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“Eunuchs - India's Third Gender”

Eunuchs - castrated males - have been in existence since the 9th Century BC. The word derives from the Greek "keeper of the bed" because castrated men were in popular demand to guard royal harems. India is the only country where the tradition of eunuchs is prevalent today. There are about 1 million of them, though their role in life has changed drastically from that of royal servants.

Eunuchs, or **hijras** as they are called in India, have become something to be feared. They are culturally defined either as "neither men nor women" or as men who become women by adopting women's dress and behavior. They live in unhygienic conditions fraught with poverty and internal disharmony and as outcasts in society. Not only do they live a life of humiliation and disrespect, but are also deprived of basic individual rights like right to education, opinion, liberty etc.

Eunuchs also do not have a proper source of income and usually resort to begging or waitressing. Some of the little fortunate ones find a place in the film or the fashion industry, but their participation in these fields only leads to further humiliation.

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It's an age-old custom in the country to have hijaras bless childbirths, weddings, housewarmings and other auspicious occasions. The eunuchs are believed to possess occult powers, and their blessings - and curses - are both considered potent. Taking advantage of this myth and the media's portrayal of them as terrifying beings, eunuchs in India take to the streets, buses, trains, and even to wedding halls demanding huge sum of money in exchange for blessings.

The hijra community is very similar in function to the Hindu Caste System. It is a community unto itself, a sect within themselves, united like the family system. There are seven nation-wide communal households known as gharanas for the most part in cities throughout Northern India. Each has its own history and rules of behaviour. Each household is headed by a nayak who appoints a Guru or a preacher trained to protect the community members, whose disciples are referred to as chelas or students and traditionally amount to about five per guru. Before entering the community, the hijra has to live in satla (female attire) and observe the community for at least a year.

LAXMI NARAYAN TRIPATHI, a Hijra Guru, is the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific in the UN. Laxmi has served on the boards of several NGOs which conduct LGBT activist work. In 2002 she became president of the NGO DAI Welfare Society, the first registered and working organization for eunuchs in South Asia.

Although they are barred from legally marry or go to school, they are now recognized as the gender 'E' in all the government papers and official documents.

"Dream is not the thing you see in sleep but is that thing that doesn't let you sleep"

- A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (Former President of India)

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