

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

**Beyond Emasculation: Pleasure, Power and Masculinity in The
Making of *Hijrahood* in Bangladesh.**

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Glossary

The words compiled below are the ones occurring most frequently in the main body of the thesis. Whilst the meanings of all the non-English words are spelt out inside the thesis, I collate them here for the sake of the reader's convenience. All Bangla and *Ulti* words are transliterated. The translations of these words are entirely mine and reflect the context in which I heard them being used during my fieldwork.

Abba: Father.

Akkhar: Used as an adjective to denote 'great', 'large' or 'big'.

Akkhar dhur: Hardcore sex.

Asla: Act of initiating a *cela* into *hijra* lineage.

Achol: Hemline of a *sari* but also used figuratively to refer to motherly care and nurturance.

Asla khawa: To become initiated as a *cela* of a *guru*.

Badhai: Demanding gifts at birth.

Bangla: The mainstream language spoken in Bangladesh.

Bandha parik: Bonded or permanent partners of the *hijra*.

Bandhobi: A female friend.

Bagicha: Garden.

Baraiya: The ritual celebration on the twelfth day after emasculation.

Bala-musibod: Danger.

Beyain: An address of endearment tinged with humour, used by the parents of a bride to refer to the parents of the groom and vice versa.

Bila tonna: Bad boys.

Bishomokami: Heterosexual.

Bipod-apod: Danger.

Bigrano: To ruin, used in the context of initiating someone into anal sexual practices.

Birit: Ritual jurisdiction within which *hijra* carry out *hijragiri*.

Birit bakhor: Trespassing of a *birit*.

Borhani: The act of frightening or shaming non-*hijra* people.

Bohurupi: Polymorphous.

Butli: Buttock.

Butli khol: buttock hole or the Anus .

Bua: A female person employed to undertake domestic chores.

Bumper: Moustache.

Cia: Heterosexual marriage.

Cela: Disciple.

Chutta parik: Transient partners of the *hijra*.

Chudda: Old men often used to refer to fathers or uncles.

Chaiton: Hindu.

Cholla or cholla manga: Monies or foodstuffs demanded and collected by the *hijra* from the bazaar.

Chippu: Urethral hole remaining after emasculation or the vagina

Chibry: An emasculated *hijra*.

Chibrano: The act of removing the penis and the scrotum.

Chis: To desire or to have a liking for something (also used as an adjective).

Chilla: An Islamic religious practice in which Muslim men go from one mosque to another to strengthen their sense of faith.

Chimpti: Tweezers.

Chipti: A synonym for *chippu* (See above).

Chiput bazi or chipti bazi: Female to female eroticism.

Chola kola: Subterfuge, *hijra*'s mystique-making capabilities in relation to various kinds of gender and erotic practices.

Dan-khairat: Acts of giving alms or donations.

Daiyar: A meeting place for arbitration.

Daratni: Leader.

Darsan: Beard.

Dorma: Rice.

Dhupni: Cigarette.

Dhurpit: Sex or fucking.

Dhurrani: A prostitute or a 'slut', used in relation to both *hijra* and females.

Dhurrani khol: A brothel or cruising site.

Dhurani neharun: A female prostitute.

Dhon: Penis.

Don: Compensation.

Dud beti: Milk daughter.

Dhol: Drum.

Gaye Holud: A marriage ritual in which turmeric paste is applied to the bodies of the bride and the groom.

Gandu: A pejorative term used to refer to those who penetrate men and are penetrated by men.

Gamchali: *Hijra* who wear *Gamcha* and eke out a living through cooking work.

Gamcha: A coarse thin fabric used to mop.

Genji: A T shirt-style garment.

Ghor: Symbolic lineage.

Gothia: Sister or *hijra* of equal rank.

Janana: *Hijra* with penis.

Jhumka: Scrotum.

Jhalka: Money.

Jok: Hair.

Jodgman: The mainstream or the outside world.

Hamsi: I.

Hijragiri: The occupation of the *hijra*.

Ilu ilu: The practice of padding out bras with water-filled condoms.

Jung: Thighs.

Kari: In the guise of a normative man. Also used as a word of warning in the presence of the non-*hijra* populace. .

Kazi: An Islamic marriage registrar.

Kam: Sex, as in intercourse.

Khol: Home or house.

Karkhana: The place where the ritual removal of the penis and scrotum occurs.

Khoma: The face of a person.

Khobra: Chicken.

Khujli: Itching.

Kudenga: A pejorative synonym for *Gandu*.

Khai khowara: A pejorative synonym for *Gandu*.

Kacchi kora: To castigate someone.

Khilwar: Alcohol.

Khadem: Custodian of a shrine.

Kothi: Effeminate male (also spelt as *koti* by some scholars).

Kothi-pona: Akin to the mannerism of a *kothi*-identified person.

Lilki: Breasts.

Lutki: Small.

Ligam: Penis.

Ligam potano: To disappear the penis.

Lohori or *Lohori Khawa*: Exchange of glances and gestures, often used in the context of attracting men.

Lungi : A seamless tubular shape garment worn around the waist.

Nirban: Ritual acts of emasculation.

Maigga: A derogatory expression for an effeminate male.

Magi: A 'slut'.

Nayak: Leader.

Neharun: Female or women.

Nati cela: Grand disciple.

Nilki: Breast

Norom sorom: Soft .

Orna: A patch of cloth worn across the breast by women.

Oli: A red sack used to store foodstuffs and other gifts received during *badhai*.

Pan pata: Betel leaves.

Patli: Tea.

Pakki: Schooled in *hijra* mores.

Parik: Husband, lover or intimate partner.

Parik pala: The act of making a pet of a *parik*.

Panathi: A masculine man, or just man.

Panathi-pon: In the manner of a man.

Puti cela: Great grand disciple.

Pakki kora: To turn a place into a cruising site by managing the locals and the police. Also used by the *hijra* to refer to one's being made knowledgeable about *hijra* ways.

Panathi thekano: To catch or capture a *panathi* for sex.

Pon Pesha: The *hijra* occupation.

Potano: To vanish.

Sawab: Divine blessings or credits.

Samokami: Homosexual.

Samajik lingo: Literally social genitalia, but often used as a translation for the English word gender in ‘NGO’ circles.

Sanan: Compensation paid by a *panthi* to the *guru* of a *hijra* on the event his marriage to a *hijra* (also referred to as *Pakki*).

Salish: Arbitration.

Shasuri: Mother in law.

Sona: Literally gold but also used to refer to the penis.

Sot: An internal calling or celestial power sought by the *hijra* before undergoing emasculation.

Sinni: A celebratory feast in the name of a Muslim saint.

Sudrani: Semen.

Surki: Muslim.

Taka: Name of the Bangladeshi currency.

Thappu: Money.

Thalia: Small trappings or patches of cloth used to wrap up or clean small children especially the new born.

Thikri: Clap.

Tonna: A young man or a teenager.

Tumsi: You.

Ulu jhulu: Fun.

Ulti: The clandestine argot used by the *hijra* and the wider community of male bodied feminine identified people.

Vabi: The wife of a brother.

Vabraj: Pregnant.

Vabrajer chibry: *Hijra* born with defective or missing genitals.

Velki: Fake.

Introduction: Pleasure, power and masculinities

In contemporary Bangladesh, as in many parts across south Asia, gangs of *hijra* adorned in *saris* with gaudy makeup are often seen to swagger down the busy streets clapping and demanding alms from the sellers in the bazaars. Popularly known as a third sex or gender or as ‘neither men nor women’ (Nanda 1999), *hijra* are a publicly institutionalized subculture of male bodied feminine identified people who secretly desire masculine men and identify themselves as non-men. *Hijra* are also said to sacrifice their male genitals to a mother goddess in return for celestial prowess to bless and curse newlyweds and the new born. Based on ethnographic research in Dhaka, I interrogate the production, reproduction and transformation of *hijra* identities and subjectivities. Against the dominant trope of the *hijra* as an intermediate category of third sexed/gendered people, I contend that a deeper cultural politics of masculinity, pleasure and power is implicated not only in the way *hijra* are produced but also in how the *hijra* are represented both in scholarship and in popular imaginary.

First, this thesis dismantles the trope of asexuality in terms of which *hijra* have been conceptualized in the extant body of literature. *Hijra* as a lexeme in several South Asian languages, namely Hindi, Urdu and Bangla, denotes impotence and asexuality. In addition, *hijra* across South Asia publicly present themselves as people born with defective or missing genitals and above desire. This trope of asexuality that puts the *hijra* on a par with the band of ascetics and renunciates, holds special cultural salience in the context of India. It is in terms of such a public understanding and *hijra* insistence on their being asexual that people in India generically deem the *hijra* to be endowed with special ritual and sacred power. In contrast, I argue that desire is a very significant dimension of *hijra* subjectivity: it is on account of the desire for men that one becomes a *hijra*. In that sense, I would submit that scholars privileged gender over desire in the representation of the *hijra*. Although

scholars often comment on *hijra* sexual entanglement with men, the role of desire has rarely been interrogated in the crafting of *hijrahood*. For instance, the principal groups of *hijra* that Reddy (2005) based her ethnography on were sex workers. Yet her monograph offers very little information and analysis on erotic practice and desire and their roles in the lives of her interlocutors.

Second, that desire is central to the sense of being a *hijra* brings into view complex processes of the construction of masculinity within which *hijra* subjectivities and *hijra* erotic and affective relations are formed. For instance, *hijra-ness* is always constituted in relation to the *panthi*, the *hijra* word for men. While *hijra* desire men, they only desire what, according to the *hijra*, are normative men: men who are expected to be attracted to women. Also significant here is the idea of men being inevitably penetrators, as opposed to the *hijra* and females, who are receptive in sexual intercourse. To my *hijra* interlocutors, a man's desire to be penetrated is indicative of that person's non-man status. While I elaborate these issues in detail later in this thesis, suffice it to say that *hijra* in this framework become party to maintaining and reinforcing the normative ideals of masculinity. Put in other words, the non-masculinity of the *hijra* and the masculinity of their partners are mutually co-constituting.

Scholars (e.g. Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004), in varied contexts, contend that masculine performance is often directed towards a critical audience of men. That is, it is in relation to other men that men craft and assert their masculinities. Particularly highlighting the role of male to male homosocial space as the site for the production of masculinity, scholars (e.g. Flood, 2008) note that it is in terms of heteronormative talk or flaunting of heterosexual prowess that manhood is produced and reproduced. In that sense, such homosocial space is productive of masculine dominance and its reproduction. Those who fail to speak the normative masculine language are often denigrated and relegated to the status of non-men. In contrast, what this thesis demonstrates is the way *hijra* expectations and strict policing of the normative

gender boundaries work to produce the masculinity of other men, especially their partners. For instance, men who do not act in the normative vein are severely castigated by the *hijra*, as will be shown later in this thesis. In a similar vein, *hijra* too have to negotiate their masculinities in relation to the expectations of their partners. Here, let me also note that although it is often in relation to the dominant masculine ideals that *hijra* are discursively constructed as non-men, *hijra* do not challenge such norms when it comes to their involvement with men with whom they want to have sex or be romantically involved. In other words, *hijra* tend not to challenge the very ideals of masculinity in terms of which they are disparaged as *hijra*. That *hijra* reinforce such ideals begs further questions to which I turn later.

Third, emasculation or the ritualized removal of the penis and the scrotum is routinely described as the single most defining ritual through which *hijra* bodies are produced in South Asia. In the extant scholarship, *hijrahood*, therefore, inheres in and flows from emasculation. In addition, the incontrovertibility of emasculation has been justified on mythic grounds, as *hijra* in India are said to routinely invoke various mythic tales that valorise such sacrifices. In contrast, I argue that there are both *hijra* with penis as well those without and the very fact of being emasculated is not necessarily a marker of greater social prestige within the *hijra* community in Bangladesh. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the accommodation of the *hijra* with penis is explainable in terms of *hijra* cosmological frame of reference that celebrates bodies both with and without penis as the purist embodiment of the first two primordial *hijra* archetypes that I elaborate at length later in this thesis.

From the slant of masculinity, my contention that *hijrahood* does not flow from emasculation alerts us to probe deeper why some undergo emasculation while others do not and what are the reasons that propel one to opt for it. It is, as I will explain later, often in relation to partners' expectations and demands that many *hijra* undergo emasculation. This is not to suggest that this is the single most important reason. While emasculation can be read as *hijra's*

response to the call of a sacred goddess, as will be shown later in this thesis, *hijra* also single out the control of the *birit* (ritual jurisdiction), economic gains and bodily urges as significant factors in their decisions to be emasculated. Furthermore, the conventional privileging of emasculation in the depiction of *hijra* has often reflected orientalist connotations of the *hijra* with Islam. In colonial scholarship as much as in recent scholarly disquisition, *hijra* are often represented as Muslims. Several scholars (e.g. Taparia 2011, Jaffrey 1997) contend that the institution of the *hijra* in the subcontinent is a contribution of the Mughal sultanate while others, notably Reddy (2005), maintain that *hijra* are deemed to become Muslim on account of their practice of circumcision and emasculation. That *hijra* self-identify and are identified as Muslims in contemporary India is redolent of the cultural politics of virile Hindu masculinity in India where Muslims are routinely demonised as ‘incomplete men’ on account of circumcision (Ramaswami 2007). Against such an argument, I demonstrate that there are both *hijra* with penis as well as those without and both the emasculated and non-emasculated *hijra* have specific ritual functions and are complementary in the conduct of *hijrahood* or the occupation of the *hijra*. In addition, I also foreground that while emasculation entails removal of the male genitals, it does not necessarily render the *hijra* non-masculine. Rather, *hijra* become the embodiment of hyper-masculinity on account of their emasculation. Having relinquished somatic masculinity, culturally considered to be most valuable, emasculated *hijra* become intrepid and invincible. In addition, emasculated *hijra*, as my *hijra* interlocutors explained, also become ever-green on account of incremental concentration of semen in their bodies.

Fourth, a closer look at the extant ethnographic literature reveals a problematic tendency to attribute defect, lack and inadequacy in terms of gender and desire in the representation of the *hijra*. Scholars (Nanda 1999, Pattnaik, 2009) argue that *hijra* as a community comprises people of varied gender and sexual preferences, including intersex, transsexual and even hermaphrodites. Although Nanda argues that Indian society catapults such people to the status of a sacred ‘third sex/gender’, such a projection ironically anchors the *hijra* in

their bodies. Put differently, it is as if one becomes a *hijra* by default, i.e. it is on account of having defective male genitals or failure to be sufficiently normatively masculine that one enters the *hijra* community. Against this narrativization of lack and inadequacy, most powerfully encapsulated in Nanda's now famous expression, 'neither men nor women', I demonstrate that the very act of people's taking up the *hijra* subject position entails conscious disapproval and disavowal of normative masculinities. That is, one joins the *hijra* not because of one's failure to excel in masculine performance, but rather in order to be able to explore varied gender, erotic and ritual possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to the normatively masculinised subjects in Bangladesh.

According to the *hijra*, only those who renounce the privileges of heterosexual masculinity are entitled to varied forms of bodily pleasure. Desire is framed in terms of heterogendered idiom: those who penetrate are by definition men as opposed to the *hijra* who are always essentially receptive and therefore feminine or 'female-like'. While such a penetrated/penetrator framework is often reversed in practice, this configuration of desire is not simply mimetic of heterosexuality. Rather, the reason why *hijra* lionize and strictly police this paradigm is because, as I will explicate later in this thesis, being penetrated is a lot more pleasurable than penetrating. In other words, it is within this heterogendered framework that *hijra* maximize their erotic delights. Furthermore, *hijra* believe that only those who are part of the community as *hijra* are entitled to such pleasures. This does not, however, require the *hijra* to be permanently detached from the heterosexual affiliations. Rather, as will be indicated later, there are both *hijra* who are heterosexually married as well those who are feminine identified on a permanent basis, but the point is that once one becomes a *hijra*, one is required to 'publicly' identify receptivity as the only legitimate form of sexuality.

Finally, notwithstanding a massive body of scholarship on the *hijra*, this body of knowledge is centred on the Indian context. In contrast, the ethnography I

present focuses on Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. To the best of my knowledge, it is one of the first full length ethnographies of the *hijra* in Bangladesh. More often than not, South Asia gets reduced to India within South Asian studies. The field of gender and sexual diversity is no exception in this regard. This dominance of India is particularly pronounced in the case of *hijra*, evident not only from the huge body of work on this subject that this thesis will systematically engage with but also because of the popular conflation of the *hijra* with Indian gender and sexual difference in Western academe and popular imaginary. One outcome of this India-centric methodological nationalism has been the reification of *hijra* as a pan-Indian phenomenon. Here, what is problematic is not just this territoriality but more importantly the foreclosure of epistemological and methodological possibilities such India-centricity entails. In that sense, the study of the *hijra* of Bangladesh opens up possibilities to imagine and conceptualize the *hijra* subjectivity beyond the stereotypical Indian *hijra-ness*.

In arguing the case for rising above narrow India-centricity, I am not suggesting that cultures are bound in space and time and that it is within such ‘cultural particularism’ that subjectivities are forged. Rather it is precisely this form of essentialist reading of the *hijra* that my thesis challenges. In line with the insights of ‘critical regionality’ (Johnson, Jackson and Herdt 2000, Wilson 2006), I would argue that subjectivities are forged at the interstice of incessant comings and goings of flows, both material and symbolic. The critical regionally- oriented approach can not only help problematize the spatial metaphor of India in terms of which *hijra* have been framed but more importantly trouble the essentialism contained in the artificial geo-political marker called South Asia. South Asia, like any other region, is a geo-political concoction intended to serve specific imperial geopolitical and strategic interests. While this thesis does not undertake a full-scale critical regional reading of the *hijra*, it foregrounds how *hijra* subjectivities in Bangladesh often emerge in complex interplay with the *hijra* workings in India. In that sense, this thesis not only de-Indianizes the *hijra* but more importantly allows us to envision the *hijra* beyond the hegemonic Indian lens. Furthermore, it

allows us to trouble the tendency to reduce South Asian masculinities to Indian masculinities by allowing us to re-read certain variants of scholarship on South Asian masculinities in the light of new ethnographic materials on Bangladesh.

Reading *hijra* through the lens of masculinities/male femininities

This thesis departs from the overarching proclivity to read the *hijra* as emblematic of some resistant thirdness in a global skirmish against Western sex/gender binary. For example, Serena Nanda's (1999, 1990) '*The Hijras of India: Neither man nor woman*', one of the first full length ethnographic studies on the *hijra* in India contend that (a) *hijra* are one of the last few vestiges of an institutionalized third sex/gender that challenges the sex/gender dimorphism of the western world and (b) Indian society is more tolerant than the West, in its acceptance of gender and sexual variance, which she traces to the prevalence of Hindu mythic valorisation of androgyny and the Mughal patronage of the 'eunuchs'.

Against the third sex/third gender framework, this thesis interrogates the *hijra* through the cipher of masculinities. In other words, this thesis uses the ethnography of *hijra* in Bangladesh to critically examine South Asian masculinities as much as it deploys 'masculinities' as a lens to interrogate the *hijra*. Scholars concerned with the exploration of South Asian masculinities alluded to the problematic deployment of *hijra* as a third category and the consequent foreclosure of other conceptual and analytical possibilities (Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004, p-2). Notwithstanding this acknowledgement, *hijra* have not been interrogated from the slant of masculinities and vice versa. I argue that adopting the optic of masculinities can furnish valuable insights not only into the making of *hijrahood* in South Asia but also about the configuration of masculinities and the politics surrounding their production, reproduction and transformation in terms of

varied modalities of class, kinship, religion, gender, desire, power and transnationalism.

Scholars have noted the dearth of scholarship on South Asian men and masculinities in general. Although, in recent times, a new body of scholarship, particularly devoted to the setting up of the methodological and epistemic contours of 'South Asian masculinities studies', has been in sight (Chopra et al 2004), systematic ethnographic excavation of masculinities, particularly outside the context of normative sexualities and genders, is still rather scant. Osella and Osella (2006) noted that the extant ethnographic work on South Asian masculinities tends to privilege heterosexual marriage, providing for families and fathering children as indispensable to the making of men and masculinities. Consequently, very little is known about non-heterosexual masculinities. This is inarguably more pronounced in the case of subaltern sex/gender subjectivities towards which this thesis makes some contribution.

In recent times, however, a flurry of scholarship on varied nonnormative gender and sexualities in South Asia has emerged. While this growing scholarly interest in the marginal gender and sexual subjects has complicated our understanding of gender and sexual configurations in South Asia considerably (Boyce 2006, 2007, Cohen 2005, Hall 2005, Khan 1999, 2003, Seabrook 1999, K. Kole 2007, Khanna 2007), masculinity has rarely been made the focus of this body of work. Even when masculinity is referenced, it is always in terms of an oversimplified cultural model deemed to be framed in terms of the dyad of the masculine man versus the effeminate. Here, the underlying assumption is that the effeminate, including the *hijra*, bear the brunt of masculine dominance while the masculine men remain culturally unmarked. Put differently, the scenario may be seen to echo the cultural presence and valorisation of a hegemonic masculinity posited in relation to its subordinate variant. This thesis will, however, contest such an easy bifurcation by taking on board nonhegemonic masculinities and their production, reproduction and transformation through an ethnographic excavation of the

hijra in contemporary Bangladesh. This is particularly important in view of the fact that while there is now a growing body of literature concerned to map the making of normative men and masculinities, subaltern masculinities are often discursively projected as the abjected alterity of the normative masculinities. In contrast, this thesis introduces fresh ethnographic materials on the subaltern perspectives on men and masculinities through the lens of the *hijra* who are publicly identifiable in South Asia as occupying not only a marginal sex/gender position but also a working class milieu.

Although it is now common knowledge that masculinity is not reducible to anatomical maleness, one might be led to think that invoking masculinities in relation to the *hijra* and vice versa works to essentialize the *hijra* as male or men. This thesis is by no means projecting or distilling the *hijra* as men. Rather, throughout this thesis, I argue that while *hijra* are often posited as the antithesis of men and masculinity, *hijrahood* and masculinity (not male or man) are not necessarily antithetical to each other. Rather than view *hijra* as male, what this thesis does is bring into view how a closer attention to the making of *hijrahood* can contribute to our understanding of masculinities. As a subculture comprising male bodied feminine identified people, the institution of the *hijra* serves as an interesting site to interrogate the production, reproduction and transformation of normative as well as subaltern masculinities.

One of the widespread, albeit problematic, translations of *hijra* into English, often deployed in the popular media in South Asia, is eunuch, a moniker that clearly marks the *hijra* as made out of male bodies. In addition, there remains a strong tendency to collapse men and masculinity into a causally linked proposition. Recent queer and ethnographic intervention has, however, strongly challenged such analytical conflation, urging us to conceptually de-link masculinities from maleness. A slew of ethnographies on female masculinities, in diverse settings, have clearly driven home the point of masculinities being qualities and styles that females take on, thereby guarding

us against the reification of masculinity as maleness (Halberstam, 1998 Sinnot 2007, Davies 2007, Lai 2007, Blackwood 2007). In a similar vein, the study of femininities is not to be conflated with females. Thus, in speaking to masculinities, my thesis does not essentialize the *hijra* as men. Nor does it reify masculinities or femininities as intrinsic properties of biological maleness and femaleness respectively.

Scholars agree that there is a form of masculine dominance across South Asia. In this andocentric social configuration, it is not only women but also nonnormative men who are subordinated. Critical scholars, however, argue for a more nuanced reading of such androcentric dominance, either drawing our attention to the socio-historical specificities and situatedness of ‘male dominance’ (Ortner 1990) or highlighting different ways in which women and subaltern men actively subvert such dominance and exercise agency (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).

In speaking of masculine dominance, it may be useful to think through the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Although originally developed in relation to Australian empirical materials, its usefulness lies in its ability to unpack gender hierarchies. Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity problematically singularizes both hegemony and masculinity, what I am interested in is the way such masculine hegemonies, if not hegemonic masculinities, are produced, reproduced and transformed. That is, the concept of hegemonic masculinity does not reside outside the domain of the social. Nor is it discontinuous from the ordinary. Attention to the way it is produced, reproduced and contested brings into view the fact that there is no single hegemonic masculinity: rather, divergent models of masculinities are enacted in a complex interplay with a variety of factors namely class, ethnicity, gender, power, desire, religion, kinship and transnationalism. Attending to the multiplicity of differentiations through which masculinities are inflected foregrounds how such hegemonies paradoxically engender variant counter-hegemonic trends. Cornwall and

Lindisfarne (1994) and Alsop et al (2002) alert us to the fact that only a very few men actually live up to the normative ideals of hegemonic masculinity, while an overwhelming majority become complicit in sustaining its dominance. Throughout this thesis, I contend that while *hijra* help us de-link masculinity from its popular naturalized association with maleness and heterosexuality, *hijra* also become complicit in consolidating and imposing hegemonic notions of masculinities in constituting themselves and men in general. In other words, how *hijra* talk about and are distinguished from their partners, masculine identified men, provides insights into the complex configuration of masculinities, hegemonic, complicit and subordinate (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

However, in speaking about and drawing on the concept of hegemonic masculinity, I do not take hegemonic masculinity or normative masculinity for granted. The diverse enactments of more or less hegemonic, complicit and subordinate masculinities in Bangladesh is structured by and contested along various vectors of social differentiation namely class, ethnicity and kinship within which various styles and categories of normative masculinities are produced and performed. Describing that wider system of masculinity is beyond the scope of this thesis. In this thesis the concept of normative masculinity primarily to refer both to a generalized model of male bodied masculinity against which *hijra* are publically defined in mainstream discourse and to the set of stereotypical traits and styles that the *hijra* associate with men and masculinity. As I demonstrate the so called ideals that the *hijra* verbally valorize and associate with normative men rarely correspond to lives of the actual men with whom the *hijra* are romantically or erotically involved. It is also the case, as I elaborate in Chapter 3, that those ideals relate in particular to the specific working class cultures within which *hijra* and the men that are their love interest are situated. As I indicate there from a middle class vantage point neither *hijra* nor their masculine identified partners are more or less deemed to be 'failed' men.

While *hijra*, as the putative antithesis of men and masculinity, may be read as an outcome of an oppressive masculine hegemony that is inflected in class specific ways, *hijra* ironically produce and reinforce such reifications by tending to define men in such strict hegemonic terms: a man is someone who is by definition penetrative while *hijra* and females are receptive. Yet closer attention to the dynamics of the *hijra*/men relationship discloses more complex and nuanced gender dynamics than the concept of hegemonic masculinity allows for. For instance, although *hijra* generically demand that their male partners comport themselves in a stereotypically masculine manner, such attributions are contradicted by their own lived practices wherein *hijra*, rather than their masculinised partners, emerge as more dominant, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis. Furthermore, although *hijra* are often viewed as the abjected other of the hypermasculine at the discursive level, the very adoption of a *hijra* subject position endows the member of the *hijra* community with uncanny virulence that the mainstream normative imagination would engender as nothing short of ‘hypermasculinity’.

It is also instructive to note that *hijra* occupy social spaces conventionally inhabited by men in South Asia. Ranging from the bazaar settings to the cruising sites, *hijra* are predominantly seen to occupy a public space gendered masculine across South Asia. Scholars working on South Asian masculinities and further afield (Chopra et al 2004, Flood 2008, Vigoya 2001) note that practices of masculinities are often oriented towards a critical audience of men, real and imagined, hegemonic and non-hegemonic, and not always women. That the practices and performances of masculinities are undertaken in relation to men raises important questions not only about the division of labour but also about the extant configuration of heteronormativity. In the South Asian context and specifically in Bangladesh, while heterosexuality is the predominant norm, strong forms of homosocial spaces exist alongside and within the extant heteronormative social configuration. Recent studies have drawn our attention to all male and all female homosocialities in South Asia and the role such sex-segregated spaces play in inflecting same sex intimacies and eroticism (Boyce and Khanna 2011, Bhaskaran 2004, Hossain 2010,

Osella 2012). Here, a point worth noting is that in the South Asian and specifically Bangladeshi context, homosocial relationships often take precedence over heterosocial relations, so much so that excessive heterosociality is often deemed dangerously emasculating. It is within such segregated homo-socialities that my *hijra* interlocutors were located. It is within and in relation to such contexts that *hijra* gender and sexual subjectivities and those of normative men are enacted.

It is important to note that embedded power inequalities mark various homo and hetero-social relations across South Asia. For instance, males failing to be sufficiently normatively masculine are often relegated to the status of *hijra*, while females falling short of normative femininities are linguistically unmarked in Bangla, the predominant language in Bangladesh. While gender-transgressive females are likely to be pigeonholed as ‘loose’, their femininity is not questioned in the first place as it is the case with males. From that slant, hegemonic masculinity is not just an assemblage of socially valorised static traits or mere physical features. Rather, it is about celebrating and consolidating regimes of power that valorise certain types of male masculinity as the ideal type. While I acknowledge the predominance of such hegemonic masculinities, what I am particularly interested in is how the reification of a masculine hegemony works to deflect our attention from various ways in which such hegemonies are contested and challenged. In much contemporary gender theorisation, while we have detailed accounts on the production and reproduction of such hegemonies, very little attention is paid to various agencies and intentionalities within non-hegemonic or subaltern masculinities. For instance, while *hijra* publicly define men in terms of certain hegemonically stereotypical attributes, more often than not, such attributions are contradicted by *hijra* themselves, as will be demonstrated later in the thesis. What this thesis, therefore, does is attend to the experiences of gendered subordination to foreground the complexities that the engenderment of power inequalities entails: that is, while such power differentials disenfranchise the *hijra*, *hijra* too paradoxically and actively sustain, reinforce and consolidate and simultaneously challenge such inequalities. That *hijra*

become complicit with the perpetuation of a form of masculine hegemony is not to be dismissed as some kind of a 'false consciousness'. Rather than fall prey to such sociological vagueness, I attend to the lived complexities to foreground the way *hijra* both singularize and pluralize the hegemonic.

Trends within South Asian masculinities and dis/embodiment of the *hijra*

Although masculinities, as I have suggested already, have rarely been the subject of disquisition in discussion on the *hijra*, a closer look at the scholarship on the *hijra* reveals interesting insights into the cultural and colonial and postcolonial politics of masculinities. For instance, Lal (1999) and Gannon (2009) contended that the *hijra* posed a particular challenge to the classificatory imperatives of the colonial administration and social science. In addition, *hijra* were also classed as a special caste and a criminal tribe as part of the British colonial civilizing mission (Levine 2000). While I do not intend to delve into a full blown critique of the colonial work on the *hijra*, suffice it to say that recent representations and writings on the *hijra* resonate with many of the colonial themes and representations (Gannon 2009).

Agrawal (1997) critically interrogates the centrality of the body in colonial and anthropological literature in the construction of a third gender identity in India and argues that the construction of a so-called third gender operates not in opposition to but within the framework of gender binarity, as even when Indian society allows for the transformation of a body into a third gender, it does so at the cost of bodily change or castration. Agrawal contends that the presence of many gender categories is no emblem of progressivity. Nor does this so called third gender or sex category constitute in itself an opposition to the binary. Cohen (1995) too challenges the uniformity of Nanda's *hijra* narrativization by calling attention to the disjuncture and slippage that mark the process of becoming a 'third'. Cohen is particularly bent on foregrounding what he calls 'a multiplicity of differences' in terms of spatiality, locality and desire of the embodied subjectivity of thirdness and opposes the easy

construction of the *hijra* merely in terms of trope of a third sex/gender. Cohen takes up the issue of castration and interrogates its centrality in the construction of *hijra* identity particularly in terms of what is at stake for those undergoing this process rather than treating this so-called ‘third gender’ as some ‘disembodied liminal markers of thirdness’.

Particularly relevant to this thesis is the trope that posits ideals of sexual renunciation and androgyny as alternatives to the dyadic imperial bifurcation of the colonizer and the colonized into hyper-masculine and effeminate respectively (Kalra 2009, Chowdhury 2001, Krishnaswamy 2002, Sinha 1995). Instructive, in this regard, is Nandy’s (1989) study that highlights the internalization of colonial principles by Indian elites and their role in the making of Indian selfhood in postcolonial India. Drawing on Gandhi’s call for the feminisation of masculinity in the anti colonial movement, Nandy argues that Gandhian androgyny emerged as an alternative to the political binary of effeminacy and hyper-masculinity. Yet as Cohen (1995) points out, in deploying Gandhian androgyny as an anti-colonial subjectivity, Nandy bypasses the materiality and historicity of the lived bodies of the people marked as ‘third’ in their daily lives. Cohen contends that the metaphorisation of androgyny further disembodies the *hijra* and obscures the way androgyny is differentially experienced across the class spectrum. Cohen’s insightful critique of the class-specific and elitist nature of Gandhian anti-colonial androgyny resonates well with one of the concerns that my thesis takes on board: That is, the *hijra* subjectivities are forged in a complex interplay with varied class dynamics that this thesis unpacks.

Additionally, such lop-sided discursive distillation of the colonized as emasculate, relative to the hyper-masculinisation of the colonizer, not only works to reify such differentiation as a form of naturalized distinction but also obscures the subaltern negotiation of such impositions. This thesis, however, makes an intervention in bringing into view the ways *hijra* imagine and construct themselves, rather than reading them in terms of the discursive

abstraction of the middle class imaginary. While much has been said about the way variously situated hegemonic groups view the subaltern, there remains a recognisable dearth of subaltern views on masculinities (cf Ahmed 2006, Rogers 2008, George 2006). Against this one eyed narrative, this thesis challenges the discursive abjections and stereotypical demonization of the working class *hijra* by foregrounding how *hijra* view and construct their own gendered/sexual subjectivities.

The problem with the above bipartite engenderment is not only that it obfuscates the actual empirical practices but also the way it reifies the hegemony of masculinity. An ethnographic standpoint, therefore, can provide the necessary correctives and complicate masculinities by foregrounding how the so called infantilized working class or the colonized effeminate subjects critically interact with and respond to such attributions (cf Ortner 1995). For instance, although *hijra* are popularly conceptualized as non-men, this does not render the *hijra* as non-masculine in real life situations, where *hijra* are seen to act in ways that would in the normative order of things be read as hyper-masculine. While *hijra* are thought to be non-masculine, closer attention to the dynamics of *hijra's* interaction with the normative mainstream, as I demonstrate later in this thesis, foregrounds emasculation of the former by the latter rather than the other way round.

It is also instructive to note that scholars have tended to read the institutionalized presence of the *hijra* reductively as an instance of the generalized Indian oedipal anxiety. Cohen (1995), Agrawal (1997) and Reddy (2005) note that the first systematic anthropological debate on the *hijra* figured in the pages of 'American Anthropologists' between G. Morrison Carstairs and Morris Opler within the framework of what can be called the 'culture and personality' anthropology of the 1950s. While for Carstairs, *hijra* were a group of 'perverted homosexuals' emblematic of a latent tendency of the normal Indian personality structure, Opler repudiated Carstairs by projecting the *hijra* as 'born hermaphrodites'. Additionally, scholars have also

located the *hijra* within the broader cultural logics of the Hindu ideal of renunciation and asceticism (Nanda 1999, Reddy 2005, Taparia, 2011). Although in the Indian context, *hijra* are not classed as ascetics per se, *hijra* evoke the image of Hindu asceticism and renunciation at the popular level. From that slant, *hijra* can be read as some form of an embodiment of superior Hindu masculine individualism. While in Hindu-dominated India, this trope of semen anxiety has special cultural salience (cf Alter, 1995 1997), very little is known about such masculine anxieties and the making of men and masculinities in Islamicate South Asia (See Ahmed 2006, Walle 2004, Marsden 2007, Mookherjee 2004 for the various configurations and negotiations of masculinities in non-Indian Islamicate South Asian contexts).

In contrast, my thesis sheds some light on the constructions and constrictions of *hijra* gender and erotic practices in relation to Muslim ideals of masculinities, a topic that is still heavily under-researched. Emblematic of the underlying logic of colonial masculinity, a growing body of scholarship notes the simultaneous feminization and hyper-masculinisation of the Muslims in Hindu-dominated India post-partition. Here, the dominant theme is that Muslims are popularly relegated to the status of not only ‘non-man’ but also hyper-masculine/sexual in the dominant Hindu imaginary. Different forms of discursive abjections of the ‘Muslim other’ have been read as attempts to recuperate Hindu masculinity (Hansen 1996, Osella and Osella 2006, Reddy 2003, Ramaswami 2007). Once again, the problem is the one-sided depiction and its scholarly privileging that engenders a discursive climate wherein the perspectives of the subaltern/Muslims are routinely effaced.

In terms of conceptualizing masculinity, the focus of this thesis is not limited to the local ‘ethnographic particular’ alone. Rather, it also brings into view the evolving configuration of masculinities in relation to transnational forces. Linking the local to the regional and to the global brings into view various constructions of masculinities. These various inflections of masculinities are often mutually co-constituted. Rather than view the global as an all-

encompassing force imposing a particular type of masculinity onto the regional and local, this thesis attends to the way the local actively adapts and reworks the global idioms of masculinities. Kimmel (2005) contends how a global hegemonic masculinity operates to provoke the emergence of regional and local ‘protest masculinities’ and vice versa (Cited in Connell et al 2005:849). In other words, the emergence, production, reproduction and transformation of masculinities do not transpire in a vacuum but in relation to active external forces, namely, international division of labour and state and transnational activist policies, engendering new forms of contestations and conflicts through which hierarchical masculinities are produced, reproduced and transformed.

The use of transgender framework in anthropology and male femininities in the study of *hijra*

One of the analytical lenses worth reflecting on in relation to my project on the *hijra* is that of the transgender. Much contemporary work on the *hijra*, I have already noted, emerges as a critique of the third sex/gender framework. In a similar vein, several anthropologists have deployed transgender as a critical intervention to challenge the third sex/gender-mediated narratives on non-Western gender and sexual variance (Towle and Morgan, 2002). While scholars have vehemently critiqued the deployment of a third sex/gender optic in the study of *hijra*, there is a pronounced disinclination on the part of scholars on South Asia to use ‘transgender’ as a critical cipher in place of the third sex/gender. It was not until the advent of HIV/AIDS epidemic and activism that transgender as a moniker entered the analytical and popular currency within South Asia, an issue about which I speak at length later in this thesis.

The use of transgender seems more pronounced and a dominant trend in the studies of gender and sexual variance in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Particularly two studies worth mentioning are *Travesti: Sex, gender and*

culture among the Brazilian Transgendered prostitutes by Don Kulick (1998) and *Beauty and power: Transgendering and cultural transformation in the Southern Philippines* by Mark Johnson (1997). Both these studies can be seen as critical interventions in complicating the terrain of gender and sexuality in anthropology by shifting the attention away from the trope of third sex/gender (cf Herdt 1996). Whilst I do not intend to engage with the specifics of both these studies, what I am specifically interested in here is their use of transgender as a framework in the exploration of gender and sexual diversity. The espousal of a transgender framework allows both these anthropologists to highlight the complex entwinement of gender and sexuality and the inadequacies and non-applicability of Euro-American models of gender and sexual paradigms in their respective field settings. For instance, while the word ‘gay’ figures throughout Johnson’s text, he italicizes it to draw our attention to the differential import with which it is invested in his ethnographic field site. Contra the western signification of gay as indexical of gender-normative same sex desire, ‘gay’ in southern Philippines is culturally understood to refer to male bodied feminine identified people. The dominant Euro-American tendency to de-link gender from sexuality and to posit them as distinct ontological domains of experience makes very little sense in the context of either southern Philippines or Brazil. It is precisely this confluence of gender and sexuality and their conjoint role in the formation of gender and sexual subjectivity that makes these two studies relevant to my project on the *hijra*. Although the very use of a transgender framework allows both these anthropologists to concatenate gender and desire in their elaboration of the sex/gender systems of their respective fields, one problem with their work is that they expend very little energy in explicating their use of transgender as a framework (See also Peletz 2009, Blackwood and Wieringa 1999, Besnier 2002, Jackson 2003, Sinnot 2004 for the use of transgenderism as a framing device). For instance, Morgan and Towle (2002) and Valentine (2007) contend that whilst both Johnson and Kulick are keen on illustrating the socio-historical and cultural contexts out of which sex/gender subjectivities emerge, the very deployment of a transgender framework works to partly undermine their goals of countering the Euro-America centric assumptions. Valentine, for instance, notes that transgender and its rise to popularity is a recent

phenomenon rooted in a specific social history and power relation. On the other hand, Morgan and Towle draw our attention to the way the very use of transgender may work to bolster Euro-American transgender activists' miscomprehension of those local contexts as being isomorphic to their own and consequently result in representational effacements and flattening out of differences.

More important and particularly pertinent to my project is Valentine's observation that the emergence of transgender as a collective category of personhood in the United States emanates from an aprioristic distinction between gender and sexuality as discrete ontological domains. He argues that people not fitting into the gay and lesbian identities are relegated to the status of transgender, i.e. whilst gay and lesbian are deemed to be sexual constructs, transgender is understood to originate in gender. It is this fundamental analytic distinction that works to impose fixity onto the lived lives of people for whom experiences are not compartmentalized but are concatenated. Here, what is interesting to note is that while Valentine sees in the rise of transgender a proclivity to divorce erotics, both Johnson and Kulick use it to conflate desire with gender. While both Kulick and Johnson devote sustained attention to aspects of desire in the formation of sex/gender subjectivities, they offer very little detail on whether transgender as such is used in the context of their respective fields. I particularly raise this as the very meanings and practices associated with transgender are highly likely to vary from context to context. For instance, in contemporary Bangladesh, as will be detailed later in this thesis, the very espousal and popularization of transgender has taken place mainly through discourses of epidemiology, where transgender not only embodies a new disciplinary regime with prescriptions of (trans) gender-appropriate practices and behaviours but also works to de-sexualize the *hijra* (here the assumption is that *hijra* is about gender only).

Another very important point that Valentine raises is the ready assumption of transgender as an umbrella reference point only for male bodied feminine

identified people cross-culturally, often to the blatant exclusion of the female bodied male identified people, a tendency he explains in terms of a generic cultural devaluation of femininity. This observation is particularly insightful as I am critically attentive to the problems of marginalization of femininities the adoption of a masculinity slant can enact.

In contrast, the approach I adopt is that of male femininity. I use male femininity to capture the practices of gender variance by the male bodied feminine identified *hijra*. Whilst male femininity as an approach has been variably used in recent times in the context of Western male to female transgender practices (Ekins 1996) and late capitalist androgynous metrosexuality (Atkinson 2008), expropriating Halberstam's (1998) concept of female masculinity, I use male femininity mainly to illustrate the various forms of corporeal and social transformational possibilities that my male bodied feminine identified *hijra* interlocutors seek and experiment with. Halberstam's female masculinity decouples masculinity from men by challenging the essentialist conflation of masculinities with male bodies. My intention in deploying male femininity as opposed to transgender is not to essentialize the *hijra* as men. Rather, 'male femininity' aptly encapsulates the fluidity and complexity within masculinities without reifying either masculinities or femininities or bodies. In other words, the adoption of male femininity works to alert us to the problematic reduction of the *hijra* to either femininities or failed masculinities or some exotic intermediate category. Rather, male femininity allows for a processual reading of *hijra* gender practices and performances by foregrounding not only the constructedness of masculinity and femininity but also the so called third gender/sex. Additionally, male femininity foregrounds how *hijra* draw on and re-signify both masculinities and femininities. Whilst transgender as an approach may work to de-sexualize the *hijra* by centring the focus on gender alone, male femininity moves beyond such gender transcendence by highlighting the processual appropriation of the cultural idioms and practices of masculinities and femininities.

In the context of ‘male femininities’, various scholars have often dismissed such practices as a form of masculine conquest (e.g. Raymond 1996). In her study of the Omani society, Wikan (1977) argues that the institutionalised presence of the *xaniths* (male bodied feminine identified sex workers) in Oman is emblematic of a dualistic system of gender wherein the honour of the female hinges upon that of the men and in this dualistic framework, the institutionalization of the *xaniths* works to protect the collective masculine honour. In the context of South Asia, Goerge (2006) challenges this seamless narrative of masculine honour being dependent on the feminine in South Asia, urging us to see how what she styles ‘honourable masculinity’ is fashioned through female discourses on male as well as male views on male, in the context of a slum setting in Mumbai. My point here is not to dispute the fact that masculine honour is often consolidated through various mechanisms of control of females. What I dispute, however, is that *hijra* are simply an intermediate foil designed to protect the honour of the female (e.g. Gabriel 2004, Vasudevan, 2004). My argument here is that taking femininity on board for study in itself does not work to counter this devaluation. Rather, one way to challenge such devaluation is precisely to not ignore masculinity with its privileges and hegemonies that work to subjugate both female femininities and male femininities. In other words, the very act of not paying attention to masculinities or ignoring them works to reinforce rather than challenge not only their privileged normative (often unmarked) status but also their wider dominance. To challenge such unmarked categories, therefore, opens up possibilities for critical reassessment of the socio-historical composition and dominance of masculinities and their perpetuation.

Although I take South Asian masculinities on board for critical interrogation, it was not necessarily on my research agenda during fieldwork. Rather, masculinities emerged in the course of the fieldwork to be of particular salience in the way the lives of my *hijra* interlocutors were organized. One of the features that struck me throughout my fieldwork was the conspicuous

physical absence of women in certain spaces, namely, the public gardens and the streets, especially after dusk. The peripheral appearance of women throughout my thesis brings into view the particular forms of engenderment of the very spatial contexts within which the subjectivities of my interlocutors were forged. This is not to suggest, as one not familiar with the cultural context of contemporary Bangladesh might readily assume, that cross-gender interaction is rare in Bangladesh or that women are always seen to be confined within the domains of household domesticity. Rather, the fact is that there are forms of segregated male to male homosocialities to which females are denied access, as much as there are all-female spaces of which males are not part. It is instructive to note here that male to male socialities are not necessarily readily visible to others on account of their visibility in public. Chopra (2004), for instance, argues the case for expanding our notion of 'veiling' in relation to such all male segregated socialities in the South Asian context. Denied access to certain all male spaces, namely, the street, she argues that there are all-male spaces that are not only closed to females but also at times hostile to women. She contends that the very spatially segregated nature of those subjectivities does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of deciphering those situations, as social practices never emerge in isolation but always in interplay with other cultural space and practices. The publicly visible male attitude towards females, she contends, contains elements which can be used as resources to delve deeper into those not readily available all male domains.

That women make peripheral appearance in certain spaces whilst being more visible in others should not be taken to denote the insignificance of women in the engenderment of those spatial settings in Dhaka that I studied. Nor is it to be seen as being illustrative of ontologically dichotomized gender relations wherein men and women inhabit conceptually and practically distinct realms of experience. As Gutmann (1997) demonstrates, the point of integrating women into ethnography on men and masculinities is not merely about expanding the sample size to include women. Rather, it is about recognizing the centrality of women in the way male subjectivities and masculinities are forged. In a similar vein, my intention here is not to ignore the importance of

women in the formation of masculinities. Women, despite not being explicitly referenced or sufficiently elaborated ethnographically, were always present as conscious or unconscious reference points against which male femininities and male masculinities were formed.

It is also worthwhile to note that my *hijra* interlocutors do not intend to become females per se, although they may at times publicly project themselves as being 'like female'. Additionally, *hijra* 'male femaling' practices, as will be indicated later in the thesis, are not merely mimetic. The acts of taking on feminine bodily and sartorial practices by the *hijra* do not constitute colonization of the feminine. Rather the femininities *hijra* enact are qualitatively distinct from the notions and styles of 'female femininities' that as indicated in a later chapter, *hijra* associate with women. More importantly, becoming a *hijra* entails losing certain privileges that accrue with the attainment of a normative masculine position. Adoption of a *hijra* subject position, therefore, subjects one to cultural disparagement and abjection. Against this backdrop, it would be analytically naive to assume that *hijra* are party to some conspiratorial conquest of the feminine. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is not to push the 'female femininities' into zones of invisibility and mutedness. The study of the *hijra* can benefit from the study of female femininities as much as our conceptualization of female femininities can be honed by a focus on the *hijra*. However what I am keen on undertaking here are male femininities which, I would submit, are distinct from female femininities. The exploration of *hijra* 'male femininities' does not work to disenfranchise female femininities. Rather, it alerts us to the problematic essentialization of anatomical femaleness as femininity. What also needs mentioning specifically here is the problematic tendency to always interrogate either masculinity or femininity in terms of a male/female opposition. Instead, I contend that these are not necessarily empirically distinct or mutually excluding. Rather, studies anchored in such axiomatic dyads often run the risk of reifying and singularizing both masculinity and femininity (Cornwal and Lindisfarne 1994).

The process approach and the ethnographic particular

While I locate this thesis within the broader terrain of South Asian masculinities, let me elaborate a little more on what a masculinity slant has to offer in terms of our understanding about the *hijra* and vice versa. In elucidating the contributions of this thesis on the ethnographic particular, I do not mean to enact an artificial segregation between the particular and the analytical. Expounding on what this thesis does to add to our understanding of the *hijra* also points towards new analytical directions and possibilities. Analytical frameworks to understand the *Hijra*, I have suggested at the outset, are often over-determined by the so-called third sex/gender paradigm. I also argued that one intellectually debilitating consequence of such a third sex lens is that it works not only to maintain the exoticizing gaze on the *hijra* but also to reify *hijra* as an essentialized third, often to the detriment of other important vectors of social differentiation, namely, class, location, kinship, desire, power, gender and transnationalism, through which *hijra* subjectivities are modulated (Reddy 2005).

Based on her ethnography in the South Indian cities of Hyderabad and Secundarbad, Reddy's (2005) full-length ethnography, *With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*, places *hijra* within the matrix of varied and shifting identity categories intersected by myriad modalities of class, caste, language, desire, locality and a moral economy of respect (*izzat*). Rather than taking the *hijra* as a bounded religious community of castrated ritual performers, Reddy's ethnography considerably nuances our understanding of the *hijra* by foregrounding the way gender and sexual differences are embedded within other forms of social difference and vice versa. Reddy's argument that *hijra* subjectivities are multiply configured informs my approach to the *hijra* in Bangladesh.

Yet this thesis further complicates the *hijra* by advancing a processual approach that locates *hijra* claims to authenticity not in the singular rites of

emasculation, as Reddy contends, but rather, in keeping with my interlocutor's assertions, in the practices of *hijragiri* or the occupation of the *hijra*. That is, it is on account of systematic and consistent acquisition of the ritually sacrosanct skills and acumen that comprise *hijra* occupational practices and their dextrous and persistent demonstration both before fellow *hijra* and non-*hijra* that one manages to assert one's *hijra* status. Becoming a *hijra* is, therefore, a complex process and is best understood, following Bourdieu (1992) and his feminist interlocutors (e.g. Moore 1994, Blackwood 2010) as emerging in practice, i.e. in the normative inclinations and transgressive identifications they acquire as part of doing and becoming *hijra*.

The processual approach permits us to view *hijrahood* not as some static social formation or institution but as formations always in the making through embodied action. A processual approach allows us to trouble the seamless narrativization of *hijrahood* as inhering in and flowing from emasculation. I argue that *hijrahood* is not a permanent transformation that a person attains by virtue of undergoing emasculation. Rather, one becomes a *hijra* through the practice of *hijragiri* or the occupation of the *hijra*. In addition, a processual approach allows this thesis to sufficiently attend to the corporealities of *hijra* gender/sexual practices rather than relegating the *hijra* to some universal signifiers of psycho-sexual aesthetics (cf Jonson 1997, Morris 1995). A process approach also attends to the production, reproduction and transformation of the practice of *hijrahood* in relation to forces both internal and external, without reifying either the internal or the external. In organizing the presentation of the thesis material I have attempted to descriptively capture the processes as well as the ethnographic specificities in terms of which *hijra* subjectivities are brought into being in contemporary Bangladesh. The ethnographic materials I deploy to complicate *hijrahood* are presented in the following order.

Thesis plan / Chapter overview

Chapter one details the story of my ethnographic entanglement with the *hijra*, highlighting my decade-long casual involvement and systematic ethnographic immersion between September 2008 and September 2009 into the daily lives of the *hijra*. I foreground stories of the friendship, tension and trust that emerged during the period of my interaction with the *hijra* in Dhaka. I demonstrate that what started as a casual curiosity about the ‘spectacular’ *hijra* eventually grew into a systematic research interest leading to my writing this thesis. Following from there, I discuss my curiosity about a ‘secret’ language that my *hijra* acquaintances spoke and the practical difficulties encountered in my effort to master that language. I then interrogate ethnographic method and review some of the dominant approaches as a way to demonstrate their suitability over other approaches in the study of the *hijra*. Highlighting my own fieldwork experience, I foreground the dilemma of ‘insiderliness’ versus ‘outsiderliness’ that structured my ‘field’ and examine some of the essentialist notions in the study of gender and sexual diversity. I end this chapter with a discussion of the problematic legacy of anthropology in the service of colonial and postcolonial empire and the possible ways to guard against such complicities by underscoring the need to exercise greater circumspection in the representation of subaltern others like the *hijra*.

Chapter two introduces several male bodied feminine identified groups of *hijra* and *kothi* in Dhaka. I not only highlight similitude and disjuncture among these various groups but also show how *hijra* are located within this broader matrix of culturally recognized ‘male femininities’. Although these variably situated groups are often embroiled in conflicts and contestations over authenticity, they are all concatenated through their shared similarity in terms of working class background and desire for normatively oriented masculine men. Over the life course, a male bodied feminine identified individual may switch from one group to the other or may variably belong to all these groups simultaneously. One crucial difference between the *sadrati hijra*, those following the occupation of the *hijra* goddesses, and that of the other groups is

a difference in the degree of possession of ritual knowledge and formal affiliation. Yet these groups are entangled through a complex web of kinship network with the *sadrali hijra* acting as the quintessential marker of *hijrahood* against and in relation to which other groups negotiate and assert their identities.

Chapter three locates the *hijra* in the Bangladeshi social structure, arguing that *hijra* are a class-specific category comprised of only working class male bodied feminine identified people. I demonstrate that not only are *hijra* situated in the working class milieu but their situatedness there is enforced. Although *hijra* are a visibly organized public subculture in Bangladesh, not only are the middle and upper classes hostile and prejudiced towards the *hijra* but also *hijra* often become the language employed to speak about gender variance and lack of respectability. In other words, *hijra* are defined and described by the middle classes in class-specific terms wherein male bodied people transgressing the normative bounds of gender including those of the middle classes are relegated to a *hijra* status. In contrast, *hijra* in Dhaka are spatially in tune with their working class neighbours who also act as their chief patrons. Elaborating two ritualized *hijra* occupational practices, namely *badhai* (demanding gifts at birth) and *cholla* (collecting money and foodstuffs from the bazaar), I demonstrate various sorts of agencies that *hijra* appropriate and exercise in soliciting recognition as *hijra*. I contend that whilst the middle class understandings of the *hijra* are informed by flimsy media reportage and medicalizing discourses, working class understandings of the *hijra* are based on direct encounters with the *hijra*. Whilst the middle class representation works to de-masculinise and demonize the *hijra*, I also foreground the ways that the class cultural abjection of the *hijra* paradoxically confers on them a different sort of masculinity that calls into question the power of the stereotypical middle class representation.

In chapter four I underscore the role of erotic desire and practice in the making of *hijra* subjectivities. Like class, desire is another very important, albeit often

neglected, factor in the interrogation of the *hijra*. I contend there that desire is not peripheral but central to one's sense of being a *hijra*. In other words, it is on account of desire for normatively oriented masculine men that one becomes a *hijra*. Whilst desire is paramount to *hijra* subjectivity, it is through a particular manifestation of that desire in the form of anal receptivity that one can lay claim to authentic *hijra* status. It is worthwhile to recall a major paradox pertaining to desire and its public proclamation. Whilst publicly *hijra* almost inevitably present themselves as people without and above desire, internally it is this publicly denounced desire that qualifies one to be a part of the *hijra*. This dilemma and ambivalence bearing on internal knowledge and external projection is foregrounded in the *hijra* invention and use of a clandestine langue known as *Ukti*. Whilst *Ukti* is a coded way of signalling communitarian belonging and a shared sense of desire for normative men, the very deployment of this semiotic system foregrounds the limits of the Bangla, the predominantly spoken language in Bangladesh, as an appropriate medium to convey those desires. Put differently, the very existence of *Ukti* and its use by the *hijra* and other male bodied feminine identified people brings into view the unspeakable nature of desire that *hijra* deem central to their sense of selves; that is not just desire for 'masculine men' but more particularly for the pleasure of being anally penetrated by them. Navigating through the apparently inscrutable realm of *Ukti* complicates the popularly understood and scholastically sanctioned tropes of *hijra* asexuality and its situatedness within the broader cultural politics of renunciation by calling our attention to the centrality of lived and embodied desire in the construction of the *hijra*. Significantly, *hijra* view accessibility to these culturally forbidden pleasures in terms of a principle of dis/entitlement wherein only those ready to forego the Bangla defined masculinity, specifically penile pleasures, in encounters with other male bodied people are allowed to partake of the hitherto undiscovered anal pleasures.

Chapter five concerns emasculation, arguably the most dominant trope in the representation of the *hijra* in extant scholarship. Underscoring myths, rituals, bodily transformation and functional factors bearing on emasculation, I detail

the practice and concept of emasculation as acted out in the context of the lives of the *hijra* in Dhaka. I contend that whilst emasculation is deemed to confer on the operated a ritually superior position, such a position is not uncontested. That is precisely because the very mythic tale invoked by the emasculated *hijra* to authenticate their position also offers resources for the *janana* or *hijra* with penis to challenge such authenticity. Furthermore, I contend that because emasculation does not, as frequently assumed, render one asexual, since erotic desire is deemed by *hijra* to be located in the anus and not in the penis, conflicts and contestation over authenticity between *hijra* with penis and those without occur. In this sense, this chapter is an important intervention that challenges dominant scholarly views of *hijrahood* as inhering in and flowing from emasculation. The chapter also challenges the presumed link between circumcision, emasculation and Islam that in the Indian context serves to reinforce the Hindu nationalist stereotyped construal of Muslim men as either effeminate or hyper-sexual.

Following from emasculation, chapter six discloses multiple processes of engenderment that *hijra* in Dhaka practice and perform. One of my main aims in that chapter is to foreground *hijra* notions of masculinity and femininity and their enactments in every day settings. Rather than view *hijra* through the now famous trope of ‘neither men nor women’, I demonstrate the variable and contextual meanings of those practices in terms of both the wider Bangla mainstream gender ideologies and *hijra* appropriation of those Bangla protocols. That is, the very acts of their taking on feminine sartorial trappings are not permanent but are episodic with regular switch across and between varied masculine positions and feminine identifications. In fact, central to being an authentic *hijra* is the mastery of this very art of movement between and across heterosexual masculinities and feminine marked *hijra* identifications. This fluidity is best captured through ‘*ligam potano*’, the physical art of magical dis/appearing the penis. Although a physical art that *hijra* with penis master, *ligam potano*, I contend there, is indexical of various agentic ‘vanishing’ acts- not only corporeal penis but also Lacanian phallus,

namely, heterosexual masculinities, households and marriage - through which *hijrahood* is constructed.

In another significant departure from previous ethnographic work, Chapter seven turns to consider the normatively inclined ‘‘masculine male partners of the *hijra* in Dhaka. Doing so not only discloses Bangla men’s view of *hijra* but also illuminates further *hijra* ways of describing these Bangla men. I demonstrate that despite the rhetoric of those Bangla men being macho in their erotic and affective interaction with the *hijra*, Bangla men’s interactions with the *hijra* exemplify a kind of doubly hidden ‘male femininity’ evident not only in their being ‘domesticated’ by the *hijra* but also because of their entrance into the *hijra* lineage as affine. Unlike the mainstream heterosexual Bangla relations, where brides enter the houses of their masculine husbands, *hijra* relations with their *parik* or intimate partners illustrate a reversal of such culturally valorised ideals of heterosocial configuration. Furthermore, the mobility of the partners is seen to be restricted not only in terms of how and to what extent they can interact both with the *hijra* and the normative Bangla society but also, as demonstrated in the chapter on erotic desire, in terms of what is and is not acceptable in erotic play with the *hijra*. I contend that the *Uti* universe enables not only accommodation but also cultural recognition of *hijra/parik* relationships that are otherwise forbidden within the mainstream Bangla world. The ethnographic elaboration of *hijra* affective affinity for and entanglement with partners underscores the complex processes of the formation of masculinities wherein both the partners of the *hijra* and the *hijra* co-constitute each other’s gender. Although partners are presented here mainly through the lens of the *hijra*, partners’ participation, albeit circumscribed, in the *hijra* communitarian rules and rituals complicates the conventionally assumed tightly drawn lines of demarcation between the *hijra* and Bangla men. Furthermore, these Bangla *parik* incorporate elements of the Bangla world into the *Uti* universe as much as they carry elements of the *Uti* into the mainstream Bangla realm. Finally, this chapter offers an account of *hijra* performance of male femininity by highlighting the *hijra* proclivity to be good Bangla ‘housewives’ in the natal families of their partners.

Whilst the preceding chapters underscore the constitutive factors of class, desire, power, erotics and affect in the configuration of discourses and practices of masculinities and the production and reproduction of *hijrahood* in Dhaka, the last chapter extends on these themes in relation to the recent effects of State and NGO interventions in Bangladesh and the resultant efflorescence of various and often contradictory discourses and categories on same sex sexualities and the *hijra*. Locating the *hijra* within the broader processes of political economy and international division of labour and transnational movement of ideas, people, symbols, NGO praxes and activist energy, I demonstrate the changing perception of the mainstream Bangla world about *hijrahood*.

Particularly two phenomena I interrogate are the emergence of various sorts of discourses pertaining to same sex sexualities and the *hijra* and the proliferation of various kinds of identity categories. One of the effects of these recent epidemiological interventions has been the rise of various sorts of contradictory discourses about *hijra* being not only criminally sexualized but also purveyors of disease. Discourses pertaining to *hijra* sexuality as both criminal and pathological gained an added impetus with the problematic involvement of Islamic faith-based organizations which, on account of recent exposure to *hijra* vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, are increasingly drawing on certain versions of internationally circulating and Islamically inflected denunciatory discourses of same-sex sexuality to publicly demonize the *hijra* for the first time in the history of Bangladesh. Additionally linked with the efflorescence of these varied discourses has been a proliferation of varied identity monikers in contemporary Bangladesh circulated mainly through the NGO symbolic capital. Whilst often contradictory and contested, the discursive consolidation of these varied monikers works to enact novel forms of governmentality and disciplinary regimes through its power of material and discursive interpellation of the *hijra*. Linked to my concerns about transgender as an analytical framework, I explore how the adoption of this new identity

position by some *hijra* has led to a circumscription of conventionally sanctioned varied and fluid *hijra* sartorial practices. Specifically, the rise of transgender has reduced the *hijra* to a feminine identified subject position, requiring male bodied feminine identified people to publicly present themselves in a prescribed feminine manner. The emergence of these varied but often contradictory discourses and categories are increasingly challenging the popular perception about *hijra* being asexual and disabled and their extant accommodation within the Bangladeshi social structure. Although contestations and conflicts in the face of these changes have engendered new tensions and crises of authenticity within the community, the most notable outcome of this new adaptability has been the disclosure to the Bangla world of varied *hijra* practices of desire that are supposed to remain otherwise clandestine. Whilst I locate the recent vicissitudes in *hijra* subjectivities in terms of the rise of these new discursive regimes and categorical proliferations, I also demonstrate how *hijra* are not mere victims of these transnational processes of political economies but are active players in appropriating and adapting those newly available resources and idioms.

Chapter 1: Ethnographic fieldwork with the *hijra* in Dhaka

Male bodied feminine identified *hijra*, often adorned in feminine-marked clothes, are a publicly recognisable presence in Bangladesh. Like any typical Dhaka-dweller, I grew up viewing the *hijra* as people not only starkly different from the normative mainstream but also as ‘disabled’ people with defective or missing genitals. My first close encounter with a putatively *hijra* person was in my infancy when my parents hired a ‘*bua*’ (a female person employed to undertake domestic chores). Whilst I cannot recall the exact year when this *bua* was employed at my house, I still recall that *bua* standing out from other typical women because of her height and bodily stature. People, especially immediate neighbours, often laughed at the presence of this *bua*. Although she worked with us for about a year, once a few visiting relatives gossiped about her being a *hijra* and not a real woman and it was only after that event that she left us permanently. Another incident from my childhood comes to my mind. After months of being unable to find a trustworthy housemaid, my father, then working in Mymensingh, a district two hours ride from our house in Dhaka, sent someone to work at our home. The person that arrived at our house this time was a man in his late 20s but as he entered the house, next door neighbours and some relatives started inquiring about whether he was a man or a *hijra*, as despite his being normatively attired, he walked with swaying hips, wore tight fitting clothes and spoke in a very soft but nasalized voice. Amidst jokes and banter from the neighbours, he left after a week without informing anyone in the house. Later, we found out from my father that he had left suddenly as he was taunted by some of our neighbours and called a *hijra*.

