

# Hidden in History: Female Homoeroticism and Women of a “Third Nature” in the South Asian Past

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IN MODERN WESTERN society the polarization of sex and gender into what theorists term a “binary system” has largely eradicated legitimate third or fourth gender roles.<sup>1</sup> Those who do not behave in ways considered appropriate for their biological sex are now regarded as transgendered, for they have crossed over the socially constructed boundaries of gender-appropriate behavior. In the West, advances in surgery have even made possible the sexual assignment of hermaphrodites to one of the two acceptable genders while they are still young children—often with devastating psychological

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Randolph Trumbach, City University of New York Graduate Center and Baruch College, History (who has written extensively on illegitimate third and fourth genders in Western Europe) for his comments, feedback, and penetrating questions in a reading seminar that inspired this article; Sarah Pomeroy, City University of New York Graduate Center and Hunter College, History and Classics, for her verification of the accuracy of my Greek translation; Terence Kissack, City University of New York Graduate Center, for his generous comments; Tansen Sen, Baruch College, History, for his comments and penetrating insight into ancient South Asia; Serena Nanda, City University of New York Graduate Center and John Jay College, Anthropology, for her encouragement and feedback; an anonymous reviewer for her/his suggestions; and the members of the New York City Gay and Lesbian History Seminar for their feedback. None of these persons are in any way responsible for the conclusions reached in this essay. I would also like to thank Kathryn Payne and Kathleen Collins, City University of New York Graduate Center, for their help with research and typing.

For a discussion of the problematic dimorphism of sex and gender in Western culture, see the collection of essays titled *Third Sex, Third Gender* (Herdt 1994). The preface and introduction to this volume are particularly useful in this regard, as is the essay by Randolph Trumbach: “London’s Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture.” Unlike many other historians who have carefully analyzed male homosexuality but neglected female homosexuality and gender variance, Trumbach discusses “illegitimate” third and fourth genders (Trumbach 1994).

*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January 2001  
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consequences. In other regions of the world, however, sex and gender are not linked in the same way. In South Asia, for example, a gender-variant category, *hijra*, remains intact despite the efforts of British colonials to eradicate what they called “a breach of public decency” (Nanda 1990; Preston 1987). This “third gender” consists of hermaphrodites, women who do not menstruate, as well as passively homosexual and castrated men—all who proclaim they are “neither man nor woman” (Nanda 1990). Generally, though not always, *hijras* wear female attire and have female mannerisms and patterns of speech.<sup>2</sup>

While the role of *hijra* may be recognized, what is notably absent in most present-day South Asian cultures is a masculine “third-gender” role for women. Giti Thadani, a modern Indian lesbian, has recently written about “lesbian invisibility” in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, recounting frightful tales of women who identify as lesbians but whose families force them to marry (Thadani 1996, esp. chaps. 1 and 5–8). Although female gender variance now finds little acceptance except in a few remote areas of India,<sup>3</sup> an examination of ancient and precolonial texts reveals that distinct social and economic roles once existed for women thought to belong to a third gender. Hidden in history, these women dressed in men’s clothing, served as porters and personal bodyguards to kings and queens, and even took an active role in sex with women.

To explore this female third-gender role, I shall first consider some of the current theories about alternative genders in traditional societies and then examine the remnants of such genders as still exist in remote regions of India. I shall then survey ancient Sanskrit and later historical documentation of women whose occupations, cross-dressing, and masculine behavior match what we might expect a third gender to entail. Finally, I will discuss the demise of third-gender roles for women in the subcontinent, and suggest how further analysis of female gender-variant roles might advance the historiography of gender and sexuality.

<sup>2</sup>Earlier studies of *hijras*, influenced by Western discourse, viewed them as inverts and deviants. More recent studies have attempted to understand *hijras* as they understand themselves and as South Asian societies construct their identities, though this construction has become confused and negated by colonial and nationalistic ideology.

For a comparison of *hijras*, *jhankas* (noncastrated transvestite men who may or may not eventually become *hijras*), and, oddly enough, “academics,” see Cohen (1995). Cohen discusses the idea of economic necessity as well as sexual orientation as involved in the making of a *jhanka* and possibly *hijra*. He places the *hijra* into a larger cultural context, examining issues of forced sex and the Western-style lesbian and gay movement in major metropolitan centers in India and the Indian diaspora. His ideas, I would argue, have some validity.

<sup>3</sup>Shashi, a *hijra* interviewed by Kira Hall, says, “A lot of women walk like men and talk like men,” and describes a woman she knows who “always curses like crazy,” “talks just like a man,” and “looks like one too.” In contrast, both *hijras* and *hijrins* (female *hijras*) speak, dress, and act like women, even though some are born males, some females, and some

## THE CONCEPT OF THIRD AND FOURTH GENDERS

Third, fourth, or alternative genders have been variously defined by historians and anthropologists. Will Roscoe argues that “evidence of multiple genders in North America offers support for the theory of social constructionism, which maintains that gender roles, sexualities, and identities are not natural, essential, or universal, but constructed by social processes and discourses” (Roscoe 1998, 210). A system of multiple genders, according to Roscoe, can only exist outside dichotomous gender systems, which polarize sex, gender, and sexuality into categories of male and female. In a binary gender system, androgyny becomes the only available alternative. “Third and fourth genders, on the other hand, help us to perceive all that is left over when the world has been divided into male and female—the feelings, perceptions, and talents that may be neither” (210). Roscoe argues that many traditional non-Western societies have utilized the talents unique to individuals who were members of an alternative gender to serve society as a whole (212). Roscoe identifies three elements common to the alternative gender roles found in early Native American societies: “economic specialization,” “techniques and patterns of shamanism,” and “gender difference and homosexuality”—the latter “commonly equated with non-procreation” (206).

As they settled the Western hemisphere, Europeans described gender-variant natives with the French word *berdache*, derived from a Persian root. Roscoe does not find a single concept of berdache among the Native American peoples; rather, he notes that the diversity of their languages, ideas, and cultures resulted in the use of many different terms for berdache. In societies where a single term was used for both male and female berdache, Roscoe considers all persons in this category to be of a third gender, regardless of their sex. In societies where different terms were deployed, he classifies male berdache as a third gender and female berdache as a fourth gender (Roscoe 1998, 71).

Serena Nanda, who refuses to use the word *berdache* because of the negative associations Europeans gave it when they introduced the term in North America (Nanda 2000, 11), prefers the expression “variant gendered” or “gender variant” (13). She notes that studies have failed to establish a connection between the development of gender-variant categories and the degree of gender differentiation in a society. India, for example, is a highly patriarchal society with sharp gender differentiation, while many precolonial North American societies exhibited much less

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hermaphrodites (Hall 1995, 368). Some Hindu female ascetics do dress like male ascetics, though most seem to wear saris (Ojha 1981). Nonetheless, they do shave their heads upon initiation into asceticism.

differentiation. Yet, Nanda concludes, gender-variant roles have been institutionalized in both regions.<sup>4</sup>

Nanda does not view female gender variance as a “derivative, parallel, or reverse of male gender diversity,” but notes its unique cultural dynamic (Nanda 2000, 7). For example, while the variant female of northern India, the *sadhin*, like the sworn virgin of the Balkans, is defined by renunciation of sex, the variant male is “widely, if not universally, associated with male same-sex sexual relations” (102).

Bullough and Bullough have observed that male gender-variant roles occur more frequently and are emphasized more than female roles, which are considered less threatening (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 46). While this may be true in some locales, attitudes toward variant women in South Asia, as we shall see, have shifted over time: today gender-variant men find more institutionalized footholds in South Asian societies than do women.

GENDER VARIANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIA: *HIJRA*,  
*SADHIN*, AND *JOGAPPA* AND *JOGAMMA*

As noted above, *hijras* consider themselves to be “neither male nor female” (Nanda 1990). Although some may be hermaphrodites or women who do not menstruate, many are gender-variant men who do not wish to procreate or are sexually attracted to other men, and are eventually castrated.<sup>5</sup> Their gender variance is noted by the wearing of clothing representative of the female sex and/or both sexes combined. *Hijras* group together as devotees of a Hindu mother goddess, *Bahuchara-Mata*; while thought to possess unique powers by traditional Hindus, they are sometimes more feared than respected. They sing and dance at birth and wedding ceremonies, activities that in Hindu tradition would disgrace women, and they often work as prostitutes. Since whoever has sex with or “marries” a (usually castrated) *hijra* takes the active role, that person is considered male, not third-gendered.

Recent investigations by anthropologists have shed much light on both the internal life of the *hijras* and their relationship with society at large. Serena Nanda has broken new ground on this topic by attempting to understand the *hijras* from their own viewpoint (Nanda 1990). Recently, her work has been criticized by Kira Hall, who contends that Nanda “leads to a concluding focus on the notion of societal tolerance, giving many readers a

<sup>4</sup>Today in many societies, imported ideas regarding sex/gender coexist simultaneously with native traditions due to the spread of Euro-American concepts such as “lesbian” and “gay” (Nanda 2000, 6). According to Nanda, “The evidence argues against any one-way, cause and effect relationship between homosexuality and sex/gender diversity, and a specific sexuality may well emerge from a sex/gender variant role” (101).

<sup>5</sup>The word *hermaphrodite*, which was once used as a translation of *hijra*, is thus inadequate, though some *hijras* are hermaphrodites.

false impression of the status allotted to these ambiguously sexed figures” (Hall 1995, 30). As evidence, Hall cites attacks on the *hijras* in the press and the fact that they are forced to leave their families and live in a marginalized setting. In her concluding remarks, Hall notes that India has had difficulty “interpreting the notion of hijrahood during the past 40 years” (217). An oppressive colonial attitude is now “native.”

But generalizing from any one “attitude” that may be present in society at a given time is problematic: As an Indian proverb states, “Truth is a many-sided diamond.” Nanda calls the role of the *hijra* “ambiguous” like many other facets of Indian society (Nanda 1990, 19–23). *Hijras* are simultaneously mocked, feared, and shown respect.<sup>6</sup> Traditional viewpoints toward the *hijra* are still powerful in Indian society, though perhaps more among the rural masses than in the urban, educated, Westernized sectors (Hall 1995, 113).<sup>7</sup>

Sudhir Kakar helps contextualize the position of *hijras* by noting that Hindus are more accepting of “deviance or eccentricity” than are Westerners, who treat sexual variance as “anti-social or psychopathological, requiring ‘correction’ or ‘cure’” (Kakar 1981, 39). The “extreme manifestations” of deviance, “male transvestites,” are acceptable as a “group phenomena, sanctified by tradition and formalized in recognized rituals.” In the Hindus’ view, the status of *hijra* is the working out of a particular *svadharma*, the spiritual life task of the individual who is traveling on the path to *moksha*, final release from the cycles of human existence (37). Fulfilling the destiny received is an important aspect of Hindu belief. This aspect of religion, on which the caste system is built, allows institutionalized gender variance to exist within Hindu society, despite its highly patriarchal nature.

