

Eunuchs: The Tortured Gender

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EUNUCHS, we all must have often come across them in a busy market demanding money from the shopkeepers. They usually come in a group of four or five dressed in saris, and over the top makeup, drawing our attention through their peculiar behavior. But who are these eunuchs? How many of us have ever given them a thought? According to the Merriam Webster dictionary eunuchs are castrate men, in charge of a harem or employed as a chamberlain in a palace. But in the Indian concept eunuchs are born, and not made. In popular belief eunuchs are the genderless people, who are born without a distinct sex organ. According to Kalra (2012), “eunuchs are given a homogenous sexual identity, irrespective of their physical or endocrine status”(par. 4)¹. But among these eunuchs, many of them are castrated, few are born hermaphrodite, that is born with genitals of both male and female and few are transvestites, that is, a female mind trapped in a male body or a male mind trapped in a female body. They are described as ‘Tritiya Prakriti: people of the third sex in the Vedic literature. This suggests, they are present in our society since Vedic time. But in contrast to the present day they used to enjoy a better position in the society during that era. They were considered an integral part of the society like all other individuals and creatures. Wilhelm (2014) mentions that:

Vedic society was very tolerant with this category and they were protected from

¹.Kalra S, “The eunuchs of India: An endocrine eye opener,” *Indian J Endocr Metab*, 2012, <http://www.ijem.in/text.asp?2012/16/3/377/95676>

all odds. A society can be judged by how it treats its minorities and gentler classes. In Vedic civilization the cows, the brahmanas, the women, and those belonging to the neutral gender were all protected equally. But in modern times, everything has changed. These groups are now ridiculed, exploited, persecuted, and even killed, and often under government sanction (par. 45)².

Eunuchs are the highly deprived and ostracized class. They are looked down upon by the society and often meted out with mockery and hatred, and the reason being that, as Sharma (2009) calls them “the labeled deviants”³. They do not confirm to the societal norms of gender; they do not follow the binaries of male and female and that is why they are denied of the right to live a normal life. They are not allowed to work normally as we do.

Indian law code recognizes only two sexes: male and female, and so they are deprived of many fundamental rights, like the right to education, right to vocation, right to vote, etc. They cannot hold a ration card or a driving license owing to the fact that government forms mention only two gender categories: male or female. Though a recent Supreme Court decision has given them a full legal recognition, our society is still reluctant to accept them. They are still not given a social sanction. No one wants to be associated with them and they are forced to live a shunned life. Even their families disown them. They are left with no other option but to live in the *hijra* community, where they are happily accepted (though they have to pay a big price for these favors). They form a small world of their own, which is not to be intruded by anyone. They have their own Gods, and follow their own custom and rituals. They make their own laws and every member of the community has to follow these laws. Despite a world of their own, their life is not

². AD Wilhelm, “Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex”, *Xlibris Corp*, 2010.
http://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=gRjGApZVwPIC&oi=fnd&pg=PA4&dq=EUNUCH+india&ots=cO95mH3wl&sig=yGb_9kP2EUIORK5F0a2kDIpm7cM#v=onepage&q=EUNUCH%20india&f=false .

³. S. K Sharma, *Hijras: The Labeled Deviants* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009).

‘all bed of roses.’ They live a wretched life and also die wretched. I read somewhere that when a eunuch dies, the corpse is beaten 27 times with slippers by the others in the community, so that the dead eunuch is never born as a eunuch again. Indeed a heart piercing fact!

Many NGOs and human rights activist are fighting for the woman’s cause, child abuse, and human trafficking, but how many of us are raising a voice against the discrimination that is faced by the *hijras*. The main problem that *hijras* are facing is violence. They are verbally and physically abused at every step. They are addressed with derogatory remarks. Often they ignore these remarks with a deliberate smile, implanted on their face to hide the pain they feel deep down in their heart. They, too, like us are the respectable citizens of this country, but their rights to live and work like others are violated at every step. They are facing torture and harassment at every nook and corner. As they are deprived of education and respectable jobs, they usually earn their bread by begging, singing, dancing, performing at auspicious occasions, and not to forget, through prostitution. The unsafe corners of sex trade usually drive them into the world of crime.

