Decolonizing Transgender in India
Some Reflections

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Abstract This essay is a set of reflections arising out of prolonged conversations in which we compared notes on our respective experiences as activist (Raina) and ethnographer (Aniruddha) working among, and to different extents belonging to, gender/sexually marginalized communities in eastern India. As we shall argue, the attempted universalization of transgender as a transnational "umbrella term" by the development (nongovernmental) sector, the state, and their funders tends to subsume South Asian discourses and practices of gender/sexual variance as merely "local" expressions of transgender identity, without interrogating the conceptual baggage (such as homo-trans and cis-trans binaries) associated with the transgender category. In the Indian context, this process bolsters the long-standing and continuing (post)colonial construction of hierarchies of scale between transnational, regional, and local levels of discourse and praxis, as evidenced in the relation between the hegemonic anglophone discourse of LGBTIQ identities recognized by the state and the development sector, on one hand, and forms of gender/sexual variance that are positioned as relatively regional or local on the other.
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How does the transnational expansion of "transgender" as a rubric of identity and activism appear when we look at the phenomenon from the vantage point of communities and social movements of gender-variant persons in the global South, specifically South Asia? This essay is a set of reflections arising out of prolonged conversations in which we compared notes on our respective experiences as activist (Raina) and ethnographer (Aniruddha, henceforth Ani) working among, and to different extents belonging to, gender/sexually marginalized communities in eastern India. If "decolonization" implies the ability to freely question, critique, and, if necessary, reject globalizing discourses or practices, this essay considers the conditions of possibility for such critical engagement with the expanding category of transgender.

       We do not intend to make a prescriptive argument regarding how to make *transgender* into a more cross-culturally inclusive term—indeed, as previous

critiques have pointed out, the imagination of transgender as an expansive category for all gender-variant practices and identities risks replicating colonial forms of knowledge production (Stryker and Aizura 2013: 8) or overriding other epistemologies of gender/sexual variance (Valentine 2007: 4). As we shall argue, the attempted universalization of transgender as a transnational umbrella term by the development (nongovernmental) sector, the state, and their funders tends to subsume South Asian discourses and practices of gender/sexual variance as merely "local" expressions of transgender identity, often without interrogating the conceptual baggage (such as homo-trans and cis-trans binaries) associated with the transgender category. In the Indian context, this process bolsters the long-standing and continuing (post)colonial construction of hierarchies of scale between transnational, regional, and local levels of discourse and praxis, as evidenced in the relation between the hegemonic anglophone discourse of LGBTIQ identities recognized by the state and the development sector, on one hand, and forms of gender/sexual variance that are positioned as relatively regional or local on the other. The increasing recognition of transgender identities as subjects of rights and citizenship is evident in a series of developmental, state, and legal policies, ranging from transgender-specific funding for HIV-AIDS prevention to recent directives in favor of transgender people's rights by the Supreme Court of India and the Indian Government's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (UNDP 2008; SC 2014; MoSJE 2014). However, statist and developmentalist deployments of the transgender category may generalize linear narratives of transition and stable identification with the "opposite" gender as defining features of trans identities, and even when they recognize possibilities beyond the gender binary such as a "third gender," they tend to delimit and define such categories through a model of stable, consistent, and authentic identification that seeks to clearly distinguish transgender from cisgender and homosexual identities. But South Asian discourses of gender/sexual variance may blur cis-trans or homo-trans distinctions, and community formations may be based also on class/caste position rather than just the singular axis of gender identity. Emergent models of transgender identity certainly create new possibilities for social recognition and citizenship, but they may be colonizing precisely in the ways in which they may refuse or fail to comprehend many forms of gender variance relegated to the scale of the local, even though such discourses and practices may actually span multiple regions of South Asia.

However, such colonizing deployments do not necessarily exhaust or foreclose other evocations of the transgender category, particularly by people in the lower rungs of activism and the development sector. Such usages do not coalesce to a globalizing definition but may better translate or express the multifarious forms of gender/sexual variance found in India and South Asia. Thus there

may be a decolonizing struggle over transgender itself, though the very emergence of transgender (rather than categories positioned as local) as a privileged site of such struggles is informed by its prior ascendance within the transnational development sector. We will not have space here to examine these hegemonic and counterhegemonic practices in all their nuances; rather, we will attempt to delineate some of the systemic conditions under which hegemonic usages of transgender emerge or counterhegemonic practices might become possible, particularly from the purview of working-class and/or *dalit* (lower or oppressed caste) communities who cannot freely access or modify statist and developmentalist usages of the transgender rubric.

