

Eunuchs in India

Eunuchs are a ubiquitous lot in India, standing out in the crowds throughout the length and breadth of the country. Their fortunes are determined to a large extent by their looks. Caked in cheap rouge, kohl (*kajal*), powder and lipstick, they dress in ill-fitting blouses and colourful saris (with the exception of a *Haji* – this term is prefixed to names of people who have been on a pilgrimage to Mecca) in a grotesque parody of womanhood as they roam busy marketplaces in groups, often terrorizing pedestrians and hustling them for one or two rupees. These are not your average beggars on the street. With male sounding voices shouting expletives, palms meeting crossways in their trademark clap, they prey on the unsuspecting passerby, who will part with his cash sooner than be treated to the sight of the group collectively lifting up their saris and threatening to flash castrated genital areas right in his face, though an actual flashing may be a very rare event and more of the impression carried by the common man walking on the street. Eunuchs in India have become something to be feared. Nobody wants to be accosted by one of them - be nudged with their elbows, stroked on the cheek, taunted, cursed and flashed.

It's by taking advantage of this discomfort and embarrassment at their existence that eunuchs in 21st Century India are making their living. Begging isn't their only source of income. It's an age-old custom in the country to have eunuchs bless newborns, weddings, housewarmings and other auspicious occasions, mainly at hotels, restaurants and bars. A few eunuchs are singers (though mostly limited to belting out raucous, lewd songs in hoarse voices), dancers and entertainers. Eunuchs are believed to possess occult powers and their blessings and curses, both are considered potent. Another interesting aspect that sets eunuchs of the Indian subcontinent apart from those of the West is their visibility. Intersexual people are not visibly distinguishable in the West, as in India. In stark contrast, eunuchs in Indian subcontinent are found to dress and behave differently, in addition to living apart in bands and groups.

For most Indians of present times, eunuchs are 'diabolic creatures', a source of eternal disgust and perennial fear. They are looked at as hapless and strange creatures bereft of sexual potency. This is evident from the way the word '*hijra*' is used in the day-to-day conversations of people. It is often found being used to abuse people. Even dictionaries in Hindi define '*hijra*' in derogatory terms. The very utterance of the word carries with it an obvious sense of denigration. In India they are a stigmatized, socially marginalized and economically impoverished people.

Eunuchs as Social Outcasts: The Attitude of Indians towards Eunuchs

India, along with other South Asian countries are the only places where the tradition of eunuchs is prevalent today. There are about 14 lakhs of them in India, their role in life drastically changing from that of royal servants, confidantes and friends to a less meaningfully contributing one to society. Though society in India is admittedly heterosexist and homophobic, eunuchs in this part of the world did possess higher social prestige, more so historically, due to their being endowed with specific social roles.

The eunuch community and its traditions, including their very basic form of 'sex change' from male towards female, has a recorded history of over 4,000 years in India. This widespread practice in India enables transsexual kids to escape the trauma and fate of masculinization as teenagers and provides a safe though very low place in society. The agonizing extremes to which these transsexual youngsters will go in order to 'approximately have a female gender', with the full knowledge that they will never see their families again and will face social degradation for the rest of their lives, is a testimonial to the reality and extremity of the gender conflict that they face within themselves.

Before British rule, eunuchs lived fairly secure lives working as domestic 'girls' in the homes of wealthy people and by performing during numerous ritual ceremonies. The coming of the British to India saw the downfall of the eunuch community. The British viewed them as freaks to be shunned, an attitude that prevails among westernized urban Indians. Many traditional eunuch social roles were eliminated by homophobic

British colonials, unable to visualize the deeper meaning of eunuch traditions. Many Indians themselves then came to view eunuchs as 'perverted' street people, by buying into the 'modern and advanced' British colonial attitudes towards this gender minority. The roots of contemporary violence against the hijra community can in fact be traced back to the historical form that modern law in colonial India has taken. It took the form of the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which was an extraordinary legislation that even departed from the principles on which the Indian Penal Code was based. Once a tribe was notified as a criminal tribe, all members of the tribe including women and children, would have to register with the specified authority, with non-registration rendering the person liable to prosecution.

