

# Interrogating the Interconnection between Hijras and Indian Folk Narratives

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**Abstract:** *This paper mainly concentrates on exploring the interconnection between hijras and folk narratives in India. It also reveals how they authenticate their identities connecting themselves with the narratives told in the past. As Devdutt rightly points out, “Every mythology brings different kinds of value to the community. Abrahamic mythologies seek singularity, hence collective efficiency. Indian mythologies seek plurality, hence diverse effectiveness” (Roshni 2017). Like mythology Indian folk narratives are also diverse and have their own effectiveness on the hijra community in several ways. That is the reason still in twenty first century we witness how they connect themselves with these narratives.*

**Key Words:** *hijras, mythology, Yellamma, Aravani, jogappa, gender fluidity*

## Introduction

“The notion of ‘origin’ and ‘true nature’ is all myths with different mythologies offering different explanations. Islam believes in god creating man. Jains do not think that is so. Buddhists don’t believe in an essential soul. Christians do. So what is ‘true’ for one tribe or community is not so for others” (Roshni 2017), pointing out the uniqueness of myths, Devdutt Pattanaik states thus. This could also be applicable to folk narratives. As he said, truth is hidden in the tales but it is difficult to say whether the myths are true or not and it is also difficult to believe which version of mythical or folk narrative is true. Yet, India has a rich history and documentation of such narratives. We could also witness the lived experiences of hijras who get associated with such beliefs even in this twenty first century. Hijras who call themselves as *jogappas*<sup>1</sup> in North Karnataka region of India worship the goddess Yellamma. Apart from Karnataka, in the other states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh also Yellamma is worshipped by them and other devotees. They recognize themselves as jogappas and believe that the essence of their life lies in the service of the goddess. As they have the established cult of Yellamma in Karnataka, hijras in Tamil Nadu follow the similar tradition or culture called the cult of Aravan. Aravana is another popular god and patron of hijras in Tamil Nadu. They call themselves Aravanis believing that they are women and they get marry to the god. Bahuchara Mata is another popular deity worshiped by the majority of hijras in Gujarat and other parts of India. There are many folk versions of these stories. Hence, several versions have been analyzed to explore how these stories are connected to those who do not confirm their gender roles assigned at birth and to their communities. This paper mainly concentrates on exploring the interconnection between hijras and folk narratives. It also reveals how they authenticate their identities connecting themselves with the narratives told in the past.

Since there are several myths and legends about the origin of goddess Yellamma and the cult, there is no single text that provides proper information about the goddess. Hence the most prevalent narrative told and believed in the north Karnataka region is that, the goddess Yellamma was the daughter of the king Renuka. She was named as Renuka later. She is also known as Renuka Yellamma or *Elu kollada*<sup>2</sup> Yellamma. Since there are no authentic documentations, I refer to a Kannada film *Sri Renukadevi* (2004) directed by Nagendra Magadi Pandu. As this visual text mentions, there are places such as *Yellammanna Gudda*<sup>3</sup> and *Parashurama honda* at Savadatti of Belgaum district. They authenticate the incidents related to the goddess. The pond of Parashurama is very popular among all. It is called by this name because Parashurama went around twenty one countries and killed twenty one kshatriyas as the revenge of the death of his father Jamadagni by the son of king, Katyarjuna. He came back to the hermitage and washed of that *Parashu*<sup>4</sup> in the pond that is gifted by the lord Shiva. There are several places situated nearby to the temple of Renuka Devi. *Jogula bavi* of Satyakka (the holy pond called on the name of Satyavati, the kind mother in law of Renuka) is one among them. As it is believed everyone takes bath in this pond before visiting the temple of Yellamma and Satyakka. The other temples by name Ekanatha and Joginatha are beside the shrine of Yellamma. Still the devotees both jogappas and *jogtis*<sup>5</sup> ask *joga*<sup>6</sup> utter the names ‘Ekkayya and Jogayya’ over

<sup>1</sup> Jogappa is a male servant of the goddess Yellamma who assumes himself as a woman and live his life accordingly dedicating himself to serve the goddess.

<sup>2</sup> *Elu Kolla* does mean seven ponds in Kannada. These ponds, mentioned in the myths and puranas are found in the hills of Yellamma till day.

<sup>3</sup> Yellamma Gudda is a hilly area, adobe of the goddess where she is worshipped. It is situated in Savadatti of Belgaum district.

