

Cremation And Burial

Having accepted the harsh life of a third gender as their fate, many not having great ambitions or big dreams, the lives of eunuchs do not suffer from the stress of careers, rearing children and other duties that are the norm in a regular human's life. They normally lead healthier lives than gendered people. Most of them are physically fit, the reason being they need to walk a lot to earn a livelihood.

Though they are not immune to diseases, recovery is faster, their response to treatment being quicker. Eventually, death overcomes them, just like the rest of us. The last rites are carried out in the normal way. Not many of us have witnessed the death of a eunuch. Death being a sombre affair, hence burial or cremation takes place without any fanfare. Developing filial and social relationships that cause bereavement on one's demise is limited to very few, due to the isolation this breed confines itself into.

Premonition of Death

Eunuch *gurus* are supposedly clairvoyant. It is said that they can foretell events. They can see their sins and also activities of disciples etc. Disciples are afraid that their clandestine plans would get known to their *gurus*, even without their disclosing them. It is believed that

Jamila was an eighty-eight year old eunuch from Jodhpur. When she felt that the end was near, she called all of her close friends and relatives. Upon their arrival, she asked for a cot and told the assembled people to be ready to transport her to the crematorium. She passed away peacefully within a couple of minutes.

they can even foresee their death. This ability to foresee their death is believed to be present only in born eunuchs.

When a eunuch comes to know about her death, she will not go out anywhere but will sit in a corner of the house without consuming any food or tea and surviving only on water, similar to birds and beasts. She immerses herself in prayer. In fact it is the best way to welcome a painless death. Other eunuchs start praying, ask for the blessings of the dying eunuch and beg for her forgiveness, in the knowledge that she is soon going to travel to the other world. Occasionally, their fellow beings inform other acquaintances about her being on the deathbed. Many eunuchs from different parts of the country come to take blessings, as dying eunuchs are considered godly and imbued with divine powers. Those who want to visit but cannot due to some reason, i.e. old age, sickness etc think of the dying eunuch and seek her blessings. Others pray for the soul. Amidst such surroundings, the dying eunuch peacefully travels to the other world, a belief subscribed to by most Indians. After her soul departs the body's last rites are carried out.

Disposal of Corpses

About 4000 years ago, in the Indian subcontinent, human bodies were exposed to the elements of nature or birds, buried in earth, rivers and occasionally in a cave or an urn. Centuries later, cremation became the favoured mode of disposal of dead bodies, with certain exceptions - bodies of infants, *yogis*, *sadhus* and a few others. According to Hindu customs, the body of a child under 28 months is buried and not cremated. Among some Hindu castes, bodies of children up to the age of 3 years are buried. The mortal remains of *sanyasis* are buried even now and sometimes, a temple is constructed in their name at that place.

Throughout the recorded history of humans, the most favoured methods for the disposal of dead bodies have been:

1. *Bhoo Samadhi* (underground burial)
2. *Jala Samadhi* (water burial)
3. *Agni Dah* (cremation) or *Agni Samadhi*

Apart from the above, consumption of the body by vultures and other birds or beasts, preservation in caves and mummification were also in use in ancient times.

Cremation became popular due to the notion that the soul cannot enter a new body until its former has been completely disposed of and cremation was considered to be the fastest way to expeditiously dispose of the dead bodies.

Performance of Death Rituals

Hindu

Upon hearing of the death of a eunuch, her eunuch friends gather. They inform other eunuchs, relatives (if available), friends and neighbours who have been close to the deceased. The group members also inform the crematorium authorities, who are requested not to disclose the death of the eunuch. Though most Hindu eunuchs are poor, they all contribute for these funeral requirements. The last rites are performed in a simple manner. Her body is ceremonially bathed and wrapped in clean, mostly white cloth. Jewellery, such as wristwatches and rings, is removed before cremation.

