

Eunuch Deities, Rituals and Festivals

The author, in his quest to know about the various facets of the lives of eunuchs, has participated in various festivals and rituals celebrated by them. Eye witness accounts of few of the celebrations are presented here so that one may have a view of the religious and spiritual lives of eunuchs.¹

Regardless of their individual faith, eunuchs participate in all festivals, whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim, like Holi, Diwali, Christmas, Eid etc. There are some festivals which though celebrated by one and all, are of prime importance for eunuchs. The nine day *Urs* festival at Khwaja Garib Nawaj's *dargah*, eighteen day long festival celebrating Aravan's sacrifice, Kalash ceremony at various Goddess Durga temples, festivals celebrated for Goddess Yellamma etc. are examples of some festivals that are celebrated by eunuchs with much more fervour than common people.

¹ The author has maintained his record of over 68 hours of exclusive video recording of various festivals and get togethers of eunuchs in which he participated as being one of them where people with gender are not permitted to enter. Films and documentaries can be made using this exclusive, uninhibited exposure of their closed rituals, unknown cultures and clandestine arrangements, unknown to society at large.



Urs of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz (KGN)



Urs of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz (R.A.) is celebrated at Ajmer, Rajasthan every year in the first week of *Rajab*, on seeing the moon of *Rajab*, the seventh month of the Islamic calendar.

The prime reason for the huge participation of eunuchs in this festival is the *mannat* (wish) of a eunuch getting fulfilled **as per** her prayer to KGN. The belief lies in the fact that a long time ago, the Khwaja had blessed eunuchs and one of them even got pregnant due to his blessings. This eunuch used to fetch water from long distances in the desert for the Khwaja and also do his daily chores. Pleased with her devotion, Khwaja blessed her with a son. Since then, eunuchs across all over India and abroad gather at the Khwaja's *dargah* (shrine) during the *Urs* festival and offer a *kalash* filled with water to seek his blessings,

so that they may also be impregnated like their ancient counterpart. Not all eunuchs offer *kalash* though, most of them only offer a *chaddar* (holy cloth) at the *dargah*.

Hundreds of eunuchs join this ceremony wearing flashy, richly embroidered dresses, make-up, ornaments etc. Non-eunuch worshipers may also join them during these prayers. The *kalash*, a brass vessel, contains gold/silver ornaments, coins etc.. Eunuchs fill it with rose water, *attar* (scent), flower petals etc. A lot of care is taken while carrying the *kalash*. Long processions covering a few kilometres to the *dargah* are led by selected eunuchs who carry a *kalash*. These eunuchs normally include newcomers to the group or elderly eunuchs or the *guru* of the group. Eunuchs, unlike common people, go strictly barefoot to the *dargah* after taking a bath. Consumption of anything addictive is not permitted. Regular people wear caps similar to those worn by Muslims to cover their heads at the time of entering the *dargah* but eunuchs cover their heads with sarees or scarves right after leaving their residences. At the time of going to worship to the shrine, eunuchs dress appropriately. Midnight or early morning is preferred for their prayers and worship. After reaching the *dargah*, they put the *kalash* in front of the *jannat ka darwaja* (door to heaven) of the *dargah*. After offering their prayers, eunuchs distribute the scented liquid contained in the *kalash* to the assembled crowd. There are many who wish to receive this water, since the liquid is considered to be very holy.

After offering the contents of the *kalash*, the eunuchs go to the left side of the entrance of the shrine. Here, there are two big metallic pots called *deg*. This pot has a capacity of cooking up to 1000 kg of rice at a time. Eunuchs carry the *kalash* containing the ornaments, currency etc. to the pots and pour the remaining holy liquid from the *kalash* into the pot kept for cooking. The other pot is for collection of religious offerings.

When a eunuch is returning from the *dargah* after offering her *chaddar* and/or *kalash*, if anybody, even a non-eunuch, requests her to join his *chaddar procession*, she will gladly do so till the *dargah*, regardless of her condition or the weather.

Eunuchs proudly pose for photographs and also allow video shooting during this procession. The adjacent photograph was taken during one such procession, where eunuchs can be seen crowding on the balconies of the 'Eagle Guest House', one of the many that line the road leading to the *dargah*.



Earlier, eunuchs used to line the balconies of the hotels along the *Dargah* Road wearing only brassieres and petticoats and clap and dance while the procession was on its way. This distracted the people on the road and led to unruly scenes. Eunuchs were requested to abstain from vulgar public display of their bodies during the procession but they turned a deaf ear and refused to comply. Finally, the district administration has now instructed hotels along the way not to rent their rooms to eunuchs during the festival; else they would lose their licenses. Obscenities have been held back here.

