Creating Groups Outside the Caste System: The Devadasis and Hijras of India

by

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Due to my nonexistent knowledge of Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, or any of the other languages traditionally spoken on the Indian sub-continent I have been entirely dependent on my secondary sources for translations and transliterations. For the sake of convenience I have omitted the use of diacritical marks and only italicized words that are not used regularly in the text.

Timeline

2,500 BCE: Earliest known civilization along the Indus River

1800 and 1500 BCE: Alleged Aryan Invasion of the Indian subcontinent

1500-900 BCE: *Vedas*

800-200 BCE: *Upanishads*

8th century BCE: *Satapatha-Brahmana*

7th century BCE - 4th century CE: *Kama Sutra* and *The Laws of Manu*

3rd century BCE: *Dharma Sutras* and *Sastras*

3rd century BCE - 2nd century CE: *Bhagavad Gita*

200 BCE - 200 CE: *Ramayana*

1st century BCE: *Mahabharata*

6th – 7th centuries CE: Rise of bhakti and Tantric movements

11th – 12th centuries CE: Peak of the devadasis and the regional temple system

11th century CE: Rise of regional Muslim kingdoms in India

1206: First independent Muslim ruler of Northern India

1580-1700: High period of Mughal power

1600: British East India Company is chartered to promote trade

1772: Establishment of British-created court system in India

1857: Indian rebellion/massacre

1858: Control of India is transferred from the East India Company to the British
Crown

1947: Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Bill

<u>Introduction</u>

       The caste system in India is one of the more criticized social systems still in existence today. It is in fact but one part of the Indian *varna* system of classifying the universe, a system which has undergone a multitude of interpretations and transformations over the course of Indian history. Although the caste system has been intricately examined in previous scholarship, few have studied it by looking at those Indians who, for whatever reason, at one point had a place in society beyond the basic caste structure. By studying groups such as these one can gain a deeper understanding of how caste developed and what aspects of society are outside of a social system which at times seems so all-encompassing. Historically there have been several such "pseudo-castes," two of the most prominent being the devadasis and hijras of Southern and Northern India, respectively.

       The devadasis and the hijras differ greatly from each other. The devadasis were the temple priestesses found mostly in Southern India. These women were dedicated to a local temple before puberty, and were expected to perform various rites and rituals. The hijras, on the other hand, currently exist and traditionally existed mostly in Northern India, where the Muslim influence was stronger, although they could be found in Southern India, as well.[1] The hijras self-identify as "neither men nor women" or as "like women," but in Western terms they are normally classified as hermaphroditic, intersexed, impotent, and/or homosexual men who dress as women and are often castrated.[2] Both the devadasis and the hijras followed a specific way of

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[1] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), 14.
[2] Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

life, but were not part of a distinctive *jati*, or caste, and encompassed members from a variety of castes.

Despite this similarity, however, the devadasis and hijras have rarely been examined in terms of each other, and especially not in relation to their respective positions in India's *jati* (caste) system. Even the individual places of these two groups in the caste system are rarely more than glanced over in related scholarship. Usually a line or two satisfies to explain that the group has a unique place outside the caste system, without detailing why or how this situation developed. To examine the devadasis and hijras as linked examples of casteless groups raises a series of questions about these groups' relationships to the caste system. By examining the similarities between the history and religious roles that led the devadasis and the hijras to their unique societal statuses, patterns emerge that elucidate those aspects of Indian society beyond the scope of *jati*-centered religion. Themes such as auspiciousness (relating to that which sustains life), Hinduism's devotional movement (bhakti), and the historical influences that the devadasis and the hijras hold in common are thereby made evident, and these themes' relationships to India's caste system are thrown into a new light.

The first basic questions about the different groups' relationships to the caste system have been only lightly approached in other scholarly works. With regard to the devadasis these questions are all the more complicated because right before the group was outlawed by the British some members did come together to seek legal recognition as a caste. Amrit Srinivasan's article "Reform or Conformity? Temple 'Prostitution' and the Community in the Madras Presidency" explains this 1948

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process and clarifies that the communities formerly part of the devadasi system formed this group to "overcome the disrepute attaching to their past association with the devadasis."[3] Kunal M. Parker, in his article "'A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes': Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800-1914," follows the same vein in his examination of the devadasis' caste status in relation to the changing legal system introduced by the British. By explaining how conceptions of caste among the devadasis changed with the advent of the British, both Srinivasan and Parker offer valuable proof of the lack of caste associations that the devadasis previously had; however they offer minimal or no explanations for how or why the devadasis' disassociation with caste originally arose.

Most articles follow the line of Saskia Kersenboom, who in "The Traditional Repertoire of the Tiruttani Temple Dancers" wrote that devadasis do not self identify as a caste. They differentiate the devadasi order, way of life, and traditional rights, from the non-existent devadasi *jati* (caste).[4] The lack of a formal caste relationship is acknowledged, but unfortunately not explained. Kersenboom investigates the relationship between the devadasis and *jati* more completely in her book *Nityasumangali*: Devadasi Tradition in South India, which contains a section on the history of the devadasis' caste associations. This section, however, concentrates on divisions within the devadasi community, rather than on their relationship to the greater Indian society.

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[3] Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform or Conformity? Temple 'Prostitution' and the Community in the Madras Presidency," in *Structures of Patriarchy: State, Community and Household in Modernising Asia*, ed. Bina Agarwal (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), 176.
[4] Saskia Kersenboom, "The Traditional Repertoire of the Tiruttani Temple Dancers," in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), 134.

Some scholarship does note that certain castes produced far more devadasis than others. For example, A. K. Prasad writes in <u>Devadasi System in Ancient India: A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India</u>: "the temple women came mostly from the low caste non-Brahmin families, although, the cases of Brahmin and other higher caste women are not unknown."[5] Other authors, such as Frédérique Apffel Marglin in her book <u>Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri</u>, suggest that the castes of the devadasis were limited to those castes which were allowed to give water to Brahmins.[6] The reasoning behind this was based on the priestesses' close relationships with Brahmin priests, both through temple work and through the sexual relationships that might develop. Marglin also ventures into explanations of the devadasis' status outside the caste system, focusing primarily on their role as harbingers of auspiciousness. In doing so she goes further than most other writers, but as the devadasis' connection to the caste system is not her primary theme it is far from fully developed in her work.

Even Marglin does not offer a clear explanation of how and why the devadasis' place in caste-based India developed. The focus of all previous scholarship has followed one basic pattern: an examination of the historical background of the devadasis, an explanation of the British-inspired resistance and eventual death of the practice, and sometimes a note about the few surviving devadasis today. Although there are instances when one of these three parts is discussed in greater detail than the others, earlier scholarship has not yet examined

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[5] A. K. Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India: A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India* (Delhi: H.K. Publishers and Distributors, 1990), 9.
[6] Frédérique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the God-King* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 68.

the devadasi institution in relation to greater questions about caste and caste boundaries in India, as will be done in this thesis.

Similar issues should be noted in the existing scholarship about the hijras. There are many sources that examine this group, especially from an anthropological, rather than a historical, point of view. As will be explained in the final chapter, the hijras continue to exist today in sizeable numbers, unlike the devadasis who more or less disappeared with the Devadasi Act of 1947.[7] There were an estimated 1.3 million hijras in India in 2001, although this is only a rough estimate, as hijras cannot be officially counted in government polls, which list no gender categories besides man and woman.[8] Because of their unique place in India as the third gender, the rise of sexuality studies has also led to a rise of hijra studies. A historical examination of this group, however, must distinguish the anthropological from the historical roots of a movement that developed quite differently from how it manifests itself today.

One valuable source for a historical examination of the hijra community is Zia Jaffrey's book, The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India. This work examines the current situation of the hijras with a side story detailing possible historic origins. Any of Jaffrey's sources can then be found and examined on their own. There is little in Jaffrey's work, however, that specifically explains the caste-status of the hijras.

Likewise, William Dalrymple's City of the Djinns: A Year in Delhi gives a valuable hypothesis of the origins of the hijras in the Muslim practice of court eunuchs. His work is helpful in understanding the history of the group, but not of

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[7] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 133.
[8] Alexandra Shiva, Sean MacDonald, and Michelle Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch," (Gidalya Pictures, 2001).

their unique place in caste-based Indian society, a phenomenon that is more related to the Hindu side of their history than to the Muslim one.

With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India, by Gayatri Reddy, provides the side that Dalrymple avoids in his explanation of the historical background of the third gender concept in pre-Muslim India, mentioning its origins in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist thought. Reddy also recognizes similarities between the social systems of the devadasis and the hijras, but he does so without specifically looking into caste status.

Alternatively, Serena Nanda's purely anthropological book Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India explains the current relationship between the hijras and the caste system very clearly. She writes that the way hijras self-divide is similar to the way that castes then divide into sub-groups. As Nanda quotes one hijra as saying "There is only one caste of eunuchs all over India, all over the world. But for convenience, like in one family there are six brothers, it's like that, we have kept these houses [sub-groups] also."[9] Her work is a wonderful place to start in examining the hijras' position in India's caste system today. This thesis picks up where Nanda does not go, and explores why and how the hijra system developed historically as it did.

It should also be noted that many of the sources that are being used are, by necessity, fairly recent writings. Few earlier sources are available, and fewer still are available in English. Although vague references to a third gender, devadasis, or the *varna* system can be found in various Hindu epics and law books, the examination that will be undertaken in the following pages is based primarily on recent sources

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[9] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 40.

that examine the historical side of the movement, as well as on anthropological works that can be used to deduce similar conclusions about earlier times.

In order to establish the places of the devadasis and hijras in India's caste system, the system itself must also be understood. Scholarship on caste has developed in recent times, as conceptions of the historicity of today's caste system have changed. Older works on the subject tend to emphasize the caste system as the overriding influence on Indian social life since before the Common Era. Books such as Max Webber's The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism (1958) and Lois Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System (1970) stress the strictness of purity-based caste regulations and their roles in formulating traditional Hindu society. These books and others from their time are useful for their explanation of the pure/impure aspect of the caste system, which is a true and important side of its societal role. Their emphasis on the historicity of the system's strictness is contested, however, in Susan Bayly's Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age. Her book is a valuable resource for understanding the role of the caste system historically, and how that role has changed over the past three thousand years.

The changing character of India's caste system will be examined in relation to the unusual phenomena and historical influences found among the devadasis and hijras, in order to develop a clearer understanding of these groups' unique places in Hindu society. How these groups evolved and what led to their social state are historically interesting issues to examine and also hold implications for the present day. Social divisions are a normal part of society, but they are also responsible for

much of the discord and dissatisfaction found today. This study examines those

groups that were inclusive of many in India, but that were also in some ways

alienated by the majority of a caste-based society into which they did not perfectly fit.

Knowledge of the creation and acceptance of the devadasis' and hijras' unique

societal positions will lead to a deeper understanding of the workings of religious

Indian society as a whole, and of how divisions can be subverted, changed, and

recreated.

Certain historical and religious themes are common to both the devadasis and

the hijras, and these will help to explain how such boundary-breaking groups came to

develop in India. The first chapter of this thesis will present the background of the

caste system and explain the places of the devadasis and hijras within caste structure.

Chapters two and three will analyze the devadasis and hijras with particular emphasis

on those aspects that may be partly responsible for their societal places. This

examination will culminate in chapter four, which will compare and explain the

influences common to the two groups, and will provide a concrete hypothesis for

which aspects were most important in creating the unique societal places held by the

devadasis and hijras. The conclusion will then bring this analysis up to date,

explaining the changes that occurred during England's legal control of India and the

statuses of the two groups today. It is hoped that the reader will emerge from this

thesis with an enhanced understanding of India's societal systems and groupings,

which may then be applied to the larger global community as well. The uniqueness

of the devadasis and hijras lies not only in their existence beyond caste structure, but

in Indian society's historical acceptance of that position. The religious incorporation

of their "otherness" into mainstream society provides an example of integrative social

techniques that may be able to explain various social groupings, divisions, and

customs in other parts of the world and throughout history.

Chapter 1: The Place of the Devadasis and Hijras in India's Caste System

In order to have a proper understanding of the complexities of India's caste system and the particular groups being examined in relation to it, one must have at least a basic understanding of Hinduism, the religion historically (and still today) practiced by the majority of Indians. The word "Hindu" gained prominence in the nineteenth century, and was used mainly to distinguish a wide variety of peoples on the Indian subcontinent who shared certain cultural practices and traditions, such as cremation of the dead, from the Muslims who also lived in the area. Indians had only begun using the term as a self-description three or four centuries earlier, so labeling documents or religious practices from before the fifteenth century as "Hindu" is theoretically anachronistic.[10] Another common designation for the religion practiced by these peoples is "Brahmanism," in reference to the Brahmans who are the highest caste in the social system followed by most Hindus.[11] Followers of "Hinduism" traditionally hail from a variety of beliefs and creeds, and only hold in common certain rituals which are also part of Indian culture. Until recently people who would today be labeled as "Hindus" self-identified religiously as followers of specific deities or sects, such as Saiva or Vaisnava.[12]

For convenience, the term "Hindu" is now commonly used to label the religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent, and is often offered with an explanation to differentiate which region or group in particular is being discussed. Although the term is not historically accurate when used with reference to events,

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[10] Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Traditions of Hindu Religion* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 7-8.

[11] Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale, trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 4.

[12] Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History* (Oxford: One World, 2000), 1-3.

beliefs, and people from before the fifteenth century, it does accentuate the existing

similarities in cultural and religious traditions and practices throughout the Indian

sub-continent. These similarities were sufficiently present to warrant, under certain

circumstances, the use of such umbrella and anachronistic terminology.

The historical origins of what is today called Hinduism are surrounded by

some controversy among different scholars. Those who embrace "the Aryan Invasion

Theory" see Hinduism as a religion built upon a combination of several different

influences, most notably those of the Aryan (translated as "noble") invaders and the

already established Indus River civilizations that the Aryans found upon their arrival.

Proponents of this theory believe, based on archeological evidence and linguistic

differences present in the area, that Aryans from Central Asia and east of the Caspian

Sea entered India between 1800 and 1500 BCE.[13] Some of the beliefs of both the

invaders and the natives of the area then combined to form Hinduism, which was at

times polytheistic and at times henotheistic, worshiping one god as supreme over all

other gods.[14] Other scholars argue against the idea of an outside invasion and instead

claim that archeological, linguistic, and textual history points to a continual

development of Indian society without the influence of warring invaders.[15]

According to these scholars the religious practices of India are the natural

development of time, and are not based on the syncretism of two distinct groups.

There is no concrete proof for either theory, and neither is endorsed by this

thesis. The majority of sources examined that mention Hindu origins, however, do

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[13] A. L. Herman, *A Brief Introduction to Hinduism: Religion, Philosophy, and Ways of Liberation*
(Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 37.
[14] Ibid., 52.
[15] Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 37-41.

embrace the Aryan Invasion Theory, and this is reflected in how they approach issues

surrounding the caste system. Regardless of the origins of the religion, Hindu

practices are based on several religious texts, including the *Vedas* (1500-900 BCE),

known as the books of knowledge, and the *Upanishads* (800-200 BCE), the

philosophical commentaries on the *Vedas*.[16] The *Vedas* in particular will come into

play when examining the facet of Hinduism which is of chief importance to this

thesis: the caste system.

India's caste system is often traced back to the concept of *varna*, which

literally means color. Proponents of the Aryan Invasion Theory suggest that *varna*

was the word used by the Aryan invaders to distinguish themselves from the

populations already present in India, and eventually to divide society into four

groups.[17] Some historians hold that these invaders brought with them a method for

classifying society into a three part system, which was then expanded to four basic

parts, probably due to the incorporation of the indigenous population whom the

invaders encountered. Others believe that India's strict social divisions originated, at

least in part, in indigenous traditions which prescribed specific social responsibilities

for different classes, as is articulated in later texts such as the *Dharma Sutras* and

Sastras (composed around the third century BCE).[18]

Regardless of its inspiration, this classification system developed into a

stricter caste system in later Vedic times due to the influence of the priestly and ruling

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[16] Herman, *A Brief Introduction to Hinduism*, 50-63.
[17] R.V. Russell, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol. I (Delhi: Rajdhani Book Centre, 1975), 16.
[18] Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 26-7.

groups, who desired to secure their dominant place in society.[19] The *Vedas* include

an invocatory piece, called the *Rg Veda*, which explains how the gods created the four

varnas from a sacrificed thousand-eyed man, Purusa. The concept behind the idea of

varna is that all of Hindu society, regardless of regional associations, can be divided

into four ordered divisions, with the "untouchables," sometimes today called

"tribals," existing in their own fifth category.[20] The importance of these divisions is

stressed by the tradition that the creation of the *vana* system dates back to the

beginning of time and that the deities are similarly classified into their own *varna*-like

system.[21] The earliest texts to explain the workings of this system are the *Dharma*

Sutras and *Sastras*, two indigenous works that focus on the *dharma* expected of each

group. One of the fundamental ideas behind *varna*-based classification is that each

group has its own duty, laws (*dharma*), and traits, which are unique to it.[22] When

seen in terms of *dharma* the caste system is not about dividing society but about

articulating individual responsibilities and preventing mixing among already present

divisions.

