The Tale of the

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Hermaphrodites have often been depicted in cinema to provide some comic element. Seen as freaks of nature; they are ridiculed and sometimes feared in our culture that does not tolerate anything that diverges from the common. In the Hindi movie *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) they accompanied one of the heroes, Akbar (Rishi Kapoor), in a song. But one of the first sympathetic portrayals was in Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995). Off-screen their story is one of discrimination and dejection. In the customs of South Asia, a hijra, is usually considered a member of "the third gender" neither man nor woman. Most are physically male or intersex, but some are physically female. Hijras usually refer to themselves linguistically as female, and usually dress as women. To Indian anthropologist Serena Nanda, Hijras described themselves simply as "neither man nor woman.

According to Adnan Hossain, a student of the PhD programme in Social Anthropology Department of social sciences, University of Hull, "Hijras or hermaphrodites are people with ambiguous genitalia. Also called intersexed, hermaphroditism is primarily a medical condition which results from multifarious biological factors. The term 'intersexed' is reserved to refer to a somatic condition in which the hermaphroditic person is supposed to posses both masculine and feminine traits". However, hijras of Bangladesh define themselves as people who are neither male nor female. They regard themselves as people incapable of sexual sensation. They also claim to have neither a male nor a female genitalia.

According to them, hijras are of three types. A 'real' hijra has no trace of genitalia except for a tiny hole for urination. They can be both flat-chested as well as big-breasted. The 'male hijra' has a tiny non-erectile phallus. More often than not, they go for a medical operation. The 'female hijra' look like women, have female genitalia but they do not menstruate. They may also possess masculine traits.

According to Canadian researcher Aude Leroux-Lévesque "in the last two centuries, hijras progressively struggled against marginalisation, harassment, malicious rumours, denial of human rights and lack of resources." Consequently the number of hijras who turned to prostitution dramatically rose. This is because according to hijras themselves, they are not given any support by the government or local authorities. Hijras



are a significant presence in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and are part of the variegated South Asian culture. National governments deal differently with hijras, according to their constitutional and religious identity. When it comes to hijras and prostitution, the law is particularly strict although the demand of hijras by male customers is extremely high. In Bangladesh sex work has been declared legal by the Bangladeshi High Court in 2000. However, hijras still live in the margin of the society. Bangladeshis, as other South Asians, respect hijras out of fear but at the same time, especially with the increasing spread of Islamist predication, overtly condemn their existence. Leila Hijra of Shustha Jibon a NGO of Hijras says " People who are building a new house sometimes hire us to dance in each new room, to take away any potential bad luck. We are also hired to dance at weddings and to celebrate the arrival of newborn babies. The everyday life of Bangladeshi hijras is far from being a laughing matter. With the spread of modern forms of entertainment --particularly TV-- the call for hijras is decreasing. Increasingly, we are compelled to earn our living by collecting money from shopkeepers --a form of mild extortion -- and by prostitution."

Abu Mokeram Khondaker Secretary General of Association for Environment and Human Resource Development (AFEAHRD) says,"Hijras face prejudice and discrimination at every turn. Marked out by their sexual difference, they are hounded out of schools, and