The vignette above exemplifies various ascriptions of *hijra* status to people in the context of a typical middle class household in Dhaka. Whilst I detail the class inflected construction of the *hijra* in another chapter, here my intention is

to present the background to my research interest in the *hijra*. It was precisely through my encounter both inside my household and in the wider public sphere with the *hijra* that my understandings about them were initially formed. Yet it was not until 1999 that I began to develop strong interest in the *hijra* as a subject for serious exploration. In this chapter, I detail the stories of my encounter with the *hijra* since 1999. Whilst I systematically conducted fieldwork with the *hijra* in Dhaka between September 2008 and September 2009 for this current PhD project, much of my data and discussion is drawn from this extended period of my observation and entanglement with the *hijra*. In presenting my entanglement with the *hijra*, I first introduce the story of my first systematic encounter with the *hijra* and the difficulties I faced in my attempt to befriend and understand them. I highlight some of the events that led me to cling to this subject. This discussion then flows into a systematic analysis of the methodological approaches-ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation- that I undertook for this current PhD project. I also offer an account of how I gradually learnt a special language that *hijra* spoke. Following on from there, I foreground my gender and erotic subjectivity as a way to interrogate some of the widely held assumptions in anthropological knowledge production on gender and sexual diversity. The penultimate section of this chapter interrogates some ethical templates and their relevance in my study of the *hijra* and the extent to which I was un/able to follow those principles. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on scholarly proclivity to attribute political intentionality into subaltern subjects like that of the *hijra* and the way such ascriptions may work to further disenfranchise the subaltern.

My first encounter with the *hijra*

I have already mentioned two events from my childhood involving the *hijra*. I also mentioned my growing up in Dhaka and my frequent exposure to *hijra* in public. To these, I want to add that I grew up in a locality in Dhaka where a band of *hijra* lived in a dilapidated tin-built two-storey house. Every afternoon on my way to and from the playground, I encountered those *hijra* sitting idly on the rooftop. Despite this regular exposure, it was not until 1999, as I have

already stated, that I grew interested to explore them. Whilst exactly what drew me to the *hijra* in 1999 is still not clear to me, it could very well be linked with my then developing interest in knowledge and becoming a writer. One afternoon I chanced upon a group of *hijra* strolling in a busy marketplace. With trepidation, I approached one of them and collected her/is¹ address, expressing my interest to learn more about them. A week later I along with a few friends went to the house of that *hijra*. It was sometime in the afternoon and s/he was alone in her/is straw-built house in the middle of a dense slum. With inkling from a rickshaw mechanic working nearby, we knocked at her/is door. Although s/he did not exactly decline to speak to us, it was evident that s/he was not very keen on divulging much about the *hijra* on account of her/is not having the permission from the *guru* who, we were told, lived on the other side of the area across the river. Equipped with the address, I along with a friend set off the next day in search of the *guru*. The very fact that the *hijra* needed permission from a *guru* to speak to us left me puzzled. After trudging through the zigzags of semi-macadamized roads when we reached a local bazaar, I saw a person dressed in female attire who seemed like a *hijra* to me. Abruptly instructing the rickshaw driver to pull up, I hastily dismounted to inquire about the *guru* but the target of my questioning appeared disinclined to tell me anything about the *guru*. At this point, another person dressed in normative male attire entered the scene from nowhere and started questioning my intentions. When I told them that I was looking for the *hijra guru*, they started talking to each other in a language that I barely understood. Nonplussed, my curiosity about them skyrocketed. Later, with further leads from them, I reached the road where, I was told, the *guru* would perhaps be available. Still not sure about the location, I asked some locals at a tea stall. It seemed everyone there was aware of the *hijra* and pointed towards an alleyway leading to the *hijra* house. One of the locals volunteered to take us. While we waited outside, he went in to inform the *hijra* about us.

¹ The third person singular pronoun in Bengali is uninflected by gender. I use 'her/is' instead of 'her' to demonstrate the context specific and fluid nature of *hijra* gender performativity. Though scholars have conventionally used 'her' in the representation of the *hijra*, this convention works to reify *hijra* as a feminine subject position that people who fail to be either adequately masculine or normatively feminine adopt, foreclosing the possibility of reading *hijra* through other optics, most notably masculinity.

After a while, a *hijra* clad in a sari fluttered out of the house with a broomstick and cried out loud, ‘*Today I will beat up the journalists. They just come to kill our time*’. Seconds later a number of them came out, all in female-identified attire, except one who was dressed in typical male attire. Sensing that they were angry and on the verge of attacking us, I gathered up the pluck to tell them that I would return another day. As we were leaving, two of them called us and started grilling me about what I was up to. Unsure as to how to respond to their queries, I clarified that I was not a journalist and that I was there to speak to them to be able to find out more about them. In the meantime, the normatively clad person from that group took the lead in calming the situation and asked me to step aside to talk to him, but despite his suggestion I was still sticking to the ones clad in female-identified attire. After another round of conversation, they too declined to tell me much without the permission of the *guru* and suggested I came back some other time. When I asked where the *guru* was, they pointed to the normatively attired man, who I had thought to be the only *non-hijra* in that group. In fact, that *non-hijra* person, who self-identified as Megna, a female identified name, eventually became my closest guide and *guru* to the mysterious universe of the *hijra*.

Since it was getting dark and the *hijra* seemed to have other plans, Megna asked me to visit the following week. Accordingly I went and had a long conversation and this was the beginning of what would eventually turn out to be my protracted immersion into the *hijra* world. After a couple more visits to the same place, when I became close to Megna, s/he brought to my notice that s/he lived in Lalbag not far away from Hridoypur (a pseudonym) where s/he would come to supervise the *hijra* group. Megna suggested I met her/im separately in Lalbag so that s/he could tell me things that s/he argued s/he would not have the time or be able to tell in the presence of other *hijra*. Lalbag, an old part of Dhaka, is about 20 minutes rickshaw ride from Hridoypour where Megna operates as a *hijra*. Lalbag boasts one of the historic forts in present day Bangladesh, said to have been built during the Mughal

reign. In the months that followed I would go to the fort at least once a week to meet Megna to talk about the *hijra*. Although Megna had a house in Lalbag, s/he never took me there. Aside from meeting Megna in Lalbag almost every week, I would also visit Hridoypur infrequently during that time. In 2001, I decided to write a book on the *hijra* and it was with this intention that I started interacting closely with the *hijra* in Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh until September 2007, when I came to the UK to undertake my current doctoral studies. Then, in September 2008, when I went back to Bangladesh to undertake fieldwork, my interactions with this *hijra* group resumed.

There are three things I want to reiterate here. First, I was dazzled by the gaudy makeup and sartorial practices of the *hijra* in the bazaar whom I thought to be killingly ‘exotic’. Second, I could not resolve the puzzle of Megna’s not only being a *hijra* but also being the *guru* of the group as, from the outset, Meghna was dressed in normative masculine attire. Third and most importantly, the unintelligibility of the language that I heard those two *hijra* in the bazaar speak piqued my imagination.

By the time I came to England to turn this long term interest into a doctoral degree, I was close to the *hijra* not only in Hridoypur and elsewhere in Dhaka but also in many other parts of Bangladesh. It was also during this time that with the help of Megna and other *hijra* in Hridoypur I was able to carry out first hand observations of several *hijra* internal rules and rituals. While throughout this thesis I foreground whenever necessary the specific context of my interaction and the emergence of any particular set of information, I describe below my systematic fieldwork with the *hijra* in Dhaka from September 2008 to September 2009.

Reflections on fieldwork and ethnographic entanglement

The primary data on which the thesis is based is drawn from fieldwork collected in Hridoypur (a pseudonym) a predominantly working class locale in Dhaka where about 50 *hijra* lived. Between September 2009 and September 2010 I visited Hridoypur three to four times a week and it was the *hijra* there who I came to know best. In the evenings I also visited some of the popular cruising sites elsewhere in Dhaka to meet people in other *hijra* groups. In total the number of people I interacted with during the formal phase of my fieldwork during that period reached almost 300. Although the several groups of people I interacted were differentially positioned within the wider universe of alternative desire, one commonality among them was their shared working class background. The exception to that was self identified gay men who, as I discuss in a later chapter, come from more middle class backgrounds.

The 'data' from those encounters consist both of ethnographic fieldnotes and transcribed material from digital recordings of informal and directed conversations as well as selected interactions and exchanges at public events. Field notes based on observations and recollections were normally written up at the end of each day after returning to my home in Dhaka. Fieldnotes were supplemented by transcription of recordings from a small digital recorder that I carried with me on a daily basis. The digital recorder was not used to record formal interviews but rather to record informal and more directed conversations with the *hijra* in Hridoypur, as well as some of their conversations with visiting *hijra*. I also made recordings of their performances and interactions with people in wider society in Hridoypur. My *hijra* interlocutors in Hridoypur were informed both about my recorder and my reasons for engaging with them, even if, as I discuss below, they did not entirely comprehend or believe my account of those reasons. While initially I kept my recorder on most of the times, later in my fieldwork I turned it on only when I felt something interesting and new was being discussed. Although I did not conduct formal interviews as such, I did prepare specific questions for particular people. For instance, in the case of my interaction with some of

the *hijra* in charge of NGOs in Dhaka I prepared specific questions related to NGOs. I visited both the residence and NGO offices to speak to NGO related *hijra*. These were never formal interviews but more directed conversations.

Unlike many novice ethnographers setting foot in a new place and facing immense difficulties in finding the right connections, my landing in my own city and entering into the lives of the *hijra* afresh was not so difficult. Yet armed with the conceptual and methodological paraphernalia of ethnographic fieldwork, my one year plunge into the city of Dhaka and the *hijra* groups was far more intense and exciting, not least because I was regularly and systematically scribbling fieldnotes down but also because of the difficulty on my part to explain to my *hijra* friends and acquaintances about my new vocation. For one thing, the fact that I was curious about them and wanted to write a book about them never really made any sense to them. My coming to the UK to study and write a thesis on them left them further flabbergasted. Several *hijra* in Hridoypur refused to accept that they were worthy of being studied in a university. Some thought I was playing a practical joke on them. Despite my repeated attempts to explain to them about my being an anthropologist, they always took me to be some kind of ‘journalist’ (See my chapter on erotic desire for other *hijra* ways of reading my interest in them). Before I elaborate some of the tensions and problems I encountered prior to and during my one year long systematic excavation into the *hijra*, let me introduce ethnography.

Ethnography literally means ‘writing about people’. However, in the social sciences and particularly anthropology ethnography refers to a particular mode of research practice. Although generally associated with anthropology, the ethnographic approach has also been appropriated by other social sciences. Consequently ethnography has come to mean different things to different people. In their edited volume, ‘Handbook of ethnography’ Atkinson (et al) (2001) open the introductory chapter with the caption, ‘mapping ethnographic diversity’, a phrase that clearly defies any overarching disciplinary definition to it. Despite the similitude and disjuncture across the social sciences about the

defining features of ethnography, there is at least some consensus on what is commonly called ‘participant observation’, a form of embodied and embedded practice that constitutes the core of ethnographic method.

Through participant observation, an outsider is expected to be empathetically immersed into the community under investigation and foreground the lived subjectivities of the community through an emic approach. In other words, ethnography is a process of bringing to the forefront the ‘cultural truths’ as they are conceived by the community. Thus, an ethnographer has to be an insider despite her/is being an outsider and has to judiciously minimize as much as possible her/is ethnocentricity in her/is excavation of the intricate webs of signification that underpin the internal workings of the culture under investigation. Ethnographers, through near-experience submergence into the community, are anticipated to offer a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1993). The value of ‘thick description’ lies in the fact that it allows the ethnographer to bring out situated knowledge, i.e. knowledge that arises at the interstice of ethnographer’s prolonged encounter with the community in an embodied space and time. I should like to stress here once again the issue of ‘prolonged encounter’. That is, much in common with the classical anthropological approaches (be it British social anthropology or American cultural anthropology) I subscribe to the view of ethnography as a protracted immersion into the cultures under study (Faubion 2001). I side with this perspective not least because it sanctions a prolonged ‘plunge’ into the lives of the community through which a ‘holistic’ understanding about a people can be gained but also because of my long term engagement with the *hijra*.

Ethnography is about ferreting out systems of meanings. That is, ethnography is innately an exercise in charting out idiographic truths as opposed to a scientific quest for governing regularities (Atkinson et al 2001). This observation resonates with one of the classical debates dating back to the formative stage of social science. While the positivistically minded social scientists intended to model social sciences on the image of the natural

sciences, the anti-positivists or interpretivists argued that because of the cantankerous nature of social beings, society or culture cannot be amenable to neat momothetic scientism (Blumer 1967 cited in Goldbart and Hustler 2005).

In the case of anthropological ethnography, the opposition remains very staunch to date particularly because of its open-ended character. The criticism usually levelled is one of objectivity. That is, ethnography is incapable of foregrounding objective truths. Nevertheless, in line with the insights of feminist epistemology (Burns and Walker 2005, Skeggs 2001) I would submit that knowledge is always essentially interested. Thus, by espousing ethnography as an approach to understand and explicate the *hijra*, I do not intend to make any false claim for scientific neutrality. Rather, my project is very much sided and partial. While many social sciences might throw ethnography overboard because of its partial character, I would call this a disciplinary virtue that sets ethnography apart from other more structured and distant approaches (Cf Haraway 1991, Strathern 1991 cited in Kulick 1995).

While ethnography is about meanings, it is also an embodied subjective practice. The 'practice' of ethnography is a central axis through which the distinctive salience of ethnography emerges. For instance, an oft-used data-gathering technique in social science is interview. It is the speech gathered through interviews that forms the scaffold for the subsequent text. While ethnographers, too, undertake interviews and base their research heavily on such texts, to a trained ethnographic eye, the non-verbal context is no less significant. That is, through a utilization of senses like sight, taste, sound, touch and smell (Okely 1994) an ethnographer is expected to obtain a multi-sided sense and perspective of the people under investigation. The importance of sensory knowledge lies in the fact that expressed thoughts may conceal meanings that senses can help spot. This brings us back to one of the central tenets of anthropological fieldwork known as holism. The virtue of holism is that it allows the ethnographer to get a 'fuller' understanding of the people. While questions may be raised as to the extent of holism, it is holistic in the

sense that by being immersed in the ongoing activities of the people over a considerable period of time an ethnographer manages to learn about the people from many angles. And it is through the use of the senses that ethnographer brings a sense of 'incomplete' completeness to the picture that s/he would not have been able to generate through formalized interview or a questionnaire survey.

Thus, anthropological fieldwork or ethnography is very much about building human relationships, sharing with and befriending the interlocutors. It is about convincing the people under study to speak openly about themselves. Wolcott (1995) makes a significant distinction between data-collection and fieldwork. While ethnography is about gathering data, it is not just mere compilation in an impersonal way. Rather it is through a long term intimate submergence in the lives of the people that anthropological materials are marshalled. Hence Wolcott calls ethnography a sort of 'performing arts' where the ethnographer is a live performer from the very moment of her/is entrance into the field.

While in most social scientific research the presence of the investigator is cautiously excluded from the discussion to ensure 'disembodied objective knowledge', ethnographic exercise, particularly after the reflexive turn in the 1980s calls for an interrogation of the fieldworker's embodied subjectivity in relation to the people being studied. Thus ethnography is distinct from other research methods in that the role of the individual ethnographer is constantly interrogated in the process of ethnographic praxis and meaning-making. In other words, it is the positionality of the researcher in relation to the people under study that is also equally important to ethnography. Ethnography, unlike other research methods in the social sciences, is not depersonalized. Ethnography in the post-orientalist academic climate makes a conscious effort to interrogate the hierarchies between the researcher and the researched. The hierarchy involved in the research process is taken care of not only in the field sites but also at the final level of textualization. This is not to suggest that the inequalities that mark the relationships between the researcher and the

researched taper off in the process. Rather it is about ensuring that the researcher's own authorial position, privilege and status are adequately accounted for and foregrounded in the production of ethnographic knowledge.

Against the backdrop of these formalized definitions of ethnography, it is worthwhile to illustrate how my presence as a normatively gendered middle class subject in Bangladesh shaped the participant observation I carried out with the working class *hijra* in Dhaka. Parts of these dynamics are variously elaborated in my chapters on class cultural politics and erotic desire. Here I just intend to highlight one issue that recurred throughout my fieldwork. Having befriended the *hijra* in Hridoypur and participated in many of their rituals, which are otherwise inaccessible to outsiders, I always felt extremely privileged to be a part of not only their quotidian lives but also special ritually marked festivities. Yet time and again my closest *hijra* interlocutors explicitly instructed me to stay at a remove from them or pretend to be not with them, especially during some of the ritual practices in which either *hijra* or other areas or members of the wider society were present. Three such ritual events that I elaborate in later chapters bear on *cholla* or the *hijra* collection of money from the bazaar, *badhai* or the acts of demanding gifts at birth and 'night kam' or sex work in the public gardens. In the case of *badhai*, in which they performed before a normative audience and blessed new born children, they often advised me to act like any other curious bystanders gleefully gazing at their performance, whilst in the cruising sites I was specifically instructed to observe the events from a safe distance so that the suspicions of their clients were not raised about my intrusive presence. There were also instances in Hridoypur where *hijra* categorically asked me to not talk to visiting *hijra* from other areas of Bangladesh and India. There were also ritual occasions like *baraiya* (a festival undertaken to mark the rebirth of a newly emasculated *hijra* that I discuss in my chapter on emasculation) when I was instructed to appear in the role of an amanuensis and write down the names of the guests and their gifts, as my status there as a researcher would raise uncomfortable questions for the *hijra* group in Hridoypur. Here I do not intend to give full details of all these 'distancing exercises' suggested by my interlocutors. Rather, what I am

interested in foregrounding is the way I was an outsider despite my being an insider. Such acts of ‘distancing’ are not meant to be read as instances of *hijra* distrust towards me. Rather, it was they who suggested such strategies in a bid to enable me to acquire more information about the *hijra*, as much as those suggestions were also intended to maintain boundaries between the *hijra* and the normative mainstream to which I belonged.

There are two issues I intend to flag here. First, that *hijra* often insisted on my being visibly distant resonates with broader debates about sameness and difference (Argyrou, 2002) that are at the heart of anthropological knowledge production. I speak more about this in the conclusion but suffice it to say here that it was precisely on account of those ‘distancing stratagems’ suggested by my interlocutors that the logic of sameness and difference (both literal and figurative) was engendered and reinforced. In other words, despite my being a temporary insider in the sense of my being granted access to many of their rites and rituals, I remained an outsider throughout my fieldwork not least because of the marked class distinction that set my *hijra* interlocutors apart from me, but also because of my being visibly normatively gendered. Second, that *hijra* specifically suggested that I keep a distance or carefully mark my presence before fellow *hijra* of other areas as well as before the wider society, complicates the conventional narrative about ethnographic practice being inherently colonial and penetrative (e.g. Killic 1995). This is not to suggest or obscure in any sense the position of privilege in Bangladesh that I enjoyed as a normatively gendered middle class male subject in Dhaka. On the contrary and as I suggest later in this thesis, the very possibility of a putative romance with a middle class and normatively gendered male worked to my advantage. Yet my interaction with the *hijra* was not one of dominance and subordination in any sense. Rather it was my interlocutors who often set not only the terms of our relationship but also the extent and the manner in which I was supposed to be acting. In other words, the *hijra* in Dhaka were not some passive penetrated other. Nor was my privileged position unmarked. Rather the terms of our interaction were always framed in keeping with what my *hijra* interlocutors deemed to be appropriate. What this illustrates is that ‘field’ is not to be reified

as inherently powerless, inferior or emasculate. Rather as Johnson (2000; p-135) suggests, ‘*The way to problematize it is not to reify the terms of the relation but to show instability, partiality and partisanship of its position*’. To further illustrate the complexity of the field, I now turn to a discussion of my endeavour to acquire skills in a special language that *hijra* spoke.

Mastering the *ulti* bhasa or the *hijra* language

My inquisitiveness about the *hijra*, I already noted, intensified substantially when I first noticed the *hijra* communicate in what seemed like a different language to me. In a way, my attempt to understand this language was precisely how I learnt more about the *hijra*. I elaborate at length on this language in a later chapter; here I focus on some of the practical stratagems through which I gradually acquired skills to communicate in this language.

Known as ‘*Uti Bhasa*’ literally ‘reverse language’, *hijra*, it seemed to me initially, resorted to it only to avert unwanted attention towards them in the presence of outsiders. I also noticed that *hijra* were also generally protective of this argot, as any attempt on my part in the early stage to comprehend led to their being more cautious. Additionally, every time I asked them to explain to me some *Uti* expressions, they were either disinclined to disclose or offered me misleading meanings. Over the course of my interaction, I realized that the language was spoken and used not only by the *hijra* but also by some of their neighbours, who I later found out to be their partners. Additionally, in Dhaka and elsewhere, I heard other male bodied feminine identified groups use this argot, about whom I speak at length in the next chapter.

I realized that even the partners of the *hijra* who spoke *Uti* had been connected with the *hijra* for a prolonged period of time, and hence they were ‘*pakki*’, the *hijra* expression to refer to someone who is adequately aware and trained in their ways. In contrast, I was rather too overenthusiastic about

learning this language from the very outset and from my second visit to Hridoypur, I carried a small diary to be able to jot down some of the words. My plan was to gradually take down the words and closely observe the contexts of their use. To my utter amazement, Megna agreed to teach me the language once s/he realized that I was really keen. In fact, initially I was more concerned to retain some of the words in my head than to closely observe other details. Although I never really wrote down a word in the presence of the *hijra* fearing that they might object to it, I jotted in that small diary whatever I could recall on my way back. There were also occasions when I went straight to the toilet only to write them down, to make sure that I did not forget those words and the context of their utterance. Between 1997 and 2000, I ended up compiling a detailed list of words with their meanings. Aside from double checking those meanings with Megna, I also employed those words whenever I could in my interaction with *hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere in Dhaka so as to be able to be sure that I had got them all right. There were, in the early stage of my interaction with the *hijra* in Hridoypur, questions from *hijra* of other areas as to how I learnt those words. Megna categorically asked me to try not to use *Uti* in the presence of other *hijra*. By 2001 I was fluent in the argot and was able to communicate with other *hijra* adequately. One consequence of my mastery of this argot was that *hijra* in areas other than Hridoypur often assumed that I must have been a long term partner of a *hijra*. The other assumption *hijra* often made was that I was one of them but one who was in ‘*kari besh*’, i.e. a *hijra* in the guise of a normative man who, because of his class background, did not live like a *hijra*.

Epistemic essentialism and ethnographer’s gender and erotic subjectivity

Sometime in 1999 I invited Megna to my house for a visit. Later on, other *hijra* of Hridoypur also visited my house and interacted with my parents and brothers. I must note that *hijra* generally are not welcome in so-called middle class ‘respectable’ households in Bangladesh. To my utter relief, my family members were also equally welcoming. Both my parents were of the opinion that as people born with some ‘defects’ and ‘disability’, *hijra* ought to be

loved regardless of their class positions (I discuss the class-inflected interpellation of the *hijra* as ‘disabled’ and my own position in relation to them at length in the chapter on class). In the years since 1999, *hijra* from Hridoypur and elsewhere often visited my house and developed close relations with my parents. In 2000 one *hijra* from Hridoypur took up a job in my house as a cook and stayed there for six months until s/he got a new job in an NGO. I specifically mention this to highlight that the distinction between my personal life and professional ethnographic interest became blurred in the process of my researching the *hijra* significantly.

By 2000 I realized that the *hijra* in Hridoypur took me to be Megna’s *parik* or partner. Although it often engendered discomfort for me, especially when some oblique and at times direct insinuations were hurled at me by the *hijra* (I discuss this phenomenon further in my chapter on erotic desire), I broached this particular issue with Megna on several occasions. In response, Megna made it clear to me that even if the whole world made efforts to dispel this misconception, *hijra* in Hridoypur would not accept it. Megna categorically asked me not to worry about what people thought and pointed out that the truth was known to both of us. In fact, Megna never made any sexual advances on me. Once during our conversation over this, Megna drew to my attention the fact that the reason s/he never made any sexual advances towards me was not because s/he thought I would be disinclined to have sex with her/im but because s/he did not wish to ‘ruin’ (*Bigrano*) me by trying to be either romantically involved or having sex with me. Moreover, Megna pointed out to me the importance in life of friendship which s/he explained transcends all material quests and social norms. Megna also contended that the very fact that s/he had no intention to ‘ruin’ me should indicate to me her/is goodness and distinction from other *hijra* who, s/he argued, would never be interested to help me with my research unless I was inclined to reciprocate either sexually or romantically. In explaining to me why the *hijra* in Hridoypur thought I was her/is partner, Megna contended that it was because of my normative masculine status (assumed on their part) and my class position. ‘*Why would a panthi (normatively oriented masculine man) want to be so close with the hijra*

and spend so much time with them if he is not erotically inclined?’, argued Megna. It is worthwhile here to mention that by the time I became close to the *hijra* in Hridoypur, I had a girlfriend to whom *hijra* in Hridoypur and specifically Megna were introduced. Yet the mere fact of my having a relationship never prevented the *hijra* in Hridoypur from pondering the possibilities of my being simultaneously erotically or romantically involved with Megna. I specifically state this as, to my *hijra* interlocutors, the mere fact of a man’s involvement with women is not deemed to be indicative of his erotic or affective disinclination towards the *hijra*.

In fact, it was with the aid of Megna that I was able to delve into the inner universe of the *hijra*. Without her/is trust and friendship, it would not have been possible on my part to observe and participate in myriad sacred and secret rituals to which outsiders generally are denied access. For instance, I had the good luck of being a part of several emasculation practices and rituals in Hridoypur that I discuss in another chapter. To the best of my knowledge, other ethnographers who conducted research among the *hijra* make no mention of their being present during this operation. I am, however, not suggesting that it is by virtue of direct observation of such secret rituals that one’s ethnography gains greater sophistication and legitimacy. Rather, what I would argue is that every field site is marked by specific complexities and idiosyncrasies which in turn are inflected by the ethnographer’s own subjectivity, including but not limited to gender, sexual preferences, class, ethnicity and dis/ability. All of these factors, combined together, contribute to the kind of narrative tapestry that an ethnographer is eventually able to weave.

In recent times, a number of gay-identified anthropologists have argued that gay/queer-identified ethnographers are able to study non-western gender and sexual variance better than straight anthropologists. For example, in his book on transgendered prostitutes in Brazil, Kulick (1998) argues that because he was gay identified, he was able to study the *travesti* in ways previous scholars were unable to do. He contends that the *travestis* took him to be one of them,

as opposed to a previous researcher who they viewed as a client. It was because of the orientation of that previous researcher that his work, argues Kulick, fell short of excellence. In a similar vein, gay-identified anthropologist Williams (1996) who conducted research on the Native American two-spirit people, noted that it was on account of his gayness that he was not only accepted by the two-spirit community but also was deemed to be a two-spirit person.

While I do understand the politics of systematic silencing of ‘queer’ ethnographers, the very assumption that one will be in a better position to understand issues of gender and sexual variance on account of one’s gender or erotic subjectivity is both far-fetched and paternalistic. It is precisely this form of epistemic essentialism, i.e. the very idea that certain assumed sameness or isomorphism between the researcher and the researched inevitably results in more grounded and objective knowledge is problematic, not least because such a proposition assumes some form of aprioristic shared sameness but also because such essentialist position can work to conceal important axes of differentiation, namely race and class biases, that may be operative as significant determining factors in the process of ethnographic elicitation (Towle and Morgan 2002).

While I acknowledge that the fact of my being a middle class ‘respectable’ university-educated Bangladeshi and the putative possibility of a prospective romance with me may have led Megna to introduce me to the whole range of practices and concepts of the *hijra*, the assumption that gay-identified ethnographers would have been in a better position to understand the *hijra* does not make much sense. For instance, in her research on the female two-spirited women of native America, lesbian-identified anthropologist Lang (1996) maintains that her assumption that she would be able to conduct her study with relative ease because of her sexual orientation proved to be wrong, as many of the two-spirit women in new America she approached did not identify themselves as such. Rather, to many of her respondents, their ethnic

identity as Native Americans was more important than the fact of their being attracted to women. Against this backdrop, my argument is not that an ethnographic project remains uninflected by ethnographer's subjectivity. Ethnography, as I mentioned earlier, is a very sided and interested practice and it is this sidedness that lends ethnography its distinctive beauty. My argument here is simply that there is no well demonstrated reason to reify comparative research advantage on account of one's 'sexual orientation' or any other assumed sameness on the part of the ethnographer. Rather, the very assumption of comparative advantage on the ground of shared orientation may work to conceal important power dynamics that typically structure relations between the researcher and those s/he studies.

The invocation of this form of 'nativity' or sameness re-inscribes an epistemic essentialism that came under criticism with the rise of the so-called 'native anthropologist'. In her paper 'How native is a native anthropologist?' Narayan (1993) argues that the idea that a native anthropologist is always invariably in a position of privilege because of her/is nativity or 'intimate affinity' is essentialist. Narayan discusses at length M.N Srinivas, an Indian anthropologist trained under Radcliffe-Brown during the 1930s and 1940s. Narayan argues that despite Srinivas's 'path-breaking professional contribution', his 'origin remained a perpetual qualifier'. Narayan quotes Radcliffe-Brown, who in his forward to a monograph by Srinivas, states that his official training and Indian origins contributed toward 'an understanding of Indian ways of thought which is difficult for a European to attain over many years'. Thus, Narayan maintains, nativity is often used in the anthropological establishment to rob the contributor of her/his professional contribution.

In light of the above, my argument is that instead of being an advantage, similitude or nativity can entrap an anthropologist into essentialism. It is important not to lose sight of the marked differences between the ethnographer and the community under study in terms of education, class, language and so on. For example, I was born and brought up in Bangladesh and lived all my

life there. In the Bangladeshi context I belong to a ‘respectable’ middle class background and I had the good luck of receiving an education that many of my countrymen could not obtain. In contrast, the *hijra* I studied and befriended emanated from working class backgrounds and were mostly non-literate. While my being a Bangladeshi must have helped me in the conduct of my research, the marked differences between me and the *hijra* often stood as roadblocks, as much as a foreigner’s study of the *hijra* might be troubled by various other factors of differentiation. My point therefore is that it would be wrong to assume that I was able to do whatever I could do on account of shared national and cartographical origins with the *hijra*, as much as it would be wrong to suppose that someone with a specific gender or sexual proclivity would be in a better position to carry out research with the *hijra*. Finally, my argument here is not that one’s gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class positions are not important in the conduct of a research one undertakes. It is precisely the interplay of an ethnographer’s positionality in relation to those of the researched in terms of which ethnographic work is both performed and produced but the ready and automatic assumption that certain assumed commonalities are causally linked with greater ontological and epistemological advantage is both reductive and essentialist.

The interest of the people I studied and other ethical concerns

The underpinning idea of ethics in social research is a concern for the people under study. By showing attentiveness to ethical considerations, researchers are expected not to cause any harm to the people upon whom the study is conducted. For this research, I abided by certain ethical codes of conduct set by Association of Social Anthropologists and American Anthropological Association. The ethical guidelines for good research practice adopted by ASA in March 1999 (recently updated on 15th September 2011) and the code of ethics of AAA drafted during the period January 1995-March 1997 clearly articulate a series of concerns anthropologists are expected to adopt as part of

their commitment to both the profession and the people under study². Some of the major issues broached in these ethical codes revolve around responsibilities towards research participants, intrusions, avoidance of harm to the people, negotiation of informed consent, anonymity, intellectual property rights of the participants and disclosure of research findings.

It was in line with these guidelines that I undertook my ethnographic research with the *hijra* in Dhaka. However, in carrying out my ethnography, my approach was not to adhere to these principles in a literalist manner since, I suggest below, the mere ritualistic observance of these concerns in the ethnographic context can also be very dangerous for the community under study. To illustrate my concern, I will take up particularly two issues for a brief analysis in the context of my research: informed consent and confidentiality. ‘Informed consent’ is about eliciting consent from the people under study and confidentiality is about keeping the information gleaned from the researched in confidence.

Long before I embarked on this current doctoral project, as noted previously, I was fairly well-acquainted with the *hijra* in Dhaka and retrospectively I can assert with conviction that from the very onset of my interaction with the *hijra* I made clear to them my interest in writing a book about them, although my repeated attempts to convince them of my intentions were always dismissed as a smokescreen for my otherwise covert erotic desire for the *hijra*. Although I was always keen on informing the *hijra* about what I was seeking, I certainly did not seek consent of all the *hijra* that either resided in Hridoypur or those that visited occasionally. That is, I did not elicit consent in the typical sense, not because I did not want to, but because it did not make much sense either to my interlocutors or to me. Given the serendipitous nature of ethnographic fieldwork, it was impractical to seek consent from everyone. For example, in Hridoypur while studying the *hijra* community, I also observed the normative

² Ethical guidelines of ASA and AAA can be accessed at <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml> and <http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics/> respectively (accessed 21 June, 2013).

neighbours of my *hijra* interlocutors, to whom I did not disclose my interests unless directly asked. Furthermore, I went with the *hijra* in Hridoypur to several social settings such as the bazaar and it was not possible to seek consent from each vendor that my *hijra* interlocutors interacted with. Furthermore, *hijra* from other areas of Bangladesh and India often visited the *hijra* in Hridoypur. There were occasions when my *hijra* interlocutors in Hridoypur actually insisted on my not disclosing to anyone what I was doing while at other times and especially when visitors stayed there for longer periods, I divulged the reason for my regular stay in that vicinity. Here my point is that, while I was keen on seeking consent as much as I could, given the nature of the context, my approach was to resort to some sort of 'rolling informed consent' (Piper and Simons 2005).

As to the issue of confidentiality, I must first note that so far I have never used any of the information about the *hijra* in a way that can cause harm to them. For example, I anonymized the names of the *hijra* whenever it was necessary. Here, I was guided by the desire of my interlocutor, as anonymity may also constitute an infringement of intellectual property (Piper and Simons 2005). The ASA, for instance, has a clear stance on intellectual property rights of the research participants and categorically asks anthropologists to seek all necessary permission from the community before putting the information to any use. Nevertheless it can be argued that there can be communities to whom these issues of ritualized consent might mean nothing. Additionally, a researcher can exploit people for her/his self-interested gain through a tokenistic elicitation of consent. That is, the mere collection of signatures by the people one studies may be no less problematic in contexts where people may not be able to not only sign but also are unaware of the wider consequence of those research projects. For example, out of almost 50 *hijra* that belonged to the *hijra* group in Hridoypur, only three of them could write their names. Against this backdrop, mere ornamental adherence to these codes of conduct, in my opinion, would not ensure the protection of their interests. Finally, what I can say is that my intention throughout this research process was to be able to understand the *hijra* and in so doing, I exercised utmost

circumspection to ensure that the people I studied and befriended are not harmed or exploited in any possible way as a result of the research undertaken or the writing that I do about them.

Conclusion

Anthropology, perhaps more than any other social science, has been the subject of scathing critique because of its direct partnership with the project of colonization and imperial expansion. Particularly problematic was the very method of participant observation and its ability to elicit intimate information about the community under investigation and its subsequent appropriation by the state and military apparatuses to further domination, not only in classical colonial times but also in postcolonial neo-imperial contexts (Robben 2009, Sahlins 2009). In his invited paper to American Anthropological Association, Said (1989) took anthropology to task not only for reifying difference and otherness but also because of the discipline's direct complicity with the U.S. Empire. Whilst scholarly complicity with imperial expansion extends far beyond the discipline of anthropology (see for instance Nugent 2010 for a sharp analysis of the growth of area studies and U.S. social science and imperial expansion), anthropology has particularly been accused of being a direct vehicle of domination. Concerns such as these raised by non-anthropologists like Said have led to serious reflection within the discipline not only in terms of the broader political economy and unequal power relations bearing on knowledge production but also in terms of ethnography's trafficking in alterity and difference. While I do not intend to offer a systematic account of the broader debates about the politics and political economy of anthropological epistemology (see Dirks 2004), here I want to use these reflexive leads to raise some concerns about representation of subaltern subjects like the *hijra*.

One of the problems with the long standing scholarship on the *hijra*, I already hinted in the introduction, is a proclivity to impute varied meanings and intentions to them that *hijra* may not necessarily acknowledge. While it can be argued that all research including ethnographic works are projects of

individual authors and contextual and sided reflections of the scholars concerned, it is important to be mindful of the broader politics of representation and the symbolic if not material violence likely to result from such apparently innocuous scholastic projections (Spivak 1988). One of the tropes in terms of which concerns over representational effacement have been manifested bears on the concept of agency, not only in anthropology but also in other social sciences. Especially in the climate of vibrant theorising under the influence of postcoloniality, the issue of agency and its direct relation with subalternity of the people one studies has gained an added impetus. One of the major contributions of subaltern studies concerns the erasure of agency of the marginal from the dominant historiographical representation (Chakrabarty 1992, Prakash 1994). In a bid to challenge and dismantle such representational and agentic effacements, numerous authors affiliated with this trend have foregrounded the role of the subaltern in the making of history. Particularly taking issue with the Marxist reading of history as the game of an elite coterie, subaltern studies scholars have driven home the vantage point of those who have been erased from historical representations. Like anthropology in general, the subfield of gender and sexual diversity, too, has been instrumental in responding to such challenges by proposing various postcolonial queer approaches (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan IV 2002, Hawley 2001, Bhaskaran 2004). While quite diverse, one broad theme in this new call to challenge the hegemony of western sex/gender epistemology has been to foreground the agency of the 'queer' in non-western settings. Although novel in its effort to trouble and dismantle several variants of Anglo-American queer epistemology and its hegemonic preponderance, this approach, in my opinion, suffers particularly from its tendency to impute varied political intentions and meanings to gender and sexual subalterns. In other words, it is often through politicizing the subaltern *hijra* either by projecting them as a third sex resistant to sex/gender dimorphism (e.g. Nanda 1999) or as politically oriented people challenging the communal Hindu/Muslim divide (e.g. Reddy 2005) or opposing heteronormativity (e.g. Pattanaik 2009, Bakshi 2004) that scholars seem to justify both the *hijra* and their projects. This is precisely what I take exception to, not least because such attributions run the risk of occasioning further violence to the *hijra* but also because such politicization via ascription

of varied intentions works to further de-politicize the subaltern. *Hijra* have their own various self-defined projects and while they may have different sorts of political import in the local context, they are rarely about or directly addressed to the sorts of political interventions that external analysts are concerned with.

Chapter 2: Formal affiliations and the institution of *hijrahood*

One afternoon I was in the house of Joynob, a *hijra guru*, in Savar on the outskirts of Dhaka. Suddenly a few *cela* (disciples) of Joynob arrived after finishing their day's work. Handing Joynob the cash and the foodstuff collected from the bazaar, they started talking about two people they had encountered in the bazaar. The *cela* explained that while on their way back, they had met two 'vabrajer chibry', i.e. *hijra* born straight from the womb of their mothers. Dubious, Joynob's *cela* inspected those two persons and found that they had genital ambiguity. Those two individuals had stopped the *hijra* group and wanted to join them. Joynob was enraged and warned her/is *cela* to stay away from such people. Later Joynob argued that those 'born *hijra*' are dangerous and even looking at their faces can spell disaster.

The vignette above underscores one of the central concerns of this chapter: what is a *hijra*? If, as Joynob contends, those born *hijra* are dangerous, then what is the status of Joynob? What are her/is *cela* like? Are Joynob and her/is *cela* real *hijra* and if so, on what basis do they make the claim to be *hijra*? In this chapter I navigate through these questions to better understand the contests over what it means to be a *hijra* in Dhaka and the various markers of authenticity and differentiation that *hijra* employ to assert their identities.

In her monograph, Reddy (2005) offers a contextual ethnography of variably situated *koti*³ groups in the context of the South Indian cities of Hyderrabad and Secundarabad. She contends that whilst several groups of male bodied feminine identified *koti* groups (she uses *koti* as a generic all encompassing identity within which several non-normatively oriented groups belong,

³ Whilst Reddy uses the spelling *koti*, I spell it as 'kothi' as *kothi* is closer to the way it is pronounced by my interlocutors.

including the *hijra*) exist there, these various groups often assert their moral superiority over others in a bid to claim authenticity. Her main contention is that all these groups identify sexual receptivity as central to their sense of *koti* identity, as opposed to men who they define in terms of the penetrative role. Stressing the fact that these groups are not reducible to gender and sexual difference alone, Reddy foregrounds various markers of differentiation, namely religion, class, language and desire, kinship, occupation and bodily practices as salient to the contextual construction of ‘thirdness’ and competing claims over authenticity. To this important list of factors, Reddy adds what she calls ‘a moral economy of respect’ in terms of which these groups negotiate and claim authenticity. In deploying this trope of respectability, the most important rhetoric invoked by her interlocutors is that of asexuality and emasculation. In other words, it is on account of emasculation and asexuality that the South Indian *hijra* claim to be the most superior and authentic of all these diverse groups within the *koti* universe. Reddy locates this trope of asexuality within the broader cultural valorisation of renunciation and emasculation in the Indian context, arguing that this trope works to set the *hijra* apart from other groups who, although often linked with the *hijra*, are placed below the *hijra* in a ladder of hierarchical valuations. Reddy’s analysis is particularly relevant to my discussion of various markers of authenticity deployed by several male bodied feminine identified groups in Dhaka. A key distinction here is that although *hijra* in Dhaka too always inevitably invoke the trope of their being born that way and asexual, respectability in the context of my fieldwork accrues from the ability to conduct *hijragiri* or the occupation of the *hijra*, regardless of one’s genital status. Whilst as suggested in detail below, various markers of differentiation, namely occupation, ritual knowledge and formal affiliations, are variably employed by the male bodied feminine identified groups in Dhaka, *sadrals* *hijra* or those who conduct the occupation of the *hijra* claim to be the most authentic *hijra* groups, not least because of their association with putatively missing or defective genitals but also because of their possession of ritual knowledge and skills and the ability to demonstrate those before both fellow male bodied feminine identified groups and the mainstream society. In terms of authenticity, another key distinction worth underscoring is that emasculation in the Bangladeshi context

does not resonate with cultural ideals of renunciation per se. Rather, emasculation, as I suggest in detail in a later chapter, primarily confirms one's effeminate, asexual and disabled status.

Because of this popular conflation of the *hijra* with missing or defective genitals, there is a widespread perception among the public that *hijra* forcefully abduct and castrate men to enhance their member base. Equally strong is the idea that *hijra* snatch newly born children with ambiguous genitalia by force during 'badhai' performance (the practice of demanding gifts at birth and conferring blessings on the new born, which I discuss in the next chapter) as a way to secretly check out genital ambiguity. To the best of my knowledge, those who join the *hijra* in Dhaka do so voluntarily. There is no element of coercion in recruitment, as is often claimed in the popular press. It is also worth pointing out that persons born as biologically females but incapable of menstruating are not part of the *hijra* in Bangladesh (cf Nanda 1999 p-15 and 18). I never heard of a single case where a female, due to her inability to menstruate, became or was identified as a *hijra*. It is not on account of embodied ambiguity or a lack of penile prowess or sexual potency that one becomes a *hijra*. Rather, it is desire for 'masculine' men that my interlocutors contend define them as *hijra*. While I analyse the gendering of this desire in another chapter, suffice it to say that when *hijra* talk about desiring 'masculine' men, they talk about their desire to be anally penetrated and it is this receptive desire that my interlocutors argued is what makes one a *hijra*, regardless of whether one is a part of the formal *hijra* group or not.

There are in contemporary Bangladesh several groups of people who in popular imagination are classed as *hijra*. While these various groups of male bodied feminine identified people, as already suggested above, possess some shared commonalities, there is also subtle and at times pronounced distinction on the basis of which each of these groups seeks to assert its moral superiority over others and legitimize its position. What are those shared similarities

among these various groups of people? How are they different from each other and more importantly what are the criteria on the basis of which such distinctions are drawn by the *hijra* themselves? Can one be a part of these various groups at the same time? In analysing these disjunctures and similitudes, I do not mean to impose any fixity onto any of these groups. Rather, my intention here is to demonstrate ethnographically how each of these groups talks about the others and the various idioms of distinction that each group deploys in a bid to assert their authenticity over the others.

The main analytical aim of this chapter, therefore, is to offer the broader picture of male to male gender and sexual variance in Bangladesh. It is in relation to this broader context of gender and sexual diversity that *hijra* become culturally intelligible subjects in Bangladesh. While these various groups, I suggest below, may not always identify themselves as *hijra*, more often than not, these groups are embedded into the same spatio-cultural context where *hijra*-identified groups operate. Locating the *hijra* within such contexts, therefore, pre-empts any tendency to distil the *hijra* as an essentialist category. Attending to the contextual cultural complexities within which *hijra* subjectivities are embedded allows me to nuance the *hijra* not as some reified ‘third’ but as a prominent variant of ‘male femininity’ within the broader context of male to male homo-social configuration of Bangladesh. Here, a caveat is necessary. While I present these various groups separately, the actual empirical context in which I observed these groups defies such neat compartmentalization. In that sense, the artificial segregation of these various groups amounts to reducing the complexities of the lives of the *hijra* that I am keen on unpacking. However, as will be made clear, it is precisely through paying attention to these differences and similarities that we may be able to make sense of the *hijra* as a culturally constructed subject position.

In organising this chapter, I first offer a brief discussion on the various ways *hijra* as a publicly recognisable group is defined and understood by the wider

society. I draw a distinction between *hijra* self-definitions and that of the wider society, particularly highlighting the *hijra* gendered view of the cosmos. I elaborate that although there are various male bodied feminine identified groups, one commonality that binds all these groups is a shared desire for normative masculine men. Four such groups I elaborate are *dhurrani*, *gamchali*, *bagicha* and *sadrals hijra* that are not only publicly recognisable but also have their own internal networks and rules. Finally I draw attention to the fact that although these various groups can be distinguished from one another on the basis of various markers of differentiation, empirically there is considerable overlap not only in terms of rules and rituals but also in terms of individual's simultaneous membership of various groups.

The *sadrals* view on social universe

In what follows, I describe the social universe as explained to me by my *hijra* interlocutors. I do so primarily through the lens of *sadrals hijra*, i.e. those who conduct *hijragiri*, not least because they are most organized and publicly visible of all the groups I describe below but also because *sadrals hijra* deem themselves and are deemed by other groups to be the icon of *hijragiri*. In *hijra* conceptualization, the universe is composed of three types of people. These are a) *panthi* or men b) *neharun*/ women and c) *hijra* or *kothi*. I elaborate in detail on these categories in another chapter; here I only introduce how *hijra* define these types. It is also worth noting that this view also corresponds to the mainstream understandings of gender in Bangladesh, although the mainstream terms to describe those categories differ from those of the *hijra*. A *panthi*, according to the *hijra*, is someone who is inherently and essentially a penetrator, as opposed to a *neharun* or a *hijra /kothi*, who are receptors. In this configuration, both *neharun* and *hijra* are positioned against the penetrating *panthi*.

Given the popular and scholarly conceptualization of *hijra* as ‘handicapped’ and castrated, it is very difficult to imagine *hijra* without any reference to a discourse of biological defect or lack. I interrogate and challenge this view in another chapter. Here, I would like to highlight that it is not genital defect, intersexual condition, castration or impotence for which one becomes a *hijra*. Rather those who become *hijra* also define themselves as successful normative house-holding men. Yet they become *hijra* to be able to explore varied gender and erotic possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to normatively masculinised subjects in Bangladesh, issues I explore later in this thesis.

That genital defect or asexuality becomes the starting point for analysing the *hijra* partly arises from the fact that *hijra* always present themselves to be such in public. In reality, however, there are *hijra* with penis as well as those without penis and more significantly those who get rid of their penis and the scrotum do so neither because of impotence nor because of some genital ambiguity or deformity. All my interlocutors who underwent emasculation maintained that they had well-functioning male genitals and it was on account of the functionality of their genitals and an associated sense of embarrassment due to their having penis that they underwent emasculation. *Hijra* in general, however, deny not only the functionality of their penis but more importantly, the very fact of their being endowed with penis in the first place. While *hijra* make such claims to ‘disability’ in public and often verbally pride themselves on being born that way, my ethnographic materials suggest a different story. In a nutshell, one becomes a *hijra* not because of some inherent genital defect or one’s inability to perform normative masculinity but because of one’s desire for normative men. And it is this shared desire for normative masculine men that binds the various male bodied feminine identified people that I elaborate below.

Categorical fluidity and the debate over *hijra* versus *kothi*

One evening I was strolling through a park with a few *sadrals* (those who wear feminine-identified clothes) *hijra*. As a group of middle class males walked past from the other direction, my *sadrals* interlocutors cried out, ‘*Akkhar Kholer Kothi*’, literally, *Kothi* of the rich household. *Kothi* as a moniker denotes ‘effeminate males’. *Sadrals* claim it to be *hijra* argot and use it to refer to any man who they consider to be effeminate and desirous of other men. Another example leaps to mind. Once, a friend of mine came to visit Hridoypur, the area in Dhaka where I conducted prolonged fieldwork. *Hijra* in Hridoypur later wondered if he was a ‘*kothi*’. When I asked why they had thought so, they argued that his bodily comportment and style of talking were typical ‘*kothi-pona*’/akin to the mannerism of a *kothi*. When I wondered why they thought he was a *kothi* rather than a *hijra*, they argued that all *hijra* are *kothi*, but not all *kothi* are *hijra*.

Hijra in Hridoypur and elsewhere would often address each other as *kothi*. *Sadrals* explained that they called each other *kothi* rather than *hijra* as the word *hijra* has stigma attached to it. They also maintained that *kothi* is an alternative term for *hijra* that they use to avoid being understood in public. *Sadrals* also often use the expression called ‘Bangla *kothi*’ to refer to those unschooled in *hijra* mores. Bangla is the predominant mainstream language. So a ‘bangla *kothi*’ is someone who desires men and is effeminate but is unaware of the secret universe of the *hijra*. Another expression *hijra* often use is ‘*kari kothi*’ literally a *kothi* in the guise of a man. So to skeletonise, *kothi* in *hijra* argot is used as a generic term to refer to ‘effeminate’ males who desire other ‘masculine’ men and it is on account of this desire that one is a *kothi* independent of any formal affiliation. While I expound on the gendering central to this construction later in this thesis, suffice it to say here that *kothi* as a generic moniker encompasses all male bodied feminine identified people who desire normative masculine men. The complexities pertaining to the cultural context in which such monikers are used as a mode of ascribed and self-identification will become clearer in the discussion of four main groups of

people below. It is, however, important to indicate that the main descriptive labels that I use are those articulated by the *sadrali* group, although the views of each of these groups also inform my elaboration. *Sadrali* spoke about these groups mostly in relation to my questions about the status of these other groups, whilst at times discussion emerged when members of these non-*sadrali* groups either attended some of the events organized by the *sadrali hijra* or during our casual encounter with these groups. Owing to a lack of documentation of these various groups in Bangla, the mainstream language wherein all these groups are popularly classed as *hijra*, the etymological trajectories of these terms are hard to determine. Yet members of some of these groups, as will be specified below, often trace their lineage to a long running but unspecified past. In describing themselves, the non-*sadrali* groups acknowledged many self-referential terms to be part of the *sadrali hijra* argot although some of the labels used by the *sadrali* to describe others were resisted by the *non-sadrali*.

Bagicha kothi

Dressed in normative male attire, troupes of youthfully flamboyant males congregate once or twice a week in a large public garden in Dhaka to enact feminine gendered performance and cruise men. The word ‘*bagicha*’ literally denotes garden and is used by the *sadrali hijra* to refer to these groups of *kothi*. These *kothi* groups, however, describe themselves only as *kothi*. Although these groups of *kothi* never explicitly self-referenced themselves as ‘garden *kothi*’, I use this expression to describe them as it is mostly in such large garden premises that they act out their *kothiesque* behaviours. Garden *kothi* gather in public gardens from afternoon onwards typically to undertake what they call ‘*ulu jhulu*’ or fun. Garden *kothi* use this expression to refer specifically to experimentation with their bodies, dancing, singing and cruising men. Garden *kothi* at times put on lipstick and makeup. Some also pad out their chest with ‘*ilu ilu*’, condoms filled with water. Even though they are normatively attired, the style of clothes they wear (tight fitting) and choice of bright colours mark them out from other normative crowds in the garden.

More importantly, garden *kothi* speak *ulti*, the *hijra* argot about which I speak at length in another chapter. Relatively young in age, garden *kothi* live with their natal families and switch to a normative masculine mode once they leave these park or garden premises. My visits to such gardens always left me with the impression that there was never a shortage of such *kothi*, as within a very short span of time, old frequenters would be replaced by new groups of *kothi*. For instance, *kothi* I befriended and saw to be present in one public garden regularly in 2005 were no longer available when I went back there in 2007. Many of the *kothi* I knew later joined the *sadrals* *hijra* group (see below) while others took up work in NGOs. Some were still frequenting the gardens but as casual visitors, while those with NGOs were acting as peer educators providing safe sex information. There is also a strong presence of a middle class gay-identified group in this public garden that I do not discuss here, but suffice it to state here that *hijra* and *kothi* groups identify these middle class gay men as *kothi*, whilst middle class gay men consciously seek to distance themselves from *kothi/hijra*, even though they cruise in the same area and seek sex with them but divide here is primarily one of class that I take up in the next chapter.

Garden *kothi* form a human ring while they dance in turn inside the circle to music playing from mobile phones. Bystanders, mostly male visitors, gather and watch while *kothi* cruise. All the *kothi* I spoke to argued that they were both *kothi* and *hijra*. Chanchal who had been cruising in a park for the last two years, maintained that although s/he was not a *sadrals* *hijra*, her/is *guru* was. Aziz, another garden *kothi*, once related, ‘*We are kothi. We have many colours. Sometimes we are men, sometimes women and sometimes a bit of both*’. In public gardens where *kothi* do ‘*ulu jhulu*’, the bystanders I spoke to always termed these *kothi* as *hijra*. None I interacted with knew the word *kothi*.

The majority of these garden *kothi* live with their natal families and hail from lower class backgrounds. Unlike the *kothi* in Delhi observed by Hall (2005), the garden *kothi* in Dhaka neither trace their lineage to Mughal times nor do they consider themselves to be a special group distinct from the *hijra*. Rather many of these *kothi* are intimately linked with the *hijra* groups and are regular visitors to *hijra* households. The very first time I saw garden *kothi* was on the occasion of a *baraiya*, the festival conducted to celebrate emasculation (I discuss this celebration in the chapter on emasculation). That garden *kothi* attend ‘*baraiya*’ is significant, as *hijra* consider ‘*baraiya*’ to be a quintessentially (*sadrili*) *hijra* ritual. Jomuna, a *hijra guru* in Hridoypur, pointing her/his finger at one of these garden *kothi*, once stated that s/he was her/his *puti cela*/grand disciple (see below on *guru-cela* relationship). Several *hijra* in Hridoypur were once regular frequenters of such gardens but as they grew older and became full time *hijra*, they stopped visiting these ‘*dhurrani khol*’, the *hijra* expression for public gardens used to cruise men.

Gamchali hijra

Groups of men dressed in *lungi* (a *lungi* is a seamless tubular shape garment worn around the waist), *genji* (t shirts) and *gamcha* (*gamcha* is a traditional Bangladeshi towel made up of thin coarse cotton fabric) are often seen to walk down the streets with swaying hips and exaggerated body movements. Although *lungi*, *gamcha* and *genji* are normative male attire, the *gamchali* group stands out by virtue of their crimson lips reddened from incessant chewing of betel leaves, plucked and threaded eyebrows and especially their style of wearing the *gamcha*. The way they wear the *gamcha* across the chest inevitably conjures up the image of the *orna*, a piece of cloth similar to long scarf, worn across the breast by females in Bangladesh. *Gamcha* is the trademark of this group. It is important to note that despite *gamcha* being the distinctive marker of this group, they style themselves and are popularly styled by the mainstream as *hijra*. *Gamchali* as an expression is used as a mark of differentiation within the wider community of male bodied feminine identified people. I call them *gamchali hijra* in line with the *sadrili* practice of

describing them. Whilst they generally do not identify themselves as *gamchali hijra*, they often highlighted their occupation and the visible marker of *gamcha* sartoriality as a way to set themselves apart from other groups. ‘*Gamchali*’ *hijra* work in the burgeoning construction sites in Dhaka as cooks. Once a construction project is over, they move to a new construction site. Mostly emanating from the rural areas and low socioeconomic backgrounds, most *gamchali hijra* are heterosexually married and their heterosexual families live in the village. They support their families with the income earned from cooking. In speaking of the origin of this occupation, Mustafa, a *gamchali guru*, maintained that *gamchali hijra* are not a new phenomenon and have been in existence for a very long time. Previously, *gamchali hijra*, maintained Mustafa, were considered a special group of people to be summoned to beat the roof of newly-built houses with hyacinth, a practice that has fallen into disuse today⁴ (See also Gannon, 2009, p.188 for a discussion of *hijra* as cooks in historical documents).

Gamchali hijra take pride in the fact that they do not beg or prostitute themselves but work for their living. Mostofa once related, ‘*Kormo koira khai*’ (We live by working). Hasina, another *gamchali*, stated, ‘*We are not like them. We do not take penis in the back like them. We work to earn money and live with it and we do not engage in sex work*’. *Gamchali hijra* argue that they work as cooks as this is a soft work that they as *hijra* are capable of doing, unlike men for whom hard work is reserved. Abida, another *gamchali hijra*, argued ‘*I derive mental peace from cooking for men. Every day I cook twice for the workers in the site. Once in the morning and once in the evening. I go to the bazaar and buy foodstuffs. I also do the cleaning and I like my work*’.

⁴ Some senior citizens in Dhaka also told me a similar story about *hijra* being summoned to beat the rooftop in the past. That *hijra* were summoned to undertake this task may very well have been the result of a wider societal conception about *hijra* being ‘intermediate beings’ with the power to connect the other-worldly with this-worldly and it was on account of such beliefs that they used to be summoned to sacralise the making of an abode. Such beliefs no longer persist in contemporary Bangladesh. Similar arguments have been advanced in relation to island Southeast Asia (Johnson 1997).

There are about eight hundred of them in Dhaka, said Mostofa, the leader of a *gamchali hijra* group. Mostofa maintains a register where s/he writes the name of each newcomer to the group. Once a week, they all gather in a public park in Dhaka for rendezvous and dispute resolution. In line with the *sadrali hijragiri* (see below), Mostofa the leader of this group in Dhaka moderates such arbitrations. In case one disrespects one's *guru*, a 'don' (compensation) is imposed. Mustafa maintains that although s/he is the main *guru*, there are others who are her/is *gothia* (*hijra* similar in rank) but because of her/is efficiency and experience, s/he is the chief of this group.

Mustafa once related to me her/is story: *'My hijra life began back in my village. It was there I first learnt hijragiri (the hijra code of conduct). During that time my guru used to come to Dhaka to work as a cook. S/he would stay in Dhaka for about 5 to 6 months and then come back. Once I went with my guru to Dhaka and worked with her/im. Later on as I got married in the village and fathered children, I stopped being a hijra openly. These days I come to Dhaka and work as a cook for a few months and then return.'*

Like Mustafa, there are several others in the *gamchali* group who were at some point affiliated on a full time basis with a *sadrali* group. Zainal, another *gamchali hijra*, has been in this line for about 20 years now. S/he has a wife and three daughters living in the village. Once a month, Zainal visits them. Shaon, another *gamchali hijra*, has been working as a cook for about 10 years now. Prior to taking up cooking, s/he was a *sadrali hijra* in Medinipur, an area in India bordering Bangladesh. Shaon lived with the *sadrali* there for about 6 months and then came back as s/he could not cope with the hard work s/he had to do there. Although both Shaon and Zainal are now *gamchali hijra*, their first *guru* were *sadrali*, with whom they are still in touch. Both Shaon and Zainal stated that that it is important to have a *guru*. *'How can you live without a guru? You may not be a sadrali but you need a guru'*, related Zainal.

Sohel, also known as Soheli (Sohel is a male identified name while Soheli is female-identified), now aged 45, came to Dhaka recently from Chapainabagong, a northern district in Bangladesh. Soheli was renamed Soheli by Kajol, a *gamchali hijra* some 20 years younger than Soheli. Kajol first chanced upon Soheli adjacent to a construction site, at a tea stall. When I spoke to Soheli, s/he said Kajol was her/his *guru*, although s/he could not explain much about what this hierarchy meant. Being new to the *hijra* universe, Soheli had no knowledge of ‘*ulti*’, the clandestine *hijra* argot. Nor was s/he aware of the *hijra* code of conduct. When I inquired how Kajol had realized Soheli was one of them, Kajol maintained that ‘*oisi akhhhar Dhurani*’ (s/he is a big whore). Kajol also explained, ‘*When you look at someone you can tell whether that person desires a man or a not*’. In one of my regular visits to a bazaar where I would meet a *gamchali* group frequently, Rehana, a *gamchali hijra*, once initiated a new member into the group. I was told that although Abdul had been with the *gamchali* group for the last three months, s/he was yet to be made someone’s *cela*. Rehana agreed to take Abdul as her/his new disciple. Rehana and I were sitting under a neon light in a tong shop sipping tea while Abdul along with two other *gamchali hijra* were sent off to buy a new *gamcha* for the initiation. Asking the *hijra* to be the witness, Rehana put the end of the *gamcha* on Abdul’s head and a piece of sweet into Abdul’s mouth. Then Rehana declared that from then on Abdul was her/his *cela*. Abdul then greeted Rehana with ‘*Salamalaikum*’/peace be on you.

Gamchali hijra denounced sex work vehemently. Kajol once related, ‘*We gamchali do not need to do ‘night kam’/ sex work as we earn enough from cooking but we all desire men (panthi chis kori) and that is why we are hijra.*’ S/he also maintained that *gamchali* never take any men from the site of their work as *parik* or husband, as they do not want to lose their reputation as asexual in their workplace. Although *gamchali hijra* do not publicly dress like females, they dress up like females on special occasions that they organize. In one such programme that a *gamchali* group in Dhaka arranged, several *gamchali hijra* dressed like females and danced and sang behind a construction site. One of the special guests of that programme was a *sadrili*

hijra guru who turned up with a few of her/his *cela* and blessed her/his *gamchali hijra cela*.

Dhurrani hijra

The word ‘*dhurrani*’ derives from the word ‘*dhur*’, literally to fuck. *Dhurrani hijra* are those who work as sex workers on a relatively permanent basis. It is important to point out that *dhurrani* is not a self referential term, but is used by all these groups to deride *hijra* associated with sex work. *Hijra* engaged in sex work, however, call themselves simply *hijra*, whilst the *sadrali* group, despite their being engaged in sex work, disparage the sex worker *hijra* as *dhurrani*. The very first time I met a ‘*dhurrani*’ *hijra* was in a cruising site. Dressed in *salwar kameez* (loose T shirt and pyjama-style trousers), Mona was cruising in a public garden. Although there were several other *hijra*, Mona seemed to be out of touch with the rest. Later I found out that Mona lives in a rented ramshackle apartment with five other ‘*dhurrani*’ *hijra*. All of them work as sex workers but in different locations. There are several such *hijra* groups in Dhaka that work as sex workers on a full time basis.

The *Sadrali* group (*hijra* with more elaborate rules and rituals who generally claim to be asexual) often condemn the *dhurrani hijra* as ‘*the most despicable and fallen*’ and maintain that it is on account of the *dhurrani hijra* that the reputation of *sadrali* or ‘real’ *hijra* has been damaged. *Dhurrani hijra*, in contrast, argue that *sadrali hijra* are all ‘*velki*’ or fake. Tomali, a sex worker, once commented, ‘*There is not a single sadrali who does not have sex. Sadrals are more voracious sexually than us. They are the greatest whores (bishoo dhurrani). They just throw dust in the eyes of the society so that they can earn thappu or money.*’ ‘*Dhurrani*’ *hijra* maintain some sort of a *guru-cela* hierarchy. For instance, Rikta, a full time sex worker, once stated that s/he would never work in the *Mazaar* (shrine) area as her/his *cela* work there. In some areas, however, I had seen both *guru* and *cela* to be cruising together, although often at a remove. ‘*Dhurrani*’ *hijra* dress like females during work

and unlike the *bagicha kothi* discussed above, make their living through sex work.

While *sadrali* always publicly present themselves as asexual and above desire, the reality is that *sadrali hijra* too participate in sex work. In fact, there are *dhurrani hijra* that are also part of the *sadrali hijra* group. For instance, both Rikta and Tomali, who I have already mentioned, were full time *sadrali* previously. Both of them are still linked with the *sadrali* group. There are also *dhurrani hijra* who are *sadrali* by day, i.e. they conduct ritually sanctioned work namely *badhai* (demanding gifts at birth) and *cholla* (collecting money or foodstuffs from the bazaar) and sex workers by night. In Hridoypur, several *cela* of Meghna, a *sadrali guru*, were full time *dhurrani* previously. There were also *cela* of Meghna who went to public gardens to sell sex at least twice a week. That *cela* of Meghna engaged in sex work was not unknown to Meghna although initially s/he was in complete denial. Later, when I grew close to Meghna, s/he spoke frankly about her/is *cela's* '*dhurrani*' work. S/he however insisted that for *hijragiri* or the conduct of the *hijra* occupation, only money earned through ritually sanctioned means was used. Meghna maintained that as the *guru*, s/he had no right over the money that her/is *cela* earned though sex work. While *sadrali* publicly maintain a sharp distinction between themselves and the '*dhurrani*' *hijra* and categorically deny any association with the latter, in reality one can be simultaneously *sadrali* and *dhurrani*.

