Liminal Bodies, Sacred Spaces: Identity and Positionality of Hijras in Interaction with the Hindu Majority in Varanasi

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ABSTRACT

Varanasi is a historically produced sacred city whose temples, ghats, pilgrimage routes and devotional institutions organise not only religious practice but also claims to authority and belonging. This article examines how Hijra identity and positionality may be understood within this landscape through a critical narrative review of scholarship on Hijra communities, ritual practice and the making of sacred space in Banaras. It develops the concept of borrowed divinity to describe the conditional attribution of ritual potency to Hijra subjects in particular encounters, without presuming that such recognition is uniformly experienced or becomes lasting institutional authority. The concept is placed alongside Ritual Visibility versus Structural Erasure (RVSE), an analytical framework for tracing the distance between being recognised in a ritual or social setting and being sustained through institutional access, resources and equal personhood. The review distinguishes Varanasi-specific research on transgender health and living conditions from comparative ethnographies of Hijra religious practice conducted elsewhere in India. It argues that existing scholarship supports a critical inquiry into conditional recognition, but does not yet establish a city-wide pattern of Hijra exclusion from temples or a uniform relationship with Hindu-majority publics. Varanasi therefore offers not a settled case of sacred contradiction, but a field in which the terms, limits and consequences of ritual recognition require closer empirical examination.

Keywords: Hijras; Banaras; Borrowed Divinity; Ritual Visibility; Structural Erasure; Sacred Geography; Gender and Religion

INTRODUCTION

The City, the Sacred, and the Politics of Belonging

Varanasi, also known as Kashi and Banaras, occupies a distinctive place in Hindu sacred geography. Its religious significance is not contained within a single temple or doctrine. It is produced through pilgrimage routes, textual traditions, riverfront architecture, neighbourhood shrines, monasteries and repeated acts of devotional practice. Eck's account of Banaras maps a sacred city constituted through interrelated sites and narratives rather than through a single centre (Eck, 1982). Bakker's historical work unsettles the idea that this geography has existed unchanged from antiquity: textual, archaeological and political evidence points instead to successive constructions and reconstructions of sacred space (Bakker, 1996). Desai extends this historical account by showing how the city's temples, monasteries, mansions and ghats were materially and imaginatively remade between the late sixteenth and early twentieth centuries (Desai, 2017). Sacredness in Banaras is therefore neither simply inherited nor evenly distributed. It is made, maintained and contested through institutions, spatial practices and social relations.

This article asks how Hijra identity and positionality may be understood in relation to that sacred landscape and the people and institutions that sustain it. The question cannot be reduced to whether Hijras are accepted or rejected by 'the Hindu majority'. Both terms conceal internal differences. Hijra communities include people with varied gender identifications, caste histories, religious affiliations, regional backgrounds, economic positions and relationships to community institutions. Hindu publics are equally differentiated by caste, class, sect, locality, gender, generation and forms of religious practice. A household inviting Hijras to a ceremony, a priest

interpreting a temple's rules, a neighbourhood resident negotiating everyday proximity and an administrator making decisions about public space do not occupy the same social position. Their responses should not be collapsed into one collective attitude.

The point of departure is a tension documented in the wider literature on Hijra communities: ritual significance can coexist with social marginalisation. Nanda's ethnography examines Hijra social organisation, life histories, livelihood and ritual roles, and makes clear that no single account can stand for every member of the community (Nanda, 1999). Reddy's work moves beyond a narrow account of ritual function by showing how Hijra identity is negotiated through the local economy of *izzat*, kinship, sexuality, religious practice and everyday interaction in Hyderabad and Secunderabad (Reddy, 2005). These studies provide an essential comparative foundation. They do not, however, establish that the same arrangements operate in Varanasi. The city's own religious and spatial history must be taken seriously rather than treated as a backdrop interchangeable with other Indian settings.

The article develops two linked but distinct concepts to sharpen this problem. **Borrowed divinity** refers to the conditional attribution of sacred potency to Hijra subjects in particular ritual encounters. It describes a relation in which ritual efficacy may be sought from a person without that recognition necessarily extending into lasting authority, institutional access or equal social standing. **Ritual Visibility versus Structural Erasure (RVSE)** offers a broader framework for tracing what happens after recognition occurs: whether it is sustained, translated into institutional arrangements, contained within a particular occasion or blocked before it can affect material security. Borrowed divinity concerns a possible mechanism of conditional sacred incorporation; RVSE examines the uneven passage from recognition to durable belonging.

The argument is not that every invitation to perform *badhai* is exploitative, nor that every Hijra participant understands ritual power in the same way. Ritual work may provide income, status, pleasure, community visibility and opportunities to exercise authority. Participants may negotiate payment, initiate encounters, refuse requests or interpret ritual obligations in ways that differ from those of household members. These possibilities are not peripheral to the analysis. They are essential to it. The question is whether recognition in one setting changes the terms on which a person is treated in other settings, and who has the power to determine that change.

The article proceeds as a critical narrative review informed by exploratory conversations undertaken in the research process behind the original Varanasi study. It brings published scholarship into conversation with situated narratives concerning ritual encounters, access to sacred space, neighbourhood distance and changing forms of embodiment. These conversations are not treated as a representative interview sample, and the article does not claim that any one account speaks for all Hijra residents of the city. The literature review establishes the wider conceptual and historical context; the conversational material keeps the discussion attentive to the relationships through which sacred recognition is actually negotiated. The distinction between comparative scholarship, interlocutor narratives and the authors' interpretation is maintained throughout.

Review Approach and Literature Selection

This article adopts a critical narrative review because the relevant literature is dispersed across anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, religious studies, urban history, public health and legal research. It does not claim to be a systematic review. No protocol was registered, no exhaustive screening count was maintained and no statistical synthesis was attempted. The purpose of the search was to identify and critically compare scholarship relevant to three connected questions: how Hijra communities have been studied in relation to ritual and religious practice; how sacred space and authority have been historically organised in Banaras; and what empirical research is available on transgender populations in Varanasi.

Source discovery and verification drew on PubMed records; JSTOR book and chapter records; journal and publisher platforms, including SOAS, *Asian Ethnology*, Brill, the University of Chicago Press and the University of Washington Press; academic library and institutional catalogue records; and official Indian legal sources. The Supreme Court Observer was consulted for case tracking, not treated as a substitute for a judicial order. Searches were updated on 12 November 2026. The search did not use a fixed lower date for foundational theoretical works. For empirical and specialist scholarship on Hijra communities and gender-diverse populations, the

principal period considered was 1990–12 November 2026, while earlier theoretical works were retained where necessary to explain the concepts used in the article.

