

From Hijra/Khusra to Transgender: Changing Language and Identity in Jammu (J&K)

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Abstract

The words used to describe gender-diverse people in India carry more than description; they carry judgments about who belongs, who is respectable, and who is owed the protections of citizenship. This paper traces how the terminology or language used for transgender communities in Jammu has changed from Hijra and Khusra to the now officially recognized category as Transgender. This change has never been a simple substitution of one word for another. Combining historical discourse analysis with oral history, together with in-depth interviews with twenty-two transgender women in Jammu, conducted between 2023 and 2025. It shows how colonial law reshaped gender-diverse communities as objects of surveillance, postcolonial India inherited this suspicion informally, and the 2014 NALSA judgment introduced rights-based vocabulary that joined rather than replaced older terms. In present-day Jammu, Hijra, Khusra, Kinner, and Transgender circulate simultaneously; each carrying a different history, institutional home, and claim to legitimacy. I call this phenomenon “layered discursive coexistence”, wherein individuals navigate multiple naming regimes strategically. This coexistence has generated a class-inflected respectability discourse. “Transgender” signals education and independence, while “Hijra”/“Kinner” remain tied to ritual labour and economic dependency. The paper offers a regionally grounded history of gendered language in region typically read only through security and conflict.

Keywords: Gender History; Transgender Communities; Hijra; Khusra; Language and Identity; Colonial Discourse; Jammu & Kashmir; Jammu

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I. Introduction

The language through which societies describe gender diversity is never neutral. Terms such as Hijra, Khusra, Kinner, and more recently Transgender¹ have not merely described people whose gender identities fall outside the male-female binary; they reflect changing political, legal, religious, and cultural frameworks through which gender diversity has been interpreted and governed. Each term emerged within a distinct historical context and carries different social meanings, institutional associations, and claims to legitimacy.

Across the Indian subcontinent, gender-diverse communities have long occupied complex and often contradictory social positions. Pre-colonial narratives associated Hijra communities with ritual authority as demigods, particularly through the practice of badhai² and the guru-chela kinship system³. Colonial administration fundamentally altered these understandings by classifying gender-variant communities through medical, legal, and criminal categories that transformed ritual identities into objects of surveillance and suspicion (Preston, 1987; Hinchy, 2019). Although independent India gradually dismantled the formal legal architecture of this classification, its discursive legacy persisted in everyday language, public attitudes, and institutional practice (Dutta, 2012).

The recognition of transgender rights in the twenty-first century, particularly following the Supreme Court's judgment in *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014), introduced a rights-based vocabulary centred on the category Third gender or Transgender, grounding gender self-identification in Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21 of the Constitution (Khaitan, 2014; Dutta, 2014). Subsequent legislation, most notably

1 Note: The terms Hijra, Kinner, Khusra, and Transgender are not interchangeable. Hijra refers to a historically constituted socio-cultural community organized through guru-chela kinship and ritual traditions; Kinner is a regionally variable and increasingly respectful public designation adopted by some but contested by others; Khusra is a vernacular term whose meanings range from community self-identification to social insult depending on context; and Transgender is a modern legal and rights-based umbrella category encompassing diverse gender identities beyond the hijra community. Throughout this article, these terms are used in accordance with the historical period, institutional context, or self-identification of the individuals concerned rather than as synonymous labels.

2 Badhai is a traditional blessing ceremony performed by hijras (the transgender or "third-gender" community of India and South Asia). On such occasions as the birth of a baby boy or a wedding hijras come to the household, sing and dance, and offer blessings for good fortune, prosperity and fertility. They are paid in cash or in kind. The tradition is deeply rooted in Hindu cultural and religious practice. The roots of the hijras are in Hindu mythology, and they are believed to have divine power to bless or curse, so their ritual presence is culturally significant of hijra's community life (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005).

3 The guru-chela relationship forms the central organizational and kinship principle of hijra communities across much of South Asia. A guru inducts a chela into a dera (household) and gharana (lineage), creating a lifelong relationship of mutual obligations in which the guru provides protection, training, and access to community networks, while the chela owes loyalty, respect, and economic contribution. Although ritual practices and local terminologies may vary across regions, the guru-chela hierarchy remains the primary framework through which authority, succession, and community membership are organized (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005).

the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, further institutionalized this terminology within legal and administrative frameworks, even as commentators have documented a wide gap between the Act's promises and its implementation (Bhattacharya et al., 2022; Venkatesan, 2025). Yet legal recognition did not erase older vocabularies. Terms such as Hijra, Khusra, Kinner and Transgender now circulate simultaneously, though they often carry different meanings for state institutions, community organizations, families and transgender individuals themselves. This condition is termed "layered discursive coexistence": successive historical regimes of naming - ritual, colonial-bureaucratic, and rights-based do not retire one another as each new one arrives. They accumulate, remain simultaneously available, and are drawn on strategically depending on who is speaking, who is listening, and what is at stake.

This is a claim about the discursive field, not only about individual behaviour. Identity negotiation, as commonly theorized, describes how individuals select, present, interpret, or modify aspects of identity in relation to particular audiences and situations. Layered discursive coexistence describes a prior and broader condition: historically distinct vocabularies and explanatory frameworks remain simultaneously available and institutionally anchored, even after the emergence of newer categories. In the Jammu case, these include the family and neighbourhood vocabulary of Khusra and Kinner, the guru-chela and dera-based framework of Hijra community life, the administrative and legal category of Transgender, and the increasingly influential vocabulary of digital and rights-based discourse. These frameworks do not simply offer equivalent labels from which an individual can freely choose; they carry different histories, forms of authority, moral meanings, and material consequences. Individuals therefore negotiate identity within a discursive field that has been historically layered before they enter it. Identity negotiation describes how individuals respond to and navigate this condition; layered discursive coexistence describes the historical-discursive condition within which that negotiation becomes necessary and through which it acquires its stakes.

