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From the Margins to Demigod

The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India

This article introduces the Kinnar Akhara, a recently established transgender religious organization that stems from the *hijṛā* tradition, a religiously syncretic subculture of transgender individuals in India. The Kinnar Akhara was established in 2015 by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a transgender activist and at the time a *hijṛā* leader, together with other *hijṛā*s. Their purpose was to legitimize the presence of *hijṛā*s (now labeled *kinnar*s) and that of transgender people among the Indian population. To obtain this, they evoked a past Hindu religious identity, challenging the male-dominated and change-resistant patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s, while also questioning the Islamic legacy of the *hijṛā* traditions. The article analyzes the Kinnar Akhara as a form of selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition and as a form of religious feminism. It further highlights the complexity of this religious movement, which harnesses local and global dynamics and challenges cultural and social structures.

Keywords: LGBT+—Sanskritization—religious feminism—*hijṛā*—Kinnar—*akhāṛā*

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*Hijṛā*s form an ancient religious subculture of trans-women that combines Hindu and Islamic features. Today they are in economic and social hardship, to such an extent that the word *hijṛā* has become a derogatory term in contemporary India. In 2015 Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a *hijṛā* leader and transgender activist, decided together with other leaders to establish the Kinnar Akhara (*akhāṛā*). The Kinnar Akhara aims to unify groups of *hijṛā*s (now labeled *kinnar*s) who are reclaiming their Hindu religious identity and dignity, in order to legitimize their presence and that of transgender people among the Indian population. To this end, they relate themselves to mythological celestial beings (*kinnar*s) and refer to Hindu scriptures, aligning themselves with orthodox and heterodox Hindu traditions and rituals. These new stands challenge the male-dominated and change-resistant patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s but also question the Islamic legacy of the *hijṛā* traditions.

By means of textual, ethnographic, and online sources, this article describes the religious identity construction of the Kinnar Akhara using two analytical perspectives: that of selective Sanskritization and that of religious feminism. Considering Sanskritization as the process whereby groups modify their beliefs, rituals, and practices in order to be closer to those who are dominant in the religious landscape (Srinivas 1966, 6), the Kinnar Akhara identity reshaping can be investigated as a form of selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* traditions, which involves not only a phenomenon of emulation but may have sociopolitical dimensions (Jaoul 2011). Since Kinnar Akhara identity-shaping involves the exclusion of Islamic features, it is important to consider whether it has aligned itself with the anti-Muslim turn taken by the current BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government to obtain recognition and support (Chacko 2018). Some claims released by *kinnar* leaders have already mobilized the lay transgender communities. However, this article demonstrates that apart from this possible political component, the Kinnar Akhara is creating a challenge to the Indian patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s; it is vocal in its strong condemnation of Indian patriarchal society and in support of gender equality and social justice. In practice, these themes occupy the *akhāṛā*'s attention more than communalist ones. Therefore, the article suggests that the Kinnar Akhara may be also seen as a form of what Emma Tomalin calls "religious feminism," defined as "re-interpretations of religious systems that are consistent with the 'core' values of the tradition as well as various types of feminist thinking" (2006, 387). In effect, the Kinnar Akhara leaders use different strategies, moving between Western feminist discourses as activists, as well as moving between the different religious systems of the *hijrā*s and of the *akhāṛā*s, aiming their reinterpretations and adjustments to conquer social space and recognition. The consequences, however, have as yet to be verified.

This article initially engages with a presentation of the *hijṛā* tradition and relates its later development to the creation of the Kinnar Akhara. The use of the word "*kinnar*" will be contextualized and the tradition of the male *akhāṛā*s presented. After a description of the dynamics developed between the male *akhāṛā*s and the Kinnar Akhara in 2019, this article provides examples of *kinnar*s' selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition and questions its "saffronization." In the end it shows the *akhāṛā*'s feminist standpoint. Since this article discusses preliminary results of a wider research project, it does not present fully developed conclusions; rather, it attempts to draw attention to a contemporary process of religious identity-making, which reveals power dynamics that concern the religious, social, and political spheres.

The *hijṛā* traditions: Present and historical developments

The Urdu term *hijṛā*[1] refers today to religiously syncretic communities, often marginalized and stigmatized, constituted by "feminine-identified persons who pursue distinct professions such as ritualized blessing during weddings and childbirth . . . typically dress in women's clothes and may undergo penectomy and castration (orchiectomy) but also commonly designate themselves as distinct from men and women" (Dutta and Roy 2014, 323).[2] These communities may have regional features (for example, see Reddy 2005; Mal and Mundu 2018) but may also have transnational aspects, as they are also present in Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (see Hossain and Nanda 2020). In general, the term *hijṛā* collects an "extraordinary blending of the biological body, gendered identity and sexuality in complex permutations and combinations within a specific social and cultural milieu" (Mal and Mundu 2018, 622, referring to Goel 2016).[3]

Hijṛā traditions likely stemmed from or benefited from the acknowledgment of "third nature" individuals present in *dharmaśāstrik* literature, as well as from stories and myths about same-sex procreation and androgynous gods or heroes who turn into eunuchs in the Hindu epics and early Vedic and Puranic literatures.[4] They also draw their "cultural heritage from the *Khawjasara* of [the] Mughal era," eunuchs employed by Mughal rulers as caretakers of their harems (Mal and Mundu 2018, 622). However, as highlighted by Adnan Hossain and Serena Nanda, although Mughal eunuchs had some similarities with *hijṛā*s—and *hijṛā*s today recall the power and role of eunuchs, underscoring their special status in the past—in reality, eunuchs were not invested with religious or ritual powers, which derived instead from *hijṛā*s' connection with Hindu traditions and deities (2020, 40). For their religious role, *hijṛā*s received patronage from Muslim and Hindu rulers and therefore held a religious place in Indian society and even a certain prestige.

From the early nineteenth century, as the British gradually took over, these rights were greatly reduced; *hijṛā*s underwent strong repression and were criminalized under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a law that was revoked in 1952 (Dutta 2012, 828). It is during the British period that the word *hijṛā* became an umbrella term under which to gather different regional names, such as *khojā*, *pavaya*, *khasua*, and *mukhannas*,[5] notwithstanding their diversities. Through the prevention of emasculation,[6] the CTA aimed in the long term to eliminate the practices of eunuchs *tout court*, and through the prohibition of performance and transvestism it also aimed to remove *hijṛā* "as a visible socio-cultural category and gender identity" in the short term (Hinchy 2014, 279).

Despite these colonial attempts, *hijṛā*s were able to find a way to elude controls and keep their tradition alive, articulating "an alternative socio-cultural and gender identity through the everyday re-telling of their communal mythology, derived from Hindu myths of androgynes and emasculates" (ibid., 284, 286), an approach that has been used by present *kinnar*s as well. Although in the British period the "community was forced into the urban underworld of low caste workers, prostitutes and beggars" (Dutta 2012, 828), it was able to maintain its tradition in the private sphere, making *hijṛā*s' households a crucial space for their resistance to colonial projects (Hinchy 2014, 287).

Today, *hijṛā* households are spread all over India and are organized around seven *gharāṇā* (literally "houses" or "clans").[7] A *hijṛā* household is structured as a commune "generally composed of individuals from a diverse range of religious, caste, class, ethnic, linguistic, gender and sex backgrounds" (Roy 2015, 12). Each member contributes with her earnings to the management of the place, which therefore works as a residential and economic unit as well as a place for protection (Nanda 1990, 30). As the work of Jeffrey Roy in Mumbai has shown, *gharāṇā*s are the nucleus of all social activities and "identity making processes," since each may be conventionally associated with certain occupations (2015, 10).

Similar to Hindu ascetic orders, *hijṛā* households rely on an internal system of laws and rules, but also upon elaborate structures that appoint "familiar" roles and relationships to different members of the household (e.g., aunt, sister, daughter, and so on), established around the figure of the guru who manages it (Hall 1995, 42). The guru is herself part of a hierarchy and under the control of *naik*s or *nāyak*s (chiefs), who meet to discuss events and decide the policy of their communities, even on a national level.[8] Like ascetic groups, inner hierarchies are not based on age but upon time of entry into the community (Nanda 1990, 43). There are then multiple divisions, ranks, roles, and rules to follow that are controlled by *hijṛā* houses' councils called *jamāt* or *pañcāyat* (Goel 2016). Although a *hijṛā* is strictly associated with her household, as part of a lineage she can move among households belonging to the same *gharāṇā* (Reddy 2005, 9).

