

**CULTURAL STUDIES**

# The Evolving Status of Eunuchs in India: From Medieval Servitude to Modern Identity

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## ABSTRACT

The research work will examine the emergence and role played by eunuchs in the medieval period of India particularly in the Mughal Empire with contrary to what can be seen today in Indian society. Eunuchs were either natural impotent men or castrated impotent men. It is today well known that the institution had existed in a number of societies ancient to Islamic societies, to as early as societies in Rome and Greece. India too received white eunuchs from the West, as we know from the 9th century Persian chronicler. Malabar along with Bengal continued to supply eunuchs to the Islamic courts. In Vijayanagar kingdom, there had been considerable presence of eunuchs; the ruler also sent gifts of eunuchs to the Islamic courts. Eunuchs played an important role in all Islamic empires. It was not possible for an emperor to have a harem without the presence of eunuchs as protectors and guardians. It has been observed that interaction of Rajputs with Mughal Empire in the medieval period had contributed to not only in the sphere of Political development but also in social sphere. Thousands of adolescent men and boys were emasculated to serve as eunuchs in Muslim cities as domestic help, mainly in the harem. This practice was prominent in Bengal particularly in the district of Sylhet. This event is also recorded in the 'Jahangirnama' under a section titled the 'The Eunuchs of Bengal'.



Importance and values of eunuchs have been decreased over time due to Victorian morality and its impact in colonial legislation. But in today's time where there is an increase in violence and threats faced by women, it should be considered the faith placed by the Bihar government in transgenders is largely reflective of a time when they were not just trusted as guards of imperial harems and chambers, but were also privy to intimate details of the court and the household. From this we can find out that they need the same kind of trust and regard as was historically given to them.

**Keywords:** Mughal servants; Mughal India; servants; eunuchs; history; class; gender; Mughal empire; elite households.

## Introduction

In the present world of socio-political turbulence, mankind is endeavoring to uplift the human condition from a global perspective. In India, there are unnoticed yet important subjects which demand our attention. Our attitudes towards these problems are attitudes of disregard, ignorance and cold indifference. One such problem is problems of a particular section of the society whose life is devoid of dignity and they are the objects of our ridicule and jokes. We call them 'eunuchs'. Their life is almost completely unknown to us. They are the outcasts of the mainstream society. They also have the right to live with dignity and respect. In fact eunuchs do not enjoy those human rights which all human beings deserve irrespective of caste and creed.

Hetero-patriarchal society divides the human world into males and females. By male it means biological males with masculine characteristics and by female it means those who are biologically females with feminine characteristics.

But when we look back into the medieval period in the world perspective and particularly in Indian perspective regarding the Sultanate period and Mughal period, we can see that eunuchs enjoyed high social status and luxury life when compared to the contemporary period. The aim of this paper is to locate and reconstruct the important role played by Eunuchs in medieval India, its importance to contemporary period with reference of policies of Bihar government. This article will also demonstrate the changes that took place in eunuchs life in the colonial period because of the victorian morality.



The paper is divided into four parts with the first three parts dealing with definition and etymology; role of eunuchs in Mughal establishment; gradual change in role played by Eunuchs in modern period due to the negative influence of victorian morality, and the last part analyzing the importance of these groups and contextualizing the information on gender and social aspects in contemporary period.

### **Definition and Etymology**

Natural classification of human species into male and female is based on sex. In other words, we may say that for all values of  $x$ , if  $x$  is a human being then  $x$  is either a male or a female. Sometimes children are born of human parents who are neither male nor female. These human beings are generally called 'hermaphrodites'. These 'hermaphrodites' belong to a natural kind. But there are human beings who are born male but turn out to be neither male nor female owing to human intervention –they are actually castrated males. These castrated males are generally called 'eunuchs'.

Let us look into the origin of the word 'eunuch'. Presently it is used in the English language, but it has its origins in Latin and Greek. 'Eunoukhos' can be specified as the root-word of eunuch. From 1150 to 1500 the British commonly used it. The word consists of two words 'Eune' and 'Okh'. 'Eune' means 'chamber' while 'Okh' stands for 'hold'. Thus 'Eunoukhos' signifies a man who is in charge of a chamber or room. As per the dictionary it means 'bed chamber attendant'.<sup>1</sup> These persons are castrated males, especially those who were employed in a harem (seraglio) or worked as court officials. This definition is clearly stated in the Concise Oxford Dictionary of current English.

