



Status of Transgenders (Eunuchs) in Mughal India

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Abstract – The present work focuses on the status of eunuchs in Mughal India. Eunuchs are one type of transgender community known as third gender. It is the marginalised section of our society particularly in context to our Indian society till today. But the status of eunuchs in Mughal India was far better than present day. So, through the present work, an attempt has been made to study the various contemporary works to analyse the status and position of this marginalised section of our society.

Keywords – Transgender, Eunuchs, Marginalised, Harem, Zenana, Seraglio, Castration, Revenue, Traffic, Khwajasara, Nazir

INTRODUCTION:

Transgenders have been an integral part of Indian society. Mostly, they were addressed as *hijra*, *kinnar*, transsexual, *Eunuchs*, third gender etc. They are the marginalised section of our society and are deprived of the normal rights exercised by males and females. In 2014, Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, in a case titled "National Legal Services Authority vs Union of India & others" has recognised transgenders as third gender. Earlier, they were forced to write male or female against their gender. The Hon'ble Supreme Court of India directed the Union & State Governments to treat transgenders as socially and economically backward section and directed that they should be allowed admission in educational institution and given employment on the basis that they belonged to the third gender category.

But, the focus of the present work is to explore the status of transgenders, particularly eunuchs in Mughal India. Eunuch, generally refer to a male who has been castrated in

his childhood. The process of castration was very prominent during Mughal India. They were mostly appointed to guard the royal *harem*, as they were not able to sexually exploit women, so the women in the royal *harem* were guarded by them.

The process of castration of males in childhood was very prominent in Bengal. It became custom in Bengal that people make their sons eunuchs and gave them to the Governor in place of revenue.¹ This practice was so common that every year some children were castrated. In order to stop this practice, Emperor Jahangir issued an order that hereafter no one should follow this abominable custom and traffic in young eunuchs should be completely done away with.² Islam Khan, Governor of the *suba* of Bengal, received *firman* from Emperor Jahangir that whoever committed such acts should be severely punished.³ But inspite of these orders by Emperor Jahangir, eunuchs were produced and were even offered in the form of gifts. In 1612 A.D., Islam Khan offered 50 eunuchs from Bengal to Emperor Jahangir along with 28 elephants, 40 horses and other things.⁴ Similarly in 1621 A.D., Ibrahim Khan sent some eunuchs from Bengal to Emperor Jahangir. Jahangir writes in *Tuzuk* that one of these eunuchs was hermaphrodite.⁵

Eunuchs were mostly employed in the royal *harem*. They were the guard and guardian of the *harem*. The *heram* of the Mughal Empire was very large due to which large numbers of eunuchs were needed for its security. They



guarded the gates of the palace and maintained the security of the royal *harem*. Mughal *harem* consisted of a large number of womenfolk. The term '*harem*', is derived from the Arabic *harem* which means sacred. The terms *Zenana* and *seraglio* are also used for *harem*. *Harem* was the place where all the female relations of the Emperor reside which includes his wives, mother, step mothers, foster-mothers, sisters, daughters, cousins, aunts etc. Abul Fazl in *Ain-i-Akbari* writes that Emperor Akbar's *Harem* consisted of more than five thousand women and separate apartment was given to each woman.⁶

The Mughal *harem* was heterogeneous in character where women of different nationalities reside as Emperor Akbar formed matrimonial alliance with the princes of India and also with other countries. Abul Fazl writes that, "His Majesty formed matrimonial alliance with princes of Hindustan and of other countries and secure by these ties, of harmony the peace of the world."⁷ Regarding the size of the *harem*, Manucci, a Venetian traveller writes that ordinarily two thousand women of different races lived in the *Mahal*. They all were provided with separate set of rooms.⁸ Every women, whether Emperor's wives, daughters or his concubines were concerned, all had their duties which they had to perform. Another European traveller Francois Bernier writes that royal *seraglio* contains beautiful apartments, splendid and spacious given to royal ladies according to the rank and income of the ladies. Every chamber had its reservoir of running water at the door, on every side are gardens, shady retreats, fountains etc.⁹ Mughal *harem* was well guarded and secure place. Men were not allowed in *harem* except the Mughal Emperor. Special security arrangements were made for the security of the *harem*. The interior of the royal *harem* was guarded by sober and active female soldiers and most trustworthy among them were appointed to guard the apartment of the Emperor.¹⁰ Regarding the female guards, Abul Fazl writes, "several chaste women were appointed as *daroghas* and superintendent to guard the *harem*."¹¹ Manucci has also