The idea of upholding caste boundaries is stressed in another religious-legal

book, known as *The Laws of Manu*, which gained prominence and authority around

the beginning of the Common Era. *The Laws of Manu*, attributed by scholars to

several authors and acknowledged to have a priestly bias, strongly supports the *varna*

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[19]G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, ed. C. K. Ogden, vol. 24, *The History of Civilization* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1932), 39. Suvira Jaiswal, "Change and Continuity in Brahmanical Religion with Particular Reference To "Vaisnava Bhakti"," review of Reviewed Item, *Social Scientist*, no. (2000).

[20] Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, ed. Gordon Johnson, vol. IV.3, *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8-13.

[21] Smith, *Classifying the Universe*, 59, 89.

[22] Ibid., 27.

system and repeats the tale of its divine origins.[23] Manu writes (in translation): "From his ['the lustrous one's'] mouth he created priests, from his arms the ruler, from his thighs the commoner, and from his feet the servant."[24] The law-book then continues to explain how "the lustrous one" created unique and innate activities for those born of each body part.[25] The caste-based responsibilities (*dharma*) of each member of society are thus given importance by having been divinely decreed.

Culturally familial groupings are emphasized in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a portion of spiritual teaching which is found in the *Mahabharata*, one of the two "great epics" of India. The origins of the *Bhagavad Gita* lie sometime between the third century BCE and the second century CE.[26] A section of this work bemoans those who lead their families to hell through the mixing of clans, and especially emphasizes the role of women in caste duties, writing that women become corrupt when "wrong [ways] prevail" and that when this happens "the mixing of clans arises."[27]

To facilitate an easy understanding of caste-based restrictions, it may also be helpful to consider how Louis Dumont, a French sociologist who wrote on the matter, defined the system:

> The caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: *separation* in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); *division* of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and finally *hierarchy*, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.[28]

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[23] *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), xviii.
[24] Ibid., 6-7.
[25] Ibid., 12-3.
[26] Nataraja Guru, ed., *The Bhagavad Gita: A Sublime Hymn of Dialectics Composed by the Antique Sage-Bard Vyasa* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), 1-4.
[27] Ibid., 99.
[28] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 21.

According to Dumont and others, marrying within one's familial group is heavily emphasized in the caste system. Various punishments are offered for marrying outside of one's caste, such as expulsion from one's caste or sub-caste.[29] The most important reason for such strictness is that with marriage comes the expectation of children and children who come from inter-caste marriages are considered impure, and without a proper place in society.[30] The marriage restrictions differ somewhat from the concept of *varna*, and are instead based on the idea of *jati*, birth group. One's *jati* refers to the group of people with whom one may associate for purposes such as marriage and *jati* distinctions are more restrictive than *varna* differentiations. While there are only four *varnas*, thousands of *jatis* are present in India.[31] One hypothesis is that the *varna* system preceded the idea of *jatis*, and from the offspring of mixed-*varna* marriages arose the multitudes of *jatis*, which can also be translated as sub-castes.[32] The word "caste" is today commonly used to refer to both *varna* and *jati* classifications.[33]

Although *varna*-based distinctions are present in some of the earliest of Hindu writings, one must also note that the caste system, especially as it is seen today, is the product of millennia of growth and development. Even though caste-like practices and ideas have been accepted by some groups of people throughout the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years, the marital strictness that Dumont stressed was not universally adhered to by all groups in the area. Forest and hills people, now commonly known as "tribals," and large groups of plains-dwellers and pastoralists

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[29] Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, 18.
[30] Ibid., 146.
[31] Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India*, 8.
[32] Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, 96, 51.
[33] Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India*, 8.

remained moderately free of caste ideology until relatively recently. Ideals surrounding purity based regulations became progressively stricter in the centuries leading up to and including British rule.[34] Regardless of the universality of the caste system, though, it was present in Brahmanism, making the existence of temple or deity based groups outside of its societal structure, such as the devadasis and hijras, an interesting phenomenon worthy of the examination which they will be given.

The classificatory nature of India's caste system should by no means be thought of as a unique occurrence. Other methods of categorizing are used worldwide, in a variety of forms. Ideas in cognitive science point to a relationship between categorization and the nature of the human mind. There is also a scholarly consensus that human beings are born with an innate desire to classify, making the only differences between the *varna* system and other organizational schemes into the details of the arrangements. The *varna* system is simply how Indians classify, in comparison to how any other social, religious, or political groups might do so.[35]

At the heart of *varna* is a drive for hierarchy.[36] One sociologist, Talcott Parsons, explains that hierarchy is created as values are created, and is thus necessary to social life. Whenever there are values governing society, different roles are ranked differently, creating a hierarchy. Although hierarchy can give off the appearance of power, it is about personal and societal responsibility more than about the power of a certain group. This does not mean that hierarchies do not lead to systems which give power to one group over another. Power inequities, though, are the result of

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[34] Ibid., 25.
[35] Smith, *Classifying the Universe*, 3-4.
[36] Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 2.

hierarchies, and not their cause.[37] The *varna* system is thus best viewed as a social system, intent on organizing society in the most efficient and religiously-prescribed manner possible.[38] In fact, the strictness of the modern *varna* system owes much to the influence of the British, who brought with them a desire to codify and classify what was less strictly established in India. The caste system was thus originally much more about *dharmic* responsibilities than strict classifications. Although it was comparatively more fluid in the time before the British took control than directly afterwards, throughout its history it still played an important role in providing Indians with a place, and often a profession, in society.

What is in this case most relevant, however, is not how the caste system divides, but how it failed to do so in a few instances. Even when caste relations were more fluid, in India there were historically few instances in which members of different castes could be deliberately pulled out of their own castes and incorporated into a single unit. Of these, at least two formed specific groups/occupations in mainstream Indian society. The first of these were the devadasi priestesses, who served in the local temples, and the second were the hijras, a catch-all group of people whom Western society would label as transvestites, homosexual men, intersexuals, and eunuchs.

When discussing devadasis, this thesis specifically refers to the women who served in the temples (or later, in the royal courts) as dancers and songstresses. Strictly speaking the word devadasi can also be connected to other women who fit into the same religious category as the temple servants, but nowadays scholars use

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[37] Ibid., 19-20.
[38] Smith, *Classifying the Universe*, 5.

different words to distinguish the different sub-categories of these women.[39] During

the height of the devadasi period different regions of India designated their respective

temple dancers with different terms. The term "devadasi" came into use during the

rule of the Chola empire from 985 CE to 1279 CE, and means "slave of god." Other

terms which were used for temple women are translated as "women belonging to the

streets of the temples," "elder sister," and "dancing girl."[40] The term "devadasi"

became universally popular in the 1920s after the position of the devadasis in society

had become more controversial and people outside their community initiated the

revival of the devadasi dance form. Since that time "devadasi" has become a pan-

Indian word to refer to these various temple dancers, and the term will hitherto be

used in this manner.[41]

The earliest mention of the devadasis in Indian literature is a highly contested

subject, which depends on how one defines a devadasi. Some scholars cite the fourth

century work entitled *Megnadutan* that mentions "devadasis" performing in a certain

temple in Ujjaini.[42] Others say that devadasis "proper" did not arise until the sixth

century, when the women who had previously performed informally became

incorporated into the structure of the temple ritual.[43] The rise of the devadasi system

to prominence is also related to the decline of the Gupta Empire in India at this time,

which led to the beginning of what some scholars call the "feudalization" of Indian

society. At this point the sub-continent was under the control of different ruling

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[39] Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 179.
[40] Ibid., xv, 24-28.
[41] Leslie C. Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.
[42] Rajatnandan Dasgupta, "The Institution of Devadasis in Assam," *Journal of Indian History* 43, no. 127 (1965): 567.
[43] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 18.

chiefs, and status became associated with economic production instead of just with caste. India's feudalization also became defined by the emergence of regional courts and the rising importance of Hindu temples. [44]

Simultaneously the temples were experiencing their own development of rituals, including those of the devadasis. At this time worship became more subdued and the devadasis developed their artistic and ritual roles which continued into the twentieth century.[45] As the temples rose in prominence, so did the devadasis who were attached to specific temples to dance, sing, and carry lamps in processions in praise of the temple deity. [46] The earliest description of the tasks of the devadasis can be found in Māṇikkavācakar's ninth poem entitled "The Sacred Gold Dust," which talks about the "simple maidens fair" with "beauteous shapely eyes" constantly dancing and singing "praises of our Lord."[47] Māṇikkavācakar and his work are dated to the seventh or eighth century CE, at which time the devadasi system had fully taken root.[48] The devadasis reached their peak by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when India's medieval temple-based society also reached its height.[49] At this point there were hundreds of devadasis at some of the larger temples. For example, an

[44] R.S. Sharma, "Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval in Indian History," *The Indian Historical Review* 1, no. 1 (1974): 6.

[45] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 22.

[46] Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India*, 95-101.

[47] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 22-3.

Manikka-Vacagar, *The Tiruvacagam Or "Sacred Utterances" Of the Tamil Poet, Saint, and Sage Manikka-Vacagar*, trans. G. U. Pope (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 128-38.

[48] G. U. Pope, "The History of Manikka-Vacagar," in *The Tiruvacagam Or "Sacred Utterances" Of the Tamil Poet, Saint, and Sage Manikka-Vacagar*, ed. G. U. Pope (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), xvii.

[49] Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India*, 29.

inscription from the early eleventh century mentions the transfer of up to 400

priestesses from various parts of the land to the Tanjore temple.[50]

The responsibilities of the devadasis varied, but all were expected to serve in

some capacity in the temples. The most well known of the devadasis were dancers,

but many more were also needed to serve in other ritual aspects of temple life, such as

fanning the idols, singing before the gods, and carrying the sacred light called the

kumbarti.[51] Outside of the temples the devadasis were expected to perform other

religious duties, such as accompanying the king on processions, performing

ceremonies to ward the evil eye off him, and attending the rite-of-passage and

coming-of-age ceremonies of locals.[52] These and similar responsibilities were given

to the devadasis because they held a unique place in Indian society as *nityasumangali*,

ever-auspicious. Auspiciousness is a difficult word to translate into English, but

relates to anything that "creates, promotes, and maintains life." Western thought

often associates purity with auspiciousness, but in Hinduism they are quite different

concepts. While purity refers to status and moral uprightness, auspiciousness refers

to well-being and health.[53] Impure acts, such as childbirth and other activities

associated with bodily fluids, can still be auspicious because they promote life.

Auspiciousness for women was intricately connected to marriage and the presence of

a living husband. At puberty the devadasis were symbolically married to a deity. As

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[50] Anant Sadashiv Altekar, *Rashtrakutas and Their Times*, Second ed. (Poon: Oriental Book Agency, 1967), 294-5.

[51] Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. II (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 126.

[52] Kay K. Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute: A History of the Changing Legal Status of the Devadasis in India, 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2003), 32. Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 145.

[53] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 19.

a result, they had a godly husband who could never die, and were considered the most auspicious of women.[54]

As ever-auspicious women, the devadasis were put in a unique position, which resulted in many problems when the British came into control of India. Most scholars agree that although the devadasis were temple servants, they were never meant to be celibate. They were prohibited from marrying, but were still expected to have sexual relations, in order to spread their auspiciousness. Devadasis were financially maintained by the men with whom they had intimate relationships—men who would be chosen by the girl's mother and grandmother. These men were preferably upper-caste and wealthy, and usually already married. A devadasi was not expected to live with her patron, and any children resulting from the marriage belonged to her alone. The chief attraction of maintaining a devadasi was her auspicious status and the desire by the male patron to imitate the god to which the devadasi was married, on human terms. When the British gained legal control of India, however, this system came to be construed as prostitution, since the devadasis were very rarely legally married to their patrons.[55] This in fact led to the eventual demise of the system, a development that will be discussed later.

In almost all cases girls were dedicated as devadasis by their parents. This could be done for any number of reasons, including that the mother was herself a devadasi, that the parents had made some kind of vow promising the dedication of a

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[54] Judith Whitehead, "Measuring Women's Value: Continuity and Change in the Regulation of Prostitution in Madras Presidency, 1860-1947," in *Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism*, ed. Himani Naerji et al (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 156.
[55] Amrit Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform: An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Context of the Devadasi of Tamil Nadu, South India" (Dissertation, Cambridge University, 1984), 1869-70.

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daughter, to insure the daughter's religious salvation, or sometimes for the economic gain which such a dedication could bring the family of a successful devadasi.[56] Upper-caste girls in particular were dedicated to prevent the possibility of widowhood, which is the lowest stage of auspiciousness a woman can reach.[57] The devadasis, however, were not a catch-all category for families trying to rid themselves of daughters. Only good-looking girls proficient in dance and/or music were actually allowed to complete the dedication process.[58]

A second class of dedicated girls, known as *basavis*, is sometimes classed with the devadasis, but in reality they form a completely different category. Although also married to a god and considered ever-auspicious, *basavis* were dedicated when a family had no male heir, and the express purpose of such a dedication was to produce an heir to carry on the family name. A son of a *basavi* thus took his maternal grandfather's name.[59] *Basavis* were not involved in temples service and will therefore not be discussed any further in this thesis.[60]

Girls from a variety of castes could be dedicated as devadasis, although opinions differ on exactly which castes were allowed to dedicate their daughters. At least in some temples membership was limited to those women whose castes were sufficiently pure to give water to Brahmins. Except for the universal prohibition to dedicate girls from the untouchable castes, women were dedicated across the caste structure, so that devadasis have included Brahmin and other upper-caste women as

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[56] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 16.
[57] Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India*, 10.
[58] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 2.
[59] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 129. If a *basavi* failed to produce a male heir her daughter (and if necessary her granddaughter) would also be dedicated, until a male child was born (see Prasad, 44-5).
[60] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 22.

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well as a majority of lower-caste women.[61]   Certain castes, such as the *Vellala* and the *Kaikola*, were also traditionally known to dedicate large numbers of their girls to be devadasis, and it was to these castes that the sons who did not remain in the devadasi group as musicians would often go.[62]

The devadasis' relationship to the caste system was complicated by the ambiguity of their group-structure, which is by some erroneously titled a caste. As one author writes: "the use of the term 'caste,' *jati*, in relation to the devadasis is misconceived; according to the devadasis themselves there existed a devadasi way of life or professional ethic (*vrtti, murai*), but not a devadasi *jati*."[63] In some cases the right to become a devadasi was hereditary, and many daughters of devadasis were dedicated, following the traditional structure of the caste system in which children continue in their parents' professions. The devadasis differed from a proper caste, however, in that even among those girls who had the hereditary "right" to be dedicated, not all actually became devadasis. One's right to dedication was complicated by many other factors which could easily prevent the dedication of any given devadasi daughter.[64] To outsiders, though, the devadasis became known as a sub-caste in southern India because they had their own laws, customs, etiquette, and *panchayot* (council) whose decisions had to be followed by its members.[65]

With the advent of the British came the actual codification of the caste system, and the institution of a devadasi caste.[66] Thus the Madras census report of 1901

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[61] Ibid., 19. Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India*, 10.
[62] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 127.
[63] Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform ", 175-6.
[64] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 179.
[65] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 127.
[66] Kunal M. Parker, "'A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes:' Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 32 (1998): 589.

recorded a specific caste of dasis or deva-dasis, numbering 6,862 people. But even here it was acknowledged that the word caste was being used lightly, because many of the people born to the devadasis, such as daughters who were too plain to be successful, or sons, drifted out of the "caste."[67]

The British colonial system gave legal rights based on "caste customs." In order to continue their traditions which were at variance with textual Hindu law, such as dedicating girls with the knowledge that they would engage in sexual relations outside of the sphere of marriage, the devadasis had to self-identify as a caste.[68] This has resulted in much of the confusion over the caste status of the devadasis. The reality, however, is that even at the time of the British the caste status of the devadasis was up for questioning because so much of the caste system was based on marriage and the devadasis did not engage in traditional marriages to mortal men. Additionally, the devadasi practice of accepting outside members into their ranks distinguished them from any other profession-based caste.[69]

The second group being examined, the hijras, have an even vaguer history than the devadasis. In examining their narrative, it is easiest to begin with the present and move backward from there, as the hijras of today are a heterogeneous product of several distinct, equally important influences. One modern hijra, Meena Balaji, describes the basic characteristics of the group saying: "we were born male or with deformed genitals. We all prefer dressing in women's clothing…because we feel we are women. We are worshippers of the Mother Goddess *Bahuchara Mata*. We believe that she takes over our lives because of our infertility. So we serve as a

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[67] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 20-1.
[68] Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 563-5.
[69] Ibid.: 570-3.

channel for her."[70] Balaji thus describes some of the main characteristics associated

with the hijras. They are born biologically male or intersexed, but identify as women,

and as such come together not just as sexual non-conformists, but as unified religious

adherents. Hijras are often labeled as eunuchs, because most undergo castration.

