



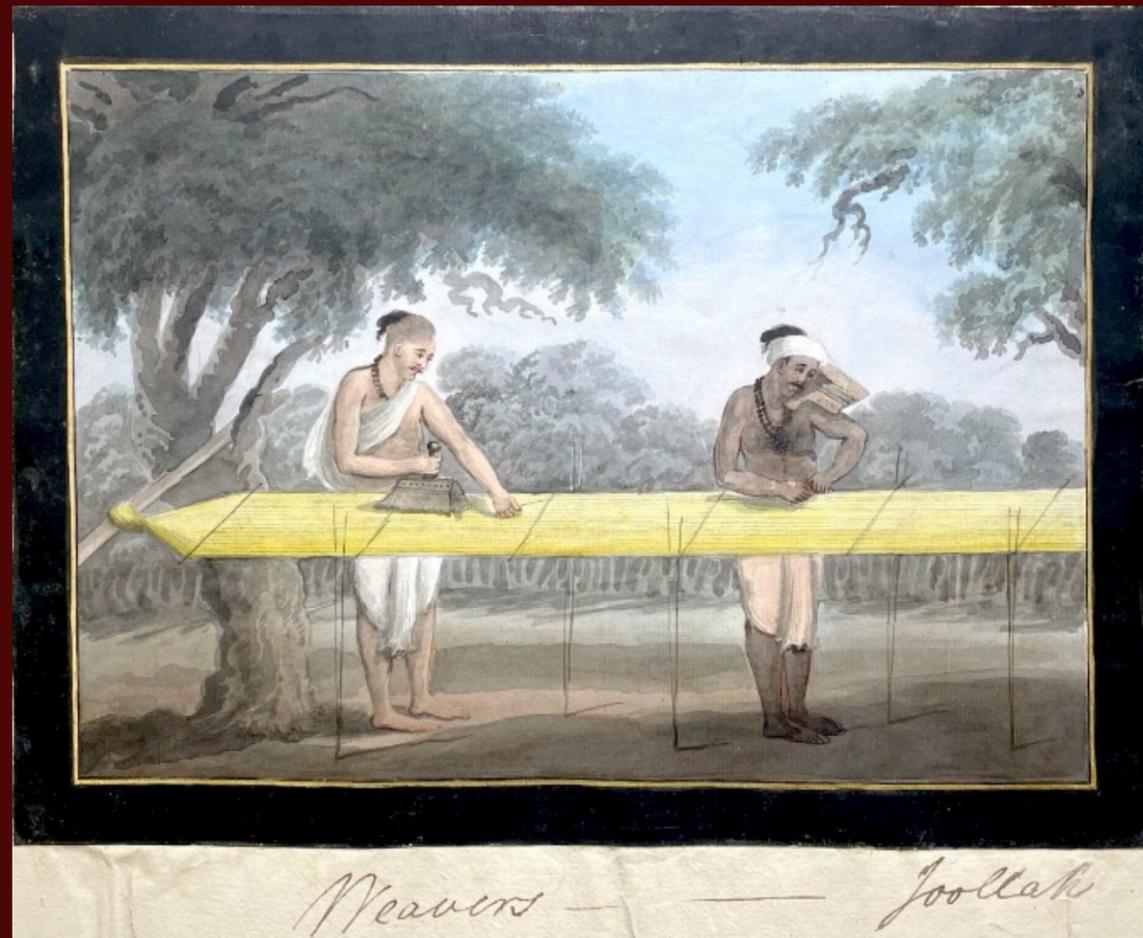
“THE SO-CALLED HIJRA CASTE”:

*Ethnography and Gender Deviance in
Colonial North India*

Kiran Bhana (they/them)



MAKING KNOWLEDGE



"Trades and Occupations in India. Watercolours, 18--," between 1800 and 1899, 569634i, Wellcome Collection.

