"We were together and we had our own family in each other": refusing repatriation and forging gendered belonging as Hijra refugees in Kolkata

Sarah Nandi*

Department of Political Science and the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminism, McGill University, Montréal, QC, H3A 2T7, Canada

*Corresponding author. Department of Political Science and the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminism, McGill University, 3610 McTavish St. 2nd Floor, Montréal, QC, H3A 1Y2, Canada. E-mail: sarah.nandi@mail.mcgill.ca.

Abstract

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Kothi, and Hijra (LGBTQKH*) refugees in South Asia have long reimagined the meaning of refugeehood and belonging. This paper explores the case of Hijra Bengali refugees following the 1971 Bangladeshi independence war, focusing on their crafting of belonging from below. Despite international pressures for repatriation and organized abandonment, some Hijra refugees chose to remain in Kolkata's red-light areas, seeking safety, livelihoods, and community through precolonial ties. This study examines Hijra refusal to return to Bangladesh and their subsequent involvement in the Kolkata sex worker movement, highlighting their everyday decision-making, cultural practices, and gendered community. By centering the experiences of Hijra Bengali refugees, this paper both disrupts victimizing narratives from the Global North and reframes top-down belonging, demonstrating how Hijras have been producing and maintaining their own belonging outside of the ambit of the refugee regime and the state.

1. Introduction

The 1971 Bangladeshi war for independence from Pakistan displaced approximately 10 million people to India, including Hijras—a South Asian third-gender community—who faced targeted gender-based violence and were involved as militants in the struggle for their homeland (Dowlah 2016; Hasanat 2022). In spite of this, the experiences of Hijras were notably absent from humanitarian responses, reconstruction after the conflict, and in official accounts of the Bangladeshi Liberation War. Addressing this gap, this article traces the lives of four Hijra refugees who left the capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka, in 1971 and established themselves as a part

of communities in the red-light areas of Kolkata. This research contributes to studies of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Kothi, and Hijra (LGBTQKH*) forced migration by exploring how refugees create their own belonging, often challenging state narratives and humanitarian planning about who belongs where and, in doing so, reframing top-down notions of belonging.[1] I argue that Hijra refugees, in response to their exclusion and abandonment by state and humanitarian actors, refused their former homeland and forged their own gendered community, recentering the experiences of LGBTQKH* refugees in the Global South as producers of belonging.

The Hijra identity, though diverse across South Asia and throughout history, is unified by a connection to divine femininity. The term "Hijra" encompasses a diverse range of gender identities, such as transgender women, gay men, intersex people, men who have sex with men, and gender non-conforming people (Nanda 1999; Saria 2021). Hijras often define themselves and are legally recognized as belonging to a "third gender". At times, Hijras utilize the term "queer" as a means of connecting their experiences with global communities.[2] As Lal (1999) observes, "[t]here is something deeply transgressive about the life choices made by hijras, just as there is a deep anxiety about their identity, since they do not fall within the paradigms of classification and enumeration that are dominant in modern knowledge systems" (134). Many Hijras present themselves in clothing and cosmetics that reflect their connection to goddesses in Hindu belief, or for non-Hindu Hijras, to a broader concept of divine femininity.

Historically, Hijras have occupied a paradoxical position, being both venerated and marginalized (Goel 2016). This duality persisted under both colonial and post-independence governments. The British *Criminal Tribes Act of 1871* criminalized Hijras identities, exemplifying state-based discrimination (Atluri 2012). However, as independent governments, India and Bangladesh formally recognized the third gender as a protected gender minority in Supreme Court cases in the 2010s.[3] In spite of this, Hijras have continued to face violence and discrimination, often being pushed to sex work as one of the few means of securing community safety and financial stability (Shah 2014; Mugloo and Rafiq 2023; Yasmin 2023).

To explore the historical experiences of this community during the 1971 Liberation War, also referred to as the 1971 genocide, this article proceeds in five sections, starting with a brief overview of the history of the 1971 Bangladeshi Independence War and the Indian political environment as it hosted Bangladeshi refugees. The second explores traditional conceptions of belonging as a top-down process that operates through non-belonging as well as organizational abandonment and presents how, in contrast, this case examines bottom-up practices and everyday refusals that produce belonging. In the third section, I provide an overview of oral history and archival methods. Following this, the fourth section explores the experiences of the four Hijra participants during the 1970s as they left Bangladesh, encamped in India, and decided where to go after the conflict ended. The fifth section examines the ways in which Hijra participants established themselves in their chosen community in the red-light areas of Kolkata and fought for their community's safety in the sex worker movements of the 1980s and 1990s. I argue that while states and humanitarian actors imposed paternalistic repatriation policies and engaged in organized abandonment, Hijra refugees resisted these mechanisms by actively

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[1] I use the acronym Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Kothi, and Hijra (LGBTQKH*) to centralize historically and socially-situated South Asian queer identities. Kothi is typically used to describe men who engage in receptive sex with men, often adopting behaviors or dress associated with femininity, yet who do not identify as gay or transgender. Hijra is defined in the following paragraph. The asterisk symbolizes inclusivity of the greater community. As noted by a Hijra grassroots organization, "India has an incredibly diverse queer culture which also includes: intersex, asexual, kinnar, shiv-shakti, aravani, men having sex with men and many others" (Anandam 2021).
[2] In this paper, I use the term "queer" in the same way that Hijra communities use this term, often as a way of connecting their experiences to global activism for LGBTIQA+ rights.
[3] The term "gender minorities" reflects its frequent use in Hijra political activism, where Hijra organizers have argued that they should be included in minority politics. In contrast to many Global North settings, in South Asia, minority politics are spaces of power rather than subordination due to the reservation system, which is a government policy designed to provide affirmative action for historically marginalized groups, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, by reserving a certain percentage of seats in education, government jobs, and political representation to promote social equality and reduce disparities. In India, Hijras have been eligible for inclusion in these policies since the 2014 court ruling, but Hijra activists are still advocating for implementation.

constructing their own forms of constrained belonging within spaces of marginality, thereby defining their own places of inclusion.

