she agreed to participate in this relationship on the condition that her guru cannot adopt any other *chelas* except herself. Shanti had observed other *gurus* who have many *chelas* come to interpret the income from their *chelas* as their only source of livelihood and she did not want to get into a situation where her guru may begin to think of her in that way. Because of the declining powers of *gurus* to dictate the terms of the guru/chela relationship, Shanti was able to clearly articulate the conditions of their relationship.

Neelima attributes the altered expectations in *guru/chela* relationships to NGO outreach and increased awareness of transfeminine people’s experiences. As she explains,

earlier, it was not so open...there was little information about *gurus* and *chelas*. There was no publicity. There were no [NGO] offices. There was nobody to care for *hijras*...now everyone is smarter. Everyone got some confidence to ask questions. So there are changes. Among the *gurus* and *chelas*, it is like this. They say, ‘you are in your place and I am in mine. If I give something then you take it and eat.’ It goes on like this.

Here, Neelima highlights media publicity and NGOs as major players in the changes that have occurred within *hijra* communities. Due to the influence of NGOs and the information that now circulates about transgender lives and *hijras*, people are more willing to question aspects of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Paam padti* can be translated as “I demonstrate my sincere respect for and devotion to you by touching your feet.” Such actions are reserved for elders in one’s family, spiritual leaders and others of a very high social status. I observed people simply say this phrase to *gurus* and I also observed some who attempted to touch the feet of the person they were addressing.

*guru/chela* relationship. This has prompted an understanding that each person within the relationship has a particular place, but these positions no longer entail strict roles as they once did. The *guru/chela* relationship is no longer governed by the idea that people *must* enact certain behaviors, but instead, reciprocity is understood as, “if I give something, then you take and eat it,” suggesting that a preset standard of giving money, gifts, etc. is no longer required of either party.

*“My chela is my own hand”: Gurus and Independence*

Even amongst older *gurus*, I spoke with people who were no longer attached to the idea of having a *hijra* family and did not find it necessary to participate in *hijra* family systems. As we sat on the floor of her small, brightly-decorated living room sipping milk tea, Manvi, a *hijra* in her early 40s, explained to me that even though she is quite senior in the *hijra* community, she no longer takes *chelas* and she does not choose to be very involved with the group these days. Manvi had lived with a large *hijra* family in Mumbai for many years and she returned to Bangalore a few years ago to live on her own and earn her livelihood through sex work. Though she had around 25 *chelas* in Mumbai, she explains, “I left them all and came away [to Bangalore]. I do not want any *chelas*. My *chela* is my own hand.” Manvi explained that when she left her *hijra* family in Mumbai, she left with surprisingly little money, despite the fact that she had done sex work for so many years, and no one was willing to offer her financial assistance, so she decided that she was better off depending only on herself. Here, Manvi implies that *chelas* should help their gurus, but since her *chelas* were unwilling to help her when she needed it, she no longer wants to participate in these relationships; instead, she will manage on her own. Like former *chelas* and younger gender non-conforming people, who perceive

better opportunities for themselves outside of *hijra* systems, Manvi has decided that *hijra* relationships do not offer the kind of support they claim to.

When I asked if she considers herself to be a part of the *hijra* community in Bangalore, Manvi replied, “I am with all the others and I am also separate. I meet everyone once in a while. But I don’t meet up with them much. I want to live separately.” Here, Manvi indicates that it is possible and even desirable for her to live by herself and only occasionally meet other *hijras*. She further explains that her decision to reside in Bangalore is about her ability to earn an income, but that if earning money through sex work was not a concern for her, “I would have been living a good life with my parents and family [in rural South Karnataka].” Here, Manvi references a desire to participate in kinship systems, but the noteworthy aspect is that her desire is to return and live with her natal family instead of actively participating in *hijra* kinship relationships, which has only recently become a possibility for gender non-conforming people. As Mariyamma, another senior *hijra* who has curtailed her participation in *hijra* groups, explained, “fifty years ago, *hijras* were a taboo,” and one would not think of disgracing their natal family by continuing to associate with them after they had joined the *hijras*.

### ***Transwomen, “Choice” and Consumer Citizenship***

As the above sections indicate, there are multiple reasons that *hijra* relationships are in transition, including: increased urbanization, gentrification, changing non-*hijra* family expectations, and an increase in the amount of “publicity” and information about the lives of gender non-conforming people that have made it possible for transwomen to imagine living outside of *hijra* communities. Intriguingly, when I spoke to a variety of sexual minorities, activists, NGO workers, and *hijras*, these complex and intersecting dynamics are often subsumed under the

rhetoric of choice, with people emphasizing the fact that transwomen now have choices to make regarding their living situation as necessarily a positive change. I argue that framing these complex changes in terms of “emerging consumer discourses of a woman exercising choice” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81) serves to position transgender women as competent consumer citizens who are now free to make their own choices, whereas before this group had no options and was confined to living in *hijra* groups. In some ways, the discourse of transwomen’s newly found ability to exercise choice mirrors the discourse around (presumably) cisgender women’s consumption choices in liberalized India, which have dramatically expanded, a change that is positioned as inherently positive and indicative of India’s economic progress.

A significant social component of liberalization in India has been the effect of advertising on gender ideologies. In the early 1990s, India went from having two government-controlled TV channels to 20 national and international channels in the mid-1990s to nearly 1000 permitted private satellite channels in India in the late 1990s (Munshi 1997: 38). By December 2015, there were 190 government TV channels in India in various languages of the subcontinent (Wikipedia.com) and there are no reliable estimates of the current numbers of private TV channels available. Along with an increase in television channels, commercial advertising has increased exponentially since the early 1990s (Munshi 1997: 38). As marketing studies began to indicate that Indian women (whether they are employed outside of their homes or not) are increasingly key consumers and considered as partners by their spouses in major purchasing decisions, women have been targeted by advertisers, with the bulk of advertisements emphasizing the salience of a woman’s “choice” to make her own distinct consumption decisions (Munshi 1997: 38). Advertising plays an important role as “a mediator of meanings” that often “work[s] to shift the very terms of social relations for its own self-promotional ends” (Cronin

2000: 5).

Perceptions of “women’s advancement” in India are shaped by and increasingly oriented around notions of individualism (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81), which have been conveyed most strongly through advertising (Munshi 1997). Media representations, particularly TV shows, have increasingly portrayed images of the “emancipated woman” who is no longer under the strict control of parents, in-laws or spouses (Munshi 1997: 39). Her newfound freedom allows her to make more choices about her life and “do[] what she does and be[] what she is out of conscious choice, as opposed to destiny” (Munshi 1997: 39). An executive for Femina, a popular women’s magazine, explained in the mid-1990s, “this persona is well-accepted, and is perhaps even an aspirational one” (Munshi 1997: 39). A key message in many ads focuses on a woman’s individuality and how the product being sold will accentuate her individuality (Munshi 1997: 44). Because women’s individuality and notions about individual choice comprise a major portion of advertising directed toward women, women often conceive of empowerment in the sense of individual choice (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81). Transwomen and others draw from these media discourses emphasizing the salience of women’s ability to exercise individual choice when discussing the changes to the *guru/chela* system and the emergence of the transgender woman.

When discussing the expectations within contemporary *guru/chela* relationships, Neelima explains, “the *chela* can choose [whether or not] to follow what the *guru* asks her to do. It is fine if she does not choose to obey.” When I asked if *gurus* and *chelas* still see each other regularly, she replied that *chelas* “go and meet the *guru* when they feel like it, but if they don’t feel like it, they will not go to meet the *guru* at all. Once in a few months, either quarterly or half yearly they may still go.” During these visits, the *chelas* might offer their *gurus* a portion of their earnings,



if, she explains pointedly, “they choose to do so.” Similarly, Mariyamma, a *hijra* in her sixties, emphasizes the newfound choices available to gender non-conforming people today. She explains that when she was growing up, “The only place for any *hijra* to go was to a *guru* or a *hamam* or somewhere [associated with *hijras*]. [That was] fifty years ago, but now, it is *very* different. You have lots of options. You can have a *guru* or you don't need a *guru*. It is left to you [to choose/decide].”

Several people drew on broad understandings about the additional choices available to gender non-conforming people through NGOs as having a salient impact on the changes in *hijra* groups and the emergence of transwomen. Rishabh, a former Dosti leader, explains that Dosti represents an additional space where *chelas* and transwomen can come to access support, belonging and employment options. He explains,

I think they [*chelas*] came to the organization because they felt that there was an alternate protection system, you know? Because till then, there was no alternate protection system. It was only the *guru/chela* relationship, so they felt that, you know, there is a space for them beyond the *guru/chela* relationship and they could become more independent, more free to do what they like.

Prior to the proliferation of sexual rights NGOs such as Dosti, Rishabh explains, there were no additional places that offered gender non-conforming people protection and belonging. Because NGOs like Dosti offer this additional space and protection, which transwomen can choose to take advantage of, transwomen are able to become “independent” and “free.”

Suma, a transwoman activist and author who was formerly part of *hijra* communities, positions the additional information available about transpeople’s lives and experiences as enabling younger transwomen to make better choices. She explains that in the past, gender non-conforming male assigned people “didn't have exposure that much and they don't know where do I go, how can I live? They had this, you know, insecure feeling. They needed somebody to

guide them.” At that time, their only viable option to live as a gender non-conforming person was to join a *hijra* clan and in order to join the *hijras*, they needed to be under the tutelage of a *guru*. Even if *gurus* were mistreating *chelas*, the *chelas* did not perceive that they had other options, so they had to struggle and cope on their own. Now, as Suma explains, “they have that little exposure [and think] ‘ah ok, if you don't accept me this way, I can go to some other group. I'll manage, so I won't worry.’ It's like that. If [the *gurus*] cross a limit, they'll just change” their allegiances and find another group. Here, the implication is that *chelas* and transwomen now have access to additional options and additional information which enables them to make more and better choices about their lives.

In liberalized, consumer-driven economies, acts of consumption become imbued with meaning. Such acts are “imagined as symbolic work in the reflexive project of the self, communicating to others messages of identity, belonging and distinction” (Cronin 2000: 1). Acts of consumption and consumer culture are often imagined as “feminine domain[s]” (Cronin 2000: 2). In Europe, as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, consumerism was imagined and “consistently figured” as a woman, “embod[ying]” those womanly characteristics such as “capriciousness and hedonism” (Felski 1995 cited in Cronin 2000: 2). The figure of the “consuming woman” became an important site for interpreting “cultural imaginings of the modern” in the global North (Felski 1995: 65 cited in Cronin 2000: 2). Consumption has long been associated with women in various parts of the global North (Cronin 2000: 2); in an era of economic globalization, globally, consumption and consumer culture are associated with women and femininity. Historically, the figure of the consuming woman has also featured as “a recurrent trope for understanding cultural change” (Cronin 2000: 2). Here, I argue that the transgender woman (and/or *chela*) with her enhanced ability to make choices, is a contemporary trope invoked to

explain the complex cultural changes that have led to the transformation of *hijra* groups.

The act of narrating the emergence of the transgender woman and the transformation of *hijra* relationships through “emerging consumer discourses of a woman exercising choice” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81) draws on a familiar association between women and consumption and it also recruits transgender women to participate in the narrative and project of liberalization. The positioning of transwomen and *chelas* as consumer citizens making choices overlaps with and echoes the ways that (presumably cisgender) women are positioned by advertisers as newly emancipated due partly to (and as evidenced by) their ability to make their own purchasing decisions. The narrative of transwomen who, at one time, could not make choices about their lives and who now can make a variety of choices also mirrors the discourse on the evolving nature of consumption in India, often positioned as a progress narrative from a time of few choices for consumer goods to a time of overwhelming choices.

The act of making consumption choices is imbued with meaning including, increasingly, an indicator of citizenship (Cronin 2000: 1). The “abstracted notion of ‘choice’” that my participants draw on to explain changes in *hijra* groups and the emergence of the transwoman has become a salient component of consumer citizenship (2000: 33). As Cronin explains, “the citizen as consumer is defined as an individual who is *capable* of making [an] informed choice. For it is in the very act of choice that the individual actualizes *[her]self* as chooser and hence citizen” (2000: 33). Thus, the act of choosing, whether the choice is about a product, healthcare, or where to live and which identity to take on, becomes an indication of legitimate citizenship. In the narrative above, Suma draws on such understandings when she suggests that before, gender non-conforming people did not have enough information to make properly informed decisions, whereas now, they have access to information that helps them to make better

decisions. This language of choice positions transwomen (and some *chelas*) as empowered citizens who can effectively participate in globalized marketplaces through their ability to make competent individual choices, thus connecting the shifts in *hijra* groups to transwomen's claims to citizenship via their increased ability to exercise choice.

### *Conclusion*

The social changes that paved the way for younger transpeople to live outside of *hijra* groups are related to the vast changes that have swept through urban India in the wake of liberalization, include urbanization, gentrification, increased acceptance of gender non-conforming and perceived changes in non-*hijra* families, among others. Intriguingly, when people discuss these complex changes, these multiple and varied shifts get subsumed under the rhetoric of choice, such that these changes are attributed to transwomen's (and other gender non-forming people's) increased ability to make choices. This rhetoric of transwomen's newly found ability to exercise choice overlaps with and echoes the discourse around (presumably) cisgender women's ability to make consumption choices in liberalized India.

This aspect of transwomen's claim to citizenship does not focus on including transwomen via the exclusion of a dangerous other; instead, the diverse social changes through which the transwoman emerged are narrated in a way that connect her to projects and ideologies of liberalization and consumer citizenship. Through narrations of the changes in *hijra* groups via the rhetoric of choice, transwomen are recruited to participate in the progress narrative of liberalization and their citizenship claims are bolstered by their underlying association with consumer citizenship. Having access to additional choices positions transgender women as competent consumer citizens who are now "free" to make their own choices, a major contrast

with earlier times when this group had no options and was confined to living in *hijra* groups.

This discursive form of transwomen's inclusion into citizenship normalizes the connection between consumer choice and citizenship and, by explaining the emergence of the transwomen as a product of her newfound choice, enables a place for transwomen with the ideological project of liberalization.

***Chapter 4: “‘Modern Girls’: Identity, Livelihood and Transwomen’s Citizenship Aspirations”***

*Introduction*

On a hot summer day in 2011, I sat across the desk from Akriithi, a transwoman and Dosti staff member. As bright sunlight streamed in through the window behind her, she excitedly narrated her experience of a recent advocacy project for transgender people undertaken in partnership with the government of Karnataka. As a result of her participation in Dosti’s activism, Akriithi explained that her abilities were fully revealed to her. She explains,

I never knew that I would achieve such great success in my leadership...I have learned a lot, I have learned a lot through all this...my skills and capacity have gone up. I’m here to prove to any of the society [people] that I can do what you’re doing...When I just look back at my way of life, how I came up, from [performing] sex work and then joining Dosti as a peer educator, field supervisor, then coordinator of the information division, then program manager of the organization, this shows the levels of growth in my life, that [my position now] is a big achievement...I have proved what I am, the community has proved what they are.

Here, Akriithi highlights the many opportunities she has benefitted from via her employment at Dosti, emphasizing that the skills she has developed enabled her not only to climb the employment ladder at Dosti, but that these skills also caused a concomitant shift in her self-perception and understanding.

I met Akriithi the first day I went to the Dosti office in the summer of 2009. At that time, she had just become the Coordinator of the Information Division (library) after working part-time as a Community Mobilizer and then full-time as a Field Supervisor and a Field Officer in Dosti for several years. My memory of her from that first meeting is of a demure, even shy, feminine-presenting person wearing a bright yellow kurta with a white dupatta draped elegantly over her chest. She seemed hesitant as she spoke quietly and almost shyly to me in English, explaining that she was learning to speak English through her employment at Dosti and politely suggesting

that I should ask her or any other people in the office if I had questions. In the 18 months of fieldwork I conducted between 2009-2014, I witnessed Akriithi's ascension to one of the most influential public figures in Dosti and, eventually, one of the most influential transpeople (if not *the* most influential transperson) in South India.

As she took on increased responsibility at Dosti, Akriithi became involved with transgender rights initiatives involving members of the Karnataka State Government as well as the National Government. I remember the excitement she expressed about her first trip to Delhi, which Dosti sponsored. She proudly showed me pictures on her Nokia phone of herself, dressed in a bright red and pink sari, standing in front of several monuments and government buildings in Delhi, which she was seeing for the first time. I often heard her proudly relate how she was invited to the "swearing-in ceremony" for the President of India in 2012. After my fieldwork was complete, I saw several pictures posted online of her with government officials of other countries, including the President of Japan. One day, she explained to me that her ability to interact with state officials has made a tremendous impact on the way she perceives her abilities, herself as a human being and as a citizen. Through her work with Dosti, she explains,

From ministers [of Parliament] to other department chairpersons to the Chief Minister [of Karnataka], to the Chief Justice [of Karnataka], I have contacts... What I thought eight years ago [before coming to Dosti] was I'm unfit to be a human being in this world; *I'm unfit to be a citizen of this nation*. But after meeting such high-level people, I came to know that I am able to be here, I can prove what I am [emphasis in original].