The link between criminality and sexual non-conformity was made more explicit in the 1897 amendment to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which was sub-titled 'An Act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs'. Under the provisions of this statute, a eunuch was 'deemed to include all members of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear, to be impotent'. Being a eunuch was itself a criminal enterprise, with surveillance being the everyday reality. The surveillance mechanism criminalized the quotidian reality of a eunuch's existence by making its manifest sign, i.e. cross-dressing a criminal offence.

Today eunuchs are generally made fun of and avoided but there is a much greater tolerance of them in rural areas. The use of the word eunuch is a total misnomer and is very unfortunate, because the English word has long been used to signify castrated adult males who identify with females. Unlike Indian etymology of the word for eunuchs, which has mythico-religious roots in the term for 'hermaphrodite', the English surrogate of eunuch clearly registers an ingrained fear of sexual difference. The word conjures up images of loss and neutering, rather than of feminization and the resolution of gender conflict. Thus the word does not convey the transsexual nature of the eunuch and tends to further marginalize them as social outcasts.

Types of Eunuchs in India

Eunuchs of India define themselves as people who are neither male nor female. They regard themselves as people incapable of sexual sensation. They also claim to have neither male nor female genitalia. A few are hermaphrodites – that is, born with both male and female genitalia, typically underdeveloped (refer to page _____). Some spurious eunuchs or a category known as '*bahurupias*' are normally endowed passive homosexual men who prefer the eunuch lifestyle. Cross dressers, i.e., who wear women's clothing, makeup, etc. are also misconstrued erroneously as eunuchs at times.

Eunuchs can be classified into three categories:

- a) Real eunuchs: These are eunuchs with no trace of genitalia except for a tiny hole i.e. urethra for urination. They can be both flat-chested as well as big-breasted with juvenile nipples.



- b) Male eunuchs (*jenanas*): These are eunuchs with a tiny non-erectile penis. More often than not, they go for a surgical procedure as having that penis shortened greatly enhances the status of the male eunuchs in the eunuch community. Some of them have a small-sized bust.



- c) Female eunuchs: These are eunuchs who look pretty much like women and are said to have breasts as well as female genitalia. But they do not menstruate. They may also possess masculine traits. (For more details, refer to the section on PAIS/CAIS on page _____.)



Though the first two types are the most predominant, the female eunuchs generate the most interest and create the most controversy.

Eunuch by Birth, Accident or Choice?

Most people, in fact, have no notion about how eunuchs come to be. In the Indian context, owing to an absence of medico-technological growth and exorbitant expense, gender-reassignment in the case of an intersexual child is not rampant. Some believe they are simply born that way - males without male genitalia - while others will tell you that they are really men who were forcibly castrated during childhood. Both views may not be completely true, though natural eunuchs are a regular occurrence and castration is usually opted for by the TG/TS person.

Many but not all have been castrated – voluntarily for the most part, although there have been reports over the years of eunuchs who were forcibly emasculated. For the most part, to become a eunuch, the desirous people voluntarily undergo fully emasculating

surgeries under primitive conditions just as they would have in ancient times. In the face of caste stigmatization, eunuchs are secretive about their surgical initiations and practices. Some say that they were abducted and emasculated against their will, making it seem to 'not be their fault'. The highly ritualized castration operation is done without anaesthesia, with only opium used in rare cases. Eunuchs normally get castrated by quacks or unqualified people pretending to be doctors in unhygienic conditions without use of proper surgical equipment. Two quick cuts are made, severing both testicles and penis. A stick is inserted to keep the urethra open for urination. No attempt is made to staunch the bleeding or stitch the wound, which is treated with warm sesame oil to prevent infection. This makes them prone to various viral and bacterial infections of the urinary system which may cause grave complications like blockage of the urinary tract and infections in the pelvic region. In such cases, they take antibiotics and analgesics for the treatment and reduction of pain. Sometimes there is a requirement of a second surgery too to adjust the mutilated skin parts. Sometimes this surgery becomes life threatening for them but goes unnoticed as eunuchs rarely visit speciality hospitals, due to illiteracy and poor financial condition. For them, these complications are '*Allah ki marji*' (God's will) and as they say, 'they die a slow death every day and every moment and if someone amongst them actually dies, they don't feel sad about her', though they may mourn for her for a few days. Despite this, one veteran castrator claims that out of the 87 odd persons that he has castrated so far only one patient developed serious infection which lasted for 2 months.