“Women who never marry are exceptionally rare throughout rural India. Among Hindus and Sikhs, both sexes popularly consider it an unfortunate and demeaning eventuality for a woman to remain unmarried” (Phillimore 1991, 331). One exception to this prevailing pattern is the *sadhins*, who live in northwest India among the *Gaddhi*, a pastoral people who inhabit the foothills of the Himalayas. Though the title *sadhin* is derived from the word *sadhu*, or holy man, these women do not have religious obligations but lead a secular life. According to Phillimore, they are committed to celibacy and chastity for life, although they take no public vows to that effect. Their “only renunciation,” he states, is “of

<sup>6</sup>It is instructive to read the appendix to Hall’s dissertation, which indicates that the *hijras* are respected by others in society. For example, Sulekha, a *hijra* whom Hall and her staff interviewed, notes that she is friendly with other villagers, who are “just like neighbors.” They visit her and she visits them on a regular basis (Hall 1995, 283–84).

<sup>7</sup>One of the *hijras* whom Hall interviewed discusses how the respect paid *hijras* in Gujarat, for example, is dependent upon that paid to *Babuchara-Mata*, the mother goddess who is thought to empower them (Hall 1995, 114–15).

marriage—and by extension sexuality . . .” (332). They continue to live with their families and do not renounce the secular world in the same fashion as do other Hindu ascetics. They retain female names and are referred to as females, but they do men’s work and dress as men. They often sit with women at large gatherings, but sometimes they smoke with the men—which women do not do. In a society where women are forced to marry and rear children, the role of *sadhin* provides an alternative style of life. However, women must renounce marriage and adopt the status of *sadhin* at puberty, whereas other Hindu ascetics may renounce the world later in life and may have already married (cf. Bradford 1983, 317). Those *sadhins* who reverse their decision and have sex with men are cast out from their villages (Phillimore 1991, 339).

Phillimore notes that the *sadhin* may be more closely linked with Buddhist than with Hindu traditions. Like *sadhins*, some Buddhist nuns, called *jomo*, continue to live with their families rather than in a monastic setting (Phillimore 1991, 342). On the other hand, female Hindu ascetics differ from *sadhins* in important ways: they must renounce the material world and leave their families.<sup>8</sup> Though some of those studied by Catherine Ojha in Varanasi dressed like male ascetics, most continued to wear *saris* (Ojha 1981, 265, 274).<sup>9</sup> And though Hindu girls called *basivis* were recorded in the 1890s as wearing male clothing and being given male privileges in order to bury their parents and pass on the family name, they, unlike *sadhins*, were allowed to have children (Fawcett 1891).<sup>10</sup> While Phillimore stops short of attributing the role of *sadhin* to transmission from Buddhist cultures (for he considers most arguments for such transmission to be problematic), I would

<sup>8</sup>Female Hindu ascetics are not allowed to live with their families because the only role allowed women in orthodox Hinduism is marriage.

<sup>9</sup>Since high-caste women are forbidden to remarry and widows are considered to be dead (Ojha 1981, 255), some decide to become ascetics. For them, renouncing the material world is an act synonymous with death and provides the widow with a life after death, so to speak. All of the female ascetics studied by Catherine Ojha seemed to shave their heads upon initiation, as do male ascetics, though some grow “matted locks” later.

<sup>10</sup>These *basivis* lived in the western part of the Bellary district of Madras. Though they were clearly not a cultural transmission from Buddhism, they seem to be exceptional within Hinduism. Bradford discusses modern *basivis*, equating them with *devadesis*, the word for sacred prostitute in other Indian languages (Bradford 1983). It appears that Fawcett and Bradford examined different locales within the southern subcontinent. Like other ancient traditions, these roles may be in danger of being subsumed by a nationalistic Hinduism that is striving to end local differences and eradicate ancient customs which do not meet the criteria of nationalist ideology.

Nationalist Hinduism was discussed at a recent conference at the City University of New York, sponsored by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies and titled “Whose Millennium? Religion, Sexuality, and the Value of Citizenship.” Among the scholars there who brought the existence and encroachment of nationalistic Hinduism to my attention was Bishnupriya Ghosh, University of Utah.

suggest that cultural transmission from Tibetan Buddhist societies to the north of India is possible in this case.<sup>11</sup> The *Gaddhi* migrated from—and still have interaction with—the northern reaches of India, where Buddhists and Hindus live side by side.

*Sadhins* do not have the characteristics that Roscoe associates with a “third gender”: They do men’s work, rather than take on a unique economic specialization; they do not have a religious role; and although they renounce procreative sexuality, they do not appear to engage in sexual activity with other women (although further investigation of this may be warranted). Their status is perhaps more “transgendered” than “third-gendered.”

In southern India, “transvestite” males and females serve as devotees of *Yellamma*, a goddess of skin disease who is believed to have the power to change the sex of individuals (Bradford 1983, 307–10). *Jogappa* are her male attendants who don female clothing; *jogamma*, her female attendants who dress as men. *Jogappa*, though apparently not castrated, fulfill some of the same traditional functions as do *bijras*, including but not limited to dancing and singing at birth ceremonies and weddings (311–12). While *jogamma* do not dance in rituals, they carry images of the goddess and other sacred items (313).

Because *Yellamma* is thought to have the power to change the sex of both men and women, the gender-deviant states of both *jogappa* and *jogamma* are considered to be a direct result of possession by the goddess. Bradford notes that they are regarded as “‘divine’ rather than ‘queer’—and it is nigh well impossible to say ‘homosexual’ in Kannada,” the native tongue of the region. Symptoms of a goddess-induced “sex change” are thought to begin with such minor pains as a pulling in the muscles. At that point, the goddess can sometimes be appeased by an offering or atonement and the process reversed. When more serious symptoms occur, such as sexual impotence, a change in sexual identity, or leprosy, the impending “sex-change” of the individual in question must be enacted or the goddess, it is believed, will unleash her wrath upon the individual (Bradford 1983, 311–12).

Upon initiation, *jogamma* undergo a clothing change, adopting white clothing that is often draped in the manner of a *dhoti*, or male dress, instead of a colorful *sari*, typical female dress. Afterward, they may even wear a turban and a jacket. But Bradford does not consider *jogamma* on par with *jogappa*, whom he calls “female men.” He does not regard *jogamma* as “male women,” though he notes it would be tempting to do so (Bradford 1983, 318). He prefers to call them “ascetic women” and views their wearing of masculine clothes as a manifestation of asceticism

<sup>11</sup>I thank Professor Tansen Sen, Baruch College, History, for his input on this issue.

rather than gender transformation. “In contrast with the transformation of men into female men, these ascetic women are not,” he notes, “given male names or addressed by male pronouns” (318). Women become *jogamma* “later in life,” often as postmenopausal widows or, “if they have married, [they] will have left, or been deserted by, their husbands” (317). They continue to do women’s work and, when not performing ritual, may sometimes be seen still wearing female attire. *Jogappa*, Bradford reports, do not perform public functions in the same space as either men or women, but have their own space reserved (311). Whether *jogamma* perform public functions in such spaces or in women’s areas, Bradford does not say. One is also left wondering how British intervention has affected the *jogamma*. Today this role seems to be more like retirement than a third gendering, yet the mixed male and female aspects of the role, coupled with the religious specialization, suggest that it is indeed the end-spectrum of what had once been a third-gender role.<sup>12</sup>

#### GENDER VARIANCE AT THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION

The traditional religious roles ascribed to the *hijra* and the *jogappa* and *jogamma* may be quite ancient, even prehistoric. Archaeology in northern India and Pakistan has revealed that worship of a mother goddess occurred along the Indus River in the earliest known periods of civilization, approximately 2500 B.C.E. (Rawlinson 1954, 16–17). Representations of her are, in fact, the most common idols found among the artifacts. Images of a three-horned god who has been identified as an early form of *Shiva* have also surfaced, along with representations of the *lingam* (phallus), the symbol of this god.<sup>13</sup> *Bahuchara-Mata* and *Shiva* are the two patron deities of modern *hijras*.

We have no written records of this early civilization that can be deciphered at this time; though seals with pictographs have been found, their meaning has yet to be decoded. What we do know is that the early inhabitants of the Indus Valley civilization did have contact with their Sumerian neighbors: seals with Indus-style pictographs have been discovered at Tel-Asmar, and Mesopotamian objects have been found in Sind. Although we cannot be certain, it is possible that the early language of the Indus Valley people was related to ancient Sumerian (Rawlinson 1954, 17).

<sup>12</sup>I thank Randolph Trumbach for his comment on this point.

<sup>13</sup>John Marshall’s thesis that representations on the seals found in the excavation at Mohenjo-Daro are prototypes of the god *Shiva* has become the scholarly consensus for the most part, though Hildebeitel has argued against it (Marshall 1931, I, 52–56; Hildebeitel 1978). Whatever the case may be, the representations of a mother goddess are perhaps more important; gender-variant attendants of a mother or female goddess were apparently part of many cultures in the ancient Mediterranean, Near East, and India (see Roscoe 1996).

The ancient Sumerians believed in people of a third type. In the Sumerian myth of “The Creation of Man,” the god *Ninmah* fashioned seven variant persons, including “one who has no male organ, no female organ” and a “woman who cannot give birth” (Murray and Roscoe 1997, 67). The barren woman became the prototype for *naditu* priestesses. In the Akkadian myth of *Atrahasis* (ca. 1700 B.C.E.), the god *Enki* instructs *Nintu*, the goddess of birth, to establish a “third category among the people” that includes demons who steal infants, women who are unable to give birth, and priestesses who are prohibited from bearing children.