2. From East Pakistan to Kolkata: historical context of the 1971 refugee situation

To understand the experiences of Hijra refugees, this section provides an overview of the 1971 conflict and the ensuing refugee situation. It is important to note that the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War is considered a genocide due to the systematic mass killings, sexual violence, and targeted extermination of Bengalis—particularly intellectuals and Hindus—by the Pakistani military and its collaborators (Saikia 2011). During this period, repatriation emerged as the primary solution advocated by India, Bangladesh, and the UN agencies. Despite these directives, many refugees established themselves in Kolkata, challenging the prescribed course of action.

In 1947, British officials and Prime Ministers Muhammad Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru drew new borders to establish independent South Asian states. Exceptionally, Pakistan came into being in the form of two halves separated by over 1000 miles of difficult terrain. West Pakistan, or present-day Pakistan, held the capital city and was run by Urdu-speaking political elites. East Pakistan, or present-day Bangladesh, was more resource rich and comprised primarily ethnically and linguistically Bengali people, sharing a language, culture, and history with the Indian neighboring state of West Bengal they had been separated from since 1905 following an anti-colonial revolt (Chatterji 2007). In this arrangement, for decades the eastern, Bengali, wing of Pakistan experienced mounting linguistic, political, and economic discrimination by West Pakistan (Shamsul Hasan 2018). Tensions erupted when the Bengali political leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared East Pakistan as an independent, Bengali country (Saikia 2011) and the Pakistani military responded by launching Operation Searchlight to bring the eastern wing back under their control. Under this directive, the military began systematically slaughtering Bengali intellectuals, minorities, students, and other active groups in the hopes of swiftly bringing resistance to heel (Bass 2013). When the separatist movement battled on, the Pakistani military utilized mass military rape of an estimated 200,000 women and targeted an unknown number of Hijras targeted (Mookherjee 2015). Fleeing the violence, approximately 10 million Bengalis took refuge in the neighboring Bengali-speaking Indian state of West Bengal.

While neither India nor Pakistan were signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Janmyr 2021), India provided protection for refugees, albeit in dire conditions given the swift onset and the intensity of the conflict. This move enabled the Indian state to declare that it had the right to intercede against its longtime rival, Pakistan (Biswas 2023). With this Indian support, the genocidal violence ceased by December, and the new state of Bangladesh was created. The end of the conflict heralded the earnest repatriation of refugees to Bangladesh.

Both India and Bangladesh set about expedient repatriation. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi proclaimed that "I am just going to send them [the refugees] back. I am determined to send them back" (Sajen 1971). Likewise, on the other side of the border, the new Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib was equally eager to welcome his citizens back from displacement and insisted upon their belonging in the new state. Mujib hoped that the population influx could support much-needed projects to rebuild the country, such as restoring infrastructure and communications (Sahoo and Chaney 2021). In a speech on 10 January 1972, Mujib pleaded, "My brothers, you know that we have a lot of work to do. I want all my people to begin working on repairing broken roads. I want you all to go back to the fields and cultivate paddy" (Mujib 1972). The desire to bring the nation back to their homeland was rooted in a need to re-establish the broken ties between the wounded, displaced population and the new state. Efforts to repair this tie took on a distinctly gendered form with Mujib's government building rehabilitation centers for women raped during the war, establishing funds for gendered vocational training, and commissioning marry-off campaigns for these same women (Mookherjee 2015). The Bangladeshi state also re-adopted Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code from British India, which re-criminalized gender

nonconformity. The re-adoption of this measure in Bangladesh spurred anti-Hijra sentiment and its implementation became a source of anxiety for this community (Dhaka Star 1973).

To implement the "greatest, and fastest, movement in contemporary history" India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh increased access to the UN agency for refugees (UNHCR), allowing them to establish the first field office in South Asia and to coordinate repatriation with other local offices (Datta 2012: 57). As a representative told the High Commissioner, "Nobody speaks of the need to resettle any of these refugees. They are considered as temporarily staying in India and that they will be able to return to their homes in the not too far away future." Bangladeshi refugees were seen as being sent back to their "rightful place." In line with this thinking, the UN General Assembly even passed Resolution 2790 (XXVI) and outlined that "voluntary repatriation is the only solution to India's refugee problem" (UNGA 1971), a view that was "fully shared by the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Refugees, and indeed by the international community as a whole" (UNGA 1971). To facilitate this, a UNHCR office was established in Dhaka and "repatriation began in earnest in January 1972" (UNHCR 1980). Just 4 months after the end of the Liberation War, the Indian refugee relief commissioner expressed his joy at the repatriation process: "Fifty-thousand gone? Excellent! Wonderful! Keep it up!" (Rangan 1972). By February, four million had departed from India and returned to the new state.

