

Legacies of Slavery and Contemporary Resistance

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Edited by

David W. Bulla,
Karen E. Bravo,
Judith N. Onwubiko,
and Kremena Dimitrova

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INTRODUCTION

KAREN E. BRAVO AND DAVID W. BULLA

Frederick Douglass, the orator and journalist, used his pen to fight for the abolition of slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States. Douglass was a warrior with words, fighting against the slavery he grew up with through his lectures and his newspaper editorials. However, one source of his remarkably successful dissent against slavery was a skirmish he had as a teenager with his overseer, Edward Covey. On a farm in Maryland, Douglass fought with Covey, who had unleashed upon Douglass countless savage beatings—and, on this occasion, hit him with a hickory stick and was attempting to rope Douglass like a calf. Douglass, not knowing why he acted in defiance, “resolved to fight” rather than be abused again. At times, as Douglass fought back, he held Covey by the throat, causing the white man to bleed. When Covey asked for help from a white worker, Douglass kicked that man, who then no longer assisted Covey. Another man came to help Covey, but realizing that Douglass had the upper hand, decided to leave Douglass and Covey to their tussle. Foreman and slave fought for two hours, and Covey eventually gave up. The future journalist stated that Covey never laid a hand on him again. “That battle with Covey was a turning point in my career as a slave,” Douglass wrote in his autobiography. “It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”¹

Douglass’s fight with his white overseer was extraordinarily courageous, and it showed to the future writer and orator that resistance was the first step on the road to overthrowing such a barbaric system. The following volume offers no such bravery from its authors, but they do attempt to throw light on slavery’s legacies and the resistance to its consequences. Indeed, the chapters in this book come from two editions of the *Slavery Past, Present, and Future*, an international conference. The first of the two conferences whose work is highlighted here occurred on July 7-9, 2021, when scholars of slavery from a multiplicity of disciplines gathered online for the Fifth Global Meeting. Then, with the coronavirus pandemic waning just enough, the conference steering committee decided to proceed

and have a face-to-face conference in Leiden, the Netherlands, at Webster University's Leiden Campus; this would be the Sixth Global Meeting. The intention had been to have the conference in Leiden in 2020, but it was postponed that year and went virtual in 2021 due to the pandemic.

Together, employing a multidisciplinary and non-hierarchical approach, historians, lawyers, scholars of journalism and museum studies, social workers and economists discussed their research on slavery, enslavement, and exploitation in various forms through time—past, present, and future—and in different geographic spaces. Specific subjects included enslavement in the brothels of Ancient Rome, of Native Americans by colonists in seventeenth-century New England, and of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas and the Caribbean, through to contemporary human trafficking. The chapters in this edited volume are the product of these two meetings of the conference.

Briefly, the editors would like to provide the context for these Global Meetings and the research that has emanated from them. In 2015, at Oxford University's Mansfield College, the First Global Meeting was held as part of the Oxford-based Inter-Disciplinary.net organization's series of meetings on international topics from multiple research perspectives and methodologies. Subsequent meetings have been held in Prague, Berlin, Innsbruck, and then Leiden. A Seventh Global Meeting has been proposed for Accra, Ghana, in the summer of 2023. Slavery Past, Present, and Future has assembled scholars for the goal of sharing knowledge on slavery and human trafficking, and then the conference organizers also have wanted to share that knowledge beyond the conference. There have been four volumes associated with the conference, and the third, titled *Why Slavery Endures*, has become the theme for a series published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England. That volume, which came from papers given at the global meeting in Prague in 2016, included chapters by authors from Denmark, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. This, then, is the fifth volume coming out of the conference, again with scholars from many points on the globe: England, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Scotland, and the United States.

The themes of this volume include the role of the past in the present, loss and re-discovery of knowledge of the past, anti-slavery resistance and anti-enslavement efforts today, and the commonalities among disparate forms of enslavement. One additional theme came out of the face-to-face Leiden conference, and that was the perception of anti-slavery causes in social media—including a discussion of the gulf between arm-chair and boots-on-the-ground activists.

The volume's organization reflects the rich discussions. What follows is a breakdown of this volume by sections—with a brief synopsis of each chapter within those sections:

In "Section One: Past Slavery" the chapters address different types of historic enslavement, delving into the methodologies and purposes of the exploitation. Shreejita Basak's Chapter, "Altered Bodies, Altered Lives: The Making of Eunuch Slaves in Mughal India," discusses the use of eunuchs as domestic slaves on the Indian subcontinent. Basak examines various aspects the eunuch slave trade, including eunuch acquisition, exchange, trade routes, castration, and their connection to Islam.

Joanne Jahnke-Wegner's Chapter, "Native Enslavement, Commodification, and Racialization during King Philip's War," delineates the process English colonists used to enslave their Native enemies during King Philip's War (1676-1678). Jahnke-Wegner exposes the English colonists' use of a process of human commodification to simultaneously remove Native peoples from the land while enslaving and exploiting them for labor or selling them into Atlantic slavery for profit.

Marcella Schute's Chapter, titled "The First Proposal to Reopen the Transatlantic Slave Trade in New Orleans in 1839," brings up a rather surprising and little examined movement in U.S. press history. The *Louisiana Courier* in New Orleans began to campaign for the reestablishment of the United States' involvement in the international slave trade three decades after it has been banned as part of an original constitutional mandate. Schute breaks ground on an insidious, yet very public attempt by a Southern editor to move the United States backwards at a time when abolitionism was gaining momentum.

In "Section Two: Legacies," contributors identify and analyze the legacies of forms of enslavement in Nigeria and the United States.

