

Trade of a Eunuch

(Abridged version)

To a casual observer, while life as a eunuch may seem to be rather safe and sound, with few worries on the employment or family fronts, it is far removed from the harsh truth. Eunuchs lead lives that are more akin to slaves rather than free citizens of a democratic country. Thrown out of their own homes, eunuchs find shelter in the Gurus' homes. But they have to pay a very heavy price for the same, viz. their independence and self respect. Every action of theirs is questioned, while even inactivity is frowned upon, since the emphasis is on earning the maximum possible.

Once they step into this lifestyle, they are embroiled in a web of deceit and abuse at every turn. They are subjected to harsh mental and physical torture in order to break their spirit and turn them into meek and subservient automatons, who live only to satisfy the unbridled greed of the *gurumais*. Worse, initiates discover to their sorrow that the life of a eunuch is a one way street and once inside, there is no way out. Their situation is very much akin to that of a gangster who is lured into the underworld by the glitter and riches of a 'Don'. However, once inside, there is no way out of the very tightly knit fabric of his shady circle. Eunuchs simply cannot leave their guru's homes and go back to leading some semblance of regular lives, since they know too much about the highly secretive ways of the eunuchs and their *gurumais*. Those who try to do so are meted out the worst torture possible, including verbal, mental and physical abuse designed to strike terror into their hearts and snuff out any whimper of dissent or hope of leaving.

When a new eunuch enters her guru's home, she is welcomed as if a new child is born in the family. But this child has no blood relationship with her guru. In a normal family, the mother carries the baby for 9 months. The father also feels responsible for the upbringing of the baby. This creates a bond of attachment between the child and its parents. The family is usually seen as an institution and a safe shelter free from violence. Most media portrays the family as a haven in which the individual finds

fulfillment, love and peace. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state (Article 16, G.A. res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc A/810 at 71 (1948), Adopted on December 10, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations).

In reality, the so called mother-daughter relationship between the guru and *hijra* is an intriguing one with a somewhat religious and social basis. Eunuchs depend upon the guru for support and security while for the gurus, it is less of an emotional bond and more of a nefarious business deal. With each new additional entrant, the guru gets two more hands to earn for and support her. Since the guru has no biological source to enhance the number of disciples, such as the birth of children in normal homes, the new eunuch is God's gift to her. The guru has to make full use of this opportunity. Soon the new eunuch learns that she has to share the burden of the guru's household for the rest of her life.



Guru Padmavati Nayak from Jhansi

Sometimes, a new eunuch does not get along with her guru after the initial period. At this point, the eunuch is at liberty to leave her present guru and either carry on her life

without a guru or move in with another guru. However, before parting ways with her present guru, she has to compensate Rs. 25,000/- to 100,000/- to her old Guru in lieu of her past investment as well as prospective future earnings. She generally gets this amount from the new Guru as an advance and starts working as a slave to the new Guru. And she cannot hope for anything better even under the new Guru. A eunuch, on condition of anonymity said, "All Gurus are the same. Moving from one Guru to another is like falling from the frying pan into the fire. It is our sad fate in life to be abused and exploited by one and all. We live a lonely life, not loved by anyone, despised by everyone and die a lonely death a little every day, mourned by no one."

Though they are free to not live with gurus, in reality it is very difficult to face life alone. If she runs away from the Guru without paying her 'alimony', she earns a bad name in the community. She becomes an outcast from the eunuch community and is beaten and left alone in the world. No other eunuch will talk to her. With no family or friends to fall back on for support, dire consequences await the rebellious. Therefore no eunuch dares to commit such an act. The result, she is left in the grind till life breaths and to eke out whatever semblance of a human life is afforded to her.

However, some desperate eunuchs still attempt the flight to freedom, albeit rarely. On occasion, a group of 4-5 eunuchs decide to run away from their guru(s). First they save some money and look for a suitable house in the slums, where they can move in after escaping. A lot of effort is needed to find a suitable room, more often than not, and their spare time is limited. They skip begging on some days and locate a room in a distant locality. In the new locality, the local eunuchs ask the newcomers about their past. These runaway eunuchs boldly fabricate a cooked-up story. The local eunuchs do not bother to investigate much further because their own lives and self issues are more pertinent. There is acceptance and the coup is considered successful.