Some clarifications before we begin. We realize that our collaboration and this essay itself are also implicated in the aforementioned scalar hierarchies. We are unequally positioned within transnational economies of knowledge production; Raina's location as an activist working with small community-based organizations in India restricts her access to academic and cultural capital, whereas Ani's position in US academia entails a privileged role in structuring and translating our concerns to a Northern audience. Yet we hope that our collaboration may also indicate variant circuits of dialogue and exchange that interrupt the unidirectional transmission of high-end knowledge from the "West" to the "rest," as exemplified by the dissemination of transgender itself.

Further, our analytic purview is largely limited to feminine-identified gender-variant persons assigned male at birth, particularly the *kothi* and *hijra* communities of West Bengal in eastern India, rather than masculine-identified trans or gender-variant people. *Hijra* is a well-known term connoting a structured community of feminine-identified persons who pursue distinct professions such as ritualized blessing during weddings and childbirth; *hijras* typically dress in women's clothes and may undergo penectomy and castration (orchiectomy) but also commonly designate themselves as distinct from men and women (Reddy 2005: 134; Nanda 1990). *Kothi* is one of several South Asian terms for feminine male-assigned persons who may or may not present or identify as (trans) women; while *kothis* do not form separate clans like *hijras*, some *kothis* may also join *hijra* clans or professions (Dutta 2013: 494–95). In the following sections, we consider the interface between these largely working-class, oppressed-caste communities and subcultures and transgender as an emergent category of identity and representation.

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One potential risk of our critique, which we wish to guard against at the outset, is the implication of cultural dualisms between the West and the non-West. Transgender, in itself, need not be perceived as exogenous or foreign by Indians or

South Asians who identify as such. Online forums such as the Facebook group Transgender India, activist groups like the Association of Transgender/Hijra in Bengal, and films on "male-to-female transgender people" like *Rupantar* (*Transformation*, dir. Amitava Sarkar, 2009) are evidence that there are already many adoptions, translations, and hybridizations of transgender as a rubric of identity. Like other seemingly foreign terms such as *lesbian* or *gay*, *transgender* has been found by many to be a suitable word for expressing who they are, and many may use the term (or its translated counterparts) in itself or in conjunction with terms like *hijra* or *kothi*. Given the hybrid postcoloniality that foundationally marks many articulations of "Indian culture" today, none of these subject positions can be seen as inauthentic vis-à-vis their sociocultural context—which would mimic right-wing religious and political viewpoints that have denounced the emergence of LGBT activism and identities as a form of corruptive Westernization.

However, while there are certainly ways in which transgender has emerged as a South Asian category of identity and community formation, the same ease of adoption, translation, and negotiation vis-à-vis the transnational circulation of "transgender" and "transsexual" categories may not be available to everyone. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, one cannot simply endorse postcoloniality or hybridity without recognizing how agency and mobility within transnational circuits of exchange is often shaped and restricted by class/caste location and one's position within the international division of labor (Spivak 1999: 361). Only a relatively small proportion of people in India can access the Internet or have fluency in English as the hegemonic transnational medium through which categories like transgender disseminate. Moreover, as we demonstrate below, for many working-class and *dalit* gender/sexually variant communities, transgender (or TG) has arrived as a constrained rubric of representation for gaining funds and recognition, without much freedom to negotiate or alter its usages at higher levels of activism or funding. As an emergent hegemonic category, transgender may offer representation and upward mobility for people who fit official definitions, but it may elide or delegitimize working-class and *dalit* discourses and epistemologies of gender/sexual variance that are not entirely legible in terms of hegemonic usages of transgender—even as these groups, particularly *kothi-hijra* communities, must increasingly represent themselves as TG to be intelligible to high-level networks of large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), transnational funders, and the state. Thus while "transgender" is not indubitably foreign or colonizing, its hegemonic position in discourses of activism and funding reflects inequalities within the hierarchical political economy of social movements and the nonprofit sector, even as the category may be appropriated or translated in ways that subvert these hierarchies.