written that during the night time, the apartment of Mughal Emperor was guarded by women slaves, who were very brave and highly skilled in the management of bows and other arms.¹² The outside of the royal *harem* was guarded by eunuchs who were known as *Khwajasaras*. Manucci writes that the principal eunuchs of the royal household served inside and outside of the mansion.¹³ They looked after everything that goes in and out of the mansion. The title of *Nazir* was given to principal eunuch. The person holding this office was highly esteemed by the Emperor. The ladies of the *harem* placed great confidence in Eunuchs. Infact each Queen, princesses and other ladies had a *Nazir* incharge of their property, lands and income.¹⁴ All the other eunuchs worked under the supervision of *Nazir* and were posted at the doors of the *harem* to check the entries into the *harem*. Manucci writes that eunuchs searched everything with great care to stop the entry of intoxicants like *bhanga*, wine, opium or other drugs.¹⁵

Thomas Roe writes, "For noe man enters his house but eunuchs; his woemen are never seen."¹⁶ These eunuchs also acted as spies for everything that goes on in secret. They played very important role in the royal *harem* and were the guard of the *harem*. Manucci writes, "When a physician came to visit *harem*, he was taken by the eunuchs to the *harem* with head and body covered as far as the waist and in the same way he was taken out of the *harem*."¹⁷ There were number of titles which were bestowed upon them i.e. *Nadir* (the excellent), *Danyal* (of good family), *Daulat* (Riches), *Firuz* (valour), *Hilal* (new moon), *Amanat* (a deposit), *Itibar* (faithful), *Nilam* (sapphire), *Anwar* (limited) etc.

Eunuchs were primarily employed to guard the royal *harem* but there are number of eunuchs who rose to the very high positions like Governors of the *subhas* and also as a Commander to different military campaigns. Although being Eunuch did not hinder their carrer in Mughal India and they rose to the higher positions. Here are some examples of some eunuchs who were confident of the Mughal Emperors and attained high positions and ranks. *Itibar Khan* was the eunuch



of Emperor Babur and after his death, he served Mughal Emperor Humayun. When Humayun left Qandhar for Iraq, he dispatched Itibar Khan with others to bring Maryam Makani to his camp.¹⁸ In 1557 A.D., he accompanied Emperor Akbar's mother and other ladies of the *harem* from Kabul to India.¹⁹ Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar appointed him as a Governor of Delhi.²⁰ Itimad Khan, another eunuch was trustworthy of Emperor Akbar. His real name was Phul Malik. Earlier, he served Salim Shah Sur, who bestowed upon him the title of Muhammad Khan.²¹ After the fall of Sur Empire, he joined Mughal services and the rank of 1000 was given to him and was appointed to look after the finances. In a short span of time, he brought the royal treasury into proper order. Emperor Akbar bestowed upon him the title of Itimad Khan.²² In 1565 A.D., he escorted daughter of Miran Mubarak Shah, King of Khandesh to Emperor Akbar's *harem*.²³ Later, he distinguished himself in the conquest of Bengal. In 1576 A.D., Emperor Akbar appointed him as the Governor of Bhakkar. He founded Itimadpur at a distance of six *kos* from Agra.²⁴ He constructed many buildings there including his own tomb and also made a large tank there. On his death, he was buried there.²⁵

Another Eunuch, who rose to the high position and held the highest rank of 6000/5000 during the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir was Itibar Khan. He was one of the most confident servants of the Emperor. During the rebellion of prince Khusrau, when the latter was arrested, he was put under the charge of Itibar Khan. In 1607 A.D., Emperor Jahangir assigned him Gwalior as his *tankhwah jagir*.²⁶ In 1617 A.D., he held the rank of 5000/3000.²⁷ In 1622 A.D., he got increase in his rank which becomes 5000/4000 and Emperor Jahangir appointed him as incharge of *subah* of Agra. Emperor Jahangir while writing about Itibar Khan writes, "As he was an old servant and had become very weak and old, I promoted him to the *subah* of Agra and entrusted to him the defence of the fort and treasury, and, presenting him with an elephant, a horse and a dress of honour, dismissed him."²⁸ He performed his duties efficiently as an Incharge of Agra. Emperor Jahangir bestowed upon

