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Bahuchara Mata (Deity of Transgenders)



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Introduction

Bahuchara mata is a Hindu goddess of fertility with origins in Gujarat and worshipped largely by the transgender community, widely known as *hijra* in many parts of India. Her temple is located in Becharaji town in the district of Mehsana in Gujarat [2]. One of the popular myths that surround her is that she is worshipped by the people of the Brahmin caste, Charan in Gujarat [6]. The women of the Charan community are regarded as divine goddesses [3]. The narrative of the myth goes like this: Bahuchara was travelling with her sisters when a thief named Bapiya attacked them. Bahuchara cursed the thief with impotency, while severing her breasts and self-immolating herself as a symbol of casting away her femininity. Bapiya could free himself from curse of impotency if he worshipped the mata by taking on the role of a woman by dressing and acting like one [2]. In another myth, there was a king who prayed to Bahuchara Mata for a son, but he was born an impotent. The goddess Bahuchara mata appeared to the prince named Jetho and ordered him to

sever his genitals, dress himself with women's clothes, and become her devotee [2]. The myths of Bahuchara involve some form of change in gender which explains her popularity with the *hijra* community. Many heterosexual men who worship in her temple also wear women's clothing to seek her blessings. The *hijras* believe that the blessing of the goddess gives them the power to bless and curse people and in her name they bless the newborn infants and couples on their wedding. The *hijras* also seek alms at the temple of Bahuchara Mata and in return bless the devotees who visit the temple [5].

Iconography of the Goddess

Like many of the gods and goddesses, Bahuchara mata is depicted with four hands and seated on a rooster, which is much bigger than the goddess herself. In her upper right hand, she carries a sword; a book of scripture on her upper left, her lower right has an open palm in the form of abhay hasta mudra and on her lower left, a trident [3]. These elements of her iconography symbolize a balance between the violent, represented by the sword; the "balance of the trinities of creation, preservation and destruction," represented by the trident; "learning and knowledge" represented by the scripture and blessing, represented by "the abhay hasta mudra" [3]. Many Indian gods and goddesses have their own vehicles which are usually depicted in their iconographies and

Bahuchara is no exception. Many transwomen in India have a small corner of their homes dedicated to Bahuchara mata, which they worship every day.

Bahuchara Mata and Transwomen in India

Bahuchara mata is a Hindu Brahmin goddess but largely worshipped by people in and around Gujarat and also by transwomen who are generally excluded in the caste hierarchy. The *hijra* community comprises of transwomen from diverse communities, castes, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds. But the various myths and folktales that surround the Mata always depict some form of change in gender and sex. In the Bapiya folktale, the goddess cuts her breasts off to strip herself of her femininity, which is a dominant feminine marker and Bapiya had to worship her dressing up as a woman for him to be free of his curse [3]. The goddess is a source of strength and courage to the *hijra* community especially during the emasculation operation, when the male genitals are severed by an old midwife; the time of the operation is decided after praying to Bahuchara mata [1]. The *hijra* utters the name of the goddess while she undergoes the process of emasculation which is done without a local anesthesia. Calling upon the name of Bahuchara mata implies that the whole ritual brings together the *hijra* and the goddess, “transforming her into a devotee” [3] through the nirvana process [4]. For 41 days after the operation, the *hijra* convalesces with minimal food intake and seeks the blessings of

mata. After 41 days are complete, the *hijra* is finally initiated into the community and adorns herself in the manner of a woman, wearing feminine clothing, jewelry, make-up, flowers, and other religious markers that women wear. The ceremony after the end of 41 days is exclusively dedicated to Bahuchara mata, where the *hijra* pledges allegiance to the community in front of the picture of Bahuchara mata.

Conclusion

The origins of Bahuchara mata and the connection with the transwomen community in India remain unclear, but she has become a part of the collective conscious of the *hijra* community in India.

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