There is evidence dating from 1800 that hijras believed that if an impotent man was

not castrated, his impotency would continue for seven more incarnations.[71] As was

mentioned in the introduction, one must remember in studying the hijras that they

self-identify themselves differently than Western society may identify them.

Therefore it is theoretically incorrect to call hijras transvestites, eunuchs,

hermaphrodites, intersexed, or homosexuals, although those may be proper biological

definitions of their physical condition. Hijras self define as "neither men nor women"

or as "like women," and thus form their own gender category, of "hijra."[72]

Historically the narrative of the hijras is rather murky. There is clear evidence

for the existence of impotent men and eunuchs from at least the time of the earliest

Hindu literature. The *Satapatha-Brahmana*, a collection of myths and rituals from

the eighth century BCE is one of the earliest written records of the existence of a third

gender in India, and it explains that this third category consists of castrated men.[73] It

says (in translation): "the castrated bull is neither female nor male; for being a male it

is not a female; and being a female (unmanned) it is not a male."[74] In the slightly

later *Kama Sutra*, an erotic text originally written around the seventh century BCE

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[70] Meena Balaji, *Hijras: Who We Are* (Toronto: Think Asia, 1997), 6.

[71] Zia Jaffrey, *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 235.

[72] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, xxiii.

[73] Michael J. Sweet and Leonard Zwilling, "The First Medicalization: The Taxonomy and Etiology of Queerness in Classical Indian Medicine," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4 (1993): 601.

[74] *The Satapatha-Brahmana: According to the Text of the Madhyandina School*, ed. F. Max Muller, trans. Julius Eggeling, 5 vols., vol. III, *The Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 138.

and re-compiled and summarized around the fourth century CE, transvestites, homosexuals, and members of the third sex are mentioned in a positive light, as prostitutes who give a somewhat unique form of sexual pleasure.[75] *The Laws of Manu* (from around the same time) mention impotent men more negatively, explaining when such people must be excluded from ceremonial activities, warning kings from killing them, and elucidating the sexual situation that leads to the birth of a hermaphrodite.[76]

Hijras also feel that they are referenced in the *Ramayana*, composed between 200 BC and 200 CE.[77] In one part of this epic, the hero, Prince Rama, tells the people who accompanied him into exile "men and women, go home." According to the hijras' version of the story, fourteen years later, when Rama returned, he found only the hijras waiting for him, because as neither men nor women they did not feel obligated to heed his command. Lord Rama than blessed the hijras with the power to bless and curse, and it is in part from this legend that sacred powers are attributed to them.[78]

Although the *Vedas*, one of the earliest Hindu law books, do not speak about hijras or intersexuals specifically, they mention castration as a degrading punishment for very bad deeds. Likewise, in the *Mahabharata*, a book of Hindu epics dating from around the first century BCE, being a eunuch was considered a curse, and the sight of one to be defiling.[79] Interestingly, Arjuna, the hero of the epic, was (or

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[75] Vatayayana, *The Complete Kama Sutra: The First Unabridged Modern Translation of the Classic Indian Text by Vatayayana*, trans. Alain Daniélou (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1994), 3-4, 183-4.
[76] *The Laws of Manu*, 3.165, 3.239, 7.91, 3.150.
[77] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 29.
[78] Balaji, *Hijras: Who We Are*, 7.
[79] William Dalrymple, *City of the Djinns: A Year in Delhi* (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1993), 171.

pretended to be) a hermaphrodite for a year. When introducing himself to the king

Arjuna says (in translation): "The reason I have this form—what profit is there in

recounting but great pain?" and goes on to explain that his mother and father deserted

him for being both "son and daughter," emphasizing the era's negative perception and

treatment of hijra pre-cursors.[80] Modern hijras identify with Arjun and proudly cite

him as proof of their origins in pre-Muslim India.[81] Regardless of how they were

represented it is clear that eunuchs and/or hijra-like people existed and were openly

acknowledged in India prior to the Common Era.

Most scholars believe that the formation of a hijra group was due to a

combination of these earlier Hindu traditions of eunuchs and intersexuals, and the

Muslim traditions surrounding eunuchs which were brought into India during the

Muslim conquest and the establishment of the Mughul Empire.[82] The Muslim

practice of keeping eunuchs originated around the twelfth century CE in Medina, and,

interestingly, the majority of early eunuchs were imported from the Indian sub-

continent.[83] Islamic law prohibited the act of castration, but already-castrated men

from other countries were afforded high levels of respect, although they were

sometimes seen as more feminine than other men and thus were perceived as limited

by women's lower rational abilities.[84] When Muslim courts moved to India their

eunuch system moved as well. For this reason many contemporary hijras see

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[80] J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed., *The Mahabharata*, 7 vols., vol. 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 41.
[81] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 29.
[82] Dalrymple, *City of the Djinns*.
[83] Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 34-9.
[84] Ibid., 41, 63.

themselves as (metaphorical, not biological) descendants of Muslim court eunuchs. The actual connection, however, is rather unclear.[85]

The Hindu and Muslim cultural diffusion gave the ideas of a third gender, eunuchs, and castration, which were already present in Indian society, a place in the household system introduced by the Muslims.[86] The result was a unique group that has deep roots in both Hinduism and Islam, and no clear place in either. Within their indeterminate position, hijras, like devadasis, also had a unique position of auspiciousness. Although it was considered a curse to be born as they were, their blessing was believed to ensure fertility for barren women, and their curse was unequivocally feared. Hijras were thus invited to all coming-of-age ceremonies, such as marriages and the birth of male children, or else the ceremony itself was almost invalidated.[87]

The eunuchs of India are and were subdivided into different groups. A British writer from the turn of the twentieth century mentions two divisions, khojas and hijras. Khojas were classed as "the artificially created eunuch" and hijras as "natural eunuchs." The distinction seems to be that the former were not born impotent, while the latter were.[88] Distinctions were also made between transvestites and actual eunuchs. The hijras being referred to in this work belong to the latter category, those people born biologically male or intersexed, who then underwent or planned to undergo a castration ceremony.

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[85] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."
[86] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 146.
[87] Dalrymple, *City of the Djinns*, 172.
[88] Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. III (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 289-90.

There are different suggestions regarding how the hijras have recruited members. Many of their enemies say that they kidnap young boys, and perhaps this belief is rooted in the practice that historically, when hijras graced the births of baby boys to sing and dance, they would also check the baby's genitals. If the genitals were malformed, it was expected that the baby would be given over to the hijra community. Nowadays this seems to happen very rarely, as there are few babies among the hijras.[89] Some say that the hijras now entice older boys to join their group, and then forcefully castrate them, but the hijras hold that all of their members come of their own volition.[90] Being born impotent is considered shameful and possibly contagious, so most hijra-initiates leave their families to join a hijra group and find other people with whom they can more easily identify.[91]

Like devadasis, the hijras' place in the caste system was unusual. Their initiates were not limited by caste, but rather by sexuality. Infertility also limited one's place in one's original caste, as that system was based primarily on marriage and reproduction, responsibilities impractical for hijras to try and fulfill. In fact, a British law compiler writing in 1826 found that hermaphrodites (a category included in hijras) were legally excluded by their families from their caste of birth.[92] Hijras were given their own section in Thurston's 1909 book entitled Castes and Tribes of Southern India, suggesting that by this point they were seen as their own pseudo-caste. They could not be considered a proper caste, though, because they had to recruit members, and did so from all strata of society, including Muslims. Hijras

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[89] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 244-5.
[90] Ibid., 40.
[91] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."
[92] Arthur Steele, *The Hindu Castes: Their Law, Religion, and Customs* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1986), 224.

have self-analogized themselves as a caste, saying "there is only one caste of eunuchs all over India, all over the world." They therefore self-divided as *jatis* (castes) do, from one caste into different households and families.[93] Yet, this was clearly a comparison to, and not an actual identification as, a caste-group. Hijras in fact were said to renounce caste, just as ascetics did, and transcend the caste system network by leaving their families and forming their own community-groups.[94] The hijras can most properly be called an association instead of a caste, just as the devadasis were a profession instead of a caste.

Theories behind classifications of the devadasis and hijras are what lie at the heart of this thesis. The upcoming chapters will expand on the information presented here to examine what specific factors may have led Hindu society to form, and then accept, the devadasis and the hijras, two groups that transcended the caste system. This acceptance is not surprising when one considers that it was relatively later in Indian history, and especially with the advent of the British, that the emphasis on strict categorization was formalized. In contrast, historically Indian society has emphasized grouping, even if the grouping was not as precise as the *varna* system initially implies. Because of this emphasis on societal grouping, the creation of certain professions and social groups that were meant to subvert the caste system, such as the devadasis and the hijras, is a historical phenomenon that merits examination.

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[93] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 40.
[94] Ibid., 51.

<u>The Devadasis</u>

The logical place to start in an examination of the devadasi system in relation to caste is by placing it within its historical context. Where and how the practice originated is a question to which no definite answer can be given, but one suggestion is that the precursors to the devadasis are related to other practices of "sacred prostitution" common in the ancient world. The practice of ritual dancing, which emerged in India around the fourth and fifth centuries CE, is predated by similar customs that flourished thousands of years earlier in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece.[95] One author hypothesizes that women's temple service originated in a time of matriarchy, which placed nature, fertility, and a Goddess at the core of the popular religion. Unattached maidens were expected to serve in the temples honoring said deity, and were then sought out by men desiring a deeper spirituality which was thought to be attainable through sexual intercourse with these priestesses. Evidence seems to show that in this matriarchal culture, sexual desire was considered divine and intricately connected with religion, leading to a system of "sacred prostitution," or the sexual union of temple women with ordinary male pilgrims, in a desire to attain religious fulfillment.[96]

The sacred prostitution system mirrors what is known of the early devadasi system, in which men vied to be the patrons of successful devadasis as a means of gaining a deeper spiritual connection with the deity to whom the devadasi was symbolically married. As with the devadasis, the temple maidens came from a variety of social backgrounds, were given a high social rank, and were educated.

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[95] Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India*, 29, 7.
[96] Nancy Qualls-Corbett, *The Sacred Prostitute: Eternal Aspect of the Feminine* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1988), 30-1.

They were also, in some cases, politically and legally equal to men. The devadasis were far better educated than most Indian women and were afforded social privileges that other women did not have, such as the rights to adopt girls and to let their daughters inherit over their sons.[97] While some might argue that these matriarchal customs are simply in place to facilitate the continuance of a female-dominated profession, they do highlight clear similarities between the devadasis of India and the priestesses of other parts of the Europe and Asia. As with the devadasis, many of these outside cultures symbolically married their priestesses to a deity, such as the "Vestal Virgins" of Greece and Rome who were ritually married to the god, a ceremony which used the king as the god's surrogate.[98] Virgin, in this case, refers to unmarried but not chaste women, as opposed to its common usage today to refer to women who have not experienced sexual intercourse.

India does have a tradition of Goddess worship, which certainly dates back to before the earliest mention of the devadasis. Although little is known about the religion of the Indus Valley people before the alleged Aryan invasion, a number of terra-cotta figurines have been found which "represent a standing female figure with an elaborate head-dress." The bloated shape of some of the figures is similar to those produced by Goddess-worshiping fertility cults in other parts of the world, implying the existence of a religion which at least incorporated a goddess, and was perhaps even centered on one. Unfortunately, this evidence is shaky at best, as many of the figurines are unidentifiable, and even the significance of those that are obviously

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[97] Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 572.
[98] Qualls-Corbett, *The Sacred Prostitute*, 36.

female and/or pregnant can only be hypothesized.[99] Significantly, however, one clear

archeological remnant of the Indus civilization is a four-and-a-half bronze statue of a

naked "dancing girl."[100]

What is known with certainty is that many branches of later Hinduism

included "the Goddess" as one of their more important deities. The *Puranas*, a

collection of myths from the fifth century, include many names for the Goddess,

which probably reflect the different local traditions surrounding her. The powers of

war as well as fertility are attributed to her, and mythology claims that the Goddess

was the first being to exist. She is also considered the mother of the gods and of all of

the rest of life. Although some aspects of the Goddess seem to come from Vedic

beliefs, for the most part she is considered a deity of non-Vedic origins.[101] If the

devadasis arose out of this pre-Vedic tradition, as an offshoot of the many Goddess-

worshipping societies contemporary to them at the time, it would make sense that

they developed outside of the caste context. "Sacred prostitutes" were often recruited

from all classes, and in some cultures, such as among the Babylonians, all women had

to lose their virginity as temple servants before joining in a monogamous relationship

with a husband.[102]

If the devadasi system did indeed develop from the time before the Aryan

invasion, the caste system would, according to many scholars, also not have been as

securely in effect, if existing at all. Most scholars attribute the creation of fairly strict

castes with the desire of the invaders to secure a powerful place for themselves in

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[99] J.L. Brockington, *The Sacred Thread: Hinduism in Its Continuity and Diversity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 25-6.
[100] Herman, *A Brief Introduction to Hinduism*, 41.
[101] Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 189-90.
[102] Qualls-Corbett, *The Sacred Prostitute*, 34-5.

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society. Thus connecting the devadasis with the greater phenomenon of sacred

prostitution and Goddess worship establishes them as a remnant of a culture which

developed before the prominence of the caste system, and in some ways explains their

continued presence outside of that system.

It must be noted, however, that not all scholars agree in connecting the

devadasis with similar women in other cultures. Alain Daniélo, the translator of a

second century Tamil novel about an Indian dancing girl, explains that a "caste of

courtesans, female dancers, musicians, and prostitutes" existed in Dravidian

(Southern Indian) society at the time of this novel, but without any connection to the

temples. He describes their art as profane, without any religious connotations or

associations, and notes that it is only in later times that devadasis, dancers who were

attached to temples, came into existence.[103] In his introduction to the *Kama Sutra*

Daniélo also mentions that sacred prostitution never existed in India, and that instead

the temple dancers belonged to the dance-profession caste of courtesans.[104]

Other scholars, such as Saskia Kersenboom-Story, see the devadasis' roots as

more indistinct, and endeavor to connect them with earlier female worshippers,

especially the bards which were popular during the Cankam period, the four hundred

year long period from 100 BC to 3000 CE from which the earliest indigenous

Southern Indian literature dates. These bards differed from sacred prostitutes in that

they involved both men and women, but the female bards did engage in dancing as

later courtesans and devadasis also did. [105] Kersenboom-Story suggests that the

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[103] Merchant-Prince Shattan, *Manimekhalai (the Dancer with the Magic Bowl)*, trans. Alain Daniélou
(New York: New Directions, 1989), viii.
[104] Vatayayana, *The Complete Kama Sutra*, 9.
[105] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 4-16.

devadasis developed from some combination of the various cultures which produced

female bards, courtesans, and ritualists.[106] She would certainly cite a connection

between the later devadasis and Daniélo's courtesans, even if she did not mention any

relationship between the devadasis and the earlier sacred prostitutes from other

regions. By connecting the devadasis to the bards from the Cankam period,

Kersenboom-Story also situates their precursors outside of the social structure

developed by the (hypothesized) Aryan invaders, as the literary evidence of a bard-

based tradition reflects the society that the Aryan invaders found upon their migration

south, not the society that they helped to create.[107] Tracing the devadasis back to the

bards thus creates the same justification for their non-caste status as tracing them

back to sacred prostitutes, that their position developed before the emergence of the

caste system, and that their place outside of that system was thus firmly established.

Even considering Daniélo's assertions that these early Indian dancers were not

connected either to the sacred prostitutes that preceded them or to the devadasis that

followed them, his early dancers were still connected to the divine. Daniélo explains

that the dancer dynasties were believed to be born of "the celestial nymphs exiled

from the paradise of Indra, the king of the gods," and the translated novel mentions

that the dancing being performed by the courtesans was to celebrate "the festival in

Indra's honor."[108] The universal opinion therefore holds that the devadasis, early

Indian dancers, and "sacred prostitutes" had in common a relationship between

dance/prostitution and worship, which lends credence to an inclination to link the

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[106] Ibid., 24.
[107] Ibid., 4.
[108] Shattan, *Manimekhalai*, viii, 4.

practices of the three and use their commonalities to understand more fully the
position of the devadasis in Hindu society.

