

Muratan, Mahants and Emergent Identities: Vernacular Culture and the Power of Place in Transgender Punjab

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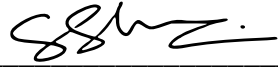
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Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. The Ethics Committee at Macquarie University approved the fieldwork component of this project on the 19th of December 2016, with the reference number: 5201600905.

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Abstract

This thesis articulates the various trajectories that transgender lives follow in the Punjab, India. The transgender identity of *muratan* marks the first part of this journey, as one riddled with exclusions based on class, caste, gender, and sexuality. In contrast, the *kinnars* are relatively respected and revered in their capacity as ritual holders, an elevation that is dependent on the cultivation of place and strategic alignments with divinity that allow a transcendence of their sexual and gendered difference. By according primacy to place as crucial in the constitution of these subjectivities, I bring a new perspective to the literature on transgender identities in India. I explore the fluidity and exchange between the transgender identities in Punjab by contending that all of the identities on the transgender spectrum are shaped by dominant cultural mores, myths, and meanings, in that we may define them as ‘vernacular identities’. Furthermore I look at how the nature of emergent transgender activism in the Punjab is also an interplay between the old and the new, pointing to the centrality of vernacular culture, myth and religion in the constitution of subjectivities across the transgender spectrum in the region.

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Notes on Transliteration

Diacritics have not been used in the transliteration of non-English words for ease of reading. I have added double vowels for emphasis and stress where needed instead. Translated terms appear in italics throughout, except for the most commonly used words such as *kinnar*, *murat*, *dera*, *badhai*, *kothi*, and so on. All translations and transliterations are from Punjabi, Hindi, as well as Urdu. All of these translations are my own, unless specified. All terms, except *muratan*, have been pluralised following English conventions. Wherever a place, name, or deity is mentioned, the terms have not been italicised, and follow their most commonly used English spellings.

Introduction

I travelled to my native Punjab at the beginning of 2017 to conduct an ethnography of the culturally institutionalised third sex of Punjab, known as *kinnars*. Kinnars are known as *hijras* across India and parts of South Asia, and have been a popular subject of scholarly inquiry over the years (Shah 1961; Pimpley & Sharma 1985; Nanda 1986, 1990; Cohen 1995; Hall & O'Donovan 1996; Agrawal 1997; Hall 1997, 2005; Reddy 2005; Dutta 2012, 2014; Kalra 2012; Goel 2016, Jaffer 2017). Over the course of the next three months, I got to know the kinnar community. At the same time, I also came to know another transgender community that has not been explored in the literature thus far. I came to know this community as the *muratan*.

Kinnars live in communal dwellings called *deras*, which are hierarchical households where kinnar gurus live with their *chelas* or disciples. The principal source of income for a dera is *badhai*, which means 'to congratulate' and refers to their ritual role of blessing newlyweds and newborn males by singing and dancing, for which they get paid in cash and gifts. Kinnars must get initiated into *deras* in order to become members of the community, a process that often involves the *nirvan* (castration) operation (though this is not mandatory), and a *mela* or festival that celebrates the new addition to the dera. The kinnars of Punjab, just like their counterparts in other parts of North and South India, position themselves as asexual renunciates, who have either been born intersex (though this is a rare occurrence) or

have undergone castration to become ‘third’. For the kinnars, this is a ‘severance’ from the world of procreation, which in turn imbues them with divine power, a power that they channel in fulfilling their ritual role of bestowing blessings.

The existing literature has explored many facets of kinnar life in India, from kinship practices, gender performance, the hierarchical nature of the guru-*chela* relationship, badhai rituals, the particularities of castration, as well as their status as conduits for divine power (Nanda 1986, 1990; Cohen 1995; Hall & O’Donovan 1996; Hall 1997, 2005; Reddy 2005; Dutta 2012, 2014; Kalra 2012; Goel 2016). I would like to contribute to this rich literature by elaborating on place and place making as central to the constitution of kinnar identity. Though I also explore many of the themes that have been described in the literature, place and its centrality in kinnar life is yet to be discussed at length. The kinnars I encountered in the cities of Jalandhar and Chandigarh in Punjab, whilst sharing many aspects of their identities with the kinnars/hijras we encounter in the literature, also have their own unique cultural, social, and religious universe. A strategic mastery of place (de Certeau 1984), in this case the deras or community dwellings, allows them to make moves that re-negotiate their sexual and gender deviance, by claiming the status of *faqirs* (Sufi renunciates) and *mahants* (saintly keepers of shrines). I explore the role of the dera at length in constituting kinnar identity, to show how this dwelling allows them to manage their exteriority to a mainstream society that could so readily punish them for their difference.

In contrast, muratan are another transgender identity that we may call a ‘vernacular identity’ because of their embeddedness in the Punjabi cultural, musical,

and religious universe. They are an identity that is almost identical to the *kothis*¹ of North India (Hall 2005; Bondyopadhyay & Shah 2007; Dutta 2012; Morcom 2013; Nagar & Dasgupta 2015), and the *jankhas* described by Cohen in his work (1995). However, I make some distinctions between the muratan and the kothis as their identity is shaped largely by Punjabi vernacular culture, influenced by specific class affiliations and proximity to kinnar communities. Muratan often claim to be kinnars, a move that affords them relative safety in a society that punishes their gender and sexual deviance with violence. Muratan must hide their true feminine identity in daily life, and often employ ‘mobile tactics’ (de Certeau 1984) in an attempt to remedy their lack of a safe place and community, the kind that kinnars have access to in the form of the dera and wider kinship networks.

Amidst the dominance of kinnars and the liminality of muratan on the transgender spectrum, a new subjectivity is emerging. Dhananjay Chauhan, a transgender activist from Chandigarh, is on a mission to ensure that all kinnars and muratan have access to education, jobs, and a place in ‘mainstream’ society. Through an appeal to some of the ‘residual elements’ (Williams 1973) of kinnar culture, and the emerging voices of ‘modern’ queer identities, she is carving out a space for herself and her philosophy of unity between the old and new, between the traditional and emergent meanings that define transgender subjectivities in Punjab.

For Cohen, any theory of gender must have its foundations in the corporeal, in lived experience (1995). Whilst the narratives of Cohen’s respondents resisted ‘any a priori divisibility into embodied sex and expressive gender’ (1995, 278), I found that for the muratan especially, their biology, or possibly simply their ‘embodied sex’ seemed to stand in the way of their social understanding and embodiment of their

¹ The term has two variations in spelling, *'koti'* and *'kothi'*. I will be using the latter, as it is the more commonly used pronunciation in Punjabi, *ko-thee*, rather than *ko-tee*.

gender. Most muratan ‘feel like a woman on the inside,’ or contend that they have been born ‘in the wrong body,’ pointing to how the facts of their bodily make-up stand in the way of their gender expression, facts they often wish to alter through hormones, breast augmentation, and castration. I find that this desire for the appropriate embodied sex, in conjunction with social and cultural understandings of the body often inform the individual in learning how to creatively inhabit a body that reflects the synthesis of these desires in the absence of access to medical intervention. I do prefer the term ‘embodied sex’ as it is not always strictly their biology muratan wish to alter, but any bodily facts that can make them more of a ‘woman,’ whether that be hair removal, or the use of make-up.

Judith Butler finds gender to be both linguistic and theatrical in its expression (1999), two elements that defined my respondents’ gendered performance. The theatrical hand clapping of the kinnars and the *lachak-mathak* (exaggerated swaying of the hips) displayed by the muratan are just two examples of this performance. They may be read as a way in which a deeply felt sense of gender identity is expressed, not simply performed, both at the level of bodily practices as well as of language. We can include in this reading an understanding of how the apparent ‘givenness’ of biology also shapes the experiences of these identities – as something that hinders their ability to be their true selves in the world and therefore as something they wish to correct. I explore how these desires for transformation and transition interact with class and caste in the shaping of these identities.

Fieldwork and Methodology

I was born in the village of Raipur just outside the city of Jalandhar in the north Indian state of Punjab. For the next ten years, I grew up in the village, whilst attending school in the city. The village was like any other village in rural Punjab, populated by a majority of landholding Jatt farmers, Hindus of various ‘upper’ castes, *mirasis* (Muslims of a lower caste), *chamars* (formerly known as the ‘untouchable’ class, they identify as Dalits, meaning crushed or broken in Sanskrit), as well as other smaller communities and castes. I grew up listening to *qawwalis* (Sufi devotional music) with my mother, going to the *mata/devi mandir* (temple of the goddess Laxmi) every Tuesday, and to the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) every weekend. Religious plurality defined life in the village, and I took a keen interest in all of these religious philosophies from a young age.

I had read DeVault and Gross (2012) on Feminist Qualitative Interviewing before I left, and had reflected upon the principles that would guide my own approach in the field. Being well aware that my education, status as a Punjabi living in Australia, as well as being a *Brahmin* or upper caste Hindu were all factors that would shape my interactions with respondents in the field, I wanted to approach my respondents in a way that would be both familiar and comfortable for them. I wanted to engage in active listening, finding and acknowledging common ground with my participants, and keeping in mind that an understanding of gender must always

intersect with a knowledge of the respondents' race, caste, and class identity (DeVault and Gross 2012). These principles would become formative to my fieldwork approach as a whole, as they ensured that the respondents were able to talk to me with confidence and ease.

I initially met the muratan in 'The Centre',² an NGO working with the queer community in Jalandhar. At the time I was unaware of their distinct identity. The muratan, from the very beginning, were curious about me, asking me questions about my life in Australia, about relationships, and the kind of *azaadi* (freedom) I had as a woman in a foreign country. They welcomed me into their homes, their places of work, and their social lives. For this, and much more, I will forever be grateful to the muratan of Jalandhar.

In Jalandhar and surrounding villages, I was able to understand the rural and more traditional practices that define murat and kinnar identities. I had re-established contact with deras I had visited on previous trips, when I had filmed some interviews with kinnars for a video project. Having had previous interactions with these dera kinnars in Jalandhar made it easier for me to identify new respondents through these contacts.

Travelling to Chandigarh, the capital city of Punjab, provided new insights and allowed me to explore the 'modern' and emergent transgender culture of Punjab. Kajal Mangalmukhi, a kinnar and activist from the area, whom I had met in 2012, invited me to come and see the work that she was doing. There I discovered a world of activism, of queer Pride events, and of Dhananjay Chauhan, a transgender activist fighting for education and employment. I believe that travelling to Chandigarh

² This is how I will be describing the NGO throughout, having withheld the name to protect the safety of the staff, as well as visiting muratan and kinnars, at the request of the founder of the NGO. Other NGO names have been mentioned with permission.

allowed me to witness a whole new dimension of transgender life in Punjab, one that I could not have been able to understand had I conducted all of my fieldwork in the smaller town of Jalandhar.

Methodology

My methodology had its foundations in the understanding that ‘we cannot live other people’s lives and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what in words, in images, in actions they say about their lives’ (Geertz 1986, 373). Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were the two key techniques I engaged as part of my fieldwork methodology. However, the time I spent socialising with my respondents, especially with muratan, proved to be the main and most fruitful component of my research strategy.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to let my respondents speak with leisure about their life histories, though I did sometimes draw on research themes to make specific inquiries. I found that this worked especially well with kinnars, a lot of whom were nervous or hesitant to speak at first. It was common for kinnars to say ‘what can I tell you? we are not educated people,’ at which point I would simply ask them to tell me their life stories. This proved to be quite effective in making the kinnars feel at ease in interviews, also making it easier for me to then be able to ask specific questions that related to themes of my research.

As a key part of my research looks at identity and place, I also spent a lot of time observing my respondents in their homes and places of work. My understanding of dwelling practices in the dera, kinnar gatherings, badhai rituals, and also the experiences of muratan on the road and on stage were all shaped by observation.

Especially in Sonia's dera, I was able to spend long periods of time observing everyday activities, as well as special occasions such as the yearly *mela* (festival), both being pivotal in shaping my understanding of kinnar life and identity.

With the muratan, the very lack of a place they could call a collective home meant I could not simply observe from the sidelines. I was often very actively a part of their activities, whether it was birthday celebrations at the NGO or going out to the *bazaar* (market) together. These experiences allowed me to experience life as the muratan do – to feel, hear, taste, smell, and see things as they do, and to be able to learn from that exposure. I would travel with them on foot, on their scooters, into their neighbourhoods, and the places that they frequented. I was able to get a more intimate grasp of their lives by living these moments with them, moments that allowed me to understand their lives in a way that an outside observer could not. These experiences came with their challenges, and in some cases I did fear for my safety when travelling with muratan. Being subject to catcalls and being followed by men was a common occurrence when I was out with the muratan, and although they would reassure me that this was normal, these situations always made me nervous. I had to learn to put my safety first, and on two occasions had to turn down offers to accompany muratan to musical concerts at night. Though not being a full participant may have taken away from my abilities to fully observe my respondents in these situations, I believe that my friendship with the muratan enriched my understanding of their lives and experiences in many other ways, by living, feeling, and connecting with them.

It is through finding common ground with and listening to my respondents, as well as being able to feel the contours of their experiences first hand, that I have been able to speak about their pain, their struggles, as well as their successes and triumphs. I was able to connect with my respondents largely through a shared love of Sufi music

and poetry. Living outside of ‘mainstream’ society means that many kinnars wish to keep their dera lives secret and often refuse to speak to ‘outsiders’. My relatives told me at first that they would not speak to me, yet I always felt welcome in deras, and the kinnars were generous with their time and patience for my questions. I believe that sharing a love of Sufi philosophy, being able to speak to them in their tongue, as well as being from a local village were all factors that allowed me to connect with kinnars, a connection that was both a privilege and a pleasure.

I have changed the names of most individuals and organisations in order to protect their identities. Muratan will not appear in photographs outside of *roop* (dressed up as women) to protect their privacy and safety. Pictures of The Centre in Jalandhar have also been withheld in order to protect the safety of the staff and the transgender individuals who visit the NGO.

