

## The Religious Transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhārā

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### ABSTRACT

Established in 2015, the Kinnar Akhārā is a Hindu religious order of gender non-conforming individuals rooted in the *hijrā* tradition but structured akin to traditional Hindu ascetic groups. *Kinnars* aspire to enhance the social inclusion and acceptance of transgender people within Indian society by reclaiming their (supposed) historical religious role in Hinduism. In this pursuit, they challenge the patriarchal, male-dominated ethos of traditional ascetic orders, but also face criticism from those who see them pandering to right-wing Hindutva ideology to garner political favour from the central government. This article examines the Kinnar Akhārā as an example of religious transfeminism, a form of feminism that integrates various strands of feminist thinking into a religious group. By describing how this religious transfeminism manifests in religious space, activism, and a decolonial and intersectional approach, this article expands feminist discourse beyond the narratives of the global North and highlights forms of alternative empowerment to achieve religious and social transformations in India.

**Keywords:** religious transfeminism; kinnar; hijrā; sanātana dharma; decolonisation; Hindutva

### INTRODUCTION

On 15 April 2014, the third gender was officially recognised by the Supreme Court of India, which affirmed that the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution applied equally to all, including transgender individuals. This ruling granted transgender people the right to self-identify as male, female, or third gender.<sup>1</sup> Among the petitioners championing this cause was Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (henceforth Laxmi), a transgender activist and a *hijrā* leader at the time. Nearly one year later, on 30 October 2015, Laxmi, along with fellow *hijrās*, established a religious organisation named Kinnar Akhārā. In 2019, during an interview with an online organisation, Bharat Marg, Laxmi expressed the importance of religion to connect with the masses. She noted that while LGBTQ+ activists often engage with specific segments of their community, religion has a broader reach, transcending boundaries (Bharat Marg, 2019). Recognising the limitations of secular activism in challenging ingrained societal attitudes, *kinnar* leaders decided to use religion to raise their communities from marginalisation. Despite coming from the *hijrā* tradition, which blends Hindu and Islamic features (Nanda, 1990),<sup>2</sup> they asserted a *kinnar* Hindu identity to reclaim their religious role within *sanātana dharma*, the eternal (Hindu) faith,<sup>3</sup> and mainstream religious spaces in India. By establishing a new *akhārā*, they challenged – and intend to challenge – the entrenched patriarchy within ascetic communities.<sup>4</sup>

This article presents the Kinnar Akhārā as a case study to explore religious transfeminism, a form of feminism that integrates various strands of feminist thinking into a religious structure (see Tomalin, 2006). Since 2019, following their official acceptance by the Jūnā Akhārā, a powerful religious institution, at the Ardh Kumbh Melā, an

<sup>1</sup> <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/193543132/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Hijrā* gurus are mostly Muslims, and although individuals from all religions can become *hijrās*, in some *hijrās*' households they first must convert to Islam. The tradition, however, presents a religious syncretic approach influenced by the context in which *hijrās* worship or perform (Reddy, 2005: 113). Traditionally, *hijrās* are religious performers: they sing and dance on special occasions to bestow blessings.

<sup>3</sup> The term *sanātana dharma* has been used since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Hindu leaders, reformists, and nationalists to refer to Hinduism as a unified world religion.

<sup>4</sup> Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thirteen *akhārās* (traditional Hindu militant orders) have been recognised. Today, their leaders form the Akhārā Paṛiṣad, a 'family' entitled to organise religious events and protect the Hindu *dharma* (religion).

Hindu gathering held at Prayagraj (Bevilacqua 2022: 62–63), *kinnars* have participated in major religious events, occupying religious spaces they previously attended as secondary performers. As well as their religious advocacy, *kinnar* leaders remain active in social spheres, promoting rights and integration for transgender individuals. Additionally, they advocate for a decolonial and intersectional approach. However, the movement also seems to navigate the political climate in India, influenced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing political party leading the central government since 2014, which favours Hindu supremacy over minorities such as Muslims (see Jaffrelot, 2021).

To explore the complexity of this case study, the article is divided into three sections. First, I outline Indian feminism and transfeminism to contextualise the religious transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhārā. Second, I clarify the methodology and theoretical framework used. Third, I analyse *kinnars*' transfeminism as it relates to religion and activism, and decolonial and intersectional dynamics such as caste and class. This research reflects on aspects of South Asian feminisms and how, in the case of *kinnars*, religion serves as a catalyst for enhancing status, gaining power, and occupying new spaces within Indian society.

## FEMINISM, TRANSFEMINISM AND RELIGIOUS FEMINISM IN INDIA

Emerging from the backdrop of the Indian Liberation Movement, which sought independence from British colonial rule after World War Two, and influenced by the global Women's Liberation Movement since the 1970s, Indian feminism has navigated numerous historical moments (see Sen, 1990). Rekha Pande (2018) divides Indian feminism in two main phases: pre-Independence and post-Independence.<sup>5</sup> In the pre-Independence era, the women's movement was initially led by educated elite (mostly men), and between 1917 and 1927 by feminist organisations such as the Women's India Association, the National Council of Women in India and All India Women's Conference (Pande, 2018: 6). As women actively participated in the India Freedom Movement, women's civic rights were included in the Indian Constitution (1950).<sup>6</sup> In the first decades after Independence in 1947, no specific political agendas were thought of for women, therefore the Women's Movement took on important issues ranging from the dowry debate, women's labour, land rights, women's political participation, the rights of Dalit and marginalised women, growing religious fundamentalism, and the representation of women in the media (Pande, 2018: 9). Despite the presence of progressive social legislations and constitutional rights, women continued to have an inferior status in areas such as employment, political participation, and health provision. The 1970s, saw an increased focus on socio-economic and ecological issues, often linking these to women's issues. Women were frequently portrayed as victims in need of aid, which influenced development strategies (Guha Ghosal, 2005). This resulted in forms of feminism characterised by strong activism linked with non-governmental organisations, which led in the 1990s to the 'NGO-ization' of several women's organisations to get access to funds and resources (Roy, 2012: 10).

