



*Written by Nirmal Mitra and  
photographed by Prashant  
Panjiv. Both visited the village  
of Bechrabi and did extensive  
research on the hijra community  
and the cult of Bahuchara Mata*

# Bahuchara Mata and her rooster



# Saga of a Hijra Goddess

The temple at Bechraji



**A** dozen fat red roosters scamper out of their boxes, crowing, flapping and flying about in wild abandon. Crows caw. Pigeons flutter. Temple priests and employees stagger out of their rooms. The large cemented courtyard is swept and washed. Work starts on cutting up vast quantities of fruit and kneading *atta* or flour to fry *puris* for the goddess' first *bhog*. It is still dark, but dawn over Bechraji.

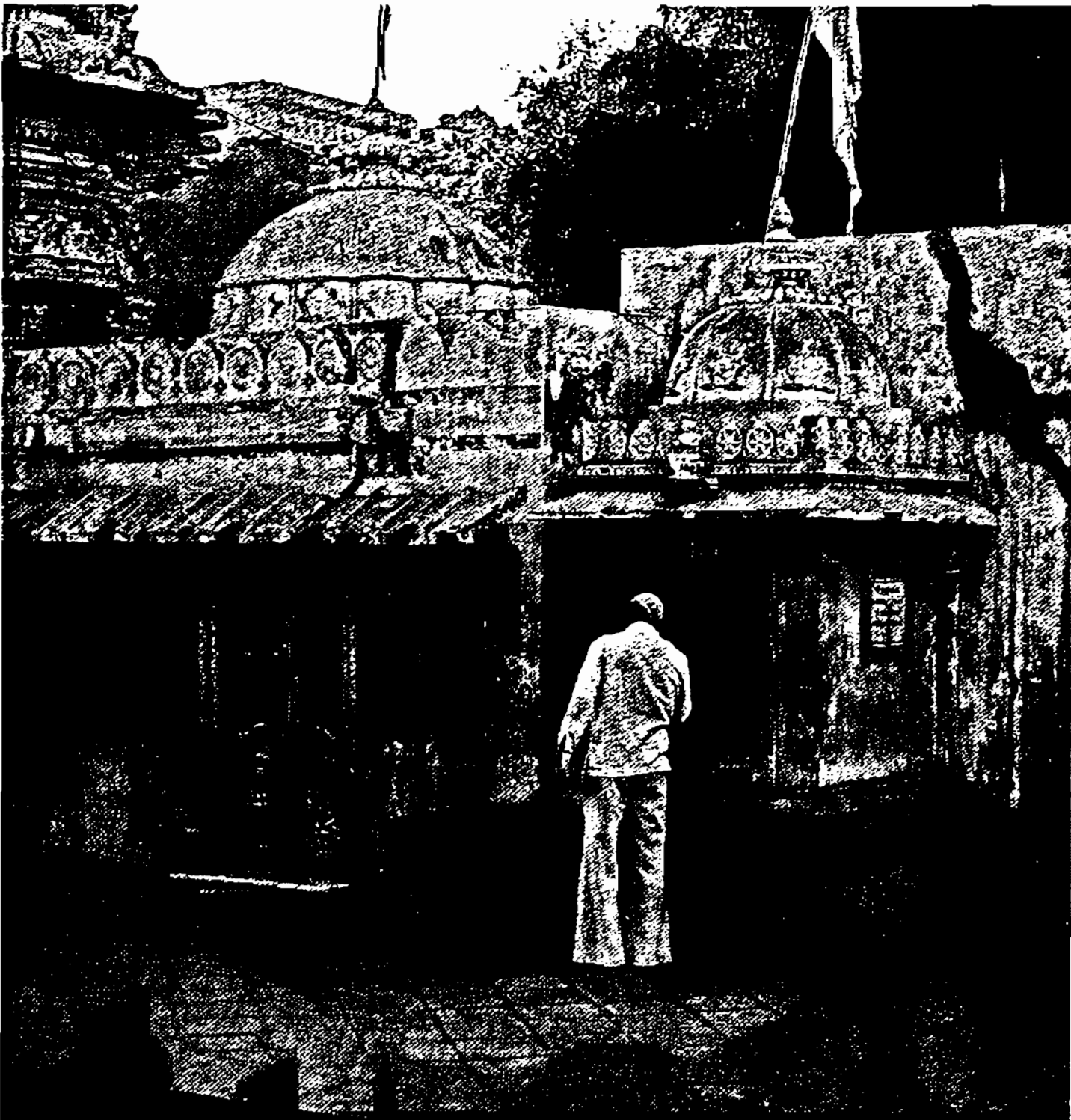
An *aarti* or invocation begins to the accompaniment of bells, gongs, cymbals and the nerve-assaulting strains of high pitched windpipe music from atop a temple tower. Faithful early morning devotees, just in time for the *puja* or prayer, gather to sing *Jai Jagdeesh Hare* in a slow, mournful chorus. Verses are read from a small, holy book.