Here, Akriithi's explanation of her "fit[ness]" as a human and citizen is intriguing. Instead of drawing on liberal understandings of equality emphasizing that everyone is entitled to be treated as a human and entitled to be a citizen of their nation, the shift in Akriithi's self-perception is made possible through her "contacts" with government officials, indicating that even marginalized sexual minorities are capable of interacting with "such high-level people."

Whereas prior to her work with Dosti, Akriithi thought she was “unfit to be a human being in this world” and even “*unfit to be a citizen of this nation*,” her ability to penetrate hierarchies of social and political authority has “prove[n]” her “fit[ness]” as a human being and a citizen.

As Akriithi’s narrative indicates, NGO employment has had an important impact on the experiences of a small group of gender non-conforming people in India. Of course, NGOs are not able to hire all (or even the majority) of working-class gender non-conforming people in India, so these employment options are available to only a select few. However, as the chapter addresses, this group of transpeople is highly visible through various kinds of media, which they often use to educate the “general public” about their identity and to emphasize the differences between themselves and *hijras*. While these opportunities directly impact only a small group of transwomen, the media image of transwomen’s enhanced opportunities to exercise their rights related to livelihood, education, living conditions, etc. is reshaping public understandings of the opportunities for transwomen to exercise their rights and claim full citizenship in India.

This chapter explores the co-constitution of class, gender and citizenship, arguing that access to office employment serves as an important precursor for transwomen’s claims to legitimate citizenship. I argue that respectable office employment, which is constructed as “empowering” and enabling “independence” for middle-class women in postcolonial India, offers possibilities for working-class transgender women to fulfill their middle-class aspirations while simultaneously confirming the propriety of their gender identities. Transwomen’s newfound opportunity to engage in office employment offers them a salient way to position themselves in contradistinction to *hijras*, whose options for employment are usually limited to soliciting money and sex work. In order to bolster their claims to citizenship, transwomen emphasize the distinctions between their legitimate claims to citizenship and *hijras*, whom they position as



unfeminine, disreputable and necessarily outside of the boundaries of legitimate citizenship. Drawing on my fieldwork experiences and transwomen's narratives about their identities as well as an analysis of a media campaign that circulated online entitled "I am Not a Hijra," I argue that transwomen claim citizenship by drawing clear boundaries between themselves and *hijras* and positioning *hijras* as undeserving of the rights of citizenship, thus bolstering their own claims to legitimate citizenship.

### *Shifting Identities and the Co-constitution of Class and Gender*

Akrithi's identity underwent important changes during the time I have known her, which is at least partly related to how NGOs encourage certain sexual minority subjects to identify themselves and to her changing class status as a result of climbing the employment hierarchy at Dosti. When we met, Akrithi identified herself as a *kothi*, which, as she explained, means a "male-born" person "with feminine characteristics" who is attracted to people "with masculine characteristics." She also clearly articulated her class background as working class. Around this time, she asked me one day where I got my *kurta*. I had to think a moment before replying that I bought it at FabIndia, a popular middle-class oriented store whose prices have exponentially increased since then. She clicked her tongue and remarked, "Expensive!" In the following years, I regularly saw her wearing FabIndia clothing that was much more decorative, fancier and, presumably, expensive than mine. She also mentioned shopping there in conversation with me several times and I heard her speak about shopping at FabIndia with others around me on several occasions. These examples indicate that Akrithi's perceptions about which kind of clothing is expensive have changed drastically over the period of time that I have known her, likely propelled by a rise in her salary as she climbed the employment hierarchy in Dosti, which has

enabled her increased identification as middle class. Indeed, consumption habits are one way that the heterogeneous groups of “new middle class” Indians differentiate themselves from other classes and from members of different strata within the middle class (Fernandes 2015: 235).

About two years into my fieldwork, Akriithi began identifying herself as transgender while still retaining her *kothi* identity, which coincided with the current discourse used in Dosti around *kothis* as a subset of people falling under the transgender umbrella. Around this time, Akriithi also began to make statements suggesting that she no longer would situate herself in the working class, such as sternly telling me to “take care of your things” at events since the majority of people there will be from the working classes. She began to clearly differentiate herself from lower-tier staff members whom she would often point out are “from the working class sections of society,” especially when anything would go missing in the office. In the last stages of my fieldwork, Akriithi stopped identifying herself with the working class identity of *kothi* and began to identify herself as a transgender woman and then later simply as a woman. These changes that I witnessed in Akriithi’s identification clearly indicate the co-constitution of gender and class. Akriithi’s employment at Dosti enabled her upward class mobility, which further impacted her gender identification, while her identity was also entangled with NGO current funding trends.

#### *“Modern Girls”: Working-class Transwomen and Identity*

*At an NGO office in a nearby city, I sat in a small, unlit front room leading to the office with a group of four to six people for around two hours, having a discussion about the organization’s work with sexual minorities. Deepa, a transfeminine-identified healthcare worker dressed in fitted jeans and a V neck shirt with a bright scarf thrown over her shoulder, explained that she works part-time at the NGO. Visibly excited to inform me about the kind of work the organization engages in, she enthusiastically moderated the discussion. When I asked a young, shy feminine-presenting person wearing a deep green sari if she identifies as a hijra, before she could answer, Deepa explained, “the people who are castrated and they are living in the hamams, following the tradition of the hamams, they are called hijras. She’s a modern girl; she’s educated,*

*she's literate. She's called transgender."*

*Indu, a light-skinned, softspoken woman in her 50s wearing a coral colored sari looked serious as she said she does not want to be interpreted as a hijra. In fact, she does not want to be associated with hijras at all. She explained, "See, I being a transgender or I being [in the distant past] a hijra, if I see a group of hijras outside, you know, I won't come, [pause] I'm not comfortable going and talking to them. I'm not comfortable. Their dressing, the way of their loudness—I'm not comfortable. I really avoid them." At this point, Deepa jumped in, saying emphatically, "Sometimes I want to hide my identity in front of them. I want to give money to them and [dramatic hand motions suggesting send them away]."*

This conversation is revealing of the tensions for working-class transgender-identified women around being identified as a *hijra* that were briefly mentioned in chapter two. Deepa compares *hijras*, defined as castrated people living in *hamams* and following traditions set by the *hamam*-based senior *gurus*, as entirely distinct from "modern," educated and literate "girls," who are best referred to as transgender people. In order to distinguish *hijras* and trans "girls," Deepa draws on the binaries of traditional/modern, yet equally important in the conversation are notions of respectability and the desire for inclusion in a reputable social group. Indu's characterization of *hijras* as loud and unattractively dressed mirrors middle-class accounts of *hijras* in media and other popular discourses that characterize *hijra* mannerisms and behaviors as improper and threatening to disturb properly-behaved middle-class people. Deepa's desire to "hide [her] identity" so that the *hijras* (and perhaps others around her) do not assume that she is one of them, illustrate her fear that, in being recognized as a (working-class) gender-nonconforming person, people will assume that she is a *hijra*. The thought that she could be perceived as having commonalities with *hijras* provokes her to do something (give money) that would ensure that they leave quickly so that she is no longer faced with such a potentially embarrassing dilemma. This conversation, occurring in a sexual rights NGO that fights for the rights of sexual minorities (a term that purports to include *hijras*), is illustrative of Dutta's point that "even at the moment of protesting against transphobia, a division emerges between the innocent and victimized

transgender and unruly trans-people who behave badly in public” (Dutta 2012: 132). Deepa and Indu are at pains to distance themselves and their proper behavior from groups of *hijras*, who they assume will embarrass them through their improper behavior.

Another important distinction that Deepa points out between “modern girls” and *hijras* is that of employment and education. *Hijras*’ options for employment are assumed to be sex work and soliciting money, whereas she positions transwomen as more likely to be educated and to have employment options other than sex work and soliciting money. Previously, people most often joined the *hijras* as teenagers and discontinued their participation in educational institutions, instead participating in sex work and soliciting money to pay their gurus, who would, when there was enough money saved up after daily expenses were paid, use it to fund their operations. Increasingly, a small subset of younger gender non-conforming people are remaining in their educational institutions and then opting to live as “independent” transgender women who are able to fund their own surgeries, if they choose to have surgery.

### *Sex Work Vs. Office Work*

The idea that transpeople are now able to pursue an education and a career outside of soliciting money or sex work is gaining traction due to media reports on the cases where people have obtained this kind of education and employment. However, for many transpeople marginalized by their class/caste background are unlikely to have access to opportunities to work in “mainstream jobs” (outside of working in NGOs) since these kinds of jobs often require an education and a skill set that is not available for working-class people.

Following the example of large corporations in North America and Europe, some multi-national companies in large Indian cities are presenting themselves as LGBT-friendly

workplaces and a few local companies in Bangalore have also claimed inclusivity for LGBT employees. Ratna, a transwoman from an upper-middle class background and a well-known radio personality in South India, explained,

I don't want to say [there is] no discrimination [towards gender non-conforming people]. I would say a much-reduced level of discrimination. Now if a transperson wants to get into a corporate job, like an MNC [multi-national company] job or even a regular job, if they're well qualified and if they present themselves in a good way, they won't face that much of an insult; many of them get employed.

Here, Ratna explains that increasingly, transfeminine people who are qualified for middle-class and upper-middle class employment options are less likely to be excluded from workplaces on the basis of their gender non-conformity. However, she concedes that the majority of transwomen, meaning *hijras* and working-class transwomen, “are not educated and don’t dress nicely,” which does not make them desirable candidates in occupations that employ middle- and upper-middle class people.

Many *hijras* express regret that sex work and soliciting money are the only employment opportunities available to them as *hijras*, sometimes going so far as to state that they should not have joined the hijra group since their *hijra* identities block them from participating in other employment. Younger *hijras* and transwomen have also reported that elder *hijras* encouraged them not to join the *hijras* because their lives would be very difficult if they joined. When Akriti met *hijras* for the first time, she felt a strong affinity with them that might have persuaded her to join the community if some of them had not explicitly encouraged her not to join them. She explains,

Even the hijras advised me not to become like them. Because they were very worried about their economic status, their condition in society, people advised me not to become like them, [saying] ‘don’t come with us. Don’t wear sari. Don’t do begging or sex work.’ They gave such good advice...Good people [laughs]. They took care of me.

Others pointed out that engaging in sex work affects one's life in ways that are often hidden. Rishabh has been an active member of the sexual minority community since the early 1990s and he explained that over the years, he has heard a lot of discussion about how sex work impacts people's lives. He explains,

sex work is not easy; it's quite difficult and it takes so much of your energy, so much of your time. And your whole life cycle changes and then you're not comfortable with that change...where you used to sleep for eight hours in the night, now you are not able to sleep [because you are working]. And you can't sleep in the day also because you have other people are [living] with you, right?, and they will be going for day work, for begging in the morning. So you can't be sleeping. So these are things that people find difficult and then, you know, you go for sex work, there is so much of harassment, there is so much of violence, there is so much fear [while] standing on that spot. The first fear is whether I'm going to earn the money that I require. The second thing is how long am I going to stand here and how many people am I vulnerable to?

Here, Rishabh offers a nuanced understanding of how participation in sex work affects many facets of people's lives, from sleep cycles to exposure to violence to the potential anxiety that a sex worker faces each time they go to work.

As discussed in chapter two, occupations such as sex work and soliciting money are also undesirable forms of employment because these are stigmatized jobs. For hijras and transwomen fighting for their rights to obtain alternate employment, an important consideration is whether their work can be considered as "dignified" since hijras have been denied entry into dignified professions for so long. Suma, a transwoman who was once part of hijra communities, explains, "see, that's my dream, like everyone has to work, but dignity is very important. Begging and sex work are not bringing you any dignity." The more transwomen who obtain jobs outside of sex work and soliciting money, Suma explained, the less hijras and transwomen will be associated only with sex work and soliciting money, which contributes to their stigmatization and thus blocks them from exercising the full rights of citizenship. Employment opportunities are

especially important when considering how one's natal families and communities will react upon realizing that their child is gender non-conforming. As Suma explains,

for example, if a family comes to know [their child is] a transwoman, they might feel bad, but ultimately their idea is that one day my son is going to be a beggar or one day, my son is going to be a sex worker. How can a parent accept it? But if they think, OK, you are a transwoman, but still if you're working with dignity, if you're working in a mainstream job, that is different. The feeling is different.

Here, Suma points to the lack of rights to alternate employment as a central reason that *hijras* remain stigmatized and unable to exercise their rights as citizens. If *hijras* and transwomen had the rights to pursue other forms of employment, they would experience a greater degree of belonging in the society and their parents might therefore be less likely to disown their gender non-conforming children.

#### *State Recognition and Citizenship via Respectable NGO Employment*

During my fieldwork, I heard of several instances in which NGO employment enabled transwomen direct access to forms of citizenship that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. In 2013, Akriti was thrilled to finally receive a passport identifying her as female and stating the name that she had chosen and everyone knew her by, instead of her birth name. She had gone through a lengthy process that took double the amount of time than in 2011, when she got her first passport, which indicated her birth name and on which her gender was listed as male. Prior to 2011, she did not have a passport or the opportunities to travel internationally that would require this form of state identification. The opportunities for international travel to places like Japan, Switzerland, Thailand, and the US, among others that working at Dosti provided were the impetus for Akriti to request a passport. Her increased competency in advocacy and familiarity with rights frameworks along with the legal assistance provided by

Dosti assisted her in navigating bureaucratic state processes and ultimately enabled her to get a passport with her preferred name and gender identity.

Because she was only the fourth person in the state of Karnataka to have her gender changed on her passport, the day after she received the document, a local news channel had sought out an interview with her. Before we left the Dosti office to go to the interview location, she related how the delivery person had asked her father whether this passport was “for a boy or a girl,” since a girl’s name was listed, but the person in the picture did not look like a girl to him. Her father had replied, “This passport is for my daughter,” she proudly related. I was surprised to hear this, since in the time that I had known her, she told me many times that she faced resistance from her parents in recognizing and accepting her gender identity. In the auto on the way to the interview, she explained that it has been a long, difficult process to gain her parents’ acceptance, but with the help of her brother, she feels they have made slow, incremental progress toward “full acceptance” from her parents.

We arrived at the location of the interview, which was in a parking lot near a collection of municipal buildings in Bangalore flanked by tall trees that offered shade from the sun. As the reporter asked probing questions about the process of getting her passport changed, Akriithi stood tall, looked directly into the camera with a determined expression on her face, as she held up her passport, she said, “I’m struggling for more than 20 years to claim [my identity] as a woman. So finally, the official document has said that I am a female. I *am* a female. I am Akriithi Goudar. I am an Indian. I’m so proud of this!” she said laughing.

This instance reveals Akriithi’s understanding of the multiple layers of belonging that her new passport symbolizes through its conferral of her citizenship status. The receipt of her appropriately gendered passport symbolized her belonging to the nation, evidenced by her



statement that “I am an Indian.” This interview actually marked the first time I heard her claim a national identity, referencing the belonging to the nation that this passport confers on her, which is made possible by the official recognition of her gender identity. This recognition from the state and the concomitant sense of belonging such recognition offers has, in this instance, propelled her to emphasize her national identity.

In her interview, Akrithi accords a degree of importance to the recognition of her gender identity from the state that I had not heard her emphasize before. I was rather surprised to hear Akrithi state that she has struggled for over 20 years to “claim as a woman,” since I had heard her confidently and publicly claim the identity of woman on several occasions, with no indication that she was waiting for state recognition in order to do so. This was the first time she had referenced the state’s interpretation of her gender as being of crucial importance in her ability to “claim” that identity. Listening to her speak about the importance of state recognition of her identity, it seemed as though this recognition became crucial only after she received it.

Still looking directly into the camera, Akrithi explained there were *lots* of legal forms that she had to fill out during this process and it took a very long time. Indeed, the process for her to change her gender on her passport took double the amount of time it would take for someone to receive a new passport. Looking seriously into the camera, she stated, “I readily request the Home Ministry or the Passport Authority of India to please not discriminate [against] any transgenders.” Here, Akrithi demonstrates her political competency to participate in government processes as a citizen (political citizenship) by drawing on her knowledge of the specific governmental offices that regulate the assignation of passports. She also demonstrates her ability, nurtured through her advocacy work with Dosti, to engage with the state as an involved

political citizen when she calls on these offices to speed up the process of changing one's name and gender in passports.

*Employment and Transwomen's (Middle-class) Aspirations*

In this section, I examine how the possibility of respectable office employment in NGOs for gender non-conforming people interacts with cultural ideas about white collar employment as “empowering” and enabling “independence” for middle-class women in postcolonial India. Office employment offers transwomen respectable employment and potentially the ability to control their income, while it also serves to differentiate them from *hijras*, who sustain themselves and their *hijra* families through sex work. I point to the ways that the rhetoric of individualism and independence from oppressive *hijra* communities articulated by NGO-affiliated transwomen aligns with the development discourse used in state and non-governmental organizations to stress the value of women's autonomy through paid employment. By enabling gender non-conforming people to access respectable office employment, NGOs offer possibilities for working-class transgender women to fulfill their middle-class aspirations while confirming the propriety of their gender identities.