The principal search combinations were: (1) 'Hijra' OR 'Hijras' OR 'Kinnar' with 'Varanasi' OR 'Banaras' OR 'Kashi'; (2) 'Hijra' OR 'Kinnar' with 'ritual', 'badhai', 'blessing', 'religion', 'Hinduism', 'temple', 'caste' or 'sacred space'; (3) 'transgender' OR 'third gender' with 'Varanasi' and 'health', 'housing', 'living conditions' or 'access'; and (4) 'Kinnar Akhara' with 'religious authority', 'recognition' or 'institutionalisation'. Variants in spelling and transliteration were used where relevant. Screening took place in two stages: titles, abstracts and catalogue descriptions were checked for relevance, followed by examination of full texts or publisher records for the sources used in the analysis. Reference lists of central works were checked selectively to locate foundational studies.

Sources were retained where their subject, method or argument contributed to at least one of the three questions above. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research, ethnographies, scholarly monographs, academic book chapters, empirical studies with identifiable methods and primary legal materials. Studies conducted outside Varanasi were included when they clarified Hijra social organisation, religious practice, ritual work or the negotiation of identity; they are explicitly treated as comparative scholarship, not as direct evidence about the city. Work on Banaras's architecture, sacred geography and ritual labour was included to establish the historical and spatial context. Varanasi-based health research was included for its city-specific empirical value, while its broader transgender category and health focus were kept distinct from the article's questions about Hijra ritual positionality.

Sources were not used to support claims beyond their geographical or thematic scope. Popular retellings of myth were not treated as ethnographic evidence, and a source that mentioned gender diversity only in passing was not used to substantiate claims about temple access or caste relations. Since this was a targeted narrative search rather than a systematic database review, the article does not report a PRISMA flow diagram or numerical inclusion totals. The search nevertheless supports a narrower conclusion: the materials located include important studies of Banaras and transgender life in Varanasi, but do not provide sustained peer-reviewed ethnography of Hijra relations with temple authorities, domestic ritual settings and Hindu-majority publics in the city. Hindi-language scholarship, unpublished theses, local archives and community-produced materials remain areas for further retrieval.

Conversational Material and the Status of Interlocutor Narratives

The original article emerged not only from reading scholarship but also from conversations and discussions with people whose accounts informed the authors' understanding of Hijra positionality in Varanasi. Those narratives matter because they prevent the article from treating the community as an abstract object of theory. They direct attention to the circumstances in which a Hijra person is approached for a blessing, the different terms on which sacred and public spaces are inhabited, and the distance that may persist between ritual recognition and everyday coexistence. The revised article retains these concerns as part of its interpretive argument rather than converting them into general claims about every Hijra person or every Hindu household.

The conversational material is used as exploratory, situated evidence. It was not designed as a statistically representative sample, and the article makes no claim of saturation. The accounts are read relationally: what a participant says about a ritual encounter is not treated as interchangeable with a priest's explanation of temple rules, a household's account of custom or an administrator's description of public-space management. The article distinguishes interlocutor perspectives from the authors' conceptual interpretation and recognises that disagreement, ambivalence and silence are part of the material rather than defects to be edited away.

The conversations are represented in analytic paraphrase rather than through decontextualised quotation. The article does not treat these exchanges as a representative sample or use them to make prevalence claims; it draws on them as exploratory, situated interlocutor narratives.

Liminality, Purity, and the Production of Sacred Space

Liminality remains useful for the study of ritual transition, but it is a poor substitute for an analysis of durable social position. Van Gennep's model distinguishes separation, transition and incorporation in rites of passage (van Gennep, 1961). Turner develops the transitional phase into an account of ambiguity and the temporary suspension of ordinary status distinctions (Turner, 1969). These concepts help explain why certain ritual moments may loosen established classifications. They do not explain why a community can remain subject to exclusion long after the ritual has ended. To describe Hijras as inherently liminal risks converting an historically produced social position into an attribute of identity. The more consequential question is who produces the threshold, which institutions maintain it and what resources or authority remain beyond reach.

This distinction matters because the language of liminality can romanticise the very marginality it is meant to explain. Turner's account of anti-structure illuminates the temporary possibilities opened by ritual, but a temporary suspension of hierarchy is not the same as a redistribution of power. Ritual ambiguity may confer potency without altering the ordinary arrangements governing housing, livelihood, social respectability or institutional office. Liminality should therefore be used to analyse a particular ritual relation, not as a total description of Hijra life.

Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution directs attention to the classificatory work through which bodies, substances and boundaries are made socially meaningful (Douglas, 1966). It helps explain why social orders invest certain bodily differences with symbolic significance. But purity cannot become a universal explanation for every encounter involving Hijras. In Varanasi, the relation between caste, gender and ritual access must be established at the level of specific institutions and practices. A temple rule, a household preference, a neighbourhood interaction and a labour arrangement may all invoke ideas of purity, but they need not operate in the same way. Nor can caste hierarchy be reduced to a generalised anxiety about bodies being 'out of place'.

The production of sacred space brings these questions into material view. Lefebvre's account of space as socially produced shifts analysis away from the idea of space as a neutral container and toward the practices, representations and power relations that make places usable and meaningful (Lefebvre, 1991). Bakker demonstrates that Banaras's sacred geography developed through changing textual, political and institutional formations, not through an uninterrupted religious essence (Bakker, 1996). Desai's architectural history further shows how the city was materially remade and how its built environment became central to competing accounts of religious identity and urban authority (Desai, 2017). Sacred space is thus produced through decisions about construction, patronage, access and the recognition of ritual expertise.

Parry's ethnography of death in Banaras offers another important point of comparison. His account of cremation, ritual specialists and the Dom community shows that sacred labour is distributed through differentiated social positions and relations of dependence, status and exchange (Parry, 1994). It does not provide evidence about Hijra access to temples or ghats. Its relevance lies elsewhere: it demonstrates that religious work in Banaras is organised through social hierarchies, and that proximity to indispensable ritual labour does not necessarily confer equal status on those who perform it. This insight helps frame the question of borrowed divinity without treating different communities or forms of labour as equivalent.

The analytical task, then, is not to declare Varanasi inclusive or exclusionary in the abstract. It is to examine how particular sites distribute entry, ritual participation, labour, payment, office and decision-making. A person may enter a temple without being authorised to perform a ritual; a ritual worker may be valued without participating in governance; a public ghat may permit physical presence while remaining unevenly accessible in practice. These distinctions are indispensable to a study of sacred geography and gendered belonging.