A group of colourfully dressed eunuchs who have trekked all the way from the nearby villages where they live, walk briskly into the premises chewing *neem* twigs. They make for the hydrants, wash up and get down to their busy daily beat. "Amma!" they shout, clapping in preface and pounce upon devotees to sell the only thing they can, gratuitous blessings for a rupee or two, nothing less. The better dressed the visitor, the more the demand. The *guru*, Mangu Masi, the revered one, squats under a pipal tree in the compound to keep a watch over her *chelas*, occasionally bolting around to scare off troublesome roosters about her.

Only scare them off, never hurt them. For the roosters are holy birds, carriers of *Bahuchara Mata*, also known as the *Murjey Wali Mata*, who have borne her faithfully since time immemorial and whom she protects. To cut up and eat them would be an outrageous sin deserving of the *Mata's* vilest imprecations, damnation, hell. Legend has it that the soldiers of Allau'din Khilji's invading army had once come upon the holy roosters in the jungles of Sankhalpur, near Bechraji, and made a hearty meal of them. The goddess in her fury cursed them all, and the birds tore open the stomachs of the soldiers and hopped out of the

Below: Behind the main temple built in the eighteenth century by the Gaekwad is a smaller temple. This is where the special pujas are performed by childless couples

Facing page: This temple is only used for the rituals. Most of the time it is kept locked



corpses, alive and whole. Till today this triumph of good over evil is commemorated in garish wall paintings in the *Mata's* temples all over Gujarat.

The aura of the eunuch and its fiery goddess has a strong grip on common lives in Bechraji, a small, nondescript central Gujarat temple town, eighty kilometres west of Ahmedabad. Religious legend, myth and superstition combine to foster an unshakeable belief in the power of the goddess and her sexless devotees. Day after day, hundreds of anguished men, women and children stream in and out



of the temple (though it isn't even on Gujarat's tourist map), leaving generous amounts of money with the eunuchs with the hope of a long awaited child, or cure of a painful disease or disability. Bahuchara, one of the forms of Durga, goddess of *shakti*, is beseeched for her magic power over mortal lives which the *hijras* too supposedly share. Hence their social status, respect and growing wealth.

Popular awe of the goddess is much like the common fear of a *hijra* curse; the *Mata* is made out to be a temperamental deity who can make or mar fortunes at will, somebody who should be kept happy forever because she is fickle and irritable, yet large hearted. In Gujarat, popular devotion to *Bahuchara Mata* and respect for the eunuchs grew under the rule of the Gaekwads who assiduously built temples to the goddess and patronized the eunuchs. The latter were brought under state protection, given houses and money, enabling them to be contented. Kings and rulers dared not offend them lest they turn an evil eye on the fortunes of the state. No wonder the eunuch community grew alarmingly. Even today a semblance of such respect remains in large parts of Gujarat where eunuchs are seen as saints of an ancient order.

Known as the Mecca of eunuchs, home of *Bahuchara Mata*, Bechraji is a proliferation of shops, *dhabas*, local eating

places, *dharamsalas* or rest houses and mud houses which have sprouted around an impressive, sombre looking eighteenth century black stone and marble temple dedicated to *Bahuchara Mata*. More of an overgrown village, the town hardly has proper roads, is barely accessible, poorly populated, and, like innumerable other villages, has a large number of people living on the brink of poverty. The temple forms the principal means of sustenance, with a lot of people eking out a living by selling little totems, pictures and beads to the religious and superstitious with others touting *yagnas* or ceremonial rites and *pujas* to fleece the gullible, all in concert with the priests. The eunuchs, are divine beggars and promptly excused of their greed.

The temple at Bechraji, built in 1782 by Maharaja Manajirao Gaekwad, is an elegant structure with a large cemented courtyard bound by a row of *dharamsalas*, surrounded by a great wall on all four sides. Outside the temple's wrought iron gates, hawkers sell their wares — miniature totems, pictures of the *Mata* atop a rooster, booklets of holy verse, bead necklaces and pieces of tin cut into the shapes of arms, legs, heads, ears, noses, eyes and other parts of the human anatomy. Devotees who come to pray to be cured of disease must buy the appropriate totem for the *puja*. So say the priests.