The 1990s also witnessed the political exploitation of religious and communal issues by political parties to consolidate their electoral supports. These had profound impacts on inter-community relations, leading to periodic outbreaks of violence and communal tensions that continue to influence the country's social and political landscape. In the 1990s, the spread of communalism also led to the emergence of forms of militant Hindutva feminism. Hindutva, the ideology behind Hindu nationalism, defines Indian culture in terms of Hindu values and advocates for policies that foster and preserve the Hindu identity and culture in a country they perceive as being overly secular or influenced by non-Hindu elements (see Jaffrelot, 1995). While Mazumdar (1994) dissociates the possibility of considering movements that refer to Hindutva as part of any kind of feminism, Sarkar (1993) shows that, although not contributing more broadly to women's rights, women participating in Hindutva politics were able to gain space in the public sphere, and a sense of empowerment and self-confidence. Recent analysis supports this perspective. Atreyee Sen (2012) describes the militancy of women affiliated with the *Shiv Sena* (a Hindu right-wing organisation) and shows how these women are not victims of right-wing ideologies, but protagonists in its dissemination.<sup>7</sup> Sen argues that this is an example of 'how a localized politics of womanhood and belonging, embedded in different material conditions and political realities, produced varying forms of women's resistance' (2012: 78). This attitude is in line with the propaganda built by the current BJP government regarding women's

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<sup>5</sup> See Chaudhuri (2005) for a comprehensive historical analysis, and Guha Ghosal (2005) for a summary of feminist trends in India.

<sup>6</sup> Articles 14, 15 and 16 establish the right to equality and prohibit discrimination based on gender. Articles 39, 42 and 43, advocate for economic justice, equal pay and support during maternity. Article 51A(e) emphasises the moral duty to renounce practices derogatory to women's dignity (<https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s380537a945c7aaa788ccfcd1b99b5d8f/uploads/2023/05/2023050195.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> On this issue, see also Sarkar (2022: 21–22).

empowerment, which co-opts feminist ideals in order to compete with modern feminist tendencies (Singh and Parihar, 2024: 145).

Different forms of Indian feminisms coexist and present a distinctiveness that 'had to constantly negotiate, define and distinguish itself in relationship to the West' (Chaudhuri, 2005: xiv), as Western understandings of freedom, agency and oppression cannot be representative of the women's struggle in India. Indian women are part of hierarchical relationships that differ from the 'simple' gender division but are entangled in duties according to society, caste, age, religion, and gender (Sugirtharajah, 2002: 100). It is because of this structure of duties, political unawareness, and lack of education that, despite the presence of pro-women laws, basic rights are frequently not claimed by women (Chitnis, 2005: 19–21). Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan propose a precise definition of feminism for South Asian women: an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation (1999: 3).

According to this definition, anyone who recognises the existence of these forms of repressions and acts against them is a feminist. Is there a place for transgender individuals in it?

Transgender communities in India have been clamouring for the recognition of their rights. Considering their historical relationship with feminism in India, Urvashi Butalia points out that trans men and women were far from the movement, because Indian feminists did not engage directly with sexuality and sexual identities (2017: n.p.). Transwomen first began to join the feminist movement in the mid-1990s, but as it has been recently emphasised by Sohini Sengupta (2022: n.p.), 'the cis-het Savarna<sup>8</sup> spaces continue to treat Dalit or trans rights as peripheral'. Given the complexity of these dynamics which do not only concern India,<sup>9</sup> it is here necessary to introduce the term transfeminism,<sup>10</sup> which denotes 'a trans-inclusive form of feminism, which challenges the assumptions of restrictive perspectives that focus only on cis women', and does not merely merge trans politics with feminist discourses, but expands them with intersectional, critical and global issues (Weerawardhana, 2018: 187, 189). In India, it would seem that important changes and practices come from transfeminist grassroots, from 'the alternative spaces created by trans people, queer folk, as well as Dalit and Bahujan women' (Sengupta, 2022: n.p.). In this article, I show that the Kinnar Akhārā, though not without controversy, provides an example of an alternative space, deeply grounded in religion.

A link between women's empowerment and religion has been created in India since the beginning of the Women's Movement because Hindu religious traditions give special importance to female goddesses and the principle of *śakti*, the feminine creative power (see Rajan, 1998). While the Brahmanical ideology that in most cases shapes the life of Hindus does not confer power on actual women as individuals, contemporary religious and socio-political movements have used religion as a source of female agency and emancipation. Hindutva movements discussed above provide an instance of this approach (see also Basu and Sarkar, 2022; Bacchetta, 2004; Menon, 2006).

