



Rituals of the Eunuchs in Punjabi Fiction: A Critical Study

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Abstract

This article examines the ritualistic practices of Punjabi eunuchs—especially related to *nirvana*,ⁱ marriage, death, festivals, and so on—in the context of creating a sense of identity, cohesion and order. The embodiment of rituals and their characteristics—including formality, fixity, and repetition—constructs, upholds, enforces, and maintains the identity of eunuchs. Moreover, rituals serve various cultural functions, such as fostering belief, preserving religious vitality, promoting trade, fostering courage, bringing about healing, and altering individual consciousness.

Keywords: Ritual, Identity, Culture, Eunuchs, Consciousness.

Introduction

Barbara Boudewijnse observes that etymologically or historically, the word ‘ritual’ was first recorded in English in 1570, and initially it was used to define “the prescribed order of performing religious services” or particularly a book of these prescriptions (278). According to Victor Witter Turner “a ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (1100). Ritual, as a meta category, includes both “religious and nonreligious rites, the human and nonhuman, the traditional and the contemporary, the prescribed and the improvised, and rubs up against a number of other cultural domains, such as play, games, performance, and theatre

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worlds” (Stephenson 3). Similarly, Clifford Geertz argues that rituals are places to invent new cultural forms or orders. He, further, states that the purpose of religious symbolic systems is to provide both a “model of” reality (by offering how to interpret the world) as well as a “model for” reality (clarifying its ideal state) (Geertz 126–27). His analysis of rituals structures them as language-like codes that can be interpreted independently similar to cultural systems.

Rituals in India

In the Indian context, rituals have a long history and a special importance in human lives in establishing an organized order of society. The religious as well as civil codes like *karma*ⁱⁱ (to do), *mangala*ⁱⁱⁱ (auspicious event), *samskara*^{iv} (well formed), *kalpa* (to bring something in perfect order), *puja* (worship/ honour), etc. are native Indian terms that not only cultivate the social structure but also inculcate rituals to regulate the whole livelihood. In Punjab, the central beliefs in the state largely pertain to Sikhism and Hinduism. Punjab, in the majority, follows Sikh *Rehat Marayada*^v – the manual that specifies the duties of the Sikhs, it is a kind of a code of conduct. Aligning the self with a particular religion demands the person to follow the patterned living style. As Peter Burke's *Identity Theory* (2009) argues “Simply identifying with the religious group is enough to activate similarity in perceptions and behaviour among group members” (118). From a meaning-making perspective, the construction of different rituals is similar to the establishment of a family culture where one develops a sense of identity through shared rituals.

Eunuchs and the Role of Rituals

Parallel to the mainstream culture of Punjab exists a culture of eunuchs or *khusras*,^{vi} a community whose members are defined as neither male nor female. In Punjab, eunuchs can be seen as a minority group that has a secretive society carrying their invented cult rituals and value system. But most of the rituals are appropriated from the mainstream culture.

According to Serena Nanda's ethnographic study, most of the eunuchs perform stereotypically feminine gender roles in the context of dressing, gendered behaviour, as well as patterns of speech. Just like mainstream social set up they also adopt patterns of behaviour or ritual to define their identity. Meanwhile, others prefer to behave 'as men' or carry masculine features but use cosmetics, and jewellery and keep their hair long by transgressing normative gender presentations. Kira Hall critically argues that "they do not occupy a position 'outside the male-female binary', but instead have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity" (13).

Staying within the dichotomy of male and female, eunuchs have created an ambiguous identity through certain rituals like *nirvana*. Their festivals and the *guru-chela* kinship relationships also play a significant role in defining their collective identity. In this sense, the roles of rituals or the process of *ritualization* (Bell i) are associated with strategies for differentiating itself – to various degrees and in various ways – from other ways of acting within any particular culture of the same society. The ambiguity in identity is the primary reason that they are deprived of entering into the normative society. At one level, the entire *gharana* or *dera*^{vii} of the eunuchs follows the mainstream rituals but it transforms them according to its cultural needs. These rituals are related to marriage, death, and celebration on auspicious events. Other rituals like emasculation or *nirvana*, *dand* or *taka bharna* (paying money), are examples of rituals that they have tried to create.