British increasingly interested in 'knowing' the people of India

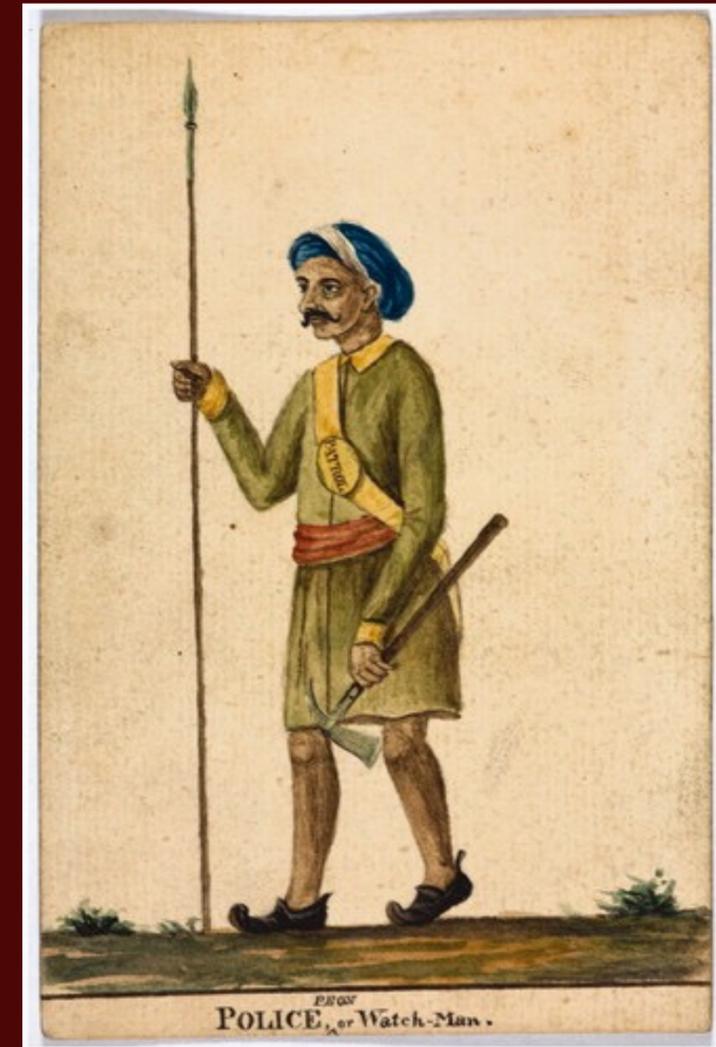
Explosion in the production and printing of knowledge in censuses, surveys, martial race handbooks, ethnographies, and more