In several ways this Mesopotamian idea of a third category is comparable to the ancient South Asian idea of a “third nature,” which materializes in later Sanskrit texts. The demons that steal children in the Mesopotamian texts are similar to third-natured demons in Sanskrit literature. Charms to protect pregnant women from these dancing, third-natured demons are found in the ca. 500 B.C.E. *Atharvaveda* (8.6.7–11; Roscoe 1996, 211). And if in traditional Hindu birth ceremonies the *hijras*’ singing and dancing is not appreciated, they will curse the newborn and/or the parents. *Hijras* are thought to be empowered by the mother goddess and have the ability to speak the future, to make their curses come true, and to detect impotency in others. As impotency carries a stigma with it, modern Indians are likely to tip *hijras* to avert being called impotent (Nanda 1990; Hall 1995).

The similarity between *hijras* and other Indo-European transgendered priests of a mother goddess is also striking.<sup>14</sup> Like the *hijras*, *galli* were priests of a mother goddess from Anatolia whose cult spread through the ancient Mediterranean. They were reported to be castrated males or hermaphrodites, sexually attracted to men, passive in sex, and dressed in feminine or androgynous clothing (Roscoe 1996). They also danced, sang, and whipped themselves.

The attendants of the Mesopotamian goddesses, unlike their Indo-European counterparts, the *galli*, are not known to have been castrated, nor are the male attendants of the goddess *Yellamma* (Bradford 1983). This may be explained by the facts that the Indo-European Aryans, who migrated into the Indus Valley civilization ca. 1500 B.C.E., did not push into southern India; and that the Dravidian peoples of southern India, who may have migrated from the north when the Aryans arrived, have, in many ways, maintained their unique ethnicity. In the south, then, we see both uncastrated male and female gender variants taking on religious roles, similar to the religious roles that are recorded for ancient Mesopotamia. In the north, unfortunately, the extent to which the customs of Aryan and earlier

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed comparison of ancient Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and South Asian gender-variant priests of mother goddesses, with references, see Roscoe (1996).

Indus Valley civilizations were amalgamated remains uncertain. Decipherable writing does not appear until after the Aryan migrations.

When a written record can first be established in the subcontinent, the theme of sex change is recurrent in the region's mythology (Thadani 1996, 65; cf. O'Flaherty 1980, 302–4). Not only are men turned into women, but women are also turned into men. An example of the latter is Amba, the daughter of a queen who had already given birth to seven daughters, but no sons (Thadani 1996, 64–65). Upon her eighth pregnancy, the king told the queen that her next child must be a son or she would be thrown out of the royal household. When an eighth daughter, Amba, was born, the queen disguised her as a boy. She eventually married and her true gender identity emerged, but she was able to remedy this by exchanging sexes with a *yaksh*, a semidivine forest dweller, for a period of time.

The most common story of sex change, according to Thadani, is that of a princess disguised as a prince who jumps into the water and reemerges as a boy so that she can be married to another princess (Thadani 1996, 65). This “radical shift” in gender is interpreted by Thadani as an assimilation of female homosexuality “back into the façade of heterosexuality.” While such an interpretation of the myths is possible, the *Kama Sutra* and other Sanskrit treatises indicate that a concept of alternative genders rather than sex change was more prevalent in ancient South Asia.

#### THE THIRD GENDER IN SANSKRIT RELIGIOUS AND MEDICAL TEXTS

The concept of a third gender can be identified in a number of ancient and later Sanskrit texts, though its exact meaning has been disputed. The fourth-century C.E. *Kama Sutra* mentions *tritiya prakriti*, a “third nature,” which is described in Yashodhara's ca. twelfth-century C.E. commentary as “a neuter [*napumsaka*] bereft of either a masculine or feminine nature” (*Kama Sutra* 1.5.27; *Jayamangala* on *Kama Sutra* 1.5.27, trans. Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 600). Richard Burton employed the term “eunuchs” when translating *tritiya prakriti* in the *Kama Sutra* of Vatsyayana: “There are two kinds of eunuchs [*tritiya prakriti*], those that are disguised as males, and those that are disguised as females” (*Kama Sutra* 2.9.1, trans. Burton, Vatsyayana 1963, 154). Artola argues that “eunuch” is a mistranslation and that in other Sanskrit literary works *tritiya prakriti*, literally “third nature,” is clearly transvestism (Artola 1975, 57).<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Artola provides a very different translation. “The third nature is of two types: (1) female [*strirupini*] and (2) male [*purusharupini*],” which he interprets as meaning

<sup>15</sup>Artola believes that eunuchs were introduced into India by the Muslim conquests. While possible, the *hijra* of today do bear a close resemblance to *galli*, priests of a mother goddess in other Indo-European cultures in the Mediterranean. Thus the Aryans, who brought Indo-European language and other customs into India, may have introduced the castration (and penectomy) of the *hijras*. See Roscoe (1996) and Murray and Roscoe (1997) for further discussion. Sweet and Zwilling (1993) argue that castration was at

“(1) the male takes on the appearance of a female and (2) the female takes on the appearance of the male” (58). Sweet and Zwilling provide a third interpretation, asserting that the two forms of the third nature described in this passage were both biologically male—one dressed like a woman, the other like a man (Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 600). Danielou’s recent translation of the *Kama Sutra* seems to support this view (Vatsyayana 1994). The chapter that the disputed *sutra* (passage) begins describes fellatio and male-male sexual relations. According to Sweet and Zwilling, in medical texts fellators are described as being of an alternative gender, along with “effeminate homosexuals,” and “masculine lesbians” (Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 592–95).

I would add the following comments about the passage in question (*Kama Sutra* 2.9.1): First, according to Artola, the Sanskrit term employed by Vatsyayana, *strirupini*, is commonly used in Sanskrit literature as a synonym for a [male-to-female] “transvestite” (Artola 1975, 58). Since the Sanskrit root *stri* stands for female, *rupini* should be equated with transvestism. It has been variously interpreted to mean “appearance” or “disguised as” (Vatsyayana 1994, 183; Vatsyayana 1963, 154). *Puruscharupini*, as Artola suggests, might then be the opposite, a female-to-male “transvestite,” as the root *purusha* means “male” or “masculine.” *Puruscharupini* shares the same word root as *purushayita*, “virile behavior in women,” and *purushasatmyata*, “virile female partner” (Yashodhara, *Jayamangala* Commentary on the *Kama Sutra* 2.8.36, trans. Danielou). Second, the passage in question (2.9.1) is immediately preceded by vivid descriptions of virile sexual behavior in women called *purushayita* (2.8.11–41) and immediately followed by a brief description of a male-to-female transgendered prostitute (2.9.2–5). The next sections deal with other men who “dissimulate,” working as masseurs and giving oral sex to male clients (2.9.6–24). The latter category may be associated with having a “third nature” simply because its members are fellators (see Sweet and Zwilling 1993). Third, Sweet and Zwilling fail to note that Yashodhara’s comment on a list of women in the *Kama Sutra* who can be used for oral sex (presumably with men), implies that women of a third nature did exist:

*Sanvabika* are women who do arduous work. This kind of woman can be used, and can be allowed to practice oral coition. The term does not refer exclusively to the third sex (*Jayamangala* on *Kama Sutra* 2.9.25, trans. Danielou, Vatsyayana 1994).<sup>16</sup>

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times outlawed in ancient India, but it should be noted that self-castration or castration and penectomy for religious purposes could have been viewed differently than the castration of slaves. Though castration is illegal in India today, *hijras* still undergo ceremonial castration and penectomy (Nanda 1990).

<sup>16</sup>This and all subsequent translations of Yashodhara’s *Jayamangala* and Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra* are quoted from the Danielou English translation, which contains both Sanskrit and English renderings of many terms, and the *Jayamangala* Commentary printed alongside the *Kama Sutra*.

*Sanvabika* literally means “women who carry burdens” (*Kama Sutra* 2.9.25, trans. Danielou). The implication is clear that some women were of a “third sex” (i.e., uninterested in men and thus unsuitable partners) while others were not. Women dressed as men in the South Indian cult of *Yellamma* still serve as porters of sacred objects to this day, as we have seen. Fourth, one of the passages cited by Sweet and Zwilling as proof that both types of the third nature described in the *Kama Sutra* are “biologically male,” describes male *tritiya prakriti* as “not being manly” and as “acting” as women (*Jayamangala on Kama Sutra* 1.5.27). But no suggestion of a masculine male being of a third nature is made in this passage. While there is no reference to a biologically female *third nature* either, this is not surprising, as the passages in this chapter of the *Kama Sutra* list possible sexual partners available to men.

The question at hand is, does the *sutra* (2.9.1) act as a transitional statement between chapter 2.8, which describes masculine sexual behavior in women, and 2.9, which describes the fellator, as Artola’s interpretation would suggest, or is it the topic sentence, so to speak, of chapter 2.9, as Sweet and Zwilling and other English translators suggest? Sweet and Zwilling note that the category of “masculine lesbian” is subsumed into the idea of a third gender in other texts and propose that the audience of these Sanskrit treatises, which dealt with sexuality and gender, were “by and large” a group of male scholarly elite.<sup>17</sup> These authors further note that while “female-female sexual activity” is discussed in the *Kama Sutra*, it is considered “situational behavior found among otherwise normative women in sexually segregated environments (such as the women’s quarters), rather than as an essential characteristic or pathology of certain individuals” (Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 600).

Women thought to be of a third gender, however, can be identified in erotic treatises, medical texts, and a host of other works written by South Asian, Chinese, and even European authors. Aspects of their sexuality and gender can be recaptured. The male “anxiety” surrounding such women appears to be more a modern phenomenon than an ancient one, as I will demonstrate. While Sweet and Zwilling are correct to note that South Asian women lived in “sexually segregated” environments, they are wrong to assume that the concept and essential characteristics of a third-gendered woman were not present in South Asian thought. Though the third-gendered woman (like other women) may be underrepresented in the texts, she was not “subsumed as a subcategory of the third.” She was considered part of the third gender because she was not sufficiently distinct from third-gendered men to be otherwise: ancient South Asians did not conceive of a “separate fourth gender” (Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 600).

<sup>17</sup>In their words, “The general lack of attention paid to lesbianism in this literature may be ascribed to male authors’ greater anxiety about those who transgress male gender roles.” (Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 600).