David W. Bulla's Chapter, "*The Colored American/The Loyal Georgian*: A Black Republican Newspaper in Georgia at the Start of Reconstruction," examines the history of a short-lived Black Pro-Republican newspaper in Georgia after the U.S. Civil War. Bulla discusses the development of the newspaper from its inception, assessing its purpose, the changes the newspaper endured, and the local organizations that the newspaper was associated with in Augusta during the Reconstruction era. The newspaper shows a vibrant community, but one that struggles with the political and social environment factors at play in the post-Civil War South.

Judith Onwubiko's Chapter, "Vestiges of Igbo Indigenous Forms of Slavery: The Oruku and Umuode Crisis," examines the scope and presence of Igbo indigenous forms of slavery in modern Nigeria. Onwubibiko

focuses on two main indigenous slavery practices in Igbo societies: *osu* and *ohu*. Owunbiku analyzes the Igbo indigenous slavery practices, drawing on literature from Igbo history and religion specifically as they relate to marriage, politics, and land ownership in indigenous slavery practices.

In “Section Three: Legalities and Literature,” contributors examine the depiction of enslaved persons and their use of the law and other resistance methodologies in ancient Rome, Cuba, and the United Kingdom.

Laurie Venter’s Chapter, “Fettered by Your Tresses: The Sexual Agency of Brothel Slaves in the Roman World,” analyzes of the sexual agency of brothel slaves in the Roman Empire. The chapter examines the various means by which the agency of brothel slaves is evidenced—through emotional labor, erotic capital, and knowledge transfer—and suggests that pre-conceived notions of the nature and extent of the agency of enslaved prostitutes in the Roman world deserve further exploration.

Elena Barattini’s Chapter, “Petitioning for Autonomy, Questioning Arbitrariness: Enslaved Women’s Lawsuits in Cuba, 1791-1880” analyzes enslaved women’s practices of petitioning in colonial Cuba, considering the intersection of race, gender, and class in the enslaved women’s lives. Barattini focuses on a critical reading of colonial legal transcripts and sources to show how the enslaved women made use of legal institutions to challenge political concepts and power relations in the long abolition process in Cuba.

Kremena Dimitrova’s Chapter, “Running with the Runaway Everywhere and Nowhere: Comics-based Research as a Contemporary Form of Decolonial Resistance,” examines the renewed attention to the decolonization of museums by utilizing comics to explain and represent the history of runaway slave advertisements.

In “Section Four: Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking,” the contributors identify the challenges to anti-human trafficking activists and legislators, and proffer a technology-based mechanism to combat the exploitation.

Muiread Murphy’s Chapter, “The Challenges Associated with the Identification of Severe Labor Exploitation,” focuses on challenges to effective identification of human trafficking and investigation in nation states. Murphy examines European case law, discusses duties arising under applicable international protocols, and aims to outline and implement the legal obligations of Nation States arising under international and European law. The chapter draws attention to the barriers of frontline stakeholders, such as labor inspectors who contribute to the failure to identify cases of labor exploitation.

Stefania Herrera Guzman and Sheetal Shah's Chapter, "Healing Trauma through Yoga: Assessing the Effectiveness of a Six-Week Trauma-Informed Yoga Therapy Intervention on the PTSD Symptoms of Women Survivors of Complex Sexual Exploitation and Abuse," looks at the thousands of survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation in the Netherlands and the physical and mental health consequences with which they must live. Their chapter involves two in-depth case studies from survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse through human trafficking and considers how trauma-sensitive yoga can reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and enhance wellbeing.

Deanna R. McPherson's Chapter, "Female Offenders and Perpetrators of Sex Trafficking," explores the under-researched area of female perpetrators of sex trafficking and how females evolved to undertake and facilitate the sexual exploitation and/or trafficking of other females. Traditionally women and children have been viewed as victims, and studies have verified this even though more men are being discussed as victims. Levels of perpetration have also been gendered with males often being viewed as offenders, although more women perpetrators, or those assisting in trafficking offenses, are also being seen.

Amy Plummer's Chapter, "Hashtag Activism and Freedom Fighting: The Missed Opportunities of Digital Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Awareness Raising," looks at awareness raising of modern slavery and human trafficking in social media. Awareness raising topics range from educating the general public about what these issues are, what causes these issues to occur, their prevalence, recruitment methods, anti-slavery and trafficking legislation, the common signs of exploitation and how to report suspicious activity, and non-profit organization work and how to get involved, among others. Social media has evolved awareness raising methods, where information can spread faster than ever before to larger and more global audiences than traditional campaigns. Modern-day digital activism incorporates hashtags, symbols, and "likes" to show support, engage advocates, and take action to fight modern slavery and human trafficking. These "slacktivist" efforts, though, risk missed opportunities when individuals and celebrities use these platforms to present their "activist" title but fail to provide meaningful education and practical ways to get involved in real-time, on-the-streets activism.

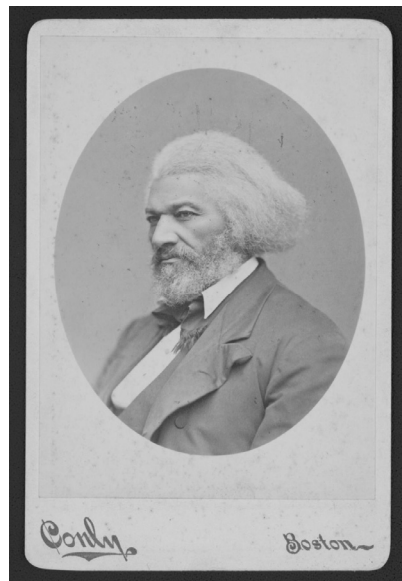
Yelyzaveta Monastyrova's Chapter, "Governed by Exclusion: Discursivity of Human Trafficking in Spanish and Italian Public Spaces," looks at the concept of human trafficking as it is fixed in international criminal law and transposed into regional and national legislations. These policies reflect global preoccupations with sexual and labor exploitation of,

mostly, immigrant workers. This chapter focuses on the nature of these concerns and the effects of the global anti-trafficking agenda on the practices and persons it concerns—on the international as well as local levels. The chapter presents the results of a critical discourse analysis of the local dimension of the human trafficking discourse in the public space of Spain and Italy, by examining human trafficking representations in national newspapers.