CRIMINALIZATION

Some people socially/biologically 'criminal'; crime thought to be hereditary

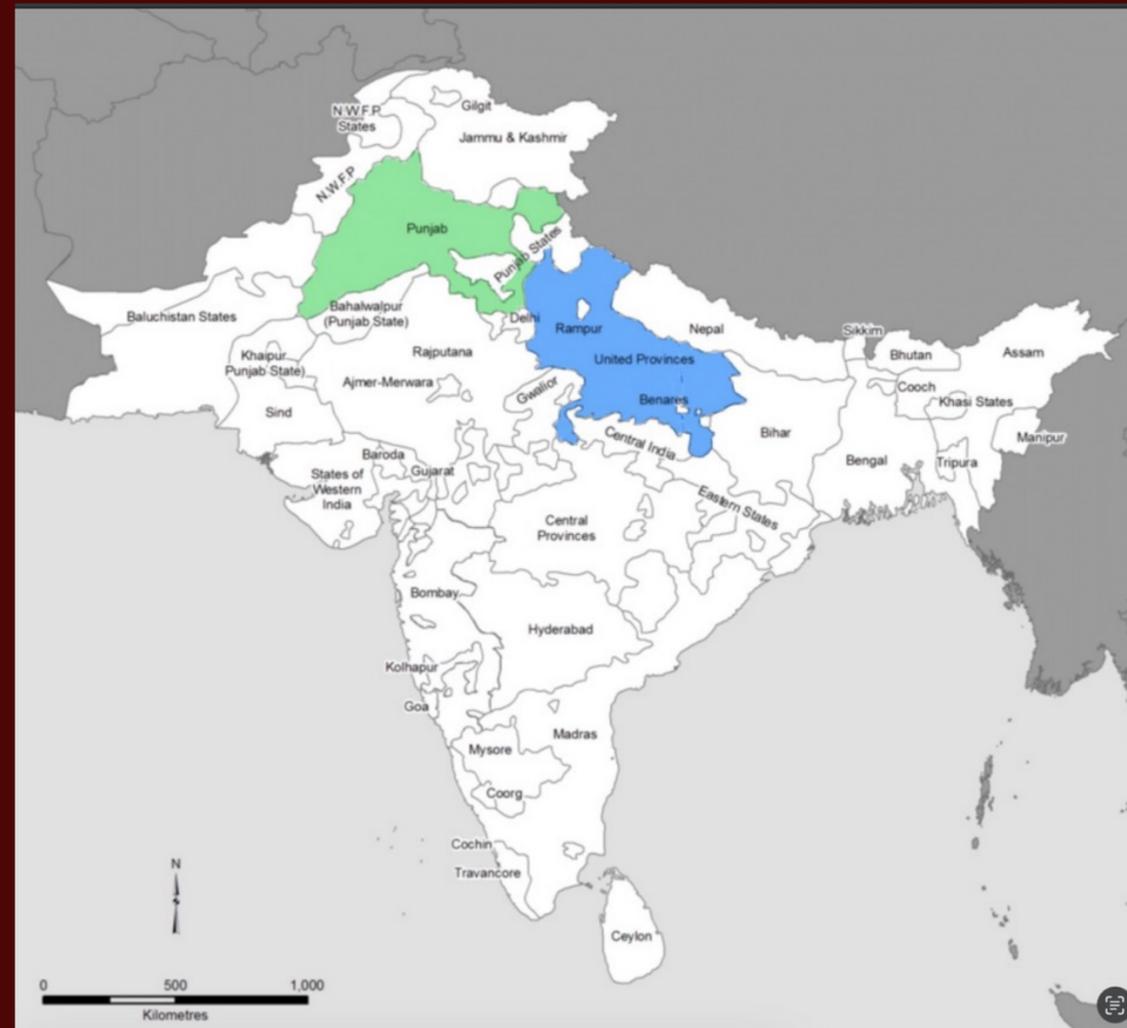
This effort relied in part on ethnographies

- Allowed state to determine which groups were criminal
- Allowed police to identify members of criminal groups



Unknown author, 'Police, Peon or Watch-man', 1810-11.
Watercolour on card, 7.5 x 11.5 cm. Bombay Views and Costume.
© British Library Board, WD 315 no. 48.

CRIMINAL TRIBES ACT, 1871



Dirk Spenneman, "Age Heaping among Indian Hawkers in South-eastern Australia and their source communities in the Punjab." *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* (2017), 167. Coloration added.

Part I: forcibly registered, resettled, and surveilled people deemed 'criminal'

Part II: forced *hijras* to register with the state, prohibited them from wearing women's clothing, and more

Implemented in NWP (blue) and Punjab (green), but Part II only enforced in NWP

“THE SO-CALLED HIJRA CASTE”

What information did the state need to have about *hijras*?

How did the state understand *hijras*?

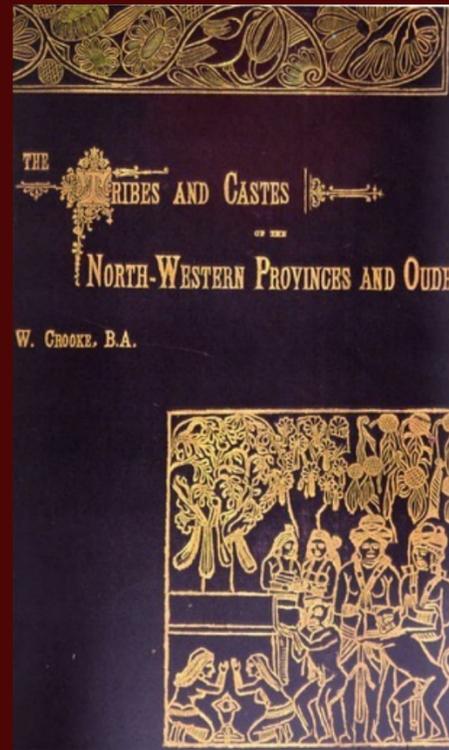
Were there contradictions and conflicts in how officials saw *hijras*?