The connection between the devadasis and the sacred prostitutes of other
cultures also loses probability if one follows the school of thought that believes that
the precursors to the devadasis were actually chaste temple servants, and only became
sexually active in modern times.[109] The vast majority of scholars believe that the
devadasis were always a sexually active group, and that the chaste hypothesis was a
later interpretation forced on their history by revisionists seeking to "purify"
traditional Indian culture in the face of British Victorianism. Indeed, much of the
literature about the devadasis revolves around their unique positions as sexually-
active women in extra-marital relationships. As was mentioned in the previous
chapter, devadasis were desirable as sexual partners because through them men could
attain the higher levels of auspiciousness which they, as wives of a deity, possessed.
The devadasis represented the eternal *ahya*, or "un-widowed," as a wife whose
husband could never die.[110] As such, they were known as *nitya-su-mangali*, ever-
auspicious women, and this became one of the defining characteristics that linked
devadasis from across the Indian subcontinent.[111] The death of a husband was the
ultimate sign of inauspiciousness for a Hindu woman, and the devadasis with their
godly husbands had no fear of being widowed. This status was intricately connected
with their sexuality, for part of the inauspiciousness of a widow is that she is sexually

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[109] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 8.
[110] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 70.
[111] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, xv.

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inactive. On the other hand, by their very definition the devadasis represented the well being and active sexuality of the ever-auspicious.[112]

It was important for the devadasis not only to represent active sexuality, but to perform it, in order to balance their sacred power. As the *Akam* Tamil poetry (dating from 100-300 CE) explains, there was a deep connection between sexual maturity and the sacred power of women which was often considered to be very dangerous.[113] A woman's sexuality needed to be harmonized through intercourse with a man, in order to keep such power balanced. The devadasis, more than any other women, needed their feminine power to be offset by a physical male in order to remain auspicious and balanced, so as to be able to perform their duties to the community, which included restoring imbalances and preventing potential crises.[114]

The devadasis' status as ever-auspicious women may also have played a role in legitimizing their status as caste-system outsiders. The auspicious/inauspicious dichotomy is very different than the pure/impure one on which the caste system is based, but the two do relate to each other, and to the third descriptive determinant of place in society: status. As one anthropologist describes it, status is linked to masculinity and auspiciousness to femininity. Status and masculinity are also the determinants of one's place in the caste system.[115] The caste system revolves around conceptions of the pure and impure, and keeping activities and people associated with either separate from one another. Caste hierarchy is a simple categorization of what

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[112] Frédérique Apffel Marglin, "Types of Oppositions in Hindu Culture," in *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, ed. John B. Carman and Frédérique Apffel Marglin (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 74.
[113] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 4-6.
[114] Ibid., 69-70.
[115] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 19.

is pure or impure in relation to everything else.[116] This is, however, largely a

categorization of men, as women are all loosely classed as servants, and their caste

status is primarily important due to their responsibility to serve their husbands.[117] As

The Laws of Manu, a Hindu law book, writes: "The ritual of marriage is traditionally

known as the Vedic transformative ritual for women; serving her husband is (the

equivalent of) living with a guru."[118] Because the devadasis did not marry mortal

men, their high state of auspiciousness was unconnected to a responsibility to serve

the caste of their husbands, and unrelated to the pure/impure dichotomy of Indian

society. Their state of auspiciousness may thus have been a key factor in their

continuance as a group outside of the caste system. Because, as wives of the deity,

they have been privileged to be ever-auspicious, they cannot be classed by caste. For

women caste would be related to marriage or auspiciousness, and the devadasis fail to

fit the traditional mold in either case.

The devadasis' unique relationship to the laws of purity and impurity that

governed Hindu men (and indirectly their wives) is best illustrated through the

customs of some devadasis not to observe purity-based restrictions, such as those

surrounding menstruation. Hindu mythology and law relates that the low ritual status

of women is in part due to their periods. While a woman is menstruating she is

considered impure and is forbidden to touch others or worship in temples. If she

disregards these rules misfortune is expected to descend upon the woman's family.[119]

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[116] Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 43.
[117] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 19, 88.
[118] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 24.
[119] Catherine Thompson, "Women, Fertility and the Worship of Gods in a Hindu Village," in *Womens Religious Experience: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Pat Holden (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983), 113.

The Laws of Manu reinforce these customs, saying that "a menstruating woman becomes clean [pure] by bathing after the bleeding has stopped" and forbids priests to accept food from women who are in their time of impurity.[120] Some devadasis, however, claim no such restrictions. As one Telugu-speaking devadasi from Southern India said "We have no restrictions to go into the temple during our periods." According to these devadasis, there was a direct link between their status as ever-auspicious women and their lack of menstrual taboos. As ever-auspicious women they did not need to deal with mundane matters of purity and impurity, descriptions that had little relevance to their practices.[121] Likewise they had little need to deal with the caste system, a purity-based structure equally at odds with their governing principles of auspiciousness.

Although the devadasis' position as ever auspicious women is most often attributed to their status as wives of the deity, it may also be related to their ability to have sexual relationships outside of normative caste and class restrictions. Sexual activity is, by definition, auspicious, because auspiciousness is based on creating and maintaining life, and sex is the ultimate life-creator. This should once again not be confused with purity, as sex is also considered impure.[122] But to the devadasis impurity has little significance, as their status is based on auspiciousness. Due to the connection between auspiciousness and sex, the devadasis are considered especially auspicious because they engage in sexual activities in many different realms, through their relationships with the deity, the priests, the king, and sometimes lay lovers. The

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[120] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 106, 93-4.
[121] Davesh Soneji, "Living History, Performing Memory: Devadasi Women in Telugu-Speaking South India," *Dance Research Journal* 36, no. 2 (2004): 42-3.
[122] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 18-9.

devadasis were also considered to be adding to their auspiciousness because, ironically, they often practiced contraception. By practicing contraception but still having those relationships intricately associated with giving life, devadasis were seen to be storing up their procreative powers, and thus heightening their state of auspiciousness.[123] The state of auspiciousness of the devadasis was thus enhanced by the devadasis' ability to transcend caste boundaries regarding their sexual partners, as well as in part created by it.

The auspicious character of the devadasis gave them other boundary-breaking privileges that relate to their transcendence of social boundaries. As ever-auspicious women they were given the respect of members of even the highest castes. Besides the desire of upper-caste men to have sexual relations with the divinely-married devadasis, they were also invited to perform at marriages and other auspicious ceremonies at elite homes. In secular society upper-caste and upper-class Hindus were expected to treat a devadasi with respect and chivalry, in recognition of her ability to spread her auspiciousness to them. The devadasis were a symbol of good luck, and were thus invited into wealthy homes which would never have opened their doors to the lower-caste parents of most of the dedicated girls.[124] Some rich aristocratic homes even employed their own private devadasis, known as a *manikkam*, to take care of the auspicious state of the room holding the family's altar, and to prevent the inauspicious influence of the evil eye, that would potentially attach itself to family members on their way back to the house.[125] The devadasis thus crossed

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[123] Serinity Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: Sexualities in Buddhist Narrative, Iconography, and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 109-10.
[124] Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform ", 1870-1.
[125] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 147.

caste lines not only through their sexual relationships with their patrons and through their unity as a group with members hailing from different caste backgrounds, but also in that their high state of auspiciousness gave them the opportunity to ignore the social boundaries created by the caste system, and to be welcomed and respected by upper-caste Hindus.

When thinking about how the devadasis were able to cross boundaries through their auspiciousness, it must also be remembered that for the devadasis, many aspects of society, and in particular the social, political, and ritual spheres, were interconnected. These three divinely-regulated spheres were within the professional expertise of the devadasis, through their work with private patrons, before the king, and as sacred priestesses in the temples, roles which often integrated one sphere with another. The devadasis were expected to manipulate and control the divine energies present in each through their auspicious songs and dances. A devadasi's position as eternally auspicious was her key to crossing boundaries, such as serving both the personal worshipper and the political king. This ability to transcend categories was indicative of the caste-based boundaries which she also transgressed.[126]

One must also not downplay the role of marriage in the devadasis' caste-position. As mentioned, the caste system is, for women, built upon the institution of marriage, and it is due to the religious responsibility of women to serve their husbands that a woman's caste is even significant. If classed at all, the devadasis were called *stri jati*, the caste status of women-kind.[127] One can attribute the devadasis' status as outsiders of the caste system as due to their inability to marry

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[126] Ibid., 137.
[127] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 19.

mortal men. Without the possibility of caste-classified husbands, it mattered little

what the caste status of the devadasis themselves was.[128] It was important that the

devadasis be of castes high enough to give water to Brahmins, because many of the

women's patrons were Brahmins, but the caste status of a devadasi's parents certainly

did not have to be on par with that of a Brahmin's wife, who would be expected to

perform auspicious acts for her husband, such as cooking for her husband's

household and ancestors.[129]

One key reason for the importance placed on marriage for Hindu women was

that with marriage came a balance of shakti, or power. Both men and women have

shakti, but they are expected to handle it differently. Male shakti is stored in semen,

and men can best retain it by being chaste ascetics. Women, on the other hand, are

considered to have greater shakti, which is present in their milk. By engaging in

sexual intercourse women increase their shakti, and through marriage this intercourse

is regulated and the shakti controlled.[130] The female power, when unrestrained, is

considered very dangerous and uncontrollable, which is in part why Indian culture

stresses directing it via marriage and maternity.[131] This power is even more

dangerous in its divine form, also known as shakti. Divine shakti is considered a

dynamic principle, with the power to be both destructive and creative.

The rite of passage which formally consecrated a woman as a devadasi

involved a marriage ceremony with the divine or with an object meant to represent

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[128] Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 566.
[129] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 51.
[130] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 45.
[131] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 54.

the goddess or the shakti of the god. This "marriage ceremony" was seen as a merger

between the dedicate and the divine's shakti, making the devadasis part of the

goddess, or the shakti side of the god.[132] The devadasis were thus immune to the

dangers inherent to the goddess's shakti, because they themselves were part of the

goddess. As ritual people with this position the devadasis were able to channel any

dangerous anger coming from the goddess and avert negative effects of the evil

eye.[133] Abbé Dubois, a French author from the 1800s, wrote: "whenever people in

these positions [high ranking people such as governors and rajas] have been obliged

to show themselves in public, or to speak to strangers, they invariably call for the

courtesans or dancing-girls from the temples to perform this ceremony over them, and

so avert any unpleasant consequences that might arise from the baleful glances to

which they have been exposed." As Dubois explained it, the devadasis unique

position in regards to divine power was harnessed by other Hindus in both the public

and private spheres. [134] One of the most important functions of a devadasi was

therefore to deal with the dangerous feminine side of the divine, shakti, by ritually

merging her own feminine power with that of the great goddess, thus harmonizing the

dangerous side and creating a nourishing and protecting force in its stead.[135]

This nourishing side of female power is associated with food, particularly the

food of the goddess Lakshmi. This is likewise associated with the king, who was

expected to be the bountiful provider to his people.[136] The connection to food puts

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[132] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 197.
[133] Ibid., 59-60.
[134] Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* trans. Henry K. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 148-9.
[135] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 136.
[136] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 182-3.

both the king and the shakti-controlling devadasis outside of the realm of the *varna* hierarchy, as the production of food is inherently outside of the caste classification scheme. The sexuality of the devadasis builds on this, as she is expected to counterbalance the heat of the ascetics and usher in rain. Her sexuality thus assures the material prosperity, via food crops, of the realm, and in doing so demonstrates the role of shakti in allowing her to transcend the caste structure.[137]

The devadasis' important role in the control of shakti and harmonizing its dangerous aspects also places them outside the need for the caste system. One main purpose of the caste system is to control the dangerous powers associated with the chastity and sexuality of women by marrying them to partners appropriate in the cosmic equilibrium which the caste system supports.[138] As the devadasis' role already put them outside the need for controlling shakti, they also had no need for a caste system to determine their cosmically balanced husband.

The marriage ceremonies of the devadasis explain how the devadasis were enabled to take control of this power. The devadasis often had full-scale wedding ceremonies, where they were symbolically married to a sphere or other object representing the divine. The divine being represented was in some ways seen as the male deity whom the devadasi was "marrying," and in other ways viewed as a manifestation of the goddess herself. By marrying in such a manner, the devadasi merged her own power with the shakti of the male god, which was considered identical to merging with the goddess.[139] This illustrates the ambiguity of the meanings of shakti, gods, and goddesses. By marrying "the divine," the devadasis

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[137] Ibid., 108-9.
[138] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 59.
[139] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 136.

placed themselves into their ambiguity, acknowledging their sole purpose as harbingers of auspiciousness and controllers of shakti. Amid such ambiguity but with a clear cut purpose, it is unsurprising that more material considerations, such as caste, were downplayed in their communities.

The close connection between the devadasis and shakti also suggest a connection to Tantrism, practices relating to the Sanskrit Tantric texts of early Hindus and Buddhists. Tantrism is based on practices associated with the appeasement of mostly-female local and regional deities in Indian villages, which were popular in ancient times and continue into the current day.[140] Scholarly disagreement exists about a connection between Tantrism and the origins of the devadasis, but several prominent scholars hypothesize a relationship.[141] Some suggest that the fertility cults mentioned earlier in the chapter and believed to be precursors of the devadasis may have merged with Tantrism as they entered the temples.[142] In Assam, once the center of Tantrism, similar sexual practices have led to the idea that the devadasi system developed under Tantric influences.[143] Others reject this assumption because they see Tantric sexual practices, which often involved an upper-caste man and a lower-caste woman, as performed for very different reasons than the relationship between a devadasi and her upper caste patron. While Tantric relationships were of a strictly ritualized nature in order to increase a man's shakti or other special powers, devadasis

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[140] David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" In Its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), xiv, 3-4.
[141] Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India*, 5.
[142] Dr. K. Sadasivan, *Devadasi System in Medieval Tamil Nadu* (Trivandrum: CBH Publications, 1993).
[143] Rajatananda Das Gupta, "The Institution of Devadasis in Assam," *Journal of Indian History* 43, no. 127 (1965): 570.

engaged in non-ritualized sexual activities in order to allow their patrons to imitate the god to which the devadasis were officially married.[144]

Regardless of whether Tantrism led to the institution of the devadasis, most authors agree that it influenced its development. For example, Tantric influences can be seen architecturally in the temple sculptures where the devadasis of Odissi used to worship.[145] Within her practices, the devadasi's task of removing evil influences through her shakti may also relate her to Tantric ideas of the Cosmic Energy of shakti. The devadasi safeguards and reabsorbs the dangerous Cosmic Energy released by the divine during her rituals, preventing the Energy's dangers from entering and destroying the world. A Tantric retelling of the meaning behind the devadasis' rituals is, therefore, quite similar to ones based on more general conceptions of shakti and divine power.[146] These similarities lead one to deduce a connection between Tantrism and the devadasis. A connection between the two is highly relevant because Tantric practitioners also operated without a caste system.[147] In part this may be because the deity-worship relating to Tantrism developed very early in Indian history, possibly before the existence of the caste system.[148] Yet it may also simply be an aspect of Tantrism's sectarian character, similar to the anti-caste tendencies of the bhakti devotional movement.

One of the social phenomena that is often cited in the development of the devadasis and hijra movements is bhakti devotionalism. Bhakti is Tamil for devotion,

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[144] Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (1985): 1870.
[145] White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, 97-9.
[146] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 119-20.
[147] Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History*, 210.
[148] White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, 3-4.

and the bhakti movement was one that encouraged the personal devotion of adherents to a specific deity.[149] Scholars surmise that the bhakti movement gained popularity around the seventh century CE, placing it about two centuries before the rise of the devadasis.[150] This movement is, in fact, sometimes credited with indirectly contributing to the development of the devadasis as priestesses dedicated to specific temples, because bhakti ideology stressed a spiritual connection with individual deities, which led to the rise in prominence of the temples associated with these deities.[151] As the temples gained power, so did their religious servants: the devadasis. The rise of the bhakti movement and the devadasis were therefore part of the same socio-political change: a transition from a unified kingship to a more feudal-like era of landowners and their dependent tenants, which increased the importance on regional temples.