Similar to gendered Hindus in India, Hindu eunuchs too are cremated in open grounds upon wooden pyres. To kindle the fire quickly, resin, *loban*, *ghee* or oil is sprinkled over the wood logs and in some cases, they use kerosene and old rubber tyres as well. This is to facilitate the burning of the pyre during the monsoon or when the logs have high moisture content. Water from either the Ganga or from any other holy river is poured into the mouth of the deceased. Before cremation, any strings etc that tie the body are removed, symbolising the severance of all ties of the deceased with this world. The body is to be set alight by the male blood relative of the deceased, if present or the senior most member of the band.

Once the skull of the dead body bursts (usually an hour after lighting the pyre), the attendant people face the pyre and join hands in prayer, after which they return home.

This practice of cremation is universal among Hindu eunuchs. Contrary to popular belief, Hindu eunuchs are never buried but invariably cremated.

Muslim

Upon death, eunuchs from the neighbourhood areas assemble and visit the place to see the dead eunuch. If the dead eunuch is a *guru*, the eunuch next to her in seniority in the home bears the responsibility of performing all the rituals at home. Generally, everybody comes with garlands, flowers, *agarbattis*, *loban* or whatever they desire to offer.

Burial rituals should normally take place as soon as possible and this includes:

- Bathing the dead body.
- Enshrouding dead body in a white cotton cloth.
- Funeral prayer or *fatiha* before burial of the dead body in a grave, and
- Positioning the deceased so that the head faces towards the Ka'aba (Makkah Al-Mukarramah).

a) Bathing the Deceased Eunuch

The corpse is bathed, the purpose is to physically cleanse the corpse. The exact manner varies and may be different in method, style and accessories used for bathing the corpse. However, it is an essential ritual and the body is washed and a cloth is put on top of it. The water is then poured over the body with the cloth on the body. The genital area should be covered at all times. This is done to respect the dignity and privacy of the deceased. The “washers” are commonly the eunuchs and immediate

family members. In the case of violent death or accident where the deceased has suffered trauma or mutilation, morgue facilities accommodate this practice and mend or pack the body in a shroud.

b) Enshrouding the Deceased Eunuch

The corpse is typically wrapped in a simple plain cloth, the *kafan*. It is generally preferred to use white cotton cloth to serve as the shroud. Some perfume may be applied to the cloth as well.

Subsequent to the above, the body is handed over to the local mosque authorities, who are responsible for completing the process of burial.

Since women are not allowed to participate in the burial procession, eunuchs, who are considered akin to women, cannot accompany the procession either.



c) Funeral prayer

The fellow members of the community gather to offer their collective prayers for the forgiveness of the dead and it is obligatory for every Muslim adult male to recite the funeral prayer upon the death of any Muslim but when *janazah* is carried by only a few bearers, the ritual suffices to fulfil that obligation for all concerned.

d) Burial

The deceased eunuch is then taken for burial (*al-dafin*). Ideally, the grave itself should be aligned towards the Qibla (i.e. facing Ka'aba). The body is placed in an open grave without a casket, with the head pointing towards the Ka'aba.

Grave markers may be raised only up to a maximum of 12 inches (30 cm) above the ground.

Three fist-sized lumps of hand-packed soil (prepared beforehand by the gravediggers) are used as props, one under the head, one under the chin and one under the shoulder. Those present pour three handfuls of soil into the grave while reciting a Quranic verse in Arabic:

“Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un.”

It means – Surely we belong to *Allah* and to Him shall we return.

More prayers are then said, asking for forgiveness of the deceased and reminding the dead of their profession of faith.

The corpse is then buried by the gravediggers, who may stamp or pat down the grave to shape. After the burial, those who have gathered to pay their respects to the dead eunuch collectively pray for the forgiveness of the dead. This prayer is the last formal collective prayer for the dead. In some cases, flowers and perfumed rose water are scattered upon the grave as the last action prior to leaving the grave.

e) Mourning

Beloved ones and relatives are to observe a three day mourning period. Mourning is observed by increased devotion, receiving visitors and condolences at the *guru's* home.

Eunuchs do not take photographs of the deceased or the funeral procession nor allow anyone else to do so, since it is prohibited.

Christian

Christian eunuchs are mainly found in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Upon the death of a Catholic eunuch, various religious observances surrounding the mortal remains are observed as per the Catholic tradition.