How did *hijras* assert agency in the ethnographic process?

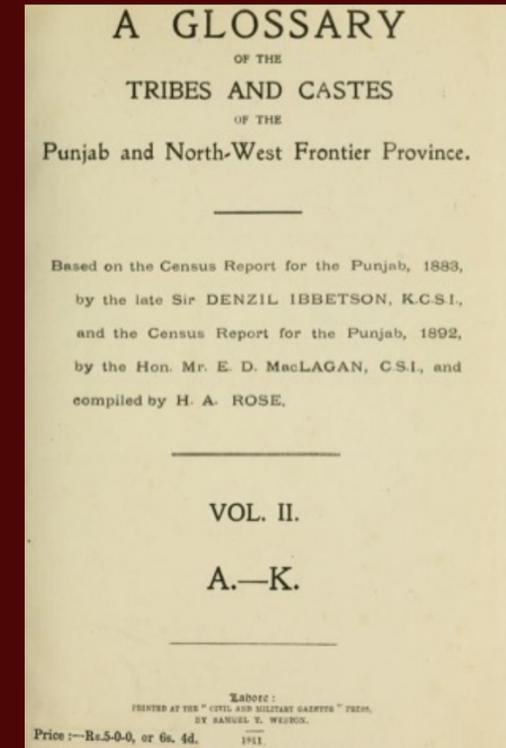


Brown History, “How the British Attempted to Erase the Hijra,” Substack newsletter, Brown History (blog), November 10, 2022.

ETHNOGRAPHERS

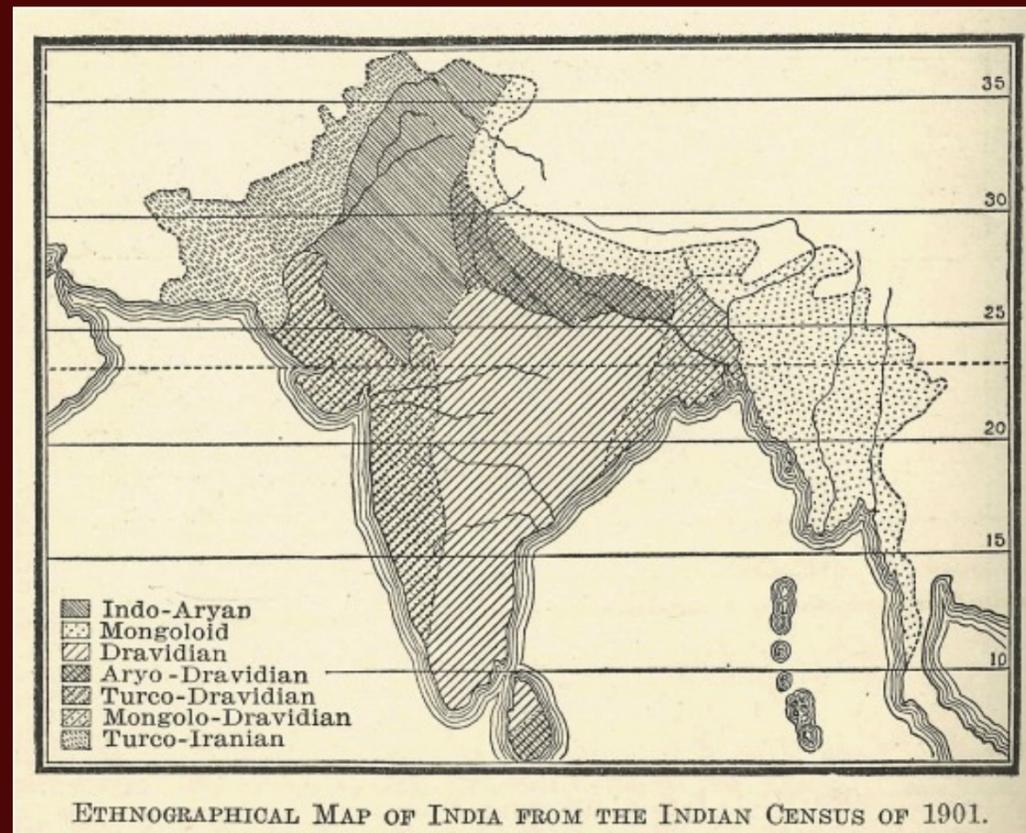


William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1896), 495.



