

## ***Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850–1900***

**By Jessica Hinchy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.**

Jessica Hinchy's book *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India* considers the relationship between the colonial state and the transgender *Hijra* community. Since 2014 *Hijras* have been officially recognised as the third gender in India but in the nineteenth century were known to the British as a small community of eunuchs primarily identified by wearing female clothing and associated with public performance and blessings of fertility at weddings and births. Providing a history of this understudied group and its interactions with colonial officials in the North West Province in the late nineteenth century, Hinchy convincingly argues that the interest in *Hijras* was more than an eccentric colonial obsession with a group associated with deviant sexual behaviour. Rather a detailed study of the colonial "panic" surrounding *Hijras* provides a glimpse into the underlying fragility of colonial power (27), the ambiguities inherent in colonial attempts to classify and monitor Indian subjects, the ways in which "gender expression, sexual behaviours, domestic arrangements and intimate relationships were central to colonial governance" (20) and how this was played out in individual lives.

In Part One Hinchy argues that *Hijras* came to be viewed by colonial officials in NWP as an inherently ungovernable population, conceptualised in terms of filth or contagion. This view was reinforced by the information provided by middle class Indian men such as Syed Ahmed Khan, reflecting both changing concerns about homosexuality and anxieties that "respectable" children were threatened with kidnapping and slavery. The incorporation of *Hijras* into Part II of the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 in NWP shows their association with criminal, deviant and mobile populations. Yet unlike other CT populations *Hijras* were castrated and therefore insufficiently masculine, which categorised them as incapable of moral improvement through productive labour, showing the intersectionality of race with ideas about gender, sexuality and the body (98). As *Hijras* could therefore be neither assimilated nor recovered, Hinchy frames the colonial approach within Patrick Wolfe's "logics of

elimination,” drawing parallels with the settler colonies. The aim of legislation was the physical extirpation of the future *Hijra* community by prohibiting emasculation and by removing children from *Hijras*’ households, and cultural extermination through policing dress and public performance.

Methodologically Part Two is probably of most interest to the non-specialist. Hinchy weaves together microhistories with wide-ranging observations on the nature and implications of colonial governance, and the disjunction between the claimed power of legislation and the realities of its enforcement. Chapter Five provides a detailed analysis of colonial archival practices and the limitations within the collection and circulation of colonial record-keeping and intelligence gathering, highlighting the silences in the archive and the ways in which gaps themselves became evidence of criminality. More interestingly, Hinchy demonstrates that the colonial archive is “multivocal,” formed through the participation and contributions of a wide number of individuals and networks of information within both Indian and British communities, reflecting multiple and contested narratives. This is used to good effect in Chapter Six, which is an account of *Hijra* life histories pieced together from fragments of biographies and individual lives. This detailed assessment reveals the wilful limitations of colonial understandings of *Hijras*’ everyday life, showing their seasonal mobility and complicated household structures and emphasising that performance, begging and the *badhai* gifts received were only one aspect of economic life, with many engaging in agriculture and artisan crafts. It also highlights the centrality of discipleship lineages for the generational transfer of knowledge and the extent to which anxieties surrounding the corruption of innocent children vastly overstated the proportion of children living in *Hijra* households.

Moving away from grand narratives of sexuality and gender in colonial rule, Part Three focuses on the everyday contingent interactions between colonial officials and *Hijras*. Chapters Seven and Eight highlight the difficulties faced by a wide range of competing medical, legal and penal officials who sought to make deviant bodies “legible” and controllable, in particular through policing their “’gendered self-presentation’ (clothes) and bodily labour (performance). Chapter Eight also examines the experience of the “disorderly subject,” helpfully reading the colonial archive for “small,” everyday actions by *Hijras* which undermined colonial legislation and policing

through evasion and mobility. Although even survival against extirpation was a significant form of resistance, there is perhaps too much focus on the significance of interactions with the colonial state and on bodily practices driven, of course, by the available archive. This leaves me wondering if it underplays changing power relations within the *Hijra* community, overemphasises resistance as a conscious decision and overplays the role of colonial power in impacting everyday life on anything but a very occasional basis.

Throughout the book, childhood is foregrounded as a significant aspect of inquiry. This is explored in detail in Chapter Nine, where Hinchy argues that for colonial officials “childhood was a moral, embodied *and* numerical category” (244). This reflected perceptions of children as innocent victims and malleable subjects who should be saved, but who remained unreformable and a source of moral danger (245) to their peers, particularly if innocence was defined in terms of sexual activity. This perception of children in the late nineteenth century as both “victimised and corrupting” has been well documented by historians such as Satadru Sen, but it is refreshing to find it mainstreamed in a book not only about childhood.<sup>1</sup>

Hinchy’s book is a thought-provoking read for those with a research interest in British colonial rule and themes of gender, sexuality or childhood, despite its rather repetitive writing style. However, it also speaks more widely to historians interested in colonial governance and in methodologies of using the colonial archive and is a stimulating example of a historian grappling effectively with analysing a community in terms of both “a social role with local cultural meaning *and* as a colonial category” (20).

Catriona Ellis  
University of Strathclyde

**Note**

<sup>1</sup> Satadru Sen, *Colonial Childhoods: The juvenile periphery of India 1850–1945* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).