Hijṛā communities are highly syncretic, combining Hindu and Islamic features.[9] Their heads are mostly Muslims, and although individuals from all religious backgrounds can become *hijṛā*s,[10] according to Reddy's ethnography, they first have to convert to Islam. As we will see later in the article, this is an aspect challenged by the Kinnar Akhara. This conversion would result in the adoption of some Islamic practices, such as *namāz*; pilgrimages, especially to Sufi shrines and possibly to Mecca; greeting each other with *salām ʻāleikum*; and burial at death (Reddy 2005, 105). However, *hijṛā*s may also identify themselves as Hindu, and in general they follow Hindu goddesses and participate in Hindu festivals, demonstrating that their mixed approach depends on the context in which they happen to perform worship (ibid., 113). The power of their performances, nevertheless, is associated with a Hindu religious background.

While the reasons for choosing to become a *hijṛā* differ,[11] to officially enter *hijṛā* society the individual has to find a guru and get initiated. Theoretically, in order to become a "true" *hijṛā*, if the individual is not a eunuch by birth, he should undergo a ritual called *nirvāṇ*, during which the penis and testicles are removed,[12] but this ritual is not compulsory and remains an individual choice. The word *nirvāṇ* comes from a Buddhist background, indicating a state of neither suffering nor desire, in which the individual attains liberation. For *hijṛā*s, the state of *nirvāṇ* is a kind of liberation, since it marks their new birth. The penis and testicles are removed from the body with a cut, and the blood is left flowing, because it is thought that the male blood is leaving the body (see Nanda 1990, 27). It is thought that through this initiation a curse of impotence is removed, and the individual is reborn as a "she" and as a vehicle for the power of the goddess Bahucara Mata, who is constantly worshiped and invoked for protection during the emasculation ritual. It is also thought that castration bestows "fertility power." *Hijṛā*s are believed to have the power to confer fertility on others, by sacrificing their individual fertility in order to bestow universal procreative power (Reddy 2005, 97). Castration also marks the entrance into celibacy and the repression of a *hijṛā*'s sexual desire, which is transformed into sacred power. These "powers" legitimize *hijṛā*s' religious roles and other activities.

Traditionally *hijṛā*s are performers: they sing and dance on special occasions (see Roy 2015). One such occasion is the *badhāī*, the celebration of the birth of a male child or of a marriage, where they bless the child and the family, or bring fertility to the married couple (Nanda 1990, 2, 4). This practice appears in the *Mahābhārata* epic, specifically when Arjun takes part in weddings and births by singing and dancing after deciding to spend one year as a eunuch named Brihannala, in the court of King Virata. According to Alf Hiltebeitel (1980, 153), Arjun would then represent Shiva's creative power as a self-castrated god, giving *hijṛā*s an explanation and legitimation for their roles as dancers and bestowers of fertility. Another practice is the *māṅgtī* (also called *basti*), which refers to the collection of alms from shops, temples, or people sitting in trains or walking on streets (see Mal and Mundu 2018).

The power of *hijṛā*s' blessings is connected to another story that would link them to the deity Ram, the divine hero of the other main Hindu epic known as the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Before going into exile, he told the people of Ayodhya, male and female, to go back to their houses. However, since he did not include those who were neither man nor woman, they remained there waiting for him. When he came back, after twelve years, he found them still there, and to thank them for their devotion, he bestowed on them the power that whatever they say will come true.[13] As a result of these traditions, people may fear *hijṛā*s, who announce their presence in public spaces with a special type of clapping, known as *tālī*. As Kira Hall says (1995, 188), *hijṛā*s have to learn how to clap after entering the community, and they are "well-known throughout northern India for their resonant, hollow-handed clap." This clap is an unambiguous marker of *hijṛā* identity in public spaces, "acknowledging their stigma and playing on it . . . to their advantage," but it is also used within the *hijṛā* community to reinforce their ideas and statements (Reddy 2005, 137). It is not unusual that, when they want to show their disappointment, *hijṛās* clap, especially when they want to curse people. In fact, *hijṛās* also embody an inauspicious potential that manifests itself through cursing and abusing people (Nanda 1990, 5). Because of these behaviors, especially in the main cities,[14] people are not only scared but also annoyed by *hijṛās*. Their association with homosexual prostitution, which is often a way to mitigate economic hardship, further increases their marginalization and stigmatization.

With the growth of the LGBT[15] movement in India, a new attention has been given to *hijṛās*, reframing them as legitimate historical figures of queerness in the nation (Saria 2021, 11), while also incorporating them into the category of "transgender." The diffusion of the transgender category and movements associated with it have created new opportunities for *hijṛās*. The expansion of global human rights movements supported by NGOs has motivated *hijṛās*' activism to fight for social integration, legal equality, social services, employment, educational opportunities, and so on, leading them to become an "established part of the South Asian NGO sector" (Hossain and Nanda 2020, 46). In 1994 *hijṛās* gained the right to vote as women in the national elections; in 2005 the Indian state added in its passport application forms the E option for eunuchs, to affirm their nonbinary (male or female) status. By 2009 both *hijṛās* and transgenders were officially listed among "others" in ballot forms. The most decisive step was on April 15, 2014, when the third gender was officially recognized.[16] *Hijṛās* have also achieved success in political office at national and local levels, a right they won in 1977 (see Reddy 2003; Hossain 2020, 414–15).

However, despite all these "successes," downsides are also present. The use of the "transgender" category has also worked "to engender a new hierarchy in which *hijṛās* become the embodiment of an indigenous and traditional, but also backward and non-respectable subject position against the modern and modernizing transgender community, which significantly, in many cases seeks integration, not distinction from the larger society" (Hossain and Nanda 2020, 47). This has led to strong friction between *hijṛās* and lay transgenders, the latter strongly resisting association with the former, an approach that tends to further marginalize *hijṛās*, "pointing at their preexisting pejorative connotations" (Hossain 2020, 408). As Hossain has pointed out, *hijṛās*' involvement as politicians and activists may damage them as subjects with ritual power and significance, therefore ending *hijṛā* subculture by incorporating it into mainstream occupations through new forms of employment (2020, 419). Furthermore, electoral victories do not necessarily represent emancipatory possibilities, considering that *hijṛā* politicians often emphasized aspects of their identity that worked to bolster majoritarian Hindu nationalist politics (Reddy 2003). Thus, they usually refrain from acknowledging any association with Islam in their public engagements, "thereby re-producing the hijra as a subculture rooted in Hindu tradition" (Hossain 2020, 415).

Creating the *Kinnar Akhara*

From this background of *hijṛā* activism and politics, the Kinnar Akhara was established to return to a supposed original and respected status, in contrast with the degradation and marginalization of these communities despite their legal recognition and political success.[17]

The aforementioned main leader of the Kinnar Akhara, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, is indeed a transgender/*hijṛā* rights activist and was the first transgender person to represent the Asia-Pacific at the United Nations in 2008. She was also one of the petitioners in the case that allowed for the recognition of the third gender in 2014. After winning the battle in court, she decided—together with other *hijṛā* leaders—to bring this battle to the general public, because any government program could only succeed with popular acceptance from the wider community. In an interview Laxmi declared the following:

> Religion is the one avenue that connects with the masses and fills the gap that activism cannot. . . . Activists in the LGBTQ community are only connected with only a certain group of people in their own community. It's an echo chamber.
> (*Bharat Marg* 2019)

As Laxmi told me in 2019, twenty-two *hijṛā*s/*kinnar*s met on October 19, 2015, to talk about the *akhāṛā*, and this was finally established on October 30. According to *kinnar*s, transgenders traditionally occupied a religious space in South Asia, and it was necessary to reclaim it. To do that, they presented themselves through a new *kinnar* identity and, following a policy similar to that of *hijṛā* politicians, rejected their Islamic background to claim their place among one of the most visible Hindu religious institutions, the *akhāṛā*.