Working-class transwomen's desires for “respectable” employment are also connected to a desire to demonstrate appropriate (middle class) femininity through their paid work. Like many working class people in urban India, many and perhaps most of the transwomen I met are aspiring to join the ranks of the middle class. Among the middle classes and those people aspiring to be middle class, women's employment can be an important marker of class identities and aspirations. As scholars have pointed out, “the representation of gender is central to the construction of class identity” and this point is particularly salient in cosmopolitan cities with a

highly visible growing middle class such as Bangalore (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 197). In contemporary urban India among the generation that came of age during the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, the association of middle class women with paid white-collar employment is strong. A salient marker of class identity among middle class aspiring people is “a desire for women to be publicly visible and have relative freedom to pursue careers” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 82). One way working class transwomen can demonstrate their middle class (aspiring) identities is through emulating behaviors and characteristics associated with appropriate femininity demonstrated by women in the middle classes.

There is a history of contention over women’s employment in India, due partly to the meanings about the class/caste nexus that are reflected by women’s employment status. During the nineteenth century, women’s employment was positioned in public discourse as two opposing sides of a spectrum: poor women and widows participating in manual and household labor for wealthy people and upper class women who were engaged in higher status professions (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81). Employment of poor women and widows was less contentious due to their economic necessity and higher status women’s employment was viewed as a “moral obligation” and their duty to the public (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81). For the majority of the people who fell between the class identities of poor and elite, women’s engagement in the work force signaled a loss of respect for the women and a loss of social status for their families (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81). After India gained Independence from British Colonial rule, women’s education became increasingly valued and, especially in urban areas and among more progressive families, women’s employment in an office setting has become an important marker of middle class femininity (Waldrop 2011: 166).

In the context of development, women’s “empowerment through employment” has been a

basic goal of the post-colonial developmentalist state (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81).

Since the 1980s, neoliberal ideals and aspirations have somewhat replaced developmental goals, yet women's empowerment still remains an important part of this discourse (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 81). In particular, conceptions of "female empowerment" continue to circulate "in the state's lexicon of development issues" relating to gender (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 86). Government agencies and NGOs often use these terms, such that "the rhetoric of female empowerment...has become influential in the public domain" (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 86).

In contemporary India, while the "homely housewife" ideal continues to be invoked as a model for conservative and traditionally-minded middle class families, amongst younger, more liberal and perhaps more educated urban middle class families, another ideal has emerged, which is that of the woman who works in an office (Waldrop 2011: 166). Young middle-class women now position employment as "a road to independence," sometimes rejecting the idea that women work out of economic necessity (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 89). One of Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase's respondents, stated, "I want every woman to stand on her own two feet. She should not be dependent on anyone. Whatever job she does, small or big, she should be independent and not depend on others" (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 89). The authors found that "[w]omen are emphatic about the renewed confidence [from working] and take the attitude that paid work brings autonomy" (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009: 82). These kinds of representations are important because they "challenge some aspects of traditional femininity and demonstrate the powerful meaning that going out to work has for women" (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009: 91).

Several *hijras* and transgender-identified women I spoke to reported a desire for other types of jobs than sex work and soliciting money. Manisha, a *hijra* in her 50s, explained that as a teenager when she joined the *hijras*, she refused to do sex work, which got her in trouble with senior *hijras*, who claimed she needed to earn her keep. She explained, “I want to work in a nice job. I want to work how the ladies are working. Ladies and gents [men and women], all are working now, right? Like that, I want to work in the world. [And with] that money only, I want to live.” Here, Manisha expresses a desire to be able to support herself through a “nice job,” meaning middle class office employment, and justifies this desire by explaining that now, women also work in such jobs alongside men. These justifications suggest that her aspiration to work draws on notions of women’s independence, progress and empowerment through paid (office) employment.

Many transwomen explained that they would like to engage in the kinds of jobs that “normal” and “proper” women work in and not sex work. Kanika, a transwoman in her 40s who had been part of *hijra* communities for several years, explained to me on multiple occasions that she does not like sex work and this was her least favorite aspect of being part of a *hijra* group. She earnestly explained, “I want to be like *normal* girls, study and get a job, like *normal* girls,” a reference to the options available to “normal” middle and upper-middle class girls. Kanika is also at pains to align herself with respectable middle-class femininity, assuring me that she’s a very peaceful person who “do[es]n’t like to get into any conflicts.” Among *hijras*, she explained, “you have to be rude, rough, it’s like that,” which she could not cope with because she is “totally feminine.” She emphasizes that during the ten years or so that she was part of *hijra* groups, she was “not comfortable with those people.” She emphasized that, “I always wanted to

be a girl from the time I was very young, *that's it*," widening her eyes in an attempt to highlight her difference from *hijras*.

Social class aspirations mediate how *hijras* and transwomen describe their gender identity, which is not surprising considering that gender ideals have long functioned as markers of social class. The opportunity to work in an office, which is constructed as "empowering" and allowing for "independence" for middle-class women, allows for a greater possibility for working-class gender non-conforming people to identify as (middle-class aspiring) (transgender) women. This opportunity is available to visibly gender non-conforming working-class people largely through NGO employment, so NGO employment is positioned as a route that may enable working-class transwomen to attain a kind of middle-class womanhood or femininity. Girish, a former Dosti employee, explained that from his perspective, many transwomen want to be part of Dosti for access to middle-class employment options. He explains, "all said and done, there is a dignity to walking into office in the morning for a transwoman and sitting in an office space and, you know, doing some paperwork." On the other hand, *hijras* are largely restricted to soliciting money and sex work for their income. For this reason, Girish believes younger transwomen seek to be associated with an NGO, in the hopes that this association may lead to enhanced employment opportunities.

When discussing their desire for the rights to be employed in occupations other than sex work and soliciting money, transwomen draw from state discourses promoting women's independence and autonomy to develop postcolonial India as well as popular rhetoric that connects office employment to middle class femininity. The newly-available option of working in an NGO office serves to differentiate transwomen from *hijra* sex workers while enabling transwomen to align themselves with middle-class standards of femininity, thus demonstrating

the propriety of their gender identification. Like many urban working class Indians, transwomen desire upward mobility and they also seek to distance themselves from the stigmatized identity of the *hijra*.

The rhetoric of desiring independence and wanting to do things “on one’s own” in the context of paid employment discussed above overlaps with and echoes the ways that transgender women talk about their desires to be independent of the *hijra* system and to live on their own and not under the control of their gurus, as discussed in chapter three. Many of the people I spoke to positioned *hijras* as constrained by their participation in a collectivity and transgender women as unconstrained individuals. These people likened *hijras* as dependent and somewhat enslaved by the *hijra* system, whereas transgender women were positioned as “independent,” doing things “on their own,” etc. I often witnessed *hijra* identities being pitted against transwomen identities, in a binary of traditional, hierarchical vs. modern, free. As the following section discusses, these kinds of associations are also emphasized in the frequent media attention to gender non-conformity.

### *Transwomen Vs. Hijras in Media*

India has witnessed an explosion of media coverage around gender and sexual non-conformity in the last 20 or so years. While media coverage of gender non-conformity initially focused on *hijras*, the most visible group of gender non-conforming people at the time, reports about gender non-conformity in South India have increasingly focused on the emerging identity of the transgender woman. These reports highlight the differences between transgender woman and *hijras*, thus reifying these differences and teaching viewers how to make these distinctions. Especially in the past 10 years, there have been several articles that focus on the distinctions

between transwomen and *hijras* and generally position transwomen as closer to the ideals of womanhood than *hijras*, thus praising transwomen for their difference from *hijras*.

In an article from The Hindu, a well-known sexual rights activist described as “the voice of the sexual minorities, especially in the South,” A. Revathi is praised for how different she appears from *hijras*. Revathi, who was once associated with *hijra* communities and now identifies as a transwoman, is said to “beli[e] the image of a *hijra*. There’s no makeup, no gaudy dressing and no exaggerated mannerisms. In a simple cotton green kurta and a handbag slung over her shoulder, Revathi is your regular working woman one encounters on a local train” (The Hindu 2014: 1). Here, Revathi is depicted as a “regular” woman who dresses modestly in “simple” attire, a respectable characterization when contrasted with the “gaudy dressing” and “exaggerated mannerisms” associated with *hijras*.

Another article that delineates the differences between *hijras* and transwomen was featured in The Times of India in February 2015. This article focuses on the “transgender vs. *hijra* debate” in the North Indian state of Bihar, which is in the beginning stages of creating a Transgender Welfare Board to advocate for legal protections and reservations for transpeople. The article reads,

The battle for controlling the board is between transgenders and *hijras*. Exasperated transgender activist Reshma Prasad says, ‘The *hijras* are hogging all the space and are trying their utmost to run the board.’ Now wait a minute, aren’t *hijras* transgenders? ‘That’s the point. *Hijras* are a type of transgender, but the vast majority of transgender people are not *hijras*,’ says Reshma. ‘I am not a *hijra*. I do not live in a community and under the orders of a *guru*. I do not sing and dance and ask for alms. And I have a right to be upset when I am called a *hijra*, or confused with a *hijra*’...The non-*hijra* transgender in Bihar need to come together and work towards realizing their rights. Dr. Santosh Giri, transgender activist from Bengal...[explains,] ‘We are a better educated lot, we can negotiate our social spaces’ (Krishner 2015: 1).

Here, transgender-identified Reshma characterizes *hijras* as a minority among transpeople, explaining that the most salient difference between herself and a *hijra* is that, “I do not live in a



community and under the orders of a guru.” She also highlights her employment, which differs from *hijra* occupations and insists “I have a right to be upset” if these differences are unrecognized. Another transperson interviewed in the article, Dr. Santosh Giri, points out that transgender people, in comparison to *hijras*, are “better educated” and have a degree of “negotiat[ing]” power he perceives as unavailable to *hijras*. Characterizing transpeople as “better educated” is a reference to the middle class aspiring identities of NGO-affiliated transwomen, many of whom are pursuing education through formal and informal means. This is not necessarily a distinction of class identities, instead indicating that many transwomen actively aspire to join the middle classes, so they seek the cultural capital that might enable this upward mobility. In emphasizing the differences between transwomen and *hijras*, these characterizations thus serve to reify these differences and to educate Times of India readers to make this crucial distinction between the two groups. These transgender women (who may have formerly identified themselves as *hijras*) who now identify as transwomen (and/or simply as women) are using media to ensure that the differences between these two identity categories are recognized and understood by the public. This article also puts forth a call for “the non-*hijra* transgender” to “come together and work towards realizing their rights,” thus explicitly linking transwomen (a category which could perhaps include other transgender identities) and claims to citizenship.

*Claiming Citizenship Via Exclusion: “I am Not a Hijra”*

Despite the fact that some transwomen have access to respectable employment and other opportunities that would enable them to claim legitimate citizenship, because they are likely to be misrecognized as *hijras*, they are denied a sense of acceptance and belonging that would

otherwise be available to them. In order to counteract the misinformation circulating that connects them with *hijras*, transwomen stake their claims to citizenship through actively constructing themselves as legitimate citizens by reifying the notion that *hijras* are different from them and necessarily excluded from citizenship. This section analyzes a recent online photo project seeking to differentiate transwomen from *hijras* that received a significant amount of attention and criticism throughout India, suggesting that the desire of transwomen to clarify their distinctness from *hijras* is a salient issue for transwomen beyond my fieldsite.

On August 19, 2016, the Facebook group Transgender India, which currently has over 16,000 followers, published a photo series entitled “I am Not a *Hijra*.” Transgender India is organized by a Neyara Rai, a Mangalore-based transwoman who “came out” to her family after completing her university degree in Engineering at the age of 23 (Das 2016: 2), an event that suggests her background is middle class. Believing that their gender variant child wanted to become a *hijra*, Rai’s parents took her to several doctors, psychiatrists and spiritual healers to attempt to “correct” her gender identity (Das 2016: 2). Rai created Transgender India as a platform to reach out to and educate young trans people in India and let them know they have options beyond joining the *hijras*. Rai explained, “[w]e want to educate young people” in order to show them that “there are transgender people who have regular jobs and lead ordinary lives” (Das 2016: 2), which are positioned in contradistinction to the kinds of lives that *hijras* lead. Transgender India seeks to “give young transgender persons ‘positive role models’ to look up to” and the Facebook group is run by six transpeople (including Rai) living in locations across the country (Das 2016: 3).

The 17 photos that are part of the “I am Not a *Hijra*” series, which are pictured in figures one through 17 on the preceding pages, show trans-identified people holding signs that cover

their faces (except for one, who is wearing a *burqua*). The signs state facts about the subjects' lives that serve to mark them as contrary to stereotypes about *hijras*. The signs all end with the same sentence: "I am not a *hijra*." The subjects in the photos are pictured in a variety of backgrounds, ranging from in front of an escalator (perhaps at a mall or corporate office), outside of a hospital, in a physical therapy office, on a wooden bench outside, in an inexpensive restaurant, outside of an ophthalmology office and several photos look as though they were taken inside the subjects' homes. The transpeople are wearing a variety of clothing, including several sundresses, a *burqua*, working-class men's clothing, a checkered collar shirt, a sari and a few t-shirts. The series was first published on the online news platform *The Better Indian*, where it was later taken down due to complaints that it expressed anti-*hijra* sentiments (Sengupta 2016: 3). Subsequently, the series was published on the popular news site *Buzzfeed* and *The Logical Indian*.

Like the transwomen that I spoke with, the transfeminine people pictured in this photo series emphasize how their employment (and, thus, class) status serves as a key marker of their difference from *hijras*. Five of the 17 cards in the photos mention the holder's upper-middle class occupations (including surgeon, corporate worker and physical therapist) and the fact that one person earns a "six figure" salary and another is "not a sex worker," thus differentiating the transpeople pictured from the figure of the impoverished *hijra* who is confined to the stigmatized occupations of soliciting money or sex work.

The transpeople pictured also draw on middle class standards of femininity to situate their sexuality as contrary to the supposedly unrestrained sexuality displayed by *hijras*. In one photo, the transwoman's sign indicates that she is "not a sex maniac" and another photo assures the viewers that the transwoman pictured is "not loose." These photos draw on stereotypes of

*hijras* as displaying an overt, and therefore improper, sexuality and promiscuity in order to position the transwoman pictured, who claims her sexuality is restrained, as clearly distinct from *hijras*. Another sign states that the person holding it is “asexual,” in contradistinction with the hypersexuality that *hijras* are assumed to embody. Another photo indicates that the transwoman pictured “do[es]n’t like makeup,” in contrast to *hijras* who, as indicated in the above newspaper article about A. Revathi, are assumed to enjoy wearing an inappropriate amount of makeup.

One photo links middle class respectable femininity, family status, and Hindu devotional practices to claim the transwoman pictured as absolutely distinct from *hijras*. The card this transwoman holds emphasizes her familial status, writing that she is “a daughter, sister, wife and mother,” followed by the refrain “I am not a *hijra*.” Here, the implication is that *hijras* cannot claim such familial statuses, which as my research has shown, may have been true for many *hijras* at one time, but is increasingly being challenged. This transwoman is wearing a modestly tied dark colored sari with a simple decorative border, a blouse that has sleeves reaching to her elbows and she wears a gold *mangalsutra* (the chain that married women wear) around her neck, a manner of dress that symbolizes proper and respectable middle-class femininity. She is also standing in front of an ornate *gopurum*, the large tower that rises above the entrance to South Indian temples. In this photo, the transwoman pictured links respectable middle-class femininity with Hindu devotional practices in order to differentiate herself from *hijras*.

Two of the cards in the photos insist that the transwomen pictured should be understood as humans with opinions and desires. In the only photo where the card is not covering the transwoman’s face (perhaps because she is difficult to recognize as she is wearing a *burqua* that covers her face), the card reads, “I am trans\* and I have my opinions and desires too. I am not a *hijra*.” Here, the card juxtaposes being a *hijra* with possessing opinions and desires, as though

*hijras* are necessarily excluded from having opinions and desires, which are common to all people. In another image, the card reads, “I am trans\* but I am a human first. I am not a *hijra*.” Here, while the transwoman pictured foregrounds her identity as trans\* and not a *hijra*, she emphasizes her status “first” as a human, who is deserving of the rights that are supposedly available to all humans through citizenship. Not only is she dis-identifying with *hijra*-ness, but she is also downplaying her trans\* identity in favor of emphasizing that she is a human and thus deserving of the rights and respect available to all humans. This statement indicating her human identification then gets juxtaposed with her non-*hijra* identification, which almost suggests that one cannot be both a *hijra* and also a human, as though *hijras* are outside the group of individuals considered human. Here is another indication of the presumption of *hijras*’ status as non-humans who are not deserving of rights and, thus, their lack of citizenship. In taking pains to position themselves as distinct from the stereotypes associated with *hijras*, these transwomen are claiming human-ness and citizenship for themselves by dissociating from the stigmatized figure of the non-human and non-citizen *hijra*.