H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (Lahore: The Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1911), 331-333.

ETHNOGEOGRAPHY AND BIOLOGY



E.C. Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment, on the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthropo-Geography*, New York, 1911, 102.

“Formerly when a deformed boy was born in a family the Hijras of the neighbourhood used to beset the parents and endeavour to obtain possession of him.”

(Crooke, p.495, emphasis added)

“It appears to be a fact that eunuchs are permanently unsexed[...] the eunuchs say they get recruits from the zanána or zankha class, who are impotent even before initiation.”

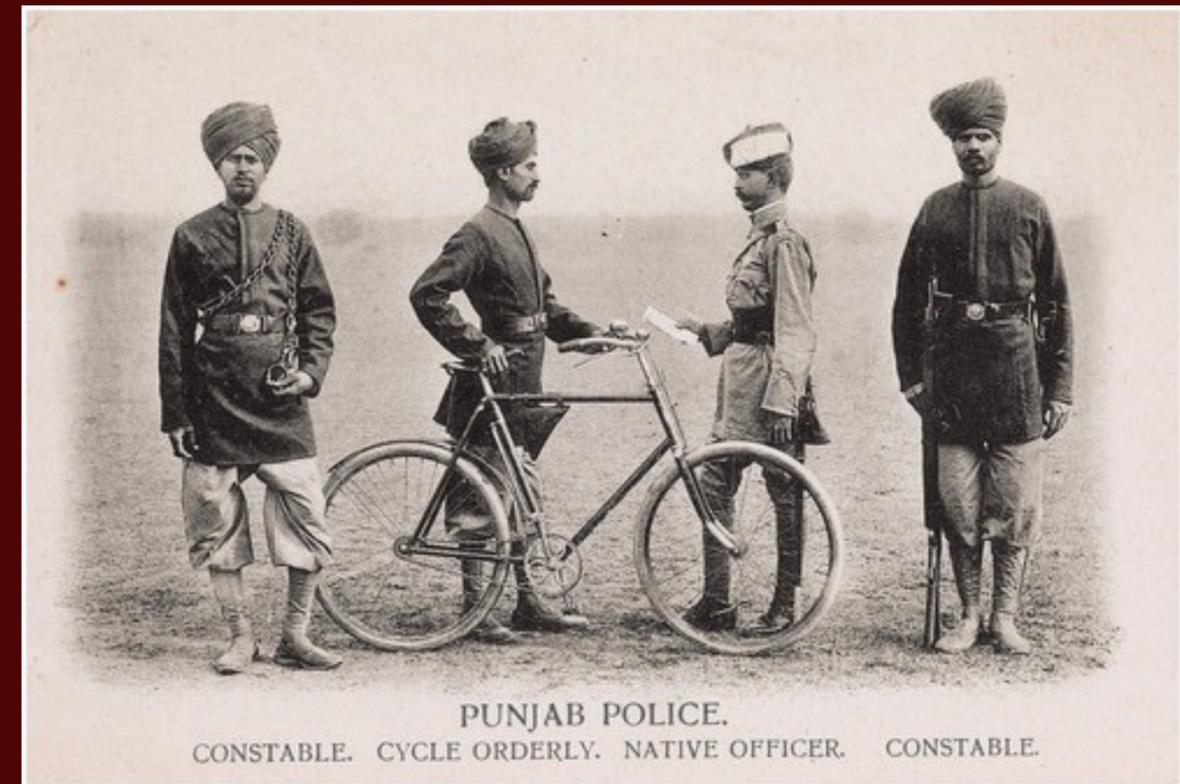
(Rose, p. 332, emphasis added)

CRIMINALIZATION?