Name	Profile
Tara	A young murat in her early twenties. She is from Jalandhar and dances at Hindu and Sufi festivals to earn a living. She lives at home with her father, and supports the household financially.
Dhananjay	Transgender activist from Chandigarh. She has been organising Pride Week in the city for five years. She is in her mid forties, and has two children from a previous marriage. She refers to Kajal as her guru.
Kirat	In her early twenties, Kirat lives at home with her family and works at The Centre, an NGO working with the queer community in Jalandhar. She feels close to the kinnars, and is often seen at their <i>melas</i> (festivals).
Shweta	She is the founder of The Centre and identifies as an ‘effeminate gay’. Shweta is in her late twenties and refers to herself as a male and female interchangeably. I refer to her as ‘she’ because that is how she refers to herself most often.
Sonia	In her late fifties, Sonia is a kinnar guru and refers to herself as a <i>mahant</i> (saintly keeper of a shrine) and <i>faqir</i> (Sufi renunciate). Though she no longer works for badhai, she keeps herself busy tending to the shrines on her property.
Priya	The only murat I met who dresses in <i>salwar kameez</i> in everyday life. She is in her early twenties and lives with another murat in a rented room in Jalandhar. She dances and begs on trains to earn a living. Her dream is to build a temple dedicated to Shiva.
Kajal	A dera kinnar in her early forties. She is originally from Karnataka, and lives in a dera in Manimajra, Chandigarh. In addition to working for badhai, she is also involved in transgender activism. Her guru is Neelam <i>mahant</i> . Kajal refers to Dhananjay as her <i>chela</i> (disciple) and supports her financially and in her work as an activist.
Kamini	A dera kinnar from Jalandhar. Kamini is in her early fifties and lives with her guru. She often came to see me at The Centre, as her guru would not allow her to speak to outsiders about their ‘secrets’.
Neelam	Neelam <i>mahant</i> is the guru of the kinnar dera in Manimajra, Chandigarh. She is Kajal’s guru. In her early fifties, she is from Karnataka. Neelam does not approve of Kajal’s work as an activist, and believes badhai to be the only work appropriate for kinnars.

Table 1.1: Profiles of Key Participants

Chapter 1

The Muratan of Punjab

I met Tara in the third week of my fieldwork trip to Punjab. We exchanged numbers and agreed to meet a week later. As my uncle dropped me off to meet Tara, he told me to ‘be careful, and call me if you feel unsafe. You don’t know how *these* people are’. As I alighted from the car and made my way through the cacophony of cars, rickshaws, scooters, and shouting street vendors, I thought about what my uncle had said. In fact, every time I told anyone in my family that I was interested in meeting and talking to people from the Punjabi transgender community, they were quick to warn me with *eh log change nahi aa* (they are not good people). Passing a series of narrow streets that seemed to disappear into the innards of the city, I took a right turn at the bicycle repair shop as Tara had specified. I felt exposed, acutely aware of the eyes that followed me down the narrow alleyway, my uncle’s words certainly of no help to my nervous self. I finally found the maroon screen doors that I was looking for, and made my way up the stairs.

Tara greeted me with a smile and a handshake. I was somewhat reassured by the laughter from the group of people sitting on the sunny terrace, soaking in the

winter sun. Tara sported a short blonde-streaked bob and a black turtleneck; her closely shaved face was angular yet feminine, and her long nails were painted black. She introduced herself as a *murat*. Though I was born and raised in Punjab, and am fluent in the local vernacular and most colloquial terms, I had never heard this word before. Tara explained what the word meant in the following way:

When I was ten years old, I came into this ‘line’. Before that, I didn’t know who I was. My friends knew, but they never told me. I always felt like a girl, and wondered why. Am I the only one like this? Then I started to go here and there with the muratan (plural of murat). They told me we are all muratan; we have the soul of a girl and can get operated on to become a *mahant* (keeper of a shrine, term used by kinnars to refer to themselves). They used to call me a murat and I always said no I am not one of them, but I was.

Before elaborating on the muratan and what I came to understand them to be, I need to explain some of the key terms that will be indispensable in understanding both kinnar and murat identity. The matter of nomenclature is also not neutral – as we shall see it reveals regional specificities that may have been overlooked, as well as a more general gap between the nomenclatures of contemporary urban gay movements in relation to what we might term ‘vernacular culture,’ in South Asia.

1.1 Kinnars: The third gender of Punjab

In both the Pakistani and Indian Punjab, hijras are known by various names, such as *mahant*, *khusra*, *khwaja sira*, and kinnar (Kalra 2012; Abbas et. al. 2014). None of these terms actually included the term murat, which is how Tara had introduced herself. And indeed, the kinnars are a very important social category in Punjab, but

even here there are gaps of meaning. The popular belief in Punjab is that kinnars are all born intersex. However, as Goel highlights, a very small percentage of kinnars are actually biologically third (born with genital deformities), and both *akwa* (non-castrated) and *nirvan* (castrated) individuals make up the majority of the kinnar community (2016, 537). The ritual significance of the culturally sanctioned role that kinnars play emplaces them in a web of signifiatory practices, so that even though they are deviant in their sexual and gender identity, they are nevertheless respected because of their ability to both bless and curse. I will maintain the use of the term kinnar to refer to hijras throughout this thesis, as they are a distinct group who have managed to occupy a position of some respect in rural Punjabi history. It is also the most commonly used term for hijras in the region. Other terms, such as the derogatory *khusra* and the respectful form of address for kinnars in Punjabi, namely *mahant* (keeper of a shrine), which connotes their ritual purity and the significance of their religious powers were also mentioned by respondents at certain points in the ethnographic data. I have avoided the use of the Punjabi *khusra* and the Hindi *hijra*, as both terms are often used to insult kinnars in the Punjabi context, suggesting impotence in men.

1.2 Where do ‘muratan’ fit into such a network of signifiatory practices?

During my previous interactions with the kinnars of Punjab in 2012 and again in 2015, there had been no mention of muratan. It was also not easy to trace their presence in the literature I reviewed both before and during fieldwork (Shah 1961; Pimpley & Sharma 1985; Nanda 1986, 1990; Hall & O’Donovan 1996; Agrawal

1997; Hall 1997, 2005; Reddy 2005; Dutta 2012, 2014; Kalra 2012; Goel 2016; Jaffer 2017; Kumar 2017). It was mentioned once in Reddy (2005). This is where Reddy is describing a *kori murat* (2005, 163) which in Punjabi would mean ‘blank statue,’ or someone who has not yet adopted the dress and adornments of a woman. Amen Jaffer also mentions a murat in the Pakistani context as a fusion of the Urdu *mard* (man) and *aurat* (woman), but no distinction is made between a murat and a kinnar in his work (2017, 181). In other Pakistani literature, murat is always described as a term synonymous with kinnar (Mithani & Burfat 2003; Nazir & Yasir 2016).

As my understanding of the muratan progressed throughout my fieldwork, I found that they had in fact been referred to in the literature, but under quite different names, such as *koti*, *kothi*, *cada-katla kothi*, *zenanas*, *jankhas*, and men who have sex with men or MSM (Cohen 1995; Hall 2005; Reddy 2005; Bondyopadhyay & Shah 2007; Dutta 2012; Morcom 2013; Nagar & Dasgupta 2015).

Kira Hall’s (2005) work on the kothis of Delhi provides an appropriate point of foray into murat identity. Muratan mirror the kothis of Delhi not just in their self-identification as women in contrast to the ‘thirdness’ claimed by kinnars, but also in their use of the secret lexicon of *Farsi*, a vocabulary that allows muratan to communicate with each other in public. Though muratan explained to me that Farsi is in no way related to Persian as a language, they did admit to its rootedness in the Punjabi vernacular of Pakistan. Indeed, muratan also loved the Punjabi music of Pakistan. These are continuing shared meanings amongst vernacular identities in both the Pakistani and Indian Punjab. This attraction to Pakistani Punjabi culture, through vernacular, music, and even religious practice reappears several times in both murat and kinnar narratives. This is evidence that cultural exchange amongst vernacular

identities in South Asia is a reality that continues to shape and influence these groups despite the history of partition and nationalist states on both sides of the border.

Dhananjay, a transgender activist from Chandigarh, described muratan to me in the following way:

We call muratan the people who are in the process of transformation, those who identify themselves as transgender women, or want to transition at some point in their lives. They are *muratiyan* or muratan. When they enter the kinnar culture, then they are called kinnars, but the ones who are in-between are muratan.

Murat (singular)/ muratan (plural), though being very similar to the kotis or kothis discussed in the literature (Hall 2005; Reddy 2005; Dutta 2012; Morcom 2013, Nagar & Dasgupta 2015), are a distinct vernacular identity. Referring to muratan as the Punjabi term for kothis underestimates the degree of difference, not at a strictly sexual level, but at the level of the way that being a murat is lived. As a Punjabi identity, it is defined also by distinctively Punjabi (which often includes a Pakistani Punjabi) culture. At the same time, it is important not to underplay the similarities between the two identities. Both kothis and muratan describe their partners as *giriya* (a Farsi term), or men that consider themselves heterosexual, but assume the role of the active partner in sexual relationships (Hall 2005, 129; Kalra 2012, 122). Kothis and muratan are receptive partners, desiring penetration by the *giriya*. This is why kothis have been referred to in the literature as a ‘feminine homosexual identity’ (Bondyopadhyay & Shah 2007, 17). This feminine identity is therefore also distinct from western gay and bisexual identities, as kothis do not desire other kothis or gay men. They desire straight men that are willing to be penetrative partners, just as the muratan do.

Both identities are based on a gender performance, which Bondyopadhyay & Shah have called an amplification of a feminine identity (2007, 17). It is boisterous and loud. The exaggeration of female identity enacted by muratan and kothis is often influenced by Punjabi and Hindi (Bollywood) popular culture. Mannerisms such as walking with a *lachak-mathak* (Cohen 1995, 287), or swaying of the hips, the displaying of *nakhre* (sass), and being openly flirty are also common ways for these identities to embody femininity. These expressions of gender are rooted not only in influences from dominant cultural reproductions of femininity, but also in class. Murat and kothi identity is a class-based identity, often adopted by boys from the lower classes, with strong influences from groups such as the *mirasis*, who are Muslims of a lower social group that work as entertainers and musicians.

Cohen describes two such men in his study of hijras and *jankhas* (who we are calling kothis/muratan) in Varanasi:

Both men were very poor and low-caste, and had grown up in communities with drama troupes which played drums and performed satiric skits with female ingénue roles....dressing in saris and dancing was not only a sign of gendered difference but part and parcel of local subsistence (1995, 287).

The muratan I met had mostly grown up in low caste families, and also performed in order to survive. Feminised performances were therefore not only accepted but also encouraged. And though not all muratan I met came from a *mirasi* or entertainment background, they did all share a lower class/caste status (See 1.6).

Despite having a lot in common with the kothis, I came to understand muratan as a distinct identity, one that is embedded in the cultural universe of Punjab. As Dhananjay pointed out, a murat has both the desire for and seeks the possibility to

transition. I witnessed the expression of this desire in many muratan, and Kirat, a murat from Jalandhar, would often show me breast augmentation injections and hormones that she wanted to buy. Though I advised her against using them, she nevertheless continued to show me videos of a kinnar on You Tube, and would excitedly point out how feminine she looked, how perfect her breasts were. I came to understand this as a desire for biological transition, a transition into kinnarhood, or both. Whereas the kothis of Delhi often parody kinnar identities, and seek to distinguish themselves from both the lower class kinnars and upper class gays (Hall 2005, 127), muratan see themselves as being close to kinnars, and often attempt to adopt a kinnar identity. For the kothis, there is a certain pleasure in passing as kinnars, but for the muratan it is often a deliberate move that affords them some safety and respect when they move through society. Hall points to the *possibility* of kothis transitioning into kinnarhood, whereas many muratan often pointed to an *inevitability* of transition. Preet, a kinnar who danced to earn a living once said to me ‘we can dance now, but in the end we will have to live in deras with kinnars, in the end that is the place for people like us’. For the muratan, this transition into kinnarhood can ensure them safety and security, as well as a community, whereas neither the kothis nor the *jankhas* envision this transition to be an inevitable part of the trajectory that their lives will follow. Even Tara pointed to this whilst defining the term murat for me, saying ‘[we] can get operated on to become a *mahant* (kinnar)’ referring not just to a biological transition or a transition into kinnarhood, but both.

Muratan mirror the syncretic religious practice of kinnars, both as tools of elevation and as practices that they have been socialised into through early association with kinnars, as well as with other class identities related to the kinnars, such as *mirasis* or lower caste Muslims linked with music and entertainment. There is also a

strong influence of vernacular culture in the lives of muratan, who often also referred to themselves as *khwaja sira*, or the Pakistani Punjabi term for kinnars. Muratan also have an affinity with Sufi devotional music, an interest that they share with the kinnars. Therefore, whilst acknowledging that the muratan of Punjab are quite similar to kothis, I would like to also highlight the specifically Punjabi influences that shape murat identity.

1.3 Making a murat: coming into '*roop*'

It is in this gap in the literature that I would like to situate this thesis. Murat identity has not been explored at length in existing scholarship, and I believe that they are a group who must be understood in order to grasp the motivations behind kinnar traditions and practices. Dhananjay's definition and my own observations both establish that though not *all* muratan transition into kinnarhood, most kinnars were muratan before they made the transition. I therefore contend that the kinnar community has largely been shaped by the practices that seem to be remedial to the exclusions that muratan face. In that the two communities are interlinked, and I believe that all of the tools of elevation that kinnars utilise to escape violence, have been forged to ensure this transition can facilitate a respite from the marginalisation they once faced as muratan.

It will be one of the key aims of this thesis to convey just what a difference it makes in terms of harassment and violence towards homosexual and transgender identities as to whether or not muratan are able to connect themselves to social meanings and values that offer a relative respite and the chance of respect. In other words, how do muratan survive in a social grid that punishes their sexual and gender

deviance? Some of the spaces they utilise are modern, newly minted ones, such as the NGO offices I explore in the final chapter of this thesis. Others, however, derive from the longer traditions of the Punjab and other parts of South Asia. This theme ties back to my other key theme about the vernacular identities of the Punjab region, which intersect not only the border of divided Punjab but also the border between sexual and religious identity.

Muratan will therefore strategically refer to themselves on occasion in elevated terms as ‘*mahants*,’ invoking the ascetic and holy persona of an initiated kinnar. I explore the kinnars in their embodiment of this persona in some detail in the next chapter. But they are also already a part of this discussion of muratan. In what follows, I explore one of the key ways in which muratan try to align themselves with the religious meanings of popular traditions that draw on both Sufi and Hindu traditions of *bhakti* (devotion). I begin with ‘coming into *roop*’.

Do you want to see me in my *roop*?.....this was at a *hijra habba*, it’s like a big party for kinnar people, they all gather there and dance, and have a fashion show. I look like a girl! You can’t even tell, can you?

(Kirat, a murat from Jalandhar)

Amen Jaffer defines murat as a term that is a fusion of the Urdu *mard* (man) and *aurat* (woman) (2017, 181). The Hindi origins of the term, on the other hand, are rooted in the word *murati*, or the statue of a deity that occupies the inner sanctum of a Hindu temple (Kramrisch 1946, 7). These statues are imbued with power through the consecration ritual of eye-opening and establishing the breath, followed by *darshan* or the ritual viewing of the god or goddess (Eck 1985, 51). To ‘come into *roop*’ for a murat is to undergo a similar transformation to the deity. Just as the statue becomes the deity or god in the process of embellishment, of being adorned with clothes and

jewels, the murat becomes a woman when she dresses up or ‘comes into *roop*’. Whilst the deity is viewed at the sacred level in its true *roop* through *darshan*, Cohn reminds us that this being seen also operates at the profane level as ‘Indians wish to see and be seen’ (Cohn [1989] in Reddy 2005, 126). The murat wishes to be seen in her *roop*, as her true feminine self, a transformation which is achieved by dressing up or ‘coming into *roop*’.