VIRILITY IN WOMEN: *SVAIRINI* AND *SANDHI*

As noted above, chapter 2.8 of the *Kama Sutra* is devoted to describing women's virile sexual activities. While sections 2.8.1–10 discuss women sodomizing males, sections 2.8.11–41 explain how a woman can seduce and penetrate another woman with a dildo.<sup>18</sup> Some of the descriptions of “virile copulation” (*purushopasriptani*) are quite graphic: “churning, the rod, the devastator, the cruel, the thunderbolt, the wild boar's thrust, and the bull's blow” are among the more eye-catching ones (*Kama Sutra* 2.8.22–28). “Churning” involved lowering the penetratee onto a virile object spinning on a potter's wheel. The “devastator” caused vibrations by shaking the “rod” violently while penetrating the other woman with it. “Normal copulation” between the two women involved the use of a “rectilinear object” (2.8.21). In his commentary, Yashodhara noted that, on the authority of Suvarnabha, such behavior among women was not forbidden (*Jayamangala on Kama Sutra* 2.8.16).<sup>19</sup>

The penetrator was called *svairini*, which Danielou translates as “lesbian” (Vatsyayana 1994, 188) and “homophile” (171). However, finding an English equivalent is difficult for the word is used in different contexts throughout the *Kama Sutra*. *Svairini* are not only penetrators, but possibly oral sex partners and prostitutes:

Buccal coition can also be practiced with corrupt women [*kulata*], lesbians [*svairini*], servants [*paricharika*], women who carry burdens [*savahika*] (*Kama Sutra* 2.9.25).

The various kinds of prostitutes are: the water carrier [*kumbhadvisi*], the servant [*paricharika*], the corrupt woman [*kulata*], the lesbian [*svairini*], the dancer [*nati*], the worker [*shilparika*], the divorcee or widow [*prakashavinashita*], the harlot who lives on her own charms [*rupajiva*], and the courtesan [*ganika*] (*Kama Sutra* 6.6.50).

The commentary and context of the latter passage do not make it clear whether those who pay for the services of these women are necessarily men. But Yashodhara's comments on these passages are instructive:

*Svairini* are independent women who frequent their own kind or others (2.8.26).

The liberated woman, or *svairini*, is one who refuses a husband and has relations in her own home or in other houses (6.6.50).

Since *svairini* are described as frequenting “others” as well as their own kind, they may have had sexual relations with men as well as women—

<sup>18</sup>The latter sections were abridged from Richard Burton's 1888 translation of the *Kama Sutra*. The modern Hindi commentary written by Devadatta Shastri also neglects to mention the abridged sections (trans. Danielou, Vatsyayana 1994), as do Sweet and Zwilling.

<sup>19</sup>Suvarnabha was an ancient author from whom Vatsyayana also quoted, dating to the fourth century C.E. or even earlier.

perhaps taking the active role described in *Kama Sutra* 2.8.1–10, though this is not clear from the text. Or perhaps the “others” mentioned are passive, feminine partners, unlike other *svairini* who are masculine. The fact that a *svairini* is independent and attracted to members of her own sex is reinforced by another passage in the commentary, which states:

A woman known for her independence, with no sexual bars, and acting as she wishes, is called *svairini*. She makes love with her own kind. She strokes her partner at the point of union, which she kisses. Once she has won the girl’s trust, the *svairini* practices the acts mentioned above, pitilessly, ill-treating the girl’s pubis (*Jayamangala* on *Kama Sutra* 2.8.13).

Here the *svairini*’s attraction is described solely as homoerotic. The “ill treatment” refers to acts performed with the dildo. Another passage states, “These acts are usually practiced by a woman with her own kind” (2.8.31). The commentary states that “usually” means “particularly women with a sweet [*mridu*] and middling [*madyha*] temperament” are involved (*Jayamangala* on *Kama Sutra* 2.8.31).

If we look at sexuality as categorized by acts, as historians have argued was the practice in other ancient cultures, the *svairini* was distinguished by her dominance in penetration. However, as she is also noted for her independence from a husband, she can be considered to have an “identity.” Since we do not have enough information, I would argue, to place this woman in a modern category, I will refer to her by using the original Sanskrit term *svairini*.

In the *Kama Sutra*, privacy and secrecy are stressed as important factors in certain sexual relations. The voice of the *svairini* remains mute—we know only what men thought of her, not how she constructed herself. Further, different women called *svairini* may have thought differently about their sexuality and even their gender. A passage written by Sharif al-Idrisi (1100–66) describes what may be a similar social role in Arabic society:

There are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men so that they resemble them even in their movements, the manner in which they talk, and their voice. Such women would like to be the active partner, and they would like to be superior to the man who makes this possible for them. Such a woman does not shame herself, either, if she seduces whom she desires. If she has no inclination, then he cannot force her to make love. This makes it difficult for her to submit to the wishes of men and brings her to lesbian love. Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and elegant women, the scribes, Koran readers, and female scholars (quoted from Murray and Roscoe 1997, 99).

This text records the transitions in the identity of a woman, who first takes an active role with men in order to be “superior,” and then abandons men altogether to have sex with women.

Additional information about gender-variant females appears in several ancient Sanskrit medical treatises: the *Caraka Samhita* and the *Susruta Samhita* (Sweet and Zwilling 1993). In the *Caraka Samhita*, gender and sexual variance is attributed to biological causes. The fault is not placed upon the individual in question, but rather upon the parents. The masculine female, alternatively called *narisandha*, *sandha*, or *sandhi* in Sanskrit, was also thought to be suffering from a disease of the female organs (*yoniroga*). This was due to “reversed” coital positions during conception, or simply just a case of “embryonic damage” (*Susruta Samhita* 3.2.45, 6.38.8; *Caraka Samhita* 6.30.33–34; Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 597). Effeminate males, hermaphrodites, fellators, and the impotent were similarly afflicted; in fact, all of the above appear to be part of a category of persons marked by the inability to procreate—a condition marked by lack of desire as well as infertility (cf. Thadani 1996). Sweet and Zwilling equate all of these people as belonging to a third gender.

Thadani suggests that in ancient South Asia, an inability to procreate actually meant “sterile in the heterosexual sense,” noting the representations of such women in literature as “man-hating” (*nrdvesini*), “breastless” (*astini*), “not fit for medical treatment,” desiring “like a man,” and “possessing no ovum” (*Caraka Samhita* 6.3.34; *Susruta Samhita* 6.38.18; Thadani 1996, 59).<sup>20</sup>

It seems clear that women who rejected men, women of a third gender, and women who took a masculine role in sex with other women existed. It seems reasonable that *sandhi* (the masculine woman) and *svairini* (the woman who engaged in the “virile behavior” of penetration) could have referred to the same woman, and that such a woman could be considered to be of a third gender, just as were some *sanvabhika* (women who carry burdens). While Sweet and Zwilling make a connection between the *sandhi* and the third nature, they do not develop the role of the third-gendered woman in their work.

#### FEMALE BODYGUARDS, WANDERING NUNS, AND “EROTIC ASCETICS”

Besides the *sanvabhika* (women who carry burdens), other interesting figures emerge from the texts who may help us understand the specialized labor that existed for women who were identified as “third natured.” One

<sup>20</sup>Similarities between South Asian and Native American societies may exist in this regard. Walter Williams suggests that Native American women who were so-called Amazons may have hidden evidence of their menstruation because they did not wish to be sexual with men (1992, 239–40). Additionally, the Mohaves believed that masculine women did not menstruate.

figure that has not been examined in this context is the female warrior, who long served as the bodyguard of precolonial South Asian kings and queens. In an ancient Sanskrit treatise on security, Kautilya (ca. fourth century B.C.E.) instructed readers that “the king’s personal guard of female archers shall guard him from an adjacent chamber while he is asleep in his own” (*Arthashastra* 1.21.1, trans. Rangarajan, Kautilya 1992, 152). Other sources confirm that the personal bodyguards of Chandragupta Maurya, the great emperor who ruled in the area of the present-day Ganges (ca. fourth century B.C.E.), were hand-picked women. Strabo recounted the tales of Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador from the Seleucid Empire who had traveled to Chandragupta Maurya’s court on a diplomatic mission:

The care of the king’s body is entrusted to women, having been purchased from their fathers; outside the gates are [other] bodyguards and the remaining soldiers. . . . A third [type of outing] is a Bacchic hunt, with a circle of women surrounding [the king], and outside of them a circle of spear-bearers. So that the road may be held open, the fate of the one who passes inside to the women is death; the drum-beaters and bell carriers advance [first]. The king hunts in the enclosed areas shooting arrows from a platform (two or three armed women stand beside him), and he also hunts in the unenclosed hunting grounds from an elephant; the women [also] hunt, some from chariots, some on horses, and some on elephants, and, *as when they join a military expedition, they practice with every kind of arms* (Strabo 1917, 15.1.55, italics and translation mine).<sup>21</sup>

Strabo called these customs “very novel” as compared to those of the Greeks. Centuries earlier Herodotus had discussed a tribe of women named Amazons, who lived apart from men and served as warriors and hunters (4.110–17). Eventually they married into the Scythian tribe of Sauromatae, but only on the condition that they would not have to do “women’s work” after marriage.<sup>22</sup> The Amazons stood in antithesis to Athenian women, who led secluded lives and did not participate in warfare or politics (see Pomeroy 1995, 79).

Saletore attributes the use of “Amazon” bodyguards by Indian rulers to their adoption of Scythian customs (Saletore 1974, 158). Like the Greeks, the Indians also knew of an Amazonian kingdom, which they called *Strirajya*. In the *Kama Sutra* of Vatsyayana, the *Strirajya* (matriarchal country) is described as a place where “violent practices [*kharavega*]

<sup>21</sup>While the dates of Kautilya and Megasthenes have both been disputed, the general consensus among scholars is the fourth century B.C.E. for both.

<sup>22</sup>For more on the Amazons in Greek myth and historical reality, see Pomeroy (1995, 23–25, 97).

and brutal sexual behavior are needed” to satisfy the women, where “dildos [*apadravya*] are much employed,” and where women often hid young men in their apartments for sexual use (2.5.27; 2.6.45–46). Another passage indicates that the women in “matriarchal countries” slept only with men of their own caste (5.6.33). Saletore argues that Vatsyayana is incorrect in assuming that men lived in *Strirajya*, citing mostly mythical fables as evidence (Saletore 1974, 155–71). In the commentary, this latter passage is identified with “the palace of *Shripuri*, ‘the City of Women,’” presumably a grand-scale harem of a rich king. (The whole chapter describes “Behavior in the Gynoecium,” or women’s quarters.) Perhaps there is some confusion in the sources between *Strirajya* and *Shripuri*. In any event, Saletore’s explanation of the origin of able-bodied female bodyguards as “foreign” is not persuasive. Even he admits that they were a “tradition” known to the ancient author Kalidasa (158).<sup>23</sup>

Female soldiers were present in both Persian and South Asian kingdoms. Arrian reported that Atrophartes, a satrap (governor) of the Persian province of Media, presented Alexander the Great with one hundred armed women, skilled in horsemanship and armed with round shields and axes (Arrian 1959, 7.14.1; Saletore 1974, 157). Strabo, quoting Megasthenes, noted that a South Asian king’s female guards were bought in the same fashion as his wives, from their parents (Strabo 1917, 15.1.55). Strabo did not call these bodyguards “Amazons,” nor did Kautilya mention any foreign origin of the king’s attendants in the early period. Like countless others who were employed by the state, these women were maintained by the king, as the payment of their bride-price indicates.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the Amazons of Scythia portrayed by Herodotus (4.107–17), they probably did not marry.