An emerging body of scholarship within South Asian sexuality studies has critiqued the elitist or colonizing potentials of gay/lesbian identity politics in India, which can serve as a point of departure for critiquing the hegemonic emergence of transgender, but which we also seek to question or go beyond. In keeping with historiographical work on South Asia that has argued that colonial administration calcified ambiguous social boundaries into rigidly bound identities (Dirks 2001), this body of scholarship has claimed that the consolidation of homosexual personhood and identity during the period of globalization is largely propelled by urban activists, the law, and the state and potentially erases tropes or idioms of (particularly male) same-sex desire that are not based on personhood or interiorized identity (Khanna 2009; Katyal 2010; Boyce and Khanna 2011). Akhil Katyal argues that the interiorized conception of sexual identity, which classifies people based on their inner essence of homo- or heterosexuality, may elide behavioral and habit-based idioms of desire prevalent in South Asia that do not connect same-sex practices with distinct forms of personhood (2010: 24). Paul Boyce and Akshay Khanna argue that the creation of a minoritized homosexual subject, separate from mainstream heteronormative society, by "principally urban" activists and communities is largely unsuited to the Indian context, as it erases how same-sex practices are diffusely scattered within "putatively heteronormative social formations" among actors who largely do not distinguish themselves as homosexual (2011: 90–97).

While we share concerns about the imposition of identitarian divides, we seek to go beyond this mode of critique through the gendered analytic lens offered by transgender studies. The aforementioned critique, while questioning the homo-hetero divide, takes the male-female binary for granted and assumes the unmarked gender normativity of sexually variant males/men without considering how putative participants in "same-sex" behavior may be socially marked or unmarked on the basis of gender. Often, same-sex-desiring men who do not claim a distinct identity may gain their anonymity by virtue of their masculine gendering, which permits a degree of sexual license, whereas feminized male-assigned persons (whether they desire men or not) have less access to such unmarked flexibility, being subject to stigmatizing labels like *gandu* or *chhakka* (roughly: fag, sissy), common to many South Asian languages. As Katyal notes in passing but does not analyze, *gandu* (feminized, anally-penetrated person) is a much more pejorative label than *laundebaaz*, the man who plays around with boys (2010: 24). This suggests that "same-sex" practices in South Asia are not just diffusely spread among "men" but are fundamentally constituted vis-à-vis gender normativity or variance and that gender variance, often perceived as being connected to same-sex desire, serves as a significant axis of social demarcation. Thus while sexuality may not have been a distinct axis of personhood in India prior to the emergence of the modern

homosexual, the gendering of sexual behavior and the (homo)sexualization of gender variance (as in *gandu* or *chhakka*) seems to have a longer legacy, which may inform both patterns of discrimination and resistant formations of community and identity (Reddy 2005; Hall 2005). As we shall argue, people inhabiting the intersections of gender/sexual variance have not only formed communities prior to contemporary identity politics but have also been amenable to interpellation within newer rubrics such as MSM (men who have sex with men) and TG, which are thus not *only* urban or elite in origin but draw from these community formations and interact with them in potentially both liberatory and oppressive ways.

Raina's experiences as an activist and long-time participant within *kothi-hijra* communities and Ani's experiences as an ethnographer who was gradually included as a community member suggest the range and span of these communities. As a child, Raina dressed up secretly in clothes meant for (cis) women, discovered her attraction for men, and faced repeated abuse as an effeminate boy (*meyeli chhele*) in school. As an adolescent in the late 1990s, she discovered an old cruising area around Rabindra Sarovar, a chain of lakes in south Kolkata. There, she was introduced to a local community of feminine male-assigned persons, mostly poor or lower middle class, who formed a loose sisterhood among themselves and spoke a generationally inherited subcultural argot that was broadly similar to the language used by *hijra* clans (see Hall 2005). They used the terms *kothi* and *dhurani* to designate themselves, words that are unknown in standard Bengali. While they primarily cruised or undertook sex work with men outside their immediate circle, there were also less visibly articulated forms of desire (e.g., *kothis* who desired women or other *kothis*). The community included both those who wore standard male attire (*kodi kothis)* and feminine-attired *kothis* (variously called *bhelki*, *bheli*, or *bhorokti kothis*). *Kothis* could also switch or transition between *kodi* and *bhelki* states. Raina herself alternated between androgynous and feminine attire before mostly adopting the latter. While some of them joined *hijra* clans and professions, underwent castration-penectomy and adopted consistent feminine attire, others, like Raina, did not join *hijra* clans formally, even if they wore female-assigned clothes. Moreover, some would temporarily join *hijra* clans and professions while remaining *kodi* at other times. These varied practices do not signal an unfettered fluidity, as there were also intracommunity tensions around gender and respectability. When Raina took to feminine clothes, she was distanced by some *kodi* friends who regarded public cross-dressing and *hijras* as being disreputable. Meanwhile, some *hijras* and *bhelki kothis* regarded *kodi kothis* with suspicion for their duplicitous overlap with social masculinity and privilege. Yet friendships and sisterhood within the community also crossed these divides; some of Raina's closest friends are *kothis* who are mostly *kodi* or who cross-dress sporadically, given that they share many commonalities in terms of geographic