Why must the murat come into *roop*? Why isn’t she always her female self? What are the conditions that place limitations on her ability to simply be her ‘true essence’? I will now explore the reasons why muratan are not able to embody their true feminine identities in everyday life.

Kirat, a murat I met in Jalandhar, lived at home with her family, though many muratan do leave home or get thrown out as teenagers. She invited me to her house during the week of Shivaratri, or ‘the night of Shiva,’ a festival that celebrates the Hindu god Shiva. I rode on the back of her scooter through the narrow alleyways of Basti Bawa Khel, a neighbourhood comprising primarily of Dalit or lower caste households. At home, she introduced me to her mother, father, and two brothers. Kirat’s short coloured hair and painted nails were all signs that her family seemed to ignore, and in turn she dressed in jeans and a t-shirt to avoid conflict at home. Later in the day, Kirat and I went to the *bazaar* (market) together. We wove our way through the narrow lanes lined with jewellers, grocers, and apparel stores in the heart of Jalandhar. It was when we were getting piercings together in a jewellery shop that she offered to show me a picture of herself in *roop*. Kirat was wearing a *saree*, golden jewels, a full face of make-up, and a wig. She excitedly pointed out to me that the photos were taken at a *hijra habba* (gathering of kinnars).

‘Are you allowed to go to kinnar parties?’ I asked her. ‘Of course *didī* (sister), *we are also like them in a way, we are close to them*’.

Most of the muratan I interviewed often alternated between referring to themselves as men, women, and in some cases, kinnars or *mahants*. It is perhaps because they are required to conceal and at the same time portray identities interchangeably at home and in social circles that this identity shifting becomes second nature. Of course, referring to oneself as a kinnar is also a tool of elevation. In Kirat’s case, at home she was Karan (a male Punjabi name), and outside the house she would refer to herself as Kirat, walk with a sway of the hips, and display all the *nakhre* (sassiness) of a murat.

Dancing at festivals and religious events is an opportunity for muratan to come into *roop*. For the muratan who live independently, this is also a principal source of income, though many also do sex work to survive. Whereas some of the kothis in the literature report having long term partners who support them, muratan did not report any long term or financially supportive relationships with their *giriya*s (male partners). Rani, a murat introduced to me by Tara during the week of Shivaratri in Jalandhar, told me about dancing and *roop*:

We perform at all festivals, because it is not good work [dancing] for women here. Men do not want to dress up and dance in front of people, but this is our ‘line’. I dance at Hindu and Sufi *melas* (festivals), and now starting in June, all the Sufi *melas* will be held in summer. I can make a lot of money in a few months that way.

If dancing is ‘not good work for women,’ it is also not good work for the more respectable kinnars who inhabit a religious identity. *Melas* celebrating the Sufi *pirs* (saints) are often said to be incomplete unless a kinnar dances there. Often the *chaadar* (ceremonial shroud placed upon the tomb of the saint) is also offered by the

kinnars. What I noticed during fieldwork however was that mostly muratan were performing at these *melas*. Kinnars occupied the more privileged position of watching them dance, and offering the shroud, both markers of their superior position in the transgender world of Punjab.

The dancing muratan Tara and Rani, whom I met at one of the many stages set up across busy intersections of the city during the week of Shivaratri, were both dressed as consorts of the Hindu god Krishna, who was also played by a murat. Tara was unrecognisable in her *roop*, as I had earlier seen her in a turtleneck sweater and jeans. She wore a teal-green *lehenga*, a long skirt with a thickly sequined blouse, complete with a full face of make-up.

Performing arts, especially dance, are amongst the most common occupations for muratan. The stigma on females in public performances means that muratan are able to assume these stage roles, and are often in high demand during festival season. Though muratan perform primarily at Hindu and Sufi religious events, they also have a history in erotic dance, which is part and parcel of sex work. However, there does not seem to be an active culture of erotic dance in Punjab, as muratan themselves only speak about dancing at *melas*. Nevertheless, muratan do have an affinity with the *mujra* style of dance, which is often set to *ghazals* (poetic Urdu music), and has a history that is embedded in the Mughal Period. This style has further been popularised by Bollywood films, and muratan often perform to these Bollywood numbers in the *mujra* style, even at Hindu and Sufi festivals. This is made possible by the hybridised nature of Bollywood music itself, which is often a bricolage of themes of romantic and divine love.

I recorded some video footage of Rani on the stage, performing as Krishna's consort Radha. She danced to a Bollywood number called *Mohe rang do laal*, in

which Radha is pleading Krishna to ‘colour her red’. Rani’s immaculate moves and playful gestures were revealing of the pride and emotion she invested in her performance. Though the crowd was sparse and largely unresponsive, Rani was unaffected. She was not performing for the crowd, I thought, she was performing for herself, for her own pleasure, and her desire to be in *roop*.



Figure 1: *Muratan pose for a photo after their performance during Shivaratri.*

Muratan enjoy the performance aspect of their work. Dance becomes a privileged place to perform gender, and in the case of muratan, a chance to become their true female self (Morcom 2013, 99). Though all of the muratan on stage enjoyed performing and especially dressing up, Rani pointed out the ambivalence with which the public receives their performance:

As you know these people don't respect us on the street, but they worship us [as gods] on stage. When we dance at Sufi *melas*, we are respected. Some men are very dirty, they will take my hand and ask me to come with them, but we just do our work and come home. When we dance [at the Sufi *melas* hosted by kinnars], the *mahants* embrace us and even the world gives us respect in this *roop*.

Their labour is appreciated when they are on stage, yet this seldom translates to respect in their experiences off the stage. In this way, the product of their labour, this performance, is little more than what de Certeau describes as a tactic:

What it wins it cannot keep...[it has to] accept the chance offerings of the moment...a tactic is an art of the weak (1984, 37).

In contrast to the strategic positioning we will explore in the next chapter, of kinnars as renunciates who enjoy the dera as their place of power, muratan can win respect on stage, but it is a temporary triumph. It only stretches as far as the boundary of the stage. Muratan are employed as reproducers of a religious culture, yet allowed very little access to the world of that culture itself. They may be revered as gods on stage, but are often approached to perform sexual favours by men in these performance settings.

Later that week, one night before Maha Shivaratri (meaning 'Great Night of Shiva,' it is the final culmination of the week long celebrations devoted to the god Shiva), I witnessed the muratan performing at a Sufi *mela* held at Sonia *mahant's* dera or communal kinnar dwelling. Every song that the muratan danced to was a Sufi devotional song, which addressed the *pir* (Sufi saint) as the beloved. These performances were more uninhibited, as the signature *lachak-mathak* (swaying of the hips) and high-energy jumps as well as thrusts entranced both the kinnars and the

local villagers that came to watch. Indeed, the kinnars embraced the muratan, throwing handfuls of cash on them as they performed as a token of appreciation for their performance. It was clear that the kinnars occupied the superior position of watching as the muratan danced.

The pleasures that coming into *roop* entails need to be understood in relation to what muratan have available to them in daily life. Few muratan dress like women in everyday life. This is partly due to the fact that they usually live at home, where they must constantly conceal their identity, whilst others dress like men for safe passage in public and to avoid unwanted advances by men. The ambivalence that runs through the pleasures muratan feel about dancing derives from these power relations. Dancing in *roop* allows their true selves to come out into the open. Yet the freedom is temporary and exposes them to sexual advances they may well experience as a fall in status after performing the love of divine lovers who infuse the meanings of love with transcendence. This next section highlights the fragile nature of a freedom they cannot keep.

1.4 Harassment, comportment, concealment

The Centre is an NGO that works with the queer³ community in Jalandhar. Shweta, who runs the organisation, identifies as an ‘effeminate gay,’ and refers to herself as a male and female interchangeably. One day I arrived at the office, hoping to get some information about kinnar deras I was planning to visit. Shweta invited me into her

³ Kole (2007) distinguishes between the modern/postmodern LGBT as a group of emerging sexual identities, from the traditional identities such as kothis and kinnars. Though the term is not commonly used in India, activists prefer the term ‘queer’ as it is an inclusive term that allows more diverse sexualities to be included. Therefore, I will be using queer instead of LGBT when talking about NGOs and activism, as my respondents in these settings were always a combination of traditional and modern identities.

office and introduced me to Rita, a murat from the local area. We spoke briefly and then Rita left. Shweta then told me of the incident of assault for which she was helping Rita to sue for compensation:

She was walking on the street in the evening a few months back. I don't know where she was in Jalandhar, it was a dark street and she was alone. Three men approached, started to push her around, they wanted her to perform oral sex on them....when she refused, one of them hit her over the head with a glass bottle. She was in hospital for days. And you know how they treat people like us at the police station. So now she came to me, and I am helping her get some compensation....if we threaten then with a court case, they will pay up....we will see what happens, but I have made her write down what happened....

Muratan who display their deviant gender identity are vulnerable to attacks like this on the streets, as they are often perceived to be prostitutes. As well as this, Shweta explained that seeking legal help might aggravate the situation for muratan, as the police can charge them with engaging in homosexual activity. Homosexual behaviour remains a criminal offence under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, though homosexual and transgender identities are not criminalised (Kole 2007). Kole suggests that the law is used predominantly to threaten gay, lesbian, as well as transgender individuals with arrest on the streets and in public places (2007). Dhananjay, who identifies both as a murat and kinnar (though she believes both identities fall under the 'umbrella term' transgender), recalled a similar incident before she started working as an activist in Chandigarh. At her insistence, we caught a

local bus from Panjab University⁴ to the site of the incident. As we walked along the footpath, she pointed to the redbrick buildings where the incident occurred:

My friend and I were here, and she was smoking a cigarette. And just over the other side of the road, there were some boys sitting there. I could tell that they had come to know that these [Dhananjay and her friend] are different people. They gestured for me to come there, so I went. So the boy said you look nice, this and that...he said our house is just behind DAV College...so let's sit down and talk. So then I told my friend, and she said yes let's go. They had a car and so did we. So we followed them, and they parked there inside DAV College and came and sat in the backseat of our car.

After a while, they took us by the collar from the back and started hitting both of us, on the head and back. They said *saale bhenchod* (sister fuckers) people like you have made a mess of things here, this and that. They asked me to give them my purse, they also took my gold chain that I was wearing. They dragged us out of the car, and started saying you people are gay, you are *chakkas* (derogatory term for gays), and they kept hitting us. In that time, about ten or fifteen more boys came out from DAV College. Together they started hitting my friend and I. One boy kicked me in the stomach, and at that point I used my brain, and I acted as though I was dead. There was no other way of saving ourselves. I fell to the floor near the car, and they all started saying to the boy that hit me, that 'you killed him'. So they got scared and ran away. Meanwhile the other boys dragged my friend away and kept beating him. His shirt was totally ripped, and his back was red, his hair had been pulled out and there was blood all over his ear. They continued to beat him for another half an hour.

By that time, the police had reached the scene, as they were patrolling. So then I decided to run. I thought now I will really be in a mess. They [the police] took my friend to the police station. And he [the friend who had been beaten] gave them [the police] ten thousand rupees [approximately 200AUD] and then finally he could go free. Otherwise they [the police] would've killed him.

So like this there are many problems. It is difficult for us to live in society....

⁴ Whereas 'Punjab' is the most commonly used English spelling for the state, the University uses the rarely used 'Panjab'.

The use of violence against individuals who display signs of sexual or gender deviance is a symptom of the patriarchal nature of Punjabi society. Brown et. al. discuss the nature of male dominance in Punjab, whereby violence is used as a corrective tool to keep women in their place (1981, 129). This violence extends to muratan because of their effeminate mannerisms. It also exhibits an egotistic punishment meted out by men when their sexual advances are rejected, as well as being a way that the heterosexual males seek to reprimand the deviant behaviour of muratan. Kole (2007) highlights the homophobia that plagues Indian society, not just at the social level, but also at the legislative level through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Political elements such as the Hindu right are often also involved in punishing any deviance from the norm. Both Kole (2007) and Dave (2011) report the vandalism of cinema halls by the Hindu right in protest against the 1996 film *Fire*, which revolves around a lesbian relationship. In Dhananjay's story, just as in Rita's, law enforcement is a further threat to their safety, rather than an avenue of help for muratan.

Some facets of murat identity and behaviour started to make more sense as I started spending time with them, meeting them at places of work, being invited to their homes, and well as navigating the city with them. It began to make more sense as to why most muratan (with the exception of Priya) in Jalandhar and Chandigarh dressed like men and kept their hair short, despite expressing a constant desire to 'come into *roop*' and eventually transition into womanhood if they could afford the process. I came to recognise this concealment of identity as a tactic, affording them safety in that moment, but failing to win them safe territory in any permanent sense. Again, by engaging De Certeau's (1984) definition here, this conscious hiding can be seen as a 'weapon of the weak' in James Scott's terms (1985). This practice allows

them safer movement in public, as well as a deliberate concealment of identity around family and wider social circles.

This was also conveyed to me in quite explicit terms on occasion. Tara told me in no uncertain terms why she prefers to wear jeans and a t-shirt in public:

We don't want to deal with society. Now, because of muratan going here and there with men, everyone has come to know that we are men. I don't believe in going out at night. Go to work and come home...that's it for me. The *izzat* (respect/honour) we had before, we do not have anymore. But society gives us problems. Even going out on the street, I am scared. And we try to dress like men. How can we hide so much? It's very difficult.

Tara was not the only murat to refer to the 'old times' when they had more *izzat* in society. In this muratan were joined by kinnars. They spoke of the loss of *izzat* due to muratan doing sex work, or what Tara describes as 'going here and there with men'. As we will see in the next chapter, the respect gained by kinnars is tied to the wider perception of them as an asexual or transcending sexuality as well as gender. Kinnars therefore especially expressed disgust at other kinnars and especially muratan who did sex work. Other forces are also at work here. People are increasingly able to distinguish muratan from kinnars due to increased awareness through social media and films based on homosexual and transgender identities. Hence, the murat's *izzat* comes to hinge even more on the respect she can gain by being perceived as a kinnar. It figures as another device that may mitigate the violence to which a murat is otherwise exposed.

1.5 *Izzat*: kinnar authenticity and distinction from muratan

The concept of *izzat* (respect/honour) appears in many contexts in the lives of both kinnars and muratan. I heard muratan talking about kinnars beating muratan up for ruining their *izzat*, with some claiming that kinnars have forcefully tried to castrate muratan to make them join the community. There is ambivalence between the communities, as I often saw muratan come into kinnar deras, apparently welcome, yet some kinnars cursed muratan, saying that they should join the community and not ruin kinnar reputation by begging in trains and doing sex work.

