CHAPTER THREE

Emasculation Ritual Among the Hijras

“Why must you have this operation?” I asked Kamladevi. She answered by saying that the hijras have many powers, but only if they have the operation. She then told me this story:

There once was a king who asked a hijra to show him her power. The hijra clapped her hands three times and immediately the door of the king’s palace opened automatically, without anyone touching it. Then the king said, “Show me your power in some other way.” By the side of the road there was a thorny cactus. The hijra just took the thorn of the cactus and emasculated himself. He showed the king that he had the power. The hijra just stood there with the blood oozing out and raised his hand with his penis in it. Then the king realized the power of the hijras.

As this tale so graphically illustrates, emasculation is the major source of the ritual power of the hijras. It is the source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a hijra and of being so identified by the larger society. It is the emasculation operation that links the hijras to two of the most powerful figures in the Hindu religion, Shiva and the Mother Goddess, and it is emasculation that sanctions the hijras’ ritual role as performers at marriages and births. If we accept the view (Hiltelbeitel, 1980) that the various kinds of eunuch priests who serve the Mother Goddess in India are ultimately impersonating Shiva, or Shiva in union with the Mother Goddess, this accounts for the third aspect of the hijra role, that is, their presence at temple festivals.

While hijras may worship at all Mother Goddess temples, as well as at Shiva temples, their major object of devotion is Bahuchara Mata, a version of the Indian Mother Goddess whose main temple is near Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat. Every hijra household has a small shrine dedicated to Bahuchara Mata, and ideally, every hijra should visit her temple. It is in the name of this goddess that hijras shower blessings of fertility and prosperity on a newborn child or a married couple. In Bahuchara’s temple, hijras act as temple servants of the Mother Goddess, blessing worshipers who approach the deity and explaining the stories of Bahuchara to them. But it is only after the emasculation operation that hijras become vehicles of the Mother Goddess’s power.

Bahuchara is one of the most important goddesses in the Gujarat region and is worshiped by a large part of the population, but she is particularly associated with male transvestism and transgenderism and thus as a special relation to the hijras. The origin of her worship is told in a legend well known throughout this area. Bahuchara was a pretty, young maiden in a party of travelers passing through the forest in Gujarat. The party was attacked by thieves, and fearing that they would outrage her modesty, Bahuchara drew her dagger and cut off her breast, offering it to the outlaws in place of her virtue. This act, and her ensuing death, led to Bahuchara’s deification and the practice of self-mutilation and sexual abstinence by her devotees to secure her favor. Bahuchara is also specifically worshiped by childless women in the hope of bearing a child, particularly a son (Mehta, 1947).

Many myths attest to Bahuchara’s special connection to the hijras as impotent men who must undergo emasculation. In one story, a king prayed to Bahuchara for a son. She granted him his wish, but his son, named Jetho, was impotent. One night Bahuchara appeared in a dream and commanded Jetho to cut off his genitals, dress in female clothing, and become her servant. Jetho obeyed the goddess and from that time on, it is said, impotent men get a call from the goddess in their dreams to be emasculated. Indeed, there is a belief in Gujarat that impotent men who resist the call of Bahuchara to get emasculated will be born impotent for seven future births. Such is the price one pays for disobeying the goddess.
Another story that is an important part of hijra folklore illustrates even more dramatically the connections of Bahuchara to the hijras as impotent men who must undergo emasculation:

Once there was a prince whose parents wanted to get him married. The boy did not want to get married, but his parents insisted. They selected this goddess as his wife, and the marriage took place. He was a very handsome boy, but the Mata was also a very beautiful lady. But after the marriage the husband and wife never joined together. On the first night, leaving the goddess alone in the nuptial room, the prince rode away into the forest. The goddess waited till dawn and felt very angry that her husband had left her. This went on for some months.