Castration or the Nirvana Ritual

Taking into consideration their cultural practices, the first important ritual that plays a significant role is related to the castration ritual, called *nirvana*. Originating from the Sanskrit language the word *nirvana* is associated with extinction and disappearance of the individual into the universal which contains eternal peace and happiness. In Prakrit, the word *nirvana* connotes 'blown out' which represents the religious doctrine or the state of soteriological release. Collins argues that the *nirvana* is derived from the verbal root *vana* means 'blown' and its prefix *nir* means 'out' (Collins 1998). It is also

a stage of liberation from *samsara* (world) and *dukha* (pain). In *Introducing Philosophy of Religion* (2009), Chad Meister remarks that “Buddhism: the soteriological goal is nirvana, liberation from the wheel of *samsara* and extinction of all desires, cravings and suffering” (25).

Among eunuchs, this process is associated with entry into the community as well as identity formation and physical transformation which involves an excision of male genitalia where the *nirvana* enters into a new phase of life. In reference to eunuchs the idea of ‘sameness’ supports them to create a sense of belongingness or collective identity. Moreover, this process is also a prominent part of their devotion to the divinity, Bahuchara Mata, who blessed them with new lives. Nanda states that “The emasculation operation consists of surgical removal of the penis and testicles, but no construction of a vagina. This operation defines them as *hijras* – eunuchs – “neither men nor women” (ix).

According to A. M. Shah, the castration *hijra* rituals derive from a particular form of Mother-Goddess worship. The concept of identifying oneself with one’s deity or object of worship is prevalent across many Hindu sects. The phenomenon of the *hijras* represents an intense manifestation of this idea, particularly within the worship practices of the cult of *mata* (1326). Jessica Hinchy, illustrates this practice by taking examples from the Ramanandi monastic order that crosses gender boundaries. In their devotion toward Ram and his wife Sita, male Ramanandi “perform feminine behaviours, dress as women and even observe the taboos of the menstruation period” (278). Among the eunuchs, *nirvana* stands for transcending such boundaries of gender that ultimately distinguish them from mainstream society.

As a central practice *nirvana*^{viii} is also referred to as the stage of calmness or the transcendent state in which there is neither suffering nor the sense of self but the subject is released from the effects of *karma* and the cycle of death and rebirth. According to popular belief through the emasculation or nirvana, the former, impotent male person dies, and a new person, endowed with sacred power (*shakti*), is reborn (Nanda 26). The character of Simran in *Ki Jana Main Kaun*

is represented as a *khusra* who has gone through the process of castration: “At last, I attained Nirvana Although this journey was very painful, I was happy and made myself like a woman. I also adopted the attraction that a woman is proud of.” (Rana 144) In the process of identity formation emasculation is a major source of power or the source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a eunuch and of being so identified by the larger society.

Ideally, the emasculation operation is usually performed by an experienced eunuch called the midwife or *dai ma*, who transforms them into a *hijra/khusra* and not a man to a woman. The operation takes place in the early morning (around 3:00 or 4:00), a usual time in India for auspicious ceremonies, such as marriages and worship. The treatment given to the nirvana during the recovery period is quite similar to the one which a woman experiences after childbirth. It is important to notice that during and after the surgery, the wound is left without stitches and when the cut is made, the blood gushes out, and nothing is done to stem the flow, as they believe the blood is considered the ‘male part’ that should be drained off. No stitches are made in the wound after the surgery, and the wound is healed through repeated applications of hot *gingili* (sesame seed) oil and heat to prevent infection. The hour just after the operation is considered to be the critical time during which the *nirvana*’s life or death is at stake or in the balance. This uncertainty is conceptualised by the *hijras* as a ‘tug of war’ between Bahuchara Mata, who gives life, and her elder sister, Chamundeswari, who takes life.