An early example of a feminist religious movement unrelated to right-wing politics is provided by the Brahma Kumari – a religious association that proposed a form of 'liberation' for women according to religious parameters – described by Lawrence Babb (1984: 399). Babb (1984: 416) analyses the activities of the Brahma Kumari and classifies it as a form of 'indigenous' feminism. He points out that 'to be free can be manifested in different ways by different cultures' (1984: 399). For the Brahma Kumari, freedom occurs through celibacy: sexual renunciation could provide women with freedom and effective control over their bodies (1984: 411). Babb defines this group as feminist because it recognised women's position as an alienation caused by corrupt institutions (which is a feminist motif), and adds the adjective *indigenous* because its notion of the wrongs suffered by women and its image of liberation 'are all in one way or another derived from the Hindu tradition', thus it is a form of feminism 'that is radical in its implication and true to its own past' (1984: 416).

Babb's (1984) analysis partially aligns with what Emma Tomalin calls religious feminism: the 're-interpretations of religious systems that are consistent with the "core" values of the tradition as well as various types of feminist thinking' (2006: 387). In India, under the umbrella of religious feminism, one could cite emancipatory religious movements such as the 'dharmic feminism' of the Pari Akhārā led by Trikal Bhavanta (DeNapoli, 2019: 30); or the 'feminist theological stance' taken by the high-profile and well-educated female guru Anandmurti Gurumaa, studied by Angela Rudert (2017: 130). These religious leaders challenge religious interpretations and the way

<sup>8</sup> Members of the four main castes (Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras) are referred to as the *savarna* (those with *varṇa*, i.e., social class), while Dalits (or untouchable) are *avarna*, without caste, outside the system (see Singh, 1983: 734).

<sup>9</sup> See the issue Stryker and Bettcher's *Trans/Feminism* and its references.

<sup>10</sup> The label is credited to activists Diana Courvant and Emi Koyama, although it was Koyama's *Transfeminist Manifesto* published on her website in 2001 that led the term to reach a wider audience. Transfeminism is 'primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. It is also open to other queers, intersex people, trans men, non-trans-women, non-trans-men, and others who are sympathetic to the needs of trans women and consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation' (Koyama, 2003: 245).

women have been prevented from embodying religious authority. As I explain in the below section, I use Tomalin's (2006) theoretical frame to analyse Kinnar Akhārā's religious transfeminism.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I began directing my attention to Kinnar Akhārā during the 2019 Ardh Kumbh Melā<sup>11</sup> in Prayagraj, a city in Uttar Pradesh, Northern India. Although my research at that time primarily focused on male ascetic groups, the Kinnar Akhārā intrigued me. After disclosing my role as researcher on Hindu ascetic groups to the main *kinnar* leaders, I requested permission to attend the *kinnars'* camp and conduct interviews. *Kinnars* leaders, especially Laxmi, are used to answering questions from scholars, journalists and reporters. However, the fact that I was a white foreign woman working alone among male ascetics aroused their curiosity, because at that time they were also dealing with the ascetics from the male *akhārās*. During the festival months, I observed how the Akhārā garnered public support and, through it, the backing of the Jūnā Akhārā.

This article draws on ethnographic data collected in 2019 and during subsequent field research from November 2023 to March 2024 in Kolkata, Varanasi, Prayagraj, and Delhi. In both 2019 and 2024, my privileged position as a white researcher but especially as a foreign woman granted me special access to *kinnar* leaders, compared to the general public.<sup>12</sup> I focused predominantly on two leaders, Laxmi and Bhavani Ma Nath Valmiki (henceforth Bhavani), because they operate in distinct spaces with different strategies, collectively moving towards the same goal: empowerment and the occupation of mainstream spaces as part of their lost rights. Laxmi played a crucial role in the recognition of the third gender and emerged as a prominent figure in the Kinnar Akhārā. With her Brahmanical background, she navigates challenges posed by orthodoxy and countered critics comprehensively. Bhavani, a Dalit (untouchable) *kinnar* leader, previously converted to Islam as part of her *hijrā* identity and performed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. She returned to *sanātana dharma* to create the Kinnar Akhārā, pursuing a religious tantric path rooted in her family tradition. In 2019, I spent most of my time at the Ardh Kumbh Melā with Laxmi, whom I interviewed again in March 2024 in Delhi. During the 2024 Magh Melā, I was predominantly in the company of Bhavani, who generously provided time in the morning to answer my questions. By conducting interviews with *kinnar* leaders and attendees, participating in *kinnars'* events, and interacting with *hijrā* communities in the aforementioned cities, I gained a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the order, its activities and relations to *hijrās*.

Before reconnecting physically with *kinnars* in 2024, I expanded my 2019 ethnographic data using the Internet as a research tool (Markham, 2003: n.p.). I explored whichever online source I could find related to *kinnars*: TEDx Talks by Laxmi (TEDx Talks, 2017a, 2017b, 2018); *kinnar* leaders' interviews, statements, and videos in online newspapers and platforms like Facebook and Instagram.<sup>13</sup> The analysis of the contexts in which these online sources were produced, the interlocutors and the language used, helped in understanding the image *kinnars* want to project, the spaces they occupy (both physical and digital) and their agency. This online data was verified during fieldwork. Participating as an observer was crucial for capturing everyday contexts not evident on social media or headlines.

Online sources and ethnographic data presented in this paper are those that address the four main themes – religion, activism, and decolonisation and intersectionality – through which I expand Tomalin's definition of religious feminism into 'religious transfeminism'. Religious transfeminism, as my theoretical framework, is functional in describing a religious movement whose leaders reinterpret religious sources to support emancipatory claims also driven by human rights-based approaches and feminist theories. *Kinnars*, in fact, rather than 'rejecting the religion for its inherent patriarchy' (Tomalin, 2006: 385), have opted for a reinterpretation of its 'core' values – read *sanātana dharma* – to reclaim a religious role. Kinnar Akhārā leaders use Hindu religious textual sources to create their own tradition and authority. In so doing, they also occupy religious spaces that had been barred to them, aiming for the empowerment and recognition of transgender people. The religious transfeminism of *kinnar* leaders is enriched by decolonial and intersectional aspects emphasised by the leaders themselves.