and class location even though their precise gender identities or expressions may differ. Subsequently, as Raina moved to other cities for professional reasons, she made contacts with broadly similar communities with different names depending on cultural and linguistic context. In north Bengal and the neighboring country of Nepal, a similar spectrum of people called each other *meti*. In Delhi, *kothi* was commonly used within the community, but *hijra* clans would also call them *zenana* or *zenani* (Urdu words for effeminate/feminine persons). Through a very different trajectory as an ethnographer, Ani discovered similar communities with mutually intelligible subcultural languages in various districts of West Bengal in the late 2000s, including terms such as *kothi*, *dhunuri*, and *dhurani*. As zie transitioned from a relatively *kodi* youth to a more *bhelki* visibility, Ani was gradually interpellated into these communities as a friend and sister.

Taken together, our experiences indicate translocal and transregional networks that enabled us to find shelter within a range of overlapping languages and communities. As most book-length studies of gender variance in India have focused on organized *hijra gharanas* or clans (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005), these diverse communities, and particularly their transregional connections, have been only partially and fragmentarily documented in the literature (Cohen 1995; Hall 2005; Reddy 2005; Dutta 2012). Given the existence of these communities, a conceptual polarity between gender/sexual identities and more fluid practices is not adequate, since gendered differences seem to have prompted the emergence of community formations *prior* to the contemporary moment of "global queering." Rather, we may need to explore the bridges and gaps between these community formations and emergent forms of identity politics.

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Transgender has emerged as a prominent category in the Indian LGBTIQ movement and development sector relatively recently, roughly around the late 2000s. While the term has been used since at least the late 1990s by upper-tier activists and within acronyms like "LGBT," its increasing adoption by relatively low-rung community-based organizations (CBOs) may be linked to shifts in the pattern of funding available to such groups. Since 2007, the Indian state and transnational funders have increasingly recognized "transgender" people, particularly male-to-female trans people, as a "high risk" group for HIV infection (NACO 2007: 13). This shift in funding has been charted elsewhere in more detail (Dutta 2013), so we will only provide a brief contour here. The second phase of India's National AIDS Control Program (NACP-II, 1997–2007) recognized MSM as a high-risk group (NACO 2006). In this period, "transgender" was used sporadically by particular activists such as Tista Das, one of the first trans women in

West Bengal to undergo modern "sex change" or gender-affirmation surgery, as distinct from *hijra* castration-penectomy (Das 2009). However, the government did not define transgender as a target group for developmental aid or HIV intervention, though it did use the colonial category "eunuch" to designate *hijras* (NACO 2006: 43). This period saw the establishment of many CBOs in eastern India that received funds under the MSM rubric, such as MANAS Bangla, a CBO network in which Raina worked for several years. These CBOs typically drew membership from *kothi-dhurani* communities rather than focus on gender-normative MSM. Raina recalls going around with other fieldworkers in various cruising sites and finding potential community members whom they would interpellate as *kothi*, which gained popularity as a more common usage relative to similar terms like *dhurani*. Lawrence Cohen has argued that the *kothi* became an "emergent reality" during the expansion of HIV-AIDS intervention projects as fieldworkers interpellated more and more people into the category (2005: 285). However, Raina's experiences suggest that the *kothi*, rather than marking a new social emergence, marked a further consolidation and expansion of the networks in which she had participated in her youth (see Dutta 2013: 501).

The third phase of the NACP (2007–12) classified *kothi* as a high-risk subgroup of feminine MSM (NACO 2007: 13). Simultaneously, "transgender" entered the NACP lexicon, but NACP guidelines took transgender to largely mean *hijra*, replacing their earlier designation as eunuchs (13). Subsequently, in 2008, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a multilateral organization that assists the Indian state with its AIDS program, organized consultations to assess gaps in HIV-AIDS infrastructure, where upper-tier activists demanded greater, more specific provisions for transgender people—including and beyond *hijras*—but also conceded that it was an ambiguously defined category (UNDP 2008). This prompted UNDP to fund regional consultations organized by large metropolitan NGOs in 2009, which aimed to arrive at a common transregional definition of TG in consultation with community representatives. Transgender was defined as an umbrella term, including both *hijra* and *kothi*:

> Transgender is a gender identity. Transgender persons usually live or prefer to live in the gender role opposite to the one in which they are born. In other words, one who is biologically male but loves to feel and see herself as a female could be considered as a male to female transgender person. It is an umbrella term which includes transsexuals, cross dressers, intersexed persons, gender variant persons and many more. In eastern India there are various local names and identities, such as Kothi, Dhurani, Boudi, 50/50, Gandu, Chakka, Koena. . . . Among these, the most common identity is Kothi. A few transgender persons also believe in a traditional culture known as Hijra . . . with its own hierarchical social system. (SAATHII 2009: 17)

Besides obvious problems like the total exclusion of trans masculine identities, this articulation of transgender as an umbrella term resulted in the scalar subsumption of "local names" under transgender as a common (trans)national, cross-cultural signifier. As a universalizing rubric, *transgender* subsumes terms that are now posited as merely local variants, even if they actually span multiple regions of South Asia and thus belie their containment to the scale of the local. The scalar hierarchy between transnational/universal/cosmopolitan and local/particular/vernacular discourses or categories thus *emerges* during this definitional process rather than preexisting it. As transnational feminists have argued, the hierarchy between global/local cannot be taken for granted, and scale is continually in the making (Mountz and Hyndman 2006). Through such ongoing constructions of scale, the understandings of gender/sex associated with transgender become the governing rubric under which regional subordinates must be organized rather than a resource that varied idioms of gender/sexuality can negotiate in their own terms, through their own spatial or temporal scales.

Moreover, this process does not merely subsume, it also potentially elides and erases. As seen in the above document, transgender is imagined as an encompassing umbrella term that is almost infinitely extensible across various cultural contexts. Yet it is restrictively defined in biologically essentialist terms as identification with the gender "opposite" to one's "biological" sex through linear (male-to-female) transition, with only a token acknowledgment of gender variant and intersex persons who may not fit the binary. Thus while it seeks to encompass varied idioms of gender, it also carries assumptions that may contravene the discourses of gender/sexual variance that it claims to include. Following the emerging definition of transgender as a "gender identity" understood primarily through a binary transitional model, the state has tended to categorically separate funding for transgender groups from the (homo)sexual category of "men who have sex with men," belying the overlap between sexual and gender variance evidenced in the previous classification of *kothi* as MSM (WBSAPCS 2011). Thus while transgender is defined as an open-ended umbrella term, it also potentially imposes homo-trans and cis-trans borders over complex spectral communities such as Raina's friend circle in south Kolkata, with their shifting *kodi-bhelki* and *kothi-hijra* boundaries, and class/caste-based overlaps between male-attired *kothis* and those who wear feminine clothes and/or join the *hijras*. The scalar ascendance of transgender as a trans/national umbrella term tends to establish the cis/trans and homo/trans binaries (and thus the male/female, man/woman divides) as putatively cross-cultural and ontologically stable rubrics, such that local discourses or practices of gender/sexual variance are simply assumed to be intelligible and classifiable in terms of the aforementioned binaries.

Following the initial articulations of transgender as an umbrella term in the HIV-AIDS sector, recent policy directives such as a report by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE) and a judgment by the Supreme Court of India (SC) have also defined transgender as an umbrella category, extending its use beyond HIV-AIDS prevention (MoSJE 2014: 7; SC 2014: 10). Significantly, these institutional declarations explicitly include both binary (male-to-female or female-to-male) and "third gender" identities as subjects of rights and empowerment. However, they also recommend procedures for the certification of gender either by state-appointed committees (MoSJE) or through psychological tests (SC) to legally validate someone's preferred option as male, female, or transgender/third gender, which may further entrench the state-sanctioned adjudication of the boundaries between different gender categories and between cis and trans identities (MoSJE 2014: 34; SC 2014: 84). As an umbrella term, "transgender" is therefore marked by a foundational contradiction between its supposed indefinite extensibility across different sociocultural forms of gender variance and its imposition of new categorical assumptions and identitarian boundaries. As a result, ongoing attempts to define the scope of transgender as a category for funding and representation have prompted bitter border wars and activist conflicts regarding whom to include or not. *Hijras* have been included with relatively little controversy given their old status as eunuchs or a "third gender"; indeed, in some official usages, "transgender" may primarily serve to designate *hijras* (NACO 2007: 13). However, *kothi* and similar terms become particularly controversial due to their spectral nature and previous classification as MSM. The MSM-TG border wars and attendant debates over classification have been described by one of us in detail elsewhere (Dutta 2013). For our purposes here, we will focus on the role of these conflicts in the aforementioned elision of local categories. The controversy regarding the status of *kothi* peaked during consultations in 2010 preceding the launch of Project Pehchan, a new HIV-AIDS intervention program funded by the Global Fund to Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Raina was present at one of these consultations in Kolkata, where one set of activists accused other activists, who had previously identified as *kothi* and MSM, of being men who were masquerading as TG to gain funds. This may be seen as an intensification of the existing tensions between differently gendered subject positions in *kothi-hijra* communities, as described above. On the other hand, one of Raina's *hijra* friends willfully added to the confusion by stating that she was *hijra* by profession, TG by gender identity, and MSM by sexual behavior, much to Raina's delight. Despite such attempts to confuse the boundaries, eventually, the controversy resulted in *kothi* dropping out as a term of representation within the development sector. Since 2010, most CBOs in West Bengal have officially identified their constituencies as either TG or MSM, and *kothi* has fallen out of official activist usage.