This *izzat* is worth elaborating upon as it sheds light on how differently muratan are perceived by society in comparison to kinnars, despite both groups being deviant in their sexual and gender identities. Kinnars perform a ritual role of bestowing blessings, namely badhai. They are respected and feared by the wider society because of their perceived proximity to god and ability to curse. By contrast, muratan are perceived as failed men, and their effeminate behaviour is constantly punished by the homophobic elements of Punjabi culture. Kinnars are able to transcend the category of being failed or effeminate males through the use of strategy, which is located and grounded in a safe and enduring place, namely the dera or group dwelling. Kinnars often refer to themselves as *izzatwale* or respectable people, saying that they do not consume alcohol or do sex work. These are also questionable statements, but nevertheless, this is the image they are presenting to the world. Mimicking kinnar identity works in the murat's favour, and muratan often invoked similar notions of *izzat* when talking about themselves, denying ever doing sex work, a move that may elevate their status in society. However, the *izzat* of kinnars is often won precisely at

the expense of the way they distinguish themselves from the ‘dirty work’ performed by muratan.

1.6 Murat/Kothi: Class Identities

Priya, a murat from Jalandhar who danced and begged on trains to make a living, was having some trouble finding a room to rent:

I am staying now in a small room. Jasmin [a fellow murat] stays in another room. We do not stay in a dera because we do not want to be slaves to a guru. But...see...it is difficult to find a room, a place to live for us. Many places we just can't afford, and then there is the problem of finding a *tikana* (shelter, closely linked to the Punjabi '*tikna*' which means 'to stay put'). Where do we stay if no one wants to rent us their place?

Muratan either live at home by concealing their identity, are thrown out, or run away at a young age with other muratan or to a kinnar dera. Losing both their filial and social structures of support and security leads to an ongoing struggle for a place where they can stay put. The option of finding a dera exists, but living under the strictures of the guru is not something that appeals to every murat, as Priya highlights. Saunders talks about the intense form of social isolation faced by lesbians of African descent in Cuba (2009). In the midst of the Cuban ‘sexual revolution,’ these lesbians had no access to the new spaces being created and the visibility being afforded to other groups on the queer spectrum (Saunders 2009). Saunders explains that it is the double class-and-race disadvantage that leads to this exclusion, leaving these women to form their own networks. Ferguson, in his discussion of black drag queen

prostitutes touches on similar exclusions based on race and class, in addition to gender and sexuality (2004).

I would like to engage a similar reading of the lives of muratan, whereby their deviant gender identity is not the only axis on which their exclusion and harassment rests. All of the muratan I met, without exception, were from lower socio-economic backgrounds or from Dalit (low caste) families. Kira Hall has also conceptualised the kothis of Delhi as a class identity, whereby their low socio-economic status becomes a defining factor in their affiliation with the local kothi community as opposed to the western gay and transgender identities (2005, 127). Morcom also points to a class influence when she points out that men from upper classes are more likely to identify as gay (2013, 103), as an overt femininity is neither accepted nor encouraged higher up in the social hierarchy.

At one point Dhananjay explained to me that muratan who live at home are allowed, and even encouraged to dance to make money. Families seldom make the connection that their desire to dance could be related to their gender or sexuality in any way. How is this possible? The answer lies in the longer histories of performance in which men may perform and play female roles without this reflecting necessarily on their sexuality. Rather the role of being such a performer is more closely tied to caste and class hereditary communities. Cohen's account of the two *sahelis*⁵ from Varanasi, both of whom were low caste and trained in dance and performing skits from a young age, is indicative of this class influence on identity and on what is permissible (1995, 287). In Punjab, *mirasis* are a Muslim group of a lower caste, often working as musicians (Neumann 1990, 131). They play an influential role not just in the lives of muratan, but also of the kinnars, accompanying them to badhai as

⁵ Meaning 'girlfriends,' they are *jankhas*, an identity similar to muratan/kothis.

musicians and singers. In my own village in Punjab, *mirasis* are well known for being musically gifted. In fact, it was Billu, a *mirasi* man from my village who first introduced me to kinnars in the area. *Mirasis* are often entirely responsible for putting on shows such as the *Ram Lila* (plays based on the Hindu epic Ramayana), despite being Muslims. In these plays, boys and young men play both the male and female roles, and this kind of gender bending is not just allowed but encouraged from a young age. Though not all muratan are from *mirasi* families, there remains a connection in that muratan (as well as kinnars) are attracted to the Sufi *qawwali* music that has also been mastered by *mirasis* in Punjab. This Sufi music centres on themes of divine love, and gender inversion, whereby male Punjabi poets such as Bulleh Shah and Sultan Bahu refer to themselves as the bride of the beloved (Jaffer 2017) and may describe in their poetry, their own ecstatic forms of dance. Murat identity is thus moulded by class-based musical and dance traditions. Being from a *mirasi* or lower socioeconomic background (or both) influences not just how their identities form, but what is deemed acceptable and therefore allowed, and sometimes encouraged.

In recognising this class-identity connection, there is no reason to minimise the economic difficulties faced by muratan because of their gender and sexual identity. They often drop out of school due to ostracism, and are denied work in the formal economy, forcing them to resort to begging, dancing, and sex work. Muratan, however, are also a distinct and *cultural* identity, and the connection of their identity with their community and class is obvious in their gender performance. These are eminently *vernacular* forms of embodiment. The *nakhre*, the specific talents called for in these regional styles of performing arts, as well as specific styles of sharp wit (which they share with the *mirasis*), are all influenced by the culture that has cohered around class-based vernacular forms of expressive traditions. When I asked Billu, the

mirasi man from my village why they are so close to muratan and kinnars, he pointed out that it is because their work is the same, they all dance, sing, and perform. Indeed, many muratan pointed out to me that as children they would often run away to kinnar deras, or go and perform with the *mirasis*, solidifying this class influence on their identity from a very young age, precisely because they were interested in the same work that the *mirasis* are known for.

Muratan are venturing beyond sex work and dancing, with new opportunities to work for NGOs and with new access to higher education (See Chapter 3). However, this is limited to muratan living in cities, whereas those living in rural areas continue to be shaped and influenced by these forms of vernacular culture. They may continue to dance, do sex work when possible, choose to marry due to family pressure, or join a dera.

For Hall (2005) and Reddy (2005), trying to absorb kothis within western terms such as MSM (men who have sex with men) works to erase much of the historical continuity and the subcultural formations that emerge. Such labels privilege sexual identity as the principal subjectivity that defines them. Kothi and murat identity cannot be reduced to a sexual identity, as it is also embedded in class, gender, and caste-based exclusions. Muratan are a unique vernacular identity – largely influenced by class, with a history in the performing arts, and a close affiliation with kinnars that has led to a lot of confusion in the public eye about who they are. We have seen too, that the specific regional configurations that pertain to the muratan of Punjab have led to their scant appearance even in the ethnographic literature on transgender identity in India, though similar identities such as kothis have been written about at length.

Chapter 2

Becoming Kinnar: Dwelling, community making, and renunciation

The door is the boundary between foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world. It is thus an important act in marriage, adoption, ordination, and funeral ceremonies.

(van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* 1960)

Jandusingha is a village in the Jalandhar district of Punjab. I grew up in the nearby village of Raipur, and am therefore familiar with the terrain, the sprawling fields of rice, sugarcane, wheat and mustard, as well as the cultural practices indigenous to this area. The village is home to a *mandir* (Hindu temple), a *gurudwara* (Sikh temple), a small *dargah* (A Sufi shrine where there is a mausoleum of a *pir* (saint), some kind of

a sacred relic, or active Sufi practices of devotion⁶ taking place), and several other smaller places of worship dedicated to local deities and ancestral spirits. In addition to these places of worship, there is another spiritual centre that many villagers and people from surrounding areas come to visit. It is the dera, a community dwelling where groups of kinnars live together under a guru, of Sonia *mahant*. Sonia, with a *bidi* cigarette perpetually in hand and a serious air about her, identifies as a *faqir*, an ascetic who lives on alms, and a *mahant* or the spiritual head of the dera.

The dera is a typical Punjabi farmhouse, surrounded by fields of rice and sugarcane, complete with cows, a dung-filled barn, a sprawling peepul tree, and a small house of two rooms and a kitchen. Under the tree there is a small shrine, a brick-and-cement structure about a metre in height that is painted green. Here a *chirag* (oil lamp) burns day and night in the name of the *pirs*, who are Sufi saints worshipped by people from all religions and across social strata in Punjab, and in other parts of India and Pakistan. A couple of metres from the peepul tree is a *barmi* (snake mound) belonging to the *naga* (Shaivite snake god) Bhairon Jati (dreadlocked Bhairon), an incarnation of Shiva. Sonia lives here with two *chelas* (disciples), the newly initiated Puja, a boisterous young kinnar, and Nisha, the senior and more serious of the two.

⁶ I witnessed practices such as the singing of *qawwali* or Sufi devotional music, dancing, lighting of a *chirag* (oil lamp), and offering of gifts. Furthermore, *dargah* is to be distinguished from *darbar*, which means ‘spiritual court,’ and can be used to describe *dargahs* but also smaller home shrines, spiritual centres of non-Sufi saints, or simply places where there is a ‘presence’ of a holy being, just like in Sonia’s dera.

2.1 The dera: On the margins of society, at the centre of kinnar lives

Scholars have explored various facets of kinnar lives, such as gender, sexuality, kinship, religion, marginalisation, and status in society (Shah 1961; Pimpley & Sharma 1985; Nanda 1986, 1990; Cohen 1995; Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Agrawal 1997; Hall 1997, 2005; Reddy 2005; Dutta 2012, 2014; Kalra 2012; Goel 2016) across parts of North and South India. However, none of them have explored the centrality of the dera at length, or how dwelling practices shape initiation, identity, and confer a sense of belonging amongst kinnars.

I would like to dedicate this chapter to the exploration of the dera as a home, a religious centre, as well as a place from which kinnars are able to go forth into the world in some safety, dignity, and even a degree of esteem, although this is not guaranteed. The dera transforms the *murat* into a kinnar, and is essential to the constitution of becoming and being a kinnar.

In one of our first interactions and interviews, Sonia *mahant* introduced herself by placing herself in her regional location as well as in the dera:

I am Sonia *mahant*, a resident of Jandusingha village in Jalandhar. I have been living here for a long time. There is a *darbar* (spiritual centre/court) of Bhairon Jati here, I pray here and do *seva* (service) of the saint. My *chelas* also live here, they also serve the *darbar*. I've been working through song and dance for around thirty to thirty-five years. This is our work. This is how we eat. We don't have any other way of earning a living here. We go for badhai and make enough to eat. Devotees come here, we serve them tea. We have no other income. And this is a *darbar*, devotees come and go as they wish. Just like that, by living in harmony with everyone, we make do.

Sonia places herself in a specific village, in the region of Jalandhar, and moves immediately on to a spiritual power that is already emplaced – ‘there is a *darbar* of Bhairon Jati here’ she says. The *darbar* centres around the *barmi* or snake mound, which marks the presence of Bhairon Jati on her property. These mounds are regarded as autochthonous emanations from nature, in that they are *svayambhu*, or ‘self existent’ (Irwin 1982, 352). Deities are said to appear from and disappear into the mound in the form of the serpent being worshipped. Irwin also relates their connection to fertility, whereby clay from a mound is often modelled into potent shapes and used in marriage ceremonies (Irwin 1982, 341). It is this already emplaced quality of the mound, which in turn gives her the possibility of cultivating and propitiating that power. The dera becomes sacred not only by virtue of the shrines installed within its parameters, but has already been rendered sacred by the formation of the mound, and the *pehra* or guarding presence of Jati. Each dimension points to the centrality of *place* in the life of a kinnar, as opposed to a murat who may not enjoy such security. Sonia’s identity is both as head of household as well as caretaker of the shrines that define the parameters of practice and place.

Heidegger (1977) and Bachelard (1964) have both written extensively about place. Each in their own way rejects the modern western conceptualisation of place as a secondary specification of neutral, homogenous space. Contending that we are never without emplaced experiences, they regard place as a primary experience that must be accorded primacy in our theory making as well. Drawing on this phenomenological tradition, Casey (1996) addresses anthropologists who may or may not recognise the centrality of place when they discuss ‘culture’. Thus, Casey urges anthropologists not to regard place as a *tabula rasa* on which culture and traditions are inscribed, but

rather as a *region* that holds the cultural, social, and historical together (Casey 1996, 14, 34). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Casey also highlights the role of embodied movement. Culture is carried into places by bodies. So to ‘have’ culture is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensely to cultivate it (Casey 1996, 34).

It is in this understanding of place that I would like to situate both the Punjab as a *region*, which in turn gives the dera specific meanings as a certain kind of place, and the dera itself. It is a place that has inscribed within it the history, sociality, and the culture of the people who inhabit it. I will be describing this ‘inscription’ not as something written on bodies, but rather as made by embodied subjects in their bodily movements, both daily and annual. There are everyday practices such as tending to the shrine as well as ceremonial and special practices such as the yearly *mela* or festival, and kinnar initiation rituals that coincide with the *mela*. Following the phenomenological tradition, which has had a significant effect on anthropological writings (Ingold 1993; Feld & Basso 1996; Ram & Houston 2015), I define the dera as a place, a *place* and not a *space*. It is not a neutral measurable space but rather a highly distinctive place, in contrast to the mobile space in which muratan exercise tactics. For Ingold, such a place ‘owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there,’ (1993, 155) which is precisely how I came to understand the dera and its relationship to the kinnars.

However, a further distinction is required at this point, since I wish to also discuss how this place making serves certain strategic purposes for a group that could so readily be marginalised and despised. For de Certeau, groups that enjoy an institutional location are able to manage relations with those external to it. Such a place, in de Certeau’s terms, comprises of elements that exist in some kind of order, each with its own stable location and configured position (1984, 117). Groups

enjoying such a place can devise strategies. By contrast, those who have no such stable location are reduced to makeshift tactics. We have already glimpsed just what a makeshift life can look like in the plight and the desperate nature of the creativity of muratan on the street.

How then, does Sonia *mahant* render the dera ‘placeful’? In which ways is her identity and that of other dera kinnars shaped by and inscribed into the dera itself? The following is an ethnographic account of activities observed at the dera from my field notes:

Sonia wakes up and bathes in the small brick-and-cement cubicle in front of the house. She puts on a fresh salwar kameez every morning, complemented by the red bangles and bindi that signify the auspicious status of a married woman. After she has splashed water around the barmi or mound, she lights some incense and offers it in front of the picture of the naga or snake that hangs on a brick wall besides the mound. She then stands there and offers prayers silently before moving on to the small shrine under the peepul tree. At the shrine of the pir, she fills the lamp with oil and lights some incense. Then she goes inside the house, where she has a shrine dedicated to the goddesses Laxmi and Kali. Here again she offers incense and an oil lamp, completing her morning ritual.

On Thursdays (the day of the *pir*), the dera transforms into a *darbar* or spiritual centre, and devotees who visit are offered tea and snacks. Sonia ensures that both the mound and the shrine are open for everyone to access.



Figure 2: Sonia prays at the *barmi* (snake mound) on her property.