In contrast to their situation in history their present conditions are highly pathetic. They are living a doomed life. They are treated with disgust and the society leaves no chance to torture them, and punish them for differing from the patriarchal gender norms. Indian society shows no sympathy towards eunuchs. We show pity for the disabled, but where our so called humanitarian feelings go when we come across this ostracized community. They are treated with abhorrence and hatred.

India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are the only countries where the tradition of eunuchs is prevalent today. We enjoy them performing at the functions and expect them to bless the newlyweds and the newly born as they are believed to confer the special powers to bless owing to their ‘third sex’ dimension. But when it comes to showing some sympathy towards them, we all step back, instead they are ill-treated.

PUCL-K (2001) in its report ‘Human rights violation against sexuality minorities in India’ (cited in Narrain 2003) has documented the kind of prejudice that *hijras* face in Bangalore. According to the report:

Hijras have no safe place to go, there is no place where they can live a secure life, free from prejudice and abuse. This prejudice often translates into violence of a brutal nature, in public spaces, police stations, prisons and even in their homes. The main factor behind the violence is that society is not able to accept the deviant behavior of the eunuchs. Eunuchs do not conform to the accepted gender divisions, and this makes them susceptible to the hatred and apathy of the society. The lower middle-class background of the eunuchs makes them susceptible to harassment by the police. The discrimination based on their class and gender makes the *hijra* community one of the most disempowered groups in Indian society (par. 3)⁴.

One can fight poverty, but how can one fight with the violence and harassment meted out at them by the legal system itself. Police are seen as our protectors, but in the case of eunuchs, it's just the opposite. They feel free to abuse these poor people at the police station and public places, and these poor souls have no place to go as the legal system provides them with no protection. Instead the entire community has been tagged as criminals by the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871.

The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, subtitled as "An Act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs," has put eunuchs in the category of criminals, equating them with other criminal tribes. There are certain tribes and communities, which are considered to be criminals by birth, and it is perceived that the criminality passes from generation to generation. This law makes them highly susceptible to torture. Under this law, the local government keeps a record of the names and residences of all eunuchs who are suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or committing offenses under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Any eunuch so registered could be arrested without warrant and punished with imprisonment of up to two years or with a

⁴Siddharth Narrain, "Being a Eunuch." *Frontline*, (2003).

fine or both. But most of the time innocent eunuchs fall prey at the hands of police, and once entrapped in the clutches of law, it becomes impossible for them to prove their innocence. *Narrain* (2003) mentions:

Section 377 of the IPC, criminalizes "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal" even if it is voluntary. In effect, it criminalizes certain kinds of sexual acts that are perceived to be 'unnatural'. The law in effect presumes that a *hijra* or a homosexual person is engaging in "carnal intercourse against the order of nature", thus making this entire lot of marginalized communities vulnerable to police harassment and arrest. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA) of 1956 (amended in 1986), whose stated objective is to criminalize brothel-keeping, trafficking, pimping and soliciting, in reality targets the visible figure of the sex worker and enables the police to arrest and intimidate the transgender sex-worker population (par. 17-18)⁵.

At the police stations they are brutally treated by these so called protectors of the citizens. They are asked to pay *hafta* and when they refuse to do so they are brutally beaten. In fact at times they are raped in police custody and in jails. They are often forced for 'carnal intercourse' (the crime for which they have been allegedly arrested). What an irony!

The poor souls are even not spared at their homes. A family which is considered to be a biggest solace for all the miseries, acts as the torture house for the transgenders. They are constantly insulted and chided for their deviant behavior. They are not only tortured physically, but are also tormented mentally at the hands of their family members. Every possible steps are taken to make them behave like normal beings, (*hijras* are also normal beings), and when they fail to do so, they are thrown out of the house. This is then the *hijra* community comes to their rescue.

⁵. Ibid

Here I would like to mention the true story of a *hijra*, Sarita. She was the younger of two brothers, and was born with ambiguous genitals. When her parents came to know of her situation, they started treating her with apathy. She was an unwanted child for them. It was not possible for them to get rid of her, nor could they accept her. She was not allowed to attend school, and was given discarded clothes to wear and stale food to eat. She was beaten at home and mocked by the neighbors. When she couldn't bear the torture and humiliation, she left her house without telling anyone. She started begging on the streets, and was spotted by a *hijra*, who came to her rescue. These *hijras* are very apt in recognizing their own kind. A new entrant is welcomed very warm heartedly, but as the time passes, all the love evaporates in the air. The grey reality of the *hijra* world finally dawns on them, and then there is no going back. Once they enter the *hijra* community, all the other doors are shut for them, they are not accepted back in their family.