And, finally in a fifth and closing section, Karen E. Bravo's Chapter, "Looking Back to Lean Forward," identifies and examines significant anniversaries in United States and Jamaican histories, unearthing and exploring the interlinkages and commonalities between the two countries with a focus on their legacies of racial enslavement and the struggles of their enslaved and formerly enslaved people to derive lessons for the future.

Notes

¹ Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, MA: Anti-Slavery Society, 1845), 72.



Abolitionist orator and journalist Frederick Douglass is shown here in an 1884 photograph by Charles F. Conly. (Library of Congress)

SECTION ONE:
PAST SLAVERIES

CHAPTER ONE

ALTERED BODIES, ALTERED LIVES: THE MAKING OF EUNUCH SLAVES IN MUGHAL INDIA

SHREEJITA BASAK

Abstract

The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, alongside classifying a number of socio-ethnic communities of India as habitual and hereditary criminals, also criminalised the eunuch community on grounds of being “suspicious,” owing to their secretive and peripatetic lives. These proscribed eunuchs, now identified by terms such as *hijra* and *zenāna* in the Indian subcontinent, however, had a long and dynamic past. The installation of the Turkic regime in Delhi in the thirteenth century, sparked an unprecedented increase in the demand in slaves which the foreign import could no longer satisfy, thereby triggering acquisition of slaves from within the geographical limits of the state. The eastern province of Bengal, in this context, played a pivotal role in supplying slaves to the imperial capital for centuries. However, the most interesting feature of this slave trade from Bengal was the ancillary trade in eunuchs. Despite being banned legally, political Islam across cultures had constantly compromised with the act of emasculation and with eunuch employment in royal and aristocratic establishments. The Mughals were no exception. Referred to as *khwājasarā*, roughly meaning the “lord of the seraglio,” eunuchs in Mughal India continued to be “manufactured” and employed as an exceptional category of domestic servants considered indispensable for the smooth functioning of the *haram*. Despite the repeated royal ultimatums issued against the practice, the trade continued steadily till eighteenth century, indicating that the very existence of eunuchs in the Islamic societies were nested within a set of ingrained contradictions. The solitary study made on the trade in eunuchs came from Gavin Hambly in 1974, ever since which, despite important scholarly interventions on royal eunuchs as *haram* appointees and on issues of eunuch masculinities, no

study has been made on the multi-dimensional eunuch trade which practically kept the institution thriving. The aim of this chapter therefore is to revisit the trade and engage with some of the issues left unanswered in previous studies.

Keywords: Slavery, eunuch, eunuch trade, Bengal, Mughal India.

* * *

Introduction

There is a *sarkar* in the Allahabad *subah* called Handiya, and in it a village called Damgarh, where reside some Naishapuri Saiyads of pure descent. A gentleman of this stock, who was named Bakhsh Alam, had a sister who was without a son. She bought a Brahman boy from his father and mother in a year of famine and brought him up as her son. When the boy was fourteen years old, Nawab Abulmansur Khan Safdar Jang's army marched by that village and the lad came out of the house to see the sight. The castrators lifted him, carried him off, castrated him and sold him to the Nawab, who made him over to Shujauddaulah ...¹

The above passage from an eighteenth-century account of the province of Awadh, located in northern India, narrates the story of one of Bahu Begum's confidant and a leading statesman of the time Bahar Ali Khan's journey into eunuchhood.² It simultaneously provides a glimpse into the abominable practice of eunuch-making and eunuch trade that had prevailed in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. It began as an ancillary enterprise to the broader traffic in slaves, and catered to the demands of a niche. This chapter shall examine the attributes of this specialised trade, the roles played by the actors involved, besides taking a glance into the reasons behind the comfortable continuity of the trade in the face of continued "opposition" of the Mughal state.

Domestic slavery, though not a medieval Indian introduction, underwent an intense metamorphosis both in scale and character with the advent of the Turks in the thirteenth century. They imported and formally established the concept of the *haram* (sactum sactorum), otherwise foreign to the Indian subcontinent. With this development, the demand for domestics escalated, which the foreign influx in slaves could no longer suffice, causing slaves to be procured locally.³ The eastern province of Bengal resultantly became one of the foremost suppliers of slaves to the

imperial capital during this period and is sufficiently documented. However, the most striking feature of this trade from Bengal was the auxiliary trade in eunuchs which constituted one of the pillars upon which the system of the *haram* rested in medieval India. This unique slave category, though primarily recruited at the domestic, could concomitantly be employed at the barracks, marking them as prime agents in the act of negotiating between the two heavily gendered and arguably disparate spaces of the woman and the man.

Identified as “merely purchased Bengali slaves” by Fransisco Pelsaert in the seventeenth century, it is, however, from the thirteenth century Venetian merchant Marco Polo that one of the earliest records of this flourishing trade in eunuchs comes forth.