The group members inform the family members about the death of the eunuch and obtain their oral consent about the burial location. They ascertain whether to perform the burial at the village of the dead or the place where she was resident at the time of her death.

a) Conveyance of the body to the church

Before the coffin is removed from the house of *guru* it is sprinkled with the holy water. Then the procession sets out for the church. The cross-bearer goes first, followed by members of the clergy carrying lighted candles. The priest walks immediately before the coffin and the friends of the deceased and others walk behind it. The feet are to be turned towards the altar.

A rule also exists that both before the altar and in the grave, the feet of all Christians should be pointed to the East. “A man ought so to be buried”, he says, “that while his head lies to the West his feet are turned to the East...” The second stage is a cycle of prayers, the funeral Mass and absolution.



A Catholic graveyard

b) Mass for the Dead

As in the case of the Office, the *Missa de Requie* (Mass for the Dead) is chiefly distinguished from ordinary Masses by certain omissions. Some of these may be due to the fact that this Mass was formerly regarded as supplementary to the Mass of the day. In other cases it preserves the tradition of a more primitive age.

During the Mass it is customary to distribute candles to the congregation. These are to be lit during the Gospel, during the latter part of the Holy Sacrifice from the Elevation to the Communion and during the absolution which follows the Mass.

c) Ceremony by the graveside

After the absolution, the body is carried to the grave. The tomb or burial plot is then blessed, if it has not been blessed previously. A grave newly dug in an already consecrated cemetery is considered blessed and requires no further consecration. However, a mausoleum erected above ground or even a brick chamber beneath the surface is required to be blessed when used for the first time. This blessing is short and consists only of a single prayer after which the body is again sprinkled with holy water and incensed. The priest intones the antiphon, "I am the Resurrection and the Life", after which the coffin is lowered into the grave and is again sprinkled with holy water.

At the end of the funeral service, the spiritual father of the deceased reads the Prayer of Absolution, which is printed on a separate piece of paper. After the prayer, he rolls the paper up and places it in the deceased's hand.

d) Last Kiss

Symbolic farewell is taken of the deceased by a 'last kiss', during which the friends and relatives of deceased eunuch come forward and give a last kiss of peace to the departed.

e) Memory Eternal

After the last kiss, the choir chants, 'Memory Eternal' three times, to a slow and solemn melody. If the deceased has a shroud, it is pulled over the face of the deceased.

Finally, the coffin is closed. In some traditions, the priest will sprinkle a little earth on the remains, in the shape of a cross, before closing the coffin.

f) Mourning period

In the light of the Resurrection, the death of a believer is not considered to be a tragedy but a triumph. The traditional mourning period of Orthodox Christians lasts for forty days. During this period memorial services are served to pray for the repose of the soul of the deceased and to comfort their loved ones. During this period, certain days are considered to have special significance: the third day (on which the funeral is usually held), the ninth day and the fortieth day. Of these three days, the fortieth is the most important, because it is believed that on that day the soul undergoes the Particular Judgment, which will determine where the soul will remain until its reunification with the glorified body at the Second Coming.

A noteworthy event of the funeral is that all the dead eunuch's group members and close relatives stand together in a row at the graveyard and rest of the assembled people walk past them, giving their condolences. The eunuch's group members and relatives respond with thanks to these.

Orphans

In the case of eunuch orphans, as the real parents or relatives are not known by the church, his godparents and proxy parents (If they are alive) have to complete all the formalities. The last rites of the deceased orphan

eunuch is carried out in a simple way. A simple white shroud is put on the body and she is buried in an inexpensive coffin. Only around twenty to thirty persons are present. In some cases, the church does not charge for offering mass and even provides a free gravesite etc. If an outsider wishes to donate for any reason, such as charges for the shroud, coffin, grave digging, mass, lighting candles, offering tea/coffee after burial etc, the eunuchs welcome it. Many people are keen to avail of this privilege, since they believe that eunuchs are God's special creation, a gift to their sinful lives.

