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## **Invigorating and Reinventing Sacred Space: Hijra and Non-Hijra Relationships in a Dargah**

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# Invigorating and Reinventing Sacred Space: Hijra and Non-Hijra Relationships in a Dargah

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**Banhishikha Ghosh<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

The article juxtaposes the lived realities and perceptions of a hijra *gharana* connected to a *dargah* (shrine of a revered religious figure belonging to the Sufi tradition) in a North Indian city, Narayanpura. It addresses how a hijra community interacts and develops interpersonal relationships with their non-hijra neighbours, devotees and shopkeepers, thereby engendering hijra selfhood. The potent element of symbolism enunciated through mythology, rituals and festivals becomes pertinent in constructing and authenticating the hijra identity. Concomitantly, the spiritual pursuits of these groups are intertwined with their material interests in constructing their complex universe. The monument provides a site where shared connotations for each section of people connected to the dargah, hailing from different cultural, religious and gender orientations, are invigorated. The dargah is, therefore, not only part of the religious system, but it is a system in itself. Data for this article have been accumulated through limited participant observation, unobstructed conversations and narratives of the interlocutors.

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## Keywords

Hijras, sacred spaces, intercommunity relations, dargah

## Introduction

Research on the hijra<sup>1</sup> gharanas of South Asia has hitherto sedulously focused on facets of their individual and group life. This is mainly because hijras have been most often documented as living within a *gharana* (cultural family based on fictive kinship networks), leading a segregated peripatetic lifestyle, travelling from one place to another and sustaining themselves through ritual begging (*badhai and challa-mangti*).<sup>2</sup> The literature until now has not emphasized their relationships with their neighbours and non-hijras. As a corollary, our understandings about hijra subjectivities and their lived realities remain partial. In such a context, this article makes a reflexive analysis of the dynamics of interaction and interrelationships between hijras hailing from both Hindu and Muslim communities, their non-hijra neighbours surrounding the dargah and pilgrims of varied religious affiliations travelling from distant places to visit the dargah. The ethnographic setting within which these dynamics are investigated is a sacred monument, a dargah comprising a shrine and holy graveyard, with which these groups are directly and indirectly associated. The dargah, a 15th-century monument dating back to the Lodhi dynasty, is a site of ritual relevance in Narayanpura,<sup>3</sup> a major metropolitan city in North India, and is owned exclusively by a hijra community. It has a courtyard, a shrine and white-washed tombs where *hijras* are buried. The space to construct this dargah was donated by a Sufi saint to Ammaji, also designated as Mai (mother). Mai was a *muh-boli-behen* (fictive sister) of the Sufi saint, related to him in a system of 'practical kinship' (Bourdieu, 1977). Today, Ammaji's descendants are in possession of this monument, which is a place of worship for devotees who come from different parts of India to solicit blessings. Their offerings are one of the sources of the hijras' income.

Academic literature and travelogues (Cohen, 1993; Dalrymple, 1994; Hall & Bucholtz, 2005; Jaffrey, 1996; Kalra, 2011; Nanda, 1986, 1999; Patel, 2005; Reddy, 2005) have described hijras as outcastes who live in segregated communities. Despite being institutionalized within the third gender order in India (Nanda, 1986), scholars till now have argued that their non-heteronormative performances and anatomical presentations often alienated them and made them a marginal community distinctive

from mainstream society. The theme of the hijra community renouncing worldly materialistic ambitions and becoming ascetics also reverberates in the literature (Lal, 1999; Loh, 2011). Against such notions, this ethnography, centring on a dargah, attempts to demonstrate how the sacred site of veneration serves as an extraordinary space weaving together both materialistic and non-materialistic connotations for diverse sections of people of different genders, religions, castes and classes, into a web made cohesive through everyday communication and interaction.

In this article, I analyse narratives gathered from different stakeholders connected to the dargah: hijras, non-hijra insiders, local shopkeepers (some of whom pay rent to the hijras) and devotees. The aim is to understand how the monument, as a site of ritual relevance, provides a 'common ground' (Bigelow, 2010, p. 154) for each of these stakeholders: people with different social positions who orient themselves and remain plaited together through a shared space of worship. The myths and narratives associated with the space are conducive to legitimizing the hijra identity within the locality. Finally, I demonstrate how the entanglement of physicality, materiality and sacrality (Sinha, 2011) in the life worlds of these groups unfolds with respect to this monument. Sustaining a ritual universe on an everyday basis requires an extraordinary range of apparatuses, specialists and common people, having both sacred and profane objectives.