There are many eunuchs, and from this province [Bengal] all the noble and gentlemen of the neighbouring provinces are provided with them...Indian merchants come to this province, and buy the eunuchs I have mentioned, and also many slaves, and then take them to diverse other countries to sell them again. Eunuchs and slaves are very numerous, because all who are taken prisoners by those people, are straightway castrated, and then sold.⁴

Interestingly enough, the fact that Marco Polo was unfamiliar with the region (for he had never visited Bengal) and yet was aware of its unique traffic, is perhaps indicative of the potency the phenomenon had reached by then. War captives, as he mentions, would be at times emasculated by the conquering forces and thus formed one of the sources for eunuch production. In this case, a selection procedure of some sort must have been at play as all men were not considered biologically competent enough to undergo and endure the criticality of the eunuch-making surgery. Pre-pubescent boys and young men were usually preferred over the rest. There existed, in addition, a second and perhaps more agonising condition under which young boys were procured for the purpose.

The Moorish merchants of this city [Bengal] oftentimes travel up country to buy Heathen boys from their parents or from other persons who steal them and castrate them, so that they are left quite flat. Many die from this; those who live they train well and sell them...⁵

In times of poverty and distress, parents often took recourse to the selling off of their children to slave traders. Suitable boys were secured by merchants specialising in the trade who invested in the surgery and sold the

survivors at exorbitant rates as commodities now considered exotic. Niccolao Manucci, the seventeenth-century Venetian physician and traveller to Mughal India noted that “all eunuchs, grantees as they may be, have no other than poor and miserable progenitors, who out of absolute hunger have sold their sons...”⁶ Furthermore, in some parts of the subcontinent, as was the custom in Sylhet during Firuz Shah Tughluq, debtors paid off their land revenue by turning their own sons into castrates.⁷

Despite involving lengthy and rigorous stages, the procedural details of eunuch-making can hardly be satisfactorily traced, perhaps owing to the taciturn nature that dominated the traffic. Interestingly however, Abul Fazl (1551-1602 A.D.), Akbar’s court chronicler and the author of the *Ain-i Akbari* and *Akbarnama*, left one of the rarest and fairly comprehensive pieces of information on the processes of castration prevalent in the province of Bengal. Recognising the differential effects emasculation produces in humans and animals—making animals calmer and gentler, while contrarily causing fierceness among humans—Abul Fazl identified three basic modes practiced.

There were three categories of eunuchs from Bengal: *sandali*, *bādāmi* and *kāfūri*. In case of the first category, also known as *atlasī*, the entire genitals were removed; in the second, part of the penis was left functioning; in the third testicles were either cut or crushed.⁸

This passage, besides sharing significant information previously uncharted, raises a number of important concerns around eunuch-making, such as, what was the rationale, if any, behind differential castration, or what was the principle behind naming the three modes after valuable commodities, and did skin-complexion of the person to be neutered have a role to play in the specificities of the surgery they were to undergo?

It must be noted in this connection that differential castration, as suggested by Abul Fazl, was not unique to medieval Indian society, as contemporary Islamic polities like those of the Ottomans and the Mameluks actively practiced similar methods. Owing to the hierarchy existing within the eunuch community, not all eunuchs employed in the *haram* were allowed access to the inner-most parts of the chambers. Those bestowed with this right, one that distinguished them from the rest of the *haram* eunuchs, were probably the ones subjected to total castration. The degree of proximity a eunuch enjoyed with the female members of the seraglio perhaps therefore formed the premise for the practice of differential emasculation. The presence of completely neutered eunuchs in the *haram* would have substantially lowered down the risks of potential eunuch

liaisons with the women, thereby maintaining the sanctity of the space.

Gavin Hambly, one of the earliest scholars to draw attention towards the eunuch trade in Bengal, was of the opinion that flavours and odours were “traditionally used in the nomenclature of eunuchs.”⁹ He, however, refrained from delving deep into the matter thereby rendering the discussion quite inconclusive. Kishori Sharan Lal, on the other hand, believed in a close relationship between skin complexion and the type of emasculation a eunuch underwent. He advocated that it was in accordance with this selection “depending on the colour of their skin” that eunuch slaves were bracketed out.¹⁰ This argument, of the methods being skin-colour specific, can not be completely brushed aside and is a plausibility which needs to be explored. Taking a close look into the colours of the items after which the three modes derive their nomenclature, it would not be difficult to identify *sandal* with a light brown colour, *bādām* with a darker shade of brown and *kāfūr* with white. This possibility receives an impetus when Abul Fazl is alternatively seen using the term *atlasi* for the “*sandali* method”¹¹ which further presses on the idea that young boys with different complexions, that is to say, hailing from diverse geographical locations, were subjected to distinct castration methods.¹² The brown skinned boys (*sandali*), thus, were subjected to total castration, among the darker skinned ones (*bādāmi*) a part of the penis was left functioning, while in case of the fair-skinned boys (*kāfūri*) the testicles were crushed instead. This sounds like a fascinating argument till the point where, in order to prove the theory, it becomes an imperative to historically establish connections between a slave’s racial origin, the type of emasculation he was put through, and the name he was eventually assigned as a eunuch. Unfortunately, owing to an insufficiency of evidence, this intersection is yet to be confirmed.