Borrowed Divinity: Conditional Sacred Incorporation

Borrowed divinity is the principal conceptual contribution of this article. It names a relation in which sacred potency or ritual authority is attributed to Hijra subjects for a particular occasion or function, while that recognition remains conditional and may not extend into durable institutional authority or equal social standing. 'Borrowed' is used to describe the terms on which recognition is socially granted, not to suggest that Hijras lack

their own religious traditions or that sacred power originates with dominant institutions. The concept concerns the unequal power to define when a person's sacred significance will be acknowledged and what consequences that acknowledgement will carry.

The concept builds on, but does not simply repeat, existing ethnography. Nanda's account remains foundational because it examines the organisation of Hijra communities alongside individual lives, ritual roles, economic adaptation and relations with wider society (Nanda, 1999). Her work resists the reduction of Hijras to a single symbolic function: the community is not only a ritual category but also a social formation with internal relationships, labour arrangements and differentiated life histories. Reddy develops this complexity further through the local economy of *izzat*. Her ethnography shows how respectability, sexuality, kinship, religious practice and economic relations shape the negotiation of Hijra identity in Hyderabad and Secunderabad (Reddy, 2005). Her discussion of Hindu iconography and Hijra renunciation is especially relevant, but it is not a simple account of Hindu acceptance. Religious symbols and practices are negotiated alongside other identifications and social claims.

Loh's study of religious identifications makes a different, equally important intervention. She argues that Hijra religious practice cannot be captured through a singular Hindu or Muslim label; practices vary across communities and individuals, and are shaped by belief, background, region and life history (Loh, 2011). This is not the same process that the present article calls borrowed divinity. Loh examines how Hijras adopt, combine and make meaningful religious identifications. Borrowed divinity asks how other actors attribute ritual efficacy to Hijra subjects in particular encounters, and whether the recognition extended in those encounters persists beyond them. One concerns the plurality of religious practice and self-positioning; the other concerns the social terms on which sacred authority is recognised and used.

Bevilacqua's analysis of the Kinnar Akhara adds a further distinction. The Akhara, established in 2015, represents an organised attempt by transgender and Hijra actors to claim a place within Hindu religious institutions and the public sphere. Bevilacqua examines the strategic mobilisation of Hindu identity and the challenge this poses to established, male-dominated akhara structures (Bevilacqua, 2022). This is a claim to institutional presence and legitimacy, not simply the temporary invocation of ritual potency. It therefore helps distinguish two forms of recognition that should not be conflated: being sought for a ritual function and pursuing an enduring place within religious organisation. Neither can stand as evidence for the experience of every Hijra person, and the Kinnar Akhara should not be treated as a proxy for ordinary religious life in Varanasi.

Borrowed divinity can be examined through four questions. **Invocation:** under what circumstances is Hijra presence requested, permitted or treated as ritually significant? **Instrumentality:** what work is that presence expected to perform, who defines its value and who benefits from it? **Revocability:** does recognition persist beyond the ceremony, or is it confined to a specific time, place or transaction? **Institutional translation:** does ritual recognition lead to participation in decision-making, religious office, sustained relationships, resources or other forms of social legitimacy? These questions distinguish the concept from a general observation that marginalised groups may be included conditionally. Borrowed divinity focuses specifically on the attribution and use of sacred efficacy.

The concept nevertheless requires limits. It should not be applied whenever a Hijra person participates in a ceremony, nor should ritual participation be presumed exploitative. A household may invite a group through custom, affection, fear, religious conviction, an established relationship or several motives at once. Participants may regard the encounter as work, spiritual practice, customary entitlement, performance, livelihood or a combination of these. They may initiate the visit, negotiate the payment, refuse a request or interpret the blessing in terms that are not shared by the household. Agency is part of the relation being analysed; it does not, however, erase the institutional inequalities that may shape the encounter.

The word 'borrowed' also risks implying that sacredness is lent by a dominant society to subjects who otherwise possess none. That is not the claim. Hijra communities have their own devotional histories, deity affiliations, ritual knowledge and understandings of sacred power. A participant may understand their authority as inherent, inherited, cultivated or grounded in community practice, while a household treats it as relevant only for a particular occasion. The asymmetry lies in the power to delimit public recognition, not in the source of divinity

itself. Used in this way, borrowed divinity is a relational and testable concept. In Varanasi, it remains a question to investigate rather than a finding that can be assumed in advance.

Ritual Visibility and Structural Erasure: The RVSE Framework

RVSE provides the broader frame within which borrowed divinity can be examined. Ritual visibility refers to the circumstances in which Hijra presence becomes culturally legible or valued through domestic ceremonies, public performances, religious narratives or other ritual practices. Structural erasure does not mean literal invisibility. It describes the persistence of institutional and material exclusions despite recognition in particular settings: the failure of recognition to become durable access, authority, protection, resources or equal personhood.

The framework challenges the assumption that visibility is itself evidence of inclusion. A person may be invited to bless a household yet have no role in the organisation of its religious life. A community may appear in a public festival without influencing the rules governing that event. A state may recognise an identity category while individuals continue to encounter barriers in healthcare, housing or welfare. These are not interchangeable examples, and they should not be treated as established facts about Varanasi without local evidence. Their analytical value is to insist that recognition be followed across domains rather than measured at the moment it becomes most visible.

RVSE can be represented as a set of linked questions: where does visibility occur; who recognises it; what does that recognition enable; which institutions are responsible for translating it into durable rights or resources; and where does the process stop? The sequence ritual visibility to social legibility to institutional translation and finally towards material security is therefore not a universal progression. Recognition may be contained within a household, withdrawn after a ceremony, acknowledged symbolically but denied institutionally, or translated into specific resources without producing equality in other domains. Visibility can also bring surveillance, stigma or unwanted exposure. In some circumstances, privacy or selective non-visibility may be a strategy of safety rather than evidence of erasure.

Borrowed divinity occupies a specific position within this framework. Where ritual potency is invoked for an auspicious function but recognition remains confined to that function, borrowed divinity may describe the mechanism through which visibility is made conditional. The concepts must nevertheless remain distinct. Borrowed divinity concerns the attribution and use of sacred potency in a particular relationship; structural erasure concerns the wider failure of recognition to become durable institutional presence or material security. A ritual encounter may involve borrowed divinity without proving structural erasure, and structural erasure may operate in domains unrelated to religion.

RVSE is used here as a conceptual heuristic, not as a claim that findings from another regional context can simply be transferred to Varanasi. The framework directs research toward the spaces where recognition is produced and the institutions through which it may or may not travel. It does not predetermine whether a temple, household, neighbourhood, public festival or welfare office will reproduce exclusion. That determination requires evidence about the rules, relationships and experiences specific to each setting.