As Bangladesh began to rebuild its national economy and identity through the influx of returns, the neighboring state of West Bengal also underwent a period of upheaval. Although many refugees departed, the Indian state had long been shaped by the in and outflows of migration, causing the politics of West Bengal to be more sensitive to refugee politics and claims to refugee belonging. Especially concerning Bengali refugees, the barriers between insider and outsider had previously been somewhat traversable due to shared culture, language, and kinship networks between pre-Partition Bengal. As an example of this, refugees had formed the United Central Refugee Council in 1950, which was affiliated with the Communist Party, and led hunger strikes, rallies, meetings, and more to gain the ability to settle on public and private land (Chatterji 2007; Chatterji and Basu 2020). When the Left Front came to power in 1977, the government constructed public art commemorating the post-Partition refugee communities, as can be found in the Netaji Nagar Colony, where a statue of a refugee family "who were murdered by Congress anti-socials" while encouraging labor strikes. An American journalist described the feeling of Kolkata during these decades: "[f]or as long as anyone can remember, this crowded and squalid old city has danced to the rhythm of labor strikes, political agitations and Marxist theorizing" (Weisman 1988). As a striking example of one such protest, refugees mobilized for a month when the Calcutta Tramways Company posed a 1 paisa tram ticket price increase. Their slogan became "ek poishar lorai!" (war for a paisa). Refugees and other agitators turned the city into a battleground throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The 1970s–1990s saw the creation of the state of Bangladesh, the largest repatriation effort ever undertaken, the newly established influence of the UNHCR in non-signatory states, and the rise of Communist pro-labor politics in Kolkata.

3. Refusing to belong: the need for perspectives "from below"

This analysis draws on the concept of belonging within both refugee studies and queer theory, particularly as it relates to repatriation, exclusion, and refusal. Belonging is often understood as a top-down process of recognition, with scholars examining refugee integration into host societies (D'Angelo 2020), gendered and biological citizenship (Lori 2019; McGee 2020), and repatriation (Chowdhory 2012). These studies frequently highlight how the intersection of being queer and a refugee compounds the exclusion LGBTQKH* individuals experience, emphasizing themes of abandonment, hostility, and violence that reinforce their "non-belonging". Building on this work, this research contributes to studies that examine "belonging from below," demonstrating how Hijra refugees forged a localized sense of belonging through gendered community, precolonial ties, and everyday practices.

3.1 Top-down inclusion and exclusion

During crises and violence, both states and humanitarian organizations significantly shape belonging by deciding who receives aid, protection, and resources, thereby influencing the identities and lived experiences of affected communities. Unfortunately, LGBTQKH* refugees are often excluded from services, integration, and other pathways to belonging by the very actors charged with providing protections in what Bhagat (2023) terms "organized abandonment". This was particularly evident for Hijra refugees, whose experiences do not appear in mainstream state or humanitarian responses to the refugee situation (Datta 2012).

For these top-down actors, belonging underpins solutions for general refugeehood because belonging often dictates who "belongs" where based on attributes such as birthplace, language, religion, and family ties and is traditionally viewed through the lens of state-enforced citizenship rights (Long 2013; Bradley 2014). A core assumption of the international refugee regime thus operates on the idea that refugees can *and should* be returned to their "rightful" place. As Culçasi (2023) outlines, repatriation operates through "the 'rightness' of the national-state order by putting refugees back in 'their' place" (31) and is "unequivocally the solution preferred by the UNHCR, individual states, and many refugees" (29). This perspective reinforces the notion that repatriation is not only a legal solution but also a moral imperative, resulting in systems that operate through what Yuval-Davis (2011) describes as the "politics of belonging." The "politics of belonging" encompass how dominant groups legitimate identities through social criteria, such as gendered roles that fit cleanly within nationalist projects and racialized boundaries that distinguish citizen from non-citizen, ultimately shaping access to resources, rights, and recognition (Antonsich 2010; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014). In this framework, powerful actors produce and distribute belonging "from above" to "maintain and control social and political order" (Yuval-Davis 2011: 2995). For LGBTQKH* refugees, belonging is frequently mediated by both state and humanitarian actors who impose heteronormative and cisgendered criteria for inclusion in assistance and protections (Camminga 2023; Martinez 2023).

This exclusion creates an active process of "non-belonging" or "un-belonging" (Berg and Millibank 2009; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir 2018; Ritholtz and Buxton 2021; Held 2023). Korteweg and Yurdakul (2024) explain "non-belonging" as shaped by colonial histories of bordering, and constructed by "the denial of personhood, where personhood captures one's sense of self, one's capacity to act, as well as the human and citizenship rights tied to this" (294). LGBTQKH* refugees face a compounded non-belonging due to both their gender identity and their lack of citizenship (Bhagat 2023: 1521) which sorts refugee worthiness based on "the heteronormative division of lives into valued versus disposable bodies" (Shakhsari 2014: 1000).

3.2 Belonging from below

While the literature on LGBTQKH* forced migration has deftly explored non-belonging and organized abandonment (Camminga 2021; Held 2023), this research examines how Hijra refugees' respond to such exclusion through what I term the "practices of belonging" to create a precarious belonging, or belonging from below. Precarity underscores how practices of belonging from below exist under threat and within marginalized spaces without overstating their permanence or stability. Pouliot (2016) defines practices as "the socially organized way of doing things" in everyday settings (17). The practices described in this study show how belonging is produced through daily acts, such as *badhai*, which is a performance that Hijras use to collect alms and take up public space, as well as small ways that these refugees made decisions based on linguistic and affiliative connections that transcended colonial borders.