Throughout this paper discourse is used in a broadly Foucauldian sense: not language or speech in general, but a historically specific system of statements, categories, and institutional practices that determines what can be said about gender diversity, by whom, and with what authority, and that cannot be separated from the institutions that produce and enforce it (Foucault, 1972, 1978). A discursive regime, correspondingly, refers to a relatively coherent configuration of such statements, categories, and institutional practices, ritual, colonial-bureaucratic, or rights-based, that authorizes particular ways of naming and governing gender diversity at a given historical moment. This paper's approach to naming is also indebted to Valentine's ethnographic argument that categories such as "transgender" are not neutral labels applied to an already-existing population but are themselves

productive (Valentine, 2007); they are actively argued into being by specific institutional actors, such as activists, public health bodies, and legal systems, and only then taken up, resisted, or reinterpreted by the people they are meant to describe. Read alongside Dutta and Roy's caution against treating "transgender" as a self-evidently liberating globally import (Dutta & Roy, 2014). They argue that its top-down implementation by development sectors and the state often establishes a hierarchy of scale, subsuming and potentially erasing regional, indigenous, and localized practices of gender variance under a standardized Anglophone umbrella. In Jammu, these theoretical tensions are lived realities. Traditional and customary roles (such as performative wedding blessings, astrology, and matchmaking) exist alongside bureaucratic state-level attempts to codify, evaluate, and certify transgender individuals through psychiatric and medical screening boards. This has sparked direct resistance from local activists fighting to protect the right to self-identified gender. Epistemic authority refers to the socially and institutionally recognized capacity to define what a person's identity truly is; citizenship refers to the terms on which a person's belonging to the state is recognized in institutional and legal practice, following the constitutional sense established by NALSA; and respectability refers to the socially constructed association of particular identity categories with education, propriety, and legitimacy, discussed further in Section 4.5.

Jammu presents an especially significant context in which to examine these transformations. Situated at the intersection of Dogra, Punjabi, and Kashmiri cultural influences, and administered as part of a princely state whose own history sits awkwardly at the edge of colonial India, the region has long employed local expressions such as Khusra and Kinner in everyday discourse while more recently witnessing the growing adoption of the globally circulating legal category "Transgender"⁴. Existing scholarship on gender-diverse life in India has concentrated heavily on Hijra and kothi communities in eastern and southern metropolitan centres (Dutta, 2012, 2013, 2019; Saria, 2021), leaving relatively little attention to how these vocabularies have been negotiated within Jammu specifically. The ordinary social and linguistic lives of the region's marginalized communities rarely surface as objects of study in their own right.

This paper argues that the transition from Hijra/Khusra to Transgender in Jammu is not simply a linguistic replacement, but a transformation in the discursive regimes through which gender diversity has been understood, regulated, and lived. Drawing on historical sources and oral histories of twenty-two transgender women in Jammu, the study shows that traditional community identities, colonial classifications, legal categories and global LGBTQIA+ vocabularies coexist rather than replace one

4 The *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019* defines a transgender person as an individual whose gender does not match the gender assigned at birth and includes trans men, trans women, persons with intersex variations, genderqueer persons, and individuals belonging to socio-cultural identities such as Hijra, Kinner, Aravani, and Jogta.

another, and that interlocutors actively navigate these overlapping discourses to negotiate belonging, legitimacy, family acceptance, education, employment and citizenship.

II. Historical Transformation of Gendered Terminologies

The vocabulary used to describe gender-diverse communities in South Asia has never been historically fixed. Rather than representing stable identities, terms such as Hijra, Khusra, Kinner, and Transgender emerged within different political, cultural, legal, and institutional contexts, each reflecting a particular way of understanding bodies, gender variance, morality, and social order. The history of gender diversity is better understood as the accumulation of multiple discursive formations that continue to coexist and shape contemporary experience.

Prior to colonial rule, gender-diverse communities occupied complex positions across the subcontinent. Scholarship on same-sex desire and gender variance in pre-modern South Asian literature has documented this presence across a range of regional traditions (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). Communities now broadly referred to as Hijras often occupied recognized ceremonial roles associated with childbirth, marriage, and fertility, maintaining organized kinship structures centred on the guru-chela relationship (Nanda, 1999). Ritual recognition coexisted with social ambivalence, economic dependency on patronage that could be withdrawn, and hierarchies of respectability within these communities themselves. Pre-colonial recognition was real, but it was recognition of a specific, circumscribed kind, ritual and occupational, not a general social equality that colonialism then destroyed. Treating the pre-colonial period as a lost golden age risks obscuring exactly the kind of internal stratification and conditional belonging that this paper documents in later sections.

It is also worth noting that no equivalent to the contemporary category Transgender existed in this period. Neither gender identity nor sexual orientation existed as independent legal or psychological classifications in the modern sense; individuals were situated within social, religious, and occupational relationships that cannot be directly mapped onto present-day identity categories. This earliest discourse examined in the study is referred to as a ritual discourse, within which legitimacy derived primarily from religious symbolism, community affiliation and ceremonial practice.

The establishment of British colonial administration fundamentally transformed this landscape. Colonial officials frequently employed the category “eunuch” as a generalized administrative label for a wide range of gender-variant people, reflecting European medical and anatomical assumptions rather than indigenous understandings of gender diversity (Preston, 1987). Complex social identities were reduced to bodily characteristics, and cultural practices associated with Hijra communities were in-

creasingly interpreted through a language of abnormality and public disorder. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871⁵, and specifically Part II, which targeted persons registered as “eunuchs,” institutionalized this transformation in law: gender-diverse persons became subject to registration and police surveillance, and the very badhai that had once conferred legitimacy was reinterpreted as evidence of criminality. As Hinchy’s history of this period demonstrates, colonial law did not simply regulate an existing population; it actively produced the modern category of the criminalised “eunuch” through registration, surveillance, and forced dispersal of hijra households (Hinchy, 2019). Colonial law thus reshaped public language itself, so that words once referring to a recognized social community steadily acquired new associations with deviance and suspicion.