Here I will describe how the choice of the word *kinnar* was the first meaningful step to construct a new identity. The word *kinnar*, used especially in Madhya Pradesh (but also in Gujarat) as a more respectful term than *hijṛā* (Loh 2014, 14), has been adopted by the Kinnar Akhara to link transgender identity to celestial beings associated with music. Present in the Vedas and Puranas, *kinnar*s are listed in the *Manusmṛti* law code, together with *sādhu*s, *yakṣa*s, and *gandharva*s, as those beings that do not reincarnate, given their divine origin. For this reason, contemporary *kinnar*s declare themselves to be demigods. Laxmi also recalls a passage in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, a sixteenth-century epic poem written in the Awadhi dialect of Hindi, in which the author Tulsidas uses the term *kinnar* to describe the third gender when he says, "*dev danuj kinnar nar śreṇi sādar majjahin sakal triveṇī*" ("deities, demons, *kinnar*s, men, women, all went to Triveni, the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers with the mythological river Sarasvati").[18]

However, if we actually scrutinize the *Manusmṛti* (1.39), *kinnar*s (literally "what man") are presented in a list that also mentions monkeys, fish, various kinds of birds, wild animals, and humans. Wendy Doniger explains the passage by saying that *kinnar*s could be a species of ape, and that in mythology they are alternatively said to be creatures with the head of a horse and body of human, or the head of a human and the body of a horse (1991, 8). In *Manusmṛti* 3.196, *kinnar*s are further mentioned as the offspring of Atri and appear together with demons, genies, ogres, snakes, and centaurs (ibid., 64). While *kinnar*s as demigod musicians are treated with special regard in these texts, in textual sources the third gender is acknowledged only in passing. In the *Manusmṛti* there are references to *klība*, a word that can refer both to homosexual and impotent men, and in the second volume of the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* (36–45) the term *śaṇḍha* identifies one of the five types of *klība*, the one who has the qualities and behavior of a woman. The erotic manual *Kāmasūtra* explicitly describes a third gender (or a third "nature" or "sexuality") as *tṛtīya prakṛti*, stressing that it manifests in the form of a woman and in the form of a man. The one in the form of a woman would imitate women's dress, chatter, grace, emotions, and so on, who "gets her sexual pleasure and erotic arousal as well as her livelihood from this, living as a courtesan."

A link between the *kinnar* demigod and the third gender is not present in textual sources, so the claim made by contemporary *kinnar*s to be demigods can be interpreted as way to recall a supposed mythological past to obtain sociopolitical empowerment, and to rehabilitate a distinct Indian/Hindu transgender identity.[19] However, as we will see in the following paragraphs, this new semi-divine identity has been received with suspicion by some activists, who interpret it as "an alibi to absorb *hijṛās* within ascendant right-wing Hindu nationalism" (Saria 2021, 4). The word *kinnar* is not the only one through which their religious identity is constructed though, since defining the group with the word *akhāṛā* has several implications as well.

Traditional *akhāṛā*s and contemporary *kinnar*s

The term *akhāṛā*, which generally means "training ground," specifies religious ascetic communities belonging to both Shaiva and Vaishnava orders. Although identified by specific names such as *gosain*s/*saṃnyāsī*s (in the case of Shaiva warriors), *fakīr*s (Sufi warriors), and *bairāgī*s/*vairāgī*s (Vaishnava warriors), these ascetics were in the past generally called *nāgā* ("naked," from Sanskrit *nagna*) because they tended to wear little or no clothing. They represented the armed sections of Hindu orders and acted as warriors as well as mercenaries. It is difficult to discern the origin of these groups or when they were properly organized. As William Pinch writes, the presence of warrior ascetics in India has a long pedigree, and it is strictly connected to the "automatic equation of asceticism with power" (2020, 157). As several studies have suggested (Lorenzen 1978; Ghurye 1964), however, the emergence of *nāgā* groups is connected to the admission of low-caste individuals, untouchables, and women into the ascetic world. Pinch has also argued that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries north Indian ecological and political shifts precipitated the selling and abandoning of children into the care of local institutions or into the families of landed magnates, leading toward forms of domestic, agricultural, and even military slavery (Pinch 2006, 81). Organizationally, the nonbiological bonds of loyalty that tied *celā*s (disciple) to their gurus would have enabled smaller bands of armed ascetics to expand over time into larger and more institutionally complex regiments and armies (ibid., 80). These regiments and their monasteries were identified as *akhāṛā*s.

Warrior ascetics became a "common feature of the religious and political topography of eighteenth-century north India" (Pinch 2020, 159), until the East India Company and then the British Raj threatened their power and activities. Wandering ascetic warriors were a problem for the British administration. Therefore, although the Company and the Raj did not hesitate to ally with powerful ascetic commanders when convenient, in general they tended to criminalize armed ascetics, while supporting a more devotional and monastic form of asceticism (Pinch 2006, 259). The fact that *nāgā* groups survived in the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries and continued to be an important section of both Shaiva and Vaishnava orders suggests that their contribution was, and still is, more social than militaristic (Pinch 1996, 29).

Since the end of the nineteenth century, thirteen *akhāṛā*s have been acknowledged, and today their leaders form the Akhara Parishad (*akhāṛā pariṣad*), a committee that has a fundamental role not only in the organization of religious events but also in the "protection" of Hindu *dharma*, or sacred duty.

Notwithstanding the different religious backgrounds, *nāgā* and *hijṛā* histories present similar developments (especially in relation to colonial rule).[20] Furthermore, there are strong structural similarities between their communities: both are organized according to lineages (*gharāṇā*s and, for the ascetics, *paramparā*s), which underline the importance of the guru-disciple relationship and the creation of familial links with other members of the order; the guru is in both orders part of a wider hierarchical structure; an initiation with specific rituals is required to enter the group—Shaiva *nāgā sādhu*s even go through a particular practice in which the penis is strongly pulled by the guru to ensure celibacy; the individual has to follow the rules and laws of his or her new ascetic family; both ascetics and *hijṛā*s collect alms; they both have secret languages and esoteric practices, which are not shared with uninitiated people; both have to follow a particular *sādhanā* (spiritual discipline) to get religious/spiritual power to assist lay people; and both can include individuals coming from low castes. In general, both communities are comprised of liminal people that move in between worlds; they enter a religious world from where they take their identity and whose inner rules they have to follow, and a social world with which they have to interact to assure their survival.

Given such similarities, it is not surprising that *kinnar*s decided to reframe themselves as an *akhāṛā* organization. When I asked Laxmi why they decided to create an *akhāṛā*, she replied: "That is the way. . . . Whichever community had lost its own presence came with an *akhāṛā* and went forward. And for me it had to be in that way, as *Ādi śaṅkarācārya prabhu* said. We follow his footstep." Laxmi was referring to the eighth-century philosopher Adi Shankara who, according to her, organized the Shaiva *akhāṛā*s to face social troubles and to have a voice among the masses, which is a vocal goal of the group. According to Arpita P. Biswas, the idea actually came from Acarya Jitendra Anand, a *saṃnyāsī* living in Varanasi, who is well known for his support of Hindu nationalist (*hindutva*) politics and founder of the nongovernmental organization Ganga Mahasabha clean-up project, and who "was trying to come back into political relevance by initiating the formation of a militia, the Kinnar Akhara" (2021, 84).[21]

However, the choice of the term *akhāṛā* was not welcomed by the Akhara Parishad, which led to a direct dispute. The thirteen traditional *akhāṛā*s are strongly male dominated and, although some have female sections, there is a tendency to discourage female participation, since women are considered an obstacle for male ascetics.[22] Furthermore, they claim that the number of *akhāṛā*s is fixed and cannot be modified, for individuals can join one of the already existent *akhāṛā*s. For this reason, the Akhara Parishad is strongly against the recognition of the Kinnar Akhara, especially when it appeared for the first time at a religious event, the Ujjain Kumbh Mela of 2016, one of the main religious gatherings in India. There, the Kinnar Akhara obtained permission to set up camp, and *kinnar*s were also allowed to bathe during the auspicious days, although they did so at a different time from the male ascetics. Already in Ujjain, their *peśvāī* (the procession to reach their camp at the festival that they called, instead, *devtā yātrā*) created a certain interest among a large crowd that awaited their arrival with curiosity. In the 2019 Allahabad Kumbh Mela, the Kinnar Akhara garnered even more support from the public. In this case their *devtā yātrā* was followed by a crowd larger than that for male ascetics, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi led the procession as a warrior, riding a camel with a sword in her hand, appearing to openly challenge the *akhāṛā*s (see figure 1). Although their camp was quite far from the center of the religious scene, it was one of the most visited and searched for.

This success led Hari Giri Maharaj, the head of the Juna Akhara, the most influential *akhāṛā* and the one with the largest number of members, to negotiate with the leaders of the Kinnar Akhara. On January 12, 2019, in a meeting of historical importance held at Juna's Moj Giri *āśram*, Hari Giri signed an agreement with Laxmi and fifteen chosen *kinnar* leaders, in which he acknowledged the *kinnar* presence in Hindu religious history, thereby including the Kinnar Akhara among Juna Akhara's supported *akhāṛā*s, such as the Avahan and the Agni (see figure 2).

