

Terminologies on Eunuch-Hood in Hinduism, Islamic and Abrahamic Traditions in India

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ABSTRACT: Gender has its ramifications. New gender alternatives has created new social spaces in the society. Society is the one major factor determines the roles played by a human being. By breaking the gender binaries new roles were recognised or came out. Once in our society there were no room for a third gender. As time passes by gender stereotypes were broken and gender fluid society was created. It was not in terms of body but in terms of biology. As exceptions Eunuchs were identified in the society long years back. The eunuchs are those who castrate themselves as they rejected their masculinity. While analysing the history and traditions of the eunuchs they dates back from the ancient Indians texts, the Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana. In Islam and Christianity their history can be traced and their role in the society and other major activities they were indulged in can be seen. The article analyses the role played by them in Hindu Mythologies and also there antiquity in Islam and Christianity as well.

KEYWORDS: *Eunuchs, Gender Identity, Medieval India, Hinduism, Colonial India, Androgynous*

Eunuchs in Society

Eunuchs in Greek means “bed”. They were mainly guardians of bedchambers. Eunuchs in general means someone who lost or decided not to indulge in any kind of sexual intercourse which results in procreation. Most of them are sterile but they but sometimes they chose sexual activity. Ancient societies distinguish eunuchs as natural eunuchs

and eunuchs by nature. They were also be refereed as men born with underdeveloped sexual organs due to chromosomal abnormalities like rare genetic conditions like 5alpha-Reductase Deficiency and Klinefelter Syndrome. They created new roles and establish their place in every field in the society.

The britishers considered eunuchs as ungovernable. They were termed as objects and undesired men. Colonials termed them and their existence as danger to public Morales. But apart from their biased view, eunuchs are a disciplined community, especially in south Asian cultures they are believed to be the harbingers of blessings and curse They have the power to bless fertility and curse it.¹ They are cross dressers and have feminine body language which leads to ridiculing form the peers. In India these eunuchs were given to a community called *hijra* for bringing them up.²

They faced rejection and violence from their family and termed as a curse and will be thrown out of their home often. Once they will be with the eunuch community they will be performed with the *Nirvana* ceremony and will be accepted as their family. In India the *Hijras*, the male cult they had total castration or emasculation with an operation called nirvana. This is done by *Dai ma* meaning midwife. The penis and scrotal sac are tightly tied with the string. They will be saying the name of god. The *Daima* cut the organs separately with diagonal cuts. They will insert a small stick to the urethra for keeping it open. Blood loss will be termed as the losing of male element and the organ will be buried under a tree. They will be dressed as women. The *Gurubai* or *Thayamma* the group leader will took the castrated one to the dark room along with the other *Aravanis*. They will be treated with sesame oil, if the patient survives for forty days, facial hair will be pulled out and they will be applied with turmeric.

Antiquity of Eunuchs

The term “eunuch” is an English translation of a variety of Sanskrit terms: *Kliba*, *Shandha*, *Pandaka*, *Napunsaka*, *Tritiya*, *Prakriti*, and *Kesava*.³ Eunuchs are found in many parts of the world especially in Africa, Asia, and Mediterranean Europe. In China they dates back to Shang dynasty

(1765- 1222 B C), later Han dynasty (AD 25 to 219) and they were an important part of the Chinese government. They also appeared in the time of Tang Dynasty (618-906). During the Ming Dynasty by the end of fifteenth century (1368-1644) there were an estimate of ten thousand Eunuchs in the city. By 1644 their number increased by one lakh during the Qing Dynasty. Most of them were drawn out from poor families castrated for helping their children attaining a better position in the court and the others from judicial custody. Some of them were given as diplomatic gifts. Mostly in china they were associated with courts and administration. They were the guardians of women.⁴

Eunuch were served as courtiers in Neo Assyrian Empire (934-610 BC). Traces were there in Egypt and in later Persian Empire. Rome and Greece also had them and they also made eunuchs who were centred around courts. In Islam eunuchs were not common, Islamic world had eunuchs from North Africa, Southern Spain, and Sicily. In Islam apart from the courtiers they were accustomed with the duty of guarding the shrines. Black Eunuchs were brought from Africa by Egypt. White Eunuchs from Western Europe and Slavic lands were purchased at slave markets and brought to Spain for castration they will be shipped to East. Some were captured in war. The eunuchs were served as servants in modern Islam. As of 1990 thirty one elderly eunuchs tomb guards were served at shrines in Mecca and Medina.