An annual beauty pageant is also held during this festival, as well as various health and HIV/AIDS awareness seminars.²

Showering of Money

During the procession, eunuchs throw currency notes on the crowd. They enjoy this and feel proud of it. Earlier, eunuchs also used to gather in the balconies of the hotels along the road and shower money on the procession below. Groups of eunuchs from different states gather on opposite sides of the *dargah* road and shower money on the *kalash* procession. The assembled crowd rushes to pick up this money, since the common belief is that it is holy and more valuable than just ordinary money and will attract good fortune to them. It is observed that there is competition between the groups

² The personal experience of eunuchs in this festival is shown in the documentary 'India's Ladyboys' aired on National Geographic Channel and also on BBC Three channel series 'Taboo'.

to shower money. If one group throws a total amounting to Rs. 2,000/- then the other group enhances their throwing to Rs. 3,000/- and so on.



There is competition between eunuch groups pertaining to wearing of dresses too. Showmanship is on display and each group tries to outdo others wearing flashier dresses and jewellery, more decorative and elaborate.

Distributing Food on Streets

The author observed a eunuch of around 25 years standing alone and distributing *biryani* (a dish of fragrant rice cooked with meat and/or vegetables) in plastic bags to a queue of *faqirs* (mendicants who live by begging). She told me that she does this every year because she owed a lot to Allah & KGN. “Once a year, if I give alms to these people, their well wishes double my earnings next year, which I further pass on.” she said, happily doing this amongst the assembled crowd of a thousand people.

Evening Entertainments

In the late evening, eunuchs engage the services of *qawwali* (religious and romantic songs) singers, since they are fond of listening to *qawwali*. Decked in their finest attire, they shower currency notes on the assembled people, mainly gurus. Eunuchs were forbidden to attend regular song recitals attended by normal people. Making their own arrangements led to *qawwali* concerts, which are devoted to the praise of 'Allah' as the central theme.

Photo of KGN shrine during qawwali

Crime (pick pocketing, chain snatching, theft) during the Festival

During *Urs*, thieves are scared to steal or snatch the valuables of eunuchs. They fear that the curse of the eunuchs will fall and destroy them in one way or another, e.g. monetary loss, family sickness, physical accident etc. If any ornament like ring etc. of a eunuch falls on the road, it is picked up and promptly returned to the rightful owner. As a last option, the finds are deposited with the police, who open special counters for lost valuables. Eunuchs are not much bothered about their ornaments, money etc. knowing they are safe in the *Khwaja's* shrine. Hotel boys and waiters too do not demand any tips from eunuchs. On the road to the *dargah*, no person dares to tease any eunuch, because they move in groups of 3 – 5 or more. The police also give eunuchs special security among the thousands of worshippers. Eunuchs also appoint their own people to guard this procession till it reaches the *dargah*. If eunuchs attack anybody when abused, even the police do not intervene in these matters, being scared of their ferocity.

A few years ago, a commissioner of police arrested a eunuch for sexual harassment by mistake. The news went to a eunuch called Sonam, who was the President of the Rajasthan Mahila Congress. In response, she came down heavily and slapped 2 police officers. From that time onwards, the police are more vigilant about their actions against eunuchs.

Koovagam festival

Aravan is a minor but significant character from the Hindu epic of Mahabharata. According to various epic tales, Arjuna, the third Pandava prince, married Ulupi, a windowed '*nag kanya*' during his exile. They had a son Aravan from this wedlock, who later sacrificed himself to the goddess Kali to ensure her favour and victory for the Pandavas. Legend is that, Aravan requested Lord Krishna that he be married before the sacrifice, thus entitling him to the right of cremation and funerary offerings that were the due of a married man, since bachelors were buried. But no woman wanted to marry Aravan, fearing the inevitable doom and widowhood. Lord Krishna solved this dilemma by taking on his female form – Mohini, the enchantress – marrying Aravan and spending that night with him. The next day, Aravan bowed before Goddess Kali with sword in one hand and offered his head to the Goddess. Lord Krishna mourned as a widow in the form of Mohini the day after Aravan's sacrifice, after which he returned to his original masculine form for the duration of the war.