Hindu Cosmology, Mythological Narratives, and the Limits of Symbolic Inclusion

Hindu traditions contain narratives and images that unsettle fixed accounts of gender. Ardhanarishvara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati, is frequently invoked in contemporary discussions of gender plurality. The Mahabharata includes Shikhandi and Arjuna's period as Brihannala; traditions associated with Aravan and Mohini have become significant in particular Hijra and Kinnar ritual formations, especially at the Koovagam festival in Tamil Nadu. These figures are not interchangeable, and none is a direct historical representation of contemporary Hijra identity. Their significance lies in the ways communities interpret and mobilise them.

Reddy's discussion of Hindu iconography and Hijra renunciation shows that religious images do not merely decorate an identity formed elsewhere; they can shape negotiations of embodiment, asceticism and social legitimacy (Reddy, 2005). Anupama's ethnographic study of the Aravan festival, based on fieldwork at

Koovagam between 2015 and 2017, is useful for a different reason: it refuses to reduce the festival or its participants to one settled meaning of the body, and instead traces competing and sometimes conflicting forms of embodiment (Anupama, 2019). Bevilacqua, meanwhile, examines how mythological and historical references are mobilised strategically in the Kinnar Akhara's claim to religious recognition (Bevilacqua, 2022). Together, these studies show that myth is not a stable repository of inclusion. It is interpreted and put to work within particular ritual and institutional projects.

The existence of gender-crossing or gender-composite figures does not settle contemporary access. A deity's form cannot determine temple rules, the composition of a priestly body or eligibility for religious office. Nor does Shikhandi's or Brihannala's presence in an epic establish that every gender-diverse person will be welcomed by every Hindu community. Symbolic representation can furnish a language through which belonging is claimed; institutions decide how authority and participation are organised. The two registers may inform one another, but neither guarantees the outcome of the other.

It is therefore misleading to describe Hindu cosmology as uniformly inclusive and Hindu society as uniformly exclusionary. 'Hinduism' is not a single institution with one position on gender. It comprises diverse textual traditions, sectarian authorities, devotional practices, local interpretations and publics. The more precise question is how particular actors interpret gendered narratives, whether Hijra participants themselves draw on them, and whether such interpretations affect their access to ritual space or authority in a given setting. For Varanasi, this question remains open. Mythological references establish an important interpretive field; they cannot substitute for evidence about the practices of identifiable temples, shrines or households.

Ritual Economies, Badhai, and the Negotiation of Recognition

The practice commonly called *badhai* is central to many ethnographic accounts of Hijra ritual work. It is associated with visits to households during life-cycle occasions such as births and marriages, where blessings, songs, gestures and the exchange of money may form part of the encounter. Nanda's work situates ritual roles within a wider account of community organisation and economic adaptation (Nanda, 1999). Reddy shows how ritual efficacy is entangled with local economies of respect, kinship and religious practice rather than existing as a detached symbolic function (Reddy, 2005). These studies explain why Hijra presence may be sought at particular ceremonies; they do not establish the frequency, organisation or meaning of *badhai* in contemporary Varanasi.

The encounter cannot be reduced to a transaction in which a household purchases a blessing and subsequently rejects the person who gives it. That sequence may describe some experiences, but it is not an adequate account of the ritual relation. A household may invite Hijra participants through custom, belief, fear, respect, an existing relationship or several motives at once. Participants may understand the visit as livelihood, customary entitlement, spiritual practice, performance or an assertion of community authority. These meanings do not have to coincide. The analytic question is not whether badhai is emancipatory or exploitative in itself, but how authority, obligation, payment and recognition are negotiated in a particular encounter.

Borrowed divinity directs attention to what happens around and after the blessing. Who initiates the encounter? What form of efficacy is attributed to the participants? How is payment determined? Does the relationship continue after the ceremony? Are the participants approached as religious interlocutors in other contexts, or is their authority confined to the auspicious occasion? These questions make the concept empirically usable. They also prevent the researcher from mistaking a household's belief about ritual potency for the participant's own account of sacred authority.

The economic dimension cannot be separated from the ritual one. *Badhai* may provide income and a basis for collective livelihood; it may also involve disputes over payment, restrictions on movement, harassment or conflict with household members and public authorities. Treating it only as a symbolic practice obscures the labour and negotiation through which it is sustained. Treating it only as an economic transaction, however, ignores the religious meanings participants may attach to the work. Both dimensions must remain in view.

Nor should the community be represented as internally uniform. Seniority, guru-chela relations, age, health, mobility, economic position, regional affiliation, caste history and individual preference may shape who undertakes ritual work and who represents a household. Such differences require ethnographic attention. In Varanasi, research would need to document the specific occasions on which Hijra participants are invited, how invitations and payments are negotiated, and what relationships persist afterwards. Until that evidence is available, the wider Indian literature should be used comparatively, not as a substitute for local accounts.

The subversive force of badhai lies in the fact that the ritual actor is not merely an object through which a household expresses its beliefs. When Hijras bless, sing or pray, they temporarily inhabit and exercise a sacred authority that cannot be fully enclosed by temple administration or priestly lineage. The doorway, courtyard or domestic threshold becomes a site at which the boundaries of authorised sacredness are unsettled. This authority may be brief and conditional, but it is not therefore unreal. The household seeks a blessing because it attributes efficacy to the presence and performance of the Hijra participants. In that moment, the social order must make room for a sacred agency that it may refuse to recognise in other domains.

This is the subversive movement within borrowed divinity. The sacredness is called upon, but the terms of its public recognition remain contested. Hijra participants may use the expectation of ritual efficacy to negotiate payment, command attention, refuse disrespect or insist on their right to appear. Blessing can carry grace and warning at once; song and prayer can be devotional acts and claims to presence. Such performances do not automatically dismantle structural hierarchy, and they may remain bound by the ceremony. Yet neither can they be dismissed as passive service. They expose a limit in the authority of institutions that seek to monopolise the sacred: ritual power is also produced and enacted through embodied practices beyond their direct supervision.

Nanda's ethnography is useful here because it resists reducing Hijra ritual work to a decorative or symbolic role. Ritual performance is entangled with community organisation, livelihood, negotiation and the management of relations with non-Hijra publics (Nanda, 1999). Reddy similarly shows that ritual significance is inseparable from kinship, respectability and the local economy of izzat (Reddy, 2005). Read together, these accounts complicate the idea that a blessing simply confirms a household's control. The encounter may reproduce an expectation, but it also gives Hijra participants a resource with which to negotiate the terms of that expectation. The question for Varanasi is how far this authority travels beyond the moment of badhai and what forms of relationship remain after the ceremony.