During the healing period, the nirvana is not permitted to leave the room, where the recuperation takes place, throughout the 40 days. She is not even to use the restroom all alone. Her needs are addressed by the elder *hijras*, who seriously take care of her. In addition to the restricted diet, nirvana is forbidden from having milk (black coffee or tea can be consumed), eating bananas, looking in a mirror, combing hair, and seeing men. She gets a bath on the third day following the operation. Saffron is applied to the nirvana’s face and her hair is cleansed at the end of the 12th day; this is done again on the 20th, 30th, and 40th days.

The restrictions or obligations of this ritual are also borrowed from mainstream society. For example, the postpartum ceremony or *sawa mahina* (40 to 45 days), a ritual of the mainstream society, where mother and baby do not go outside the room. Women (other than close family members) avoid frequent visits to the room to prevent any kind of infection. During this period, the mother undergoes a process of purification from the impurities associated with childbirth. The instructions followed after the nirvana symbolises the adaptation of rituals related to childbirth. The dietary pattern used during the *sawa mahina* also matches with eunuchs' food followed during the castration process. The absence of female genitalia in eunuchs attracts them to adopt feminine characteristics. During nirvana, they act as a pregnant woman who has given birth to a child. Moreover, this ritual is a celebration of their impotency.

Death and Its Significance among Eunuchs

In their everyday lifestyle eunuchs appropriate the ways of the heterosexual society. However, in the case of rituals related to death, the rituals are performed differently. The rituals and ceremonies associated with death in most of the cases depend on the philosophy of life and death in different communities/religions. Hindus believe that after death a person is reborn (in another human or animal form) but Muslims, Christians, and many other communities do not believe in the idea of rebirth. Death is considered a sad and fearful thing that everyone desires to avoid. Various mortuary rituals provide a gratifying platform in which the demise is mourned and social memories are created or (re)asserted in order to renew social bonds and individuals make claims for individual identities and group membership.

Different from every religious practice of the prevailing society, it is believed that the funeral of *khusras* takes place at midnight so that no one (especially from the normative society) can see it all. They are suspicious that if an outsider sees the one who dies then he/she would again be born as a eunuch in the next life. The deceased is not carried on the four shoulders but they make the body stand and then take it for the funeral. The last rites are performed in a simple manner. Following the mainstream rituals, the body is ceremonially

bathed and wrapped in clean, mostly white cloth. Jewellery and other items are removed before cremation. Sacred water, from either the *Ganga* (sacred river in India) or any other holy river, is poured into the mouth of the deceased. Before cremation, any strings that tie the body are removed, symbolizing the severance of all ties of the deceased with this world. The body is to be set alight by the male blood relative of the deceased (if present) or the senior member of the community. But most of the time, the dead body is buried instead of burning.

It is also believed that before the last rites are performed, the deceased person is abused and hit with slippers and shoes. This is done because they have a firm belief that if the eunuch had committed a crime, then he/she gets repented and in the next life should be born as a 'complete' human being (male or female). For a week after the death, the companions keep a fast for a week and pray for the deceased to be born like an ordinary person in the next life. Surprisingly, the eunuch community does not get sad about the death of their fellow *khusra*, but instead, they feel happy for liberation from such a negligible life.

“Noori,” a Punjabi story written by Aneman Singh vividly describes the last rituals on the death of a *khusra*. The story outlines the situation “The news of Bibi Pashi’s death disseminated far and wide throughout the community. As she was about to die, Chando, Kalo and Raji started beating the body lying on the bed” (Singh 177). These lines explain the normal activities that are done on the death of a *khusra*. Instead of mourning, they beat the body and curse the demised person: “Bibi Pashi was engulfed in flames as soon as everyone saw it. Everyone started playing *bhangra*. They started thrashing and talking loudly. God, don’t put in this life again (Singh 178). The lines are the reflection of collective trauma, pain, and discrimination that they face for being a *khusra*. Consuming alcohol and performing *bhangra* are two unconventional practices that are observed during the funeral.

The story focuses on the festival-like post-funeral performances of the community. This is an imitation of the mainstream ritual of *dastar bandi*. In this ritual when the head of the family (like the father

or the eldest son of the family) dies, the son or the brother becomes the new head of the family. The reference from the story conveys a similar sense as Noori acts as a new head of the family after the death of Mahant Pashi. Unlike mainstream society, they prefer to enjoy or to celebrate the death of a *khusra* because they associate this with *moksha* or liberation from worldly affairs.