The goddess felt very hurt and decided to investigate. So one night she followed him on a path to the forest clearing where the prince had been acting like the hijras. She was puzzled by what she had seen and returned home. When her husband returned, she said to him, “I want to ask you something, do not get angry at me. Don’t you feel that you must have your wife by you?” Then the prince fell at her feet and told her, “Mother, if I had the urge for a wife and children I wouldn’t have left you and gone away. I am neither a man nor a woman, and that is the truth.”

The goddess got very angry and said, “They have spoiled my life by hiding the facts, and therefore your life will also be spoiled. Hereafter, people like you should be nirvan [undergo emasculation in order to be reborn].” So saying, she cut off his genitals. After cutting off his genitals she said, “People like you, who are going to have this nirvan, should call me at that time.” After this the prince took on the form of a woman.

“So that is why,” the storyteller continued, “whenever there is an (emasculation) operation to be performed, we call the Mata. During the operation she is with us and afterwards we live in her power.”

THE OPERATION

The hijras call the emasculation operation nirvan. Nirvan is a condition of calm and absence of desire; it is liberation from the finite human consciousness and the dawn of a higher consciousness. The Hindu scriptures call the beginning of this experience the second birth, or the opening of the eye of wisdom. The hijras, too, translate nirvan as rebirth.

Emasculation is explicitly a rite of passage, moving the “nirvan” (the one who is operated on) from the status of an ordinary, impotent male to that of a hijra. Through the operation, the former, impotent male person dies, and a new person, endowed with sacred power (shakti), is reborn. Like other rites of passage described in the literature (van Gennep, 1960), this passage consists of three stages: In the first, a preparatory period, the person is separated from his former, male status. In the second, the liminal period, which corresponds to the recovery period after the operation, the person is in a liminal state, betwixt and between, no longer a male but not yet invested with the Mata’s powers. In the third stage, in an elaborate ceremony, the individual becomes nirvan, a “real” hijra: The curse of impotence is removed and she is reborn as a vehicle of the Mata’s powers.

Traditionally, the emasculation operation was performed as part of the initiation into the hijra cult, at the site of the Mata’s temple. In 1888, however, this rite was outlawed by the Raja of the area, in spite of strong hijra protests against its prohibition (Bhimbhai, 1901). Today, the operation may be performed wherever hijras are in India. Although the operation was always performed in secret, today this is also necessary because emasculation is a criminal act under the Indian penal code (1981:1068-1069). In spite of its criminalization and strong government pronouncements against it, however, the operation does not seem to be dying out; indeed, it may even be increasing in frequency (Ranade, 1983).

Ideally, the emasculation operation is performed by a hijra called a dai ma (midwife), a clear and strong symbolic statement of emasculation as rebirth. Meera, the dai ma whom I knew well, and whose personal narrative appears later, had a dream in which the Mata gave her the call to perform the operation. She, like other dai mas, has no medical training; she believes that she operates with the power of the Mata so that the result is not in her hands.
Prior to the operation there is a preparatory stage, in which the dai ma and the client seek the Mata’s blessing in a puja (ritual of worship). A lamp made of rice flour mixed with milk is covered with ghee (clarified butter) and then burned. This is an offering to the Mata and is placed beside a picture of the deity. The same flour used in the making the lamp is then mixed with brown sugar, cardamom, cashew nuts, and raisins—traditional offerings in Hindu pujas—and this becomes the prasad (sanctified food).

The dai ma asks the prospective nirvan to look at the Mata’s picture. If the Mata appears to be smiling and laughing, that is a sign that the operation will succeed. It is not necessary for the dai ma to see the Mata smiling her approval; it is sufficient for the client to do so. The dai ma then breaks a coconut; if it breaks evenly in half, the operation can take place. If it breaks unevenly, the operation will be postponed. Clients who do not receive these positive omens translate this into their own lack of courage, and some of the hijras I met had gone two and three times for this puja before the signs were propitious. Given the irreversible and life threatening nature of the operation, it seems reasonable to interpret the puja as a way of attempting to resolve the ambivalence that anticipation of the operation generates.