Varanasi as Sacred Geography: Access, Institutions, and Spatial Difference

The sacred geography of Varanasi comprises different kinds of spaces: major temples, neighbourhood shrines, ghats, pilgrimage routes, monasteries, akharas, domestic devotional spaces and public festival sites. Eck maps the city through networks of sacred sites and narratives (Eck, 1982); Bakker traces the historical construction of those networks (Bakker, 1996); and Desai shows how architecture and urban reconstruction shaped the material form through which the city came to be seen and used (Desai, 2017). Parry's account of ritual labour adds that sacred practices are organised through differentiated roles and relations of exchange (Parry, 1994). Together, these works establish that sacred geography is historical and socially organised. They do not establish a uniform pattern of Hijra access to Varanasi's institutions.

Physical access and religious authority are not the same. Entry into a temple does not necessarily confer the right to perform a ritual, receive instruction, undertake paid religious labour, hold office or participate in administration. Conversely, absence from a priestly or administrative role does not prove that entry has been denied. Research must distinguish who can enter, who can worship, who can perform or be employed, and who can make institutional decisions. Each dimension may produce a different pattern of inclusion.

The same precision is needed in relation to the ghats. Their public character does not mean that all users experience them as equally accessible, but neither does it justify a claim that Hijra participants are confined to the margins of processions or informally removed from tourist areas. Such statements require observation, interviews or documentary evidence tied to specific sites and periods. The city should not be made to stand as evidence for a claim that has not been investigated at the scale at which it is made.

Residential space requires equal care. *Gharana* refers to a community and kinship formation; it should not be used as if it automatically named a geographically bounded neighbourhood. Claims that Hijra households are clustered in areas of urban precarity require current evidence on housing, tenure, rents, access to services, mobility and neighbourhood relations. A spatial study would need to establish where community members live, how housing is acquired and maintained, whether discrimination affects residence, and how people move between domestic, ritual and public spaces. It should not presume that all members seek or are able to maintain residence within a single community formation.

The same is true of domestic shrines and devotional practices. Reddy and Loh show that Hijra religious life is varied and shaped by local histories, individual belief and community relationships (Loh, 2011; Reddy, 2005). Their work supports asking how deity affiliations, household shrines and devotional routines shape belonging in Varanasi. It does not justify asserting that all local *gharanas* maintain particular shrines or that worship is routinely conducted at specific hours to avoid confrontation. The empirical question is how devotional spaces organised by Hijra participants relate to the institutions that claim authority over the city's public sacred geography.

A rigorous spatial analysis would therefore map relations, not merely sites. It would record who controls movement, who is authorised to perform, which forms of labour are recognised, how payments are organised and where decisions are made. Only then would it be possible to determine whether borrowed divinity has a spatial pattern in Varanasi and whether ritual recognition remains concentrated in domestic or public encounters without extending into institutional authority.

Hijras at the Margins of Sacred Space

The account of Hijra positionality in Varanasi drew attention to the margins of sacred space: ghats, temple thresholds, festival routes, neighbourhood shrines and the domestic sites where ritual encounters take place. These locations should not be collapsed into a single category. A ghat is not governed like a temple; a household courtyard is not equivalent to an institutional shrine; and presence at a festival does not necessarily confer the same authority as participation in its organisation. Yet the distinction between them is precisely what makes the spatial question important. The same person may be welcomed as a ritual presence in one setting, tolerated as a public performer in another and denied a recognised place in institutional religious life.

The conversation-informed material behind the paper directs attention to this unevenness. It suggests that the question is not simply whether Hijras can physically enter a sacred site. It is whether they can remain there without being treated as a disturbance, whether they can worship on terms they define, whether they can undertake recognised ritual work, and whether they have any role in the decisions that regulate the site. Physical entry, devotional participation, ritual authority, employment and institutional governance are different dimensions of access. The article therefore retains the claim that sacred exclusion must be examined as a differentiated experience, while avoiding a blanket assertion that every temple in Varanasi applies the same rule.

The ghats are especially important because their public character can obscure the difference between visibility and belonging. A Hijra person may be visible while blessing, singing, praying, seeking alms or participating in public devotional life. That visibility does not establish equal access to the institutions that manage the surrounding ritual economy. At the same time, the presence of Hijra participants at a riverside shrine or during a festival cannot be dismissed as merely peripheral. These are also sites where devotional authority is enacted. The margin is not simply outside the sacred; it can become a place from which the terms of sacred participation are contested.

This distinction gives the spatial argument greater precision. The article is not claiming that Hijras are uniformly barred from all temple interiors or that all public religious sites in Varanasi are closed to them. It argues that the organisation of sacred space must be examined through the different powers attached to entry, worship, performance, labour and decision-making. Where the available accounts describe constrained or negotiated access, those accounts should be preserved as situated narratives and linked to the particular site and encounter from which they emerge. The absence of a city-wide rule does not make these experiences analytically insignificant.

Spatial Ghettos and Social Distance

The manuscript uses the language of 'spatial ghettos' to describe the relationship between Hijra residence, social distance and the unequal geography of urban belonging. The term needs to be handled carefully. A gharana is first a community and kinship formation; it cannot automatically be treated as a geographically bounded neighbourhood, nor does the presence of a shared household prove that a group has been spatially segregated. To establish a ghettoisation process requires evidence about housing access, rent, tenure, mobility, infrastructural services, discrimination and the constraints that shape residential choice.

Yet caution about the term should not erase the spatial argument. Social distance can be produced even where residential segregation is not formally documented. It may operate through the routes people avoid, the places where they are expected to remain, the conditions under which they are tolerated in markets or neighbourhoods, and the difference between being recognised at a ceremonial moment and being accepted as an ordinary neighbour. The conversations that informed the original account draw attention to this relation between public visibility and social distance. The issue is not simply where Hijra households are located, but how everyday movement and proximity are negotiated across the city.

Gharanas may also function as counter-geographies. They can provide kinship, protection, livelihood networks, devotional practice and spaces in which community members define their own relations to sacred figures and ritual authority. Such spaces should not be romanticised as necessarily free of hierarchy or conflict. Nor should they be described only as refuges from exclusion. They are social worlds in which belonging is made, negotiated and sometimes contested. Their devotional practices may assert a sacred authority that does not depend on institutional recognition, even as the material conditions of residence remain shaped by the wider city.

The analytical task is therefore twofold: to document whether and how spatial concentration is produced through exclusion, and to understand how Hijra participants themselves use, value or contest the spaces associated with gharanas. A spatial ethnography of Varanasi would have to trace residence, routes, work, worship and neighbourhood relations together. Without such evidence, the term 'ghetto' should remain a critical question rather than a settled description of the city's residential geography.