Sadrali hijrahood and its internal social structure

When people generally talk about *hijra* in Bangladesh, the very image that leaps to mind is that of a group masculine in stature but feminine in attire walking down the busy streets of Dhaka clapping and demanding money and hurling raunchy comments at the public, especially men. This typical image is that of the *sadrali hijra*. While the previously elaborated groups are also publicly recognisable, *sadrali hijra* are the most dominant and organized of

all. In a way, the rules and regulations including the use of the secret argot called *ulti*, and the *guru-cela* hierarchy that the previously discussed groups observe, are all modelled on the *sadrali* practices. The word ‘*sadrali*’ literally denotes the state of being clad in a *sari* or *sadra*.

Sadrali as *hijra* argot is used to specifically single out this group of *hijra*. *Sadrali hijra* self-identify and are identified by other nonnormative groups by that moniker. The import of *sadrali* here extends beyond the mere feminine identified sartorial practices, to refer to the ritual conduct of *hijragiri*, namely *badhai* and *cholla*, the two quintessentially *sadrali hijra* occupations. I elaborate both *Badhai* and *cholla* at length in the next chapter; here I just intend to highlight that it is on account of these ritually sanctioned occupational practices that the *sadrali hijra* distinguish themselves and are distinguished from other groups. *Sadrali hijra* believe that these occupational practices are the direct prescriptions of two primordial *hijra* archetypes, namely Maya Ji and Tara Moni, whom I discuss in another chapter. *Sadrali hijrahood* is a ‘way of life’ centred on the occupation ordained by these two goddesses. *Sadrali hijrahood* entails a systematic mastering of rules and regulations and the ability to live up to those ideals on a daily basis. It is on account of formal initiation into this group and the subsequent acquisition of ritual acumen and practices on the basis of which *sadrali* make claims to be the real and most authentic *hijra*. One, therefore, has to learn the *sadrali* ways in a systematic manner through rigorous practice over time under a *hijra*’s mentorship. In what follows I unpack some of the organizational structuring principles of *sadrali hijrahood*.

***Guru-cela* hierarchy**

Hijra social structure revolves around a *guru-cela* hierarchy. While a *guru* is like a preceptor, a *cela* is like a student or disciple. It is only under the aegis of a *guru* that a novice can be initiated into the *hijra* group. While a *guru* may

have many *cela* under her/his command, *cela* too can have *cela* under their discipleship. So important is this affiliation that a *hijra* is known throughout her/his life by the name of her/his *guru*. For instance, the very first question a *hijra* is asked when confronted by another *hijra* is ‘whose *cela* are you?’ or ‘whose house/*ghor* do you belong to?’ Although *ghor* here signifies a symbolic lineage, what is essentially asked of a *hijra* is the name of the *guru* to whose house s/he belongs. In other words, the *guru* becomes the marker of the house or *ghor*.

Hridoypur, where I spent a large amount of time during my fieldwork participating and observing the daily lives of the *hijra*, is presided over by Jomuna, a nonagenarian *hijra*. Because of infirmity, Jomuna lives in another area along with her/his natal sister and brother in law. Jomuna inherited a small room from her/his natal family where s/he now spends her/his time. Jomuna has put Meghna, her/his *cela*, in charge of the *birrit*, the ritual jurisdiction to which a *hijra* group is entitled in terms of performing *cholla* and *badhai*. Meghna, the *cela* of Jomuna, has around 50 *hijra* under her/his command, comprising not only her/his immediate *cela* but also *nati* and *puti cela* (grand *cela* and great grand *cela*). While Meghna lives in a rented one storey tin-shed room, her/his other *cela* live across the area. *Hijra* in Hridoypur are all known as belonging to the *ghor* of Jomuna. Here, belonging to a *ghor* does not embody the physical habitation of a single household but the symbolic lineage of Jomuna.

The reason Meghna has been given the task of overseeing the whole *birrit* on Jomuna’s behalf is not only because Meghna is the most trusted and loved of all *cela* of Jomuna but because of her/his capacity to manage the group. In order to become a *guru*, a *sadrili hijra* has to be expert in dispute resolution, manage the whole group and most significantly possess the knowledge of *hijragiri* (the ritual occupations of the *hijra* and the associated rules and regulations). Within the *sadrili hijra* universe, status differentiation is not based on some rigid essential traits such as age or socio-economic

background. For instance, there are several *cela* of Meghna who are older than her/im. In *hijragiri* or the conduct of the *hijra* occupation, one of the decisive factors for becoming a *guru* is not age but seniority based on the time of one's entry into the group and subsequent acquisition of ritual knowledge and its skilful execution. In Dhaka there are about 20 such houses, all of which are known by the name of the *guru*. Most of these *guru* are *gothia*, or *hijra* of more or less similar rank. For instance two *cela* of the same *guru* are *gothia*, while *cela* of *cela* of the same *guru* are her/is *nati* or grand *cela*. Although age is not technically a factor in becoming a *guru*, the twenty *hijra ghor* are all headed by older *hijra*.

Initiation rites

There are well-established rites of initiation in keeping with which the entrance of a new *cela* is officiated. Typically the ritual of initiation or *Asla* as *hijra* call it, is conducted in the presence of the sponsoring *guru* and her/is existing *cela* and *hijra* of other houses. The word '*asla*', derives from '*achol*', literally the end of a sari. '*It is like being under the achol of your mother. Like mothers guru also keep the cela under their achol*', said Meghna, the *hijra guru*, during one initiation. '*Asla khawa*', as *hijra* often say to refer to one's becoming a *cela*, is to come under the *achol* of a *guru*. Here, the word '*achol*' is figurative, its meaning extending beyond the mere piece of cloth to encompass motherly care and nurturance. *Guru* bear all the expenses associated with the initiation rite. The sponsoring *guru* purifies a space on the floor and asks the initiate to sit on the 'purified space' and touches the head of the novice with the end of her/is *sari*. S/he then puts a piece of sweet into the mouth of the novice and then the initiand says '*salamalaikum*' ('peace be on you') to the *guru*. From that moment onwards, the initiand becomes a *cela* and a new member of the *hijra* group. Typically *hijra* from other '*ghor*' present during an initiation give out cash to the newly initiated but the money goes straight to the sponsoring *guru*. The invited guests are treated to rich food like *biriyani* (oily rice cooked with fragrant spices and meat) and sweets on such occasions. Sometimes guests come from faraway places including India.

Usually *hijra* close to the sponsoring *guru* are invited. Nevertheless depending on the economic condition of the sponsoring *guru*, the extent of the festivity of initiation varies.

During my fieldwork, among many of the initiation rites I attended, one event in particular leaps to my mind, where I was given the task of being an amanuensis. Rani, a *hijra guru*, organized a festival on the occasion of the initiation of a new *cela*. *Hijra* from both outside Dhaka and Barashat, India were invited. Since influential *hijra* from several different places were present and because some of them might object to the presence of an outsider like me, Rina asked me to write the contract for the initiation and keep a record of the amount of money given by the guests. As several *daratni*, the *hijra* word for leaders, assembled in the room, Rina handed me a 100 taka (roughly £1 or less) notarized government stamp paper. Siraj Master, a *hijra*, dictated while I scribbled. The contract which I later photocopied from Rina is reproduced below in translation, with the original names changed:

‘I, Sadia hijra (father: Moshrraf, mother: Monira, Village: Mithakhali, District: Kurigram) hereby declare that I am accepting the discipleship of guru Trisna Hijra of 1/a, Topkhana road, Segunbagicha, Dhaka-1000 (Guru: Rina hijra, dad guru-Jomuna hijra,) and Nan guru- Rina hijra (Guru-Jomuna Hijra, 28/2, Sohag vila, 1 no college road, Asrafabad Kamrangirchar, Dhaka). I also declare that if I ever join another hijra house leaving my guru and the house of Rina, I will be liable to pay a fine (Don) of 100000 taka in keeping with the hijra pon-pesha/code of conduct.’

The above contract was signed by Nadia, the initiate, along with six *hijra* witnesses. The contents of the contract not only illustrate the importance of the *guru* in the life cycle of a *hijra* but also the binding nature of such discipleship. Trishna, the *guru* of Nadia, is known by her/is *guru* and grand

guru as the contract shows. So is Rina, the *guru* of Trishna in whose household the festival took place. Although typically the *hijra* initiating a *cela* sponsors such an event, in this case it is Rina *hijra*, the *guru* of Trishna, sponsoring this event. The reason the initiation took place at Rina's *khol* (house) is because Trisha is not a full time *sadrals* but a *bagicha kothi* who lives with her/his natal family. The contract also shows that despite the binding nature of this contract, Nadia is allowed to change her/his *guru* and move into a new house, although such a decision entails the clearing up of the agreed compensation or *don* of 10000 taka (around £100).

Although *cela* can change *guru* by paying the agreed amount, in the case of Nadia it may be very difficult given the size of the amount. Typically a '*don*', the *hijra* word for penalty or compensation, can be a lot lower or higher than this. *Hijra* in Hridoypur maintained that it was around 1 lac taka (around £1000) in the case of their grand *guru* Jomuna, while the '*don*' for other initiations I attended ranged between 5 to 20 thousand taka (roughly £50-200). When a *cela* changes into a new house, the sponsoring *guru* pays the amount to the old *guru*. *Cela*, however, rarely change houses and when they do it, it is often due to severe problems of adjustment. Although several of my interlocutors in Hridoypur left on occasions, they all came back eventually.

It bears noting that signing such a contract is not a common practice among the *hijra*. Meghna, the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur who was also present during the aforementioned initiation, later explained, '*Agreements like this are entered only when there is a lack of trust. Since Rina is very bad-tempered and has lost several of her/his cela in the past, s/he now always uses a written contract to ensure that cela don't leave her/im easily*'. Meghna also maintained that the use of the government notarized stamp was merely symbolic, with no legal standing as in the case of a *cela* leaving her/his *guru*, such matters are never referred to the court for resolution.

Both Nanda (1999) and Reddy (2005) noted that *cela* in India change from one house to another. For instance, Reddy maintains that there are seven *hijra* houses to which *hijra* all over India belong. In contrast, there are no such major symbolic divisions in the way *hijragiri* is organized in Bangladesh. Rather *cela* are all known by the name of their *guru*. There are, however, three symbolic houses, namely *Shambajariya*, *Ghunguriya* and *Machuya*⁵. *Machuya* is the smallest of the three and is a breakaway group from the *Ghunguriya*. The word ‘*Shambajariya*’ derives from a bazaar known as sham bazaar, although *hijra* could not specify its exact location. In contrast ‘*ghunguriya*’ derives from the word ‘*ghungur*’, literally anklet. *Ghunguriya*, therefore, originated from a group of dancing *hijra* while *shambajariya* are named after a place. *Hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere in Dhaka maintained that since *ghunguriya* are associated with dancing, they have lower prestige. However, the fact is all *hijra* groups dance and sing and such a division is nominal, with very little bearing on how one group treats the other. There is practically no difference among these three major houses in terms of ritual practices. Nor were my *hijra* interlocutors sufficiently knowledgeable about the differences among these three houses. Unlike India, where change of a *guru* entails a change of house or symbolic descent line (Reddy, 2005), such divisions are of little practical significance to the *hijra* in Dhaka. A *hijra* can change to any other *hijra* group irrespective of this nominal tripartite division. *Hijra* in Dhaka rarely talk in terms of these symbolic divisions. Rather the predominant marker of belonging is decided in terms of one’s *guru*. Except a few *hijra guru*, most *hijra* had no clear conception either about these symbolic houses or about which of these houses they represented. Rather the name of the *guru* or *guru*’s *guru* is more important than these three symbolic divisions.

Reciprocity and power in *guru-cela* relationship

Hijragiri or the occupation of the *hijra*, is a *guru*-centric institution. A novice may become a member of the *hijra* group only if an existing member is willing to take the novice as a *cela*. *Guru* are highly venerated among the

⁵ Some *hijra guru* dismissed ‘*machuya*’ as a house, saying that it does not exist.

hijra. When a *guru* grows infirm, the *cela* are expected to take care of her/im. Although Hridoypur, as already mentioned previously, is the *birit* of Jomuna, Megha, the most trusted and dearest *cela* of Jomuna oversees the group on her/is behalf. Once a week, Jomuna visits Hridoypur to supervise and get her/is share. If Jomuna is unable to visit, *hijra* from Hridoypur visit Jomuna with the ‘*cholla*’ (foodstuff and money). Jomuna maintains that it is Meghna in whose name s/he conducts *hijragiri*. Jomuna contends that Megha was like her/is father and mother and without her/is blessing, s/he would not have been where s/he was today. Meghna once related, ‘*It is a relationship based on mutual trust, love and respect. If I did not respect my guru, s/he would not have conferred the birit on me. In a similar vein if my cela do not respect me, then they too will be denied their rightful share*’.

Misconduct with a *guru* is a severe offence for which stringent punishment is meted out. On almost every aspect of life, consultation with the *guru* is sought by the *cela*. The *guru*-centricity of *hijra* social organization was further evident to me when I started to frequent Meghna’s house on a regular basis. Twice a week, *cela* would eat at Meghna’s house. While *cela* of Meghna dropped by whenever necessary, *cela* gathered at her/is house at least twice a week before setting out for *cholla* and *badhai*. After coming back from *cholla* and *badhai*, Meghna would eat with all her/is *cela*. Meghna, like a mother, would cook *dorma* and *khobra*, the *hijra* words for rice and beef respectively. *Cela* would always seek permission from Meghna before eating. When *cela* see their *guru*, the first thing they do is greet the *guru* with ‘*salamalaikum*’, the standard Muslim greeting in Bangladesh. In the evening at the sound of the call for prayer or *azan*, *cela* would greet their *guru* with ‘*sham bati salamalikum*’ (an evening greeting). At the time of leaving, *cela* would say ‘*guru pao lagi*’ literally ‘*guru, I touch your feet*’, a form of good bye. Touching of feet or *pao* is considered a way of showing respect to elders among the *hijra* and in Bangladesh generally. Another event leaps to my mind. Once I was in the house of Nasima, an influential *guru* in the old part of Dhaka. We were all sitting on the floor. Suddenly a next door neighbour called out for Nasima from outside. Tania, Nasima’s *cela*, was rushing out of the

room to respond but accidentally her/his *achol* (the hem of the *sari*) touched Nasima's head. Instantaneously Nasima stopped Tania and asked her/im to tear a thread from the hemline of her/his *sari* to give to her/im. Since the '*achol*' is used to initiate a *cela*, a *cela's achol* is not supposed to touch the head of a *guru*. In case this happens, a thread is to be torn from the *sari* to be given back to the *guru*, to undo the *guru-cela* 'role reversal' believed to result from such a faux pas. *Cela* of Meghna argued that despite the hard work that they had to do as *cela*, like trawling through the streets and the bazaars in search of *cholla* under scorching heat and the strict code of conduct under which they have to act, their lives under Meghna were far better than the previous lives with their natal families. Ruposhi, another *cela* of Meghna, once related that s/he would have been on the street without a place to stay had s/he not been a *cela* of Meghna, who not only provided for her/im but also protected her/im from street thugs. Another *cela* of Meghna in Hridoypur related, '*It is my duty to take care of my guru. Don't you take care of your parents? It is the same with us. If I do not take care of my guru now, when I grow old I will also be left uncared and without cela*'.

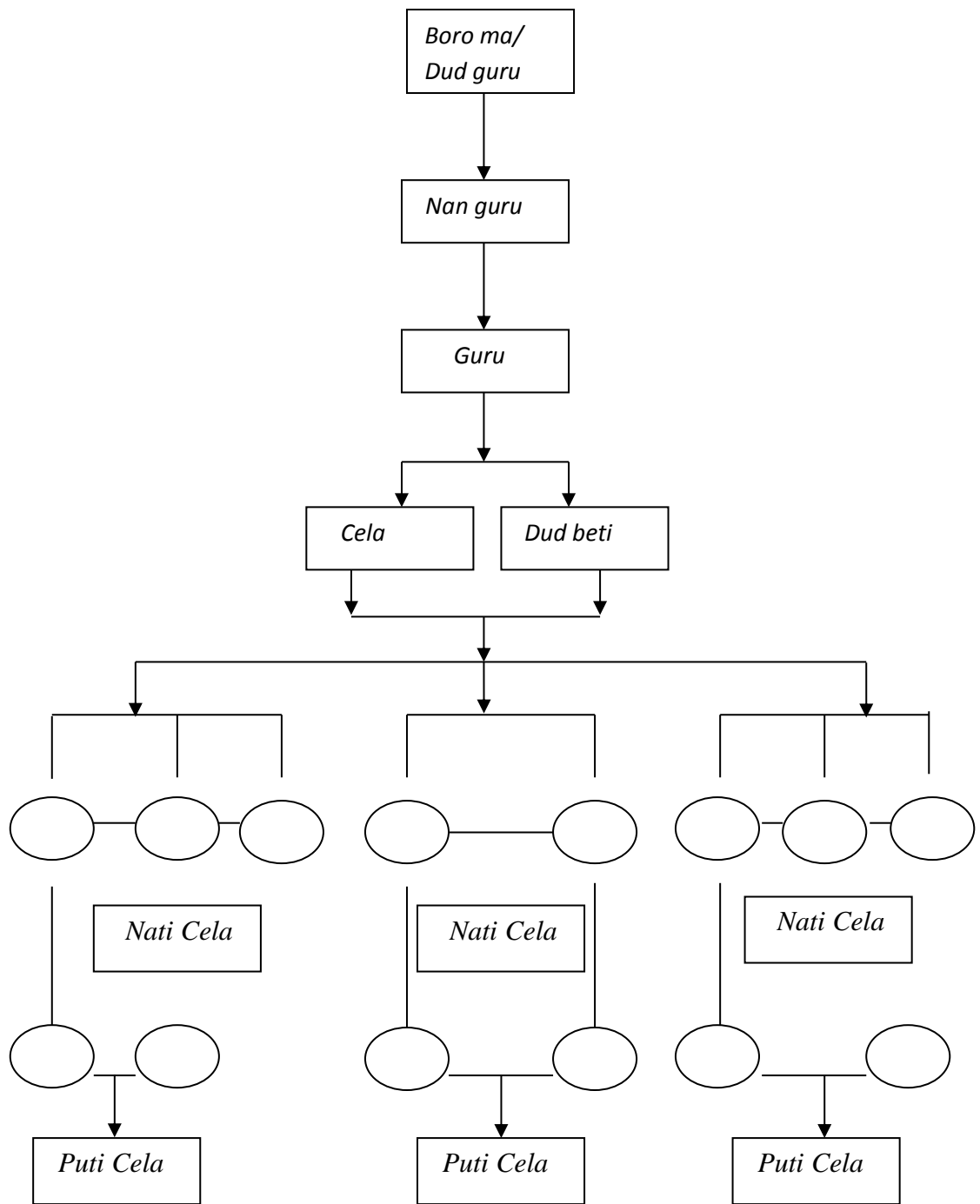
What emerges from the above is that the *guru-cela* relationship is central to the reproduction of the *hijra* social system. While the *guru* may seem like the tyrannical patriarch of a *hijra* house, the relationship between a *cela* and her/his *guru* is based on mutual respect, care, love and trust. Although the will of a *guru* reigns supreme in *hijra* hierarchy, it is not an exploitative arrangement with *guru* enjoying the benefits at the expense of the *cela*. Rather this hierarchical configuration enables a division of labour with both *guru* and *cela* having a specific set of tasks, the undertaking of which is central to the maintenance of the *hijra* status quo.

While the *guru-cela* relationship is based on mutual respect and reciprocity, it is also at times fraught with tension. For instance, in the event of an infringement of a code of conduct, a *hijra* may be subjected to stringent

punishment. The nature of the punishment hinges upon the severity of the offence. An accused is at best fined or at worst excommunicated. During my fieldwork, I saw two such incidents. Once it so happened that a *cela* was found to be sexually involved with the husband of a *guru*. As a punishment, the accused had to have her/his head totally shaven before being kicked out of the group (I discuss this at length in my chapter on the partners of the *hijra*). The second incident took place after a *cela* underwent emasculation without the permission of a *guru* but was later reincorporated by paying a ‘*don*’ or penalty (See my chapter on emasculation). Aside from such serious infractions, penalties for petty crimes include paying a ‘*don*’ or ‘*chol Pani Bond*’ (moratorium on consumption of food and water). Once ‘*chol Pani Bond*’ is imposed, it is only the *guru* who reserves the right to lift it. Once the ban is lifted, the *guru* embraces the *cela* and feeds her/im with her/his own hand.

Although the *guru-cela* relationship is modelled on a mother-daughter relationship with the *guru* acting like a mother, the dynamics of this relationship also resonate with Hindu husband-wife relationships. While *hijra* do not read it along this line, some of the practices bespeak this symbolic similarity. For instance, when a *guru* dies, a *cela* in line with Hindu mourning rites, breaks her/his bangles and puts on a white *sari*. The mourning *cela* also abstains from consumption of meat and fish for forty one days. In addition, the *cela* continues to wear white clothes on major *hijra* occasions. Although a *cela* whose *guru* has died wears a white dress for the next forty one days, a thin red wrist band is worn alongside the white. *Hijra* argued that this red amidst white is a way for a *cela* to go back to colourful dress or a state of normalcy at a later stage. The practices adopted by a *cela* after the demise of a *guru* may be seen to echo at least at a symbolic level the funerary rites that the wife of a deceased husband does in Hindu culture. Although *hijra* strongly objected to such interpretations, I expound this possibility further in my chapter on erotic desire and practice.

Hierarchy of *Hijra* social structure



‘Milk daughter’: A bond of permanence and unrequited love

Cela, I noted previously, can change from one *hijra* house to another. However, there is a kind of *guru-cela* relationship that transcends the typical conditionality of the *guru-cela* divide. Often spoken of in terms of the umbilical cord, a milk daughter or *dud beti* is a *cela* perpetually tied to the mother-like *guru*. Unlike other *cela*, a *dud beti* remains a *cela* for good and can never break this affective bond. Like a daughter who is fed by her mother, a *dud beti* is also a daughter to the *hijra* mother. Although not based on umbilical cord and breast feeding, it is a bond based on unconditional love. A *dud beti* always remains a *dud beti* to her/is *hijra* mother regardless of how bitter the relations may grow. ‘It is like an unbroken bond that nothing on earth can dismantle’, related Megha in speaking of her/is *dud beti*, Tulsi.

During Tulsi’s initiation, an elaborate ritual was undertaken in Meghna’s home amidst the presence of all her/is *cela*. Typically the preparatory ingredients for this initiation include a plate, a glass, seven pieces of betel leaf and seven dots of vermilion. These ingredients serve as witnesses to the enactment of this sacramental bond. The initiate is made to sit in the lap of the *guru* and symbolically feed at her/is breast. While the initiate does not suck literally the breasts of the *guru*, the mother pours some milk into her/is *beti*’s mouth. Meghna, after this initiation, told that while a regular *guru-cela* relation or *asla* involves one knot, the relation between a *dud beti* and her/is mother signifies five knots and hence is difficult to untie.

Interestingly, milk daughters are rarely seen to stay with their *dud* mothers. For instance, Tulsi, the *dud beti* of Meghna, is not part of the Hridoypur *hijra* group, although Tulsi would occasionally visit Meghna. Tulsi is what *hijra* in Hridoypur called a ‘*kari beshar kothi*’/ a *hijra* in the guise of a normative man. Tulsi, also known as Tola, is a heterosexually married man who worked in a sweet factory. Tulsi had never been a part of a *sadrili* group, i.e. s/he never

undertook *badhai* and *cholla*. Even during the initiation, Tulsi was dressed in Panjabi and pyjama, typical masculine attire in Bangladesh. This is not to suggest that *dud beti* are always heterosexually married and without any formal affiliation with the *sadrals*. Rina, another *hijra*, also has a *dud beti* who works as a *sadrals* in Barasat of West Bengal in India. During my fieldwork in Hridoypur, Sugondhi, Rina's *dud beti*, visited Hridoypur twice.

What emerges is that the relationship between a *dud beti* and her/his mother or *guru* is eternal. While *cela* of a *guru* can change the *hijra* house, a *dud beti*'s ties with her/his *hijra* mother are hermetically sealed. More interestingly, the case of Tulsi suggests that one does not have to be a *sadrals* to be a *dud beti*. Although Tulsi lives like a normative male, *hijra* in Hrodpypur viewed her/him as a *hijra*. What kind of a *hijra* is s/he? In what follows, I present a system of classification that *sadrals* employ to talk about different types of *hijra*.

***Sadrals* internal classification**

According to the *sadrals hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere in Dhaka, there are basically three kinds of *hijra*. These are:

***Janana*:** *Janana* are *hijra* with penis. As Dilu a *hijra* from Hridoypur once explained, 'It is like someone has a pen but no ink'. In other words, they have a penis but no use for it. While this statement may be taken to indicate the status of a person's erectile dysfunction or impotence; what it actually means is that they do not put their penis to use (See the chapter on erotic desire where I unpack this). However, *hijra* generically contend that those among them with penis can neither get an erection nor produce sperm.

***Chibry*:** *Chibry hijra* are those who have had their genitals (both penis and scrotum) completely removed. As *hijra* in Hridoypur would often put it, 'They neither have pen nor ink'. *Hijra* including the *chibry*, generically claim to

have been born that way.

Vabrajer Chibry: ‘*Vabrajer chibri*’ means born straight from the womb of the mother. The word ‘*vab raj*’ in *hijra* argot denotes ‘pregnant women’ but when used in this context, it refers to those born with ambiguous or missing genitals. As Nina, a *hijra guru*, once explained, ‘*They are hijra with ambiguous genitalia. Many just have a hole to urinate. They are actually real hijra but are not part of the organized hijra group. They pass their lives in the guise of females in their natal families. Also females who never menstruate can be classed as part of this group*’. While *hijra* have a category for the ‘*Vabrajer chibry*’, they are, as the opening vignette of this chapter suggests, neither part of the *hijra* groups nor welcome to become members.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, the above system of classification that *hijra* deploy to describe the diversity within the *hijra* universe is primarily centred on genital status. It needs mentioning that whilst *hijra* publicly claim to be born that way, i.e. born with defective or missing genitals, such a classificatory grid is employed only internally. For instance, *janana* is rarely used as a self-referential address. Nor do they constitute a separate *hijra* group. Furthermore, whilst people with missing or ambiguous genitals are marked as ‘*vabrajer chibry*’, they are not part of the *hijra* universe. Yet it is precisely this essentialist trope of defective or missing genitals that *hijra* invoke day in and day out to seek recognition as real *hijra*. Second, *Sadrali hijra* groups typically boast both *janana* and *chibry* as members. While monographs on *hijra* in India (Nanda, 1999, Reddy 2005) report status differentiation based on genital status, in the context of Bangladesh the state of being emasculated does not necessarily correlate with greater status, for reasons I explain in the chapter on emasculation. Third, the aforesaid system of *sadrali* classification centred on genital status is also employed by other non-*sadrali* groups in that in speaking among themselves they often resort to the same sort of classification and language. Yet one important point to note here is that it is only among the *sadrali* group that emasculated or *chibry hijra* are existent, whilst other non-*sadrali* groups boast

only *janana hijra* as members. Fourth, whilst the trope of realness and authenticity is often invoked by the *hijra*, realness or authenticity here entails the ability to master the sacrosanct acumen and the consequent acting out of those acumen and skills both before the public and fellow *hijra*. In other words, the attainment of a successful *hijra* status entails the ability to conduct *hijragiri*, regardless of one's genital status. In the words of Jomuna, the nonagenarian *hijra guru* in Hridoypur, '*one becomes a hijra by virtue of one's ability to converse (bole), earn money (thappu), maintain rules and rituals (peshha and pon), and arbitrate (salish)*'. This comment illustrates a critical point relevant to one of the wider arguments of this thesis: one becomes a *hijra* processually, regardless of whether one is a *janana* or a *chibry*.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I elaborated the various groups of male bodied feminine identified people in Dhaka, highlighting similitude and disjuncture and the tendency on the part of these groups to vituperate each other on account of occupational practice, involvement with sex work and knowledge and conduct of ritual practices. Navigating through these distinctions and isomorphism foregrounds questions of authenticity and realness that each of these groups deploys to seek moral superiority over others. *Bagicha kothi*, *gamchali hijra* and '*dhurrani*' *hijra* groups all approximate some of the practices of the *sadrali hijra*, evident in the way they maintain a *guru-cela* divide. While this is strictly enforced among the *sadrali hijra*, other groups too acknowledged its centrality. Although *bagicha kothi* do not enforce such a strict *guru-cela* hierarchy in the garden premises, they are also often affiliated with the *sadrali hijra*. Whilst the *sadrali hijra* consider themselves superior to others on account of their ritual knowledge and adherence to the archetypical occupations of *badhai* and *cholla*, *gamchali hijra* seek to authenticate themselves on the ground of their occupation of cooking, which they regard as superior to *sadrali* work. Both the *sadrali* and the *gamchali hijra* publicly denounce sex work and argue that involvement in prostitution is emblematic of fake *hijrahood*. '*Dhurrani*' *hijra*, on the other hand, retort by saying that

sadrali too are *dhurrani*, although they may deny it. *Bagicha kothi*, too, consider themselves to be *hijra* on account of their linkage with the *sadrali* group and their *hijra-like* performance in the garden premises. Whilst these groups differ from each other on account of space, occupation, sartorial practice, public presentation and kinship, such distinctions often collapse as many of my interlocutors belonged to all these groups simultaneously, while others switched from one group to another in the course of their life-historical trajectories.

More often than not, ethnographic discussion on *hijra* reduces the complexities of the cultural context by not positioning the *hijra* within the wider context of gender and sexual variance. In highlighting the complex and fluid cultural context of male to male desire within which *hijra* are embedded, Reddy (2005) contends that the various groups including that of the *hijra* she encountered were actually part of a broader *koti*⁶ family. In other words, *koti* in Reddy's account emerges as a generic moniker to encompass variably situated male bodied people who desire masculine men. In a similar vein, Hall (2005) notes the presence of *kothi* in Delhi and argues that *kothi* is distinct from the *hijra* and is a 'fourth breed'. Both Reddy and Hall contend that *kothi* is no less authentic than the *hijra* and in some sense precedes the *hijra* as a subject position. In contrast, Boyce (2007) and Cohen (2005) argue that *kothi* as a subculture is a by-product of recent AIDS-focused NGO activism. That is, the very organized groups of people that self-identify as *kothi* in contemporary South Asia are a new phenomenon. Here my concern is not to resolve the debate over *hijra* versus *kothi* firstness. Rather what I would like to underscore is that *hijra* and *kothi* are not antithetical to each other. Following the lead from my interlocutors, I would argue that *kothi* as an expression originates in *hijra* argot, a view that all the aforesaid groups in Dhaka endorsed. Here I side with Reddy in arguing that *kothi* is a generic label that various male bodied feminine identified groups identify with, although the context of its use as a form of self-identification varies. Furthermore, while *kothi* as a word derives

⁶ Scholars variably spell this group as *koti* or *kothi*, which I follow depending on who I am referencing.

from *hijra* argot, unlike *hijra*, *kothi* is an internal word and its use outside the nonmainstream groups is still rare.

Finally, my intention in this chapter was not merely to document the existence of several nonnormative groups. Rather I presented them with the aim of bringing into view the complex and fluid cultural contexts within which *hijra* are embedded. The elaboration of the cultural context that these various groups inhabit allows us to read the *hijra* not as some reified category with fixed traits but as a part of a continuum of ‘male femaling’ practices. In other words, each of these groups requires systematic mastery of various kinds of ‘male femaling’ knowledge and skills. Yet a point worth accentuating is that all these male bodied feminine identified groups are concatenated through a shared desire for normative masculine men, regardless of their presentation to the contrary in public. I discuss the centrality of desire in the crafting of *hijra* subjectivity later in this thesis. Here, let me just contend that it is on account of this shared desire that these various groups consider themselves to be part of a similar universe of desire. This shared similarity is further reflected in their possession of knowledge of *ulti*, the clandestine *hijra* argot which works to assert a communitarian belonging to this secret universe of desire. Another commonality that binds these groups is their shared lower class background in Bangladeshi social structure, which I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: On class-cultural politics and the making of the *hijra*

Ethnographies of *hijra* in contemporary South Asia have often projected the *hijra* as a group lying outside the dominant markers of social differentiation, namely class, caste, religion, and ethnicity (Reddy 2005; Nanda 1990). Although *hijra* do often crosscut such markers in terms of accepting people of various backgrounds, the class dimension of *hijra* identity has been largely ignored. My *hijra* interlocutors often emphasized what they styled as '*lutki kholer maigga*', literally effeminate boys of the poorer families, in describing the social standing of their natal families. '*It is not that hijra are not born to the upper and middle classes but only those from the lower classes join the community*', commented Jostna, a *hijra* in Dhaka. Moyna, another *hijra*, once stated '*The upper and middle class hijra are called gay. They have their own societies but we are no different from them in essence*'. In this chapter, it is this class-specific nature of the *hijra* subculture that I interrogate. I bring into view specifically the role of class in the formation of *hijraness* not only on account of their working class backgrounds but also in terms of their situatedness within the wider class-inflected social structure in urban Bangladesh. I argue that the public vilification of the *hijra* is not reducible to their sex/gender difference alone but inherent in this process is a class-cultural politics that works to reproduce such discursive and material abjections. In advancing my argument, I contend that class is not a static category but a social fact always in the making. Focusing on the *hijra* spatial practices and location within the urban socio-cultural milieu, I bring into view the complex interplay between class, gender and sexuality in the production and reproduction of the *hijra*.

Scholars within the field of critical gender and sexuality studies have noted the problematic tendency to overlook class in the formation of sex/gender subjectivities (Hennessy, 2000; Heapy, 2011; Binnie, 2011). While the culturalist queer theory tends to reduce subjectivities to the level of discourse

alone (e.g. Butler, 1990), the material queer strand calls for a re-materialization of sexuality studies. Material queer theorists argue that the very invocation of class as an analytical tool continues to be intellectually suspect in much of the cultural queer theoretical strand. The main criticism of the cultural queer body of scholarship is that the privileging of class has often resulted in the relegation of gender and sexual subjectivities to the status of a super-structural excess. That is, subjectivities have been read as superfluous derivations of some over-determined economic structure (e.g. Morton, 2001). On the other hand, the material queer strand tends to dismiss the culturalist queer point-blank for its inattention to the economic structures of inequality. Notwithstanding this disagreement, I argue that these two positions are not necessarily antithetical to each other. In overcoming this disjuncture, I follow Liechty (2002) in arguing that class and culture co-constitute each other. In his analysis of the burgeoning middle class in Kathmandu, Nepal, Liechty calls for an anthropology of class that shows adequate sensitivity to both the cultural practices constitutive of class as well as the unequal distribution of power and resources that disproportionately affect people's lives. Following Bourdieu (1984), Liechty argues that class is not a predetermined category but a process always being made and remade through embodied spatial practices or what he calls the class cultural process. The usefulness of the class cultural approach as proposed by Liechty lies in its ability to locate the spatial dynamics through which class is produced and reproduced on a daily basis. More significantly, as Liechty argues, a class cultural analysis enables us to understand not only what class is but also what it does. This insight is particularly useful for my analysis of the class-cultural abjection of the *hijra*. *Hijra* in Bangladesh are not only vituperated on account of their positioning within the working class milieu but more importantly are constantly produced and reproduced via middle/upper class cultural imaginings. Middle/upper class cultural and spatial imaginings serve as powerful discursive tropes through which *hijra* bodies are continually and simultaneously de/sexualized and de/masculinised. It is through a displacement of the middle class cultural anxieties about morality, respectability and boundaries onto working class bodies that the middle classes imagine their own class cultural difference and superiority over their abjected working class others. It is worthwhile to

mention that in the normative scheme of gender relations, generically talked about in terms of the categories of men, women and the *hijra*, not only are *hijra* bodies defined as a ‘failed’ middle category but also described in highly class-specific terms. That is, when a middle class male is denigrated as *hijra* by his class equals, it is not just his transgressive gender expression but a specific kind of transgressive gender expression associated with the lower class *hijra* for which such men are disparaged.

Morality tales, middle class imagining and the spatial location of the *hijra* in Dhaka

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is one of the fastest growing cities in the world with a population size in excess of 10 million. With a dense concentration of urban slums, the gap between the rich and the poor is one of the highest in the world. *Hijra* in Dhaka mostly live in these shantytowns. Hridoypur, my primary field site, is one of the poorest areas in Dhaka with a massive constellation of poor migrants and working class people. Members of the *hijra* community in Hridoypur, like any typical *hijra* group, are spread across the area. Despite the stigma associated with the *hijra*, *hijra* are not spatially ghettoized but are seen to be living with the mainstream poor populace. My *hijra* interlocutors often argued that poorer sections of the society are more approving and loving of them compared to the rich. *Hijra* predominantly emanate from the same kind of socio-economic backgrounds that their mainstream neighbours come from. *Hijra* in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh often complain that it is the middle and upper class populace who are hostile to them. For instance, *hijra* in Hridoypur pointed out that even if they were in a position to afford to move, they would never be accepted into the middle/upper class neighbourhoods. I discuss later in this chapter *hijra* entanglement with their class counterparts; here I highlight the way the middle classes construe the *hijra*.

The term *hijra* is often used by the middle classes not only to describe males who fail to be sufficiently normatively masculine but also middle class men who do not conform to the norms of respectable middle class masculinity. As a middle class, normatively-gendered male subject in Bangladesh, I had never seen *hijra* come to my house or any typical middle class households either as guests or as performers. Nor had I heard any middle class people talk positively about the *hijra*. Although I grew up in an area close to which was a *hijra* household, it was not until I developed some interest in the *hijra* that I started interacting with them in a personal capacity. I discuss how my middle class positionality in Bangladeshi social structure shaped my interaction and reception among the *hijra* in two other chapters; here I highlight the dominant middle class readings of the *hijra*.

In fact, there is rarely any interaction between the middle classes and the *hijra* except for fleeting moments of confrontational encounter in public premises, which I discuss later. My observation is that the middle classes entertain ingrained prejudices against the *hijra*. The main patron base of the *hijra* in Dhaka is not the middle/upper classes but those of working class backgrounds. For instance, the *sadrals* *hijra* perform *badhai*, the *hijra* occupation of demanding gifts at birth only in the poor households (See below). In the Indian context, anthropologists noted that *hijra* perform *badhai* in both lower and middle/upper class households. Additionally, *hijra* are also seen to demand money in ceremonies like marriage and birthdays in middle/upper class houses. In contrast, the mobility of the *sadrals* *hijra* in Dhaka is restricted only to working class households. Older *hijra* often nostalgically related to me that once upon a time they were the exclusive band of people to be invited to entertain people but with the rise of other forms of outlets, namely media, TV and satellite channels, the traditional cultural demand for *hijra* as performers has disappeared. Nanda (1999) for instance opens her monograph with a description of a *badhai* performance in an upper-middle class household. She notes that in the popular Indian imagination, *hijra* are conceptualized as specialist cultural performers. In contrast, there is no such popular perception of *hijra* being cultural performers in Dhaka. Unlike India where *hijra* are

believed to possess sacred power which in turn entitles them to perform and bless the new born, there is no such corresponding belief in the *hijra* ability to either bless or curse among the non-*hijra* Bangladeshi populace in general. My interlocutors often pointed to this difference in cultural attitude as the reason for the wide income disparity between the *hijra* of India and those of Bangladesh. I reproduce below a few highlights from newspapers in Bangladesh as a way to demonstrate how the middle classes read the *hijra*.

On 8th September 2008 *Ittefaq*, a national Bangla daily, reported the arrest of 27 *hijra* from the premise of a multinational telecom company. The *hijra* had demanded alms but had been denied and then the police were summoned. On 25th June 2009 the *Daily Star*, an elite English newspaper, carried a report titled ‘Hijra panic grip city dwellers’. The report contains several vignettes of the reported harassment faced by the mainstream middle/upper classes. Excerpts from the news are as follows:

City dwellers remain in a state of panic nowadays due to frequent attacks of hermaphrodite (hijra) populace who suddenly come to the houses or make attacks on individuals at different signal points for money or other goods. Hijra attacked Shamima Akhter, mother of a two-month-old son, at her Gulshan residence where she lives with her husband. She said, “ I went to the veranda after hearing shouting of my guard around 11:00 am yesterday and found some five to six hijra beat up my guard as he refused to allow them to the house. I got panicked and called my husband, who was also harassed by the group of hijra. They demanded Tk 5,000 (around 50 £ or less) for our kid’s welfare, otherwise they would kidnap my son,” said Shamima. The doting mother also said, “We finally paid them Tk 2000 after much hard bargaining. We have already decided to change our house from this area as they (hijra) frequently come.....Hijra also attacked the commuters at different signal points where cars and other vehicle stopped for few minutes, said a victim, who recently lost a mobile phone and a wallet from his own car at Mohakhali. “Suddenly they

come to the car and try to enter the vehicle by force or start to scold in very offensive language and gesture.’’ Said the victim.....

On 24th march 2010 the same daily ran another report titled ‘Panic attack by hijra at Uttara: Two hurt’. The news is as follows:

“A group of hijra (hermaphrodites), who were engaged in raising extortion money from different houses by intimidation, attacked a house at Uttara sector 5 yesterday and injured two security personnel. The group, consisting of five to six hijra, was chased away by the local people with canes and brickbats. During the short chase, one hijra was injured. The hijra, however returned to the area with 20-25 ones of the community immediately and attacked people and some houses located on Road No. 3 of the sector. On information, Uttara police rushed to the spot and tried to take control of the situation, but the hijra ignored their presence and launched their attacks, creating public nuisance. The hijra made phone calls to their friends to ‘send more hijra’ to the scene. Panicky residents stayed within their homes while the police tried to calm down the agitating hijra, who claimed that one of their comrades was killed. Traffic movement came to a halt for almost one hour. With the interference of the police, the hijra finally left the area. Locals said a small group of hijra stormed a six-storey house, went to the second floor, where a family with small children resides, to seek money. The security guards of the house tried to push two hijra from the stairway. At that time, other hermaphrodites waiting outside the building attacked the security men...”

There are a few things to be noted here. First, the news items above underscore one of the central contentions of this chapter: Unlike India, *hijra* in Bangladesh are not recognized as sacred and religiously powerful cultural performers in middle class imaginary. *Hijra*, in one of the news item, reportedly demanded money for the welfare of a two month old child while another *hijra* group stormed into a house to approach a family with small

children. That the middle classes do not recognize *badhai* (the practice of demanding gifts at birth) is also evident in the way they described the *hijra* demand for money as extortion. Second, *hijra* demand for alms has been variously described as criminal, extortion, mugging and public nuisance. While I am not able to ascertain the veracity of these specific allegations, the *hijra* encounter with these middle class households was confrontational. *Hijra*, I already noted, are not welcome into middle class households or areas to demand *badhai*. Third, the news items indicate a class-specific way of representing the *hijra*. That *hijra* have been labelled ‘criminals’ and ‘thugs’ is not surprising. Several middle class friends, acquaintances and relatives, having read these reports, rang me up and variously described the *hijra* as hermaphrodites, transsexual, disabled and abnormal. Some went to the extent of saying that *hijra* were basically muggers and a real source of public nuisance.

Ethnographic research has brought into view the centrality of class in the formation and abjection of gendered/sexed subjects. In her research on working class women in the north of England, Skeggs (1997) has persuasively shown how imageries of class and respectability are inextricably intertwined in the derogatory representation of the working class. Skeggs shows how the notion of middle class has been consolidated over time in relation to the discursive abjection of the working class. In a similar vein, in the popular imagination of the middle/upper class in Dhaka, *hijra* are ‘foul-smelling’, ‘dirty’, ‘violent’ and ‘shameless’ people. It is the lower class status with its associated imageries of filth, foul smell, cheap and gaudy makeup and aggressiveness through which *hijra* are discursively produced as the abjected others in the dominant middle class imaginary of Bangladeshi society. And it is through constructing the *hijra* as non-respectable that the middle classes consolidate their own notions of respectability and distinction. It is also instructive to note that the dominant middle class imagination generically construes the working classes as not only non-respectable but also emasculate. Recent work on male domestic labour has also amply demonstrated the de-virilization and infantilization of working class men in middle class imaginary

on account of their association with putatively feminizing domestic settings (Chopra 2006; Sarti and Scrinzi 2010; Bartolomei 2010). It is, therefore, not only the *hijra* but also the working class populace in general that are conceived as an undifferentiated whole characterized by a concurrent lack and excess of sexual desire.

That working class people are often defined in terms of presumed genital lack or deficiency resonates with the wider history of sexuality in Europe. Johnson (2009) for instance, notes that the boundaries of the normative categories of gender and sexuality in the western world have been distilled not only in relation to the ‘deviant’ within (lower classes) but also in relation to the racialized other without (primitive races). In a similar vein, the presumed genital lack or deficiency of *hijra* bodies metaphorically stand in for the lack of clearly defined gender of working class populations evident not only in the generic class specific demonization of the *hijra* as demonstrated previously but also in the way such understandings inform the distance that middle class gay men seek to maintain from the working class *hijra* populace, to which I briefly alluded in the previous chapter. Such class inflected constructions of the *hijra* are further evident in the emergence of various kinds of medicalizing discourses among the middle classes in contemporary Bangladesh, where the *hijra* are not only pathologized but also there to be potentially ‘fixed’, issues on which I reflect more in chapter 8.

While the interaction between the middle classes and the *hijra* indicates some degree of hostilities and class-cultural anxieties, the following section presents materials on the enforced location of the working class within which *hijra* are spatially located in Dhaka. Specifically, I present three different spatial arrangements within the working class context where *hijra* are seen to interact with their normative working class counterparts. Focusing on the neighbourhoods that *hijra* in Hridoypur inhabit, I demonstrate class-cultural solidarity between the *hijra* and their normative working class neighbours. Through a discussion of *badhai*, the *hijra* act of demanding gifts at birth, I

demonstrate how conventions of neighbourliness that define space are transgressed by the *hijra* in a bid to seek recognition as *hijra*. Drawing on theories of gift exchange, I argue that the *hijra* exchange relations with their working class counterparts can be partially explained in terms of the broader islamically-inspired cultural logics of gift exchange in Bangladesh. I also demonstrate that while *badhai* is a way for the *hijra* to solicit recognition, *badhai* also serves as a site where masculinities are contested and transacted. Finally, I elaborate *hijra* presence within bazaar settings in Dhaka where the *hijra* solicit gifts from the vendors as a way to further assert their *hijraness* and be recognized as *hijra*. I contend that the *hijra* presence and interaction with the normative crowd within the public bazaar settings, albeit often confrontational, takes on the appearance of carnivalesque conviviality.

Class-cultural solidarity and conventions of neighbourliness

Hijra in Hridoypur, I have already noted, are dispersed across the area rather than being concentrated into a colony-like neighbourhood. Like the majority mainstream, *hijra* in Hridoypur are also migrants from other parts of Bangladesh who have come and joined a *hijra* group in Dhaka not only to be away from their natal homes but also for better income prospects. Hridoypur, as a relatively new settlement in Dhaka, is unique not only on account of its large number of working class migrant workers but also because of dense concentrations of mosques and Islamic seminaries.

Although *hijra* live alongside this mainstream normative population, the presence of the *hijra* is also very marked in most of these neighbourhoods. For instance, every time I went out to look for a *hijra* in a neighbourhood in Hridoypur, it was always the mainstream populace either from the tea stalls or some casual passersby who led me to the exact location. Sometimes overenthusiastic children would go back inside to pass the word of my arrival to the *hijra*. Despite a generic tendency on the part of the mainstream to not rent out rooms to the *hijra* as many of my interlocutors often complained,

hijra in Hridoypur were spatially in tune with their normative working class counterparts.

Sathi, a *hijra*, lived in the middle of a dense bazaar on the rooftop of a ramshackle building next to an open space used as a mosque. Mona, another *hijra*, lived in a room belonging to an Islamic seminary. Mousumi, another *hijra*, lived amidst a constellation of households. Although they were all part of Jomuna's (the *guru* in Hridoypur) lineage and gathered at her/is house twice a week and publicly operated as *hijra* in that area, they were looked upon not only as *hijra* in that area but also as neighbours. Mousumi had been living in her/is house for the last two years and over this period had befriended the neighbours pretty well. Every time I visited Mousumi, I saw women and children of other households all crammed in her/is room watching cinema or a popular show in the television. My arrival, however, always led to the disbanding of the gathering. As an aside, let me also mention that although Mousumi was the name given to her/im by her/is *hijra guru*, s/he was also known as Abul, a masculine identified name in the area and was variably called by both names, like majority of the *hijra* in the neighbourhood. Unlike other *hijra* in Hridoypur, Mousumi lived with her/is mother to whom Mousumi was Abul although her/s mother knew full well about Abul's *hijra* vocation. *Hijra* in Hridoypur were also very close to Abul's mother.

Bristhi, another *hijra* whose house I used to visit, would also draw a mainstream normative crowd in her/is house for TV. Many times, I saw both Mousumi and Bristi help their next door female neighbours with washing and cooking. For instance, during one of the marriage festivals of a neighbour's daughter, Bristi supervised the entire food preparation. Not only did Mousumi and Bristi and their neighbours share utensils on a regular basis, but also would often share food. On occasion, the *hijra guru* Jomuna would ask the children to bring some *dhupni and patli*, the *hijra* words for cigarettes and tea, respectively, from the adjoining shops. Aside from such good neighbourly sociality, *hijra* would also often be the first group of people to be approached

by the neighbours in times of emergency. When a neighbour was undergoing an operation, *hijra* were not only there at the hospital throughout the process but also lent money to the neighbours. Neighbours reciprocated such favours. Abdul, a local influential vendor once arranged a free space on the rooftop of a building for holding a *hijra* festival free of charge.

During one *baraiya* festival (a festival undertaken to celebrate emasculation, which I discuss later in this thesis) in Hridoypur, *hijra* danced with music in the open space around their makeshift tents. Dressed in gaudy makeup and bawdy female attire, *hijra* danced and sang while neighbours, mostly children, stood up close and watched. Suddenly at the sound of the call for prayer (*azan*), a senior *hijra* dramatically fluttered out from inside the tent and asked her/is *hijra* companions to suspend the *ulu jhulu*, the *hijra* term for fun. *Hijra* immediately stopped their dancing and singing spree and covered their heads with scarves. After the *azan* had finished and prayers commenced they once again resumed the singing and dancing. On another occasion a local mullah arrived at the scene and asked the *hijra* to behave since their dancing in the public was, according to the mullah, against propriety. The *hijra* stopped dancing immediately. They explained to me that they stopped not because they were scared of the *mullah* but because they did not want to be in their neighbours' bad books.

In fact, several *hijra* in Hridoypur would not only say prayers regularly in the mosques but also often take part in Islamic preaching. Sonia, another senior *hijra* from Hridoypur now in her/is late 40s, underwent emasculation some ten years back. After being with a *hijra* group in Medinipur in India for about 10 years, s/he recently bought a house in Hridoypur and settled there. Recently Sonia performed *hajj*/pilgrimage. Since returning from *hajj*, Sonia has been working with the local mosque as a volunteer in weekly Islamic preaching. Sonia, along with other Muslims, moves from door to door to preach Islam. Sonia dresses like a man during her/is service for the mosque. S/he also works as the branch manager of an NGO working on the sexual health of the *hijra* in

the same area. In the office and house, s/he stays dressed like a female in line with *hijra* lifestyle. The mosque committee and the locals are aware that Sonia is a *hijra*. The fact that Sonia is a *hijra* has never been an issue for the mosque committee and the locals.

In Hridoypur groups of devout Muslim men often walked from door to door to preach Islam. On occasion they accosted the *hijra*, encouraging them to take up the path of Islam. The advice these groups meted out to the *hijra* centred on the importance of saying prayers five times a day in the mosque and following the Islamic life style. *Hijra* approached by them were never asked to give up their *hijra* identifications. Nor were they ever upbraided for their cross-dressings, as is often assumed to be the case in Muslim majority societies⁷. In fact, a number of my *hijra* interlocutors in Hridoypur and elsewhere participated in *chilla*, a practice where groups of Muslims journey together for a certain period of time from one place to the other to preach Islam. *Hijra* often spoke gleefully about sexual encounters with Muslim men during the ‘*chilla*’ or ‘*tabliq safar*’ organized by an Islamic group. Although one of the *hijra*, after returning from *chilla*, reverted to her/his normative life as a man, s/he rejoined the *hijra* community after about 6 months.

What emerges is that *hijra* are spatially in tune with their normative working class neighbours with whom they interact in the capacity of good neighbours as much as their neighbours tend to reciprocate. While in the quotidian settings *hijra* share a lot with the females of the neighbourhoods, they not only join the male folk at times to participate in public Islamic gatherings but also often extend hands of cooperation during medical emergencies and social festivities. What these interactions underscore is that *hijra* live in keeping with the conventions of normative neighbourliness, like the rest of the normative

⁷ The assumption derives from one of the oft quoted hadiths or sayings of the prophet according to which men who dress like women and women who dress like men are to be condemned. See also Murray and Roscoe (1997) for historical examples of varied practices of cross-dressing in Muslim societies.

society, despite their being visibly marked as *hijra* within the working class neighbourhoods in Dhaka.

In her paper on the *hijra* in Pakistan, Pamment (2010 p.30) contends that the elite class approves of greater gender bending and sexual norms, in contrast to, the lower and the middle classes, to whom gender and sexual transgression are unimaginable. In contrast, the vignettes I presented above illustrate that the working class populace are far more accepting of the *hijra*. This is not to suggest that the generic understanding of the working classes about gender and sexuality is different from that of their middle class counterparts. Like the middle classes, the working class populace too conceive the social universe in terms of tripartite categories of men, women and the *hijra*. Yet working class people, owing to their spatial proximity and everyday entanglement with the *hijra*, tend to have greater understanding and acceptance of the *hijra* in Bangladesh than the middle classes including the gay identified sections, for whom *hijra* are the working class deviant other in opposition to which their own notions of respectable gender and sexual categories are negotiated and produced. The middle class image of the *hijra* is based largely on media reportage and various medicalizing discourses around gender ambiguity that I elaborate in a later chapter.

Rethinking *Badhai*, the traditional *hijra* occupation

It was around 11 in the morning. *Hijra* gathered at the house of Meghna, the *guru* entrusted with the task of supervising the house of Jamuna. Jamuna, a nonagenarian *hijra*, bought a small piece of land in Hridoypur some twenty years ago. Meghna, Jomuna's most favoured *cela*, conducts *hijragiri* from that house. *Hijra* started gathering at Meghna's house from 10 a.m. Later they broke into two groups. One group composed of three young *hijra* took a rickshaw to go to the sweeper colony of the old Dhaka. The other group consisting of four young *hijra* set out on foot as they would be covering the adjacent areas. A point worth noting here is that each of these groups had one

chibry (emasculated *hijra*) with them, while the rest were *janana* or *hijra* with penis. I joined the walking group but was told to be at a safe remove so that the ‘*jodgman*’, the *hijra* word for the mainstream, would not suspect my being with them. Dressed in *saris*, four of them left the room with permission from Jamuna, who had come early that morning. One of them took a drum and slung it around her/is neck. With a small recorder in my pocket, I walked slowly behind them. Trawling through the narrow dust-filled alleys for about half an hour, they started looking for prospective houses with new born children. One from the group went inside the houses or peeped through the doors or windows to see if there was any sign of a new born child. I was told that one of the ways to find out was to see if there were *thalias* (small trappings) hanging from the wire to dry in the sun. If a lady is *vabraj*, the *hijra* word for a pregnant woman, they count the months till the probable birth of the child and come back accordingly. After checking about 12 houses they chanced upon a house with a newborn. Unlike middle class households, the gates of most of these houses were open. In poor neighbourhoods in Dhaka, gates are often left open during the day; though there is commonly shared etiquette pertaining to how one enters through the gate into another’s home. One of the *hijra* barged in to check first and then beckoned others to move in. There was a narrow L-shaped passage with 5 one-storied rooms lined up in a row. One of the *hijra* took the baby in her/is lap and started dancing and singing while the rest sat on the ground clapping and drumming. As they were performing, a group of curious bystanders elbowed through the narrow alley and encircled the *hijra* to watch the performance. After rendering a few songs and dancing, one of them went inside the room and brought some mustard oil. S/he whispered some mantra-like words into the ear of the new born and smeared oil on its head. Afterwards they started demanding money for the *badhai*. The conversation that took place is given in translation below:

Mousumi : Give us money.®⁸

(Hijra start to sing and dance)

Mousumi: What is the matter? Where is the father of the child?

Mother: He is out on the road.

Three Hijra in unison: Go and get him.

Liza: Go bring him here®. Go bring him. Or else we will insult you®.

Neighbour: Sing another song.

Mousumi: Did you hire us with money to dance and sing? ®

Liza (pointing to the gathering crowd): Go away. What is wrong? Why are you here? Have you seen us before? Are you here to see new vaginas or what? Why don't you go?

Liza: Give us something. We will go away. Don't just keep standing like this. Give something. Haven't you seen people like us in Bangladesh? ®

Neighbour addressing the mother of the child: Go and get something. Or else they will attack and snatch away. Go, get 100 taka for them.

(hijra suddenly conversing among themselves in ulti. They have kept us waiting for long. Let us insult them. One of them says to wait for a while)

An old woman: Sing another song.

Mousumi: Go, you old whore. Go, sleep with the grandfather. You won't get pregnant, go and fuck him.

(Hijra talking among themselves in ulti: We should insult them. Let us give them a serious bashing.)

Me: What if they don't give anything?

Liza: No. we danced.

A male neighbour: If you don't sing a few more songs, they won't give anything.

Liza: Why don't you give? You are the uncle of the child.

Mousumi: We have been waiting for half an hour. We danced and sang so many times. What else do they want? We will have to go to other places.

⁸ I use registered sign ® to indicate 'accompanied by clapping' throughout this chapter.

Neighbours addressing the mother: Why don't you give?

Mousumi: Call the father. I will ask him to impregnate me the way he impregnated the child's mother. Let him marry me. I neither have a crack nor a hole. Let him marry one of us and then there will be no pregnancy. There will be no poverty. No hijra will come then. Both will earn. This is the first house we have come to, to demand badhai today.

The old woman: Sing another song.

Mousumi: You old whore. Why don't you sing? It hurts to sing. The householders are silent and you neighbours are so excited. Where is the mother of the child? Has the father fled away? Let me go out and bring the father inside.

Liza: I will insult like anything. I will curse. Give us our dues for the newborn.

Neighbour: You have been sitting. Why don't you sing? They will be happy if you sing and then they will give.

Mother: His father is calling someone outside for money. He has no money.

Mousumi: Your husband is in politics and has a regular flow of cash. You are not likely to be going short. He earns 3 to 5 hundred taka (4£ or less) daily. So you must give us 200 taka (around 1.5£).

Mother: Take this 100 taka. We are poor. I managed 100 after a lot of requests from his father.

Mousumi, addressing the neighbours: How can they be poor? He earns cash every day. What does he do? Does he traffic in prostitutes? You must bring 200. And then we will leave.

Another woman: Don't you see they are poor?

Mother: This is all we have. Please leave.

Mousumi: If you don't bring 200, I will bang my head and bleed and tell everyone that you have hurt us.

Mother: This is not fair.

Mousumi: Only four of us have come. If you don't donate us something, we will bring 10 more hijra. I will bang my head and bleed.

Liza: You can't fool the hijra.®

Neighbour: Just take whatever is given.

Mousumi: No way. Go, fuck and eat flattened rice.

Neighbour addressing the mother: Today you have been caught.

Mousumi addressing the remaining crowd: Go and get us some betel leaves. We neither have cracks nor holes. So give to us.®

Neighbour: Get the child. They will pray for the child.

Mother: Take these rice and potatoes.

Sonia: Put it in this red sack.

Mousumi: We would not have left without 500 but we are leaving only because of you (addressed to the neighbour who insisted that the household was poor).

A number of themes emerge from the description above. For instance, the household where the *hijra* performed was markedly lower class. The significance of this lies in the fact that typically *hijra* undertake *badhai* work only in such working class households in Dhaka. More importantly, *hijra* too hail from a similar sort of a background. The fact that *hijra* performances are restricted to working class backgrounds is significant, especially in view of the fact that in India the chief patrons of the *hijra* are the middle and upper middle class (Nanda, 1999; and Jaffrey, 1997). Here, what is worth pointing out is that unlike India where people in general look upon *hijra* as cultural performers and ritual specialists, there is no similar corresponding recognition of the *hijra* as such in urban Bangladesh. Ethnographers note that in the Indian context it is not only on the occasion of the birth of a male child but also during marriage ceremonies that *hijra* make appearances to bless the newlyweds with fertility. *Hijra* in India are also said to gate-crash marriage ceremonies and make demands. In contrast, a similar sort of gate-crashing in the middle class neighbourhoods is impossible to imagine in Dhaka. As a middle class Bangladeshi born and brought up in Dhaka, I never saw *hijra* making similar sorts of demand during marriage ceremonies. The very practice of *hijra* blessing the newlyweds with fertility is culturally unrecognized in middle class urban Bangladesh.

Yet the *badhai* performance described above clearly indicates that *hijra* make some sort of a claim to being a special group of people with the ritual power to bless and curse. Does it mean that working class populace in Bangladesh conceptualize *hijra* differently from their middle/upper class counterparts? It is worth recalling that the *hijra*, during their search for the houses, did not seek any permission to enter the houses. Moreover, when they found a house, they went straight into the room, took the child and started singing and dancing. What exactly is it that empowers the *hijra* to barge into these households and perform? Why did the family finally pay the *hijra*? Does this practice of ‘barging in’ index local economies of beliefs wherein *hijra* are implicitly conceptualized as sacrosanct beings with the power to confer blessings? We can also note from the *badhai* performance above that the householder agreed to pay the *hijra* only in the face of irresistible demand and the constant request of the neighbours.

Although ethnographers of Indian *hijra* note a similar sort of bargaining, the very fact that *hijra* make claim to such status and people reciprocate is explainable on account of *hijra*'s association with Hindu mother goddesses. *Hijra*, Nanda notes, invoke the name of the mother goddesses to confer blessings, whereas in Muslim-dominated Bangladesh there is no such popular conflation of the *hijra* with a mother goddess, a reality *hijra* too acknowledge. Although *hijra* consider *badhai* as their archetypal occupation prescribed by the goddess Maya ji (see my chapter on emasculation for a full unpacking of this myth), they also clearly acknowledge the lack of its cultural salience in Bangladesh. ‘You know in India if you decline, *hijra* would beat you up and rebuke you badly. Do you know what *hijra* in Delhi, Bombay and Kolkata get? 20 ounces of gold and 20 sacks of rice per household. And only then they leave’, said Jomuna the *hijra* guru. In explaining to me the reason for the reluctance of the people to give, Jomuna pointed to the lack of skill on the part of the new generation of *hijra*. ‘You know those who you see these days are useless with no proper skill in either singing or dancing. All they know is sex. Why would people give to them?’ related Jomuna with a sense of despondence. Rina, another *sadrili*, told me that it is not easy to get money from the houses

of the new born. 'You know we have to talk them into paying us. Moreover, not every household we visit to conduct *badhai* pays us. Sometimes it is 100 taka and sometimes 150 and at times it is just 10 taka.' Many households in the face of *hijra*'s persistent demand take them inside the house to show them their assets. Thus it is only after prolonged bargaining, pleading and at times shaming and insulting that *hijra* manage to obtain 'alms' both in cash and kind.

It is important to note that *hijra* do not perform *badhai* in their immediate neighbourhood but in other working class areas, where the same group of *hijra* are seen to take on a different persona, contrary to their image of being good neighbours. In other words, it is through transgressing the conventional norms of neighbourliness that *hijra* assert their identity. In her analysis of *hijra* use of abuse with the mainstream, Hall (1997) interprets such 'verbal insolence' as a subversive act wherein the *hijra* pull the mainstream into conversations with them in order to challenge the discourses of respectability and heteronormativity that the mainstream deploys to marginalize them. Although *hijra*'s conversation with the mainstream serves as a site where notions of gender and class are transacted, what I intend to highlight here is that in terms of *badhai* and the encounter between the mainstream and the *hijra*, what we see is a conventionalized form of exchange where transgression and haggling are part of the game rather than the exception. *Hijra* acts of barging into people's houses and making demands on the occasion of the birth of a male child contravenes the conventional rules of neighbourliness. Yet that *hijra* enter and make demands is not something that the households do not anticipate. It is, after all, a known fact that once *hijra* enter a household, haggling will follow. In that sense, *badhai* is a unique context where exchange of gift follows a pattern of conventionalized transgression, contrary to dominant anthropological perspectives on gift exchange. While anthropological accounts as will be shown below often underscore the centrality of gift exchange in the production of reciprocal sociality, rarely is haggling invoked as a part of that normative gift exchange convention.