The result of these events suggests that, although not officially recognized by the Akhara Parishad, the Kinnar Akhara is considered to be independent of the Juna, since it follows its own rules and practices but participates with them during important events. In fact, this agreement led to another major result: namely, the adjustment of the order and timeline for the procession and ritual bath of the *akhāṛā*s during the Kumbh Mela, which has remained almost unchanged since the nineteenth century.[23] It is now modified to include the *kinnar*s in the schedule. This procession is an impressive moment in which the various *akhāṛā*s parade in succession to reach the bathing spot, the *saṅgam*: while the majority of *nāgā*s walk, the leaders process on

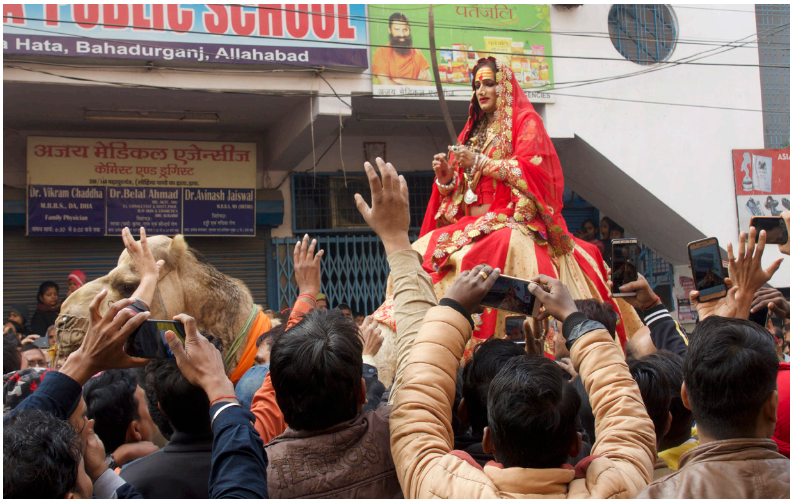

Figure 1. Laxmi during the *peśvāī*, Allahabad. Photo by Daniela Bevilacqua.

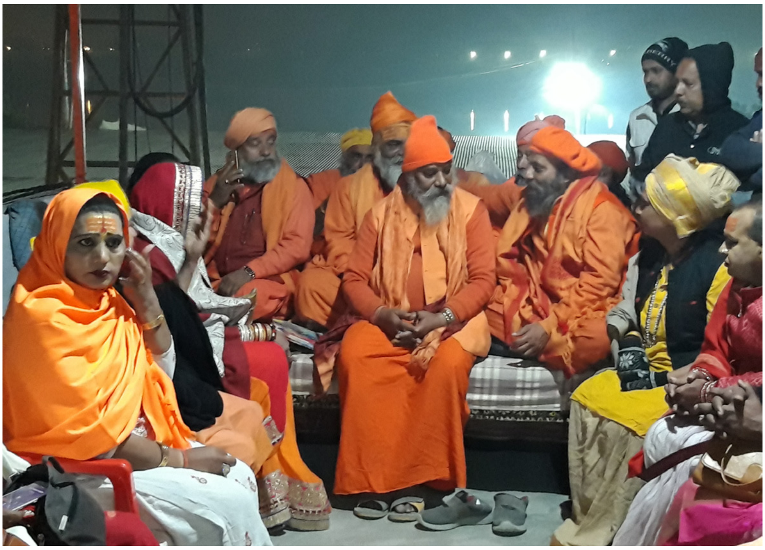

Figure 2. *Sādhus* and *kinnars* discussing on the night of the agreement.
Photo by Daniela Bevilacqua.

floats, waving to the crowd of people waiting for their *darśan* (auspicious sight) on the way to their bath. Usually, the procession is opened by the Maha Nirvani Akhara with the Atal Akhara, then followed by the Niranjani, along with the Anand Akhara. Then comes the Juna, in tow with the Avahan and Agni Akharas, respectively, which close the time slot for the Shaiva *akhāṛās*. In 2019, the Kinnar Akhara's procession was inserted in between the Avahan and the Agni.

These turning-point events changed the attitudes of representatives of other *akhāṛās* and religious groups, who started to visit the *Kinnars*' camp and show respect toward their leaders. However, the Kinnar Akhara is still not accepted by all the *akhāṛās*, and preliminary informal interviews with *nāgās* I conducted in 2019 demonstrated the *sādhus*' distrust toward them. The opposition to the Kinnar Akhara does not come only from the male ascetic world but also from some members of the transgender community, especially because of some of the steps the Kinnar Akhara has taken to construct an identity that looks exclusively to Hindu traditions.

A selective Sanskritization of *hijṛā* traditions?

The Kinnar Akhara's practices and religious stands are here presented as a form of selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* traditions. Drawing on Nirmal Singh's consideration that Sanskritization is not an overarching concept and cannot be used as "an analytical concept, entering as a building block for any elaborate sociological theory, made up of [a] logically connected non-contradictory set of propositions" (2006, 108–9), I propose another interpretation of Sanskritization, that of selective Sanskritization. Selective Sanskritization has to be considered as a useful heuristic concept that can be associated with other theories to describe specific historically, socially, and geographically contextualized situations. In this way, the concept does not become a cage to fit the case study in but rather a tool that takes into consideration contemporary changes and the specificity of the singular case studied without losing its value.

As my preliminary investigation has demonstrated, *kinnar*s' agency manifests in a Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition that does not occur through a strict emulation of Brahmanical textual sources nor of the ascetic world, but through a selection of features that can be easily adopted by *kinnar*s without losing their distinctiveness. *Kinnar*s indeed do not want to become like or be recognized as ascetics; rather, they want to remain *kinnar*s while appropriating certain ideas and practices that allow them to be recognized as Hindu. This approach also concerns the practices associated with *hijṛā* traditions that are maintained and highlighted in their Hindu past and origin. Therefore, they do not follow a "Brahmanical" track submissively. Rather, the way they are shaping a *kinnar* identity demonstrates that multiple agencies participate in it, and there is a clear selection of what to adopt or discard. To exemplify this, I will take into consideration two very different leaders, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Bhavani Ma, the first a Brahmin by birth and the second a Dalit by birth. I will frame the leaders in the context of the more general changes brought about by the Kinnar Akhara into *hijṛā* traditions.

*Kinnar*s, and especially Laxmi, present themselves mostly as Shaivite followers,[24] not only of Shiva in his *ardhanārīśvara* (half man, half woman) form but also in his form of *mahākāleśvara* (great lord of time) residing in the renowned Mahakaleshvar temple in Ujjain, which contains one of the twelve *liṅgam*s of light, the aniconic manifestations of the deity Shiva. To express this connection, *kinnar*s have established that their greeting is *jai śrī mahākāl*, which means "glory to the lord Mahakal." Laxmi has declared herself to be an ardent devotee of Mahakal and that she loves doing his *śṛṅgār*. The word *śṛṅgār* holds a variety of meanings that range from decoration (Kumar 1988) to erotic mode (Doniger O'Flaherty 1969). In its decorative meaning, followed by Laxmi, it is mostly associated with a celebration that consists of cleaning and decorating temple deities. During some *śṛṅgār* devotional events, music and dance programs may be held (Kumar 1988, 141). Considering Laxmi's background as a dancer, her *śṛṅgār* also recalls the use of a metaphorical romantic relationship between lover and beloved to express the devotional relationship between the individual and the divine in classical theatrical dance (see Zubko 2014, 48–49). This attitude is well represented in the Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotion) tradition, where the word *śṛṅgār* is used to express the emotional mood (*ras*) through which a devotee engages with the deity who is the object of devotion. The *śṛṅgār ras* finds place in many religious lineages associated with cross-dressing and the emulation of female attitudes (see Lorea 2018, 181–87). However, it should be noted that in these groups transvestism is not part of a gender or sexual identity but rather occurs as "imitation of a character of the cosmic drama . . . through one's devotional self" (ibid., 185). Therefore, Laxmi's religious approach can be identified as a devotional one, very much in line with the mainstream religious attitude of several religious currents.

The connection between the Mahakaleshvar temple and the Kinnar Akhara is remarkable, because the place is also a *śākti pīṭh*, one of the 108 "seats" of the goddess Sati associated with feminine power (*śākti*) emanating from her dismembered body parts that fell in these places that have become pilgrimage centers over time. It is believed that the upper lip of the goddess fell there after her immolation. Therefore, the choice of this temple can be interpreted as a way to associate *kinnar*s with both male and female powers. This association is also symbolized by the specific shape of their *tilak* (forehead mark) that identifies the sectarian affiliation of an individual devotee. The *kinnar tilak* consists of the three horizontal lines (*tripuṇḍr*) typical of Shaivites, made with a yellow paste but crossed by a vertical red line in the middle, the symbol of the Shri (feminine), and the application of a big, red *bindī*, usually worn by married Hindu women.