Although scholars suggest that the rise of the bhakti movement took place around the seventh century, its origins may run much deeper. Opinions differ as to how it developed, and the earliest suggestions offer bhakti as a remnant of the indigenous people living on the Indian sub-continent before the presumed arrival of the Indo-Europeans. The evidence for this comes from seals depicting figures in bhakti-yoga positions.[152] Others suggest that bhakti-devotionalism developed as a Hindu challenge to Buddhism and Jainism, both of which had strong influences in India between the fourth and sixth centuries. Exponents of this hypothesis point out the similarities between the three methods of spirituality, and suggest that the bhakti

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[149] Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.
[150] Sharma, "Problem of Transition," 9.
[151] Kesavan Veluthat, "Religious Symbols in Political Legitimation: The Case of Early Medieval South India," *Social Scientist* 21, no. 1/2 (1993): 24-5.
[152] Herman, *A Brief Introduction to Hinduism*, 42-3.

movement was the Hindu way of incorporating aspects of the rival religions into their own faith. A third suggestion is that this turn towards individual devotionalism was a response to the exclusivity of Brahmanism, and a reaction to the caste-oriented side of Hinduism, which would place it around the time of the *Vedas* (1500-900 BCE).[153]

Regardless of its date of origin, the philosophies behind the bhakti movement are what make it particularly applicable to the relationship between the devadasis and the caste system. Most people differentiate bhaktism into two strains: *nirgun* and *sagun.* While the former became almost a separatist movement, creating new sectors in India that refused to conform to traditional ideas about caste differentiation or gender-based exclusions, the latter oriented itself more in league with traditional Hindu society. *Sagun* bhakti is believed to have developed first, and integrates ideas of devotion into normative Hindu assumptions about caste, suggesting that while upper-caste men can gain salvation through wisdom, bhakti offers spiritually-lower individuals, such as women and people from lower-castes, the opportunity to become closer to, or perhaps even gain, salvation. On the other hand, the leaders of *Nirgun* bhakti, which developed around the 1500s, were predominantly lower-caste and lower-class, and openly rejected the theology, rituals, and social ideology of Veda-based Hinduism. Both traditions were different from mainstream Hinduism in their endeavor to offer salvation to all castes, with the exception of the untouchables, whose situation was left ambiguous.[154] Almost all bhakti sects also included a ritual in which all castes ate together, a custom in direct opposition to caste-based

[153] George W. Spencer, "Religious Networks and Royal Influence in Eleventh Century South India," review of Reviewed Item, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, no. (1969).
[154] David N. Lorenzen, "Introduction: The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, ed. David Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 13-21.

conceptions of purity and separateness.[155] And integral to both strains was an emphasis on devotionalism, exemplified as the complete self-surrender of the individual to the deity being worshiped.[156]

The later date of *nirgun* bhakti places it after the rise of the devadasis, but *sagun* bhakti certainly existed during their time. Bhaktism influenced the societal place of the devadasis in several ways, reacting to different defining aspects of the devadasi community, most especially its character as consisting of women, dedicated to a deity, and coming from a variety of castes.

The connection between the bhakti movement and the devadasis being dedicated to a temple relates to the systems gaining prominence chronologically close to each other (as was discussed above), and also to the idea of devotionalism. The suggestion that there is a relationship between bhaktism and the devadasis gains strength because the role of the devadasis in the temples can be seen as bhakti-devotionalism. Image-worship and temple ceremonies are both associated with the rise of bhakti, and these are two of the devadasis' duties as priestesses.[157] For example, the evening ritual practiced by the devadasis of Puri, has been cited as a form of bhakti-devotionalism.[158] Furthermore, much of the Tamil poetry of the devadasis was based on the themes, ideas, and language of Tamil bhakti, and the first scriptural mention of the devadasis occurs in a seventh-century bhakti poet's

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[155] Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, 307-8.
[156] Sharma, "Problem of Transition," 8-9.
[157] Peter van der Veer, "Taming the Ascetic: Devotionalism in a Hindu Monastic Order," *Man* 22, no. 4 (1987): 681.
[158] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 20.

collection of hymns.[159] Both of these facts indicate a clear connection between the devadasis and the bhakti movement. Some go as far as to credit the growth of the bhakti-devotional movement, in conjunction with the rise of the temples, with the existence of the devadasis as a rich and respectable class.[160]

Bhaktism may thus have contributed to the respectability of the devadasis, and almost certainly influenced their roles as devotional worshippers. It probably had an even deeper effect on them, though, in relation to their position in the caste system. Having established that there was a connection between the devadasis and the bhakti movement, one would be justified in assuming that there was also a connection between bhakti's unique view of the caste system and the devadasis' own ambiguity in it.

Regardless of what one believes about how the bhakti movement came into existence, all scholars agree that it is associated with changing opinions about the caste system. The most extreme of these believe that the bhakti sect emerges as a "religious rejection of Brahmanical value system," and that bhakti was characterized by a break in the social restriction that had hitherto limited the performance of certain rituals within certain castes.[161]

The least extreme and least common view is that the bhakti movement began with an openness to incorporating members of different castes, and then, as it gained popularity, began instead to strengthen the caste institution. This theory is related to the rise of the bhakti movement occurring with the rise in feudal-like relationships,

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[159] A.K. Ramanujan, "On Erotic Devotion," in *When God Is a Costumer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and Others*, ed. A.K. Ramanujan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 9. Whitehead, "Measuring Women's Value," 156.
[160] M.G.S. Narayanan, "Handmaids of G-D," *Aspects of Aryanisation in Kerala* (1973): 45.
[161] van der Veer, "Taming the Ascetic," 680-1.

suggesting that the relationship of complete devotion between the deity and the worshipper was meant to mirror the devotion that should be shown to an upper-caste ruler or priest by those lower down on the hierarchy pyramid.[162] Instead of suggesting that all people could worship equally, bhaktism is thus represented as saying that all people must be aware of their place in society in relation to their superiors. This opinion of bhaktism, however, is a minority view, and still establishes that there was a relationship between the devotional movement and the Hindu caste system, which, at least at some point, encouraged a breaking of caste-based boundaries.

The view between these two extremes suggests that *sagun* bhaktism embraced the caste system, but simultaneously offered devotionalism as a self-directing opportunity for lower-caste people to become closer to salvation. In this view devotionalism is not expected to be practiced to the exclusion of the karmic (religiously prescribed) duty on which the caste system is based, but is offered as an additional socially appropriate level of worship. Under this idea devotees believe that practicing this kind of bhakti-devotionalism enables lower-caste people to be reincarnated as learned Brahmins who can then embrace the highest level of worship through learning and reach salvation.[163] Bhakti thus offered another religious opportunity to people of lower castes, while accepting the caste structure.

These views all hold in common, to differing degrees, an interest in the bhakti treatment of the caste system. The dominant views held by scholars are the first and third ones, that a key aspect of bhaktism was its ambivalence towards the caste

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[162] Veluthat, "Religious Symbols in Political Legitimation," 26-7.
[163] Lorenzen, "Introduction," 15-6.

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system. This ambivalence can be viewed at most as a complete rejection of the caste system, and at least as a revolutionary opportunity for lower-caste Hindus to worship a deity directly, rather than simply following religiously-prescribed duties.

The bhakti view of the caste system is especially on par with the devadasis, whose confusion about caste is not just that they have no clear place in it, but also that the system is acknowledged and part of their daily life. Thus although the devadasis do not belong to any general caste, they are expected to choose their patrons based in part on caste, preferring members of the Brahmin (priestly) and Kshatriya (ruling) castes. As with the adherents of *sagun* bhakti, the devadasis, in most cases, accepted everyone but the untouchables, whose situation was so far below the rest of society as to make it impossible for its members to be incorporated even into these systems which would incorporate all others.

The relationship between the caste politics of bhaktism and the caste status of the devadasis also plays into the gender-based distinctions (or lack thereof) of bhaktism, and its implications for the devadasis as a predominantly female, matriarchal-ruled group. Women are associated with sudras (the servant class, above only the untouchables in the caste hierarchy) in Hindu legal texts.[164] Therefore what bhaktism preached about providing religious opportunities for Hindus across caste boundaries would have resonated with the devadasis both as a group outside the caste system, and as women.

Bhakti devotionalism was developed and considered especially appropriate for the lower classes and women. The idea of complete devotional unity with the divine was meant to be universal, but it was offered to play a particular role in the lives of

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[164] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 63.

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women (and lower caste Hindus).[165] It then became translated, by women, into the idea of god as an alternative to a husband; a logical jump in a patriarchal society where a woman's religious duty was primarily to obey her father and serve the man he chose to be her husband.[166] This jump is best illustrated in the example of Mira, a female sage of the bhakti movement who probably lived around the 1400s. The tradition around Mira says that she refused to accept her *dharmic* (religious) duty to serve her husband, even when a royal one was picked out for her, and instead declared that she would love and serve only the deity Krishna. Mira would not consummate her marriage, or mourn upon the death of her legal husband.[167]

The bhakti community surrounding Mira, called the community of Mirabai, publicly demonstrated how the bhakti movement could be used not only to subvert social systems surrounding caste, but also those surrounding gender. The community of Mirabai defied the patriarchal norms surrounding marriage, and gave women the opportunity to reject male power and instead choose for themselves a religious alternative to the traditional path of serving a husband: serving a deity instead.[168] Although Mira came hundreds of years after the rise of the devadasi system, she is an illustration of values connected with bhaktism that existed before her time. The place of women and caste are intricately connected in the Hindu social system, and by subverting both bhaktism gained added relevance to the devadasis, who also subverted the conventions of these two aspects of society by living in a matriarchal

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[165] Jayant Lele, "The Bhakti Movement in India: A Critical Introduction," in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. Jayant Lele (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 2.
[166] Ibid., 12.
[167] Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62-6.
[168] Ibid., 38-41.

structure outside of the caste system. Bhaktism is thus additionally related to the devadasis, and can be cited as a significant role in their performance of their ritual. Although it is impossible to know the degree to which the bhakti movement influenced the devadasis' development particularly related to their caste-system status, a relationship between the two can be reasonably hypothesized.

Bhakti-devotionalism can therefore be seen as a social movement with a strong relationship to the devadasis, especially in relation to their status as caste-system outsiders. Additional factors which probably played a role in the devadasis' development and societal place include the history of their matriarchal practices, their high level of auspiciousness, the lack of a human husband, and their position as the controllers of the dangerous shakti (female power). In the next chapter similar explanations will be made regarding the hijras, a second Indian group which draws in members from across the caste hierarchy. Although some aspects are very similar between the two, such as a high level of auspiciousness and a close connection to the Goddess, other influences are quite unique, and will present even those things held in common differently.

<u>The Hijras</u>

The hijras are a more difficult group to examine historically than the devadasis, because so much of the literature about them is very contemporary and the group itself has changed so much over the past few hundred years. In an endeavor to understand the hijras' place in (or outside of) the caste system one must look at their contemporary position in society.   From there one can trace the historical reasons behind the characteristics which make the hijras into the casteless group that they are today.

As with the devadasis, when examining the hijras' position in Indian society as a group containing members of various castes it is important to start with the historical influences that formed the group. Although the roots of the hijra movement are far more unclear than those of the devadasis, several aspects of their history are generally established, some of which may strongly link to their current out-of-caste lifestyle. The historical and national influences on the hijras can be roughly divided into five categories: Hindu, Sumerian, Roman, Jain/Buddhist, and Muslim. Within each of these categories explanations can be hazarded for the hijras' present social situation.

Within Hindu history there are traditions of eunuchs dating back to at least Vedic times. The roots of the hijras, however, may go back even further. Archeology from Northern India and Pakistan exhibits mother goddess worship similar to that which the hijra religious system is based on. This evidence was found along the Indus River and dates to about 2,500 BCE, the time of the earliest known civilization in the area. Along with the statues of goddesses, archeologists have also

uncovered images of a three-horned Shiva pre-cursor. The god Shiva, as well as a goddess, Buchara Mata, is the patron deity of modern hijras.[169] This places the religious traditions which the hijras still follow to before the alleged Aryan invasion of India, and possibly to a time before the prominence of the caste system.

Furthermore, archeology shows contact between the early inhabitants of the Indus River Valley and their Sumerian neighbors. Significantly, these Sumerians also had what scholars commonly call a third gender, similar to the hijras. As with the hijras, this third gender was a catch-all category, which the Sumerian god *Enki* commanded to include demons that stole infants, barren women, and priestesses who were not allowed to have children. If the hijras and the Sumerian third gender developed together, it would make sense for the former also to be a catch-all category, accepting members regardless of social background. To support the claim of similar social structures between the two cultures, one should note that a group of Sumerian priests, the *kur-gar-ra*, also cross-dressed, in an effort to portray accurately the goddess which they served, reminiscent of the hijras who cross-dress today.[170] Communication between the two peoples, and thus co-development of societal groups, is supported by a theory that some scholars hold that the language spoken by the inhabitants of the Indus River Valley is similar to ancient Sumerian.[171]

There are also strong similarities between the Roman *galli*, and the hijras. Dating from between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, the male-born *galli* were an official part of the Roman state religion, most of whom self-castrated themselves and

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[169] Walter Penrose, "Hidden in History: Female Homoeroticism and Women of A "Third Nature" In the South Asian Past," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 10.
[170] Will Roscoe, "Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion," *History of Religions* 35, no. 3 (1996): 215.
[171] Penrose, "Hidden in History ," 10-11.

acted as women.[172] Non-castrated *galli*, as with the hijras, were hermaphrodites.

Galli were expected to dance and sing, as well as whip themselves, the latter perhaps

being a connection to the asceticism of the hijras which will be explored later on in

this chapter.[173] Also perhaps related to the hijras' asceticism is the devotional

character of the *galli's* lives, which involved twice-daily prayers, long chants, regular

fasts, and a diet devoid of bread and pork.[174] Roman men decided on their own

initiative to be *galli*, and apparently also came from across the social system.[175]

There is no clear evidence that the hijras were inspired by the *galli* or vice versa,

although there are strong similarities between myths surrounding the *galli's* god

Cybele, and hijras' god Shiva.[176] Regardless, the existence of such similar systems

suggests that hijra-like groups were widely considered a necessary part of ancient

society, and generally came from across the social strata. Perhaps because being a

hijra was a unique identity related to one's sexuality and religious convictions, it

could not be restricted to those who were born into a given group.

Influences on the hijras are brought closer to India when one considers how

interactions with Buddhist and Jain philosophies may have impacted their

development. Both Buddhist and Jain texts reference a third gender, although it is

called many different names. By the third century CE these views of a third gender

were solidified and differentiated from each other. The Buddhist position, similar to

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[172] Roscoe, "Priests of the Goddess," 196-203.

[173] Penrose, "Hidden in History ," 11.

[174] Victor T. Cheney, *A Brief History of Castration*, Second ed. (Bloomington: Author House, 2006), 181.

[175] N. M. Penzer, "Appendix II: Indian Eunuchs," in *The Ocean of Story: Being C. H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva Katha Sarit Sagara (or Oceans of Streams of Story)*, ed. C. H. Tawney (London: Chas J. Sawyer Ltd., 1924), 327, quoting Lucian.

[176] Cheney, *A Brief History of Castration*, 155.

that of the Sumerians, assigned gender based on procreative abilities. The third

gender was thus the catch-all category for impotents, who were called *napumsaka*.