My *sadrali hijra* interlocutors pointed out that they carry out *badhai* less for the income generation and more for the sake of the *hijra* occupation. *Badhai*, as many of my *hijra* interlocutors often highlighted, is an indispensable and defining feature of *sadrali hijrahood*. Unlike other work like *birit manga* (see below) and sex work, *badhai* is considered sacrosanct. For instance, before setting out for *badhai*, *hijra* worship the *dhol*/drum and seek permission from the *guru*. *Hijra* also carry a special red sack known as ‘*oli*’ to store foodstuffs like rice, potatoes, vegetables and lentils that they receive from the households. Upon returning to the house of the *guru*, *hijra* put the drum back and then hand the ‘*oli*’ to the *guru*. *Hijra* maintain the ‘*oli*’ ‘gets heated’. So upon returning home their first duty is to ‘cool down the *oli*’. ‘*Oli is the business of the hijra. We the hijra make our ends meet with the help of this ‘oli*’, stated Mousumi. The foodstuff and the money gained from *Badhai* are given straight to the *guru*. The *guru* then distributes the money among the *cela*. The foodstuffs are either consumed by the *hijra* or sold out in the market.

What emerges is that although the wider society including the working class may not subscribe to the idea of *hijra* ritual and sacred power, *hijra* in Bangladesh do often claim to have such prowess, evidenced from their acts of paying respect towards the drum and subsequent cooling down of the ‘*oli*’. More significantly when *hijra* receive rice from households, they return a portion of it to them immediately. *Hijra* pointed out that if not returned, such acts of giving may in the long run bring bad luck for the household. ‘*You know it is bad for the household if everything they give is taken away by us. So we give a fist of rice back so that nothing bad happens to them*’ explained Liza. How do we explain the *hijra* performance of *badhai* in a cultural context that does not explicitly recognize such performances as special or sacred? Perhaps one way to understand this is to look at the local systems of exchange relations within which *badhai* performances can be located. The importance of an exchange perspective lies in the fact that it helps us better understand the broader moral order across the class divides within which the very presence of *hijra* in Bangladesh is rendered intelligible. An exchange perspective also

helps us come to grips with structural inequalities, class cultural practices and corresponding notions of respect, respectability and commensality.

Critiquing Dumont's postulation of purity/impurity as the structuring principle of Indian caste based social structure, Raheja (1989) argues the case of in/auspiciousness as a more nuanced way to reconceptualise the exchange relations in the Indian context. Raheja's proposition centres on the idea that it is through acts of giving that the donor passes the inauspiciousness to the donee, which the donee then passes on to others or counteracts. Prestation, thus, is a form of exchange through which the giver gets rid of the evil, the 'poison in the gift', to expropriate Raheja. At first blush, the *hijra* exchange relations during *badhai* may seem indicative of some embedded underlying structural logics of exchange in terms of which gifts are transacted between the *hijra* and their non-*hijra* working class counterparts. For instance, *hijra* return a portion of the 'gift' that they receive to ensure the welfare of the donating household. Although in Raheja's case such acts of prestation are redolent of a deep-seated reciprocal transaction wherein upper castes pass gifts to the lower castes, what is different in the context of *badhai* is that the donors and the donees are more or less of the same class backgrounds. While Raheja's disquisition on exchange relations in a casted society may not apply across the board in Bangladesh, her account offers insights into the Islamically inspired cultural logic within which prestational exchange takes place in Bangladesh.

In her paper on hierarchical gift economies among the British Pakistanis, Werbner (1990) elaborates, among other things, systematics of gifting in the Muslim majority Pakistan, contending that whilst gifts are directed towards superiors, inferiors and equals in Pakistan with variable implications for social prestige and status, such acts of giving are intended in the name of the Allah whose blessings are sought through such giving. In a similar vein, in Bangladesh, gift giving or *dan-khairat* is predominantly understood as a form of exchange wherein the donor gives away to the poor in a bid to seek Allah's

blessings. Here, the recipient is a mere medium to propitiate Allah in whose hand the ultimate welfare of the people lies. For instance, the rich give to the poor on the occasion of Eid el Fitr and Eid el Adha, two main Islamic festivals marking the end of Ramadan and Hajj respectively. Furthermore, Muslims are required to give to the needy as part of their religious obligation. Such donations are not only restricted to Eid festivals. Muslims in Bangladesh make such offerings throughout the year, especially in times of ‘*bipod-apod*’/ ‘*bala-musibod*’ or bad times/danger. When people suffer from ‘*bala-musibod*’, there is a widespread practice of sacrificing animals and distributing their meat among the poor to get rid of the inauspiciousness inherent in such ‘*bala-musibod*’. People also often arrange a feast for the poor, called ‘*kangali voj*’, or make offerings to a shrine. Some also arrange *milad mahafil*, a special prayer after which the religious performers along with the guest are fed. In all these acts, the idea is to get rid of the imminent *bala musibod* or the danger and its possibility of occurring. Aside from such formalized acts of giving, people give away money day in and day out to the beggars. One of the striking features of Dhaka is a conspicuous presence of beggars almost everywhere. Those who give away a taka or two often do so to earn ‘*sawab*’ (divine goodwill) or with the hope that this will bring some good in the long run. In that sense, people in Bangladesh through their acts of giving anticipate some celestial reciprocity. While literally it may seem like a transfer of evil to the poor, it is Allah who is expected to reciprocate rather than the poor. Whilst the poor invoke the name of Allah during begging and remind people of Allah’s bounty that they will be entitled to through such acts of prestation, what the donee offers is ‘*dua*’/prayer to Allah for the donor. Here, both acts of giving and receiving are oriented towards Allah, who reserves the sole right to judge and reciprocate, while the donor becomes a mere medium.

Hijra categorically maintain that their acts of demanding are not in any sense akin to the acts of begging undertaken by the mainstream beggars. For instance, *hijra* often justify such claims on the ground of their being born ‘handicapped’. Let me give examples. One of the houses where the *hijra* found a new born turned out to be the local Imam’s. I followed the *hijra* and

went inside. While the *hijra* were waiting outside the gate of the room, a man suddenly appeared and inquired about what was going on. The *hijra* explained to him that they were there to get their dues for the newborn. In response the man brought to the notice of the *hijra* that the child of the imam was more than 1 year old. Mousumi immediately retorted by saying that they had a licence from the government which entitled them to *badhai* money for children up to the age of 5. Mousumi sarcastically told the members in the house that the imam earned throughout the year and hence should pay them more than others. In the meantime, the man sent a little boy to the imam, who was in the nearby mosque. The boy returned with a 100 taka note. The man immediately gave away 100 taka to the *hijra*. Later the *hijra* told me that because this was the house of an imam, they were not very harsh towards them and left peacefully without any bargaining. Later I spoke to the Imam and was told that although ‘disabled’, *hijra* were creatures of Allah and ought to be loved. On another occasion when a household questioned why they should pay, the *hijra* drew their attention to the fact that they were given a licence from the government to carry out *badhai* and that this was something they had been undertaking from time immemorial. ‘*This is our right. We are hijra. What can we do? We are not like men or women that we can take up a regular job. So you have to provide for us. Would you not have given some cash if any of your children were like us?*’ stated Mousumi.

What emerges is that *hijra* in Bangladesh, while demanding *badhai*, invoke the popular discourse of their being physically ‘impaired’ and ‘disabled’ and it is on this ground that they rationalize their demands. Although *hijra* in Bangladesh are not necessarily looked upon as sacrosanct with special religious power, they are still feared on account of their putative state of handicap, an image that *hijra* too routinely invoke in substantiating their demands. It is important to highlight that the trope of disability that *hijra* invoke is characteristically distinct from that of the normative disabled beggars in that whilst the disability in the latter case is visible, in the case of the *hijra*, it is not. That is, here disability is conflated with *hijra*’s putative defective or missing genitals. In other words, it is not just as disabled persons

but as a specific sort of disabled person that *hijra* make their demands. Key distinctions between *hijra* acts of demand and mainstream begging lie in the fact that whilst the mainstream disabled beggars do not generically force people to donate, *hijra* do. Furthermore, that *hijra* resort to coercive techniques to solicit their demands is anticipated, unlike the case in the context of normative begging. Furthermore, *hijra* do not conceptualize their acts of demanding as begging. Rather, they draw a clear distinction between mainstream begging and their acts of demanding which they try in various ways to ritually validate (see below for more on this). Another important distinction here is that whilst *hijra* carry out *badhai* in working class neighbourhoods, the mainstream disabled beggars typically frequent middle class neighbourhoods to beg. Also noteworthy is the fact that unlike the normative beggars who remain at the mercy of the people, as suggested below, *hijra* presence activates masculine anxieties which ‘coerce’ the householders to pay. Thus, while the broader cultural logics of gift and exchange elucidated above inform people’s acts of gifting to the *hijra*, what is at stake here is not just the supposed disability of the *hijra* but more significantly masculine anxiety, to which I now turn.

Verbal slurs, masculine anxiety and *badhai*

While the broader cultural logics of prestation in Bangladesh partially explain working class acts of donations to the *hijra*, a closer look at *badhai* performance also reveals more interesting gender dynamics. Before I make my point, let me reproduce an excerpt from a heated conversation that *hijra* had with a reluctant mother that I recorded.

Hijra: If you don't pay us money, how will we live and eat? Call your husband and ask him to marry the four of us. Ask him to impregnate us all. We have been sent by the government to dance with the new born.®

Mother: In my village hijra work and earn. They don't do what you do.

Hijra: They are men. We are not. We are real hijra. ®

Mother: Leave my house at once. I will not pay you a penny.

Hijra: You fucking whore, give us money now.

Mother: This is why you have been born impotent. What Allah did to you is justified.

Hijra: Go and ask your man to pay us immediately. When he fucked and impregnated you didn't he realize he would have to pay the price for this? ®

Householder: (dramatically coming out of the room) Come back some other day and I will pay you.

Hijra: No we won't leave until you pay. You have been blessed with a male child. When he grows up he will earn and feed you. Now give something. ®

Householder: I have no money. Please come another day.

Hijra: if you have no money then why did you fuck her and impregnate her? Why did you become a father? Would you not have given if your child was born a hijra? ®

There are a few things to be noted with respect to the excerpt above and *badhai* performance in general. First, *hijra* tend to perform *badhai* mostly on occasion of the birth of a male child. Although *hijra* in Bangladesh also demand *badhai* money for the birth of a female child, when a male child is born, like those of India (Nanda 1999) the demand they make is a lot higher. During my several visits to working class households where *hijra* demanded *badhai*, my interlocutors always demanded more when a male child was born. In that sense, my argument is that *badhai* can be read as a celebration of masculinity.

Second, several households that the *hijra* visited to demand *badhai* later argued that the reason they gave to the *hijra* was not only because the *hijra* were handicapped but also because of the curses *hijra* hurled at them. For instance, one male householder specifically argued that the reason he gave what the *hijra* demanded was to make sure that nothing bad could happen to

his son. What he meant was that he would not want his child to become a *hijra* when he grew up. In other words, because a male child is desirable, someone who will light up the face of the father, a sense of fear that his child too might end up as a non-man/*hijra* is performatively instilled into the households via the presence of the *hijra*, i.e. *hijra* performance in the household settings instigates masculine anxieties where both the father and the mother of the child are directly confronted with the possibility of their son's being a *hijra*.

Third, in all the *badhai* conversations I reproduced above, *hijra* made the demand on the male householder and not the females. *Hijra* typically ask the women in the house to go and get the money from the men. Recall that in the first *badhai* I elaborated, Mousumi repeatedly asked the mother of the child to go and bring her husband back to the house and pay. Even in the case of the Imam that I noted earlier, we see a similar pattern. It is also important to note that in all these cases, the reason those householding men gave money to the *hijra* was not only because of the fear that their male children might too become 'handicapped' like *hijra* but also because they all wanted to protect the honour of the women in the house. That *hijra* invoke sexualized conversations brings dishonour to the householders, whose masculine honour is jeopardized in the face of *hijra* use of obscenities. For instance, one of the householders categorically argued that the reason he met the demands of the *hijra* was to get rid of them so that the women in the house were not shamed at the sight of their lifting up their *saris*. Also recall that the man in the last excerpt I presented came out of the room dramatically immediately after the *hijra* started abusing his wife, highlighting his fucking of her and making her pregnant. Also noteworthy in the first *badhai* is that whilst the *hijra* shamed an old female neighbour, they refrained from abusing the mother. Rather the main target of their vilification was the father who sired the child and therefore was expected to provide for the child. *Hijra* disgraced the householding men more than the women. In that sense, the use of verbal slurs by the *hijra* poses a threat to the masculine honour of the household dependent upon the protection of feminine virtue (See Osella et al 2006 for more on

masculine honour being dependent on feminine virtue in South Asia more broadly).

Fourth, aside from extensive use of profanities, one of the distinctive features of the *hijra* is their clapping. While *thikri*, the *hijra* word for clapping, serves as a quintessential marker of *hijra* identity in public space in Bangladesh, *hijra* employ various forms of clapping depending on the context. While I elaborate other connotations and contextual variations of this semiotic practice in another chapter, here I highlight only its deployment in the context of public settings, especially *badhai*. As already noted and will be shown further, *hijra* often let the wider society know of their presence through their distinctive clapping. My *hijra* interlocutors in Hridoypur and elsewhere in Dhaka often unambiguously stated that a true *hijra* can be separated from a false one from the sound of her/is clapping. In public *hijra* employ clapping to make their bellicose imminence and presence felt. Accompanying demands, as in the context of *badhai*, such clapping also works to coerce the public to give in to *hijra* demands. *Hijra* also claim sole ownership of this practice. Meghna once related, ‘Every group has its symbol. We too have ours. For the *hijra*, it is clapping’. One of the *hijra* during a *badhai* practice once maintained that there was a time when *hijra* by virtue of their special clapping could exercise special magical power including turning disabled children into able-bodied ones. Whilst *hijra* publicly claim to possess the power to bless and curse on account of their disability, internally, however, *hijra* often attribute their possession of such powers and clapping abilities to two *hijra* goddesses that I discuss in the chapter on emasculation. Clapping, I discuss in another chapter, works to assert one’s authentic *hijra* identity not only in public but also in private. Clapping is also a part of a generic practice known as ‘*borhani*’ literally ‘frightening or shaming people’. In the context of heated exchange with the mainstream, a certain kind of clapping is a way to initiate *borhani* to communicate aggression, verging on some sort of hypermasculinity, a theme I explore in another chapter. *Hijra* also argued that in times of emergency if a *hijra* is under attack by the wider society especially in public, a single loud flat-palmed clap is used to alert other nearby *hijra*.

Cholla Manga: Hijra in the bazaar

Cholla manga, literally collecting money and foodstuff from the bazaar, is another ritually sanctioned source of income for the *sadrals*. Typically once or twice a week, *hijra* collect *cholla* both in cash and kind only within the *birit*, the ritual jurisdiction within which a *hijra* group is allowed to perform *badhai* and *cholla*. Collection from marketplaces is a major source of income for the *hijra* community in Bangladesh. *Cholla* is considered a legitimate source of income, unlike the monies earned through sex work and is used for the conduct of *hijragiri*. For instance, collection from marketplaces is handed back to the *guru* who in turn distributes it among the *cela*, whilst money earned through sex work belong solely to the *hijra*. Too often fights ensue over the trespassing of *birit*. To put the picture in perspective, I reproduce an excerpt from my diary.

Jorina, Maya, Katha and Ishita, all dressed up in saris gathered at Hira's house to set out for cholla. Paying respect to Hira, the guru, they started on foot for the bazaar. They had four big bazaars to cover while another group of hijra went to collect from the fruit market. Mirpur being a birit full of bazaars of different sizes meant hijra not only had to do a lot of hard work but also that these groups on average had more income compared to hijra of other areas like Hridoypur. I followed the group led by Jorina. Jorina, now 25 years old, had been Hira's cela for the last five years. Maya and katha were new initiates while Ishita was recently initiated into the group via Jorina. After about 20 minutes of walk, as we neared the furniture market, they paused to buy some paan pata or betel leaves. Beautifully folding a leaf and filling it with slices of areca nut and an iota of slaked lime, Zorina gleefully inserted the paan into her/his mouth. Crossing over to the other side of the road, they all started clapping and demanding cholla. The very presence of the hijra in the bazaar, it seemed, was a sigh of relief for the vendors otherwise tired of the din and bustle of the

bazaar. As the hijra kept moving into the bazaar, vendors seemed overexcited. 'There they come', cried out a few vendors at a remove. Many shopkeepers were acquainted with this group. Each shop they approached gave away taka one or two (equivalent to one or two pence in GBP). They at times picked up fresh cucumbers or onions from the sitting vendors. While demanding, Zorina and her/is gang flirted with almost all the shopkeepers with explicit sexual innuendos. 'How are you darling? I called you so many times last night. Why didn't you pick up? Don't you know I can't fall asleep without talking to you', stated Zorina to one vendor. The vendor, seemingly in his late 50s, giggled and gave away a few potatoes. Another vendor refused to give any tomatoes. Hijra became angry and started threatening. 'Give us tomatoes. Give us. Allah will give you in return' said Zorina but the vendor seemed stubbornly disinclined. Then the hijra took a packet of tomatoes. The vendor tried taking it back and then a slight bargaining ensued. Finally, the hijra left with four tomatoes. While Zorina was collecting vegetables, Ishita was collecting monies on the other side. Maya and katha, being new to this group and the area, were carrying the sacks and clapping off and on to back up Zorina and Ishita. As they went close to the row of rice shops, Zorina's group was greeted with laughter. Each vendor put a handful of rice into the sack as if they were all waiting to hand in the pre-agreed shares. One of the vendors wondered if they would like to have tea. Another vendor inquired about Maya and katha: 'Who are they? I have not seen them before'. Introducing them as her/is cela, Zorina in an instructive voice stated, 'Hello uncle, look at their faces carefully. Next time when they come on their own, make sure you acknowledge them. These two are my new cela. They are real. Don't give to some fake hijra'.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, although there were middle class customers all around, *hijra* demanded only from the vendors and not from either the working class or middle class buyers. It is also in such bazaar settings that *hijra* directly confront the middle classes although there is hardly

any interaction. In Dhaka today every few months a new gated shopping complex is being built to which *hijra* are not allowed entry. The new middle classes tend to shop increasingly in such shopping malls rather than the open markets where *hijra* traditionally make their demands. Second, unlike the middle classes who tend to be disgusted at the sight of the *hijra*, the working class vendors tend to be exuberant about *hijra* presence. As *hijra* promenade through the bazaar, they not only take control of the space by swaggering up and down but their very presence works to ‘carnivalize’ the lacklustre bazaar settings (cf Gilmore 1993, Crichlow and Armstrong 2010). The ludic eroticized playfulness and flamboyance mixed with belligerent recalcitrance often render the bazaar settings carnivalesque. Although very different from typical carnival settings, *hijra* not only speak with total licence but also lighten the minds of the people there. Nevertheless, such playfully sexualized banter and ribald jokes that *hijra* deploy in a bid to demand their share often escalate into confrontations. Third, whilst *hijra* invoke their bodily defect as a rationale for their demands over vendors’ goods, their aggressive and lecherous gestures, jokes and conversations push the conventional rules of propriety that define public space in Bangladesh.

While I have more to say about *hijra* presence in public settings, I introduce another vignette to clarify the context. In Dhaka, as elsewhere, as already indicated previously, *hijra* often carry with them special ‘identity papers’ signed by the local law enforcing agencies to justify their demands. I reproduce below excerpts from one such ‘identity paper’ in translation.

‘Identity paper

Subject: Permission to seek help from the inhabitants of Asulia area

Sir,

We (1. Rashida, 2. Putuli,) have been living in this area for 15/16 years as hijra with the help of the public. So far no harm has been done to the inhabitants of this area by us. There will never be any

harm to anyone in the area in future as well. The markets we visit to seek help are as follows: 1) Amtola 2) Benipur 3)Shimulia 4)Gohayil 5)Jirani....Once or twice a week and on special days like the two Eid festivals, we collect baksheesh from these aforesaid bazaars to make our ends meet. We, the members of the hijra community like to stay peacefully beside the brothers and sisters of the area. Under this circumstance we request you to endorse our application to work in the area. Sincerely yours, Rashida and Putuli.'

This letter of appeal was approved, signed and stamped by the local police. The officer in charge of the police station also wrote a note requesting the inhabitants to extend their cooperation on humanitarian grounds. Although *hijra* do not necessarily carry such letters during *cholla*, they mention this letter of authorization as a way to justify their demands. I previously noted that *hijra* drew the attention of the households to their being given permission by the state to demand *badhai*. In a similar vein, *hijra* during *cholla* collection often invoke the government as empowering them to do so. While in the Indian context *hijra* invoke the names of the mother goddess, *hijra* in Bangladesh invoke the state authority to press their demands, even though there is no such legal statute to grant the *hijra* the right to carry out either *badhai* or *cholla*. That such letters are granted on humanitarian ground is also indicative of the discourse of disability in terms of which *hijra* are understood by the police and the wider society. One police officer later explained that because *hijra* are handicapped, they need the support of the wider society to survive.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, in making the demand, *hijra* stress their being helpless people. Like the police authority, a number of rice and vegetable sellers drew my attention to the helpless situation of the *hijra* as a reason for their patronage. '*Hijra are helpless. They don't have what we have. Allah made them that way. So we help*', stated one vendor. *Hijra* typically stress their being born with defective or missing genitals to justify

their demands. While *hijra* patronisation by the working class vendors in the bazaar settings is explainable in terms of the broader cultural logic of *dan-khairat* that I previously explained, here I want to highlight the discourse of disability that both *hijra* and their patrons invoke in conceptualizing the *hijra*. In the context of South Indian leprosy-affected beggars, Staples (2011) draws our attention to gendered reading of disability, arguing that whilst disabled people, especially males, are popularly denied their masculinity on account of their disability-specific status, such stigmatized status also works to hyper-masculinise the disabled in their encounter with the non-disabled public. Drawing on Appudurai's concept of 'coercive subordination', Staples (2003) also highlights the contradictions of begging in the context of leprosy-affected people's encounter with the mainstream. In a similar vein, while *hijra* acts of demanding position them as inferior to the wider public, the very invocation of embodied ambiguity by them works to produce a 'surfeit of masculinity', instilling perhaps a fear of curse by association. It is also through such encounters that *hijra* consolidate and become complicit with the wider societal conceptualization of their being 'handicapped'.

Second, such invocation of disability and state power as part of their ritualized demand is a creative act of appropriating agency, not least because traditional cultural roles of the *hijra* as performers are increasingly on the wane but also because the state has no specific provision to empower the *hijra* in Bangladesh⁹. It is interesting to note that during the time of the British raj, specific laws were introduced to ban such activities (Preston 1987) while in the 1960s *hijra* activities were apparently banned in erstwhile East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) (Pamment 2010)¹⁰.

⁹ In recent times, the government of Bangladesh has taken up some initiatives to 'rehabilitate' the *hijra*. I discuss those interventions and their effects in my chapter on contemporary transformation.

¹⁰ Also note that contrary to the popular perception about police being hostile to *hijra*, *hijra* always maintained that the police loved them more than others. See also Nanda (1999, p-7) for a similar observation.

Third, the socio-economic status of a *hijra* group largely depends on the *birit* i.e. depending on the size and type of the ritual jurisdiction, income levels among the *hijra* groups vary. While *hijra* in Hridoypur never really disclosed to me their monthly average income, they often drew my attention to other *hijra birit* and the consequent income disparity. Speaking about Mirpur, the *birit* that I already mentioned, *hijra* in Hridoypur argued that the average monthly income there was around 20 to 30 thousand taka (roughly £ 180 to 280) while during festivals like Eid, it could exceed £1000 a fact that they argued those *hijra* groups would never disclose to outsiders. In speaking of *cholla*, *hijra* often drew my attention to ‘*birit bakhor*’ literally stealing off others’ *birit*. *Birit bakhor* is considered a serious crime. Those found poaching are immediately penalized and at times special meetings are summoned to settle such disputes. If caught in the middle of a bazaar, *hijra* often expose the impostors to the *jogman*, the *hijra* word for the mainstream as fake *hijra*. This is done via exposing the genitals of the *hijra* poaching, followed by beating and chasing and at times with instant cutting off of the hair of the poachers. Here, the main purpose is to show to the wider society that those poaching are not real *hijra* but men in *hijra* guise. However, the irony of the matter is that those exposing are also often *janana* or *hijra* with penis. Despite the fact that *janana hijra* are schooled in the art of magical disappearance of their penis, which I elaborate in another chapter, under such circumstances, it is difficult to hide one’s penis from the view of the public, argued a *hijra*. The bazaar, therefore, serves as a site for intricate negotiation and contestation of authentic *hijraness*.

Fourth, the encounter between the *hijra* and the mainstream populace in the bazaar also serves as a site for gender transaction. In the bazaar settings the exchange takes place between the *hijra* and the male vendors. Whilst people view *hijra* as non-men, the act of demanding in public space in Bangladesh is culturally understood as a form of masculine prowess, such that the bazaar is conceptualized predominantly as an all male domain (See Osella 2012 for a similar kind of observation in South India). Whilst *hijra* on account of their intrepid navigating through the bazaar and demanding *cholla* in the public

space challenge the conventional stereotyping of them as non-masculine, it is precisely the paradoxical trope of their being non-masculine that both the *hijra* and their patrons invoke to explicate those carnivalesque exchanges in the bazaar.

Conclusion

One of the key aims in this chapter was to foreground how class and gender/sexuality interact in the production of *hijra* subjectivities. I contend that the wider societal understandings about the *hijra* are framed in class specific terms as much as *hijra* sense of selfhoods are inflected by the broader class-mediated notions of respectable gender and sexuality. Although people in Bangladesh, regardless of class background, conceive the social universe in terms of the tripartite divisions of men, women and the *hijra*, the middle or intermediate category of the *hijra* is often defined and described in class specific terms. In other words, *hijra* are popularly invoked not only to describe gender nonconformity and failure but also to describe specifically lower class-style gender expressions. *Hijra*, in popular imaginary, are, therefore, not just gender transgressive people but are class specific gender ‘deviants’. It is against the backdrop of such popular conceptualization that I described the enforced location of the *hijra* in the working class milieu in Bangladesh.

People generically conceived the *hijra* as not only working class gender ‘deviant’ but also as disabled. Whilst *hijra* are often complicit with wider societal projection of their being so, the middle class understandings of the *hijra* are informed by media reportage. In contrast, the working class people are directly entangled with the *hijra* in their daily lives, with *hijra* living side by side the normative working class populace, not as some distant and ghettoized other but as good neighbours to whom the normative working class can relate in terms of friendship and necessity. In contrast, I argued that there is no commensal interaction between the *hijra* and the middle class people in Bangladesh, for whom *hijra* often metaphorically stand in for the generic

working class people whom the middle classes imagine as simultaneously hypermasculine and emasculate.

I demonstrated that unlike the stereotyped image of the working class as crude and unsophisticated and non-accepting of gender and sexual variance, it is the middle and upper classes who in Bangladeshi context fail to relate to the *hijra*. Through ethnographically elucidating particular kinds of interaction between the *hijra* and their working class neighbours, I argued that *hijra* are not only spatially in tune with the working classes but also such interactions with their class counterparts serve as important sites for the production and reproduction of not only *hijrahood* but also masculinities of the normative working class men. Through appropriating various kinds of state machinery and establishment, *hijra* creatively exercise agency in pressing for their demands, acts that challenge the stereotypical image of *hijra* being 'effeminate'. Overall, this chapter foregrounds the politics of class in the positioning of the *hijra* within the Bangladeshi social structure. Instead of taking class as a fixed category, this chapter complicated class as a process in the making that takes on critical valence in its encounter with other factors like desire and masculinities.

Chapter 4: *Hijra* and erotic subjectivities: Anal Pleasure, practice and power

It was one of my regular visits to the house of Mousumi, the *cela* of Meghna the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur. Meghna was reclining on the bed while her/is *cela* were sitting on the floor. *Hijra* would often hole up at Mousumi's as her/is room was spacious and had a television. Nadira, a *gothia* (sister) of Mousumi, brought a '*Dhur piter chaya masi*' literally film on fucking or porn video from a local CD shop. In one of the clips a man was having sex with another man. Pointing to the penis and face of the penetrator, Mousumi started talking about a man she recently had sex with. 'The face and the penis of the person in the video take after my man', while Zorina, Chottu and Hira, three *cela* of Meghna, were making erotic cries in a bid to taunt Mousumi. Within minutes the room was abuzz with laughter. Because the room was in the middle of a dense constellation of houses, the TV sound was turned off. Although initially they had seemed extremely enthusiastic to watch this clip, the moment the actor who had been penetrated started penetrating, an utter sense of disgust was expressed, with profanities being yelled at not only the actor but also Nadira, who had brought this DVD. The TV was switched off immediately and everyone in the room seemed extremely embarrassed.

The ethnographic vignette highlights a moment in the lives of my interlocutors and their exuberant engrossment in a porn video. It clearly shows that despite the popular perception about *hijra* being asexual, an image *hijra* too reinforce in their interaction with the mainstream, Mousumi spoke gleefully about her/is desire while others revelled in playful sexual banter. More importantly it indexes a sense of disgust on the part of my *hijra* interlocutors towards certain types of male to male sexual acts. How do *hijra* negotiate *dhurpit*, the *hijra* word for sex and fucking? Why were my interlocutors in the above vignette disgusted? How does erotic desire shape *hijra* subjectivity? Would my interlocutors have reacted the way they did had I not been present in that

room? In other words, did my presence as a normatively masculinised Bangladeshi subject work to prevent them from identifying with those sexual acts that they otherwise publicly denounce?

A closer inspection of extant ethnographic scholarship on *hijra* indicates a privileging of gender over desire as a critical analytical cipher. As already documented in the introductory chapter, Nanda's (1999) pioneering ethnography reads the *hijra* as a third sex/gender while the overarching focus of later ethnographers (e.g. Cohen 1995, Hall 1997 and Reddy 2005) was to develop a systematic critique of the inadequacies of the third sex/gender paradigm. Whilst desire figured in their writings, it was framed mainly through the trope of sexual renunciation and its (Hindu) scriptural valorisation. Given the fact that the social standing of the *hijra* in India has historically been legitimized on the ground of putative asexuality, a view that *hijra* too reinforce on a daily basis, it perhaps makes sense that scholars amassed a wealth of scriptural evidence on the valorisation of erotic asceticism to come to grips with *hijra*'s lived erotic contradiction. Where this analytical move, however, falters is in its assumption that contemporary *hijra* erotic desire and practices are shaped by these scriptural standpoints. One outcome of this has been a sustained ethnographic inattention to erotic contradictions, ambivalences, meanings and practices that *hijra*, as will be shown below, deem central to their subjectivity. This dominant narrative of *hijra* asexuality has come under challenge with the advent of HIV/AIDS. In recent times a growing body of scholarship particularly in public health has documented a range of sexual practices through the lens of risk and disease (Khan, 1999, 2003, Khan et al 2005). This slew of epidemiologically driven scholarship has had the un/intended consequence of relegating the *hijra* subculture to a set of pathologies in dire need of intervention. Whilst humanist and culturally sensitive ethnographies (Nanda 1999 and Reddy 2005) allude to *hijra* sexual practice, they rarely made any sustained attempt to adequately ethnographically illustrate the erotic practices and meanings that are central to the formation of *hijra* subjectivity. One of my central arguments in this

chapter, therefore, is to underscore the centrality of eroticism in the making of the *hijra*.

There is, however, an obvious danger with any effort to map the sexual practices of the *hijra* as disclosure of sexual practices may work to reinforce the orientalist proclivity to reduce them to positivist pathologies. From another slant, to bring into view *hijra* erotic desire and practice is to traffic in the obvious, i.e. that *hijra* have sex is a common knowledge among anthropologists of *hijra* and is therefore analytically insignificant. For instance, Reddy (2005) categorically contends that her project is to foreground how *hijra* subjectivities are not reducible to gender/sexual difference alone. Desire in her analysis is accorded critical valence in the context of intersectionality. It is on account of desire's imbrications with other vectors of social differentiation that desire not only attains its critical significance but also is rendered sociologically intelligible. That sexuality or gender is constituted in a complex interplay with other modalities of differentiation like ethnicity, class, locality and so on is now common knowledge. The problem is that scholars concerned to explore gender and sexual diversity are more interested in the intersectionality than they are in issues of desire. Put differently, critical sexuality scholarship often tends to be emptied of actual erotic contents and sexual details of the lives of the people under study (Greenberg, 1995). Against this backdrop, this chapter interrogates sexual practices and meanings not because they have been downplayed but because desire, as my *hijra* interlocutors pointed out, is central to their sense of selfhood. This incuriosity about *hijra* erotic lives is not just emblematic of scholarly indifference but may very well be the corollary of a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of scholars as to what *hijrahood* entails.

Dilemma, ambivalence and sexual conversation with the *hijra*

Although *hijra* consciously refrain from talking about sex with outsiders and present an image of their being asexual, *dhurpiter khutni* or sex talk figured

frequently in my interaction with the *hijra*, not just because I was interested in their erotic lives but also because of my long term presence in the *hijra* universe in various capacities that I elaborate below. More often than not, I stood out as what *hijra* generically styled as a ‘normative masculine man’. Yet my presence was unmarked as my being there with them for such a long time led them to ignore my presence and go about their daily lives. For instance, among the *sadrals* *hijra* who deem themselves and are deemed to be the embodiment of the ideal of asexuality, in keeping with the public understanding of what a *hijra* is, i.e. persons born with defective or missing genitals and hence incapable of sexual intercourse and pleasure, talking about sex and desire was at times difficult. This was further compounded by the fact that by the time I became close with the *sadrals* group of Hridoypur, my presence as a friend of Meghna, the *hijra guru* in the community was well established. Particularly among the *sadrals*, a close male friend or a partner of a *guru* is a respectable figure whom the junior *hijra* are expected to treat respectfully. Junior *hijra* in Hridoypur would always address me as ‘*mama*’ (a term *hijra* often use to refer to the *parik*, the *hijra* word for partners of *guru*, though ‘*mama*’ in the mainstream means maternal uncle) and greet me with ‘*salamalaikum*’ (the standard Muslim greeting, literally ‘peace be upon you’, expressed when two people meet). Even Jomuna, Meghna’s *guru* at times would treat me as if I was her/is son in law. The fact that I was there to research and learn more about the *hijra* made no sense to Jomuna or to other *hijra* in Hridoypur. For instance, in response to my explanation for my frequent presence in Hridoypur, Jomuna once retorted, ‘*I know the game you men play. This is all nonsense. All you want is butli/buttock. You can fool the whole world but not me. I am a hijra from the British era and I have seen this world more than you all have*’. Because of the way I got adopted as Meghna’s ‘husband’ by the members of the *hijra* group in Hridoypur, it was immensely difficult to talk to them openly about their sex lives. However Meghna’s *gothias* or *hijra* sisters of equal rank would often talk about sex explicitly. Ranu, a *gothia* of Meghna, would often tease me as if I was the husband of her/is sister. In addition, the *nati cela* or the grand disciples of Meghna would often not only tease me but also behave in a coquettish manner. It is permissible for the *nati cela* and the *gothias* to flirt with the partners of a *hijra*

but anything verging on sex is to be strictly avoided in the interaction between the partner of a *hijra* and her/his immediate *cela*. Nevertheless exceptions were made when at times some of my male friends accompanied me to Hridoypur. *Cela* of Meghna always inquired in *Ulti*, the *hijra* argot, not only about the intention of their visits but also whether they were seeking sex. They often expressed their attraction and dislike towards my male friends by saying things like ‘*Chis Panthi*’ literally a nice man or ‘*bila panthi*’ literally not a nice man or ‘*Aisi panthir khoma chis*’/This man has a beautiful face or *Oisi re takmu*/ I will eat him or *Oisi ki hamsire dhurbo*/Would he like to fuck me?’. On occasion they struck up desirous poses or simply sat on their laps till a senior *hijra* scolded them to stay off.

While in Hridoypur I could rarely speak to the *hijra* about their sex lives, in other *sadrali hijra* houses I visited, initiating a discussion on sex was also difficult. For instance when directly asked, *hijra* always inevitably denied that they were in any way sexual. It is, after all, the putative asexuality of the *hijra* and its associated imagery of chastity that *hijra* highlight on a daily basis in their encounters with the mainstream. Yet sex sprang up as a topic in our interaction as soon as they realized that I was able to speak *Ulti*. Both the *sadrali* and ‘*dhurrani*’ *hijra*, having deciphered my ability to use *Ulti*, often remarked that I must have been a *parik* of a *hijra* at some point in my life. My ability to speak *Ulti* indicated to them both my familiarity and closeness with the *hijra*. Switching to a discussion on sex was also made easy by the fact that almost every *hijra* household had some members directly or indirectly linked with the sexual health NGOs. In addition *hijra* households had sexual health materials, namely condoms, brochures, lubricants and posters. Hence, a discussion on these NGO interventions always led to discussion on sex. Interestingly, it was mostly the junior *hijra* who seemed forthcoming in terms of sharing details about their sex lives while the senior *hijra* often categorically denied any involvement with sex ever in their lives, although most of them had *parik*. Senior *hijra* often argued that these NGO interventions were for the new *hijra* who did ‘*dhurpit turpit*’/sex. Nevertheless young *hijra* in the absence of their seniors drew my attention to the fact that

their *guru* were like them when they were young and as they grew old, they stopped doing ‘night’/ sex work even though they all continued to have lovers.

The ambivalence registered by the *hijra* towards matters sexual in public, as shown above, is contradicted by the *hijra* themselves. Whilst the degree to which *hijra* share details with outsiders varies according to spatio-cultural locations, desire is internally deemed to be a central marker of *hijrahood*. And it is this constant tension between the public proclamation of asexuality and internal acknowledgement of desire that lies at the heart of *hijra* lives. I discuss this contradiction in terms of a mythic tale in the next chapter. I now go on to shed light on the way *hijra* navigate and negotiate these two contradictory universes of desire and asexuality respectively through the lens of *Uti*.

***Uti* universe of desire versus the Bangla world of hetero/a/sexuality**

In the mainstream Bangla language, *Uti* as a word means topsy-turvy or simply reverse. *Uti* or *Uti bhasa* also denotes language spoken in a reverse order, although in reality *Uti* is not the mainstream Bangla spoken in a reverse order. Rather than read *Uti* as a language, *Uti* is perhaps better understood as a dialect with a specialized set of words. *Hijra*, however, deploy this term to specifically denote a language of communication that they claim is spoken by *hijra* all over the world. Although the use of *Uti* and its internal workings are not my focus here, suffice it to say that *hijra* use it not as a complete alternative to the mainstream Bangla. Rather *hijra* tend to pepper their mainstream use of Bangla with *Uti* idiolects to engender a parallel universe of signification that remains enmeshed in the mainstream yet makes an attempt to transcend it. While it is possible to use *Uti* to have regular everyday conversations, *hijra* never really use it as an alternative to Bangla in that way. Rather they routinely replace Bangla expressions with *Uti* while registering erotic desire and practices.

That *hijra* or nonnormative groups elsewhere often use special vocabularies is not a novel observation. Indeed a lot has been written on the so called secret or lavender languages of sexual minorities in the western context. In contrast, there is a dearth of scholarship on such semantic practices of non-western sex/gender subjects (See Leap and Boellstorff 2004 for an exception). Several anthropologists, most notably Reddy (2005) and Hall et al (1996) have noted the presence of such vocabulary among the *hijra*. Kira Hall was the first anthropologist to have paid sustained attention to *hijra* use of language, especially Hindi in India. Noting the use of this specialized vocabulary or *Farsi* as her interlocutors in Delhi styled it, she calls it '*hijralect*'. More recently, linguists from Pakistan (Awan and Sheeraz 2011) also noted the presence of this special language among Pakistani *hijra* and contend that it is also known there as *Farsi*. While exact reasons why it is called *Farsi* and how it developed are unspecified in the existing literature, *hijra* in Delhi, according to Hall (2005), often traced it to the Mughal sultanate and its use of *Farsi* as the official language. *Hijra* in Bangladesh generically do not call it *Farsi*, although several *Farsi* words noted by others bear striking resemblance to *hijra* idiolects in Bangladesh.

Although Hall (1996, 1997)) critically interrogates *hijra* use of Hindi, her prime concern is to foreground the ways *hijra* use of Hindi works to challenge the normative social codes through a system of semantic subversion. My approach differs from Hall's in that instead of focusing on *hijra* use of language as a form of subversion, I examine *hijra* language or *Uti* through the lens of desire. My intention, therefore, is to foreground how *hijra* construct themselves as desiring subjects through *Uti* and vice versa. According to my *hijra* interlocutors, *Uti* is first and foremost a secret semiotic system. *Hijra* in Dhaka often contended that *Uti* is not just a mere conglomeration of specialized vocabularies. Rather *Uti* is also about, in the words of one of my interlocutors '*facial expression, gesticulation and bodily comportments*'. My observation is that while it can be read as a secret code, it also works to establish communitarian belonging and authentic membership (Boellstorff

2004a) within the broader universe of nonnormatively gendered/sexed subjects in Bangladesh that I elaborated in a previous chapter.

In their book ‘Language and desire’, Cameron and Kulick (2003) bemoan the reduction of sexuality to sexual identity in much contemporary ‘language and sexuality research’. They contend that while the dominant trend within this subfield is to foreground how language is used to forge and affirm identity, adopting the lenses of desire can nuance not only how we understand identity but also how desire often exceeds both identity and language (See also Harvey and Shalom 1997 for a similar argument). Although they primarily propose psychoanalysis to examine desire, what I am interested in is how the very existence of *Uti* allows the *hijra* to navigate a different world of desire while being a part of the mainstream normative Bangla universe. Here, I follow Johnson (1997) to argue that *hijra*, much like his Southern Filipino male bodied feminine identified interlocutors, construe and conceive desire in terms of variously imagined worlds lying outside the geography of their origin. Yet I foreground that central to *hijra* erotic economy is a putative opposition between the *Uti* world of desire and the Bangla world of both hetero/a/sexuality.

Hijra explained to me that because sex and especially their desire for men are ‘*kacchi*’ i.e. considered bad in the eye of the *jodgman*, the *hijra* word for the Bangla mainstream, *Uti* had to be invented. In a way, understanding the *Uti* universe, i.e. the particular kinds of registers and conventions that *hijra* deploy to communicate desire, is tantamount to fathoming the internal workings of the *hijra*. The fact that a different ‘semiotic system of desire’ (Cameron and Kulick 2003) or *Uti* is used underscores how *hijra* conceive erotics and desire beyond and outside the mainstream Bangla world. *Uti*, therefore, is not only a medium for secretive communication among members of the *Uti* world alone but more importantly a langue of desire that cannot be articulated in the mainstream Bangla. In other words, *Uti* signifies and indexes a world of desire that is unsayable and unspoken in the mainstream Bangla idioms of

desire. One of the widely used expressions among my *hijra* interlocutors was ‘*Bangla kothi*’, an expression *hijra* use to refer to lower class ‘effeminate’ males and middle class gay men. The use of this pre-modifier ‘Bangla’ before *kothi* indexes a lack of formal affiliation with the alternative universe of desire. Every time my *hijra* interlocutors chanced upon *non-Ulti* speaking male bodied feminine identified people in public gardens, they pejoratively labelled them as ‘Bangla’ or *Bangla kothi*, highlighting the fact that although they belonged to the same universe, they were yet to be schooled in the *Ulti* or arcane ways.

As already noted earlier, *hijra* ambivalence with regard to discussing sex derives from the contradiction between the Bangla societal understandings of *hijra* asexuality and the *Ulti* world of erotic desire and practice that *hijra* have to negotiate and navigate day in and day out. *Hijra* both in Hridoypur and elsewhere always inevitably switched to *Ulti* mode while talking about sex. *Ulti* has a wide range of amorously loaded lexemes ranging from sexual organs to various kinds of erotic acts. Words related to erogenous body parts, sexual positions and semen and sexual activities would always be described in *Ulti*, whilst the rest of the words in a sentence would be churned out in Bangla, the mainstream language.

What emerges is that first, not only is the very existence of *Ulti* a manifestation of its being a secret argot for communication but also, more significantly, *Ulti* also works to affirm one’s belongingness to the *hijra* world or the wider universe of male bodied feminine identified groups that are concatenated through a shared referent of *Ulti* desire. Second, it is through *Ulti* that *hijra* construct themselves as desiring subjects while being asexual in the Bangla mode, although their objects of desire, as I illustrate below and later in this thesis, are normative Bangla men i.e men that are expected to be attracted to women. I elaborate the different articulations of *hijra* desire in relation to varied spatio-cultural contexts later in this chapter; I now go on to an

elaboration of the structuring principles in terms of which *hijra* conceptualize desire and erotics.

Hijra erotic economy: engendering sexuality versus sexualizing gender

‘*We desire men (Hamsira panthi chis kori). It is the desire for men that makes one a hijra*’, maintains Shefali a *sadrali hijra* in Hridoypur. Like Shefali, *hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere often singled out their desire for men as opposed to women as the reason why they are *hijra*. This sense of their not being men is causally linked with their desire for men. It is indeed difficult to pin down whether their identification as women is the direct result of their desire for men or whether their desire for men emanates from their female identification (I elaborate *hijra* gender practices in the next two chapters). What is, however, important to note is that it is not just desire for men but a shared expression of desire and one’s conformity to it that makes one a *hijra*: It is the desire to be anally penetrated by men that, *hijra* contend, makes one a *hijra* as opposed to the *panthi*, the *hijra* word for men who are by definition inserters. For instance, Rakhi a *hijra* once narrated ‘*I knew I was a hijra the moment I took a penis in my buttock . Do you think a man can take such a thing in their back? Never. Only hijra can.*’ In *hijra* conceptualization, a man is, therefore, someone who penetrates while those who receive are inevitably *hijra*. There is, however, in reality discrepancy between sexual acts and identifications among the *hijra* which I will elaborate in due course.

Nanda (1999) argues that the very existence of the *hijra* as a subculture is a proof of institutionalized homosexuality in South Asia. Descriptively charting the earlier scholarly debates about homosexual prostitution and the *hijra*, she contends that *hijra* do engage in homosexual prostitution although this very role of the *hijra* as homosexual prostitutes should not debar us from recognizing the ritual role of *hijra* as specialist cultural performers in Indian society. While I agree with Nanda’s suggestion that the institution of the *hijra* should not be reduced to prostitution, I take issue with her representation of *hijra* sexuality as homosexual prostitution. *Hijra* do not look upon their erotic/affective desire for men in homoerotic terms. *Hijra* neither identify

themselves as homosexuals nor do they view their partners as such. Rather *hijra* look upon their sexual desire for men in Bangla heterogendered terms. It is this very Bangla hetero-gendered model that *hijra* not only idealize but also strictly police and any digression from this normative model not only incites disgust but also publicly jeopardizes the authenticity of one's *hijra* status. This is not to suggest that *hijra* publicly talk about their being sexual. Rather my point is that even when they talk about desire, they always talk along this line.

This tendency to frame desire in terms of hetero-eroticism is locatable within the wider Bangla societal hetero-normative idioms of gender and sexuality in Bangladesh where sexuality is conceptualized within a penile frame of reference. For instance, in popular imaginary the very idea that two women can have sex makes no sense. The argument often given is that women, being without penis, are not in a position to have sex. More importantly sexuality in the Bangladeshi context is not conceptualized in terms of a homo/hetero binary. It is instructive to note that although there is a word in Bangla for homosexual (*somo-kami*, a literal translation of the word homo-sexual), the Bangla word for heterosexual (*bisomo-kami*) is far-fetched and is unmarked. In fact, heterosexuality and homosexuality are not culturally recognized as distinct ontological categories, nor are those popular linguistic currencies recognized culturally. While 'educated' middle classes may be aware of the existence of these lexemes, I have never heard any of my *hijra* interlocutors mention those words although male and female same sex desires are recognized and linguistically marked within the *hijra* erotic economy which I discuss later. The expression *hijra* typically use to refer to sex is '*dhurpit*'. To get fucked is '*dhur khawa*' while to fuck is to '*dhur*'. Like the majority Bangla universe, *hijra* too view sexuality through a penile frame of reference wherein acts of receptivity and insertivity are associated with maleness and femaleness respectively. I discuss and complicate *hijra* subscription to and appropriation of those Bangla models later in this chapter. I now present below various kinds of *hijra* erotic encounters and transactions in and within the Bangla world.

Erotic transaction and register in the public garden

'*Dhurrani Khol*', the *hijra* expression for cruising site and brothel, is a typical mainstream Bangla public space where *hijra* cruise mainstream normative Bangla men for sex. During my fieldwork, I routinely visited *dhurrani khol*. While some such sites are exclusively popular with feminine identified *hijra* (that is those who cruise those spaces always dressed like females), there were also sites that were popular with both *hijra* and other groups that I elaborated in chapter two.

Every time I told my close *hijra* interlocutors about my visits to one of these *dhurrani khol*, it always led to interesting conversations about some of their or others' experience in one of those public spaces. Jomuna, the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur, for instance, nostalgically stated that the original meeting point for the *hijra* was the shrine premise of the high court where *hijra* till 1980s gathered with gay abandon but after some events of lethal bombing in shrine premises elsewhere, the high court shrine was made off-limits to the *hijra*. Some of Jomuna's *cela* who had not cruised in that site contended that there was no shortage of such cruising areas for them. Jorina, a *sadrili hijra*, once argued that new areas often emerge as cruising sites as older ones become off-limits. Pointing to the crackdown on an area near the national parliament, s/he was very critical of a government's coming to power and the subsequent intensification of security watch over that area. Jorina argued that in times of such crises *hijra* would often make cruising sites out of a new area. The expression used in relation to making a place suitable for cruising is called '*Pakki kora*'. By '*Pakki kora*' *hijra* refer to the managing of the locals and the police so that there is no disruption. Like a place that *hijra* make suitable for cruising, my *hijra* interlocutors often spoke of '*Panthi thekano*' to refer to what I understand to be cruising in English. A rough translation of it would be to 'capture or hold a man'. Aside from the cruising sites, this expression is used to refer to a *hijra*'s 'capturing' a man anywhere.

In some of the cruising sites, namely the shrine premise and the public garden that I frequented regularly, *hijra* typically start cruising from 7 pm onwards. Every time I went to a *dhurrani khol* alone, I was approached by the cruising *hijra*. In most cases, they either struck up an inviting pose by acting in an excessively feminine manner or simply slowed the pace of their walk while making some gestures with their eyes. The act of checking out a Bangla man or a *panthi* either for sex or otherwise is known as ‘*Lohori*’. For instance, when a man checks out a *hijra* or when a *hijra* checks out a man, the exchange of gestures and glances is called ‘*Lohori Khawa*’. In contrast, when I was accompanied by my *hijra* interlocutors, cruising *hijra* would often direct me to certain spaces inside the gardens or at times just ask me to sit on one of the benches. On occasion, I would also be asked to walk slowly behind them as if I was not known to them. Let me reproduce below one entry on a *dhurrani khol* straight from my fieldnotes.

Lakeside sex

Gulshan Lake is one of the popular cruising sites with hijra in Dhaka. Although the area boasting this lake is marked out as a diplomatic zone with all the embassies located in its vicinity, there are huge pockets of shantytowns. Trawling through the lakeside passage I saw tall walls and gates with mounted grills to demarcate the back side boundaries of continuous row of apartments. House guards peeped through the netted grills and the hedgerows off and on with prurient curiosity. There were peripatetic tea sellers every few minutes. After minutes of walk, I crossed over to the other side of the lake. My plan was to stroll through the total length of this cruising route. People walked past me every now and then. As I kept moving, I found a few hijra standing in a scattered vein. Between the lake and the passage was dense coppice with broken bricks, discarded garbage and sewers. Hijra spoke a word or two to the passing men. Tina, a hijra who accompanied me, was walking in front of me as if I was not known to

her/im. Tina had been cruising in this lake area for the last five years and was well known to the hijra frequenters there. As I walked past a few hijra, one of them asked if I would like to have sex with her/im. Dressed in sari, s/he wondered 'amar sate kam korba'/'will you do me?' I ignored the call and kept moving. I saw a man walking up and down the road with a sense of panic. After a while I saw him vanish with a hijra only to reappear pretty soon. I realized that they went into the bush to have sex. Working class men coming from workplaces were walking fast through the lane. Two men slowed the pace of their walk and stole up behind a tree while another man stood a bit away from a hijra as if he was waiting for someone. One hijra moved towards the man under the tree and spoke for a while. Then they vanished into the tunnel-like structure underneath the lakeside passage. So did the other man with another hijra after a brief conversation. As I was loitering around that road, another band of working class men were passing through. They suddenly stopped. After few moments three of them went to the cave down below in response to the gesture of the hijra while the rest left. I followed those three men slowly. It was a rather narrow bumpy muddy path running along the lake. On the left side was a big cement-built tunnel where two men entered with two hijra. I walked along pretending nonchalance and took a furtive glance at the hole. A man was standing right in front of the tunnel as if he was deployed to guard the surreptitious play going on inside. Later I realized he was waiting for one of them to come out so that he could take his turn. He seemed undisturbed by my movement. Later as those hijra came out onto the lakeside passage, Tina inquired whether they ate grass or counted the stars. In response, one of them said 'Sister, I only eat grass. The space inside the cave is uneven'. Eating grass, as was later explained to me by Tina, refers to hijra's crouching on all fours while the men penetrate from behind, while counting the stars is to lie on one's back with the man on top, which in the above case was not an option because of the uneven nature of the surface on the ground.

The response of the *hijra* to Tina's question about whether s/he ate grass or counted the stars indicates the way *hijra* talk about assuming sexual positions in a coded manner. Typically when *hijra* have sex with men in public space, they first take the *jholki*, the *hijra* word for money. Although rates vary depending on the socio-economic backgrounds of the clients and the situational interaction, Bangla men who typically buy sex from the *hijra* in the aforesaid lakeside park are markedly lower class. Tina my companion later told me that the charge ranges between one and two hundred (less than £ 2) if the men are poor. Ruposhi, another *hijra* cruising there, once stated that *hijra* generally charged more than the female sex workers although I was not able to confirm this with the female sex workers.

Hijra sexual encounter with the lower class Bangla men in such cruising sites is a form of commoditized sexual relations where *hijra* receive money from the Bangla men for sexually servicing them. Although men who bought sex in the above case were markedly from the lower class, middle and upper class men too frequent such cruising sites. In the same lake area I once saw a middle class man stopping by for a quick release. Although he was jogging, he suddenly stopped and stole up behind a tree with Rina. Later Rina told me that all that he wanted was a quick release, for which s/he was paid 500 taka (roughly £ 4.50). Given the lack of space and convenient erotic hideouts, middle and upper class men were relatively less visible in this lake area, although men of middle and upper class would often cruise *hijra* in other big and spacious public gardens¹¹.

¹¹ Many gay men in Dhaka I interacted with had their first sexual experience in one of these big public gardens although there is a generic tendency on the part of gay groups to dismiss such public gardens as the den of crime and lower class.

We went for ‘Party’ last night: erotic encounters with middle/upper class Bangla men

In the previous section, I elaborated not only the coded manner in which *hijra* speak about cruising sites but also more specifically their commoditized sexual transaction with working class Bangla men. Here I present materials on how *hijra* interpret their erotic encounter with middle and upper class Bangla men. The common expression used by the *hijra* to refer to their sex with men of the middle and upper classes is ‘party’, a befitting caption given the popular and public association of parties with affluence and upper class in Bangladesh. While *hijra* generically use ‘party’, as I suggest below, in relation to their being picked up by men in vehicles, *hijra* erotic transactions with middle and upper class men in public gardens are not linguistically marked as ‘party’. Furthermore, men who pick *hijra* up by car are not always affluent, as on many occasions, *hijra* drew my attention to their being drivers rather than owners of the vehicles.

As already stated above, to be hired by a man or men with cars is to go for a ‘party’. For instance, *hijra* would often say things like ‘*Long time no party*’ or ‘*I went for a party yesterday*’. Although I could never speak to any of the men taking my *hijra* interlocutors for party, there were stories galore about ‘party’. I copy below one such entry from my journal.

‘I got picked up from Dhanmondi area. I was in the lake area close to the dingi (a food shop). It was around 11:30 in the night. I was dressed in salwar kameez (female-identified attire). I never cruised in this area until then but one of my gothia (hijra sister) told me about this place and I was strapped for cash that week. So I asked my guru to grant me leave as I was supposed to stay at the house of my grand guru that night. I’d always heard about ‘party’ but never went to one. I was taking a stroll on the right side of the bridge while other dhurrani (sex worker) hijra were scattered on the other side. Suddenly a running

jeep pulled up and the man inside asked if I would like to go with him. After a bit of confusion, I jumped in on the car. I didn't realize that he would be taking me to his home. It was Baridhara the other side of the town. He was very nice to me. He didn't speak a lot in the car as he was constantly receiving calls. I barely understood what he talked about as he conversed in English. When we reached his house, he took me inside. It was an empty duplex flat. He took me upstairs and asked me to take a shower. After I came out of the bathroom, I saw him wearing nothing but underwear. He took me to the bathroom again and asked me to use the soap and clean myself up again. I did accordingly. He also took shower. We spent the night together. He fucked me very slowly. He put some spray into my anus before inserting his penis. During the night he fucked me three times but he proceeded very slowly. Later at around 6 in the morning, he gave me 5000 taka (roughly £50) and then I left'.

Hijra who get picked up in this fashion are not always taken to the houses of their clients. More often than not, they either have sex inside the car or are taken to an office premise or a hotel. Some of the hijra also told me about their being taken abroad for sex. Rupali, an ex sex worker and now an NGO worker, once proudly related that she had gone abroad twice for party. Rupali stated,

'I went to Dubai with the help of one of my gothia who used to work there. People in that country prefer hijra to women. I went and stayed for a week and made a lot of money. The receptionist in the hotel as well as the bell boys fucked me. The boss of my gothia who sponsored my trip took me to other hotels and houses where I had sex with other men. Then after a week I came back. The trip to Singapore was arranged by a Nigerian football player who once picked me up from Gulshan in Dhaka. He was playing for a Bangladeshi football team.

We became so close that he would meet me two or three times a week. Later I went to Singapore with him and stayed there for three days'.

While such stories of *hijra* being taken abroad are rare, *hijra* often shared their sexual experiences with foreigners in some of the most expensive hotels in Dhaka. Notwithstanding their boasting about sex abroad and with foreigners at times, *hijra* generically displayed a dislike for 'party' as such work often involved risks. In 2004 a university teacher was murdered by a *hijra* who went on a party. Although it received insufficient attention in the media, it led to an outrage among some of the *hijra* groups in Dhaka not because, as Megha contended, s/he got implicated in a murder case but because it exposed the *Uti* practices to the Bangla public.

Anus versus vagina: *Hijra* as providers of 'English sex'

One of the threads that my *hijra* interlocutors repeatedly insisted on was their ability to pleasure men in ways that they contended women were traditionally incapable of. And it is precisely because of these erotic skills that the Bangla men, regardless of their class affiliations, preferred *hijra* to women. Jomuna the nonagenarian *hijra guru* once nostalgically recounted, '*I am now old and incapable but there was a time when I was a real beauty. Men the world over would approach me. Now they approach my disciples for English kam (literally sex) that women cannot give.*' Crouching on the bed and inserting the forefinger of her/is left hand between the thumb and index finger of her/is right hand, Jomuna cried out '*tight ah pleasure ah; you can fuck a hijra in whatever way you want. Women's vagina is slippery but ours is tighter*'. Later, upon inquiry about what exactly Jomuna meant by English sex, I was told by her/is *cela* that Jomuna was referring to receiving the penis in the anus and sucking it. Jomuna later explained, '*Men seek pleasure. Women can't give what men really want. Suppose you have married a woman and then for one or two years you may enjoy sex with her but then you will see that your penis is just sliding in and out without much friction and pleasure and regardless of*

how much you fuck her you will not be able to ejaculate easily'. Sweety, another *sadrali hijra guru* in Dhaka, once remarked, *'The vagina is for reproduction while the anus is for pleasure'*. Arguing the case for *hijra* superior ability as pleasure givers relative to women, Sweety drew my attention to the fact that s/he had been married to a man for about ten years and had s/he not been skilful in satisfying her/his man, he would have relinquished her/him by now. *'I have international sex with my husband. You know what that is? I take his penis in my anus and that is international sex'*, related Sweety.

On occasion, *hijra* outside of Hridoypur wondered if I would like to have sex with them. When I declined, they argued that I was unlucky not to have had the pleasure *hijra* could offer. Payel, a *sadrali hijra* who also worked with me during my fieldwork, once regretted my erstwhile heterosexual marriage arguing that *'If you had known me before you met your woman, you would never have settled for her'*. Dipali, now a *sadrali*, was previously involved in the film industry as a dancer. In speaking of how the *hijra* can pleasure men more than women, Dipali recalled one of her/his experiences from the past. *'When I used to work as a dancer, my female colleagues and friends would often bring men to my place for sex. One day a female friend brought a man to my house. While she was kissing him, I started touching his penis. Later I put it in my mouth and sucked it. That man had never had sex with a hijra. But that day afterwards he fucked me instead of my female friend. In the end, he was compelled to say hijra were really better than females in terms of giving satisfaction'*. Dipali also argued that while s/he was very adept in artful sucking of the penis, s/he knew *hijra* who were more capable than her/him. Diplai once commented, *'You know there are hijra who can take both the penis and the scrotum of panthi simultaneously inside their mouths. Hijra also eat sudrani (the hijra word for semen) which no Bangladeshi woman would do. Why do you think men of wealth would come and throw themselves at our feet despite their having wives? Is there any shortage of dhurani neharun/female prostitutes? Those who had tasted us would never like/chis women'*. Echoing the same sentiment, Asma a *gothia* of Dipali who previously worked

in a *hijra* group in Medinipur, India but was now living in Dhaka described the power of anus over vagina in the following metaphorical terms. '*A butli khol/buttock hole is made with a thousand molten vaginas/chippus. If the vagina of a neharun/woman is a pond, the butli khol of a hijra is an ocean. Men can swim endlessly in the butli.*'

What these ethnographic vignettes underscore is that *hijra* represent their erotic practices as non-Bangla, evident not only in the way they consign these erotic practices to the realm of *Uti* but also in their use of words like 'English' and 'International' to reference anal sex and fellatio. Additionally, *hijra* not only construe their sexual practices as foreign to the Bangla world but also project themselves as the only medium through which Bangla men can access those 'forbidden' pleasures. The switch to either *Uti* or English expressions to index erotic desire and practices underscores a central tension that lies at the heart of *hijra* lives. While on the one hand, they solicit recognition as *hijra* in the wider Bangla society on the ground of their being asexual and above desire; *hijra* inhabit a parallel universe of pleasure and desire wherein they not only assert their sexual desire but also take exaggerated pride in their *Uti* or putatively English/international erotic skills. Away from the Bangla world that entwines sex with reproduction, *hijra* open the floodgate of pleasure for Bangla men that they contend women with vaginas are unable to offer these Bangla men. The corollary of that is that presumably many Bangla men are aware of that parallel universe. In that sense, the *Uti* world is something of a shared secret between *hijra* and their Bangla partners, a theme I explore in detail in another chapter.

Anal power and the politics of pleasure

While my *hijra* interlocutors often boasted about their abilities to pleasure men, they rarely spoke about how they derived pleasure. Every time I tried to initiate a conversation on how they were pleased, my interlocutors always blushed and covered their faces with their palms or a patch of clothing or just

giggled. Jomuna once reluctantly pointed to *butli khol*, the hijra word for buttock hole. ‘*You know our pleasure is in the back side. When we take a ligam/ penis in our butli, we experience pleasure*’ related Meghna. Overhearing our conversation, Shima a gothia of Meghna burst out into a guffaw and blurted out, ‘*We hijra get this khujli/itching in the anus every now and then and when we get this itching we need a ligam/penis to curb this itching and that is how we get pleasure*’.

Aside from highlighting anal receptivity as the apogee of sexual pleasure, my interlocutors often emphasized the size of the penis as a critical factor in receiving pleasure. In speaking of *panthi* in the context of sex, my interlocutors often talked about how big or small the penis of a man was. If the penis of a man one had had sex with was small, *hijra* typically expressed dissatisfaction by saying ‘*lutki ligam*’, literally small penis while the expression ‘*arial/akkhar ligam*’, literally huge penis, was used to signal greater satisfaction.

One of the recurrent themes that emerged in my conversation with the *hijra* on erotic delight was what I can roughly translate as ‘roughing up’. Tahmina, a sex worker *hijra*, once related in *Ulti*, “*I desire men with a huge penis who will fuck me real hard*’ (*Hamsi arial ligam ala panthi chis kori, ar jeisi hamsire akkhar koira dhurbo*). Dipu aka Dipali, a *sadrali hijra*, once related one of her/is sexual fantasies. Although Dipu had had a stable partner for the last two years with occasional side sex with other *panthi*, s/he had a recurrent dream in which s/he was ‘roughed up’ by a man and then fucked from behind. Dipu argued that the reason s/he had this dream every now and then was because her/is partner went ‘soft’ on her/im. Moina another *sadrali* once related that it was through her/is being ‘roughed up’ that s/he not only felt pleased but also felt more like a ‘real’ woman. Although my interlocutors often valorised the ‘rough and tumble’ sort of a man, it seemed like an exaggeration as the *parik* I spoke to did not fit those descriptions. This is not to suggest that the *parik* were not that way in bed with my *hijra* interlocutors.