The temple itself reverberates with activity right through the day and despite that a calm prevails. The atmosphere is peaceful, even though sometimes noisy. The main structure is bound off from the heat and dust outside by enormous walls and the shade of leafy trees. A sub-structure, open on all sides with a concrete roof above, has a small square platform in the centre where *yagnas* take place. Pillars that support the roof have tawdry drawings depicting the epic struggle of *Bahuchara Mata* against the *rakshasas* or demons of Sankhalpur. The temple itself is at a higher level, four steps above, and has two entrances. It has a marble floor and marble walls which have elaborate coloured drawings of the episodes in the eventful life of *Bahuchara Mata* on earth, and the Khilji invasion. The cockerel eating incident is, incidentally, a major exhibit.

The temple is not an architectural masterpiece nor are the figures and drawings on the walls and pillars finely carved or painted but they are quite beautiful and symbolic. The colours are bright, characteristic of rural art. Although the temple was built by the Gaekwad family, it is not well maintained, perhaps due to a lack of funds. Temple authorities have to depend on local help to paint the place when needed, or re-touch the figures.

The image of the goddess sits in the sanctum with large piles of fruit and vegetables around her feet. Enveloped in the fragrance of *agarbattis*, incense sticks, the *puja ghar*, or prayer house, is nearly always cool and segregated from the rest of the temple. Every half hour, the *pujari* or priest stands up, a bell in one hand, tufts of broken flowers in the other and conducts an *aarti*. The ceremony fetches money,



Above: It is considered auspicious to donate money to the hijras

Facing page: The rows of clay idols which symbolise the child a barren mother prays for

devotees offer *bhog* which is later distributed as *prasad*. For the very wealthy and the desperate, there are *yagnas* and *mahayagnas*, special ceremonies to appease the *Mata* for an exclusive, coveted favour. The fees for these are much more, and the arrangements are elaborate. A fire is lit and the priest with devotee, sit around it, chanting *mantras* and verses for hours.

Behind the main *puja ghar*, within the precincts, is a smaller temple under the benign shade of a pipal tree. Locked up much of the time, it is used for rituals performed for childless couples. A long row of doll sized, round faced, clay idols line the wall of the compound nearby. These are picked for the special *puja* as symbols of the offspring prayed for. The idols are ordinary images, with coloured noses, eyes and ears.

Photography inside the main temple is forbidden although there is nothing truly special about the interior. The ceiling rises high above and the walls and corners show a vast array of drawn and painted images telling the history of the goddess and the story of the man who built the temple dedicated to her. The main idol stands in a wooden

frame laden with flowers and jewellery. A man sits behind a small counter with stacks of booklets about the history of the temple, the goddess, the work of the Gaekwad trust and selected holy verses. These sell for five rupees a copy.

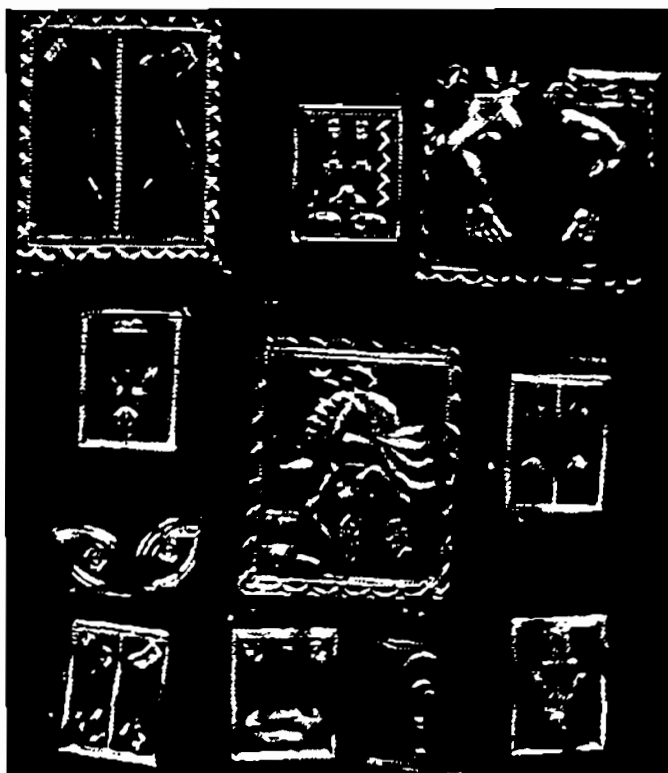
Entry into the tower where two musicians beat huge drums and blow strange trumpets, one short, like a *shehnai*, the other long and winding, is restricted. Normally only the two musicians are allowed, none else. But we managed to get in. The artists were initially confused and uncomfortable in our presence but later they enjoyed displaying their skills. Much like Carnatic music, it is high pitched, with long notes.