While Laxmi presents herself as a devotional follower of Mahakal, as mentioned earlier, Bhavani Ma has highlighted her connection with *tāntrik* traditions. She is associated with an *aghorī* guru[25] from South India named Manikandan Baba, and in the 2019 Kumbh Mela he publicly performed special ceremonies in the Kinnar Akhara camp. This relationship was also maintained in June 2019 when Bhavani Ma participated in the Ambubachi Mela held in Kamakhya, Assam, where the main temple is considered another important *śākti pīṭh* containing the fallen *yoni* (vagina) of Sati. The Ambubachi Mela is a weeklong festival held every year around the middle of June to celebrate the yearly menstruation course of goddess Kamakhya. Menstruation, perceived as highly polluting in Hindu society, becomes a tool of enlightenment in the *tāntrik* traditions of the so-called left-hand path. In Ambubachi, the temple remains closed for three days, "due to the perceived impurity induced by menstruation," but the supposed menstruating blood of the goddess collected in blood-soaked cloth is believed to be a blessed substance (Borkataky-Varma 2018; see also Urban 2010).

I attended the Ambubachi Mela in 2017 and in 2018. There, I met *hijṛā*s (not yet known as *kinnar*s at that time) who were especially present at the cremation ground, sharing the place with Manikandan Baba's *aghorī*s. Their relationship could be due to *tāntrik* practices or, in light of the festival period, to a peculiar celebration that involves the participation of "polluted" characters such as prostitutes and *aghorī*s (see Parry 1994, 256), but to my knowledge the connection between *hijṛā*s and *aghorī*s has yet to be properly investigated. In 2019 Bhavani Ma attended the Ambubachi Mela with other *kinnar*s from West Bengal. Their presence was covered by several media outlets, since their procession, carried out under the banner of Bhavani Ma, once again drew a large crowd. During the festival, *kinnar*s shared a building with Manikandan Baba,[26] and they often participated in the evening ceremonies organized by him at the charnel ground. In so doing, Bhavani Ma established a strong connection between the Kinnar Akhara and this renowned *tāntrik* place where the festival occurs.

These two portraits of Laxmi and Bhavani demonstrate that *kinnar*s come not only from high castes supporting Brahmanical orthodox stances, but that they can also embrace heterodox celebrations. In both cases they have become leading protagonists of sacred spaces that they reinterpret and occupy according to their personal agency. It would be wrong to think that Bhavani associated herself with a *tāntrik* practice because of her low-caste origin, since she participated in all the orthodox ceremonies performed by *kinnar*s in the 2019 Kumbh Mela. She was at the forefront together with Laxmi during the *kinnar*s' *devtā yātrā*, the procession through which *kinnar*s officially entered the *melā* (festival) ground for the first time, and which began in the Ram

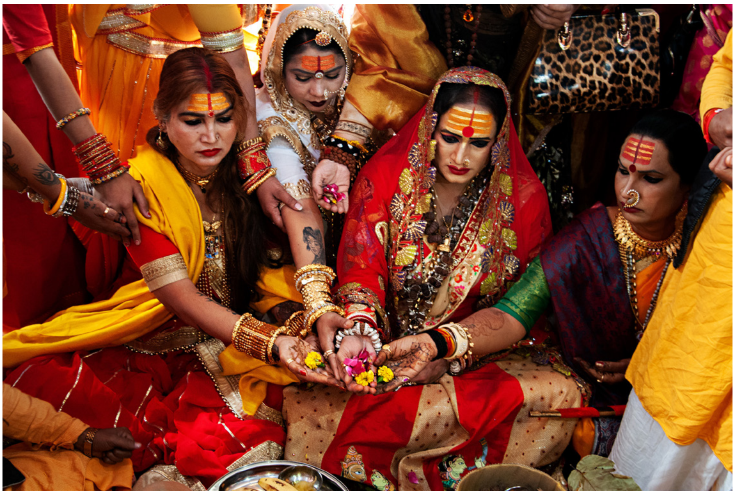

Figure 3. Kinnar Akhara members performing the *liṅgam abhiṣek*, Allahabad.
Photo by Alessio Maximilian Schroder.

Bhavan Chauraha neighborhood of Allahabad, with a *liṅgam abhiṣek* (anointing) ritual. At that time, several *kinnar* leaders including Bhavani squeezed themselves in a little *pracīn* (old) Shiva temple to pour water, milk, curd, and various other offerings over the *liṅgam* (see figure 3).

This *devtā yātrā* offers an interesting example of how *kinnar*s are carving a specific identity that uses symbols from ascetic and *hijṛā* traditions. After the *liṅgam abhiṣek* the *kinnar*s got on their floats and opened their *devtā yātrā*, which covered only six kilometers but lasted eight hours because of the size of the crowd. The use of colorful and decorated floats, the presence of musical bands, the use of animals such as camels and horses, and the bestowing of blessings and small presents thrown from the tracks were all features that characterize the procession of ascetic groups in general. However, *kinnar*s were also there to satisfy public expectation about their powerful blessings. People in the crowd, recognizing *kinnar*s' traditional powers, were also asking them to bless their babies or to bite or kiss coins,[27] a practice that is usually associated with *hijṛā*s, who transmit their blessings and good luck through these actions. In the camp, *kinnar*s continued their activities of blessing people and also dancing in front of them: there were often long queues of devotees waiting to touch the feet of—or to receive a touch, word of support, and blessing from—*kinnar*s seated in the main pavilion. *Hijṛā* practices thus have not been abandoned, since *kinnar*s continue the practice of *badhāī* and *māṅgtī*, as well as using the *tālī* "language." *Kinnar*s acknowledge these as a part of a Hindu tradition that was appropriated by Muslim gurus, who also used to oblige Hindus to convert to Islam before initiation into the *hijṛā* community. The sensitive topic of conversion was stressed several times during the *melā*s, and the *kinnar*s maintain that since several Hindus had to convert to Islam to become *hijṛā*s, by entering the Kinnar Akhara they can now return to their former religion. However, conversion or "reconversion" to Hinduism is not compulsory, and Muslim and Christian *kinnar*s are also accepted. Already in 2016, Laxmi stressed that only those people who are interested in rising to the position of *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* or *mahant*—religious titles adopted from the Hindu ascetic hierarchy to replace the aforementioned term *nāyak*[28]—have to convert to Hinduism (Dikshit 2016). The Kinnar Akhara is otherwise open to everyone without caste and gender distinction, which means that also non-transgender individuals and trans-men can be a part of it.[29]

Probably because of this inclusive policy, the initiation has been modified. While a practice like the *nirvāṇ* ceremony previously discussed is not mentioned, a *kinnar*'s initiation resembles that of ascetic Hindu orders in which, generally speaking, during a ritual the disciple is given a new name from the guru, a mantra, a *mālā* (string of beads), a *tilak*, and specific ascetic clothes. I noticed that after the Kinnar Akhara made its alliance with the Juna questions arose in the camp as to whether *kinnar*s should have their name ending in Giri, or in one of the ten "surnames" present in the Dashnami *sampradāya* to which the Juna order belongs. Eventually some decided to add it, while others embraced the title *mā* (mother), often used by female ascetics (Clémentin-Ojha 1985) as well as by *hijṛā*s to address their guru. Another issue related to initiation was that of hair shaving: when they enter the ascetic path *sādhu*s have to shave their hair completely or, in the case of Vaishnavas, leave the topknot intact. But Laxmi pointed out that *kinnar*s had their own identity and should not follow *saṃnyāsī* (renunciant) procedures. Since then, she had been very vocal in stressing that *kinnar*s are not ascetics but a different category of holy beings, given their demigod status. It thus also follows that *kinnar*s are not obliged to follow celibacy or dietary prescriptions.

The examples given here demonstrate how the Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition does not occur through a complete emulation of the ascetic world or the adoption of an entire set of Brahmanical "purity" rules but through a selection of features that can be easily adopted by *kinnar*s without losing their distinctiveness.

A saffronization of the *hijṛā* traditions?