The works of scholars such as Mignolo (2000) and Quijano (2000), following key orientalist and postcolonial thinkers such as Said (1978), Mohanty and Alexander (1996), Spivak (1990), Bhabha (1994), show how colonialism

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<sup>11</sup> The term *melā* indicates a fair, or a religious festival. During the *melā*, religious groups set up camps with tents to accommodate devotees and pilgrims.

<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, in the ascetic world, having foreign people around signifies internationality and value, so religious leaders often invite them to stay. However, the power dynamics in place are that the leaders decide everything: whether a person can stay, if they will answer questions, etc. Adopting a respectful approach that acknowledges these power dynamics facilitates the possibility of interviewing people. Interviews followed the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of my research center (<https://cria.org.pt/en/ethics-comitee>).

<sup>13</sup> Online sources are mentioned mainly in brackets while the link is included in the References.

not only involved political and economic domination but also imposed Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies, which continue to shape global hierarchies, cultural relations and to marginalise non-Western ways of knowing today. The imposition of a specific understanding of gender roles and power relations is part of it. According to Lugones (2010), gender cannot be precluded from discussions of decolonisation because it strongly affected and produced social and cultural identities. A decolonial approach seeks to sever from Western-centric systems of thought to create alternative epistemologies and forms of knowledge production. This approach has influenced feminism, and decolonial feminism has become an emerging theoretical concept that attempts to understand ‘gender that emanates from marginalized women in the Global South’ (Manning, 2021: 1204). This framework is important for understanding how *kinnar* leaders use a decolonial approach to challenge the colonial history that has marginalised them (see Hinchy, 2014) and to position themselves regarding the use of the term ‘transgender’ to describe South Asian gender non-conforming identities. The limitations of the term transgender with respect to Indian terminology have been discussed at an academic level. Dutta and Roy (2014: 327) underline that because it is used to universalise, it ‘subsumes terms that are now posited as merely local variants’, while the binaries associated with the use of terms such as cis/trans, homo/trans, limit possible discourses or practices of gender/sexual variance present in India (Dutta and Roy, 2014: 328). Hossain and Nanda (2020: 47) emphasise that the term transgender ‘engender[s] a new hierarchy in which hijras become the embodiment of an indigenous and traditional, but also backward and non-respectable subject position against the modern and modernising transgender community, which significantly, in many cases seeks integration, not distinction from the larger society’. This has led to strong frictions between *hijrās* and lay transgenders (Hossain, 2020: 408).

Frictions between communities are also driven by power dynamics rooted in social stratifications and, therefore, by the presence of multiple layers of intersectionality. Since Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualised the term (1989: 140), intersectionality has been used to demonstrate how various forms of social stratification (such as race, gender, class, etc.) intersect and overlap in complex ways. Consisting of a society where hierarchies and systemic inequalities are deeply embedded, the principle of intersectionality becomes a useful analytical tool in South Asia to tackle systems of power and oppressions (see George, 2023). Reddy (2005) and Revathi (2010) provide insights into how intersectionality operates in *hijrā* communities. Scholars like Dutta (2019), Fry *et al.* (2021) have presented the complexity of intersectionality within South Asian queer communities and the various power and social dynamics at play. In this article, I examine the intersectional issue by focusing on how socio-religious identities are managed within the Kinnar Akhārā and its entanglement with *hijrā* communities.

As I shall demonstrate, the religious transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhārā becomes an example of Velez’s (2019) suggestion for a reorientation of feminist practices (here in a religious guise) that propose decolonial and intersectional aspects not referring to inclusive or general categories, but that offer spaces of empowerment through local definitions and praxis.

## KINNAR AKHĀRĀ’S RELIGIOUS TRANSFEMINISM

When in March 2024 I met Laxmi in Delhi, I asked her if she was a feminist. She answered: ‘Of course I am a feminist! Yes, totally’. To my second question on whether the Kinnar Akhārā could be understood as a transfeminist religious organisation, again she answered: ‘Absolutely, yes!’ On a similar note, Bhavani stressed that only thanks to her *nārī rīpa* (feminine shape) she could be Bhavani and therefore be recognised as *mā* (mother), sister or daughter, without being abused (Prayagraj, 5 February 2024). She owes everything to womanhood, she said, and therefore, she fights for the respect of women, even in the religious field. Although it is likely that not all *kinnars* call themselves feminists or transfeminists, as Chaudhuri explains (2005: xvi) self-identification should not necessarily be used as a criterion for inclusion/exclusion. As already mentioned, anyone who recognises the existence of forms of repressions and acts against them could be defined as a feminist. Expanding on Tomalin’s (2006) theorisation of religious (trans)feminism, I analyse how it manifests in the Kinnar Akhārā. This section is divided into three subsections, focusing on religion, activism, and decoloniality and intersectionality.