The daily shrine-tending activities, complemented by the gatherings every Thursday and the yearly *mela* transform the dera into a place that is more than just a dwelling for these gender deviant individuals. This is despite the fact that Punjabis see the kinnar dera as a place where the consumption of alcohol and drugs is commonplace. The secretive nature of the dera does not help this perception either, so these special events are apertures through which the public can gain access to the dera. When seen in this light, Sonia becomes elevated from kinnar (third sex) to *mahant* (saintly keeper/spiritual head of a shrine). From the shrine to the goats found grazing on the property, which are evidence of the stream of gifts coming from the community, the dera has been inscribed with all of the symbols that do not just make it a safe dwelling for the kinnars, but also a place that is above marginality in its holiness and divine potential. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this cultivation of place is indeed

central to their attempts at trying to live as respectable people in a society that punishes the kind of deviance they embody as transgender individuals.

If we contrast this cultivation of place with the experiences of muratan, a clear distinction emerges, one that is hinged on the centrality of an institutional place in the elevation of kinnars into divine ritual specialists. Whereas muratan are simply men who fall from grace when they reject masculinity, kinnars are able to occupy both the world of masculinity and femininity in this ‘thirdness’ that they claim from the privileged place of the dera. They often smoke publicly and shout obscenities, whilst claiming the status of auspicious brides and saintly renunciates. This paradoxical behaviour is reconciled by the fact that kinnars present themselves as *faqirs* (renunciates) and *masts* (intoxicants) who worship their *pir* without regard for social protocols. At kinnar *melas*, *faqirs* and *masts* are often invited. They smoke together, dance together, and sing their praises to the *pirs*, highlighting the intimacy between the two communities. Indeed, this kind of mingling does attract scrutiny from the wider community. Yet it is also this strategic positioning as *faqirs* that allows kinnars to get away with doing as they please. Practices like dancing at badhai are also justified by statements such as ‘we dance for the *pir*,’ again setting their forms of dance apart from the murat’s homoerotic performance.

In contrast to the fleeting tactics of muratan, these practices and strategies are sustained through the dera over time in the form of lineages and the constitution of a tradition. Kinnar lineage and religious practice, which is passed down from guru to *chela* (disciple) therefore makes the dera a *place* with culture already inscribed into its various elements, be it the shrine, or the tradition of the yearly *mela*. The dera provides certain luxuries and shelters the kinnars from the abuses that muratan face. The dera produces their identity as renunciates, defined by a syncretic religious

practice that is not just a mingling of Hindu and Sufi traditions, but a ‘going beyond’ all distinctions, in the vein of the traditions of the *faqir* renunciates they seek to embody. I turn in the next section to a deeper examination of such traditions and their relevance to the cultural strategies of kinnars.

2.2 Renunciation and initiation

It was at the *mela* during the week leading up to Shivaratri that Sonia celebrated the initiation of a new *chela*. As I arrived for the *mela*, I saw big bright floral marquees erected around the property. There was a simple buffet that served *dal*, *rotis*, and rice to all the guests, and many people from surrounding villages had come to watch the *qawwali* (Sufi devotional music) and dance show put on by the kinnars, whilst many muratan and Sufi *faqirs* were also invited. I noticed a clear hierarchy between the two groups, as kinnars sat and watched whilst muratan provided the entertainment, dancing with enthusiasm and exaggerated *lachak-mathak* moves to the Sufi music. Puja, the petite and dusky new addition to the dera wore *chuhra* (ceremonial wedding bangles) and a bright orange *salwar kameez*.

After the *mela* I spoke to Sonia about the celebrations:

One day before [the *mela*] we put *mehendi* on (ceremonial henna tattooed on a bride before the wedding). Just like there is a *mehendi* ceremony before a wedding. We treat this *mela* as a wedding for the new *chela*...it is a day of happiness. Even I just took it off, I was also wearing *chuhra*. *Mahants* are *sada suhagan* (literally meaning forever married, referring to the auspicious status of a married woman who can never be widowed), they belong neither to the married or the widow category, they

are always auspicious, and the *pir* is our husband, he is our everything. These are our relationships with each other. Like the *mahant* [who just] came with sweets and an invitation, I also gave them when I had the function at my place. These are our relationships, someone becomes a sister, someone becomes a brother, and we invite each other to celebrate our happiness.



Figure 3: *A murat dances at Sonia's mela*

Through initiation into a dera, the murat crosses the threshold from the outer world to the world of the dera, and becomes a renunciate by severing all ties with family. This transformation is tied to place, to the dera. As van Gennep (1960) describes it in the opening epigraph to this chapter, all acts of adoption and initiation are defined by the centrality of the threshold, tied to a place. It is this which grants the murat a new identity, a new community, and a new set of relationships. It is this 'crossing-into'

that emplaces the kinnar within all of the pre-inscribed practices relating to place as a means of establishing a new identity.

This transition may also entail a physical severance from their previous biology in the form of the *nirvan* (castration) operation. However not all kinnars undergo this ritual. It is a matter of personal preference, many kinnars told me, and some may even undergo this operation later on if they wish to become gurus, since the castrated status of a kinnar is directly related to hierarchy and privilege within the dera. An elevated position in the community is earned as a result of the brutal nature of the *nirvan* operation, which itself is described as a form of *tapasya* (ascetic austerity) that grants them spiritual powers.

We have a lot of connection with *faqirs*...the *faqirs* know that our *faqiri* (renunciation) is the highest. They go door to door and beg and eat. We also get from the people...we pay *salaam* (to greet, a way of acknowledgement) to everyone, but we feel more connected to the *pirs*.

(Sonia mahant)

In this quote, Sonia mahant recognises the similarities between the wandering renunciates known as *faqirs* in the Punjab, and the kinnars – but her statement also contains knowledge of the differences that mark them. What I witnessed in the initiation was a severance from old ties, rather than a complete renunciation of the sort practiced in the kind of asceticism discussed by Dumont (1970). Dumont considers the renouncer as one of the few slots available for the emergence of the individual in an otherwise hierarchical society. In this instance, however, new relationships replace old ones. Like the individual renouncer discussed by Dumont, the movement of renunciation enables the renunciate to reconfigure their relationships from an external place, outside society as it were. In this case, that external place is

the dera, which places the kinnar in a new set of relations, ones that are other than yet not utterly alien to their previous ones.

Dumont reminds us that no renouncer ever leaves society altogether, that this renunciation often gives rise to a sect, a kind of alternative caste system that entails conditions for membership (1970, 184-87). There is a rich literature for South Asia that describes renunciation in the context of the setting up of alternative communities, a renunciation unlike that of the wandering *faqirs* of India. Alpa Shah (2014) invokes a contrast between individual, wandering ascetics and organised groups of renouncers who have sought to create parallel societies. Unlike the revolutionaries that Shah describes, many renunciative sects seek to neither negate nor alter society, but create a parallel society of their own, which becomes augmented as individual renouncers join existing groups of renouncers (Thapar [1978] in Shah 2014. 343). Such sectarian communities of renunciates may exercise considerable worldly influence. The Gosains are one such group of Shaivite devotees who have been studied by Cohn (1964). They are a sect of renunciates living in monasteries called *maths* across North India. Cohn reveals the considerable influence wielded by the Gosains, in the form of moneylenders, farmers and traders (1964, 176). I wish to suggest that many similarities can be found between the Gosains and the kinnars. Both communities are headed by regional *panchayats* (councils). Both live in community dwellings. Both are shaped by a hierarchical structure in the form of the *mahant-chela* (guru-disciple) relationship. The main point to grasp here is that their renunciation does not seal them off from the rest of society. Instead, like the Gosains, it initiates the new member of the kinnar community into a new set of social, economic, and religious relationships with Punjabi society. Goel also defines kinnar communities as ‘cultural enclaves,’ which allow them to become a closed social group, one that can set up an alternative

to the society that has essentially left them on the margins (2016, 543). This is precisely the function the dera serves. It contains within it all the elements that are essential to the constitution of an alternative society, be it the shrine, the kinship networks, or the celebrations that have been institutionalised within the dera over time.

The *mela* also marks the ceremonial wedding of the new *chela* to the *pir*, which grants her auspicious status as a married woman. It is this metamorphosis from being failed men to becoming auspicious wives that sets the kinnar apart from the *murat*. There is a strong parallel here with Lucinda Ramberg's (2014) ethnography on the nature of personhood amongst the Dalit *devadasis* of Karnataka. When they are married to the goddess Yellamma, they are formally dedicated to her. But the marriage disrupts the ordinary binary between what Ramberg describes as the stereotypical 'ethical wife and terrorised prostitute' (2014, 114). Instead, she encourages a reading of dedication as an ethical practice, in that the *devadasi* becomes a conduit between devotees and the goddess, and her value as a person is tied to community, devotees, as well as her natal family (2014, 115). The same applies to the kinnars. The dedication of the kinnar moves the initiate beyond the binary classifications of sex and gender. Just as the *devadasi* becomes a new kind of person when she is given to the goddess in marriage, namely, an auspicious person who transacts between devotees and the goddess, so also the kinnar, through her initiation into the dera and marriage to the *pir*, becomes *sada suhagan* (literally meaning forever married, referring to the auspicious status of a married woman who can never be widowed). This is a momentous transition. It elevates her from being possibly viewed and punished as a 'failed man' to an auspicious individual imbued with divine power. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this initiation also leads to

the formation of new kin relationships, ones that replace old ties and also give the kinnar a sense of belonging not just to the dera but also to the wider kinnar community.

2.3 Safety of movement from the dera to private homes

For muratan, movement in public warrants certain tactics and manoeuvres such as concealment of identity in an attempt to hide their femininity. I experienced this first hand when walking the streets with the muratan, on public buses and in bazaars. When I walked with the muratan, I too was a deviant. My short hair, western clothing, and at the same time my proficiency in the language, all attracted the attention of men, and this would often lead to stares and in some cases, catcalling. I did not have the same experience with kinnars, as the dera itself provides them access to safe movement into and through society, both in social and physical terms. At all the deras I visited in Jalandhar and Chandigarh, I noticed that there was at least one private vehicle (usually a van) in which the kinnars travelled to and from badhai.

The following ethnographic account sheds some light on the many purposes that a private vehicle serves for the kinnars:

Kajal Mangalmukhi is a nirvan (castrated) kinnar who lives with her guru, Neelam mahant, and fellow chela Simran in their dera in Manimajra, Chandigarh. Kajal is also a transgender rights activist, and is often seen at various seminars and events promoting kinnar rights to education and employment. As an initiated chela of

Neelam mahant, Kajal also has responsibilities to the dera, and the most important of these is badhai.

I met Kajal and Simran, who were accompanied by two musicians and a driver, near their dera. We travelled together through the clean, quiet, tree-lined streets of Mohali, a neighbouring city. Kajal held a small diary in her hand. In the diary she had written down rows of names and addresses of homes where a male child had been born, or a son had recently been married. After half a day of travelling around in the van through Mohali, Kajal and Simran had secured three badhai payments by dancing, singing, and blessing two newborns and a newlywed couple.

Tamil stage actresses have been studied as a group that attempts to stretch the definitions of what it means to be good women by employing self-protective practices. One of these is the use of private vehicles. Seizer describes the van as offering a ‘collective interiority, a protective group cohesiveness’ (2000, 228). The kinnars are afforded a similar protection through travel by private vehicle. For them too, the van becomes a microcosm of the dera, from the safety of which they manage interactions with and movement into society. The private vehicle is convenient when looking for houses for badhai, as well as being an enclave of privacy for the kinnars. Kajal would throw her *chunni*, the scarf that is supposed to cover the breasts and shoulders of a Punjabi woman, over her shoulders every time she left the van. But in the van she felt comfortable enough not to have her scarf around her neck. Both Kajal and Simran retouched their make-up at various points throughout the day, and they used the van to do this. Whilst travelling in the van with the kinnars, I realised that many of them experienced this kind of travel as *taking the dera and its safety with them into the world*.

Whereas the Tamil actresses and the kinnars have access to private vehicles, muratan must look to other ways of finding safe passage in public. Muratan dress up like men in order to minimise the risk of conflict and harassment in public, and even at home. As Tara said to me ‘I can’t even cross the street without boys calling out to me, they try to touch me even in the street’. Kirat’s concealment of her identity at home was a similar tactic in that through it she was able to avoid being thrown out of home. She renounced her *roop* for the safety of family and a roof over her head.

As de Certeau (1984) contends, these are flexible, and almost unconscious moves. They are not conscious strategies honed deliberately over time. Rather, they are tactics employed in situations where muratan have no choice but to improvise. Such tactics, employed in the complex navigation of private and public domains, do not always ensure safety. Whereas for kinnars the private vehicle did serve as an enclave of familiarity and comfort. Hanna Papanek introduced the concept of the *burqa* as a portable form of seclusion for women in Pakistan in 1982. She pointed out that it allowed them to observe moral norms such as not associating with unrelated men, while remaining mobile outside the domestic space of the home (Papanek [1982] in Abu-Lughod 2002, 785). My own experience as a woman when walking on the streets, as opposed to visiting homes seated in a van with the kinnars, further corroborates the connections between this argument about women and the argument about muratan and kinnars. I too experienced the van as a mobile home, a place of refuge between visits to strangers’ homes. By contrast, when I rode on the back of Kirat’s scooter, I felt exposed. At one point, two men followed us on a motorcycle on the way to the *bazaar*. Kirat reassured me, realising that I had become a little agitated when we turned into a deserted street. For the muratan, these are everyday

occurrences, and indeed Kirat was inoculated to the threat that seemed very real to me.

2.4 The dera as a source of livelihood and financial stability

Each dera has an *ilaaka* (territorial boundary), in which kinnars can perform and earn money through badhai work (Reddy 2005, 159). Reddy explains some aspects of the lives of ‘badhai hijras,’ however badhai itself is not explored in ethnographic detail. The most comprehensive account of the badhai rituals in Punjab can be found in Nanda (1990, 1-3), however I would like to provide a brief account of badhai work as I witnessed it whilst travelling in the van with Kajal:

The musicians sat in one corner of the courtyard, setting up the harmonium and dholki (drums) on the floor. Kajal started singing ‘congratulations to the mother and father, for they have been blessed with a son,’ followed by some famous Bollywood numbers and Punjabi songs. She then covered her head with her chunni (scarf) and said some prayers for the householders and the newborn baby. The grandmother had asked Kajal to bless her younger son and his wife, who were recently married. Kajal sat the couple down, and after passing a fistful of rice over the couple’s head a number of times, placed it in the woman’s scarf, which she held in her lap. I understood this ritual as a symbolic god-bharai (filling of the lap with a child), an act to bestow fertility. Kajal then brought the baby out into the courtyard and blessed it, as the neighbours who had all gathered looked on. She wished the baby good health, and a successful life...the grandmother then took Kajal inside the house and gave her clothes, sweets, and cash. Kajal did not disclose how much cash was given.