These ancient practices continue in some parts of the world even today. In India and Bangladesh, very large numbers of desperate young transsexuals run away from home to join the eunuch community. Most undergo the surgery in their teens, shortly after the onset of puberty. By being castrated early enough they can avoid the development of male secondary sex characteristics (except for the breaking and lowering of the voice) and their bodies can remain permanently soft, childlike and girly. In a country where many are very poor, this provides an inexpensive means of escape for those affected by intense transsexualism. These castrations and their effects are shrouded in mystery and religious symbolism.

Although they view their emasculation surgery as a 'sex change', eunuchs are also realistic in their recognition that they are not really women. However, they wear female clothing, take feminine names and use female pronouns. They embrace their ambiguous status as preferable to being men.

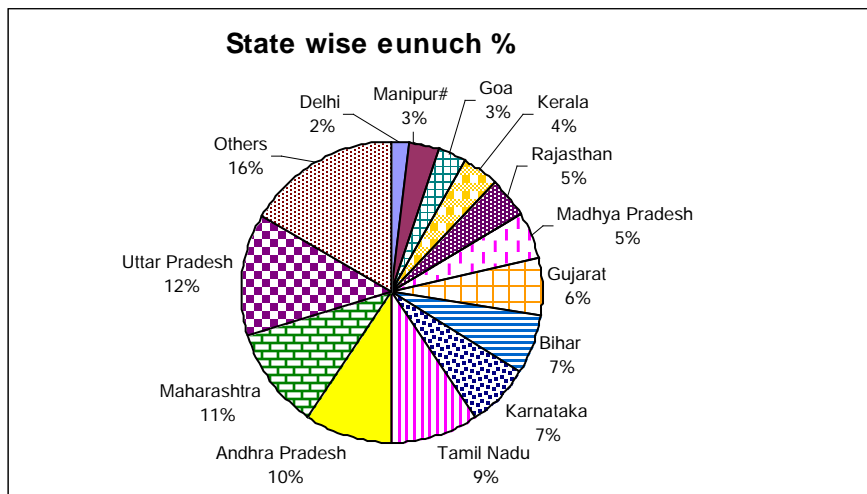
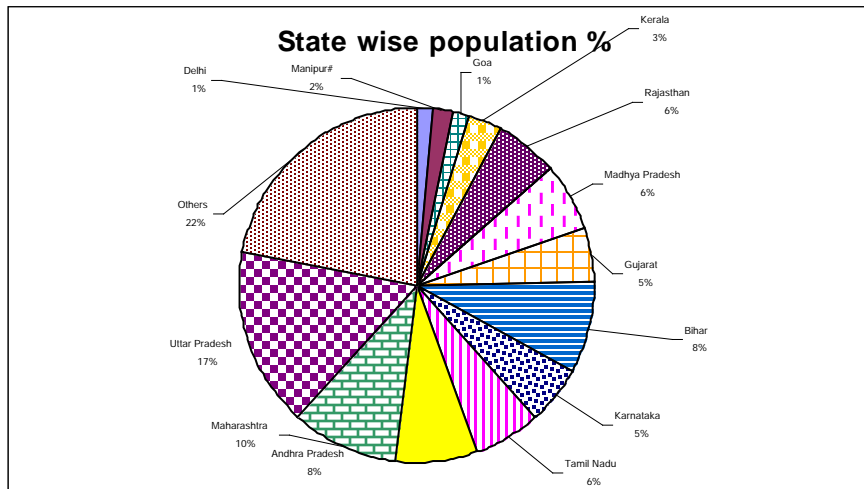
Although shrouded in caste secrecy and mystery for centuries, the underlying condition that compels most of the young teenagers who become eunuchs voluntarily is clearly transsexualism. Says Shantamma, the leader (a eunuch guru) of a eunuch family in Tamil Nadu: "We are born with a gender identity crisis. It is not an imitated or learnt one but a natural instinct that urges us to be women."