Claiming rights for transpeople, including the right to have your specific gender identity recognized instead of being lumped into one particular gender non-conforming category, is a goal that can have liberatory potential. However, in the photo series, “I am Not a Hijra,” the demand for the recognition of transpeople as legitimate citizens hinges on differentiating them from *hijras*, whose non-citizen status is thus unchallenged and even supported. These transpeople are claiming citizenship in a way that positions themselves as deserving of the rights of citizenship by positioning *hijras* as undeserving, thus reifying and supporting the exclusion of *hijras* in order to claim what ultimately appears in many cases as a class-based notion of citizenship for themselves. The group’s stated intention in circulating the photo series was to

amplify Indian transpeople's voices, carving out a space of recognition of their identities as separate from the identities of *hijras* (Sengupta 2016: 1). However, the explicit goal of the series is the assimilation of transpeople, exemplified by an interview with one of the Transgender India organizers, who states that the photo series seek to establish that, "I am a transperson. *I am as normal as you*. And I am not a *hijra*" [emphasis mine] (Sengupta 2016: 1). This statement reveals the goal of assimilating transpeople into an uncritical and normalized mode of citizenship that is frequently criticized within queer studies scholarship (Brandzel 2016; Haritaworn 2015; West 2014). Moreover, it suggests that the "normal" presented in the photos relies on a construction of normality that is synonymous with middle class status and is necessarily juxtaposed with the non-normality presumably inherent in *hijra*-ness. The citizenship claims of transwomen in this photo series gain legitimacy through invoking middle class signifiers (usually connected to respectable femininity) and an implicit understanding that the figure of the *hijra* lies outside of this "normal"-ness and her lack of access to humanity and citizenship is thus justified.

Figure 1

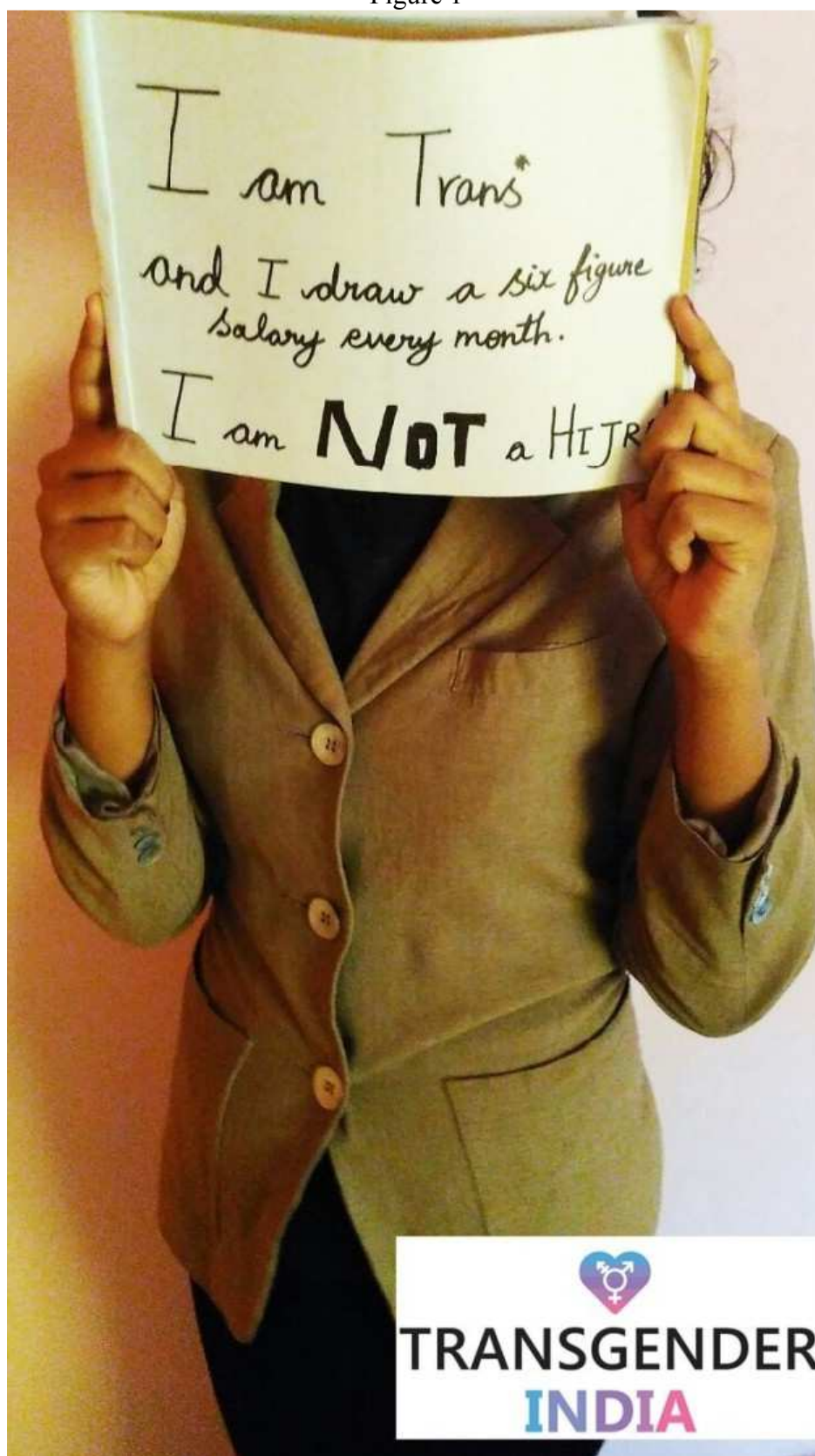


Figure 2





Figure 3

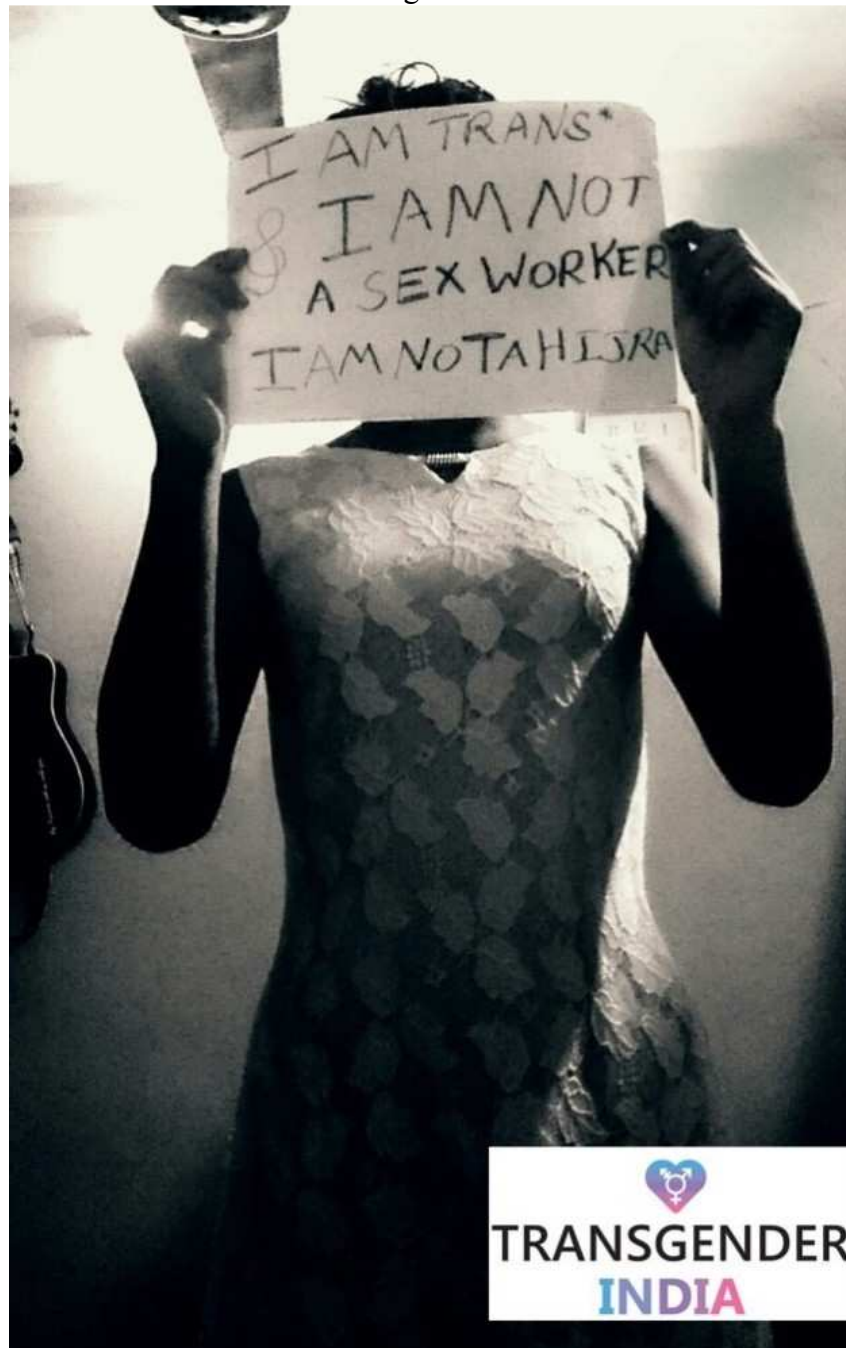


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6





Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10





Figure 11



Figure 12

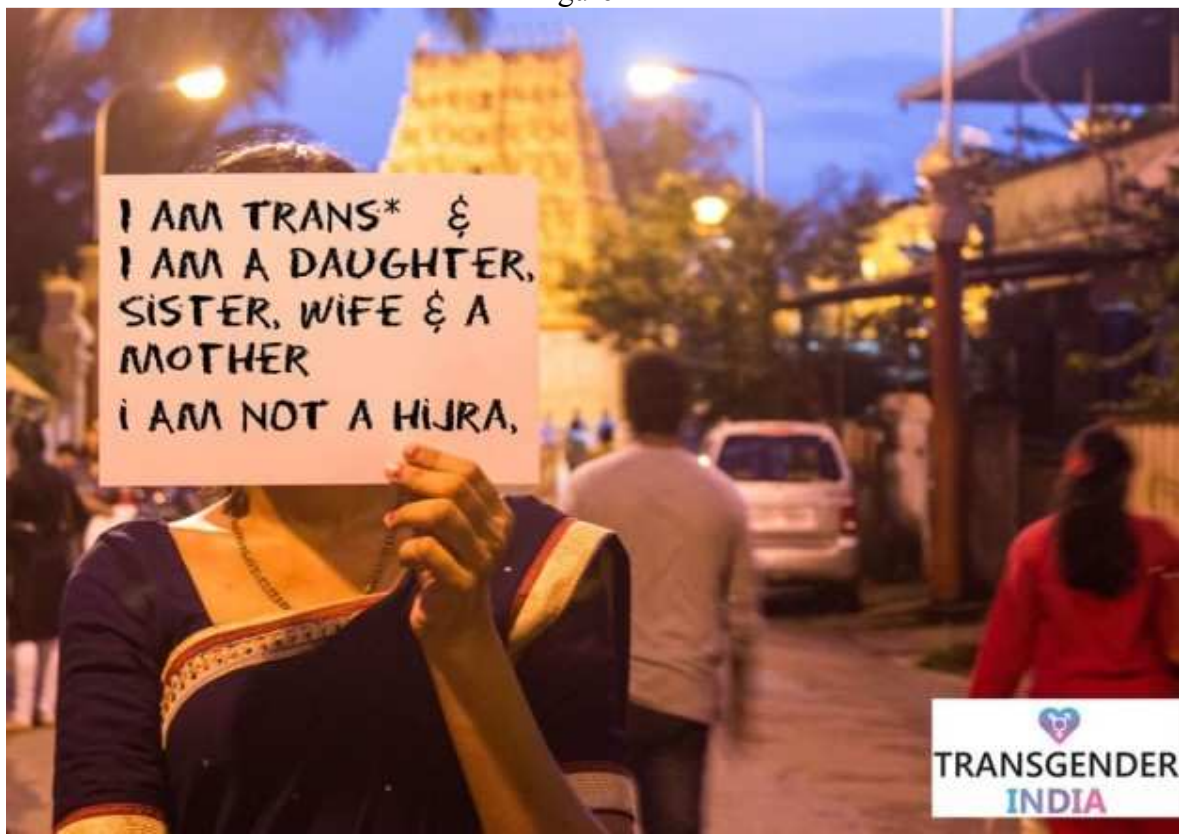


Figure 13





Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Transgender India

*Claiming Citizenship via “Murderous Inclusions”*

What is sidelined, forgotten, even “murdered” (Haritaworn et al. 2015) in transwomen’s articulations of citizenship are any current and previous connections they might have with *hijras*. During the many Dosti-sponsored public programs I would attend, I often heard Akriithi introduce herself and discuss her struggle to come to terms with her gender identity. At these times, she did not mention any contact with *hijras*, so I was surprised when one day, she explained that she was in contact with *hijras* as a teenager and that these connections had been important to her at the time. Like many other transwomen I spoke to, Akriithi de-emphasizes her connections to *hijras*, which I read as a “murder” of that part of herself who sought and found warmth, kindness and feelings of “family” with *hijras* as a young transperson. This part of herself and her past could bring into question the notion of clear boundaries between transwomen and *hijras*, it could invalidate her transwoman identity, perhaps ultimately calling into question her status as a legitimate citizen, thus this part of herself and this time in her life must be glossed over, hidden, and even “murdered.”

In the time I spent at Dosti, I would often accompany Akriithi, who became, as my fieldwork progressed, the public face of Dosti, to various public advocacy programs throughout Bangalore. These included programs to discuss issues around sexuality and gender identity in colleges, events with development workers who wanted to incorporate issues of sexuality into their work, information sessions on Dosti’s work in which local and sometimes state politicians were present, and various kinds of “sensitization” trainings at schools and colleges. Especially for formal events that involved “non-community” people (meaning people not known to be sexual minorities), Akriithi would often start by singing a song that she had written herself in English about her life. The lyrics of this song:



I born as me.  
 My feelings changed.  
 When I was eight years, my feelings were feminine.  
 I started behaving like a girl.  
 I started walking like a girl.  
 I started dressing like a girl.  
 When my parents forced me to stop myself,  
 When my parents forced me to stop myself,  
 I was beaten up,  
 I was locked up.  
 I was beaten up,  
 I was locked up.  
 I was tortured by my parents.  
 My schoolmates, my collegemates, my friends circle, my neighbors,  
 Started teasing me, like “*chakka*,” like “*ombattu*,” like something, something.  
 I joined to work, my colleagues came to know I’m feminine.  
 They started teasing, they started blaming, they started sexually harassing.  
 There was nobody to ask these things.  
 I started doing sex work,  
 I started doing sex work.  
 I did for four years, I was not very happy.  
 This kinds of tortures, violence, harassment are not faced only by me.  
 There are other transgenders who face similar problems [vocalizing]  
 Where to live?  
 Where to be she?  
 Where to survive?  
 You should feel us,  
 You should tell us,  
 You should tell us what to do.

Each time I heard this song, the room was silent and everyone was fixated on Akrithi as she narrated the violence and abuse to which she was subjected due to her gender identity. She emphasizes that others face such violence and the song’s ending implies that this is not Akrithi’s individual problem, but it is a societal problem and so the people witnessing her story are the ones who should solve it. She narrates her lack of belonging in her family, her school and college and her place of work, which was reinforced by the violence she faced from others around her in these institutions. She went from one place where she was tortured (the family home) to another (school and college) to her initial place of employment, yet the violence and

discrimination she faced in each of these places made this journey miserable. Moreover, “there was nobody to ask [about] these things.” I heard many stories from transfeminine people who attempted to report sexual abuse and violence to school or workplace authorities only to be told that the incident was their fault, since they were “acting feminine.” Perceived effeminacy thus opens up male-assigned people to a lack of recognition of their rights, as Akriithi narrates. She briefly mentions her participation in sex work, emphasizing that she “was not very happy.” In this narrative that Akriithi often sings, there is no mention of her interactions with *hijras*, whom I later found out were her companions during the time she was engaged in sex work.

As Akriithi related to me one afternoon in an activist radio station where one of her friends worked, *hijras* were the among the first gender non-conforming people and sexual minorities she interacted with as a teenager when she was struggling with her gender identification and sexuality. When Akriithi met *hijras* for the first time, she felt a strong affinity with them that I had never heard her mention before, despite the many times I heard her relate her difficult experiences around her sexuality and gender as a teenager. She explained that she had been getting off a bus when she saw two *hijras* and the sight of them made her so happy that she started crying inexplicably. She approached the *hijras* and told them, “I want to be like you.” She explains,

When I saw them [*hijras*], I was 16 years old [and I was walking] at Cubbon Park Circle. I was so happy to go and meet them...I was so happy after seeing them. I went to them, I spoke to them, I took their flowers [that they gave me] and put them in my hair...I never felt scared seeing *hijras*...I wanted to be like them. I felt that [pause] they are my family. That thought came to my mind because...[in my own family,] there was lots of rejection, no acceptance, there was a kind of torture, violence, [I was placed under] house arrest...I thought, you know, ‘this is the community where I want to live.’ They have the same feelings, same attitude, [they are wearing the] same attire [that I want to wear], [pause] yeah, everything. But it’s difficult, no?