If it is decided that the operation will take place, the client is isolated for a period of several days to a month. During this time she is not permitted to leave the house and all of her personal needs are taken care of by hijras. She is surrounded by a number of prohibitions, such as not looking in a mirror, not having sex, and not eating spicy food, which suggest the creation of a psychological state of mind of peace and passivity.

The operation takes place at about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, a usual time in India for auspicious ceremonies, such as marriages. Only the dai ma and her assistant are present, along with the client. A photograph of the Mata is also placed in the room. While the client is still sleeping, the dai ma and her assistant perform a puja in front of the Mata’s picture, to ask Bahuchara’s blessing to make the knife effective. After this puja, the dai ma puts the knife out of sight in the hipfold of her sari. Then the sleeping client is awakened and given a drink of water.

The client’s clothes and jewelry are removed—“they must be naked as the day they were born.” After being given a bath the client is ready for the operation. She is seated on a small stool and held from the back by the dai ma’s assistant, who also crosses the client’s hair over her face for her to bite on. The client’s penis and scrotum are tightly tied with a string, so that a clean cut can be made. The client looks at the picture of Bahuchara and constantly repeats her name, Mata, Mata, Mata. This apparently produces a trancelike state during which the dai ma takes the knife from her sari and makes two quick opposite diagonal cuts. The organs—both penis and testicles—are completely separated from the body. A small stick is put into the urethra to keep it open. None of the hijras who had the operation told me that they felt any pain when the cut was made; it was variously described as “a small pinch” or “like an ant bite.”

When the cut is made, the blood gushes out, and nothing is done to stem the flow. Meera told me that the blood is considered the “male part” and should be drained off; she stated that this is why it is important to have a hijra dai ma do the operation. If others do it, for example, the “sex change” doctors who are available in Bombay, they try to stop the flow of blood, and this is considered less effective ritually, as well as medically harmful.

The hour just after the operation is considered to be the critical time during which the client’s life or death is in the balance. This uncertainty is conceptualized by the hijras as a “tug of war” between the Bahuchara Mata, who gives life, and her elder sister, Chamundeswari, “the goddess who sits on a lion in Mysore,” who takes life. During this hour the dai ma’s assistant secretly disposes of the severed organs, which are placed in a pot and buried under a living tree.
A 40-day recovery period, similar to that of a woman after childbirth, follows the operation. This is the liminal period of the rite and includes behaviors and symbols that express the marginal status of the client at this time and also have a beneficial impact on her health. No stitches are made in the wound after the surgery, and the wound is healed through repeated applications of hot gingili (sesame seed) oil and heat to prevent infection. For the first 3 days the nirvan’s diet is limited to tea with brown sugar, ghee, and farina with brown sugar. By the fourth day rice and vegetable curry are added to the diet; this induces vomiting, which brings out the “bad materials” left in the body. After the fourth day, chapatis (flat wheat bread) made with oil and onions may also be eaten, and this diet continues for the remainder of the 40 days. Pure sugar and wheat bread are also important elements in the diet of women who have given birth; both items are also part of the traditional badhai given to hijra performers, another illustration of the symbolic identification of childbirth with emasculation as rebirth.

At no time during the 40 days is the nirvan allowed to leave the room where the recovery is taking place, not even to go to the toilet. The hijra elders look after her so that all of her needs are met. Apart from the restricted diet, there are other prohibitions: The nirvan is not allowed to see milk (coffee and tea must be taken black), eat bananas, look in a mirror, comb her hair, or see a man. On the third day after the operation, she is given a bath. At the end of the 12th day, saffron is applied to the nirvan’s face and her hair is washed; this is repeated on the 20th day, the 30th day, and the 40th day. This is the same ritual as for a woman who has given birth.

On the 40th day the reincorporation stage of the ritual takes place. The facial hair, which by now may have grown very long, is pulled out with tweezers. Turmeric is applied to the face and body and then washed off. The nirvan is dressed as a bride, and her hair parting, hands and feet are decorated with mehndi, a red vegetable dye, as those of a bride. She is adorned with elaborate jewelry and new clothes. She is given some milk to drink and then, accompanied by a procession of hijras, late at night, is taken to a body of water—a lake, an ocean, or a temple tank. Now a puja is performed to the Mata; this includes pouring milk three times over the head of the nirvan and three times into the water. This is the final act in the ritual; only now is the nirvan free from the curse of impotence and reborn as a hijra, who can call on the Mata and act as a vehicle of her power.