The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir maintained its own administrative structures and was not directly subject to the Criminal Tribes Act, which applied to British India proper. This distinction matters and is returned to in Section IV, because the colonial-bureaucratic discourse that reshaped Hijra communities in cities such as Lucknow or Delhi did not arrive in Jammu through direct legal imposition. Unlike the Partition-era history discussed in Section 4.6, where community memory still preserves an oral record within living or recently living generations, no such oral testimony is available for this earlier period. Those who might have witnessed the colonial administrative and medical culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s are no longer living, and the paper’s oral-history method, however well suited to tracing the more recent NALSA-era transition, cannot recover this earlier layer directly. Documentary traces of transmission have accordingly been sought rather than relying on oral memory alone. One plausible channel, worth noting though not itself conclusive, runs through administrative personnel such as Sir Walter Lawrence, who served in the Indian Civil Service in Punjab through the 1880s and early 1890s. This was the same period during which the Criminal Tribes Act’s provisions on eunuch registration were active in adjacent British territory, prior to his appointment as Settlement Commissioner of Jammu and Kashmir (1889-1894) and his subsequent co-authorship, with the state’s own Settlement Commissioner Major J. L. Kaye, of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India: Kashmir and Jammu* (Lawrence & Kaye, 1909). This shows that individuals moved directly between the Criminal Tribes Act-era British administration and the Dogra state’s own bureaucracy, which makes such a channel of transmission plausible. It does not, however,

5 Under Part II of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a “eunuch” was legally defined to include all persons of the male sex who admitted to being impotent or clearly appeared so upon medical inspection. The colonial government mandated the registration of such individuals if they were “reasonably suspected” of kidnapping, emasculating boys, or committing “unnatural offences” under Section 377 of the Penal Code. Once registered, these individuals faced severe punishments, including arrest without a warrant and up to two years’ imprisonment for appearing in female dress, wearing ornaments, or performing music and dance in public. Additionally, it was a criminal offence for them to have any boy under sixteen in their charge, and they were stripped of basic civil rights, such as the ability to act as a guardian, adopt a son, or make a will. These draconian measures were explicitly designed to facilitate the “gradual extinction” of the community by criminalizing their cultural identity and cutting off their means of material and social survival.

establish that colonial ideas about gender-variant communities specifically travelled through it. Despite searching, no Jammu-specific newspaper, administrative file or medical record from this period that discusses Hijra, Khusra or eunuch-classified persons directly has been located. This absence is itself worth registering rather than glossing over: it may reflect the limits of what has survived and what was accessible within the scope of this study, rather than the absence of such discourse in Jammu at the time. It remains a specific direction for future archival research, alongside the Partition-era material discussed in Section 4.6.

Following independence, explicit colonial restrictions gradually lost legal force, yet many of their cultural assumptions remained embedded in everyday language. Across northern India, including Jammu, local expressions such as Khusra and Kinner remained current in popular speech: for some speakers they referred specifically to members of traditional Hijra communities organized through the guru-chela system; for others they functioned as general labels applied indiscriminately to anyone perceived as gender non-conforming. Their continued use illustrates how colonial stigma and local cultural understanding became intertwined, producing vocabularies that carried community identity, ritual authority, ridicule, and social exclusion simultaneously.

A further transformation occurred with the emergence of rights-based approaches to gender diversity. Judicial recognition of transgender persons as a distinct legal category, followed by statutory protection and welfare policy, institutionalized the term Transgender within governmental, legal, educational, and administrative discourse (Dutta, 2014). Unlike earlier community-based labels, this category sought to recognize self-identified gender independent of ritual affiliation, caste, occupation, or membership in an established Hijra household. International human rights frameworks, digital media, and LGBTQIA+ activism further expanded the circulation of this vocabulary, particularly among younger and more educated individuals.

Yet the arrival of the category Transgender did not retire earlier vocabularies. Within contemporary Jammu, a neighbour may still use Khusra colloquially; a member of a traditional community may identify as Kinner or Hijra; the state recognizes the same person as Transgender; and a younger relative may reach for LGBTQIA+ terminology encountered at school or online. These vocabularies are not synonyms distributed across different speakers. Each carries a distinct historical genealogy and a different claim to legitimacy, morality, community membership, and citizenship, the layered discursive coexistence this paper sets out to document.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical approach that combines historical discourse analysis with oral history to examine the changing language of gender diversity in Jammu. Historical discourse analysis provides the framework for examining how institutions, colonial administration, postcolonial law, community structures, and contemporary rights movements, have produced different vocabularies of gender diversity over time; shifts in terminology are read as indicators of broader transformations in power, citizenship, and social recognition rather than as purely linguistic developments.

Written and archival sources reveal how states and legal authorities have classified gender-diverse populations, but they cannot capture how these changing vocabularies were experienced or resisted by transgender individuals themselves. To address this, the study employs oral history as a complementary method, treating interview narratives as historically situated acts of remembering through which participants interpret their own lives and reconstruct changing social meanings.

