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Eunuch Deities, Rituals And Festivals

A community steeped in mystery tends to have customs and traditions that are even more esoteric for the common man. Some eye witness accounts of a few of the celebrations are presented here so that one may have a glimpse of the religious and spiritual lives of eunuchs.¹

Regardless of their individual faith, eunuchs participate in all festivals, whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim, like *Holi*, *Diwali*, Christmas, *Eid* etc. There are some festivals which, though celebrated by one and all, are of prime importance for eunuchs. The nine day *Urs* festival at *Khwaja Garib Nawaz's dargah*, eighteen day long festival celebrating Aravan's sacrifice, *kalash* ceremonies, festivals celebrated for Goddess Yellamma etc are examples of some festivals that are celebrated by eunuchs with much more fervour than common people.

¹ The author has participated in various festivals and rituals celebrated by them. He has maintained a record of over 68 hours of exclusive video recording of various festivals and get togethers of eunuchs in which, normally gendered people are not permitted. Films and documentaries can be made using this exclusive, uninhibited coverage of their closed rituals, unknown culture and clandestine arrangements.



Cobra shielding Aravan

Kuttantavar Festival

Aravan is a minor but significant character from the epic of *Mahabharata*. Arjuna, the third Pandava prince, married Ulupi, a widowed '*naga kanya*' (girl belonging to the '*naga*' tribe of North Eastern India) during his exile. They had a son Aravan from this wedlock, who later sacrificed himself to the goddess Kali to ensure her favour and victory for the Pandavas. He was also

granted the boon that he would be able to witness the war through the eyes of his severed head.

Legend is that, Aravan requested Lord Krishna that he be married before the sacrifice, thus entitling him to the right of cremation and funerary offerings that were the due of a married man, since bachelors were buried. But no woman wanted to marry Aravan, fearing the inevitable doom and widowhood.

Lord Krishna solved this dilemma by taking on his female form – *Mohini*, the enchantress – marrying Aravan and spending that night with him. The next day, Aravan prayed with bowed head and sword in one hand before Goddess Kali and offered his head to the Goddess. Lord Krishna mourned as a widow in the form of *Mohini* the day after Aravan's sacrifice,

following which, he returned to his original masculine form for the duration of the war.

Aravan is known as *Kuttantavar* in the South Indian cult that bears his name and in which, he is the chief deity. His main temple is in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu. Here, the marriage of Aravan and *Mohini*, her widowhood and mourning, form the central theme of an eighteen-day annual festival celebrated during the period on either side of the night of the full moon in the Tamil month of '*Chittirai*' (around April/May) every year.

The *Kuttantavar* festival sees eunuchs, who call themselves *alis or aravanis* in this area, re-enact the marriage of Aravan with *Mohini*. They participate in similar festivals, on a smaller scale, in other villages like Devanampattinam, Tiruvelkalam, Adivarahanattam and Kothatai (all in Tamil Nadu) as also in Pillaiyarkuppam, in Puducherry.

During the first six days of the *Kuttantavar* festival, *cami* (Aravan's head) is 'danced' around the streets of Koovagam, with music and fireworks accompanying it. Each household offers a *pooja* to Aravan, with *aarti* (lamp waving), coconut offerings and other rituals. On the 13th day of the festival, Aravan's 'soul' is ritually transferred from his head to a pot and the head is repainted.

Eunuchs arrive in increasing numbers from the 14th to the 16th day of the festival. Late on the 15th night, they dance with the *karakam* (flower-crown) of Aravan, which is believed to possess his power. After this dance, the

priest marries the *alis* to Aravan, with the traditional *thali*-tying ceremony. Young and middle-aged male farmers and traders, men afflicted with diseases from Koovagam and surrounding villages, who have vowed to marry Aravan, purchase *thalis* – the traditional mark of a married woman, in this case a pendant with a piece of turmeric at its centre. The *alis* then indulge in role play, symbolic of consummating their ritual marriage, without the actual act. While *alis* wear women's clothes and jewellery, villagers generally retain their ordinary men's clothes.



Mourning the death of Aravan

On the 16th day, the 'soul' of Aravan is transferred back from the pot to his repainted head (*cami*) and the '*cuvamitirukkamtirattal*' (opening of God's holy eyes) ceremony is performed by painting the pupils. Aravan's head is fixed on the post, with his large epaulettes and chest plate fixed to his body, which is made of straw and surrounded by a

garland. The image is then paraded across the village in preparation for his *kalappali* (sacrifice) and ritual re-enactment of his death on the 8th day of the war. At noon his chariot turns north, to face the ceremonial Kurukshetra battlefield, symbolising his

entry onto the battlefield, to die at the hands of Alambusha. On arrival in Kurukshetra, the garlands are removed, indicating the removal of his flesh and his demise.