This shift has also fueled a division between public representation and intracommunity usages. Even after the ascendance of transgender, *kothi* as a term of identification has remained close to our hearts. As Raina puts it, when a *kothi* sees another community member on the streets of Kolkata, they do not usually call out to each other as "hey, you transgender!"—rather, they feel more comfortable hailing each other as *kothi*. Yet when speaking to funders or state officials, CBO leaders typically represent their constituency as transgender without referencing local terms. This disjunction between subcultural terms and official usages of transgender signals a split between the affective register of community building and the language of political representation. Even when Raina and her friends do use "transgender" among themselves, their usage is often different from official discourse and may flexibly include people who would be identified as feminine gay men or MSM by funders (e.g., Ani in hir more *kodi* days). While this suggests that intracommunity usages resist hegemonic definitions and demonstrate alternative appropriations of transgender, the split between these distinct registers also serves as a constraint that limits upward mobility in terms of linguistic facility in English and the ability to employ the politically correct discourse du jour. While both of us can negotiate between subcultural intracommunity usages and organizational discourse, most *kothis* have not had the training or privilege to be able to do so, which restricts their mobility within activism and the development sector.

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Moving on from the level of official representation, the increasing circulation of transgender as a category associated with certain ideas of gender may also bolster social hierarchies and forms of stigma around gender identity and presentation. In many emergent articulations of transgender identity, "transgender" and "transsexual" are loosely conflated, and the Bengali translation, *rupantarkami* (someone who desires transformation in *roop*, or form), can signify both senses (Das 2009). In many usages, "transgender" connotes an MTF (male-to-female) or FTM (female-to-male) model of identity and the affirmation of one's womanhood or manhood through some form of transition from one sex/gender to another (Das 2009; SAATHII 2009). However, in contexts where contemporary methods of transitioning have largely not been available, people within the *kothi-hijra* spectrum have devised trajectories of sartorial, bodily, or behavioral feminization that need not imply identification with social or ontological womanhood per se but, rather, may be expressed as a separately gendered subject position. For instance, several *kothis* of our acquaintance assert than while they are *like* women or have a womanly or feminine psyche (*mone nari*), they are not women as such (also see Reddy 2005: 134). Raina herself generally presents as a (trans) woman but

does not identify as either gender (Ani, having come to hir subject position via the academy and queer theory before hir introduction to these communities, is another case altogether). Further, as Gayatri Reddy argues in her ethnography of *hijras* in South India, *hijras* may elect castration-penectomy and other methods of feminization such as hormonal treatments and yet not wish to socially "pass" as women, even if they are pleased when such passing does occur (Reddy 2005: 134–36). Indeed, *hijra* livelihoods like blessing people for money *depend* on their perception as distinct from both men and women. In this context, the advent of a new discourse of trans womanhood, whether accompanied by gender affirmation surgery or not, creates new possibilities of personal and social identification, which may have life-affirming implications for some people. We do not seek to rehearse the facile critique of transsexuality as conformist and reproducing binary gender, as if nontranssexuals do not do so all the time (Valentine 2012). At the same time, both of us have encountered gendered and classed hierarchies between emergent models of trans womanhood and older forms of feminization and gender liminality. Given that *hijra* communities and *kothi* forms of public visibility (such as flamboyance, sex work, and cruising) are often socially disreputable and stigmatized, some CBO leaders actively advocate that community members fashion themselves as women rather than *hijra/kothi*—to quote one such person, "the way that you people behave in public, does any woman behave like that? No wonder you have no respect in society." Indeed, as observed by Raina, the imputation of *hijra*-like behavior may even become a form of shaming and insult within some *kothi/*trans communities, in contrast to the proud avowal of *hijra* identity by *hijra* clans. This intensification of social stigma against gender liminality by holding up (middle class, upper caste) womanhood as a more desirable and respectable ideal of self-fashioning may be paralleled by a hierarchy between castration-penectomy (called *chhibrano* in the subcultural language) and the achievement of what trans women like Tista have termed their "complete" (*sampurna*) womanhood through "sex change" surgery (Das 2013). Over the last few years, both of us have encountered *kothis* who identify as (trans) women and deride *chhibrano*, saying they would never settle for anything "less" than "full" SRS (sex reassignment surgery). Such equations between transition, womanhood, and completeness (*sampurnata*) perpetuate the stigmatization of *hijras* and nontranssexual *kothis* as less than human and heighten the challenges faced by those who cannot afford, or do not want, "complete" womanhood or "full" transition.