All the modes of castration identified by Abul Fazl being named after aromatic ingredients accoutred with varying degrees of healing properties is indicative of an alternative possibility that these elements perhaps formed the base of the mysterious concoction used for dressing the post-surgery wound. John Lewis Burckhardt visiting Upper Egypt and Nubia in the early nineteenth century recorded in his account that the boys undergoing the operation in the various Coptic “castration centres” had the fresh wound dressed by a special bandage, the ingredients of which were considered a “closely guarded secret.”¹³ The silence of the medieval Indian sources despite being an impediment on the way of arriving at well-grounded answers, nonetheless leaves behind a possibility trail that the situation in India might have been analogous to that of nineteenth century Egypt, that similar bandaging secrets as observed by Burckhardt were being followed in medieval India as well. To make a convincing case, one may look at some

of the medicinal benefits sandal, almond and camphor provided owing to the range of their healing properties. Sandalwood, a popular aromatic and an excellent antiseptic, for instance, was often used for treating infections and wounds in India while the oil was used as a urogenital antiseptic; the oil extracted from almond acts as a good moisturiser which when applied to a wound has the potential to maintain the moisture balance of the area thus preventing irritation and infection; similarly camphor, when used in safe quantities acts as a local anesthetic and increases body secretions (including perspiration and urination).¹⁴

As previously noted, pre-peubescent boys were considered the most suitable for eunuch-making. Islamic law, which divides the life cycle of an individual into various phases based on the criterion of maturity, distinguishes the stage of puberty (*bulugh* in Arabic meaning readiness or ripeness) to be of utmost significance. This phase marks the physical transformation of a person into a “complete man” (*rajul kāmīl*) or a “complete woman” (*mar’a kāmīla*) and subsequently assigns the individual with a set sexual identity required to play his/her role in society.¹⁵ This important phase of puberty was, thus, laced with liminality and ambiguity, the changeover from which caused the pubescent to transition from childhood to a more complex phase of adulthood where s/he assumed a fresh set of social, ethical and legal roles. An adolescent boy getting neutered before this transformation, therefore, would not only be restricted from experiencing the change of *bulugh*, but furthermore, would be denied the status of being *kāmīl*.

The sudden change that pre-puberty castration caused in the body of a eunuch led to a series of health issues, ranging from minor discomforts to major imbalances. Among the minor issues, which were recurrent life-long conditions, pain and urinary tract infections were the most common. An onset of osteoporosis towards the later part of a eunuch’s life, caused due to a lack of bone development and strengthening usually brought on by the gushing testosterone levels at puberty, was also commonly reported. Additionally, eunuchs often grew up with disproportionate limbs. Hormonal deficiencies and imbalances made them susceptible to either obesity or emaciation.¹⁶ Apart from these, their skin tended to age prematurely while the voice remained relatively high pitched all through life for not having broken during puberty. Some of them, however, remained receptive to sexual stimulation, at least for a period immediately after the surgery.¹⁷

The hormonal imbalances, perhaps, were also responsible for fostering an acute sense of bitterness and anger, which has often been reported in eunuchs across cultures. Though difficult to substantiate, the atrocities involved in the very idea of emasculation must have caused

immense psychological trauma to the young castrates turning them bitter towards life in general.

...Throughout their lives the survivors suffered hormonal and psychological disorders and were said to have developed peculiar characteristics and an eccentric social behavior ... Although hard to establish in fact, most writers believe that the eunuchs were often motivated by a deep sense of bitterness and sought to avenge the “unnatural crime” perpetrated on their person...¹⁸

It is in this context, that one may take the liberty to explain the *khwājasarā* I'tibar Khan's¹⁹ behavior towards his parents, as noted by Nicollao Manucci.²⁰ Manucci claiming to be present when the event panned out, writes:

It is easy to understand the nature of this eunuch from what he did to his parents. They came from the country of Bengal as far as Agrah, having heard that their son was governor of that fortress. They anticipated the receipt of something to help them in their old age and poverty. On reaching the gates, they stayed there several days, the door-keepers not consenting to permit their entrance, until they swore they were the parents of the governor...I'tibar Khan could have no doubt that they were his parents. Recognising that most certainly they were such, he said publicly to them: “How have ye the great temerity to come into my presence after you have consumed the price of my body, and having been the cause, by emasculating me, of depriving me of the greatest pleasures attainable in this world? Of what use are riches to me, having no sons to whom I could leave them? Since you were so cruel as to sell your own blood, let not my auditors think it strange if I betray anger against you. He therefore ordered each to receive fifty stripes ...”²¹

The surgery not only radically altered the bodies of the young eunuchs but also altered their life purpose. They were now expected to perform a very different set of roles in society, from what would have originally been expected of them had they successfully lived through puberty to transition into “complete men.” This revised purpose was often accompanied by a fresh name and a changed religion. The names given to eunuchs across various Islamic cultures, were rather striking and creative. Though many were assigned typical Muslim names, the trend was, however, towards naming them after precious stones, perfumes, flowers and other high-priced commodities—perhaps an attempt towards equating their exotic nature and

high value with the equally attractive items after which they were being named.²² Some were even named after their most prominent characteristics and personal traits, thus aiding easy identification.²³ Despite the fact that the young castrates were generally procured from “heathen” (non-Muslim/mostly Hindu) households, these names were suggestive of a most definite conversion to Islam. Since the eunuch had to function in propinquity with the women of the *haram*, it was in a way the patriarch’s tool to warrant that the religion professed by his eunuchs was same as that of himself and his women, so as to avoid violating the sanctity of the space and its residents. In the absence of definitive evidence in order to tackle concerns like, when, by whom and at which exact juncture were the procedures of conversion carried out, the only conjecture that one may make is that the castrates were converted by the merchants immediately after they survived the operation, the name perhaps was assigned eventually. Converted to a new religion and christened with a new name, the eunuchs were thus born as new individuals, completely deracinated from their past, struggling to rediscover themselves.

As for who were the actors operating on the young boys, the early seventeenth century French sailor Francois Pyrard’s claim that the merchants were in a way directly involved in castrating the boys and selling them as eunuch slaves, appears to be spurious.