Aravan is known as Kuttantavar in a South Indian cult which bears his name and in which he is the chief deity. His main temple is in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu. Here, the marriage of Aravan and Mohini, Krishna's female form, her widowhood and mourning, forms the central theme of an eighteen-day annual festival celebrated during the period on either side of the night of the full moon in the Tamil month of Cittirai (April–May). The day of the full moon is the central day of the festival, when Aravan's sacrifice is ritually re-enacted.

The Koovagam festival sees *alis* (eunuchs), who call themselves *Aravanis* in this area, re-enact the marriage of Aravan with Mohini. The *alis* participate in similar Kuttantavar festivals, on a smaller scale, in other villages like Tevanampattanam, Tiruvetkalam, Adivarahanattam and Kotthatai (all in Tamil Nadu) as also in Pillaiyarkuppam, in Puducherry.

During the first six days of the *Kuttantavar* festival, Aravan's head (*cami*) is 'danced' around the streets of Koovagam, with music and fireworks accompanying it. Each household offers a *pooja* (a kind of devotional ceremony) to Aravan, with (*aarti*) lamp-waving, coconut-offerings and other rituals. On the thirteenth day of the festival, Aravan's 'soul' is ritually transferred from his head to a pot and the head is repainted. On the evening of the fourteenth day, a twenty-foot high post is erected on a processional chariot. The post supports Aravan's head and body later in the festival. After the post-setting ceremony (*kampam niruttata*), young and middle-aged male farmers and traders from Koovagam and surrounding villages, who have vowed to marry Aravan, purchase *thalis* – the traditional mark of a married woman, in this case a pendant with a piece of turmeric at its centre. The priest, representing Aravan, ties the *thalis* around their necks in the inner sanctum of the temple. Even married men and men afflicted with diseases, all dressed as women, are described as ritually 'marrying' Aravan in the festival, to please the deity.

Eunuchs or *alis* arrive in increasing numbers from the 14th to the 16th day of the festival. Late on the 15th night, they dance with the flower-crown (*karakam*) of Aravan, which is believed to possess his power. After this dance, the priest marries the *alis* to Aravan, with the traditional *thali*-tying ceremony. The *alis* then indulge in role play, symbolic of consummating their ritual marriage. However, the villagers who married Aravan, do not have sex as observed by the author. While *alis* wear women's clothes and jewellery, villagers generally retain their ordinary men's clothes.



	<i>Aravanis</i> — the ‘brides’ of Aravan—mourn his death
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Early on the 16th day, the ‘soul’ of Aravan is transferred back from the pot to his repainted head and the ‘*cuvami tirukkam tirattal*’ (opening of God's holy eyes) ceremony is performed by painting the pupils. The head is then paraded around the village on a portable platform called a *ketayam*. The *ketayam* is accompanied by two other platform-chariots, one holding the chest plate and epaulettes of Aravan — without which the festival is considered incomplete — and the other carries his flower-crown. The ceremony ends with an offering of roosters, which are ‘killed’ by throwing them off the temple roof, since their sacrifice by cutting their heads is banned. Aravan's head is fixed on the post, with his large epaulettes and chest plate fixed to his body, which is made of straw and surrounded by a garland. The image is then paraded across the village in preparation for his *kalappali* and ritual re-enactment of his death on the eighth day of the war. At noon his chariot turns north, a symbolic gesture representing his *kalappali* and then he is turned to face the ceremonial Kurukshetra battlefield, symbolizing his entry onto the battlefield to die at the hands of Alambusha. On arrival in Kurukshetra, the garlands are removed, indicating the removal of his flesh and his defeat on the eighth day of war.

Returning from the battlefield, the chariot turns towards the location prepared for the ceremonial mourning rituals, the ‘weeping ground’ (*alukalam*). The ‘widowed’ *alis*, with their hair disheveled, lament the death of their ‘husband’ as he performs the *kalappali*. The garlands from Aravan's image are thrown at devotees one by one, symbolizing his gradual loss of vitality. At this weeping ground, the *alis* mourn Aravan's death by breaking their bangles, beating their



Mohini

breasts and discarding their bridal finery, like the legendary Mohini-Krishna. The *alis* and the men wedded to Aravan cut their *thalis*, which are flung at a post erected for the ceremony (*vellikka*). After bathing, they put on white saris as a mark of their widowhood. The *alis* bear these signs of widowhood for a month, before re-adorning themselves with bangles and wearing coloured saris again.

Also at the *alukalam*, a symbolic sacrifice of cooked 'blood rice' is distributed in honour of the deceased Aravan. This rice is believed to make childless women conceive. It is this belief in general which brings *alis* across India to this sleepy town in Southern India. The *alis* think that like Mohini, they too will get a masculine form and virility in their next birth. If not so, then Lord Aravan will bless them and they will be able to conceive by getting a clear gender in future births.