Interactions with Hindu-Majority Publics: Recognition, Distance, and Negotiated Encounter

The phrase 'interaction with the Hindu majority' is useful only if it does not turn a diverse population into a single actor. Hijra participants encounter household members, neighbours, shopkeepers, pilgrims, priests, temple staff, police personnel, local political actors and organisers of public events. These encounters are shaped by different relationships and distributions of power. Familiarity, reciprocal obligation, curiosity, avoidance, respect, discomfort and hostility may coexist, sometimes within the same neighbourhood or institution. The conversations informing the original account are important because they keep these interactions situated: they point to lived negotiations rather than an abstract opposition between a homogeneous Hijra community and a homogeneous Hindu majority.

Nanda's ethnography shows why ritual roles must be read alongside livelihood, community organisation and relations with non-Hijra publics (Nanda, 1999). Reddy's account of izzat complicates any simple opposition between respect and stigma: respectability is negotiated through conduct, kinship, economic relations and religious practice, not bestowed once and for all (Reddy, 2005). These studies help explain how a household may seek a Hijra blessing while the same or another social setting remains marked by distance. They also caution against treating a request for ritual service as automatic evidence of either reverence or exploitation. The relation has to be read across time and across settings.

Purity and pollution may help explain particular forms of classification, but they cannot explain every instance of discrimination. A refusal of service by a shopkeeper, a priest's interpretation of temple rules, a household's ritual expectation and harassment in public space involve different actors and institutional settings. Gender norms, respectability, caste, class, economic relations and religious commitments may intersect, but their effects must be traced rather than presumed. The phrase 'Hindu-majority gaze' is useful only when it names a power

relation in a particular encounter; used as a universal explanation, it conceals the very differences the article seeks to analyse.

Butler's account of performativity helps explain how gender norms acquire force through repeated social acts and expectations (Butler, 1990, 1993). It should not be reduced to the claim that Hijra identity is a performance staged for an undifferentiated audience. Embodied lives and self-understandings exceed the expectations projected onto them. The analytical question is how specific encounters make gender legible, how norms are enforced or unsettled, and how Hijra participants respond. Attention to performativity should sharpen the analysis of power, not turn dress, gesture or public presence into evidence of artifice.

Agency is not an afterthought. Participants may invoke ritual custom, negotiate payment, mobilise kinship networks, refuse an encounter, use humour or contest disrespect. Such actions can alter the terms of an interaction even when they do not dismantle wider inequalities. For Varanasi, this argument requires relational and multi-sited research: the accounts of Hijra participants should be read alongside observation of specific household, neighbourhood, public and institutional settings, and, where ethically appropriate, the accounts of other interlocutors. A single leader or household cannot represent the range of community experiences. Nor should research make people more visible than they wish to be in the name of documenting exclusion.

The conversations behind the original analysis also make visible the instability of the norms that participants encounter. When a Hijra blesses a child, sings at a doorway or offers a prayer at a riverside shrine, the logic of exclusion is interrupted. The person is not merely being observed or tolerated: they are acting as a ritual subject whose words, gestures and devotional practice are sought for their efficacy. This authority is not necessarily recognised beyond the encounter, but the encounter itself cannot be reduced to the household's private belief. It brings the social relationship into the domain of sacred power.

This is why interactions between Hijras and Hindu-majority publics are not merely social transactions. They are negotiations over who may exercise sacred authority, where such authority can be recognised and how long its recognition is allowed to last. A religious order may venerate divine fluidity in its iconography and narratives while remaining unsettled by embodied gender variance; it may depend on Hijra ritual labour while withholding an institutional place from Hijra subjects. The contradiction is not resolved by calling the ritual encounter inclusive. It has to be examined in the unequal movement between invocation and everyday coexistence.

Hijra participants are not passive recipients of this ambivalence. They read the anxiety of others, anticipate the expectations attached to a ritual moment and may use those expectations to assert presence, negotiate payment or contest disrespect. The original manuscript's observation that blessings may carry both grace and threat should be understood in this context. The ritual repertoire can include devotion, humour, insistence, refusal and forms of performative pressure. Such actions should not be romanticised as unconstrained resistance; they are strategies exercised within unequal conditions. But they do show that Hijra participants actively interpret and work upon the social relations in which they are placed.

Through these encounters, the everyday becomes theological, the mundane becomes political and the social becomes cosmological. The significance of a fleeting moment of reverence lies in what it reveals about the larger relationship: sacred efficacy is sought from people whose social presence may still be stigmatised. The argument is not that society is a single actor that literally cannot coexist with Hijras. It is that particular social and religious arrangements may rely on Hijra ritual presence while failing to offer the conditions of ordinary, sustained coexistence. Borrowed divinity names this contradiction without erasing the agency of those who negotiate it.

Contemporary Transformations: Law, Urban Governance, and Development

Legal recognition is one domain of belonging, but it is not interchangeable with social or religious recognition. In *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court recognised Hijras and other transgender persons as a third gender and affirmed constitutional protections connected to gender identity and self-identification. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 established a statutory framework addressing discrimination, identity certification and welfare. These developments created legal entitlements; they did not, by themselves, ensure that those entitlements could be exercised without administrative barriers or discriminatory treatment.

The statutory framework changed in 2026. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026 received presidential assent on 30 March and came into force on 25 May 2026. Among other changes, it narrowed the statutory definition of 'transgender person', specifying socio-cultural identities including Hijra and Kinner, specified intersex variations and persons compelled to assume or present a transgender identity through specified forms of coercion. It excludes persons whose claims are based on different sexual orientations or self-perceived sexual identities. The amendment also changes the identity-certification procedure, including a role for a designated medical board in the process before the District Magistrate (Government of India, 2026a, 2026b). The legal change therefore raises a direct question about the relationship between the constitutional principle of self-identification articulated in *NALSA* and a statutory regime that places greater emphasis on prescribed categories and certification.

The amendment has been challenged before the Supreme Court in *Laxmi Narayan Tripathi v. Union of India*. The Supreme Court Observer's case record, last updated on 31 October 2026, listed the challenge as pending and reported that no interim stay had been granted (Supreme Court Observer, 2026). This is a legal position in flux: the amendment is in force, while its constitutional validity remains unresolved. The article therefore does not treat the amendment as a settled statement of constitutional law. Nor does it assume that the express inclusion of socio-cultural identities such as Hijra and Kinner removes the effects of the narrower definition or the certification process. Their consequences depend on implementation, administrative practice and judicial review.

For RVSE, legal recognition and institutional translation are distinct. A statutory category may make a person legible to the state while access to services remains uneven. It does not determine how a household, temple or neighbourhood recognises a Hijra person. The relevant questions are whether formal status enables welfare, healthcare or protection, whether certification creates new barriers, and whether local institutions alter their practices. These domains intersect, but they should not be collapsed.

