

## The Hijra Community and Decolonizing Gender

🕒 June 24, 2021 🏳️‍🌈 LGBTQ+

If you are from South Asia, you almost certainly have some knowledge of the hijra community. If you are a reader from here in Minnesota, or anywhere else in the West, hijra may be a new word to you. A historically important community, hijra today face prejudice, discrimination, and violence. But it wasn't always this way.

Hijra, the third gender of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal, have long been the subject of colonially imposed bigotry. However, for far longer, hijra were an extremely important and respected segment of society. While some of that cultural reverence remains, the status of the hijra community has long been eroded. Today, a grueling fight for acceptance rages across South Asia.

### Who Are the Hijra?

Hijra refers to the third gender of several South Asian nations. For a long time, hijra was India's third gender. But just as India was fractured by colonization, so too was the hijra community.

Hijra may be a difficult concept for Western readers to understand without cultural context. Some may find the closest equivalent in a Western lexicon to be transgender. However, that would not be an accurate descriptor as hijra and transgender are not the same, nor do they occupy the same space in South Asia. It would be a disservice to both communities to use Western LGBTQ+ terminology to explain as it simply does not have the appropriate words.

Hijra is a third gender, neither man nor woman. Transgender is therefore an inaccurate equivalence because hijra is its own. Transgender is transgender, and hijra is hijra. Hijra are individuals who identify outside the normal gender binary, but typically present as female. This includes, but is not limited to, people who are intersex, or people who were assigned male or female at birth but self-identify as hijra.

### Historical Background of the Hijra Community

Long before colonization, before modern states like India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, hijra were a respected community that crossed cultural boundaries. In the Muslim Mughal Empire, which ruled modern-day India and Pakistan from the 16th to 19th centuries, rulers were often generous patrons of the hijra community.

However, the history of the hijra community stretches back to ancient times. There are important genderfluid characters in both the Ramayana and Mahabharata, sacred Hindu texts written nearly 2,400 years ago. Even Shiva, one of the most important figures in the Hindu pantheon, has a transgender form named Ardhanarishvara. [Click here to read an Indian study on transsexualism in Hindu mythology.](#)

Many scholars agree that the first explicit mention of a third gender came from the Kama Sutra period, which ended over 2,200 years ago. There are accounts from European travelers in the 1650s that tell of "men and boys dressed like women" in Thatta, modern-day Pakistan.

Throughout the history of South Asia, the hijra community has been a constant. Mainstream discomfort with homosexuality, transgender people, and hijras is a relatively recent development.

When the British Empire took control of the Indian subcontinent, they passed laws that imposed their own intolerance on the public. The 1871 Criminal Tribes Act included hijras as a group that was inherently "immoral and corrupt."

Though the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed when India gained independence in 1947, the damage of 200 years of legally enforced stigmatization was already done. A Bangladeshi hijra activist, Joya Sikder, lamented that the people who created this law, often known as section 377, have now changed the law in their own country while hijras continue to suffer because of it.

### Hijra Culture

The Semitic Arabic root of "hijra" is *hjr*, whose meaning is akin to "leaving one's tribe." The meaning is an accurate one, as the reality for many hijras is leaving home and joining the hijra community. This is not figurative; hijras in South Asia predominantly live in defined, organized all-hijra communities led by gurus.

Communities "adopt" young boys who have been forced from their homes or fled their family of origin. Trans and gender-nonconforming people across the world can certainly empathize with finding their adoptive family when rejected by their birth family.

