

Hijras in History

Introduction

The ancient legend about Vishnu in his form as Narasimha relates how the demonic king Hiranya undertook severe penance and gave a large amount of offerings, in order to get a boon granted by the Gods. When it became impossible for the Heavenly Rulers to resist any longer and they asked him what would be the boon he wanted to get fulfilled, he claimed that he should never be killed

-neither by any human being, nor by an animal,

-neither during day, nor during night, -neither inside, nor outside his palace.

Reluctantly, the Gods granted the boon. Hiranya now felt sure and invincible enough to start tyrannizing earth and heaven and all the spaces. Soon, the situation became unbearable and the Gods decided that something had to be done.

As mostly in such situations in which the world-order is endangered, it was Vishnu who took on an appropriate incarnation and solved the problem: Vishnu came to earth in the guise of Narasimha, Man-Lion, hence neither human nor animal and he killed Hiranya at the time of dusk, when it is neither day nor night, on the threshold of his palace, hence neither inside nor outside.

In the field of Shaiva-mythology, what comes immediately to our mind, is Shiva's form as Ardhanarishvara, in which the left half of his body is female. This form of God obviously existed already in earliest times, when the human mind was mainly preoccupied with concepts of creation and fertility.

Hihras are at the threshold between men and women

Early Knowledge of Hijras

People inexplicit with regard to their sex - and hence with regard to the grammatical gender to be used denoting them - are known right from the beginnings of Tamil Literature onward: Tolkappiyam, the earliest Tamil grammar available and most probably the most ancient Tamil work available at all, already includes specific mention of persons 'where the maleness is dormant' (Albert), which, according to the commentators signifies hermaphrodites with a clearly effeminate character. At the time of the composition of Tolkappiyam a more or less numerous community of '*Mukhannathuns*' was in existence and was important enough to be treated in a differentiating manner in a general grammar-book.

Eunuchs - castrated males - have been in existence since the 9th Century BC. The word derives from the Greek 'keeper of the bed' because castrated men were in popular demand to guard royal harems. The practice is believed to have started in China where, at the end of the Ming dynasty, there were as many as 70,000 eunuchs in the grand palace itself and many thousands more waiting to fill vacancies in the royal quarters. In the 1930s, when American journalist Vincent Starrett visited Beijing, he interviewed 33 palace eunuchs, ranging in age from 60 to 80. In his journals, he described the surviving eunuchs as 'thin, hairless, fat-lipped and bejeweled with shrill voices and hair which hang down to their necks.'

The surgical methods and the effects of castration were everywhere for the ancients' to see. It's use in the domestication of animals quickly taught ancient people that removal of a human male's testicles at a young enough age would prevent his masculinization too. Such a person would forever be childlike - or 'girly'. These surgeries were also often forcibly done upon captive adult male slaves in order to 'domesticate them' as 'eunuchs'. Performing such surgeries on normal post-pubertal males does not change their gender feelings or gender identity, although it lessens their sexual drives somewhat and sharply reduces their ability to develop male musculature.

The accumulated knowledge about the effects of castration was further extended to help MtF transsexual girls: Untold millions of them over thousands of years have voluntarily sought and undergone surgeries vastly riskier and more dramatic in effect than mere castration. In these surgeries the girls are completely emasculated by total removal of the testes, penis and scrotum. In addition, the external pubic area is often roughly shaped to look like a girl's vulva. No one knows precisely how it started but such transsexual surgeries were well known by the time of ancient Greece and Rome. These transformations were usually traditionalized in 'religious rituals' that provided the resulting 'women' with an explanation for what they had done and thus a 'cover story' for finding a place in society.

It is so sad when archaeologists naively obscure and inherently ridicule these girls' gender identity by calling them 'cross-dressing eunuchs'. Such comments reveal their lack of understanding of human nature in the large and their lack of appreciation for how sophisticated some ancient civilizations were when accommodating gender variations. Those who are knowledgeable about transgenderism and transsexualism will recognize that this person is not a 'eunuch' (a male-gendered boy or man who has been castrated - in ancient times usually as a slave), nor is she a 'transvestite' (an intact male-gendered man who is cross-dressing for male erotic satisfactions).