

CHAPTER 14

Hijras/Transwomen and Sex Work in India

From Marginalization to Social Protection

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SUMMARY

Transgender people have been evident in India for centuries, a fact reflected in descriptions in the *Kama Sutra*, an ancient Sanskrit text more than 1,500 years year old. Descriptions of transgender men and women are also found in major Sanskrit epics of India (Pattanaik, 2014), among the oldest surviving epic poems on earth, and images of transgender people are depicted in many ancient Indian temple carvings. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Mughal Empire controlled most of the Indian subcontinent, trans people attained special status in the king's court as political advisers, administrators, and generals; they also served as guardians of women in harems (Reddy, 2005). Thus, the concepts of a third gender, that some male-born and female-born individuals desire to identify with a gender different from that assigned at birth, and that transwomen may engage in sex work, have been relatively well known in India for centuries. From this perspective, transgender people in India have a longer documented history than they do in most other nations on earth.

KEY TERMS

hijras; HIV; sex work; third gender; transwomen

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