Ju-kua Chau, a Chinese ethnographer who wrote about the subcontinent ca. thirteenth century C.E., described the Kingdom of Kerala, known as Nan-pi in Chinese, on the southwestern coast of modern India (1.16). The ruler of that country went about barefoot in a loincloth, with his body draped, and a white turban on his head. He was guarded by five hundred “picked foreign women, chosen for their fine physique.” These women were also barefoot, wore loincloths, and had their bodies “draped”; there is no mention of their wearing leggings or saris. Like the king, they wore pearls, dancing in front of him and riding horseback behind him. It is possible that these women, chosen for their athletic and military abilities, were

<sup>23</sup>Saletore mentions only Kalidasa. Kautilya and Megasthenes also mentioned these women.

<sup>24</sup>The collection of a bride-price from the groom’s parents rather than a dowry from the bride’s parents as in ancient Greece seems to have been the prevalent custom in traditional Hindu society. (*Laws of Manu* 9.93, trans. Doniger with Smith, Manu 1991; see note also).

mercenaries from other South Asian kingdoms or abroad, as Chau reports, but that does not prove that the institution itself was of foreign origin.

In South Asia another gender-role alternative to that of wife was to be a wandering nun or mendicant.<sup>25</sup> Such nuns appear throughout Sanskrit literature, sometimes in surprising situations. Distinguished by their shorn hair, they could move freely within society—unlike virgins and wives, who were secluded, but like widows, actresses, musicians, and “experts in love affairs” (presumably courtesans). In his treatise on government, Kautilya (ca. fourth century B.C.E.) noted that nuns could serve as royal messengers and instructed rulers on using them as agents and spies:

A wandering nun may be a Brahmin (*parivrajika*) or from another sect (*vrshala*) with their heads shaven. Such agents shall be recruited from poor but intrepid widows, who need to work for their living. They shall be treated with honor in the palace so that they may go into the houses of high officials freely (Kautilya *Arthashastra* 1.12.4–5, trans. Rangarajan, 505).

Because married women could not accept outside invitations without either the permission of their husbands (Vatsyayana *Kama Sutra* 4.1) or the assistance of a confidential go-between, an entire chapter in the *Kama Sutra* is devoted to the “Business of a Go-Between” (5.4), providing detailed instructions on how a go-between could be used to arrange secret meetings between adulterers.<sup>26</sup> As the passage below indicates, wandering nuns could serve as go-betweens:

For the *Kama* test, a wandering nun shall be used to gain the confidence of a minister in order to convey the suggestion that the Queen is in love with him. Much wealth and a meeting with her shall be promised. If any minister refuses to be tempted he is clean (Kautilya *Arthashastra* 1.10, trans. Rangarajan, 508).

Vatsyayana warned male readers not to consider as sexual objects women who “have taken monastic vows” (*Kama Sutra* 1.5.29).<sup>27</sup> The law also provided a deterrent, subjecting to fines both the man and the consenting

<sup>25</sup>Some widows may have also selected this vocation, for in orthodox Hinduism to this day women of high caste do not remarry (Ojha 1981). Since women often married at a young age, they might be widowed while still young.

<sup>26</sup>Vatsyayana also advised that “harem residents must not go out. People from outside may not enter, except the women who come to work there, on condition that they are not loose-living or sick” (*Kama Sutra* 4.2.67).

<sup>27</sup>Vatsyayana noted that such a woman should not be considered as a *Nayika* (sexual object), apparently disagreeing with Suvarnanabha, whom he quoted: “According to Suvarnanabha a sixth kind of woman is the nun [*pravrajita*], the itinerant ascetic” (*Kama Sutra* 1.5.23).

ascetic woman (Kautilya *Arthashastra* 4.1.3.36–37). Because wandering nuns presumably could be trusted to defend themselves in the outside world, they were the perfect go-betweens to link the female and male spheres together.<sup>28</sup>

One of the distinctions of gender in ancient South Asia was hairstyle. Longer hair was a mark of a woman's femininity and a distinguishing characteristic of a man who was (hetero)sexually defective (Sweet and Zwilling 1996, 365). In the *Satapatha Brahmana* (ca. eighth century B.C.E.), a "long-haired man" is described as "neither man [*pums*] nor woman [*stri*]" (5.2.1.14; trans. Roscoe 1996, 211), and long hair is still an identifying characteristic of the *hijra*. Ancient female ascetics, on the other hand, apparently shaved their heads (Kautilya *Arthashastra* 1.12.4–5), as do modern Hindu female and male ascetics (Ojha 1981).

We know that by becoming nuns, ancient women chose a lifestyle independent of men. But like modern female ascetics, their sex/gender identity is more difficult to establish; there is no treatise which calls them part of a third nature. Though considered "off-limits" to men (*Kama Sutra* 1.5.29), trusted "mendicant nuns" are listed by Vatsyayana among the potential teachers of young girls in the arts of love (*Kama Sutra* 1.3.14). While the function of go-between was assigned to persons of a third gender in other cultures,<sup>29</sup> it may not be prudent to consider all wandering nuns in South Asia as part of a third gender. Some may have chosen this vocation out of economic necessity. Nevertheless, the role of nun was a "safe haven" for women who renounced marriage for other reasons. It afforded them independence and a viable economic role, as well as an opportunity to adopt some features of androgynous dress (hairstyle, in particular) and to have homoerotic relations with other women.

As the title of Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's study, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (1973), suggests, asceticism was defined differently in South Asia than in the West. It is not entirely clear that "ascetic" women always refrained from having sex with men, and it is even less clear that they refrained from having sex with other women. To the Westerner, this may seem confusing, since we expect "ascetics" to have sex with no one. Once again, comparison with the *hijras* becomes useful to understand the South Asian concept of a third-gender "ascetic." *Hijras* proclaim

<sup>28</sup>Kautilya noted that the professions of "wandering minstrels, people who deal in women and women who follow a secret profession" were to be supervised by the Chief Controller of Entertainers (2.27.25).

<sup>29</sup>In some Native American cultures, for example, "[b]ecause they can move freely between the women's and men's groups, berdaches are a natural go-between for disputes between the sexes" and are "a valuable community asset" (Williams 1992, 70–71). In North America, berdache also arranged marriages between young adults. Williams does not venture to guess whether the gender variant women served such a function in Native American cultures.

themselves to be ascetics while they simultaneously practice prostitution (Nanda 1990, 10–11, 29–32, 34, 52–53). They assert that they are impotent and unable to procreate, but they do not deny sexual involvement with other men (13–14). Roscoe argues that asceticism and impotence in the Hindu tradition refer to abstinence from heterosexual, not homosexual, activity (Roscoe 1996, 211 n. 59; Murray and Roscoe 1997, 74). In the collection of Hindu myths gathered together by O’Flaherty, asceticism is always defined as lack of procreative sex (O’Flaherty 1973, 1980). The asceticism of the *hijras* in modern-day India is then both complex and ambiguous (see Nanda 1990, 52–54).

#### THE HAREM AND OTHER HOMOSOCIAL SETTINGS FOR WOMEN

Thadani has proposed, based on several legal texts, that “any exchange between an older and younger woman was seen as extremely threatening because it supported the initiation of younger women by older women and the autonomy of women as constitutive of a separate autonomous caste” (Thadani 1996, 53):

A *kanya* [virgin] who does it [*kuryat*] to another *kanya* must be fined 200 panas, pay the double of the bride price and receive ten lashes of the rod.

But a *stri* [woman] who does it [*prakuryat*] to a *kanya* shall instantly have her head shaved and/or two fingers cut off and be made to ride through the town on a donkey (*Laws of Manu* 8.369 and 370, trans. Thadani 1996, 53).

However, these texts deal solely with virgins, not with women who are already married. Moreover, the same collection of laws stipulates similar, if not higher, penalties for the man who assaulted a virgin:

But if a man in his arrogance overpowers a virgin and does it to her, two of his fingers should be immediately cut off and he should pay a fine of six hundred (pennies).

If a man corrupts a willing virgin when he is her equal, he should not have his fingers cut off but should be made to pay a fine of two hundred (pennies) in order to put an end to this addiction (*Laws of Manu* 8.367 and 368, trans. Doniger with Smith, Manu 1991).<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, while the laws confirm the importance of virginity, they provide no basis for the claim that “exchange between an older and a

<sup>30</sup>According to the *Arthashastra*, the penalty for a woman who took a girl’s virginity was less than that of a man. The woman was subject only to a fine whereas the man was subject to a fine and the loss of either two fingers or his entire hand, depending on the circumstances (Kautilya 4.12.3–7; 20–21, trans. Rangarajan).

younger woman” aroused great concern in South Asia. In fact, considerable evidence suggests that female homoerotic relationships were commonplace in the harem (*zenana*).<sup>31</sup>

The *zenana* was a homosocial institution where women were usually secluded from all men save their husbands and sons. The *Kama Sutra* contains an early description of such eroticism in South Asia:

As a protective measure, nobody may enter the inner apartments. There is only one husband, while the wives, who are often several, therefore remain unsatisfied. This is why, in practice, they have to obtain satisfaction amongst themselves.

The nurse’s daughter, female companions, and slaves, dressed as men, take the men’s place and use carrots, fruits, and other objects to satisfy their desire (Vatsyayana *Kama Sutra* 5.6.1–2).

The account of Allen Edwardes, who surveyed the customs of the Ottoman court, provides a similar record:

In the restricted harem, *esh-shbeyykheb-el-bezzreh* (one who teaches the art of rubbing clitoris against clitoris) taught every girl in the sapphic sciences. To solace her in long hours of desire for the male, nearly every concubine had her own private companion whom she styled *merseeneh* or *reehauneh* (myrtle) and with whom she practices all the sapphic pleasures (quoted from Murray and Roscoe 1997, 98).<sup>32</sup>

These passages suggest that the royal women of the harems developed what scholars call “gendered” homosexual relations with the female attendants who acted as their bodyguards, or even among themselves.<sup>33</sup> To

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Doniger and Smith translate *panas* as “pennies,” but it should be noted that two hundred *panas* must have been worth more than two hundred modern-day pennies; otherwise the fine would hardly have served as a punitive measure.