Guru Padma



There is a moot question. If the escaped eunuchs put up in a nearby area, their guru(s) may locate them and make life hell for them. In few cases the Gurus have even tried to eliminate these runaway eunuchs. This practice is so random that NGOs working for the upliftment of eunuchs have started demanding that the government move to alleviate the miserable conditions under which they exist. Alleging that eunuchs who grow old and whose earning ability is thereby lessened are then dumped and left to die on the streets these NGOs are protesting for humanitarian treatment to be meted to them and also that the eunuch gurus be booked and brought to justice for their heinous crimes.

The following is the story of Salma, as narrated in her own words. She was fascinated by the eunuch lifestyle as a teenager, only to discover the true horror that lay behind the smiles, once she cast her lot with them.¹

Could Salma Sell Herself in the Open Market?



Bhiwani is a laid back, conservative but fast growing town in Rohtak district in Haryana. Caste, creed, *gotra* (sub caste), religion and sex are of supreme importance here, just like in the rest of the state. The majority of the people here are so fond of having a male child that the male to female ratio is lowest in this state compared to the rest of

India.

I was born as Nikhil Kumar to Ram Prakash and Sheela Devi, who lived near the Kharakhari By Pass in Bhiwani in the year of '*Mandal* and *Kamandal*', i.e. 1989. My first few years evoke faint memories of being dearly loved and pampered. By the time I was around 8 years of age, I began to notice that something was amiss with me. I did not feel comfortable in the company of boys. I did not enjoy their rough and tumble games and preferred to play softer, less violent games with girls in my class. At first, I was able to get away with it but later my male friends began to tease me about being 'girly'. Also, girls began to keep aloof from me and did not allow me into their games.

As time passed, my body language became quite feminine. I withdrew into a shell and grew increasingly more depressed. However, there was something wrong with my body which only my parents knew. Even then they took me to the local doctor, who after making a cursory examination, prescribed some tonics and advised me to be more

¹ The testimony of Salma may be shocking and rude in terms of language but by retaining the passage in its actual form, the author would like to uncover the truth behind the eunuch lifestyle and leave readers to draw their conclusions whether such bonded slavery and mental as well as physical violence can be tolerated in 21st century.

outgoing and assertive. However, though I had a so-called 'healthy' body, my mind was becoming progressively sicker.

My mother used to take me with her occasionally on her shopping trips to the local market, where she used to buy vegetables and other items for daily use. During these trips, I often noticed beggars and mendicants who used to visit the shop or even merely sit by the side of the road, hoping for alms. However, there was a group of people who also sought alms but this group did not look like the others. They were dressed in saris and wore garish makeup. They moved about with an exaggerated swaying walk and spoke in harsh, almost masculine voices, though everything about them was made out to be female. They would always move around in groups of two to four. Shopkeepers who otherwise rudely shooed away beggars would dip into their cashboxes without murmur whenever these people approached and gave them a coin or two. The group would then move to the next shop, where the process would be repeated. Occasionally, they would accost a passerby, who would hastily hand over a coin and they, in turn would bless the alms giver. I noticed that they would give me a strange look whenever they saw me looking at them.

I was fascinated at first by these people but whenever I tried to give them any alms, my mother pulled me away with a jerk and warned me to keep away from them, though the same treatment was not meted out when I gave alms to 'regular' beggars and mendicants – in fact, I was encouraged to do so in these cases.

By the age of ten, my life at school had become miserable and I had become a loner. Everyone could notice that my physique was smaller than that of the average boy and larger than the average girl. However, my voice and mannerisms had a certain girl-like quality about them. A few times, the parents of my male friends watched me play with their boys and joked that a girl had got into their group by mistake. Everyone would laugh loudly at this and I would slink away with my face downcast. A couple of times,

the fathers of my friends caught me roughly and groped my genitals, saying that they wanted to see if I was really a 'boy'.

Even my relatives used to mock me and scold me for my 'unnatural' ways. The attitude of my father towards me changed for the worse, although my mother continued to be sympathetic to my condition. Even my local shopping trips to the market had been stopped by my father. Once a loving and caring couple, my parents had started fighting a lot, often me being the reason. But I was unable to understand why my father used to scold me and fight with my mother though neither of us had made any mistake. As time passed, these fights become more and more frequent. As my parents were aware of the fact that there was something abnormal with me and they must have anticipated these changes within me. I realized that for my father, respect in society was much more important than his own son. He was unable to deal with the attitude of society in general, who instead of having a sympathetic attitude towards people like me, a cursed lot, chose to make fun of us instead.