It is the emasculation ritual that transforms an impotent male into a potentially powerful person. The renunciation of sex and the repression of sexual desire, are, in the Hindu belief system, associated with the powers of the ascetic, and it is this association that is at the heart of the powers of the hijra. Hijras explicitly recognize this connection: They frequently refer to themselves as “other worldly” and as sanyasis, people who renounce society to live as holy wanderers and beggars. This vocation requires renunciation of material possessions, the social relations of caste, the life of the householder and family man, and the worldly attachments of normal men and women, most particularly, sexual desire (kama). The importance of chastity to the religious ascetic is that sexual desire is seen as a distraction from spiritual purposes. Also, sexual activity, which involves a loss of semen, results in a loss of spiritual energy. The hijras’ emasculation is their culturally defined “proof” that they do not experience sexual desire or sexual release as men. This proof of renunciation is the basis of the hijras’ claims on society. As I suggested earlier, and as we shall see later, not all hijras, or even most, live up to this ascetic model; it is nevertheless the most powerful idea that legitimates their ritual functions in Indian society.

THE POWER OF EMASULATION: CREATIVE ASCETICISM

In Indian reality, the hijra, as an impotent man, is “useless, an empty vessel, and fit for nothing” because he is unable to procreate. But in Hindu mythology, impotence can be transformed into the power of generativity through the ideal of tapasya, the practice of asceticism.
Tapas, the power that results from ascetic practices and sexual abstinence, become an essential feature in the process of creation. Ascetics appear throughout Hindu mythology in procreative roles, and of these, Shiva is the greatest creative ascetic.

In one version of the Hindu creation myth, Shiva carries out an extreme, but legitimate, form of tapasya, that of self-castration. Brahma and Vishnu had asked Shiva to create the world. Shiva agreed and plunged into the water for a thousand years. Brahma and Vishnu began to worry and Vishnu told Brahma that he, Brahma, must create and gave him the female power to do so. So Brahma created all of the gods and other beings. When Shiva emerged from the water, and was about to begin the creation, he saw that the universe was already full. So Shiva broke off his linga (phallus), saying that “there is no use for this linga,” and threw it into the earth. His act results in the fertility cult of linga worship, which expresses the paradoxical theme of creative asceticism (see O’Flaherty, 1973:131). Consistent with the paradox of creative asceticism, it is the castrated phallus that is the embodiment of creative tapas and is associated with Shiva. The falling to earth of Shiva’s linga in castration does not render him asexual, but extends his sexual power to the universe. O’Flaherty’s comment about Shiva that “[the linga] becomes a source of universal fertility as soon as it has ceased to be a source of individual fertility” (1973:135) bears directly on the position of the hijras, who as emasculated men (whose organs are buried in the earth) nevertheless have the power to bless others for fertility.

This Hindu theme of creative asceticism provides an explanation of the positive role give the hijra in Indian society. Intersexed and impotent, themselves unable to reproduce, hijras can, through emasculation, transform their liability into a source of creative power that enables them to confer blessings of fertility on others. This identification with the powers of generativity is clearly associated with the ritual importance of hijras on occasions when reproduction is manifest—-at the birth of a child—-or imminent—-at marriages, “which anticipate the reunion of male and female in marital sex” (Hiltelbeitel, 1980:168).