The portrayal of *khusra* community in the novel *Aadam Grehan* discusses the death rituals in a brief manner and shows how the sudden demise of *Mahant* Bulbul is mourned by fellow eunuchs of the *dera*. Just like the Sikh funeral, the body of the deceased is washed and dressed in white-coloured clothes. The major difference in performance is played by Miran. She acts like a bride of the *mahant* and wears a white dress that is a mandatory dress code in Indian mainstream society for a wife to wear on the demise of her husband. The bond of a guru and *chela* or disciple (here in the case of Bulbul and Miran) is represented as a husband and wife. The practice of playing a band on death is quite unusual in the mainstream Punjabi culture. The band symbolises that the celebration of the death of the *mahant* and his liberation from the miseries of the human world.

Keeping in consideration the loss of a person, after death in a Punjabi family, the period of mourning continues for nine days among the Sikhs and for thirteen days among the Hindus. The relatives and neighbours visit the house to sympathise with the family. The funeral ceremonies can happen in a number of places including the family home, at the *gurudwara*, outside the house, or at the crematorium. Traditionally, a Sikh funeral will include a community prayer, called *ardas*, as well as two daily prayers, 'Japji Sahib' and 'Kirtan Sohila.' But the *khusras* perform this ritual in their own ways that are quite opposite to the mainstream culture. They call other eunuchs from different *gharanas* or from the states to join them in their hard times. The ritual starts with celebrating the death and ends in jubilation or delightful manners.

In the novel *Aadam Grehan*, the last rites of the *mahant* are performed according to the traditions of the community. Following the legacy "A total of one thousand letters were posted in Punjab and every state of India. The period of mourning was to last for a whole

month and a half” (Chahal 76). For the next month and a half period of time, the community performs different activities to complete the last rites. The surprising side is seen when “This environment of mourning ends with a ceremony of joy. A couple is prepared as a man and woman. . . . *Mehndi* is applied, heads are tied, *barat* is held and *doli* is also sent off.” (Chahal 76)

The rituals of the mainstream society are mimicked and subverted by eunuchs to create their own meanings. For instance, in Punjabi society, after the death of a Sikh, the family of the deceased may undertake a non-continuous reading of the entire Sri Guru Granth Sahib called *Sehaj Paath*. This reading or *path* is timed to conclude within nine days of the death of the person. The conclusion of this final ritual is called the *bhog* ceremony which marks the end of the mourning period. Considering the death rituals of *khusras*, they do not perform the practices prescribed in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. On the contrary, by reframing certain practices they end the death ritual not with a *bhog* but with a marriage. A couple, selected for the marriage, acts like a man and woman, which symbolises their desperation to be heterosexuals. The marriage rituals or ceremonies of *mehndi*, *barat*, and *doli* are performed at the occasion of death.

On the last day, the members of the *dera* and the invited guests gather to perform the final part of the ritual where the members from different *gharanas* collect money for the *dera* of the demised eunuch. As it is seen in the novel *Aadam Grehan*, “On the last day, according to the ritual, all the groups put money in the pot according to their financial conditions. It is thus a ritual which is performed to overcome the economic crisis” (Chahal 77). The ritual of collecting money, which is performed to overcome the economic crisis, is quite similar to ‘*neonda pauna rasam*’ that is observed in Punjabi marriages. In this ritual the relatives and the neighbours give money to the family so that they shall not face the economic crisis for a specific period of time. This is how eunuchs appropriate certain practices from others, and convert them to create their own.

Rituals Related to Marriage

The Punjabi eunuchs have their own marriage rituals. Dressed from head to toe in traditional bridal wear, with henna on their hands and dyed hair, they marry either in front of the idol of the Goddess Yelamma or with Aravan during the Kuvagam (Tamilnadu) festival. The famous Koothavandar Temple in Kuvagam or Koovagam is dedicated to an incarnation of Aravan. *Aravanis* (bridal eunuchs) visit the temple to replicate a one-day-long marriage ceremony. This is a festival that helps the eunuchs to forge a collective identity. For instance, the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun* provides a reference to such a ritual when Dr. Ayyiyar explains the significance of the festival to Nasibo. He says “And they get married to the god Aravan. They definitely perform the wedding rituals. And on the second day of marriage, considering themselves as widows, they break the bangles. They wear white robes. They also erase the vermilion from the head” (Rana 57).