Many people I spoke to said that from the time they were very young, they had been taught to fear *hijras* and therefore initially felt terror at the thought of coming in contact with them. By contrast, Akriti explains that she was not afraid of the *hijras* she interacted with and she thought of them as “family” in a way that she could not think of her own family at the time. Here, she emphasizes her feelings of belonging, stating that “this is the community where I want to live.” The *hijras* she interacted with responded to Akriti’s interest in them in a kind manner and took Akriti to see their *guru*. This *guru* eventually became Akriti’s own *guru* and one of the people who encouraged Akriti not to become a *hijra* for lack of employment options, which she alludes to saying, “It’s difficult, no?”

It is important to keep in mind that Akriti frequently “comes out” in media and at public events, sharing her story of confusion, abuse, and ultimately self-acceptance. Thus, it is curious that this moment, which she describes to me as salient, does not appear in any public narrative of her experiences that I heard during my fieldwork period or that is currently available online. As this dissertation has argued, part of claiming citizenship as transwoman entails the creation and reinforcement of distinct differences between *hijras* and transwomen. Another way in which transwomen claim citizenship is the distancing of oneself from any previous connections with *hijras*, groups which many current transwomen were involved with, at least at one time. I read this distancing of transwomen from their connections to *hijras* as “murderous” forms of inclusion (Haritaworn et al. 2013) in the sense that they represent a murdering of those parts of themselves that found solace, companionship and family among *hijra* groups, a murdering of the forms of belonging and support that *hijra* groups have provided to non-*hijras*, and a murdering of the possibility for political solidarity between transwomen and *hijras* that might enable them to collectively advocate against their oppression and marginalization.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has emphasized the ways in which transwomen's claims to citizenship are based on the co-constitution of their classed and gendered aspirations for upward mobility. Employment is a central area in which transwomen seek to differentiate themselves from *hijras*; to do so, they draw on associations between "proper" (office) employment and contemporary middle-class womanhood that appear in state, development and popular discourses. The opportunity for a select group of transwomen to obtain white-collar employment in NGOs interacts with struggles for rights to employment for transpeople and specific constructions of gender and class in postcolonial India to produce the emerging identity of the "independent" transgender woman. I find resonances in the state and development discourse about women's autonomy through paid employment and the ways that transwomen talk about desiring "freedom" and "independence" from *hijra* groups as discussed in chapter three. Transwomen's enhanced employment opportunities offer possibilities for working-class transwomen to align themselves with popular notions about (middle class) women's "independence" and confirms the propriety of their womanhood/gender identification.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that transwomen's claims for their inclusion into citizenship are centrally predicated on the exclusion of *hijras* from citizenship. Transwomen's enhanced visibility and demands for the rights of citizenship has led to an insistence that clear and static boundaries be drawn between themselves and the disreputable *hijras* they are most likely to be confused with. From individual conversations to media representations that reach the "general society," transwomen establish and reify the borders between themselves and *hijras*, in order to bolster their claims for citizenship rights. In differentiating between these two groups,

transwomen are produced as respectable citizens whose rights are unjustly denied and who are deserving of protection, while *hijras*' lack of citizenship rights is uncontested and even supported by this discourse. Transwomen thus stake their claims to legitimate citizenship over and against the figure of the *hijra*, who is positioned as illegitimate and therefore consigned to her non-citizen status. Indeed, the figure of the *hijra* often serves as the necessary foil through which transwomen favorably position themselves. I therefore link this example of transwomen claiming inclusion into citizenship in South India to Haritaworn et al.'s (2015) notion that inclusion can be "murderous." This chapter has discussed instances we could read as metaphorical murders of *hijras*' citizenship prospects, the required murders of those parts of transwomen's past in which they were intimately involved with *hijra* groups, the murder of the instances in which non-*hijra* gender non-conforming people have found solace and comfort in *hijra* groups and certainly the murder of any possibility that *hijras* and transwomen might join each other and advocate against their marginalization. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how NGO interpretations of *hijras*' relationships as contrary to "human rights" serves to further reify the idea that *hijras* (particularly those who remain stubbornly attached to *hijra* relationships) fall outside the boundaries of acceptable citizenship, thus justifying their exclusion.

## ***Chapter 5: “Human Rights and Hijra Relationships”***

### *Introduction*

This chapter explores how NGO characterizations of *hijra* relationships as “against human rights” serve to construct *hijras* (particularly *hijra gurus*) as outside of the boundaries of citizenship, thus (perhaps inadvertently) bolstering the citizenship claims of transwomen. Dosti has used the powerful, globally-recognized discourse of human rights to critique *hijra* relationships and to position *hijra gurus* seeking to protect these relationships as unworthy of rights, thus legitimating their exclusion and abandonment. I argue that Dosti’s characterization of *guru/chela* relationships sets into motion a process intended to reform *gurus* and to teach them the kinds of behaviors that would make them worthy of citizenship (specifically respect for human rights), yet this process ultimately builds resistance from *gurus* who are unwilling to incorporate human rights into their behavior and self-understanding, producing them as unworthy of rights and thus outside of the boundaries of citizenship. This process is related to the emergence of the transgender woman, who claims citizenship by differentiating herself from *hijras*, as explained in the previous chapter, since Dosti staff encourage *chelas* to discontinue their participation in *hijra* relationships (thus becoming “independent” transwomen deserving of rights) and Dosti also encourages younger gender non-conforming people not to join the *hijras*.

Throughout India, NGOs such as Dosti interpret *guru/chela* relationships through the paradigm of human rights, with many NGOs positioning these relationships as necessarily “against human rights.” As scholars critical of human rights discourse have argued, the abuse of rights takes place within specific social contexts, suggesting that the way in which reported abuses are dealt with therefore deserve attention, particularly because methods of halting such abuse can produce unintentional effects (Brown 2004). While Dosti’s attention to sexual

minority issues generally has contributed to a reported increase in the numbers of *hijras*, by calling attention to negative aspects of *hijra* relationships, Dosti has also encouraged younger *hijras* to be skeptical of these relationships. Due to their role in these relationships and their investment in protecting *hijra* group structures, Dosti characterizes *gurus* as potentially unworthy of rights and in need of “civilizing” training in order to become the kinds of subjects who are worthy of rights and legitimate citizenship. When *gurus* do not respond enthusiastically to the training that Dosti provides in the hope of making them into legitimate citizens, Dosti staff and leaders position *gurus* as unworthy of and therefore outside the boundaries of citizenship, thus sanctioning their abandonment and exclusion. However, many *hijras*, particularly *gurus*, have actively resisted this interpretation of their relationships. I end by discussing the creation of a community group and NGO comprised of self-identified Mangalmukhis that is unabashedly organized around *hijra* relationships and does not attempt to make itself legible through frameworks and discourses appealing to human rights and normative citizenship.

### *The Context of Human Rights Discourse*

there is no such thing as *mere* reduction of suffering or protection from abuse—the nature of the reduction or protection is itself productive of political subjects and political possibilities. Just as abuse itself is never generic but always has particular social and subjective content, so the matter of *how* it is relieved is consequential. Yes, the abuse must be stopped but by whom, with what techniques, with what unintended effects, and above all, unfolding what possible futures?

-Wendy Brown, 2004

As a sexual rights NGO, Dosti draws on globally-circulated discourses about human rights to support their demands for better life opportunities for sexual minorities. Human rights frameworks are valuable tools since they offer marginalized groups a way to situate their struggles within a global language that state agencies and social movement actors are cued to

listen for and hear. The re-framing of *hijra* relationships using the language of human rights impacts how NGOs interpret *hijras* and how younger transpeople who may at one time have joined the *hijras* interpret these relationships. It is thus important to understand the contested history of human rights claims and human rights as a discourse.

Issues of rights were not formulated as such prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Western Europe, when a group of philosophers began to consider what it means for people to have rights (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 17). This new formulation of rights was then expressed in the American Revolution in the Declaration of Independence and in the French Revolution in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, marking the first time that rights as such were codified into law (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 17). These documents and the movements that produced them indicate a shift in how humans are considered vis-à-vis their social environment (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 17). These rights were interpreted as “natural rights” accorded to all people “when in the state of nature” and prior to “the imposition of a social and cultural order” (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 17), despite the fact that rights are (most often) upheld and protected by states and are accorded on the basis of citizenship in a particular state.

This conception of rights invoked fierce debates that continue to this day. For conservatives like Edmund Burke, this understanding of rights broke with the traditional order that many wanted to protect (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 18). Even scholars considered liberal at the time, such as Jeremy Bentham, dismissed rights claims, questioning the pre-societal concept of rights by arguing that only societies can offer their citizens rights (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 18). Karl Marx argued against the individualism expressed in concepts of rights, pointing out that notions of individualism are a formative feature of capitalist systems (Sjoberg et. al. 2001: 18). Marxists in turn have argued that broad statements about rights often oversimplify power relations and



implicitly reinforce an unequal social organization (Charlesworth 1994 cited in Richards 2005: 203). Other scholars assert rights-based advocacy favors reformism, drawing recognition and energy away from the possibility of radical change, thus implicitly reproducing existing relations of power (Charlesworth 1994 cited in Richards 2005: 203). The notion of rights as universal has also been challenged by poststructuralists “as a relic of the Enlightenment that serves to justify the dominance of certain sets of values over others” (Richards 2005: 203). Indigenous and feminist activists argue assumptions that all individuals are universally similar in their need of protection glosses over the important differences among women and other groups that have access to differing levels of power (Richards 2005: 203).

In spite of these notable shortcomings, human rights discourse is interpreted by marginalized groups “as a basic, even primary, tool in their struggle for justice” (Zreik 2004: 77) and marginalized people across the world continue to look to human rights discourses to convincingly make their claims (Zreik 2004: 78). Framing their struggles through human rights discourse remains a highly effective way for groups to “mobilize many people for their goals, [and] present their cause in a way that most effectively identifies the problem/injustice and proposes solutions” (Tsutsui et. al. 2012: 378). Human rights can be a very convenient tool for activists due to the “‘indexical’ quality” of human rights discourse, which is powerful because it “enables activists to point to specific abuses in order to indicate the broader problems they seek to solve” (Landy 2013: 418). Because human rights is a global discourse, organizations that use these discourses participate in a globally-recognized form of framing, which involves “the use of external symbols to orient local or national claims” (Tarrow 2005: 60). Due to its global reach and resonance, human rights discourse offers “a language which enables activists to present easily understandable problems which stir the emotions” of potential supporters (Landy 2013:

418). Global human rights rhetoric contains the kinds of external symbols that can offer “legitimacy” to locally-based social movements by “making their claims more cogent to their potential constituents, broader audiences, and targets” (Tsutsui et. al. 2012: 378). In the case of *hijra* relationships, NGOs’ use of human rights discourses allows *hijra chelas* to understand themselves as subordinate victims who live within an unequal power hierarchy from which they can choose to withdraw their participation. Their position can be connected to other oppressed groups, such as women oppressed by their husbands, sexual minorities oppressed by police violence and anyone else who is on the subordinate end of a power hierarchy.

Despite its claims to supporting “natural” and inherently fair claims of oppressed people, human rights discourse does not serve any clear-cut ideological position; it must always be “appropriated” in the service of a specific ideology (O’Byrne 2012: 835). Paradoxically, human rights claims often endorse situations wherein “the actions of those seeking liberation are judged with the same yardstick as the actions of those preventing it” (Landy 2013: 422). Ultimately, the problem with this is that human rights discourse can both “uphold as well as challenge power,” and these circumstances can occur “paradoxically...in the same situations and at the same time” (Landy 2013: 424). Claims of violations against the human rights of a particular group of people “can be and ha[ve] been used to justify numerous competing positions” (O’Byrne 2012: 835). For example, while NGOs like Dosti use human rights discourse to position *hijra* relationships, and by extension, “*hijra* culture,” as hierarchical and oppressive, they are unconcerned with the “human rights” of those who are dependent upon the *hijra* system maintaining its cohesiveness and membership, particularly elder *gurus*.

Human rights discourse also tends to universalize situated struggles because it “offer[s] an explanatory framework for social struggles everywhere” (Landy 2013: 424). While there are

“indisputable gains” for positioning struggles in the context of human rights, it is important to consider the “losses” that result from using human rights frameworks, particularly “the loss of context” since employing human rights discourse necessarily “entails the renunciation of the frame, the historical context” (Zreik 2004: 77-78). The loss of context by framing struggles using human rights discourse is concerning because context is “the background condition that allows us to speak and imbues our words with meaning” (Zreik 2004: 78). While Dosti’s position that *gurus* oppress *chelas* can be read as challenging the authority of the *guru* over her *chela*, the human rights framework cannot simultaneously recognize that because the *guru* is financially reliant on her *chela*, her authority is limited and she is vulnerable despite holding a certain degree of power over her *chela*. This complex context is elided when the struggle is positioned as being essentially about a subordinate *chela*’s struggle to assert her rights, which are being denied to her by a powerful *guru*.

In terms of Dosti’s critiques of *hijra* relationships, there is limited discussion of the social context of deprivation that influenced the creation of *guru/chela* relationships and the evolution of these social structures. The re-framing of *hijra* relationships using the language of human rights impacts the relationships between NGOs and *hijras*, specifically by building resistance to Dosti from many senior *gurus*, and it impacts how younger transwomen who may at one time have joined the *hijras* now understand and interpret these relationships. To return to the epigraph at the beginning of this section by Wendy Brown (2004), this chapter is concerned with the “unintended effects” of the “techniques” that Dosti employs to curtail abuse and to examine the “possible futures” that these interventions contribute to. Specifically, I consider the “possible futures” of elder *gurus*, many of whom face material and social deprivation due to the transformations in *guru/chela* relationships that were discussed in chapter three.

### *Hijra Relationships Viewed through Human Rights*

Alongside their efforts to expand the rights of citizenship to *hijras* and other gender non-conforming people discussed in chapter one, Dosti also uses rights discourses in a different context to characterize *guru/chela* relationships as “against human rights.” These discourses focus on the human rights of *chelas*, some of whom face abuse and tyranny from their *gurus*. These discourses position most *gurus* as powerful abusers of weak *chelas*, an analysis which does not recognize the reciprocal nature of *hijra* relationships and refuses to acknowledge the vulnerable positions of *gurus* as a result of the transformations in *guru/chela* relationships. I therefore argue that the human rights framework deployed by Dosti to critique *hijra* relationships cannot capture the dynamics at play within *hijra* systems, as it does not adequately acknowledge the reciprocity of *hijra* relationships.

During my fieldwork, the staff at Dosti regularly referenced their disapproval of *hijra* “traditional culture” and relationships. They also shared this disapproval with media outlets, positing these actions as courageous for “speaking out.” Yamuna, who was formerly part of the *hijra* community and now identifies herself as a transwoman, explains that due to her employment at Dosti, she stopped following certain precepts of “*hijra* culture.” She explained, “I don’t like the *hijra* culture. It is very difficult to live with *gurus* and *chelas*.” When I asked if there are other reasons she does not like *hijra* culture, Yamuna replied,

Dosti is teaching me like this, so I’m following Dosti. And also Dosti is telling me, ‘don’t take *chelas* and don’t do the claps, don’t tell ‘*paam paadti*,’ it’s like this. We are following them. Those who are working in Dosti as employees, we are not following the *hijra* culture. *Because this is a human rights organization, that’s why we are not following the culture.* [emphasis mine]

Here, Yamuna directly states that Dosti has specifically told employees not to follow *hijra* cultural traditions such as having *chelas*, greeting elders with “*paam padti*”<sup>6</sup>, and engaging in the *thikri*, a style of clapping that recognizably marks one as a *hijra* (Reddy 2005). Yamuna’s last statement that “this is a human rights organization, that’s why we are not following the culture” necessarily posits “*hijra* culture” as incompatible with and indeed antithetical to human rights.

