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Means Of Livelihood

Not so long ago, eunuchs were much in demand as royal guards of harems, chamber maids and keepers of holy places. In olden days, employment as cooks in palace kitchens, bodyguards to queens, dance and etiquette tutors to princesses and many other highly sought after duties were taken up by them. Not a single incident is recorded where they failed to perform the duties assigned. Traditionally, eunuchs were invited to sing and dance at the home of a newborn. Even today, they drop in uninvited at the house of a newborn and dance with fanfare. They are also found singing and dancing at marriages and other social gatherings, in exchange for a few hundred rupees.

However, in recent times, they are rarely called upon to celebrate the arrival of the newborn or perform at wedding functions. During earlier days, singing and dancing supplemented their income substantially. However, this declining popularity as entertainers has left them with little option other than begging¹ and prostitution.

¹ SOOE could not get registered initially, when two eunuchs, who are founder trustees, listed their profession as 'begging' - it is an offence as per Indian Law. Finally, their profession had to be changed to 'household', in order for them to be shown as being occupied in legally permissible activity.

Also, one of the major reasons behind eunuchs working as beggars or commercial sex workers is not getting an opportunity to work in regular trades. The unwillingness of the larger mainstream society to accept them as normal humans has an equal hand in barring eunuchs from seeking new sources of income.

The general thought of society is that they will beg, borrow, steal or do other immoral or illegal jobs to earn easy money but not work at regular, respectful jobs. Hence, they rarely get opportunities in regular avenues of employment, such as manufacturing, retail, marketing, service sectors etc (1%).

Movies and fashion (< 0.1%) are two industries where transsexuals are making an entry, though restricted to a select few. A few eunuchs (<0.1%) also work as temple priests, as laid down by tradition. However, by and large, India's development has bypassed the eunuch community. Recently, eunuch owned and operated fast food stalls can be found, especially in Tamil Nadu and people have responded favourably by patronising such eateries.

Begging by Eunuchs

Eunuchs are never stationary while begging, like physically disabled beggars. They are always on the move, going from door to door in search of alms. Whereas, in the former case, donors willingly go up to beggars and feel blessed by giving alms to the less fortunate, they feel irritated at being approached by eunuchs and are relieved when they get rid of them by yielding to their demands.

They are regular collectors of alms from market places, shops, hotels or at traffic signals etc. When denied or refused, they sometimes force people to part with money. They often gatecrash weddings, newborn celebrations and other festive occasions, threatening to disrupt the celebrations with vulgar behaviour and bring bad luck unless paid off handsomely. Though these threats are rarely carried out, people are often sufficiently intimidated and part with money. Such behaviour amounts to a mild form of extortion.

The territory (area of operation) of each group is defined but not strictly demarcated. Since there is no formal demarcation for each group, this results in an occasional overlapping of visits by different groups. Generally, disciples of a *guru* stick to begging in her area and will not ply their trade in an area belonging to another *guru*. However, there are exceptions to this norm.

Eunuchs usually follow a code of conduct. They normally visit each market or residential colony about once a week. When a eunuch is informed that another has already collected alms from that place on that day, she will move on. Eunuchs observe a day of rest each week, which may be Monday or the day the market is closed. On selected days of the week, they visit wholesale markets of the area, along with their *gurus* and pick up fruits, vegetables, fish etc from each vendor as a matter of right. No shopkeeper dares to stop them, for fear of being humiliated or cursed.

At times eunuchs are found to lose their temper while begging, since they may not have earned sufficiently

during the day. Threatening to flash their private parts, which is prohibited by their community, may also be resorted to. Having done so, they beg for their sins to be forgiven in the evening. There is a designated prayer area in the eunuchs' home. They assemble there late in the evening after returning home from the day's work and apologise for the sins and irregularities committed during the day.

Begging in Trains

Trains are also a source of income generation. The eunuch community is bifurcated into groups begging on local suburban trains and others that beg on long distance mail/express/passenger ones.

Normally, a group of four to six eunuchs enter a train and form groups of twos or threes. Division of the bogies is made amongst themselves, i.e. two or three bogies per group and then they proceed to collect alms from the passengers.