## Methodology

My unobstructed sustained visits between 2018 and 2020 disentangled the nuanced politics and brought forward the diverse experiential realities and the multiple meanings of the sacred space. In this ethnographic study, the methods employed were limited participant observation, unobstructed and unstructured conversations and observations, narratives gathered from interactions with local shopkeepers, hijras, devotees and non-hijra 'insiders'. This was made possible with the approval of the late hijra *Guru* (spiritual teacher) Zubeida Hajim (all names used here are changed to protect the privacy of my respondents) and Sharma, the caretaker of the monument. In 2018, during the initial periods of my research, my interlocutors were exceedingly apprehensive of my 'intentions'. Previous inexorable local and media intrusions made them anxious to steer clear of any conceivable threats to the ownership of the place. Once a local Muslim leader had entered the premises intending to

convert it into a mosque and make it *pak* (pure). On another occasion, a local news reporter after shooting a documentary left without cleaning up the litter created. However, our deliberations progressively flourished over our shared love for Bengali cuisine, betel leaves and politics. Many of my hijra interlocutors hailed from Bengal, and their natal families were migrants from Bangladesh who had settled in India during the 1970s. My identity as a native Bengali-speaking university student, with a family lineage also from East Bengal (now Bangladesh), was a colossal advantage in establishing rapport. I also gained goodwill by translating official notices/court letters for them from English to Hindi and Bengali.

## The Ethnographic Setting

The hijra dargah stands in close proximity to a Sufi dargah, which is also a popular site of historical and religious relevance. The alleys radiating from the Sufi dargah comprise a cornucopia of shops selling objects of ritual relevance to devotees—rose flower baskets, prayer rugs, *mazar chadars* (silk pieces offered at the shrine), candles, incense sticks and a myriad variety of *itars* (perfumes). Despite being close to this major site of religious activity, the dargah of the hijras is immeasurably distinctive in terms of aesthetics, sensations and the populace converging on it. The monument is located in a marketplace, amidst a plethora of electronic, hardware, grocery and garment shops. Despite being in such a crowded bazaar, the dargah has a drastically different atmosphere. A clean marble courtyard, trees with chirping birds darting in and out, white-washed tombs, religious carvings from the Koran on the walls adorn the space and distinguish it from the cacophony of the bazaar.

The hijra community owns the space on which the dargah stands but does not live there. The hijras reside in a three-storied house in the southern part of Narayanpura. My hijra interlocutors consisted of *Guruma* (spiritual teacher) Salma Hajim, her disciple Zubeida Hajim (the next *guru*), her two disciples Nadia and Saroj, along with younger members: Shilpa, Nisha and Ranjita. After Salma Hajim passed away in 2019, Zubeida Hajim became the *guru*. They also own a large chunk of land contiguous to the dargah and the ten shops, located on its boundary facing the narrow road, who pay a monthly rent. When the hijras visit the site at the beginning of the month, they collect the rents due, partake of a meal prepared by the caretaker's wife, and pay the caretaker a handsome amount of money for cleaning and maintenance. They also visit the

dargah on the occasions of festivals such as Eid, Navratri and Shab-e-Barat, when they organize *langars* (community meals) for everyone who pays a visit to the dargah. Unlike the conventional Sufi dargah where devotees flock every day, this shrine is frequented by devotees only on Thursdays. Devotees come over from different states: Delhi, Punjab, Maharashtra, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh among others, with candles and incense sticks and to pray.

## Multiple Actors, Multiple Meanings

### *The Hijras*

For the members of the hijra *gharana*, the dargah serves three important functions. First, it is an important site of worship. Second, it also serves as a medium for the construction of hijra solidarity. Third, as a space it manifests different shades of power play. Let me discuss each of these in some detail.