Self-castration was a religious practise known in India since the second century BC. The *hijra* community provides shelter for those who had malformed sexual organs or intersexual. The *hijra* community has a goddess named *Bahuchara mata*. They were believed to be gave blessings at weddings and to new-born.⁵

Process of castrations

The term *Khasi* is meant as Eunuch who had a testicles which will often be cut off and the scrotum will be burned with a red hot blade, and while another identity *Madjibub* had both testicles and penis cut off. They tie the testicle with a cord, they will bulge out and they will be crushed out. They will also cut out the circulation as well by tightening the scrotal sac.

Cutting of penis causes major bleeding, infection and urinary problems or sometimes death and closing of urethra.⁶

If done a simple removal of testicles the arousal will not be always prevented because of the age factor, while done after puberty, erection and testosterone receival from the glands will be there even though they will be sterile, but if done by crushing, this testifies at very young age, there will be possibilities of having low sperm count, rare pregnancy and presence of some testosterone depending the damage. Appearance of Eunuchs depended on the age of castration, if castrated young they will have the voice of a boy but there lungs and chest will be of a man. Most of them have a good voice. Beardlessness is another aspect of Eunuchism. But in some *harems* total castration was unusual.⁷

Mostly the tentacles were removed. In China the procedure and the process of eunuch making was considered as an occupation. Removing the tentacles (Penectomy) totally had a higher mortality rate. In China there was profession called eunuch making. The abdomen and tights of the patient will be tied with strings or bandages leaving the scrotum and penis exposed. It will be washed with hot pepper water for three times while the patient will be in a semi reclining position couch-like piece of furniture known in Chinese as the *k'ang*.⁸

The eunuch makers questions the patient whether they are willing for the process. If they gave their consent he will be held by the assistants. They will use a sharp razor sickle shaped knife and the penis and scrotum will be cut off. The wound will be covered with paper soaked cold water and the urethra will be plugged and blocked off. The patient will be bound tightly. He will not be allowed to lie down before getting a walk for two to three hours with the help of the assistants. The patient will not be allowed to take fluids for three days. After de-plugging the urethra, if urine gushes out the surgery will be termed as a successful one. If the process doesn't happened as far as planned he will be proclaimed to be soon dead⁹. After the castration their genitals will be pickled and will be returned to the person himself for safekeeping. He had to preserve it because if he aims for higher ranks he should show his preserved genitals and it will be buried with him as a part of his masculinity restoration in future life.

Eunuchs in Mughal India

The Mughals from Akbar to Aurangzeb forbade castration of young boys who came from Bengal and Orissa. But these were not strictly followed. They were in to administration and help the female servants in the *Mahaldar*.¹⁰ There are no traces of eunuchs who served princes while they were young or as children. It was *Khwaja Talib* or *Kidmatgar Khan* the chief administrator of Aurangzeb's Imperial Harem in the last years of his reign who was with him while he was a prince and were getting, married to Dilras Banu Beegum in 1637¹¹. Khwaja was given to the emperor by his father in law. The prince was never alone in his chamber. He will appoint the eunuchs to dress him and they will watch him in the sleep as well. The eunuchs along with the servants lit candles and incense sticks; heated coals for heating water, portable furnaces, and preparing food; and laid out the prince's clothing. If an early morning hunt was on the schedule, swords and daggers would be sharpened, bowstrings tightened, muskets primed, saddles cleaned, princely flags and insignia gathered, horses and elephants brushed, and lists of dependents accompanying the prince prepared.¹²

There is a space between *zenana* the royal harem and the outside world and there lies the eunuchs who are neither fully male nor female. They are actually prized and brought from the slave markets of Bengal and was customary that at least one son in the families of Bengal should be castrated as they should be presented for the *padshah* for joining the royal household and get rewarded. Eunuchs are the ones who guard the *zenanas* and beyond their protection, there will be the Rajput soldiers.¹³ The price paid for the eunuchs were comparatively high. It was during 16th and 17th century the *Subah* of Bengal became the major centre of eunuchs supply.