Their territory of operation is fixed on railway routes. Hence, if one group begs from one station to another, say Dadar to Kalyan, it will get off at Kalyan and another group will take over from there and so on. On long distance trains, they travel for short stretches like Mumbai to Surat or Delhi to Jaipur and not for the entire length of the journey. Also, they beg only in the unreserved, general and sleeper class coaches and not in the air conditioned ones.

Occasionally, the authorities clamp down on begging and eunuchs are also hauled up. On such occasions,

they are detained at the railway station for 8-10 hours and fined around Rs 200 each. This, however, hardly discourages their activities.

Prostitution

While eunuchs support themselves to a major extent by begging, a much more lucrative source of income is prostitution, for which they are much in demand. While this mode of earning supplements the income of the eunuch to a large extent, it is generally not encouraged by the *gurus*.

Invariably the passive partner, they satisfy their customers orally, anally or between the thighs. Often found to sell their bodies to homosexual and bisexual males at a very cheap price, eunuchs are flexible, based on the customer's paying capacity. The frequency of selling sex is high among young eunuchs, as they work almost six days a week. Usually, they throng various places like *dhabas* (highway eateries), markets, parks, railway trains and stations, bus depots, traffic signals etc in search of clients.

Some eunuch prostitutes claim that once a man enjoys sex with them, he seldom goes back to women. An explanation for this could be the tireless service provided by eunuchs.

Sex with a prostitute is purely mechanical and involves no attachments. As soon as the sexual act is over, she parts ways. On the other hand, a eunuch cares and enquires about her customer, his likes and dislikes, his general state of affairs and whether he was satisfied

with the service provided by her. Sometimes she gives credit facility as well, whereas a prostitute always demands advance payment.

A normal prostitute gets exhausted soon but this is not the case with a eunuch. Also, eunuchs are willing to try innovative sex positions such as sandwich sex. This is a position where the male customer is between two eunuch prostitutes. This is quite common among eunuchs but a rarity among female prostitutes. Some eunuchs have also learnt better stimulation techniques. They have flat stomachs and better body shape than regular prostitutes because they are always on the move. The most sensitive organs in a eunuch's body are her lips and about 2" above the urethra, where there are maximum nerve endings. Sometimes, eunuchs have orgasms² too (page 461).

Blessings

'*Hijda*' or '*hijra*' is an insulting and derogatory remark directed towards eunuchs in India, as is generally known. However, people fear that if a eunuch says something, it is bound to happen. This may only be superstition but because of this, people are fearful of eunuchs cursing them. The belief is that if a eunuch curses a man, the person may become impotent for life, incur major financial or business losses or may lose health. In the case of women, the curse is feared to even make them infertile.

² Details of achievement of an orgasm in a eunuch cannot be delved into here; however, if one wishes to research this aspect, guidance on the subject can be provided.

On the other hand, as eunuchs are considered to be pious souls, the contrary belief that their blessings can change one's destiny for the better also exists. Hence, many prefer to seek their blessings before starting a new venture.

Almost all eunuchs are ready to go to any extent, if someone has done a good deed to them. If someone has helped them in their time of need or otherwise, they will bless him/her spontaneously. Their blessings are not pre-meditated and invoke health, wealth and prosperity for the giver, such as:

- 'May my life be added to yours'
- 'May God bless you with a happy family'
- 'May your children always enjoy good health'
- 'May you prosper in life'
- 'May all your wishes be granted' etc