The noise and excitement of the temple brings an otherwise quiet town alive. There is nothing the place can boast of apart from being an occasional picnic spot for truck drivers and motorists on the road to Viramgam, and a famous eunuch rendezvous. The people of the town have deep religious regard for the *hijra* community, in spite of their sordid rites and practices being common knowledge. Over the years, the *hijras*' wealth has grown. Today, they own a large nine roomed *dharamsala*, the most expensive in town, where the charges per night are four rupees with a rupee extra for a quilt, a rupee for a cot, and another for a pillow. They also own a walled house, and some cattle. They move about town like a bunch of rich traders, respected and feared by the poor. The people of Bechraji do not, however, grudge them their wealth. The *hijras*' collections are seen as a religious right. Today, the eunuchs have a number of male servants and watchmen employed in the *dharamsala* and their homes.

Irrespective of their wealth and prosperity, *hijras* live austere. The *guru* keeps a strict vigil on all its *chelas* in the *akhada*, eunuch community home, to guard against any "waywardness" and extravagance. This often implies coming home early, going to sleep around seven, eschewing the company of men and women and keeping away from "corrupting" films. Never do they move about alone, even while going to the market. Marketing is a collection spree. Vegetables and spices are donated to them. If they do not need all they collect they sell off the excess.

Most *hijras* gather at Bechraji during Chaitra for an annual jamboree. The *Mata* is appeased with huge offerings of food, utensils and money and the eunuchs hold mass prayers not to be born as eunuchs again, their sole request to their goddess. Many visit Bechraji at least twice a year, once for the Chaitra Mela. It is a moment of communal pride and amity, with the *gurus* and *nayaks* and *chelas* making merry and praying for better lives.

Although the Bechraji temple is famous, the original structure is a small shrine in Sankhalpur, the next station from the town. The eunuchs' connections with both the temples at Sankhalpur and Bechraji is steeped in Hindu



*These small totems made in tin of the different parts of the body are bought by sick pilgrims representing the afflicted area and are offered to the Goddess*

mythology and tradition. The eunuchs, also called *hijras*, *sataras*, *venders* and *paovais* and a community called the Kamalias are the two major groups which lived off the proceeds of these temples, bound together by historical and mythological ties.

According to the *Bahuchas Smriti*, the only authentic account of the history of the *hijras* and Kamalias, the latter were the servants of *Bahuchara Mata*. They were easily recognised dressed as half male and half female, a vertical division! For instance, they would wear half a moustache, and half their hair would be long. In their hands they held a trident, a gift from the *Mata*. The Kamalias no longer dress in this manner, although some of them are still specially employed for religious ceremonies. In Bechraji, most of them have moved into petty trades like selling totems and pictures, helping priests with their work and touting for *pujar* and *yagnas*.

The *hijras* used to work for the Kamalias' in the days of yore. Since they were forbidden to marry and enter the *sansari duniya*, the Kamalias needed to be looked after and the *Mata* is supposed to have given them the *hijras* as chattels and also, incidentally, as a source of sexual gratification. Then came *kaliyug*. The Kamalias could no longer stay away from women, and began to get married. The *hijras* split away and lived among themselves as they continue to.

The origin of the Kamalias themselves is a myth. The story is told of a wicked demon, Sankhas, who took delight

