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Eunuchs In India

Eunuchs are ubiquitous in India, standing out in crowds throughout the length and breadth of the country. Their fortunes are determined to a large extent by their looks. Intersexual people are not visibly distinguishable in the West. In marked contrast, eunuchs in the Indian subcontinent are found to dress and behave differently, in addition to living apart in bands and groups. Caked in cheap rouge, *kajal* (kohl), powder and lipstick, they dress in ill-fitting blouses and colourful saris (with the exception of *hajis*¹) in a grotesque parody of womanhood, as they roam busy marketplaces in groups, often terrorising pedestrians and hustling them for a rupee or two.

These are not your average beggars on the street. With male sounding voices shouting expletives, palms meeting crossways in their trademark clap, they prey on the unsuspecting passerby, who will sooner part with his cash than be treated to the sight of the group collectively lifting saris and threatening to flash castrated genital areas right in his face, though an actual flashing may be a very rare event and more of the impression carried by the common man walking

¹ This term is prefixed to the names of Muslims who have been on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

on the street. Nobody wants to be accosted by one of them - be nudged by their elbows, stroked on the cheek, taunted, cursed and flashed.

Eunuchs as Social Outcasts

India and other South Asian countries are the only places where the tradition of eunuchs is prevalent today. There are about 19 lakhs of them in India, their role in life drastically changing from that of royal servants, confidantes and friends to a less meaningfully contributing one to society. For most Indians today, eunuchs are 'diabolic creatures', a source of eternal disgust and perennial fear. They are looked upon as hapless and strange creatures, bereft of sexual potency. This is evident from the way the word '*hijra*' is used in the day-to-day conversations of people. It is often found being used to abuse people. Even dictionaries in Hindi define *hijra* in derogatory terms. The very utterance of the word carries with it an obvious sense of denigration. In India they are a stigmatised, socially marginalised and economically impoverished people.

The eunuch community and its traditions, including their very basic form of 'gender change' from male to eunuch, has a recorded history of over 2,000 years in India. This widespread practice enables transsexual kids to escape the trauma and fate of masculinisation as teenagers and provides a safe though very low place in society. The agonising extremes to which these transsexual youngsters will subject themselves to in order to 'approximately have a female gender', with the full knowledge that they will never see their families again and will face social degradation for the rest of

their lives, is a testimonial to the reality and extremity of the gender conflict that they face within themselves.

During the Mughal era, harems of kings were full of eunuchs. It is said that they were used to entertain and keep a watch on the queens. Until a few hundred years ago, the Indian subcontinent was plagued by numerous wars. Many soldiers, who were drawn from the ranks of commoners, were killed on both warring sides. This resulted in the loss of male members in many families, leaving behind only widows. Women outnumbered men, with the result that polygamy became common. The higher up the social and financial ladder the man, the more was the number of wives or concubines that he kept and that increased the demand for eunuchs to keep watch on them.

Eunuchs lived fairly secure lives working as domestic 'girls' in the homes of wealthy people and by performing during numerous ritual ceremonies. This role of eunuchs ended with the advent of the British rule and abolition of many kingdoms. Eunuchs were left with no means of supporting themselves. Hence, they exist in this pitiable condition in the Indian subcontinent.

The British viewed them as freaks to be shunned, an attitude that prevails among westernised urban Indians. Many traditional eunuch social roles were eliminated by British colonials, unable to visualise the deeper meaning of eunuch traditions. Many Indians then came to view eunuchs as 'perverted' street people, by buying into the 'modern and advanced' British colonial attitudes towards this gender minority.

The roots of contemporary violence against the *hijra* community can in fact be traced back to the historical form that modern law in post-colonial India has adopted. It took the form of the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which was an extraordinary legislation that departed from the principles on which the Indian Penal Code was based. Once a tribe was notified as a criminal tribe, all members of the tribe including women and children, would have to register with the specified authority, with non-registration rendering the person liable to prosecution.

The link between criminality and sexual non-conformity was made even more explicit in the 1897 amendment to the said Act, which was sub-titled 'An Act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs'. Under the provisions of this statute, a eunuch was 'deemed to include all members of the male sex who admit themselves or on medical inspection clearly appear to be impotent'. Being a eunuch was itself a criminal occurrence, with surveillance being the everyday reality. The surveillance mechanism criminalised the quotidian reality of a eunuch's existence, by making its manifest sign, i.e. cross-dressing, a criminal offence.

Types of Eunuchs

Eunuchs of India define themselves as people who are neither male nor female. Cross dressers, i.e. men who wear women's clothing, makeup etc are also misconstrued as eunuchs at times.

Eunuchs can be broadly classified into three types, depending on their looks:

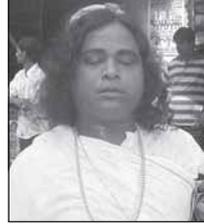
- a) **Neutral eunuchs:** They are eunuchs who look neither like males nor females.

They have hoarse voices and are sometimes flat chested.



Neutral eunuch

- b) **Male eunuchs (*jenanas*):** They tend to look like males. Their body and bone structures are more like males than those of neutral or female eunuchs. They do not have proper male genitalia.



Male eunuch

- c) **Female eunuchs:** They look like females. They have fully or partially developed breasts. However, they do not have proper female genitalia. They do not menstruate. Also, they do not have hair on their bodies, chests, hands or thighs (For more details, refer to the section on PAIS/CAIS at pages 318, 319).



Female eunuchs

All the above types exist as a continuum of gradation, rather than as discrete categories. Hence, the exact percentage for the occurrence of each 'type' as such cannot be ascertained.