Blessing Newborns

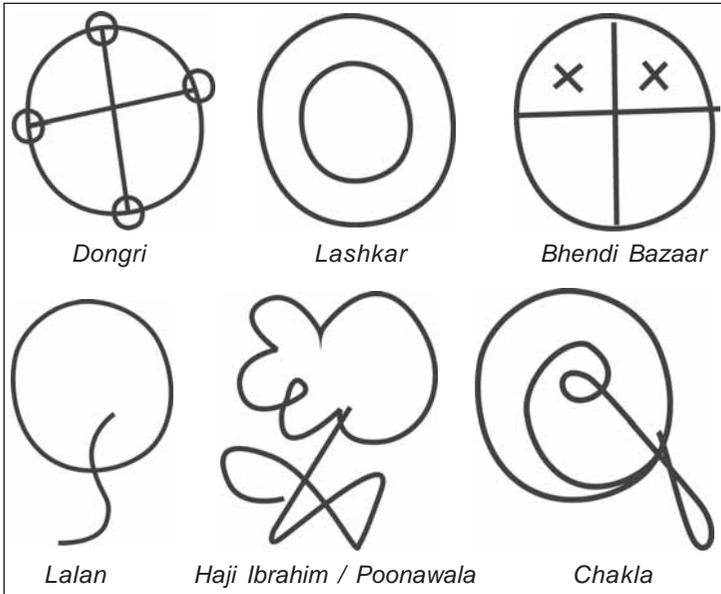
Eunuchs get news of auspicious and celebratory events from the neighbourhood of the baby, hospitals, chemists, shopkeepers or even infants' clothes drying in balconies etc. They visit the house to confirm the news and then make a mark on the door of the house.



Blessing a newborn

The mark denotes first right to collect gratuity for a particular group from the residence.

After this mark is made, no other group of eunuchs will ask for a tip for the birth of that newborn. If two or more groups reach the home of the newborn



Marks representing various eunuch *gharanas* of Mumbai

at the same time, then they will distribute the money or gifts in equal proportion. They do not fight or argue amongst themselves on such issues. If eunuchs learn well in advance about the expected arrival of a baby, they visit the house even as early as the 8th month of pregnancy and put a mark. There is a stiff penalty if a eunuch erases a mark made by another.

On a mutually decided day, a group of 5-6 eunuchs reach the home of the newborn. They sing, dance, beat *dholaks*, pass the baby among themselves and put the baby in their laps. They lift the child to their breasts and cover it with their saris, as if they are breastfeeding the child. Eunuchs behave as if it was their own child and experience motherhood in the act. That is the child's gift to them. The parents, who are witnesses to

the proceedings, confer that privilege to the eunuchs for the moment. Eunuchs pray for the long life of the child and say in unison, “*Jug jug jeeyo mere lalla* (May you live long).” The eunuchs bless the mother with the exclamation, “*Doodho nahao, pooto falo* (May you lead a long and prosperous life and beget healthy children).” Parents and elders of the house offer them clothes, utensils etc, as also any money they wish to donate, usually ranging from Rs 101 to Rs 2,500.

However, in modern residential areas comprising of high-rises, eunuchs hardly come to know about a newborn. Even otherwise, they are prevented from entering by the building security and hence this once revered custom is on the wane, especially in metros and other big cities.

Blessing of Hotels, Shops and Others

Before starting a new business or the inauguration of restaurants, shops etc, entrepreneurs sometimes invite eunuchs for their blessings, before the ritual *pooja* (prayers). Eunuchs visit the location and sing and dance. On such occasions, they expect as well as receive much larger amounts as gratuity. However, if a shopkeeper does not invite them, they barge into the establishment uninvited and demand an amount which is normally in excess of Rs 5,000, depending upon the size of the establishment.

Blessing at Weddings

Occasionally, people invite eunuchs to invoke their blessings during the weddings of their sons or daughters. When eunuchs visit these ceremonies, they

first bless the *pandals*, then the hosts and finally the visitors. Starting with a small prayer, they start dancing with anklets, to the beat of drums. This dance may last up to an hour and is performed in a corner of the hall. After the dance, they bless the newly wed couple.

In some states, especially Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka, it is customary to invite eunuchs to perform on auspicious occasions. Usually they earn handsomely during such occasions, admittedly amounting to thousands.

Overseas Entertainment

Bollywood biggies, struggling starlets and dancers from Mumbai bars performing at private parties overseas is a common phenomenon. But lesser known is the fact that eunuchs are much in demand in the Gulf



Dancing at a private event

and African countries as entertainers and dancers at private parties.

Various recruitment agencies and event management companies in Cochin, a coastal city of Kerala and Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, supply eunuch dancers to overseas countries, especially the Middle East. The charge to the customer works out to around Rs 3 lakhs to Rs 5 lakhs for a single or maximum of two events. Sadly, eunuchs get only peanuts from this amount. A few of them like Bhavna, a well groomed and educated dancer from Bandra, Mumbai are paid handsomely, i.e. Rs 50 thousand to Rs 1 lakh for a single event. On the contrary, recruitment agents and *gurus* have made lakhs through these means.