I still remember the day, which proved to be a day of doom for me and life changed forever; for the worst to come. It was late in the night, father came home drunk and no sooner did he see me, he started beating and abusing me, "*You son of bitch, hijra, saala, teri vajah se main mohalle mein muh dikhane layak nahin raha. Uperwale se vansh chalane ke liye ek beta maanga tha, saala, hijra paida ho gaya. Ja kahin aur apna mooh kala kar* (because of you, I cannot show my face to our neighbours. My only prayer was for a son to carry on my name but I got a eunuch instead. Get out of my house)." Mother started to stop him and seek a reason for his sudden violent outburst, but it was of no use. He also slapped her for giving birth to a eunuch, a *hijra* and abused her, "*Banjh reh jaati to achcha hota* (it would have been better for you to have been childless)."

Tears rolled continuously down my mother's cheeks. I can never forget her whispers. She held me close to her and said to herself, "*Kya karu, tuzhe mar kar khud mar jau. Roj ki jillat se yehi achcha hota. Lekin ma hoo, nau mahine pet me rakha hai, mar nahi sakti* (I wish that I kill myself rather than have to bear such humiliation. I shall also kill

my child before I die, so that he does not have to face this ruthless world in my absence).”

From that day onward, I was stopped from going to school. Certain restrictions were passed on my movements. I was not allowed to go outside or even to stand in the balcony. My home had become a beautiful prison for me. During those traumatic days I was not aware of the actual meaning of Hijra but I knew it was some derogatory remark. It was one of the most common abusive words used by the boys along with “*m*****d*” and “*b*****d*” which is very common to us Hariyanavis. I still remember that whenever my maternal uncle or any of my father’s friends used to visit our home, my father used to greet them by saying, “*B*****d, ithne din kidhar tha* (You ***, where have you been)?” My mother used to remind him that he was at home and in front of a kid, he should not use abusive language. In reply my father used to laugh and say, “*Ye gaali kaha hai, ye to saale-bahnoi ka pyaar hai!* (These are not swear words, they represent the love and affection between brothers-in-law).”

Alas! If my father had taken the taunts and abuses of my neighbor in such a sporting manner then I may not have been what I am today. On that fateful day, my short tempered father had a fight with our equally short tempered neighbor over some petty and trivial issue. During the arguments my father warned him, “You better behave yourself or else I will kill you.” This made the neighbor more aggressive and without giving a thought to what he was saying, he replied, “*Tu kya maarega, hijre ka baap bhi hijra hi hota hai, mard nahin!* (You dare not touch me, only a eunuch like you can father another eunuch.” This statement of his hit my father where it hurt most. In the fit of anger my father started beating him with a stick. The neighbor started bleeding profusely and ran away. Now, it was my turn to bear the brunt of his anger. He started beating and abusing me. “It’s because of you, a hijra, I have to go through all these nonsense. Either you leave my house or I will kill you to protect my honour.”

Perhaps God did not wanted a son to be killed by his father. My injured neighbor came along with police. My father was arrested and my life was saved. That night neither my mother nor I could sleep and we spent the night crying. I was sure that my father would

definitely kill me once he came out of jail. I just wanted to run away from home, from Bhiwani but I was unable to decide where to go, whom to go. I was sitting in a corner of my room thinking of my future. I remembered an incident which had occurred about an year ago. During one of my visits to market along with my mother, I had seen those strange looking, sari clad beggars looking at me. “Doesn’t this boy seem to be one of us?” they were whispering. One of them came near me and looking closely at me, smiled and passed her hand over my face and said gently, “*Chikne*, you may not realise it now but you are one of us. The sooner you come to terms with it, the happier you will be. Come, live with us and be free and happy.” She called me ‘*chikna*’ because of my fair looks and chubby cheeks but I could not realize what the woman had meant by me being ‘one of them’. Now, after so many years, I was able to understand the meaning of ‘being one of them’, the less fortunate, who were suffering due to no fault of theirs. I began to become increasingly more despondent and longed to be with ‘my’ people, which meant those strange yet fascinating creatures.

Early in the morning the next day, my mother along with my maternal uncle had gone to some advocate’s office. She wanted my father to come out of jail and wanted the advocate to forward his bail application. I was angry with my mother at the thought that she wanted to bring that *kasai* (butcher - my father) back home again and feared for my life if he came back. I decided to run away from home and without giving a second thought I ran away and went to the market. It wasn’t hard to find the people I was looking for. I directly went to one of them and started crying and told her my whole story. Even they started crying after hearing my story. “Now your sufferings are over. No one can beat you now, *tera bhadwa baap bhi nahi* (not even your abusive father). Come along with us. *Gurumai* will take care of you,” they tried to console me.