<sup>31</sup>What Westerners would call “butch-femme” relations did occur in the harems and possibly within other contexts, and age-structured homoeroticism probably existed in ordinary households as well as in the harems—part of an *ars erotica* or an exchange between older and younger women. In fact, Vatsyayana went so far as to dictate that a girl should be instructed in the art of love by “a woman used to sleeping with men, a girlfriend who has already been initiated, a maternal aunt of her own age, an old confidential servant woman, treated like an aunt, a mendicant nun known for a long time, or an elder sister whom she trusts and who has had experience with men” (*Kama Sutra* 1.3.14, trans. Danielou). Given the importance of virginity prior to marriage, penetration was most likely not involved in such instruction, but other forms of eroticism may have been.

Furthermore, women married at a young age (*Laws of Manu* 9.93–94; cf. *Kama Sutra* 3.1.1.) and, once no longer a virgin, could presumably participate in penetrative sex without others’ knowledge. After her marriage was consummated, there was no legal penalty for penetration by another woman.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Sweet and Zwilling (1993, 600), as previously mentioned.

<sup>33</sup>I have stopped short of using the roles of butch-femme, but such a comparison might be appropriate.

the contrary, another account written by a sixteenth-century Venetian envoy indicates that in Ottoman harems, vegetables such as cucumbers were banned from use for erotic enjoyment:

[I]t is not lawful for any one to bring aught in unto them [the women of the harem] with which they may commit deeds of beastly uncleanness; so that if they have a will to eat Cucumbers, they are sent in unto them sliced to deprive them of the means of playing the wantons (quoted from Murray and Roscoe 1997, 98).

While some controversy exists over this custom in Ottoman harems, it appears from the *Kama Sutra* that such a ban was not imposed under early Hindu rulers, though attitudes may have varied from kingdom to kingdom, as they apparently did regarding other sexual practices.<sup>34</sup> One ancient “authority,” Suvarnanabha, even called the behavior of the female penetrator “acceptable” (*Jayamangala* commentary on the *Kama Sutra* 2.8.16).<sup>35</sup>

The absence of men is most often deployed as the reason for female homoeroticism in a gender-segregated environment (Murray and Roscoe 1997, 100). While there may be some truth to this argument, it cannot be the only explanation for female-female sex in the harem. Vatsyayana reported that in South Asia:

Citizens dressed as women are sometimes introduced into the harem with the maidservants. They are assisted in their comings and goings by the nurses or the other harem women, in the hope of a gift. The maidservants explain to them that entry is easy and the guards are not there all the time. If the way is not easy, men should renounce the task, since the matter is risky (*Kama Sutra* 5.6.6–9).

It was thus possible for a man-starved woman to obtain male sex partners. In some areas harems were not closely guarded, and men could enter (5.6.30; 35). In others, entrance was easily obtained on days of the full moon and the festival of lights, or “by way of the vaults” (5.6.26). In Vindarbha, the queens slept with all the princes except their own sons (5.6.32). Though Vatsyayana warned of the dangers to which a man who entered the harem might be exposed and advised against such behavior, he acknowledged that a man who was in the “grip of violent passion” would enter anyway, even go “every day” if invited and able to enter and exit (*Kama Sutra* 5.6.10–20). Conditions apparently varied

<sup>34</sup>See *Kama Sutra* 2.9.28–34, which describes different attitudes toward oral sex in different parts of the subcontinent. Different customs regarding heterosexual coitus are described in 2.5.23–35.

<sup>35</sup>“According to Suvarnanabha’s authority, such practices are not forbidden” (Yashodhara). Since Suvarnanabha is quoted by Vatsyayana, he lived before the fourth century C.E., when most scholars believe the *Kama Sutra* was written.

regionally, but it seems reasonable to assume that female-female sex in the harems was not due only to the lack of men, as male scholars have fantasized and conjectured.

Polygyny, concubinage, and the structure of the extended family created situations where homoeroticism between women could occur. The women's quarters of even the average household in many South Asian cultures provided a homosocial context for such desire. Vatsyayana informed wives how to interact and behave with their husband's other wives (*Kama Sutra* 4.2). The good wife was to sleep next to the elder women of the household when her husband was absent and to develop intimate relationships with them. In the harems some kings slept with wives in turn, one per night; others slept mostly with favorites; still others, who were more considerate to their wives, slept with all or many of them at one time (*Kama Sutra* 5.6). As there was only one man and many women in such a situation, female homoeroticism could be incorporated. In the *Kama Sutra*, group sex involving one man and several women is compared to a "bull" with a "herd of cows [*goyuthi*]," (*Jayamangala on Kama Sutra* 2.6.43).<sup>36</sup>

The structure and flavor of traditional court life survived in South Asian kingdoms throughout the medieval and early modern periods, despite waves of Muslim invaders who conquered much of present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Fortunately, detailed descriptions of that life are preserved in the diaries of Europeans who traveled to the courts of South Asian kings and sultans. In the early sixteenth century, Domingo Paes, a Portuguese national, visited the southern kingdom of Vijayanagara, which was the last holdout of the Hindu rulers who had once dominated the region (Saletore 1974, 163–64; Sewell 1970, 1–15).

In his diary, which provides a more detailed description of a royal harem than is found in earlier literature, Paes recorded that the King of Vijayanagara had twelve wives, and the inhabitants of his *zenana* totaled some 12,000 women.<sup>37</sup> Each queen had "her house to herself, with her maidens and women of the chamber, and women guards and all other women servants necessary" (Sewell 1970, 240). Each queen had an equal number of servants and maidens in attendance so that there would be no animosity or jealousy among them. In fact, the wives were "great friends" with one another. These women were never seen by a man other than the king, "except perhaps by some old man of high rank by favour of the king." When a queen went out, she was carried in a "closed" and "shut up" litter, accompanied by three or four hundred eunuchs. During the *Mahanavami* festival, to cite one instance, the same women who guarded

<sup>36</sup>To us this may not seem a particularly flattering way to describe women, but it should be noted that cows are sacred in Hindu tradition.

<sup>37</sup>An English translation of the Paes narrative is found as an appendix to Sewell's *A Forgotten Empire* (1970, 228–78).

the inner apartments preceded the eunuchs, with whips on their shoulders and canes in their hands (Saletore 1974, 164). Women porters, also carrying canes in their hands, followed the eunuchs. Within the *zenana* these and perhaps other women handled “sword and shield”; wrestled; blew trumpets, pipes, and other exotic instruments; acted as “bearers and washing-folk”; and held administrative offices (Sewell 1970, 240). As no men were allowed within the household, women performed all tasks.

The king lived by himself within the palace, and when he wished to have the company of one of his wives, he ordered a eunuch to call for her. The eunuch would approach the queen’s household, bearing a message to the female guards who stood watch there. The guards would then inform the queen, who would send a chambermaid to learn what was wanted. At this point, either the queen would go to the king or vice versa, and so they would pass time together without the other queens knowing. We see from this description that the queen’s quarters were sacred to women—even eunuchs did not enter the inner household of a particular queen, but instead gave messages to the female bodyguards.

Royal courtesans, according to Paes, also lived in great luxury and came to visit the queens for tea. These public women, it appears, may have been available to the queen as well as the king for an afternoon’s delight. While the heterosexual opportunities for royal women were quite limited, the homoerotic possibilities in such large-scale homosocial situations must have been numerous. In any event, it is clear that the tradition of gender-variant guards and workers in the harems continued until a late date in the southern kingdoms.

Under the Muslim Mughal rulers of the northern subcontinent, homoeroticism in the harem also survived, as did the roles of female bodyguards, attendants, and ministers. A seventeenth-century C.E. Mughal illustration in a translation of the twelfth-century C.E. *Koka Shastra* shows two women having sex with a dildo (see Figure 1; Roscoe and Murray 1997, 101; Saslow 1999, 125–26).<sup>38</sup> The woman who takes the active role holds a bow, which she is using to work the dildo. She has all the

<sup>38</sup>I am not ready to agree with James Saslow’s assessment that “the alarming bow that one lover aims at the other’s genitals is not to be taken too literally: the arrow, with a dildo for a tip, is a visual metaphor for less dangerous methods of vaginal stimulation” (1999, 125). In the *Kama Sutra*, graphic descriptions of what we today would call lesbian sadomasochism may point to the contrary. Such positions as “the devastator,” “the cruel,” and “the thunderbolt,” involve using brutal or violent force when inserting and vibrating the dildo. This evidence, coupled with the descriptions of female bodyguards who carried bows and arrows, lead me to believe that such sexual activities, however painful they might look, could have occurred (*Kama Sutra* 2.8.24–26). “The cruel,” in particular, described the phallus being “driven in brutally” and “pressed forcefully in for some time” (2.8.25). Saslow is probably correct, however, to note that such activity was not the norm. It is stated in *Kama Sutra* 2.8.21 that “generally, union with a rectilinear object [*riju*] is termed normal copulation.” Such unions, apparently, were performed more gently. These sections of the *Kama Sutra*, as



Figure 1. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

earmarks of a third-gendered female bodyguard: a bow, androgynous clothing, a shaved forehead, and a feminine partner.<sup>39</sup>

According to the traveler Nicollao Manucci (1657–1708), “women slaves, very brave and highly skilled in the management of the bow and other arms,” guarded Mughal rulers while they slept (Manucci 1957; Saletore 1978, 61).<sup>40</sup> Ordinarily two thousand women of “different races” inhabited the court of Sultan Aurangzeb, employed in a variety of tasks for his queens, princesses, and concubines. Women who could exercise “wit and judgment” and knew what was “passing in the empire” rose to positions of authority within the court:

For, just as the king has his officers outside, he has the same among the fair sex within the palace. Among these ladies are some who occupy the same offices that are held by grandees outside; and it is by

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noted above, were abridged from Burton’s translation and only came into print in English in 1994 (trans. Danielou).

<sup>39</sup>The two women shown are not touching—suggesting a comparison between the bodyguard and what we now call a “stone butch.”