One of the greatest trades in Bengal is in slaves; for there is a certain land subject to this king where fathers sell their children, and give them to the king as tribute; so most of the slaves in India are got from hence. Many of the merchants castrate them, cutting them when they are young, and not only the testicles but also the entire organ. I have seen many of this kind, who appeared to have but a little hole for the passage of water ...²⁴

Merchants in those times, usually, were not endowed with the surgical skills deemed indispensable for conducting such critical operations. Hence, Pyrard’s indication that “merchants castrate them” was perhaps not exactly the scenario in medieval India. On the contrary, the possibility that there existed a collaborative body of merchants and surgeons, as stated by Hambly, appears to be more convincing. This clandestine nexus between the two groups was one of the prime elements in the successful continuity of the trade for centuries. Drawing his argument from contemporary Ottoman situation, Hambly writes that the surgery was generally performed “by non-Muslims on the fringes of the Dar-ul Islam who thereafter sold the boys to Muslim merchants, as was probably the case in Bengal.” Alternatively, the boys were “purchased by Muslim merchants who arranged for the operation to be performed by specialists from a minority group.”²⁵

Emasculation was also used as a mode of punishing imperial defaulters, rebels or their captured family, though it was not as common a practice. Similarly, “voluntary castration” was heard of, though it was a rare occurrence.²⁶ Most of the accounts discussing this trade also mention that the merchants involved were mostly Muslims.

The site of surgery is another issue that Abul Fazl’s note raises. In this regard too, one is forced to depend heavily on other contemporary cultures as there is no evidence from medieval India which answers the question sufficiently. From Jan Hogendorn’s Ottoman understanding, for instance, one learns that the sites of castration were somewhat away from both the native land of the boys on the one hand, as well as from the final market and place of employment on the other.²⁷ Hogendorn argues that despite the practicality of the idea of the surgery being conducted near the final market, which would ensure that no period of recovery delayed shipment and would also maintain the health of the freshly made eunuch who would otherwise fall weak if made to travel long distance immediately after the operation, the reality of the situation was quite the contrary. He states that in the Ottoman case, for example, there were special sites that acted as “castration centres” on the route frequented by the slave traders. Cultural and religious reasons were cited by scholars for the longest to elucidate this situation. The most popular argument being that political Islam though refrained itself from any local participation in the act of castration continued to enjoy the end product nevertheless. Arguing against this cultural proposition, Hogendorn posed an economic explanation instead to explain the phenomenon.

The economic argument based on price is based on the fact that the “manufacture” of eunuchs had an opportunity cost involving the deaths following the operation. Any slave who died from the castration could have been sold unemasculated at the price of an ordinary slave.²⁸

Gathering fragments of evidences available from the various sources, it may be suggested that the situation in medieval India might have been quite similar, especially during the Mughals. The boys collected for the purpose of eunuch-making must have been castrated at places away from both Sylhet and Ghoraghat *sarkārs* of Bengal which were the two major centres for gathering young boys mentioned in the sources, as well as from their final destination, that is, the imperial capital. Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627 A.D.) writes in his memoirs that in 1610 A.D., Afzal Khan sent before the Emperor some of the people involved with the “vile offence” of eunuch making from the *sūba* of Bihar and that as a punishment, the emperor

ordered them to be imprisoned for life.²⁹ While the *sūba* of Bihar emerges as a probable “castration centre,” in another account from the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707 A.D.), Awadh and Allahabad too appear to be functioning in similar capacity. The *Maasir-i Alamgiri* states that in 1668-69 A.D., Aurangzeb ordered the *sūbadārs* and *faujdārs* of the provinces of Awadh and Allahabad to probe and punish the ones continuing the practice.³⁰ It is noticeable that Bihar, Allahabad and Awadh as “castration centres” were at a distance from Bengal on the one hand, while on the other being not too close to the imperial capital.

With the availability of the names of the regions practicing this trade, mapping the route becomes less challenging. The main artery ran through the Gangetic plains considered the heart of the Mughal Empire, beginning roughly from Sylhet and Ghoraghat in the Bengal *sūba* from where suitable candidates were procured. These boys were not immediately operated upon and instead were brought to the different “castration centres,” which arguably in the Mughal case were the *sūbas* of Bihar, Allahabad and Awadh. Finally, they were sold in the various slave markets that dotted the terminating section of this route. Jaunpur, for example, was known for housing a flourishing market from the time of the Delhi Sultans, and so was Delhi itself. Ziauddin Barani, the fourteenth century chronicler, mentions, “slaves trained for work” and “untrained boys” were available for sale.³¹ That eunuch slaves were a important commodity sold at these markets becomes evident when Barani noted that during the reign of Qutbuddin Mubarak Khalji “the prices of beardless and handsome slaves and good-looking eunuchs (*khwajasara i khubru*) and beautiful slave girls reached 500, 1000 and 2000 *tankas*.”³² A branch of this principal trade route also bifurcated towards the south and possibly catered to the requirements of the Deccan Sultanates. Cuttack (Odisha) functioned as a junction on this route.³³

However, this transaction in eunuchs was not exclusive to Bengal and the enormous body of Ethiopian (known in India as *habashi*) slaves present in almost all the imperial courts of the time especially those of the Deccan, bears testimony to the fact. Richard M. Eaton while elucidating on the influx of the *habashi* slaves into the Indian subcontinent suggests that the slave dealers, active between the Ethiopian highlands and the coasts of east Africa, acquired suitable boys and conveyed them to the slave markets of the Middle East, of which Baghdad was particularly notable.³⁴ The Portuguese apothecary to India, Tomé Pires, wrote in 1516 A.D. that the Arabs were known for making raids on horses, “in the course of which they capture large numbers of Abyssinians whom they sell to the people of Asia.”³⁵ It was from the Arabian ports that the enslaved boys were sent to

