

Research And Presentation

June 2006 – I was sitting with Santosh Pyasi, the editor of a popular Hindi health magazine, 'Health aur Nutrition'. I was a regular contributor to the magazine and my articles on cleansing therapy were regularly published in it. During the course of our conversation, he casually mentioned that I should write about eunuchs, a much maligned and detested community by all and sundry in India. Though eunuchs are a highly visible lot, people know very little about them and shun them. I was nonplussed, since I was hardly aware about them myself. However, my curiosity was aroused and mulled on the subject for the next few days.

I discussed the various issues pertaining to the proposed book with my publisher and distributor. They confirmed that they had not come across any book that addressed the subject and also offered me encouragement. I decided to delve into the mysterious lives of these shadowy creatures. However, this was easier said than done, as I was about to find out the hard way. When I tried to speak to eunuchs about their customs, I discovered that they were unwilling to divulge any information about their community. I met a number of eunuchs with the same objective and my efforts yielded

similar discouraging results. Finally, with the help of a friend of mine, I managed to meet a eunuch *guru*, posing as a journalist. Though I was hardly able to glean much information during the meeting, which lasted for an hour, it was fruitful in the sense that I learned that whatever knowledge I had about eunuchs was wrong. To prise the truth from these secretive people looked like a very daunting task. However, as my fascination for this community grew, I started meeting them on regular basis. I was able to extract titbits of information but nothing of much substance. Whenever, I asked them about their ways, all eunuchs gave me the stock reply that they would speak to me on the matter only after being permitted by their *guru*. During one such attempt, a eunuch drew up the hem of her sari and warned me that she would flash her mutilated parts unless I left the scene. I discovered to my chagrin that though the *guru* was willing to speak to me, she would not let her *chelas* speak to me. Only later did I find out that these *chelas* lived as bonded labourers and the *guru* did not wish to let these sordid details about the eunuch community be revealed.

I talked to two other *gurus*. They refused to talk to me, citing the commandments of the community. In four months, I made several attempts, without any success. I was losing confidence but not my hope. The attempts failed but did not dampen my enthusiasm.

My next attempt proved much more encouraging, when I met a very senior *guru* from Mumbai. The *guru* and her *chelas* became friendly with me. Over the course of my visits, I gained their confidence. It took numerous trips

and dogged perseverance to foster a degree of comfort in our interaction, leading to enhanced communication between us.

One evening, I visited the *guru's* home at about 7 pm and found her sitting with five of her *chelas*. I did not broach the subject of my book or research. Instead, I performed a few magic tricks, ordered some snacks and shared them with the group. After an hour, I took permission to leave. On my way out, I deliberately asked for assistance to carry my bag of magic tricks to my car. Two *chelas* came forward and offered to help. They accompanied me to the car, whereupon I invited them for a drive. They were thrilled at this unique experience of interacting so closely with a 'normal' person. I tried to put them at ease by making small talk about the various features of the car.

Once their fears were set at rest, I gently broached the subject of their personal relationships with their *guru*. They tried to skirt the issue by giving nebulous answers but I wanted to elicit the truth. I cited specific instances that I had observed during my visits to their home, to demonstrate that their relationships were far from healthy and they gave me their hesitating acquiescence. Having achieved my objective of stirring of some interest in them, I dropped them back home and invited them for another meeting during the following week. Before parting, I casually mentioned that I was writing a book about their community and the various issues that they faced.

The following week, I showed them my published material, as well as a few photographs of mine in films

and TV serials. The twosome gradually opened up and I was able to wean pertinent facts about their lives over the next few weeks. However, I still had to sift fact from fiction and by cross checking the information of each with that of the other, as also other sources, I was able to piece together a coherent whole. I was beginning to achieve a sense of satisfaction at being able to uncover this facet of society and it bolstered my hope through many an evening, when the prospects of obtaining the requisite material looked bleak.

There was still a highly relevant, yet vexing issue that I had to address. The only difference between 'normal' people and eunuchs lay in their genitals, as explained elsewhere in the book. I felt that the book would not fully serve its intended purpose of disseminating information about eunuchs, if it did not include photographs of the private parts of eunuchs. But how was I going to get such photographs?

During my next meeting with the two eunuchs, I requested their assistance in getting the crucial photographs. At the mention of the photographs, the two hesitated and were of a heart to dissociate themselves entirely with me. I clarified that I would be the sole person present, as also that I would not photograph their faces or any other identifying features, confining myself only to photographing the parts in question. Also, the photographs would be used only for educational purposes and their names would never be mentioned in any connection, lest they be excommunicated by their *guru* for breaking their commandments. They asked me to wait for a week while they thought the matter over.

During this period, I continued to answer their numerous queries about how I would maintain their anonymity. Finally, having satisfied themselves that my interest in their affairs was genuine, they agreed in principle to the shoot and laid down their conditions to safeguard their interests.

Now that I had obtained their consent, I was faced with a new problem – where was I going to photograph them? Hotels posed a problem, since renting a room was fraught with the danger of being apprehended by the police. Any story I might cook up would not be plausible and I would face detention and the daunting prospect of explaining the proceedings to my associates at work and society at large, at the least. Also, if I brought them home, the whole neighbourhood would be watching and the resultant buzz would be a cause for embarrassment to my family. Unsure of what to expect, I turned to the friend mentioned earlier and asked for the use of his apartment for four hours, to complete the photo session. It worked!

On the designated day, both eunuchs turned up for the shoot, along with two of their eunuch friends. I reassured them. All four of them obliged me in the interests of informing the readers of this book.