One of the most important links of the hijras (as eunuch-transvestites) to the creative asceticism of Shiva is mediated by Arjun, the hero of the Mahabharata, who is ultimately identified with Shiva (see Hiltelbeitel, 1980:156-157). Within the Mahabharata, there is a well-known story involving Arjun, which hijras point to as a story of their origin. Yudhistira, one of the Pandava brothers, is seduced by his enemies into a game of dice in which the stake is that the defeated party should go with his brothers into exile for 12 years and remain incognito for the 13th year. The Pandavas lose and go into exile as required. When the 13th year comes around, Yudhistira asks Arjun what disguise he will take up for the 13th year in order to remain undiscovered. Arjun answers that he will hide himself in the guise of a eunuch and serve the ladies of the court. He describes how he will spend the year, wearing white conch shell bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire, engaging in menial works in the inner apartments of the queens, and teaching the women of the court singing and dancing. Gopi, the hijra who narrated the story that opens Chapter 2, also told me that whoever is born on Arjun’s day, no matter where in the world, will become a hijra.

The theme of the eunuch is elaborated in several different ways in the Mahabharata, and it is Arjun who is the theme’s main character. Arjun, in the disguise of eunuch-transvestite, participates in weddings and births and thus provides a further legitimation for the ritual contexts in which the hijras perform. At one point, for example, Arjun, in disguise, helps prepare the king’s daughter for marriage and her future role as mother-to-be. In doing this, he refuses to marry the princess himself, thus renouncing not only his sovereignty, but also the issue of an heir. His feigned impotence paves the way for the birth of the princess’ child, just as it is the presence of the emasculated hijras at the home of a male child that paves the way for the child’s virility and the continuation of the family line (Hiltelbeitel, 1980:166). The portrayal of Arjun in popular enactments of the Mahabharata in the vertically divided half-man/half-woman form, again highlights the identification of Arjun with the hijras and the identification of both with the androgynous Shiva.
The widespread association of the powers of asceticism with self-castration in Hindu mythology, particularly as associated with Shiva, provides the background through which we can understand the legitimacy of hijra emasculation, which is often conceptualized as self-castration. Indeed, the powerful imagery of the story that opens this chapter—the hijra flaunting her power through the upraised male organ—recalls vividly the fact that Shiva worship centers on the erect linga.

Still another important way in which the hijras identify with Shiva, the creative ascetic, is through their powers to bring rain. In Hindu mythology, the production and cessation of rain is a form of creation that results from tapas and chastity (O’Flaherty, 1973:42-43). One of the stories that the hijras tell about their own powers parallels precisely this theme in Hindu mythology as it involves ascetics:

One time there was a king in Hyderabad. There was a great drought during his reign. There were two hijras sitting in the road…The people of the country went and told the king, “Do something about the drought, the whole country is famished and the people are dying.” The king said, “What can I do? I can’t do anything, you people must approach those two hijras who are sitting there by the roadside.” The people spoke to the king with contempt and said, “Why should we ask them instead of you?” The king said, “If anything at all can be done, only they can do it, not me.”

So then the king himself went to the hijras and told them, “There is a drought, people are dying, and the city wants rain. If you make rain, you can live here; if the rain doesn’t come you must go outside the city to live.” The two hijras who were sitting together were mother and daughter [elder and junior]. The daughter said, “Look, mother, so many people have come, let us tell some lies and run away.” But the mother said, “Wait, please, I’ll do something. God will look after me.” So she took the cloth from the upper part of her body and dipped it in a cup of water and gave it to the people to take with them. Then, she said, the rain will come.

Immediately the lightning and thunder came and rain started pouring down; everyone was neck deep in water, it was such a heavy downpour. Then the mother said “enough” and the rain stopped. The people came back to see the hijras but they were gone, and the place they had been sitting in was submerged in water. So the king ordered that wherever hijras were seen in that city they should be respected, and that is why that city is full of hijras.

The centrality of this theme of generative power and its relation to emasculation is seen in what might be called a modern variant of this myth, in which hijras are given the power to make trains stop and start. In talking about the power of the hijras, I was told this story by a hijra elder:

Do you know why we hijras travel free on the trains from Poona northward? There is no rule to ask us for the train fare. Not even the Central Government can ask us. What happened was that there was a hijra who had just got operated on, she had become nirvan. The people, after the operation, put her on a train. It was just the seventh day after the operation. The people traveling in the train were making fun of her and bullying her. The ticket collector and the others made her get down from the train. On top of this, the ticket collector kicked her.