The Jains, on the other hand, rejected the Buddhist conceptions of procreative-

based gender in the fifth century CE and instead determined gender on the basis of

sexual behavior and the role adopted in sexual intercourse. They had four categories

of gender, including the masculine and feminine *napumsaka*, the former playing the

penetrative and receptive roles in sexual intercourse, and the latter only playing the

receptive part. Aspects of Jainism's third and fourth genders were similar to

Brahmanism's hijras. Two of the terms used to signify the third gender in Jain

literature also implied transvestism and dancing, practices still associated with the

hijras today.[177] While hijras form their own monastic-like communities together, Jain

members of the third sex often took refuge in monasteries. Although transvestite men

were prohibited from becoming monks, people who were born male and dressed male

(even if they were sexually attracted to men) were permitted to be ordained.[178] Third-

sex sexuality and the related stigma were seen, at the time, as sufficient motivation

for an otherwise healthy person to renounce society and societal pleasures and live an

ascetic life.[179]

The development of a third (and fourth) gender among both the Buddhists and

the Jains was influenced by and in turn influenced conceptions already existing in

Vedic literature of sex being determined by the presence of certain primary and

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[177] Leonard Zwilling and Michael J. Sweet, ""Like a City Ablaze": The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (1996): 363-4.
[178] Ibid.: 369-70.
[179] Ibid.: 377.

secondary sexual characteristics.[180] The fact that Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain

conceptions of gender developed so closely together indicates a possible relationship

between the hijra community and their Buddhist and Jain neighbors. And if

conceptions of gender were shared between the groups, conceptions of caste would

logically have been shared as well. Significantly, neither the Buddhists nor the Jains

endorsed a caste system.[181]

Beyond the influences of other Indian based religions, the hijra movement and

its existence outside the caste system is most often attributed to the Muslim roots of

the group. Although eunuchs are mentioned in early Hindu texts such as the

Mahabrata and the *Kama Sutra*, many contemporary hijras trace their heritage to the

eunuchs who served in the Muslim courts during the period of Muslim rule which

lasted into the 1800s.[182] The word most commonly used to describe the group,

"hijra," is actually an Urdu word, coming from the language used at the Mughal

bazaars.[183] Many of the Muslim court eunuchs rose to high positions of

administrative and political power, and it is from their legacy that modern hijras trace

their own respectability, as well as various land grants and social privileges (such as

expecting money when begging).[184]

One would not ordinarily expect a group such as the hijras, with the combined

stigmatism of being eunuchs and inter-caste, to be afforded any level of respect or

understanding. According to the *Vedas* castration makes a person lower than the

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[180] Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 18-22.
[181] Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir: Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 71.
[182] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."
[183] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 29.
[184] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."

untouchables (the lowest in the caste social pyramid), and according to *The Laws of Manu* the caste system was divinely created. The Muslim influence, however, served in some ways to turn these stigmas around, and afforded Hindu eunuchs, who had existed long prior to the Muslim invasion, a higher and more respectable place in society.[185]

Muslims considered eunuchs to be endowed with boundary-breaking abilities before the Mughal courts came to India. As people who could not fully mature as men, but also certainly were not women, Muslims were at a loss as to how to categorize eunuchs, and therefore compromised by proclaiming their physical ambiguity to be a sign of a responsibility to mediate barriers.[186] In the physical sense this took the role of sitting between Sunni preachers and Shiite audiences to prevent violence. In a more metaphorical sense Muslims associated eunuchs with the fundamental boundaries they believed to be present in the world to preserve humankind from *fitna*, "disorder on all levels."[187]

Rather than this ambiguity giving Muslim eunuchs a disgraced state, the vagueness surrounding eunuchs' societal places became associated with the honor that was accorded to their position. Special eunuchs existed to serve the (deceased) Prophet Mohammed, a position known as entering "the noble service," and these men were given respected titles and positions.[188] Such men were also thoroughly educated in religious matters such as the Koran, and were often very devote, although the

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[185] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 150.
[186] Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, 63, 87.
[187] Ibid., 56-60.
[188] Ibid., 41.

majority of them were actually born in non-Muslim homes and brought to Muslim lands as slaves, because the castration of Muslims was forbidden by the Prophet.[189]

The high level of respect associated with Muslim eunuchs probably played a large part in the position that hijras later gained in Indian society. Additionally, the function of eunuchs as devout boundary-breakers echoes the hijras' current position in the caste system. Like their Muslim forbears, today's hijras ignore boundaries, neither allowing themselves to be classed by gender, nor by religion, nor by caste. Modern hijras do not distinguish between Muslim or Hindu members of their group, and all are buried together.[190] In this sense, operating outside of the caste system is merely one way in which hijras transgress boundaries, and is no doubt related to their Muslim heritage. In addition to eunuchs operating as unclassifiable people in Islamic traditions, there is, in general, no caste system in Islam as there is in Hinduism. In fact, adherents of Muslim devotional traditions spread a message of transcendental worship without hierarchies or rankings, similar to the ideology of bhakti devotees.[191] Although many Muslims who settled in India were classified as one caste or another, the caste system is a Hindu phenomenon, and the Muslim influence on the hijras gave them a greater ability to develop beyond the reach of caste. In some areas lower caste Hindus even adopted Muslim practices en masse as a way to rebel against the rigidity of the caste system and their low position within it.[192]

One should be careful, however, to note the difference between Mughul eunuchs and modern day hijras. Today's hijras are a conglomeration of many sides

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[189] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 28.
[190] Ibid., 78.
[191] Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India*, 47.
[192] Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, 69-71.

of Indian society, and many differences exist between them and their Muslim precursors. For example, while Muslim eunuchs were devout followers of Mohammed, hijras just as carefully worship Buchara Mata, a Hindu goddess.[193] The connections between the hijras and the Muslim eunuchs are strong, and no doubt account in a large part for the ability of the hijras to form a group consisting of members of various castes, but the Muslim influence is still only one of the many that led the hijra community into its present place in Hindu society.

Within Hinduism there is also a connection between the hijras' ambiguous caste status and their ambiguous sexuality. The sexuality of the hijras is a complex subject, and different aspects of it contribute to their place in society in several ways. For example, in her book about sexuality in traditional Hinduism, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty describes the hijras as androgynes, transvestites, and male homosexuals all in one, adding that their true identity is as "female androgynes." She adds that female androgynes are negative figures, which are normally identified with evil women in androcentric societies.[194]

O'Flaherty distinguishes between eunuchs, who she defines as "man minus man," and androgynes, who are "man plus woman." She characterizes the hijras as the latter, differentiating them from the eunuchs of the harems because those eunuchs did not dress as women, as the hijras do.[195] As androgynes the hijras can represent, on a theological level, the relationship between the devotee and the deity, which is either a relationship of blissful union with the divine, or the longing for such a union. Androgynes are representative of this because Hindus characterize them as either in

[193] Dalrymple, *City of the Djinns*, 173. Balaji, *Hijras: Who We Are*, 12.
[194] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 284-97.
[195] Ibid., 297.

complete union with their dual sides (masculine and feminine) or in a state of agonized desire for such a union which cannot occur, because the two sides are permanently placed on their respective parts of the androgyne's body. By bringing together the two sexes, androgynes also bring together two sides of Hindu society, the first associated with marriage and caste distinctions, and the second relating to unorthodox passion and tantalizing desire.[196]

Since the hijras, as androgynes, are the syncretism which brings these two sides together, their lifestyle of embracing societal oppositions, such as including adherents of multiple religions, genders, and castes, makes more sense. The Hijras combine the unorthodox side of Hinduism with the orthodox one, and only the latter embraces caste distinctions. As the combiners, it is logical that they themselves cannot formally uphold caste distinctions, and that they alternatively developed a system outside of such boundaries.

As androgynes the hijras are also often associated with the god Shiva, who is frequently depicted as half-man/half-woman. Shiva's most powerful symbol of worship is a phallus which is almost always set into a *yoni*, the symbol of the female genitalia.[197] According to the Hindu creation myth, Shiva castrated himself, and by doing so extended his sexual power to the entire universe. The hijras believe themselves to have similar abilities, in that despite having emasculated themselves, they have the power to bless others with fertility.[198]

Shiva is often known as the "erotic ascetic," because he is a god infamous both for his asceticism and his extreme sexual prowess. In Hinduism these two

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[196] Ibid., 332-3.
[197] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 20.
[198] Ibid., 30.

characteristics are not mutually exclusive, a concept indicative of the cyclical nature of the religion. One common cycle in Hinduism is the cycle of rebirth, where people are generally reincarnated after death and can thus change caste from one life to another, based on previous merits. Hindu mythology also embraces cycles regarding sexuality, such as the old ascetic being transformed into a young lover, or a sage's chastity resulting in him obtaining increased sexual powers, as well as the right to use said sexuality.[199] Through the concept of such cycles eroticism and asceticism become closely linked. The power of the ascetic is in his divine sexuality, which he has conserved and concentrated through his asceticism.[200]

Despite Hinduism being a cycle-based religion, however, such cycles generally occur one part at a time, and not concurrently. Thus a person cannot belong to two castes simultaneously, or be erotic and ascetic at one time. The unusual aspect of the god Shiva is in his ability to be both erotic and ascetic, simultaneously. Hijras are another exception to this generality, for they are considered, like Shiva, to be erotic ascetics. As erotic ascetics the hijras formally break through the traditional Hindu paradigm of eroticism versus asceticism, which also includes other opposites, most importantly that of low-caste/high-caste.[201] The hijras' connection to Shiva therefore strongly relates to their ability to transcend boundaries. The same ability to transcend erotic-ascetic boundaries allows the hijras to also work outside of the caste boundaries which basic Hinduism would normally embrace.

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[199] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 64.
[200] Ibid., 10.
[201] Nicholas J. Bradford, "Transgenderism and the Cult of Yellamma: Heat, Sex, and Sickness in South Indian Ritual," review of Reviewed Item, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, no. 3 (1983).

Through their connection to Shiva the hijras are also associated with shakti, the divine female power which the devadasis possessed. The conception of Shiva as androgynous is based on his representation of uniting with his shakti.[202] The hijras trace their power to bless to the shakti emanating from Buchara Mata, the Mother Goddess whom they worship. Based on this connection to shakti, hijras display an aggressive female sexuality in their performances, despite having been born men. Through their emasculation the hijras are transformed from impotent men into vehicles of the Mother Goddess's divine power of birth and creation.[203]

The hijras' position is similar to that of the *Jogappas*, the "female erotic men" who are part of the cult of *Yellamma* in Southern India. Although the *Jogappas* do not castrate as the hijras do, they dress as women, do women's work, dance, and are similarly bawdy in public.[204] The *Jogappas* are considered by the inhabitants of their area to be sacred female men, and to symbolize the aspects of shakti which defy male control. Their sacredness is reinforced by the taboos which they embrace, one of which is that *Jogappas* can come from any caste.[205] Similarly, one can hypothesize that the sacredness of the hijras, which gives them the abilities to bless and confer fertility, is reinforced as is that of the *Jogappas*, by the taboos which the hijras ignore. Chief among these taboos is, of course, caste distinctions.

There is also an interesting connection between the hijras and rain, which mimics the connection between the devadasis and food. Just as the devadasis are considered to represent nourishment, the hijras are traditionally thought of as

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[202] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 20.
[203] Ibid., 5.
[204] Bradford, "Transgenderism and the Cult of Yellamma," review of Reviewed Item, no.
[205] Ibid.review of Reviewed Item, no.

providers of rain. A common story that the hijras tell about themselves concerns a

drought that a hijra stopped through her prayer.[206] One might consider this power

over rain to be indicative of the same nourishing power (shakti) which the devadasis

possess, and which contributes to their place outside the caste system. As with food,

rain is nourishment, and nourishment is inherently outside of *varna* categorization.[207]

In Hindu mythology power over rain is also associated with chastity, which

the hijras additionally embrace as part of their unique sexuality.[208] More specifically,

it is the philosophy of Hindu asceticism that says that chastity generates the power to

produce or otherwise control rain.[209] Despite being associated with the *erotic*

asceticism of Shiva, hijras ideally expect themselves to be completely sexually

abstinent. This expectation of celibacy has become twisted in recent times as many

hijra communities have turned to prostitution as one of the only available means of

making a living. Even though many hijras now engage in prostitution, community

elders endeavor to continue the perception of the community as sexually abstinent,

proving that this is a key aspect of their communal personality, which they want to

portray to the outside world.[210]

It is logical for the hijra elders to want to continue the hijra persona of sexual

abstinence, because it is in part from this that hijras receive the creative powers to

bless births and marriages.[211] By disciplining their bodies through renouncing sex,

hijras transform their male sexual energy into a higher spiritual power.[212] Such

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[206] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 31.
[207] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 182-3.
[208] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 31.
[209] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 42.
[210] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."
[211] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 5.
[212] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 30.

abstinence puts them on the same level as *sannyasis*, "individuals outside the world" people who renounce society to live as holy beggars and wanderers. Besides giving up worldly attachments such as sexual desires, *sannyasis* must also relinquish social relations, such as those based around the caste system. In exchange for such sacrifices, hijras (and *sannyasis*) gain the powers associated with asceticism; power which gives hijras their explicit place in society. Hijras therefore refer to themselves as "other-worldly," in an effort to emphasize this connection.[213]

The hijra religion is centered on the hijras' ascetic character, in that their two main deities are Shiva, commonly considered the erotic ascetic, and the goddess Buchara Mata, also known as Bouchera, Beherchrā, or Bahucharā, who tradition cites as the spirit of a woman who cut off her own breasts and killed herself rather than being raped.[214] Buchara Mata is thus associated with "impotence, sexual abstinence, and mutilation."[215] Both of the hijras' main deities, therefore, not only castrated themselves (Shiva tore off his penis as part of the creation myth), but also in some form renounced sexual desire and activities. In their asceticism, including through castration, hijras mimic these actions.

Like the hijras, ascetics violate caste boundaries, and should therefore be polluting to other Hindus who follow the caste hierarchy.[216] Ascetics, however, have created a niche for themselves in Hindu society which allows them to exist outside the caste system, a niche which hijras seem to imitate. A key component of asceticism is leaving one's caste and family for a new spiritual family, and the actions

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[213] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 29.
[214] Penzer, "Appendix Ii: Indian Eunuchs," 321.
[215] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 56-7.
[216] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 66.

of the ascetic are considered to be the ideal for Hindu men.[217] While women increase

shakti by being chaste wives, men increase their divine power through asceticism and

retaining semen. There is even folklore that when an ascetic retains his power by

storing up his semen he develops breasts as does a pregnant woman (who is retaining

her menstrual fluid), an image quite similar to that of a castrated ascetic hijra

developing the outward characteristics of a woman.[218] Ascetics are sometimes

viewed as the complementary side of caste-based society, which acts outside normal

social norms also to achieve spiritual transcendence and release.[219] The attainment of

such goals through asceticism has historically been a personal process which was

unlimited to any certain social group.[220] Ascetics have therefore always operated

outside the caste hierarchy, and the hijras' association with ascetics legitimates their

similar position outside the caste system, besides building up their claim to ascetic-

like powers.

Asceticism can sometimes be linked to the bhakti movement, which may also

play a role in the hijras' customs and place in society. As previously mentioned, the

bhakti movement was a devotional form of worship, often of a specific deity from the

Hindu pantheon, which gained popularity around the seventh century C.E.[221] Various

aspects of the bhakti movement, including asceticism, link its prominence to the

development of modern-day hijras, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the

hijras' position outside of the caste system.

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[217] van der Veer, "Taming the Ascetic," 684-5.
[218] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 44-5.
[219] Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India*, 16.
[220] Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, 149.
[221] Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 3. Sharma, "Problem of Transition," 9.

The bhakti movement is especially linked to the hijras in that it conforms closely to the religious side of their community. For example, one of the hijras' main deities is a goddess, Buchara Mata, and the emergence of the bhakti movement was contemporary to the emergence of the worship of a single Goddess, in the beginning of the Common Era.[222] Bhakti also offers a logical explanation for the hijras' use of castration. Bhakti is about finding a personal, sometimes pseudo-sexual relationship with a specific deity, and bhakti mythology speaks of worshippers seeking an erotic relationship with the divine, and the need for the male worshipper to "become female" to do so.[223] This is true regardless of whether the divinity is male or female, because even though a mortal man could theoretically have an erotic relationship with a female divinity, such a relationship is considered dangerous to the extreme, so the male worshipper must actually become female so as to avoid uniting with the goddess. Castration can thus be seen as an attempt by the male worshipper to feminize himself and lessen the danger of his deep attachment to a female deity thereby bringing dangerous consequences.[224]

Even when the relationship between the deity and the worshipper is not erotic, bhakti still dictates subservient devotion. In this relationship the worshipper is expected to be meek and devout, characteristics which are also associated with the ideal woman. In bhakti poetry it is said that men become like women in their attitude towards the divine.[225] By becoming more feminine through castration and cross-dressing, hijras follow bhakti ideas of more closely imitating the feminine

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[222] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 87.
[223] Ibid., 77.
[224] Ibid., 89.
[225] Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, "Introduction," in *On the Threshold: Songs of Chokhamela*, ed. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), xxiv.

characteristics of the ideal devotee, to better serve the goddess they are worshipping. The act of castration also symbolizes the goddess's complete triumph over the person being castrated and that person's complete devotion to the deity.[226]

It is easy to see how the hijras' deep connection to the bhakti movement could have led to their development outside the caste structure, similar to the influence that the movement had on the devadasis' place in society. Tirumular, one of the earliest wandering bhakti saints who sang in the sixth century, wrote "caste is one and god is one," meaning that all castes are equal in terms of religious worship. Many of his contemporaries challenged the basis of the caste system, and are examples of how the bhakti movement became associated with anti-caste ideology.[227] Such an attack on the social order was not, in general, the point of the bhakti movement. But the movement did, however reluctantly, direct worship and allow salvation for devotees regardless of caste, even going as far as to almost include untouchables, the lowest on the Hindu caste pyramid.[228] The connection between the hijras and bhakti ideas could very easily connect the hijras to bhakti social ideas about developing communities outside of the confines of the caste system.

The hijras' connection to both Islam and Hinduism may have strengthened their relationship with the bhakti movement, which also connected both religions. Bhakti devotionalism opened its doors, and the path to salvation, to members of all groups, including those people of Muslim descent. One of the most well known bhakti leaders, Kabir, hailed from a Muslim background, and is still revered by both

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[226] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 87-90.
[227] K. Kailasapathy, "The Writings of the Tamil Siddhas," in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, ed. Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 386-9.
[228] Lorenzen, "Introduction," 15.

