

Third Gender : Connections with the Past

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Transgender community in India has recently been into more limelight after the abolition of section 377. They are proving themselves in every walk of life. However, they have their roots in the past. The paper aims to study the historical status of the third gender in India. In studying the same, we will take examples from both the mythology as well as the Indian history. The paper will walk through the different roles played by the transgender community in past and their position in the present day society to conclude that the third gender is excelling in all walks of life and is setting an example, that irrespective of the circumstances, they too can shine and build an identity of their own.

[**Keyword** : Transgender, Eunuch, Khwajasara, Mughal Harem]

1. Introduction

Transgender community has recently gained more popularity in India. With the revoking of Section 377 in India, which was earlier deemed criminal offence in the British Era laws, the LGBTQ society

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as a whole came into the limelight. We have now third gender centric films like “Laxmii” in Bollywood and “Kanchana” in South Indian film industry where the commercially and critically acclaimed actors like Akshay Kumar and Raghawa Lawrence have played the role of a transgender. We also have famous transgender celebrities like Saisha Shinde who is a transgender designer, Madhu Kinnar who was the first trans-woman to be elected as a Mayor in the state of Chhattisgarh, Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi who is a famous transgender activist and also raised her voice against the discriminatory Section 377 of the Indian constitution. Naaz Joshi is India’s first transgender international beauty queen and has made India proud in the international stage by winning Miss World Diversity three times in the in a row. Manabi Bandhopadhyay is the first transgender principal of a college in West Bengal.

The list is endless. The key takeaway is that this community is excelling in all walks of life be it politics, education, entertainment etc. However, little do people know that the community also forms an integral part of our historical past. Not only do we find their contribution in historical India but they have relevant roles to play in the Hindu Mythology as well. The paper will aim to highlight the role of transgender community in both the historical past as well as the mythological past connecting the broken links of the past and the present.

2. Glimpses in Mythology

Before moving to the mythological text, let us focus on the language in which these are written, that is, Sanskrit.

Sanskrit is the mother of all languages and is also known as the “Dev Bhasha” or “God’s language”. It is one of the oldest language in the world. Many Hindu holy texts are written in Sanskrit. There are three genders in Sanskrit-masculine, feminine, and the neutral gender. This means that the recognition to the third gender started way back when the oldest language of the world was developed-let alone the references in text that we will further discuss.

2.1 Instances in the Ramayana

The third gender holds a special relevance when we talk about the Ramayana. Very few people know that when Lord Ram along with Goddess Sita and Lord Lakshman were going for 14 years of

exile, their countrymen followed them. They requested all the males and females to go back to their homes. When they returned back after 14 years of exile, they found a group of *hijras* (transgender) waiting outside the gates of Ayodhya. They were out of Ayodhya ever since Lord Ram left for exile because the Lord had not given any instruction for their return. Lord Ram was deeply moved and blessed them with a promise that their place will always be auspicious. And till date, it is indeed considered an auspicious thing to seek blessings from a eunuch at ceremonial occasions like childbirth, marriages, etc.

2.2 Instances from Mahabharata

Mahabharata is another major epic of the Hindus. There are many instances in the epic highlighting the presence of third gender as enumerated below :

1. **Arjun as Brihannala** : Arjun was one of the five Pandavas who fought the war of Kurukshetra against the Kauravas. He was one of the main protagonists in the epic who was known for his skills in archery and was considered one of the greatest warriors of all time. Arjun disguised himself as a eunuch-Brihannala for one year during the 14 years of exile of the Pandavas. This was a result of the Curse given by Urvashi to Arjun. Arjun considered Urvashi as her mother as she was related to Kurus. However, she fell in love with him and came up with the marriage proposal. Rejected by Arjun, she felt insulted and cursed him to be a eunuch for life. When Lord Indra intervened, the duration of the curse was reduced to one year. During that one year, the mighty warrior lived the life of a eunuch as a dancer, teaching dance to princess of Virat Nagar-princess Uttara.
2. **Shikhandi** : Shikhandi is another strong character of Mahabharata who was a eunuch and was the eldest child of king Drupad and fought the war of Kurukshetra from the Pandavas side. Shikhandi was the rebirth of Amba, one of the three daughters of the king of Kashi, who wanted to seek revenge from the mighty warrior and son of Goddess Ganga-Bhishm, for ruining her life. Reborn as Shikhandi, she became the reason for the death of Bhishm in the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

2.3 Instances from our Historical Past

Eunuchs have been an important part of our historical past as they were not only the guardian of the Mughal Harems but have also played an important role in giving advisory services to the kings and participation in wars owing to their strong physical strength.