“Mata,” she prayed, “if you’re true, and it is true that you’ve given me back my life, and if my procession is to be done after 30 days, if you want to save my life, this train must not start from here. Then only will I realize you are the truth.”

Then the signal was given and the train had to start, but it could not start. There was a big crowd around the hijra and the people asked her what had happened. She said, “I’m an old hijra and I’ve just got the operation done under the name of the Mata. If you want the train to start, put me back on the train.” Then they made her sit in the train, but still the train would not start. Then she realized that she had prayed wrong, so she put a cloth on her head and prayed to Mata: “I want this train to start. Then only I can reach my place and also the other passengers can go without difficulty.”

Then the train immediately started. From this time on there was no rule to ask a ticket from the hijras on any train. We can even dance in the train, beg in the train, nobody will say anything. From Poona onward, the whole of North India we can travel.

In many ways, then, do the hijras transform their impotent males and its associated lack of status into generative power through emasculation.
EMASCULATION AND WORSHIP OF THE MOTHER GODDESS

Whereas at a deeper level the hijras’ claim to power is through the ritual sacrifice of the phallus, as the identification with Shiva suggest, at the more conscious and culturally elaborated level, it is the devotion to the Mother Goddess (specifically Bahuchara, who is one variant of the Mother Goddess) that is the focus of the hijra community and the most explicitly acknowledged source of their powers.

In Hinduism, religious devotion is related to success and salvation and devotion is equated with submission, particularly in regard to the Mother Goddess. The Goddess is compelled to offer help when confronted with the “utter helplessness” and complete surrender of the devotee. This response is part of the larger “universal compulsion” in Hindu society not to deny anyone anything if they beg for it (Carstairs, 1956:160). This universal compulsion to offer help comes from an underlying fear of those whom one rejects: In Hindu mythology, to reject a woman, particularly a goddess, is especially fraught with danger (O’Flaherty, 1980:278-279). The realization of the Mother Goddess’s power and the danger of denying her wishes are often explicitly given as the reason for her worship. This underlying fear in worship of the Mother Goddess helps to partly explain, or at least put into context, the willingness of the hijras to sacrifice their genitals to her in response to her call and as evidence of their devotion.

In Hindu mythology and ritual, the Mother Goddess is represented as having both a beneficent and a destructive aspect; his represents an ambivalence toward the real mother that is perhaps universal. But it is the “singular intensity and pervasiveness” of the destructive aspects of the Mother Goddess, which “nevertheless contain the seeds of salvation,” that is particularly characteristic of Hindu India and provides the psychological and symbolic context of hijra emasculation.

Hindu mythology—and hijra mythology—abound in images of the Mother Goddess engaging in aggressive acts—devouring, beheading, and castrating—a regular panoply of violent behavior that nevertheless also contains symbolism of initiation and rebirth. This theme is nowhere so obvious as in the myths and rituals of the hijras where rebirth emerges from emasculation. One of the forms taken by this theme is that of the Goddess as castrator of her mortal consort, as in the hijra myth cited earlier (pp.25-26).

The Mother Goddess as castrator of her mortal consort appears frequently in Hindu mythology and ritual (O’Flaherty, 1980:81-86) and is an example of the many violent, destructive acts that the Goddess perpetrates on those who anger her. One of the sources of her anger, as in the myth cited here, is the rejection of her love by her consort, who attempts to evade her advances by explaining that she is like a mother to him. This suggests that the consort experiences the offering of the Goddess’s love as an incestuous confrontation—a confrontation from which he must free himself. How does one flee the sexual advances of a mother? One way is to transform oneself into a child, a form of unmanning that is less severe than castration. Thus, we see that in the hijra myth above, the prince calls the Goddess “mother” in an attempt to seek protection from her sexual demands by retreating into the nonsexual condition of a child.