Scholars have long challenged the idea that individuals must "belong" exclusively to the geographic location of their birth (Malkki 1992). This literature argues that belonging often emerges without explicit state consent, citizenship, or socio-legal recognition, but rather, is the contribution of marginalized actors. As Scuzzarello and Morosanu (2023) show, those positioned "at the bottom" "are not simply recipients but also producers of categorization and protagonists of boundary work" (2998). Those experiencing non-belonging thus produce their own forms of

belonging by legitimating practices such as acts of refusal, claiming space, and asserting the legitimacy of one's livelihoods with precolonial shared language, family networks, and memory (Huizinga 2023). As Culçasi (2023) describes, this belonging is more fluid and often encapsulates "an act of feeling of inclusion and connection with other people, groups, or things" (8). Exemplifying these dynamics, in interviews, refugees from Bangladesh frequently articulated how their shared language, culture, religious practices, history, and transnational family networks facilitated a right to belong in Kolkata that pre-dated the colonial borders drawn before and during Partition. Belonging is thus, not always the domain of bureaucratic actors granting legal protections or pathways to citizenship, but also emerges through the affiliations and practices of refugees themselves.

These approaches significantly complicate simplistic arguments for repatriation based on spaces that change considerably through colonialism and conflict. There are many examples of refugees refusing where the refugee regime has placed them and asserting their right to be elsewhere based on precolonial political identity. McGranahan's (2018) study focusing on Tibetan refugees' refusal of Indian or Nepali citizenship as a means of preserving their claims to a Tibetan homeland and identity shows how belonging is connected to refusal, or "autonomous decision-making," of where one is said to belong (328). Further exemplifying these dynamics is Irfan's (2017) exploration of how Palestinians refuse resettlement as a political act of asserting one's right to belong in a homeland, whose memory is preserved through symbols, storytelling, and other practices. These cases underscore how everyday acts of refusal assert localized forms of belonging.

Adding to this, LGBTQKH* individuals have historically created their own forms of belonging by establishing gendered communities where they can engage in routines, rituals, and livelihoods that affirm their identities and foster solidarity. For example, in North American contexts, queer social clubs (Ghaziani 2022) and lesbian bars and cafes (Ketchum 2025) have cultivated LGBTIQA+ culture and gendered community. In displacement, queer refugees have established support networks and safe spaces as a means of maintaining cultural practices and fostering a self-created sense of belonging amidst displacement (Held 2023). As Balaguera (2018) exemplifies, through "trans liminal agency", gender non-conforming people navigate and assert their agency within the fluid and often contested spaces between different social and legal categories, making their own belonging possible.

Belonging is not only determined and recognized by the state and international organizations but is also produced through everyday acts of refusing citizenship, establishing gendered communities, and maintaining precolonial ties. Belonging is thus constantly in tension between the messy and lived realities of on-the-ground life, and the top-down recognized right to belong mediated by the "politics of belonging".

4. Oral history and archival methodology

This article was drawn from 12 months of qualitative fieldwork conducted from 2019 to 2020 in Kolkata, India, with four participants, given the pseudonyms Vertika, Shima, Rahima, and Smarita. The data include oral history interviews with these four participants and five interviews with other stakeholders such as doctors and care staff (also given pseudonyms), participant observation at sex worker's associations where I volunteered, as well archival methods of newspaper publications, such as *The Statesman*, and government reports about the events of 1971 and the decades following. This research began as a part of a project focusing on the sexual violence that many Bengali cisgender women and refugees suffered during the genocide, but as I conducted interviews and participant observation in the sex-working community in Kolkata where many Hijras lived and worked, I wanted to learn more about this community's experiences during 1971 and after. By tracing these threads, my aim became twofold. First, I hoped to cast the events of 1971 in a new light by writing Hijras back into these historical accounts. Second, I wanted to analyze how this community managed to remain in Kolkata after the smoke of 1971

cleared and then became involved in the sex worker movements that continue to influence the city's political structure today. To do so, I turned to oral history, archival methods, and secondary literature.

Oral history provides a powerful method for highlighting the experiences of LGBTQKH* people (LGBTQ Digital 2024) and refugees (Frisch 2003) within historical narratives that often exclude or erase their existence. Oral histories revisit events through a community's own words, which disrupts hegemonic narratives (Kerr 2016). As French (2019) explains, "personal stories [are] a means of understanding the nuances of the historical process, the positioned significance of historical events, and the perspectives of people whose stories are often *not* a part of standard historiography." (268). Attention to the life stories of Hijras can yield valuable results by destabilizing reified understandings of the past. Thus, although the primary data for this analysis comes from just four participants, their narratives provide a level of empirical depth that gave a detail-rich unique view into the daily practices of Hijra culture, livelihoods, and beliefs. In this case, the sample size was limited because of the practical difficulties of identifying willing participants who fit the criteria of this study, namely Hijras who had come to Kolkata due to the events of 1971 and stayed on in the city. Many whom the participants spoke of as friends who fit the criteria had passed away or had lost contact, limiting the possibility of engaging in a snowball sampling method. As another limitation, this fieldwork was partially conducted when the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 and the National Registry of Citizens were passed, which effectively restricted citizenship for migrants—or those perceived as migrants—based on religion (Ratha 2021). These developments made discussions about participants' formal legal status or other sensitive topics significantly more difficult. In spite of this, these oral history interviews were conducted over multiple meetings for several hours, resulting in rich narrative data that spoke to the "intangible aspects of everyday life" (Bennett 2014: 66). The time shared and the stories told permitted me to engage in in-depth analysis with this small sample size as participants were encouraged to tell their stories and to speak in-depth about the aspects of their narratives that they found the most significant.