### Religious Transfeminism in the Religious Field

In this subsection, I examine the transfeminist approach of *kinnar* leaders in the religious field, starting from online interviews given by Laxmi and Bhavani in recent years. This online data is supplemented by information collected during my ethnographic fieldwork, which shows how this approach manifests when *kinnars* occupy the space of a religious festival. In 2021, Laxmi said to the *Times of India*:

Religion has been made patriarchal. The Akhada parishad is a male-dominated, patriarchal body. They (ABAP) didn’t even accept the Dashnami Panchayati Majiwada, [so] expecting them to accept trans person[s] is far-fetched. (Mishra, 2021)

During the *Amit Rai Show* in 2023,<sup>14</sup> Bhavani uttered similar words. In fact, when *kinnars* decided to establish a new *akhārā*, this was strongly opposed by the Akhārā Pariṣad. Basically, the two leaders accused the patriarchal world of the *akhārās* of not being inclusive especially towards women. The thirteen traditional *akhārās* that form the Pariṣad are male-dominated and although a few have female sections, there is a tendency to discourage female participation because women are seen as a hindrance to male ascetics. While the Kinnar Akhārā was eventually accepted in 2019 by the Jūnā Akhārā, a women-only *akhārā* has not yet been recognised.

As I have shown elsewhere (Bevilacqua, 2022: 63–67), *kinnars* created new religious symbols to express their religious identity and began to celebrate Brahmanical Hindu rituals but also more esoteric, tantric ones. To justify their authority, *kinnars* claim to be present in the Vedic and Puranic literature as demigods. Therefore, they use and reinterpret some aspects of Hinduism, referring to an ancient ‘Vedic/*sanātana*’ period<sup>15</sup> that, according to them, was more modern than the current patriarchal and corrupt one. The responsibility of *kinnars* is to change the current narrative of religion and bring *sanātana dharma* back to be more inclusive. They do not refer to or support ideals rooted in traditional gender roles (e.g., an orthodox idea of Hindu femininity as supported by right-wing feminists) but rather they emphasise the need for respect, dignity, and inclusion in religion. Such a stand aims to empower gender non-conforming people in the religious field. The Kinnar Akhārā has created a religious space within the heart of Hindu orthodoxy able to host those gender non-conforming individuals who are seeking a religious path unhindered by their gender identity or who wish to participate in religious events without hiding their gender identity. I observed this in the 2019 Ardh Kumbh Mela, and in the 2024 Magh Melā, both in Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh). In the Magh Melā 2024, for example, I met P. who officially joined the Kinnar Akhārā, although he is not a transgender person. He is a gay man who, attracted by the religious context, decided to become part of the Akhārā to avoid hiding his sexual identity with them. He is a *saṃnyāsī* (renouncer) part of the Kinnar Akhārā.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, I met a few other gay men who felt completely accepted by *kinnars* and preferred to stay and attend their camp rather than others. This feeling of safety and empowerment was also felt by the women who attended the *kinnars*’ camp. Except for three priests reciting tantric mantras, only women could actively participate in the three days ritual organised by Bhavani (from 6 to 8 February). They brought the offerings, creating the ritual grounds together with Bhavani’s *kinnars* disciples, and contributed to the performance of the ritual, late in the evening.

Muslim gender non-conforming individuals are accepted too. Bhavani told me that she recently initiated a Muslim, and she became her disciple (Prayagraj, 5 February 2024). She became *fakīrī mā*, to stress an Islamic ascetic identity. Entering the Akhārā does not require a conversion. Bhavani claimed that nobody should be obliged to change his/her *dharma* and go against his/her religious path. She also said that Muslims could come and participate in the Melā with accommodations for their own needs.

The ‘queerisation’ of the religious space – the creation of a safe space for members of the LGBTQ+ communities and cisgender women – and the increased visibility of *kinnars* in religious festivals as protagonists rather than secondary religious performers, results from a specific strategy that uses religion to normalise gender non-conforming individuals in contexts where they were not traditionally entitled to such positions, thereby attempting to influence broader societal norms.

### Religious Transfeminism and Activism

Since one of the features of religious transfeminism is the support of human rights-based claims, in this section, drawing on online speeches and posts, I emphasise the role of *kinnar* leaders as activists and how their religious position makes their activities more visible.

Laxmi was among the petitioners in the appeal against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which made homosexuality a crime, and was among the petitioners for the official recognition of the third gender by the Supreme Court of India. As an activist, she began working in an organisation to raise awareness about HIV among *hijrās* and transgender communities and today, she collaborates with several NGOs, including the *Astitva Trust*, the *Asia Pacific Transgender Network* and the *Maharashtra Tritiḃiya Panthi Sangatana*, which promote equality for transgender individuals. She collaborates with the National Network of Transgender Persons (NNTP), a national collective of transgender people, rights activists, and transgender organisations. As an activist and a community leader, Laxmi gave several talks that can be found online. Reading the comments left by viewers, it seems these talks provide inspiration to the younger generation for their feminist and anti-patriarchal stance. Here are some online examples from 2017 onwards:

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<sup>14</sup> Amit Rai Show. (2023). *Kinnar ka Sach. Bhavani Maa Kinnar*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1knjoRSP-0>.

<sup>15</sup> According to *kinnar* leaders, *sanātana dharma* was the just and universal law present during the Vedic period (second millennium BCE), a time when social and gender discrimination were absent from society.

<sup>16</sup> As some *kinnars* were initiated into *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation), they are entitled to give the same initiation.