Returning from the battlefield, the chariot turns towards the location prepared for the ceremonial mourning rituals, the *alukalam* (weeping ground). The 'widowed' *alis*, with their hair disheveled, lament the death of their 'husband' as he performs the *kalappali*. The garlands from Aravan's image are thrown at devotees one by one, symbolising his gradual loss of vitality. At this weeping ground, the *alis* mourn Aravan's death by breaking their bangles, beating their breasts and discarding their bridal finery, like the legendary *Mohini-Krishna*.

The *alis* and the men wedded to Aravan cut their *thalis*, which are flung at a post erected for the ceremony (*vellikkal*). After bathing, they put on white saris as a mark of their widowhood. The *alis* bear these signs of widowhood for a month, before re-adorning themselves with bangles and wearing coloured saris again.

Also at the *alukalam*, a symbolic sacrifice of cooked 'blood rice' is distributed in honour of the deceased Aravan. This rice is believed to make childless women conceive. It is this belief in general, which brings *alis* across India to this sleepy town in Southern India. They believe that they too will be blessed by Lord Aravan with either a masculine form and virility or get a clear feminine gender and be able to conceive in their next birth.

After the death rites at dusk, the head is taken to the temple of Kali, where it is 'revived'. On the 18th and final day, the head is decorated and paraded around the village a final time. In the evening, the '*pujari*' (priest) as Yudhishtira (*Dharmaraja*) crowns Aravan's head in a coronation ceremony held in the inner sanctum of the temple. The head symbolises not only self-sacrifice, but also regeneration and continuity because of his ability to witness the war after his sacrifice.

Yellamma Devi

In the southern parts of India, Goddess Yellamma is known for her abundant strength. Also known by other names like Jogamma, Renuka, Holiyamma etc, her temples are located at Saudathi in Belgaum district, Chandraguthi in Shimoga district and Hulgi in Bellary district of Karnataka.



Idol of Goddess Yellamma in Saudathi,

The Yellamma *Devi* fair is held about five times between October and February every year at the Yellamma temple located at Saudathi in Belgaum district. The most popular celebration and the largest gathering takes place on the full moon day of *Margshirsha* (Hindu calendar month beginning in November and ending in December). On this occasion, the annual Yellamma *Devi* procession is taken out and hundreds of eunuchs, with vermilion on their foreheads and wearing ornaments made of cowries, participate to seek her blessings.

The belief is that Yellamma alias Renuka, a beautiful Brahmin, was married to sage Jamdagni, famous for his short-tempered nature. She had five sons from the sage and one of them was the famous Parashurama. One day while she was at the river to fetch water, she saw a group of youths playing water sports. So engrossed was she in watching them play that she forgot to return home on time. This led her husband to suspect her chastity. He ordered his sons one by one, to kill their mother but four of them refused on one pretext or another. Jamdagni cursed them to become eunuchs and got her beheaded by his equally short tempered fifth son, Parashurama. To the sage's surprise, Renuka's head multiplied by tens and hundreds and moved to different regions.

This miracle turned her four cursed sons and others into her followers. Eunuchs consider themselves to be the favourite sons of Renuka and every year, they throng to her various temples in southern India to seek her blessings. Infertile couples, people suffering

from chronic ailments etc visit Yellamma *Devi* with the belief that she will bless them with a child and good health.

Similar to Aravan's followers, those of Yellamma too worship her head. One can find a number of similarities between Yellamma *Devi's* fair and the *Kuttantavar* festival. Both have a large presence of the eunuch population; the followers of both basically belong to the lower strata of society, who are going through the hardships of life everyday and are unable to face the same. A number of men dress like women (symbolising the sons of Renuka *Devi*, who were cursed to become eunuchs) and sometimes engage in female sexual gestures. The staunchest followers of Goddess Yellamma are none other than eunuchs, who are primarily responsible for propagating the virtues, powers and achievements of the Goddess.

Bahuchara *Mata*

The temple of Bahuchara *Mata*, another diety of eunuchs, is located in Varakhdiwala in Bechraji town, 35 km west of Mehsana in Gujarat. The original temple complex was built in 1783 AD. Every year, about 4 lakh pilgrims, a large number of whom are eunuchs, visit this temple.