Hindus and Muslims.[229] In this case, Islam and the bhakti movement can be combined to offer an explanation for the hijras' position in society, for both Islam and bhakti devotionalism were influences leading the hijras outside of the caste structure.

The hijras are also brought closer to bhakti ideas because of their ascetic tendencies. Asceticism and bhakti devotionalism were often linked, as can most easily be illustrated by examining the hijras in relation to the *Tyagi* and the *Naga*, two ascetic groups of Ramanandi bhakti order. Like the hijras, these groups organized themselves into spiritual families, practiced asceticism, and deemphasized caste distinctions.[230] Although certainly not the only group to combine bhakti devotionalism with asceticism, they are a prime example of doing so. Additionally, by the 1900s caste was downplayed to the extent that Ramanandi followers may not have necessarily been thinking of it as biologically determined or unable to be changed.[231] This sentiment was echoed in the hijras' grouping of themselves irregardless of caste distinctions. This is not to say that there is any relationship between the hijras and the Ramanandi followers, but rather that the connection between asceticism, bhakti, and caste which is found among them is similar to that found among the hijras, and can thus lead to a deeper understanding of the latter.

It is therefore clear that a variety of influences came together to create the societal place that hijras currently hold outside the caste system. These influences probably came from a variety of places, such as Sumer, Rome, and India, and a variety of religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Buddhism. It was some

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[229] Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, 11-2.
[230] van der Veer, "Taming the Ascetic," 686-9.
[231] William R. Pinch, "Reinventing Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1996): 568-9.

combination of these places and faiths, as well as other sexual and religious characteristics of the hijras, that allowed their group to develop as it did. What exact combination led the hijras to the position they hold today will probably never be known, but by examining as many of the possibilities as possible one can glean a greater understanding of how the exceptions to the caste system might have developed, and thus more thoroughly understand the caste system in general. To gain a more complete picture of phenomena that can create casteless groups, it will be useful to examine the devadasis and hijras in relation to each other, and note the similarities between the two groups. This will be the goal of the next chapter.

Commonalities between the Devadasis and Hijras and the Making of "Pseudo-Castes"

In the past three chapters the devadasis and hijras have been examined as separate groups in relation to their places in India's caste system, and the historical and religious reasons that may have led to such unique societal positions. Most interesting about this situation is that the devadasis and hijras are two of a very small number of groups in Indian society that have held positions considered within the caste structure, but not as proper castes. Other groups, such as ascetics and members of devotional movements, carved niches for themselves in society by either rejecting the caste structure or establishing themselves outside of its scope. Besides the devadasis and the hijras, the only group which historically acted as a caste yet accepted members from outside hereditary relationships was the musicians, who worked closely with the devadasis and whose system thus strongly resembled that of the priestesses. By analyzing the devadasis and the hijras one can therefore gain a fairly complete understanding of an unusual feature of India's caste system, the "pseudo-castes." And in order to appreciate fully what might make a pseudo-caste, one must compare the histories of the two groups and pull out the similar features relevant to their societal-positions.

The first similarity is that both the devadasis and hijras have connections to non-caste based societies. As was previously seen, the devadasis' connections are historic, in that some scholars trace their precursors to the pre-caste Indian subcontinent. As a fixed relic from that time period one can hypothesize that the system retained its pre-caste orientations despite the changing society around it. There is also archeological evidence to suggest that a society religiously similar to the

hijras existed from this early time.[232] Besides historically, the hijras trace their

origins geographically and religiously to important influences that came from places

and religions which did not use a caste system. For example, hijras may be related to

various other Eurasian groups such as the Sumerian *kur-gar-ra*, and to other religions,

such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam.[233]

Besides outside influences, the devadasis and hijras also share internal

influences which similarly place them outside the caste context. One of the most

visible connections between the two groups is their shared relationship with sectarian

movements in general, and the bhakti movement in particular, which became deeply

rooted in both groups. As the previous chapters have explained, the devadasis found

special meaning in the bhakti movement because it was closely related to the temples

where they served and it was particularly open to women.[234] The hijras, in their turn,

were influenced by the physicality of bhakti devotionalism and its connections to

asceticism, as well as its acceptance of all members of society, including those hijra-

precursors who may have come from Muslim homes.[235] Although both groups

related to the bhakti movement for very different reasons, their common emphasis on

its influence presents a unifying feature between the two, and perhaps a key element

in the formation of the groups' societal places in the caste-based system.

One important aspect in bhaktism's view of the caste system was that the

movement itself was not unilaterally opposed to a caste structure, as other sectarian

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[232] Penrose, "Hidden in History ," 10.
[233] Roscoe, "Priests of the Goddess," 215. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 18-22. Dalrymple, *City of the Djinns*, 172.
[234] Veluthat, "Religious Symbols in Political Legitimation," 24-5. Lorenzen, "Introduction," 15.
[235] van der Veer, "Taming the Ascetic," 682-6. Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, 12.

groups were.[236] Like the devadasis and the hijras, the bhakti movement gave

individuals an opportunity to worship a deity in ways that traditional caste restrictions

did not always allow. Yet in giving lower caste people a greater religious voice, the

mainstream movement did not unilaterally break with caste-based Hinduism. There

are exceptions to this, and certain bhakti leaders did say inflammatory and

provocative things about caste, but on the whole the bhakti movement existed at

peace with the caste system just as the devadasis and hijras did, with a few alterations

and changes.

The devadasis and hijras are also connected by the theme of auspiciousness.

Auspiciousness is one of the primary characteristics of the devadasis, and they are

officially called *nityasumangali*, ever auspicious women.[237] Although auspiciousness

is not a widely discussed theme among the hijras, they are sometimes called

"*Mangala Mukhi*," which translates into "auspicious face." The hijras receive this

title because their presence at a marriage or childbirth is considered a good omen, and

they have the power to bless through their singing and dancing. The hijra claim to the

title of "*Mangala Mukhi*" derives from a legend that the Lord Shiva (a god) directed a

young boy to be born who, like the hijras, dressed as a woman and danced. Through

his dancing, this boy facilitated the death of a murderous devil, and the cross-dressing

hijras are considered to have retained some of the legendary boy's auspiciousness.[238]

The devadasis and hijras are thus connected in that both had/have unique claims to

auspiciousness. In turn, a unique claim to auspiciousness helps to put both groups

outside the caste dichotomy of purity/impurity, and places them instead in the non-

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[236] Lorenzen, "Introduction," 15.
[237] Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, vx.
[238] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 258-9.

caste based structure of auspicious/inauspicious.[239] Connecting the two groups based on auspiciousness is a more precarious step than connecting them through bhakti and other sectarian movements, because the notion of auspiciousness is less developed among the hijras than among the devadasis. Its presence, however, does support the relationship between the two groups and their positions as pseudo-castes.

Relating to the theme of auspiciousness is that of not participating in normative sexual relationships. Both the devadasis and the hijras were viewed by the rest of society as deviant sexualities, in that the hijras were seen as ascetics and the devadasis as ever-auspicious women who took on male partners outside of a marriage structure. Much of the hijras' rationalization for their place outside the caste system lay in their claim to asceticism, as ascetics traditionally renounced their caste for the spiritual family they gained through their asceticism.[240]

According to the devadasis of Odissi, otherwise known as the *maharis*, the temple women originally were ascetics, knotting their hair as the male ascetics did and refraining from sex. At one point, however, the deity of the temple, Lord Jagganath, told a devadasi-precursor to ornament herself. When she protested that doing so would cause men to desire her, he still insisted, and said that it was acceptable for his servants to touch her body. From this point onward, as the story goes, the devadasis of Odissi ceased to be chaste, despite their original connection to ascetic practices.[241]

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[239] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 19.
[240] van der Veer, "Taming the Ascetic," 684-5.
[241] Ron Hess, "Given to Dance: India's Odissi Tradition," (United States: J.E.G. Hess Productions, 1983).

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The devadasis could, in some ways, be seen as the opposites of the ascetics, as they were quite wealthy and did not live a sexually-abstinent lifestyle. As such, though, they can also be seen as models of "auspicious female asceticism." Asceticism was a difficult concept for women in Hinduism, because a chaste man could be the traditional sexually abstinent ascetic, but a chaste woman was one who was sexually active, providing her only partner was her one, human husband. Chastity (proper sexual behavior) thus meant very different things to men and women.[242] A woman was not allowed to renounce sexual relations with her husband until he died, at which point, as a widow, she was considered inauspicious. The devadasis reconstructed this entire complex of rules for female behavior by being auspicious and unmarried to a human husband.[243] As wives of a deity, their form of chasteness included having relationships with men, and still retaining the highest level of auspiciousness. The devadasis thus became the female counterpoint of the male ascetic, because they and only they could religiously embrace sexually divergent practices. Some scholars also suggest that the devadasis abstained (or tried to abstain) from having children, perhaps further linking them to ascetic ideas.[244] Although their exact forms of contraception are unknown, the devadasis of Puri did say that "they placed a contrivance in their belly" to prevent births.[245] This is supported by Englishman Edgar Thurston's record of the South Indian proverb "like a dancing-girl wiping a child," used to refer to someone who tries to help but lacks the

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[242] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 45.
[243] Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform ", 261.
[244] Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts*, 109.
[245] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 78.

experience to do so. The creation of the proverb dates to the idea that devadasis did

not bear children, and therefore did not know how to care for them.[246]

The connection between the devadasis and ascetics is also illustrated in "The

Farce of the Pious Courtesan," a play commonly attributed to the South Indian king

Mahēndra, who ruled around the beginning of the seventh century CE.[247] In this

drama the souls of an ascetic and a courtesan are switched when both meet in a

forest.[248] The juxtapositions of an ascetic's actions with a courtesan's body and vice-

versa produce an effect which is both comedic and thought-provoking. That these

two personas in particular were chosen by the playwright to have their souls switched

is a comment on the two characters' relative places in society, in that both move

outside the area of conventional morality and are similarly free of social restraints.

"The Farce of the Pious Courtesan" illustrates how the devadasis acted as the female

counterpoints of the ascetics, and thus connects them with the asceticism of the

hijras.[249] The common connection of both groups to asceticism may be seen as one of

the stronger rationales for their existences as pseudo-castes, since asceticism is so

commonly accepted in Indian society as a religious practice outside of the caste

system.

As controllers of unconventional forms of sexuality, the devadasis and the

hijras additionally had religious functions which by necessity placed them outside the

context of caste regulations. For the devadasis this related to their positions as earthly

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[246] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 152.
[247] King Mahendravarman, *The Farce of the Pious Courtesan*, trans. Michael Lockwood and A. Vishnu Bhat (Madras: Diocesan Press, 1991), iii.
[248] Ibid., 34-46.
[249] Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts*, 106.

representatives of divine shakti, female power.[250] Part of the reasoning behind the

caste structure was to control the shakti present in every woman by regulating

marriages and finding women appropriate husbands.[251] As the human harmonizers of

divine shakti, the devadasis had no need for a caste-ordained societal place to balance

their shakti. Rather, they were in control of their and society's shakti through their

relationship to deities, without the help of mortal men or a caste-based position. On

the other hand, the hijras simply embrace religious taboos, such as caste distinctions.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, their religious sacredness can be seen to

emanate from embracing such taboos. Although the functions of the devadasis and

the hijras, with respect to the caste system, are widely different, the common theme is

that both were placed outside of the caste system's structure by their religious duties

or places in society. Both were also placed outside the caste-related duty of marriage,

because neither the devadasis nor the hijras engaged in formal marriages to other

caste-Hindus.

Another pertinent similarity between the two groups is that both broke societal

boundaries. As has been emphasized, the devadasis occupied a unique sexual

position in society, in that their sexual activities outside the confines of marriage were

in no way considered debasing. Rather, their upper-class clients were obliged to

honor the devadasis and treat them as respectable members of society.[252] The

devadasis also surpassed the expectations that society had of women through their

knowledge of male subjects such as reading and writing. As British Reverend

Maurice Phillips wrote in 1903: "The dancing-girls are the most accomplished

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[250] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 136.
[251] O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 59.
[252] Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform ", 1870.

women among the Hindus. They read, write, sing, play as well as dance."[253] To

emphasize the importance placed on their unique accomplishments, devadasis were

the only women under Hindu law who were allowed to adopt children without a male

partner, and to adopt girls at all. All other Hindu women, including widows, were not

allowed to adopt without a husband, and when adoptions took place in other castes

they were restricted to adoptions of boys.[254]

The hijras broke religious boundaries between Hinduism and other faiths.

Besides being a group composed of men who did not fit into the traditional Indian

male proto-type, the hijra community went beyond the religious confines present in

mainstream Indian society. As one modern hijra, Meena Balaji, wrote in 1997: "We

are Moslems, Christians and Hindus, but we are joined together by our worship of

Bahuchara Mata."[255] Another said: "religion does not matter for hijras. Hindu,

Muslims, Christians, anyone can join."[256] Religious syncretism is not only a modern

phenomenon: in the early nineteen hundreds, when the British began taking an

interest in them, hijras were reported to be a mix of Hindus and Muslims. Although

cultural syncretism is not unusual in Indian village-settings, the extent to which the

hijra community crossed religious boundaries was apparently far more extreme than

what was found in other settings, as the British took special note of the religious

differences and syncretism in the hijra communities during their attempts to order the

hijras into the fixed social categories that they were applying to the rest of India.[257]

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[253] Maurice Phillips, *The Evolution of Hinduism* (Madras: M.E. Publishing House, 1903), 119.
[254] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 151.
[255] Balaji, *Hijras: Who We Are*, 12.
[256] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 100.
[257] Laurence W. Preston, "A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth-Century India," *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 2 (1987): 375-6.

A final aspect of the devadasis and the hijras, which has not and perhaps cannot be thoroughly researched, is Indian society's need for them. Both groups provided societal services which could not be pre-determined by birth, as was usually the case with peoples' professions and societal places in the caste system. These aspects of the devadasis and hijras are less historical or religious, but still very relevant to a discussion of why the two groups did not develop into proper castes.

The devadasis, as singers and dancers, could not accept every girl born into their community. What is continually stressed in research on the devadasis' initiations is that even girls coming from devadasi families had to qualify to join the sect by being sufficiently skilled in the arts associated with the group. [258] In this way the devadasis were more strictly a profession than the traditional Hindu castes, which were familial first and professional second. The same rules applied to the temple musicians, who were also not a strictly-family based group.[259] Viewing the devadasis as a profession instead of a caste makes their place in the caste system much clearer. I would hypothesize that dancers were needed to perform temple rituals, but obviously not every woman was equally talented kinesthetically. The devadasis thus developed into a core group of hereditary women who adopted outside girls to ensure that a supply of gifted dancers was always on hand for temple worship. As time progressed, this system became less and less hereditary, although in some temples daughters of current devadasis had a greater chance of following their mothers into the profession, providing they qualified artistically.[260]

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[258] Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform ", 1869.
[259] Ibid., 1871.
[260] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 128.

The hijras can be seen to have followed a similarly structured story, but fulfilling a completely different societal need. Men outside of the male prototype, such as those who were asexual, intersexed, homosexual, and transvestite, have existed in various societies throughout history. Groups similar to the hijras, emphasizing gender diversity, can thus be found from the *berdache* (a European term) of the American Indians to the *jinbandaa* of Central Africa.[261] By endorsing a group such as the hijras, Hinduism provided a societal place for people who would have been present in society regardless of how their presence was treated. By accepting the hijras and endowing them with certain honorable characteristics, that place became one that was, if not respected, at least tolerated and livable. There is no doubt that being a hijra is considered low within India's social structure. Hijras are compared with untouchables and, as renouncers of their families and homes, are outcasts in Hindu society.[262] But they still have a place in that society. And because the place is structured around sterile individuals, it must perforce operate outside the caste structure. Non-heterosexual men can come from any caste and cannot reproduce themselves to form a single multi-generational group. Hijras therefore have to exist in the form they do, as a pseudo-caste, in order to provide a place for such individuals in Hindu society.

Many similarities can therefore be found between the development of the devadasis and hijras as groups outside the caste system. Their histories, sectarian influences, sexual practices, religious rights, and societal roles can all be seen as

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[261] Serena Nanda, *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variation* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 2000), 11. James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 54.
[262] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 78-85.

being related to each other. Although certain aspects of this relationship are stronger than others, there are clearly similar trends between the two groups and their relationship to Indian society as a whole. Some of the strongest influences that have led the two groups to their positions in Indian society are remarkably similar to each other, such as their shared connection to bhaktism and the societal roles which both performed that excluded the possibility of a caste-based structure. The devadasis and hijras almost certainly developed independently of each other and from different influences, but their places in Hindu society reveal close parallels to each other. This leads one to conclude that certain aspects of the religious development of the Indian subcontinent are especially prone to forming pseudo-castes. These aspects include religious roles, historical influences, societal necessities, and connections to other groups that also rethought the caste system. In the final chapter, these theories will be placed in the context of the devadasis' and hijras' more recent history, and will be analyzed in terms of their subsequent development after the British legal system entered India in the 1800s.