First, the dargah serves as a sacred site for commemorating the ancestors of the hijras who had been laid to rest in the white-washed graves situated within the dargah. The myths, customs and symbols which have developed around the shrine legitimize the authority of the hijras in a space where the question of their sexual difference remains subdued and unstated. The shrine belongs to Ammaji who settled in the area where the monument stands today on the land donated to her by a Sufi saint. The hijras uphold and explain the immense power of the shrine. Saroj told me the following:

We generally don't stay in the dargah at night. Sometimes, if you enter the dargah at night, you will find Ammaji in a white sari, holding a walking stick and praying to Allah. This dargah is her sacred resting place. Ammaji was a very powerful soul. She was respected by everyone and whatever she uttered happened without fail. Now she watches over us. If we go astray, she shows us the right way.

In the same vein, extolling Ammaji, Zubeida Hajim said, 'All these trees here are sacred too, the date palm tree, the fig tree, the henna tree... Did you see how miraculously all the trees in the courtyard, tilt in the direction of the shrine, as if bowing down and providing shade and breeze to Ammaji?'. Interestingly, a few myths are associated with these trees.

Thus, according to Zubeida, Shadab, who was in charge of cleaning the place, once sought the permission of the hijras to prune the date tree. But instead of pruning, the woodcutters cut down the whole tree. Zubeida went on:

Giving Shadab permission was our big mistake. That tree shaded the shrine of Ammaji. After the tree was cut to its 'neck', Shadab's daughter-in-law died and his grandson fell sick. He was so scared that he ran away. The two men who cut the tree died too. We hijras also started falling sick. Then my great-great *guruji*, Komal Hajim prayed to Ammaji in repentance, and promised to feed the poor. Then we got better. Although it was cut to the base, the plant grew back and continued to shade the resting Ammaji.

Another myth deals with a fig tree in the dargah. According to the story, one of Ammaji's descendants ate only figs and used her earnings solely to feed the poor and the needy. Every time a fig tree in the courtyard perished, a new one was planted in memory of this hijra ancestor whose austerities and philanthropy were legendary.

The recurrent theme of social legitimation has reverberated through many other myths<sup>4</sup> commonly elaborated in classical literature which assert the historicity of hijras and their acceptance by heroic figures as well as the gods. For instance, in the epic *Mahabharata* Arjuna, the third of the five Pandava brothers transformed himself into the hijra Brihannala when the Pandava family went into hiding; Amba was reborn as Shikhandi, who was crucial in the battle of Kurukshetra between the Kauravas and the Pandavas; and in the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama blessed the hijras (Ghosh, 2019).

Stories such as these are used to strengthen their belief systems, identity, role in society, as well as their capacity to impact the lives of people around them, both positively through blessings and negatively by cursing. Loh argues that the specific identity of the hijras and the way they define, explore or accept their non-normative gender status is linked to these narratives which not only reflect the social, cultural and political significance of the hijras through time, but also serve as a means to subvert the experiences of being looked down upon for being a part of the gender non-normative community (Loh, 2014, p, 29). Interestingly, appearing to extend this point, a counter-narrative can be noticed surrounding the dargah which legitimizes the role and status of the hijras among a significant section of their non-hijra neighbours and devotees. Rather than focusing on the sexual orientations of the hijras, these ontological narratives highlight their social role as well-wishers and good neighbours, thereby authenticating the hijra identity. The

Durkheimian idea of religion in this context can be used, argues Maffesoli (1996, p. 38), to describe that aggregate force which is the basis of any society or association, something which unites strike through a community, through a common matrix, a foundation of the 'being-together'. The dargah in this case serves as a culturally distinct space yielding shared cosmologies, resulting in a repertoire of actions that sustain interrelations between hijras, non-hijra insiders, neighbours and devotees.

Second, the dargah serves as a place of pilgrimage for hijras from several countries in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and Malaysia. Amina, a hijra from Bangladesh, who came to visit the dargah, stated, 'This place is one of a kind. It is holy for the hijra community. I come here, pray to Amma, she fulfils my wishes, keeps me healthy and safe'. Further, when a hijra becomes a *guru*, or undergoes the required *katna/jalsa* (ritual of castration) to become a hijra, they visit the shrine. While the manifest purpose is to seek the blessings of the departed, the latent purpose is also to build a pan-Indian basis for hijra solidarity. On the death of any hijra associated with the dargah especially a *guru*, hijras from all over India assemble for three days, express their condolences, pay their last respects and attend the ceremony at which the successor *guru* takes over the reins. When Salma Hajim died, Anita, a hijra *guru* from the state of Kerala, explained,

Whenever a *guru* passes away, we come from all over India to pay our respects. Our *gurus* also used to do the same. Also, whenever there are important events in our lives, like becoming a *guru*, or undergoing the ritual procedure of castration, we go to Narayanpura and seek the blessing of the shrine. Sometimes while going to Ajmer Sharif, we stop at Ammaji's shrine first and take her blessings.

