

Eunuchs – Who Are They?

They are very much like other people, made of flesh and bone, have similar blood coursing through their veins and have the same feelings and emotions. However, there is still a significant lack of understanding of these people as human beings, who are torn between their biological sex and gender identity. They are '*hijras*', as we call them, South Asia's ancient and secretive community of eunuchs. They are acknowledged in Hindu, Muslim as well as other ancient cultures and have existed in most of South Asia with their own local identities, customs and rituals. Throughout a recorded history of 4000 years, eunuchs were a trusted lot to kings, companions to queens, tutors and etiquette teachers to princes/princesses till a few hundred years ago. They dress as women; they live and function as women; most of them consider themselves women but were ruled to be legally male. For us, they are neither male nor female but freaks of nature.

In India almost 14,00,000 eunuchs live as outcastes. They are a caste unto themselves, living a marginalized life, abused and disliked by one and all. The lies commonly mouthed by those who dislike them pass into the realm of fantasies like "everyone knows that *hijras* kidnap boys and cut off their genitals". Even the government is least considerate towards these less privileged human beings. The apathy and discrimination of the general public as well as their so called 'democratically elected' governments has made them criminals, prostitutes, beggars and irritating characters.

Civilized society tosses terms like 'differently abled' for the handicapped, 'commercial sex workers' for prostitutes etc. as a sign of understanding and to accommodate them into society at large. These feelings of ours towards the less privileged are laudable. But our feelings towards eunuchs are in no way civilized. Instead of showing the same level of understanding towards eunuchs, we call them by derogatory names like *hijra*,

chakka, ali, mamu, nau number, 6 number, gud, gandu etc. although they are merely born with a genetic deformity and have deformed genitals.¹

It is not that our behaviour towards eunuchs is totally negative. It is said that those who cannot procreate have occult powers to bless infertile couples with healthy children. They are seen as having special powers due to their presumed 'third sex' dimension and hence, are also invited during religious ceremonies. People accord special status to *hijras* in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab and other northern states during auspicious occasions, since they believe that they (*hijras*) are messengers of God and can bring fertility to even infertile couples. It is really strange that on one hand we call them by derogatory names and on the other side we invite them to confer blessings on newlyweds, newborns, new establishments and enterprises!

The author has made an attempt to understand these misunderstood beings, who are the most powerless community in Indian society. The result has been some startling findings to say the least, since these poor beings lead a life mostly full of misery and penury, in stark contradiction to the common perception of an easy and relatively well off existence for these people. In addition, they are often abused and tormented by their own superiors, leading to a no win existence.

¹ These words, when spoken with reference to normal gendered people, are assumed to be abusive since they are synonymous with eunuchs.