I was reassured and started following them. Very soon we reached to a colony of cluster houses in a slum. Here I found many more of these strange but caring creatures. Upon my arrival at the ‘home’ of eunuchs, I was warmly welcomed by everyone. I was taken to meet Amina, the head of the home, who was called ‘*guruma*’ by the eunuchs who had brought me to her. Upon meeting her for the first time, I was so overcome with emotion that I fell at her feet and began to cry. I felt that I had found my true mother as

gurumai stroked my hair and looking at me with kindness in her eyes and a smiling face, she told me to forget about all my troubles and welcomed me into her 'family'. She told me that I had left my past behind and was being reborn and announced that henceforth, I would be known as 'Salma' to herald my new life. The next couple of weeks went by in a blur, where I was fed and pampered by everyone in the group. I did not have to do anything else and spent my time wondering about my parents, especially my mother and how happy I was in my new home.

One day, I had an unexpected visitor – *gurumai* called me to the outer hall and when I entered, I was taken aback to find my mother sitting there. A mother will always remain a mother – kind, caring and loving. She alone has borne the child in her womb for nine months and knows the joy of bringing forth a life into this world. There is only one pretty child in the world, and every mother has it. For her, any child is the same – whether a boy, girl or even a eunuch. She had made enquiries about my whereabouts without my father's knowledge and had come to see her '*raja beta* (beloved son)'. I felt ashamed that I had ever doubted her love for me.

Upon seeing me, my mother started crying and rushed to me and wrapped her arms around me. With moist eyes, she begged me to come back with her. I was overwhelmed by all this and burst into tears. I was sorely tempted to go back with her but the fear of being killed by my ill tempered father held me back. Then I saw *gurumai* and was struck by the affection in her eyes for me. I steeled myself and turned my mother away, saying that I had finally found my true family. I was like them and had decided to stay at their home for better or worse. Though my mother kept pleading with me to return with her, perhaps even she knew in her heart that I had found a caring family and a stable home, safely away from the clutches of my abusive father. Finally, my mother left with a heavy heart and I grieved deeply at seeing her walk back with slow, faltering steps to the main gate.

However, life is not a bed of roses and during the third week, *gurumai* asked me to accompany a band of three eunuchs on their daily trip to collect alms. Unaware of

things to come, I eagerly joined the band, excited at the prospect of going out into the world like a free person at last, where I no longer had to worry about where I belonged. I was given a new sari and blouse to wear along with a little makeup. During our outing, my friends informed me about the intricacies of begging and how to spot easy 'customers'. They also offered me tea and snacks, which I relished and we returned in the evening laughing and giggling like girls. Upon our return, I saw the others in my group handing over the money they had collected by begging to gurumai, who counted it carefully before handing some back to each of them. I did not have to hand over my earnings, since I had hardly collected any money. Over the next few days, I went out regularly with my group and became adept at collecting alms from shopkeepers and also the occasional couple or unaccompanied woman. Upon returning home, I had to hand over the day's earnings to gurumai, who would then hand me back a part of my daily earnings. I was happy with the arrangement and thanked my lucky stars at having found a family, means of income and no troubles or worries.

In my group, there was Farhana, who was elder to me by a couple of years. She had been living in that home for about three years and was well acquainted with the '*hijra*' world. She was also good looking and managed to hold her own in our band. We took a liking to each other and usually, we hung out together, even after work. We used to swap stories about each other and often relied upon each other to provide moral support.

Little did I realise at that point that my comfortable life was about to come to a rude end. After two weeks, gurumai called me to her and with a hint of sternness in her voice, told me that my earnings were rather meagre. She told me to follow the example of the others and work harder to earn more money. I was rather taken aback by this sudden change in attitude, yet assured gurumai that I would definitely work harder. During the next few days, I made extra efforts and went all out to collect more alms. At first, I was successful and I beamed proudly as I handed over my money to gurumai. She praised me and told me to keep up the good work. This phase lasted but for a few days and my earnings again dipped. One evening, gurumai called me to her presence. I was

immediately struck by her unsmiling face and stern countenance, which was a huge change from her usual loving demeanour with me. For the first time, she spoke harshly to me and told me in no uncertain terms about what it cost her to provide me with a shelter, food, clothing and security. She also told me bluntly that my earnings were not enough to cover her expenses for me and gruffly told me to work harder. I was taken aback by gurumai's rudeness and in tears; I told her that I was trying my best. This, however, did not have much effect on gurumai, who dismissed me with the rather stern threat that unless I improved my performance, she would have to review my position. Alas, things have a way of going wrong and my earnings dipped. When my earnings hadn't improved after a week, I was once again summoned by gurumai to her presence.