Eunuchs were also criticised for being gossip mongers. As reported by Manucci they were ridiculed for listening among kings, princes, queens and princess. Most of the writers ignored the role played by eunuchs in Mughal state. Sometimes eunuchs stand opposite to the royal blood. *Khwajasara Wafadar* was sent to govern Gujarat. Dara Shikoh appointed a Khwajasara as the governor of Attock. *Khwajasara Khwaja Agah* was given the charge of *faujdarship* of Agra. Eunuchs also had a managerial

duties. They guarded the harems from unwanted man supplied women with sexual connotations. The supervisor eunuchs were called as *Nazirs* they were assisted by *Khwajasaras*. If they misbehaved with the women in harem they will be punished. Sometimes they gave their life to their masters¹⁴.

The britishers categorized the so called third genders in one umbrella term Eunuch. As per European literature the eunuchs were the attendants of *zenana* and *darbars*. They were healthy and powerful. The *hijras* were represented as vile and debaucheries. It was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan categorised three types of Eunuchs. They were *Khaja Sarai*, the *harem* custodians who were confined to the domicile of their masters and couldn't outrage public decency. The second one is *Hijras* who were performers and the *zenanas* who were impotent and mixed with *hijras*. Another district administrator identified six types of eunuchs who had genital deformities, castrated, impotency etc..¹⁵ Shane Marmon one of the major writers who wrote about the eunuchs, as per her studies the eunuchs guard the religious sanctuaries from danger and *fitna* which literally translates into sexual temptation or political disorder. But there are instances of them resorting to violence and they refuge on to the sanctuary they were supposed to take care. Eunuchs acted as mediators.

Shane Marmon states witness that the emergence of eunuchs in the prophets tomb, they had their role in Mamulk Cairo, they acted as supervisors and guardians of the *harem* and mediated between the master of the house. They were suited for the job of protection of the *harems* and holy sanctums because they are unable to procreate. In Medina they guard the holy tomb of the prophet the messenger of god and mediates between the prophet and the devotees. The belief is still intact that the body of the prophet is not corrupted by the worms. The eunuchs will be able to protect the tomb in any period and point of time as they will not attain puberty or adolescence and neither have they undergone changes biologically a man or women will have.¹⁶ Shaun Marmon summarizes in an interview with the officers in charge of the eunuchs of Mecca published in *al-Yamama*, a Saudi magazine, in 1990, by which they spoke of their Saudi counterpart, Rutter a British traveller visited the prophet's tomb

in 1925 in disguise to enquire about the eunuchs and their recruitment. Lady Cobbold, a British embraced Islam and performed hajj in 1935 in Saudi opined that the eunuchs will cease to exist in few years in Arab or Islamic culture. But some historians refer that the Saudi government has given them retirement and replace them with honour and made them free because they became mentally weak and their education and intellectual part is much weak. They are not even mentally strong. They will be extinct like that of in Jerusalem and Iraq.¹⁷

Islamic History

While tracing the Islamic history most of the women and female population in the court are portrayed by male counterparts as the society was a male dominant one. Most of the eunuchs bear no name. They usually bear titles and nicknames in Islamic world. A eunuch is a male servant (*Khasiyy*) introduced to domestic service under the *Umayyads*. While under the Abbasids they used to serve in the harems and also their services utilised in military as well. From 10th century onwards they were elevated to vice sultan, commanders of army and even as de facto rulers. The eunuchs castrated were capable of copulation and could own concubines.¹⁸ Another type of Eunuch who was not castrated but had entire sexual organ removed. They were used in domestic service in the harem. The *Umayyads* used the eunuchs from first to last *Caliph* in numbers and capacities. The eunuchs were known in other civilisations before Islam. Eunuchs enjoyed full freedom to move around palaces. When it comes to castration it was carried out in early Islamic history in Spain and Byzantium where eunuchs were imported from Africa, the black eunuchs were bought. The inhuman practice of castration was denounced by the Muslim laws at any age or time because mutilation or alteration in the body was against the will of God.