The author is not a member of the communities studied, and access to deras and individual life histories depended on relationships of trust built, tested and in some cases repaired over fieldwork. With an etic perspective, presence as an outsider shaped what was said. Interlocutors still affiliated with dera life often spoke only briefly, while those who had built lives of relative security within natal families spoke at far greater length. This asymmetry is understood to reflect that accounts of respectability and self-sufficiency were easier to share than accounts of ongoing precarity would have been. It is visible in the material below. The interlocutors who speak most extensively in this paper are disproportionately those for whom speaking was relatively safer and easier to access. A number of dera-embedded and older prospective interlocutors were approached but were either unwilling to be interviewed at length or provided answers too brief or guarded to support the sustained semi-structured format this study required, and were accordingly not included into analysis. The resulting skew toward younger and family- or independently-housed participants in the qualitative sample should therefore be read partly as a methodological artifact of differential access and willingness to speak, rather than solely as a reflection of the underlying population's composition.

The empirical component draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-two transgender women in Jammu, conducted between 2023 and 2025. These twenty-two participants were purposively selected, chosen to span a comparable range of age, education, and community affiliation. Participants represented diverse educational, occupational, and familial backgrounds, including individuals affiliated with traditional Hijra deras and individuals residing with natal families or living independently. Snowball and purposive sampling were used, owing to the absence of a formal sampling

frame and the social marginalization of the community. Table 1 presents demographic profile of the twenty-two qualitative interlocutors. No identifying information is included. It is worth noting that respondents in the underlying survey were not restricted to a single self-descriptive term for gender identity: many selected more than one of Transgender, Hijra, Kinner, Khusra, or related categories to describe themselves, a pattern consistent with this paper's central argument that these vocabularies coexist rather than function as mutually exclusive labels.

Table 1. Participant profile summary

Category	Distribution (n = 22)
Age	New generation (18–35 years): 15 (68.2%); Older generation (36 years and above): 7 (31.8%)
Living arrangement	Family-based or independent: 15 (68.2%); Dera-embedded: 7 (31.8%)
Education	Educated (any formal schooling): 19 (86.4%); Illiterate (no formal education): 3 (13.6%)
Religion	Hindu: 19 (86.4%); Muslim: 2 (9.1%); Christian: 1 (4.5%)
Caste / social category	Scheduled Caste: 9 (40.9%); General Category: 8 (36.4%); OBC: 3 (13.6%); Scheduled Tribe: 1 (4.5%); Not disclosed: 1 (4.5%)

Source: Fieldwork in Jammu 2023-25

Given the small, non-random sample and the reliance on snowball and purposive sampling, these findings should not be read as representative of transgender women in Jammu as a whole. They document a set of lived trajectories, selected in part through community networks of trust, rather than a generalizable distribution across the population. It is worth noting that the age distribution and the living-arrangement distribution in Table 1 show the same proportions (68.2% and 31.8% respectively), a parallel consistent with this paper's qualitative account of younger participants more often living

with family or independently and older participants more often remaining within dera life. Because the underlying survey data are reported here only as separate marginal distributions rather than as a cross-tabulation of age against living arrangement for the same individuals, this should be read as a suggestive parallel in the aggregate figures rather than a demonstrated individual-level correlation.

Interviews were conducted in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Dogri, or a combination of these, and were translated into English for analysis. Because interviews moved fluidly between languages, and because certain terms carry meaning that does not survive translation, the paper have retained culturally specific vocabulary such as badhai, dera, guru, chela, Khusra, and Kinner in the original throughout this paper rather than substituting English equivalents, glossing each on first use. Translating Khusra as, say, “slur,” or badhai as “blessing ceremony,” would flatten exactly the historical specificity this paper is trying to recover.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, with attention directed to the discursive patterns through which participants constructed identity, attributed legitimacy, and negotiated recognition in everyday life. Oral narratives were read alongside secondary historical scholarship, legal judgments and the limited archival material available for the region. Where participants described events reflecting personal or community perception rather than independently verifiable fact as with the oral history of dera property presented in Section 4.6; these accounts have been analyzed as expressions of social memory rather than settled historical record, and this distinction is flagged explicitly wherever it arises.

Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study’s objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying information has been omitted or altered.

IV. Historical Genealogy of Gendered Language in Jammu

4.1 Ritual Identities and Community Recognition

Across northern India, including the territories that later formed the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, gender-diverse communities participated in ceremonies surrounding childbirth, marriage, and fertility. Their presence was believed to carry ritual efficacy, and badhai became an important source of livelihood and social recognition, organized through the guru-chela relationship, which functioned as kinship, socialization, and economic organization at once (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). As noted in Section II, this recognition should not be romanticized as equality; it was recognition of a

specific, ritual kind, embedded within hierarchies of guru over chela, and of some deras over others, that this paper's oral testimony shows persisting into the present.

4.2 Classification, Criminalization, and the Production of the "Eunuch"

Colonial administrators increasingly interpreted gender diversity through nineteenth-century languages of medicine, criminology, and moral regulation. The category "eunuch" reduced complex social identities to anatomical assumption, and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 institutionalized registration, surveillance, and policing of gender-diverse communities across British India (Preston, 1987; Hinchy, 2019). This bureaucratic-colonial discourse marks the shift of authority over gender diversity from community institutions to the colonial state, with the regional qualification, noted above, that Jammu and Kashmir's status as a princely state meant this authority arrived indirectly rather than through direct legal imposition.

4.3 Persistence without Recognition

Political independence did not immediately transform everyday language. Although colonial legislation gradually lost legal authority, its cultural assumptions remained embedded in public consciousness. In Jammu, participants consistently described Khusra as the dominant public vocabulary of their childhood, not a neutral descriptive category but one that appeared within jokes, insults, warnings directed at children, and expressions of ridicule. One interlocutor recalled that whenever children displayed feminine behaviour, parents would caution them that "Khusre will take you away," a warning she herself later heard directed at her own younger self. Participants distinguished between the meanings attached to Khusra within wider society and Kinner within community settings. Outsiders often used the two terms interchangeably, whereas community members invested them with different associations relating to ritual practice, guru-chela affiliation, and collective belonging. This period may be understood as one of discursive continuity: legal independence altered constitutional citizenship, but everyday language continued reproducing assumptions inherited from both indigenous tradition and colonial classification.