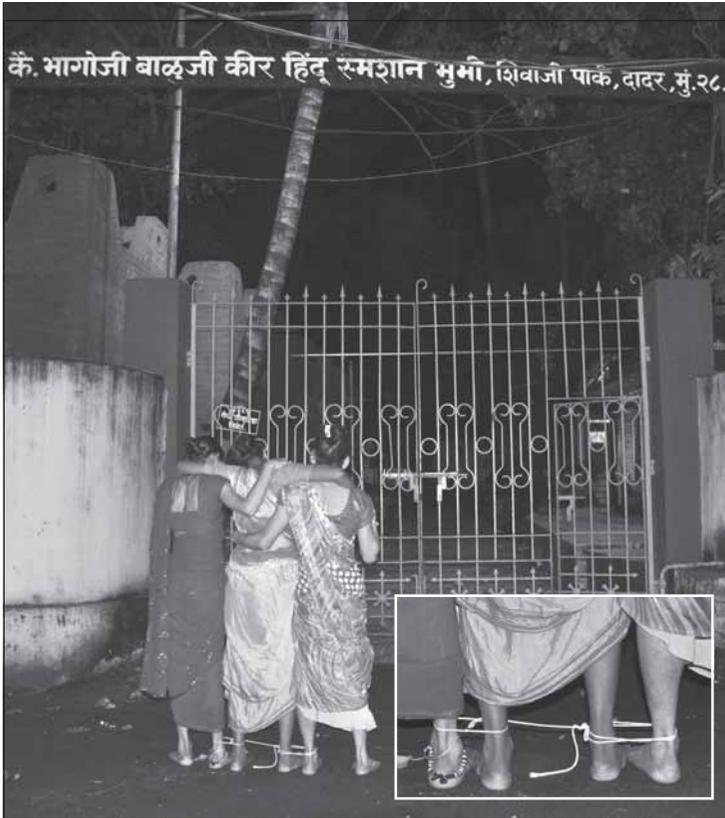
Some Uncommon Practices

Eunuchs normally observe the local custom for disposal of corpses. Thus, in some parts of the country, in keeping with local customs, the last rites are performed in singular fashion.

In case of a Hindu eunuch, two eunuchs tie leather belts, so that one leg of each person is tied to one of the dead eunuch in a standing posture. They are helped by two more eunuchs to hold the dead body. The belted eunuchs hold the hands of the dead body very firmly on their shoulders, standing on either side.

Then they walk with the body of the dead eunuch slowly to the crematorium where it is to be put on the pyre. There, they remove the belts and lay down the body on the pyre with the help of others. In the case of Muslim eunuchs, the corpse is buried in a standing position.

When a eunuch has cheated her *guru* and/or friends, earned income through illegal or forbidden means or



Walking the dead eunuch to the crematorium

on occasion, to denote the severance of all material attachments, the body of the dead eunuch is beaten with sandals and slippers by other eunuchs. This rite may last for up to five minutes.

The death of such a eunuch is mourned by others by beating their chests but they do not fast and eat food as usual.

However, the above practices could not be ascertained.

Eunuchs on Death of Common People

Eunuchs do not attend the death rituals of non-eunuchs at a crematorium or graveyard, since it is against their tradition. However, they may visit the home of the deceased, before the corpse is taken away for cremation/burial. They give condolences to the family members of the dead person. Taking money or drinking water from the house of the dead person is prohibited. This restriction continues for fourteen days after death of the person. This practice is generally followed by Muslim and Hindu eunuchs. Christian eunuchs can attend the death of gendered friends and relatives. However, even they normally avoid going to the cemetery or graveyard.

Common People on Death of Eunuchs

Not too long ago, blood relatives of the eunuchs were not permitted to see the dead body because the deceased had left the family of her blood relatives and belonged to the family of the eunuchs. Nowadays, eunuchs commonly remain in touch with their blood relatives e.g. parents, brothers, sisters and others who wish to see them during the last stages and at death. These people can visit the dead eunuch at her home, before the body is carried to the graveyard/cemetery. Here they can pay their last respects.

However, unrelated people are generally not allowed to accompany the funeral procession or last rites of a eunuch. It is erroneously believed that if a non-eunuch sees the face of a dead eunuch, then that person is blessed with fame, fortune and good health.