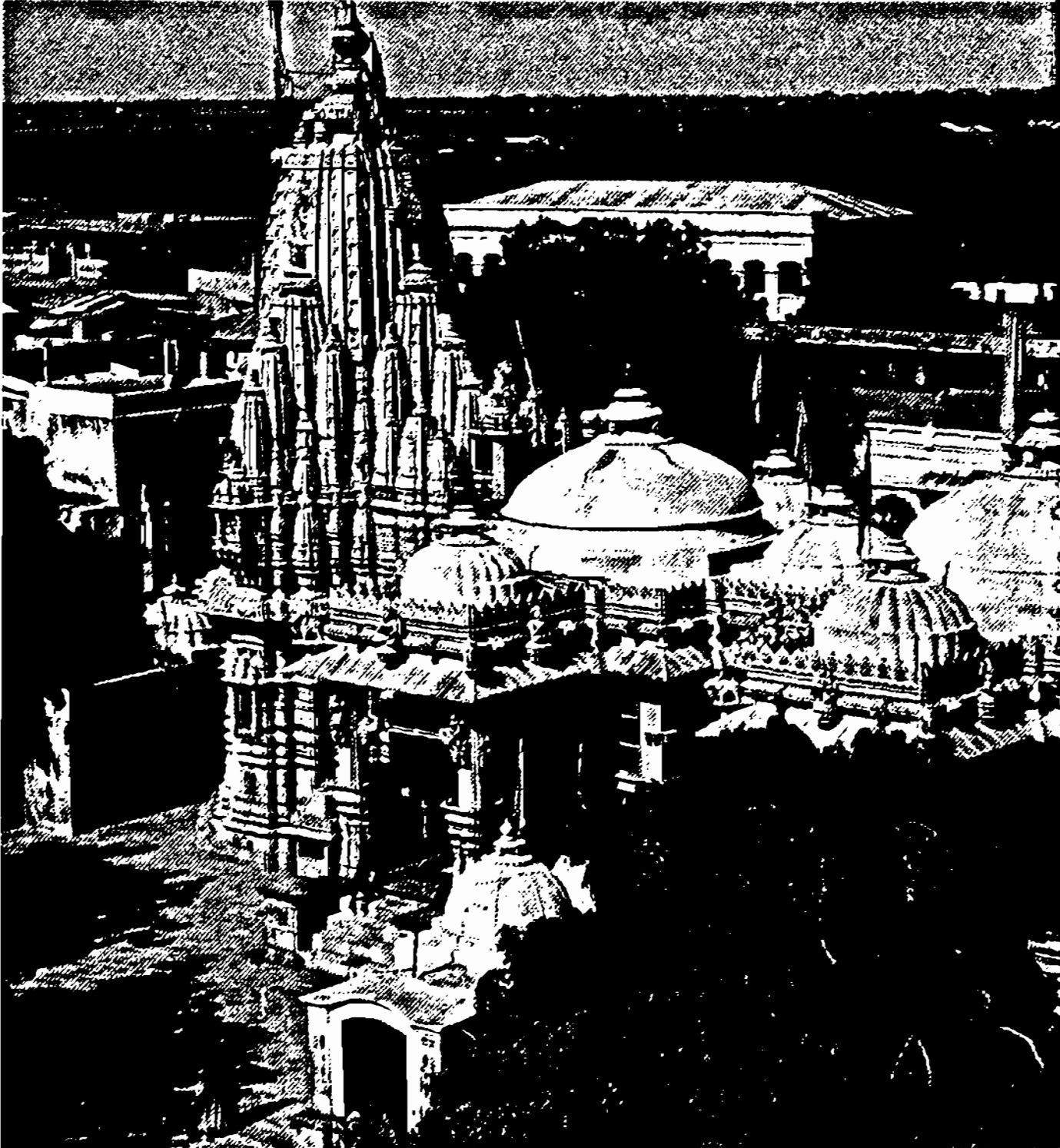


in spreading terror and misery in the accursed villages and jungles around nearby Sankhalpur. When the frightened people of the areas prayed to God to rid them of the cruel menace, God created Bahuchara, one of the forms of Durga, and sent her to earth. The goddess needed an army of charioteers. So she created them out of the dirt, *kamal*, she rubbed off her skin and called them Kamalias. They were to dress as half male and half female and remain fiercely loyal and devoted to the *Mata*. For their service and pleasure they were given the *hijras*, actual eunuchs or castrated males, known to share Bahuchara's *shakti* or

Below: A panoramic view of the temple complex at Bechrabi, the home of Bahuchara Mata and Mecca for the hijras

Facing page, above: The inner sanctum where the goddess resides enveloped in a fragrance of *agarbattis*

Below: A portrait of the original Kamalia. They were once the servants of Bahuchara Mata and have given the hijras as chattels. Today the two lead separate lives



strength.

The faith and belief persists. Today, the *hijras* command respect while the Kamalias live in virtual penury or as decadent feudal landlords. The earnings from the temple have thinned to a trickle. Agriculture remains difficult in an arid zone and there is practically no other means of survival than migrating to the big cities, Baroda being the nearest. And so they have left, both the *hijras* and Kamalias. Bechraji, however, is where they find salvation and a home far from the taunts of human society.