4.4 Rights, Recognition, and the Reconfiguration of Identity

The closing decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first marked a profound transformation, driven by the convergence of constitutional rights, judicial intervention, medical discourse, civil society activism, and global human rights frameworks. The decisive moment was the Supreme Court's judgment in *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014), which recognized transgender persons

as a constitutionally protected third gender and affirmed the principle of self-identification (Khaitan, 2014). Commentary on the judgment has noted both its significance and unresolved ambiguities, for instance over whether Hijra communities specifically, already named a third gender, retain the same open-ended choice of self-identification extended to trans persons more generally (Khaitan, 2014; Dutta, 2014). The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 subsequently institutionalized the category within administrative procedures relating to identity documents, welfare, education, employment, and anti-discrimination measures, although reviews have documented a persistent gap between the Act's promises and its implementation (Bhattacharya et al., 2022; Venkatesan, 2025).

My interlocutors described a gradual and uneven process through which new vocabularies of gender entered their lives, through schools, universities, non-governmental organizations, social media, healthcare, and peer networks, rather than through law alone. These vocabularies did not simply replace earlier explanations; rather, they accumulated alongside family beliefs, local terminology, community knowledge, and later rights-based and digital discourse. One interlocutor, referred to here as Meher⁶, gave this transformation its most vivid description, and her life history illustrates this process particularly clearly. Raised within her natal family in Jammu, Meher recalled recognizing from around the age of five that she was “different,” although she initially had no conceptual language through which to explain that difference. Feminine behaviour was already visible within the household: she recalled wearing her mother's dupatta at home, and remembered that her gestures and mannerisms were understood by family members as evidence of something unusual about her, well before any vocabulary of gender identity was available to name it.

Her family's interpretation of this difference initially belonged to a very different explanatory register. Recalling the period when her family learned about her gender expression, Meher explained that they believed someone had done something to her, and consequently took her to a tantrik, a ritual healer, to have the condition removed. She recalled-

“Jab mere gharwalon ko pata chala mere bare mein, unko laga ki humare ladke ko kisi ne kuch kar diya hai. Tab woh mujhe baba ke paas le gaye, tantrik ke paas le gaye.”

(When my family found out about me, they believed someone had done something to their son. So they took me to a baba, to a tantrik.)

Her response to the ritual intervention, however, articulated a distinction between the body's susceptibility to external intervention and the continuity of the self-

6 Note: Pseudonyms are used throughout the text to protect confidentiality in compliance with standard ethics, and all interlocutors gave informed consent.

“Woh mujhe dhaaga dalega... mere body par effect karega, meri soul ya meri atma par nahi. Jisne tantrik ko banaya, woh bhi Bhagwan; jisne mujhe banaya, woh bhi Bhagwan.”

(He may tie the thread around me and affect my body, but not my soul, my atma. The one who made the tantrik is also God; the one who made me is also God.)

She further explained this in terms of an enduring sense of reality and self-

“The thing is, aapki atma se koi kuch nahi nikal sakta, aapki reality, the one who you are”

(The thing is, no one can take anything out of your soul, your reality, the one who you are).

The significance of this account is not simply that the family held a different belief from the participant. It demonstrates that, within a single life history, gender difference could be interpreted through a ritual-spiritual framework while the participant herself was gradually developing a different understanding of her own experience, and that she met the ritual framework not with silent avoidance but with a counter-claim of her own, drawn from the same theological vocabulary her family used. The two frameworks did not replace one another at the moment a new vocabulary became available; they coexisted, and were actively argued over, within the same household.

A parallel shift can be traced in Meher’s changing vocabulary during adolescence. At around fourteen or fifteen, before she had encountered the contemporary vocabulary of LGBTQIA+ identities, she understood her feelings through the only foreign-language category she had encountered, “gay,” since the only alternative vocabulary available to her locally was Kinner, a word her mother invoked as a warning rather than a possibility by saying-

“Khusre aayenge aur le jayenge,”

(Khusre will come and take you away).

At approximately sixteen or seventeen she encountered the term “trans,” and later, searching online, encountered more differentiated categories such as trans women, trans men, and gender identity. Only after this process of discovery, she told me, could she “explain to others who I really am.”

This trajectory demonstrates what the paper mean by layered discursive coexistence. Meher did not simply exchange one identity label for another in a sequence of individual choices. The vocabularies available to her were historically and socially produced before she encountered them: the family language of Kinner and Khusra, the spiritual interpretation of gender difference, the borrowed sexual-identity category of “gay,” and eventually the rights-based and digital vocabulary of transgender identity. As newer discourses became available, earlier ones did not disappear from her social

environment; they remained present in family memory, everyday interaction, and community life, while she acquired additional conceptual resources with which to understand and articulate herself. Between the tantrik's explanatory framework and the medical-legal one she encountered a few years later online, an entire discursive shift is compressed into a single household.

Participants generally associated Transgender with dignity, education, legal recognition, and personal agency. The preference for this vocabulary reflected changing aspiration as much as changing politics: identifying as Transgender allowed many participants to imagine futures centred on higher education, formal employment, modelling, and family acceptance, rather than the historically dominant expectation of dera life, though, as Section V shows, this new vocabulary did not retire the old one so much as sit alongside it, unevenly, across generations and institutions.