The claims made by Laxmi about Muslim gurus and possible reconversions have not gone unheard. Her opponents accuse her of being a "daughter" of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), two Hindu organizations, one cultural and the other religious, with a strong, right-wing nationalist attitude. This was particularly ubiquitous when she decided to openly support the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya: Indian trans, intersex, and gender nonconforming individuals and groups released a response to condemn Laxmi's support and accused her of being "bound to fuel communal hatred and violence . . . alienating minority-religious and atheist, gender expressions and identities" (Trans, Gender Nonconforming & Intersex Collectives 2018). This *Round Table* response positioned itself against a saffronization of the LGBT+ communities, accusing Laxmi of appealing to *hindutva* ideology in her aspiration for a political position within the BJP. Neha Dixit from *The Caravan* reports the claims of Meera Sanghamitra, a transwoman activist who related the establishment of the Kinnar Akhara and the "reconversion" to Hinduism with "the *ghar wapsi* [home return] and purification framework of the Sangh," a campaign run by Hindu right-wing political groups to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism (Dixit 2019).

One may rightly question whether the Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition is part of or a consequence of the sociopolitical transformations India has experienced in the last years under the Modi government. With the rise of the BJP to power since 2014, there has been a resurgence of a far-right *hindutva* movement, and the current ruling narrative "posits a narrow and rigid version of Hinduism as fundamental to Indianness," popularizing a repressive, high-caste, chauvinist version of it (Banaji 2018). The protection of this Hindu-Indianness has been used as a pretext for violence against minorities, especially Muslims. Likewise, Indo-Islamic culture has been completely marginalized to favor the idea that India was great when it was Hindu, neglecting any contribution of Muslim rulers or South Asian Islamic culture to that of the subcontinent, therefore entrenching "the impossibility of imagining Muslims as having had a positive influence on modern-day India" (Waikar 2018, 171).

Nationalist groups, however, do not shine for their advocacy in supporting queer groups, although this has been changing. As the work of Paola Bacchetta (2019, 377) demonstrates, Hindu nationalist groups have been mostly queerphobic and have reworked "colonial misogynist notions of gender and sexual normativity," often rejecting homosexuality as not Indian. In 2016, the international secretary general of the RSS's cultural-religious wing, Champat Rai, said that homosexual acts were influenced by Western culture and were against Indian culture. In an earlier phase, the RSS supported a gendered binary "that included direct queerphobic pronouncements against lesbian and gay subjects, as sexual subjects, and their explicit exclusion from the Hindu nation" (ibid., 385).[30] However, more recently, the nationalist position has become more complex and contradictory, and there "is a great difference across all these positions between attitudes towards homosexual and transgender subjects" (ibid., 386). It is likely that the visibility the Kinnar Akhara has gained may have moved Mohan Bhagwat, a leader of the RSS, to claim in 2019 that, "society is changing and we need to accommodate everyone so they do not feel isolated." His statement anticipates a book titled *The RSS Roadmaps for the 21st Century*, which expresses the RSS's views on contemporary issues. It was written by Sunil Ambedkar, the national organizing secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (*Business Standard* 2019).

However, given the general queerphobic attitude of nationalist groups and the battles fought by several *kinnar* leaders to have their rights recognized and to decriminalize homosexuality, it is doubtful that the Kinnar Akhara is actually taking inspiration or comfort from them. Considering the turn toward the RSS, it is questionable whether this is a case of a queerization of Indian politics rather than a saffronization of the *hijṛā* tradition.[31] Laxmi has said several times that she is not interested in politics,[32] and she will support any party that works for the transgender community. She has lamented her exhaustion at people calling her "BJP *kī beṭī*, RSS *kī bahū*" (daughter of the BJP, daughter-in-law of the RSS), and her exhaustion from fighting the male *akhāṛā*s, when she should instead be spending her energies "in creating opportunities and an equal space for *hijṛās*, my brethren, instead" (*Bharata Bharati* 2017). She recently reiterated her position as one against communal division, and she also pointed out how her words about the Ram temple were misunderstood, and that from a "liberal Laxmi" she became a right-wing supporter with the entire country against her (The Public India 2020).

Laxmi's critics have become critics of the Kinnar Akhara, because they associate the Akhara exclusively with Laxmi's identity and social background. For example, a strong statement such as "joining the Hindu fold has been that caste has crept into the Kinnar Akhada"[33] seems indeed based only on the persona of Laxmi, but the Kinnara Akhara is not reducible to the figure of Laxmi. As already mentioned, Bhavani comes from the Valmiki caste, a Dalit group. Although she is not as famous as Laxmi, she is a powerful leader of the Kinnar Akhara. Furthermore, Bhavani was the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) candidate from Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) in Uttar Pradesh for the general election of May 2019. She said she decided to contest elections after witnessing the popularity of the Kinnar Akhara during the Kumbh Mela: "You can only fight for your rights when you have conquered the fight for food," she said to *The Caravan* newspaper (Dixit 2019). "I am now past it." She admitted that she had approached the BJP and the Congress, and all were dismissive; while the AAP accepted her candidacy, it was not very supportive, mostly because she did not have enough money to support her electoral campaign. Among her few poll promises were the revival of the factories and tanneries in the Naini Industrial Area and the amendment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2018. When asked by Muslim men how she was going to protect Muslims who were being killed and marginalized, she replied: "I am a Haji[34] and I am a monk. When a transgender child is born to a family, they abandon them regardless of whether they are Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. We are the ones who raise them regardless of their religion. How do you ever think the Hijra community can set religious boundaries?" Bhavani's example shows that while some critics point to features of the Kinnar Akhara that favor a pro-*hindutva* interpretation of the movement and its leaders, its reality is more differentiated. From the political point of view, the *akhāṛā* established for *kinnar*s follows a more pragmatic than religious stand.

Furthermore, to criticize the use of religion and automatically associate this use with *hindutva* politics means to give "the burden of being politically correct" even to those coming from marginal spaces of representation that do not always have the possibility to achieve a populist space (Goel 2020). The majority of *kinnar*s come from a marginalized, oppressed position. Could we read the opposition to *kinnar*s' deification as an opposition to an identity that does not match the rubric of gender and sexual identification that Indian activists, governmental state, and transnational developmental agencies have created, legitimizing certain roles and activities while opposing those individuals who do not conform to a "globalized," standardized, transgender identity (see Dutta 2013; Mount 2020; Consolaro 2020)?

Discourses of respectability, empowerment, and legitimation have led to extremist results, as *Transgender India*'s 2016 Facebook campaign titled "I am not a *hijṛā*" illustrates. In this campaign, trans-women took photos of themselves holding signs describing why they were not *hijṛā*; that is, "I am a trans, and I am a surgeon. I am not a *hijṛā*," or "I am a trans, but I am not a sex maniac. I am not a *hijṛā*" (Goel 2019). This campaign was also opposed by members of the transgender community who, although recognizing the importance of acknowledging the different non-*hijṛā* trans identities present in South Asia, insisted that privileged sections of the community not reiterate negative stereotypes about the *hijṛā* community (Chakraborty 2016). The opposition to *hijṛā*s risks translating into an opposition to *kinnar*s, since many come from the same tradition and background of marginalization and social struggle.

Therefore, returning to the question of saffronization of the *hijṛā* tradition, one should inquire whether in practice the Kinnar Akhara is indeed using "the gendered grammar of upper-caste Hindutva politics" (Biswas 2021, 86) to obtain Hindu reforms. If we look at talks and practices, the eradication of Islamic heritage does not seem to be a main priority of the organization. Neither is the banishing of Muslim *hijṛā*s or actions against them, and nor does it seem that there is hostility to the word *hijṛā* itself, which is still used by *kinnar*s to describe themselves and their community. Rather, it seems that the *kinnar*s' priority is to garner power, social space, and rights using religion as a tool, which is why I associate them with the concept of religious feminism, which I explore in the next section of this article.

Is Kinnar Akhara a case of religious feminism?