the Deccan, and the ports along the Konkan coast, such as Cambay and Surat, provided inward access. From here the *habashi* slaves, eunuchs included, were supplied to meet the needs of the various royal and noble households. Jahangir notes how Muqarrab Khan, arriving from Cambay and Surat, presented before him exquisite and uncommon items including “male and female Abyssinian slaves.”³⁶ Later, the French traveller Thevenot, who visited Surat in the 1660s wrote about his first encounter with a hermaphrodite.³⁷ Giovanni Francesco Gamelli Careri, the seventeenth century Italian traveller records that at the court of Emperor Aurangzeb “the daily expense is 50000 Roupies, to maintain the Elephants, Horses, Dogs, Hawks, Tigers, and Deer; as also hundreds of black and white Eunuchs to look to the Royal palaces, Musitians and Dancers ...”³⁸ The spurt in the demand for the Ethiopian slaves and eunuchs, according to Hambly, was caused by the establishment of the independent sultanate at Bengal under Fakhr-al Din Mubarak Shah in the fourteenth century.³⁹ The neighbouring land of Java too acted as an important source. The Italian traveller Ludovico di Varthema, who visited Java during the first decade of the sixteenth century records:

...Before we departed, however, my companion bought two emeralds for a thousand *pardai*, and he purchased for two hundred *pardai* two little children who had no sexual organs; for in this island there are a kind of merchants, who follow no other trade excepting that of purchasing little children, from whom they cut off in their childhood everything, and they remain like women.⁴⁰

That this traffic in eunuchs was not a one-way affair but a reciprocal one active between Central Asia and Arabia on the one hand, and the Indian subcontinent on the other, may be discerned from the ethnic diversity noticeable among the eunuch guards of the Prophet’s tomb in Medina. The Indian eunuchs comprised one of the four major ethnic groups guarding the tomb. “There are forty or more eunuchs,” mentions al-Sakhawi the fifteenth-century theologian, “from several ethnic groups: *Hindi* (i.e., from the Indian subcontinent); *Takruri* (West African); *Rumi* (Greek or Balkan, possibly from the non-Muslim frontiers of Anatolia); and *Habashi* (Ethiopian or East African).”⁴¹

Burckhardt, writing in the nineteenth century, had encountered Indian eunuchs with a “sallow or cadaverous complexion” in Arabia and reported on having been informed “that slaves are often mutilated in Hindostan.”⁴² Similarly Mughal eunuchs were often identified and addressed by their ethnicities as in the case of a certain Khwaja Basant, for example,

who was described as “a haughty Turk.”⁴³

Apart from being initially purchased, many of the eunuchs reached distant locations as gifts, thereby drawing a delicate line between the trade and exchange of eunuchs. Eunuchs fell into one of the most exorbitant categories of purchased slaves and was considered as a suitable gifting item which could be offered to the members of the aristocracy. These slaves passed through many hands during their lifetimes and very rarely would spend their entire career in a single employment space. Getting placed at the royal *haram* at the very start of their careers was similarly tough, though not impossible. Instead, the higher and the lower nobility who purchased them from the different slave markets, made use of their services first before passing them on to others. This was perhaps the learning phase in the lives of the *khwājāsārās* during which they received their education, went through rigorous trainings, acquired and mastered various skills. They were introduced to the ways and nuances of aristocratic life, and familiarised with the requirements of the class they were employed to serve. Eunuchs being transferred between members of a family, or being handed down from a generation to another was not uncommon. The Mughal emperor Babur’s eunuch Khwaja Ambar, for instance, served his son and successor Humayun after the former died and the latter assumed power.⁴⁴

Mughal nobles too were often seen presenting before the emperor the best of the eunuchs in their possession for him to accept. Jahangir records in his memoirs from time to time about the eunuch “offerings” he accepted from his nobles.

On the 15th of the month of Amurdad [1613-14 A.D.] the offering of Islam Khan was laid before me. He had sent 28 elephants, 40 horses of that part of the country which are known as tamghan, 50 eunuchs, 500 pargala nafs sitarkani.⁴⁵

He notes again in 1619-20 A.D.:

19 elephants, 2 eunuchs, 1 slave, 41 fighting cocks, 12 bullocks, and 7 buffaloes were brought before me as offerings from Ibrahim K. Fathjung....⁴⁶

Whether Jahangir was particularly fond of receiving eunuch tributes, we know not, but he continued to record receiving them in his memoirs. The King of Ethiopia’s embassy to the court of Aurangzeb soon after his accession to the Mughal throne in 1658 A.D. confirms the continuity of accepting eunuch slaves among the Mughals.

The *African* Monarch, anxious that his ambassador should appear in a style suitable to the occasion, contributed liberally toward the expenses of the embassy. He presented them with thirty-two young slaves, boys and girls, to be sold at *Moka*; and the money raised by this happy expedient was to supply the expenses of the mission. A noble largess indeed! for let it be recollected that young slaves sell at *Moka*, one with another, at five and-twenty or thirty crowns per head. Besides these, the *Ethiopian* King sent to the *Great Mogol* twenty-five choice slaves, nine or ten of whom were of a tender age and in a state to be made eunuchs. This was, to be sure, an appropriate donation from a Christian to a Prince!⁴⁷

References to eunuchs being received as parts of wedding trousseau and dowry is also available. The author of the *Maasir-i Alamgiri*, for example, records that the eunuch Khidmatgar Khan (Khawaja Talib), the superintendent of Aurangzeb's *haram*, reached the emperor's household as part of his wife's dowry.⁴⁸

Eunuch slaves, arguably the most trusted of all servants, usually attended to their masters for long periods. There were, however, provisions for manumission and retirement. In case of the imperial eunuchs, the change of rulers invariably led to a reshuffling among the royal domestics when some of them (the older ones in particular) were either manumitted or allowed to retire, while some of the younger eunuchs preferred joining the service of the new ruler instead. Hence the older eunuchs struggling with age or diseases were allowed to retire or at the least assigned less-demanding responsibilities. Appointments as *mutawalli* or *wali* (trustee) in the tombs of exalted people and saints was often treated as partial retirement by the Mughals.⁴⁹