“[...] under the rigid supervision to which they are now exposed their numbers are gradually decreasing.”

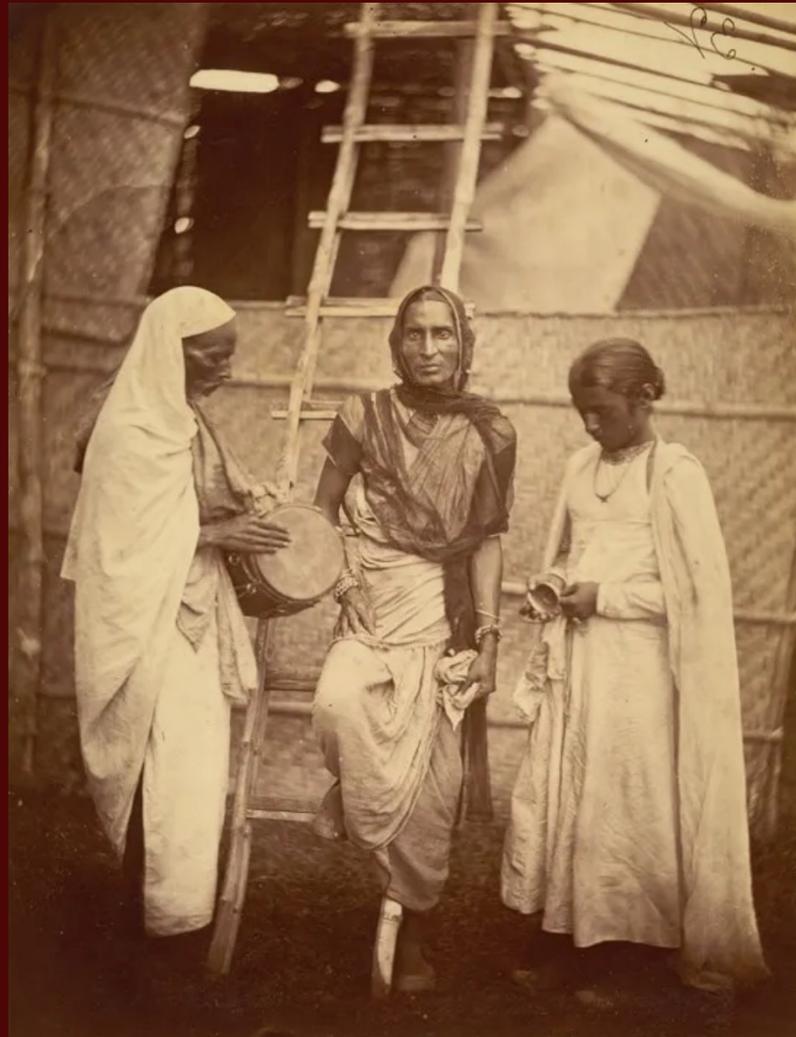
(Crooke, p. 495, emphasis added)

However, neither mentions the crimes *bijras* were thought by other officials to commit, such as kidnapping and sodomy



Frederick Bremner, 'Punjab Police. Constable. Cycle Orderly, Native officer. Constable. [Uniformed group.]', 1900. Collection of Postcard Views of India. © British Library Board, Photo 504/(29).

ASSERTING AGENCY



Jessica Hinchy, "The Long History of Criminalising Hijras," *Himal Southasian*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.himalmag.com/comment/long-history-criminalising-hijras-india-jessica-hinchy-2019>.

“What the ingredients of this meal are no one knows, and the eunuchs themselves are reluctant even to mention its name, saying that it was a myth, and who would dare to administer such drugs now-a-days ?”
(Rose, p. 332, emphasis added)

CONCLUSION

- Discussion of *hijras*' bodies naturalized gender stereotypes
- Administrators in NWP and Punjab may have differed on *hijras*' criminality
- *Hijras* were able to navigate the ethnographic process both through cooperation and refusal



Brown History, "How the British Attempted to Erase the Hijra," Substack newsletter, Brown History (blog), November 10, 2022.