Conclusion: Bringing the Devadasis and Hijras into the Present Day

The historical development of the devadasis and hijras, on which the bulk of this thesis is based, spans millennia of Indian history. To conclude an examination of their places in society it is helpful to bring these groups up to date, and to explain them in their current context in Indian society. This chapter therefore examines the devadasis, hijras, and caste system in terms of British influences, and the present day positions of the two groups in relation to India's caste system.

The caste system changed drastically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, becoming more codified and sectarian. As Brahmans gained religious control in a number of Hindu-ruled kingdoms, expectations surrounding purity grew. Although an emphasis on purity and rank was already present among Brahman-identified Hindus, before this time period such values played a significantly smaller role in the lives of other people in the area.[263] In response to the increase in Brahman power other groups adopted caste-related customs, such as restrictive marriage practices, in order to create a caste identity similar to, and ideally imitative of the social status of, the upper-class Brahmans.[264] When the British, in the form of the East India Company, entered the area they increased the advantages of forming caste identifications by encouraging the formation of defined communities among Indians. By the end of the eighteenth century the Company was distinguishing individuals from among these communities as headsmen, to control the British trading interests in the area. This arrangement, which enforced Company-created divisions, was

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[263] Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India*, 64-5.
[264] Ibid., 71.

economically advantageous for the Indians and made business considerably easier for the British.[265]

The British further consolidated the idea of caste when their power increased outside of the commercial realm. As the East India Company took up a political role it deposed Brahman political leaders and justified its actions with caste-based ideology, asserting that the Brahmans' positions were those of priests and not of territorial rulers. This action began a rigid articulation of the caste system and caste-based customs which informed much of their later political policy concerning Indian society and their treatment of caste-based laws and traditions.[266]

Native Indians reacted to changing conceptions of caste by proposing their own opinions about the efficacy of the caste system, and creating corresponding reformist and advocacy groups. The three basic opinions among westernized Indians at the end of the nineteenth century were: 1) the caste system was evil and harmed the Indian nation, 2) caste represented spiritual and moral order and had the potential to assist nation-building, and 3) caste was a fact of Indian life and a source of historical national strengths. None of these views questioned the historicity of the caste system, only its place in modern (nineteenth century) Indian society. [267] By this time the historical presence of the caste system in its current strictness was well established. Those who condemned caste-based policies and religious practices had to exercise caution in voicing their opinions, due to the power that the caste system possessed by this time. If, for example, those who formally opposed it acted on their ideals by changing marriage practices, they faced the possibility of outcasting not only

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[265] Ibid., 80-2.
[266] Ibid., 88-9.
[267] Ibid., 154-5.

themselves but their families as well.[268] Changes in caste politics simultaneously affected the lower classes (and castes) as caste based hierarchies became an easy tool for landowners to demand added subservience and labor from their workers. Although such changes were often contested, they nevertheless led to a greater acceptance of purity-centered values and caste ideology.[269]

Although much of the law used by the East India Company was based on native Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim legal texts, as early as 1827 the Company also acknowledged the need to give unwritten custom a measure of legal authority.[270] By doing so the Company tried to continue its policy of noninterference with Indian religious customs, both for political reasons in that Indians far outnumbered the British, and also for ideological concerns about religious tolerance.[271] Due to the importance which the British attributed to the caste system, it became a prime authority for what actions should or should not be considered outside the scope of the textual law due to "local custom." This legal structure made the question of whether the devadasis were a proper caste very important to the survival of devadasi customs which the British considered immoral.[272]

The British viewed the devadasis as prostitutes because they partook in sexual activities outside the realm of marriage. Relating to this conception, the act of dedicating pre-adolescent girls as devadasis was also seen as prostitution, due to the associated ceremony which imitated that of a marriage and prevented the girls

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[268] Ibid., 172-3.
[269] Ibid., 191-2.
[270] Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 564.
[271] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 55.
[272] Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 564-5.

dedicated as devadasis from contracting "real" marriages in the future.[273] The year

that marked the transfer of political power from the East India Company to the British

crown, 1858, began the period for potential anti-devadasi legislation.[274] In deference

to Queen Victoria's 1858 promise of noninterference with religious beliefs, the

British abstained from passing any legislation specifically targeting the devadasis for

many years. Yet the government did inquire into the local moral and religious status

of the devadasis.[275] An 1861 code forbade disposing of minors for the process of

prostitution, which restricted the devadasis' abilities to adopt pre-adolescent girls into

their communities but did not outright attack the devadasi institution. In those places

where devadasis were prominent, they in turn pleaded special customs as devadasis

for legitimacy in circumventing the penal code.[276]

In order to gain enough legal recognition to counter this and later British laws,

the devadasis deliberately created a caste identity. If they could successfully plead

caste-customs, sexual practices outside of marriage could be condoned and accepted

despite their variance from the moral code instituted by the British and based on

select Hindu texts. If not, their sexual practices would be understood by the British as

the customs of degraded women and would be condemned.[277] This was the beginning

of devadasi self-characterization as a caste group, rather than as a semi-hereditary

profession.

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[273] Kunal M. Parker, "Observations on the Historical Destruction of Separate Legal Regimes," in *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Judgment*, ed. Gerald James Larsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 192.
[274] Srinivasan, "Reform or Conformity?," 177.
[275] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 58-9.
[276] Ibid., 59-62.
[277] Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 565-7.

Although for a time some places, such as Madras, accepted the devadasis'

claim to caste custom, their self-portrayal as caste-based religious practitioners was

more often overshadowed by Anglo-Indian preconceptions of them as "a professional

corps of traditional 'prostitutes.'"[278] The British often referred to the group as a caste,

but the devadasis' unique position in the caste system was also recognized in many

rulings against them, which denied the devadasis the caste-based right to formulate

their own religious practices. Instead of receiving the title "caste," the devadasis

were instead seen as a "guild," a "loose aggregate," a "company," a "corporate or

quasi-corporate body," or an "organization" of immoral customs. The British

definition of the devadasis as outside the caste system strengthened as the British

characterization of caste became more defined. A 1909 British source defined caste

as a social group in which membership was restricted to those born of members, and

whose members were forbidden to marry outside the group. As the devadasis

routinely recruited from outside of their membership pool and rarely married, it was

fairly easy to see them as a profession rather than an actual caste.[279] Unlike a caste, a

profession's customs and traditions could not be used as a legal argument under

Anglo-Indian law.

Following the 1861 legal ban on giving or receiving minors for prostitution

different Anglo-Indian courts passed a variety of measures which targeted the

devadasis more and more directly. Later resolutions increased the age of sexual

consent for women, legalized devadasi marriages to men, and dissociated current

devadasis from the temple system by making them economically independent from

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[278] Ibid.: 565, 95.
[279] Ibid.: 589-94.

the temple economies.[280] Much of the impetus for these reforms came from within

Hindu society. Starting in 1892 educated Hindus began attacking the devadasis

through protests and marches.[281] As Indian nationalism increased after the First

World War, the Indian Westernized elite became more concerned with the fact that

the devadasis represented Hinduism as a sexually promiscuous religion to the outside

world.[282] In 1947 the devadasis' situation was clinched with the "Madras Devadasis

(Prevention of Dedication) Bill," which forbid dedicating girls and declared all

dedications performed before or after the bill to be null and void. It also outlawed

female dancing in temples, religious institutions, and religious processions.[283]

Although the law officially only applied to the province of Madras, it had enormous

influence on social conceptions of devadasis throughout India and effectively, if not

legally, ended the institution even outside of the law's jurisdiction.[284] By this time,

however, dedications had dropped dramatically anyway, due to the lack of social and

economic support.[285]

Throughout the legislative period the devadasis endeavored to represent their

community to Anglo-Indian society as a positive religious component of temple

ceremonies. In these defenses they self-identified as a caste, saying: the "real purpose

of our caste is religion and service."[286] In 1948 a variety of former devadasis merged

together under the caste title *Isai Vellala* in order to overcome the disrepute

associated with their backgrounds and families. "*Isai Vellala*" is a modern version of

[280] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 103, 40-2.
[281] Srinivasan, "Temple Prostitution and Community Reform ", 1873.
[282] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 95, 106, 23.
[283] Ibid., 144-5.
[284] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 8.
[285] Srinivasan, "Reform or Conformity?," 197.
[286] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 128.

the term used in ancient times to refer to prestigious bards and court musicians, but was only adopted by the devadasis in response to the reform movements pitted against them.[287]

The devadasis' eventual formation as a formal caste, therefore, does not reflect on their traditional practices or religious place in society, but rather on the necessities of the time. As Indian society became more westernized and conceptions of proper female behavior solidified the devadasis, for the most part, lost their ritual importance to Indian society. For the Westernized elite of the country, much of the stress formally placed on the devadasis' rituals seemed to have been sacrificed to the moral code introduced by Great Britain.

The legal and social restrictions placed on the devadasis became a downward spiral, so that by the time the institution was formally outlawed in 1947 there were few devadasis left to prosecute. The institution of the devadasis did not, however, entirely die out at the time and strains of it continue into the present day. It continued officially in Orissa until 1955 due to the Hindu king in charge of the large temple there. By 1975, however, only nine of the devadasis present in 1955 could be identified.[288] This decline was the combined result of the end of royal patronage of the devadasis in 1958 and of the fact that pilgrims to their temple ceased to pay attention to them.[289] Yet in another area one author writes that in 1986 people were still coming to the home of a Tiruttani devadasi to ask her to remove the evil eye from

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[287] Srinivasan, "Reform or Conformity?," 176.
[288] Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 11.
[289] Ibid., 87.

family members, demonstrating that not all belief in their spiritual efficacy disappeared in the 1940s and 50s.[290]

New laws passed in 1982 and 1987 made devadasi dedication illegal in other areas of India, and today most devadasis are very similar to common prostitutes. In 1994 a doctor of the Indian Health Organization estimated that 15% of India's 10 million prostitutes were devadasis, and in 1997 the same man estimated that the number of girls dedicated to a specific goddess, Yellamma, had gone down from 7,000 less than ten years earlier to 1,000.[291] Today the devadasis are also known for their association with Bharata Natyam, the popular neo-classical dance form based on their ceremonial dances. Their religious roles, however, have largely disappeared.

The East India Company's reaction to the hijras in some ways corresponded to their attitudes towards the devadasis, in that the hijras were also seen as an example of a barbarous Indian practice that needed to be stopped in the name of "public decency."[292] Like the devadasis the hijras were seen as prostitutes. The Company, however, was also more careful when dealing with the hijra community, because too vigorous a pursuit of the topic could lead to nasty accusations.[293] In 1845 one British officer, Sir Richard Burton, lost his reputation in England after writing up a report on the hijra prostitutes whose brothels British troops patronized.[294] In addition to considering the hijras as immoral and offensive, the British were also downright confused by their easy syncretism of various religious and gender categories. Since

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[290] Kersenboom, "Tiruttani Temple Dancers," 145.
[291] Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 153-6.
[292] Preston, "A Right to Exist," 372.
[293] Ibid.: 377.
[294] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 186-7.

the Company saw India as composed of fixed social groups, they found their inability

to characterize the hijras easily to be disconcerting and confusing.[295]

In 1871 (once again after legal authority passed from the East India Company

to the British Crown) the Governor General of India passed a comprehensive law

against the hijras. Act No. XXVII, "For the Registration of Criminal Tribes and

Eunuchs," extended to all of the local Indian governments and principalities and

required the registration of all eunuchs by name and residence. The act also

criminalized public appearances of transvestites, the presence of boys below the age

of sixteen in eunuch houses, and the adoption of sons by eunuchs.[296]

As with the devadasis, the status of the hijras declined due to British

condemnation of them.[297] In the words of J. Shortt, who wrote about them in 1873,

the British saw them as "impudent beggars, rude and vulgar in the extreme, singing

filthy, obscene and abusive songs to compel the bazaarmen to give them

something."[298] The hijras also resemble the devadasis in that after the British left,

westernized Indians took up the campaign against the hijra community. The 1950s

saw a rising interest in hijras from Indian medical scholars, who rounded them up in

order to study their physical characteristics and, as the hijras claim, to further damage

the position of the hijras in Indian society.[299] The social status of the hijras seemed to

decline in response to these concerted efforts against them, although most Indians still

consider them to be ritually effective. Today hijras grace weddings and births and the

threat of their curse is often enough to procure their payment. The hijras are

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[295] Preston, "A Right to Exist," 376.
[296] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 220-2.
[297] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."
[298] Penzer, "Appendix Ii: Indian Eunuchs," 326.
[299] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."

gradually becoming more accepted by mainstream Indian society. In 2001 five hijras were elected to executive positions such as town mayor and state legislator, and a few months ago a hijra was, for the first time, signed on as a TV talk show host.[300] The hijras are also supported by local police forces, a phenomenon that increases their local power, and they are traditionally exempt from paying for their bus fare.[301] Although in earlier times hijras were normally found in villages, they are today more common in cities.[302]

The number of hijras in India today is highly contested, but they are certainly a small minority. In 1996, when India's population was around 930 million, official estimates put the number of hijras at between 50,000 and 1.25 million.[303] A more recent estimate, from 2001, suggests 1.3 million hijras in India.[304] Most of them live (and traditionally have lived) in Northern India, although there are a few communities further south, as well.[305]

One can only surmise why the hijras did not die out as a result of British prejudice, as the devadasis seem to have done. Perhaps because they were always considered social outcasts, forced to leave their families and communities and join with others in the hope of eventual death and rebirth into a single gender, British condemnation could not have the same effect on them as it did on the respected and ritually important devadasis. Some might also say that in essence the devadasi and hijra communities have reached the same unfortunate end—prostitution—and that the

[300] Cheney, *A Brief History of Castration*, 156. Amelia Gentleman, "Tackling Society's Boundaries, on TV and in a Family," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2008.
[301] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 6-7. Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 74.
[302] Preston, "A Right to Exist," 387.
[303] Jaffrey, *The Invisibles*, 147.
[304] Shiva, MacDonald, and Gucovsky, "Bombay Eunuch."
[305] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, xxii.

hijras' eunuch status just makes them more distinguishable than the devadasis, who merged into the ranks of common prostitutes. Regardless, they have continued to survive as a pseudo-caste to the present day, adopting adherents from different castes and creating their own unique communities.

Caste, as an identification system, also continues to be present in Indian society. Discrimination based on caste has been outlawed for decades, but caste is still an important part in the formation of community and personal identities.[306] Lower castes actively vote in India, and as a parliamentary democracy lower caste parties are normally needed to form parliament majorities. Especially among the lower castes of South India, caste identities have been used to form cohesive social groups which can then use their numbers politically to fight prejudice and upper-caste domination. In 1997 India elected K. R. Narayanan, a man from an untouchable family. This election was remarkable in that only one of India's political parties dared to oppose Narayanan's nomination.[307] Social inequalities based on caste have also declined, especially in South India where there have traditionally been a greater number of lower caste people.[308] Caste based prejudices do still exist, however, as is evidenced by an Indian man living in Chicago who at the beginning of this year set fire to his daughter's apartment largely due to her having married a lower-caste man. This incident echoes the violence surrounding inter-caste interactions that still occurs in India today.[309]

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[306] Monica Davey, "Father Says He Set Fire That Killed Three," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2008.
[307] Ashutosh Varshney, "Is India Becoming More Democratic?," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 1 (2000): 4-7.
[308] Ibid.: 20-2.
[309] Davey, "Father Says He Set Fire That Killed Three."

Recent events surrounding the devadasis and hijras provide an interesting subtext to a historical examination of their societal places. The devadasis' and hijras' reactions to changing ideas of caste and customs in Indian society further establish their positions as pseudo-castes. Neither had the staunch caste identification that other groups were able to form to legally battle the Anglo-Indian courts that questioned their customs. Although the hijras have survived into the present day, they survive in the same pseudo-caste context in which they have done historically, despite changing conceptions of India's caste system. In contrast, perhaps because they eventually tried to work themselves into this system, the devadasis as temple servants have essentially died out. Bringing the devadasis and the hijras into the current context has shown that both of these groups cannot and do not exist within the caste structure, no matter how it changes and transforms itself. In their societal places outside of caste, however, they do reveal important aspects of Indian religious society relating to auspiciousness, sexual practices, and sectarian influences that continue to exist today.

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