<sup>4</sup> Parashu means an axe. The son of Jamadagni, Parashurama got an axe or *parashu* by lord Indra as a boon after performing the penance.

<sup>5</sup> Jogtis are the women who are sent out by their families to serve the goddess, Yellamma. Some of them are called Devadasis who indulge in prostitution.

and again, holding the *padalgi*<sup>7</sup> especially while begging the jogappas, alms on Tuesdays and Fridays. In many other parts of Karnataka like Chandragutti in Shivamogga, Hugli in Bellari, Mahur of Maharashtra and in Andra Pradesh also the goddess has innumerable devotees. Most of the hijra devotees reside in the hills permanently. Some of them are called as jogtis or devadasis, the women who are devoted in the service of the goddess among the jogappas, the men who dress and live like women serving to the goddess.

The story of Yellamma is important to mention in this context because the men who live like women or jogappas initiate the gender issues consciously or unconsciously. They associate themselves with the goddess, sometimes forcefully and voluntarily. We found many reasons behind the men becoming jogappas and living like the women their entire life; the one, men who become jogappa forcibly to obey the tradition or belief system of their families, seem scapegoats of the situation. Yet they accept it as their fate may be because of the conventional rigidity, traditional belief system or the 'divine fear' of the rejection. Later they spend their whole life in serving the goddess suppressing their desires. But some of them reject this tradition or forceful ritual of making them jogappas as it is difficult for them to hide the manly characters and desires, as the protagonist does in a Marathi film *Jogva* (2009). However, these kinds of forceful acceptance of such tradition and the rejection are rarely seen. The second and most important reason for the men becoming jogappa is the feminine characteristics hid inside them. Males are expected to behave like men, though the answer and logic has not been found that 'what is it to be like men or women. If one does not behave like a man and express himself the other way unconsciously, unknowingly and naturally it is considered as the curse of the goddess on the 'male'. Hence the males who express feminine behavior will be sent to serve the goddess believing that the goddess has possessed them. In most of the cases family's belief system plays predominant role than the interest of an individual in such context. Such persons are considered as the 'divine and holy' for serving and marrying to the goddess. Some of them suppress their sexual or erotic attraction towards men in the name of goddess and most of them engage in relationship with men secretly since such act is considered as sinful in the cult or community of jogappas. However all of them wear green sari, wear garland made up of *cowdi*<sup>8</sup> and *tali*<sup>9</sup> around the neck, green bangles, applying *bhandara*<sup>10</sup> and *kumkum*<sup>11</sup> on forehead in special days or occasions.

Though the gender identity of jogappas does not match with their biological sex and though they feel that they are trapped in wrong bodies they never feel to assert their real self or identity but instead suppress it in the name of the goddess. More importantly they think that they are distinct from the hijras communities in expression of their gender identity, sexual orientation and in following the rituals as well. Since they have constructed their own culture they do not mingle with hijras. They are not supposed to have erotic or sexual relationship with other men though they feel that they are not supposed to get marry, bear children, and even to assert their true gender expression. They are not even allowed to undergo castration, hormonal therapy or surgery thinking that cutting off their organs would not make them real devotees of the goddess but rather incomplete or impure. Breast augmentation is also not allowed but these days some of them are daring to cross the boundaries rejecting the rules and norms of 'jogappa communities'. They believe it is Jamadagni's curse that made them to be impotent. Hence all jogappas follow the cult unquestionably by serving to the goddess.



Figure 1, Soudatti Yellamma, taken from online source.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Joga means alms or begging. It is a ritual of the servants of the goddess Yellamma, both *joagappas* and *jogtis*. They go to the doors of people on Fridays and Tuesdays carrying the deity (only her face) on their head or in the bamboo baskets. People treat them as holy and sacred and give them the alms.

<sup>7</sup> Paddalgi is a small basket made up of bamboo sticks. *Joagappas* and *jogtis* use it to place the deity; Yellamma's face in it and carry it to beg the alms on Tuesdays and Fridays.

<sup>8</sup> Cawdi is a white necklace used as an ornament/ garland. *Joagappas* and *jogtis* mandatorily use it while going to beg the alms.

<sup>9</sup> Tali or mangalya is a sacred yellow thread tied at the time of marriage in Indian culture. It is also made up of little black beads. It is a predominant identity marker of a married woman in India, particularly in the rustic parts of Karnataka. Jogappas and jogtis tie it themselves assuming that they got married to the goddess.

