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Nomenclature

Most popular dictionaries are unanimous that the word 'eunuch' has its origins in the Greek word for a castrated person employed to take charge of the women of a harem and act as chamberlain.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines 'eunuch' as:

1. A castrated man placed in charge of a harem or employed as a chamberlain in a palace,
2. A man or boy deprived of the testes or external genitals or
3. One that lacks virility or power.

The dictionary gives the etymology of the word as being derived from the Middle English 'eunuk', from Latin '*eunuchus*', from the Greek '*eunouchos*', from '*eunç*', i.e. bed + '*echein*' which means 'to have' or 'have charge of'.

The Oxford English dictionary defines the word as:

1. A man who has been castrated, especially (in the past) one employed to guard the women's living areas at an oriental court,
2. An ineffectual person – thus, we may have a nation of political eunuchs.

The dictionary gives the etymology of the word as being derived from Old English, via Latin from Greek 'eunoukhos', literally 'bedroom guard', from 'eunç', i.e. bed + a second element related to 'ekhein', which means 'to hold'.

As can be seen from the definition listed at no. 2 at Merriam Webster, it is not clarified how the man or boy was deprived of his testes or external genitals but one may deduce from the mention of 'deprived' that the unfortunate person probably had to undergo some physical procedure in order to become a 'eunuch', with or without his consent.



The symbol of the
'In-between' sex

Obviously, such a person who was deprived of the basic power provided by Mother Nature became 'a person devoid of power', i.e. the power to reproduce and hence 'powerless'. This resulted in the term also being used figuratively to mean an ineffectual person, who could not carry out the tasks expected of him and hence dictionaries include this meaning in the definition of the term, as listed at no. 3 (Merriam Webster) and no. 2 (Oxford).

The use of the word eunuch is a total misnomer and is very unfortunate, because the English word has long been used to signify castrated adult males who identify with females. Unlike Indian etymology of the word for

eunuchs, which has mythico-religious roots in the term for 'hermaphrodite', the English surrogate of eunuch clearly registers an ingrained fear of sexual difference. The word conjures up images of loss and neutering, rather than of feminisation and the resolution of gender conflict. Thus the word does not convey the transsexual nature of the eunuch and tends to further marginalise them as social outcasts.

The emphasis in the Western world has always been on the physical act of castration, the act of making of an otherwise 'normal' man into something different or rather into a person who was physically incapable of having sex with women. This was done primarily to safeguard the harems of kings and protect queens from opportunistic liaisons in the absence of the kings. This powerlessness is also reflected in the informal use of the word to denote an 'ineffectual, powerless or non-masculine man' - in other words, a reflection on the deficiency of the person due to the taking away of his virility or power.

Thus, eunuchs were 'made', not born and this has been the concept of 'eunuchism' or 'state of being a eunuch' in the Western world.

However, the Indian concept of a eunuch (for lack of a more appropriate word) differs from the Western one in that, a eunuch is born, not made. The only true eunuchs in India are those who are genderless and suffer from the lack of any distinct sex organs that may set them apart from normal males and females. Even if they have a penis, they can never get an erection

and hence, they are eunuchs. Though, in order to attain *nirvana* (page157), they have to undergo voluntary castration, it is done more to remove any traces of the male gender in the person, rather than result in the removal of his virility.

There are many terms used to describe eunuchs in India - *ali, aravani, aruvani, chhakka, hijra, jogappa, khusra, khasuaa, kinnar, kojja, maada, mukhannathun, napunsak, nau number, pavaiyaa, thirunangai* etc¹, depending upon the region. All of these describe and are used to refer to a person deprived of a gender, with very fine nuances pertaining to a social or religious context.

Perhaps, more appropriate in English are the terms 'transgender' and 'transsexual', since they come closer to defining a lack of gender or a phase in transition. However, even these terms connote a change from one gender to the other or someone trapped in the wrong gender, exhibiting the outward physical manifestations of one while psychologically identifying with the opposite. They do not explicitly denote a 'genderless' state, as is the case with *hijras*.

Also, they have a very clinical tone to them and are probably more appropriate in a medical context, rather than for the dissemination of information, as is the case with this book.

¹ These words, when spoken with reference to normal gendered people, are assumed to be abusive since they are synonymous with eunuchs.

In the context of the book, the word 'eunuch' is used simply for lack of a more appropriate word. In fact, due to the rather unique social and religious circumstances which are an integral part of their existence in India, there exists no parallel term in English which adequately describes the Indian concept of '*hijra*'.

In order to address this anomaly, we may propose a subtle differentiation in terminology, for the following definition:

Eunuch

A person whose gender identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female roles and has a dysfunctional male or female reproductive system. Such a person combines the qualities of each to a varying degree, with a predominantly female psychological identity and follows the tenets of a eunuch lifestyle.

This will finally provide an impetus for society to even begin to recognise the plight of this ostracised category of humans by first acknowledging the problem as the means to alleviating it.