Varanasi-specific empirical research also requires careful interpretation. Manisha and Chakravorty's cross-sectional study compares 45 transgender respondents with 90 cisgender respondents in urban Varanasi. It reports differences in living arrangements and identifies concerns about health-service access and treatment by health professionals (Manisha & Chakravorty, 2026). This is important evidence that gender-diverse residents of Varanasi encounter material and institutional conditions that warrant attention. Its category is 'transgender', however, and its focus is demographic and health-related. It does not examine Hijra ritual practice, temple access or relations with Hindu religious institutions. The findings should be cited for what they establish, not made to carry questions the study did not ask.

Urban governance and development interventions introduce another set of questions. The original manuscript raised concerns about beautification, tourism-oriented redevelopment, public-space regulation and the possibility that informal policing may restrict the movement of Hijra participants around ghats, markets and festival sites. These concerns should be retained, but their evidentiary status must remain clear. Claims that a particular Smart City project displaced Hijra participants or that security personnel systematically removed them from a specified site require project documents, municipal orders, observation or testimony. The argument is not that all redevelopment is necessarily exclusionary; it is that the reorganisation of public space can alter who is able to earn, gather, perform, worship and remain visible. The effects on Hijra participants must be traced at the level of particular projects and encounters. The same scrutiny applies to NGO and welfare interventions. Programmes described through the language of rehabilitation, skill development or mainstreaming may expand access to resources, but they can also carry assumptions about respectable work, normative gender presentation and the need to abandon community-based forms of kinship or livelihood. Their consequences cannot be inferred from their stated objectives. Research should ask how participants understand, use, negotiate or refuse these interventions, and whether policy categories recognise the diversity of Hijra social and religious life.

Biomedicalisation, Nirvan, and the Negotiation of Embodiment

Biomedicalisation adds a further dimension to the changing terms of Hijra embodiment. The term is used here to describe more than the availability of medical treatment. It directs attention to the growing authority of clinical knowledge, diagnostic categories, pharmaceuticals, surgical techniques, institutional protocols and state mechanisms for certifying bodies and identities. Clarke and colleagues developed the concept to describe

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technoscientific transformations in contemporary biomedicine; its use in the Indian context must be adapted rather than transferred wholesale from the United States (Clarke et al., 2003). The question is how medical systems, community traditions and state regulation come to shape the terms on which gender-diverse people can understand, modify and have their bodies recognised.

For Hijra communities, this question cannot be framed as a simple transition from 'traditional' practices to modern medicine. Nirvan, also rendered in scholarship as Nirvanam or Dai Nirvan, refers to a culturally situated set of practices and meanings that may involve castration, ritual initiation, community recognition and a reconfiguration of social identity. Its significance is not reducible to the surgical act alone. Nor does every Hijra person undergo nirvan, desire genital surgery, use hormones or understand bodily transformation in the same way. To treat any one pathway as the authentic route into Hijra identity would reproduce the very standardisation that the article critiques.

At the same time, cultural significance cannot be used to romanticise practices that may entail serious risk or be shaped by coercive community expectations. Singh and colleagues' multi-site study of gender-transition services in India documented the limited availability of services in public hospitals, the high cost of private procedures and the barriers that led some Hijras and other transgender people to rely on informal procedures or self-administer hormones (Singh et al., 2014). Their findings connect bodily practice to the organisation of healthcare: the use of informal services cannot be understood apart from the absence, cost or unwelcoming character of formal care.

More recent research complicates the picture further. Goel's long-term ethnographic analysis examines how castration and practices of bodily suffering are embedded in hierarchical kinship networks, guru authority and vernacular understandings of parampara and sacred rebirth (Goel, 2025). Biswas and Riggs compare the experiences of Hijra participants who underwent informal Nirvanam and those who accessed gender-affirming surgery through public hospitals. Their study identifies both the risks associated with exclusion from formal care and the importance of time, due process and nonjudgmental treatment in clinical settings (Biswas & Riggs, 2025). These studies do not describe Varanasi specifically, but they make clear that the relationship between community practice and biomedical care is neither uniform nor adequately captured by a tradition-versus-modernity binary.

The point is not to place community-based practices on one side and clinical medicine on the other, as though one were culturally authentic and the other necessarily emancipatory. Community traditions may provide recognition, belonging and a pathway unavailable through public institutions; they may also reproduce hierarchy, pressure or unsafe conditions. Formal medical services may offer safer procedures and professional support; they may also impose diagnostic gatekeeping, long waiting periods, financial barriers and expectations that do not fit every person's understanding of gender. Hormone use, surgical intervention, nirvan and social transition are distinct practices and must not be collapsed into a single index of authenticity.

The 2026 amendment to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act makes the relationship between medicine and state recognition especially consequential. The amended framework introduces medical-board involvement in the certification process and narrows the statutory category of transgender person, while the constitutional challenge to the amendment remains pending in the Supreme Court. The medical board is not simply a neutral administrative device: it raises questions about who is authorised to determine the legibility of a gendered body and how self-identification is mediated by state institutions. This legal development should not be confused with a requirement that every person undergo surgery; its significance lies in the increased role of medicalised verification in statutory recognition (Government of India, 2026a, 2026b; Centre for Law and Policy Research, 2026; Supreme Court Observer, 2026).

For RVSE, biomedicalisation reveals another possible break in the movement from recognition to security. A person may be recognised as a member of a socio-cultural community yet encounter medical or administrative systems that demand a particular form of proof. Conversely, access to respectful clinical care may expand bodily autonomy without resolving stigma in neighbourhoods, households or religious institutions. Borrowed divinity and biomedicalisation therefore intersect around the question of who has the authority to interpret the body: the

community, the individual, the clinician, the state or the religious institution. None of these positions should be presumed to speak for the person concerned.

A Varanasi-based study would need to ask how Hijra participants understand nirvan and other forms of bodily transition; whether access to hormones, counselling or surgery is available and affordable; how clinical settings respond to Hijra identities; and whether biomedical pathways alter participation in ritual work, community membership or devotional life. It should also examine the choices of those who do not seek medical intervention. The analytical task is not to decide which embodiment is more authentic, but to understand how distinct forms of knowledge and authority intersect in people's lives.

Research Gaps, Methodological Problems, and Directions for Future Study

The gap identified here is not an absence of all research on gender diversity in Varanasi. It is the limited coverage of Hijra-centred questions about ritual authority, institutional religion, spatial belonging and everyday relations with Hindu-majority publics. The city has been studied as a sacred and architectural landscape, and empirical work on transgender health and living conditions is available. What remains insufficiently documented is how Hijra participants interpret and negotiate religious positionality in Varanasi, how interlocutor narratives relate to institutional practice, and how ritual recognition moves—or fails to move—into ordinary coexistence.