While archival methods provided valuable contextual details and strengthened triangulation, the archive by itself provided an incomplete picture. This is because, as Araújo (2022) argues, "the erasure of sexual dissidence(s) from the historical record is a function both of the archive, as a selective and politically oriented gatekeeper of historical 'stuff' and of historiography, as the practice of representing the imagined past." (67). Because of the limited sample size and archival absences, I do not aim to make any broad assumptions about Hijra refugees or general experiences during 1971. Instead, I hope that this research can open up further ethnographic and historical study about the practices and experiences of queer Global South refugees during conflict, humanitarian intervention, and political mobilization.

5. "The blood was not dry on the streets of Dhaka and yet they wanted us back": Hijra displacement and repatriation

The 1971 Liberation War forced Vertika, Shima, Rahima, and Smarita to flee from Dhaka to the neighboring West Bengal, where they became entangled in and then abandoned by the international refugee regime. Despite being denied protections under the state's bureaucratic apparatus, they chose to remain in West Bengal rather than returning to Bangladesh, a homeland that they felt estranged from due to the violence they experienced prior to the conflict and during the war. Their refusal to repatriate highlights both the exclusionary mechanisms at play and their agency in crafting their own paths of belonging.

Vertika, Shima, Rahima, and Smarita described how their lives were transformed at the onset of the Liberation War, pushing them to depart from Bangladesh. Recounting the outbreak of the killings, each participant was reluctant to discuss the violence directly but reflected on the suddenness and the uncertainty that had gripped the city. Two participants explained that they had experienced routine anti-Hijra violence and discrimination prior to the Liberation War, but the

war considerably exacerbated their vulnerability. Shima explained "[a]ll of a sudden, it became very dangerous even to travel from one neighborhood to another in Dhaka" (Interview 2020). Each participant reflected on how the stories of torture, military rape, mutilation, and massacres quickly began to circulate, creating a feeling that no one was safe. Talking about the urban violence that was steadily unfolding, Shima detailed, "when I saw what I saw in Dhaka, I packed up my things quickly. My hands were shaking" (Interview 2019). Seeing how the state was unable to protect even accepted members of society, such as renowned doctors or engineers teaching at the University of Dhaka, Shima explained that she knew that she was in danger and she departed.

Shima, her Hijra sisters, and other Bengali refugees generally faced a severe lack of infrastructure and aid upon coming to India. Yet, this lack was notably more acute for Hijras because they described how they felt ostracized by other refugees and were less directly addressed by care workers and volunteers. In April of 1971, just 1 month after the start of the war, Rahima came to West Bengal in India "with my sisters" or other Hijras in her community, following the rapid outflows from Dhaka and found that they had to live as separately as possible from the other refugee communities. Rahima recounted, "It was packed on the streets [of the camp]. We did not know where to go, who to speak with. We were lost." (Interview 2019). In spite of feeling lost in the chaotic camps, no Hijra-specific planning or programming was undertaken to address their needs.

In the camps, Rahima, Vertika, Shima, and Smarita detailed a bleak situation that echoed the experiences of others who had described the misery of the disaster, yet for them, they faced a lack of resources or social safety from both other refugees and humanitarian staff. Refugees stationed in camps throughout Bengal lived in "squalor" that were described as places of "utter human misery" by those who visited. One such visitor, Amit Kumar Bhowmik who was working as a journalist, later described the camps as "a nightmare" due to the proliferation of wounds from the war and a lack of treatment and care. Horrified, he described women who had been "gang-raped by marauding *razakars*; their nipples or breasts sliced off, vaginas slit with razor blades. Children, eyes gouged out; limbs hacked off" (2021). Rahima reflected back on her time in the camps and discussed how the genocidal violence had clearly left so many with wounds and an insufficient system of care, but at least these refugees belonged to a system. "They [other refugees] had babies, and many sick aged people, but we were sick too. We would be in pain, but we could not go to the volunteers like everyone else." (Interview 2019). Organizations, primarily constituted of UNHCR contracted groups and Indian volunteers, were overwhelmed, but did not make efforts to address the different needs of Hijra refugees.

Within this, Shima, Vertika, Rahima, and Smarita described the horrible conditions that they faced in the camps and explained how the monsoon season only made matters more dire, with Vertika describing how she had lived in a makeshift dwelling as, "I was never given my own tent." (Interview 2020). The others described how their tents easily became water-logged or buried in several feet of mud during the rain. Shima recalled this time in a camp between Kolkata and the India-Bangladesh border.

> We saw people in thousands walking from all directions. And through the rain we walked, taking pains to keep our little bit of rice and muri dry. Sabrum river felt very dangerous and frightening. Alone we had to cross it on foot in the middle of the night. In Sabrum, we heard of small pox and cholera diseases. We took shelter here and there, and waited to arrive in the camps. We went to the camps and took shelter, if you could call it that, in some concrete areas that gave us some protection from the rain. We knew we had to leave, to get to Calcutta, to the city. The time there cannot be forgotten, but is difficult to remember.[4]

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[4] Calcutta was the official British name of the city until 2001, when it was changed to Kolkata to better reflect the Bengali pronunciation. Many older speakers continue to use "Calcutta" out of habit or preference, which I reflect in my transcription.

Encountering these difficulties, Shima and others aimed to leave and to travel to Kolkata to find greater safety in the urban spaces that had long been more safe for Hijra communities (Chakraborty 2020).