Eunuchs Statistics in India

According to the author's estimate, the number of eunuchs in India is around 14 lakhs (1.4 million) **as on May 1, 2010**. The process of estimation was not an easy task. Whenever the author approached eunuch communities in order to make an assessment of their numbers and their social structure, general lifestyle etc., he was usually turned away by them with the remark that they (eunuchs) were satisfied with their lot in life and did not wish interference by anyone else. During one trip, a eunuch drew up the hem of her sari and warned the author. She was ready to flash her mutilated parts unless he left the scene. It took numerous trips and dogged perseverance to obtain the information about them contained in this book.

Arriving at these figures is achieved by sampling their population in Mumbai, Kolkata, New Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Chandigarh, Bhopal, Ahmedabad, as well some smaller towns across the country. On rationalizing the figures with gurus and various groups, the numbers are extrapolated. Based upon the strength present during festivals in each State, social gatherings and other activities and the sample representation from each region and group, estimates are made. Yet, they are approximate, because eunuchs live in a secretive, shadowy world that they have created for themselves, away from the abuse and persecution of society in general.

Here, the term 'eunuch' refers to only those people who wish to be treated as neither male nor female and embrace a lifestyle that is in conformity with their sexual divergence. This group does not include those intersex people who pretend to lead their lives as either males or females and embrace a normal lifestyle.



The ratio of eunuchs to normal population is higher in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Eunuchs believe that the inhabitants of these regions have carried out some sinful activities in the past and hence the land has been cursed with the birth of a much higher ratio of eunuchs. Also, they do not have family ties so they prefer to migrate for livelihood. Even the gurus trade them off to places where earnings are higher. Therefore they throng to Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai and such big

cities. In Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, they are in demand during festivals etc. for their blessings, so they also migrate to these places.

The percentage of eunuchs compared to normal population is lower in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh because society is orthodox in these parts and they shun eunuchs, leading them to migrate to other places.

	% of Total Population	% of Eunuchs	No. of Persons	Males	Females	M/F Ratio
India#			1,028,610,328	532,156,772	496,453,556	933
Jammu & Kashmir	1.0		10,143,700	5,360,926	4,782,774	892
Himachal Pradesh	0.6		6,077,900	3,087,940	2,989,960	968
Punjab	2.4		24,358,999	12,985,045	11,373,954	876
Chandigarh	0.1		900,635	506,938	393,697	777
Uttaranchal	0.8		8,489,349	4,325,924	4,163,425	962
Haryana	2.0		21,144,564	11,363,953	9,780,611	861
Delhi	1.3	2.0	13,850,507	7,607,234	6,243,273	821
Rajasthan	5.8	4.5	56,507,188	29,420,011	27,087,177	921
Uttar Pradesh	16.5	13.0	166,197,921	87,565,369	78,632,552	898
Bihar	8.4	6.5	82,998,509	43,243,795	39,754,714	919
Sikkim	0.5		540,851	288,484	252,367	875
Arunachal Pradesh	1.1		1,097,968	579,941	518,027	893
Nagaland	1.9		1,990,036	1,047,141	942,895	900
Manipur#	2.1	3.0	2,166,788	1,095,634	1,071,154	978
Mizoram	0.8		888,573	459,109	429,464	935
Orissa	3.6		36,804,660	18,660,570	18,144,090	972
Chhattisgarh	2.1		20,833,803	10,474,218	10,359,585	989
Madhya Pradesh	6.0	5.0	60,348,023	31,443,652	28,904,371	919
Gujarat	5.0	6.0	50,671,017	26,385,577	24,285,440	920
Daman & Diu			158,204	92,512	65,692	710
Dadra & Nagar Haveli			220,490	121,666	98,824	812
Maharashtra	9.6	11.0	96,878,627	50,400,596	46,478,031	922
Andhra Pradesh	7.6	9.5	76,210,007	38,527,413	37,682,594	978
Karnataka	5.2	6.5	52,850,562	26,898,918	25,951,644	965
Goa	1.3	3.0	1,347,668	687,248	660,420	961
Lakshadweep			60,650	31,131	29,519	948

Kerala	3.1	4.0	31,841,374	15,468,614	16,372,760	1058
Tamil Nadu	6.2	9.4	62,405,679	31,400,909	31,004,770	987
Pondicherry			974,345	486,961	487,384	1001
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	Others	16.6	356,152	192,972	163,180	846

(Source - ???)