While it was not possible for me to empirically verify these claims, partners of most of my *hijra* acquaintances seemed to me to be rather soft-spoken and mild, at least in terms of demeanour.

One very popular perception among my *hijra* interlocutors was that the men they had sex with were not in a position to find out about their genital status. The *janana hijra* or those with *penis* with permanent *parik* categorically maintained that their ‘men’ were not clued up about their having a penis. Typically, *hijra* would say ‘*We don’t let the men find out about our penis/Panthi go ligam chamai na*. Zhinuk, previously a dancer in the film industry and now a part time *sadrili janana*, had been involved with Rasel for about two years and over this period they shared the same house. Zhinuk argued that Rasel, her/is boyfriend did not know about her/is having a penis. I wondered how this could be possible when both of them had not only lived together but also had sex on a regular basis. Insistent on this view, Zhinuk showed me some pictures of her/is sexual acts with Rasel, stored in her/is cell phone. ‘*Look we are having sex. Can you see that I have a penis?*’ asked Zhinuk. I was told Rasel had taken the photos while they were having sex. Interestingly, Mala, another *hijra* present during this conversation, volunteered to demonstrate how *hijra* could hide their penis while having sex. Mala went on all fours and hid her/is penis between the ‘*jung*’ or thighs. I wondered if they always had sex in that style. Zhinuk then argued that s/he could hide it even when they had sex with the men on top. Zhinuk said when s/he had sex with a man on top, s/he would never undress completely but would rather cover her/is penis under the t-shirt. Like Zhinuk, Dilara another non-emasculated *hijra* had been involved with a man for the last seven years. Although Dilara was evasive in her/is response to whether her/is partner knew about her/is penis, Dilara claimed that s/he never let Raihan, her/is *parik* touch her/is penis. ‘*Once Raihan laid his hand on my penis. I instantly jumped up and slapped him*’ was her/is response.

In a similar vein, sex worker *hijra* maintained that the men who bought sex from them in the cruising sites always took them as women and not as *hijra*. The same view was expressed by the *Chibry* or emasculated *hijra*. *Chibry hijra* with partners argued that their partners never realized that they were emasculated. Rather their partners always took them to be women. ‘*You know when my panthi looks at my genitals, what he sees is my chippu (the urethral hole remaining after the emasculation). So he thinks it is my vagina*’ related Julekha. Sweety, an emasculated sadrali *hijra*, had been married to a man for the last ten years. Sweety argued that her/his husband in all these years had never realized that s/he was a *hijra*. Sweety maintained that because s/he had large breasts which she said were naturally developed, her/his partner always thought s/he was a woman.

While the contention that the partners of the *hijra* were not able to find out about their genital status seems like an exaggeration to me, what is noteworthy is that this sense of embarrassment and discomfort associated with the disclosure of their genital status was always expressed in relation to *partners* (both casual and permanent). What my *janana* interlocutors found disgusting was not just the fact of their having a penis but more importantly its erection in the presence of their partners. ‘*Ligam forkano*’, the *hijra* expression for erection was a recurrent theme when *hijra* spoke among themselves about sex. Time and again, *Janana hijra* taunted other *janana*, particularly pointing to their inability to control erection in the presence of the *panthi*. Although my *janana* interlocutors experienced erection while being anally penetrated, they took every possible measure to hide it from the view of the men. In addition, *hijra* always expressed an utter sense of irritation and repulsion at the thought of their ‘genital area’ being touched by men.

In his study of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes, Kulick (1998) argues that while his *travesti* interlocutors were comfortable penetrating the male clients who bought sex from them, it was never acceptable for the same group of *travesti* to penetrate their male partners back home. Noting this, he contended

that while the *travesti* derived their gender from their partners, they derived sexuality or pleasure from their clients whom they penetrated. In contrast, my *hijra* interlocutors in Bangladesh always dismissed any possibility of their being in the penetrative position either with their partners or with male clients. Although it was acceptable for the *hijra* to penetrate women as evident from the fact that there are heterosexually married *hijra*, on which I elaborate in another chapter later, it was totally unacceptable for the *hijra* to penetrate men under any circumstance. This is not to suggest that *hijra* never penetrated men. There were in fact stories galore about situations where *hijra* had to endure the embarrassment of being asked to penetrate. I reproduce below a few such stories that my interlocutors narrated to me.

Rupali, a sex worker *hijra* and a *sadrili janana*, met a man at a bus stop. One day while Rupali was waiting for the bus to come, a man approached her/im after minutes of exchange of glances. Later Rupali went with that man and had sex. The experience in Rupali's words was as follows:

'I could not believe myself. He was such an akkhar panthi (a real masculine man). He asked my name and where I was going. I was coming back from the house of one of my gothia (hijra sister) in Uttara. Later he asked if I would like to go with him to his house. He was so handsome. I felt so delighted and nervous. We went to his house and then started making out. We undressed completely and then when I was ready to take his penis, he refused to enter me. Instead he asked me to enter him. Can you believe that? I felt the sky was about to crash and fall on my head. I was speechless. I refused to enter him but he was insistent and begged me and said he would pay three times the amount but I still refused. I was so disgusted that I put my clothes back on and left immediately without taking any money.'

Jhorna, previously a full time *sadrali hijra* and currently working in an NGO as a peer leader, was involved with a 'dengu' or policeman. Recently Jhorna broke up with her/is *parik*. The story s/he narrated to me is as follows:

'I met him in a cruising site. I didn't know he was a dengu. We had sex in the park. He said he would come again to meet me and then the next day he came and I went with him to his house. Afterwards we exchanged telephone numbers. We used to have sex regularly. One day at his place he asked me to penetrate him. I thought he was joking with me. But later I realized he was serious. I was very embarrassed. Later I penetrated him. After that every time we had sex he was more interested in being penetrated than penetrating me. You know what the problem is. It is not that I am incapable of penetrating but it is just that I don't want to penetrate him. The very thought puts me off and I lose erotic interest in a man who yearns to be penetrated. This is the reason I don't want to penetrate men. Once one experiences the pleasure of being penetrated, it becomes an addiction. Being fucked (dhur khawa) is more pleasurable than fucking (dhurano) '.

Trisna, a *sadrali* who previously worked as a *hijra* in Hridoypur but later joined another *hijra* group after a row with her/is *guru*, once related,

'I am just not attracted to men who like to get penetrated but the truth is many hijra penetrate men though they rarely talk about it publicly or even with other hijra. I once met a very handsome panthi. We used to have sex. One day out of curiosity I put some lubricants in his buttock hole and stirred and then penetrated him. I laughed during the entire period of sex and later that night I kept laughing. But I don't blame that panthi. Once a person gets the pleasure of being anally penetrated, it is difficult to resist the temptation to get it through the anus. '.

The vignettes above reiterate my previous contention about *hijra* sense of discomfort and disgust associated with the disclosure of their genital status, especially in the presence of their partners. The reason for this sense of disgust derives not only from the fact that disclosure of genital status publicly jeopardizes the authenticity of one's *hijra* status but more significantly because this very disclosure was an erotic turnoff for my interlocutors. While it was acceptable for my *hijra* interlocutors to penetrate women although not desirable, penetrating men was not. It was through their being anally receptive in intercourse with men that they derived utmost pleasure. Thus it is not just a sense of disgust for which they refrain from penetrating men but because the acts and thoughts of their penetrating men foreclose receptive anal erotic pleasures which my interlocutors consider central to maximizing erotic delight.

That *hijra* assert anal receptivity as more pleasurable than penile insertivity runs counter to conventional accounts of male to male sexual encounters. For instance, too often such receptivity is dismissed as a form of repression where only those who penetrate are pleased at the cost of the penetrated. Typically in cultural frameworks structured around the inserter/insertee model, it is assumed the insertees often find other ways to derive pleasure via either being masturbated or being allowed to penetrate their partners. In western contexts, such models have often been vehemently critiqued on the ground of repressive traditionalism, where versatility or instances of both penetrating and being penetrated are posited as more egalitarian and democratic alternatives to those erotic frameworks that idealize inserter/insertee models (Kippax and Smith, 2001). In contrast, the *hijra* conceptualization of erotic desire can be read as an appropriation of the hetero-patriarchal and phallocratic model of Bangla sexuality that resonates with the dominant western conceptualization of erotics and pleasure through the cipher of the penis (Potts 2000). While power differentials inevitably structure sexual practices and most especially penetrator/penetrated relations, in the case of the *hijra*, such readymade

assumptions would be analytically short-sighted, not least because underlying such a conceptualization of power inequality is an essentialist proclivity to conflate the penis with pleasurability but also because acts of receptivity by my *hijra* interlocutors do not render them either powerless or inferior.

In the *hijra* conceptualization, as already noted, only those who are anally receptive qualify to be *hijra* as opposed to the *panthi* who are penetrators. In recent times, this very *kothi-panthi* (penetrator/penetrated) model of male to male sexuality has been critiqued in the context of HIV/AIDS prevention work in India. Particularly critiquing the NGO interventions framed in such terms, scholars like Boyce (2006, 2007) and Cohen (2005) contend that the indigeneity ascribed to this *kothi-panthi* framework is questionable. They contend that the very ossification of this *kothi-panthi* framework is the by-product of HIV/AIDS activism. While both Boyce and Cohen make a valid point about the problematic reification of this model, what needs mentioning here is the ready assumption about insertees being in a position of inferiority. Khan (1999), for instance, argues that in this indigenous model of penetrator/penetrated sexuality, it is only the *kothi* (and *hijra*) who get vituperated while those who penetrate always go scot-free. While I do not contest the wider societal denigration associated with the receptive status and the production of gender in such erotic encounters, it would be reductive to assume that this disproportionate power dynamic structures the lived erotic practices between the *hijra* and their *panthi*. In other words, despite the wider societal valorisation of penetration, penetrators do not necessarily exercise greater dominance in the actual erotic play. Rather, based on my interaction with the *hijra*, I would argue that the power dynamics in actual sexual practice is often if not always reversed, with *hijra* taking the style and position of a stereotypical masculine man. The ethnographic episodes mentioned earlier about the *hijra* sense of discomfort and embarrassment about genital status expressed in relation to their partners indicate that my interlocutors often dominated the actual play in terms of determining what could and could not be done during sex. Given that, the assumption that receptivity is tantamount to

submissiveness is analytically naive. Nor is the pleasure of penetration illustrative of a superior dominant position at all times.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, *hijra* tend to frame their desire in heterogendered terms where one's *hijraness* and manliness are produced on account of the assumption of penetrative and penetrated styles respectively. *Hijra*, I already noted, strictly police this inserter/insertee model and any deviation from this triggers strong reactions (See also Johnson, 1998 and Boellstorff, 2004b for similar accounts in Philippines and Indonesia respectively). That *hijra* consider this model to be inviolable indicates a structuring principle of pleasure in terms of which *hijra* erotic economy is organized. Yet such a spatio-hierarchical paradigm of sexual intercourse gets complicated when the principle of pleasure enters the picture, i.e. *hijra* valorise anal receptivity as central to authentic *hijraness* as being anally penetrated is more pleasurable than penetrating. Second, the positing of the anus as the apogee of erotic gratification by the *hijra* not only challenges the conventional Bangla and Euro-American hegemonic privileging of the penis as the fount of erotic delight but also calls our attention to the possibilities of non-penile bodily and erotic pleasures and their desublimation (Hocquenghem 1978). Third, the reason for *hijra* objection to a man's being receptive, I would submit, may also be explained in terms of an entitlement principle, i.e. only those who are *hijra* are exclusively entitled to this realm of pleasure. Put simply, in order for one to be eligible for anal erotic delight, which according to the *hijra*, is the supreme delight, one has to take up a *hijra* subject position. In other words, *hijra* as a space for actualizing nonconventional erotic possibilities are off limits to normatively masculinised subjects. In order for one to explore and enjoy those bodily pleasures, one therefore has to jettison the normative masculine pleasure and privilege. Put in other words, one's entitlement to those (*Ulti*) erotic anal pleasures, in principle, hinges upon the extent to which one is ready to eschew the conventional (Bangla) penetrative pleasures.

Beyond grammar: erotic transgression and taboo in *Hijra* sexuality

I was sitting under the shed in Hridoypur with Ruma and Tahmina two *sadrali hijra*. We were talking about NGO intervention into the *hijra* community. Suddenly Tahmina started castigating one of the leaders of an MSM-focused (men having sex with men) NGO. Tahmina angrily pointed out that even a few years ago that NGO leader was a *dhurrani*/whore and now by throwing dust into the eyes of the wider society, he was impersonating as a *panthi*. Pointing to the fact that the person in question recently got married to a woman from a village, which according to Tahmina was another instance of how shrewd s/he was, Tahmina continued, '*It does not matter how many times he gets married, he will always be a gandu to me*'. Suddenly Rupali, another *hijra*, chipped in, '*He used to cruise in the Gulisthan area with me. In those days he would often come to me and tell me her/is stories of plight, I still recall. One day, you know what he did? He even had sex with another kothi and later with the parik of that kothi*'. Tahamina immediately burst out, '*Spit on him. Such a kudenga, Khai khowara*'. *Kudenga* and *khai khowara* are two derogatory expressions synonymous with *gandu* often used in relation to those male bodied people who fuck men and also get fucked by men. When I inquired about why they were so mad at that person, they seemed perplexed by my inability to understand the reason and Tahmina disdainfully contended '*You know hijra to hijra sex is like eating the meat of crow while being a crow yourself. It is incest*'.

The vignette above resonates with the opening contention of this chapter where *hijra* expressed a strong sense of repulsion at the sight of a penetrated male's being in penetrative position. More specifically while the issue of *hijra* fucking men indispensably triggered a strong sense of disgust, any suggestion about *hijra* to *hijra* eroticism was an absolute taboo. In a way the *hijra* normative protocols defining acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices bear resemblance to Rubin's (1992) idea of sexual stratification, a system of

erotic economy that differentially valorises sexual practices in a hierarchical gradation. That *hijra* too subscribe to and strictly police (at least publicly) those normative protocols is also informed by the broader Bangla societal ideologies around sexual values. Yet I came across incidents during my fieldwork that verged on what my interlocutor above termed as ‘incest’. In this section, I explore whether this apparent sense of opprobrium associated with *hijra* acts of penetrating men or ‘their own kind’ is a mere public proclamation, much like the way *hijra* in general deny any involvement with erotics and desire in public. In other words, I try to shed light on how my interlocutors would have reacted, had I not been present in that room, as described in the opening vignette. Could it be that they would have refrained from expressing any sense of disgust and kept on watching or even engaged in sexual play among themselves? While definite answers to these questions are difficult to generate without further investigation, I encountered several incidents during my fieldwork that lead me to reflect on such possibilities. My intention therefore is not to assert but to gesture towards erotic possibilities within the *Uti* universe other than those publicly proclaimed by my interlocutors.

One of my closest interlocutors during my fieldwork was Choyonika. Choyonika was a sex worker until s/he became an NGO worker. Recently Choyonika found out about some of her/is old *gothia* with whom s/he used to cruise in the airport area. Sokuntala, one of her/is oldest *gothia*, recently underwent emasculation and was working as a full time *hijra* in Faidabad on the outskirts of Dhaka. As planned, we set out for Sokuntala’s house without informing her/im, to give her/im a surprise. After reaching the area and wading through dark alleys for about 20 minutes, we arrived at Sokuntala’s house. In the house was Sokuntala and her/is *cela*. Both sokuntala and her/is disciple were emasculated. Sokuntala was heterosexually married with two children and was still not officially divorced. The Pictures of her/is daughter and son were hanging on the wall. Not realizing I was conversant with *Uti*, Sokuntala started talking to Choyonika about the times they spent together in that cruising site. After briefing each other about some of their common *hijra*

acquaintances, Sokuntala started teasing Chayanika for her/his activities in the airport area. Sokuntala continued, *'I would never forget what you used to do to the new hijra. I was new in that dhurrani khol and you were the queen there, always dressed like an air hostess. Do you still recall that night when I went with you to your room and you fucked me?'* Utterly embarrassed, Chayanika said to me, *'Brother, please don't tell this to anyone. I will lose my face if people find out about this'*. Later as the ice was broken, Chayanika told that every time a new *hijra* started cruising in the airport area, s/he had to pay compensation to the old *hijra* and being fucked by senior *hijra* was the way the newcomers would pay the compensation. *'I too was fucked by Mithila hijra who was the leader before me. Mithila introduced this rule. So if you want to castigate (Kacchi kora), castigate Mithila, not me'*, quipped Chayanika. Later in the conversation Chayanika acceded to Sokuntala's allegation that s/he was very bad but then s/he argued that Sokuntala was even worse. *'Remember what you did. I may have fucked you and other hijra but you used to demand compensation even from the new female sex workers. Remember Jorina, that girl from naya bazaar. You used to fuck her regularly.'*

The vignette above is not intended to suggest that *hijra to hijra* sex is rampant. Like fucking men, *hijra to hijra* sex is also strongly frowned upon and tabooed in the community but is not uncommon, although *hijra* may not generally talk about it. When I asked Sokuntala about why s/he had sex with women, s/he related by saying that s/he did that as s/he was blessed with a penis by Allah and so s/he put it to use but now s/he was no longer comfortable with it, so s/he had got rid of it. In addition, both Chayanika and Sokuntala pointed out that those were playful acts or sisterly banter and not really erotically charged. As to the issue of sex worker *hijra* being fucked by senior *hijra*, both argued that it was more like an initiation into the world of *dhurpit/sex* in the manner in which *sadrili guru* initiate new *cela* (See also my discussion on initiation of new *cela* by *guru* into the art of phallic dissimulation later in this thesis).

The above assertions and confessions of both Chayanika and Sokuntala about their previous erotic entanglements run counter to the conventional narratives of not only the ideals of *hijra* asexuality but also the normative erotic systems in terms of which *hijra* desire is performed: the fact that anal receptivity is the single most defining feature of *hijrahood* as opposed to the practice of insertivity that *hijra* ascribe to men. I already previously complicated this erotic model and the principle of pleasure underwriting it. Here I intend to push this conventionalized erotic protocol to suggest that the picture may be far more complex than *hijra* narratives of sexual practices indicate.

In Hridoypur, on occasion, I saw junior *hijra* grab the breasts of their *gothia*. Once I was sitting in the room of Jomuna waiting for her/im to come back from the mosque. Seated on the floor, Tarana a *cela* of Jomuna was applying henna to Zorina's hair. After a while I went out to fetch myself a glass of water outside. In the meantime, Tarana squeezed the breast of Zorina and commented, '*Ki akkahr lilki*', literally 'How beautiful your breasts are!' In response Zorina cried out, '*Where did you learn this chiputbazi?*' When I inquired what *chiputbazi* was, Zorina explained that it is like '*neharun neharun dhurpit*', literally 'female female sex'. On another occasion in the shrine premise of Shah Ali in Dhaka, a popular cruising site among both *hijra* and female sex workers, Choyonika introduced me to two tea-selling women whom Choyonika described as '*Neharun dhurrani neharun*', literally women fucking women. Choyonika knew both these women from one of the cruising sites. In recent times both of them had left sex work and started selling tea to eke out a living. Both these women, fluent in the *Uti*, agreed to Choyonika's suggestion about '*Neharun-neharun dhurpit*' and stated '*Hamsira lesbian kori*', literally "we do lesbian".

Later in Hridoypur when I was sharing this experience with Jomuna, s/he was surprised at my being surprised and contended that it was a common practice among the female sex workers and that emasculated *hijra* too practised something similar, known as '*chiput bazi* or *chipti bazi*'. *Chiput bazi* comes

from the word *chippu* or *chipti*, the *hijra* word for vagina as well as the urethral opening remaining after emasculation. Jomuna explained to me that *chiput bazi* is one kind of '*neharu neharun dhurpit*'. '*You know those who are chibry can't release but like women they too have to menstruate every month. While women release blood, chibry hijra release a kind of liquid which is lighter than sudrani/semen. Without releasing that, their bodies heat up. So they do it to cool their bodies down. Chibry hijra use the sticky substances of eggs and then smear it over each other's chippu and that is how they release the heat*'. Jomuna also told me that this practice is not widespread and even when it takes place it is never between an emasculated *guru* and her/is *cela* but always between *hijra* of equal rank. When *hijra to hijra* eroticism either between *janana* (*hijra* with penis) or *chibry* (emasculated *hijra*) occurs, it is conceptualized as a form of *neharun neharun dhurpit* or female to female sex or a form of sisterly banter or frivolous playfulness devoid of any erotic charge. The practice of *chiputbazi*, on the other hand, is not considered as a form of eroticism at all but as a way to release the bodily heats akin to female menstruation. In addition, while female to female eroticism or sex is linguistically unmarked and culturally unrecognized in the Bangla mainstream, these practices are recognized in the *hijra* erotic economy.

Whilst in the context of my fieldwork, *hijra* rarely spoke of *hijra to hijra* eroticism and always condemned such possibilities point-blank, it would perhaps be analytically naive to rule out such a possibility because of their public presentation of what is and what is not sexually appropriate. Noteworthy here is the fact that despite Chayanika's being one of my closest interlocutors, s/he never really disclosed to me the way *hijra* in the cruising sites not only had sex with each other but more significantly how new entrants into that cruising site had to pay the *guru* sexually to be given the rights to cruise. What exactly happens when a *guru* tries to teach a *cela* the art of phallic dissimulation (I discuss this art later in this thesis)? Is there an erotic charge in such initiations? While I am not in a position to offer definite answers to these questions at this point, I take a cue from a Bangla novel written by a *hijra*-identified author in West Bengal India. In her novel

‘*Antohin Antorin Proshitovortika*’, Somnath Bandopadhyay (2002), a scholar working on the concept of ‘third sex’ in Bangla literature, sheds light on the *hijra* world through a fictional character Subir who left his family and came all the way to Kolkata to be initiated into a *hijra* group. Bandopadhyay provocatively illustrates Subir’s sexual rites of passage at the hands of Shamoly Ma, the *hijra guru*. Shamoly the *hijra guru* not only touches the erogenous zones of Subir’s body but also licks, sucks and bites Subir’s nipples. What comes across is that Shamoli the *guru* was not only teaching Subir the art of pleasuring men but also arguably seeking pleasure her/himself.

Conclusion

This chapter has disclosed ethnographically the *Uti* universe that not only enables varied forms of publicly forbidden pleasures but also complicates recognisable (hetero) sexualities and male bodied erotic possibilities. Whilst the Bangla world of normative men and women deem the *hijra* to be asexual, the *Uti* universe in contrast acknowledges both the Bangla conventions of heterosexual desire and parallel possibilities of erotic entanglements and desire between *hijra* and men. Yet the *Uti* world of desire is in many ways similar, though not identical, to the Bangla world in that it strictly follows the Bangla cultural logics in which insertivity and receptivity are equated with masculinity and femininity respectively. Any attempt to move away from this convention inevitably results in both internal and public disparagement. *Gandu* or male bodied people who are both penetrators and penetratees in sexual intercourse with men are, according to the *Uti* view, the worst category as they contravene both the *Uti* and Bangla protocols of desire wherein men are stringently defined in terms of exclusive penetrative capabilities and pleasures. In other words, *Uti* protocols are as much about protecting *hijra*’s exclusive access to anal pleasure as it is about the imposition of Bangla norms. That *hijra* take great pains at least in public to maintain these boundaries between *Banglaness* and *hijraness* understood and associated primarily with pleasures of penetration and pleasures of the anus respectively underscores a ‘this or that’ sort of communitarian principle in which only those ready to

forgo the Bangla pleasures of penetration are entitled to the anal pleasures of receptivity. Yet such tightly drawn demarcations also tend to collapse with *hijra* penetrating not only Bangla men but also other *hijra-identified* people. What is significant here is that such practices, although generally clandestine, are described within the *Uti* universe of the *hijra* in terms of female to female same sex desire, whereas in the Bangla worldview such non-phallic erotic possibilities are culturally and conventionally unrecognized.

Another key contribution of this chapter was to foreground male bodied erotic possibilities outside the essentialist locus of the penis. Whilst the *Uti* universe recognizes penile pleasures in terms of which *hijra* define Bangla men, the *Uti* system expands the Bangla horizon of pleasure by eroticizing other bodily and most notably anal possibilities of pleasure. In that sense, whilst the *Uti* universe serves as a site for Bangla men to partake of conventionally unavailable tastes of forbidden pleasures by positing the putative superiority of anus over vagina, the *Uti* system also nullifies the penis by locating supreme pleasure in the anus. The significance of shifting the focus from penis to anus in the *Uti* world lies in the fact that it foregrounds the possibility of cultural recognition within *Uti* that erotic and sexual pleasures are possible outside the grammar of the phallus. Whilst in this chapter I interrogated the non-phallic possibilities of erotic delights, the next chapter extends on this theme and sheds light on the *hijra* practice of getting rid of the penis altogether.

Chapter 5: Emasculation and *hijra*hood

Sathi, a *janana hijra* who I had known from the very first day I set foot in Hridoypur used to live on the rooftop of a building next to a mosque. Because of the location of Sathi's house, I would often drop by at Sathi's before heading off to the house of Meghna, the *guru* in Hridoypur. Sathi was not only one of the oldest members of the *hijra* group in Hridoypur but also one of Meghna's favourites. One morning I turned up at Meghna's as pre-planned to travel with her/is *cela* to sweeper's colony to observe a *badhai*. However, on arrival, I realized that Mousumi, one of Meghna's *cela* with whom I was supposed to be going, had already set off to the other side of the river to distribute cloves. '*Long bata*' or distribution of cloves is what *hijra* do to invite other *hijra*, especially when arbitration is to take place. While Mousumi went to invite Alo a veteran emasculated *hijra*, another *cela* of Meghna, went to the house of Jomuna, the *guru* of Meghna to fetch her/im to Meghna's house. After a while, I found out that Sathi, who was to be one of my guides to the sweeper colony, had been excommunicated from the *hijra* group in Hridoypur because of her/is undergoing emasculation the night before and a sudden arbitration had been called to settle the matter. When I asked Meghna, s/he angrily told me that although s/he had asked Sathi to become '*murad*' (to take the vow to undergo emasculation¹²) when another *cela* of Meghna was emasculated two months ago, Sathi had declined but suddenly s/he had it done without her/is consent. While Meghna was exceedingly angry at Sathi's sudden infraction of this communitarian rule, s/he also expressed anxiety about what could have happened to Sathi in the absence of support and care of other *hijra* during the process. Although Sathi, the arbitrators later decided, would be kicked out of the *hijra* group, the injunction was later lifted after

¹² While I acknowledge the psychoanalytic connotations of 'emasculation', I do not use it to refer to the reductive theories of oedipal complex.

Sathi paid a massive ‘*don*’ (compensation) of 20 thousand taka (roughly £ 180). What exactly is it that Sathi did that drew the wrath of the *guru* and led to her/his initial excommunication? Why is it that a *hijra* has to get the consent of the *guru* to opt for emasculation? What is it that *hijra* mean when they talk about emasculation and how important is it for *hijrahood*? It is this related set of questions surrounding *chibrano* or *nirban*, the *hijra* expressions for ritual excision of the scrotum and the penis, that that I will elaborate in this chapter.

I revisit the classical trope of emasculation in the construction of *hijrahood* highlighting various meanings, rituals, cosmologies, processes and practices in terms of the broader cultural logics and politics of masculinity and renunciation in South Asia. In organizing this chapter, I first introduce the mythic story of two archetypes to whom *hijra* in Bangladesh trace their lineage. I demonstrate that this mythic tale operates as a cultural resource in terms of which *hijra* make sense of emasculation as embodied practice. Following from there, I draw attention to practical and functional reasons in terms of which *hijra* read emasculation. Here, the point I highlight is that while this mythic story works as a creative resource, *hijra* decisions and practices around emasculation are not to be read as the outcome of some overdeterminate mythic structure. I also underscore the cultural risks associated with this practice, particularly in terms of the conduct of the operation. I then present some ethnographic materials on the ritualized celebration of *Baraiya*, a practice conducted on the twelfth day after emasculation to mark the re-birth of a newly emasculated *hijra*. Underscoring contradictions and conflicts around the supposed attainment of special spiritual power through the cipher of desire, I highlight paradoxes of ritual emasculation. Although through emasculation, a *hijra* is anticipated to be cleansed of masculine blood and normative masculine comportments, I argue that emasculation paradoxically renders *hijra* bodies hyper-masculine both in cultural and somatic terms. Finally, I critically interrogate the wider cultural politics and logics of masculinity, renunciation and Islam to challenge the dominant orientalising proclivity to read *hijra* through the lens of Islam and emasculation.

Hijra cosmologies and ritual practice: Maya Ji and Tara Moni

In the majority of the *hijra* households I visited in Dhaka, drums called *dhol* frequently hang on public display when they were not being used in ritual performance. *Hijra* consider the *dhol* sacred. Every time *hijra* go out to perform *badhai*, the traditional occupation of dancing the new born, they honour the *dhol*. On one occasion after a day's hard work of *badhai* and *birit manga* (alms collection in the marketplace) a group of *cela* gathered at Meghna's house where s/he was entertaining Jomuna, the senior *hijra guru*. On entering Meghna's house, Moina, the *hijra* who plays the *dhol* during *badhai*, slung it onto its hook and wearily sat down on the ground. Jomuna immediately took her/im to task for not paying respect to the *dhol*. Before setting out and after returning from *badhai*, *hijra*, she angrily stated, are to pay respect to the *dhol*. If respect is not paid to the *dhol*, I was told, the *oli* (a red sack) that *hijra* carry during *badhai* to keep the alms both in cash and kind, does not cool down. After a shared meal, we drank locally made alcohol (*khilwar*) and relaxed. Suddenly Jomuna burst into tears and cried out, '*Now that I am old you people are least respectful of me. You don't care about me. Remember when I was young I was a beauty. People always marvelled at my ability to sing and dance. And you are all so unskilful and good for nothing.*' She cursed her/is *cela* invoking the name of Maya Ji and Tara Moni. '*Maya Ji will punish you all for your misdeeds and negligence towards me. Don't forget you too will become infirm one day.*'

Maya Ji and Tara Moni, who Jomuna invoked to solicit her/is *cela*'s deference and berate them for being inattentive, are the two *hijra* goddesses most associated with and in whose name *hijra* commonly undertake *hijragiri*, the *hijra* occupations of *badhai* and *birit manga*. The story of these two *hijra* goddesses and their association with the defining occupations of *hijrahood* are recounted in origin myths that were narrated to me by a few older *hijra*. The

majority of my *hijra* interlocutors had little knowledge of these origin myths. Generally, when I asked about how the subculture of *hijra* emerged, I was simply told that it was bequeathed to them by previous generations of *hijra* and that *hijra* the world over followed the same practices as devotees of the goddess.

In what follows I reproduce the origin myths as they were narrated to me by the most senior *hijra* who presided over three influential *hijra* groups in Dhaka. The myths I reproduce below are not verbatim accounts but constructed from the different accounts given by those three *hijra*. More or less the contents of the myths described to me were structurally isomorphic, but the style and the context of their narrations differed.

It was the age of truth. In the first place there was only one hijra called Maya Ji and s/he was alone. S/he was a true ascetic without any worldly lusts. S/he devoted her/is life to the service of Allah. Temples/shrines were her/is abode. S/he was a janana; that is, a hijra with a phallus. Yet s/he was neither a male nor a female as despite her/is having male genitalia s/he was never a male at heart. S/he had the preternatural power to vanish her/is phallus with three claps. S/he could also bring it back with the same. S/he lived alone for years serving at the temples and shrines and then one day s/he implored Allah to send her/im a companion. In response Allah sent Tara Moni as a disciple to her/im. Tara too was a janana and was blessed with magical powers. They would use rooster¹³ to traverse the length and breadth of the earth and entertain people. Rooster was the divine vehicle for them. Maya would lead the rooster while Tara would sit on its back. They would don themselves in sari and put on ornaments made of clay. Every day while setting out for their destination they would ask the clay to turn into ornaments and put them on. Upon

¹³ On one occasion the disciples of Luna *hijra* came back from the bazaar with alms while I was sitting on a bed with Luna the *hijra guru*. Among cash and foodstuff was also a rooster. Luna was enraged that her/is *cela* brought with them a rooster and considered slaughtering it for consumption. This was another occasion when the myth of Maya Ji and Tara Moni was narrated to the *cela*.

return at dusk they would break the bangles and the bracelets. They were purely asexual and it was their asexuality that gave them the power to perform miracles.

Once during their visit to a king's house, Tara Moni fell in love with the prince. Tara Moni was so enamoured of the prince that s/he by virtue of her/is magical power turned the prince into a garland and left. Later upon reaching home, as they sat to have food, Maya Ji found that though two plates were put in place whenever Tara served food, two plates magically broke into three plates. When it first happened Maya put the food back and re-served the food, but this made no difference and then s/he realized what her/is disciple had done.

Having deciphered the sin Tara had committed Maya convulsed with anger and asked the earth to split. Immediately the earth cracked open and Maya entered into the hole to vanish from this earth [the place slipped into is now apparently the site of temple somewhere in India though they did not specify an exact location]. While she was falling Tara grabbed her/is hair and implored Maya to tell her/im about what s/he (Tara) would do to lead her/is life after her/is departure. Maya Ji then told her, 'Since you have become debauched you have lost all your powers and from now on you will lead a cursed and despised life. Now you are no longer asexual and pure. From now on you have to get rid of your genitalia artificially, beg from door to door and dance the new born and entertain the people for your livelihood'.

In the Indian context Nanda (1999) notes that *hijra* worship a mother goddess called Bahuchara Mata, whereas Reddy (2005) notes a similar goddess called Bedraj Mata. During my fieldwork, unsure as to whether Maja Ji was also the same goddess named differently, I once showed some *hijra* a poster of Bahuchara Mata perched on a rooster. They immediately identified the goddess seated on the rooster as Maya Ji. Yet what is striking is not only the difference in the plot of these origin myths – of Maya Ji and Bahuchara Mata,

the mother goddess whose temple is in Rajasthan - but also the fact that both Maya and Tara were *hijra* with penis who devoted themselves to both temple and shrines and prayed to Allah (see below for more on this eclectic religious frame of reference that *hijra* follow).

Myriad tales about androgynous gods and goddesses circulate at the popular level in India. While Hindu scriptures contain references to numerous instances of sex/gender subversion (Pattanaik 2002), *hijra* as both Nanda and Reddy suggest also often invoke such gender-transient gods and goddesses to authenticate their position in Indian society. In Bangladesh, however, although *hijra* routinely invoke the name of Maya Ji in the company of fellow *hijra* and understand *hijra* occupations to be in some sense acts of devotion proscribed by those founding figures, they do not generally refer to these origin myths as a way to legitimate their position in the wider society, as has already been elaborated in the second chapter.

One of the central themes that emerge from the numerous tales that both Reddy and Nanda reproduce is the lack or loss of genitalia in the origin stories of *hijra* selfhood and sacredness. For both Reddy and Nanda, *hijra* are a group of religious ‘men’ who sacrifice their genitals to the mother goddess in return for the power to confer blessings. In contrast, both Maya Ji and Tara Moni were *janana* (*hijra* with penis) who could make them disappear with their magical claps. That mythical status corresponds to the real life context of many of the *sadrali hijra* in Bangladesh who are not only non-emasculated, but also often heterosexually married, simultaneously living the lives of *hijra* and of masculine house-holding men (I unpack this in the next chapter). One of the misfortunes that fell on subsequent generations of *hijra* as a result of Tara Moni’s deceit was that they lost the magical ability to make their penis disappear on command. Today, *janana hijra* must learn the physical arts of *ligam potano*, ‘the art of vanishing the phallus’ that I discuss in the next chapter. At the same time, the myth explains why at least some of the subsequent generations of *hijra* undergo a more radical form of vanishing via

emasculaton.

Functional factors and stories of emasculation

Although the mythic tale described above explains the ritual commandments for undergoing emasculation, very few emasculated *hijra* actually pointed out this mythic prescription as a reason for their undergoing emasculation. In fact *hijra* in Dhaka in general had very little knowledge of these origin tales although they all knew the names of the goddesses. While the ritual context in which senior *hijra* pass down the knowledge of these cosmologies will be discussed later in this chapter, here I want to highlight a few cases about how *hijra* in real life situations ended up going through this process. There are periodic reports in the media about forceful abduction and castration of individuals to strengthen the member base of the *hijra* community. Contra this popular belief, I had not seen or heard of a single case where any of my *chibry* interlocutors had been coerced into emasculation. Rather they always opted for it voluntarily. Cohen (1995) calls the act of emasculation a ‘bloodied violence’ at the cost of which the status of third gender/sex is sealed in the Indian context. In a similar vein, Agrawal (1997) draws our attention to the fact that even when Indian society grants the *hijra* a special status, it happens at the cost of castration. While their arguments are made in opposition to Nanda’s celebration of Indian society as accommodating, my quibble is that *hijra* in Dhaka do not view emasculation as a form of violence.

Sweety, a *hijra guru* now in her/is 40s, is widely known among the *hijra* in Bangladesh for her/is dauntlessness. Rumour has it s/he cut off her/is own penis long before s/he became a formalized *sadrals*. The very first time I visited Sweety, s/he generously shared her/is story. Sweety used to live with her/is parents in the old part of Dhaka. Although s/he was attracted to men from an early stage and came into contact with the local *hijra* groups, because of her/is family s/he was not allowed to associate with the *hijra*. At the age of seventeen, s/he cut off her/is own penis. S/he did it with a razor that s/he

borrowed from a saloon nearby her/is house. Sweety took some tablets and was in a state of trance for three consecutive days. On the third day there was a calling (*sot*) from within and then s/he chopped off her/is penis with three diagonal cuts. S/he tried to stem the flow of blood but nothing was working. Then s/he blacked out and later discovered her/imself in hospital. Sweety's family and her/is lover spent a lot of money to save her/is life. Since s/he had lost a lot of blood, s/he needed to be given eight bags of blood. On the very first day her/is *Parik* or partner had to spend one *lac* taka (almost £ 1000). In the hospital s/he was speaking in English with the doctors. Being in a state of trance, s/he spoke in a language in which s/he was not adept. Sweety had severe complications afterwards. Initially s/he was having trouble urinating and the doctors said s/he would not be able to urinate through the *chippu* or the urethral hole . The doctors wanted to insert a pipe on the left side of her/is waist for urination. Then s/he cried before Allah and asked him to take her/is life. S/he asked Allah to keep her/im alive only if s/he could urinate through the *chippu*.

One of the things worth noting here is that although Sweety singlehandedly cut off her/is penis long before being a part of a *hijra* group, the language s/he used to describe her/is experience was in keeping with the typical *hijra* description. For instance, s/he argued that s/he experienced 'sot', the *hijra* word for an internal calling which eventually led her/im to cut it off (I discuss *sot* in detail later in this chapter). When I asked why s/he described it in the way s/he did, s/he contended that s/he might have learnt the word 'sot' later but the feelings s/he experienced was actually akin to 'sot'. In other words, it was because of the call of Maya Ji that s/he could summon up the pluck to cut it off on her/is own.

While I spoke to many senior level *chibry hijra guru*, unlike Sweety, none really spoke in such candid terms. While senior *hijra* always spoke of being born that way, it was mostly their *cela* who spoke unreservedly about emasculation. In speaking of senior *chibry hijra*, *cela* contended that most

nayak or senior *hijra* leaders had not undergone emasculation until very recently. Meghna, the *guru* in Hridoypur, once related that it was only in the recent past that Jomuna, the nonagenarian *hijra guru*, had undergone emasculation.

The reason why Jomuna underwent emasculation so late in her/his life, according to Meghna, was *birit*, the ritual jurisdiction to which a *hijra* group is entitled in terms of collecting money and ritual performance. When Jomuna's *guru* was ill, s/he wanted to hand over the control to Jomuna but because Jomuna was not emasculated, other *cela* of Pushpo, jomuna's *guru* vetoed and demanded more than what was given to Jomuna. So to ensure *birit*, Jomuna had to become a *chibry*. On numerous occasions, *hijra* invoked *birit* as the single most important factor in explaining *chibrano* or emasculation. Although I note in the next chapter that in reality one's being a *chibry* or emasculated does not necessarily correlate with higher status in the community, evident in the way *janana* or *hijra* with penis not only control *birit* but also have emasculated *hijra* as their disciples. *chibrano*, explained a *janana*, does not guarantee *birit*, although it is often easier for *chibry hijra* to secure *birit*. This is so, not because emasculation automatically confers on one superior status but because emasculation makes one conform to the public understanding of what a *hijra* is, i.e. the idea that *hijra* are born with defective or missing genitals. *Hijra* outside of Hridoypur also spoke of '*birit*' as an important reason for becoming *chibry*. Josna, a *hijra* who underwent emasculation two years ago, related, '*Suppose I am in the bazaar collecting money. If suddenly a vendor challenges my hijra status, I will have no option but to show them that I have no ligam/penis. If they find out I have a ligam, then they will beat me up as a fake hijra*'. Although I rarely heard of any such incident actually taking place, *hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere often told me of instances from the past when *hijra* with penis were caught red-handed in broad daylight and were eventually beaten and kicked out of the *birit*. In reality *non-hijra* populace exposing the *hijra* is rare. Rather it is often the *hijra* members who 'out' other *hijra* in the event of '*Birit Bakhor*, the trespassing of a jurisdiction that I already elaborated in a previous chapter.

In speaking of *chibrano*, *hijra* also singled out ‘bodily urge’ as a driving force. Meghna for instance stressed what s/he called ‘*the uselessness of a pen without ink*’. Although *hijra* in public tend to talk of their being born without any *ligam*, those who do so often present themselves as being devoid of any functional *ligam*, i.e. either the size of their *ligam* is very small or they are impotent. It is worth recalling here that notwithstanding this rhetoric in public, many *hijra* undergo this operation not because of any genital defect or lack of prowess but because of the sense of shame and embarrassment caused by the very functionality of their genitals in their sexual interaction with partners, as already discussed in a previous chapter. Recall the opening vignette of this chapter where I introduced Sathi a *hijra* who became a *chibry* without the consent of the *guru*. Later Sathi told me that s/he had to do it on that night as her/is partner was upset about Sathi’s having male genitals (I discuss partners of the *hijra* in detail later in this thesis).

There are a few things to be drawn out here. First, although *hijra* present a variety of reasons for their decisions to become *chibry*, these reasons are not necessarily mutually excluding. Those who single out a partner’s discontent as a reason may also link it to *birrit* and vice versa. Second, very few *hijra* singled out ‘*sot*’ or the calling from those mythic figures as the primary reasons for their becoming *chibry*, even though, as will be suggested later, it is also in terms of this mythic significance that many *hijra* seek to sacralise emasculation. Finally, I want to note that in the life-historical trajectory of a *hijra*, economics, partnership, affect, bodily urge and cosmology may variously contribute to one’s decision to become a *chibry*.

Fear, secrecy and the operation

Chibrano, the *hijra* word for emasculation, literally means the excision of the scrotum and the penis. During my fieldwork, I directly observed two such

operations. Hridoypur, the main location of my fieldwork in Dhaka is a vast expanse of marshland situated on the banks of Buringanga, the river that runs along the city of Dhaka. While one can enter Hridoypur from the main city of Dhaka, the other side of Hridoypur is directly connected to Buriganga. More often than not, I along with my *hijra* interlocutors in Hridoypur crossed the river to go to the other side by boat. The area on the other side, often referred to as 'o *par*', was home to another *hijra* group with whom the *hijra* in Hridoypur were closely associated. That area is an important location as it is there that several of Meghna's *cela* were made *chibry*. In 'o *par*' the other side of the river, lived Joynal widely known across the community for his special cutting skills. Those who operate are called '*Katial*'. Joynal, once a long term *parik* or partner of a *hijra*, had learnt these skills from his *hijra* partner who had died some 5 years previously. A *katial* can either be a *hijra* or her/is partner. As planned, we set out from Meghna's house, with Jorina, one of Meghna's *cela* just past mid-night. The reason we set out after midnight was to ensure that the neighbours did not see any of us leaving. Although I was not sure why they were so surreptitious, Meghna later told me that this was to maintain secrecy in case anything went wrong. Here, what Meghna meant was that if in the process of becoming a *chibry*, Zorina died and if the cause of her/is death was leaked, then they would not only be in the bad books of the *jodgman* or the normative mainstream but they might also have to get embroiled with the courts and the police. *Hijra* generically maintain that *hijra* affairs are totally a matter of their own discretion and even if a *hijra* is murdered by another *hijra*, it is the *hijra* who have the sole right to adjudicate. However, of the 13 *chibrano* operations I directly knew of, none of the initiands died. As we crossed the river by boat and reached the other side, Joynal the *Katial* was already waiting for us. We all took a three wheeled vehicle known as '*tempo*' and after about 30 minutes riding reached our destination. Walking through what seemed like a paddy field for about 20 minutes, I saw a tin shed room standing in the middle of a field. Although I could see lights from a row of tea stalls on the other side of the field, there was total silence in that area. Panicked, I followed my companions into room. There we met Alo, the *hijra guru* in that area, along with one of her/is *cela*. Contrary to my anticipation, the operation did not take place there. Later I

found out that the *Katial* collected the instruments that he had left there earlier that morning. I was told that we would have to go deeper into a village to avoid any possible danger of being seen. Because I was told it would be risky to be visible around the '*karkhana*', or the place of operation, we stopped by that house so that Jorina could finish seeking '*sot*', i.e. the power and blessing of Maja Ji to undergo the process. While we waited inside, Jorina went out near a tree, stark naked, sat down and prayed. Before the operation, an initiate has to seek *sot* from a tree¹⁴. I was told that it was on account of this *sot* received during this crucial moment of meditative prayer that the initiate would receive the power and courage to undergo the process and once one receives the power, regardless of how bad the circumstance may get, the operation must take place. The very tree in front of which the initiate seeks '*sot*' remains the perpetual witness to one's becoming a *chibry*. If '*sot*' is not sought in the presence of a tree, then the cut genitals on doomsday are believed to turn into a snake and bite the initiate. As soon as Jorina returned, we started for the *karkahna*. The *katial* took a spacious ball with a sharp knife and stitches stored inside it. After walking about for another half an hour we finally reached the *karkhana*. The *karkhana* which seemed like a typical house from outside was dilapidated inside with used newspapers draped over the walls on all sides. A wooden bed, a table and two chairs were all there was in that room. On one side was an earthen stove. Leaving torn pieces of cloth on the table, Joynal put a bowl of hot water on the stove to heat while Jorina, Meghna and her/is other *cela* sat on the bed. Finally, I decided not to observe the operation and stayed outside while Meghna and her/is other *cela* were inside along with the *Katial* and Jorina. Extremely worried and panicky, I anxiously waited outside, anticipating some groans of pain but to my utter consternation, in about ten minutes the whole procedure was rounded off without any noise from inside. The *katial* came out with a *bodna*, a pot where he kept the cut genitals. Joynal dug some earth near a tree and buried the cut genitals underneath. As promised, I left the *karkhana* before the sunrise.

¹⁴ *Hijra* did not specify if this was a particular sort of tree or any tree although some *hijra* contended that *sot* could be sought only from a special tree whose name they did not disclose.

Before the surgery, I was told, Zorina was made to drink alcohol to be anaesthetized. Zorina was placed upon a chair while Meghna and others held Jorina from behind. Joynal tied up Jorina's penis and scrotum with a long string. Then, with the knife, Joynal severed the penis and the scrotum with three diagonal cuts. Burnt clothes and flour mixed with hot water were applied to the scar to cauterize the wound. Jorina stayed back at Joynal's for the next three days and as s/he recovered, s/he was transferred to the house of Alo *hijra* where s/he stayed for another seven days to recover. Later another day, Joynal told me that that the blood that gushes out after the cut is 'impure' and should therefore be allowed to drain out to cleanse the body. The thorn of a tree known as '*bel*' whose juice is also ingested by the *hijra* to undermine erectile potency is inserted into the urethra so that the hole does not close up. At times a silver stick is also used. The time immediately after the surgery is considered the most crucial and the operated is not allowed to sleep till the danger period of twenty four hours has passed. Joynal also told me that only those without the *sot* would make a sound but because Zorina had the blessing of Maya Ji, s/he could endure the operation without any difficulty. Joynal also told that once someone gets the call, s/he would follow it irrespective of whether a *guru* approves or not and in such circumstances if the individual does not have permission, s/he would cut her/himself.

While in a moment I will go on to an elaborate discussion of the next stages of *chibrano* that the *hijra* in Hridoypur held to celebrate this rebirth, I want to stress the point of secrecy. Time and again, *hijra* in Hridoypour told that *chibrano* is always conducted clandestinely. Payeli, another *cela* of Meghna, once told me that in the case of death of a *hijra* resulting from *chirbaro*, the body of the deceased is cut into pieces and then thrown into the river to be eaten by the fish so that no clue is left. Echoing Payeli, *hijra* in other areas also articulated a similar line of arguments. While these pronouncements seemed a bit exaggerated to me, *hijra* stressed that the two famous *karkhana* outside Dhaka are situated close to rivers precisely for that reason.

Baraiya festival: welcoming ‘new born’ *hijra*

Baraiya, literally the festival observed on the twelfth day after the operation, is the most ceremonious and formally ritualized practice among the *hijra* in Bangladesh. *Baraiya* marks the completion of the twelve day liminal period during which the initiand is segregated from the outside world and prepared for their reincorporation into the community as a reborn *chibry* (*hijra* without penis and scrotum). The rituals are generally performed in private without the presence of outsiders. However, *hijra* from other areas are frequently invited to attend the celebrations. Thus, while *Baraiya* rituals are conducted in secret and closed to non-*hijra* outsiders, the wider public is frequently aware of the festivities surrounding the ritual process.

From the night before the *Baraiya*, Jorina was donned in a yellow *sari* which was changed only after the ritual cleansing or bath. Before the bath, which was conducted by senior *hijra*, turmeric was smeared over Jorina’s body. After the bath, Jorina was brought back to the room and dressed in a new yellow *sari* given by her/is *guru*. A thick dab of vermillion was applied to the forehead. Jorina then was brought to the room where the ritual was conducted. A senior *chibry hijra* drew the figures of Maya Ji and Tara Moni with red colour on the wall. Five different types of fruits, five pieces of betel leaves, sweets, five candle lights and five small earthen bowls like ramekins were placed on the altar. After ritually cleansing the space through mopping with wet clothes, Jorina was made to sit before the altar. Coconut husks were burnt to create smoke while special mantras were chanted invoking the names of *Maya ji* and *Tara Moni*. Fruits were exchanged between Jorina and a *janana* (*hijra* with penis). It is believed that the *Janana* that receives fruits from a *chibry* on the occasion of *Baraiya* would get a ‘call’ from Maya Ji in her/is dream at which point the *Janana* must undergo emasculation (I discuss *janana hijra* at length in the next chapter). After the exchange, Jorina genuflected before Maya Ji and Tara Moni. Immediately after the submission, Jorina got possessed and

blackened out. Water was poured into her/his mouth to bring her/him back to consciousness. Instantaneously a coconut was thrown on the ground. All the participants in the ritual then frenziedly scrambled to get hold of the broken pieces of the coconut. During this worship, Jorina was believed to directly communicate with Maja Ji. Later when Jorina gained consciousness, a senior *hijra* fed her/him a piece of meat marking the end of the abstinence of twelve days.

While the ritual bath and worship took place in the afternoon, elaborate preparations were underway for another round of celebration in the evening. The celebration was to be held on the top floor of a three storeyed building of Lokman a *non-sadrali gothia* (sister) of Megha the *hijra guru*. An ornate canopy known as ‘pandal’ covering all sides of the rooftop was erected. Glittering electrical lights were hung from the roof to the ground. A stage decorated with rows of yellow and red flowers was created in one corner of the rooftop. In front of the house, massive culinary preparation was underway. Madhu, a *hijra* who works as a cook outside Hridoypur, was busy cooking rice, beef and chicken curry. From 7 pm onwards guests started arriving. *Hijra* from 10 *ghor* (symbolic lineages in terms of which *hijra* groups are identified) were invited along with some local neighbours. It bears noting that the *non-hijra* locals I had spoken to told me that they were invited to Jorina’s birthday celebration. Jorina along with Jomuna, the *guru* of Meghna and other *hijra* sat on the stage. Jorina was dressed in a gorgeous yellow sari with her/his hair decorated with yellow garlands. With killing red lipstick and thick layers of makeup, Jorina stood out from the crowd. All the *hijra* were dressed in yellow *saris* except Jomuna, who wore green. Alo, another *hijra guru*, came in yellow *salwar kameez*, loose pyjama-like trousers. The two rows of chairs placed in front of the stage were occupied by *hijra* and some locals. One *hijra* started singing songs while playing the *dhol*, while the guests made their way to the stage to liberally apply turmeric to Jorina’s face. Different kinds of fruits and sweets were placed in front of the stage for people to pick up and feed Jorina. The first person to apply turmeric to Zorina’s face was Jomuna, the nonagenarian *hijra guru*. Celebrants who applied turmeric to Jorina’s face also

smear turmeric paste onto their own faces. In the meantime a few *hijra* started dancing in front of the stage. Once the round of turmeric-applying ended, popular music was played from a cassette player with a loud speaker to which younger *hijra* started to dance. Each of the *hijra* houses gave money to the *guru* of Jorina as gifts. At Meghna's request, sitting in a corner with a small writing pad, I took down the names of each of the *hijra* and neighbours who gave money. Later, after the celebration, as everyone made their way to eat, I was asked to calculate the total amount received in gifts. Meghna, the *guru* of Jorina, spent about 1100 taka (roughly £ 150) while the total amount received in gifts was 10071 taka. Typically the kind of celebrations that *hijra* arrange depends on the socio-economic status of the *hijra* group. The *hijra* in Hridoypur are relatively poorer than other *hijra* groups in Dhaka. For this reason, the celebration was not, according to Meghna, as grand as s/he had wanted it to be.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, many *hijra* including some newly initiated ones of the very *hijra* group conducting the *baraiya* had little prior knowledge of the origin myths behind the rituals: that synoptic knowledge is held by senior *hijra guru* and partly underpins their ritual power. Rather for the majority of *hijra*, it is only through their participation in specific ritual contexts that they acquire knowledge of those origin myths whether it be in the performance of *badhai* or in undergoing emasculation. Second, *hijra* often consider their occupation of *hijragiri* to be Hindu in origin. The ritual aspects, namely the genuflection before Maya Ji and Tara Moni, the drawing of vermilion on the forehead and the chanting of mantras invoking the name of these two goddesses, are markedly Hindu aspects with which *hijra* in Bangladesh, despite their being born Muslims, wholeheartedly identify. This, however, does not make the *hijra* Hindu (See below for more on problematic communalization of *hijra* in South Asia). My *hijra* interlocutors do not see any contradiction between their Islamic identification and the observance of these rituals. Utter consternation was expressed by *hijra* when I raised the very question as to whether they identified themselves as Hindus or Muslims. Jorina, whose *baraiya* I described, adamantly told me that s/he was no less a

Muslim after the *baraiya* than s/he was before. Neither s/he nor any other *hijra* I spoke to saw any contradiction between their allegiance to Maya Ji and their Islamic identification. Third, the ritual of *Baraiya* corresponds to one of the most popular marriage rituals in Bangladesh. Known as ‘*Gaye Holud*’, it is a ritual in which relatives and friends smear turmeric on the face and hands of the bride and the groom just as *hijra* initiands are marked with turmeric in *bariaya*. While the ritual of *Baraiya* marks the reincorporation of the initiand into the house of the *guru*, ‘*gaye holud*’ in the mainstream is a pre-marriage ritual through which the bride and the groom are purified and beautified for the imminent heterosexual union. What strikes me as significant is the symbolic similarity between this heterosexual marriage and the reincorporation of the *cela* into the house of the *guru*. While I do clearly acknowledge the significant difference between these two events, the *guru-cela* relationship in many important ways resonates with the husband-wife relationship, a possibility I hinted at in the previous chapter.

Contradiction, authenticity and ritual power

Laila, a *chibry hijra*, once related, ‘*Once emasculated, one becomes sot or chaste and is no longer prone to sexual sin*’. In other words, one becomes a real *hijra* by undergoing emasculation. I challenge the easy transposition of *hijra* status onto emasculated bodies in the next chapter; here I highlight some of the conflicts and contradictions between *janana* (non-emasculated) and *chibry hijra*. Although anthropologists writing on the *hijra* in India have often reported such contestations centred on genital status, this trope of realness actually means different things in different contexts. The invocation of authenticity by the *hijra* in Dhaka is intended to facilitate a claim of realness based on some inborn genital status. It is instructive to recall my discussion on ‘*vabrajer chibry*’ that I elaborated in the chapter on the wider context of male bodied feminine identified people. As noted there, those born with missing or ambiguous genitals are neither part of the *hijra* group, nor are they welcome. In other words, whilst *hijra* both *janana* and *chibry* often contest each other’s status, internally it is common knowledge that none are ‘real’.

Chibry hijra often berate the *janana hijra* not only on account of their having male genitals but also because of their failure to live up to Maya Ji's ideal of asexuality. *Chibry hijra* also invoke the emasculated *hijra* who reportedly serve at the shrine of the prophet to validate their status¹⁵. It is also instructive to note that *hijra* tend to perform *hajj* only after the emasculation. Paradoxically, emasculated *hijra* undertake *hajj* as men and not as *hijra*; as one of the emasculated *hijra* once related, 'You can deceive the whole world but not Allah who created us as men and not as *hijra*'. *Janana*, however, contend that *chibry* undertake *hajj* to atone for the sin of emasculation. *Janana hijra* castigate the *chibry* for contravening Allah's will by altering their God given male genitals. *Janana hijra* argue that the severed organs turn into a snake and bite the *chibry* on the day of judgement. *Janana hijra* also talk about the decision taken by *chibry* to undergo emasculation as driven by their desire to control *birrit* or the ritual jurisdiction within which a *hijra* group is allowed to conduct *hijragiri*, as being emasculated makes one conform to the public understanding of what a *hijra* is, i.e. people born with missing or defective genitals. In reality, however, there are several *birrits* controlled and supervised by *janana hijra* under whose aegis *chibry hijra* operate. Whilst contestations and conflicts around genital status typically emerge surrounding the trespassing of *birrit*, allegations of fakery are always hurled at the trespassing group, regardless of whether the trespassing *hijra* are *janana* or *chibry*.

In fact, each *hijra* group in Dhaka has both *janana* and *chibry* as members. Internally, however, *chibry cela* of *janana hijra* in Dhaka never challenged their *guru* on account of genital status. Rather emasculated *hijra* are often disparaged by *janana* as being less real on account of the artificiality of emasculation. Furthermore, in Hridoypur and elsewhere, *chibry* status does not entail either a greater share of the monies or lesser workload. Furthermore,

¹⁵ See for instance Marmon (1995) for a fascinating history of eunuchs and their association with the prophet's grave.

both *janana* and *chibry hijra* have special ritual powers in the *hijra* community. For instance, it is only the *chibry hijra* who are entitled to draw the pictures of Maya Ji and Tara Moni before the initiand's genuflection during *Baraiya*. On the other hand, *Janana* are the only group of *hijra* with the exclusive privilege to worship the *dhol*, one of the most sacrosanct objects of the *hijra*.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, my contention here is that there is neither any consensus nor any clear status differentiation based on genital status. This can be explained in terms of the cultural resources that *hijra* draw on to consolidate their position. On the one hand, both *janana* and *chibry hijra* creatively appropriate Islam to contest and affirm each other's position, as suggested above. On the other, ambiguity and ambivalence contained within the mythic tale of Maya Ji and Tara Moni are productive of such contestations. While the myth clearly marks out the *janana* as 'real' *hijra* in that both Maya and Tara were *hijra* with penis, it also denies them realness on account of their reluctance to abide by Maya's instruction to undergo emasculation.

Second, the main bone of contention over authenticity is not centred on genital status alone but more significantly linked with erotic desire. After all, *hijragiri* from the slant of that mythic tale can be read as a form of atonement for the original sins of Tara Moni, i.e. had Tara been chaste, there would have been no need for them to resort to artificial means of emasculation. The problem, however, was not that Tara Moni desired but the fact that s/he acted on it. While this was the explanation several *chibry hijra* offered, in reality all the *chibry hijra* I knew had lovers, although they generically denied this in public. When I raised this issue with a close *chibry hijra*, s/he argued that it is not just the removal of the genitals that guarantees the power and blessing of Maya Ji. Rather it is through abstention from desire that one can receive the power of Maya Ji. After all, the difference between Maya Ji and Tara Moni is not that Maya Ji had no desire while Tara did. Rather the difference lies in the fact that

despite their having erotic desire, Maya could exercise restraint while Tara succumbed.

Third, from the slant of desire that I teased out previously in my chapter on erotics, emasculation does not render one asexual, not least because emasculation in the Bangladeshi context is not culturally valorised, unlike the Hindu-dominated India (Reddy, 2005 and Nanda, 1999) but more significantly as already indicated in the previous chapter, erotic desire is deemed by *hijra* to be located in the anus and not in the penis. What this underscores is that whilst emasculation renders the penis redundant, it does not signal asexuality in the *Uti* universe, where the possibility of supreme pleasurability is obtained through the anus.

Paradoxes of bodily metamorphosis and the hyper-masculinity of emasculation

Emasculation, I have already noted, entails the attainment of 'sot' or special ritual power as expounded in the mythic tale of Maya Ji and Tara Moni. More importantly, through emasculation, a *hijra* becomes the ritual embodiment of *Tara Moni* who lost her/is magical prowess due to her/is sexual lust. I also noted that one of the purposes of undergoing '*chibrano*' is to get rid of all forms of vestigial somatic masculinity, evident in the way the initiate's masculine blood is allowed to drain out. What does '*chibrano*' entail in terms of bodily alterations? *Hijra* generally maintain that once emasculated, *hijra* lose the masculine bodily compartments, namely roughness, body hair and so on. Yet *hijra* maintain that emasculated *hijra*, despite these bodily changes, become the repository of masculine prowess unbecoming of even the toughest of men. Put in other words, *Chibry hijra* attain a degree of intrepidity and aggressiveness that the wider society including the *hijra* culturally read as 'hyper-masculine'.

Hijra in Dhaka often maintained that the *chibry hijra* are not only ‘aggressive’ but also ‘dangerous’. Once I asked a few *hijra* in Hridoypur to introduce me to Hamida, an emasculated *guru* in another area in Dhaka. Moususmi and Payeli, with whom I first discussed this, immediately cringed saying, ‘*Don’t even think of it. Even the very sight of Hamida makes our hearts beat faster. Even the police are scared to talk to Hamida. S/he is one of a kind and s/he is also extremely feared by hijra in Bangladesh*’. The reason for this fear, I was told, was not only the way s/he looked, walked and talked (Hamida being tall, dark and stout with heavy shoulders) but more importantly because s/he underwent emasculation. Echoing the same sentiment, *hijra* in other areas spoke in similar tones about some of the well known *chibry hijra*. In speaking of Roksana, an emasculated *hijra hajji*, *hijra* drew my attention to one incident. In the words of Hira, a *hijra* in Mirpur area in Dhaka, ‘*Roksana was once walking alone in the middle of the night in Dhanmondi area. As s/he zoomed past a car, some miscreants from that car catcalled. Roksana turned back and started shouting at them. In response, a widely known terrorist came out of the car with an AK 47. Roksana not only seized the gun but also held the scrotum of the terrorist till they all apologized.*’ I recall another event. Once at around 2:30 am when I was about to leave a *hijra* house, I expressed concern about hijacking, which had become quite common in that area. Noticing my anxiety, Ranu the emasculated *hijra guru*, volunteered to walk me through the notorious bazaar road. When I wondered how s/he would return, s/he laughed and said that hijackers or whoever they were would all be scared to see her/im at this time of the night. Once, in the house of Roksana when I raised this issue about her/is image, s/he proudly related, ‘*In this town there is none like me. Be it police or thugs, they all bow down before me. I am that hijra. Not like those who put their buttcoks on sale in the market these days*’. It is instructive to note that although the very sight of the *hijra* often incites laughter and mirth on the part of the wider society, it also sparks fear among the mainstream. This sense of fear is not just akin to pollution (Douglas, 1966) that their inauspicious presence occasions but more specifically it is *hijra* being ‘violent’, ‘shameless’ and ‘hyper-masculine’ that the wider public are scared of. As a middle class Bangladeshi, I had often heard my friends and

acquaintances speak about the *hijra* not only in terms of jocularly and a sense of disgust but also in terms of a deep sense of fear.

What emerges is that although emasculation is intended to permanently erase masculine prowess, paradoxically it confers on the operated a special aura of courage and belligerence bordering on what would in both normative Bangla and *Uti* imagination be classed as ‘hyper-masculinity’. In speaking of these special traits of the *chibry*, it is important to note that this attainment of hyper-masculinity is not actually a contradiction, as it may seem in the first place. Several *chibry hijra* I had spoken to maintained that *chibry hijra* manage to become fearless as they have overcome that which society valorises the most: the penis as the embodied truth about masculinity. That male genitals are considered culturally precious and valuable is evident in the mainstream monikers used to variously describe the penis. For instance, two very common Bangla expressions used are *sona* and *dhon*, meaning gold and wealth respectively. Furthermore, the very excision of the male genitals signifies an incremental condensation and distillation of *sudrani*, the *hijra* word for semen, that turns the *chibry hijra* into more masculine than normative Bangla men.