A key moment when Dosti made claims to media about the *guru/chela* relationship was in 2010, in response to reports of high rates of suicides and “unnatural deaths” among *hijras*, which was first brought into consciousness due to four reported suicides committed by *hijras* within two months. As a funding application for a mental health project written by Dosti staff in 2010 indicates, once staff began to investigate the recent numbers of suicides among *hijras*, they found evidence of at least 39 unnatural deaths of *hijras* from May 2009 to October 2010 in Bangalore. At this time, Dosti leaders felt the organization had a responsibility to address the underlying causes of these deaths. As Manjunath explains, “when there were so many suicides of *hijras*, unnatural deaths, we gave a statement.” While the statement was partly intended as a way to educate the public about the marginalization *hijras* face as a result of discrimination and stigmatization, he explains, “we said some of it is also because there is not enough free space in the community to talk,” which he suggested is due to the strictures of the *guru/chela* system. Likewise, in the message the Dosti representative, Lavanya, who identifies as a *hijra*, explained to the media that the reason there is “not enough free space” is due to the constraints within *guru/chela* relationships. These accusations provoked outrage among senior *gurus*, who threatened Dosti staff with physical violence for making these statements. Manjunath explains,

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<sup>6</sup> *Paam padti* can be translated as “I demonstrate my sincere respect for and devotion to you by touching your feet.” Such actions are reserved for elders in one’s family, spiritual leaders and others of a very high social status. I observed people simply say this phrase to gurus and I also observed some who attempted to touch the feet of the person they were addressing.

“people told her *guru* they're going to come and [physically abuse] Lavanya. Lavanya said, ‘yeah, they can come and hit me. I have my lawyer, there is the high court. I'll take your whole community to the court!’ That's it. They didn't touch Lavanya.” By framing her criticisms of *guru/chela* systems through the powerful and globally-recognized discourse of human rights she accessed through her employment at Dosti, Lavanya can be sure that even if senior *gurus* were to demonstrate their anger by retaliating against her, she would be protected by the law. In order to explain their position on this issue and to make others aware of how such statements impact their group, senior *hijras* do not have access to a recognized and seemingly clear-cut discourse like that of human rights.

As Dosti's lawyer, Sundaram explains that Dosti has sought to raise awareness about the levels of violence within *hijra* groups and to provide alternatives for *chelas* and other *hijras* who are subjected to violence from within the group. He explains,

Violence within the community is a serious issue that I have been communicating [about]...The kind of hierarchical structure which the community has, especially among *hijras*, is very violent, very oppressive...We are encouraging people that you don't have to follow this kind of strict regiment. You have freedom to choose...The degree of violence has come down because they know they can go to Dosti and...get the best legal assistance.

Here, Sundaram calls attention to the violence and oppression that can exist in *hijra* relationships, directly stating that Dosti “encourages” *chelas* not “to follow this strict regiment” and informs them that they “have the freedom to choose,” drawing on concepts of autonomy and individuality. Similar to the narrative about Veena's statement to the media above, Sundaram references the important fact that *chelas* who leave their *gurus* know they have access to high quality legal support provided by Dosti. *Hijra gurus*, on the other hand, do not have access to lawyers who can assist them in reframing their struggle to maintain their group structure in a way that is easy to understand, relatable and “stir[s] the emotions” (Landy 2013: 418).

People often emphasized the role that Dosti has played in changing the *guru/chela* system in Bangalore. A key Dosti leader, Mohan, highlights the importance of having a system that enables Dosti to deal with police violence and enables *chelas* to prosecute *gurus* for violence and unfair treatment. Though people often talk about the influence of individuals' behavior within the transformations in the *guru/chela* system, particularly more "liberal" *gurus* who are less likely to engage in abusive and controlling behaviors, he argues,

whether [someone] is a good guru or a bad guru or whatever, that is not the question here. There is a *process* in place. When there's exploitation in a relationship, people had an organization to turn to. People are able to use the police and legal system, if need be, against exploitation in the community. That changed things.

Here, Mohan points to Dosti's reputation as a place where abused *chelas* can seek assistance as Dosti has instituted a "process" that *chelas* can rely upon when they face abuse from their *gurus*. He thus argues that the changes in *guru/chela* relationships should be at least partly attributed to Dosti's efforts to curb abuse within *guru/chela* relationships, which included both subtle and overt messages to *chelas* and other gender non-conforming people that these relationships are necessarily "against human rights."

By asserting the organization as a protector of the rights of *chelas*, Dosti has positioned itself as a kind of "expert" organization that understands the issues plaguing *hijra* groups, enabling them to intervene and set things right. Dosti's attempts to educate *hijras* and reconfigure their social organization can be read as a way of claiming citizenship for non-*hijra* sexual minorities. In their study of gentrification, queer activism and "hate crime" legislation, Haritaworn (2015) argues that for sexual minorities and LGBT people to make the required "ascent" from being subjects assumed to be "mad[]" and "criminal" and ineligible for the rights accorded to citizens, they often perform this leap by claiming the "expertise" to analyze and speak on behalf of "those who belong properly segregated" from the boundaries of citizenship

(2015: 127). Dosti demonstrates their “expertise” in analyzing *hijra* relationships through human rights discourses, proving that the organization and those they fight on behalf of are legitimate citizens who sincerely believe in human rights and are thus able to point out and condemn those people (*hijra gurus*) who are engaging in “criminal” behaviors as a result of their inattention to issues of human rights. Their dedication to halting human rights abuses, even within their own “community” of sexual minorities, thus positions the organization and those whose rights they fight for, as enlightened and worthy citizens.

### *Media “Publicity” for Hijras and Transwomen*

Despite Dosti’s characterization of *guru/chela* relationships, the media attention to sexual minorities (mediated by NGOs such as Dosti, as discussed in chapter one) has impacted *hijra* communities and identification in contradictory ways. While NGOs evidence, on the one hand, a desire to erase and reconfigure *hijra* relationships and identities, on the other hand, identification with *hijras* has proliferated through NGOs’ sexual rights work. This is a curious contradiction in the relationship between *hijra* communities and NGOs, since NGOs criticize *hijra* groups based on their relationships, yet they have simultaneously enabled *hijra* groups to grow, while they also have encouraged young gender non-conforming people who may previously have joined the *hijras* to live “independently” as transpeople.

The popular press often focuses on negative reports about *hijra* behavior and, increasingly, criticisms of the *guru/chela* system. While NGOs like Dosti often emphasize what they perceive as oppressive behaviors within *hijra* groupings, paradoxically, people claim that *hijra* groups have increased in size as a result of the attention to sexual and gender non-conformity from NGOs. Dosti’s focus on sexual minorities as an unjustly oppressed group deserving of rights and



recognition seems to have had the effect of propelling more sexual minorities to, as one person put it, “come out of the woodwork” and join various sexual minority groups, including the *hijras*.

The result has been an increase in the number of people who identify as sexual minorities and who are willing to be part of various groups comprised of sexual minorities, including *hijra* groups. Several people remarked that *hijra* groups have grown, explaining that there appear to be far more *hijras* visible in public areas than there were twenty years ago. When she underwent “castration” or genital surgery, Mariyamma a transgender woman in her sixties who was once part of *hijra* groups, explained, “those days, you can hardly find any *hijras* on the road at all.” Before she and her boyfriend began hanging out in Cubbon Park, a cruising spot in Bangalore, she says, “I’d never seen a *hijra* in my life before that. I’d never seen a *hijra* in my *life* before that...I see so many *hijras* now on the road!” Mariyamma’s account of how she came to know about other gender non-conforming people is revealing since she keeps comparing her situation to the current situation, in which people generally are more aware about *hijra* and trans experiences. Meetha, a senior *hijra* who has been part of the community for a long time, explains that

when I came on the scene 23 years ago, *hijras* were few in numbers...there was not much publicity about them either. They were not seen much. Only a few *hijras* were rarely seen. But now each village has a few *hijras*. Earlier they were not talked about much. Now it is much more in the open.

Particularly in urban areas, where there tend to be larger groups of *hijras* as well as active NGOs, *hijras* have a large, visible public presence. However, Meetha points out that *hijras* have an increasingly visible presence even in villages and she implicitly links these changes to the amount of media coverage that *hijra* groups garner. Meetha continues,

After the NGOs, Dosti and [others] started, there was a lot of publicity about *hijras* in Bangalore. Even in all of India as the days are passing by, more and more publicity is given to *hijras*. [As a result,] one became 10 and 10 became 100. 100 also became

1000...they know that somehow we can manage to live like this. There are a lot of us. In fact, there are at least 50-60 *hijras* living in this neighborhood.

Here, Meetha explains that *hijras* are now garnering more public attention than they did prior to the proliferation of sexual rights NGOs. As a result of publicity accorded to *hijras* through NGOs, more people realized that “somehow we can manage to live like this” and joined *hijra* communities. People also pointed out that the visible public presence of *hijras* is a factor that makes it easier for younger gender non-conforming people to find these groups. Many *hijra* and trans-identified people speculate that much younger gender non-conforming people probably feel less isolated than they did at that age as a result of larger numbers of *hijras* in public and increased media coverage of gender non-conformity. After lamenting that she had grown up without seeing *hijras* and without realizing that the option to get surgery existed, Mariyamma says, “Now it is an easy step...you can go [and easily find a *hijra*] and you can ask them, ‘how did you get castrated? How did you become a woman?’”

However, media attention to *hijra* groups has produced contradictory outcomes, particularly from the perspective of senior *gurus*. Sunitha, a Mangalmukhi-identified NGO worker, explained that many senior *gurus* “curse Dosti [and other NGOs] a lot. They say that because of this office, our issues came out in the open through the papers and TV.” However, she argues that while many senior *gurus* are upset with NGO intervention, the “*hijra* community knows that because of this office, many people of the community who used to wear pants/shirt [present as men] came out in the open” and began to identify as (in this case) *hijras*, which caused “the population of the community [to] increase.” Here, Sunitha points to a central tension around NGOs and *hijra* identity: because of the awareness around sexuality and gender identity raised by NGOs, more people became aware of and perhaps empowered to join the *hijras*. However, these younger people who join the community may be less attached to *hijra* groups and the

relationships they are based around, partly because NGOs have emphasized the possibility for transwomen to live outside of *hijra* structures, while using human rights discourse to highlight the unfavorable aspects of *guru/chela* relationships.

### *Rights Discourses and Constructing the Boundaries of Citizenship*

Discourses of rights are based on liberal understandings of citizenship formulated in Enlightenment-era Europe and believed to be applicable to all people, hence their current designation as “human rights.” However, this configuration has been critiqued, especially by feminist and postcolonial scholars for, on the one hand, claiming rights are universal, while on the other hand, “justify[ing] the denial of rights and withholding of benefits from a vast subsection of people” (Kapur 2005: 17). This critique is evidenced in the fact that liberal understandings of rights were only selectively applied in European colonizers’ techniques of rule in the colonies such that colonial subjects, in spite of being human, were often understood by European rulers as non-rights-bearing individuals. As Kapur (2005) explains, “when Europe was in the midst of a struggle for liberty, equality and freedom, and there was an assumption that these ideas were universal, these values seemed to stumble and falter at the moment of their encounter with the unfamiliar” (23). Here, Kapur points to the ease with which “unfamiliar” groups can be excluded from ideas that were postulated as pertinent to all people. The colonies were populated by “unfamiliar subjects” who thus “came to be constituted as Others” who were posited as necessarily different from the colonizers and thus were not entitled to the kinds of rights and access to citizenship that Europeans enjoyed (Kapur 2005: 23). Once these groups were understood as “Others,” their necessary “[d]ifference in treatment” was justified by “placing [their] society at the primitive end of the civilization scale, in need of being civilized, at

time through strict discipline and punishment” (Kapur 2005: 23). If a group or society is classified as “at the primitive end of the civilization scale,” they become subjected to “civilizing” projects (Kapur 2005: 23). However, this “Other[ing]” is not a relic of the past since “these values meet with some of the same difficulties in their encounters with difference” in the present day (Kapur 2005: 23). Long after the colonial period, groups constructed as “different” and “unfamiliar” continue to be subjected to such processes. Because the relationships *hijra* groups are oriented around are constructed as “different,” rendering *hijras* as an “unfamiliar” group, they have been subjected to NGO-led projects attempting to “civilize” them through inculcating the values of human rights, which are part of the same discursive system that constructs them as different, unfamiliar and in need of “civilization” in the first place.

Dosti had several interactions with *hijra chelas* that convinced them that the human rights of *chelas* were being violated and that the appropriate course of action was to have a discussion with the guru, in which the express goal was to teach *hijra gurus* about human rights. Andavar, a former Dosti staff member, explained that around 2004 or 2005, there was a chela named Kaveri whose *guru* abused her very badly and threw her out of the *hamam*, refusing to give her any of her belongings. Kaveri came “immediately” to Dosti and told staff members what had happened. Andavar and other Dosti staff members went to the *hamam* and had a discussion with Kaveri’s guru. Andavar said that during this discussion,

We explained about human rights. What is human rights? What are [Kaveri’s] rights? We explained all that. Finally, [her guru] came to understand...we explained that it’s not good for the community and you cannot do this. And also, we explained that she will have to go to the police station [if they could not reach a solution] and she will get punished. That’s why she shouldn’t do all these things.

In this meeting, Andavar explains that Dosti staff members successfully attempted to change the *guru*’s perception about Kaveri’s rights. In case the *guru* considered not accepting this point of

view, staff members explained that they would involve the police, who presumably would punish the *guru* since her actions are interpreted as oppressive when they are framed by Dosti using human rights discourse. After this process, Andavar explained, Kaveri's guru gave back her belongings and Kaveri moved to a separate residence with her boyfriend, meaning that she left the guru's house and severed their relationship. Andavar emphatically shakes his head as he tells me that during his time as a Dosti staff member, "we had *so* many experiences like that." Dosti's ability to involve state agents in these disputes is important, as is the presumption that the state will recognize the conflict as being about the human rights of *chelas*.

In fact, Dosti heard so many complaints about *gurus* from *chelas* that they instituted a process to follow when *chelas* raised complaints about their gurus to Dosti. Johan, a former board member of Dosti, explained,

Because Dosti was working and continues to work on human rights, we felt that the rights of the *chela* were being violated, right? So definitely we would provide all the support to the *chela* if the *chela* was willing to break away from the *guru*. So we would find [the *chela*] an alternate living space, maybe with somebody from the [*hijra*] community who was more independent, who was not dependent on the *gurus*.

Here, Johan explicitly references Dosti's policy of supporting the *chela* and, if she is willing, assisting her to live independently of her *guru* and with others who do not follow the *guru/chela* system. Johan further explains that Dosti staff "felt that it was [the *chela*'s] right to be what they want to be and to do what they want to do...see, if the guru was preventing that," then Dosti would do everything that they could to ensure this behavior stopped.

The classification of certain sexual minority groups as "Others" is a familiar dynamic within the institutionalized sexual rights and LGBT movement in India. As Dutta (2012) explains,

In its aspirational trajectory to equal citizenship, the movement displays prominent tendencies to seek to pedagogically assimilate lower class groups into norms of civility and respectability as inadequate subjects who need to be trained in order to become worthy of rights, evidencing the contemporary iterations of a long history of upper

caste/class reformist endeavors to ‘recast’ subordinate groups within hegemonic constructions of national identity or culture” (Datta 2012: 114-115).

Dosti’s interventions on behalf of *chelas* are attempts to “pedagogically assimilate” *hijra* groups who are characterized as “inadequate subjects” based on their social organization (and who, incidentally, are lower class and disreputable). This understanding of *hijras* positions them as in need of “train[ing]” so that they might “become worthy of rights,” since they are currently interpreted as potentially unworthy of the rights of citizenship. When *hijras* do not enthusiastically respond to these civilizing attempts and take up such ideas and incorporate them into their own understandings, they are classified as outside the boundaries of citizenship, which justifies their exclusion and marginalization. I read this process as occurring alongside the construction of citizenship for transwomen in which transwomen position themselves as legitimate by favorably contrasting themselves with *hijras*, as discussed in the previous chapter. As Dutta explains, such tendencies that interpret education as a means of assimilation have roots in upper-caste/class attempts to reconfigure subaltern groups as a precondition to their recognition and inclusion as legitimate citizens.

Dosti staff position the need to intervene into *hijra* groups as stemming from *hijras*’ inability to understand and abide by the precepts of human rights. If *hijras* are not willing to accept Dosti’s interpretation of human rights, they are threatened with police involvement and there is an assumption that police will uphold the techniques of “pedagogical assimilation” Dosti is attempting to enforce. The predominant attitudes displayed towards senior *gurus* in these interactions are of dismissal, as though they do not deserve recognition as marginalized sexual minorities as a result of their failure to acknowledge and incorporate Dosti’s version of human rights. These attitudes serve to construct *hijras* as outside of the boundaries of citizenship, which then justifies their dismissal and exclusion.

Andavar stresses that Dosti made efforts to reason with *hijras* about *gurus*' treatment of *chelas* in the hopes of changing *gurus*' behavior. However, he explains, shaking his head, these efforts were largely ineffective since *hijras* do not operate from a human rights framework. He argues the main reason that Dosti and *hijras* have a conflict is

because Dosti is a human rights-based organization. We believe in human rights. *Hijras* don't believe in human rights and all that. That's why it's not working out. So many times, we tried. We called a meeting [with *hijras*]. All the *gurus* [came] and we explained what is human rights, how they have to behave, how we can live together, all of us. We explained a lot of things. But they cannot accept that.

Despite Dosti's efforts to convince *gurus* that "we can live together," Andavar suspects that *hijras* are not willing to accept such a point of view since *hijras* as a group do not believe in human rights. The implication is that Dosti is willing to include *hijras*, as long as they behave in a way that demonstrates respect for their interpretation of human rights, but *hijras* refuse these conditions of inclusion, as evidenced by their lack of understanding and interest in human rights.

