

Mythology and History

The appellation '*hijra*' may be an object of insult to a vast population of today but they were a respected lot in our history. One may find mention of deities such as *Naga*, *Gandharva*, *Kubera*, who were neither men nor women. Even God has taken the form of a genderless (neither man nor woman) person on various occasions, to save humankind from evil.

In the ancient legend of *Ramayana*, when Lord Rama was banished from the kingdom of Ayodhya by his father King Dasharath, upon the insistence of Queen Kaikeyi, the whole of Ayodhya accompanied him to the border of the kingdom to see him off. Many were desirous of accompanying him during his *vanvas* (exile). At the Ayodhya border, Lord Rama faced the assembled crowd and said, "*Ayodhya ke sabhi nar aur nari apne gharo ko laut jaye* (all men and women of Ayodhya may return to their homes)", since he alone was meant to go into exile. Everyone left for their homes but for the eunuchs who stayed on, since Lord Rama had inadvertently requested 'men' and 'women' to go back and they were neither, i.e. the third gender.

The eunuchs stayed there for a period of fourteen years, homeless, bearing heat, cold, rain and thunder, waiting for Lord Rama's return from exile. After conquering Ravana and returning from exile, Lord Rama was shocked to find them waiting for him where he had left them at the border. Apologetic for forgetting about them, he rewarded their loyalty with a boon that henceforth, their blessings would be sought on every auspicious occasion.

In the epic *Mahabharata*, at the end of the period of exile of 12 years, the Pandava princes had to further undergo *agyatvas* (period spent without revealing one's identity) for one year. During this period, Arjuna was turned into a eunuch by the curse of Urvashi for a period of one year, which he passed as *Brihannala*.

In another episode during this period, they came across a Brahmin who complained that a deer had carried away his *arani* (pair of wooden blocks used to generate fire by

friction) on its antlers and therefore he was not able to light a fire for the performance of his Vedic rituals. The valorous Pandava princes set out to retrieve the Brahmin's *arani* and followed the hoof marks of the deer.

In the quest for the mysterious deer, Yudhishthira became exhausted and thirsty. Therefore, Sahadeva, the youngest, ventured to fetch water and found a beautiful lake. The lake was devoid of any living creature except a *baka* (crane). When Sahadeva attempted to take water from the lake, the crane spoke, 'O Sahadeva! The water of this lake will turn into poison if you take it without answering my questions satisfactorily.' Sahadeva, in arrogance, drank the water which appeared crystal clear and died instantly of poisoning. In turn, Nakula, Arjuna and powerful Bheema also met a similar fate.

Following the same path taken by his brothers, Yudhishthira came across the lake and found all his brothers lying dead. However, when the crane warned him, Yudhishthira listened intently and proceeded to answer the questions put forth by the crane, who revealed itself as a *Yaksha*. The *Yaksha* asked 18 mystical questions with philosophical and meta-physical ramifications. The *Yaksha*-Yudhishthira dialogue is embodied in the *Madhya Parva* of the Mahabharata. The *Yaksha* is neither man nor woman.

The *Mahabharata* is replete with more instances involving eunuchs. During the epic final war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Bhishma *Pitamah* vowed not to lift arms against Shikhandi and was killed by Arjuna who shot arrows at him hiding behind her (Shikhandi). According to the epic tale, Shikhandi was none other than the princess Amba (in an earlier birth or incarnation) who was kidnapped and made captive by Bhishma. Amba proposed to Bhishma asking him to marry her but his vow to remain a *brahmachari* (celibate) compelled him to refuse. Amba pledged to take revenge and was born as Shikhandi, a eunuch. As eunuchs were considered to be feminine and a weaker gender, brave hearts of ancient times never fought or killed them, as in the case of Bhishma, who gave up self defense to prevent hurting Shikhandi.



In Lord Shiva mythology, we know of Lord Shiva's form as *Ardhanarishvara*, in which the left half of his body is female. This form of God existed even in earliest times, when the human mind was mainly preoccupied with concepts of creation and fertility.

Lord Vishnu's incarnation as Mohini, a beautiful woman, is a unique example of the same. In Vishnu-Mohini, we can see the divine transsexual and in Shiva-Ardhanarishvara the divine hermaphrodite.

Eunuchs were also in demand elsewhere in ancient times. It is said that in the Muslim world, *mataf*, the circular inner area around the Kaaba was in the care of 50 black eunuchs who also doubled as the mosque police. They were either Africans or of African origin and called *agha* or colloquially, *tawashi*. Their chief ranked directly below the *shaybi*. They wore distinctive clothes and were diligent in instantly

removing any litter. If women became involved in any incident in the mosque or had to be ejected, the *agha* could deal with them without impropriety and hence the rationale for their usefulness.

Early Knowledge of Eunuchs

The existence of eunuchs has been documented since the 9th Century BC. The term eunuch derives from Greek 'eune' (bed) and 'ekhein' (to keep), indicative of the most ancient role of eunuchs as bed-keepers.

Since understanding of the gender of eunuchs is minimal, there is confusion about which gender should be used to denote them grammatically. In India, reference to them is known right from the beginning of Tamil literature: Tolkappiyam, the earliest Tamil

grammatical treatise and probably the most ancient Tamil work available, includes specific mention of hermaphrodites with a clearly effeminate character. At the time of the composition of *Tolkappiyam*, numerous communities of '*mukhannathuns*' were in existence and were important enough to be treated in a differentiated manner in a general grammar book.

During the Moghul era also, harems of kings were full of eunuchs. It is said that they were used to entertain and keep a watch on the queens.

Eunuchs were well known and their services utilized in other countries as well. Court eunuchs in China reached the height of their political power under the Ming Emperor *Wanhi*, who employed over 10,000 eunuchs in the imperial court and had 70,000 to 100,000 of them in official positions throughout the country. While the emperor was preoccupied with his beautiful concubines, powerful eunuchs embezzled huge fortunes. In the 1620s a eunuch named *Wei Zhongxian* ruled China for all intents and purposes.



During the Ming dynasty, the demand for eunuchs was so high that the Forbidden City contained a special eunuch clinic where candidates had their genitals removed while sitting on a special chair with a hole in it. Candidates who did not survive were carried away with their penis and testicles in a pouch for reunification in the afterlife.

Surgical methods and the effects of castration were surprisingly well known in ancient times. Its use in the domestication of animals quickly taught ancient people that removal of a human male's testicles at a significantly young age would prevent masculinization greatly. 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. When performed on normal post-pubertal males, their gender feelings or gender identity does not get changed, although it lessens their sexual drives somewhat and significantly reduces the ability to develop male musculature.

The accumulated knowledge about the effects of castration was further extended to help male to female (MtF) conversion of transsexual girls born with male genitals. Over a millennium, untold *lakhs* of them have voluntarily sought and undergone surgeries vastly riskier and more dramatic in effect than mere castration. In these surgeries, such transgendered people are completely emasculated by the total removal of the penis, testes 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 at the time of ancient Greece and Rome. These transformations were usually traditionalized in 'religious rituals' that provided the resulting 'woman' with an explanation for what they had done and thus a cover story for finding a place in society. It is 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 at large and little appreciation for how sophisticated some ancient civilizations were when accommodating gender variations. Those who are knowledgeable about transgenderism and transsexualism will recognize that such person is not a male-gendered boy or man who has been castrated (in ancient times usually a slave), nor a 'transvestite' (an intact male-gendered man who is cross-dressing for male erotic satisfactions). The answer lies somewhere in between.

This shows us the various ways in which eunuchs, their utility, distinction and respect were all intertwined in society through the ages, especially in Indian history.