<sup>40</sup>Manucci’s source of information was a Portuguese woman who worked in the harem of Aurengzeb but spent seven days per month outside in the house of her husband, a soldier (Manucci 1957, 32).

the mouth of these illustrious persons, when the king does not come forth, that the officials outside receive the orders sent them from within (Manucci 1957, 33).

These “ladies” were “carefully selected” to administer the king’s business. They were informed about “all that the king ought to know” through an intelligence system not unlike the one described by Kautilya in the ancient period. Eunuchs acted as messengers, carrying reports to and from the imperial palace. Female slaves, disguised as “mendicants” or prostitutes, continued to act as go-betweens. The customs of the harem and bureaucracy seem to have changed very little from Hindu to Muslim rulers.

The lives of the royal women did not change much either. When the princess Roshan Ara Begam asked her brother Aurangzeb to allow her to move outside the *zenana*, he flatly refused her request. Though they lacked mobility, according to Manucci these secluded royal women had “no cares or anxieties, occupying themselves with nothing beyond displaying great show and magnificence, an imposing and majestic bearing, or making themselves attractive, getting talked about in the world, and pleasing the king.” They rested upon inlaid gold couches, occasionally donning heavily jeweled turbans by special permission of the king.<sup>41</sup> Female servants educated the princesses, dictating “amorous verses” to them.

In 1838, William Osborne, an Englishman who visited the court of Ranjit Singh, a Sikh ruler in the Punjab, was surprised to find that the king had “Amazon” troops:

In the evening, a detachment of Amazons arrived with music and fireworks. The establishment of this corps was one of Runjeet Sing’s capricious whims, and the result of one of those drinking bouts, which it was his delight, a few years ago, so frequently to indulge in. . . .

There were originally about one hundred fifty of these fair warriors, who were selected from the prettiest girls from Cachemire, Persia, and the Punjab. They were magnificently dressed, armed with bows and arrows, and used frequently to appear on horseback, en cavalier, for the amusement of the Maharaja. They are allowed a small

<sup>41</sup>Turbans were typically male headdress. This particular piece of information is quite interesting in light of Nandy’s interpretation of postcolonial masculinity. Nandy (1983) suggests that the British misread the Indian ethic of the good self as androgynously experienced and sexually balanced, and thus judged Indian men as hypomale (cf. Cohen 1995, 291). Nandy believes that Indian men today strive to achieve hypermasculinity because of the postcolonial effects of British ideology. While Nandy does not explore precolonial femininity nor postcolonial ideals of hyperfemininity in any depth, it is my estimation that a similar phenomenon has occurred to the point where Indian women are forced to strive for hyperfemininity. I would imagine that few women in India today would ask their husbands for permission to wear a turban, though they might do so in private or among other female or lesbian friends.

sum for their daily subsistence, and there are few of them who have not succeeded in obtaining grants of small villages from Runjeet Sing, the rents of which they receive—and many contrive to realize a considerable sum of money (Osborne 1973, 95).

It seems that Osborne had no experience with such bodyguards or knowledge of a previous tradition in India. But while he saw the troop as a “capricious whim” of the Sikh ruler, the result of a “drinking bout,” Ranjit Singh himself did not. Singh questioned Osborne about how the “Amazons” in England were kept in order, assuming that such traditions existed abroad as well as at home (197). Osborne replied that the English had no such troops, and advised the Sikh to separate them from his other (male) troops, to keep them from becoming “corrupted by communication with the rest of the corps” (197–98). When Singh confessed that his female troops “were more trouble than all the rest of his army put together,” Osborne offered to take them and “drill them into something like order”—an offer Singh refused (197–98). Osborne believed that “Runjeet would sooner face Dost Mohammed and his Afghans, than a single Amazonian body-guard” (97).<sup>42</sup>

At approximately the same time, Shah Nasir-ud-din of Oudh employed a troop of women who wore white jackets and trousers, carried weapons, and guarded the royal apartments (Knighton 1921, 38, 130–31; cf. Saletore 1978, 168).<sup>43</sup> The Shah had been placed on the throne by the machinations of his adopted mother, the Begam, a courageous and clever woman (Knighton 1921, 132). When Nasir-ud-din’s own father, Ghazi-ud-din, decided to put his son to death, his mother hid him in her apartments. Ghazi-ud-din deployed his female troops against his wife and son, but in a pitched battle, they were defeated by the wife’s armed women. Later, when she and her son quarreled and he deployed his female troops against hers, she prevailed again. These women could both make and unmake the ruling males.

Knighton described the bodyguards as “men-like women”; “of the living curiosities of the palace there were none the account of which will appear more strange to European ears” (130). Nevertheless, many of them were married. Some guards left for several months at a time, apparently to bear children, for they were ridiculed by the King if they became pregnant: “There was an express order against such disfigurement, clothed in the plainest language, and of the most absolute character, posted up in

<sup>42</sup>One of the members of the “Amazon” corps, called the Lotus, was “rather a celebrated character at the court of Lahore.” She had been received “as tribute” from Cachemire. When the king fell violently in love with her, she was placed in the harem. But she deserted him and went to the house of an Italian lover. When she returned, she was enrolled in the king’s “Amazon” corps (Osborne 1973, 86–89). In time she managed to acquire seven villages from which she drew rent (96).

<sup>43</sup>The capital of Oudh was Lucknow, in northern India.

their barracks” (131). In a typically Victorian fashion, Knighton did not discuss the guards’ sexual activities beyond marriage.

Like the guards, the women who were porters and bearers served under military discipline, had “officers commissioned and non commissioned,” and seem to have worn men’s clothing. Whether purchased or born at the palace, these “female bearers” carried “pallanquins, and various covered conveyances of the king and his ladies into the inner courts of the harem” (Knighton 1921, 134). The commanding officer of the porters was, wrote Knighton, a “great masculine woman,” with whom the King had a “vulgar discourse of the freest kind” (134). Associated by Knighton with slaves, they were not unlike the “women who carry burdens” that, in the twelfth century C.E., Yashodhara considered part of a “third sex.” Vestiges of this role still remain today in figures like the *jogamma* of southern India.

### THE “STATE THIRD GENDER”

Will Roscoe uses the expression “state third gender” when describing gender roles in ancient Mediterranean and Asian societies (Murray and Roscoe 1997, 65–71, 75–76). He cites evidence from Rome, the ancient Near East, Persia, and South Asia to show that third-gendered individuals worked as “domestics of palaces, temples, and other large estates.” He argues that a “link between alternative genders and administrative and religious specialization in Mesopotamian societies was established in prehistoric times in the context of a gender-based division of labor” (66–67). The growth of civilization and urban life created a need for specialists to administer temples that were centers of both religious and economic activity, as well as the households and extended bureaucracies of political rulers. These third-gendered persons presumably left their families in order to perform state functions. By Assyrian times, the practice of castrating captives and slaves to fulfill these roles was more common.

Roscoe discusses the position of eunuchs under Indian rulers, noting that they filled key posts in Indian courts (Murray and Roscoe 1997, 71, quoting Kautilya *Arthashastra* 1.12–20). Ancient Indian law prohibited eunuchs and other impotent persons from inheriting from their parents, prescribing instead that they be maintained at the expense of the king (*Gautama-dharmasutra* [300–100 B.C.E.] 28.43; *Arthashastra* [324–300 B.C.E.] 3.5; *Vasistha-dharmasutra* [300–100 B.C.E.] 17.52–53; *Manusmṛiti* 9.201). Roscoe does not, however, draw a distinction between eunuchs who dressed in male clothing and third-gendered individuals such as *hijras*.<sup>44</sup> Nor does he mention “state third gender roles” for women in South Asia. Given what has been established above, it is reasonable to ask whether

<sup>44</sup>I would like to thank Randolph Trumbach for bringing this point to my attention.

some women could be considered to be part of a “state third gender.”

The unique connection of state and society in ancient South Asia provided a woman who wished to be independent of men many roles in which (s)he would be supported by the state. Carrying the belongings of queens and goddesses, defending rulers and subjects, serving in low- and high-level administrative positions, acting as wandering spies, and performing the functions of a go-between seem to have been regular duties for women, some of whom were undoubtedly sexually involved with other women, engaged in virile behavior, or considered to be of a “third nature.” Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered. Can a diachronic history of a female third gender in South Asia be written? Or were there always normative women in the corps who simply dressed in men’s clothes to make a living, even in ancient times? Did economic factors make them do so?<sup>45</sup> Were there others who did so because they liked to appear masculine and do masculine things? Were the “transvestite” troops in Nasser-ud-din’s court, for example, married because of the Muslim society in which they lived? Because of the nature of the sources, I will stop short of saying that a “state third gender” for women existed in precolonial South Asia, while not ruling out such a possibility for the ancient period. I mean rather to demonstrate that a haven for independent, masculine women, women of a third nature, did exist at one time—a haven that has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared today.

#### BRITISH COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM, AND GENDER STIGMA

British involvement in India spelled trouble for the gender variant. Intolerant of such variance, the British sought to rid society of the menace of the *hijras* (Preston 1987). This effort was part of a larger attempt to eradicate the “barbarous practices” of the Hindus, including widow burning and infanticide. When the British first arrived in India, the *hijras*, like the “Amazons” described by Osborne, enjoyed title to property given to them by Indian rulers. Unlike the “Amazons,” *hijras* also enjoyed exclusive begging rights in merchant areas and had paid religious functions. The British government tried to curtail the land grants and begging rights of *hijras*, even though the latter had proof of legal title from prior native rulers (Preston 1987, 385). The British, who were aghast at having to support such “abominations” and “wretches” (386), succeeded in turning the *hijras’* land titles into life grants, which were not renewed when the *hijras* who held them died. Nevertheless, the *hijras* survived, due to their religious function and their own perseverance.

Less is known about the fate of “third-natured” women under the Brit-

<sup>45</sup>I raise this question following the precedent of Lawrence Cohen, who has raised similar questions regarding male gender variants in modern India, namely *jhankas* and *hijras*.

ish, but it is clear that the British also revoked their land grants, thereby removing their principal means of support. If the British treatment of the *bijras* serves as an example, we are not left wondering why the gender-variant, independent woman is largely invisible in most modern, South Asian societies (see Jaffrey 1996; Preston 1987).<sup>46</sup> As Osborne told Ranjit Singh, the British had no gender-variant women in their armed forces.<sup>47</sup> With the slow demise of Indian court life and the shift toward Westernization, democracy, and capitalism, the state structures supporting gender-variant persons gradually disappeared.