The attempt at flight from the mother exists in other Hindu myths, which parallel the hijra myth. One of the most popularly enacted episodes of the Mahabharata involves the celestial nymph Urvasi, who falls in love with and tries to sexually provoke Arjun. This episode describes the feminine beauty and grace of Urvasi, who, exhilarated by liquor and excited by desire, seeks out Arjun in his palace. Urvasi expresses her sexual desire for Arjun, but Arjun tries to fend her off by saying, “I bend my head unto thee, and prostrate myself at thy feet. Thou deserves my worship as my own mother and it behoveth thee to protect me as a son” (in Kakar, 1981:77). But this does not work for Arjun, any more than it does for the prince in the hijra myth. At Arjun’s words, Urvasi gets furious and she curses him, saying that as he has “disregarded a woman pierced by the shafts of Kama, the god of love” she shall have to
spend his time “as a dancer and destitute of manhood and scorned as a eunuch.” Subsequently, this curse is modified so that Arjun only need become a eunuch for a year. In the hijra myth also, the goddess is satisfied with nothing less than the complete submission of her husband, represented by the total loss of manhood of the eunuch state.

Sudhir Kakar (1981), in his psychoanalytical study of Hinduism, family, and personality in India, sees in this story of Arjun and Urvasi the increasing helplessness of the child who desires the mother’s comfort and care but is faced instead with her sexuality. In his rejection of her, she becomes dangerous and destructive, and it is only through the ultimate submission of emasculation that he can receive her protecting presence. In the hijra myth, also, we see that the Mother Goddess will protect the devotee, in this case her consort, but only after she has castrated him. She will give him life, but only after she has killed him. Whereas in the hijra myth---and symbolically in Urvasi’s curse on Arjun---it is the Goddess who does the castrating, in many Hindu, and hijra, myths it is the devotee-son, consort, worshiper—who castrates himself. In this case, the conflict presented by the male’s anxiety over his inadequacy to fulfill the sexual needs of the mother is resolved by self-castration in order to appease the mother.

There are many myths, rituals, religious roles, and themes in Hinduism that involve transgenderism in the form of transformations from male to female; asceticism, too, has been identified as a process of heightened identification with the mother. These all suggest that the hijras’ emasculation ritual is only the extreme end of a more general continuum of ritual practices which derive their cultural meaning and psychological effectiveness from the Hindu cultural and social context. Kakar’s analysis of the relation between Hindu culture and personality seems overgeneralized in its application to “Indian culture” or even Hindu culture, but it has, I believe, a certain cogency in relation to the hijras’ emasculation ritual. Though not referring specifically to hijras, Kakar eloquently expresses the relation of hijra emasculation to Hindu culture and personality: He sees the many mythopoetic (and I would add, ritual) manifestations of bisexuality in India as “express[ing] powerful, living forces in the individual unconscious—dark, ambivalent forces, repressed by most…that only the deviant, by means of…intense mental anguish, dares to act out” (1981:158).

Viewed in this context, then, the meanings and motivations of the hijras’ emasculation ritual can be understood in terms of a wider pattern of culture and personality—motives and forces—in India, which it also serves to highlight. What might these forces and motives be, which are so strong that they do not merely appear in some distant age, or in symbolic imagery, but which are acted on by thousands of persons as part of a religious obligation that no government, from the British to the Indian, has been able to erase? How may the forces that motivate emasculation be understood and related to the cultural context in which they appear? Here again we can turn to the psychoanalytic perspective on Hindu culture suggested by Kakar for a partial answer. Kakar suggests that it is the particular form of the Indian “family drama” that is the source of these “powerful, living forces in the individual unconscious,” which sometimes manifest themselves in extreme forms of gender identity, such as those displayed by the hijras. Whereas in all societies the image of the “bad mother” combines the aggressively destroying and the sexually demanding themes, in India it is in the sphere of unsatisfied erotic needs, in the seductive, provocative presence that the mother extends, that the possibility of psychosexual disturbance most centrally lies.