Figure 4: *Kajal (left) and Simran (right in black) ready to receive clothes, sweets and money during badhai*

The dera offers the kinnar and her guru a steady income and financial stability in the form of badhai work. The amount of money demanded by kinnars varies from household to household. Even though some people I met in Punjab felt that sometimes the kinnars ask for too much, none of the kinnars I spoke to reported ever being turned away empty handed by a family. The perceived power of the kinnar to curse through her divine power and her role in being able to bestow boons renders her auspicious, so much so that people often bring gifts to the dera, in order to have their wishes granted, which can pertain to everything from good health to employment.

Badhai offers the kinnar an elevated position in society through her ability to grant people's wishes. As the renunciate, she is able to bestow fertility on those who occupy the world of procreation. The creative powers of asceticism and renunciation

have their origins in Hindu myth. Shiva, a god that kinnars and muratan alike admire, represents both an erotic and ascetic state. Creative powers are produced by *tapasya* (ascetic austerities), yet there is always the risk of this creative power being lost to *kama* (desire) (Reddy 2005, 85-87). Shiva himself is tested in this capacity when he is tempted by Parvati (his consort). Shiva marries Parvati and the pair forms a perfect example of an active erotic conjugal sexuality. Yet at the same time, Shiva remains undomesticated and his *tapasya* is undisturbed in its creative as well as productive potential. This paradox that surrounds Shiva as the erotic ascetic is accepted in Indian thought as the erect phallus (a symbol for Shiva) is both a sign of priapism and chastity (O'Flaherty [1973] in Reddy 2005, 87). The *tapasya* (in the form of renunciation, castration, or both) of the kinnars is also at the risk of being challenged, as many Punjabis view them as sex workers, and deras as places of illicit activity. However, such suspicions are to some extent assuaged through their simultaneous embodiment of eroticism and asceticism, because their eroticism is not for a human man, but directed at a divine lover, their *pir*. I witnessed this rejection of sexuality not just amongst the kinnars living in the rural areas of Punjab, but also amongst 'modern' kinnars such as Kajal, who was actively involved in transgender activism in Chandigarh. '*Sex zaroori nahin hai, iske bina bhi toh reh sakte hain*' (Sex is not important, we can also live without it), she said, expressing an ambivalence towards other activists protesting for homosexuality to be legalised. Indeed, kinnars deny outright being sexually active, and express disgust at the muratan doing *gande kam* (dirty work), contending that the nature of their 'line' or trajectory in life as renunciates means that they have left 'that world behind'.

When I questioned Dhananjay, the transgender activist from Chandigarh, about this asexuality of kinnars, she laughed. 'Yes, maybe their gurus don't allow it. But

you know, everyone does it. Maybe once in a while they take a *trip*, go to some other city or something. This is how they keep it secret,' she told me. Indeed, whilst Dhananjay spoke openly on the topic, most dera kinnars maintained that they do not have sex, that it is not their *duniya*, their world.

I now turn to how kinnars are constituted as new kinds of people through initiation, not just for the wider world, but also for the world of the dera and the kinnar community that they occupy.

2.5 Kin and Community

Kinship ties and association with a dera and a guru is what ultimately sets the kinnar apart from the murat. The dera and the new relationships that it cements into the life of a kinnar provides a level of security. Along with submission to initiation by the guru comes a family of newly constituted mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, and most importantly, a guru, who defines the initiate as a *chela*. This binds the kinnar to the dera and the guru in a relationship of reciprocity that is economic in being tied to badhai. It is also social in that the more *chelas* a guru has, the more prestige they can gain within the community (Reddy 2005, 158-59). Many muratan admitted to me that the ill treatment of *chelas* by gurus was one of the main reasons they refused to join a dera, highlighting the severity of the hierarchical relationships within the dera. *Chelas* are expected to take care of gurus in their old age. They inherit whatever property the guru owns, but it is distributed at the discretion of the guru, once again tying the *chela* to the guru's approval and favour. This involves following commands of the guru that may be austere and cruel.

This process of severance and initiation brings with it new kin relations and the practices related to the establishment and maintenance of these relationships. The practice of giving *shagun* (meaning gift but usually given as cash) is observed by all kinnars, as is the protocol in Punjabi society. In ordinary Punjabi kin relations, visiting daughters and sisters are given cash and gifts of clothes by the brother or father. Veena Das (1976) describes, in her early work, the socially constructed relationships in Punjabi kinship. Though biological ties are privileged, substitution, variation, and transactional relationships are also common features of kinship in this region (Das 1976, 20). One of the most common transactional relationships is that of the *beti* (daughter) as a category of females who may receive gifts from father ‘figures’ such as biological brothers, male relatives, and even strangers who have become brothers (Das 1976, 20). In the dera, the giver of gifts is the guru. Strathern has pointed out in her work on gender in the highlands of New Guinea that transactions do not necessarily occur between ‘self-evident men and women,’ – instead these transactions become the avenue through which people are produced as men and women (Strathern [1988] in Ramberg 2013, 670). The guru may claim a third gender as far as her ritual role is concerned, but she transacts with her kin as a male. The relationship between a guru and *chela* is one of care (provided by the guru) and responsibilities (owed by the *chela*). In this transactional configuration of gender, the *chela* is the daughter and/or sister in her right to receive gifts from guru, and the guru is the father or brother, in her capacity to give. The alternative relationships that kinnars form are not alien to or hermetically sealed off from the kinship patterns dominant within Punjabi society. Kinnar kinship is easily understood in the context of Punjabi society because it draws on models of kinship based on wider hetero-

normative patriarchal gendered and sexed positions, as well as hetero-normative models of family and relatedness.

Kamini, a tall, thin, and softly spoken kinnar from a dera in Jalandhar agreed to meet me when her guru was not at the dera. Given the hierarchical nature of the guru-*chela* relationship, many gurus do not want their *chelas* to talk about their ‘secrets’. When I asked her whether she visits her family or maintains a relationship with them, she said:

Look, *didi* (sister), mostly we don’t talk to our family. Yes, once a year I will visit because I want to. Also, my brother will sometimes come to see me. But this is our family now, that [family] we have left behind. Yes, you miss them at first, but now it has been a long time. But this is our reality now; these [kinnars] are our sisters and brothers, and everything you do in your families, we also do in our own way.

Like many others I spoke to, Kamini stressed the sentiment that ‘this is our family now’.

Genealogical models of kinship based exclusively on heterosexual reproduction have long been revised by anthropologists (Ramberg 2013, 670), and alternative forms of kinship have been recognised by writers such as Strathern (1988) and Ramberg (2013, 2014). Both urge us to recognise the power of social practices in the creation of kin. Strathern urges us to look to the power of the collective in creating kin (1988, 48), arguing that gender and group affiliations can allow the emergence of kinship. This is precisely what I witnessed taking place amongst the kinnar communities. Their collective identity as third gender ritual performers formed the basis of creating relationships with new kin.

But it is in relation to the *devadasis* of Karnataka and their dedication to the goddess Yellamma, in which Dalit women emerge as wives of the goddess, that the

relationship to the kinnars of Punjab is closest. Ramberg proposes that we regard kin making as a creative and innovative technology. Through dedication, *devadasis* emerge as new kinds of people, allowing a re-writing of their gender and caste positions, as well as their place in the world (2013, 671). Just as the *devadasis* become conduits for the divine energy of Yellamma, kinnars emerge as mediators between a plethora of deities and the public. Their place in the world becomes that of a culturally sanctioned third sex, regardless of whether they have undergone castration, or are biologically third. The *devadasi's* auspicious status is linked inextricably to her marriage to Yellamma. At this juncture, she is placed in a web of relationships that give her value, mediating between devotees and divinity, and becoming the 'son' in her capacity to carry the family name forward (Ramberg 2013, 662). In a similar vein, the kinnar does not just become third or a woman when she enters the dera; she becomes a father as a guru, a daughter/sister (gifts), a son (capable of inheriting the father's patrimony), a *chela*, as well as an auspicious woman through her marriage to the *pir*. It is therefore not just an alignment with a religious entity. It is simultaneously a way of becoming a new kind of person, an auspicious person, in a world where they are otherwise ostracised and alienated.

2.6 'Our connection is straight with god': religious syncretism and encompassment in the making of the dera as 'above' formal religious boundaries

*Je tu rab nu manauna pehle yaar nu manaa,
rab mann jaanda yaar nu manauna aukha e.
Bann kanjri te Bulleh wang ghungroo tu paa,*

rab mann jaanda yaar nu manauna aukha e.

If you want to please god, first you must please your beloved,
 God is easily pleased, but pleasing the beloved is no easy task.
 Be a courtesan, like the poet Bulleh Shah, who wore ankle bells and danced,
 If you want to please god, you must please your beloved first.

(my translation)

(*Je Tu Rab Nu Manauna* [If You Want To Please God] a Sufi qawwali by Ustad
 Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, internationally reputed Pakistani Punjabi Musician)

Vignette 1

Sonia had just returned from a two-day pilgrimage to Pir Nigaha, a famous *dargah*:

Now everyone [in Punjab] is starting to believe in the power of *pirs*. Like if someone has given us sweets or some offering, for the fulfilment of a wish, and then we have to go there and give offerings. Then the wish will be fulfilled, and the weight will be lifted from my shoulders. Once you make a wish from these places, you have to go and pay your respect...the highest *gaddi* of the *faqirs* belongs to us. It's like this, even Bulleh Shah (Sufi mystic and poet from 17th century Punjab) had to tie *ghungroos* (musical anklets worn by dancers), even he had to dance for the *pir*. Then the *pir* is satisfied. We only dance on the songs of *faqirs*. At my *mela*, the whole event was for *faqirs*.

And not all mahants are Muslims, we are Hindus. Yes, we are followers of Sufis, but we are not Muslims. They are two different things. I was born a Hindu, and so how can I change that? No, that is why I take care of the *pushti* (ancestral) shrine of Bhairon here, it is a powerful place...like that we respect everyone, but our religion does not have to change to respect all powers.

Vignette 2

After having spoken to many kinnars about their relationship with *faqirs*, I decided to visit a local *dargah* near my birth village. My mother had told me about the spiritual head of the *dargah*, Bhua ji (meaning paternal aunt), whom she used to visit along with her *mirasi* friends from the village as a young woman. I entered Bhau ji's room, where she lay cocooned in layers of blankets, all kinds of boxed gifts and offerings strewn about her. I asked her what relationship the Sufis had with the kinnars. 'This is a relationship of love,' she said. 'We love them and they love us. They are pure hearted, you have to be careful...don't try any two-faced business with them. They are close to God'. Just as we were talking, Kiran, a kinnar from Rama Mandi in Jalandhar, entered the room. 'We have just returned from Ajmer Sharif' (a popular *dargah* in Rajasthan state), she told us. 'It was a beautiful pilgrimage, and we met a lot of our sisters [kinnars] there as well'. She gave the gifts to the *sevadaar* (spiritual servant), who looked like either a murat or a kinnar. Bhua ji laughed, "You see, this is the relationship we have, they are our people. And look, our *sevadaar* here, she also belongs to them, but we have kept her with us. She is our daughter, and she serves the *darbar*."

In order to better understand kinnar religious practice, it is important to look at the syncretism and plurality that defines religious practices across Punjab. Worship of *jathera* (ancestors), *pirs* (Sufi saints), *mata/devi* (mother goddess), as well as various supernatural beings and animals intersect boundaries of organised religion in Punjab. The mound, the shrine to Shiva and to the *pir* that populate the dera are a microcosm of broader Punjabi practices. People may stop at a *devi* temple and a *pir's mazar* (mausoleum) to ask for a favour or to pay their respect, whilst remaining firmly embedded in their religious affiliation and identity as Sikhs, Muslims, or Hindus

(Bhatti & Michon 2004, 143). This plurality recognises the religious identity that one is born into, whilst also acknowledging the field or region of power defined by human movement between spiritual centres that emerge across Punjab in different forms.

The transactions between the kinnars and those who come to enlist their support as mediators with the divine are themselves based on a play of meanings that are both Hindu and Islamic. There are elements of lifting the burden of inauspiciousness from the petitioners, which are covered in the literature on 'Hindu' meanings of gift giving. When Sonia talks about the weight being lifted from her shoulders, when she passes on to the *pir*'s shrine, the prayers and prestations that are offered to her, she echoes many of the meanings described by Raheja in her discussion of gift giving. Raheja describes this acceptance of the gift as a means of digesting the inauspiciousness contained in the gift, but also passing it onward in the form of prestations (1989, 82). However, the journey to the shrine of the *pir* by the kinnars in their capacity as *mahants* (saintly keepers of shrines) also draws on meanings specific to pilgrimage in the Sufi context. Werbner describes the potency of the Sufi pilgrimage in renewing the pilgrims and imbuing them with the sacred powers of the ritual centre (1998, 95). For Sonia, the pilgrimage performs both dimensions. It ensures that she is able to continue performing her ritual role without accruing all of the afflictions people seek to move away from themselves by transferring them to her, the recipient, in the form of a gift. It is also a way to appease the *pir* and therefore renew her own ritual power.

By aligning themselves with paradoxical fertile deities such as Shiva, who is both ascetic and sexual, the unambiguously fertile potential of goddesses such as Laxmi, as well as the ecstatic eroticism of music and dance among *faqir* ascetics of the Sufi order, kinnars are able to legitimise their role in the context of badhai. And although the kinnars wish to see themselves as above sexualised roles, their alignment

with *faqirs* also speaks to and legitimises sexual desire. Amen Jaffer rightly identifies this alignment with *faqirs* as a conscious move by kinnars to challenge the dominant discourse in society regarding their gender and sexual ‘abnormalities’ (2017, 184). Jaffer also points to the long tradition in Sufism of subverting gender roles and hetero-normativity in both poetry and practice (2017, 185).



Figure 5: Sonia (right) blesses a Sufi man during her mela

Indeed, when I would ask the kinnars why they dance at *dargahs*, many of them replied with the famous tale of Bulleh Shah dressing up like a woman and dancing to impress the *pir*. ‘The *pir* is our *yaar* (lover),’ Sonia once told me. Sufi lore and poetry, filled with tales of homoerotic love for the *pir*, a pining for union with the beloved, attracts the kinnar who finds legitimacy for her own identity in those

qawallis (devotional songs). Muratan also echo these meanings. Both Tara and Priya related this story of Bulleh Shah to me when I asked them why they dance. Priya said to me that ‘We dress up for the *pir*, this *chola* (robes worn by *faqirs*) is given to us by the *pir*’. As we saw in the first chapter, it is very common for muratan to claim a closeness with the *pir* akin to that of the kinnar, one that affords them some safety by fashioning themselves as renunciates. Priya would often come to Sonia *mahant*’s dera, talking about her plans to build a temple dedicated to Shiva in the neighbouring city of Phillaur. At one point she said that ‘*koi tikana vi chahida aa*’ (I need a place too). *Tikana* is linked to *tikna*, which means ‘to stay put’. Muratan seemed to understand the importance of *tikana*, a *place* other than the dera that could offer them refuge and also increase their *izzat* in society. If they cannot access the respectable world of the dera and badhai, Priya communicated the fact that constituting herself as a *mahant* or keeper of a shrine, would offer her a better chance at finding both the *tikana* and *izzat* that is so essential to survival as a murat.