Further, while the aforementioned hierarchies may be seen as related to restrictive articulations of transgender identity that exclude or deride nonbinary possibilities, even inclusive definitions of the category often imply a singular or consistent model of gender identity that may elide or delegitimize various unruly

and inconsistent forms of identification practiced by *kothis* and *hijras*. Even pluralistic definitions of transgender often assume a stable model of gender based on primary, consistent, and singular identities, wherein trans people may have a variety of identities, but each identity is assumed to be singular, consistent, and mutually exclusive with the others, thus reflecting the social imperative of authentic identification, as also required by modern citizenship and biopolitical power. ("Identity" in its very semantics implies singularity or, at best, the combination of singular-consistent identities). This is not to criticize people for desiring stable or officially recognized identities—many of us may need one to survive in contemporary societies—but to critique the *structural* imperative of authentic and consistent identification, which is particularly evident in defensive assertions that trans and queer people are "born this way." In our perception, this imperative is reflected in the proliferation of attempts to build stable cartographies of trans identities, such as those reflected in several popular introductory guides to gender identity and trans issues produced in the United States, which are also gaining circulation in Indian online trans spaces (Hill and Mays 2013; Kasulke 2013; Bauer 2010). Typically, these guides feature a list of trans identities led by trans men and women and followed by genderqueer people, cross-dressers, drag queens and kings, and so on (the latter categories progressively coming closer to gender instability and the cis-trans border and thus unevenly included). A trans woman, to be respected as such, has to be seen as really and only a woman: to suggest that she may potentially be *also* genderqueer, third gender—or worse, a feminine male—can only be seen as offensive misgendering. This is probably partly prompted by hostile tropes of the deceptive-pathetic transsexual in the West, wherein trans women are seen as deceptive "men" or pathetic failures at femininity (Serano 2013). To counter the forcible assignment of "real" or "birth" genders and assert the validity of trans identities, there is a systemic compulsion to exert a strong mono-gendered claim to trans womanhood (or manhood)— one fallout of which is the neat separation of binary and nonbinary identities, recreating a majority-minority dynamic wherein (trans) men and women are followed by a trail of genderqueer/bigender/agender "others." As one "Trans 101" rather despairingly states, "Just as nobody knows why there are so many cis people, nobody knows why there are so many binary identified folks" (Bauer 2010). However, this may be less an empirical constant and more the result of a system that makes it imperative to assign or claim a primary gender and confers legitimacy based on such identification, belying the shifting nonbinary positionalities occupied by many trans men and women, which must be downplayed relative to their *primary* identification. This process parallels the longstanding but never entirely successful attempt to dissociate gender variance from gay identity, wherein effeminacy/gender variance becomes downplayed within mainstream gay

identities and the primary gender of gay people becomes defined in terms of masculinity (Valentine 2007). Various practices of gayness that belie stable definitions of "manhood" must be deemphasized for "gay" to retain its stable (cis) gendering and attendant privileges. Once categories such as "trans women" or "gay men" are seen as *necessarily* mono-gendered and evacuated of their historical association with gender liminality, "binary" people tend to be naturalized as majorities, leaving a trailing bunch of explicitly, exclusively nonbinary people. Such a schema would fail to understand how social or legal binary identities and nonbinary practices or subject positions may be negotiated and lived simultaneously, creating unstable assemblages rather than essentialized identities.