4.5 The Emergence of a New Respectability Discourse

Participants did not simply replace one word with another; they attached different moral, social, and political meanings to the identities those words named. Transgender was repeatedly associated with education, professional employment, financial independence, family acceptance, and legal rights, while Kinner or Hijra, particularly where tied to dera-based life, was associated with ritual labour, begging, sex work, and limited educational opportunity. This pattern resonates with the study of urban Indian transgender women, which similarly documents an emergent class- and education-based distinction between a "new," respectable transgender womanhood and an older, stigmatized association with Hijra community life (Mount, 2020). These associations are not objective descriptions of two separate communities; they reflect what is termed here as a respectability discourse, actively constructed by participants themselves, who use language to legitimize particular forms of transgender identity while distancing themselves from others.

As one participant put it, "The difference is education. Those who grew up in deras saw only that world. We grew up in our families, studied, and realized that we could also become teachers, models, or professionals."

This statement constructs education as the line separating one form of transgender life from another, positioning the speaker on the legitimate side of that line. Participants did not necessarily reject Hijra communities themselves; rather they questioned the historical inevitability of joining them, recognizing that previous generations entered deras because families rejected them and no alternative existed. This respectability discourse does not only distinguish transgender identity from cisgender society; it also produces a hierarchy within the transgender community itself, in which Transgender,

associated with education, family acceptance, and formal employment, occupies a more legitimate position than Hijra or Kinner identities tied to dera life. Participants who had grown up outside deras rarely framed this as contempt for dera-affiliated women, but the distinction they drew between having studied and having had “only that world” reproduces, in a new vocabulary, a logic of respectability versus stigma structurally similar to the one colonial classification once imposed from outside.

The difference is that this hierarchy is now partly self-authored, from within the community, rather than imposed solely by external institutions, which raises the question of whether legal recognition, by rewarding one form of transgender identity over another, is quietly manufacturing a new internal stratification alongside the old one it was meant to dissolve. The contemporary category Transgender thus represents more than an administrative label. It is an emerging discourse in which education, family, rights, and citizenship have become central to the social imagination of gender diversity in Jammu, existing alongside older community identities rather than replacing them.

4.6 Oral Testimony and the Limits of the Written Archive

Jammu and Kashmir’s status as a princely state means that its records sit outside the British Indian archive that has produced most of the historiography cited in Section II, and I was not able, within the scope of this study, to locate Dogra-era administrative documentation of hijra communities in the State Archives. What can be offered instead, and what is argued to have its own evidentiary value consistent with this paper’s methodology, is an extended piece of oral testimony concerning the history of the oldest and foremost dera in Jammu, from which the other deras emerged, presented here as social memory rather than verified fact.

According to oral tradition preserved within the community associated with the dera near Shahidi Chowk⁷, remembered as dating to the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and continuing under Maharaja Gulab Singh, founder of the Dogra dynasty, who is credited with having granted the community a hereditary source of income, badhai.

The most striking part of this testimony concerns Partition. According to the account, a senior figure in the community’s line of succession, remembered as Mai Sham Ghata, migrated from the Pakistani side of the divided state to Jammu after 1947, carrying documentation of the community’s claim, its virasat, or inheritance, and asserting a right to the dera and its associated properties on that basis.

⁷ Shahidi Chowk Dera is regarded by community members as the oldest and foremost Hijra dera in Jammu, serving as the principal lineage from which other deras in the region trace their origins. According to community narratives, most contemporary deras in Jammu have emerged through successive guru-chela lineages originating from Shahidi Chowk.

Some shops on the Pakistani side, in this account, were subsequently occupied by others in the disruption of Partition, while, on the Jammu side, some were later sold off by successive gurus. A figure remembered within the community as Miya Mohammad Ali Shah is credited with transferring documents that ultimately secured a portion of the property for the community.

This narrative is presented with three caveats. First, it has not been possible to verify it against Dogra administrative records, revenue records or Partition-era refugee documentation, and it is explicitly presented as oral tradition rather than established fact. Second, oral traditions of this kind are themselves historical evidence of a particular sort. They show how a community remembers, and chooses to narrate, its relationship to sovereign power, displacement, and property, regardless of whether every specific detail would survive archival cross-examination. Third, and most importantly, the account is significant simply because it exists; it demonstrates that hijra communities in Jammu narrate their own history not as pure marginality but as one that includes royal patronage, property, migration, and legal claim-making across one of the most violent ruptures in the region's modern history. Dogra revenue records, Partition-era refugee property claims, and municipal records for the Shahidi Chowk area remain a specific direction for future archival research that falls outside what oral history alone can establish.

V. Negotiating Language and Identity in Contemporary Jammu

5.1 “Khusra,” “Kinner,” or “Transgender”?

Language in contemporary Jammu is neither uniform nor stable. Khusra, Kinner, Hijra, and Transgender circulate simultaneously across different social settings, each carrying distinct historical meaning and emotional charge. Most participants distinguished clearly between labels they preferred for themselves and terms used by wider society. Transgender was overwhelmingly the preferred term for self-identification; Khusra was consistently described as imposed from outside, associated with ridicule and childhood mockery. As one interlocutor reflected, “People still call us Khusra because that is the only word they know. For them every feminine person is simply Khusra.” This persistence does not necessarily reflect deliberate prejudice so much as the endurance of an inherited linguistic tradition largely unchanged across generations. Kinner occupies a more complex position. Unlike Khusra, generally associated with ridicule, Kinner often referred to members of traditional Hijra communities organised through the guru-chela system, and even this term remained contested, a tension consistent with Dutta's account of overlapping and contested community categories (kothi, hijra, Kinner) in eastern India, where similar terms carry distinct and sometimes competing claims to

belonging (Dutta, 2012).