Missing from this dialogue about human rights and *hijra* relationships is a serious consideration of why and how *hijra* relationships started and evolved over time and how younger *hijras*' departure from *hijra groups* has affected the wellbeing of elder *hijras*. Despite the fact that elder *hijra gurus*, who depend on financial and social support from their *chelas*, are sexual minorities who are also at risk of poverty, discrimination, and harassment, by and large, Dosti staff and leaders are reluctant to recognize that elder *hijras* are in a vulnerable state. This is partly because Dosti constructs elder *gurus*, who seek to protect the *hijra* system, as outside the boundaries of citizenship and therefore undeserving of similar rights as their *chelas*, for whose rights Dosti is willing to fight.

The manner in which Dosti leaders characterize *hijra gurus* speaks volumes about how they are positioned within the organization. When I asked Mohan, one of the founding Dosti

participants, how elder *hijras* survive financially, he replied, “See, most of them don't have any problem [buying] food. There are a few who are in a very bad situation, I heard. But I haven't heard of really such levels of poverty you're not able to have food. That's not the case.”

Implying that elder *hijras*’ financial circumstances cannot be that bad since they are not obviously starving indicates a rather low bar to judge the standards of living for a group of elders who are often unable to earn an income. When I asked how he thinks these elder *hijras* are supporting themselves, he replied, “the *chelas* may be giving, their friends may be giving them money. They might have saved something.” Then, Mohan held up his hands, emphasizing the most salient fact of the discussion of *gurus* and money, which is, he explained, “lots of the times, *gurus* take money to exploit others, it's not about their survival...it's about, you know, keeping so much of things [for themselves].” Here, Mohan implies that *gurus* are often greedy and their actions work to feed this greed. This discussion reveals the characterization of *gurus* as greedy tyrants by Dosti staff, many of whom are unwilling to recognize that livelihood options for elder *gurus* are very limited. Elder *gurus*’ reduced livelihood options impact their reactions to the efforts of an NGO that is encouraging younger gender non-conforming people that they can be “independent” of the *hijra* system.

### *Hijra Resistance: The Mangalmukhi Sangha*

One way that a group of *hijras* demonstrated their resistance to Dosti and its characterizations of *hijras* was by creating an organization called The Mangalmukhi Sangha that they then registered as an NGO in 2010. While the organization was active for less than a year, the fact that *hijras* felt the need to create their own organization, and that they registered it as an NGO (despite expressing resistance toward NGOs), indicates that *hijras* view the NGO form as offering them a



legitimate way to collectivize and demand the rights associated with citizenship (Bernal & Grewal 2014).

The name of this group indicates *hijras*' desire to draw on and reaffirm their traditional ritual roles. The term Mangalmukhi can be translated as "auspicious face" and it refers to a belief in the ritual powers of *hijras* to bless people who come into contact with them. The emphasis on *hijras*' ritual importance indicates that this group wishes to highlight their revered status in North Indian cultural traditions. The use of this term also signifies a defiant response to the negative characterizations of "*hijra* culture" by Dosti. While NGO-led sexual rights activism most often conceives of the sexual minority as an overtly political identity through its demands for legitimate citizenship, Mangalmukhi actively de-links *hijras* from the political overtones of the sexual minority identity, instead linking them to a traditional, culturally based and auspicious identity that may not be intelligible through frameworks of liberal citizenship and human rights. As Dutta (2012) argues, when making claims for the rights of those sexual minorities who are believed to fall within the ambit of legitimate citizenship (usually as a result of privileges along the axes of class, caste, gender, etc.), "forms of difference, resistance and subjectivity" believed to fall outside of legitimate citizenship "are rendered uncivil, illegitimate and/or politically unintelligible—'subaltern' in the sense of speech and resistance that cannot be heard or recognized as such within dominant discourses of equality and rights" (113). I interpret the emergence and structure of the Mangalmukhi Sangha as a form of *hijra* resistance that flaunts the group's incompatibility with liberal understandings of citizenship and human rights. Instead of trying to prove their worthiness of being included as citizens in the way that Dosti and others define proper citizenship, Mangalmukhi insists on being run and understood on their own terms, through their own cultural organization and frameworks.

During my fieldwork, there was a considerable amount of tension between Mangalmukhi and Dosti. Dosti workers employ human rights discourse bolstered by conceptions of individual selfhood to criticize the use of the term Mangalmukhi by this group. Manish, a senior Dosti staff member who has worked with the organization since its inception, explains,

*Mangala* is very much [a] caste and sex/gender based concept. Most of us come from the feminist movement and Dalit movement, so we have a problem with that word. There's a myth that *hijras* have powers [to] bless you, so if you look at [their] face, something good can happen to you. We can't be actively spreading information that doesn't have [a] rational basis. We are a secular, rational organization. So that is a problem.

Soumitree, a Dosti staff member who emphasizes that she identifies herself as a transgender woman, employs human rights-oriented discourse to critique the term Mangalmukhi. She explains, “*Mangala* [means] precious. What do you mean by precious? Everybody is precious. We don't want to identify as Mangalmukhi, we want to identify as human being, a transgender itself.” Soumitree's word choice here is revealing, as she suggests that the term Mangalmukhi does not connote “human being” whereas the term “transgender” does. Intriguingly, she points out that the term “transgender” is closer to the human rights discourse that circulates within the NGO sector than the term Mangalmukhi, which draws on local, specific and non-universal conceptions of identity in order to exploit those meanings for the benefit of *hijras*.

The organizational structure of The Mangalmukhi Sangha was based on seniority, which is highly valued within *hijra* groups, with senior *gurus* acting as board members and leaders of the organization. Dosti staff argue that senior *gurus* forced *chelas* to become Mangalmukhi members, as Rishabh explains, “through a very exploitative process where the *gurus* had complete control.” However, Mangalmukhi members report that membership in the organization is voluntary, but since it is an organization for *hijras*, membership in Mangalmukhi should be

seen as a part of membership in *hijra* groups. The characterization by Dosti of Mangalmukhi's organizational structure exemplifies critiques from ex-staff of Dosti who argue that the key problem contributing to the conflict between *hijras* and Dosti is that NGOs treat *hijras* as individuals and they do not recognize the relationships around which the community is structured. However, Manjunath argues that respecting such relationships is impossible, explaining,

There is a clash because Mangalmukhi as a group is completely dominated by the most powerful in the *hijra* community and we basically don't recognize their structure...that is the difference [between them and Dosti]. They are supporting traditional hierarchy. That's the difference.

Saraswathi, an activist *hijra* and member of Mangalmukhi, agrees that the main conflict between Dosti and Mangalmukhi stems from Dosti's unwillingness to recognize and respect *guru/chela* relationships. She succinctly explains, "If I'm a *guru*, I want to be called [and recognized as] a *guru*! But," she continues in a nasal, high-pitched tone intended to mock NGO staff members, "in Dosti, we want to be *equal rights*," and then dissolves into laughter.

#### *NGOs and Injustice: Elder Hijras' Perspectives*

Despite some *hijras*' outright rejection of the kinds of human rights frameworks that construct them as illegitimate citizens, other *hijras* articulated a frustration that I attribute to a lack of access to a globally-recognized discourse through which to voice their criticisms of the power differentials between themselves and NGO workers. Mousami, who is in her fifties, is one of only five elder *hijras* I was able to speak to. She is associated with the *hamam* mentioned in chapter three where Vandana (who is part of her *hijra* family) lives. Mousami's perspective offers a sense of how *hijra* gurus interpret the relationship between NGOs like Dosti and *hijras*. In response to my general question about the relationship between *hijra* groups and NGOs, she

emphasizes the important differences between *hijras* and other sexual minorities, earnestly explaining,

Many of them [NGO workers] are married and they even have children. But we have nobody. We go on living just like this [gestures to the living space of the *hamam*]. How we left our parents and came away, we live just like that. But they have parents, children and everybody else. They have families... We have nobody. They have everything. I ask them why they want to do this work. They are men. They have parents, relatives, children. They have everyone. We have nobody. That is why we are *hijras*.

At first glance, Mousami's narrative of the abject poverty and family abandonment faced by *hijras* face may seem like a case in which, as Lawrence Cohen points out, "[h]ijras themselves [] construct a narrative of their abject origins, explicitly for the consumption of nosy outsiders" (1992: 285). However, in the context of an onslaught of criticism towards *hijra* family structures that my research demonstrates are often amplified by NGOs, I read Mousami's claims as a defense of *hijra* family structures that were collectively created to replace the kinship structures *hijras* were forced to give up. For Mousami, many NGOs workers still have access to these kinship structures, so they are unlikely to have participated in replacement kinship systems and yet, they criticize the collective structures *hijras* have painstakingly created. In addition to their access to support from their natal families, NGO workers have alternate (and respectful) ways of earning income, which are not available to most *hijras*. As Mousami explains,

[NGO workers] make money. We are just like this—we do *dhandā* [sex work] in *hamams*. I beg on the streets for every single rupee I have!... They live comfortably... We have nothing. We have to either beg or do *dhandā*... So I get angry and *I shout at them!*... I fight with them! [emphasis in original]

Here, Mousami expresses anger that *hijras* remain confined to disreputable occupations and precarious work, while NGO workers have a (relatively) stable income. She highlights the sense of constraint and outrage she feels at this situation when she states "I get angry [at this situation] and *I shout at them!*... I fight with them!" Like other elder *hijras* I spoke to, Mousami interprets

NGO intervention into *hijra* groups as fundamentally unfair since there are power disparities between the two groups that are not acknowledged. However, like many *hijras*, she cannot draw on a powerful and globally-recognized discourse that can help her to succinctly and effectively articulate why this situation is unjust. Unlike NGO workers, who have access to a persuasive discourse of human rights, *hijra gurus* are not able to articulate the salience of their perspectives by employing a similarly meaningful discourse. If, like Mousami, their anger and frustration becomes too much and they lash out at the NGO workers, as she indicated that she does, these kinds of actions can be interpreted by NGOs as indicative of her lack of “civility,” suggesting her need for “train[ing]” to become “worthy” of the rights granted to citizens.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have explored how human rights discourse is used to characterize *hijra gurus* as unworthy of citizenship. Human rights is a malleable discourse based on understandings of liberal citizenship, which is positioned as applicable to all people, yet often excludes “others” who purportedly fall outside the parameters of citizenship. Due to their social organization and dependence on hierarchical structures, *hijra gurus* are positioned as “others” in need of training to become legible citizens. As the protector of *chelas*, Dosti staff are positioned as “experts” able to determine those worthy of inclusion into citizenship, such as themselves and those whose rights they fight for, and able to determine who falls outside of citizenship, *hijra gurus* who do not show respect for human rights. By characterizing *guru/chela* relationships as “against human rights,” Dosti sets into motion a process that aims to reconfigure *hijra* social practices and assimilate them, thus making *hijra gurus* fit for the rights guaranteed to legitimate citizens. This process can be read as attempts to “murder” *hijra* systems so that their former participants might

be included into citizenship (Haritaworn et al. 2013). However, many *gurus* resist this interpretation of themselves and insist that *hijra* identities and practices are not legible through the framework of human rights. When *gurus* resist Dosti's initiatives to educate them about human rights, Dosti positions them as unworthy of rights and outside the boundaries of citizenship, thus sanctioning their exclusion and abandonment. This process operates in tandem with the emergence of the middle class aspiring transgender woman who is positioned in opposition to *hijras*, discussed in the previous chapter. In framing the conflict between Dosti and *hijras* as a struggle around human rights, Dosti elides the power differences between these groups and disempowers *hijras*, who do not have access to a globally-recognized discourse around which to effectively frame their perspectives.

## Conclusion

So, see [in my childhood] I was a gay or I was a—what do you say, that word? [pause] *Sexual minority!* Those days [as a young gender non-conforming person], see, I was so scared. Who will I go and see? Who will I go and contact? I *was* a sexual minority. I knew from the age of four or five years that I'm different, ok? But I didn't have an option to go out and *do* anything [about it].

--Kamala, transwoman in her 40s

This dissertation has explored the process through which transgender women have emerged to claim citizenship in South India during a time when various sexual minority groups and identities are enmeshed in processes of defining and distinguishing themselves. From the notion of Mariyamma's "waiting for a chance," which I argue speaks to an emerging framework of how the advent of the transgender woman is discussed, to the quote above where Kamala narrates her journey from fear, a lack of support and a time of no "option[s]" to take action, the current possibilities for gender non-conforming people assigned male at birth have undergone dramatic (and quite recent) shifts. Transwomen are not the only sexual minorities who are waiting for a chance to claim equal citizenship rights. As this dissertation demonstrates, *hijras* also position themselves as waiting for this important chance and, like their transwomen counterparts, *hijras* often seek to distance themselves from the *hijra* identity, perceiving that it offers them a reduced chance to claim the rights associated with citizenship. This study offers an empirically-grounded example of how a marginalized sexual minority group emerged to claim citizenship via (mostly) "murderous inclusions."

This dissertation clarifies the social processes that have paved the way for this chance that transwomen have been waiting for, enabling them to make citizenship claims as gender non-conforming people. These processes include: the efforts by NGOs to ensure civil citizenship rights for gender and sexual non-conforming people, the uneven incorporation of *hijras* into

sexual minority groups and concomitant processes of distancing and exclusion, the narration of the transformation of *hijra* groups in terms of the “choice” now available to transwomen, transwomen’s claims to legitimate social citizenship by differentiating themselves from *hijras*, whose status as undeserving of social citizenship rights remains unchallenged and NGOs’ use of human rights discourses to construct *hijra* gurus as outside the boundaries of citizenship. While my argument focuses on the citizenship rights transwomen claim, as the foil to which transwomen favorably compare themselves, *hijras* also feature prominently. My argument is connected to important recent debates among queer and feminist studies scholars who are deeply concerned with the operations of inclusion and citizenship within social justice struggles.

My research also emphasizes the social transformations that have made it possible for transwomen to claim citizenship, while critiquing those citizenship claims that serve to exclude *hijras*. By analyzing these claims to citizenship, my research illustrates the ways that “publics are seduced into viewing some as less than human and come to consent to their banishment from this category and its benefits” (Haritaworn 2015: 129). Drawing on current debates about the concept and value of citizenship from scholars in queer studies and feminist studies, I argue that transgender women in South India participate in forms of “murderous inclusion” in order to demand their citizenship rights. However, I take seriously contentions from other queer studies scholars, such as West (2014), who point out that acts of claiming citizenship must not be dismissed outright as normative and/or exclusive; they must first be understood in their specific contexts. While I present evidence of a series of activist projects that do not necessarily seek inclusion into normative citizenship (West 2014) via the exclusion of others, this dissertation ultimately argues that by aspiring to become citizens, transwomen have reinforced the exclusion of *hijras*, thus, this form of inclusion is “murderous” (Haritaworn et al. 2013). Like Haritaworn



and their co-authors, my task has been to “withdraw[] the gaze from inclusion’s seductive promises” so that the “deadly outcomes of some forms of inclusion” might come into relief (2013: 446). My analysis is thus in agreement with Brandzel (2016), Spade (2015) and Haritaworn (2013 & 2015), among others, that citizenship operates as an exclusionary category and should therefore be understood as antithetical to social justice struggles.

### *The Argument*

An analysis of the emergence of transgender women would be incomplete without examining the transformations in the *hijra* community. An important part of this project is to trace the social changes that have recently altered *hijra* group relationships, enabling gender non-conforming people to imagine living outside of *hijra* groups. Intriguingly, the transformations in *hijra* relationships and the ability for transwomen to live “independent” of *hijra* groups is most often narrated as transwomen’s (and, to some degree, *chelas*’) ability to exercise their individual “choice” about whether to join the *hijras*. Narrating these transformations through the language of “choice” offers transgender women a space within the progress narrative of liberalization, constructing them as empowered consumer citizens who can effectively participate in globalized marketplaces, thus naturalizing the connection between consumer choice and citizenship. In this case, citizenship for transwomen constitutes a normalizing force.

Transwomen’s enhanced visibility and demands for the rights of citizenship has led to an insistence that clear and static boundaries be drawn between themselves and the disreputable *hijras* they are most likely to be confused with. Transwomen emphasize the distinctions between their legitimate claims to citizenship and *hijras*, whom they position as unfeminine, disreputable and necessarily outside of the boundaries of legitimate citizenship. From individual

conversations to media representations that reach the “general society,” transwomen establish and reify the borders between themselves and *hijras*, in order to bolster their claims for citizenship rights. In differentiating between these two groups, transwomen are produced as respectable citizens whose rights are unjustly denied and who are deserving of protection, while *hijras*’ lack of citizenship rights is uncontested and even supported by this discourse.