Finally, the circulation of mythical narratives associated with the dargah does not just serve to legitimize the community's claim to the space; it also propagates their authority over it. Such property rights over the space grant them authority over the non-hijra community who live beside the dargah. Although they constantly emphasize mythological narratives and the spiritual principles of asceticism and renunciation, the hijras here are equally, if not more, concerned with property rights and questions related to their financial well-being. Salma Hajim had once stated,

The land on which the monument had been constructed was donated to Ammaji by a Sufi saint in the middle of the 15th century. However, the original stretch of donated land was much larger than the exact monument as it stands today, and encompassed the entire neighbourhood. However, our



ancestors permitted people to settle on our lands, and the settlers thought, ‘Oh they are hijras, they don’t have any children, what will they do with so much land?’, and we lost our lands to the people in the locality. A few generations back, when officials came to collect the land tax, we realised that most of our lands had been claimed by the people of the neighbourhood. My great-great *guru* Padmaja Hajim then registered the remaining part of the land in her name. Gradually new people started coming in from Pakistan after the partition of India and settled here. Some of them sought shelter on our registered lands, so we allowed them to open shops. In return, they paid a meagre amount as rent to us, took care of the dargah, and served us whenever we came to visit the place. But then some of them even committed the sacrilege of erecting their homes on our holy graves. The corner most shop you see is built on the graves of two pious hijras.

In total, the hijras own 10 shops in the neighbourhood, all of which are situated on the external boundary of the monument. In 2019, each of the shop owners paid a rent of ₹120 per month, which was substantially lower than the market value, which is around ₹10,000–15,000. And the rate of rent has not increased for a long time. Zubeida says,

Our ancestors gave them the space to open their business; hence, we don’t mind that they stay there. We are however concerned when they re-rent the shop again for around 10,000 rupees. Two of the shopkeepers also didn’t pay any rent at all. In 2004, Salma Hajim filed a court case against these two shopkeepers. The verdict in one case was in our favour, but the second case is still pending.

But with the coming of a new *guru* to power, the question of raising the rent as well as control over the land became an issue again. Contrary to the common perception of hijras as communities who make restricted engagements with people except when participating in *badhai* and *challa-mangti*, the hijras of the dargah are engaged in a permanent relationship with the shopkeepers and their families over generations. Thus, when Salma Hajim took charge, she filed a complaint against the two shopkeepers who refused to leave the land. Likewise, after becoming the *guru*, Zubeida Hajim invited all the shopkeepers for a meeting at the dargah which I witnessed. We all sat on a straw mattress on the floor opposite the entrance gate. Before the meeting began, Zubeida Hajim took out a document (in English) and asked me to expound its contents. The document was a new rental agreement signed in the presence of a notary, which stated that the rent should be increased annually by 10%. Most of the shopkeepers (except one) arrived on time, greeted her by making a *pranam* (reverential salutation by bowing and touching a

person's feet) and sat down before her. Zubeida then presented them with the rent agreement and demanded that they pay a higher rent henceforth. The raise was nominal as the rent was extremely low. The caretaker collected the money on the spot and handed it over to Zubeida.

Zubeida remained unperturbed during the conversations, and blessed the shopkeepers who attended the meeting, but she became furious with one shopkeeper who was not only irregular in paying rent but had questioned the legitimacy of the hijras' rights of ownership over his shop. This particular person was not respectful enough, stood before her without greeting her in the usual manner of someone of lower rank, and dared to argue with her. Increasingly agitated, she told him to relinquish control over the shop. She stood up excitedly, started giving clamorous *talis* (ritual claps), and told him in a strident voice, 'You either vacate my shop or I will call my hijra friends from the city and chuck out your goods onto the street. Even the police will support us, as this land is rightfully ours'. A senior shopkeeper pleaded and apologized to Zubeida on his behalf and simultaneously adjured the man to show respect to Zubeida Hajim by doing the *pranam*. The other shopkeepers then joined in and implored Zubeida to relent, saying that he was a family man and his children would suffer if he was not allowed to do business. Zubeida then softened her voice and said to him, 'Move out for now, I want to paint the shop, and later I will rent it to you again'. After the shopkeepers left, Saroj said, 'we will never give him the room on rent again. We will make a small house on the site for ourselves. We could stay there when we make our rent collections.'