Here it is instructive to note that whilst the middle classes ascribe hyper-masculinity to the *hijra* based on representation of *hijra* as dangerous thugs in the elite media, the working class understanding about *hijra* being ‘hypermasculine’ derives from their direct encounter with the *hijra* in daily settings. Furthermore, in urban Bangladesh, *hakim* or religious doctors are often seen to canvass in the evening in busy marketplaces. Dressed in Islamic outfits, such bearded canvassers typically draw a large number of working class male crowds to whom they sell various kinds of special medicine related to premature ejaculation and semen discharge. During my fieldwork in Dhaka, I attended several such gatherings and discovered that one of the issues explicitly spoken about in such public space by such *hakims* is not only *hijra* as a special kind of people but also men’s sexual relations with the *hijra* and the resultant loss of penile virility and the shape and size of the penis. For

instance, one *hakim* once contended that the lack of ‘staying power’ of the penis and inability to satisfy women is directly linked with men’s sexual involvement with *hijra*. The circulation of such footpath discourses exemplifies working class men’s anxiety over the retention of semen.

There is a widespread belief both among sections of the working class people and the *hijra* that *chibry hijra* tend to live longer than the *janana hijra*. Pointing to nonagenarian Jomuna, Meghna the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur once related that the reason Jomuna was still so healthy and free from disease was because Jomuna was above the vices of lust and release. In a similar manner, Roksana another *hijra* once argued, ‘*Hijra are above decadence and destruction. Women menstruate while men release but we hijra don’t discharge. So we are not decadent like the men and women*’. That *hijra* in Bangladesh view emasculation as a route to attaining masculine vigour on account of semen retention is not surprising as semen and its retention is often linked with vigour and prowess at the popular level (See Das, 1992 on semen retention among the *Bauls* of Bengal). A vast body of ethnographic scholarship on South Asia has expounded on the theme of semen retention and anxiety as central to the construction of masculinity (Alter 1995, 1997, Srivastava, 2004). Although often juxtaposed to Hindu India, the value of semen as precious ‘interior matter’ in the context of Muslim majority Bangladesh has rarely been interrogated.

Conclusion: Revisiting the cultural politics of emasculation in South Asia

So far I have discussed the bodily, ritual and gender practices of emasculation in the context of the *hijra* of Bangladesh. In the vast literature available on this subject in South Asia, ethnographers have often posited emasculation as the foundational truth about *hijrahood*. In other words, the extant scholarship reads *hijrahood* as inhering in and emanating from emasculation.

Nanda (1999) argues that the practice of emasculation is a religiously inspired ritual sacrifice in return of which *hijra* in India become spiritually powerful

beings with the capacity to bless and curse. It is on account of this sacrifice of male genitals that *hijra* in India become the practical embodiment of one of the mother goddesses and receive the power to paradoxically confer fertility (pp-24-26). Particularly highlighting the fact that no government till date has been able to erase this institution, Nanda problematically sees in the widespread practice of emasculation a manifestation of Indian men's generalized inability to reconcile their oedipal anxieties (pp-35-37). In addition, Nanda maintains that though the tolerance of *hijra* in India emanates from the predominance of Hinduism with its valorisation of sex/gender variance, *hijra* in India paradoxically display a special bias towards Islam. For instance Nanda (1999, pp. 39-40) notes that the seven *hijra* houses or the symbolic descent lines to which *hijra* in India trace their lineage were all founded by Muslim *hijra*. In addition, drawing attention to the Mughal patronage of eunuchs in the royal regalia as harem guards, Nanda (ibid., p. 23) argues that Islam in the Indian context provides a practical/historical model of accommodating the *hijra*.

Noting Nanda's observation about Islam being a 'positive influence', Jaffrey (1997) in her quasi historical account on the *hijra* in India takes Nanda to task for not sufficiently acknowledging the link between Islam and *hijra*. Jaffrey argues that the link between the *hijra* and Islam is not merely casual. Rather *hijra* is the direct descendent of the Islamic institution of eunuchdom, a proposition she then corroborates by quoting at length from a report produced for the Indian government according to which it was only *after* the Muslim invasion that the practice of castration became widespread in India. Although non-academic in style, Jaffrey's account resonates well with the popular perception in India about *hijra* being not only Muslim but also Islamic in origin (Reddy 2003). In a similar vein, Taparia (2011) argues that while emasculation is Islamic, *nirban* (rebirth), the *hijra* word for genital excisions in contemporary India, is Hindu in origin. Taparia's argument is that *hijra* today adopted Hindu practices as a consequence of the loss of their courtly prestige under the Mughal sultante. From being a cruelly enslaved commodity under the Mughal, *hijra* actively exercised agency to transform the practice of

emasculatation into a culturally acceptable trope of idealized renunciation in Hindu-dominated India.

Reddy (2005, p. 99) drawing on her ethnography in South India argued that *hijra* demonstrate a heavy bias towards Islam. Despite being born as Hindus and their recourse to Hinduism to justify their position in Indian society, Reddy's *hijra* subjects generically identify themselves as Muslims. Reddy maintains that her *hijra* interlocutors understand Islam through the lens of practice. In other words, *hijra* claims that 'we are all Musalmans now' (ibid., p. 99) are facilitated by their ritualistic observance of practices marked as Islamic. Thus, once initiated into the *hijra* community, one becomes a Muslim by default. Reddy reads *hijra* self-identification as Muslim in Hindu-dominated India as a manifestation of a minority coalitional politics where *hijra* reputedly claim a special sense of affinity with Muslims on account of their respective subaltern identifications (ibid., pp. 113-114). Reddy contends that *hijra* identification with minoritarian Islam makes the *hijra* a true supra-local/national subject in the Indian context.

Reddy's projection of the *hijra* as supra-local/national subjects opens up novel ways to reconceptualise *hijrahood*. The problem is that the automatic conflation of the *hijra* with Islam on account of *hijra* practices of circumcision and castration in fact works to reinforce rather than subvert the Hindu cultural politics of virile masculinity. Reddy argues that her *hijra* subjects identify themselves as Muslims on the ground that they undergo circumcision and castration, both of which are considered indispensable rites of passage to *hijrahood*. That Muslim men undergo circumcision is often invoked in popular and political discourse in contemporary India to demonize the Muslims (Ramaswami, 2007). Thus the observation that *hijra* in India look at castration as an exaggerated form of circumcision by virtue of which their self identification as Muslims is expedited gels well with the stereotypical representation of Muslims as 'incomplete man'. Instead of challenging Hindu masculinist nationalism, the link between castration and circumcision further

reinforces and consolidates the dominant Hindu projection of the Muslims as simultaneously ‘emasculate’ and ‘hypersexual’ (Hansen 1996; Moodie, 2010 p. 539, Bhashkaran 2004 and Puar 2005 on other ways that Islam has been repeatedly and variously linked in cultural politics to either perceived sexual deviancy or its inverse sexual repression).

While in Hindu-dominated India *hijra*'s self identification as Muslims on account of their observance of Muslim-marked rituals may emerge as extraordinary, the ritualistic observance of Islamic identified beliefs and practices by the *hijra* of Bangladesh, most of whom emanate from Muslim families, are rather ordinary features of what Muslims in Bangladesh generically do. In the Bangladeshi context *hijra* concurrently observe both Hindu-identified and Islamic beliefs and practices. Yet unlike Hindu born *hijra* in India, Muslim born *hijra* in Bangladesh do not come to identify themselves as Hindus on account of their ritualistic observance of Hindu-marked practices and beliefs that I previously discussed. Similarly, though there are also Hindu born *hijra* in Bangladesh, they generally adhere to and identify with their religion of birth and there is no communitarian pressure on the Hindu-born *hijra*, *chaiton* as *hijra* call them, to become *surki*, the *hijra* term for Muslims. Nor do the Hindu *hijra* talk about becoming Muslims on account of their initiation into the *hijra* community, as Reddy suggests. Muslim *hijra* in Bangladesh often situate their Hindu-marked cosmology and practices within the framework of an open and transcendent Islam. Though they argue that their asexuality and gender liminality transcend all religious and geographical borders, evidenced both in their accommodation of Hindu identified beliefs and practices as well as Hindu born people, they nonetheless cling to their Islamic identity.

In summary, this chapter challenges the master narrative of *hijrahood* as inhering in and deriving from emasculation. First, as my ethnography suggests, *hijra* in Bangladesh do not necessarily become less masculine on account of their undergoing emasculation. In fact, *hijra* recognize the *chibry*

hijra as an embodiment of hyper-masculinity on account of their presumed retention of semen. Second, *hijra* do not view emasculation as an exaggerated form of Islamisation as some scholars suggests. Nor do the *hijra* in Bangladesh identify themselves as Hindu on account of their becoming *chibry* which they read as Hindu in origin. Emasculation is highly ritualized and confers on the operated special ritual power, but that position is not uncontested within the *hijra* universe. Third, emasculation is best understood as part of a wider set of bodily and cultural practices, a processual approach to the engenderment and experience of *hijrahood* that I develop further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: *Hijrahood* and processes of multiple engenderments

A: I heard them calling you *guru*. Are you a *sadrali hijra*?

S: Yes I am.

A: But you are not dressed in female attire.

S: Do women today put on *sari*?

A: I see.

A: What is your name?

S: Which name do you want ? The male one or the female one?

A: Whichever you want.

S: I am Sobuj but when I put on female clothes I call myself Sushmita Sen.

A: Are you new in this shrine?

S: Nope. I live close by.

The excerpt presented above is gleaned from a conversation that I had with a *hijra* that my *sari*-clad *hijra* interlocutors addressed as *guru* in a shrine premise in Dhaka. This normatively attired *hijra*-identified person, I later found out, was not only heterosexually married but also an influential *sadrali hijra guru* in that area. During my fieldwork, one of the things that fascinated me was the way several *hijra* I had known continuously oscillated between a *hijra* subject position and that of a masculine householding man. What does such movement across and between heterosexual masculinities and *hijrahood* entail in terms of bodily and sartorial practices? How do *hijra* interpret these various practices through which they transform their gender? In this chapter, I explore *hijra* notions and practices of gender. In so doing, I challenge the

stereotypical notions of *hijrahood* as inhering in and flowing from emasculation. While *hijra* do often talk about their being an intermediate gender, closer attention to the actual practices and processes through which *hijra* engender themselves brings into a view a picture far more complex and nuanced than the extant trope of ‘third sex’ allows for. Rather than view *hijra* as a static and ahistorical third sexed people, I elaborate how *hijra* not only understand and explain normative categories of gender but also practise those categories in quotidian settings. The guiding principle in this chapter is that gender ideologies are not to be understood as discontinuous with the practices in real life situations. Rather the ideals that *hijra* publicly proclaim and the practices they enact are mutually co-constitutive and it is through an interrogation of this mutual interplay that we may be able to understand not only the limits of a third sex framework but also the concept and praxis of gender.

Following a brief discussion on the *hijra* notion of gender, I take on board various ‘male femaling’ practices through which *hijra* seek bodily and sartorial metamorphosis. I then illustrate practices through which *hijra* come to understand femininity. In explaining and expanding on the *hijra* notion and practice of gender, I demonstrate how *hijra* gender ideologies are appropriations and extensions of broader hetero-patriarchal Bangla cultural logics. Moving on from there, I examine the constant shift between heterosexual masculinities and *hijrahood* that my interlocutors practised on a daily basis. Attending to the way such movements between and across Bangla masculine subjectivities and that of the *hijra* transpire brings into view the processual nature of *hijrahood*. Focusing on the art of phallic dissimulation that *hijra* perform, I further expound not only the making of *hijrahood* but also the limits of a third sex framework. Rather than read *hijra* as an intermediate and ‘failed’ subject position, I argue that *hijra* in Dhaka disavow Bangla masculinity to be able to explore varied gender and erotic possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to normatively masculinised subjects in Bangladesh.

Notion of gender among the *hijra*

There is no widely used word for gender in Bangla, the predominantly spoken language by the mainstream majority. The common translation in the wake of NGO-driven activism that certain sections of the middle classes employ these days is '*samajik lingo*' literally social genitalia, a phrase that is more confounding than clarifying. There is no word for it in the *hijra* clandestine argot or *Uti* either. Yet 'gender' as is commonly understood in the Anglo-American world is central to the way *hijra* view the world (cf Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994 p.11). When asked about what a *hijra* is, responses typically range from '*we are neither man nor woman*' to '*we are two in one*' to '*we are people above sex/gender*' to '*we have a woman's mind but a man's body*' to '*We are an admixture of masculinity and femininity*'. More than any other factor, *hijra* emphasize the gendered aspect of their selves when asked to speak about themselves. I elaborated briefly the *hijra* view on the gendered social universe in chapter 2; here I expand on those themes to situate the *hijra* not only in relation to the wider societal understandings of gender but also in relation to their own gendered cosmology. According to the *hijra*, the gender categories are as follows: a) *panthi/parik/man* b) *neharun/woman* and c) *kothi/hijra*.

So what is a man according to the *hijra*? During my fieldwork I asked this question every now and then. More often than not, my interlocutors laughingly said '*apni*', an honorific address in Bangla meaning 'you'. In speaking of what a man is, my interlocutors typically argued that those who carry a scrotum/*jhumka* and *ligam/penis* are men. Upon further prodding, some said men are those who have a deeper voice. Some pointed to walking styles while others focused on moustache and facial hair. Some also said men are those who marry heterosexually and father children while others argued that a man is someone who dresses like a man. What emerges is that my *hijra* interlocutors look at manhood first and foremost through the lens of anatomical features, namely the penis and reproductive capabilities. Secondly

they conceptualize man through the lens of certain societal norms of masculinity, namely, bodily comportment and sartoriality.

The *hijra* understanding of manhood is reflected in the way they define a *panthi* or a *parik*. *Panthi* is the *hijra* argot for men while *parik* is the word for an intimate partner or a husband. Both *Panthi* and *parik* are used to refer to grown up men as opposed to a ‘*tonna*’, the *hijra* word for boy. I examine the role of *parik* in the life of the *hijra* in another chapter; here I highlight some preliminary features as a way to understand the *hijra* notion of manhood. *Hijra* define a *panthi* as someone who is ‘manly’ in the way he goes about dealing with the world. An ideal *panthi* has to be endowed with a large penis and should be capable of fucking hard or what the *hijra* call ‘*Akkhar Dhur*’. More importantly a *panthi* is someone who is indispensably a penetrator and never a receptor. Though my *hijra* interlocutors stress the possession of a penis as a defining feature of manhood, it is not the mere possession but the use to which the penis is put that illustrates the *hijra* conception of manhood.

In response to my question as to who a woman is, *hijra* in Hridoypur always pointed towards vagina and breast as essential features of femininity. Additionally, they also often spoke about softness, shyness, lack of facial hair and sartoriality as traits defining women. For instance, Josna, a *hijra* in Hridoypur, argued that women are those who stay inside the house and cook and take care of the domestic chores, while Payeli contended that women are those who give birth to children. In fact, the ability to give birth to children was often pointed out as a very important factor in the way *hijra* defined women in general.

What emerges is that *hijra* look at both men and women through the lens of both physiological properties, namely genitalia, and normative societal attributes. Yet *hijra* complicate their own narratives by challenging such essentialism by categorically rejecting the manhood of those men who receive

the penis in sexual intercourse with men. It is thus not just the somatic traits and reproductive capabilities but more specifically the uses to which they are put through which *hijra* conceptualize man, woman and *hijra*. For instance, *hijra* differentiate themselves from the *panthi* in terms of sexual receptivity. A *hijra* or a *kothi* is someone who is by definition receptive as opposed to a *panthi* who is penetrative, regardless of how manly or effeminate a person is, although it is commonly assumed that those who receive are always necessarily feminine. It is on account of this receptivity that *hijra* think of themselves as being akin to female. The most common response to my question as to why they identify themselves as female was their desire for normative masculine men. For my *hijra* interlocutors, desire for men and feminine identification are isomorphic: men who desire men are not men but *hijra* and ‘men’ who identify themselves as women inevitably desire men. In that sense, gender and sexuality are not two distinct ontological domains for the *hijra*. I have already examined the entanglement of desire with gender in a previous chapter; here, let me simply reiterate that this trope of receptivity as the defining factor of *hijrahood* is so pervasive that any digression from this model jeopardizes one’s status as an authentic *hijra*. Those found to violate this norm are often denounced as *gandu/gaira/do-porotha/double-decker*, derogatory terms often used to refer to those who fuck and get fucked.

It is also instructive to note that several anthropologists have made similar sort of observation in their respective fields. Johnson (1997), for instance, in his study of the male bodied feminine identified ‘*bantut bantut*’ of southern Philippines, contends that his interlocutors not only talked about their having a ‘women’s heart stuck in a man’s body’ but also operated within a strict gender regime that draws a clear distinction between the penetrated and the penetrator. Johnson contends that any suggestion as to his interlocutors being insertive in sexual intercourse with men was not only met with opposition but also provoked a deep sense of disgust. In a similar vein, Boellstorff (2004b) argues that the *waria*, the Indonesian ‘transvestites’ often spoke pejoratively about those who fuck and get fucked. Further afield, Kulick (1997) in his study of the Brazilian transgendered prostitutes maintains that his *travesti*

interlocutors categorically drew on a system of gender configuration wherein those who penetrate are unambiguously accorded the status of men while the penetrated are culturally marked as *travesti* along with the females.

The brief discussion of the studies above highlights that notwithstanding the contextual differences and complexities of the respective cultural fields, gender and sexuality are not understood to be distinct conceptual domains in many non-western contexts (See also Jackson 2000 and Peletz 2009). However what is distinct about the *hijra* notion of gender is that while penetration defines men and masculinity, derogatory labels are used to disparage male bodied feminine identified people who penetrate men and not women. In other words, while penetrating women is acceptable, although not desirable, penetrating men is not.

Male femaling and the practices of bodily and sartorial transformation

One of the persistent themes that emerged in my conversations with the *hijra* was a generalized flair from an early age for feminine bodily comportment and sartorial practices. My *hijra* interlocutors maintained that it was because of this proclivity that they were often taken to task not only in their families but also in the wider societal settings, namely the school, neighbourhood and the playground. In explaining to me this flair for feminine deportment and lifestyles, *hijra* often invoked some essentialist narratives of their being born with such tendencies. But while those ‘innate proclivities’ may qualify one to be part of the *hijra* group, becoming a member of a *hijra* group entails systematic acquisition of and conformity to certain prescribed bodily and sartorial practices. *Hijra*, however, contend that they could learn whatever they had to learn after joining the group, precisely because of those innate tendencies.

In speaking of *hijra*, my interlocutors always highlighted their distinction in bodily and sartorial terms from men. For instance, Jomuna categorically drew a distinction between the *hijra* and men by pointing at ‘*sadra*’, the *hijra* word for female-marked sartoriality. Although in the *hijra* argot *sadra* means *sari*, an unstitched length of cloth worn from waist to knee by women across South Asia, *hijra* use of the word extends beyond wearing the *sari* to adopting a way of life. Although not all members of the community wear a *sari* at all times, wearing a *sari* is a must especially when *hijra* set out for *badhai* and *cholla*, the two ritually validated *hijra* occupations.

Munira, now in her/is early thirties, once recounted the initial days when s/he was still struggling to learn the *hijra* ways. S/he pointed out that although s/he was feminine from an early age and experimented with her/is mother’s clothes surreptitiously, s/he had to perfect the way s/he wore the *sari* after joining the community. S/he vividly recalled the way s/he used to be upbraided by her/is *guru* for not being able to wear the *sari* properly. Because s/he was not adept at wearing the *sari* in a proper manner, s/he was debarred from participating in *badhai* and *cholla*. But later, with practice, Munira perfected her/is *sari*-wearing skills. With time, Munira has perfected her/is skills so much that these days whenever a new member is initiated, Munira is the first one to be given the task of instructing the novice. Rumana, a *gothia* of Munira, once argued that if they were men they would have worn pants and shirts, although in reality many *hijra*-identified persons wear normative masculine attire.

Aside from *sadra*, *hijra* also often stress their bodily comportment. Monalisa, a *hijra guru*, once argued, ‘*If we were men would we have our ear and nose pierced?*’ *Did you ever see a man with such piercings?*’ Another *hijra* called Babli once commented, ‘*Don’t you understand that we walk differently from men? Do men sway their hips the way we do? Are their hands unhinged at the wrist like ours?*’ Most *hijra* I spoke to in Dhaka wore a bra and blouse while wearing a *sari*. Typically, my *hijra* interlocutors filled their bras with cotton, coconut husk, pads of cloth or tennis balls. Although very few *hijra* developed

breasts, younger *hijra* often experimented with various breast enlargement techniques. One very popular practice is the regular ingestion of contraceptive pills, namely ‘*maya bori*’, widely available in the market. Although widely used as birth control pills, *hijra* call them ‘*lilki/nilki bori*’, literally pills for the enlargement of breasts. Many a time my *hijra* interlocutors longingly spoke of growing breasts, although to their utter dismay only a few could actually develop breasts. One of the popular brands that I saw in many *hijra* households was ‘*Renshen*’, a Chinese breast enhancement cream. *Hijra* who used it argued that three tubes of *renshen* would do the trick and if there was no improvement then they would try some other methods. A popular perception among the *hijra* is that regular ingestion of contraceptive pills undermines penile potency and consequently the sperm gets congealed in the breast, leading to its enlargement. Whilst they could not explain the exact origin point of sperm, the idea that sperms travel through the body resonates with folk biological understandings of sperm in Bangladesh¹⁶. Initially after about 2 to 3 weeks some sort of a lump is formed in the breasts and one finds out that the breast is forming when one starts to experience pain in those lumps. Nevertheless very few of my interlocutors had been successful in enlarging their breasts either by ingesting these pills or applying breast-enhancing creams. These days, one very popular technique to make breasts is to pad out a bra with water-filled condoms a practice known as ‘*Ilu ilu*’. However I had only seen this to be prevalent among the sex worker *hijra* in the public gardens. Many *hijra* also drink the juice of the leaves of a tree known as ‘*bel*’ (wood apple) to weaken penile prowess. It is believed that regular intake of this juice causes erectile dysfunction leading to an enlargement of the breast. My *hijra* interlocutors also drew my attention to medical techniques of breast enlargement, although not a single one I had known ever had such an implant or surgery.

¹⁶ See Das (1992) for instance for a thorough account of translocation of semen within the body in *Baul* (a group of spiritual singers with secret sexual rites) thought and practice in Bengal.

Hijra with large breasts are often envied by other *hijra* and referred to as *hijra* with massive *lilki* or breasts. In Dhaka, *hijra* told me only a few were successful in developing big breasts with the help of pills. Although breast enlargement is a preferred practice among the *sadrali* group, one of the *hijra* famous for her/his natural breasts in Dhaka was not a *sadrali* but a sex worker *hijra* who, despite having big breasts, always dressed like a man. Once during my visit to a cruising site, Chadni volunteered to show me her/his breasts to prove the point of my other *hijra* interlocutors. Chandan, then 21 years old, had started consuming pills when s/he was 17 and within a few months ended up developing breasts, unlike others who despite painstaking efforts at enlargement failed. It is interesting to note that while most *hijra* I had known had to pad out their bras to make breasts, Chadni being a *kari kothi* (a *kothi* in the guise of a male) always tied her/his breasts with a long patch of cloth to hide them from the public.

Hijra typically pull their beards out with a *chimpti* (tweezers) instead of shaving them, a practice they call ‘*darsan potano*’. ‘*Darsan*’, also known as ‘*dargarani*’, refers to beards while ‘*potano*’ is to get rid of or to erase. Munira once explained to me that while men shave, *hijra* pluck their *darsan*. Senior *hijra* typically carry a *chimpti* tied to a thread worn around their waist. The very first time I saw it was when Jomuna, the *guru* in Hridoypur, perched on a bed, was stretching out her/his body and the *chimpti* was dangling from the thread around her/his waist. When I asked what it was, s/he tried changing the topic but later, as I grew close to Jomuna, s/he told me that it was a secret and precious possession that very few *hijra* these days have. S/he maintained that a proper ‘*chimpti*’ is made with either silver or gold and the one s/he had was an inheritance from her/his *guru*. Because Jomuna was the most liked of all the *cela* of her/his *guru*, the latter had passed it down to her/im. Although *sadrali hijra* generally use *chimpti* to erase facial hair, a few of Jomuna’s *cela* shaved. Mousumi, a junior *hijra*, once related, ‘*My facial hair grows too fast and too thick and it is almost impossible to pull them all out. It is not only painful but*

also very time-consuming. So I thread it¹⁷. Plus I always put on thick layers of makeup on my face when in public so as to hide the blackness of my face'. Sundori, another *hijra* in Hridoypur, always wore thick makeup. While *hijra* generally put on thick layers of pancake¹⁸ makeup, a full coverage foundation intended to cover scars, discolouration and facial hair on the face, Sundori would always have a few extra layers on her/is face. So dense and blatant was her/is makeup that I could never see her/is face without makeup. While the *hijra* in Hridoypur would not normally put on makeup during *cholla* and *badhai*, Sundori always did. When curious, I asked the reason, sundori told me that this was how s/he could avoid being seen by her/is family members to be with the *hijra*. Mousumi and others, however, contested this, saying that s/he wore thick makeup to hide acne scars.

Jok, literally hair, was another important dimension of *hijra* bodily metamorphosis. *Sadrali hijra* typically keep their hair long and those who fail to grow long hair wear false hair known as 'velki jok'. *Hijra* believe that because of the curse of Maya Ji, the *hijra* goddess that I discussed in the previous chapter, all *hijra* lose their hair and grow bald as they age. Mousumi once contended that when Maya Ji was falling between the cracks of the earth, Tara Moni held her/im by the hair and because of this all *hijra* lose their hair as they grow old. For this reason, *hijra* generically take very special care of their hair by applying henna dye and other herbal products.

Assuming femininity

Hijra, I already noted, seek bodily and sartorial transformations by resorting to various techniques. What do these transformative practices entail? After all,

¹⁷ Threading is a traditional method of hair removal done with the help of a single thread. While with a tweezer each hair has to be singly plucked, with threading an entire row of hair can be erased in one go.

¹⁸ It is perhaps a brand as I saw the name inscribed on the makeup boxes that *hijra* used. Upon researching I found this to be an expensive product, although the pancake makeup boxes *hijra* used were locally made and relatively cheaper. *Hijra* often begrudged its high price and spoke about this brand and style of makeup being used by heroines in Bangladeshi cinema.

my interlocutors often maintained that they were male bodied persons with feminine minds. It was clear to all my interlocutors that despite their attempts at bodily and sartorial transformation, they never became 'real' women. Nor did they aspire to be so. Rather to most of my interlocutors, becoming female was tantamount to acting or passing like a female. This was so not only with the *chibry* (emasculated) *hijra* but also with the *janana* or *hijra* with penis. However, it is important to recall here that, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the hijra-defined notion of normative femininity does not necessarily refer to the actual lives of women. While in reality normative female femininities vary considerably in keeping with class, status and position in the life course, my hijra interlocutors always indicated certain stereotypical traits in describing normative femininity.

Hijra, I have already noted, put on thick layers of makeup and don various female attire. But those who could wear it more like a woman, i.e. in such a way so that others would mistake them for 'real' women, always took pride in such imitations. Dipu, a *hijra*, took pride in her/is ability to change her/is voice and speak like a female. Dipu could comfortably switch between both masculine and feminine voices. Once it so happened that Dipu spoke to a man in his forties for some time on the phone and then that man came to visit Dipu. When that man came, Simmi, a female friend of Dipu, was in the house. That man mistook Simmi for Dipu. Rumana, another *hijra*, liked talking to men on the phone. Romana had dated several men through such telephonic conversations. Romana said that most of the *panthi* mistook her/im for a woman over the phone, but since Romana was somewhat masculine in her/is looks, men could easily recognize her/is as 'velki'/fake as soon as they met her/im in real life. This trope of passing also resonates with my interlocutors' claim about men being unable to distinguish the *hijra* from women at the time of intercourse that I already touched upon in the previous chapter. Whilst the veracity of such claims may be questioned, what is noteworthy is the way *hijra* take pride in such acts of passing.

In explaining to me what it means to be a female, my interlocutors often referred to their adoption of feminine bodily deportment, namely walking with swaying hips, plucking their eye brows, wearing makeup, bras and long hair, emasculation and breast enlargement. My interlocutors also stressed ‘wifely duties’, as central to being a female, namely, taking care of the household chores, cooking for husbands and attending to the husband’s emotional and physical needs. *Hijra* also often contended that they were capable of outperforming *neharun*/biological females not only in terms of erotically satiating the men but also in terms of wifely duties (I elaborate the discrepancy between this claim and the real life wifely duties that *hijra* perform in the next chapter). While *hijra* take on putatively feminine comportment and mannerisms, it is via continual practice that such gender-switching skills are acquired and perfected. More importantly *hijra* enactment of femininity is context-specific and subject to alterations in keeping with the demand of the changing ambience. For instance, *hijra* often take on exaggerated feminine trappings in the cruising sites to attract normatively masculinised or Bangla men, as I elaborated in a previous chapter. Echoing many of my interlocutors, Nili a *hijra* once related, ‘*I masquerade as a female to attract men. If I don’t act like a female/neharun-pona, will panthis come to me? So I do all these subterfuges*’.

When new members are initiated into the community, they are always given a new female-identified name but the previous male-identified names are not relinquished. Both the names are used within the community as well as in the neighbourhood. In Hridoypur I heard many *hijra* being called by the male-identified name in the wider community, even when they were dressed like females. *Guru* too at times call their *cela* by their masculine identified names. As Mousumi once explained, ‘*You know Abdul, my next door neighbour. I am very close to him and his wife. Sometimes when Abdul visits his friends and relatives I dress like a man and accompany him. Or else how can I go with him? What would his relatives or friends think about Abdul?*’ Typically, the female names *hijra* take are names of the famous film actresses of Bangladesh and India, as in Southern Philippines (Johnson 1997). At first meeting, almost

every *hijra* introduced her/himself by the name of a famous heroine. Also noteworthy is the fact that *cela* address their *guru* as mother, while *hijra* of similar rank address each other as ‘*gothia*’, literally sister. However, this female identification is not rigid. Words like *guru* and *cela* are male-identified in Bangla. Moreover, senior *guru* are also often referred to as *Nayak*, literally leader, which is also a male-identified moniker. In the mundane settings within the *hijra* households, I had often seen *guru* calling their disciples ‘*maigga*’, a pejorative Bangla colloquialism denoting effeminate males and never as ‘*Magi*’, the widely used swearword to refer to ‘loose’ women.

Although *hijra* are required to dress like females during *cholla*, they are taught to be tough in the face of any likely danger in bazaar settings, as they have to constantly haggle with the Bangla vendors to get money. As already suggested in a previous chapter, *hijra* typically swagger up and down the bazaar and approach any potential vendor in an aggressive vein. Often accompanied by boisterous clapping and excessively nasalized speech, the *hijra* act of demanding is anything but docile femininity. The very act of demanding from the wider society, as shown in detail in the chapter on class-cultural construction of *hijra*, requires masculine vigour unbecoming of normative women. When refused, *hijra* often lift up their *sari* in public and typically throw erotically loaded comments at the vendors, that people would not associate with normative women in general.

At the level of household domesticity, the picture is also far more complex than the *hijra* might have one believe in the first place. Despite the rhetoric of demurral and docility that *hijra* definition of femininity often lionizes, *hijra* in their interaction with their partners within the sphere of household domesticity are anything but docile. For instance, there is a widespread practice among the *hijra* known as ‘*parik pala*’ literally making a pet of a husband. All my *hijra* interlocutors with husbands tended to dominate their relationship with their husbands. While I discuss at length this dynamic in the next chapter, suffice it

to say that the main decision makers in those household were the *hijra* and not their husbands.

Once, in a cruising site, I was with Nili a *janana hijra*. There we met two of Nili's regular clients who over the last few months had grown close to Nili. Just five minutes walk from the shrine premise where Nili was cruising was a dark over-bridge. We climbed up one side of the bridge to have a conversation. Since I was interested in talking to Nili's clients, Nili asked them to go there. In the course of conversation, one of the clients started praising Nili's wife saying *Vabi* (the Bangla word for wives of brothers and friends) was very nice and had a respectable character. Nili, a heterosexually married *hijra*, lived in the same vicinity with her/is female wife. Every night Nili would go to a friend's house to change into female attire before cruising. In response to her/is client's praise for her/is wife, Nili nodded in total agreement. Because this client was a close friend of Nili, he had often visited Nili's heterosexual home. Nili, however, was known as Nil at home, a male-identified name. In the course of this conversation I asked Nili if her/is wife knew about her/is being in this profession. Nili said her/is wife had no clue but she had known all along that Nil was a bit 'like a female'. More importantly, when I asked what would be Nili's attitude towards her/is wife's being in a similar occupation and making money that way, Nili along with her/is clients vehemently opposed such an idea saying '*Chi chi Chi*', the Bengali expression used to articulate a strong sense of disgust and disapproval. On another occasion in Hridoypur, a female friend of mine came to visit the *hijra*. That friend had short hair and was an insatiable smoker. During her visit, we all smoked and drank alcohol and talked about *hijra* in general. Later one day, the *hijra* in Hridoypur wondered if that female friend of mine was a prostitute. When I asked why they thought so, they argued that a respectable woman would not keep her hair short as she did. Nor would she smoke and drink alcohol in public.

There are a few things to be drawn out here. First *hijra* not only publicly articulate a particular stereotype of what they deem desirable and appropriate femininity, but also never really adhere to those self and other ascribed stereotypical feminine trappings. That is evident not only in their interaction with their husbands, where they reputedly exercise greater dominance over their masculine partners, but also in real life settings, where *hijra* often take on masculine comportment despite their femininized status. Second, the *hijra* idealization of certain feminine traits and their publicly professed desire to live up to these ideals run counter to the way normatively gendered women behave in real life situations in Bangladesh. For instance, women in general do not wear such thick layers of makeup as the *hijra*. Nor do they walk with such an exaggerated swaying of the hips. Third, *hijra* approximation and adoption of feminine traits are not an expression of generalized *hijra* desire to be normatively female, although in public they may proclaim so. Rather the taking on of aspects of femininity for the *hijra* is a relational practice, i.e. they adopt and idealize these practices in relation to their desire for and construction of, equally idealized and stereotypical, normatively masculinised men. Finally, I would contend that the assumption of a *hijra* status requires simultaneous disavowal of masculinity and espousal of certain traits of female femininity. Attending to this process of negotiation and practices foregrounds how *hijra* are gendered and engendering subjects.

Heterosexual masculinity and *hijra*hood

Ethnographers of *hijra* (Nanda, 1999, Reddy 2005) have located the institutionalized presence of *hijra* in India within the broader Hindu cultural logics of renunciation. While *hijra* do not represent the life stages of Hindu life cycle in the strictest sense, the reported practice of renunciation of reproductive heteronormativity makes them true renouncers. If Hinduism, as Kakar (1990) notes, is a theory of de-sublimating sexuality into spirituality, *hijra* by virtue of their genital excision transform themselves into true ascetics. The dichotomy between renunciation and house-holding status in Hindu thought is inherently fraught with tension that *hijra* reportedly transcend

through their ritualized sacrifice of the male genitals, which in turn exemplifies an abstention from desire. I complicate this trope of conflating emasculation with lack of desire in a previous chapter; here I intend to challenge the assumption about *hijra* being located outside the domain of heterosexual house-holding masculinity. There is, indeed, some sort of a scholarly consensus about *hijra* being outside the domain of heterosexual sociality. It is on account of one's severance of natal familial ties that one becomes an authentic *hijra*. Instead, what I demonstrate below is that *hijrahood* or the assumption of a *hijra* subject position, does not necessarily entail a renunciation of the house-holding status (See Osella and Osella 2006 pp. 159-165 for a discussion on the overlap between the renouncer and householder status). To illustrate my point, I reproduce below a few ethnographic episodes from my fieldwork.

Meghna the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur and also my first *guru* into the *hijra* universe, is not only heterosexually married but also a full time *sadrili hijra*. Around 50 *hijra* that s/he supervises are all aware of Meghna's heterosexual marriage and children. Although I had known Meghna for a decade, s/he never brought it to my attention. It was only by chance that I came to learn about her/is having a heterosexual family with children. Once one of Meghna's *cela* told me about her/is dropping off some chicken and vegetables at Meghna's *non-hijra* household, assuming that I had already known about this side of Meghna's life. Sensing my sense of shock, s/he asked me to never mention this to Meghna or any other *hijra* in Hridoypur. On another occasion Jomuna, the nonagenarian *guru* of Meghna, suddenly started talking about some domestic problems her/is daughter was facing. Jomuna, an emasculated *hijra*, was previously heterosexually married. Later in the conversation, Jomuna mentioned Meghna's children while talking about the distribution of *birit*, the ritual jurisdiction. Noting Meghna's discomfort, I pretended not to have heard it and started talking to others. Later one day, Anwar a heterosexually married man living in the vicinity of Meghna's *hijra* house in Hridoypur, invited me to his house. During our conversations Anwar started talking about how hospitable Meghna's wife was every time he visited Meghna's *non-hijra*

house. In fact the very fact of Meghna's being heterosexually married was known not only to all the *hijra* in Hridoypur but also to some of the close non-*hijra* neighbours.

Purnima, another *cela* of Meghna, was about 10 years older than her/is *guru*. Although I had visited most of the *hijra* households in Hridoypur, I never had the luck to visit Purnima's house. One day, I was told that some kind of a gathering would take place at her/is place. Invited, I turned up on time and started interacting with my usual acquaintances. Big bowls of rice and chicken curry and beef were being cooked close to the main entrance of this tin-shed three roomed house. The rooms were abuzz with people that included not only the *hijra* in Hridoypur but also some non-*hijra* people. In one of the rooms I was asked not to enter was a girl sitting next to a young man with a few older women from the neighbourhood and Jomuna, the *hijra guru*. Usually when Jomuna is present in any of the houses of her/is *cela* in Hridoypur, I am asked to sit in the same room, but that day, Meghna categorically asked me not to sit there, as women from the neighbourhood would be joining them. Later, after having delicious meals, while the *hijra* were leaving, I saw some of them handing money to Purnima, who along with Jomuna were sitting next to that girl and the young man. The event I described above was actually the marriage ceremony of Purnima's daughter, about which I was told a lot later by one of the *hijra* in Hridoypur. Purnima, a heterosexually married *hijra*, lived six months in her/is village while being a *hijra* in Hridoypur in the rest of the year.

Abdul, another influential *guru*, is a heterosexually married *hijra*. Abdul has two houses. In the area where s/he conducts *hijragiri* s/he has a small room from where s/he supervises the *hijra* group, while her/is heterosexual household is located close by. The *cela* of Abdul many of whom are emasculated, as well as Abdul's wife, are aware of Abdul's 'dual' lives. Abdul unlike Meghna, was quite open about it from the onset of our interaction. Abdul does not really keep these two households separate. Abdul says her/is

wife is 'pakki' the *hijra* expression connoting knowledge about the *hijra* ways. When I visited Abdul's wife, she not only spoke to me in *Ulti* but also left me with the impression of her being totally accepting of Abdul's *hijra* vocation.

Rahim, a *hijra* in her/is late 40s, works as a sex worker in a public garden. Every day in the afternoon s/he comes to the other side of the town where s/he has a small room which s/he shares with some other *hijra*. Once on this side of the town, Rahim is known as Rahima. Rahim in Bangladesh is a male-identified name while Rahima is marked as a female one. Rahima uses this room to dress up like a female every evening before going to the cruising areas. Generally at about 3 am s/he returns to this room, changes into masculine attire and then heads back to her/is heterosexual household. Rahima is also a *cela* of Shima, the *hijra guru* in the area where s/he cruises. As Shima's *cela*, Rahima also takes part in *hijragiri*. Once I went to Rahima's non-*hijra* household. On our way, Rahima categorically asked me to refrain from referring to anything about her/is *hijra* life. As we entered Rahima's tin shed house, in a poor neighbourhood, I met Rahima's wife and two children. Although I barely spoke due to the fear that I might unintentionally allude to the *hijra*, I was intrigued by the way Rahima transformed her/imself into Rahim. After an hour we left and took a rickshaw to get back. On our way back, Rahim once again evolved into Rahima and started to speak *Ulti* and act like a *hijra*.

Tanaka, a national level *hijra* leader, has risen to prominence in recent times for her/is health activism. More often than not, Tanaka is seen to be flanked by two children in public. Once on the occasion of a *hijra* fashion show organized by an NGO, Tanaka turned up with these two children. Dressed in *sari*, Tanaka was ushered by junior *hijra* to a row near the stage where three seats were booked for her/im. Seated in the row behind Tanaka, I heard the children calling Tanaka 'abba', the Bangla expression for father. When I asked Tanaka about who they were, s/he said they were the children of her/is sister. However, other *hijra* present at the show later told me that they were actually

Tanaka's own children and Tanaka was still heterosexually married. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, I did not try and confirm this with Tanaka, but the same story was repeated to me by Tanaka's *cela*.

It is not only the *janana hijra* (*hijra* with penis) but also the *chibry* or emasculated *hijra* who are often seen to be in touch with their children from previous or existing heterosexual marriages. Jomuna, the *guru* I mentioned earlier, ministers to the financial needs of her/is daughter till today. Joynal, another *hijra* who recently underwent emasculation, regularly sends money to her/is heterosexual family and bears the expenses of the education of her/is children. Joynal's wife works in the Middle East as a cleaner and is aware of her/is having undergone this operation but according to Joynal, her/is wife is not keen on divorcing her/im.

Among the *gamchali hijra* group I discussed in chapter two, the majority of them were not only *janana hijra* but also heterosexually married. Coming from outside Dhaka, *gamchali hijra* work as cooks in the burgeoning construction sites in Dhaka. Like many *sadrals hijra*, *gamchali hijra* regularly send home money earned through their cooking. *Gamchali hijra* claim that their families and children back home are unaware of their being *hijra*, although they all have male lovers. Rabeya has been a *gamchali hijra* for about 10 years now. Prior to coming to Dhaka, s/he also worked in other areas of Bangladesh as a cook. Rabeya says when s/he goes back to visit her/is family, s/he assumes a masculine house-holding attitude that s/he referred to as '*akkhar panthi-pon*', literally akin to the manners of a masculine man. Lokman has three daughters, all of whom have been married off and interestingly a relative of one of her/is daughter's husband was once his sexual partner, but both Lokman and that relative of her/is son in law act as if they had never met. Like Lokman, when *gamchali hijra* go and visit their families back in the villages, they try not to walk in the way they walk here in Dhaka. Nor do they dress or talk like what one *gamchali hijra* styled *maigga*, a derogatory expression to refer to effeminate males. Moufuli another *gamchali hijra*, opined that her/is family

back in the village had always been aware of her/is being a bit ‘soft’ (*norom sorom*) but were not clued up either about her/is sexual relations with men or association with the *hijra*.

In a society where heterosexual marriage is the norm, the idea that male bodied people (including *hijra* and *kothi*) will marry heterosexually is not unacceptable. Many of my *hijra* interlocutors wish to marry heterosexually at some point in their lives. While some do so due to familial and societal pressure, others opt for it voluntarily to prove their masculine potency. Babita, who has been a *hijra* for the last ten years, recently got married. Before getting married s/he left the *hijra* group. S/he used to live with her/is mother in the same area. Babita says s/he got married as her/is mother was alone. When I asked about it, Babita stated, ‘*Do you think just because I wear sari like a female and do hijragiri I can’t father a child?*’ Leaving her/is newlywed wife and mother in the village, Babita joined the *hijra* group once again. Soma, another *sadrati hijra*, divides her/is time between *hijragiri* and the heterosexual family. Soma, which is a feminine identified name, is known as Sumon, a masculine name, in her/is heterosexual household. Soma’s wife works in a garment factory in Dhaka. During the day, Soma does *hijragiri* while at night s/he works as a sex worker. Since Soma is recognisably ‘effeminate’, her/is parents thought marrying ‘him’ to a female would cure her/im of effeminacy. Soma contends that s/he was known for her/is ‘*maiggagiri*’, the local term for effeminacy, in the village. Owing to this image, her/is parents had a lot of difficulty finding her/im a bride. Nevertheless, when the family of Soma’s present wife came to visit, her/is current brother in law took her/im aside to inquire if s/he had any problem. Soma showed him her/is penis and then the marriage was finalized.

There are a few things to be drawn out here. First, there are not only *hijra* with penis but more significantly many of these *hijra* are heterosexually married. There are, as shown above, instances where the heterosexual households of these *janana hijra* are located adjacent to areas where they conduct *hijragiri*.

While the *gamchali hijra* work as cooks far away from their heterosexual families, *sadrali janana* often operate in locations near their heterosexual households, of which their wives are at times aware. There are also *hijra* with an inter/national reputation in health activism who, contrary to public perception, are heterosexually married. Second, the presence and preponderance of *janana hijra* are not an exception but very much the dominant pattern whose legitimacy derives from the *hijra* origin myths that I discussed in the previous chapter. Third, while these frequent movements in and out of their normative heterosexual households and *hijrahood* may be seen to echo the classical South Asian dichotomy between renunciation and householding status (Cf. Reddy, 2005:35-40, Osella and Osella 2005: 159-163, Taparia, 2011:175), these literal and symbolic movements in the case of Muslim majority Bangladesh do not exemplify such tensions. Rather what these shifts between and across various gender, ritual and sexual statuses exemplify is the simultaneous habitation of an *Uti* universe—where these male bodied feminine identified people are practitioners of alternative desires—and the Bangla world of heteroerotic masculinity wherein they practise normative reproductive heterosexuality. In other words, many of these *hijra* are simultaneously masculine householding Bangla men and *Uti* or *hijra-nationals*. This apparent incommensurability can be explained, as I demonstrated in my chapter on erotic desire, in terms of my interlocutors' desire to explore varied gender, ritual and erotic (*Uti*) possibilities that are otherwise foreclosed to normatively masculinised Bangla subjects.

The art of 'gender-(dis)appearing'

One of the questions that intrigued me throughout my fieldwork was the way my interlocutors simultaneously lived the lives of masculine house-holding men and those of *hijra*. More often than not, heterosexually married *hijra*, as I previously noted, operated as *hijra* in a location away from their heterosexual households. It was not thus a case of their being both at the same time in a literal sense, although in the case of Abdul *hijra as* noted above, this distinction was blurred. Every time I raised this issue, *hijra* burst out into

giggles and contended that it was only the *hijra* who were capable of being so many things at the same time. In the words of Mousumi, *hijra* are polymorphic beings (*bohurupi*) while Sathi styled it as a special art that only *hijra* are capable of mastering. It is precisely these mystique-making capabilities (*chola kola*) and their systematic mastery on account of which one can become a successful *hijra*. Yet *hijra* asserted that this art comes naturally to them, i.e. regardless of the amount of training one receives, only the ‘real’ *hijra* are able to acquire this art.

One particular art that *Hijra* generically spoke about in relation to polymorphism is that of ‘*ligam potano*’. While *ligam* in *hijra* vocabulary denotes the penis, *potano* is to vanish. In other words, *ligam potano* is the art of ‘vanishing the phallus’ in the twinkle of an eye. Although *hijra* refer to ‘*potano*’ or vanishing in the specific context of hiding their penis behind and between their legs, the very symbolism of this art of phallic dissimulation extends beyond the physical art of stretching the penis backward behind the thighs. I would contend that this art of ‘vanishing’ can serve as a powerful metaphor to capture the enactment of multiple and fluid gender practices of the *hijra*. Following Lacan, I therefore translate *ligam* as phallus rather than just penis. For Lacan, phallus is not reducible to the physical penis but is the symbolic embodiment of the unconscious, and the realm of representation. Phallus is therefore the symbolic sublimation of the penis (Cited in Garber pp.119-120). The Lacanian take on phallus resonates well with the way *hijra* vanish not only the penis but also its cultural manifestation in the form of heterosexual household and masculinity.

Hijra trace this art of ‘vanishing’ back to Maya Ji and Tara Moni, the two primordial archetypes that I elaborated on in my chapter on emasculation, but suffice it to say that according to my *hijra* interlocutors, both Maya Ji and Tara Moni could literally make their penises appear and disappear with the help of clapping. Although *hijra* today, I suggest below, do not necessarily look upon ‘*ligam potano*’ in such mythic terms, the very mastery of this art of

dis/appearing phallus is central to *hijrahood*. As already suggested above, this art is not to be taken literally but is rendered more meaningful in a metaphorical way wherein *hijra* are seen to perform various sorts of magical disappearance and appearance. As if almost literally, my *hijra* interlocutors' multiple and fluid lives and their apparent control and management of them always seemed like a matter of a single clap. It is as if with one single clap their heterosexual families could be made to disappear and then be brought back within a moment with further clapping. While the practice of clapping, as I already suggested in my chapter on class, sets the *hijra* apart from the normative mainstream, clapping also works as a marker of authenticity and seniority among the *hijra*. For instance, it is an unpardonable offence for a *cela* to clap in the presence of a *guru*. In the event of such infraction, perpetrators are penalized. *Hijra* asserted that *hijragiri* or the occupation of the *hijra* is a 'play of clapping', in that it is the entitlement to that play that marks one as not only a real *hijra* but also establishes one's sway within the community. *Thikri* or clapping is therefore a symbol of power and authenticity as well as a route to achieving magical appearance and disappearance.

Hijra today, however, view this art of phallic dissimulation in pragmatic and physical terms. In other words, the reason *hijra* have to master this art today is precisely because of Tara Moni's deceit and the consequent loss of the magical power of clapping, as elaborated in a previous chapter. First, despite the fact that there are *hijra* with penis, *hijra* always deny it in public. When asked, their typical response is that they were born with missing or defective genitals. Because of this public claim, *hijra* today have to master the art of dissimulation to avoid potential embarrassment caused by public discovery of their having a penis. For instance, during *badhai and cholla*, the acts of demanding gifts on the occasion of the birth of a new born and collecting money from the bazaar, respectively, the wider Bangla society may at times challenge the authenticity of one's *hijra* status precisely on account of genital status. There have been instances where in the face of challenge from "bad boys" (*bila tonna*), *hijra* have had to prove their lack of genitals. Furthermore, *hijra* also often lift up their *sari* in a bid to coerce the wider society to give in

to their demands. On occasion, I saw *hijra* perform ‘*ligam potano*’ both in the bazaar and in household premises. While for the *chibry* or emasculated *hijra*, lifting up their *sari* in public poses no threat of exposure, *hijra* with penis require the skill of vanishing in front of the public. Given this risk of exposure, I initially assumed that only the emasculated *hijra* went for *badhai* and *cholla*, but contrary to my assumption, I found out that mostly *janana hijra* in Hridoypur undertook *cholla* and *badhai*.

Second, the constant shifts between varied masculine performances and feminine identified practices are also evident in the way *hijra* conduct themselves in the day-to-day settings. As already suggested in the chapter on class, whilst *hijra* take on the personae of aggressive hyper-masculine collectors during *cholla*, they act like ‘docile females’ in the immediate neighbourhoods they live in. In speaking of *hijra* mystique-making abilities, Mousmui once explained, ‘*It is not that we always tend to be docile in our interaction with the immediate neighbours but it all depends on who we are interacting with. If we are talking to some bad boys in the area who taunt us, we act masculine but then when we speak to the females or older people, we act as if we are some innocent daughters of the village. We hijra are full of art and subterfuge.*’ This variable and context-specific gender presentation is also evident in *hijra* speech and tonal patterns. In her research on the use of language by *hijra* in India, Hall (1996) illustrates the way *hijra* constantly switch between masculine and feminine pronouns in their interaction with the mainstream. Although Bangla, the predominantly spoken language in Bangladesh, is uninflected by gender pronouns, such switches are evident at the level of mannerisms and variable tonal patterns. Laila, a *hijra* widely known for her/is conversational skills once commented, ‘*We sometimes speak like men and sometimes like women and at times in a mixed way and on occasion like neither men nor women*’.

Third, *hijra*, I already suggested in another chapter, boast about their ability to hoodwink men into thinking that they are ‘real’ women. The reason men so

easily get ‘deceived’, according to many *hijra* in Dhaka, is precisely because of this art. One particular event leaps to my mind. Although men seeking to have sex with *hijra* generally do not inquire about genital status, on one occasion a *panthi* took Ratna, one of my *hijra* interlocutors, behind a banyan tree in a public garden to see if s/he was a ‘real’ *hijra* or not. Although Ratna lifted up her/is *sari* and showed that s/he was a genuine *hijra*, ironically the man declined to have sex as he was, according to Ratna, looking for someone with a penis. Later when I wondered about how s/he could ‘vanish’ it so quickly, s/he volunteered to demonstrate the art to me. *Hijra* cruising in that area immediately followed suit in a dazzling display of their mastery of this magical art of phallic dissimulation.

Conclusion: Beyond failure and resistance: the limits of a third sex analysis

In this chapter I sought to foreground the multiple ways in which gender is produced, reproduced and transformed by the *hijra*. I contended that whilst *hijra* undertake a series of transformative bodily and sartorial practices to undo the phallic or Bangla masculinity, these *Uti* or anal ‘male femaling’ practices do not necessarily entail a hermetically sealed non-masculine status. Rather the trajectory of the lives of the *hijra* exemplifies movements across and between heterosexual masculinities and *hijrahood*. Through several ethnographic vignettes, I challenged the conventional master narrative of *hijrahood* as emanating from emasculation. By paying close attention to their actual lived practices, I demonstrated how *hijra* not only negotiate masculinity and femininity but also *hijraness*. However such acts of transcendence need not be seen as an instance of *hijra* being stuck in a failed intermediate gender. Rather central to the assumption of a *hijra* subject position is the acquired ability to navigate various forms of partible and permeable lives marked by practices of magical appearance and disappearance of both physical and social genitals.

Hijra, I elaborated in my introduction to this thesis, are often projected in scholarship as an intermediate ‘category’ that transcends the sex/gender dimorphism. I described in details some of the conceptual and pragmatic pitfalls of a third sex lens in the study of *hijra*. Here I intend to highlight once again that underlying this third sex framework is an explicit assumption about *hijra* being some kind of a gender failure. It is as if only those failing to be sufficiently normatively masculine take up a *hijra* subject position. Allusions to such failure are powerfully encapsulated in Nanda’s now classic expression about *hijra* being ‘neither men nor women’. This tendency continued unabated even in the works of critical scholars who challenged Nanda. For instance, in her writing on linguistic practices of the *hijra*, Hall (1996) contends that attention to the linguistic practices employed by the Hindi-speaking *hijra* furnishes further insights into the construction of *hijra* as a third sex. While critical of the narrative continuity of *hijrahood* as mired in the ‘neither men nor women’ line of analysis, Hall argues that *hijra* are not just ‘neither men nor women’ but more specifically ‘deficiently masculine and incompletely feminine’ (1996:229). Whilst Hall’s projection may reflect the wider societal take on the *hijra*, it is precisely this attribution of failure/lack/inadequacy that the ethnography I presented above squarely challenges. *Hijra*, I elaborated, are clearly not inadequately masculine. Rather my *hijra* interlocutors are simultaneously successful in being *hijra* and masculine house-holding men. That is, one becomes a *hijra* not because of some genital defect or because of some erectile failure. Rather my interlocutors chose to become *hijra* to be able to explore various gender and erotic possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to normatively masculinised subjects. It also needs stressing that that my *hijra* interlocutors did not intend to become biological female per se, although they often talked about their being ‘akin to women’. Rather the taking on of certain feminine aspects by my interlocutors was a way for them to be a proper *hijra* rather than being a woman. My argument here is that *hijrahood* does not entail either failed masculinity or failed femininity. Instead of reading *hijrahood* through the lens of failure or deficit, *hijrahood* is better understood as a route to varied erotic, gender and ritual possibilities, the attainment of which requires a continuous and successful mastery of various acts and arts of magical appearance and disappearance. These various

practices of simultaneous gendered appearance and disappearance of the genitals, heterosexual family, masculinity and femininity or even the sex/gender dualism are powerful acts. It is through exercising various forms of (*Uti* or anal) agency either via the art of concealment of the (Bangla/phallic) genitals and their subsequent reappearance or through moving in and out of Bangla heterosexual masculinities and (*Uti*) *hijrahood* that one becomes a *hijra*.

Reflecting on various acts of dis/appearance also moves us beyond reading the *hijra* as some sort of a resistance group. Whilst scholars have often construed *hijra* in terms of a lack and deficit, scholarship has often sought to seek epistemic validity by presenting the *hijra* as a solid opposition to sex/gender dualism or various normative institutions (e.g. Nanda 1999, Lal 1999, Bakshi 2004). My quibble here is that taking *hijra* as a form of resistance to oppressive sex/gender regimes works to deflect our attention from the actual engendering practices and processes through which *hijra* are not only culturally produced and reproduced but also *hijra* as embodied subjects produce and reproduce those very configurations of gender and sexuality. While *hijra* may be used as a cipher to interrogate the constructedness of both gender and sexuality, what is often lost sight of is the way *hijra* too can be complicit in the perpetuation of normative sex/gender regimes that I elaborate in the next chapter. Rather than read *hijra* as a disembodied metaphor for resistance and subversion, *hijrahood* is better understood by attending to the multiple gender acts and arts that my *hijra* interlocutors rely on and enact day in and day out.

Chapter 7: Affect and emotional intimacy: *Hijra* entanglement with normative Bangla men

Anyone conducting fieldwork with the *hijra* might be struck by the way *hijra* often immerse themselves in ‘*ulu jhulu*’, the *hijra* expression for fun. Although initially I was left with the impression that *hijra* are extremely fun-loving and happy people, later I was told by my interlocutors that this ‘*ulu jhulu*’ is basically a facade underneath a stream of despair that *hijra* lives are perennially mired in. In explaining to me the fount of this constant despondence, *hijra* pointed to their deep yearning for a lover or *parik*. *Parik*, the *hijra* word for partner/lover/husband are a significant factor in the lives of the *hijra*. Although *parik* are not part of the *hijragiri* or the occupation of the *hijra*, *parik* are an indispensable source of joy and anxiety for the *hijra*.

Although male bodied feminine identified natives have been amply documented and theorized within anthropology of gender and sexual diversity, very little attention has been paid to the roles their lovers or partners play in the formation of their subjectivities (Kulick 1997a, Besnier 2004). One outcome of this sustained incuriosity about the partners is that these so called gender-variant groups have become the embodiment of gender and sexual difference unto themselves. Analytically such inattention works to rigidify the *hijra* as an instance of gender/sexual difference alone. The extent to which *hijra* subjectivities are formed relationally can potentially suggest new directions in understanding and explaining the *hijra*. Such incuriosity about partners may be explained in terms of the fact that partners and in the case of the *hijra*, the normatively masculinised Bangla men, lack the exotic appeal that anthropologists generically find in the *hijra* or other such groups. Partly this inattention is the result of the relative invisibility of the partners. Specifically, in the case of the *hijra*, as I suggest below, there is an overt tendency to ‘invisibilize’ their partners. This invisibility of partners, I would

argue, points to a broader politics of masculinity and engenderment of desire within and against which *hijra* subjectivities are situated.

Besnier (2004) foregrounds the problematic erasure of partners in the anthropological explorations of ‘transgender’ people in the context of Tonga, arguing that this ethnographic silence is not a mere descriptive omission. Rather this inattention not only works to prevent us from understanding the formation of the subjectivities of gender variant people generally but also often contributes to their social exclusion and moral abjection. Besnier contends that desire for normative men is central to Tongan transgender men’s subjectivity and it is also on account of such desire that Tongan transgender men are socially marginalized. In a similar vein, I also contend that desire for normative men is central to the formation of *hijra* subjectivity. And it is because of the forbidden nature of *hijra* desire for men that *hijra* enact an *Uti* universe within the mainstream Bangla social world. I argue that in order to comprehend *hijra* subjectivity, systematic attention therefore needs to be focused on kinship, desire and partners.

In her ethnography, Nanda (1999) devotes some attention to this relational aspect of *hijra* selves while Reddy (2005) acknowledges the yearning of her interlocutors for partners but the accounts of these authors do not sufficiently interrogate the role of partners in *hijra* lives or partners’ perspectives on the *hijra*. In other words, accounts of partners emerge only as circumstantial in their narratives and are not accorded any central importance in the constitution of the *hijra* selves¹⁹. In contrast, I submit that partners are not just some circumstantial sideshows but are the most central aspects of *hijra* subjectivity. In a previous chapter, I elaborated *hijra* erotic entanglement with Bangla men and the varied spatio-cultural contexts of those encounter. Here I highlight the

¹⁹ While desire for men does not emerge as significantly constitutive of *hijra* subjectivity in her monograph (Reddy 2005), Elsewhere Reddy (2009) devotes some attention to the role of desire in the constitution of *hijra* subjectivity.

affective and emotional context of *hijra* encounter and entanglement with their partners.

The first part of this chapter introduces *hijra* accounts of their partners specifically illustrating the way *hijra* define and describe the Bangla men who they desire, as well as the various selection criteria that they verbally stress. Briefly navigating through a few case stories about *hijra* love affairs with Bangla men, I interrogate *hijra* notions of marriage, kinship and affinal relations in the context of the day-to-day lives of the *hijra*. The second part of the chapter, albeit rather brief, illustrates *hijra* participation in the families of their partners with a special focus on how *hijra* interact with members of their ‘husbands’ friends and families. The main focus of this chapter, however, is not so much on the accounts of the *parik* as on the *hijra* accounts of them. The reasons for this are twofold. First, given the focus of this thesis on *hijra* subjectivity, I felt an elaborate discussion on partners’ accounts would be an analytical digression, because my primary intention is to foreground *hijra* views on their *parik*. Second, for reasons I explain later, it was not always possible for me to interact adequately with the partners of my *hijra* interlocutors, a fact that perhaps explains the relative absence and silence about partners in ethnographic work on male bodied feminine identified people more generally. On the whole, what I present here is *hijra* rendition of their interaction and entanglement with their partners which, as will be shown, offers unique insights not only into *hijra* notions of intimacy and relatedness but also into the wider context of affect in relation to which *hijra* subjectivities are forged.

Who are the *parik*?

Whilst the *hijra* word for normative masculine or Bangla men is *panthi*, the word *parik* is reserved for an intimate male partner, a lover or a husband. The relationship between a *hijra* and her/his *parik* can take different forms. For instance, there are *parik* who live on a permanent basis with their *hijra*

partners. Then there are also *parik* who live away from the *hijra* but visit their *hijra* partners on a regular basis. There are also long term *parik* who are visited only by the *hijra*. The expression ‘*bandha parik*’ or bonded partner is used to refer to those who live permanently with the *hijra* as well as those with whom *hijra* have been involved for a long term, although they do not share the same household. In contrast, ‘*chutta*’ or unbound *parik* are those intimate partners who live away from the *hijra* and in this case either the *hijra* or the *parik* make occasional visits.

‘*Parik kora*’ or making a *parik* out of a Bangla man, is a widely used expression among the *hijra*. *Hijra* typically want to make a man *parik* when they start to ‘*chis*’ (both desire and love) a *panthi*. During my visits to cruising sites, several *hijra* I interacted with expressed their desire to make me their *parik*. Although there is no specific criterion in terms of which the selection occurs, most *parik* are either those who the *hijra* met in a cruising site or those from the areas in which *hijra* live. *Parik* tend to be from the same social backgrounds that *hijra* come from. Whilst, as already noted in a previous chapter, *hijra* sell sex to middle class men, those groups of men rarely become the *parik* of the *hijra*. In fact, not a single *parik* I met hailed from a background starkly different from those of my *hijra* interlocutors.

Hijra typically desire Bangla men, i.e. those who are identified exclusively with normative masculinity and heterosexuality as that is understood in this context. *Parik* are expected to be attracted to women and it is on account of their attraction to women that they are marked out as normative men in *hijra* conceptualization. If a *panthi* is attracted to another masculine identified man, *hijra* not only question the manhood of such men but also lose erotic and affective interest in them. In fact men who desire other men are not in the view of my interlocutors sufficiently masculine or Bangla to be worthy of being their *parik*. Such men are pejoratively disparaged as *gandu*, *khudenga* and *khai khoara*, expressions used by *hijra* to refer to men who fuck men and get fucked by men. It is important to note that there is no organized community of

men who identify themselves as *parik*. In other words, *parik* is the label attributed by the *hijra* to Bangla men who the *hijra* consider as their intimate partners. Although *parik* I spoke to knew that the *hijra* referred to them by that term, *parik* as a moniker was far from being an identitarian position that partners of the *hijra* took on. Intimate partners of *hijra* did not generically self-identify as *parik* in the wider Bangla society, although these male partners are identified by the *hijra* as *parik*.