The young boy’s ego cannot cope with sexual demands of the mother nor can he happily accept the separation from his mother that his rejection of her entails. The son’s response to the mother’s overpowering demands and his simultaneous desire to retain her protection result in a fear of the “devouring mother.” This leads to a “vicious circle that spirals inward in the Indian unconscious: mature women are experienced as sexually threatening o men; this contributes to ‘avoidance behavior’ in marital sexual relations; this in turn causes women to extend a provocative sexual presence towards their sons, and this eventually produces adult men who fear the sexuality of mature women (Kakar, 1981:95).
The mother’s incestuous demands on the son are too strong; they lead him to want to avoid them at all costs, even at the cost of his manhood. But the rejected mother becomes dangerous, and abandonment by her is unthinkable, so close and necessary is her presence. Hence the worship of the Goddess as mother. For it is the Goddess, dangerous as she is, who nevertheless brings blessings, ultimate salvation, and rebirth, just as it is the mother, potentially dangerous as she is in abandoning her son, who nevertheless is the object of the son’s deepest longings for reconciliation with her. This, Kakar holds, is the significance of the theme of the devouring mother and the many rituals and extreme devotion shown her in India—a devotion that prominently includes the most abject submission of the (male) devotee and involves both symbolic and, as with the hijras, actual castration.

The variety of mythopoetic and ritual expressions of transgenderism in Hinduism, including, of course, hijra emasculation, suggests that a number of different mechanisms are operating in the devotee’s attempts at reconciliation with the mother through the worship of the Goddess. All involve the male’s attempt to remove his masculinity—that which he vaguely perceives to be the basis of his conflict with his mother. In one case, as we saw above, the male attempts to infantilize himself in order to flee the mother, in other cases, devotion to the Mata involves transvestism; and in still other cases, in myth and symbolism involving self-castration, the son attempts to remove his masculinity in an even more explicit way. Desperate for reconciliation with the mother, longing for that fusion which represents salvation, the (male) devotee, in rituals ranging from transvestism to emasculation, proves his submission and is thereby assured of the nurturing and life-giving presence of the mother that he desires. In the castration ritual, the nirvan finds a way to both flee the sexually demanding mother and be reconciled with her. The hijra myth makes that clear: After castrating the prince, the Goddess promises her protection but the protection is only offered—and experienced by the hijras—if the castration takes place.

The hijras call their emasculation ritual “rebirth”; this illuminates the view of the ritual as part of a struggle against death, which, because of the “Hindu family drama,” takes a characteristically Hindu form of a desire for fusion with the mother. It is the desire for fusion with the mother as a vehicle for the struggle against death that gives Mother Goddess worship such power in India, where the separation from the mother is experienced as a kind of death. As the hijras say, “It is the Mata who gives us life, we live only in her power.” In emasculation, the hijra, as a devotee of the Goddess, achieves the ultimate identification with the mother, thereby reducing his anxiety about separation from her—the source of all love and life. “The only unbearable harm that the Goddess can inflict on the worshiper is to abandon him. This, not mutilation, is the source of devastating grief” (O’Flaherty, 1980:280). It is clear that this is true for those hijras who undergo emasculation.

In the hijra emasculation ritual, then, many things are being enacted at once. On one level, the operation transforms impotence into generativity, an “empty vessel, good for nothing” into a powerful figure who inspires both awe and fear (though also mockery and abuse). By giving up their useless male organ, hijras are gaining the important power of generativity. At another level, the ritual is resolving, by culturally patterned acting out, the conflicts over the incestuous mother. At still another level, the hijras’ identification with the Goddess through sacrifice of their genitals assures them of her life-giving presence, warding off death.

The psychological motivations of the hijra emasculation ritual are reinforced by more material concerns. As noted earlier, emasculation is not only a religious obligation, but it also distinguishes true hijras from “fake” hijras. This gives the hijra community a way to protect its economic monopoly over certain ritual occasions. This is an extremely important consideration in a society where such economic niches are crucial for survival and where, of course, the social structure of the caste system provides a model for occupational exclusivity. It is to these issues that I turn in the next chapter.