However, as aforementioned, Indian, Bangladeshi, and UN authorities identified repatriation as "the only solution," which contrasted what Shima and Rahima planned (Dasgupta 2016). Upon the declaration of a ceasefire and a peace accord by Sheikh Mujib Rahman's newly formed Bangladeshi government in December 1971, refugees were directed to return by state-led and humanitarian-organized programs. As P. N. Luthra, a retired army colonel who supervised the relief program for the central government of Kolkata explained in a report, "We want to keep them [the refugees] leaning toward their own homeland." (Government of Kolkata 1971). Commenting on this pressure, Rahima explained, "I came here [India] because I could not go back there. I would not go back there, no." (Interview 2019). Similarly, Shima shut her eyes and tutted when she remembered, "The blood was not dry on the streets of Dhaka and yet they wanted us back, to march back, happily and quickly." (Interview 2019). Their reactions showed the strong distaste that they felt at the idea of returning so quickly to a place that no longer felt like home, but where they had witnessed horrific violence.

Because of this, these four Hijra refugees each decided that they would not return and they each described how close friends and Hijra community members also rejected this idea. Shima explained their deliberation:

> Staying in the camp we could not do; return we could not do. These camp people were organizing this [return], but we did not wish it. We heard others talking of Calcutta and what could be done there. I thought Calcutta would be safer. It could be a place where we could make our way again. We left the camps on foot together and reached the city-when we reached the city we were so happy.

Echoing these sentiments, Smarita explained that "I could never feel safe there [Bangladesh] again. We suffered too much." (Interview 2020). In these ways, the past experiences of violence and their lives there, that had also been precarious, were not seen as viable futures for this community.

Further, as aforementioned, the ongoing political changes and nation-building in the new country of Bangladesh also were a part of the considerations of these Hijras when they contemplated their futures. Vertika described the broader feelings of unease that she felt, noting that she had "seen all of the things going on, heard all the time from radio, from friends, that *Bongobondhu* [the Bangladeshi Prime Minister] had been talking about the nation, the family, the mother, without any room for us. I too am maa." (Interview 2020). After suffering state-led violence prior to the 1971 conflict and sensing a possible onset of a political regime aiming to legitimize itself through a return to recognizable forms of British sexual governance, these Hijra refugees felt that they simply would not be safe. Smarita joked that "we knew *Bongobondhu* meant well, but what had he promised to us? Nothing. So I would not go. I just would not!" (Interview 2019). When asked about the "new Bengali nation" in Bangladesh and whether she had wanted to be a part of it, Smarita smiled, shook her head and commented, "I remember Bongobondhu [Mujib], he was in the papers, on the radios, always telling us 'come back to *your own* country'." (Interview 2020). In spite of this, Smarita explained that she never felt that she could be a part of the new country. The nearness of the past violence and the uncertainty that lay ahead in the reception of Hijra communities back to Bangladesh caused her concern enough.

Repatriation was not a viable solution for Hijra refugees like it was for cisgender refugees. Contradicting the script laid out by humanitarian and state actors, Smarita described how she and her Hijra sisters knew early on that they had to make their own way without relying on either state.

> How could we be sure? How could they provide us anything? How could we even know that there would not be bloodshed again? (Interview 2019).

Vertika and Rahima described that they saw that they had no future in Bangladesh and thus did not belong. Rahima commented, "What was back in Dhaka for me: nothing. Bad memories. Bad dreams. Pain." (Interview 2019). This intense affiliation with the past and the future as holding the possibility for pain compounded the risk and precarity that was normalized for Hijra communities. As aforementioned, the Bangladeshi state quickly adopted a paradoxical stance by continuing to use the same British penal codes that criminalized Hijras even while drafting a constitution promising equality and non-discrimination, heightening the risk that this community faced upon return. Instead, Vertika and her sisters decided to remain behind. "We didn't need them to tell us we could live there or we could stay. We decided to do it, and we did it." (Vertika Interview 2020). This reveals the choice that Hijras made on where they felt that they belonged rather than where the state or humanitarian organizations defined where they belonged.

6. "To use what I could to make my own way": belonging and community mobilization

Hijra actively rejected repatriation by journeying to Kolkata, where they first settled in informal refugee camps, and then gradually moved into the red-light areas, forging gendered communities and livelihoods. In these marginalized spaces, they connected with Hijra and Bengali networks that transcended colonial and Partition-era borders. Their labor within these communities ensured their survival but also became integral to their collective identity, highlighting their agency in crafting belonging on their own terms, amidst ongoing exclusion and marginalization.

In interviews as well as in secondary sources, Kolkata was frequently referred to as the obvious choice for refugees determined to settle following the conflict. The precolonial cultural and shared linguistic ties as well as the offerings of an urban area were imagined as a place of safety. Rahima explained, "Kolkata. I knew that going there would be safe. I knew that there were many industries there, things that we had done for a long time. So, we moved in that direction." (Interview 2019). While geographic proximity drove the most obvious reason for crossing the border into India and remaining there, Vertika noted that "we Bengalis share the same words, the same stories, the same ways of doing things." (Interview 2019). The shared identities of Kolkata attracted Vertika, Shima, Rahima, and Smarita, who each described how they saw the metropolis of Kolkata as the space where they could build anew while still being Bengali. As Smarita explained, "I knew how to speak, I knew how to behave. I would never leave Bengal." (Interview 2020). Her words highlight how linguistic and cultural familiarity were central to crafting a sense of belonging in Kolkata, allowing her to reclaim community even in displacement. Smarita, Vertika, Rahima, and Shima each spoke Bengali, frequently mentioned ties to a relative or a sister Hijra who resided in West Bengal prior to 1971, and talked about "fitting in." As Vertika summarized, "I knew how things are done there [Kolkata]." (Interview 2019). By choosing to remain, Vertika and the other interviewees not only resisted repatriation but also reaffirmed their connection to Greater Bengal as a place where their identities, histories, and communities could thrive. In doing so, they established a microcosm of belonging that transcended political borders and state-imposed categorization.

