

# Two Baluchi Buggas, A Sindhi Zenana, and the Status of Hijras in Contemporary Pakistan

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Lal Bux alias Mumtaz resists emasculation, aspires to lead a normal life (with wife and progeny) and performs as a hijra primarily because of economic constraints. Lean and tall, with a long stride, high cheekbones, deep voice, and a muscular physique, Lal Bux is a handsome masculine specimen. But Bux/Mumtaz's hair is long and curly. "I don't do anything to it," he says, "It is naturally like this: Baluchi hair." Mumtaz invariably refers to himself in the masculine gender, although his gestures range from archetypally masculine to the quintessentially feminine. Every once in a while there are moments when Bux/Mumtaz is neither man nor woman but that peculiar mix of both that yet is uniquely neither, a hijra. "A hijra is something other than masculine or feminine, and the true face of the hijra appears best when she is angry," Mumtaz says.

"I was born at Shadpur" (in the Sanghar district of Pakistan; Baluchistan is split between southern Afghanistan, southeastern Iran, and southwestern Pakistan), he reveals. "My parents died when I was two years old and my khala [maternal aunt] raised me. I used to play with girls and I loved dolls, so my khala would say I would become a bugga [Baluchi equivalent of a hijra] when I grew up."

"Of course, I didn't know what a bugga was at that age. It was only

because of what my khala said that I became aware of them. But I have been instinctively attracted to hijras for as long as I can remember. A friend of mine, Rasool Bux, who was as feminine as them, would watch the hijras sing and dance in the Syeds' house. Rasool Bux first introduced me to the hijras of Baghdadi. Among them were Shantaal and Chandni. These hijras showered me with love."

Despite his association with them, however, and despite the fact that he became Chandni's chela (disciple and foster child), Mumtaz

was not prepared to be emasculated. "I did not get myself castrated despite constant pressure from other hijras. You see, these gurus get their protégés castrated for their own personal interests. Once the chela is castrated, he is bound to the guru for life and that means he has to give his guru the lion's share of his income. I am like other males, and I have sexual desires like

them." But his preference is for male sexual partners.

Mumtaz is a good dancer and has showbiz aspirations. Mumtaz's neighbors who have seen him grow up and watched his metamorphosis into a hijra relate their own version of how it happened. "Lal Bux used to be a very good boy," says a video shop owner. "But there was a man who would constantly be with him and take him everywhere he went. He claimed he wanted to reform Lal Bux, to take out the feminine



kinks in his personality. But the truth was that he was interested in using Lal Bux to satisfy his own sexual perversions. He was the one who ruined Lal Bux, who can't make love to a woman now, and smokes heroin."

Mumtaz acknowledges that he uses heroin, but maintains it is not a habit. "I do it every now and then, but not like I used to. When I'm with friends and they offer it to me, I take it, but not regularly."

Mumtaz's own attitude about being a hijra is ambivalent. He claims that he hasn't had intimate

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relations with anyone in the past fifteen months, although his neighbors say otherwise. Lal Bux's bashfulness about his sexuality arises from the negative image that homosexuality, especially passive homosexuality, has in the tribal, patriarchal culture of Baluchistan.

Mumtaz, who is the sole breadwinner of his family, makes most of his money from his performances as a hijra. He says it takes him four hours to make-up and dress before each performance, prior to which he spends two hours bathing. He claims that "most of our earnings are spent on makeup and clothes." The rest is spent on the upkeep of his khala and her children. "The only reason that I can't abandon this life is because I have to provide for my aunt. I am a poor man and there is nothing else I can do. Sometimes I get angry with her and tell her that it is because of her that I became a hijra in the first place, and now it is because of her that I have to continue doing it. I have lots of regrets about the way I have lived my life. But I still nurture the hope that someday I will get married, have children, and continue my line."

Rasool Bux alias Farzana was born in a Baluchi household in Lyari (a Karachi suburb). He was the eldest son, with all the expectations and responsibilities the position entailed. At the age of ten, Rasool Bux disappeared. "We looked everywhere," his mother

recalls. "No one knew where he was." After many days, one of the hijras in the neighborhood, who until then had been part of the conspiracy of silence, spoke. He told Rasool Bux's parents that their son was living with a hijra in Sanghar as his chela.

Rasool Bux's parents went to Sanghar to get their son back. They found him and managed to secure his release from his guru, but against Rasool Bux's will. At a bus stop in Hyderabad on their way back, he escaped. Even at that tender age, Rasool Bux had recognized his ruh, his spirit: he knew that he was a hijra. From then on he lived as Farzana among kindred spirits, other hijras.