While gender-variant women, clad in male clothing and with bow and arrow in hand, leap from the pages of ancient Sanskrit texts, later Chinese and European travel accounts, and even Mughal erotic manuals, in South Asia today lesbians struggle for even a glimpse of visibility. Lesbianism, like homosexuality, is often written off as a “Western” import (Thadani 1996, 5–6, 115). For many Indians, “the term ‘single woman’ conjures up a victim image, that of loneliness and not having the ‘privilege’ of a husband” (90). Lesbians are closeted, forced to marry and hide their relationships with other women, or else travel or live outside of India (98). The “drag king” does not fare well in such a climate, unless (s)he can pass as a man. Thadani argues that while the “male androgyne in the dominant canonized patriarchal traditions is positively represented, the inverse is not the case. The androgynous woman is considered dangerous” (67). Thadani conjectures that even “when homosexuality or sexual variance is analyzed in a ‘more positive’ way, it is more often than not from a male subject position or a male homosexual perspective; the lesbian is effectively non-existent or peripheral” (7).<sup>48</sup>

Thadani notes that both nineteenth-century colonial and twentieth-century nationalist discourses provided for the construction of a Hindu identity based on a glorious “Aryan heritage,” which affirmed the masculine identity of the Hindu man, while imprinting the notion of self-sacrifice and chastity upon the Hindu woman (Thadani 1996, 68–69). The regulation of female sexuality became essential to nationalist ideology, which went a “step beyond the colonial enterprise” in using the “site of the woman to construct binary notions of East and West.” “The

<sup>46</sup>Thadani (1996) is the only author I am aware of who has written a complete work on the history of lesbians in India, but her focus is more a comparison of ancient and modern lesbians than a comprehensive history. While Thadani’s focus was somewhat different than mine, I have nonetheless found her work to be very useful and I am grateful to her.

<sup>47</sup>Trumbach has described an illegitimate “fourth gender” for women found in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England and known as “Sapphists,” (Trumbach 1994). However, these women did not fill official posts that required transvestism, even if they cross-dressed.

<sup>48</sup>Thadani quotes Bullough’s (1976, 274) descriptions of gender and sexual variance in Tantric cults as an example of this phenomenon. Nanda (1990, 21), also citing Bullough

West is represented through images of an educated, shameless girl prey to arousing desires, and is juxtaposed to the image of the spiritual East through the vanquishing of desire.” Touted as a resurrection of indigenuous values, in reality, nationalist ideology appropriated the gender ideology of the (British) colonizer.

#### CONCLUSION

The evidence marshaled in this article demonstrates that social roles for gender-variant and homoerotic women did exist in the South Asian past. Brave women served vital functions in the harems and courts of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh rulers. Some were messengers, agents, and spies; others were trained in the use of arms, rode horses and elephants, drove chariots, carried heavy objects, wore male clothing, and stood in opposition to the women they guarded, who were considered feminine. These gender-variant women might take active roles in sex with other women.

The degree to which such women chose these roles for themselves must have varied with circumstances. The fate of a young South Asian woman was typically in the hands of her parents. While some girls could fetch a high bride-price for their beauty, personality, femininity, or paternity, those who were prone to gender variance may have been easier to market as servants or bodyguards than as wives. Initially the decision seemed to lay with the parents, rather than the individual woman, unless she took her own virginity or otherwise lost it. Later in life—especially for women who were widowed or divorced—the situation may have been different.

Like the famed eunuchs of the Mughal courts, gender-variant women could rise to positions of power. Some who desired to escape heterosexual union could find a legitimate place in society as nuns, porters, or bodyguards; though such options may have been more available to lower-class than upper-class women, who might have been compelled to marry for political reasons.

In ancient South Asia some women who carried burdens were thought to be of a “third nature,” and in Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim courts such women took on aspects of masculinity. While, as Sweet and Zwilling (1993) have noted, there is a tendency to “assimilate the third gender to male or female poles of gender binarism” (600), evident in the description of women’s penetrative sexual behavior as “virile,” nevertheless, a clear idea of a third gender did exist. All three aspects of a third gender that Roscoe noted in North America were present in South Asia: First, women thought to be “third-natured” did take on a specialized labor role, carrying heavy burdens, apparently working as bodyguards within a homosocial institution

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(1976, 260), notes that in some Tantric sects of Hinduism, “male (never female) transvestism is used as a way of transcending one’s own sex, a prerequisite to achieving salvation.”

(the *zenana* or harem, where men could not be employed), and possibly serving as wandering nuns and go-betweens. Second, while “shamanism” does not adequately describe the religious function of the *jogamma*, these women still carry burdens in Hindu religious processions; thus, while no religious function for women bearers or bodyguards is recorded in north India, one is evident in the south. Third, in the ancient *Kama Sutra* are clear descriptions of “masculine” sexual behavior in women, cross-dressing, and homoeroticism in the *zenana*. Artwork from the Mughal period suggests that such behavior was carried on by female bodyguards, who were slaves. The renunciation of procreation, for the most part, is evident in bodyguards, bearers, ascetics, and *svairini* (penetrators of other women). Thus, even if there were tendencies to polarize gender roles, the category of gender remained distinct from that of sex, and one can legitimately say that there was a third gender for women in the South Asian past.

The subtle differences that exist between the South Asian and Native American material suggest, however, that no cross-cultural model can fit all societies: gender variance must be examined within local contexts of society, sexuality, religion, and ideology. In South Asia, an identifiable third nature was thought to have been an essential characteristic. This is key to understanding how and what the female third nature was. It was not a socially constructed category in the sense of etiology; rather it was considered to be an inherent trait caused by reproductive problems. But while roles for third-natured persons were created, others may have filled them out of economic necessity, due to slavery, or for other reasons.<sup>49</sup> The evidence discussed above spans a long period of time, but nonetheless makes a cohesive thread from which I hope a larger history of gender-variant or “third-natured” women in South Asia can be woven.

From the material presently available one can draw tentative conclusions about the history of the third-natured woman in South Asia. The subcontinent has experienced waves of invasion and/or migration that have brought new peoples and customs: Aryan, Muslim, and British—to name the major ones. The impact of these intrusions upon gender can still be seen today in the differences between the *hijra* of the north and the *jogappa* of the south: the former is castrated, like the Indo-European *galli* of the Mediterranean, while the latter is not and has a corresponding, institutionalized opposite in the role of the *jogamma*. When the Aryans migrated into South Asia, they pushed the Dravidian peoples into the south of the subcontinent. Thus the sex/gender norms which probably once existed in the northern part of the continent were pushed southward. For example, in the fourth century C.E., Vatsyayana reported that anal intercourse was considered acceptable only in the south of the subcontinent (*Kama Sutra* 2.6.40). Remnants of gender-variant roles

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Cohen’s analysis of the third-gendered male in India today (Cohen 1995).

such as the *jogamma* and *basivi* have been found mostly in the southern subcontinent, with the exception of a few Hindu ascetics who seem to be at odds with orthodox Hinduism in the north, and the *sadhin*, whose gender variance may be attributed to Buddhist rather than Hindu factors. Such institutionalized, gender-variant roles for women may have been more prevalent in the religion of the northern subcontinent prior to the Aryan intervention, though we may never be sure due to the lack of written material for this time period (ca. 2500–1500 B.C.E.).

At a later date, sex/gender norms were affected by the decline of Buddhism and the Muslim invasions. While something close to a “state third gender” for women existed at one time in the ranks of soldiers, bodyguards, and porters, the introduction of Islam may have both preserved and changed them. By the nineteenth century, some women soldiers in Oudh married and had babies, despite a rule that they not get pregnant. And, of course, there can be no doubt that the British conquest of South Asia eliminated the economic shelters of gender-variant women in civic posts. Only a few religiously sanctioned or other gender-variant roles remain for women today, and some of these are more retirement plans than a true third gender.

To date, no evidence of third-natured women marrying other women has been discovered, as it has been for native North America, where masculinized gender-variant women took feminine wives (Roscoe 1998).<sup>50</sup> Both male-male and male-female marriages are mentioned in the *Kama Sutra* (1.1.3, 2.9.36), but no mention of female-female marriage appears. The *Jayamangala* commentary hints at the difference between male and female homoerotic relationships:

[Male] citizens behave in this kind of inclination, who renounce women and can do without them willingly because they love each other, get married together, bound by a deep and trusting friendship.

“Do this to me and afterward I will do it to you.” Arranging their bodies in contrary positions, they are indifferent to everything in their moments of passion. They are of two kinds, according to whether they are together openly and without complexes, or dissimulate. *Women behave in the same way. Sometimes, in the secret of their inner rooms, with total trust in each other, they lick each other’s vulva, just like whores* (Yashodhara *Jayamangala* on *Kama Sutra* 2.9.36, italics mine).

While men could “marry” and choose either to live openly together or to keep the nature of their relationship secret, the latter is the only alternative mentioned for women. Women could form relationships with one another,

<sup>50</sup>Thadani cites dual goddesses and procreation from female homoeroticism in describing a “gynefocal” age which existed prior to 1500 B.C.E. It should be noted that her evidence is mythical or archaeological and not historical (Thadani 1996).

in which trust was clearly important, but the relationships were restricted to the “secrecy of their inner rooms,” and the women were compared to prostitutes who lick each other’s vulvas. If marriage between women was not accepted in South Asia, it may well be an effect of patriarchy on gender variance in this region.<sup>51</sup> But this is a question that needs further study.

The disappearance of most institutionalized, gender-variant roles for women in South Asian society occurred within a larger framework of religious change, colonialism, the demise of traditional ways of life and government in the subcontinent, and the consequent introduction of capitalism and aspects of Western gender ideology. Their demise offers an avenue to explore further the impact of gender differentiation and patriarchy on gender variance and may help us better understand the circumstances that create legitimate gender-variant roles in some societies but not others.

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<sup>51</sup>In North America, gender relations were more egalitarian and less patriarchal than in India. Gender differentiation is “the extent to which gender roles are well defined, specialized, and hierarchal as opposed to fluid, overlapping and egalitarian.” Gender differentiation in India is high, but Native American cultures had lower gender differentiation (Nanda 2000, 104). Several studies done by anthropologists have been inconclusive in determining whether “sex/gender diversity” existed only in cultures with less gender differentiation (Munroe and Munroe 1977; Munroe, Whiting, and Hally 1969). Gender differentiation is clearly not the only factor that contributes to the construction of a third or variant gender role. With respect to South Asia, religion, tradition, and homosocial institutions all play a role in such construction. Gender differentiation may affect such a role, but does not define it.

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