[...] the biggest strength in the world is the strength not to surrender and my sister across the world knows that... There is no end to struggle, we have to help others. Believe in yourself to face conflict. (Women in the World, 2017)

We don't need politicians who are not educated because they say things like girls are raped because they are wearing jeans pant. Slap those men! What kind of India we have when the panchayats are still prevailing, and the government does not say anything [...]. What kind of India are we living in? [...] Don't spare time, kick their butt up, nobody will come to fight for you, as a woman, the first thing people will try to do is assassinate you. This happened to me too [...] It's my body, it's my choice, if I am begging on the street will somebody come and feed me, help me? (TEDx Talks, 2018)

In the TEDx Talks (2018), Laxmi continued emphasising that although the women's rights movement is older than the transgender ones, a women's bill is still pending, while there has been much attention and haste in proclaiming two transgender bills. This, according to her, is because too many social constructs hinder women in the fight for their rights and safety. As she lamented in another online speech, 'Nirbaya's mother is still crying for the rights of her daughter' (*The Public India*, 2020), referring to the victim of a shocking rape case that occurred in New Delhi in December 2012. In another online interview from 2020, she acknowledges that, from a legal point of view, India has improved policies for transgender people, however, the general mentality is that of a *puruṣa pradhān* (male-dominated) society, and unless education is changed, gender imbalance will remain (The Pakhandi Theatre, 2020).

*Mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*<sup>17</sup> Pushpa Maai, a disciple of Laxmi, in 2008 founded Rajasthan's first LGBT Queer community-based organisation, the NGO *Nai Bhor Sanstha* that works to secure the rights and social developments of LGBTQ+ people.<sup>18</sup> This NGO has been associated with *3rd Voice* 'a registered Impact Based Community Media Platform' that works to highlight community issues through digital videos (Third Voice, 2020). Since 2015 with *Nai Bhor Sanstha*, she has been organising the 'Queer Gulabi Pride Jaipur', the name of Rajasthan's LGBTQ+ queer pride walk.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, she declared in an interview:

Jaipur is a very conservative city and there is hardly any visibility for the LGBT community here. Most of the activities involving the community are held without involving any publicity. The idea of having this march is to assert our presence in the city and we hope to sensitize people of the needs and problems faced by us.<sup>20</sup>

In two separate online interviews, Pushpa Maai emphasised the importance of facilitating transgender people's access to identity cards, enabling them to apply for benefits and government opportunities (*Third Voice*, 2020). She underscored the importance of education and family support for transgender individuals, stating that acceptance should begin within the family, with societal acceptance following suit. This process, she believes, will break down barriers between the 'two societies' (i.e. the *kinnar samāj* and the general *samāj*) and foster transgender people's confidence, which education further enhances (Tyagi Talks, 2021). Her goal is to create an environment where transgender individuals are accepted with dignity, treated equitably, and integrated into all mainstream activities. Additionally, Pushpa Maai has become a member of the Rajasthan Government's Transgender Welfare Board. Based on her Instagram account, she has been invited to serve as an ambassador for the 2024 *Swachh Survekshan* campaign in Jaipur, an annual survey evaluating cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation in villages, cities, and towns across India.<sup>21</sup>

The developments of NGOs – not only those established by the Akharā members – is not without criticism. As Goel reports, Living Smile Vidya, a Dalit transgender feminist writer and theatre artist, 'expresses concerns, saying that "savarna transgenders who have NGO funding" claim to falsely represent the community and direct all the benefits towards themselves' (2022: n.p.). Further investigation is needed to verify the influence and effectiveness of *kinnars'* organisation over a long period. What can be observed now is that several NGOs have been started by Laxmi's disciples, and that while Laxmi was a well-known activist before she became *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*, the attention and importance given to other leaders depend on their new religious guise and the success of the Kinnar Akharā.<sup>22</sup> In terms of content, those involved in activism emphasise the need to fight for

<sup>17</sup> The title of *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* is one of the highest titles in the Hindu religious traditions.

<sup>18</sup> <https://ngodetails.com/india/andhra-pradesh/nai-bhor-sanstha/>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/jaipur-to-witness-first-queer-pride-march-on-march-1st/#gs.25x8AaI>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/jaipur-to-witness-first-queer-pride-march-on-march-1st/#gs.25x8AaI>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/C96l9zPBOrQ/?igsh=MTNIZG15aG1vZGFzOQ==>.

<sup>22</sup> Bhavani, for example, on 25 October 2023 was invited at the National Summit on Holistic Sciences & Wellness to talk about *kinnars'* society and her life experience. <https://www.facebook.com/Nationalsummitonholisticsciencesandwellness/videos/1224443592278465>.

rights and for the implementation of transgender rights, an approach shared also by non-activist *kinnars*. During the *Amit Rai Show* (2023), Bhavani claimed: ‘As long as my people do not sit in parliament, politicians will not listen to my voice or our requests’.<sup>23</sup> During one of our interviews (Prayagraj, 3 February 2024), she confirmed her position about this issue, but also added that she wants to be represented by a *kinnar* or a *hijrā*. She emphasised that she does not feel represented by a transwoman or a transman as these terms still contain definitions in which she does not recognise herself, that is being a man or a woman. She identifies herself as a *kinnar* and no Western word, she said, could carry the value of such a label.

### Religious Transfeminism, Decoloniality and Intersectionality

Bhavani’s words highlight an important aspect of decolonisation that, although approached differently, is profoundly felt by *kinnar* leaders. In this section, I show how the *kinnar* leaders’ awareness of decolonial and intersectional issues makes their words and stances part of the theoretical framework presented above (see Dutta, 2019; Hinchy, 2014; Velez, 2019). To do so, I start with examples from online data and then focus on ethnographic data collected during my fieldwork.