The practice of eunuch-making, however, was not one that was encouraged by the Mughal state, as may be perceived from the attempts of the emperors to curb the pursuit. There was however a dilemma at play. Despite the Islamic injunctions against the practice of producing eunuchs, the politics in the various parts of the Islamic world continued to make use of them as they had become an integral part of their social need—an intimate part of the establishment. Islam thus continuously accommodated with its own injunctions against the practice, a situation described by Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje as the “great abuse condemned even by Islam but still maintained.”⁵⁰ The Mughals did periodically raise their concerns against the practice. It is, however, from the year 1608 A.D. that the first written record of an official disapproval of the practice surfaces. In it Jahangir not only acknowledges the issue but also decrees against it.

In Hindustan, especially in the province of Sylhet, which is a dependency of Bengal, it was the custom for the people of those parts to make eunuchs of some of their sons and give them to the governor in place of revenue (*mal-i wajibi*). This custom by degrees has been adopted in other provinces, and every year some children are thus ruined and cut off from procreation. This practice has become common. At this time I issued an order that hereafter no one should follow this abominable custom, and that the traffic in young eunuchs should be completely done away with. Islam Khan and the other governors of the *Suba* of Bengal received *farmans* that whoever should commit such acts should be capitally punished, and that they should seize eunuchs of tender years who might be in anyone's possession. No one of the former kings had obtained this success. Please Almighty God, in a short time this objectionable practice will be completely done away with, and the traffic in eunuchs being forbidden, no one shall venture on this unpleasant and unprofitable proceeding....⁵¹

Though similar prohibitions from the reigns of Jahangir's predecessors are not available, the above passage does hint at the efforts put forth by former kings—at least those of his predecessor Akbar whose initiative to liberate his domestic servants is well-known—to end the odious practice and their failure to attain the expected results. Jahangir's injunction becomes all the more fascinating when one realises that, in 1602 A.D. as a prince, Jahangir had punished a conspirator who attempted on his life by ordering him to be emasculated.⁵² During Aurangzeb a similar prohibition comes to the fore where the emperor is seen ordering “the *sūbadars* and *faujdars* of the provinces of Allahabad and Oudh to search for and send manacled and fettered to the Court those men who castrated children and to regard it as a peremptory order that no one should be allowed to engage in this wicked practice.”⁵³ Paradoxically enough Aurangzeb, who ordered this ban on the making and sale of eunuchs, was dependent on his *khawājasarās* the most during his old age.

Irrespective of the royal ultimatums, the trade in eunuchs continued uninterrupted into the eighteenth century. The royals did not stop receiving eunuch tributes, nor did their nobles. The eunuchs brought to the Mughal court as presents have been identified by Hambly as “castrated children known to be in private hands,” and the act as one in which eunuch slaves “from private households rounded up at the Padshah's behest.”⁵⁴ This appears to be a fallacy, more so because he uses instances from Jahangir's reign to substantiate the argument. Jahangir, who does not usually fail to document his achievements, never admits to have embarked upon such a

noble enterprise. On the contrary, Mirza Nathan's account informs that on the death of Islam Khan (1613 A.D.), who was the governor of Bengal posted at Jahangirnagar (present day Dhaka, Bangladesh), all his eunuchs were sent to the Mughal court.

Shaykh Hushang sent Shaykh Ibn Yamin (to the imperial court) along with all the eunuchs of Islam Khan, who were procured specially for imperial *pēshkash*...Ibn Yamin and Shaykh Muhiuddin arrived at the imperial Court with the elephants and the eunuchs. They obtained the honour of kissing the ground and presented the eunuchs and the elephants to His Majesty...In this way the fortunate eunuchs were included among the private servants and the rest were given to the august princes and to the women and Begums of the *harem*.⁵⁵

Peshkash, clearly implying tribute, confirms the assumption that the eunuchs were not rescued but exclusively collected for being offered to Jahangir. This contradicts Hambly's claim and instead strengthens the possibility that despite the intermittent efforts by the Mughals, their continuation of accepting and employing eunuchs in their establishments, facilitated the trade to thrive in and out of Bengal in the long run.

In the accounts of the European travellers writing on Awadh, eunuchs continued to appear frequently till the "final extinction of the Lucknow *darbār* in 1856."⁵⁶ Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh confirms that the Awadh *nawāb* Shujauddaulah's wife, Bahu Begum, had around thirty eunuchs at her service, of whom "ten or twelve men and about twenty lads."⁵⁷ The presence of young eunuchs in the Begum's possession, numerically outnumbering the adult ones, is a clear indication of the robustness of the trade, especially in the Awadh region. Faiz Bakhsh's account further asserts that parents were continuing the practice of selling off their children in times of crisis in the eighteenth century and that castrators were still very active in and around Allahabad despite all the state injunctions.⁵⁸ The trade, however, began to shrink away eventually after the eighteenth century, however, the imperial interventions were not behind the alteration of the scenario. Hambly argues the trade was "never stamped-out," but instead it was the gradual disintegration of the Mughal state that deranged "long-established patterns of trade but it may be safely assumed that the demand for eunuchs in *nawābi* Bengal and Awadh remained unabated."⁵⁹ In Awadh the trade was clearly discernible well into the eighteenth century, while in Bengal its continuation was more subtle. Moreover, the eighteenth century also witnessed a gradual shift of the eunuchs from the "private" to the "public" spaces. The gradual extinction of the Mughal and the regional courts in face of the British challenge caused this steady replacement of the