<sup>10</sup> Bhandara is yellow powder- haldi. All the devotees of Yellamma use it mandatorily. They also apply that to all the people who they meet and by whom they get alms.

<sup>11</sup> Kumkum is vermilion used as one of the important identity markers of a married woman in Indian culture. It was believed that only married woman must apply this on their foreheads. The belief has not been following strictly these days.

<sup>12</sup> The image of Renuka. <http://www.renukayellamma.com>. Accessed 12 Feb. 2017.

Another popular cult of Aravan in Tamil Nadu has the similar rituals and system. hijras in Tamil Nadu call themselves the Aravanis or the wives of the god, Aravan. The story of Aravan who is also called as Iravan has been mentioned in the *Mahabharata* thus: Iravat is born to Arjuna and Ulupi, the princess of *Nagaloka*.<sup>13</sup> He met his father Arjuna being told that his father may need his help in future. Thus, Iravat is called to assist them in the battlefield. He fought against them killing the large number of soldiers. He was also protected by snake god sent from his maternal side. But the snakes are killed by Alamyush, the son of Rishyashringa. Unfortunately Iravat's head is cut off by the rakshasas. That is the end of the story of Iravat in Mahabharata (Roy, Bhishma Parva: Section: XCI. 243). But it is partly associated with the Aravanis and their culture established in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu in two ways; one is that Iravat is protected by snakes in the war. Hence, one can witness the snake's hood on the head of the deity of Iravat at Kutandavaram village. The other way, Iravat is associated with story of *Mahabharata* only through the background of his birth as the son of Arjuna and Ulupi.

However, Tamil version of the story is entirely different in which Iravat is associated with the Aravani or hijra community. It is told by one of the hijra friend from Tamil Nadu that Aravan sacrificed his life in the name of goddess Kali voluntarily to ensure the victory of Pandavas in the war. But before the self sacrifice he puts forth his wish to get marry. Since everybody knows that he will die the very next day (full moon day) no king agreed to give his daughter's hand. So Krishna transforms himself into a woman, Mohini and got married to Aravan. The very next day after the night, Aravan dies and his wife Mohini mourns for his death. May be because of gender fluidity of Krishna becoming a woman they think themselves as women and get associated with the god Aravan. Hence they get marry to Aravan on that day and call themselves Aravanis, wives of god Aravan. The very next day when Aravan dies they become widows and mourn for the death of Aravan (Kamatar 2018).



Figure 2, taken from online source.<sup>14</sup>

One of the other popular Hindu goddess, Bahuchara Mata is the patron of hijras. There are many legends and folktales about the goddess. Her temple is situated at Becharaji, North Gujarat, near Mehesana, India since 1839 or 1783 AD. The goddess is worshipped by large number of eunuchs. It is also believed that, once Arjuna had been to the temple in the form of the eunuch during the period of their exile. Hence the hijra or Kinnara community has started visiting this Bahuchara Mata temple. But before changing his look Arjuna hid his arrow and bow behind the Sami tree inside the temple. Because of this reason during the festival of Dussera devotees also worship Sami tree<sup>15</sup> ("Bahuchara Mata Temple" 2017). But in one of the well other known stories, it is said that the goddess was a daughter of Bapal dan Detha of Charan caste. When she was travelling with her sister she was attacked by a robber called Bapiya. Thinking not to surrender to the man, along with her sister she cuts off her breast. It is believed that the man was cursed to become an impotent. That curse would be resolved only when he worships Bahuchara Mata dressing and acting like a woman. This belief might have led them to perform rituals and to worship the goddess as their patron (Ankit Sharma 2016).



Figure 3, taken from online source.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Nagaloka is the country of *Nagas* or snakes. Arjun got married to the princess; Ulupi of this country and both them begot the son named Aravana.

<sup>14</sup> Sai, Vijay. *The News Minute*. "Mahabharata characters come alive at this festival celebrating gender- fluid Aravanis." 30 June 2016. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/mahabharata-characters-come-alive-festival-celebrating-gender-fluid-aravanis-45702>. Accessed 12 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Bahucharaji Mata Temple in Becharaji near Mehsana." 17 April 2017. <http://www.myowncity.in/2151/bahucharaji-mata-temple-in-becharaji-near-mehsana>. Accessed 12 May 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Sharma, Ankit. "Bahuchara Mata: The Goddess of Hijra Community." 16 July 2016. <http://www.hindugodganesha.com/bahuchara-mata>. Accessed on 10 January 2018.