*Kinnar* leaders support the idea that transgender people were present not only in Indian religions but also in Islam, and that it was only during the British Raj that they were side-lined.<sup>24</sup> According to Bhavani (Prayagraj, 4 February 2024), the Islamic ‘colonisation’ of the *kinnar* traditions did not lead to their marginalisation. In fact, *kinnars* were respected during the Mughul period and could become *senapatīs* (chieftains). The spread of British morality, Bhavani continued, destroyed Indian culture and religions because it led Indians to discriminate against and participate in the marginalisation of the various *hijrā* traditions, which struggled to survive. In a TEDx Talks, Laxmi claimed that during the English Raj, *hijrās* became ‘transparent people’, ignored by the rest of society, and that the written history is a ‘colonised’ one made by the British, which still affects the self-representation of transgender people (TEDx Talks, 2017a). While calling herself a transgender rights activist, she recognises the limitations of the term ‘transgender’ as a category to be used in South Asia and that in reality ‘there is no English word for our communities’ (TEDx Talks, 2017b). *Kinnar* leaders point out that *hijrās* and *kinnars* come from an initiatic, *guru-śiṣya* (guru-disciple) tradition and thus refer to a specific cultural context and transmission of practices that cannot be represented by a simple ‘T’ like in the acronym LGBTQ+. *Kinnar Akhārā*’s construction of a religious identity encourages the decolonisation of the concept of transgender as a Western category, making religion the source for its trans-resilience and empowerment. Its narrative supports an Indian perspective of gender non-conforming people as it arises from a specific Hindu frame. However, while Bhavani, as I mentioned, strongly asserts her identity only as *kinnar/hijrā*, Laxmi shows a more nuanced approach depending on the audience she addresses, whether it is in a UN meeting, a national committee or a religious gathering. Yet, those *kinnars* who are involved in NGOs or governmental dynamics that expect the use of such terminology, follow such directions.

In India, the theme of decolonisation has become the rhetoric of militant nationalism.<sup>25</sup> As the *Kinnar Akhārā*’s counter-narrative to the colonial discourse is a narrative that favours a Hindu identity, it has been associated with the ‘saffronisation’<sup>26</sup> of the ‘trans subjects to serve an essentialist, Hindu normative vision of the nation’ (Ung Loh, 2022: 242). Laxmi has been accused of having a strong right-wing nationalist attitude and of appealing to Hindutva ideology for political gains. The ways *kinnars* refer to a Hindu golden past could evoke associations with the central government’s rhetoric and Hindutva ideology. This alignment could potentially steer the religious transfeminism of *kinnars* towards the kind of right-wing feminism mentioned earlier. However, *kinnars*’ support to Hindutva/BJP should not be taken for granted.

On March 2024, when I interviewed Laxmi in Delhi and asked about her association and that of *Kinnar Akhārā* with the right-wing, she affirmed that she does not support any right-wing and surely not the Hindutva ideology. She said: ‘You all can put us in any wing, but we are our own wing’<sup>27</sup> and emphasised: ‘Does being Hindu or claiming my Hindu identity make me part of Hindutva?’ This is a question that gives one pause for thought. Regarding a possible saffronisation of *hijrās*, she answered that *kinnars* are not against *hijrās*, but against the fact that they are not part of the mainstream religion.

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<sup>23</sup> *Hijrās* succeeded in achieving political office at national and local levels, exemplary is the case of Shabnam Mausi elected in Madhya Pradesh (see Ung Loh, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> *Hijrās* were criminalised under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a law aiming to eliminate *hijrās* ‘as a visible socio-cultural category and gender identity’ (Hinchy, 2014: 279), revoked in 1952 (Dutta, 2012: 828).

<sup>25</sup> In 2017 the Rashtriya Swamsevaka Sangh (RSS), a right-wing organisation, planned a two-day national conference on ‘Decolonisation of Indian Mind’ which was duly attended by intellectuals from nineteen states (VSK Telangana, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Saffronisation (from the saffron colour used in Hinduism) refers to the policies of Hindu nationalist groups that glorify Hindu contributions to Indian history while undermining others.

<sup>27</sup> Such an ambiguous answer might indirectly support the thoughts shared by several *hijrās* and activists I spoke to: in essence, the *Akhārā* will ally itself and show support to whichever party is in charge.



The relationship between *kinnars* and *hijrās* is complex and offers opportunity to analyse how religion, caste and class intersect within their organisation. *Kinnar* leaders assert that the Akhārā welcomes individuals from all religions without requiring conversion to Hinduism. This approach contrasts with some *hijrā* households, where conversion to Islam is required for entry. However, as religious identities among *hijrās* are fluid (see Reddy, 2005), it is likely that the religious openness proposed by the Akhārā is due to the close interconnection between *hijrās* and *kinnars*. Many *kinnars* before were *hijrās*, and continue to maintain their *hijrā* ‘role’, exemplifying how their identities intersect. For instance, *kinnars* who were *hijrā nāyaks* (leaders) with areas of influence (*ilākā*) continue to uphold these roles, and their disciples perform the same activities as before. At a local level the structure appears unchanged. As Bhavani mentioned (Prayagraj, 8 February 2024), to join the Akhārā she had to seek permission from her guru and, like other *hijrās* who entered the Akhārā, had to pay a *daṇḍa* (fee) to her *hijrā* household. *Kinnars* with *hijrā* gurus (often Muslim) still maintain their relationship with them, including Laxmi. Despite the emphasis on a Hindu identity, there is not an opposition to Islam within the community. *Hijrās/kinnars* perform both for Hindus and Muslims, and no one from these communities questions them about their religious affiliation. Bhavani also criticised the contemporary political climate, where Hindus and Muslims are divided, and the conditions for Muslim have worsened. As *hijrās/kinnars* benefit from the well-being of the lay society, its prosperity leads to their own prosperity (Prayagraj, 4 February 2024). However, considering that *kinnars* who maintain their roles as *nāyaks* may aspire to enhance their local political influence, the interconnection between local context and regional politics might be crucial, with religion potentially being exploited to gain power at the expense of other communities.