Similarly, the Punjabi short story “Chupp Mahabharata” portrays the ritual in a very brief manner. The story describes the ritual “The priest performed many other ceremonies and after the visits, everyone danced well, Aravan was their husband for a day and they all were his wives” (Singh 115). For many eunuchs, the festival is extremely significant because this is their only chance to get married. They might not be able to experience the event of marriage due to the social and cultural prejudices they encounter. This festival offers them the opportunity to fulfill their hidden desire.

On the wedding day of the festival, the priests of the temple adorn the *aravanis* with *thaalis* (*mangala sutra* or bridal necklaces) and conduct rituals to sanctify their marriage with the deity. “Now there will be a sacrificial ceremony, it is a tragic moment in our life, when we will be married and become widows in one fell swoop” (Singh 116). For their marriage to Aravan, everyone wears their finest bridal *saris*, gold jewellery, multi-coloured bangles, *gajras* (floral garlands), and bridal makeup. Just like marriage in mainstream society, they carry with them various *puja* (the act of worship) items, *kalasha* (pot), and so on. In the sanctum sanctorum, a group of priests, who act as representatives of Lord Aravan, officially complete the

marriage ceremony and each eunuch gets married to the deity individually. The priests tie the *thali* (sacred thread made with turmeric) around their necks and apply *sindoor* (vermillion) in the partition of their hair, both symbols of marriage for Hindu women. This day of joyous celebration is followed by the next day which commemorates the death of Aravan and all the bridal eunuchs become widows.^{ix} Then ‘widowed’ *aravanis* throw their *thaalis* and remove their ornaments and flowers as a part of the mourning the death of their husband.

The festival witnesses screams all around. “Chupp Mahabharta” captures the environment thus.

A complete man was sacrificed. The idol’s head was bowed down. As soon as the sacrificial ritual was completed, the shouting and screaming started. Lamentations in various languages echoed in the air. Niranjana and her companions broke the colourful bangles on their arms, broke the *gajras*, wiped the vermillion from the head, clean the dark make-up from their faces (Singh 116).

All the brides declare themselves as widows and perform certain rituals that a woman is supposed to do on the demise of her husband. In the end, they cry aloud, beat their chests, and lament their widowhood, before bathing and changing or wearing fresh white saris as Hindu widows commonly wear. Niranjana witnessed that “Gradually, all of them wore white clothes and assumed the form of widows” (Singh 117) in order to mourn the deity.

The collective lamentation on the death of Aravan (a husband for a day) can be seen as the community’s catharsis, re-enactment of trauma of repressed feelings and as their collective protest against the discrimination they face in heteronormative society. It is a further salient feature to notice that this festival is not just a culturally significant event but symbolically it is an opportunity for the collective expression of their identity. In this sense, Koovagam festival is a rare occasion where the eunuchs can openly flaunt their sexuality and gender identity in public without facing any kind of

censorship or mockery. K. Delliswararo and Hangsing in their essay “Socio-Cultural Exclusion and Inclusion of Transgenders in India” state that “Through this narration of myth story *Hijaras* may wish to define themselves who they are and how they want to see themselves as an individual who has existed throughout history but also as important individuals within the ancient text for their deeds” (10-11). In this case, the festival for eunuchs is a brief moment where life unshackles its official pain, sorrows, and the feeling of being displaced or isolated; ultimately it brings a sense of utopian freedom. The carnival offers a non-hierarchical, co-operative, combined, and it fosters a sense of equality among the members who participate.