Another folk tale narrates that the goddess was a princess who castrated her husband for his rude treatment towards her. He never loved her since the beginning of their married life but instead he was going to the forest at night, staying there expressing his femininity (Patel, Kaushik 2012). The next narration seems more appealing: A childless king prayed to Bahuchara Mata for children and an impotent son, Jetho was begotten. Mata appeared in his dreams and told him to cut off his genitals and to become her servant by dressing like a woman. He obeyed her words and freed himself from the curse. It is a belief that impotent men will get a call from the goddess in their dreams to be emasculated. If they disobey, they will be impotent for seven births (Nanda 1990). This may be the reason why all hijras in several parts of India call loudly 'mata, mata' while undergoing castration. Though these are legends, divine or folk stories they speak about the aspects of sex change, gender change and 'emasculatation of men who are born as impotent' rather concerning/defining much about their homo/sexuality. Whatever, the interesting fact about these narratives is that all the mythical, legends, divine accounts, folktales and speak about 'male gender fluidity' than the 'female gender fluidity' which is a rarely seen phenomena till today. Castration, sex change, gender change, or body transition or mutilation has been an integral part of most of the narratives and even in the life of hijras. Earlier it was believed among them and within their communities that they will be called as 'real hijras' only when they undergo body transition whether it is castration, surgery or just a hormonal therapy. Still this belief is there among them yet a lot has changed. They opine that transition or mutilation of bodies will make their mind align with the bodies they have. This sex or gender appropriation will make feel 'complete'.

Apart from these narratives there is a unique festival in Kerala in which men dress up like women as a part of their custom and tradition. It is believed that if they pray god by doing so they will get prosperity. Though this festival is not connected to hijras and their culture their participation in the festival is increasing day by day. That day is very auspicious since most of them express their true genders and desire to 'become women'. What is interesting and unique than all these Hindu religious celebrations associated with Indian hijras is that even Islam religion shows its tolerance towards (Muslim) eunuchs. The *Urs*<sup>17</sup> in Ajmer is an instance in which they participate, offer prayers and dance unlike the Yellamma, Aravana and Bahuchara Mata festivals which are exclusively celebrated for and by the hijras.



Figure 4, taken from online source.<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, Yellamma's head was cut off by her son Parashurama on the order of his father Jamadagni for losing her concentration on sporting of mates and Bahuchara Mata castrates her breasts to protect herself from the rapists whereas Mahabharata narrates the story of the patron of hijras in Tamil Nadu, Aravana, the son of Arjuna and Ulupi that he was dedicated to Kali at the Kurukshetra war to assure the victory. But according to Tamil version he desired to get marry before beheading. Since no one was ready to marry the person who will die on very next Krishna transforms into a woman and marry him. The very next day Aravana dies. Thus, though there are different reasons behind the beheading and castration these distortions symbolize the dominance of power and the victory of masculinity. This view may be justified through the hijra devotees who undergo castration in the name of Bahuchara Mata to get rid of their masculinity and male genitals.

But a unique point to be noticed here is that most of the jogappas (men with feminine psyche and appearance) hijras (men who think they are women) in Karnataka and Gujarat get marry to the female gods (goddesses) such as Yellamma and Bahuchara mata respectively with the widely celebrated rituals, whereas Aravanis get marry to the male god Aravana. What kind of relationship do these jogappas, the men who live like women without undergoing surgery or castration and the followers of Bahuchara Mata establish with the goddesses? What kind of nature does it has if we call it a marriage of women with female gods? Why such acts are questioned when it happens practically? Why it is not questioned when they get marry to the gods or goddesses in the name of religion are few questions which should be addressed further? This is how most of the hijras establish themselves and their identities through the different cultures and their patron goddesses associating themselves with the folk narratives.

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<sup>17</sup> *Urs* is a celebration of the death anniversary of a Sufi saint.

<sup>18</sup> *Deccan Chronicle*. "Muslims commemorate death anniversary of Sufi saint at Ajmer Sharif"- Eunuchs dance at a procession during the Urs festival of Sufi Saint Khwaja Moijuddin Chishti in Ajmer, 18 May 2014. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/140518/nation-current-affairs/gallery/indian-muslims-celebrate-annual-urs-festival?gclid=201796>. Accessed 21 June 2017.

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