

Cover Story



This photograph depicts an exclusive custom of Indian eunuchs and is an honour accorded to a select few. Every year, a large number of eunuchs assemble from all over India at Ajmer, Rajasthan to offer their prayers to *Khwaja Gharib Nawaz* (KGN) during the annual function known as '*Urs*'. The word *Urs* has been derived from '*Uroos*' which means 'ultimate meeting of an individual with God'. It is said that *Khwaja Gharib Nawaz* spent the last six days of his life in seclusion in a '*huzra*' (room meant for prayers) and on the 6th day of *Rajab* (the seventh month of the Islamic calendar), his noble soul left the corporeal body. *Urs* is celebrated on his death anniversary every year.

Attired in gaudy dresses, loud make up, gold and precious stone ornaments, the eunuchs show gratitude to the divine for the fulfilment of desires granted by KGN over the year gone and symbolized by the ostentatious select. Those who are unable to reach KGN complete the ritual at the local *dargah* and offer prayers.

During the *Urs* festival, a '*kalash*' (vessel normally made of polished copper or brass) is filled with gold and silver ornaments and coins, topped with scented rose water. This is then offered to the benevolent KGN at his *dargah*. Many groups of eunuchs traverse to the holy shrine in processions through the city, carrying the *kalash* on roads lined with thronging crowds. The prized *kalash*, carried on the head by a select few, leads each procession. *Kalash* carriers are usually either eunuch gurus or newcomers to the group. It is followed in many processions by a *chadder* (holy covering sheet), the offering second in hierarchy to the *kalash*.

Buildings on both sides providing the route are crowded by onlookers, comprising of believers, non-believers and a large percentage being neutral. This walk is

symbolic of the journey of the 'life of a eunuch' – surrounded by peers, festive moments commemorated by fanfare all around, hiding deep desires and confusion within; a lost sense of context and direction but a determination guided only by spiritualism to make sense out of a life that means little.

At a profound level, the picture depicts worship (the act of offering), sacrifice (giving up one's entire possessions of gold and silver), power (*kalash*) on the head and *karma* (using both hands for holding).

Their humble effort at carving out some semblance of dignity and purpose in their lives is symbolized by this pious act challenges onlookers like us to appreciate and humanize these creations of God. Such simple, undemanding faith provokes us to realize the gift of a gender bestowed upon us and be grateful for the numerous things that we take for granted in our lives.

'Life of a Eunuch' provides a gateway to enter into their world, feel and touch sensitivities so tender, ravaged by arrogance from unthinking minds and insensitive souls.