Laxmi often describes herself as an activist who happened to become *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* of the Kinnar Akhara. She continues to work for numerous NGOs, such as Astitva Trust, Asia Pacific Transgender Network, and Maharashtra Trithiya Panthi Sangatana, but she has also established Kineer Services Pvt. Ltd., which is a social enterprise to empower and support the transgender community.[35]

It is possible to find tens of her talks and speeches online, and in none of these does she speak against Muslim *hijṛā*s. Rather, she criticizes Indian patriarchal society and the patriarchy in Hinduism. As she said to the *Times of India*, "Religion has been made patriarchal. The akhada parishad is a male-dominated, patriarchal body. They (ABAP) didn't even accept the Dashnami Panchayati Majiwada,[36] [so] expecting them to accept trans person[s] is far-fetched" (Mishra 2021). And again, to *Reuters*, she stated the following:

> When a woman still becomes powerful, the patriarchy assassinates her character and calls her names. But the community cannot wait for laws to improve its lot, and must continue to fight for its rights. . . . No one will bring us our rights to our doorstep; we have to lobby, we have to all be activists. We have to demand and take our rights. (Chandran 2016)

Her approach is not a one-off case. Bhavani, while competing for the Lok Sabha election, highlighted to *The Caravan* that in the feudal and patriarchal culture of Uttar Pradesh, "shot through with toxic masculinity," religion was the only tool she had to "shut the men up" (Dixit 2019). And again, "These men, who would not even let me stand in front of their gates when I asked for badhai, now, they touch my feet. They come running with their families and women to get my blessings. Religion's validation helps in shutting up all these men." Such claims further demonstrate the pragmatism behind the establishment of the Kinnar Akhara. As also pointed out by Pavitra Ma, *mahāmaṇḍaleśvar* and secretary of the group, *kinnar*s' main purpose was to reconquer a space in society to stop the marginalization and stigmatization of *hijṛā*s or transgenders; they wanted to mingle with people so they could approach them without fear, accepting their right of existence without any bias. She points out that their struggle was a struggle for the young generation, to save them going through what their elders went through. Such a social acceptance that is able to lead to consistent change was possible only by conquering and using the religious space. As I stressed at the beginning of this article, according to *kinnar*s, religion was the quickest way of creating change that affects not only the middle to high classes but also the grassroots of society. And it was very effective, since, as several *kinnar*s have claimed, they are now worshipped by the same people who used to treat them badly.

Rather than "rejecting the religion for its inherent patriarchy" (Tomalin 2006, 385), *kinnar*s have opted for a reinterpretation and exploitation of a religious system that, theoretically, grants them a religious role. The label *sanātana dharma*[37] to indicate a universal religion, devoid of caste, gender, and religious discrimination, is often used against those religious people (ascetics and householders) who attack the legitimacy of the Kinnar Akhara. Members refer to specific sections of religious texts with the aim of highlighting the role and power of androgynous/non-normative individuals to reclaim and rebalance an institutionalized hierarchy (religious and social) in which only males are on top. The effectiveness of this strategy has been acknowledged also by members of the transgender community that support the work of the *kinnar*s, as reported by *The Caravan*. Ashok Row Kavi, chairperson of Humsafar Trust, the oldest Indian organization fighting for LGBT+ rights and editor of *Bombay Dost*, India's first registered LGBT+ magazine, declared that "religion is a regressive source, but it is also the only support for the very weak" and that it is "laudable if someone has been able use it to de-stigmatize and integrate transpersons into the society" (Salian 2019).

Although not all *kinnar*s are explicitly motivated by a feminist agenda, it is not unlikely that their *akhāṛā* may affect women more broadly, since two cisgender women have already been elected as *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*, a title that very rarely is attributed to Indian women in traditional *akhāṛā*s. And it is not difficult to imagine that the Kinnar Akhara's fight for its complete recognition might also lead to the recognition of the female Pari Akhara led by Trikal Bhavanta, which is exemplary of what Antoinette DeNapoli calls "dharmic feminism," an Indic "style" of religious feminism in South Asian contexts (2019, 30). It is also not difficult to imagine that it will foster associations with a "feminist theological stance,"[38] such as that of the high-profile and well-educated female guru Anandmurti Gurumaa, studied by Angela Rudert (2017, 130).

It is notable that in these three cases charismatic "feminist" leaders contest religious misinterpretations and how women (and trans-women) have been prevented from embodying religious authority. Surely their "ascension has been fueled in part by the confluence of broader human rights-based discourses and social justice frameworks illustrative of the feminisms of global modernities" (DeNapoli 2019, 45). However, while Trikal Bhavanta and Gurumaa's movements are strongly based on their charismatic leaders, the Kinnar Akhara's incredible success does not only rely on its leaders' charisma but also on the routinized charisma that was already invested in *hijṛā*s and individuals now associated with *kinnar*s. It seems that the Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition, and the occupation of religious space in a very visible and powerful way, has almost "freed" some people to openly and unanimously recognize the powers and roles traditionally attributed to *hijṛā*s. And these powers and roles, rather than the new rituals and practices, are still those that mostly attract people toward *kinnar*s.

Additionally, the Kinnar Akhara has demonstrated itself to be highly inclusive. Since initiation into its religious order is possible for everyone, it has created a religious space within the heart of Hindu orthodoxy. The order is thus able to gather those individuals (LGBT+ people but also cisgender women) who are in search of a religious path unhampered by their gender identity, or who would like to participate in religious events without hiding themselves. Furthermore, the activist aspect of the Kinnar Akhara, mostly represented by Laxmi's relentless activities and talks, is also able to capture the attention of those more interested in social, rather than religious, changes. As Laxmi's success relies on her being "a cross-over transgendered figure, one who moves seamlessly between the *hijṛā* ghetto and the mainstream society" (Biswas 2021, 86), so the Kinnar Akhara, presenting various attitudes, religious stands, and identities, has been able to create a respected and recognized community of *kinnar*s.

Conclusion

The Kinnar Akhara can be described as employing a selective form of Sanskritization on the *hijṛā* tradition, but it cannot be described as a saffronization of the same, at least not yet. Given the inclusive attitude of the *akhāṛā*; its openness to every individual without distinctions of caste, gender, or religion; and especially its challenges to patriarchal society and Hindu ascetic structures rather than Islam or Muslim *hijṛā*s, it still remains to be seen what the future holds in store for this transgendered community. The main religious challenge it faces is posed by the same Hindu ascetic fold that *kinnar*s want to emulate, in terms of general structures and the potential therein to interact more openly and honestly with lay society, while at the same time imbuing the community with a completely specific *kinnar* identity to achieve specific goals. It is not impossible that one of the outcomes of the Kinnar Akhara's actions will be a further stigmatization of Muslim *hijṛā*s over time, and it is likely that some of its leaders will take a more saffronized political stance. However, in light of information available on *kinnar* activities and standpoints, it seems that it is more appropriate at the present moment to describe their *akhāṛā* in terms of religious feminism that, through selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition, is shaping its own space, identity, rituals, and so on by creating power dynamics that support gender and social struggles in contemporary India. As mentioned by Susan Stryker (2019), the construction of a (trans) religious self is indeed going to motivate intervention into the "secular order of the world," and, in the case of the Kinnar Akhara, this intervention will surely shape religious, political, and social spaces.

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NOTES

1. As stressed by Hossain, the meanings of the word *hijṛā* "shifted over time in response to various colonial and postcolonial notions of gender and sexuality" (2020, 406) and demonstrate the cultural and intellectual biases not only of the users but also in relation to the context in which they are expressed.

2. On the definition of "neither men nor women" see Nanda (1990).

3. *Hijṛā*s have been subjects of several studies (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005; Boisvert 2018; Saria 2021), with some focused on their recent history (Hinchy 2014; Gannon 2009), practices (Mal and Mundu 2018; Bockrath 2003), language and performance (Hall 1995; Loh 2014; Roy 2015), social and economic status (Jami 2005; Mal 2015; Satyal 2001), and relations with lay transgender communities (Puri 2010; Dutta 2012; Dutta and Roy 2014; Consolaro 2020). On Pakistan see for example the work of Rehan et al. (2009), Alizai, Doneys, and Doane (2017); on Bangladesh see Khan et al. (2009), Aziz and Azhar (2020), and Hossain (2012, 2017, 2020); and on Nepal see Knight, Flores, and Nezhad (2015). Roy (2015) has presented an innovative study on *hijṛā* and *gharāṇā* tradition.

4. As Goldman has pointed out, few cultures have accorded to the phenomenon of transsexualism and transvestism "so prominent a place in the realms of mythology and religion as has that of traditional India" (1993, 376).

5. The terms *mukhannais* and *mukhannas* are used in the *Hadit* of Islam; *mukhannis* indicate those individuals who behave as females and therefore loathe their male identity, while the *mukhannas* are biological males who are effeminate but do not want to change sex (Teh 2010, 91).

6. The CTA stopped eunuchs from becoming the guardians of children, and the police also removed children residing with eunuchs in order to prevent their emasculation (Hinchy 2014, 276).

7. Goel notices that the organization in *gharāṇā*s is traditionally spread in communities of musicians, dancers, and prostitutes; so, being *hijṛā*s associated with dance, music, as well as sex work, it is likely that the practice of creating *hijṛā* houses has been borrowed from these other traditions (2020, 148).

8. These discussions could also be international; as Hossain has verified, *hijṛā*s from West Bengal and Bangladesh cross the border on both sides in order to help resolve each other's disputes (2018, 324).

9. This is not true for the *hijṛā*s in Pakistan, who maintain a clear Islamic identity (Hossain 2012, 499), while in Bangladesh *hijṛā*s also worship Maya ji, a Hindu goddess considered the primordial *hijṛā* archetype, who has similar features to Bahucara Mata (Hossain 2018, 328).