Below are a few instances to put things in perspective :

1. **References in Travelogues** : Accounts of eunuch lives have often been quoted by the foreign travellers who saw them not just as guards and aides to the queen but also as influential people of the kingdom specially the 'Zanana Khana'.

One such account was by a Dutch merchant - Francisco Pelsaert who during his visit to the Mughal court in the 17th century described that the eunuchs could get whatever they wanted, be it, horses or slaves. Not just in India, the presence of the third gender at Prophet tomb in Medina, had been noted by the British Traveller - Eldon Rutter in 1925.

2. **Eunuch in the Position of Power** : There were some eunuchs that were so influential in the court and were the holders of the most prominent positions :

Malik Sarwar : Malik Sarwar, a Khawaja Sara, a eunuch, was the governor of Jaunpur in 1394. He was also known as Malik -us-Sharq (ruler of the east). He was the first ruler of the Sharqi dynasty and was a former minister under Sultan Mohammed Shah IV Tughlaq.

Malik Kafur : In the recent movie by Sanjay Leela Bhansali-Padmaavat, we saw that Malik Kafur was a close aide to Alauddin Khilji. Some historians suggest that Malik Kafur was a gay while others suggest that he was a eunuch. He was the General of the Delhi sultanate under ruler Alauddin Khilji. He had led several series of expeditions and also served as a Governor of Devagiri.

3. **Presence in Mughal Period** : Eunuchs played an important role in medieval era, where they were usually linked to the Mughal Harem. They were not only responsible for guarding the Harem but also had significant involvement in political matters and armed forces. They were considered so trustworthy that in some instances they also acted as king's messengers and in other, they were responsible for guarding the treasury.

Historian Shadab Bano in her article, "Eunuchs in Mughal households and courts", mentioned about Ambar who was a eunuch during the reign of Babar. Babar's daughter Gulbadan Begum mentioned about her acts of bravery in guarding the royal woman and also about her role as a royal agent.

It was in Akbar's time that the eunuchs came into more focus. Abul Fazl in Akbarnama mentions about Niamat, a eunuch who tried to stop Adham Khan, the General in Akbar's court, who had come to seek revenge from him. There are paintings from Akbar's time showing males in women-like attire in Zanana Khana, most probably depicting the Khwaja Saras. Itimad Khan was a eunuch officer in the court of Akbar, responsible for managing finances. Eunuchs in Akbar's Empire held high stature and wealth. Many others were commanders in the army or served as the governors of provinces.

From Akbar to Jahangir the relevance of eunuch did not reduce. Professor Ruby Lal notes that Khwaja Talib, the head eunuch was one of the most prominent person in Jahangir's Court. Jahangirnama or "Tuzk-e-Jahangir" has references of eunuchs. Eunuch Jawahir Khan was one of the supervisors of the Harem. The presence of eunuch were more important because of the prevailing 'Purdah system' where the females could not come in direct contact with any male other than their husbands. In such a case, the presence of the third gender became all the more necessary for the protection and safety of the Harem.

Shajahan's Khwaja Sara, Feroz Khan constructed his tomb in Agra. During the reign of Shah Jahan, eunuchs were so wealthy that they wanted magnificent tombs for themselves. During this period, there was a lot of construction of monuments as well. Since the eunuchs were having higher stature in Mughal Empire, several men and boys emasculated so that they could also serve the Haram and get wealthy. This episode in Jahangir-Nama is titled as "The Eunuch of the Bengal".

- 4. During the Colonial Period :** It was during the colonial period that the third gender lost its shine and stature and became a vulnerable community. The land inherited by them was taken back since it was not inherited through blood relation. They were denied of all civil rights. In 1871, the 'Criminal Tribes Act' included a list of communities and declared them as criminals.

The part 2 of the act had special emphasis on the eunuchs or hijras.

3. Conclusion

As we walk through the pathways of our history, we see that the third gender community enjoyed a special stature and recognition - both in terms of position and wealth. They served as governors, ministers and were a close aide to the throne. However, their position became vulnerable in the British Era. Even today, the third gender is excelling in all walks of life and is setting an example, conveying to us that, irrespective of the circumstances, they too can shine and build an identity of their own.

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