Non-Castrated men might create problems in dealing with the women in the harem. Chances of getting sexually involved with women in the harem could not be totally ruled out. Hence genital mutilation was the only solution to employing men in the harem.<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted here that there are some hermaphrodites in the community of eunuchs. Hermaphrodites are neither male nor female. They are usually categorized as members of the third sex. But these persons are not abundantly found, their percentage is meagre in the group of eunuchs.<sup>3</sup>

According to Moni Nag, "The primary meaning of the Urdu term 'hijra' is hermaphrodite and its commonly used English translation is eunuch."<sup>4</sup> The dictionary meaning of the term 'eunuch' is gradually fading. The word has lost its etymological significance and is used in a different sense with different connotations. The members of this cult-based community have different regional names. In Uttar



Pradesh they are known as chhakka. In Orissa people call them maya. In Rajasthan and Punjab they are called banjara and khushre respectively. In Tamil Nadu they are very commonly known as 'ali' while in Karnataka they are designated as 'kabjra'. Apart from the southern part, the word hijra is widely used and understood throughout India. In West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and even in Uttar Pradesh also hijra is the popular term for eunuch.<sup>5</sup> From this discussion it is evident that there is no single regional word for the term 'eunuch'.

### **Role of Eunuchs in Mughal Period**

Eunuchs were enslaved as children and castrated before being given or sold into the service of the Mughal elite. Given Mughal bans on this practice within the imperial territories, while some eunuchs were castrated and sold illegally. This eunuch makers (khwaja-gars) were captured and punished. Eunuchs would have originated from the borderlands of the empire.<sup>6</sup>

However, this seemed not to have had any significant effect on the conditions on ground. Eunuchs seem to have been supplied from Bengal even during Shah Jahan's period, as can be deduced from the reference to the eunuchs possessed by Abdullah Khan Firuz Jung.<sup>7</sup> Eunuchs may have shared this starting point, entering elite households as castrated, enslaved boys, but their life trajectories could vary quite significantly, with some eunuchs ultimately entering the nobility and achieving high rank, while others remained in lower-status posts. As has been widely argued in the larger comparative literature, eunuchs relative social marginality, alongside their inability to reproduce, served as the basis for the belief in their particular reliability and trustworthiness.

The constant supply and trade of eunuchs can be rationalized in the context of demand for various forms of services and duties. As far as the duties of the eunuchs are concerned, the role of maintaining and organizing the harem,<sup>8</sup> was only one part of the important duties given to them. They performed many significant intelligence and information services. Eunuchs played the role of trusted servants of their masters and used to convey messages and information of celebratory as well as of confidential nature. In fact, eunuchs in the service of the harem were the sole source of information to the outside world regarding the harem. All the intrigues and gossips of the harem travelled through the means of this servile class.<sup>9</sup> The information circulated by eunuchs was of confidential nature as well. Thus, we observe that when Aurangzeb fell ill around 1662, it was only through eunuchs trusted by Roshan Ara, the sister of Aurangzeb, that information of the condition of his health was circulated.<sup>10</sup>



The administrative duties carried by eunuchs were important in nature. The nature of the duty was crucial and similar to the ones undertaken by important nobles, for example, Abdullah Khan, an amir (noble) of Jahangir's reign, sent his Khwajasara Wafadar to govern Gujarat, which was a location of great strategic significance.<sup>11</sup> Itibar Khan Khwajasara, one of the close confidants of Jahangir, defended the city of Agra against Shah Jahan, when Shah Jahan marched on it during his rebellion.<sup>12</sup> Khwajasaras are reported to have provided counsel to the nobles as well.<sup>13</sup> There are several reports about Itibar Khan, a confidential servant of Babur, who was given the responsibility of the safety of royal ladies who were travelling from Iran to India; the said eunuch was also made the governor of Delhi during the reign of Akbar.<sup>14</sup>

Zakhiratul Khwanin authored by Farid Bhakkari contains information about nobles and rank holders for Akbar, Jahangir and part of Shah Jahan's reign, also informs of Khwajasara Khwaja Agah who was appointed as faujdar of Agra multiple times.<sup>15</sup> Badauni in his work gives account about one Khwaja Doulat Nazir Ghaif Shadid, who was a Khwajasara and was appointed by Akbar to call for day and night prayers from which we can see that they were also given duties of religious nature.<sup>16</sup>