The incident illustrates the rights the hijras feel they have over the property as well as the self-image they nourish as people who expect to be venerated and supplicated, and whose blessings are sought by their tenants as an everyday ritual. The incident is also an example of how lived materialities and sacralities of hijra and non-hijra actors are intertwined and influence their interpersonal relationships and social conversations. I felt bound myself to comply with these norms. Nisha (19 years), the newest entry into the community, who is younger than me also claimed to have the status and power to bless me.

It was very clear that the hijras are hierarchically organized, and to show ritual respect to the *guru* is to recognize the guru's sacredness and extraordinary power. It also appears that the hijras claim to play important and special roles in social and religious rituals (Opler, 1959) and demand rituals of obedience from those around them, which helps alleviate the stigmas attached to their identity. In the dargah, they also emphasize their economic and legal rights and have developed extended relationships

in the process of having nuanced interactions with their tenants, neighbours and devotees who come to the dargah. Assertion of solidarity too (Kalra, 2011; Reddy, 2005) is expressed through and in public gatherings, ritual assemblies, at funerals and succession ceremonies of a *guru* etc. The general public fears their 'outrageous assertions' in open spaces (Sharma, 2000) but desires their blessings as much as fears their curses (Ojha, 2011). Tenants and neighbours acknowledge that the hijras are philanthropic, that they bless them and their families and run special *langars* for the poor and the homeless. The good works of the hijras are appreciated.

The role of the dargah in the social and cultural life of the hijras appears salient. It is grounded in a sense of sacrality associated with the main shrine. Following Knapp (1989, p. 123), one might argue that the commitment of the hijras and the shopkeepers towards certain common narratives serve to authorize and legitimize the hijras and 'their models of action'. Thereby, some of the stigmas associated with the hijras are somewhat alleviated and they are accorded much needed respect in the locality.

### *Non-hijra Insiders*

The 'insiders' consist of a family who have assisted the hijras since generations. They have the keys (and exclusive access) to the dargah. Sharma serves as caretaker of the dargah and performs several tasks (mainly, maintenance of the space and collection of rents). While his family is financially supported by the hijras, Sharma also owns a dairy farm. He comes to the dargah once a day and lights incense sticks. He has seen three generations of hijras and is the *muh bola beta* (fictive son) of a deceased hijra *guru*.

The belief system of the Sharma family is closely intertwined with that of the hijras. Providing service to the hijras adds to the *punya* (good karma) of the family. Interestingly, while Sharma gives importance to the *dua* (blessings) of the hijras, he feels that the shrine of Ammaji is more holy and powerful than the hijras of today. He said, 'My relationship is with the Mai's shrine, whenever I asked for sons and grandsons, I got them. That is why I provide my service'. The beliefs of the caretaker need to be understood in the Indian context where the culture of son preference still holds good (Kaur, 2014).

He initially argued that he did not receive any financial benefits from the hijras, yet later he stated that Salma Hajim (the head of the hijras and

their *guru*) had given his family funds to set up a dairy business. In return, Sharma provides them with free milk; his wife makes confections for them at festivals and his sons manage all the official and legal work of the dargah. Yet, he lamented, the current generation of hijras is allured by materialistic ambitions (like buying gold, branded products and upholding an expensive lifestyle). The older hijras 'used to organize food for the poor; but the new *guru* is not interested in philanthropy'. His disdain for the younger hijras also stemmed from the fact that they are not as liberal with allowances or gifts for his family as their elders had been. All my non-hijra interlocutors (Sharma and the shopkeepers) seemed to have material interests in mind, but they never failed to point out the material interests of the hijras. Sharma's feelings were also related to the fact that he had deep emotional bonds with the senior hijra gurus, unlike the weaker relationship he has now with the new younger hijra recruits with whom he does not connect. At the same time, he was anxious about not offending them. Once he said, 'If you tell them that I have told you so much about them, they will stop my allowances'. Continuing the discussion, he said, 'They don't have children. People with families require money. Hijras splurge their money on festivals, social gatherings and frequent pilgrimages to Mecca.'