Euphemisms were applied in their names basically in Arabic *Khadim* (servant), *Mu'allim* (instructor), *Shaikh* (teacher/ chief), *Tawashi* (servant), in Turkish, *Khoda* (teacher), *agha* (master), and in Persian, *Khawadja* (teacher/ Lord), *agha* (master). Islamic Spain used different terminology such as *fate Youth* and *Ghulam*.¹⁹ Mu'awaiya the governor of Syria threatened the Arab tribes of *Mudar* with an army of 4000

eunuchs. *Caliph* Abdal-Malik used them *hajib* (chamberlains) who were vested with greater powers. They made valid decisions through the administrative procedure. They were entrusted with the *Caliphal* insignia as well as Prophets *Mantle* and *Stick* passed down to the *Umayyads*. They were mostly preferred because they had no children and unambitious.²⁰ Prophet owned a eunuch named Mabur who was a gift from the Egyptian ruler. It was in small numbers at Abbasid Caliphate and it accelerated overtime. A Eunuch was appointed as the official ruler of Abbasid Egypt under the *Ikhshidis* in the third Abbasid era. His name was Kafur and ruled over two decades. Under the Mughal eunuchs rose into the position of Mansabdars, they become commanders of armies or even governors of *subhas*. The chief Nazirs were awarded the designation of *Aitmad* or Aitbar Khan or trusted lords. Jahangirnama refers Jawahir Khan a trusted eunuch in his harem.xxvii.

Aitbar Khan was Jahangir's favourite eunuch, *shahbaz* was the chief advisor of Shahjahan. Shahjahan's custodian of the *harem* firuz khan had his tomb named *Taal* firuz khan which is a contribution to the Mughal architecture. Eunuch making progressed in Muslim rule.

Eunuchs in Christianity

The term eunuch is mentioned in bible by names *Sairs* and *eunouchos*. Eunuchs were mentioned in the passage by Matthew 19:10-12. The terms occur most often, eleven times, in the book of Esther (Esther 1:10, 12, 15; 2:3, 14, 15; 4:4, 5; 6:2, 14; 7:9). Eunuchs in the book of Daniel. 1:11 suggests that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were eunuchs. Matthew 19 and Acts 8 are the only chapters in the New Testament that mention eunuch. The Greek word eunuch in the New Testament is *eunouchos*

There are some eunuchs who were born from their mother's womb, and there are some eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by human hands, and there are some eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom²¹. As explained by Jesus stated three types of eunuchs, one born as eunuch, he does not have any testicles at birth. Medically this situation is called Cryptorchidism. The second type of eunuchs were one who's castrated and his testicles will be either crushed off or cut off. The

third ones will not marry and dedicate themselves for the religion.

Eunuchs in Hinduism

While it comes to Mahabharata there is always a point of masculinity comes in. Mentions of eunuchs are visible in it mainly for taunting the masculinity of men. The name eunuch is an undesired term for a man to be called up on. *Kilba* is one of the terms used for eunuchs in Mahabharata. Androgynes who are both male and female beyond that there are cases of androgynes who are either male or female are seen in mentions those were termed as *napumsaka*, a eunuch or an impotent man. A *kilba* may not be an androgyne, it is a defective male which literally translates in to a eunuch, who is impotent, sterile or a hermaphrodite.

In Mahabharata there are mentions of *ardhanareeswara* worship and also the androgynous character of Agni, the fire god from which draupadi and her brother was born.²² Among the common form of insult in the epic Sisupala accuses Bhisma as a eunuch by his living because of his vow of celibacy and that was equal to impotency or stupidity.²³

References of Arjuna who rejected the sexual advances of Nymph Urvasi and she cursed him for losing his manhood and this was reduced by the interference of Lord Indra thereby will only last for one year. The period of disguise imposed to the Pandavas, Arjuna chose to be a women or a Eunuch to hide among the *Viratas* palace as a eunuch dancer to teach *Viratas* Daughter Uthara named *Brihannala*. As teacher to the princess he was respected While analysing the role of Arjuna as a Eunuch it was a part of curse. The sexual metamorphosis of Arjuna is considered as non-desirable.

The *Sundara Kandam* of Ramayana narrates a story of transgender community while Rama was leaving for exile everyone arrives there to bid farewell. Ram told *nar, nari, pashu pakshi* to return home but not to the *kinners*. So they stayed near the forest for 14 years for Rama to return. While he was returning from his exile he found out that they were still waiting for him. He blessed them with the power of god to bring good luck and also the power to curse.²⁴ The *Aravanis* consider *Aravan* as their progenitor. He was the son of Arjuna. Lord Krishna as Mohini

became the bride for *Aravan* for a night. At the *Koovagam* Festival in Tamilnadu transsexuals from all over in India re-enact *Aravans* marriage perform and subsequent widowhood. The old etymology eunuch means “one who is warder of the bed”. In Mahabharata *mlecchas*, are the dirt of humanity: oil men are the dirt of *mlecchas*, eunuchs are the dirt of oil men and they who appoint Kshatriyas as priests in their sacrifices are the dirt of eunuchs. In *Satapata brahmana* referred eunuchs or long haired man, is neither man nor women. In *Apastamba dharmasastra* it was referred that they could not inherit property. No Brahmin is supposed to eat a sacrifice performed by Eunuchs was mentioned by Manu.