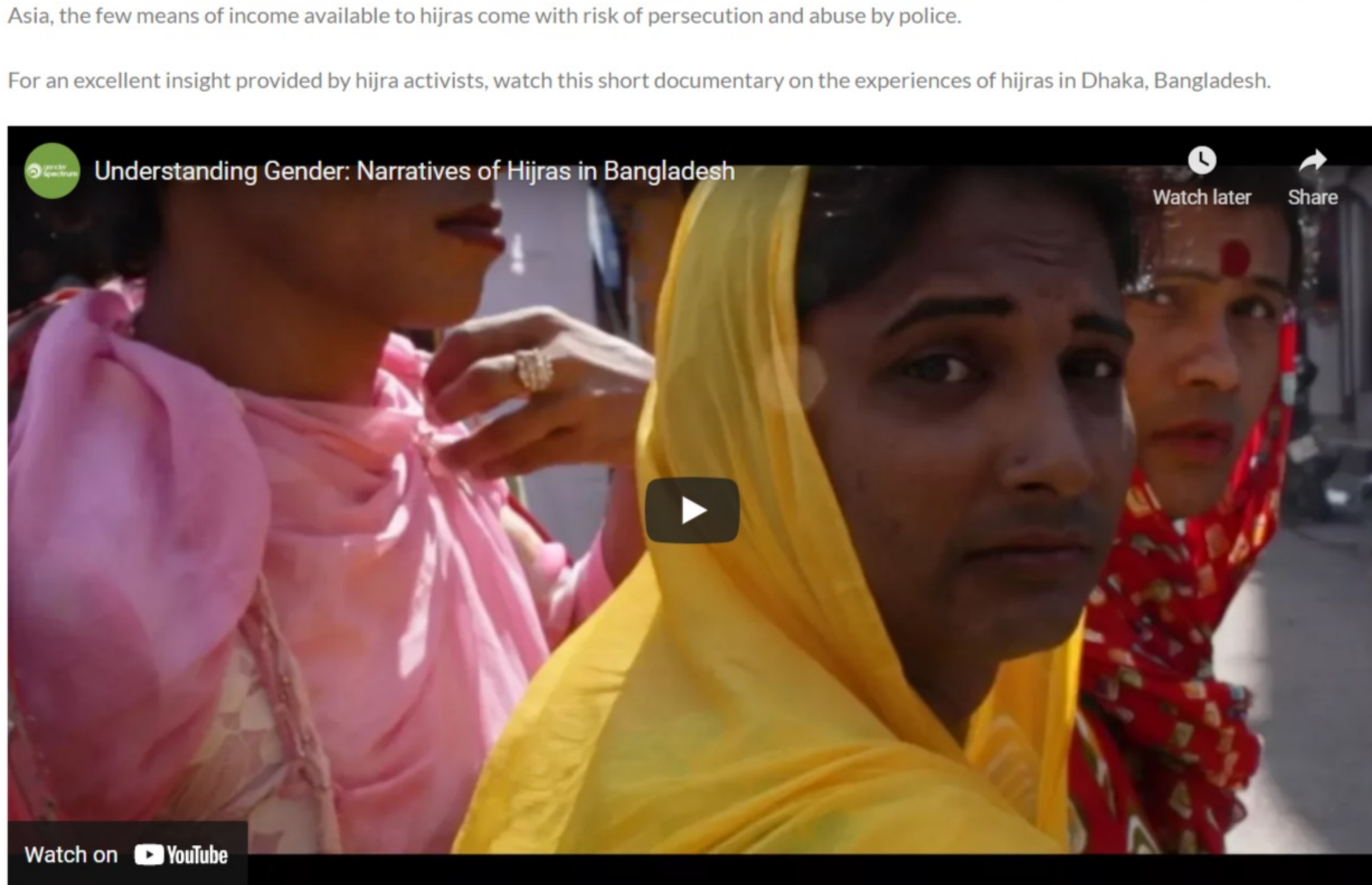
Historically and culturally, many believe hijras have power to bless and to curse. Because of this, hijra people are often present at weddings and births to perform blessings. However, this also means many are superstitious of the hijra community.

Feminine symbolism and expressiveness are important. Many hijras work as dancers and performers, where they can exhibit traditionally feminine behaviors and also poke fun at incongruencies between their behavior and that of "ordinary" women.

Due to barriers put in place by colonial and postcolonial society, there are not many "legitimate" forms of work available to the hijra community. Performances and blessings at weddings and other ceremonies have also been curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. As a result, many hijra make an income through begging or sex work, a portion of which is given to their respective gurus.

Activists are working hard to secure more avenues for work, but progress is slow going. With begging and sex work criminalized across South Asia, the few means of income available to hijras come with risk of persecution and abuse by police.

For an excellent insight provided by hijra activists, watch this short documentary on the experiences of hijras in Dhaka, Bangladesh.



Understanding Gender: Narratives of Hijras in Bangladesh (2017)

### Legal Victories for the Hijra Community

Today, the hijra community is often treated with contempt and is the subject of much discrimination. Some progress is being made to undo the colonially imposed stigmas, but it is a slow process. Nonetheless, hijras have claimed important victories in the past decade.