A further, internally-oriented axis of naming authority became visible in interviews with dera-embedded participants themselves. One interlocutor, whom I call Babita, drew a sharp distinction between what she considered authentic kinner identity, understood as intersex or by-birth status verified through community-recognized process, and identity claimed through surgical transition undertaken, in her account, primarily for economic reasons. She was equally insistent on a second distinction, between herself as a long-standing local practitioner and newer arrivals from outside Jammu whom she held responsible for practices, including begging and solicitation at traffic signals, that she argued damaged the reputation of established local community members. Both distinctions operate through criteria, birth status, lineage, tenure, and conduct, that are internal to the community itself rather than derived from state, family, or digital-rights vocabularies. This suggests a fourth site of epistemic authority alongside the ritual, colonial-bureaucratic, and rights-based regimes traced elsewhere in this paper: an internal authenticity discourse through which community members adjudicate one another's legitimacy according to standards the state and the family do not recognize and cannot arbitrate.

The significance of these differences lies not simply in the fact that participants negotiate labels across social settings. Rather, these negotiations occur within a field in which historically distinct discourses remain simultaneously operative. Meher's account, discussed in Section 4.4, illustrates this particularly clearly: the same person could be understood within her family through the vocabulary of Kinner or Khusra, encounter a spiritual explanation for her gender difference, understand herself temporarily through the borrowed category "gay," and later acquire the vocabulary of Transgender through digital media. These were not simply successive identity choices; each vocabulary was attached to a different source of knowledge and authority, and earlier frameworks remained socially present even after newer ones became available. The participant's self-identification as Transgender, a neighbour's use of Khusra, and a traditional community's use of Kinner or Hijra therefore constitute more than competing acts of naming; they reflect different sources of authority over gendered identity. What is being negotiated is consequently not only the individual's identity but also which discourse has the legitimacy to define that identity in a particular encounter.

5.2 Generational Change and the Digital Transformation of Identity

Participants repeatedly contrasted the limited vocabulary available in their childhood with the broader conceptual resources available to younger people today.

As one interlocutor put it, "Earlier we only heard about Kinners. Later I searched online and under-

stood that there are transwomen, transmen, and many other identities. Only after learning this could I understand myself.”

Digital media, in this account, function as a new historical archive, where experiences previously understood through fear, shame, or confusion become reinterpreted through the language of gender identity and constitutional right. This change remains uneven: younger, educated participants increasingly draw on the language of rights and identity, while older members of traditional Hijra communities continue to use established community vocabulary.

5.3 Family, Education, and the Reconfiguration of Identity

Family acceptance and access to education shaped not only life opportunity but the very language through which participants understood themselves. Those who remained within their families often described school as the site where they first encountered rights-based understandings of gender diversity; those who entered dera life at an early age described learning community-specific vocabulary through the guru-chela system instead.

One participant summarized the mechanism directly, “If a child is thrown out of the house at five years old, the dera becomes that child’s entire world. Whatever the guru teaches becomes the truth because there is no other source of knowledge.”

I read this not as an objective description of all dera communities, but as evidence of how my interlocutors themselves theorize the relationship between family rejection and linguistic socialization.

A separate interlocutor described the same mechanism from a different angle, emphasizing that this pattern of expulsion and absorption was not confined to a single family. Reflecting on the experience of others who entered dera life at an early age, she explained,

“Similarly dera walon ka bhi same system hai” (the dera community works the same way). In such instances, a child could be identified as Kinner by a doctor, after which the family might remove the child from the household and dera members would take the child in. She continued, “Dera walon ne kaha ki humare apne rules and regulations hain aur padhna likhna chhod do” (the dera members said they have their own rules and regulations and asked them to discontinue schooling).

She added that because such children had limited access to alternative sources of knowledge, “unki starting se thinking waisi hi rahi” (their thinking remained shaped in that manner from the beginning).

This account illustrates the institutional dimension of layered discursive coexistence. The dera vocabulary was reproduced through a concrete social structure of kinship, authority, livelihood, and social-

ization, while the family and neighbourhood could simultaneously employ Kinner or Khusra through very different registers of fear, stigma, or recognition. The later availability of Transgender discourse therefore did not simply introduce another identity option into an otherwise neutral field; it entered a social world in which older vocabularies were already embedded in institutions and relationships. What individuals negotiate is consequently shaped by which discursive regime holds authority in the setting they inhabit.

VI. Discussion

This model extends existing historiography in a specific way. Hinchy's account of colonial governance shows how the modern criminalized "eunuch" category was produced through bureaucratic practice in British India (Hinchy, 2019), and existing scholarship has traced ritual authority and kinship as a relatively stable social world (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005) and the uneven encounter between kothi-hijra communities and the globalizing vocabulary of "transgender" (Dutta, 2012, 2013; Saria, 2021). This paper's contribution is to show what happened to that category, and to the ritual and rights-based categories that preceded and followed it, in a princely-state context outside direct colonial jurisdiction, tracing their coexistence into the present rather than leaving the story at the moment of legal recognition, where much NALSA-focused literature stops (Khaitan, 2014; Dutta, 2014). The oral histories presented here show that same encounter being actively narrated against, and re-evaluated by, a generation of transgender women in a regional context this literature has not yet reached. What follows draws out what this coexistence means for legal recognition, social acceptance, and the question of identity in turn.