As non-hijra insiders, Sharma, and his family play important roles in negotiating the interactions between the hijras and non-hijras. Sharma's role as the caretaker endows him with the social status and authority to regulate the entry of people into the dargah, control individuals who could make economic gains out of the space and modulate the relationship of local shopkeepers with the hijra community. For instance, Ajmera, a 40-year-old *mehndi* (henna) leaf seller, visits the dargah intermittently to collect henna leaves free of cost with Sharma's permission. She offers occasional gifts to Sharma's family in return. Despite the fact that Sharma is slightly cynical of the hijras, he and his family remain tied to them through a shared cornucopia of belief systems and rituals, and benefit by exchanging favours.

### *The Local Shopkeepers*

While I observed ten shopkeepers saluting the hijra guru respectfully and seeking her blessings during meetings at the dargah, in their personal interactions with me outside the dargah, they came out with a different story. Some of them openly told me that the hijras did not have rights to increase the rent of the shops as there was a traditional customary rental

agreement between the ancestors of both the groups. Since the earliest times of tenancy, succeeding generations of shopkeepers have made continuous investments in the shops. Going one step further, one shopkeeper argued that 'The shops are not on rent; they were given to our forefathers by their former *guru*. We have a custom called 'pagree dena' by which the right to operate the shops is passed to us through a payment to the dargah. It's almost like a 'khareedi' (purchase). Hence, they don't have the right to increase the rent. Yet, we have to pay increased rent from time to time. They are powerful beings, so we don't want to antagonise them'.

Apart from these tenants, there are a good number of shopkeepers and neighbours living in *pukka* buildings close to the dargah. But these neighbours do not maintain any explicit contact with the hijra community. They do not even venture into the dargah. Their denial of any direct or discreet ritual association with the dargah is contradicted by the claims of the hijras that all the land in the neighbourhood originally belonged to them. Around the dargah, within the market, there were 37 shops and homes in all. One fruit shop owner told me, 'It is better to stay away from them: some say they lure young men to form relationships with them; some say their curses are enormously powerful and sometimes their own infighting<sup>5</sup> creates violent crimes in the neighbourhood', referring to property feuds within the hijra community (*The Hindu*, 2003). Such instances of conflict show that their spiritual and material interests are profoundly intertwined.

The shopkeepers are descended from Hindu middle-class migrant refugees who were settled in this area after the partition of India in 1947. While they did not disprove that the shrine and the graveyard existed even before they came here, today they have legal documents to prove that the land where they built their houses is rightfully theirs. Though these shopkeepers today do not entirely depend on the shops (many of their children have moved to other occupations), they do not want to vacate their shops merely because the hijras claim the land is theirs. Avinash, a 68-year-old shopkeeper, said that the hijra community did own the land on which the shops stand today. He says,

Even if the hijras owned these lands earlier, they don't require so much land to sustain themselves as they do not have children. This land we settled on provided my family with earnings to feed our children, send them to schools and provide them with higher education. It is a proof of resilience, a marker of our family's struggle as migrants in post Partition India.

The houses of two shopkeepers were constructed on top of some hijra graves, proving that initially the dargah property was much more extensive than it is today. Mohammed Siraj, a grocer, whose house stands on one of the graves, claims that his ancestors established the shop and constructed the house. He reasons that since the hijras did not oppose it initially, they now have lost their claim. The hijras, on the other hand, now view what might have been an act of benevolence by their ancestors many years ago as an encroachment. They feel that Siraj has converted the sacred graves into a profane space, and this has angered the hijra spirits. The shopkeepers adjacent to Siraj's shop share the opinion that the spirits have indeed cast a curse on Siraj's family. A shopkeeper who owns a betel leaf store right next to Siraj's house claims that 'as a result of this curse, his wife left him, his grandson died, and he has been having terrible losses in business'. However, Siraj contradicts such a view. He contends that there is nothing sacred about the dargah. 'This is simply a deserted graveyard', he states. 'I have read the Quran and the Hadiths and nowhere can we find mention of hijras. Individuals like the hijras are not considered to be 'complete' human beings according to our religion. Therefore, I never went inside the dargah and this place has become popular only recently'. This statement is thought-provoking as it has been heavily documented in current academic engagements that hijras have a special 'bias' towards Islam (Nanda, 1986, 1999; Reddy, 2005), and this could be found to be true when the social customs, belief systems and death rituals of the hijras are examined. It is equally true that hijras follow an amalgamation of both Hindu and Islamic religious rituals (Lal, 1999; Loh, 2011). One could argue here that Siraj is undermining the religious importance of the dargah not just because his grandfather had appropriated a portion of the dargah graveyard, but also because of his own interpretations of religious texts. Despite admitting that the dargah had gained great religious importance in recent times, Siraj considers it a banal graveyard and not a religious space.