First, research should document ritual encounters without deciding in advance what they mean. It should examine who initiates invitations to *badhai*, what is expected of participants, how blessings and performances are organised, how payment is negotiated and whether relationships continue after the ceremony. Accounts should include participants with different positions within community networks, not only recognised leaders, and should register disagreement rather than forcing a single community narrative.

Second, institutional access requires site-specific investigation. Researchers should identify particular temples, shrines, akharas and festival organisations and distinguish physical entry from worship, ritual labour, employment, office-holding and decision-making. Written rules should be compared with everyday practice. This is the only way to determine whether exclusion is formal, informal, situational or absent in a particular institution.

Third, caste must be investigated rather than presumed. Hijra participants have different caste and religious histories; community formation does not necessarily erase those histories. Research should examine when caste is disclosed, remembered, denied or made irrelevant, and whether it shapes housing, employment, ritual work, public space or relations with religious institutions. It should also ask how hierarchies may be reproduced within community structures. Neither the claim that Hijras are casteless nor the assumption that caste determines every encounter should be accepted without evidence.

Fourth, spatial ethnography should trace residence, livelihood and mobility together. Mapping *gharanas* alone would not explain housing conditions, tenure, access to services, relations with neighbours or routes between domestic, ritual and public spaces. Research should document how mobility changes during festivals and pilgrimage seasons, and whether urban redevelopment alters the use of particular sites. Terms such as 'ghetto' should be used only where the evidence establishes the spatial and social processes they imply.

Finally, the study of everyday encounters should be multi-sited and ethically accountable. Hijra participants' accounts should be read alongside observation of household ceremonies, neighbourhood relations, public religious events and institutional encounters, without treating majority testimony as the final account of a relationship. Legal and policy changes also require longitudinal attention, particularly the implementation and judicial review of the 2026 amendment. A community-participatory approach is necessary: consent must be ongoing, anonymity should be considered even for publicly known participants, and community members should have meaningful opportunities to shape research questions and respond to representations of their lives. Otherwise, scholarship intended to challenge erasure may reproduce it by turning Hijra subjects into illustrations of an argument constructed elsewhere.

The methodological problem is not only that there are too few studies. It is also that the conditions of exclusion can be difficult to observe through conventional ethnographic access. An ethnographer may enter a temple through routes unavailable to a Hijra participant; a rule may operate through anticipatory avoidance or an unspoken understanding rather than an explicit refusal; and a person may decide not to approach a site because the expected response is already known. In such circumstances, the absence of a recorded denial is not proof that access is equal. Researchers need to attend to pre-emptive exclusion, silence, route-making and the accounts people give of places they do not enter.

This does not mean that participant observation or interviews are inadequate. It means that their design must include the institutions and spaces where the researcher's own access may differ from that of interlocutors. A study of sacred exclusion cannot rely exclusively on the domestic or performative settings in which Hijra participants are visible. It must also examine temple management, priestly lineages, festival committees, neighbourhood authorities, public-space regulation and the informal rules that structure entry and participation. Written policies should be read alongside the accounts of those who are expected to navigate them.

The conversations informing the present article also make a methodological point: interlocutor narratives cannot be reduced to a checklist of themes without losing the contradictions through which people make sense of their lives. A blessing may be understood as livelihood, devotion, customary entitlement and a claim to authority at the same time. A response from a household may carry affection, fear, obligation or distance in unequal proportions. Researchers should preserve such ambiguity rather than resolve it too quickly into either 'acceptance' or 'rejection'. Direct quotations, where available and consented, are particularly important because they retain the language through which participants define these relations. They must, however, be reproduced faithfully and contextualised rather than used as decorative confirmation of an argument already decided by the researcher.

Future research should therefore be multi-sited and relational. It should include Hijra participants with different positions within community networks, not only recognised leaders; household members and neighbours where ethically appropriate; religious functionaries and institutional administrators; and those whose work shapes public space. It should examine badhai before, during and after the ceremonial encounter; trace residential and livelihood geographies; document the rules and informal practices of identifiable temples and shrines; and follow the effects of legal, welfare and biomedical changes over time. Such research requires continuing consent, careful anonymisation and meaningful involvement of community members in the framing and interpretation of findings.

CONCLUSION

Rethinking Sacredness, Recognition, and Belonging

The positionality of Hijras in Varanasi cannot be understood through the simple opposition between reverence and stigma, or through the assumption that symbolic recognition produces social inclusion. Scholarship on Banaras demonstrates that sacred geography has been historically constructed through architecture, political authority and ritual practice (Bakker, 1996; Desai, 2017; Eck, 1982). Ethnographies of Hijra communities show that ritual roles, religious identifications and social relations are varied and negotiated rather than fixed by a single pan-Indian model (Loh, 2011; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). The conversations informing the original account bring these debates back to the particular relations through which Hijra participants encounter households, sacred sites, neighbourhoods and institutions in Varanasi. They should be read as situated narratives, not as a substitute for wider empirical investigation.

Borrowed divinity names the conditional attribution of sacred potency in particular ritual encounters. It asks when that potency is invoked, what work it performs, whether recognition is confined to the occasion and whether it becomes durable authority. RVSE places this question within a broader analysis of the distance between ritual visibility and structural security. The concepts are related but not interchangeable: borrowed divinity identifies a specific relation of sacred recognition; RVSE follows the uneven movement of recognition across institutional and material domains. Their conjunction allows the article to explain how ritual authority can be real and consequential without being institutionally secured.

The article's central claim is not that every Hindu institution excludes Hijras or that every ritual encounter is exploitative. It is that ritual recognition and ordinary coexistence are not the same thing. When Hijras bless, sing or pray, they do more than occupy a role assigned by others. They exercise a sacred agency that may exceed the immediate control of the household or institution invoking it. The same society that seeks a blessing may stigmatise the body through which it is offered; the same ritual economy that depends on Hijra labour may deny Hijra participants a recognised place in its institutions. The encounter therefore reveals not only exclusion but also the instability of the norms that attempt to contain it.

These encounters make the everyday theological, the mundane political and the social cosmological. Hijra participants are not passive figures at the threshold of Varanasi's sacred geography. They read the anxieties around them, negotiate the terms of ritual presence, create devotional and kinship spaces, and assert claims to belonging that do not depend entirely on institutional permission. Their actions do not erase material inequality, but they make visible the fissures within the social order that seeks both their ritual efficacy and their social distance. Whether these forms of visibility can become durable recognition and security remains an empirical question—one that future research must answer without erasing the narratives, disagreements and agency of the people whose lives give the question its urgency.

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