Although there is no specific selection criterion in terms of which *parik* are chosen, there are some marked patterns that emerged in *hijra* description of their partners. Those descriptions, as I suggest below, did not always correspond to the realities. Among several factors, age often emerged as crucial in terms of *parik* selection. There were *hijra* who always preferred *chudda* or older men while others opted for *tonna* or young men. Two of the senior *hijra guru* in Dhaka had two very young men as their permanent lovers. Roksana, an emasculated *hajji hijra*, lived with her/is *parik* in the old part of Dhaka. Roksana's *parik* was at least a decade younger than her/im, while Pinki, another *hijra guru* now in her/is early 40s was about 18 years older than her/is *parik*. Older *hijra* in Dhaka often expressed a liking for men with a 'bumper', the *hijra* word for moustache (cf Osella et al p. 46). In reality, however, I met only one *parik* who sported a shiny moustache with twirled ends. There were also *parik* from age groups roughly similar to their *hijra* partners. In Hridoypur two permanent *parik* who lived with their *hijra* partners were more or less of the same age as their *hijra* partners.

The eternal pining for an elusive *parik*

One of the recurrent threads that emerged in the course of my interaction with the *hijra* was an impassioned yearning for the perennially elusive lover. Although not all my interlocutors had *parik*, almost everyone pined for one. Here I must stress that this pining for an intimate male partner stemmed not from the sexual urges alone but primarily from a deep-seated desire on the part

of my interlocutors to be continually loved and to love. There was a widespread conviction among my *hijra* interlocutors that notwithstanding the affective love and sexual pleasure they showered their partners with, their partners would eventually jettison them. This sense of anxiety about the possibility of their being ditched by their partners was articulated not only by *hijra* who had been through such experiences but also by those who had been involved in a steady relationship for a very long time. There was indeed some sort of a 'love and hate' attitude towards the partners. In the language of Payeli, one of my interlocutors, '*partners are like air, always amorphous and slippery and difficult to catch. Even when caught, they are difficult to keep*'. This constant sense of partners being elusive, especially in terms of affective reciprocation, was an inexhaustible source of despondence for my interlocutors. Because of the firm conviction of my interlocutors about partners' being 'opportunistic' and 'selfish', several *hijra* dejectedly spoke about *panthi* in the worst possible terms. Dipali, a *hijra* from Hridoypur, once related, '*Parik are like shoes. We have to change them every now and then*', while Payeli once contended, '*Parik are like sweepers who we need only to sweep up our buttock holes*'. *Hijra* in Hridoypur routinely contended that *parik* are a kind of '*species*' (*jat*) of its own kind' that you can never trust. Given these deep-seated misgivings, several *hijra* stated they only pretended to be in love with their *parik*, as they were certain of their *parik*'s betrayal. Despite this pronounced vituperative tone, *hijra* entertained in the deepest closet of their hearts the thought that someday someone would truly love them. In other words, selves of my *hijra* interlocutors were forged in relation to *parik* both real and imagined. To illustrate the importance of *parik* in the lives of the *hijra*, I present three short case stories.

'Two in one': the story of Dipali and Arman

Dipali, a *hijra* in Hridoypur, had a permanent *parik* for about nine years. Dipali, unlike most other *hijra*, could read and write. Dipali wrote eight diaries about Arman, her/is *parik*. In explaining to me the intensity and depth of her/is feelings and attachment, Dipali would often take them out from a secret

drawer and read them out to me. Arman was the brother of Dipali's sister's husband. When they broke up, s/he was totally devastated. S/he cut the skin of her/is hands, legs and scalp, the marks of which were clearly visible. S/he resorted to these self-injurious activities in a bid to show Arman her/is love for him. Dipali thought Arman would be moved by her/is action and come back and love her/im even more but when all these efforts on Dipali's part failed to draw Arman any closer, s/he attempted suicide twice. Once Dipali took one hundred tablets and on another occasion, s/he tried hanging her/himself from a ceiling fan. At the time of the breakup, Dipali had 6 lac taka (roughly £ 6000 or less) and 6 ounces of gold, all of which had been squandered on drugs and alcohol since then.

Dipali felt s/he could have had a bright career in the film industry as a dancer, but s/he also relinquished that for Arman. In addition, s/he also severed all her/is previous ties with the *sadarli hijra* and stopped dressing up like a female to please Arman, who was opposed to her/is feminine sartorial presentation. Arman also wanted Dipali to stop visiting the public gardens, but s/he could not stop going to the public gardens as this was the only way s/he could socialize with other *kothi*. Although Dipali explained this to Arman in the clearest possible terms, Arman was unconvinced and accused Dipali of having sex with men in the public gardens. To dispel Arman's misconception, Dipali offered to have sex with Arman as many times as he wanted every day, yet Arman could never rise above his paranoia. There were also times when Arman beat Dipali up, suspecting s/he was seeing other men. Dipali too beat Arman up in return. They always ended up having sex after each row. Dipali contended that s/he loved Arman so much that they used to share the same tooth brush. Dipali used to get angry if Arman ever looked at any other *hijra* or women. Prior to being with Diplai, Arman had several female partners. In retrospect, Dipali maintained that s/he had wasted a lot of valuable time of her/is life for Arman. It is on account of this experience, contended Diplai, that s/he lost all her/is faith in love and these days even though s/he has a partner, s/he pretends sincere love but in reality s/he lives with her/im only for sexual satisfaction.

Perennially together: Payeli and her/is long term lover Ibadod

Payeli, another *hijra* in Hridoypur, fell in love with Ibadod, a man 10 years older than her/im. Unlike Dipali, Payeli was still in a relationship with Ibadod. Payeli met Ibadod long before s/he entered the *hijra* group in Hridoypur. After the demise of Payeli's father, s/he migrated to Dhaka with her/is mother and lived in Premnagar, where s/he first met Ibadod. Later they moved to Hridoypur while Ibadod stayed back there. However, the fact of their moving to this new location did not weaken Payeli's relationship with Ibadod.

It was in Hridoypur that Payeli, previously known by his masculine name as Habib, was renamed Payeli by the *sadrals* *hijra*. In the beginning Payeli had to be extra cautious in carrying out *hijragiri* or the occupation of the *hijra*. Because Payeli lived with her/is mother in Hridoypur and Ibadod would often pay sudden visits, s/he could not be a full time *sadrals*. After about six months of equivocation, Payeli finally decided to become a full time *sadrals*, i.e. s/he publicly dressed like a female on a relatively permanent basis. Every time Ibadod paid a visit, Payeli would change her/imself back into Habib. However, Payeli got caught twice by Ibadod in *sadrals* mode in Hridoypur. Failing to convince Ibadod, Payeli left the *sadrals* group and started to put on masculine attire on a full time basis, although s/he was still tied to the *hijra* group. Although this created some discontent among the *hijra*, Payeli was not jettisoned by the group as s/he obtained permission from her/is *guru* who, according to Payeli, was sympathetic to her/is dilemma.

In the meantime Ibadod left for the Middle East to take up a job in a factory. Payeli once again took to *sadrals* mode. In 2006 when Ibadod came back to Bangladesh for three months, Payeli once again left the *sadrals* status. It was during this time that Payeli, dressed in typical masculine attire, visited my house along with Ibadod. As I ushered them into the drawing room, Payeli followed me inside and whispered in my ear to not speak a single word of *Ulti*

and to not talk about anything to do with either Hridoypur or *hijra*. In addition, Payeli asked me to address her/im as Habib, her/is male identified name.

During the time when Ibadod was away, Payeli had regular communication with him by telephone. In times of emergency, Ibadod also sent money to Payeli. Back from abroad after two years, Ibadod was under immense pressure from his family to get married. By the end of 2006 Ibadod was married to a woman in his village. Payeli not only attended the festival but also had a strong say in the selection of the bride. In fact while Ibadod was abroad, he asked Payeli to go to his village and finalize this marriage. In Ibadod's village, Payeli is known by her/is natal name Habib and looked upon as Ibadod's closest friend. I too was invited to the ceremony but was unable to attend. Payeli aka Habib went to Ibadod's village a week before the ceremony to facilitate the process and stayed an extra week after the marriage to help Ibadod and his new female bride settle. In the week prior to the ceremony and afterwards they had sex almost every night. Payeli during this time also grew very intimate with Ibadod's wife. Ibadod introduced Payeli to his wife as his best friend. Though Ibadod left a month after the marriage, Payeli was in close contact with his wife. Back in Hridoypur, Habib was once again Payeli but then after a while s/he too got married to a female in her/is village. That Payeli had got married to a female in the village, whom s/he had left behind there with her/is mother was, according to her/im, not known to the *hijra* in Hridoypur. Payeli categorically asked me to not tell anyone about it although such marriages, as I demonstrated in a previous chapter, are not uncommon. The decision came as Payeli's mother was planning to go back to the village to settle there permanently. Besides, Payeli got a job in a newly set up NGO working on male sexual health in Hridoypur. Payeli returned to Hridoypur and started working with that NGO while being a *sadrili* in the same vicinity. The last time I saw Payeli was in the middle of 2009, attending an NGO-organized *hijra* fashion show in Dhaka along with Ibadod and his wife.

Selection of a bride and a row between Konkona and Bijoy

Konkona, a Hindu (*chaiton*) *hijra*, had been involved with Bijoy, a Hindu man for the last seven years. Konkona and Bijoy had been living in the same house ever since they got involved. Konkona argued that s/he never let Bijoy feel that s/he was a *hijra* and not a woman, i.e. Konkona took care of Bijoy in every possible imaginable way a female wife takes care of a husband. There had been in recent times some pressure on Bijoy from his family to get married. Friend to both Bijoy and Konkona, I was once invited to go to a house to see a prospective bride for Bijoy. Later that evening I went with them to their house. Suddenly a fierce row erupted between Konkona and Bijoy over the fact that Bijoy was willing to marry a female from the village, chosen by his mother, rather than opting for the bride Konkona chose for him. Although I was confused, being under the impression that Konkona would have objections to his marrying a female in the first place, I realized that it was not the very idea of his marrying a female but his apparent accession to the choice made for him by his mother that was the bone of contention. When I raised this issue, Konkona categorically stated ‘*What are you saying? Is it to happen? His family will never accept me. Nor will the society. What hurts me most is not that he will marry a female but that Bijoy is not listening to me. The girl I chose is perfect for him. I have lived with him and I know him*’. In response to my query as to whether Konkona would maintain a relationship with Bijoy when he gets married, Konkona contended that while her/his life would not come to an end, s/he would have to deal with this reality as there would be no way to avoid it. The last time I spoke to Konkona was in 2011 and s/he had taken up a new job in an NGO and moved to a new location where she continued to live with Bijoy.

There are a few things to be drawn out from the three succinct accounts presented above. First, all three stories, albeit partial, resonate with my earlier contention about not only *hijra* yearning for their *parik* but also their constant sense of predicament over the *Parik*’s elusiveness. It is important to note that this elusiveness stems from a firm conviction that their *parik* will eventually

leave them and settle for female brides. While this continues to be a cause of despondence for the *hijra*, *hijra* too are party to this arrangement, as that men will eventually marry heterosexually seems acceptable to them. This is further evident in the way both Konkona and Payeli took it upon themselves to select the bride for their *parik*. In the case of Payeli, however, there was no breakup and eventually Payeli's *parik* Ibadod got married to a woman selected by Payeli, with whom Payeli too grew close. More interestingly, Payeli too entered the institution of heterosexual marriage. Although *hijra* desire to have partners on a permanent basis, they also often opined that what their partners did was justified on the ground that men were meant for heterosexual marriage after all. Some *hijra* also contended that it was actually a sin to 'spoil' men by tying them down as they would have no future (children) with the *hijra*.

Second, the accounts above also underscore the importance of *parik* in the lives of the *hijra*, evidenced from the way both Dipali and Payeli not only severed all their ties with the *hijra* community at the beck and call of their partners but also stopped dressing like females from time to time. In the case of Dipali, where the ending was elegiac, we see desperation and frustration leading to a series of self-mutilating practices and a progressive disenchantment with the notion of love. The case of Dipali is not an isolated one. Rather over the years I have heard of several *hijra* attempting suicide after their partners ditched them. In Hridoypur *hijra* would often indulge in alcohol (*Khilwar*) and drugs followed by bouts of singing and dancing, as a way to get over the agonies over the loss of their love.

Third, that *parik*, as the first two case stories indicate, not only object to their partners' identification and association with the *hijra* and feminine sartorial presentation but also insist on their *hijra* partners being masculine in public foreground that these *parik* love their *hijra* partners not as *hijra* but as men. Whilst some partners demand that their *hijra* partners be masculine, there are also *parik* who insist on *hijra*'s being emasculated. While further research is required to find out more about whether these expectations of *parik* vary in

terms of private and public space, what I can say with certainty is that *hijra* decisions about their gender presentation and sense of self are forged in relation to their *parik*'s demands and expectations.

Parik* as affine: Marriage rituals and celebrations among the *hijra

Cia, the *hijra* word for marriage figured prominently in my fieldwork. Interestingly it was only in the context of normative or Bangla heterosexual marriage that my *hijra* interlocutors used this word. Even in the interaction among the *hijra*, *cia* is used particularly to reference marriage between a *hijra* and a woman and not the marriage between a *hijra* and her/is *parik*. Unlike marriage between a *hijra* and a woman or marriage between man and woman, marriage between a *hijra* and a man is linguistically unmarked among the *hijra*. The marking of heterosexual marriage between *hijra* and a woman as *cia* in *Uti* underscores its secrecy, despite it being common knowledge among the *hijra*. In this section, I elaborate not *cia* but marriage and partnerships between the *hijra* and their *parik*. On several occasions, I was invited to ceremonies and celebrations of marriage in Hridoypur and elsewhere. It is interesting to note that although some of those celebrations were held in public community centres or in open space, the immediate neighbours of the *hijra* were told those celebrations were 'birthdays' of *hijra*. It is also instructive to note that despite frequent celebrations of marriage between a *hijra* and a *parik*, *hijra* never really explicitly used any words to reference such relations. Rather, they always spoke about such involvement indirectly either by describing it as a birthday or some other festivity.

Chottu, who had a long term *parik*, was formally married to her/is *parik* Joynal six months after her/is emasculation. Chottu had to obtain permission from her/is *guru* before tying the knot. Typically a *hijra* wishing to get married has to pay compensation to the *guru*. It is only through paying 'sanan' or 'pakki', *hijra* expressions for compensation, to the *guru* that such marriages are rendered legitimate. In Chottu's case it was five hundred taka (£5) that s/he

paid to the *guru*, although the amount payable to *guru* varies from house to house²⁰. At the time of Chottu's marriage, a small party was arranged at Chottu's house, to which only the *hijra* from Hridoypur and their *parik* were invited. Chottu was dressed in bridal attire while Joynal was made to sit outside on the matt with *hijra* smearing turmeric over his face. It is noteworthy that this ritual of smearing turmeric bears resemblance to the mainstream normative Bangla marriage ritual in Bangladesh, where turmeric is applied to both the bride and the groom on two separate occasions²¹.

Jomuna, the *hijra guru* of Hridoypur, took one of Chottu's hands and offered it to Joynal saying 'I am marrying my daughter to you. Make sure s/he is properly taken care of and fed'. In response, Joynal who was sitting with the *parik* of other *hijra* nodded in agreement and promised to make Chottu very happy. Here, what is interesting is the similarity between the mainstream marriage ritual and that of the *hijra*. In normative marriage the father of the bride offers his daughter to the groom much like the way Jomuna the *guru* offered Chottu to Joynal, but in the case of normative marriage this offering is done in the presence of a *Kazi*, the Islamic marriage conductor. In addition, while in the normative Muslim marriage a contract is signed by both the groom and the bride along with witnesses, there was no such paperwork in the case of Chottu and Joynal. No one from the natal family of Joynal was present at the time of this marriage, unlike the normative situation.

There were, however, several instances where marriage between a *hijra*, especially an emasculated one and her/his *parik* was alleged to have been officiated by a marriage registrar or *kazi*. Although I did not have the good luck to observe any such marriage, several of my *hijra* interlocutors reportedly got married in front of witnesses and a *Kazi*. Tina, another emasculated *hijra*

²⁰ Selim, the *parik* of a *hijra* in Hridoypur, told me that he had been to Chittagong and Sylhet to attend a few such ceremonies, where a *parik* has to pay an amount as high as 2 to 3 lac taka (roughly 2 to 3 thousand pounds) to marry a *hijra*.

²¹ *Hijra* also apply turmeric during the ritual celebration of *Baraiya* that I discussed in the chapter on emasculation.

in Hridoypur, had been married twice. Tina's first marriage took place in the office of a *Kazi* and was registered. Sweety, a *hijra guru* of another area in Dhaka, also was married by a *Kazi* some ten years ago, though recently s/he had obtained a divorce through the court. The allegation brought against Sweety by her/is husband was that s/he was unable to have sex as s/he was a *hijra*. When the court raised the issue of Sweety's sexual prowess, Sweety asked the judge to marry her/im for five minutes so that she could show the judge her/is capacity. Although the marriage was revoked, the verdict was on her/is side, maintained Sweety. Sweety got compensation from her/is ex husband as s/he had ample support of the local elites in the area that helped her/im throughout the trial. Sweety told me that since s/he used to teach the Marwari children the Bangla language in a school in the old part of Dhaka, s/he got the support s/he needed. Rupali, a *hijra* who I had met in one of the public gardens, once invited me to a marriage ceremony to be held in a community centre. I was told that 'Lambu', a *hijra* had got married the other day in the *Kazi* office in Gulshan. The reason Lambu was getting married was because s/he had promised her/is *parik* that s/he would get rid of her/is genitals only if he married her/im. The *panthi*, Rupali continued, would make all the necessary arrangements for Lambu's surgery.

It is important to note that unlike the normative mainstream Bangla marriage patterns where brides marry into the families of the grooms, normative Bangla men marry into *hijra* houses and lineages and become known as the *parik* of a *hijra*, rather than a *hijra* becoming known as the partner of a *parik*, as is the case with the dominant Bangla model. Despite *parik* being considered affines internally, a great deal of secrecy is often seen to be maintained around *hijra* having *parik* and their presence in the neighbourhood. Both the *janana* and the *chibry hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere argued that the wider society was not aware of their being married. Rather, they were often deemed to be closely related friends or brothers. Every time I visited a *sadrili hijra* household with a *parik* outside of Hridoypur, both the *hijra* and their partners introduced themselves to me as brothers. Later, however, the *hijra* disclosed their relations as they grew close to me.

In view of the ethnographic descriptions above, I would like to note a few things. First, among the *sadrals* *hijra*, the marriage between a *hijra* and her/his *parik* is rendered legitimate only through paying the ‘*sanān*’ or compensation. However, *sanān* has to be paid only when an emasculated *hijra* gets married. In contrast, *janāna* or *hijra* with penis could live with their partners without paying compensation to the *guru*. The reason for this, explained Jomuna, the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur, is that once one becomes a *chibry*, one has to be chaste in line with the prescriptions of Maya Ji that I elaborated in the chapter on emasculation. Second, the conduct of marriage under the aegis of an Islamic marriage registrar could take place only if the *hijra* was emasculated, although always without the *Kazi*’s being aware of the *hijra* status of the bride. *Hijra* argued that only *chibry hijra* could get married in keeping with the mainstream official law as the *Kazi* would not be able to find out. In addition, they argued that the marriage between a *janāna* and a *panthi* would contradict the Islamic norm which in the case of a marriage between an emasculated *hijra* and a man would not be contravened. *Hijra* contended that if a *Kazi* became suspicious, he would not be able to disprove a *chibry*’s female status. Third, that *hijra* often deem emasculation to be desirable in order for a marriage to be validated underscores their subscription to the Bangla heterogendered idioms of marriage. Yet they transcend those idioms creatively through a reversal of the conventional patri-local marital arrangements with their *parik* moving into the *hijra* households rather than the other way round. That *hijra* often undergo emasculation to be marriageable to their *parik*, either because they deem it to be appropriate or because of their partners’ wish, indicates a negotiation of masculinity wherein it is on account of *hijra*’s emasculation that the masculinity of their *parik* is consolidated.

Finally, I intend to reflect on the question, what exactly does this *Uti* convention of marriage between a *hijra* and a *panthi* enable that is otherwise not possible in the Bangla universe? What is the use of seeking ritual validation for such bonding between a *hijra* and a man? Besnier (2004) contends that the transformation of the socially nonmainstream Tongan ‘transgender’ men into morally abject other stems from these transgendered

people's desire for men, which both the Tongan society and the normatively oriented men consider as ridiculous and impossible. Such impossibility is also recognized by the Tongan transgender. Against this backdrop, the transgendered people become the abject other on account of their desire, as opposed to the straight men who are assumed to be the object of desire rather than initiators of such relations. In contrast, the *Uti* universe not only enables the possibility of such relations but also accommodates and acknowledges such relations, even though publically *hijra* are understood to be beyond and above desire.

Several scholars on same sex sexuality in South Asia (e.g. Boyce 2006, Boyce and Khanna 2011, Osella 2012) have noted complex homosocial configuration across south Asia, wherein the fact of two male bodied persons' being together either in private or in public is not deemed to be homoerotic in popular imaginary. Rather, these authors contend that it is precisely because of such homo-social configuration that various kinds of same sex sexual possibilities are spawned and encouraged. Whilst such fluid social configurations allows for certain types of affect and desire to take root, the *Uti* universe moves such possibilities beyond the extant homosocial arrangement by culturally recognizing and institutionalizing such relatedness. Furthermore, the entrance of a non-*hijra* man into the *Uti* universe as a *parik* or affine emblemizes an elaborate dance between the *Uti* and Bangla universe wherein the putatively masculine *parik* carry with them elements of the *Uti* universe as much as they incorporate elements of the Bangla world into the *Uti*. In other words, despite the *Uti* universe being oppositional to the Bangla world, these two worlds are enmeshed. To further explain this dance, I now elaborate Bangla men's participation in the *Uti* universe.

'Male femaling' of Bangla men and the *hijra* notion of 'insiderliness'

In her ethnography Reddy (2005) elaborates the *hijra* conception of family, arguing that although her interlocutors across the board expressed a desire for

bonding with males, these males were external to the *hijra* notion of community and family. While *parik* in the context of my research were also not a part of the *hijra* concept of community or the wider *Ulti* universe of male bodied feminine identified people, the incorporation of the Bangla *parik* into the *Ulti* universe complicates Reddy's categorical exclusion of the *parik* from the *hijra* conception of family. While in Reddy's accounts *parik* appear to be strange outsiders, my ethnographic materials suggest that despite their Bangla strangeness, such boundaries often tend to be blurred in the context of the lived lives of the *hijra*. In one sense, *parik* as Bangla men or normatively masculinised subjects are not part of the *Ulti* universe. Nor do the *hijra* expect or encourage their Bangla *parik* to cross those sexual and gender boundaries. That is, while partners are an integral part of the *hijra* lives, they still remain perennially Bangla or outsiders. I discuss possible reasons for such tightly drawn boundaries in terms of anal receptivity and phallic insertivity in a previous chapter; here I intend to present some more ethnographic episodes as a way to complicate this so called distinction.

Before I elaborate my observations of *pariks*' entanglement with the *hijra*, it will be useful to reiterate my positionality in relation to them. As already demonstrated in a previous chapter, the very fact of my being adopted as the husband or *parik* of Meghna, the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur, often made it difficult for me to elicit responses from the *hijra* about their erotic lives. Yet this ascribed status, despite causing some discomfort at the personal level, was also a blessing in disguise. As the putative *parik* of a *hijra guru*, it was not only the junior *hijra* who spoke to me respectfully but also their *parik*. The *parik* of the junior *hijra* would not only call me 'mama' like their *hijra* 'wives' but also at times invite me to their houses. Generally *hijra* are very sceptical about introducing their husbands to outsiders. *Hijra* with *parik* often strictly policed the interaction of their *parik* not only with other *hijra* but also with the wider society, especially men. In contrast, *hijra* in Hridoypur never had an issue with my interaction with their *parik*.

This tendency to police the partners' interactional mobility especially with other *hijra*, *hijra* repeatedly explained, was due in part to a deep sense of distrust of their partners' lack of commitment but more importantly because of an ingrained belief that *hijra* would seduce the *parik* of other *hijra*. Although I saw only a single case where the *parik* of a *hijra* was 'seized' by another *hijra*, talks about such possibilities were always on the tips of the tongues of my interlocutors. There had been several instances, I was told, in the past where both the *hijra* and their *parik* betrayed and cheated each other. Once in Hridoypur, Jomuna, the *guru* was summoned to another *hijra* house for arbitration to which *hijra* from West Bengal, India were also invited. The reason *hijra* from several areas within and outside Bangladesh had to be summoned was because the *parik* of a senior *hijra guru* had eloped with one of her/is *cela*. Because both this *guru* and her/is *cela* were influential figures in the conduct of *hijragiri* and the matter was blown out of proportion and subsequent attempts to arbitrate internally failed, senior level 'daratni' or leaders, had to be called in. The arbitration was to happen in the meeting place (*daiyar*) of Sona *hijra*, one of the most senior *hijra* in Bangladesh. After almost three days of argumentation, a decision was reached to excommunicate the *hijra* who eloped with her/is *guru's parik* from the community. It was also agreed that no *hijra* house in Bangladesh or in India would take this 'perpetrator' back to any of the groups. In addition, in the case of her/is being caught, *hijra* were asked to beat her/im up and shave her/is head. I cannot confirm whether the prescribed punishment was meted out to the *hijra* in question, but I heard of several other circumstances where *hijra* who slept with the *parik* of their *guru* had to undergo similar punishment. Although I could never speak to a *hijra* or a *parik* who acted in this way, the very fact that such serious and prolonged arbitrations and penalties take place bespeak the severity of this crime among the *hijra*.

In Hridoypur, particularly, two *sadrals* emasculated *hijra* lived with their *parik* on a permanent basis. Both Chottu and Sathi got married with their *parik* after six years of relationship. Joynal and Mamun, the *parik* of Chottu and Sathi respectively, were an established presence not only in the daily lives of the

hijra but also in ritual settings. Joynal and Mamun were known not only to all the *hijra* of Hridoypur but also outside. During several *Baraiya* festivals (ritual celebration of the emasculated *hijra* that I discussed in another chapter), for instance, both Mamun and Faisal supervised the arrangement of the chairs in the open space and food preparation, along with a few junior *hijra*.

In a similar vein, during *sinni*, a *hijra* festival undertaken in the name of a Sufi saint both in Hridoypur and beyond, the presence of these two partners was particularly pronounced. In one of the *sinni* events organized by a senior *sadruli* of another area to which *hijra* of Hridoypur were invited, I saw not only Mamun and Joynal but also the *parik* of other *hijra*. There I also met a man called Kadir who seemed to be aloof from the crowd. Throughout the occasion he preferred to stay busy with the packaging and preparation of the food as if he had been hired to do so but later I was told that Kadir was the *parik* of Alo, the *hijra* who arranged the *sinni*. To confirm, I asked Alo about Kadir, but in response Alo just laughed. The fact of Kadir's being Alo's *parik* became evident when during a photo shoot I was asked by other *hijra* to take a photo of Alo with Kadir. By then it was perhaps clear to Kadir that I understood that he was involved with Alo. Yet afterwards when I asked Kadir about a photo hanging on the wall of Alo's room, Kadir told me it was the picture of 'that person' (*oi lok*) when 'that person' was young. Here 'that person' was no one but Alo, his *hijra* partner, but what struck me as significant was this indirect way of describing Alo as if he barely knew her/im. This is also indicative of the distance *parik* in general are expected to maintain to set them apart from the *hijra*. Though *parik* are expected to remain segregated from the *hijra* in such festivities, Mamun and Joynal were more active than Kadir. This was so as Kadir was the *parik* of a senior *hijra guru*, unlike Joynal and Mamun who were the *parik* of junior *hijra*. That Kadir was given more respect was also reflected in the fact that Kadir was served food along with a local imam and his disciples who came to recite the Quran and conduct a *milad* (a special prayer undertaken in the name of the prophet during *sinni*) while Joynal and Mamun waited outside with the junior *hijra*.

Rahela, a *chibry hijra*, is particularly known across Bangladesh as a skilful ritual cutter (*katial*) who performs the emasculation operation. Married to Rahman, Rahela died five years ago and since then Rahman has been acting as a ritual cutter. Although Rahman is a *panthi* i.e. a Bangla masculine man, his presence in the lives of the *hijra* in Hridoypour was remarkable as it was he who performed the operations on several *hijra* in Hridoypur. It is also instructive to note that whilst Joynal and Faisal, the two notable *parik* in Hridoypur, were not allowed to be present at the time of the worship of the *hijra* goddess during *Baraiya*, which I elaborated in the chapter on emasculation, Rahman's presence was not only eagerly anticipated but was necessary for the conduct of the ritual. That Rahman, an erstwhile *parik* of a *hijra*, became a ritual cutter is not an exception. There were several other ritual cutters who were *parik* of the *hijra*.

Parik are always expected to comport themselves in a 'masculine' (*Panthi pon*) manner. When I asked them about why they behaved with such aloofness, they argued that they were *panthi* and as such, they needed to maintain an air of apartness. Typically, *parik* not only sit away from the *hijra* but also are served food earlier than the *hijra*. In addition, they are also expected to talk less and not impinge on any of the discussions to do with the conduct of *hijragiri*. It was as if, despite their being physically there, they were actually not there. On another occasion during the celebration of a birthday of a *hijra*, which took place in a community centre in Dhaka, several *sadrali hijra* came with their *parik*. Roksana, widely reputed for her/his eloquence, was the chief guest. When the cake was cut, Roksana was in the middle next to Kajol, whose birthday party it was. Roksana's husband stayed outside throughout the party. It was as if he had not come with Roksana. It was not until the food was served that Roksana's *parik* came inside and sat next to her/im to eat. On another occasion, during a picnic organized by a *hijra* NGO, the majority of the *hijra* brought their *parik* with them. Shaila, a *chibry* in her/his late 40s, performed *hajj* and was reputed across the *hijra* universe in Bangladesh. Throughout the picnic a man was hovering around Shaila, although always at a remove. When I approached Shaila to ask about her/his

experience of pilgrimage to Mecca, I addressed her/im as ‘Shaila *Hajji*’, to which the man protested and argued that it should be ‘*Hajji* Shaila’. Later when I inquired who he was, Shaila spoke of him as one of her/is acquaintances.

Whilst this apparent aloofness of the *parik*, despite their being ever-present physically in the *hijra* daily lives, may be explained in terms of a politics of masculinity wherein the masculinity or *parik*’s Banglanness is consolidated through such apartness, such intentional detachment is also indicative of symbolic emasculation of the *parik*. It is worth noting that the extent to which *parik* are allowed to interact and with whom is determined by the *hijra* and not themselves. Despite their normative Bangla masculine trappings that *hijra* relentlessly insist on, *pariks*’ activities and roles in the aforesaid quotidian settings run counter to the masculine images that *hijra* otherwise associate with *parik*. Not only were the *parik* of the *hijra* in Hridoypour soft-spoken and meek, they were often domesticated, to appropriate the oft-repeated *hijra* expression of ‘*Parik Pala*’ (Cf. Kulick 1997:155).

Parik that lived with their *hijra* partners in Hridoypur and beyond were often chronically unemployed and totally dependent on the income of their *hijra* partners. *Hijra* not only provided for their expenses but also cooked, cleaned and mopped the floor. When asked, *hijra* generally argued that it was one way for them to pin *parik* down. *Hijra* in Hridoypur with *parik* often contended that if they did not provide for their *parik*, they would leave them for women. Chottu once related that the reason s/he ‘domesticated’ her/is *parik* was because s/he needed someone permanently to love her/im and that the very thought of seeing someone back in the house every night made her/im emotionally fulfilled. Sathi argued that s/he domesticated her/is *parik* as the *parik* otherwise would jettison her/im because of her/is inability to give birth to children. Several sex worker *hijra* with *parik* also echoed the same sentiment, arguing that although they had sex with thousands of men, they preferred to domesticate a *parik* for emotional support and love.

Parik of the sex worker *hijra* and those of Hridoypur, however, seemed not to be affected by their being domesticated. Rather, they all felt proud of their being cared for in such royal manner. I once asked Kalam, a *parik* of a sex worker *hijra*, what he felt about her/is *hijra* partner's profession and whether he felt bad about it, Kalam firmly insisted that he accepted it as it was generating money for him. Similar arguments were also advanced by the permanent *parik* of Hridoypur. Kalam also contended that despite *hijra* notions about *parik* being elusive and self-interested, he would never leave his *hijra* partner as according to him, no woman would be able to love and care for him as his *hijra* wife did (Cf. Besnier 2004:312-313). In a similar vein, despite *pariks*' being domesticated, I saw several *parik* in Hridoypur take care of their *hijra* 'wives' consistently. After Chottu underwent emasculation, it was Joynal her/is *parik* who nursed her/im till s/he convalesced totally. Faisal, another *parik* who I have already introduced, stayed with his *hijra* wife not only throughout her/is surgery but also afterwards when his *hijra* 'wife' was excommunicated from the *hijra* group in Hridoypur because of her/is not seeking consent from her/is *guru* before undergoing emasculation. During this time, Faisal was the one who not only cooked food but also washed all her/is clothes.

There are a few things to be noted here. First, despite all their masculine trappings, *parik* or Bangla men in reality are more like the stereotypical housewives, as opposed to the *hijra*, who act like the husband in a typical *hijra-parik* relationship. That *hijra* take on the personae of a Bangla husband with their *parik* not only works to effeminise these normative Bangla men but also challenges Reddy's (2005: 170-171) assertion about *hijra* being akin to middle class Indian housewives in their gendered responses to their husbands. *Hijra*, I demonstrated earlier, often idealize and verbalize such conventional gendered behaviours relative to their partners but what emerges is a complete reversal of such gendered practice. Rather, as I suggest below, *hijra* take on the middle class conventional Bangla housewifely role only in the context of a *parik*'s natal family. Second, there seems to be a trade-off between *pariks*' masculinity and their being provided, i.e. as long as they were provided for by

the *hijra*, the symbolic emasculation did not seem to bother these normative Bangla men. Third, despite *pariks*' being considered non-*hijra* Bangla men, they were an active presence in the lives of my *hijra* interlocutors, not only by their being physically present in the households but also through their participation, albeit restricted, in *hijra* rituals. Furthermore, permanent *parik* of the *hijra* in Hridoypur all spoke *Uti*, even though they were not allowed to express their knowledge of it in front of the wider Bangla world. Whilst *pariks*' ability to speak *Uti* does not qualify them to be part of the *Uti* universe, it indexes the degree of their incorporation into the *Uti* universe as strictly Bangla men in opposition to which *hijra* construct their own sense of selves. I may here remind the reader that the very fact of my being able to speak *Uti*, as I have already suggested previously, was often taken by *hijra* as an indication of my being either a *kothi* in disguise or a long term *parik* of a *hijra*. This was precisely so as *Uti*, I argued in a previous chapter, works to signal 'insiderliness'. Both Joynal and Fasial and other *parik* not only spoke fluent *Uti* but also were adequately knowledgeable about the *hijra* rules and rituals, even though they were not allowed to demonstrate their acumen either to the wider Bangla world or within the *Uti* universe. Finally, I want to note that despite *pariks*' being in a position of inferiority relative to the *hijra* in the *hijra* space, *parik* continue to be the most important people in the lives of the *hijra* not least because they are the ones expected to care for and love their *hijra* partners, but also because many important decisions in the life course of a *hijra* are taken in relation to partners' likes and dislikes.

Hijra in the lives of parik's family

So far I have discussed the significance of *pariks*' presence in the lives of the *hijra*. What needs emphasizing here is that my observations and interaction with the *parik* were conducted in settings dominated by the *hijra*, i.e. *parik* as partners of the *hijra* rather than *hijra* as the partners of the *parik*. This is so as it was possible on my part only to interact extensively and closely with the *parik* that lived on a permanent basis with my *hijra* interlocutors. *Parik*, I suggested earlier, are the ones who marry into *hijra* houses and move into

hijra households, contra the normative patrilocal marital arrangements in Bangladesh. Given that, unlike brides who are traditionally expected to adapt to the new ambience in their patrilocal households, it is the *parik* who have to acclimatize to the new ambience.

Very few *hijra* I had spoken to had actually visited the house of their *parik*. Rupa, a *sadrili* in Hridoypur, had been involved with Lokman, a young, bearded Islamic-minded bus driver in his early thirties. Although Lokman lived in Dhaka with his parents, he never took Rupa to his home. Whenever I spoke to Lokman, he denied his being the *parik* of Rupa. Lokman instead stated that he was just one of Rupa's friends and that he liked the company of the *hijra* more than that of women as in his youth he had been forsaken by several female lovers. Lokman maintained that although Rupa was very close to him, the reason he never took Rupa to his home was because of the possibility of his parents being scared, as a family friend of his in the neighbourhood once became a *hijra* after hobnobbing with them. It is interesting to note that the reason for Lokman's disinclination to take Rupa to his home was not that his parents might suspect his being erotically or romantically involved with him, but because of the fear of his turning into a *hijra*.

Mamun and Joynal, who I introduced earlier, had been living in Hridoypur ever since they migrated to Dhaka. Both categorically told me that they had not been clued up about what *hijra* really were before they got involved. In the early days when they got involved both of them thought *hijra* to be people born with missing or defective genitals but later, as they grew close, they realized that their *hijra* partners were actually 'men' who transformed themselves into *hijra*. Both Joynal and Mamun argued that the very fact of their partners' having male genitals was a source of discomfort for them, particularly when they had to go out with them. In fact it was not until their *hijra* partners got emasculated that they took their wives to their villages. Here it is instructive to note that the *parik* who lived with the *hijra* in *hijra* space

often insisted on their *hijra* ‘wives’ being emasculated, whilst *parik* that stayed away demanded that their *hijra* ‘wives’ acted at least publically like normative males. Both Joynal and Mamun maintained, to my utter disbelief and bewilderment, that their family members were totally unaware of their being married to *hijra*. Rather, the mothers and brothers of their families thought those *hijra* to be women. Both these *parik* spoke very highly of the way their ‘wives’ attended to their family members whenever they visited. Notwithstanding their mothers’ concerns over their not fathering children, both these *parik* contended that their not being able to father children did not lead their mothers to question their *hijra* partners’ feminine status. Although I could never speak to any of the family members of either Joynal or Mamun, there was one occasion where I could closely observe the interaction of a *hijra* with the family of her/is ‘husband’, to which I now turn.

Valentine celebration by Zhinuk and Rasel

Zhinuk, a professional makeup artist in the film industry and also a part time *sadrili janana*, once invited me to a party that s/he described in English as ‘marriage day’. Zhinuk is also involved with a project on *hijra* in an NGO and also a dance teacher. The celebration, to my greater surprise, took place in the house of Zhinuk’s *parik* named Rasel. Usually any celebration involving *hijra* and their *parik* takes place only in *hijra*-dominated space. Having entered the lower middle class household in the old part of Dhaka, I found myself in a festive climate with children dressed in fancy clothes, with many younger and older women all around the house. Rasel’s mother, along with a few other women, was busy cooking food. It was a three room tin shed house. Ushered to the next room by Katha, another *hijra* friend of Zhinuk with whom I went there, I sat on a chair next to Katha and a few other young ladies. On one side of the room was a bed occupied by a middle aged man. I was told he was Rasel’s maternal uncle who had come to their house just a few days previously to see off his son, who was going abroad. There was also another middle-aged uncle of Rasel sitting in that room. Children were running to and fro between the two rooms and in the small forecourt in front of the main gate. Rasel’s

sister along with her two children was also present to celebrate. More significantly, Zhinuk's mother was also there along with some of her guests. I was told that both their families had been intimately involved for a very long time. What I found particularly striking was that Zhinuk's mother behaved towards Rasel's mother in the manner of a '*Beyain*', a special relationship between the parents of the bride and groom, often tinged with humour. Zhinuk also introduced me to Rasel's mother as her/is '*shasuri*', the Bangla word for mother-in-law.

Rasel, the *parik* of Zhinuk, in whose house the party was being held, was not present from the beginning. In fact, Rasel appeared only at the time of cutting the cake and that too for a few minutes. When Rasel came, Zhinuk introduced him to me as her/is husband. Uncomfortable and embarrassed, Rasel kept quiet. Holding the palm of Rasel, Zhinuk cut the cake with everyone standing around in a circle. Inscribed on the cake in bold letters was Z+ R with the by-line 'happy marriage day' and 'happy valentine day' in English. Both Rasel and Zhinuk fed each other a slice of the cake. Because their feeding of each other could not be properly photographed, Zhinuk asked me to take another photo of them with my camera. Once the photo session started, everyone was willing to get snapped except Rasel, who seemed a bit annoyed. I was told that Rasel worked in a shop nearby and had come in straight from his workplace and needed to return soon. After a while Rasel left while the party was still on. Later, when some of the guests had left, Rasel's mother came to have a word with me and Katha. In the course of the conversation, when I asked what she thought of her son's relationship with Zhinuk, she said that although Zhinuk was born a *hijra*, it was not Zhinuk's fault. She told me that she was totally approving of her son's relationship with Zhinuk but because Zhinuk would not be able to give birth to children, she would at some point marry her son to a woman. Zhinuk's mother also endorsed this and argued that she too might marry Zhinuk to a woman at some point, in the hope of seeing Zhinuk cured of this 'defect'.

What emerges is that although *hijra* tend to dominate their *parik*, especially when *parik* permanently move into *hijra* households, *hijra* also try strenuously to live up to their own notions about what good and normative Bangla housewives should do, as evidenced from the way they attend to their partners' natal family members. Also noteworthy is the fact that even when the parents and family members of the *parik* approve of their relationships with the *hijra*, it is often on account of their understanding about those *hijra* being female that they do so. However, in the case of Rasel, we see an exception, although as already stated, both the parents of Rasel and Zhinuk intended to have them married off to females at some point, especially as their pair-bonding would not result in reproduction.

Conclusion

There are a few things to be reiterated here by way of a conclusion. Partners or *parik* are an indispensable part of the lives of the *hijra*. The constant and persistent yearning for a lover is central to *hijra* sense of selfhood, even though in public it is the lack of such desire in terms of which *hijra* are recognised and seek to be recognised as *hijra*. Although *parik* are in one sense located outside the *hijra* universe, it is in relation to the *parik* that *hijra* subjectivities are forged. *Hijraness* is constructed in opposition to the normatively masculinised Bangla men and *hijra* subjectivity is intrinsically bound up with *the* Bangla men who the *hijra* not only woo and desire but also whose attention and love *hijra* actively and aggressively seek day in and day out. Whilst many *parik* love the *hijra* as men, there are also *parik*, especially those living permanently with the *hijra*, who love the *hijra* as feminine identified emasculated persons. That *hijra* are generally inclined to conform to partners' expectations about their gendered comportment while *parik* often take on tasks otherwise deemed feminine are indicative of complex economies of emotion and affect through which multiple masculinities are negotiated and produced.

In sum, despite normatively masculine Bangla men's being outsiders to the *Uti* universe, the distinction between the Bangla world and the *Uti* universe is not as watertight as many may assume, not least because Bangla men are also in certain contexts part of the *hijra* space and ritually marked contexts but also because Bangla men often move between the *Uti* and the Bangla world, incorporating Bangla elements into the *Uti* and vice versa. That Bangla men enter the *Uti* space as affines of the *hijra* foregrounds the cultural recognition of alternative erotic possibilities and bonding otherwise unrecognized and forbidden in the Bangla world even though such accommodations are framed in terms of the wider protocols of Bangla hetero-erotic relatedness.

Chapter 8: Contemporary transformation of *hijra* subjectivities

Rita, a national level *hijra* leader, has never been a part of a *sadrili hijra* group, i.e. s/he never participated in either ‘*Badhai*’ (demanding gifts at birth) or ‘*cholla manga*’ (collecting money and foodstuff), the two quintessential *hijra* occupations. From being a sex worker, s/he rose to national and international prominence in recent times for her/his HIV/AIDS activism. Once during an intense conversation with Rita and a few other *hijra* working with NGOs, s/he remarked, ‘*Bit by bit, hijragiri will taper off. The guru-cela hierarchy is tyrannical. With newer opportunities, hijra will move away from badhai and cholla manga*’. Poppy another *hijra* also affiliated with NGO took slight exception to Rita’s radical proposition and argued that with time *hijra* too should change and adopt new ways but these old traditions of *badhai* and *cholla* should be preserved. Taking a cue from Rita and Poppy, this chapter will identify and examine the newly emergent socio-cultural conditions and the possibilities of transformation. While the preceding chapters explicate the making of *hijrahood*, here I am specifically interested in understanding the transformative possibilities in the wake of a series of translocal initiatives recently being undertaken in contemporary Bangladesh. Ranging from Government initiatives to NGO interventions, these recent bouts of activities have led to various forms of conflict and contestation over authenticity, cultural conceptualization of the *hijra* and idioms and markers of identity. It is instructive to note here that the transformations I chart in this chapter are not novel per se but are part and parcel of the themes I have been talking about throughout this thesis. Rather, what this chapter does is make some of those themes of transformation more explicit.

Nanda (1999) makes a passing reference to modernization and urbanization as factors responsible for the gradual de-popularization of the cultural roles of *hijra* as ritual performers in India. Older *sadril hijra* in Bangladesh often echoed a similar sentiment linking the gradual wane of their popularity as

ritual performers to the rise of VCR and television and the advent of family planning and spread of condoms and contraceptives. While these aforesaid changes can be traced to these ongoing processes of modernization and urbanization, what I am specifically interested in here is a recent set of state and NGO interventions undertaken from the late 1990s in Bangladesh. In proposing to examine transformation, I am not suggesting that *hijrahood* is a culturally bounded phenomenon anchored in some synchronic ‘cultural particularism’ (Johnson, 1998). That systems of gender and sexuality emerge in complex interplay with broader socio-historical and intra/inter/trans-regional processes has been well established (Johnson, et al 2000).

In explicating the transformation of gender and sexual subjectivities in contemporary India, Bhaskaran (2004), following Ferguson and Gupta (2002), links those changes to ‘transnational governmentality’ (the burgeoning NGOization of sexual health both at the public and private sphere). She argues that the espousal of the Bretton Woods institution’s economic policy prescriptions of privatization and economic deregulation in the early 1990s led to these transnational governmentalities in the Indian context. Extending Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’, Gupta and Ferguson (2002) propose ‘transnational governmentality’ as a novel approach to the anthropology of state. ‘Transnational governmentality’ in their formulation does not simply embody the mere shift of the functions of state machinery to non-state entities via burgeoning NGOization of the social life. Rather, they contend that non-state actors and apparatuses have become sites from and through which various forms of governance are exerted and exercised. Central to Foucault’s notion of governmentality, as Ettliger (2011) notes, is ‘governance’ of ‘mentality’. Extending far beyond the conventional state power, the Foucauldian notion of governmentality encompasses the governance of the population, selves, identities and practices at a distance. Adopting this approach here, I examine the newly unfolding social processes and the resultant rise of new discursive regimes within which such changes are taking place. In reflecting on these practices and processes, I do not view those external interventions as some overdeterminate forces but as a ‘system’

constantly being produced, reproduced and transformed through embodied action (Ortner 1984). More specifically, I foreground not only how *hijra* as a subculture is undergoing internal metamorphosis in relation to these ‘external forces’ but also the way those changes are the products of various agentic adaptations and appropriations by the *hijra*.

Following a brief introduction to the history and formation of two organizations, I first highlight a change in the idiom of *hijra* sociality with a specific focus on how a certain type of NGO language has become a feature of everyday *hijra* conversation. Although NGO activities are often dismissed as a form of digression from the authentic *hijrahood*, NGOs have become a naturalized part of *hijra* interactional repertoire. The tension surrounding the gradual ‘NGOization’ stems from the risk of the disclosure of clandestine or *Uti hijra* practices to the Bangla world. Following from there, I examine the efflorescence of two interrelated yet distinct developments, namely, a growing sexualization of the *hijra* in new public imaginary and the political economy of categorical proliferation. In the section on sexualization, I ethnographically elaborate activities related to the promotion of safe sex in an NGO premise run by the *hijra*. I specifically argue that the very undertaking of those activities works to undermine the citadel of secrecy into which *hijra Uti* erotic practices are enshrouded. Linked to these activities is new conceptual praxis of *hijra* as rights-bearing citizens of Bangladesh. The advent of the rights discourse, I contend, further expedites the sexualization of the *hijra* with the possibility of alerting not only the masses but also the government establishments, especially the law enforcing agencies. An ethnographic elucidation of recent initiatives to train the Islamic leaders by the NGOs and international donors follows as a testament to the efflorescence and popularization of this discourse of *hijra* being ‘perversely sexual’. In the second section, I take on board the proliferation of categories as effects of broader processes of political economy and foreground novel forms of governance and disciplinary powers in the wake of this categorical proliferation. Attending to daily practices and the contextual invocation of several identity monikers by the *hijra*, I demonstrate a complex postcolonial context continuous with the colonial classificatory

imperatives. Against this backdrop, I examine the consolidation and rise of transgender as a new subject position in place of *hijra*. I demonstrate that transgender indexes a new disciplinary regime with stringent prescriptions about what is and is not authentic *hijrahood*. The disciplinary power of transgender is further elucidated in the final discussion on the encounter of the *hijra* with recently emergent gay subjectivities.

The rise of *hijra*-focused NGOs

NGO interventions into the *hijra* began in the late 90s in Bangladesh as part of the wider interventions into various forms of male to male sexualities. By 2000 two organizations were formed with exclusive focus on the *hijra*. Redolent of HIV/AIDS work across the board, the exclusive focus of those interventions was to attend to sexual health needs of the *hijra* via condom promotion, distribution and consciousness-raising about the effects of STDs and STIs. Whilst my intention is not to proffer a formal account of the trajectory of the formation of these two NGOs, I present below brief accounts of their formation as they were often narrated to me by the *hijra* in Dhaka.

Formation of Sushtho Jibon

According to Bashobi, a *hijra guru* affiliated with the NGO Sushtho Jibon, one fine morning a few front-ranking personnel of an MSM-based (men who have sex with men) NGO approached her/im with the proposal to set up an office for the *hijra*. Unsure as to whether to agree to this offer, Bashobi met other *hijra* in the area and also her/is *guru* who lives on the outskirts of Dhaka. Initially there was a lot of opposition to the idea of setting up an office, as the *guru* of Bashobi vehemently objected. Sonu, often referred to as the *Nayak* (leader) of the *hijra* in Bangladesh, took issue with this proposal on the ground that such initiatives would jeopardize their livelihoods by tainting the *hijra* as people given to *gandugiri* (used here to refer to anal receptivity). In other words, her/is concern was rendering visible in the Bangla universe what should remain primarily clandestine (*Ulti*). After a series of conversations with

Sonu and lobbying with her/is other *cela*, s/he finally gave consent to its setting up on the condition that s/he should always be left out of this activity. In line with *hijragiri*, Bashoby had to pay *don (compensation)* to Sonu for this initiative. During my first visit to Sonu's house, s/he categorically criticized the NGO activities and denied any involvement on her/is part. Pointing to a picture of Shabnam Mousi, a *hijra* from Madhya Pradesh, India and an erstwhile parliamentarian there, Sonu argued that s/he was a *hijra* from the time of the British Raj and was well known across India. Later, Sonu told me that it was her/is *cela* and *nati cela* (disciples and grand disciples) who I should approach to find out about this office. While Sonu publicly denounced NGO activities, paradoxically s/he was made the head of the board of directors, as Bashobi later confided in me. Once the office space was rented, a party to celebrate the inauguration was held with Sonu as the chief guest and it was only after receiving Sonu's blessing that the NGO started its journey.

The birth of Badhon

Joya, the then general secretary of Badhon, once narrated to me how s/he chanced upon a group of NGO personnel in a cruising site. Joya used to cruise in a public garden along with female sex workers. Sexual health support was available only for the female sex workers in those days. One day as some health workers arrived to recruit female sex workers for voluntary testing for STDs, s/he volunteered to go to the office of an NGO called CARE Bangladesh for testing. Diagnosed with syphilis, s/he later recruited more *hijra* from cruising sites for further tests. According to Joya, most of the *hijra* who underwent the test were diagnosed with several STIs and consequently Care Bangladesh launched a separate project to intervene into the *hijra* community through the formation of Badhon. While Sustho Jibon was led by *sadrili hijra*, Badhon was in its initial stage founded through the effort of some sex worker *hijra*. However, soon afterwards some senior *sadrili hijra* had to be accommodated in order for Badhon to be functional. While Joya became the general secretary, her/is *guru* was also made a part of the initiative. The reason for the inclusion of Joya's *guru* and other senior *sadrili hijra*, s/he explained,

was because no NGO for the *hijra* would be successful without the involvement of the *guru*.

While in a moment I will elaborate the effects and practices of these NGO interventions, here I note two important observations. First, that senior *sadrali hijra* are active part of the management of these NGOs is significant as *sadrali hijra* continue to see the formation of NGOs as a threat to *hijragiri*. Second, the areas these NGOs cover are modelled on the *sadrali* rules of *birit* or ritual jurisdiction. That is, when an office space was rented in a particular locale, the *guru* of that locale was made the head of the organization. Bobby one of the front-ranking NGO-affiliated *hijra*, once told me, '*now we have to do both. On the one hand I have to conduct hijragiri and on the other the husbandry of the NGO. It requires extra skills. Not everyone in the community is capable*'.

Changing idioms of *hijra* sociality

A striking feature of *hijra* sociality these days is the way NGOs, projects, funding and foreign tours are invoked as part of their every day conversations. During my fieldwork in Dhaka, hardly a day passed by when issues related to NGOs did not surface in my interaction with the *hijra*. The invocation of those concerns happened not only in the NGO premises but more significantly in the *hijra* houses and the cruising sites.

Sadrali hijra associated with the NGOs often contended that the NGO interventions, particularly condom promotions and sexual health clinics, have contributed to a heightening of awareness about sexual health issues among the *hijra*. For instance Bobby *hijra* once stated that in the past when *hijra* had any sexual problems, namely infection in the anal tract, they used to clean up their anus with hot water or at best take some generic medicines, but now with the clinics *hijra* can avail themselves of doctors' services. Additionally they are now aware of the risks associated with sex without condoms. S/he also

pointed out that *hijra* now also have a better knowledge about the wider world and international community through their exposure visits and participation in conferences/ meetings both nationally and internationally.

While those directly linked with NGOs typically talked positively about their impact, this view was not necessarily shared by all *sadrali hijra* groups. *Sadrali hijra* in Hridoypur often fretted about the way NGO intervention gave rise to new forms of communitarian friction and income inequality. They argued that the *hijra* houses that now run the NGOs were already very influential with larger *birrit*, i.e. those groups already had an average income greater than other *hijra* houses in Dhaka. Pointing at the habitations of differential cultural capitals and income hierarchies, Meghna the *hijra guru* in Hridoypur once related, '*It all comes down to jhalki (monies) at the end of the day. Now they have a two-storied building and frequently make trips abroad like memsahib*'. Hridoypur, where I conducted much of my fieldwork, had no NGO in its vicinity until very recently. Junior *hijra* working in the NGOs also often expressed dissatisfaction about low pay while begrudging the sudden and quick amassing of wealth by a select cadre of *hijra*. Moreover, junior *hijra*-identified NGO workers were also of the opinion that NGOs were basically trafficking in their marginality. Despite some *sadrali hijra*'s being critical of NGO work, several *sadrali* groups I spoke to at times wondered if I could link them with any NGO or even set up an NGO office myself for them.

The emergence of new discursive regimes and the sexualization of the *hijra* in Bangla public imagination

One of the effects of NGO intervention has been the emergence of a new discursive interpellation of *hijra* as sexual in Bangla public imaginary. While *hijra* have always been common public knowledge, *hijra* popularly were never really associated with any form of desire. This sexualization of the *hijra* is locatable within the broader epidemiologically inflected discourse on same sex sexuality that gradually sprang up from the late 90s in Bangladesh in the form

of ‘MSM’ (men who have sex with men). Even though attempts were made to draw a clear distinction between the ‘MSM’ framework and that of the *hijra*, *hijra* in practice often became reduced to one of the ‘MSM’ variants. The rise of MSM-based NGOs and the growing interest of the wider civil society to address issues related to alternative sexualities and gender, especially in the context of the global AIDS epidemic and their media coverage, have all led to the emergence of a new public discourse on male to male sexualities in contemporary Bangladesh.

The government of Bangladesh has been quite instrumental in partnering with the NGOs and the international donors to launch projects for the prevention of HIV/AIDS both among the ‘MSM’ groups and the *hijra*. One outcome of this AIDS activism has been the problematic relegation of alternative sexualities and gender identities to pathologies. In this narrow risk-based discourse on public health, *hijra* have often been represented through the cipher of sexual disease. That *hijra* are now publicly projected as sexual albeit pathological is significant as the dominant Bangla understanding conventionally posited the *hijra* as ‘sexually handicapped’ and it was on account of such cultural conceptualization that the *hijra* were accommodated within the Bangla social structure. This is not to suggest that *hijra* today publicly proclaim themselves as sexual but the discourse of denial that was once the hallmark of *hijra* public presentation is slowly being challenged on account of their involvement with sexual health NGOs. What was thus an *Uti* practice enshrouded in secrecy is increasingly becoming Bangla or public, a fact that has been and continues to be a major bone of contention among the *hijra*. To underscore this tension and to foreground *hijra* involvement with sexual activities, I produce below one ethnographic episode on typical activities inside an NGO office.

Condom demonstration in a *hijra* NGO office

It was the day in the week when *hijra* gathered for a group meet-up in the office of this NGO on the outskirts of Dhaka. The location of this branch office

is significant as this was located opposite to the house of Sonu *hijra*, a famous *sadrali guru* in Bangladesh, who had opposed NGO activities right from their inception. Bokul, an emasculated *Hajji hijra* and a *cela* of Sonu, was in charge of this branch office. While this office was supposed to cater to the *sadrali*, i.e. those who publicly dress up like females, those attending on that day were all dressed in normative masculine attire. The reason for this, I was told, was the public image of *hijra* in the vicinity as not only people without and above desire but also because of Bokul's status as a *hajji* and her/is being an active member of the Islamic preaching team and the local mosque committee. As an aside, let me mention that while Bokul dressed like a female in her/is house and the vicinity, during her/is prayers in the mosque and while preaching Islam with other devotees, s/he dressed like a normative masculine male. Bokul argued that *sadrali* or full time *hijra* only accessed the medical services furtively, when doctors would come once or twice a week while on other days, s/he catered to the needs of 'gandu', a derogatory *hijra* expression used to refer to those who fuck and get fucked. In this instance, Bokul, however, used 'gandu' to refer to the participants' male attire in public that contravenes *hijra* normative sartoriality. While I was having conversation with Bokul, the adjoining room was packed with a vibrant gathering of young males sitting on the floor with the peer educator giving out lessons on safe sex. Dressed in typical male attire and standing in a corner with a white board and a marker, S/he wrote 'HIV' and 'AIDS' and asked if anyone knew what these acronyms stood for. When none could say, s/he explained. Afterwards s/he asked if anyone would like to volunteer to demonstrate safe sex. A participant came forward and said the following:

I will now tell you about how to have safe sex with the panthi. We all know that panthi often object to condoms as they think condoms will lower their pleasure. And we all know they refer to Jhalka (money) when asked to use a condom. 'Why should I put on that? I have paid you. So you must let me do you in whatever way I want', says a typical panthi, but there are still ways to deceive them into having sex with the

condoms on. And I will show you how. Whenever you have sex with a panthi, start with your mouth. Take the condom inside your mouth and then suck the penis slowly and in the process you will see that his penis is erect and also socked. And then play.

Every time I went to this NGO premise, not only was the same demonstration repeated but more significantly the participants in the weekly gathering always turned up in normative male attire. That they turned up in male attire in an exclusively *hijra*-focused NGO premise is significant not least because *hijra* are generally disapproving of those non-*sadrals* groups but also because *hijra* typically denounce sexual activities in public. Although *sadrals* never really gathered in a routine manner to learn those techniques of safe sex, the very holding of such sessions there works to alert the Bangla world to *hijra* sexual activities that are meant to be kept clandestine.

The new visibility of *Hijra* as rights-bearing citizens

Partly as a critique of the overarching health-driven framework of HIV/AIDS work, several NGOs in recent times have expanded their activities to cover wider issues of rights in the form of legal activism and demand for change in the colonial anti-sodomy law that prevails in Bangladesh. One of the projects run by a *hijra* NGO during my fieldwork was focused on sensitization of the local elites and the law enforcing agencies about the rights of the *hijra* community. As part of this project, Joya *hijra*, the coordinator of this project held special meetings with the police and local elites in various areas in Dhaka. In two sessions that I attended, the police admitted total ignorance of a law that Joya was trying to draw their attention to. Known as penal code section 377, this British colonial law criminalizes ‘sex against the order of nature’. Joya tried explaining to the police personnel how this law is often used by them to harass and detain the *hijra*, especially in the cruising sites. Here I am not suggesting that *hijra* are not harassed by the police. Rather, my point is arrest by the police under that section is rare in Bangladesh. The law

police generically use to harass or detain the *hijra* is section 54 of CRPC (criminal procedure court) according to which anyone can be arrested on suspicious grounds and not penal code 377. That *hijra* NGOs run such projects may prove to be suicidal, not least because arrests of *hijra* on the ground of sexual involvement with men are uncommon but because such sensitization works to paradoxically alert the police to the existence and applicability of this law. It is worthwhile here to recall the issuing of special authorization letters by the police to the *hijra* to conduct *badhai* and *cholla* on humanitarian grounds that I discussed in a previous chapter. *Hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere in Dhaka often argued that the *dengu* (police) actually loved them more than the masses (Cf. Nanda 1999:7 for a similar observation). Additionally *hijra* also claim that each police station pays them more money than other government offices.

More recently contemporary Bangladesh is increasingly witnessing a new kind of visibility of the *hijra*. Since 2000, *hijra* have regularly been part of public rallies and demonstrations on International women's day with their own banners to draw public attention to their rights. In 2009, a *hijra* was also elected to be the president of the sex workers' network of Bangladesh, a network funded by international donors. Although comprised mainly of female sex workers, a few *hijra* NGOs and associations are also part of this wider network. That a *hijra* identified person got elected as the president of this network, voted for mostly by female sex workers (an overwhelming majority of the voters were female sex workers) drew the attention of national and international media and brought into Bangla public view *hijra* involvement with sex work. In fact in 2004 when a client was murdered by a sex worker *hijra* named Shohagi, *hijra* typically expressed dissatisfaction and deliberately refrained from taking any step to her/his rescue. Her/his *guru*, to whom I spoke, echoed the popular trope of *hijra* being asexual, denying any involvement of her/his *cela* in sexual activities. S/he contended that Shohagi deserved to be put behind bars for her/his involvement with such an obnoxious occupation and for disgracing the entire *hijra* community.

In 2011, *hijra* were discussed in the parliament of Bangladesh and proposals to rehabilitate the *hijra* were tabled on the ground of their being ‘disabled’. A two-year long special project due to end in 2013 to mainstream the *hijra* was launched under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Intended to cover 65 thousand *hijra*, reports suggest that initially about 10 thousand *hijra* would be given a monthly disability allowance, which if successful, could be extended. The main aims of this project are to provide primary and technical education, safe housing, and medical support, allowance and rehabilitation. As a sequel to government initiatives, BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Export Association) in 2012 announced a plan to employ the *hijra*. Furthermore, a private TV channel also launched a drama series to document the lives of the *hijra* recently. On October 22nd 2011, the Daily Star a newspaper in Bangladesh reported what it called the largest demonstration of *hijra* in the history of Bangladesh. Holding banners, placards, and festoons inscribed with messages, hundreds of *hijra* dressed in colourful attire paraded a three kilometre long path in Dhaka, demanding rights of employment, education and recognition as a third sex, an event hosted both by the NGOs and the Government of Bangladesh.

What emerges from the above is a rather paradoxical situation where the traditional societal understanding of *hijra* as asexual is being challenged with the efflorescence of a new discourse of *hijra* as not only sexual but also rights-bearing citizens. On the one hand, disability as a new term and basis for pressing rights is emergent which is in some sense an extension of previous conventional discourse of *hijra* being born that way and asexual. On the other, the state-sponsored initiative to rehabilitate the *hijra* on the ground of their being ‘disabled’ marks a new move to officially recognize the *hijra* through the cipher of disability. Furthermore, law enforcing agencies are increasingly being alerted to the existence of a law that has rarely been used in the history of Bangladesh.

Islamic revivalism and the public demonization of the *hijra*

Unlike the stereotypical image of Muslim majority countries being disapproving of same sex sexualities and cross-gender behaviours, there has been no such culturally recognized vituperative public discourse or practice of denunciation of the *hijra* in Bangladesh. Quite contrarily, *hijra* in Dhaka often drew my attention to their being loved by Islamic establishments, namely, the local mosque authority and imams. As already documented in several other chapters, Islamic sensibility is intrinsically bound up with everyday concepts and praxes in contemporary Bangladesh. *Hijra* in Hridoypur and elsewhere lived in the same house with Islamic preachers. Several *hijra* in Hridoypur and beyond lodged in the same buildings that also housed Islamic seminaries. During my regular visits to those *hijra* houses, I never heard of any Islamic person being hostile to the *hijra*. Rather, *hijra* often drew my attention to how the heads of those establishments took special measures to warn the pupils of the seminaries to not taunt the *hijra*. In Hridoypur, Islamic preachers would often approach the *hijra* and advise them to take up the path of Islam. Typically the advice these groups meted out to the *hijra* revolved around saying prayers and leading an Islamic life. Not a single *hijra* interlocutor of mine was ever asked to either give up their affiliation with the *hijra* or change their cross-gender sartorial presentation, as is often assumed to be the case in many Islamic countries. In fact, a number of my *hijra* interlocutors in Hridoypur and elsewhere participated in *chilla*, a practice where groups of Muslims journey together for a certain period of time from one place to another to preach Islam. As already mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, *hijra* not only perform *hajj* but also often become part of the Islamic establishment to welcome and inspire the general masses to take up the path of Islam.