Farzana did not return to her parents' home until, more than twenty years later, her father died. "His father just could not accept him," his mother recounts. Farzana's loving mother, however, would go and live in the hijra community in Sanghar, sometimes for weeks.

Black as night and portly, with her tight curly hair done up in a chignon, Farzana cuts a maternal figure. She conducts herself with dignity. Nowhere in her demeanor is there any indication that Farzana considers herself to be inferior or to be a member of a marginalized group. Farzana equates being a hijra with spiritual asceticism. Indeed, the deliberate emasculation that many hijras undergo is said to kill the nafs, which in Sufism (a powerful current among hijras) is considered the baser part of humans, often identified with desire, of which the most powerful manifestation is sexual desire. The word nafs also refers to the male genitalia. So emasculation, which is often, but not exclusively, the rite of passage for hijras, is an act of spiritual devotion and sacrifice. It is a very intense and dangerous one: the life of the devotee is at risk.

Farzana has not been emasculated. "He is still physically intact," says his mother with a burst of

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laughter. Farzana says her devotion to God is indicated by her sexual abstinence and by the way she earns her living. "I have a special relationship with God because I make my living uttering His name. All I do is give God's blessing to people: may God give you a son, may God give you a long life." Like many

other hijras, Farzana frequents various shrines in Pakistan, and looks forward to performing Haj when she can afford it.

Farzana scorns zenanas: "There is a world of difference between hijras and zenanas. Some zenanas even have families, wives and children. We are certainly not the same. Zenanas are in just for the dhandra (business). The so-called hijras at Zinda Pir are examples."

The zenanas themselves do not always claim that they are hijras. Says Sunny, who is avowedly a zenana, "I am not a hijra. Only my ruh is that of a woman. I started realizing I was different from other people at the age of sixteen. It was as if flames were rising in my heart. My father used to get angry with me. 'Why do you walk like this and where do you go?' he used to ask me. He once put me in chains. Then I fell in love with a man, but he is now a pardesi (a lover who has gone away, perhaps to foreign lands). I lived with him for several months in his house in Sargodha. But his brother and I couldn't get along. Even though I really loved my pardesi, we broke up, and I haven't seen him for two years."

Sunny markets his wares in Karachi's Empress Market, hanging out with other zenanas in cafes and other public places. He lives with his family and does tailoring at home, but makes extra cash by prostituting himself—without the knowledge of his parents, of course. Sunny says that a lot of men prefer hijras to women. "They like the hijra gestures, which are very different from those of normal women."

Many stories are told of marriages with hijras. One young man from Baghdadi says that in days gone by, hijras would marry men who had donkey carts, because they were prized possessions then. "Sometimes men would marry hijras because the hijras would give them all their earnings and they could then buy a donkey cart. But there was another reason, too, for

marrying hijras. People in those days were a lot stronger, worked a lot harder, and consequently had proportionally greater sexual appetites. A normal woman could not possibly satisfy them the way a hijra could. These days, however, young men marry hijras because marriages with women are too

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expensive."

A hijra's position in society is somewhat ambiguous. Formerly, they were an integral part of society and the state: they would be placed in the harems of emperors to serve the needs of the emperor's wives and concubines, and to protect them. Thus they served an important function in the affairs of the court, like eunuchs elsewhere.

Things are quite different now, however. In those days of Ayub Khan (during the early 1960s), hijra activities were banned. In response, hijras from all the various communities got together and staged a sit-in in front of his house, complaining to his mother about her son's decision, and reminding her that they had sung a lori (a lullaby for infants) for Ayub when he was born. The ban was revoked.

The next hijra encounter with the state was during the Pakistan National Assembly movement against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in 1977. Hijras participated in a PNA protest march. Direct hijra involvement in Pakistani politics, however, began in the 1990 elections, when a hijra, Mohammed Aslam, was put up as a candidate by the people of Abbottabad. Coming as it did after the collapse of the Benazir Bhutto government, the political message that seemed to come across was "The men have tried and failed, the women have tried and failed, maybe hijras will do the job better!"

Because the state recognizes only two sexes, male and female, it has a dilemma when dealing with hijras. Bureaucrats are, therefore, unsure how to deal with hijras. Many hijras complain that they have a great deal of difficulty obtaining ID cards, and say that they are continually harassed by the police, as well.

(This essay is reprinted with permission from *Islamic Homosexualities—Culture, History, and Literature* (New York University Press) edited by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe.) ▼