For legal recognition, the coexistence documented here indicates that Transgender's constitutional and administrative authority has not displaced the authority that Khusra, Kinner, and Hijra continue to hold in family, neighbourhood, and dera life; it has been added to a field of competing authorities rather than superseding them. Because Transgender carries state authority while the older vocabularies remain embedded in everyday social relationships, legal recognition can change the institutional vocabulary considerably faster than it changes the vocabulary a person actually meets at home or on the street, a gap consistent with recent documentation of the Transgender Persons Act's uneven implementation (Bhattacharya et al., 2022; Venkatesan, 2025). This gap was visible even among interlocutors who welcomed constitutional recognition in principle. Babita, for instance, described gratitude for third-gender recognition itself while acknowledging she was "not that much aware" of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act specifically, and recounted that her own access to basic citizenship documents, including a ration card, had depended for years on her guru's authoriza-

tion rather than on state process alone. Formal legal standing, in other words, was still routed through customary authority before it could be exercised. The practical implication is that legislation aimed at gender-diverse citizens cannot assume that legal recognition alone reaches into the domains - family, neighbourhood, dera, where competing vocabularies continue to carry more immediate social weight.

For social acceptance, the same coexistence shows that acceptance is not a single achievement but something distributed unevenly across institutions and, as Section 4.5 demonstrates, within the transgender community itself. The respectability now attached to Transgender, tied to education and formal employment, risks reproducing, in a new vocabulary and partly through the community's own self-narration, the very distinction between legitimate and stigmatized gender-diverse life that colonial classification once imposed from outside. Social acceptance secured through one discursive regime, in other words, does not automatically extend to those still positioned within another, and may instead generate a new internal hierarchy even as it dismantles an older external one.

It is worth acknowledging that this paper's own evidentiary weight tilts toward participants for whom the rights-based regime offered a legible language of self-articulation, a tilt that plausibly reflects the access asymmetry disclosed in Section III rather than any claim that this regime is more successful or more authentic than the others traced here.

For the question of identity, the central implication is that identity in Jammu is not best understood as a fixed attribute an individual holds and then variously discloses, but as something negotiated within a discursive field whose layering precedes and outlasts any single encounter, consistent with the distinction drawn in Section I between identity negotiation and layered discursive coexistence. Read together, these findings indicate that the coexistence of Hijra, Khusra, Kinner, and Transgender is best understood as a redistribution of epistemic authority over gendered naming rather than a simple disappearance of older institutions: government agencies, families, traditional networks, and younger educated participants each retain a vocabulary anchored in a different institutional authority, and it is this unevenness, rather than any single vocabulary's eventual dominance, that shapes what legal recognition, social acceptance, and self-understanding can and cannot achieve on their own. Legal recognition, in short, changes who has the authority to name; it does not by itself determine how evenly that authority is felt, or who within the community benefits from it.

VII. Conclusion

This study has examined the historical transformation of gendered language in Jammu through the shifting vocabularies of Hijra, Khusra, Kinner and Transgender. Each emerged within a distinct historical context and embodied a different understanding of gender, legitimacy, citizenship and be-

longing. Precolonial understanding was embedded in ritual authority and customary organization, itself stratified rather than simply accepting (Nanda, 1999). Colonial rule introduced a framework of bureaucratic and medical classification emphasizing surveillance and criminality (Preston, 1987; Hinchy, 2019). Postcolonial India inherited much of that classification's cultural residue in everyday language even after it lost legal force. The twenty first century emergence of Transgender as a constitutional and administrative category, secured through NALSA (2014) and the 2019 Act, grounded recognition in citizenship and self identification rather than ritual status or colonial classification (Khaitan, 2014; Dutta, 2014).

The central finding is that this history did not proceed through simple replacement. Older and newer vocabularies coexist in contemporary Jammu, a condition termed here as layered discursive coexistence. Individuals move between multiple linguistic worlds, negotiating identity according to social and institutional context. Being addressed as *Khusra* recalled, for most participants, experiences of ridicule and marginalization, while identifying as Transgender allowed many to articulate aspirations toward education, employment and family acceptance. Yet, as Meher's account of the tantrik visit and her own strategies of self understanding show, these aspirations did not erase older community identities or resolve the underlying calculus of risk. They produced new forms of negotiation between inherited tradition and rights based frameworks, layered on top of one another rather than substituting for one another.

This research contributes in four ways. First, it offers one of the first historically grounded examinations of changing transgender terminology in Jammu, a region underrepresented in South Asian gender historiography dominated by metropolitan studies (Dutta, 2012; Saria, 2021). Second, it shifts attention from identity categories themselves to the historical processes through which those categories acquire meaning. Third, it integrates oral history with historical discourse analysis to show that the history of a marginalized community in a princely state context cannot be reconstructed through official archives alone. Fourth, it foregrounds internal community diversity, consonant with class based respectability distinctions documented elsewhere in urban India (Mount, 2020), to show that legal transformation does not automatically produce cultural transformation and may itself generate new internal hierarchies even as it dismantles older ones.

A significant aspect of this work lies in its methodological honesty about the limits of its own archive. State records reveal how institutions classify populations. They rarely illuminate how those classifications are lived, resisted or transformed. Oral history complements the written archive but is not a substitute for it, and this study is explicit, most concretely in the account of the Shahidi Chowk dera's history in Section 4.6, about where its evidence is community memory awaiting archival verification

rather than settled historical fact.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The empirical analysis draws on interviews with transgender women in Jammu and does not encompass the experiences of transgender men, non binary persons or gender diverse individuals elsewhere in Jammu and Kashmir. The sample, though diverse in age, education and living arrangement, is small and non representative, drawn through snowball and purposive methods. Its findings should be read as documented trajectories rather than a generalizable picture of the community. Future scholarship would benefit from deeper engagement with Dogra administrative records, Jammu and Kashmir State Archives, vernacular newspapers and Partition era refugee property documentation, none of which this study was able to access within its scope.

Ultimately, the history of transgender communities in Jammu cannot be written solely through legislation or official classification. It is equally embedded in everyday speech, memory and the contested meanings attached to names. It is a history of shifting authority over naming and the continuing, unfinished negotiation of belonging in a region whose own history, as both princely state and contested border territory, has rarely been allowed to include this particular story.

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