In this segment, I have tried to bring together recent discussions of creative kin making. What I am also trying to bring together is the debate on renunciation, encompassment, and kinship with the literature on place and place making. The religious subjectivity at play here is that of the renunciate who joins a sect or alternative community, rather than that of the wandering *faqirs* such as Bulleh Shah. Kinnars thus bring a new dimension to the discussion of ‘thirdness’ as merely a category linked to gender and/or sexuality. Instead, through the mechanisms of renunciation and encompassment, ‘thirdness’ emerges as a device that allows the kinnar to encompass, to enfold society, regardless of distinctions of caste, religion and gender, into the embrace of their divine power and creative asceticism. So far, the

literature on kinnar subjectivity has focused, and quite rightly, on themes of kinship, gender, sexuality, and religion. However, the kinnars of Punjab are inextricably tied to place. It is place that gives them identity, a continuing base, which transforms these meanings into institutional practices.

We can witness the power of place all the more clearly if we visualise kinnars without their dera. This is made much easier for us since we have already glimpsed what that might look like. Kinnars without a dera are, to all intents and purposes, nothing other than muratan. Without a place from which to emerge and return to, without the resources to access private vehicles, kinnars would be in the same position as muratan - vulnerable and subject to violence and rejection. In de Certeau's (1984) conception, strategy requires both the mastery of knowledge and an autonomous place from which one can plan and strategise. The daily practices of the dera kinnars are not only fashioning their own version of belonging to a place, they are also transforming the dera into a site of power that can win the recognition of a heteronormative society. No doubt this is why the dera is at the centre of kinnar worlds. It allows them to manage the access outsiders have to their world, to their secrets, their 'true' identity. The outsider's perception of a certain secrecy in the world of the dera may arouse ambivalence from the outside world. Yet it is this secrecy that allows kinnars to fashion themselves as *izzatwale* (respectable people), and to move out into the world, a world that they navigate strategically, but with their *izzat* and authenticity in mind.

Chapter 3

New Places, Emergent Practices

In the spring of 2017, I travelled from Jalandhar to Chandigarh. Chandigarh is a city and a Union Territory, and is the capital city of both Punjab and Haryana. I had re-established contact with Kajal Mangalmukhi, a kinnar who I had met on a previous visit. Kajal, as well as being a dera kinnar, has been well known in Chandigarh as an activist for kinnar rights and her work with AIDS NGOs. Instead of inviting me to her dera like the previous time, Kajal asked me to meet her at the campus of Panjab University.

I met Kajal near the campus canteen, where she sat with a tall, thin murat wearing jeans and a trendy *kurta* tunic. Kajal introduced her as Dhananjay, her *chela*. After having spent time with muratan in Jalandhar, I recognised that Dhananjay was indeed a murat, someone who was trying not to stand out too much in public, yet still express her feminine identity. Dhananjay told me that she was the first transgender student at Panjab University, and had been organising Pride Week in the city for

many years. 'This year I am organising Pride Week on campus here at University,' she told me.

Over the next month and a half, Dhananjay and I became quite close. We bonded over our mutual love of Hindustani classical music, often listening to *ghazals* (Urdu poetry set to music) or watching the legendary *kathak* dancer Pandit Birju Maharaj, of whom she was a big fan.

In the course of these weeks, Dhananjay told me her story. A journey that started with her feeling like a woman on the inside, to one that sought to bring that woman out in front of the world.

This is her story.⁷

It's a long journey. I was born in 1970...When I was five years old, I can't say [that] I realised...I felt at that time that I'm a girl. Because I remember one incident in my family, it was [the ritual of] *mundana*, when they shave the head of the male boy. And when I was five years old, my family wanted to shave my head, through rituals. So I thought why are they doing like this? I'm female. Other females, they are not doing [this *mundana*] with them, so why they are doing with me? I never realised that I'm [a] male, I realised that I'm [a] female....They bought me army clothes, men's clothes....I said I will not wear this, I need [a] frock. They said no, girls wear frocks, you are a male. And I said no I'm a female. And then they bought me a frock....But they never stopped removing my hair. I cried and cried, but they held my hands and removed my hair...

When I was seven-eight years old, the older boys started molesting, they sexually abused me. I remember...that I used to walk like [a] female, behave like a female, sitting like a female. And sixteen-seventeen year old boys, my neighbours and relatives they started loving me....it was fake love. They started kissing and hugging me, they touched me, my body parts. They wanted me to surrender to have sex...and

⁷ This segment is a direct transcription from recorded interviews with Dhananjay, conducted in English.

one day he [a boy from the neighbourhood] forced me, saying I will not talk to you if you don't surrender. But I said this is not good. And I felt like a woman, so he started having sex with me...but it was like a cruelty...so I said this is paining...he said no you will enjoy. But I said this is not love...you are not loving me...

I didn't recognise that I am trans, I thought I am [a] female. And in school time, I [was] always scared about other boys, my seniors. I never used the toilet along with them, the male toilet...I usually [went to] toilet...when the class is going on...the teacher [was] always shouting on me, 'when the break comes you can go'. I had no answer, I didn't disclose that the boys teased me. When I go there, they touched my buttocks and hips. They [started] kissing me, and hugging me in a different way. So I felt shy...that time it was horrible days...they [the teachers] only knew that transgenders live in *deras*, they didn't know that transgenders also live at home....

After graduation, my father, my family realised that maybe he will leave the house. They started finding a girl [for me]. They didn't tell me they found me a girl till my graduation...I was crying in the room. I said what are they saying? It is possible that a woman can marry with a woman? My father was shouting at me...he started beating me...I tried to suicide, but it is not easy to die. So I was in [a] trap again, and they were successful, my parents....

I was nervous...how would I face the woman?...few months I didn't talk about anything [to my wife]. I was just talking [in a] friendly [way].....I didn't know what she is thinking about me.

One day I talked to my wife, I wanted to clear all that, that I am a trans woman. She said 'What is that?' I said I am trapped in the wrong body, I have no attraction...no ability to have sex with you...I told her everything, that it's not my fault...then she said, 'What do we do now?' Because all the relatives will blame her...women are always blamed when they do not give birth to a child....

Dhananjay and her wife had two children. Till 1998, she worked in an educational institution. During this time, an examination paper was leaked, and a police investigation ensued. Dhananjay was also questioned, and the police took her in for questioning. She told me that the police took notice of her, and at that time she came

out in a real sense, when they police labelled her 'gay'. She protested, saying she was not gay. She was held in the police station, and the police threatened to call her family and the media:

They removed my clothes; I was nude in the police office. They held me the whole day nude, from nine to five o'clock every day....they tortured me, they beat me...beaten me on my genital area...one policeman they put their penis in my mouth, saying 'suck it, you are gay, you are enjoying so let's enjoy here'. So it was horrible that time...I said you do whatever you want to do, but don't call my family. After a lot of torture, I signed on a blank paper. Then they sent me to jail for nine months. So after I came out of jail on bail, I started thinking about how I [will] face the rest of my life. If I don't take a stand, they will use me...my family, police, society [will use me]. So I started working on this issue, like [I had to] come out....

After coming out of jail, Dhananjay met a gay friend, who told her about the queer community and their world. A few years later, she started working with the community herself, and in 2009 she started the NGO, Saksham Trust. In 2013, she organised the first queer Pride Walk in Chandigarh. It was the first time queer people took to the road to ask for recognition and rights. Since then she has been organising Pride Week every year in Chandigarh:

I started reading about the history of LGBT people, homosexuality, and Sufism also....ancient history also, how transgender and kinnar people lived in those times, in Vedic period, pre and post Rig Veda. Western, Greek, Roman Empire, and Muslim world also...I found that it is universal. But India accepted it in a very easy way....'what is unnatural is also natural,' it was [written] in Rig Veda.

Dhananjay's story sits in the midst of the complex intersection of themes that permeate transgender lives in Punjab, whether that is as a murat, kinnar, or any

other individuals who identify as transgender.⁸ I witnessed her moving between the queer worlds of kinnars, muratan, and the LGBT community with ease, whether it was at Kajal's dera, on the streets with other muratan, or with the wider queer community during Pride Week in Chandigarh. Though she stands with the queer community in their opposition of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code – which criminalises homosexuality – at the core of her own activism lies the motto '*kinnar padhao, kinnar bachao*,' or 'educate the kinnar, save the kinnar'. Kajal and Dhananjay are working together to save muratan from having no option other than a life in the dera or being on the streets doing sex work. Kajal often made the remark when questioned by the media during Pride Week that 'if you can keep rapists at home, murderers at home, why do you throw transgender children out? Are they worse than these people?'

It became apparent to me over the course of my time in Chandigarh that Kajal, Dhananjay's guru, was herself was treading a delicate path between the dera and the outside world. She would spend time with Dhananjay and myself on campus, yet by four or five in the afternoon, she would start getting agitated, wanting to leave. A number of times her own guru would call her, asking her to return to the dera on time. She would ask Dhananjay to book her a taxi, often explaining that '*guru gussa hogi*' (guru will be angry). This did not come as a surprise, knowing that gurus often do not want their *chelas* to talk to people about their 'secrets' or dedicate time to activities other than badhai. Kajal seemed to be able to balance the two, often going for badhai

⁸ Dhananjay defines transgender as the umbrella term under which all other identities fall. In an effort to stay true to my respondents' own ontologies, whenever I use the term transgender, it is inclusive of cultural identities such as kinnar and murat, as well as other individuals identifying as transgender in its western definition. Kole (2007) unites traditional (kinnar, kothi) identities with emergent (gay, lesbian, bisexual etcetera) groups in the inclusive term 'queer'. I will use queer when talking about the wider community, and transgender when talking about various groups of transgender people in Punjab. Note that many muratan (like Kirat), and kinnars (like Kajal) do also use the term transgender to identify themselves. In rural areas, limited knowledge of western concepts means that this is less common.

in the mornings before coming to campus to attend Pride Week events. I came to realise that badhai was not just crucial for her own survival as a kinnar, but for her responsibility to financially support Dhananjay, whom she had in turn taken on as a *chela*. Yet her version of a guru-*chela* relationship was unlike any I had witnessed in the kinnar community before. Though not being initiated into the dera, Dhananjay addressed her as ‘Kajal guru,’ and Kajal would ensure that Dhananjay was able to get by financially. Dhananjay being financially supported by badhai was something of an irony, as we shall see in the next section, for she was simultaneously engaged in contesting kinnar traditions that she believed were out-dated.

These relationships are an indication of the emergent practices that I explore in the next section, which allow a mingling of the old and the new.

3.1 Residual and Emergent Practices

Raymond Williams describes emergent practices as new meanings, significances, and experiences that are continuously being created in a given society (1973, 11). Something of this is to be glimpsed in the life of Dhananjay. At one level there are shared meanings that derive from dominant systems of power that have been in place over time. Dhananjay’s life started off not unlike the many muratan I have spoken to. Being convinced that they are girls at a young age, accounts of sexual assault at the hands of boys and/or men, feeling like a woman on the ‘inside,’ are all significant themes of the murat narrative.

Since her release from jail, however, the direction of her life has diverged significantly from the shared patterns of murat lives. Dhananjay has given a new meaning to the word kinnar, because for her the kinnar does not just belong in a dera, confined to the labour of badhai. Indeed, Dhananjay boldly re-defines badhai in terms that underline her rejection of this tradition as an oppressive heritage. For Dhananjay, badhai is no better than ‘begging’. Indeed, whilst utilising the same myths that kinnars relate to justify their identities, Dhananjay argues that badhai and the dera culture are all practices that need to be left behind. Her ambivalence towards kinnar traditions was something I initially found to be quite perplexing, yet as I came to know her better, I realised that she did indeed connect with the myths and meanings she borrowed from kinnars, such as Sufi philosophy, song, and dance. Yet, for her, the tradition of badhai and living in the confines of a dera was not the life she envisioned for future generations, a life she had closely glimpsed through her relationship with Kajal.

Dhananjay communicated with the same fluency and ease with muratan and with queer activists, even though their worlds varied significantly. During Pride Week, queer activists such as Aditya Bondyopadhyay, a lawyer and one of the most prominent queer rights advocates in India, arrived on campus, along with other gay and lesbian people from different parts of India. They were there to celebrate and protest against Section 377 in solidarity with the Punjabi queer community. The events attracted large crowds of students cheering on and supporting kinnars and muratan as they performed on campus. A combination of gender mainstreaming workshops, film screenings, and events showcasing vernacular identities, like dance performances by muratan and kinnars, as well as a play based on the theme of ‘realities of life in a dera’ (in which Dhananjay played the role of a guru), all took

place on campus at Panjab University. Dhananjay appealed to urban queers, students, as well as muratan, kinnars, and older members of the audience through this combination of events, speaking to all parts of the cultural milieu. Dhananjay also performed along with the muratan to a popular Bollywood song, with *ghungroo* (ankle bells) on her feet and *nakhre* (sass) in her expressions.

Yet it was Simran (a kinnar from Kajal's dera) who stole the show. She danced to a song by Naseebo, a Pakistani Punjabi singer. Naseebo is popular in murat and kinnar communities, and just the previous year had been invited to perform at the dera of Sheela *mahant*, which is also a popular *darbar* or Sufi spiritual centre. Both muratan and kinnars often expressed their love of Pakistani Punjabi music, again conveying the way in which this cross-border exchange of cultural and religious meanings has its roots in Sufism and Islam, allowing them to survive as common practices for these groups on both sides of the border. The lyrics expressed themes of unrequited love, and the dichotomy of good and bad that so often permeates kinnar and murat life:

Main ishq kamaya loko,

Mainu miliyan sazaawan pyaar diyan.

Bhave changi aan ke mandi aan,

Deewani sohne yaar di aan.

I have earned love, oh people,

And have been punished for it.

Whether I am good or bad,

I am crazy for the beautiful beloved.

(my translation)

This fusion of events, appealing to both modern queer and vernacular subjectivities, facilitated solidarity between the two communities. All of this was in part the direct result of Dhananjay's efforts. The English speaking gay-identifying activists, such as Ram Rao, who was visiting from Chennai, spoke to me at length about queer activism and the explosion of Pride events across India. However, on the day of the walk, Ram was dressed up in traditional Punjabi *salwar kameez* to show solidarity with the Punjabi queer community. He was dancing with the kinnars, and walking with the hundreds of muratan that attended the event.



Figure 6: Kinnars perform a Punjabi folk dance during Pride Week

Dhananjay worked hard to incorporate kinnar and murat subjectivities into the Pride Week activities. The Pride Walk gave muratan a space in which they could interact with other queer identities and the public, walk the streets with the safety of community, and a newly unconditional ownership of their talents and identities.