Although none of the event organisers agree, the fact is that the majority of eunuch dancers recruited for events held in the Gulf countries are more for the purpose of commercial sex workers, in order to solicit rich sheikhs. It may be due to social or religious compulsion or their plentiful availability, physical intimacy with eunuchs is quite popular in these countries. Also, the myth that an individual's virility increases after having sex with eunuchs gives encouragement to this practice.

Sharing of Income

Eunuchs in metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai etc visit about 200 shops daily. Getting Rs 1 to 2 from each shop on average, the daily collection works out to Rs 300 to 350.

The distribution of the eunuch's earnings (approximately Rs 300 per day in a metro) is pre-determined. The

guru's entitlement is Rs 200 or about two-thirds of the daily earnings and the individual gets the balance. However, if the collection is below the minimum amount due to the *guru*, e.g. if earnings are a meagre Rs 150, then the eunuch owes Rs 50 to the *guru*, which is to be made up from the next day's earnings.

Alternatively, the *guru* gives the eunuch about Rs 100 per day as allowance and retains the balance.

As an illustration, the earnings³ of a eunuch under the two schemes are as below:

S. No.	Total daily earnings	Arrangement 1 (rare)		Arrangement 2	
		for <i>guru</i> (variable)	for eunuch (fixed)	for <i>guru</i> (fixed)	for eunuch (variable)
1	200	100	100	200	0
2	250	150	100	200	50
3	300	200	100	200	100
4	350	250	100	200	150
5	400	300	100	200	200

In lieu of the daily contribution, the *guru* provides them food and shelter. Other necessities like clothes, makeup kits etc are to be managed by the eunuch from her share of the earnings. Many a time, the interest of the *guru* extends to whatever the eunuch earns - against food and shelter provided by the *guru*, she does not permit any savings of her own to the eunuch. However, savings are normally retained by

³ All the amounts are in Rupees

the eunuch for use when she visits her native place or festivals at places like Ajmer (*Khwaja Gharib Nawaz*), Belgaum (*Yellamma Devi*), Nagapattinam (Mother Vailankanni), Koovagam (*Aravan*) etc or when a medical need arises. The loyal ones also keep their share of earnings if any, with the *guru* and hope that the *guru* is loyal to them in turn.

Business Funding

“For me, they are *Mohini* (a form of Lord Vishnu) and Goddess Laxmi”, says Anand Shetty, the owner of a hip and happening eatery. Starting August 15, 2005, due to change in government policies, dance bars spread across Mumbai and its surroundings were shut down. Many lost their jobs. Huma and Anand were two of them. Huma, a eunuch, worked as a dancer in a bar at Dahisar, Mumbai, where Anand Shetty was the manager.

Huma, along with some other eunuchs, helped Anand to start a food joint on a partnership basis. The restaurant has flourished within few years of its opening and Anand and his venture capitalist eunuchs have plans to open more such joints. Similarly, Sandip Agrawal, owner of a famous sweet shop in Panipat, Haryana, owes his success to eunuchs. He was thrown out of home and business by his elder brothers, after the sudden demise of their father. Neither his friends nor relatives came forward to help him. Fed up with all these troubles, he had decided to end his life. On a gloomy evening, he threw himself on the nearby railway tracks but fate had something else in store for him.

“Like Bollywood movies”, Sandip says, “Salma *didi* came to my rescue.” Salma is a eunuch and was passing along the Panipat-Ambala railway line on the fateful day. She not only saved his life but after knowing the reason behind this cowardly act, she took him to her *guru* who helped him to start his own sweet shop. Today, Sandip is the owner of one of the biggest sweet shops in Panipat but hasn’t forgotten his Salma *didi*. “My brothers threw me out and my sister didn’t help me either. Just look at Salma *didi*, she is no less than an angel to me!”

One can find hundreds of Sandips and Anands who have been helped by eunuchs to start their own ventures and are successful businessmen.