Another shopkeeper also stated that the hijras are responsible for spreading the fame of the dargah by travelling to different places and publicizing the dargah's sacredness. Whether the dargah is sacred or not, 'worship-frenzy' pilgrims arrive to benefit hijras and shopkeepers alike. For the hijras, it has meant an increase in the ritual efficacy of the dargah, their own popularity as ritual specialists and the financial gains that go with it. The rise in religiosity is not unique; it is connected to social and economic changes that have led to the rise in social insecurity and levels of personal anxiety in neoliberal India (Jodhka, 2014).

The relationship of the community of local shopkeepers with the hijras is ambivalent. They cannot completely contradict the property claims of the hijras, and also acknowledge their capacity to bless and curse. While remaining sceptical regarding the sacredness of the dargah, they admit that the public image of such sacredness has amplified its popularity, and eventually benefitted their own businesses. Stories of the 'supernatural power' of the hijras to resolve critical issues have also begun to circulate. On the ground, the popularity of the dargah has profited shopkeepers who stock items required for rituals at the dargah such as *diyas* (lamp), *chadar* (cloth) and incense. In the interest of their business, both groups of shopkeepers (the tenants and the ones who legally own their shops) try not to antagonize the hijras and try to avert the issue of landownership becoming a sore point. Their pragmatic attitude is one of passive tolerance (Hayden, 2002, p. 205) or non-interference with ritual matters. For their part, the hijras publicly pray for the shopkeepers, while calling them *badmash* (wicked men) in private, with the full intention of evicting them one day from the land. It appears that in the process of creation of the dargah as a ritual space, the 'sacred is not constructed over and against the secular and profane', it is rather produced 'in a process of negotiation with it' (Day, 2008, p. 427).

### The Devotees

People from faraway places such as Faridabad, Patiala, Roorkee, Navera, Sahadra and so on throng here. The news of the 'holy' power of this dargah is spread both by the devotees and by the hijras themselves. Wherever the hijras go to collect their ritual dues (*mangti*), they spread word about their dargah, and its power to bless people with fertility. Devotees come from diverse religious backgrounds, and they mostly come here to pray and ask for *dua* (blessings). They light lamps and incense sticks, offer flowers and pray for the fulfilment of their wishes.

They contribute largely to the financial stability and the enhanced social status of the hijras. A devotee named Arti, for instance, said that she already has three daughters and is desperately hoping for a son in order to please her in-laws and husband. She said that the hijras had come to her house on their begging rounds, and informed her mother-in-law about the dargah. I found many childless couples seeking blessings, praying particularly for a male child. Though it was a bit difficult during the festivals to talk to any particular devotee, some did share their stories in brief. I met Gurleen (a Sikh woman), who had come to know about

this dargah from a Muslim neighbour a few years ago, and has been a fairly regular visitor ever since. She came here for seven consecutive Thursdays, and also in the week of the *Navaratri* festival to perform *mathha thekna*, and *joyt jalana* (take blessings and light lamps) for her family's well-being. The dargah's capacity to promote inter-communal conviviality makes it popular amongst devotees. As a sacred space, it commands the power to bestow generalized rather than discrete, religious or sect-specific blessings on its believers. Except for the caretaker Sharma, who claimed to have received blessings of Mai, I did not personally come across any devotee who narrated their story of wish fulfilment after coming here. When I raised this issue with a hijra interlocutor, I was told that people stop coming here after getting their wish fulfilled. Few perhaps returned to give thanks. I was also told that if someone's wish is not realized, it is due to his/her failure to pray to Ammaji correctly and passionately.

