

# 3

## Eunuchs In Mythology

Indian mythology is replete with numerous instances pertaining to eunuchs. In general, eunuchs occupied a niche position and were looked upon as an integral part of society, sometimes enjoying unique benefits. This is stark contrast to their situation in modern India.

In the legend of *Ramayana*, when Lord Rama was banished from the kingdom of Ayodhya by his father King Dasharath, upon the insistence of Queen Kaikeyi, all the residents of Ayodhya accompanied him to the border of the kingdom to see him off. Many were desirous of accompanying him during his *vanvas* (exile).

At the border, Lord Rama faced the assembled crowd and said, “*Ayodhya ke sabhi nar nari, apne gharon ko laut jaye* (all men and women of Ayodhya may return to their homes)”, since he alone was meant to go into exile. Purportedly, everyone left for their homes but for the eunuchs who stayed on, since Lord Rama had inadvertently requested ‘men’ and ‘women’ to go back and they were neither.

The eunuchs stayed there for a period of fourteen years, homeless, bearing heat, cold, rain, thunder and lightning, waiting for Lord Rama’s return from exile.



Statue of  
*Ardhanarishvara*

After conquering Ravana and returning from exile, Lord Rama was shocked to find them waiting for him at the border. Apologetic for forgetting about them, he rewarded their loyalty with a boon that their blessings would be sought on every auspicious occasion.

In *Shaiva* mythology, we know of Lord Shiva's form as *Ardhanarishvara*, in which the left half of his body is female. This form of God existed even in earliest times, when the human mind was mainly preoccupied with concepts of creation and fertility.

Lord Vishnu's incarnation as *Mohini*, a beautiful woman, is a unique example of the same.

*Shiva-Ardhanarishvara* represents the divine hermaphrodite and *Vishnu-Mohini*, the divine transsexual.

In the epic *Mahabharata*, at the end of the period of exile of twelve years, the Pandava princes had to further undergo *agyatvas* (period spent without revealing one's identity) for an year. During this period, Arjuna was turned into a eunuch, according to a curse given earlier by Urvashi, for a period of one year, which he passed as Brihannala.



The *Mahabharata* is replete with incidents featuring eunuchs

In another episode, they came across a Brahmin who complained that a deer had carried away his *arani*<sup>1</sup> on its antlers and therefore, he was not able to light a fire for the performance of his Vedic rituals. The valourous Pandava princes set out to retrieve the Brahmin's *arani* and followed the hoof marks of the deer.

In their quest, Yudhishthira became exhausted and thirsty. Therefore, Sahadeva, the youngest, ventured to fetch water and found a beautiful lake. The lake was devoid of any living creature except a *baka* (crane). When Sahadeva attempted to take water from the lake, the crane spoke, "O Sahadeva! The water of this lake will turn into poison if you take it without answering my questions satisfactorily."

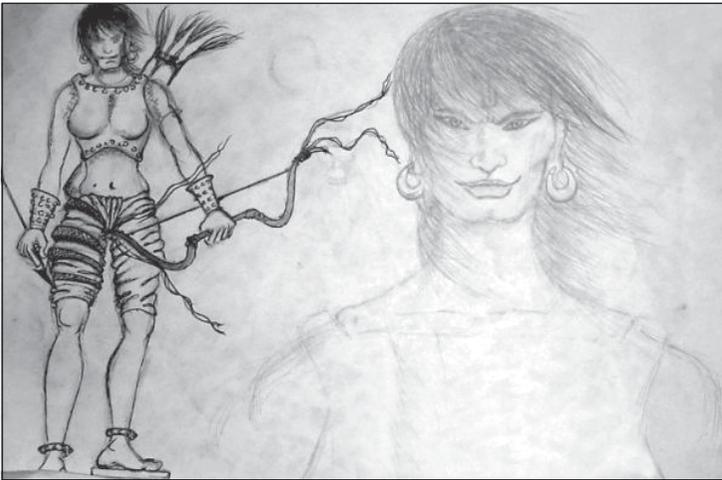
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<sup>1</sup> Pair of wooden blocks used to generate fire by friction.

Sahadeva, in his arrogance, drank the water which appeared crystal clear and died instantly of poisoning. In turn, Nakula, peerless Arjuna and mighty Bheema also met a similar fate.

Following the same path taken by his brothers, Yudhisthira came across the lake and found all his brothers lying dead. However, Yudhisthira proceeded to answer the questions put forth by the crane, who revealed itself as a *yaksha*. The *yaksha* asked eighteen mystical questions with philosophical and metaphysical ramifications. The *Yaksha-Yudhisthira* dialogue is embodied in the *Madhya Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. The *kinnars* (eunuchs) of North India believe even today that a *yaksha*, *gandharva* and *kubera* are neither man nor woman.

The *Mahabharata* has many more instances involving eunuchs. During the epic war, Bhishma, acted as the



Artist rendering of Shikhandi

‘*senapati*’ (commander-in-chief of army) of the Kauravas. The Pandavas could not win the war until the mighty warrior was defeated. This was achieved through Shikhandi, a transgendered man.

When Bhishma’s younger brother, Vichitravirya was due to get married, Bhishma abducted the daughters of the King of Kashi, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika and brought them to Hastinapura. There, Amba told him that she had already promised herself to Shalya, the King of Saubha. Bhishma sent her to Shalya but he had been humiliated and refused to accept Amba. He advised her to marry Bhishma instead. Bhishma, however, had already taken a vow of celibacy and he refused.

Amba turned to Parashurama (the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu), who fought Bhishma without result. Amba was utterly disheartened and undertook twelve years of very intense penance. Lord Shiva appeared to her and granted her a boon that in her next life, she would be the cause of Bhishma’s death. Amba promptly immolated herself by jumping onto a funeral pyre.

Meanwhile, Lord Shiva told King Drupada, the king of Panchala, that his wife would conceive a baby, who would start life as a female but later become a male. Drupada named the baby Sikhandi and raised her like a boy and even sent her to learn the martial arts from Dronacharya. Sikhandi eventually became the successful commander of one of the Pandavas’ seven *akshauhinis* (divisions).

The Pandavas, at Lord Krishna's behest, stationed Sikhandi between Bhishma and Arjuna during the war. Bhishma had made a vow that he would never raise arms against any woman, one who was born a woman, one with a woman's shape or even one with a woman's name and so he wouldn't fight Sikhandi. Arjuna and Sikhandi together shot Bhishma down and thus, Sikhandi fulfilled his destiny, to destroy Bhishma.

There are many like Shikhandi and Brihannala who served essential functions in mythical times. The above examples are but a few instances where either the services of eunuchs were gainfully employed in the pursuit of objectives or their presence deemed as a necessary part of the social fabric. Sadly, this situation did not persist through modern times and eunuchs saw a fall from grace. Their condition was transformed from that of being regular and sometimes exalted members of society to the present one of oppression and penury.