In 2014, India established legal recognition of the third gender after a ruling from *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India*. The Supreme Court of India cited Articles 15 and 16, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of "sex." The landmark ruling stated that "sex" does not pertain exclusively to biological characteristics, but also self-perceived gender identity. [You can read more about that ruling here.](#)

In 2013, Bangladesh legally recognized people of a third gender, which granted protections to the hijra community. Bangladesh's first hijra Pride Parade was held in Dhaka in 2014 to commemorate the occasion. Pakistan passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018 which granted legality of a third gender. [Click here to read about Pakistan's ruling.](#)

In 2007, *Pant v. Nepal* established protections for a third gender under the same ruling that legalized same-sex marriage. [You can read that ruling here.](#)

### Progress Yet To Be Made

The unfortunate reality for any social movement is that legal recognition often precedes cultural acceptance. Despite new legal protections, the hijra community still faces discrimination, exploitation, and violence.

Critics of the new legal protections point out that the laws lack substance and are still discriminatory. For example, Bangladesh's laws do not offer any definition for hijra, leaving officials to fill in the blanks with their own, often biased, personal understandings. When applying for government jobs, Bangladeshi hijras face humiliating medical exams.

All over South Asia, general society does not allow people from the hijra community to take part in the same way as the rest. As a result of the stigmatization and marginalization they face, most hijras must live together and often support themselves with begging or sex work. Despite legal protections, normal jobs aren't yet open.

### Decolonizing Gender

The fact of the matter is that mainstream intolerance of not only the hijra community, but the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, is a legacy of colonial rule. Yes, bigotry and intolerance have always existed to an extent. However, the mainstream acceptance of it is new. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, though repealed in India for nearly 80 years, has left scars that continue to influence policing, anti-discrimination laws, and society's overall treatment of groups marginalized by the act.

As societies, South Asia has made incredible collective efforts to throw aside colonial influences to varying degrees. However, our culture's overall mistreatment of hijra communities is a colonial legacy that too many seem to be apathetic towards changing.

Decolonizing is about more than simply repealing colonial-era laws. Yes, India repealed the Criminal Tribes Act in 1949 after gaining independence. But the legacy of that act remains, both in our societal fabric and in successive laws, such as the Habitual Offenders Act that still allows undue persecution of gender-nonconforming individuals.

Many argue that the work of decolonization is only half-finished when colonial-era laws are amended. The wider meaning is to free oneself of the colonial psyche. Decolonizing the way we think is just as, if not more important. This includes our culture's treatment of hijras, of the gender-nonconforming community, and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

People of color across the world have been forced to conform to Western colonial ideas of gender and sexuality, and our community is no different in that regard. We may live in a postcolonial world, but we have not yet achieved a decolonial world.

The painful legacy remains, and will continue to remain until we decolonize our culture in full. Decolonizing gender is a critically important step in not only making a more equitable and just society, but in reclaiming a part of our culture that has nearly been taken away.

To finish, take some time to watch this 2018 TEDx Talk given by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. Laxmi Ji is among the most prominent hijra, trans, and sexual minority human rights activists in South Asia.

Hear her experience and vision below. There is a wealth of talks given by Laxmi Ji available. [Click here to see some results.](#)



TEDx with Laxmi Narayan Tripathi: Demystifying Gender in Indian Culture

### How You Can Make a Difference

If you are curious about how you can help, consider donating to organizations that are making a difference on the ground.

**Parivar Bay Area** is based in the US and works with a network of 25+ organizations across India. Their mission is to support and protect "our South Asian Queer Trans Family." The pandemic has exacerbated the already extreme marginalization faced by the Indian Trans Hijra community.

Parivar has organized Save Indian Trans Lives, or SITAL, to distribute food and health kits in over 10,000 communities in 13 of India's 28 states. At the time of writing, the SITAL: COVID Relief Fund has raised \$105,000 of their \$176,000 goal.

[Donate to SITAL on GoFundMe](#) and read more about their efforts here.

[Click here to visit Parivar's website.](#)

Parivar has compiled a list of adjacent organizations and fundraisers, which you can view here.

Parivar was featured in a *New York Times* piece, which you can read here.

**Kolkata Anandam** is a small, grassroots organization working to support the trans community in West Bengal. During the first wave of COVID-19, their efforts supported 250 trans individuals affected by the lockdowns. The second wave, which is currently gripping India, has made things even harder.

Kolkata Anandam has raised 190,000 rupees of their 697,000 rupee goal. They are working to distribute food, rations, and supplies to 300 trans individuals during the current round of lockdowns.

[Click here to find consistent updates on their activities on their Facebook page.](#)

[Donate to Kolkata Anandam via Milaap.org](#) here.

[Read criticisms of recent landmark rulings from trans and hijra activists here.](#)

[Read an article on hijras and the third gender from Harvard Divinity School here.](#)

[Bangladesh's new laws still have work to be done. Read about the criticisms here.](#)

[Learn about the effects of COVID-19 on hijra communities in India here.](#)

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