Ceremonies Related to Guru-*Chela* Relationships

Another important ritual among eunuchs is related to adopting a *chela*.^x In the hierarchy of their community, a *chela* is the lowest member of the community. According to their civil codes, a eunuch who is willing to be a *chela* can make only one guru. Being the lowest member of the community, he/she is not in a position to leave the *dera* without the permission of the guru. In case anyone, intentionally or unintentionally, goes against this ritual can be excommunicated from the entire community and thereafter no one accepts him/her as a *chela*. The exchange of *chelas* (from one *dera* to another) is done under the ritual of ‘*taka bharna*,’ literally meaning ‘paying the money.’ The sending of eunuchs from one guru to another is realised only by taking money in instalments. In the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*, Bobby explains the ritual to Karanjit, “When we make someone our disciple, he is in a sense our property. A disciple of one guru cannot be adopted by another guru as his disciple. If someone wants to do this then he/she can make him/her the disciple only by paying a sum of money” (Rana 222). Through this exchange of *chela(s)*, the leader or mahant of the *dera* receives the demanded amount of money.

In the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*, the ritual of adopting a *chela* is portrayed in a different manner. The ritual takes place when Jugnu is adopted by Zarina Ahmed “ . . . *Aarti* was performed and Jugnu was placed on the carpet. With everyone's consent, Zarina Ahmed carried five suits, two boxes of jewellery, bangles, and a gift of eleven

thousand rupees to Jugnu's lap. Then a heavy embroidered *chunni*,^{xi} with a fringe of red and white pearls on the top and edges" (Rana 152). At the end of this ritual, Zarina Ahmed confesses in front of the present members that "I am making this my *chela*" (Rana 152). Because of their inability to continue their family line, the exchange of *chelas* becomes the only method for eunuchs to increase their population.

The power of approving the entry of a new member into the community through a *reet*, or a ritualistic ceremony, as well as the excommunication of the members also lies in the hands of a guru. In this traditional ceremony, a *chela* is adopted by the guru to the house or *gharana* to which the guru himself/herself belongs. A newly added member learns the ways of being a eunuch, for example, how to wear a dress and use makeup, singing traditional songs, and the steps of dance that accompany those songs. The newly added member is welcomed by the other eunuchs on the instructions of the guru. As the novel *Aadam Grehan* represents: "The drummer was about to go into the room rubbing his eyes, yawning, when the *mahant* called out and said, "Who will do the welcome ceremony? Noori picked up the *tabla* and started dancing. In the dead of the night, Noori, with *ghungru*^{xii} on her feet, started the tone with the beat on the *table*" (Chahal 34). Similar event is described in another novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*. The lines reflect that if one of the members decide to become a *khusra*, there is a christening ceremony, known as a *reet*, which he/she must undergo.

This practice, called *reet*, can be seen as a replica of the *janeu practice*, the thread ceremony of the Brahmins or baptising particular religion. *Janeu* or *Upanayana* is a Brahmin educational sacrament, one of the traditional rites of passage that marked the acceptance of a student by a preceptor, such as a guru or *acharya* (Kanitkar and Cole 4). Among the eunuchs, the rite is performed by the guru and the disciple is instructed accordingly. The charter of rules and regulations is explained to the aspirant. These include things like how a *khusra* must walk, and how to serve water to a visitor. There are several others, including the following: while serving water, the glass must not be held at the top or the middle. Instead, the glass must be balanced on palms joined together. The *pallu* (in case of wearing sari)

or *dupatta* must not touch anyone while moving around. One should not lie with his feet facing the guru. The guru's clothes must not be worn by the *chela*, nor should the latter utter his guru's or *gharana*'s name. One should not speak or raise the voice back to his guru and so on. The naming ceremony is also done at this stage where a eunuch is officially assigned a name and loses the former one. The methods of the practice differ over cultures and religions. At the arrival into the community, most of the eunuchs drop their old names and surnames, in order to conceal their identity, religion and caste. This not only represents their casteless social structure but also protects them from identity-based discrimination. Therefore, at this stage it becomes necessary for all of them to go under the process of *naamkaran* or naming.