him the title of Mumtaz Khan and also increased his rank from 5000/4000 to 6000/5000.²⁹ Firoz Khan, another eunuch held the rank of 3000/1500 under Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. In the war of succession between Shah Jahan and his brothers after the death of Emperor Jahangir, Firoz Khan supported Shah Jahan. As a prize of loyalty, he was promoted to the rank of 2000/500.³⁰ In 1630 A.D., he got increase of his *swar* rank and in 1634 A.D., his rank was 2000/1000. In 1638 A.D., his rank was 2500/1200 and in 1644 A.D., on the occasion of the feast for the recovery of Begam Sahiba (Jahanara Begum), who had been burnt by a spark from a lamp, he got increase in his rank which became 3000/1500.³¹ He was respected and honoured in Emperor Shah Jahan's service. He died in 1647 A.D. Itibar Khan,³² was another eunuch, who was trustworthy of Emperor Aurangzeb. Formerly, he was slave of Emperor Shah Jahan, who gave him to Aurangzeb. Emperor Aurangzeb made him the incharge of the fort of Agra where Shah Jahan was house arrested.³³ He constructed around Agra fort, an outer wall which cost him a great deal of money.³⁴

CONCLUSION:

From the above, it is amply clear that eunuchs played very important role in Mughal India. These eunuchs with their high abilities and great deeds risen to such a higher rank under the various Mughal Emperors, however when provided opportunities. There was hardly any area where eunuchs were not appointed. They performed valuable services in all the sphere of Mughal administration in various capacities ranging from civil administration to military expeditions. However, mostly they were appointed in Mughal royal *harem* but there were some eunuchs, who were on high posts like Governor. The higher *mansabs* were also given to them. Transgenders are marginalised section of our present day society and their socio-economic status is very low but this was not the case with Mughal India. They were given favourable opportunities for rising to the higher ranks depending on their capabilities.



ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ Noor-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir, Vol.I*, Eng. tr. by Alexander Rogers, ed. By Henry Beveridge, New Delhi, rpt 1985, p.150
- ² *Ibid.* p.151
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.* p.247
- ⁵ Noor-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir, Vol.II*, Eng. tr. by Alexander Rogers, ed. By Henry Beveridge, New Delhi, rpt 1985, p.20
- ⁶ *Ibid. Vol-I*, p.46
- ⁷ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol-I, Eng Tr. by H. Blochmann, Delhi, 1977, p.43
- ⁸ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, Eng. tr. by William Irvine, Vol-II, Calcutta, 1966, p.308
- ⁹ Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire*, 1656-1668, Eng. Tr. by Archibald Constable, Ed. & revised by Vincent A. Smith, Rpt. Delhi, 1997, p.267
- ¹⁰ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol-I, Eng Tr. by H. Blochmann, Delhi, 1977, p.46
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, Eng. tr. by William Irvine, Vol-II, Calcutta, 1966, p.309
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p.326
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.328
- ¹⁵ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, Eng. tr. by William Irvine, Vol-II, Calcutta, 1966, p.328
- ¹⁶ Thomas Roe, *The embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India (1615-19)*, p.270
- ¹⁷ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, Eng. tr. by William Irvine, Vol-II, Calcutta, 1966, p.328
- ¹⁸ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol-I, Eng Tr. by H. Blochmann, Delhi, 1977, p.442
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Nawwab Samsam-Ud-Daula Shah Nawaz Khan and his son Abdul Hayy, *The Maathir-ul-Umara, Vol I*, Eng. tr. H. Beveridge, Revised, annotated and compiled by Baini prashad, Patna, 1979, p. 708
- ²² *Ibid.* p.709
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol-I, Eng Tr. by H. Blochmann, Delhi, 1977, p.473
- ²⁵ Nawwab Samsam-Ud-Daula Shah Nawaz Khan and his son Abdul Hayy, *The Maathir-ul-Umara, Vol I*, Eng. tr. H. Beveridge, Revised, annotated and compiled by Baini prashad, Patna, 1979, p. 709
- ²⁶ Noor-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir, Vol.I*, Eng. tr. by Alexander Rogers, Ed. By Henry Beveridge, New Delhi, rpt 1985, p.113
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* p.372
- ²⁸ *Ibid. Vol-II*, pp.231-32
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* p.258
- ³⁰ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Padshahnama, Vol I*, Eng. Tr. by Dr. Hamid Afaq Siddiqi, Delhi, 1867-1868, rpt. 2010, p.39
- ³¹ Nawwab Samsam-Ud-Daula Shah Nawaz Khan and his son Abdul Hayy, *The Maathir-ul-Umara, Vol I*, Eng. tr. H. Beveridge, Revised, annotated and compiled by Baini prashad, Patna, 1979, p.564
- ³² The title of Itibar Khan was very prominent and given to very trustworthy Eunuchs.
- ³³ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, Eng. tr. by William Irvine, Vol-II, Calcutta, 1966, pp.71-72
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* p.73