Transwomen’s claims to citizenship center the co-constitution of their classed and gendered aspirations for upward mobility, thus the ability to obtain respectable employment is important. Transwomen’s newfound chance to engage in office employment via NGOs offers them a salient way to position themselves in contradistinction to *hijras*, who engage in soliciting money and sex work. Transgender women draw on associations between “proper” (office) employment and contemporary middle-class womanhood that appear in state, development and popular discourses to distance themselves from *hijras*. Thus, the opportunity for a small but significant group of transwomen to obtain white-collar employment in NGOs interacts with struggles for rights to employment for transpeople and specific constructions of gender and class in postcolonial India to produce the emerging identity of the “independent” transgender woman. There are intriguing resonances in the state and development discourse about women’s autonomy through paid employment and the ways that transwomen talk about desiring “freedom” and “independence” from *hijra* groups. Transwomen’s enhanced employment opportunities offer possibilities for working class transwomen to align themselves with popular notions about (middle class) women’s “independence” and confirms the propriety of their womanhood/gender identification.

Transwomen thus claim citizenship by drawing distinct borders between themselves and *hijras* and positioning *hijras* as undeserving of the rights of citizenship, thus bolstering their “murderous” citizenship claims. Though this dissertation focuses primarily on transwomen’s

efforts to distinguish themselves from *hijras* as a way to claim citizenship, there are many other sexual minority groups who seek to distance themselves from *hijras*, including even *hijras* themselves. For a group of people striving to claim the rights of citizenship, the possibility of obtaining citizenship compels more privileged sexual minorities to draw dividing lines between sexual minorities who deserve citizenship and those who are undeserving of citizenship. These tactics of distancing and exclusion are central to the process of sexual minorities (especially transwomen) seeking “murderous inclusions” into citizenship (Haritaworn et al. 2013).

In order to contextualize transwomen’s claims of citizenship, I have emphasized the role of NGO-led activism for sexual rights in positioning transwomen as rights-bearing citizens. By demonstrating how Dosti activists envision *hijra* and transpeople’s oppression through the language of rights, I show that the organization contributed to the sense among gender non-conforming people and the “general society” that these groups are (and should be recognized as) rights-bearing citizens. In claiming that gender non-conforming people deserve civil citizenship rights, I consider that, in this case, Dosti is making claims for transpeople’s citizenship that are not reducible to assimilation and do not necessarily hinge on exclusion (West 2014).

Dosti’s involvement in the process of transwomen claiming citizenship has produced contradictory effects. The organization’s attention to sexual minority issues generally has contributed to a reported increase in the numbers of *hijras*. Dosti’s early work for the rights of sexual minorities (including *hijras*) not to be subjected to violence brought the organization into contact with increasing numbers of *hijras*, through which they began to hear criticisms about the *guru/chela* system. Dosti has used the powerful, globally-recognized discourse of human rights to critique *hijra* relationships and to position *hijra gurus* seeking to protect these relationships as unworthy of rights, thus legitimating their exclusion and abandonment. The characterization of

*guru/chela* relationships as “against human rights” sets into motion a process intended to reform *gurus* to make them worthy of citizenship, a process many *gurus* resist. Moreover, this process is related to the emergence of the transgender woman, who claims citizenship by differentiating herself from *hijras*, since Dosti staff encourage *chelas* to discontinue their participation in *hijra* relationships (thus becoming “independent” transwomen deserving of rights) and Dosti also encourages younger gender non-conforming people not to join the *hijras*. By positing elder *hijras* and the relationships they protect as incompatible with human rights, Dosti bolsters transwomen’s citizenship claims that operate via the exclusion of *hijras*, thus participating in the “murderous inclusions” through which transwomen claim citizenship (Haritaworn et al. 2013).

This dissertation thus points to a central tension around NGOs and *hijra* identity: because of the awareness around sexuality and gender identity raised by NGOs, more people became aware of and perhaps empowered to join the *hijras*. However, these younger people who join the community may be less attached to *hijra* groups and the relationships they are based around, partly because NGOs have emphasized the possibility for transwomen to live outside of *hijra* structures, while using human rights discourse to highlight the unfavorable aspects of *guru/chela* relationships.

### *Cautions and New Directions*

In the process of narrowing the parameters of this research, an important part of this story that I was not able to focus on is the ways that caste, which is decidedly different from yet related to class, is complexly articulated and enacted in sexual rights activism. This issue was brought to the forefront in 2015 with the publication of the first gay marriage ad placed by a well-known gay activist’s mother, which read “Seeking 25-40, well placed, animal loving, vegetarian groom

for my son, 36, 5'11" who works with an NGO. Caste no bar (though Iyer preferred)" (Rashid 2015). Iyer is a Tamil Brahmin caste and this ad was indicted for exposing the latent casteist (and classist) tendencies at work within LGBT activism. Further studies could usefully address the dynamics of caste and religion in the context of sexual minority activism. Especially in studies focusing on marginalized sexual minorities, further research could explore how the figure of the Dalit sexual minority subject, when made visible, interrupts assumptions about caste and religion within the discursive construction of the Indian sexual minority subject.

This study focuses on shifting identities and claims to citizenship for gender non-conforming people in South India and, specifically, in Bangalore. This dissertation does not include information or analysis of the struggles of gender non-conforming people assigned female at birth, which is the focus of my forthcoming work. While I cannot claim that the findings of this research represent dynamics in operation throughout India, as I have showed through national newspaper stories and the "I am Not a *Hijra*" Campaign discussed in chapter 4, contestations around identity and citizenship for gender non-conforming people in other parts of India are prevalent. The relevance of my argument to understand the dynamics around shifting gender non-conforming identities in other parts of India can only be assessed by future research.

Future studies could usefully examine emerging identifications with transgender in other settings to ask how emerging sexual and gender non-conforming identities and groups advocate for (or perhaps reject) citizenship? What forms of exclusions and inclusions (murderous or not) operate in particular geographical contexts? How do citizenship claims impact local struggles around gender and sexuality in other postcolonial and liberalizing contexts? How are these struggles played out in the political sphere and in legal contexts? As global sexual rights activism has proliferated via HIV/AIDS outreach, which often subsumes local, preexisting

gender/sexual identities under the transgender rubric, how have these changes impacted demands (or rejections) of citizenship in different areas?

After 25 or so years of sexual minority activism in India, an oral history of the national movement would help to usefully contextualize the burgeoning amount of scholarship in this area. If such a history would focus on citizenship claims, it could help us to usefully understand the kinds of shifts that occurred at particular points and how those shifts might have impacted the ways that citizenship goals were undertaken and articulated. For example, I am tempted to speculate that at the beginning of Dosti's activism, this may have been a moment of "enormous possibility" that felt like "a new social world becoming" within the wider movement (Dave 2012). This potential or possibility could have translated into believing that their movement could broaden citizenship to include gender non-conforming people without resorting to exclusion and/or incorporation into normative citizenship. At other times, due to shifting priorities in the wider movement, there might have been pressure for sexual minority groups to assimilate into dominant norms of citizenship. A nuanced oral history of the national strategies of activism from at least the early 1990s would usefully contribute to the existing literature on queer activism in India discussed in the introduction and the first chapter (Semmalar 2014; Dutta & Roy 2014; Lakimsetti 2014; Shah 2014; Dutta 2012 & 2013; Dave 2012; Gass 2012; Puri 2010; Narrain 2009; Narrain & Bhan 2006; Gupta 2006; Reddy 2005: 32; Cohen 2005; Misra 2006; Vanita 2005; PUCL-K 2003; Cohen 1995).

In terms of empirical directions for future study, there is limited information about the lives and experiences of sexual minorities residing in rural and semi-rural areas throughout the world, but specifically in India. Studies focusing on the experiences of these groups can help to disrupt

notions of cities as spaces where sexual and gender non-normativity is somewhat permissible whereas rural areas are comprised only of gender and sexual normative individuals.

### *Final Thoughts*

This study takes up a challenge stated by Dutta and Roy (2014), who point out that there is little understanding about how the global upsurge in individuals identifying with the category of transgender via HIV/AIDS outreach and prevention projects has played out in the context of the global South. In South India, I find that the ability to identify as transgender ultimately enables (usually younger) gender non-conforming people to mitigate the stigma previously associated with gender nonconformity symbolizes by the figure of the *hijra*. In spite of their (largely) working class status, transgender women can position themselves and their identities in alignment with expectations of middle class femininity. Thus, in the context of South India, the transgender woman identity offers a small portion of gender non conforming people a chance (however distant) to achieve respect and perhaps even a degree of upward mobility through respectable employment that would not have been possible for *hijra*-identified individuals. I interpret these kinds of aspirations and the identification struggles they produce as claims to legitimate citizenship.

The problem with these new opportunities for transgender women is that they are largely predicated on the exclusion, forgetting and abandonment of those gender non-conforming people who remain tied to the *hijra* system. In this case, the transgender circulation of transgender as a category and an identity opens up possibilities for some gender non-conforming people while simultaneously foreclosing possibilities and thus reinforcing existing inequalities for others. While transgender promises to enable some gender non-conforming people to escape the stigma

associated with gender variance, in practice, it does so by reinforcing, instead of challenging, the stigma associated with *hijras*. I thus interpret the taking on of transgender identities by transwomen in this context as a way of mitigating oppression for a select few while further retrenching it for those who are the most marginalized. Such tactics are incompatible with liberatory activist projects seeking to fundamentally challenge social inequalities and people interested in the pursuit of social justice must become familiar with these kinds of tactics so that they can call attention to and challenge them.



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**EDUCATION**


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*Syracuse University*

**PhD Candidate, Sociology**

(expected May 2017)

**M.A., Sociology**

2012

Concentration: Globalization; Inequality & Feminist Theory

Graduate Certificates: Women's/Gender Studies; South Asian Studies

2011

**Dissertation**: *"We Are Here Because You Are There": NGOs, Sexual Minority Communities, and Reciprocal Need in South India*

Committee: Dr. Jackie Orr (Chair), Dr. Chandra Talpade

Mohanty, Dr. Jyoti Puri, Dr. Susan Wadley, Dr. Gretchen Purser

*Simmons College*

**M.A., Gender/Cultural Studies**

2008

Thesis: *"Wearing Saris in 'India Shining': Perspectives From Middle-Class Urban Women"*

*Furman University*

**B.A., English Literature**

2004

Concentration: Women's Studies

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**ACADEMIC POSITIONS**


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Assistant Professor

Fall 2016-present

Department of Sociology & Anthropology

Nazarbayev University

Visiting Assistant Professor

Fall 2015

Department of Anthropology & Sociology

Rhodes College

Research Associate

2014-2015

South Asia Center

Stanford University

American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Research Fellow Bangalore, India	2013-2014
American Institute of Indian Studies: Mysore, India Kannada Language Fellow	2012-2013
Teaching Assistant Syracuse University Department of Sociology	2008-2012
Teaching Assistant Simmons College Department of Gender/Cultural Studies	2007

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## PUBLICATIONS

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Mount, Liz. "Teaching in Unfamiliar Terrain: Empowering Student *and* Teacher Learning through a Photography Assignment." Forthcoming in *Teaching Sociology* 46.1 (2018) and currently available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/sE9jgRY35c5SNWSirh64/full>.

Mount, Liz. "Saris and Contemporary Indian Womanhood: How Middle-Class Women Navigate the Tradition/Modernity Split." *Contemporary South Asia* 25.2 (2017): 167-181.

Mount, Liz. "Behind the Curtain: Strip Clubs and the Management of Competition for Tips." *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. (Forthcoming and currently available at <http://jce.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/0891241616630608v1.pdf?ijkey=S1yfg9Igb099X8&keytype=finite>)

"Transgender Citizens and *Hijra* Group Transformations in South India" (manuscript in preparation)

"Transgender Women Claiming Citizenship in South India" (manuscript in preparation)

"Activism of the Oppressed: Working-class Lesbians and Transgender Men in South India" (manuscript in preparation)

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## GRANTS AND AWARDS

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Social Research Grant, Nazarbayev University, 2017-2018 (\$10,000)

Sociology Department Dissertation Fellowship, Syracuse University, 2015-2016 (\$18,000)

American Institute for Indian Studies (AIIS) Junior Fellowship, 2013-2014 (\$25,000)

AIIS Fellowship for Kannada language study, 2012-2013 (\$18,000)

Foreign Language/Area Studies grant for Kannada language study, 2012 & 2010 (\$7,000)

Maxwell School Goekjian Scholar Fellowship, Syracuse University, 2011 (\$5,000)

Roscoe-Martin Summer Research Grant, Syracuse University, 2010 (\$700)

Foreign Language/Area Studies grant for Hindi Language study, 2009 (\$7,000)

Best Graduate Student Paper Award from MIT Women's Studies Consortium, 2008 (\$500)

Simmons College Graduate Student Research Grant, 2007 (\$1,000)

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

<b>Assistant Professor</b>	Fall 2016-present
Department of Sociology and Anthropology	
Nazarbayev University	
Gender, Power and Social Change in South Asia;	
Global Social Problems; Social Movements;	
Gender and Sexuality in a Transnational World	

<b>Adjunct Professor</b>	Summer 2016 & 2017
Department of Sociology	
Syracuse University	
Introduction to Sociology, online asynchronous	

<b>Adjunct Professor</b>	Spring 2016
Sociology Department	
De Anza College	
Introduction to Sociology; Social Problems	

<b>Discussion Section Leader</b>	Spring 2009; Fall 2011
Syracuse University, Sociology Department	
Introduction to Sociology	

<b>Teaching Assistant</b>	2007-2012
Syracuse University, Sociology Department	
Social Problems	Spring 2010
Race and Immigration in the US	Fall 2009
Sociology of Marriage and Families	Fall 2008
Punishment & Inequality in the US	Spring 2012; Spring 2011
Sociological Theory	Fall 2010

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## RECENT CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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- "Human Rights and Hijra Criminalization in South India." August, 2016. American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA.
- "Class and the Professionalization of 'Community' Activists in South India." August, 2016. Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA.
- "NGOs, the state and the Criminalization of Hijras in South India." March, 2016. Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Oakland, CA.
- "Mutual Need and the Re-production of Marginality: NGOs and Working-Class Lesbian and Transmen in South India." October, 2015. South Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Madison, WI.
- "Hierarchy, 'Human Rights' and Community Transformation in South India." August, 2015. American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.
- "Mutual Need and the Re-production of Marginality: NGOs and Working-Class Lesbian and Transmen in South India." May, 2015. South Asia By the Bay, UC Berkeley, CA.
- "Hierarchy, 'Human Rights' and Community Transformation in South India." April, 2015. Yale University Modern South Asia Junior Scholar Workshop, Newhaven, CT.
- "Kinship, Hierarchy and NGOs: Transforming *Hijra* Relationships in South India." October, 2014. South Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Madison, WI.
- "'Come Out and Do What?': NGO-led Sexual Rights Activism and Identity Presentation in South India." May, 2014. *Queering Pride: LGBT Identities and Affects on the Global Stage.* Evanston, IL.
- "Behind the Curtain: Strip Clubs and the Management of Competition for Scarce Resources." August, 2013. American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, New York, NY.
- "Producing the Sexual Minority Subject: NGOs, Urban Spaces, and Neoliberalism in South India." May, 2013. *Violence, Insurgencies, Deceptions: Urban Life in South Asia* Workshop, Singapore National University, Singapore.
- "The Politics of Sexual Rights Funding and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India." April, 2012. Annual Social Theory Forum, University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA.

"Behind the Curtain: Strip Clubs and the Management of Scarce Resources." February, 2012. Eastern Sociological Society, New York, NY.

"Dilemmas in Studying Sexual Rights Activism in India." November, 2011. National Women's Studies Association Annual Meeting, Denver, CO.

"Race and Queer Studies: Challenging Norms of Whiteness." November, 2010. National Women's Studies Association Annual Meeting. Denver, CO.

"Race and Queer Studies: Challenging Norms of Whiteness." March, 2010. *Intersectionality: Challenging Theory, Reframing Politics, Transforming Movements Conference*, University of California at Los Angeles.

"The Meanings of Saris in Contemporary India: Perspectives from Middle-class Urban Women." March, 2009. Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD.

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## PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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National Women's Studies Association, member

American Sociological Association, member

ASA Sex and Gender section, member

ASA Transnational Sociology section, member

ASA Sexualities section, member

ASA Collective Action and Social Movements section, member

Eastern Sociological Society, member

Pacific Sociological Society, member

Popular Culture Association/American Studies Association, member

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## SERVICE

---

Nazarbayev University Gender, Disability and LGBT Inclusion Task Force, 2016-2017

Nazarbayev University Gender Consortium of Scholars, 2017

Syracuse University Open Doors Queer Graduate Students Organization, 2008-2012

Syracuse University Graduate Student Organization, department representative 2009-2010

Syracuse University Sociology Future Professoriate Program, co-coordinator 2009-2010

Syracuse University Sociology Graduate Student Organization, member 2008-present

MIT Women's Studies Consortium Annual Conference, Organizer 2007-2008

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**Languages**

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Advanced speaking and intermediate reading and writing skills in Kannada  
Intermediate speaking, reading and writing skills in Hindi  
Beginning speaking, reading and writing skills in Russian

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