However, while Kolkata would become a site of that belonging, early experiences in the city still reflected the exclusion that Hijra refugees experienced in the rural refugee camp setting. Upon coming to Kolkata, Shima, and Vertika briefly settled in the Salt Lake area, a neighborhood in northern Kolkata where a sizable refugee camp had been set up and where many refugees were informally working and living already. However, Vertika and Shima explained that they felt an unease living in such tight quarters with cisgender refugees in the Salt Lake area. When asked to elaborate on how she felt, Rahima responded:

we, the Hijra, had always lived away. This was our way in history, we live together, but apart from them. This kept us safe and also kept our hearts well because, because we have our own ways of being together. (Interview 2020).

Sensing this tension and left out of formal rehabilitation programs, Shima and Vertika congregated together on the peripheries of these areas and eventually began to look for more permanent settlement through Hijra sisters who had successfully lived outside of the camps. Similar to Rahima, Shima explained how she and her sisters had long used communal living away from society as a way of ensuring protection and safety, but also as a way of supporting one another and enjoying their own chosen kinship networks. "We were together and we had our own family in each other." (Interview 2019). These responses show that separating from cisgender and heteronormative society was not only a means of survival but was a conscientious way of building belonging.

Cisgender refugees were increasingly either pushed out of West Bengal by the state and supported by humanitarian actors to resettle in other parts of India while being trained in gendered forms of labor, such as construction for men and stitching for women refugees (Schanberg 1971; Datta 2012). Left out of these programs altogether, these Hijra participants began to look to the types of informal labor, such as street performance and sex work, that they had used in Dhaka and did so partially through connecting with other Hijras in the city. Hijras had connections through gurus—who are established as spiritual and material mentors, leaders, and caretakers—and community ties in Kolkata who received them upon arrival. Shima recounted how Pikoo, a prominent Hijra refugee, helped her to find a place in a brothel with a slightly safer reputation where she could earn a living. Reflecting on the moment she was received by Pikoo and her followers in the red-light area, Shima recalled her feelings in that moment, "I finally came to rest with my own people. They received me, treated me lovingly." (Interview 2019). Hijra solidarity facilitated both survival and a sense of belonging. Following Pikoo's guidance, the interviewees explained that other Hijras left the camp areas and joined socio-familial connections within the city, building collective living arrangements that remained distinct from the broader cisgendered society.

Vertika, Shima, Rahima, and Smarita eventually each came to Sonagachi and Khiddurpur, the two main red-light areas in the city, and established their belonging through earning an independent livelihood. They each began working and "resettled themselves, despite local opposition or lack of aid" (Datta 2012: 137). Vertika described this as a time of building her own business and becoming self-sufficient. She explained, "My body had been used against me in Dhaka. Of course I would use it for my own ends." (Interview 2019). Later she added that taking this control made her feel that she had finally settled in Calcutta and belonged with Hijra and cisgendered sex workers, some of whom were also refugees from 1971. A journalist and activist traveling through Kolkata during this time complained that "the brothels all over India are full of girls and women from Bangladesh." (Partha 1974). Categories of difference overlapped in Sonagachi and Khiddurpur, where those excluded from society could live together and provide their own incomes. Explaining what she found in her life working in Sonagachi, Shima explained:

what happened, in Dhaka, in the camps, in the journey, had forever changed me. The old me was gone, and I thought, 'now I will make a new me.' We could not go backwards. I thought to use what I could to make my own way. (Interview 2019).

Shima's explanations show how the past lived on with her and her sisters, informing her present and her desire to establish herself in Kolkata. She went on to say, "We spent years like this, together and safe." (Interview 2020). This shows their ability to live collectively with other sex workers, to gain mutual recognition from one another, and to establish their belonging in these areas through agency over their own bodies.

However, Shima, Vertika, Rahima, and Smarita explained that the red-light areas were still a constant target of police harassment and that they would often feel afraid. At this time, civil society groups, policing, and religious organizations began to focus on the red-light areas as a

space in need of reform, a clear reflection of Mai's (2019) concept of 'moral gentrification' wherein "sexual-humanitarian social interventions criminalize and moralize underprivileged livelihoods" to make space for their own economies (190). In the early 1980s, city officials and the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIIH&PH) prepared the largest HIV and STI prevention campaigns for sex workers. Doctors began by "educating" sex workers on condom usage and other preventative measures and they also entered brothel spaces for invasive medical assessments (Interview 2019).

In response, sex workers asserted that these supposedly beneficent health campaigns were violations of their dignity and a misuse of resources because they belonged in these spaces. Vertika explained, "I felt safe in my *bari* (home), but they would enter without a word from us." (Interview 2020). These participants and their communities in the red-light areas argued that they faced more pressing dangers, from "police raids, extortion by the local goons, and the negative attitude of service providers" as well as the "extortionate money lending practices that exist only in red light areas that have always been part of the lives of us, sex workers" (Durbar 1997). As tensions heightened between sex workers and public health workers, Rahima found herself arguing that the only way to maintain their community and employment was to mobilize. She described this time as a moment "to not sit still." (Interview 2020). Adding to this, Shima quietly explained, "just like in the [1971] War, and after what we learned in the camps, we knew we had to act to never be dependent or to allow ourselves to be run by these goons." (Interview 2020). She added that "[u]nlike some, we thought that the trick would be to be in the streets with all the others." (Interview 2019). The participants' commitment to claiming the streets as their own reflects the establishment of a localized sense of belonging, where they not only maintained a physical presence within the urban landscape but also felt empowered to resist external pressures. This willingness to mobilize underscores a paradoxical form of belonging—one in which Hijra refugees, though precariously positioned as non-citizens, found both the security and the urgency to push back against state interventions. Their actions reveal a deeper dynamic, where belonging is not contingent on formal state recognition, but on the liminal agency of those cast as 'at the bottom'.