Here my point is that the very fact of my interlocutors being *hijra* never really stood as a roadblock to their being either accepted into those mosques or being made preachers with normative Muslim men. To the best of my knowledge no

fatwa interdicting *hijra* sartoriality or their sexual involvement with men has ever been issued. Nor has there been any report of an attack on *hijra* by islamists²². Rather my *hijra* interlocutors when asked dismissed any such possibility of their being targets of the mullahs. *Hijra* often argued that islamists actually loved them more than the general public, indirectly indicating that mullahs by and large were more into sexual activities that they would publicly condemn as non-Islamic.

This practical accommodation of the *hijra* is increasingly being challenged today with the rise of a new vitriolic discourse on *hijra* as sinners. Stemming from the realization that successful curbing of HIV entails the direct participation of faith-based organizations; NGOs with international funding have recently begun conducting HIV/AIDS sensitization programmes for the imams/religious leaders across Bangladesh. The idea is that these imams in their respective areas will disseminate the acquired knowledge about safe sex and HIV to the Muslim devotees during their Friday sermons.²³ More interestingly an NGO under the aegis of an Islamic scholar with funding from international donors like FHI (Family Health International) and USAID runs this sensitization training. While on the face of it, such interventions may seem like positive moves with wide-ranging implications for increasing awareness about HIV, it is precisely with the onset of such training that imams have in recent times become hostile towards not only the *hijra* but also the wider community of males having sex with males. Let me give a few examples.

²² I use the word islamists to refer to militant groups keen on refashioning the social order in line with a particular narrow view of Islam.

²³ One report suggests that by 2007, 35 groups with 25 imams in each had undergone this training. See <http://www.fhi.org/NR/rdonlyres/erbil3vfbsn6gftz2bbw2oc57bl6wcizdqtv3dy5mc3ymqixhybihkdb6wduizz4cey4p74jqoplzk/EmpoweredbyFaithHV.pdf> for details on this intervention. This report covers the success story of one such NGO. There are, however, more such interventions by NGOs targeting the imams.

Representatives of an MSM-based NGO working under the same donor-funded project are invited to training sessions to introduce issues about male to male sex to the trainees. One of the NGO representatives who had been to such sessions told me that although his presentation was always well received by the trainees, most imams were sceptical of the NGO intervention and considered those NGOs as promoters of homosexuality. In one of the training manuals for the imams developed by an NGO, male to male sex is depicted not only as a possible medium of HIV transmission but also as a sin. Furthermore, many of my *hijra* interlocutors drew my attention to a recent tendency by Islamic preachers and scholars to implicate *hijra* in homosexual activities as part of their public sermon. When Rehana, a junior *hijra*, narrated this to me, her/is *guru* were appalled as they had not known of such public vituperation directed at the *hijra* in their entire lives. Moyna, a *hijra* from Rajshahi, told me that one Islamic preacher in a public gathering openly talked about males having sex with *hijra*, which the preacher claimed to have heard of recently. The preacher also said that those engaging in such acts ought to be stoned to death. In a TV programme during my fieldwork that I watched myself, on Islam and HIV/AIDS, an Islamic scholar also in charge of an NGO providing training for the imams demonized the *hijra* and homosexuals. The same Islamic scholar, who I interviewed later, wondered if my own research was in some way supporting the *hijra* and homosexuals. Although I skirted this issue, the imam forcefully condemned the *hijra* for their sexual activities. He also contended that except “real” *hijra*, i.e. those handicapped ones born with defective genitals, *hijra* impersonators such as those capable of being functional males but acting like the *hijra* ought to be penalized.

What emerges is that while on the one hand international donors are funding sexual health NGOs to prevent HIV among nonnormative groups, the same set of donors are also funding imam sensitization programmes with the paradoxical outcome of an efflorescence of condemnatory discourses about same sex sexualities and the *hijra*. Here, I am not suggesting that some of the quranic and hadith-derived imprecations against the nonnormative desires and practices were unknown to the imams prior to the NGO intervention. Rather,

my point is that the tendency to publicly demonize the *hijra* is perhaps causally linked with those interventions. That Bangladeshi Islam can become 'masculinist' and violent as a result of the influences of internationally circulating ritually conforming Islamic ideologies is not a novel observation. In her research on the overseas returnee migrants in Sylhet, an area in Bangladesh, Gardner (1993) contends that it is precisely on account of these migrants' exposure to international Islamic ideologies abroad, specifically in the UK and their subsequent return to Bangladesh that these returnees became hostile to certain types of Islamic practices, namely shrine-centric Sufi Islam that many revivalist groups today publicly denounce as un-Islamic. In a similar vein, I would submit that these vituperative pronouncements now being hurled at the *hijra* are not gleaned straight from the scripture and but are the direct results and appropriations of translocal discourses of Islam via a process of 'masculinist' (Ouzgane 2006) developmentalism and the consequent emergence of new mechanisms of control (Escobar 1994) via developmentalist intervention.

Categorical proliferation and the political economy of identification

The efflorescence of various discursive regimes described so far has often manifested itself through an explosion of varied semantic and identity categories in contemporary Bangladesh. One moniker that gained conceptual solidity in the developmentalist and policy circle is 'MSM'. Although NGOs have recognized from the onset the need to draw a distinction between an 'MSM' framework and that of the *hijra*, *hijra* in this burgeoning public health literature, as already indicated earlier, is often conceptualized as one of the MSM variations. I do not intend to examine the racial and orientalist underpinnings of MSM per se (See Gosine 2006) for critiques of this development); here I highlight the imperative and impetus for this categorical explosion within a system of political economy of developmentalism.

NGOs that started to work on male to male sexualities from the late 1990s put forward varied monikers at various times in collaboration with their donors. Whilst not all monikers that came into circulation as a consequence of NGO intervention have infiltrated into contemporary cultural consciousness in Bangladesh, the semantic and conceptual differences among these varied monikers have often been collapsed not only in the way people in real life situations identify themselves in response to varied organizational regimes but also in terms of practices that NGOs may strictly associate with each of these identity monikers. To put the picture in perspective, I present below an episode from my ethnographic fieldwork.

Yearly picnic of Badhon *Hijra* Shongho

Badhon *Hijra* Shongho, an NGO, organized an annual picnic in Shafipur, a popular spot located outside Dhaka. Arriving at the office of Badhon at 7 Am in the morning I saw three big buses already occupied by exuberant picnic-goers. *Hijra* dressed in all kinds of colourful and gaudy female-identified dresses were constantly hopping in and out of the bus. The first bus had a banner strapped to its front with the name of the organization and the location inscribed on it. Around 350 guests were invited. Although the majority of them were *hijra*-identified, there were about 20 to 30 non-*hijra* NGO staff. Arriving at the location after three hours, as people started getting down from the bus, some of the *hijra* dressed in female attire rushed to a corner near a brick-built shed. Lifting up their *saris*, they started urinating. While those who rushed to urinate were relatively younger, senior *hijra* immediately picked up on this and started disparagingly shouting at the contradiction between their female attire and toilet etiquette. ‘*Look at those Maigga (a derogatory term for men who act like women). They are making water like panthi. Shameless gandhu*’ was the comment from a *hijra guru*.

To my utter consternation, I saw several *sadrili hijra guru* who had previously spoken in the worst possible terms about the NGOs. Roksana, a

sadrali hajji hijra who I had not expected to be present, was no less scathing in her/his vituperation of the NGO-affiliated *hijra* participants. Pointing to a group of '*kari kothi*' (*hijra* in the guise of men), Roksana burst out, '*These are people with penis and these are the ones who sleep with men. But real hijra like me are chaste and off all kinds of erotic activities*'. The group s/he castigated remained silent although later they told me that Roksana was their *nan-guru*, i.e. the *guru* of their *guru*, and that s/he too was once like them and more significantly s/he still lived with her/his *panthi* who was also her/his companion at the picnic. Pointing to Roksana's *hajji* status, they mildly upbraided her/im for not being able to refrain from a relationship.

Although initially I was not sure how those who came in normative masculine attire identified themselves, some of those dressed in male attire categorically told me that they too were *hijra*. One of the normatively dressed *hijra* told me that among those dressed like men, some were *hijra* while the rest were either partners of the *hijra* or NGO staff. Joya introduced a 'man' dressed in suit as his/her '*Bandhobi*', the Bangla expression for female friends. Noticing surprise on my face, s/he commented '*See even hijra can wear suit like men*'.

Most participants in the picnic frequently switched between 'MSM', 'transgender', *hijra* and *kothi*. When I raised this issue, one *hijra* argued that there is basically no distinction amongst these various labels. Moni, an NGO worker who I had known previously to be 'MSM'-identified, turned up in female attire. Moni argued that s/he was basically a *hijra* but s/he used to identify as an 'MSM' as the organization s/he used to work with required her/im to identify as such. The first NGO Moni worked with required her/im to identify as 'transgender'. Moni then maintained that basically s/he was a *hijra*. Listening to our conversation, Kanthi another *hijra* commented, '*We all take penis in our backside and that is the main binding principle for us all. These differences are a way to do business for the NGOs. After all, more categories mean more projects and more funding*'. Santha, another *hijra* who works as a peer educator for an NGO, chimed in, '*Be it transgender or*

transvestite or transsexual or cross-dresser, we are all the same. But I prefer transgender as I am a hijra'. Kanta, another *hijra* affiliated with an NGO, had been to several conferences abroad. Proudly recalling her/is trips to India, Thailand and Australia, s/he argued that people like her/im are called transgender abroad.

It is interesting to note that several NGO-affiliated *hijra* in their interviews with national and international media expressed the demand to be recognized as people of a third nature or third sex. Joya, a national level *hijra* personality also present during that picnic, resented the lack of a third sex/gender framework as the cause of discrimination. Whilst third sex/gender is not widely projected as an identity by the *hijra* in Dhaka, several TV dramas and documentaries made in recent times not only contained third sex in their titles but also advocated a third sex category. In the aftermath of the last national election in which *hijra* were officially enlisted as voters for the first time, NGO-affiliated *hijra* resented not only the lack of a third line in the polling booths but also the government decision to not allow them to vote as people of a third category.

There are a few things to be drawn out from the episode above. First, despite *sadrili hijra* being vituperative of NGO activities, several of them actively participated in the picnic along with their partners. That *sadrili hijra* came to this public event with their partners is significant precisely because *sadrili* tend to hide their having partners from the Bangla world. Second, what struck me as significant was the way the conventional sartorial distinction between the *hijra* and their partners was visibly collapsed. Third, contrary to the arguments of much contemporary scholarship about reification of sexual subjectivities (Boyce 2007, Cohen 2005), NGO interventions have led to a simultaneous ossification and fluidification of identities. While on the one hand, NGOs are trafficking in sexual/gender difference, i.e. the fact that NGOs often stress distinctions of various groups and categories, as more categories and groups, as indicated by a *hijra* quoted above, denote more projects and

money. (See also Reddy, 2005a on how such distinction is banked on in the context of Indian *hijra*). Fourth, how one presents oneself and is represented depends on the context of the organization in which one works and the particular category under which an organization has received funding. In other words, an individual in the span of a day may variously identify as MSM, transgender or *hijra* in line with the prescriptions of the NGOs s/he represents. Finally, the proliferation of these several semantic monikers and their circulations represent not only a broader politics of representation continuous with the colonial proclivity to contain the apparent intransigence of the *hijra* (Gannon 2009) but also various discursive regimes and practices in/through which subjectivities are constituted.

Transgender, not *hijra*: the rise of a new disciplinary regime

Despite the fluidity with which people identify themselves in relation to varied spatio-organizational regimes, there is some kind of a consensus about transgender being the most appropriate moniker to capture the *hijra* among NGO circles and *hijra* activists. In fact despite the proliferation of various monikers, transgender as a mode of self-representation has gained in solidity and is increasingly being used to represent the *hijra* across South Asia. While *hijra* are variously described in the media as eunuch, hermaphrodite and transsexual, NGO publications and public health research on Bangladesh have increasingly deployed transgender to capture the *hijra*. *Hijra*, especially those affiliated with NGOs, have increasingly come to view themselves as transgender as opposed to the so called ‘MSM’ which, too, has become an identity in itself. NGO *hijra* contend that whilst transgender captures their feminine identification, MSM refers to male to male sex. Furthermore, NGO *hijra* also contended that transgender is a more authentic and respectable form of self-identification devoid of the baggage of stigma with which *hijra* as an identity is invested.

The discursive interpellation of *hijra* as transgender has also inaugurated a new regime of disciplinary practices, engendering new forms of tension and contestation over authentic *hijrahood*. Babuli, a *hijra*-identified peer educator working an NGO, once related that whilst s/he would generally come to the NGO office in male attire, s/he would always be dressed in female attire when donors or people of other agencies visited the office. The reason for that, s/he contended, was because the organization was exclusively for the *hijra* or transgender. Moyuri, another *hijra* working with an NGO, echoed the same sentiment and shared with me one of the ordeals s/he had to face during undergoing training on HIV in a donor alliance office in Dhaka. S/he contended that s/he was sent back from that office the very first day s/he went there as s/he was dressed in masculine attire. The project personnel categorically insisted on participants being dressed like females, as the programme was specifically designed for the transgender and not for the MSM. Since then, Moyuri along with all other participants attended the training in female attire, in line with the sartorial prescription about what a transgender should look like.

One ethnographic episode where a conflict over transgender identification transpired is worth illustrating. Once I joined the *hijra* group of Hridoypur in observing *Shab-e-Barat*, the night of fortune on 15 *Shaban* of the *Hegira* Calendar. People say that the fate of mankind for the next year is written on this glorious night. Hence Muslim men across Bangladesh meander from one shrine/mosque to the other and say optional prayers continuously. Like the normative majority, *hijra* too celebrate this day with a great deal of verve. We visited two major shrines in Dhaka located on opposite sides of the city. Often used by devotees and by peripatetic travellers coming from other areas of Bangladesh as a resting place, the shrine premises are also major cruising sites for *hijra*. Unlike the mosques that require *hijra* to adopt masculine sartorial comportment, *hijra* typically visit these shrine premises dressed in female attire. The custodian of one shrine (*khadem*) told me that Islam is the religion of peace and people of all stripes, regardless of their occupational or religious

affiliations, were welcome at the shrine, a view that runs counter to other Islamic establishments in Bangladesh (see Bertocci 2006 for multivocality in Bangladeshi Islam). On that evening, however, the *hijra* of Hridoypur, including emasculated ones, were all dressed in normative male attire.

As we reached the first shrine, we bumped into another group of *hijra* dressed in Panjabi and pyjama, typical male Muslim attire in Bangladesh. After exchanging greetings my *hijra* friends started rebuking Tina, a *hijra* who turned up dressed in female attire. ‘*At least today you could have been real to respect this day*’ someone said. Echoing those sentiments, Tina’s *gothia*, *hijra* from the same group of similar rank, launched into a tirade berating her/im for not dressing like a man. Utterly embarrassed, Tina remained silent. Later, we moved to the other shrine in the city along with Tina. There were several *hijra* groups spread across the shrine premises. Every time we spoke to a new *hijra* group, the first thing they pointed out was Tina’s female attire. One of the *hijra* said to Tina, ‘*We have been sinning throughout the year by having penis in the buttock. You should have at least been respectful today*’. When I enquired about why the *hijra* were so unhappy, one *hijra* told me, ‘*You can deceive the whole world but not Allah, who created us as men, not as women. So dressing like a female on this night amounts to sinning and disrespecting Allah*’. Significantly, the opprobrium emanated only from among fellow *hijra* and not from the other devotees. At the shrines and along the way on our long walk across Dhaka, we did not encounter any disruption from the travelling bands of devotees.

Although Tina did not respond to the more senior *hijra* who criticized her/is sartorial faux pas, she did respond to the criticism of more junior *hijra* explaining her/is conduct by saying s/he was an activist working for the rights of what s/he described in English as ‘transgender’. Tina was linked with a *sadrili* group and had a *guru* who was simultaneously a *sadrili* and an NGO leader. Tina only worked with NGOs and never undertook the *sadrili* work.

More importantly Tina argued that as a ‘transgender’ person s/he needed to stick to her/is feminine identity. Recently Tina has become a national figure on account of her/is health activism. Some of the organizations s/he worked with promote transgender as a more respectable and authentic form of *hijra* self-identification.

What emerges from the above is that the very consolidation of transgender as a subject position entails in the Bangladeshi context a strict sartorial regime wherein those so identified are expected to present themselves as full time feminine identified persons. Tina, the NGO-affiliated *hijra* who was castigated for her/is dressing like a male on that holy day, later argued that s/he always publicly dressed like a female, not least because the organizations s/he worked with promoted transgender as a more authentic form of *hijrahood* but also because s/he was a real *hijra*. In other words, realness here embodies one’s espousal of a transgender subject position which in turn entails a full time feminine sartorial presentation in public.

Another episode from my fieldwork illuminates the privileging of transgender over the *hijra* not only as a mode of self-representation but also as a form of modern and sanitized subject position. During my fieldwork, a flyer that had been in circulation for some time was a source of several fierce rows among the *hijra* in Dhaka. Intended as a publicity material, it was widely distributed among general populace to warn them of ‘fake *hijra*’. I reproduce below highlights of that flyer in translation.

“A secret story: Sapna the leader of the terrorist hijra group

Brothers and sisters,

This is to inform all of you that there is a kind of people in Bangladesh who we call hijra or handicapped. But they are actually neither hijra nor handicapped. They are voluntary hijra. They are born as male in

their family. As they grow up, they get their male genitalia cut off to identify as hijra. Currently the people who you think are hijra are actually not real hijra. They are in fact the greatest terrorists of the country. How much do you people earn through education and employment? A hijra earns between one and half lac a month (roughly £ 1000 to £1500). If they are not terrorists, how do they make such a big amount of money? As hijra, we collect a meagre two or three taka (one or two pence) to eke out a living. But if they are not into terrorism, how can some of them have three and five-storeyed buildings? They go to shops and markets and extort. In the name of dancing the new born babies, they get into people's houses and demand money. If refused, they threaten people with exposing their genitals. Due to the fear of losing social respect, people are coerced into paying them. In fact, these hijra are big terrorists and some of them also have wives and children. So who are these hijra? They get married and give birth to two/three children and then get rid of their penis. If you do not believe what we are saying you can investigate the matter with the help of medical examination. We have all the information about the places where such artificial excision of male genitals takes place and there are also those who hide their penis between their thighs and pretend not to have any penis.....This group (The flyer specifies a particular hijra group and a list of names with details on their whereabouts and genital status) lures helpless men into having their genitals excised for money. They also consume 'sukhi' pills to inflate their breasts so that they can impersonate hijra to demand money. This is one kind of business...We, a few hijra, would like to provide you with secret information about this group and their activities....The classified information that we have about the hijra has never been published in any of the news papers or media in the country. Dear brothers and sisters, the fear of inauspiciousness is the reason why you pay money to the hijra but if you pay this money to the mosque and orphanage, you will earn some sawab (divine blessings). So we request you to not pay any money to the hijra. The reason why we are divulging this information to you is because we are transgender

(This word was transliterated). We work with those who do homosex (this word was in English). We work to make a living and we have not had our genitals excised like them. So we are often under pressure and threats by the hijra. They say that they will not let us carry on with our job if we do not get rid of our genitals. There are many like us who also make a living out of paid job. They don't extort or terrorize. The reason why we are providing this information is that we have now realized our mistakes and we are repentant. But we are not scared of them. We stand by you all. If you cooperate with us, the terroristic and criminal activities by the hijra can be curbed. Disseminated by: Transgender population opposed to terrorism"

There are several things to be noted from the flyer above. First, it can be surmised that those behind its circulation were NGO *hijra*, evidenced in the way they not only critiqued the *hijra* occupations of *badhai* and *cholla* but also in their explicit pronouncement about their being in paid employment. Second, the very use of the word transgender in transliteration is striking, not only because it exemplifies NGO cultural capital but also because of the way those who intended to divulge the information about the *hijra* collectively identified themselves as a transgender group.

In response to this transgender diatribe against the *sadrili* groups, several *sadrili* leaders organized a gathering in a public garden, an event that was also covered by a national daily called Prothom Alo on 28th March 2010. This report quotes at length a response of a *hijra guru* who spoke on this occasion.

'Those of us who are real hijra have always been neglected and deprived. In recent times, some men masquerading as hijra are tainting our reputation. They are engaged in theft, mugging, selling of drugs, extortion but we the real hijra are getting blamed. These groups of men have also opened NGO business in the name of the hijra. These

NGOs show pictures of our distresses and predicaments as a way to attract funds and then eat them all up. Thus our demand is that the name of the hijra should no longer be used in this crooked NGO trade. In the name of helping the hijra, funds should no longer be misappropriated. Extortion and mugging in the name of the hijra should also be brought to an immediate end'

The rejoinder clearly illustrates the *sadrali* response to the NGO-backed transgender collective. More significantly, what emerges is a growing tension among the *hijra* in Dhaka centred mainly on what constitutes authentic *hijrahood*. Whilst the NGO-affiliated *hijra* categorically singled out the traditional *hijra* occupations as terroristic, with clear pronouncements about not only the genital status and heterosexual affiliation of those accused but also their control of *birit* or the ritual jurisdiction, on the other hand, the *sadrali hijra* vehemently denounced the NGOs and the conduct of business in the name of the *hijra*.

There are two things to be noted here. First a growing number of *hijra* today in Bangladesh tend to identify themselves as transgender rather than *hijra*. Mostly affiliated with NGOs, they rarely carry out *hijragiri* even though the majority of them are initiated into *hijra* lineages. Also often self-identified as NGO *hijra*, they dress like females on a full time basis in public on the ground of their being transgender. NGO *hijra* often talk of *hijragiri* as not only 'traditional' but also 'tyrannical'. One NGO *hijra* once argued, '*Hijragiri is very hierarchical with guru always lording over the cela. Cela work hard day in and day out and earn money but then at the end of the day, guru get the lion's share*'. Another NGO *hijra* went further and maintained, '*Hijragiri or the occupation of the hijra is nothing but fraudulence and should not be encouraged*'. Second, despite this growing tension, transgender and *hijra* are not mutually excluding identities, not only because many of them self identify

as both *hijra* and transgender but also because *sadrali hijra* or those undertaking *hijragiri* are an integral part of these NGOs.

From ritualized emasculation to genital reconstruction

Whilst one outcome of NGOization of the *hijra* has been the emergence of a new transgender disciplinary regime with its strict prescriptions on what is and is not appropriate *hijrahood*, this growing popularity of transgender has not necessarily given rise to sex reassignment surgeries as is the case in many other contexts. In other words, while the consolidation of male bodied feminine identified people as transgender has necessitated a full time public re/presentation of persons as normative female, transitioning to a normative feminine position through surgery in contemporary Bangladesh is neither popular nor even encouraged within the developmentalist circle. Rather, NGOs working on sexual health including those exclusively dedicated to the *hijra* categorically discountenance all forms of bodily feminization. An NGO staff once categorically stated that there is an unwritten policy to not encourage ‘feminization’ of any sort. Another NGO professional I interviewed argued, ‘*Feminization leads to one’s becoming a hijra. Society does not look at hijra positively and if we encourage people to undergo bodily changes, society would look down upon them even further*’. That emasculation is discouraged and viewed negatively was further evident to me when I went to a meeting organized by an NGO where various groups of people including *hijra* were invited. In the course of our interaction, the executive director of an ‘MSM’ NGO openly argued that the lack of social acceptance of *hijra* is the direct result of their gender practices, especially their tendency to dress and talk like females. On another occasion, when I was invited to a house party organized by an MSM-identified NGO worker overseeing a *hijra* project, I was surprised that not a single *hijra* was invited even though I was introduced to him through the *hijra*. Later when I inquired about the absence of the *hijra*, he drew my attention to his having some status in the neighbourhood which

could be jeopardized with the presence of the *hijra*. Even the exclusively *hijra*-focused NGOs did not offer any such provision for feminization, nor did any of those organizations seem inclined to such initiatives in the long run. While the reasons for this generic discouragement and at times opposition to emasculation are not entirely clear to me, one possible reason may be the existence of Bangladesh penal code 326 according to which ‘emasculation’ or genital excision, among various other forms of bodily mutilation, can be classed as a crime.

Notwithstanding such opposition to feminization, a growing number of *hijra* in Dhaka in recent times have secretly undergone emasculation in private hospitals. While this is not entirely a new development, its popularity among *hijra* is certainly on the rise. Although ritual emasculation is widely practised, wherein a *katial* or a ritual cutter performs the surgery, there were also cases where the surgery was performed by medical professionals in hospital under the sponsorship of the *hijra*. In other words, *hijra* would undertake all the rituals surrounding emasculation but would only have the operations performed in those secret private medical establishments. In contrast, what is happening these days is that male bodied feminine identified people with semi or no affiliation with the *hijra* groups are increasingly opting for medicalized emasculation. Once during a conversation about the future of *hijragiri*, Bokul *hijra* drew the rise of these medical establishments to my attention by stating the following: ‘*Who says hijra will cease to exist? Even if the sadrali group renounce this practice, those who want to become chibry will become so anyway.*’

One of the doctors who has recently become quite popular for performing such surgeries owns a hospital situated on the outskirts of Dhaka. This doctor, who I will anonymize as Nasir, in an interview with me styled this surgery as ‘genital reconstruction’. Trained in Europe especially France and Italy, Dr. Nasir stated that he had performed almost 100 such surgeries in the last three years. He surgically removes the penis and the scrotum while ensuring that the

urethral canal is not obstructed as is often the case when traditional ritual cutters operate on the *hijra*. He explained that most of his patients are *hijra*-identified and they typically want to have their male genitals totally removed. Not a single patient he had operated on had ever wanted a vagina constructed. According to him, a deep sense of physical and mental discomfort with their genitalia is what motivates his patients to opt for this surgery. Many of his patients had also told him that they wanted to have their genitals removed as it was shameful to have their male organs seen by their partners. He pointed out that the reason his patients want a complete removal of the male genitals rather than a vagina is because they like anal sex. He also contended that the ‘feminine sexual prowess’ of the *hijra* undergoing this surgery increases, as the removal of the scrotum significantly lessens the production of testosterone, with female hormones becoming dominant consequently.

Patients that come to access this service at his hospital, according to him, are *hijra* without any formal affiliation with the organized groups. Although the number of patients willing to undergo this surgery has been gradually on the rise ever since he started it three years ago, he also spoke about a strong opposition from a local *hijra* group. In the last few years he had also operated on a number of patients that the local *hijra* group brought to his hospital after severe complications following traditional removal of the genitals. This is exactly how, argued Dr. Nasir, the idea to perform this surgery occurred to him. A few years ago, a post-operative *hijra* on the brink of death was brought to his hospital in the middle of the night and eventually the patient survived. Although from then onwards, he had treated such complicated cases several times, non-affiliated *hijra* also began to come to be operated on since then. That non-affiliated *hijra* started to access this service was something that the local *hijra* group was not only unhappy about but also vehemently opposed to. Leaders of the local *hijra* group on several occasions had approached him and demanded that the patients coming to his hospital for surgery be handed over to the *hijra* group. There had been instances when *hijra* came to his hospital to beat up the patients undergoing this surgery. He also stated that local *hijra* groups had spies deployed in the area to regularly monitor the situation.

Although the total cost of such an operation ranges between 10 to 15 thousand taka (approximately between £100 and £150) , those coming from other areas to be operated on have to spend three times the amount as they have to pay the local hijra guru to seek her/his consent. Dr. Nasir argued that the reason the local hijra group opposed independent patients was money. While I am not entirely clear as to the reason for this, as the local group denied such allegations to me, my feeling is that the independent undertaking of such surgery perhaps amounts to an infraction of the hijra communitarian rule that I discussed at length in the chapter on emasculation. Furthermore, several journalists had also inquired about this surgery, often threatening the doctor with exposure. He categorically dismissed all those threats on the ground of his being a trained medical doctor and that the services he was offering was not castration but genital reconstruction, which he argued was widespread all over the world.

Because of my interest in speaking to some of his patients, Dr. Nasir arranged meetings with three of his patients. While I met two of them both prior to and after the surgery, the other patient I spoke to had been operated on long before. I met two of his patients in the hospital and the other one in a public garden, after making an appointment by telephone. Interestingly all three of them maintained that the main reason for their having undergone surgery was to please their partners. They also categorically stated that they did not want a vagina. One of them commented, ‘What is the use? Even if I have one, that will be useless. I can never use that crack for taking a penis. Plus my partner also likes anus more than vagina.’ None of them had ever been a formalized member of a sadrali hijra group, although they were sufficiently fluent in Ulti and other hijra mores and had claimed discipleship of senior guru. Furthermore, none of them had worked with any of the NGOs, although they all frequented NGO premises on a regular basis.

There are a few things to be drawn out here. First, despite NGO opposition to feminization and objections of sadrali hijra groups, there is now a growing trend among some non-sadrali male bodied feminine identified people to become chibry or emasculated. I say ‘chibry’ as all three patients of Dr. Nasir I interviewed described themselves as such, despite their not having any formal affiliations with sadrali groups. Second, the reasons offered by those patients and by Dr. Nasir resonate with my contention about partners being an important cause in the decision to have the operation which I elaborated in another chapter. Third, that people accessing this service want emasculation rather than a vagina further confirms my earlier contention that erotic pleasure is deemed to be located in the anus and not in the penis. Finally, what was once a highly clandestine Ulta ritualized practice is now becoming Bangla or public.

New impetus for transgender as oppositional to gay subjectivity

From 2000 onwards gay groups started to emerge in Bangladesh. Initially organized through the internet, gay groups rapidly gained momentum as an active platform for middle class homosexuals. While the initial activities of these gay groups were restricted to organizing get-togethers and parties, specifically from 2008 onwards, gay groups in Bangladesh started celebrating international day against homophobia and transphobia in public venues. Partly as a result of perceived threats of loss of funding in the wake of the emergence of new gay groups, MSM-based NGOs too started celebrating international day against homophobia and transphobia from at least 2010. In 2008, a coalition of ‘LGBT’ groups was launched in Bangladesh following a Norwegian funded workshop. Five *hijra* attended this workshop along with gay, lesbian and MSM-identified people; I too was present as a resource person. A plan to form a coalition was launched for which an office in Dhaka was rented and *hijra*, gay and lesbian groups started to gather at least twice a

month to discuss political praxis. In the days that followed, *hijra* participated in the international day against homophobia and transphobia organized by the gay groups. Here, it is interesting to note that from the very onset of *hijra* encounter with gay men, *hijra* were highly critical of gay groups' lack of organizational skills and experience. It is worthwhile to recall that *hijra* became part of NGO work from the late 90s while the gay groups' public engagement with rights work kicked off from 2000 onwards. While *hijra* have been an integral part of NGO health and rights based workshops from late 1990s, it was for the first time that *hijra* groups were seen to be interacting with gay groups in a professional capacity²⁴. It is on account of such professionalized and formalized encounters that new understandings and possibilities of gender and sexuality are being generated and transacted, often leading to an ossification of what the assumption of a *hijra* subject position should entail relative to gay. In this new climate of activist energy, transgender has become an axis of difference against which newly emergent gay groups have asserted their gay subjectivities, i.e. transgender is increasingly being seen to originate in one's experiences of gender, deemed to be ontologically distinct from sexuality that marks out gay subjectivity. This is further evident in gay groups' insistence about gayness being about attraction towards the gender-normative same sex as opposed to the *hijra* or transgender, which is often denigrated as a form of lower class asexual/handicapped and feminized identity. For instance, the coalition group I mentioned earlier eventually disintegrated in the face of growing opposition from certain sections of the middle class gay groups who were not happy about gay groups' association with the *hijra* in the same space.

This new encounter between gay groups and *hijra* has given rise to new forms of contested politics of desire, class and gender. For instance, gay groups stress their masculinity as separating them from the *hijra*, who they see as emasculate. There is widespread belief among particular sections of gay men that *hijra* are muggers and impostors. In one of the internet-based message

²⁴ Previously such encounters were only sexual and restricted to cruising sites that I discussed in my chapter on erotic subjectivity.

boards of a gay group, members have at times issued warnings against cruising areas frequented by *hijra* and *kothi* groups. This perception about *hijra* being muggers and impostors chimes well with the normative mainstream conceptualization of the *hijra* that I elaborated in my chapter on class. Indicative of the normative middle class, a vast majority of the gay men imagine *hijra* as simultaneously emasculate and hyper-masculine. Many gay men I spoke to not only expressed a sense of fear at the sight of the *hijra* but also pointed to their ‘exaggerated femininity’ as disgusting. In one of the gay parties I attended during my fieldwork in Dhaka, there was a fashion show in which some gay men dressed in female attire paraded the stage. After the show, as I went out for a smoke, some of my acquaintances seemed extremely unhappy about these cross-gender expressions, arguing that those performers must have been confused about their identities and that they (my acquaintances) were unsure whether to describe them as gay or *hijra*²⁵. While sections of gay men view *hijra* in terms of the mainstream middle class discourse, several *hijra* interlocutors who came into contact with gay groups maintained that gay men were basically *kothi* (effeminate males) and *gandu* (those who fuck and get fucked). A group of NGO *hijra* once contended that the main difference between them and gays is that whilst gay men make their penis visible at the time of having sex, *hijra* do not. One of the *hijra*/transgender-identified activists once related to me saying that in the context of Bangladesh, possibilities for political activism around transgender could be taken forward whilst similar praxis related to other identities, namely gay, lesbian or MSM, would not be possible. Her/his point is that transgender, like *hijra*, is viewed primarily as a form of desexualized subjectivity that resonates with the dominant societal understanding of *hijra* as asexual and it is precisely on account of such a conceptualization that organizing around a transgender subject position would be easier compared to gay or MSM.

²⁵ This is not to suggest that all gay men valorise stereotypical masculinity. A good number of gay men stressed their femininity as crucial to their sense of subjectivity. They also drew my attention to their being ridiculed not only by the normative middle class mainstream but also by the gay middle class, issues I do not explore in detail here.

In his ethnography on transgender as a category, Valentine (2007) contends that the advent and popularization of transgender in the Euro-American context is the corollary of a systematic and essentialist separation of gender and sexuality into distinct ontological experiences. Foregrounding his interlocutors' simultaneous self-identification as gay and transgender in New York, he argues that one outcome of such artificial compartmentalization has been a growing de-sexualisation of transgender as about gender only as opposed to gay, which has come to embody sexuality. That such a distinction has become naturalized is itself a product of particular socio-historical logics specific to American queer rights activism and ought to be subjected to scrutiny. In other words, Valentine complicates the dominant Euro-American proclivity for cultural disparagement of gender-variant or transgendered gay subjectivities. It is instructive here to note that I deployed masculinities or male femininities instead of transgender as an approach to explore the *hijra*, not only because the very adoption of male femininities moves us beyond the reductionism of its socio-historical context and its uncritical transposability onto disparate settings but also because male femininities allow for attention to be paid to the processual character of the formation of *hijra* subjectivities. The emergence of transgender as a mode of self-representation and as a subjectivity with stereotypical gender-variant expressions has emerged in contemporary Bangladesh within the socio-political context of HIV activism from the late 1990s onwards. New social and political organizing and various rights-based praxes implicating the *hijra* are increasingly taking root around this new subject position. Whilst in Bangladesh emergent gay subjectivities are often posited as oppositional to transgender, transgender has become a form of disciplinary power with particular forms of normativising gender variance wherein those so identified are expected to publicly present themselves as feminine-identified to assert their transgendered subjectivity. Furthermore, whilst transgender at least in theory is intended to encompass a variety of gender-variant identities, practices and expressions, in contemporary Bangladesh, as in the context of Valentine, transgender has also become iconic of cross-gender expression of male bodied feminine identified people only.

Conclusion

In this chapter I drew attention to regimes of transnational governmentalities and disciplinary power within a fast changing translocal political economy. I specifically argued that the vicissitudes in *hijra* subjectivities are the direct effects and appropriations of those transnational governmentalities. In locating these contemporary metamorphoses, my intention here was not to posit the *hijra* as victims of those processes. Rather, what I demonstrated is that *hijra* actively exercised various kinds of agency in shaping and being shaped by those interventions.

In a way, the emergence of various and at times contested discourses and their effects on the *hijra* in contemporary Bangladesh are anything but uniform. Rather, what I described is a bricolage of varied discourses inflected through translocal notions and practices of religion, gender, sexuality, class and political economy. In his now canonized history of sexuality, Foucault contends that the birth of the western homosexual as a subject supplants the previously circulating discourse about same sex sexuality being an activity or ‘temporary aberration’ (1980:43). In contrast, the scenario I describe is not one of discursive supersession but is characterised by simultaneous and contradictory emergences of various categories, discourses and identities that are brought into being through incessant comings and goings of transnational circulation of various material and symbolic forces, both within and without (Johnson et al 2000). Whilst the development of these varied and often contested discourses inaugurates novel forms of disciplinary regimes and governmentalities, they may also be seen to engender fresh opportunities and resources for people to negotiate and rethink their subjectivities (Wilson 2010). Here a point worth highlighting is the unequal conditions of transnational/regional political economic regimes under and within which those categories, identities and discourses are proliferating. In other words, the very nature of the emergence of those discourses, practices and categories under an inegalitarian international division of labour and neoliberal arrangements is such that they allow the exercise of various forms of power

and governmentality over the construction of subjectivities in unforeseen ways.

In his study of the transformation of the indigenous Hawaiians in relation to the advent of Captain Cook and other European colonial power, Sahlins (1981) suggests that the metamorphosis taking place within the indigenous Hawaiians is not explainable merely in terms of these external forces. Rather, in the process of cultural reproduction, Hawaiians incorporated Captain Cook as part of their cosmology. Against this backdrop, Sahlins argued that the transformation is the corollary of 'failed reproduction'. Following this insight, I would argue the contemporary changes taking place within the existing arrangements of *hijrahood* reflect 'transformation' resulting from my interlocutors' attempt towards reproduction. Despite the tension, conflicts and contestations, *hijra* as this chapter indicated, have embraced many of these new processes and practices. In their taking on and becoming an active and agentive part of these new processes, *hijra* have not relinquished the traditional structure of *hijrahood*. Rather, interestingly, even the NGO work is being configured in terms of *hijra* internal logics of *guru-cela* divide, despite piecemeal opposition from within the *hijra*. While I am not interested in making some definitive statement about the future of *hijrahood*, *hijra* today will have to constantly navigate and negotiate a complex emerging scenario marked by a contradiction between the traditional societal understanding of their being asexual and the emergent public re-conceptualization of them as sexual beings. Perhaps more than anything else, the answer to the question about the future of *hijrahood* as we understand it today will depend on the intricate negotiation of that question in the days to come.

Conclusion: Imagining *hijra* and South Asian masculinities studies beyond the spatio-intellectual hegemony of India

This thesis documents empirically the lives of the *hijra* in Dhaka, a group of people that have rarely been subjected to critical academic scrutiny outside of India. The massive body of extant scholarship is narrowly centred on India so much so that *hijra*, in popular Western imagination, are linked with Indian gender and sexual difference. More problematically, this parochial methodological nationalism not only reflects a paucity of empirical ethnographic materials on the *hijra* on areas outside of India but also forecloses new lines of analytical possibilities.

Critical scholarship (Johnson, Jackson and Herdt 2000, Wilson 2006) has drawn our attention to the geo-politically constructed nature of cartographical compartmentalisations and the subsequent consolidation of geopolitical interests of the so called superpowers. Regions, critical scholars suggest, are fictive conceptual categories organized along imagined markers of ethnicity, nationalism, religion and so on. Yet the inscriptions of areas into nationalized cartographies modelled along colonial lines are not fictional but everyday realities of the peoples of South Asia, where not only do the big states routinely marginalize and stereotype the smaller ones, but also the people inhabiting those spatial economies are often seen to shore up reactionary ideologies in a bid to demonize ethnic, erotic, gender, class and caste minorities. One way to curb, if not totally dismantle, such hegemonies is to foreground the hitherto undiscovered and unspoken contexts.

My intention in this thesis has been to challenge and revisit some of the stereotypical representations and tropes of the *hijra* that have become

established because of this India-centricity. For instance, *hijrahood* is constructed through incessant comings and goings of both material and symbolic forces across South Asia and outwith. Whilst I do not specifically elucidate the physical movements of the *hijra* between and across Bangladesh and India in greater detail, I indicated in this thesis that India often emerges, in the imagination of the *hijra* in Bangladesh, as the cynosure of the primordial *hijra* archetypes. That is evident not only in the way the two *hijra* goddesses, Maya Ji and Tara Moni, are believed to have originated there but also in terms of their beliefs about Indian patronage of the ritual practices of the *hijra*.

It is instructive to note here that although several *hijra* in Dhaka visited India, especially West Bengal, the majority of my *hijra* interlocutors had never really visited India. *Hijra* from West Bengal, India were also at times present at *hijra* houses in Dhaka especially on occasions like the conduct of arbitration. There were also *hijra* in Dhaka who had previously worked as part of Indian *hijra* groups. It is precisely through such physical and imagined encounters that *hijrahood* is constructed. Further, although senior *hijra* often visited Indian *hijra* groups, especially those in charge of the ritual jurisdiction of parts of the West Bengal, *hijra* from Dhaka rarely visited other parts of India like Delhi or Bombay, even though they always contended that Delhi and Bombay are the most suitable locations for the conduct of *hijragiri* or the occupations of the *hijra*.

My point here is to accentuate the fact that there are perhaps more shared commonalities between the *hijra* in Bangladesh and those of West Bengal than there are between those from West Bengal and other parts of India (see Gopinath 2008 on queer ‘regions’ in South Asia). While one obvious reason for this may be the shared cultural and linguistic history (although not religion, an issue I address later), *hijra* in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, India often transcend the cartographical and symbolic markers of ‘Bengaliness’ or ‘Banglaness’, the ethno-linguistic identity that concatenates the Bangla-speaking people of Bangladesh with that of West Bengal, India. The

construction of the parallel *Uti* universe which I elaborated in this thesis illustrates not only an alternative economy of desire but also *hijra* transcendence of the wider Bangla societies of both India and Bangladesh.

Yet, as I demonstrated, one's being a part of the *Uti* universe does not entail a rejection of or withdrawal from the Bangla world of heterosexual masculinities. Rather, *hijra* are, at least in the Bangladeshi context, often simultaneously heterosexual masculine house-holding men and *hijra-nationals*. Like *hijra* studies, studies of men and masculinities in South Asia too exemplify a heavy bias towards India. Critical scholars of masculinities in South Asia have recognised this dearth and silence of ethnographic materials on masculinities beyond India (Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004). Like those of the *hijra*, studies of South Asian masculinities also often get reduced to the study of Indian masculinities. That oversight may be dismissed as a mere methodological slippage; however, one consequence of this has been a gradual and systematic consolidation of the spatio-intellectual hegemony of India not only in *hijra* studies and masculinities studies but also in the context of the wider canvass of South Asian studies.

One particular trope that needs mentioning in relation to extant spatial parochialism is that of the construal and representation of *Muslim* men and masculinities in India. One dominant and problematic trope here is that of Muslim men being simultaneously emasculate and hypersexual in the popular Indian imaginary (Hansen 1996, Osella and Osella 2006). In relation to the *hijra*, scholars (e.g. Nanda 1999) note that Islam in India represents an alternative socio-historical model of accommodating the *hijra*. It is also widely argued that *hijra* in India often self-identify as Muslim (Reddy 2005). Reddy, more than any other ethnographer, accords this *hijra* elective affinity for Islam a fully fledged analytical attention and contends that this special affinity of the *hijra* in Hindu majority India exemplifies a subaltern consciousness that concatenates the minority Muslim with *hijra* in India (p-225-226). While Reddy's contention about *hijra* supra-locality is suggestive,

what is problematic is this conflation of the *hijra* with Muslim men on account of *hijra* practices of circumcision and emasculation, corporeal markers that are routinely invoked to demonize Muslim men in India (Ramaswami 2007).

In contrast, I foreground that *hijra* in Bangladesh, despite their affinity for Hindu marked goddesses and participation in Hindu marked rituals, do not identify as Hindu. Nor do they view those practices as a threat to their Islamic identification. The exploration of *hijra* religious sensibilities in Bangladesh not only challenges the popular demonization of Muslims men as emasculate but also complicates the automatic juxtaposition of the *hijra* with Islam in South Asia, a trope that can be traced to the colonial era (Gannon 2009). Here, my intention is not to reiterate the tension around masculinities and the cultural politics of Hindu and Muslim masculinities in South Asia. Rather, my point is that ethnographic silence on Muslim majority countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan often contributes to the perpetuation of such one-sided representations. In other words, whilst intra/inter/trans-regional inequalities structure the production of knowledge, scholars too may become complicit with the perpetuation of such spatio-intellectual hegemonies by not extending their critical gaze onto the geopolitically less powerful regions. While all kinds of academic gaze may be problematic in the sense of Said's (1978) orientalism, critical interventions are important to challenge the stereotypical representation of the regionally underprivileged. Specifically, exploration into the lives of the *hijra* in Bangladesh and other regions can provide critical analytical and empirical correctives not only to the preponderance of India-centric readings of the *hijra* but also to the Indian hyper-masculinity and the resultant emasculation of other nation-states like Bangladesh within the geopolitically constructed cartography of South Asia.

Beyond emasculation: Male femininity and masculinities approaches

Analytically, attending to a new empirical context can open up novel ways to reconceptualise the *hijra*, as new empirical materials may call for new

analytical language and epistemological standpoints. In other words, the empirical context of my thesis has forced me not only to rethink the conventionally privileged trope of reading the *hijra* through the lens of a third sex but also the critiques of the third sex framework. Whilst several critical anthropologists have responded to this problematic and exotifying ‘third sex’ gaze onto the *hijra* and foregrounded the multiply configured and context specific construction of *hijra* subjectivities (e.g. Reddy 2005, Cohen 1995, Agrawal 1997), what has remained un-interrogated is the critical exploration of the *hijra* through the cipher of masculinities. Adoption of masculinity/male femininity as an analytical cipher adds considerably to our understanding not only of *hijrahood* in South Asia but also of the production, reproduction and transformation of masculinities. In other words, whilst the main focus of this thesis is *hijra* subjectivities, I use my ethnographic materials on the *hijra* to nuance our understanding of masculinities in South Asia and outwith.

The heuristic utility of a ‘male femininity’ approach over that of a third sex framework and transgender is that it allows us to take into account the processual character of the formation of the *hijra*. Against the predominant representation of the *hijra* as locked in an intermediate third sex category, a male femininity approach moves us beyond such immobility and foregrounds the dynamic and fluid practices and processes of movement and shifts across and between various subject positions through which *hijrahood* is produced. *Hijra* in Bangladesh, I demonstrated, are not a subculture into which male bodied people incapable of being successful normative men enter. Rather those who enter the *hijra* community disavow the normative Bangla heterosexual masculinities in a bid to navigate and explore varied forms of erotic pleasures and possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to masculine Bangla men. I contended that unlike the stereotypical image of the *hijra* as located outside the institutions of reproductive heteronormativity, there are *hijra* in Bangladesh who are simultaneously masculine house-holding men and feminine-identified *hijra*. ‘Male femininity’ as an approach is well equipped to account for such constant shifts between and across masculinities and femininities, in that it does not reify either masculinities or femininities.

Against the dominant and stereotypical representation of the *hijra* as non-masculine, ‘male femininity’ also allows us to recognise how *hijra* simultaneously take on and transcend idioms of masculinity. In other words, male femininity does not distil the *hijra* as men. Rather it brings into view the concepts and practical strategies that *hijra* adopt to do, redo and undo masculine gender. Attention to the processes and practices through which gender is operationalised in the lives of the *hijra* further challenges the scholarly proclivity to read the *hijra* as either intentionally subversive or politically resistant to real or imagined structures of inequalities and repressive gender and erotic regimes. Put in other words, what a male femininity approach enables us to appreciate and acknowledge is that the enactment and instantiation of varied forms of gender and erotic pluralisms (Peletz 2009) by the *hijra* are not some means to an abstract end of dismantling sex/gender dimorphism but are very much the ends in themselves. That is, instead of reading the *hijra* as either some politically inclined subjects bent on resistance or some kind of a gender failure in the guise of an intermediate category, a ‘male femaling’ slant allows us to attend to every day lived arts and acts through which *hijra* construct themselves and are constructed by the wider society as both engendered and engendering subjects.

A dominant trend within South Asian masculinities studies and masculinities studies, in general, is to attend to the way the production of masculinities entails the consequent de-masculinisation of some other groups. While this relational approach to the formation of masculinities has unpacked systems of cultural and political inequalities and sharpened our understanding of the workings of masculinities, what is rarely interrogated is the way such lopsided stereotypical representation of certain social groups as emasculate conceals the negotiation of complex processes and practices through which those deemed to be emasculate engender themselves and are engendered (Rogers 2008, Osella and Osella 2006). Scholarly inability to engage with the processes and practices of the subaltern, in my opinion, further contributes to such stereotypical projections and inhibits nuanced conceptualizations of masculinities. In this connection, the ‘male femininity’ approach can attend to

such complex negotiations by accounting for the way in which the subaltern like the *hijra* variably engage with *non-hijra* middle and upper class populace in Bangladesh, who routinely demonize and vulgarize the *hijra*. *Hijra*, in the cultural imagination of Bangladesh, are a class-specific category not least because only people from the working class enter the *hijra* but more importantly because of the way *hijra* are described and defined in terms of class-marked imageries of filth, foul smell and dirt. Such middle class representation, however, does not help us understand the variable negotiation of masculinities in real life situations, where the very presence of the *hijra* instantiates masculine anxieties and fear among the *non-hijra* populace.

‘Male femininity’ also allows us to read the *hijra* beyond the dominant trope of emasculation. The extant scholarship not only views *hijrahood* through the optic of emasculation but also considers emasculation to be the most coveted cultural ‘truth’ about the *hijra*. The ethnography presented here, however, calls into question the centrality of emasculation in the production of *hijrahood*. There are both *hijra* with penis and those without, some who move between *hijra* and normative masculinity and others who live as *hijra* on a more permanent basis. Against a focus on the singular ritual act of bodily transformation, I ‘processualize’ *hijra* by taking into account the shifts back and forth between various ritual, sexual and gender statuses that make up *hijrahood* in South Asia. Becoming *hijra* therefore is a complex process. It is an achieved status and not an ascribed one. *Hijrahood* entails the attainment of ritually sacrosanct skills and acumen about various forms of gender and erotic expressions and their dexterous and persistent demonstration before both fellow *hijra* and *non-hijra* on a daily basis. The ‘male femaling’ processual approach also foregrounds various contestations and conflicts over authentic *hijra* status. Whilst emasculation is often deemed to be the desideratum both among the *hijra* in India and Bangladesh, such a position is not uncontested in Bangladesh, as *hijra* with penis often draw on the same cultural idioms and resources of Islam and Hinduism to berate the emasculated *hijra* as well as assert their own positions within the *hijra* universe. In other words, the ethnography I present in this thesis further nuances the various, at times

contested, forms of *hijrahood* that are embodied and practised in South Asia. The spatial shifts between masculine comportment, and in some instances householding status, and feminine identified *hijrahood* are but one part of a larger process of movement that typify *hijra* life and work both in a geographical sense – where *hijras* routinely travel between and across national boundaries – and in the sense of moving between different sorts of social settings and occupational positions and ritual statuses.

Pleasure, power and desire and the production of the *hijra*

In a significant departure from previous scholarship on the *hijra*, this thesis accords desire a centrally prominent status in the exploration and representation of the *hijra*. I contended that it is not only on account of desire for normatively oriented masculine Bangla men that one becomes a *hijra* but more significantly it is the abject and forbidden nature of desire which is central to the social marginalization and cultural abjection of the *hijra* (cf Besnier 2004). It is instructive to note that it is precisely the lack of desire on account of which *hijra* are said to be culturally accommodated in South Asia. *Hijra* too, as I suggested previously in this thesis, often reinforce the image of their being above and without any kinds of desire. Internally, however, desire is precisely what qualifies one to be a *hijra*. More precisely, it is not just desire but its manifestation in keeping with certain normative protocols that one's authentic *hijra* status within the wider community of male bodied feminine identified people is established and asserted. It is this contradiction between public (re)presentation of the *hijra* as asexual and above desire and the internal recognition of their being erotically inclined that lie at the heart of their lived lives and cosmologies. Drawing on the *hijra* notion and practice of *Uti* which they posit as an alternative and clandestine universe of desire, as opposed to the Bangla world of heterosexuality, this thesis foregrounds the centrality of desire in the cultural production and marginalization of the *hijra*.

That an alternative universe of desire had to be invented is emblematic of a broader politics of masculinity and the preponderance of certain types of masculine hegemonies that operate to de-legitimate desire, culturally deemed to be incommensurate with certain styles of normative heterosexual masculinity. In other words, what I demonstrate in this thesis is the interaction of desire and gender in the production of not only *hijrahood* but also masculinities. Departing from the conventionally held assumption of the insertee/insertor model as empirically flawed, I complicate this spatio-hierarchical distinction between the penetrated and the penetrator by challenging the essentialist understandings about penile pleurability through foregrounding possibilities of anal and other forms of bodily pleasures. In that sense, the *Uti* universe of desire is also the cultivation and celebration of non-phallic bodily pleasures through a valorisation of the anus as opposed to the culturally privileged phallus. In spite of that, the *Uti* universe, I demonstrated, also operates in keeping with a set of protocols that not only defines the boundaries of what is appropriate and inappropriate but also works to penalize those who digress from those normative protocols. In that way, the *Uti* universe, despite being antithetical to the Bangla world of a/hetero/sexuality, is modelled on Bangla models while simultaneously transcending and transgressing them in significant ways. Furthermore, I contended that despite contradiction between the internal and the external or public re/presentation, *Uti* functions as a site and space for actualizing and performing varied forms of erotic and bodily gratification.

A point worth highlighting here is the interplay between the *Uti* universe of desire and the Bangla world of a/hetero/sexuality. Whilst the objects of *hijra* desire are masculine Bangla men, Bangla men are not allowed to become members of the *Uti* universe. Aside from casual commoditized erotic exchange in which Bangla men partake of certain forms of *Uti* erotic delights, Bangla men are also allowed entry into this secret *Uti* universe as affines or partners of the *hijra*. Yet Bangla men are not allowed access to all kinds of bodily pleasures and most notably anal pleasures, which the *hijra* deem to be supreme forms of pleasure. Bangla men's desire to taste receptive anal

pleasure not only jeopardizes their authentic masculine status but also instigates the strongest opprobrium from the *hijra*, not least because receptivity is understood both in *Uti* and Bangla parlance as feminizing, but more significantly because for the *hijra*, only those ready to forego certain Bangla privileges of heterosexuality are entitled to such otherwise forbidden pleasures.

The *Uti* universe also accommodates and acknowledges the relationship between the *hijra* and Bangla men by formally and ritually validating such alliances. Despite their being enshrouded in secrecy, such relations are accorded cultural validity and visibility, albeit limited, within the *Uti* space. It is within this *Uti* space that we see a complicated negotiation of Bangla ideals of masculinities. Whilst Bangla men are to remain masculine and Bangla in their interactions with the wider *Uti* world, these Bangla men often undergo symbolic emasculation on account of their being ‘domesticated’ and provided for and become what, in the mainstream Bangla view, would be considered feminizing. Explorations into the complex interaction between the Bangla men and their *hijra* partners further illustrate the quest for affect and emotional intimacy on the part of the *hijra*, who desire to love and be continually loved, even though they often express ambivalence about the actualization of such possibilities.

Foregrounding desire and affect in the constitution of *hijra* subjectivity is not to reduce the *hijra* to gender and sexual difference alone. Throughout this thesis, I highlight a panoply of factors, namely class, kinship and religion in terms of which gender and sexual difference are configured and conceived. Rather, my point here is that gender and sexual difference that the *hijra* embody cannot be comprehended fully without adequate interrogation of desire that brought the *Uti* universe into being. In other words, while understanding the way gender and sexual difference are refracted through other forms of social difference allows us to decipher the multiply inflected and complex configuration of gender and sexuality (Reddy 2005), too often

desire tends to be subordinated to other cultural refractions of difference. Put simply, my concern here is the way desire often gets subsumed under other factors of social difference rather than being made salient in the crafting of *hijra* subjectivities even though desire is precisely what is at stake. The extant theorisation of the *hijra* as an identity that derives its cultural legitimacy through the wider societal understandings about *hijra* being both above and beyond desire illustrates this representational effacement. Scholarship tends to focus more on the public (re)presentation of the *hijra* as asexual and above desire and the wider societal understanding and engagement with it in terms of the culturally valorised ideals of renunciation and asceticism (e.g. Reddy 2005 and Nanda 1999). Questions as to why *hijra* present themselves as asexual and above desire have been left un-interrogated. Whilst situating the *hijra* within the wider cultural ideals of renunciation and detachment offers useful insights in contextualizing and historicising the *hijra*, failure to adequately engage with desire and its abjection not only inhibits us from comprehending the *hijra* subjectivities but also works to further the social marginalization of the *hijra* (cf. Besnier 2004).

Beyond the grammar of the phallus: challenging the penis-centred approach to ethnographic work on gender and sexual diversity

Emasculation has been the most dominant trope in the representation of the *hijra*. Given the cultural valorisation of the penis in South Asia as well as in the Western world (Stephens 2007), it is not surprising that so much attention has been paid to a group of people who are alleged to obtain power and status on account of sacrificing male genitals. In other words, this conceptual and representational privileging of emasculation is the direct corollary of and paradoxically contributes to the hegemony of not only the penis but also the phallus (Stephens 2007 and Roth 2004). While I acknowledge the complexities of this relationship, I use phallus to indicate the cultural manifestation of masculine hegemony. As my ethnography discloses, *hijrahood* is produced at the interstice between the magical appearance and disappearance of the penis and the way one's ability to claim authentic *hijra*

status depends on one's ability to master this special art. My point is that as a social institution the *hijra* have been conceptualised within a penis-centred frame of reference even though the very absence of it is precisely what has been troped to be the truth about the *hijra*.

One of the first anthropological debates on the *hijra* in the 1950s in the pages of *American Anthropologist* draws on deeply reductive theories of oedipal anxieties to explicate the *hijra* practice of emasculation and transposes this onto the general Indian male personality structure (see Agrawal 1997 and Cohen 1995). In other words, the *hijra* practice of castration is read here as indicative of Indian males' generalized inability to reconcile their oedipal anxieties. Nanda (1999) departs from this psychoanalytically grounded reading at least partially and embeds emasculation within various Hindu mythological narratives to contend that the very loss of penis paradoxically transforms the *hijra* into a universal source of fertility. More recently, scholars most notably Reddy (2005) note that it is on account of one's not having penis that one manages to assert one's authentic *hijra* status, while Cohen (1995) contends that emasculation represents an uneven distribution of the phallic power wherein the accommodation, if not acceptance, of the *hijra* in the Indian social structure comes at the cost of castration (Agrawal 1997).

In a significant departure from previous scholarship, what this thesis demonstrates is that it is not emasculation but the conduct of the *hijragiri* that affirms one's *hijra* status. More importantly, I contended that there are both *hijra* with penis as well as those without and both these groups variably draw on cultural resources to authenticate their positions. Here, the point I intend to foreground is not just this hierarchical evaluation of *hijraness* based on genital status. Rather, my intention is to foreground the penile politics that produces the current forms of representation of the *hijra*. It is precisely because of this phallocratic interpretive framework that *hijra* are placed not only outside the procreative heteronormativity but also beyond the economy of phallic pleasure. While this critical focus on the penis foregrounds the politics of

hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, analytical frameworks are often locked in a binary framework cast in terms of the appearance and disappearance of the penis, with the effect that those who get rid of their penis are denied not only masculinity but also the power of pleasure. In other words, the very abjection of the *hijra* is not only the result of societal understanding about *hijra* being people born with defective or missing genitals but also because of the popular understanding about *hijra* being outside the economy of desire and pleasure.

Hijra publically project themselves as people with missing or defective genitals and locate themselves outside the normative *Bangla* world of bodily pleasure. Most analysis stops with that taken for granted representation of *hijra* or views their sexual activity as deviations from conventional *hijra* norms. Ethnographic work on the *hijra* concerns *hijra* claims about their being outside the order of the phallus and desire, *hijra* management of an asexual and ascetic identity and the resonance of such *hijra* ideals with the wider cultural ideals of renunciation. What that body of work fails to interrogate is the complexity of the moral and political economy of desire that works to affirm particular stereotypical representations of the *hijra* as asexual. In contrast, I contend that central to *hijrahood* is the construction of an alternative *Uti* universe that represents not only an anal space but also anal masculinities. The failure to engage the economy of desire, I suggest, is not only the direct corollary of the widespread trope about *hijrahood* being anchored in emasculation but also because of the loss of desire that is equated with the loss of the penis.

Because the anus in the *Bangla* view is not only culturally devalued but also unspeakable, *hijra* invoke the lack of penis or penis-centred metaphor in their effort to seek recognition as *hijra*. My contention here is not simply the fact that *hijra* deem the anus to be the centre of erotic delight, which works powerfully to challenge the phallocratic conceptualization of not only erotic delights but also wider heteronormative social institutions, but that scholarly

engagement with the *hijra* has largely failed to interrogate the *hijra* beyond the cipher of the phallus and penile pleasures. Indeed, there remains an overarching proclivity not only to reify the penis as the ultimate apogee of sexual delight in studies of male bodied feminine identified people cross-culturally but also to adopt a phallic frame of reference in conceptualizing erotic subjectivities more generally. In much contemporary writing on male to male sexual subjectivities or *hijra* as well as further afield, the penis often emerges as the uncontested cultural truth about the source of erotic pleasure.

Scholars often question the validity of cultural models that bifurcate people in male to male sexual intercourse into rigidly penetrative and receptive roles or categories. Such models often fail to acknowledge the complexities and fluidities of sexual behaviours and identities. The unwritten assumption is not just that pleasure is centred in the penis but also that penile pleasures are superior to other forms of pleasures, a point that feminists have long made. Grosz (1994) underscores the way non-phallic body parts can be re-signified by same sex attracted people as zones of pleasure. Reclamation and restoration of the erotically devalued body parts by non-heterosexuals, she contends, works to hold out the possibility of a new order of pleasure. She further avers that it is through imagining the male body to be simultaneously engaged in insertivity and receptivity that a new order of pleasure can be established. Whilst her suggestion is insightful and intriguing, my quibble is with the way she underestimates the pleasures of receptivity and its power. This is not to deflect our attention from the relations of power inequalities within which penetration and reception are structured. Nor am I indicating that erotic acts are non-political. Rather what I emphasize here is the fact that acts of penetration are neither more powerful nor automatically more pleasurable.

The centrality of the penis is also evident in the way non-penile body parts and most notably the anus are eroticised and reclaimed. For instance, in her paper on the conceptualization of gender and sexuality in 19th century Iran, Najmabadi (2008) contends that a system of hierarchical gradation of body

parts was central to people's understanding of not only gender and sexuality but also pleasure wherein the anus (both of male and female) was considered superior to the vagina as an object of penetration. While such historical insights trouble the modernist narratives of gender and sexuality, here again the hierarchisation of the body parts is often conceptualised through the standpoint of the penetrator or the phallus. Furthermore, accounts of anal receptivity often uncritically equate receptivity with a loss of manhood. In a similar vein, as already elaborated previously in this thesis, Kulick (1997) contends that the Brazilian transgendered sex workers that he studied derived their gender from their partners, by whom they were penetrated, while they derived erotic pleasure from their clients, whom they penetrated. The dominant underlying assumption informing this interesting body of scholarship is that pleasure inheres in and flows from the penis, much like the way the very lack of penis among the *hijra* works to consolidate the *hijra* as asexual and above desire. Against this overarching penis-centred (Bangla) approach, this thesis foregrounds and asserts (*Ulti*) anal masculinity and agency through *hijra* narratives of the anus as not only an object of desire but an agentic desirous subject.

Finally, I want to note that the failure of scholarship to recognize and adequately and critically engage non-penile possibilities of pleasures is the direct corollary of how we as anthropologists view erotic pleasures and relate to self, others and the ethnographic field. That is, ethnographers' understanding about pleasure and power is configured within particular socio-historically specific economies of desire in terms of which both our understandings of the other as well as the knowledge we produce are framed (cf Kulick 2006 on masochist ethnographic interest in the powerless and the libidinal structure within which ethnographic interest in the powerless is produced). Because the epistemic framework scholars of the *hijra* specifically and gender and sexual diversity more generally adopt is penis-centred, analysis inevitably forces questions of body, pleasure, power and erotic practice and agency back to the essentialist penis. It is this power and pleasure of the penis and penetration that my ethnography of the *hijra* complicates,

pushing us to imagine a world of pleasures and power beyond the order of the phallus.

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