After the death rites at dusk, the chariot is now considered a 'house of death' and the lifeless head is removed from the frame of its skeletal body, covered by a cloth and finally paraded around the village as though at a funeral. Then the head is taken to the temple of Kali, where it is 'revived'. In a ceremony called *vitaiyatti* ('return dance'), the head is once more danced around the village, right up until early morning of the 17th day. On the 18th and final day, the head is decorated and paraded around the village a final time. In the evening, the '*pujari*' (priest) as Yudhishtira (Dharmaraja) crowns Aravan's head in a coronation ceremony held in the inner sanctum of the temple. The head symbolizes not only self sacrifice, but also regeneration and continuity, because of his ability to see the war after the sacrifice.

The Yellamma Cult

In the southern parts of India, Goddess Yellamma is known for her abundant strength. Also known by the names like Jogamma, Renuka, Holiyamma etc. her temples are located at Saudathi in Belgaum district, Chandraguthi in Shimoga district and Hulgi in Bellary district of Karnataka. The followers of Yellamma are mostly poor, illiterate and those who are going through hardships of life everyday and are unable to face the same. But the staunchest followers of goddess Yellamma are none other than eunuchs,

who are primarily responsible for propagating the virtues, powers and achievements of the Goddess.

The belief is, Yellamma alias Renuka, a beautiful Brahmin, was married to Sage Jamadagni, famous for his short-tempered nature. She had five sons from the sage and one of them was the famous Parshurama. She used to bring water from the river Malprabha for the sage's worship and rituals. One day while she was at the river to fetch some water, she saw a group of youths playing some water sports. So engrossed was she in watching them play, she forgot to return home in time. This made her husband suspect her chastity. He ordered his sons one by one to kill their mother but four of them refused on one pretext or another. Jamadagni cursed them to become eunuchs and got her beheaded by his equally short tempered fifth son, Parshurama. To the sage's surprise, Renuka's head multiplied by tens and hundreds and moved to different regions. This miracle made her four cursed sons and others her followers. Eunuchs consider themselves to be the favourite sons of Renuka and every year they throng to her various temples in southern India to seek her blessings. Infertile couples, people suffering from chronic ailments etc. visit Yellamma Devi with the belief that she will bless them with a child and good health.

Similar to Aravan's followers, those of Yellamma or Renuka too worship her head. The Yellamma Devi fair is held about five times between October and February every year at the Yellamma temple located at Saudathi in Belgaum district. The biggest celebration takes place on the full moon day of *Margshirsha* (Hindu calendar month beginning in November and ending in December). On this occasion, the annual Yellamma Devi procession is taken out and hundreds of eunuchs with vermilion on their foreheads and wearing ornaments made of cowries participate to seek her blessings.

One can find a number of similarities between Devi Yellamma's fair and the Koovagam festival. Both have a large presence of the eunuch population, the followers of both basically belong to the lower strata of the society and a lot of men dress like women

(symbolic to the sons of Renuka Devi who were cursed to become eunuchs) and sometimes engage in female sexual gestures.

Bahuchara Mata

Bahuchara Mata is a Hindu Goddess. Her followers believe that she is an incarnation of Mother Durga, Goddess of power, and patroness to eunuchs. There are two different stories involving Bahuchara Mata and the transgender community.



One belief is that Bahuchara Mata was a princess. She was married to a man who was a transsexual in behaviour. Every night he would run in the woods and act like a woman rather than having sex with his wife. Angry with his sexual abnormality, Bahuchara Mata castrated him and cursed him to become a eunuch.

Another belief is that once she was travelling through dense forests. Finding her alone, a man tried to rape her. She cursed him with impotence. The man begged her

forgiveness and requested her to free her from the curse. She agreed to pardon him only if he went to the woods and acted like a woman.

Eunuchs consider her as a patroness and visit her temple to seek her blessings. They are superstitious of the fact that they too may have got a non functioning gender due to some of their sins and Bahuchara Mata might have cursed them. By seeking her blessings, they hope that Mata will forgive them and bless them with a clear gender either of a man or woman.

The temple of Bahuchara Mata is located at Varakhdiwala in Bechraji town in Mehsana district of Gujarat and 35 km west of Mehsana. The original temple complex was built in year 1783 AD. Every year about 15 lakh pilgrims, a large number of whom are eunuchs, visit this temple.

Photo of Antop Hill temple Hijra temple visit for child to childless couple