To bring about this mobilization other sex workers recalled how Hijra refugees in general were seen as bringing a "militant edge" to the early discussions around mobilization shaped by their experiences as survivors of conflict, violence, and displacement (Interviews 2020). As Proshenjit, a doctor working with the sex worker union explained, "these Hijras who had come to us after the 1971 events, they had a fearlessness, a know-how, that shaped everything. Without them, we would not have scared the police, scared the politicians, even scared the doctors away!" (Interview 2020). This fearfulness came from a place of belonging that enabled these four participants, and the larger sex-working community, to mobilize and fight back against their own precarity.

A pivotal moment in their narratives, each participant recounted the events of May Day 1991 as a powerful example of how they drew on the cultural practices that defined them as Hijra, alongside the refusal they cultivated as refugees, to assert their claim public belonging in the city. At sundown thousands of sex workers gathered with torches and placards that read *gatar khatiya khai, sramiker adhikar chai* (Working my body to eat, I want rights). Alongside these chants, Smarita, Shima, Vertika, and Rahima described how they performed *badhai* during this protest.

Badhai, a traditional practice among Hijras, involves clapping their hands, shouting slogans, making crude jokes, teasing men about their appearance or lack of sexual appeal, and sometimes threatening to show parts of their bodies (Hossain et al. 2022). According to Lal (1990), "The Hijras clap to say that they are there, in the streets, in the city, in the nation" (730). Hossain et al. (2022) describe *badhai* as a disruption meant to "challenge the sensorial, social, cultural, and moral hierarchies of the neighborhood that otherwise segregate, exclude and discriminate their presences." (89). Unlike other sex worker protesters who clapped and shouted slogans, *badhai* intentionally shamed and embarrassed onlookers.

Smarita reflected as she smiled, "We took the street for ourselves and for our sisters. Those *bhodrolok* [Bengali gentlemen] could not look away, and yet they also could not face us!" (Interview 2020). In her inclusive view of sisterhood, both cis-gendered and Hijra sex workers were connected through their shared struggle. She elaborated, "[A]t the marches, we clapped loud! Everyone had to hear us. We did not let anyone away, not to look away, not to not hear us." (Interview 2020). Vertika explained, "the marching and the attention-getting felt right because when we were *uDbastu* (refugees) we had to learn to care for ourselves. Here again we cared for each other, but through our performance." (Interview 2020). Describing some of their chants, Rahima added mischievously, "We always did this, but in this time, we did it to accomplish more than getting a few *paisa*." (Interview 2020). These participants described themselves as marching in the front, intentionally drawing attention to the sex workers' protest and proudly taking up public space through their act of shaming those standing in the street. Their remarks reveal how these Hijra refugees used *badhai* to asserting a localized sense of belonging through visibility in public space and legitimacy in their work.

As the protests continued, sex workers in Sonagachi formed the Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society Limited, later called the Durbar Committee, which formally registered sex workers in Kolkata as a workers association. Prior to this, "the sex workers were not allowed to write their occupation as such. But their efforts changed this." (Durbar Interview 2019). Together, this association re-affirmed the notion of belonging at the heart of their demands by publishing the Sex Workers manifesto, which declared:

> we are not objects of pity. We sex workers have come to organize our own forums to create soli-
> darity and collective strength among a larger community of prostitutes, forge a positive identity
> for ourselves as prostitutes and mark out a space for acting on our own behalf. (Durbar 1997: 7)

This space of acting on their own behalf established sex work in the city as belonging and those who participated in this form of labor as protected. Partially due to this organizing and partially due to the West Bengal Communist Government policies that remain outside of the scope of this paper, sex workers in Kolkata were finally formally recognized as legally protected laborers in 1999.

In considering their participation in this struggle and the accomplishment of these goals, each participant explained the relief that they felt and the ways that they saw this as connected to their efforts. Shima described:

> When we were together, talking, marching, we *were* fearless. We were tired, very tired, of being
> told what to do. I had been told what to do by doctors in the camps. Again in the city when I
> came at first and needed medical looking after. And then the last time, we could not bear it.
> Together, we realized that we need not bear it. I had defended my sisters before.
> (Interview 2020).

7. Conclusion

This article has explored how Hijra Bengali refugees refused repatriation to Bangladesh, where Hijras refugees were purported to "belong", and instead established a localized microcosm of belonging in Kolkata where they asserted their presence in public spaces and engaged in practices of belonging, such as work and protest. This belonging was chosen and crafted through ties of shared language, culture, relationships, and community. Finding a place in sex-working communities, who were already conceived of in Kolkata as being outside of the heteronormative political and social order, Hijras drew on their shared language, experiences, and connections to maintain their belonging in Kolkata. This narrative offers critical insights for the refugee studies literature by illustrating how queer and displaced communities navigate and contest the boundaries of belonging by forging their own precarious inclusion, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Though often portrayed as victims or excluded altogether from historical and

humanitarian accounts, Hijra refugees actively cultivate their own belonging—albeit in precarious conditions—reframing their daily practices and decisions as definitional of their gendered communities. Their stories serve as reminders that belonging is not always given, but is sometimes fiercely claimed, created, and maintained.

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