In *deras*, the hierarchical relationship between *guru-chela* does not allow anyone to sit next to the guru. In case the *chela*, consciously or unconsciously, breaks the rule, he/she faces the hardest punishment from the guru. For example, in the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*, Jugnu unknowingly disobey the rules of the *dera* when she clothed the guru with *dupatta*. The novel describes: "One hand was numb from kneading the flour, she picked up the guru's *dupatta* with the other and ran and placed the *dupatta* on guru's head and started walking. Oh you the fool, what a heinous crime is committed. You should be ruined. You clothed the guru with a *dupatta*. Jugnu had really made a big mistake. She could not escape the punishment anyway" (Rana 112). These lines represent how it is mandatory for eunuchs to obey the rituals in order to maintain the hierarchy as well as to avoid hard punishments.

The *dand* (literally means punishment) is another way to send away *khusras* from one *dera* to another otherwise there is no alternative to leave the guru or the *dera*. According to their civil codes no one willingly adopt the abandoned *chela(s)*. If someone goes against the laws then the individual in question is excommunicated. Rituals, in this sense, are one of the fundamental ways in which the social order of community is maintained by eunuchs through the regulation of internal councils, called the *panchayats* or *jamaats*. Expulsion of members from the communities through self-conceived regulatory bodies can be seen as an ordered

structure of the society. Terms like *huqqa-pani band* (literally meaning to cast-out or ostracise), and *dand* (punishment) are examples of their rituals that they borrowed from mainstream culture. During the expulsion, an outcast eunuch finds it difficult to re-initiate him/herself in the community in any city because once a member is excommunicated, financial security through certain idiosyncratic livelihood prerogatives for the outcast becomes limited until the council reconfigures an appeal for their re-admittance into the community. In *Aadam Grehan*, Noori delivers Manu to Miran by paying a certain amount of money. It notes: “The next day Mahant Lainchi, Rekha, and Noori were ready to go. Miran handed over a thousand rupees to Mahant Lainchi as Manu’s punishment. Manu immediately expressed his heartfelt desire to stay with Miran” (Chahal 117). These lines show how their society functions lawfully or ritualistically from generation to generation. The exchange of *chelas* is significant in order to continue their established culture.

Conclusion

The adaptation of a different set of rituals by eunuchs offers them to a sense of distinct community even if it is an ambiguous one. Their popular rituals are also associated with marriage, death and the practice of *nirvana*. But they use these rituals by subverting their forms and meanings either to fit into the mainstream society or to disassociate from it.

Endnotes

- i. The word *nirvana* is associated with a state of peace and happiness. In Buddhism, *nirvana* is the highest state that someone can attain, a state of enlightenment, meaning a person’s individual desires and suffering drift away.
- ii. The word *karma* originated from Sanskrit means an action, word or deed and its consequences.
- iii. The *mangala* means auspicious or successful event.
- iv. *Samskara* is a Sanskrit term, derived from the word *sam* meaning ‘well planned’ or ‘well thought out,’ and *kara* meaning ‘the action under-taken.’ It is believed that actions performed with full awareness have the greatest impact, leaving impressions that are more easily traced and repeated.

- v. Sikh *Rahit Maryada* is a code of conduct and a convention for Sikhism. The word *Rehit* is derived from the Punjabi language which means *rehna* or *rehan sehan*, whereas *Maryada* is a Sanskrit word (composed of *marya* + *adda*) that connotes limits and boundaries of rules and customs.
- vi. *Khusra* is used for the Punjabi community of eunuchs.
- vii. *Dera* is a Punjabi word of Persian origin meaning camp, abode, tent, house, temple, sacred shrine or habitation, camp or cantonment. In Punjab, the house of *khusra* community is called a *dera*.
- viii. It is not mandatory for every hijra to undergo nirvana, and is more of a personal choice.
- ix. It is also important to note that this widowhood, of eunuchs, is not permanent rather only symbolic and temporary. After the festival, the bridal eunuchs can return to their usual colourful garment after a short period of time. Moreover, they can return to the festival next year to repeat the same marriage ritual.
- x. The major principle of social organization among the eunuchs is the relation between gurus and their chelas (disciples).
- xi. Another term for *dupatta* or a long scarf that some women wear around their head and shoulders
- xii. *Ghungghru* is the small metallic bells strung together on the anklets worn by classical Indian dancers.

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