Further, there were principal eunuchs who were in charge over the rest of the serving eunuchs. This section which was in the governing position was responsible for directing and looking after everything that went on inside the harem. The khwajasaras belonging to this section were given the title of nazir.. These nazirs enjoyed immense respect in social gatherings and were held in high esteem by the king. They could hold the responsibility of treasury, property, lands and income of queens, princesses and other ladies. Manucci, an important observer of Mughal India, notes that they had the authority to search everything with great care and detail.<sup>17</sup>

However, one might notice variations in duties of eunuchs. Eunuchs were indispensable elements of the military establishment, they were rarely seen as soldiers under the Ottomans and the Mughals. The eunuchs did hold important commands under the Mughals but there were no exclusive offices reserved for them.

### **Role of Eunuchs in Modern India**

From the colonial period we can see the shift in the status of Eunuchs. Initial interactions with Eunuchs during the British East India Company's rule highlight English colonists' anti-Eunuchs sentiment. While Europeans in India had



represented Eunuchs as an immoral people from the late eighteenth century, it was not until the 1850s that Eunuchs became the subject of a problem among British colonizers in India. This panic was prompted by several criminal cases which came before the courts of the North-Western Provinces (NWP) in the 1850s and 1860s.

Steps toward institutional anti-Eunuchs legislation arose in northern India after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 forced the Crown to officially seize control of the colony. The court cases that criminalized Eunuchs in the 1860s highlight the colonial anxiety in response to the 1857. In March of 1860, the NWP court charged five Eunuchs with kidnapping and castrating a nine-year-old Indian boy named Gupoo in the case *Government v. Munsa and 4 others*. According to the verdict, which imprisoned the five Eunuchs for ten to fourteen years.<sup>18</sup> This one instance committed by a small group of Eunuchs spread false stereotypes about the whole community across Indian society which became a source of colonial anxiety and addressed the Hijra threat with oppressive, anti-Eunuch legislation.

British colonial government passed IPC which was first legislative attempt to control the Eunuchs, came through restricting homosexual behavior under S377 of the IPC. Colonists passed S377, punishing those who engaged in “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” with imprisonment.<sup>19</sup> Despite S377’s vague and convoluted language, the act, in effect, made homosexuality illegal. Eunuchs defied hetero-normative standards, they fundamentally threatened British sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> S377’s failure to effectively control the Eunuch threat inspired even more precise laws. Aiming for gradual extermination of the Eunuch community, colonists established a clearer plan for addressing the Eunuchs threat through the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. The CTA encouraged police officers to collect “registers of the names and residences of all eunuchs,” enforce a “penalty on registered eunuch appearing in female clothes; or dancing in public,” and one “on registered eunuchs keeping boys under sixteen.”<sup>21</sup> Labeling and categorizing the Eunuch community allowed colonists to keep track of the Eunuchs to regulate and ultimately exterminate them.<sup>22</sup> This surveillance allowed the government to intervene in inheritance practices, which prevented the continuation of a Eunuch bloodline since a lack of generational money and property hindered the community’s survival.<sup>23</sup> The population of “registered eunuchs” in the NWP declined from 1,400 in the 1870s to only 207 in 1908.<sup>24</sup> In 1897 this law was amended to with the sub-title ‘An Act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs’. With this amendment all the criminal tribes along with the eunuchs were compelled to register their names and places of residences which the local government enforced.



Eunuchs who appear in public streets wearing female dress and ornaments and were suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or of committing offenses and could be arrested without war rant and punished with imprisonment of up to two years or with a fine or both.<sup>25</sup>The activities of eunuchs such as singing and dancing were criminalized and even the cross-dressing was regarded as an offence.

British colonists viewed homosexual populations as a threat to colonial authority and to their hetero-normative social norms, they created homophobic institutions and ideas to gradually eliminate the Eunuch community, molding a post colonial Indian culture of homophobia.