These are emergent practices precisely because Kajal and Dhananjay are deviating from the norms, not just of society, but of the kinnars who believe that the dera is their only place, and badhai their only chance at a livelihood. Indeed, a lot of kinnars, including Neelam *mahant*, are against the education of their community members because of the threat it poses to their principal livelihood, in other words, to badhai.

In Raymond Williams' re-defined usage of the term 'emergent' practices, he refers also to other elements, which cannot be expressed or verified in the terms provided by the dominant culture. These include elements that may be termed 'residual' culture. While deprived of meaning by the dominant culture, they nevertheless exist as a residue of past social formations (1973, 10). He gives the example of religious values, which often have a residual presence in dominant cultural tropes. I would argue that kinnar culture is residual in that it has a presence in both the dominant beliefs of the wider society, as well as the emergent world that modern transgender identities occupy. From Sufi music, to *pir* worship, and the reverence of deities such as Shiva are common practices across the whole spectrum of transgender identities. Kinnars, muratan, and even individuals who identify as 'transgender,' such as Dhananjay, are attracted to these myths and meanings that surround kinnar worlds. In none of these cases does 'residual' culture mean that these are practices that lack life force simply because they are not fully affirmed by the

dominant culture. And indeed, in Dhananjay's case, we could say that they are being given new and emergent meanings as a source of pride for transgender communities as having played an important part in South Asian traditions.

Dhananjay tries to invite the older generation of Indians into the conversation, a majority of whom believe kinnars to be a biological category, taken from their homes by other kinnars at birth. Having little knowledge of what being transgender means, they assume that the modern identities, which include gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals, have been 'influenced' by western media.

Many of my relatives, when I would tell them about my work, would make remarks about how the younger generation has been corrupted by the Internet, and also point to the fact that they had never heard of these identities 'in *their* time'. For Dhananjay, this is where her work lies. It consists of educating and convincing this older generation, through histories, myths, and personalities that are dominant in the Indian cultural landscape. She often told me, 'the youngsters we may convince with science, but I need to appeal to something that makes sense to their parents and grandparents'.

She pointed out to me that transgender identities have always been present in popular Hindu epics such as the Ramayana, as well as explaining how erotic art in Konark (a temple in Orissa) and the Ardhanareshwara (half male/ half female) form of Shiva, are all indications that transgender identities were not just accepted but revered in ancient times. Likewise, she engages the religious subjectivity of kinnars by recounting tales of homoerotic love between Sufi saints, fusing the old and the new to elevate transgender identities and to sensitise those who exhibit hostility and phobic attitudes towards their difference.



Figure 7: Kajal (left) and Dhananjay during Pride Week in Chandigarh

3.2 NGO Offices as New Living Places: Finding community, celebrating difference

The Centre is an NGO working primarily with kinnars and muratan in Jalandhar, involved in HIV testing, educating the community about safe sex, and also conducting surveys and collecting census information in the area. One of the very first times I visited the office, a birthday celebration was underway. A group of effeminate males (whom I was to later come to know as muratan) were gathered on the terrace facing the three rooms occupied by the NGO. Shweta, who ran the NGO, along with muratan I later came to know, such as Tara and Kirat, were also present. The murat celebrating

her birthday did not work at the NGO but clearly knew everyone there, and all of them sang and shared laughter, followed by the Punjabi tradition of smearing cake on each other's faces.

Apart from birthday celebrations, the employees also enjoyed shared lunches and tea breaks, often socialising for hours with visiting muratan and kinnars. Dhananjay's NGO Saksham Trust was run out of a small office in a building on the dusty outskirts of Chandigarh. It resembled more of a refuge for muratan than an office. When I visited along with Dhananjay, we met two muratan there. One of them told me how muratan have started to do all kinds of work, as make-up artists, and in NGOs. We talked about the upcoming Pride Week, which Dhananjay was busy organising, and listened to one of the muratan talk about her struggle living at home.

Both of the organisations mentioned above are Community Based Organisations (CBOs), and are funded by international institutions such as the Elton John Foundation (in the case of The Centre in Jalandhar) and the World Bank (Kumar 2017, 474). Both organisations are involved in education, outreach, and the provision of medical services for the queer community. However, they are also vibrant social *places* for these groups. I have used the term *places* instead of *spaces* because, as indicated in the earlier sketch of a phenomenological distinction between a neutral space and a place, these are not measurable homogenous spaces, but rather they are places that provide a level of security and community for muratan. Even kinnars would come and speak to me at The Centre when their gurus would prohibit them from speaking to outsiders. I also came to know that many muratan are employed by the NGOs, facilitating a break away from dancing and sex work, or from other occupations that entail hiding their true identities. Kirat worked as a secretary in The

Centre, and along with Tara, was one of the first people to introduce me to the world of muratan.

Conceptualising the NGO offices as social places for muratan warrants a brief exploration of the NGO as having its own institutional history as a community maker and place maker in the Indian context. De Souza's study of HIV/AIDS NGOs in South India provides some insight into how NGOs can become 'communicative' forums in that their function does not lie solely in disseminating information, but also in facilitating dialogue between community members (2009, 700). For De Souza, though NGOs are guilty of implementing 'top down campaigns,' they also contain the capacity within them to allow subaltern groups to build a sense of community, whilst managing and shaping interactions with the outside world (2009, 700). Translated into the terms of a space/place distinction, what is being set up by the state as a homogenous *space* for the surveillance of these sexual minorities is in a sense being transformed back into a *place*, a place that is made through their sense of belonging and social activities. It is a kind of alternative to the dera, perhaps not as stable and enduring a place as the dera is to the kinnar, but nevertheless a place of refuge and respite for the muratan. Dave's (2012) ethnography of the Indian lesbian movement documents a similar communal sociality. These women were not so much interested in political action as they were in finding social connection, avenues of support, and a community to communicate with about their struggles and frustrations (2012, 55).

Many of the lively descriptions of intense debates over political direction in Dave's account of Delhi groups are also vivid glimpses into the crowded and heady intimacy of NGOs as places. Similarly, Hall's (2005) account of the 'hijra' performance by Delhi's kothis at an NGO in that city, while focused on the linguistic parody of hijras by kothis, is simultaneously also unfolding in a very particular kind

of *place* – one which is situated in a middle class residential area that screens out the possibility of kothis coming to the NGO in full '*roop*' as we might now say, but at the same time provides the safety that allows such a parodic performance to take place at all, even in front of gays and lesbians who are nevertheless separated from kothis by the gulf of class.

In the Punjab, this creative re-making of these spaces into *places* allows muratan to 'come into *roop*' (to dress up). In contrast to the NGOs of Delhi that Hall mentions, there is a greater freedom for the muratan in Jalandhar and Chandigarh, who often even arrive in *roop*, indeed because activists such as Dhananjay, who share these desires with the muratan, are the ones who run these NGOs.

3.3 Musical Connections

It is through music that muratan and kinnars are able to communicate what they often hesitate to say in words. Such a way of using music to convey the forbidden has a long history in the subcontinent. It is used for such purposes in mainstream Indian cinema, where we learn about the state of mind and the passions even of heterosexual lovers in a way that would not be possible otherwise. My own ability to be able to enter the world of kinnars and muratan was heavily mediated by music and Sufi poetry. I shared with Dhananjay this love of Urdu *ghazals* as well as Sufi *qawwalis*, having grown up listening to Sufi *qawwalis* with my mother. On the day that the muratan performed during Pride Week, I sensed the power and possibility of this music in being able to connect kinnars and muratan to the wider world. Dhananjay dragged me into the crowd of muratan, kinnars, and students dancing and celebrating the show that the muratan had put on. It was a moment of immense pride for

Dhananjay, and I recalled her telling me what had changed everything for her after forty-five years of living as a man. ‘I don’t want to die a man,’ she had said. ‘I will be happy if I can leave this world a woman’.

Dhananjay and I were sitting together under a small shed in a quiet corner of the campus just as it had started to rain, listening to Begum Akhtar, the renowned singer of the Lucknow *gharana* (school) of Hindustani classical music. We were crouched together with our ears to the phone, watching the rainfall. Every so often she would nod and comment ‘*wah*’ to express her admiration for a verse.

*Kuch toh duniya ki inaayat ne dil torh dia,
Aur kuch talkhi-e-halat ne dil torh dia.*

.

*Woh mere hain mujhe mil jaayenge, aa jaayenge,
Aise bekaar khayalaat ne dil torh dia.*

If the world’s kindnesses already broke my heart,
Then these bitter circumstances broke it yet again.

.

‘He is mine, he will be mine, he will come to me,’
Such futile thoughts have broken my heart.

(my translation)

Conclusion

We have seen that the liminality of muratan is defined by a lack of space, of a vulnerable version of visibility, leaving them open to a society that punishes their sexual and gender deviance with violence. They resort to tactics in their navigation of everyday life, tactics that are described by de Certeau (1984) as flexible, not planned ahead of time because they are necessarily a response to a terrain that is not their own. These are moves employed by the weak. Their gains are not consolidated. Whether it is through a concealment of their identity, ‘coming into *roop*’ whenever a chance presents itself, or claiming a status as kinnars to escape scrutiny and violence, these tactics define the everyday manoeuvres of muratan. In my exploration of the centrality of caste and class in the constitution of murat identity, they emerge as a somewhat distinct transgender identity. Though sharing similarities with kothis, they are unique in their desire for biological or at least physical transition, the possibility of transition into kinnarhood, as well as their embeddedness in the vernacular culture of both Indian and Pakistani Punjab.

In contrast to the fleeting tactics of muratan, kinnars exercise strategy through an enduring cultivation of their own unique place in Punjab, through a combination of the institution called the dera, religious alignments, and kinship networks that ensure that these traditions are passed down over time. Whilst the muratan survive through a

concealment of identity on the streets, kinnars are able to circumvent the dangers of the outside world by taking the dera with them into the world in the form of the private vehicle. Initiation rituals and strategic alignments with the *pir* through marriage facilitates a *crossing into an established topography* that emplaces the newly initiated kinnar into relationships that provide the safety of community and the right to earn a respectable living through badhai work. All of this is enabled by the mastery of a *place*, namely the dera, which is crucial to badhai, initiation rituals, legitimising their status as *mahants*, as well as consolidating their ability to manage interactions with the outside world. The power of place is central to the employment of strategy, as de Certeau contends (1984), and it is this mastery, never complete of course, that truly sets the kinnar apart from the murat.

Dhananjay Chauhan, through an appeal of dominant Indian cultural tropes, is trying to ‘mainstream’ kinnar and murat identities, and with relative success. She draws from the same myths that kinnars draw on in order to convince the wider society of their reverence through history in order to legitimise their identities. Yet at the same time Dhananjay recognises the limits imposed on kinnars by dera life and badhai, practices that she believes need to be left behind. By organising events such as Pride Week, she seeks to give visibility to muratan, to showcase kinnar talents, as well as help them integrate with the wider world of queer identities.

A new kind of place is also emerging. The NGO office, especially if inaugurated by activists such as Dhananjay, gives muratan a sense of community, by functioning as a living place, a place of refuge and relative freedom for the murat. These NGO offices are alternative enclaves, places where secrets are shared, frustrations are communicated, and where muratan are able to find a sense of belonging that they have been missing.

Whilst each individual in these communities is unique in their sexuality, desire, and embodiment of gender, they all share an identity that is also shaped by class, caste, religion, as well as Punjabi vernacular culture. Whether it is the murat's love for Pakistani Punjabi songs, or the kinnar's love for Sufi *qawwali*, these cultural orientations and passions that spill over into mainstream Punjabi society are inseparable from any discourse involving transgender identities in Punjab. It is this spilling over that allows kinnars to win reverence amongst the wider society, that allow the muratan to share meanings with the kinnars, as well as enabling a mingling of these so called 'traditional' identities with the emergent transgender world of Punjab.

The transgender world of Punjab has largely been unexplored in the literature thus far, and I believe that the specific class influences that are formative to murat identity should be explored further in future studies. In staying with murat identity, I believe that the muratan of Punjab, when studied on conjunction with their Pakistani Punjabi counterparts, can be understood further as a distinctly Punjabi identity. Indeed, a cross-border study of this kind is also warranted for the kinnars, one that would undoubtedly reveal further connections and consolidate our understanding of their identity as one embedded in 'vernacular culture'.

Glossary of Key Terms

akwa	a hijra who has not had the <i>nirvan</i> operation
badhai	meaning ‘to congratulate’ and refers to the payment made to hijras for their performance and blessings given to newlyweds or a male child
behen/didi	sister
beti	daughter
bindi	small round dot of vermillion worn by Hindu women to indicate their status as married women
burqa	long black dress worn by Muslim women, which covers their bodies from head to foot
chakka	derogatory term used to hurl abuses at gay, transgender, or any type of effeminate same-sex desiring person
chela	disciple of a teacher or guru
chirag	an oil lamp that burns day and night, usually in a spiritual centre or the home of a devotee
dai	midwife
darbar	spiritual court/centre
dargah	mausoleum of a Sufi saint, as well as a spiritual centre
darshan	ritual viewing of a god or goddess
dera	a community dwelling where kinnar chelas live under a guru
devadasi	female servant of god
faqir	wandering renunciate who lives on alms
gaddi	an authoritative ‘seat’ that is passed down, lineage
ghazal	Urdu poetry set to music
giriya	the penetrative partner of a kothi/murat
khusra	Punjabi word for hijra/kinnar, often used in a derogatory way
kinnar	culturally institutionalised third sex, often used to describe an individual who lives in a dera with a guru and does badhai work
kori murat	same as murat

kothi	a man who identifies as a female, adopting feminine dress and mannerisms and engaging in receptive same sex intercourse
lachak-mathak	hip-swinging
mahant	saint or keeper of a shrine
mela	a gathering of people. A festival or celebration
mirasis	a low caste Muslim community
murat	Punjabi vernacular identity similar to kothis. Murat identity can be defined as a transgender identity due to their desire to transition into womanhood. Muratan (pl.) are also receptive partners in same sex intercourse.
nakhre	sassiness displayed by muratan/kothis. Behaviour that channels and heightens the performativity of female mannerisms
nirvan	the operation that involves the physical excision of male genitalia
pir	Sufi saint and spiritual teacher
qawwali	Sufi devotional music, especially popular in the Pakistani and Indian Punjab
roop	the word muratan use to describe the state of being dressed up as women. Means ‘avatar’ or an aspect of beauty in Punjabi
sada suhaagan	forever married, describes the auspicious status of a married woman
saheli	girlfriend
salwar kameez	traditional Punjabi dress comprising of a long tunic and pants
seva	service
sevadaar	servant in a spiritual centre
shagun	meaning gift, usually given in cash
thumri	a romantic song of the Hindu classical style
zenana	a kothi dancer who adopts feminine gestures and wears female clothing only when performing. It is also the name given to the domestic space reserved for women in Urdu vernacular

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