The *hijra* house, as I have mentioned earlier is also not a bed of roses. They are forced to beg, and enter the sex trade. And if they oppose they are tortured. All the possibility of leading a respectable life comes to an end. *Gurumais*, who earlier were like a messiah for them, turns out to be their biggest enemy. They are exploited in every possible way at the hands of these *gurumais*. They are forced to earn handsome alms, in any possible way, even if it involves doing heinous job. They are entrapped in this web forever. Saxena (2011) explains that:

It is not easy for them to leave their guru's home and get back to their normal lives. They come to know a lot about the secretive ways of the eunuch community, and hence are never let loose. And even if they try to escape, they are brought back and tortured in every possible way. This horrifying treatment is set as an example and it erodes all the hope or desire of leaving (233)⁶.

⁶.Dr. Piyush Saxena, *Life of a Eunuch*, (Navi Mumbai: Shanta Publishing House, 2011).

Another kind of torture that they face at the guru's house is 'nirvana'. Nirvana in *hijra* context means the removal of male genitals in order to develop the female characteristics. It is compulsory for all the *hijras*, if they wish to command respect and attain a higher status in their community. It is an illegal practice, and hence is often performed by local *dai*'s or an untrained quack. It leads to profuse bleeding and at times even results in the death of the person.

In a democratic country like India, media has become a powerful source to bring about a change in the society. But unfortunately media have done little to change the conditions of eunuchs. A lot of hue and cry is made over eve teasing, but where do our sympathies go when these eunuchs are molested. We take them to be born criminals and turn a blind eye to their sufferings. Even, they are sexually abused. Many eunuchs have narrated their sad stories, when interviewed. But these sad incidents hardly find any place in the news columns. Even the popular cinema has done little to improve their status. They are mostly used as comic relief in the movies. Though, some filmmakers have done a good job by showing the true side of their life. Films like 'Tamana' and 'Darmiyan' and 'Bombay' show the humane side of this so called crude community. But on the other hand films like 'Sadak' and 'Murder 2' strengthen their criminal status.

Nobody is perfect and so are eunuchs, but this does not mean they should be ill treated. They are also normal beings like us and need respect and love like us. Yes, we cannot truly negate their association with crime, but we should also not forget that no one is a born criminal. It is the apathy and hatred of society that has led them into the dark world of crime. They are disowned by the family, mocked by the society and deprived of the fundamental rights. Their deviant behavior makes them a laughing stock. The Indian constitution does not consider them as third gender and so they are deprived of many social, civil and political rights.

But it's high time now that we start thinking about this deprived section of our society. Many NGOs have been formed to fight for the rights of the *hijra* community, but that is not enough. Nothing will change until and unless they will be given a legal recognition. We are living in a democratic country, many fundamental rights have been provided to the citizens. Eunuchs should also be made a part of this system. They should be given recognition as a third

gender, and should be allowed to express their gender identity. Discrimination of any kind on the basis of sex, caste, creed and color is a serious offense, but *hijras* are discriminated on the basis of their sexual orientation. This should be stopped and serious laws should be made in this regard.

The police administration should adopt a humanitarian approach in their dealings with *hijras*. Proper protection and safety should be ensured in police custody and in jails, in order to avoid any kind of harassment, abuse and rape.

Human rights organizations should come forward and take up the issues of eunuchs to bring about a change in their conditions. They should organize workshops to break down the social prejudices against eunuchs. A comprehensive sex-education program should be included as part of the school curriculum that alters the heterosexist bias in education and provides judgment-free information and fosters a liberal outlook with regard to matters of sexuality, including orientation, identity and behavior of all sexualities.

Media should also behave more responsibly. They are a medium of social change, and so the issues of eunuchs, should also be given utmost priority. Filmmakers should stop treating them as jokers in their films. It hurts their ego. Serious filmmakers should come forward to take up the issues of hijra community. Society needs to be enlightened with the sufferings of the eunuchs, and then only they will be able to understand the conditions of this community and will show some sympathy towards them.

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