It is a fact that there are transgenders in the society just as there are male and female genders in the society. Therefore, we have to accommodate Eunuchs in our society. The human rights issue as addressed by the hetero-patriarchal society is wrongly formulated. Fundamental rights of the Constitution of India is distinguished from Human rights. Fundamental rights are those rights which are given to all peoples of India by the Constitution of India whereas Human rights are not given by anybody to anyone, they are rights which a human being possesses as soon as one is born. Fundamental rights provides no room for the special needs of eunuchs living on the margins of our society. Whatever benefits a person has in respect of human rights in the mainstream society does not percolate into the society of eunuchs and transgenders. Different international declarations such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984), The Protection of Human Rights in the Context of HIV & AIDS, etc. have not clearly stated the human rights of transgenders and eunuchs. So these people are simply denied of their right to be recognized as human beings.

People all over the world are slowly becoming sensitive about gender issue and trying to address the question of human and civil rights from a gender-perspective and that resulted to the International Bill of Gender Rights (IBGR) adopted on June 17, 1995 in Houston, Texas, the USA. The International Bill of Gender Rights (IBGR) enunciated 10 such rights and made it clear that these rights universal rights which can be claimed and exercised by every human being. The fifth right according to the International Bill of Gender Rights (IBGR) is 'control and change' his own body. The transgenders regard their biological sex as an object and always try to change it. Eunuchs also try to emasculate their male genitalia and wish to reconstruct their bodies in a different way, but according to IPC (The Indian Penal



Code, Article 326), citizens of India are not supposed to mutilate their body, so the members of eunuch community are not permitted to get themselves castrated. Because of this most of the eunuchs undergo the emasculation operation under ruthless conditions and in an unscientific method and in doing so their lives are at risk. No governmental medical treatment or therapy is provided to them in this respect.

These are many shocking incidents in India which show how human rights are violated against transgenders and eunuchs. We can see that eunuchs and transgenders are debarred from exercising their human rights which made their life miserable and a life without self-respect and dignity. Even some of the fundamental rights prescribed by the Indian Constitution are denied to this group of people. It is true that some eunuchs are involving in anti-social activities, but it does not mean that all eunuchs are involved in anti social activities. Therefore the fact that some eunuchs and transgenders are involved in anti-social activities does not justify that the community of eunuchs and transgender people as a whole should receive unfair and unethical treatment.

## Conclusion

In this paper, it is tried to discuss the Difference in Role Played by Eunuchs in Medieval and Modern India. In the precolonial period Eunuchs enjoyed high status and privilege. In course of time there was a rapid decline in the status enjoyed by them in the colonial period which can be traced back to the victorian morality. The impose of victorian morality which was present in Britain had great impact in the life of Eunuchs in India. British officials who came to India viewed Eunuchs as disgusting which was fueled by homophobia. British officials in India took steps forward to create legislation like S377 of IPC and Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 to suppress the Eunuchs in India which was effective as there was a steady decline in number of eunuchs in just four decades. It is clear that for years the social life of eunuchs had been totally ravished under the pressure of governmental rules and mainstream humiliation. Living in such an disgusting socio-political period the eunuchs get extremely depressed and suffer terribly from inferiority complex.

Even after India gained independence on August 15, 1947, when presented with the task of creating government and institutions to regulate society, IPC from the British colonial era was kept, making it the nation's official set of criminal laws. S377 remained enforceable in India decades after its independence from Britain which oppressed the Eunuchs in the colonial era. In 2018 Supreme Court of



India reformed the British-instated S377 of IPC which permanently decriminalized homosexuality under Navtej Singh Johar versus Union of India.<sup>26</sup> Even though this reform is momentous for Eunuchs in India, the amount of time it took to overturn the law displays the impact colonists had on the norms of gender and sexuality in Indian society. Even after the British crown left India, no longer able to dictate Indian legislation, lawmakers chose to continue British values, exhibiting lingering intellectual colonialism.

The concept of human rights reduces their rights to the male / female binary and does not make room for the persons who are transgender in mentality or Eunuchs. As a result they are excluded from those who are supposed to enjoy human rights. The fight for the equality of the Eunuchs are not over as they have not attained the importance and value they once had in the society. Which is evident from the programs and policies adopted by Nitish Kumar Government in Bihar for rehabilitating the Eunuchs. Precolonial Indians accepted the Eunuch community, but many Indians today fail to see and understand this history untouched by hetero-normative British ideology so it is time to revalue the precolonial cultural norms that the British forced us to forget.

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