In contrast to the structural imperative of stable gender recognition, *hijras* and *kothis* may deploy various unruly, changeable practices of identification and citizenship arising from complex strategies of survival and self-assertion in societies that have not provided them with stable options rather than from any abstract radical politics. *Hijras* who have undergone castration-penectomy may procure and use official female identification documents and yet purposely contravene female identification in other contexts—for instance, by dramatizing physical discordance from femaleness by thickening the voice or by employing characteristic gestures such as the *thikri*, a loud clap, which immediately marks one as *hijra*. One of our *hijra* friends recently obtained a female voter card which she proudly flaunts, but she objects if otherwise perceived as a woman: in her words, "I went to a house where they mistook me for a woman: I just gave three claps!" Thus there may be *simultaneous* identifications and disidentifications with femaleness that cannot be comprehended by the aforementioned trans cartographies (or, at best, may be relegated to a "bi-gender" minority categorically separate from trans women, denying how *hijras* may be *both* women and not-women). Further, some *hijras* and *kothis* may have a combination of identity documents under "male," "female," and more recently, "other"/"transgender" categories, due to the varying circumstances in which they procured the documents. We have known *hijras* and *kothis* with multiple identity cards who have had problems accessing healthcare services due to the expectation of a stable, singular identity. Moreover, since the entry of "other" and "transgender" as official gender categories recognized by the Indian government, there have been ongoing debates about whether *hijras* and other transgender people should be classified as female or other/transgender, often with the assumption that there could be a generalized answer to this question (see Kushala 2011). Obviously, lumping trans people into either "female" or "other" categories, each exclusive of the other, presents two problematic options. The recent MoSJE and SC directives recognize both binary-gendered trans people and a third or nonbinary category and seek to enable individual choice over identification rather than impose any

one category on all trans people; however, they still operate on the assumption of a fixed and consistent identity that must be legally validated through expert committees, psychological tests, or surgery (MoSJE 2014: 34; SC 2014: 84, 108). While enabling individual access to and choice over official identification is crucial, at the same time, it may be necessary to destabilize the polarity between binary and nonbinary (or "third gender") identities—and more broadly, to question the requirement of singular, consistent identification in order to access rights and citizenship. Otherwise, emergent transgender epistemologies that attempt to classify mutually exclusive, primary gender identities over and above the binary-defying practices of many queer, trans (and even cis) lives may fail to comprehend multiple or noncoherent gendered identifications or practices enacted by a single body and may elide or erase temporally unstable or non-unidirectional trajectories of gendered transition. In such epistemologies, the subject positions and practices of *hijras* and *kothis* can only linger on as an exotic, precarious species of gender variance, as remnants of archaic forms of gender liminality, or as afterthoughts tagged on as an et cetera to trans cartographies—rather than as people who powerfully instantiate the gendered instabilities that foundationally mark many LGBTIQ subject positions and indeed, sex/gender itself.

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The emergence of transgender is an ongoing and unpredictable process, and we can draw only a provisional conclusion to our reflections here. Given that transgender may serve as a useful and even life-saving rubric for service provision, politics, and funding, we do not advocate a disengagement with the category but a critique of the structural conditions and assumptions within which it functions. Rather than use transgender as an umbrella term encompassing all possible gender variant identities, it is perhaps better deployed as an analytic rubric for variant and liminal gendered *positions*, such that to access the benefits or services provided through the category (e.g., HIV prevention, gender-affirmative care, antiviolence work, crisis support), one does not have to *identify* with any pregiven understanding of transgender. This process of deontologizing transgender (dissociating it from ontological identification) has to be coupled with the critique and gradual dismantling of the scalar hierarchy between "transnational" and "local" or "regional" discourses, so as to enable more equitable conversations and engagements with other epistemologies of gender/sexual variance or marginality. Evidently, the definition of transgender as a universal(izing) term does not truly value the diverse understandings of gender/sexual variance in different regions, and even pluralistic definitions of transgender tend to recreate a majoritarian dynamic in which everyone has to have a (consistent) identity, and

some identities must trail behind others. Variant imaginations of scale are crucial to challenge these colonizing implications of the transgender category, such that local or regional discourses are not compelled to be legible in terms of globalizing understandings of gender, and the latter also become accountable to the former. Beyond discursive realignments, this necessitates material transformations. The way in which each region or community may build distinctive movements and approaches, network with each other, and forge counterhegemonic translations with the transgender category is restricted through a centralized structure of activism, funding, and scholarship wherein they become just subregions within a preconstituted trans/national domain. More egalitarian exchanges necessitate a gradual dismantling of the centralized and tiered structure of social movements, with funders, NGOs, activists, and scholars based in Western or postcolonial metropolises at the top and small CBOs near the bottom. The decolonization of transgender is not likely to be achieved in isolation from the transformation of the political economy of social movements, the dismantling of scalar geographies of development, and the class/caste/racial hierarchies within which they are embedded. Therefore, in the end, we wish to stress that decolonizing transgender is not just a project to include external forms of cultural difference into existing structures and epistemologies but is internal to the deconstruction and democratization of LGBTIQ activism both inside and outside the "West."

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