## Conclusion

This article juxtaposes the perceptions and lived realities of members of a hijra *gharana* attached to a dargah located in a metropolitan city in North India and of those dependent on them, either living close to the dargah or coming from a far seeking their blessings. It is common for the hijras to base their claims to respect and status on historical sources and mythological stories. In a similar manner, the dargah is found to play a significant role in such validations. What is, however, distinctive in this case is that the dargah is not only a part of the religious system, it is itself a system. It is possible to argue here, following Geertz (1973), that religion is an embodied phenomenon grounded in a materiality that makes the presence of specific material objects an indispensable part of its sacred practices. Thus, the dargah represents a symbolic world order to different groups from different social backgrounds. As a sacred space, it grants semantic validity to multiple interpretations of various stakeholders without 'over determining the site and rendering it fixed and unavailable to contrary uses and interpretations' (Bigelow, 2010, p. 27). All rituals in the dargah are invested with symbolic representations. For instance, lighting the lamp or offering flowers has different connotations for different groups: (a) for the shopkeepers, it has a strong material and commercial connotation; (b) for local non-hijra insiders and the hijras, it connotes the spread of pious power and legitimacy of the dargah; and (c) for the devotees, it signifies a space to express their



aspirations and insecurities. The rituals performed in the dargah provide an aura of actuality. They create a kind of cosmic order and make the belief system of the hijras appear supremely practical and sensible.

This study explains how the hijras are tied in a web of relations with their non-hijra neighbours and devotees belonging to different religions and deploy such relations to claim respect and honour. They feed the poor and the marginalized during festivals and social gatherings, bless neighbours and devotees. They had earlier allowed displaced migrants from Pakistan to settle down on their land, gave neighbours shops on meagre rentals for many years and made a non-hijra family their fictive kin. These actions not only foreground the connectedness of hijras and non-hijras under consideration here, they also symbolize the sacrality of their relationship. As a corollary, the idea of hijra gharanas being necessarily 'subversive' or 'oppositional' to a normative frame or disconnected from mainstream social life would also have to be rethought.

As against the common perception that the hijras of South Asia lead a peripatetic lifestyle segregated from the gender-normative society, the article shows that they can also settle down, relying on social networks with neighbours and non-hijra stakeholders to build up their narratives. Their marginalization in the society at large is also linked to such a strategy. They attempt to juxtapose their low status in modern society with the esteem they enjoyed in the past. The myths play a role in articulating the connections between the cultural, social and the political, and in forming bonds between representations and social experiences (Confino, 1997, p. 1388). A strong element of symbolism expressed through mythology, rituals and festivals become productive in understanding the collective ritual experience, which plays a crucial role in bringing the hijra identities into being as well as constructing and authenticating them to their devotees and other stakeholders.

The article, thus, tries to elaborate how the daily lived relationships of the entities involved with the dargah are fostered through shared beliefs and an interest in coexistence. It demonstrates how material and spiritual purists of different sections of the society work in intertwined ways. The dargah as a culturally distinct space produces shared cosmologies. This gets reflected in the ontological narratives of all the stakeholders who come from different social and spatial backgrounds and participate in a process of culture building.

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### Notes

1. Defining a hijra is a difficult endeavour because of their diversity. According to Kalra (2011), hijras prefer to call themselves the 'trithiyapanthi' or 'trithiyaprakriti', which literally means 'the third gender' or the 'third creation in nature'. But as Khanna (2016) argues, 'subjecthood' should not be defined as an interior construct but, rather, as transactional and relational.
2. *Badhai* (congratulatory salutations) is a socially sanctioned, conventional means of livelihood of many gender non-normative communities like the hijras, whereby they engage in ceremonial singing, dancing and blessing newborn infants and newly married couples. *Challa mangti* refers to the ritual practice of seeking alms in public spaces, from shops, commuters at traffic signals, toll plazas, railway gates, trains etc.
3. Narayanpura is a fictional name for a metropolitan city in northern India. The name of the city, along with the names of my respondents, has been altered to protect their privacy.
4. A host of myths linked to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are used to buttress the role played by people with non-normative gender identities in Indian society.
5. I was told that Zubeida left the group some years back due to certain conflicts and later rejoined the group, as a result of which she lost her seniority in the hierarchy.

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