Image of Bahuchara *Mata*

The followers of Bahuchara *Mata* believe that she is an incarnation of Mother Durga, the goddess of power and patroness of eunuchs. There are two different

stories involving Bahuchara *Mata* and the transgender community.

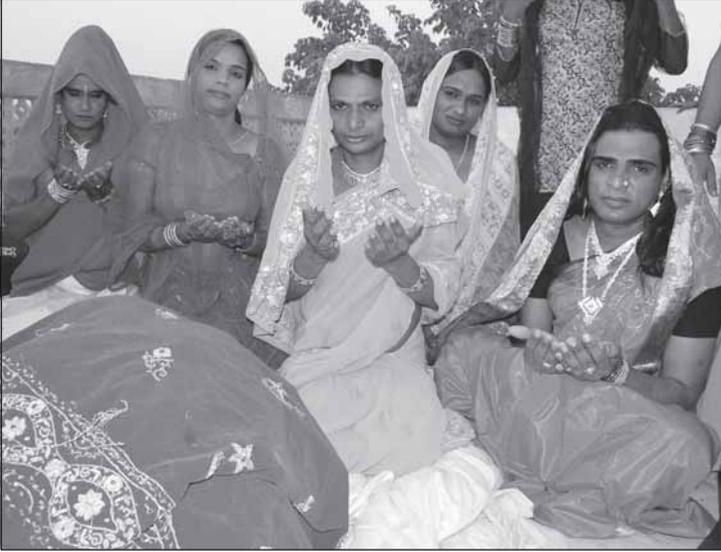
One belief is that Bahuchara *Mata* was a princess. She was married to a man who was transsexual in behaviour. Every night, he would run into the woods and act like a woman, rather than have sex with his wife. Angry with his sexual abnormality, Bahuchara *Mata* castrated him and cursed him to become a eunuch.

Another belief is that she was once travelling through a dense forest. Finding her alone, a man tried to rape her. She cursed him with impotence. The man begged for her forgiveness and requested her to free him from the curse. She agreed to pardon him, only if he went into the woods and acted like a woman.

Eunuchs consider Bahuchara *Mata* as their patroness and visit her temple to seek her blessings. They believe that they may have been cursed with non-functional gender due to their sins. By seeking her blessings, they hope that *Mata* will forgive them and bless them with a clear gender, either of a man or woman in the next life.

Urs of Khwaja Garib Nawaz (KGN)

This is held every year, in the Muslim month of *Rajab*, to commemorate the death anniversary of *Khwaja* Moinuddin Chisty in Ajmer. The festival takes place about every 355 days and the 1st, 6th and 9th day of *Rajab* are days of processions and offering by devotees.



Offering prayers at the shrine

The prime reason for the huge participation of eunuchs in the *Urs* of *Khwaja Garib Nawaz* is thanksgiving for their wishes being granted by him. The notion arose from the belief that in the 12th century, the *Khwaja* had blessed eunuchs and allegedly, one of them even got pregnant after being blessed by him. This eunuch used to fetch water from far away in the desert for the *Khwaja* and also do his daily chores. Pleased with her devotion, *KGN* blessed her with a son. Since then, eunuchs across all over India and abroad gather at the *Khwaja's dargah* during the *Urs* festival, wearing flashy, richly embroidered dresses, make-up, ornaments etc and offer a *kalash*, so that they may also be blessed like their ancient counterpart. Not all eunuchs offer *kalash* though, most of them only offer a *chaddar* (holy cloth) at the *dargah*.

The *kalash* contains coins and occasionally, gold/silver ornaments etc. Eunuchs fill it with rose water, *attar* (scent), flower petals etc. Processions covering the distance of about 200 meters to the *dargah* are led by selected eunuchs who carry a *kalash*. These eunuchs normally include newcomers, elderly eunuchs or the *guru* of the group. Eunuchs, unlike common people, go strictly barefoot to the *dargah* after taking a bath. Normal people wear caps similar to those worn by Muslims to cover their heads at the time of entering the *dargah* but eunuchs cover their heads with saris or scarves right after leaving their residences. Midnight or afternoons are preferred for their prayers and processions are generally seen after the *qawwali* sessions are over.

After reaching the *dargah*, they put the *kalash* in front of the '*jannati darwaja*' (door to heaven) of the *dargah*. After offering their prayers, eunuchs distribute the scented liquid contained in the *kalash* to the assembled crowd. There are many who wish to receive this, since the liquid is considered to be very holy.