Eunuchs in Other Civilisations

Before Islam there existed Eunuchs in Chinese, Byzantium and Persians. Main purpose of the Byzantium castration was to give their sons to church as a priest. They castrate them by removing the testicles without cutting the male organs. The council of Nicae held in 325 CE prohibited the eunuchs from entering in to the priesthood, in Eastern Church they were welcomed and as a result two eunuchs became a patriarch in Constantinople in 10th century.²⁵

Under Islam the eunuchs belonged to Mamulk slaves and in other civilisations they were free considered as people. Quran and hadith forbid the changing or alteration of God's creation.

Eunuchs Today

Now they are marginalised community in India. They had a divine side and also an exploited side. They were treated with respect and fear. Once they were entitled with reverence but they are now leading a life of poverty and face difficulty for meeting their daily needs. They have to face several discrimination. They live in western and northern states and also in some southern states. In most south state they are identified as third gender. The major problem they face today are medical care, verbal abuse, harassment, abuse by the police, mainly beating them. India is estimated to have about two million transgender people. Even though most of them are yet to come out to reveal their gender identity. The national legal services authority vs Union of India has identified the rights of eunuchs

as third gender, as citizens of India beyond gender orientation.

The Supreme Court of India stated, “it is the right of every human being to choose their gender”, and that recognition of the group “is not a social or medical issue, but a human rights issue.” It was a landmark decision in which the apex Court the Supreme Court ruled that transgender people are covered under the Indian Constitution, which stated third-gender have fundamental rights. Justice and dignity must be ensured to all without any bigotry on the grounds of sexual identity.²⁶

Puttuswami, Arunkumar judgement and Naz Foundation vs Government of Delhi, are the cases related to eunuchs in India. The Transgender (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019 was presented in Lok Sabha on July 19, 2019, by the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, Mr. Thaawarchand Gehlot. The major aim of the bill was to ensure the rights of eunuchs to attain their social, physical and educational rights. Those rights were right for residence, identity certificate, right against discrimination, offences and penalties against the eunuchs in case of any abuse or forced labour, welfare activities like rehabilitation, vocational training and promotion of cultural activities. And also setting of a commission, National Council for Transgenders (NCT) to redress the grievances, making policies and legislation concerning the transgender. Even though the act came out as a blessing to them, marriage, adoption, medical aids, social security, reservations for education or jobs, surgery, etc were not included in these.²⁷

Conclusion

The eunuchs were once a reputed position holders in India. Their antiquity can be traced back from ancient civilizations and kingdoms from various parts of the world. In India they were administrators of household, protectors and keepers of the royal houses. They enjoyed a prominent position in the Mughal India. The *Vedas* and *Puranas* mentioned about them. Several godly characters actually showed evident side of a Trans features. But mostly eunuch as a term was used as an abuse while looking into the epics. In Ramayana they were revered. In Islamic states and empires they held significant positions in the royal

household and wielded power in some extreme situations. They were safe keepers and protectors of the sacred tomb of prophet as well. But it was the Colonizers who identified them with the term *hijra* or transgenders or eunuchs. Now the term transgender became an umbrella term of a long list of several communities. The first mention of eunuch in Greek literature was Hipponax. They were discussed in Xenophon who records the assumption that they are capable of trustworthiness and devotion to their masters with protection. But they became victims of body shaming and exploitation as mentioned in literatures.

The eunuchs faced atrocities in the society mainly in the case of acceptance and brutal harassments were faced by them from their families and society they live. The community of *hijras* accepts them and provide them with safety and protection likewise they protected the harem and household once. In this case they became the protectors of themselves as community. They face severe atrocities and some of them has to be in prostitution and several immoral activities for earning bread and day to day life. But now they are having legal protection. But these laws have several defects. Within their position they emerge to be holding several positions prominent in the country. They are making their own identity for themselves and the coming generations. But still they want a Mughal era which they were respected and given a prominent position.

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