10. Bockrath claims that in Northern India, the disciple takes the religion of the guru, whether she comes from either a Muslim or Hindu family, "but traditional sectarian differences seem to give way to the survival instinct." Furthermore, "[t]he more egalitarian ideal of Islam seems to be the hijra inclination" (2003, 92).

11. Such as: to completely express a feminine gender identity, to escape from poverty or from the bad treatment of the family of origin for an individual's female attitude, after sexual abuses, etc.

12. Hossain highlights that in Bangladesh people instead view the *hijṛā* practice of emasculation as a fraud, since a real *hijṛā* is an individual who is born with missing or ambiguous genitals (2020, 36).

13. As several studies have demonstrated, myths have had a strategic and communicative use, becoming therefore potent vehicles for low-caste and marginal groups "to creatively express their social and political needs and aspiration" and means to claim recognition and equality (Doron 2009, 3). Jennifer Loh has pointed out and explained how narrative has been used by *hijṛā*s in order to explain and justify their status and ritual role in contemporary Indian society (2014, 24). She also demonstrates that *hijṛā*s do not refer to any specific primary texts (they just would talk about "ancient texts" in general), reporting oral myths that form part of a cultural canon (ibid., 28, 30).

14. As Saria has argued (2021, 58), the situation can be different in villages, where *hijṛā*s are still considered for their religious roles and called to perform accordingly. I was told the same by a *hijṛā* from West Bengal who studies in Kolkata but prefers to do her performances in villages linked to her guru's area of influence.

15. In use since the 1990s, the acronym LGBT stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender"; hereafter, other more inclusive alternatives have also been used. This article will use the acronym LGBT+ to also encompass spectrums of sexuality and gender.

16. This has also created friction, because the third gender was recognized as OBC (Other Backward Class), irrespective of official religion, caste, and class (Goel 2019). Furthermore, in 2016 the Indian government proposed a Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, which nevertheless criminalized begging and denied people's right to self-identify as trans and was therefore strongly opposed until those provisions were removed. The revised version remains controversial.

17. As several studies have shown (see for example Dutta and Roy 2014; Khan 2016), there is still confusion on how to implement laws in practice and how to precisely define transgender identity. Furthermore, the revised Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2016 was strongly opposed by the transgender community, since it denied any affirmative action for transpersons in education, healthcare, and employment and criminalized both begging and sex work—forms of livelihood that many transpersons depend on for survival. A 2018 National Human Rights Commission of India report estimates that 92 percent of transgender Indians beg or do sex work due to the inability to participate in any other economic activity. Less than half have access to education, 62 percent suffer abuse and harassment, and almost everyone has faced social rejection multiple times (National Human Rights Commission India 2018).

18. See Das (2019). However, here most likely Tulsidas refers to mythological beings; *kinnar*s in medieval texts are often associated with other such beings, like *gāndharva*s and *apsarā*s (see Callewaert 2009, 381).

19. The reconstruction of an imaginary and mythological past did not only rely on past Brahmanical sources but on practical attempts. During the Allahabad Mela, in the *Kinnars*' camp a tent was organized to collect the works of several artists, and Laxmi asked some of them to think about a "*Kinnars*' iconography" to be used in future. She wanted a number of demigod *kinnar*s characterized by specific features to be easily recognized. This visual production was to be associated with a textual outcome: a *Kinnar Purāṇa*.

20. However, a direct confrontation between the *hijṛā*s' and the ascetics' worlds has yet to occur. There are a handful of references in monographs: about the self-understanding of *hijṛā*s as *saṃnyāsī*s and as ascetics in general (see for example Nanda 1990, 10, 16, 126); about their initiation and practices being similar to *tapas* (see Reddy 2005, 96–98); and about their structures (Boisvert 2018, 49).

21. The inception of the Kinnar Akhara would have taken place when Laxmi went to Varanasi for the last rites of her father. Biswas claims that it was "popularly believed that the genesis and motivation for the Kinnar Akhada was, on one hand, to counter the masculinist, patriarchal character of the Indian Akhada system and, on the other, [it] was to facilitate the incorporation of largely Islam-following *hijṛās* into the folds of Hinduism—their rightful place within Sanatan dharma and thereby the Indian mainstream society" (2021, 84). I could not find further information about Acharya Jitendra, who has never been mentioned by *kinnars*.

22. An attempt to have recognized a women-only *akhāṛā* failed. In the Magh Mela of Allahabad 2014, *sādhvī* Trikal Bhavanta led a group of about fifty female ascetics and proclaimed the formation of a new *akhāṛā*, exclusively dedicated and accessible to women. The purpose of her action was to mobilize women's pride to improve their status in the religious hierarchy of ascetic orders: according to Bhavanta, although women do hard work in all the *akhāṛā*s, they are relegated to a subjugated position in a system run by men. On this fascinating topic see DeNapoli (2019).

23. The main moments during the Kumbh Melas are the *śāhī snān*, the royal baths during which, at a propitious time, ascetics dip in the *saṅgam*, the place where the waters of the three rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, and the subterranean Sarasvati) meet. In the past, disputes over the order of bathing led to bloody fights among ascetics, until it was codified during British rule two centuries ago. On the historical organization of the Kumbh Mela see Maclean (2008).

24. Despite this general Shaiva approach, some leaders also propose a different religious attitude. For example, *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* Hemangi Sakhi Ma is a strong Vaishnava devotee and has already mentioned an intention to establish a Vaishnava section of the Kinnar Akhara (*Neo News* 2021).

25. *Aghorī*s represent a group of Shaiva ascetics who often dwell in the charnel ground and are used to tantric antinomian practices (see Zotter 2016).

26. I thank Prema Goet, who was actually staying in the building, for this information. Bhavani Ma and Manikandan Baba lived in different floors of a building in Kamakhya, while the top floor was left for devotees (personal communication, February 15, 2021).

27. Both Laxmi and Bhavani have produced two coins, one in a gold color and the other in silver, as *prasād* (blessed offerings) to give to their followers. On the coin there is the image of Bahucara Mata on her rooster, therefore maintaining the deity as bestower of their powers.

28. At this stage, I do not have information about how this title appointment occurs and has occurred. I hypothesize that *hijṛā* household leaders, who once declared their association to the

Kinnar Akhara, have their role translated into this new hierarchy, but this hypothesis needs further investigation, especially considering the fact that many leaders are Muslims.

29. During the 2019 Kumbh Mela for example, two cisgender women were appointed *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* of the *akhāṛā*: one was Dr Raajrajeshwari Shiva Priya (*The Times of India* 2019a) and the other was Yogeshwari Katyan Tripathi (*The Times of India* 2019b).

30. Furthermore, in March 2016 the RSS leader Dattatreya Hosabale tweeted that "homosexuality is not a crime, but socially immoral act in our society. No need to punish, but to be treated as a psychological case" (Bacchetta 2019, 385).

31. Bacchetta has rightly pointed out that in contemporary times the equation that queer support comes from the left and queer repression from right political movements has to be properly reevaluated, because even the violence for queer-normativization should be taken into consideration (2019, 395).

32. Immediately after the successful 2019 Kumbh Mela she was asked whether she intended to enter politics. At that time she replied that, considering the support received by people in Allahabad, she would think about it, stressing that she would go with the one party who was to work for the welfare of transgender people (Mani 2019). This, however, did not happen; as we will see in the following paragraphs, Bhavani instead contested the election.

33. See Dixit (2019). In the same article an interviewee claimed that Bhavani, being a Dalit, took the bath during the Kumbh Mela *śāhī snān* in the evening, while Laxmi bathed in the morning. Such claims are completely false, and many photos online can testify against it; see for example DNA Web Team (2019).

34. Indeed, when Bhavani entered the *hijṛā* community, she converted to Islam also went to Mecca for the Haj pilgrimage, becoming a Haji.

35. For example, during the Covid pandemic Kineer Services has created connections with the Pune-based Villoo Poonawalla Charitable Foundation and the Apollo Hospitals to launch an initiative to ensure free vaccinations for the transgender community (Mascarenhas 2021).

36. This is the female section created inside the Juna Akhara to collect their female *saṃnyāsinī*s.

37. This label began to be used in the nineteenth century during the Hindu revivalism as a name for Hinduism to indicate the universality and "eternity" of the Hindu religion.

38. Rudert points out that although Gurumaa's stance "does not stand clearly on solely any one of the Indian dharmic traditions, nonetheless [it] draws on indigenous spiritual resources to effect transformation, rather than relying on so-called western feminism" (2017, 130–31).

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