After offering the contents of the *kalash*, eunuchs go to the left of the entrance to the shrine, where there are two metallic pots called *deg*. The smaller pot has the capacity to hold up to 2,400 kg of cooked rice at a time, while the bigger pot can hold up to 4,800 kg. Eunuchs carry the *kalash* containing the ornaments, currency etc to the pots and pour the remaining holy liquid from the

Note: The personal experience of eunuchs in this festival is shown in the documentary 'India's Ladyboys' aired on National Geographic Channel and also on BBC Three Channel series 'Taboo'.

kalash into the pot kept for cooking. The other pot is for collection of religious offerings like ornaments and cash.

On their way back from the *dargah* after offering *kalash* and/or *chaddar*, if anybody, even a non-eunuch, requests eunuchs to join his/her *chaddar* procession, they will gladly do so, regardless of their condition or the weather.

Earlier, eunuchs used to line the balconies of the hotels along the *dargah* road wearing only brassieres and petticoats and clap and dance while the procession was on its way. This distracted the people on the road and led to unruly scenes. Eunuchs were requested to abstain from vulgar public display of their bodies during the procession but they turned a deaf ear and refused to comply. Finally, the district administration informally instructed hotels along the way not to rent their rooms to eunuchs during the festival or they would stand to lose their licenses. Obscenities have reduced since.



Food for *niyaz*

Distributing Free Food

At one such festival, Chandrakala, a eunuch of around 28 years, was observed standing alone and distributing *biryani* (a fragrant dish of rice cooked with mildly spiced meat or vegetables) in plastic bags to a queue of *faqirs* (mendicants who live by begging) and other poor people in the Moti

Katla area in Ajmer. She maintained that she distributes free food (*niyaz*) every year because she owed a lot to KGN. "If I feed these people once a year, their good wishes will double my earnings during the following year, which I further pass on", she said, happily doling out food among the assembled crowd of a hundred people. Every day, during the *Urs*, different groups of eunuchs bear the expenses of distributing *niyaz* to the poor.

Entertainment

In the afternoon and late evening, eunuchs engage the services of *qawwals* (singers of religious and devotional songs), since they are fond of listening to *qawwali*. During the *qawwali* shows, eunuchs shower money on the *gurus* and other seniors.

Eunuchs were forbidden to attend regular song recitals patronised by normal people. Making their own arrangements led to *qawwali* concerts, which are devoted to the praise of *Allah* as the central theme.

Decked in their finest attire, they shower currency notes on the assembled people, mainly *gurus*. They enjoy this and feel proud of it. The assembled crowd rushes to pick up this money, since the common belief is that it is holy and more valuable than just ordinary money and will attract good fortune to them. It is observed that there is competition between the groups to shower more money. If one group showers a total of say, Rs 2,000 then another group enhances their offering to Rs 3,000 and so on. The money showered is mainly in the form of Rs 10 denomination currency notes.

There is competition among eunuch groups pertaining to dressing up as well. Showmanship is on display and each group tries to outdo others, by wearing flashier, more decorative and gaudier dresses and jewellery.

Crime During the Festival

During *Urs*, the incidence of petty crime such as pick pocketing, chain snatching, theft etc goes down. Thieves are scared to steal or snatch the valuables of eunuchs. They fear that the curse of the eunuchs will befall them and destroy them in some way or the other, e.g. monetary loss, family sickness, physical accident etc.

Eunuchs are not much bothered about their ornaments, money etc knowing they are safe in the *Khwaja's* shrine. If any ornament like a ring etc belonging to a eunuch is accidentally dropped on the road, it is promptly returned to the rightful owner. As a last option, the finds are deposited with the police, who open special counters for lost valuables.

On the road to the *dargah*, no person dares to tease any eunuch, because they move in groups of 3 – 5 or more. The police also provide special security during processions. Eunuchs also appoint their own people to guard these processions till they reach the *dargah*. If eunuchs retaliate when abused, even the police do not intervene in these matters, being scared of their ferocity.

A few years ago, the police arrested a eunuch for indecent behaviour in a public place. The news went to a eunuch called Sonam, who was the President of

Kali Mata Temple at Sion



the Akhil Bharatiya Kinnar Samaj based in Ajmer. In response, she came down heavily on the police officers. From that time onwards, the police are more cautious about their actions against eunuchs.

There is an exclusive temple devoted to *Kali Mata* on S M Road, near Sion-Koliwada, Sion, Mumbai 400 037. All the priests of this temple are eunuchs. Believers from all over India offer prayers at this temple, to be blessed with children.