As I discussed elsewhere (Bevilacqua, 2022: 69), the association of the Kinnar Akhārā with a specific uppercaste, casteist attitude stems from a focus on Laxmi (Biswas, 2021; Upadhyaya, 2020), which reduces the Kinnar Akhārā to one individual and overlooks other leaders like Bhavani. Regarding caste, Bhavani mentioned to me that the real problem in Hinduism is the caste system. She belongs to the Valmiki caste, considered an *achūt* (untouchable, Dalit) by Hindus (Prayagraj, 3 February 2024). Bhavani is vocal about her caste and the discrimination faced by low-caste and untouchable people in India. With the Kinnar Akhārā, however, she became one of first – if not the first at that time – Dalit individuals to receive the title of *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*, one of the highest religious titles in Hindu traditions. Her pride in declaring her caste contrasts with the recent tendency among some *hijrā* communities to hide their caste background or adopt high-caste Hindu surnames (Dutta, 2023). Regarding caste,<sup>28</sup> it seems that the approach among *kinnars* is more progressive than that of *hijrā* communities (see Goel, 2022: n.p.). *Hijrās* have a hierarchy of class (often related to caste) based on their practices. At the top are *hijrās* who perform *badhā* (blessing performances), followed by those engaged in sex-work, and finally those who ask for money in shops or on the streets. It is unclear if the caste/class system present among *hijrās* is mirrored in the Kinnar Akhārā at a more local level. Given that there is not a strong divide between *hijrās* and *kinnars*, these power dynamics may not be easily reinterpreted.

The Akhārā aims to include people from all castes, classes, and religions without discrimination. This openness extends to LGBTQ+ individuals who are often marginalised by Hindu orthodoxy, and cisgender women who still fight for roles in traditional religious groups. As Laxmi told me (Delhi, 23 March 2024), the Akhārā idea of empowerment does not concern only transgender people: ‘It has place for male, women and for entire LGBTQ+ community, but it is started, and it is run by trans female’. She continued: ‘We believe that empowerment has to come to everybody, especially women and trans women. Women at large, women of different colour, different caste, they all should have their own rights.’

## CONCLUSION

The Kinnar Akhārā is a complex organisation that brings together different aspects of Indian (trans)feminism that I have summarised in the first part of this article but develops them in a religious frame. *Kinnars* follow a ‘global’ transfeminist praxis based on social activism and the establishment of NGOs, through which they advocate for the social inclusion of transgender people and the implementation of women’s and transgender individuals’ rights. Following the general trend of feminist approaches from the global South, they manifest decolonial attitudes that, together with their religious approach could also lead to right-wing feminism. As the Kinnar Akhārā’s ‘local’ praxis uses *sanātana dharma* and various forms of feminist strategies to gain authority, empowerment and a new religious role, this paper has discussed it as an example of religious transfeminism. Their religious identity enables *kinnars* to occupy spaces that were previously not inclusive for them, and due to their conformity to current political – read Hindu – standards their presence is growing in the main religious festivals. Their Hindu/decolonial position allows them to ride a trend that gives them further visibility. This visibility aims to change the mindset of the public which, they believe, will lead to effective social inclusion of transgender people. This approach is not without criticism, particularly from transgender communities who reject the identification as demigods (which is the

<sup>28</sup> On the emergence of caste concerns in the trans movement and *hijrā* communities, see Kumar and Datta (2024).

propaganda used by *kinnars* to justify their roles).<sup>29</sup> Criticism also arises from proponents of a transfeminist secular approach and those who perceive the Kinnar Akhārā as a manifestation of a right-wing religious organisation aiming to exploit ‘trans Hindutva or Hindu nationalism’<sup>30</sup> solely for individual gain.

It is uncertain however whether the use of a *sanātana dharma* rhetoric that sometimes tumbles into a Hindutva-like rhetoric and the involvement with traditional orthodox groups, will lead the religious transfeminism of *kinnars* towards extremist tendencies, creating forms of exclusions, especially of Muslim *hijrās*. According to Ung Loh (2022: 227), ‘Many communities cannot afford to turn their backs on the state when it finally recognizes them’. However, as *hijrā* groups includes both Hindus and Muslim and the interconnection between *kinnars* and *hijrās* is still very strong, a sharp division between *kinnars* and *hijrās* is elusive.

The case study of the Kinnar Akhārā serves as a South Asian example to expand feminist perspectives beyond the classifications and frameworks of the global North. It demonstrates how religion and transfeminism can be jointly utilised as instruments for negotiating agency and empowerment. The *kinnar* leaders, adapting to the current Indian context, strive to reshape and negotiate power dynamics to achieve religious and social changes. As the Kinnar Akhārā is still a relatively young organisation, with leaders operating in diverse religious, social, and political spheres, both locally and globally, its future and outcomes remain in development.

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<sup>29</sup> Ung Loh reports the words of Living Smile Vidya, who claims: ‘if you are connecting identity with religion, then you’re getting distracted from the core issues [...] it doesn’t really help us if they only see us as mythological beings.’ (2022: 233)

<sup>30</sup> Dutta (2023: 11) talks of ‘trans Hindutva or Hindu nationalism’ to emphasise the rise of queer nationalism in areas that were usually outside its traditional strongholds.

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