As soon as she saw me, gurumai launched into a tirade without even pausing to hear my side of the story. I had been feeling a bit unwell lately due to a cold and that was the primary reason for my poor earnings, since I just could not put the extra effort into begging. I tried to reason with her and explain my illness which was the cause of my reduced earnings, to no avail. My explanations had the opposite effect of making her even angrier and finally, I could not restrain myself any longer. I flatly told her that I was doing my best and prepared to turn around, when I caught a stinging slap hard across my face. I was so surprised by this sudden outburst of violence that I was at a total loss for words or action. Tears welled up to my eyes and I could feel a hot flush of anger and outrage swelling up inside me. I lashed out angrily, when I was restrained by two rather burly eunuchs Zahida and Sonam, who had quietly joined the scene. While they pinned my arms to my sides, gurumai landed two more hard slaps on either side of my face. I was totally crushed and humiliated. I rushed back to the room that I shared with eight other eunuchs and flopping down on my bed, cried my heart out. Farhana laid a kind hand on me and whispered softly that I would learn. She continued to stroke me softly while I cried myself to sleep. For the first time since leaving home, I began to doubt my decision. What was the difference between my father and gurumai after all? At least, my father did not force me to go out and beg for a living.

Over the next couple of days, I went about my occupation with a heavy heart and downcast eyes. During our daily rounds, Farhana pulled me aside and tried to comfort me. She said in a kind voice, "Salma, I know that you have been hurt and are feeling resentment toward Gurumai but think of her as your mother. Didn't your mother ever discipline you or beat you? Besides, don't think that you have been singled out for punishment - we have all had to face her wrath and punishment at some point or the other in our lives. You need to put this behind you and work harder, so that you will earn a lot and please Gurumai. She has high hopes from you." She tried to cheer me up and urged me to increase my earnings but I could just not put my heart into it. I carried this resentment inside me and attempted to beg in a half-hearted way.

This had the obvious effect of lessening my earnings and I could feel the cold stare of Gurumai on my face as I handed over my meagre earnings. A few days later, as we stood in line to hand over my earnings, I could sense that Gurumai was awaiting my turn. Though I wished to the high heavens that I could just slink away quietly without having to face Gurumai, stark reality quickly dawned and my turn came to hand over my earnings. As I forked out the few notes and coins into Gurumai's waiting hands, I could sense her shrill scream even before I heard it. She angrily flung the money back at me and screamed, "You wretch! Do you think that I am a beggar like you that you put this pittance into my hands? Do you know how much it costs to feed, clothe and house you? You are nothing but an ungrateful drag on my resources." I started to protest but Gurumai was unstoppable. Hurling abuses at me, she landed two hard slaps across my face and turned to the others. "Keep this miserable bitch without any food for two days," she yelled, "That will teach her to be more grateful and work for a living."

I could do nothing but crawl back to my bed and cry my heart out. I was still sobbing when I fell asleep. The next morning, I awoke feeling sick and would have gladly stayed in bed but Farhana warned me of my fate if I did not go out to beg and improve my earnings. My friends had tea and breakfast but no one dared to offer me anything. My head felt like it would explode and I would have given my life for a steaming hot cup of tea but everyone avoided me like the plague. Silently, I got ready and followed them out

of the door. As we roamed the streets, I felt a bit better. I even managed to earn some money from a few vegetable and fruit vendors. I hadn't eaten anything since last night and looking at the money in my hand, I felt like getting a cup of tea and some biscuits. I made my way to a roadside tea stall and was about to order tea and biscuits, when I felt a restraining hand on my shoulder. I turned around and came face to face with Farhana. At this point, she was my only friend, who had stood by me through thick and thin. "What are you doing, have you gone mad?" she asked me. "Do you think you can get away with this? Are you aware of what Gurumai will do to you when she finds out?" she added. "But how is she going to find out?" I asked in desperation, "She isn't here to find out." Farhana pointed to the others in our group and said "But they are." The others had begun to look at me suspiciously by now. Farhana almost dragged me away from the stall and told me that word of everything all of us did invariably got back to Gurumai, since everyone kept an eye on everyone else and reported to Gurumai. Any deviant behaviour or breaking of rules was promptly reported back to Gurumai and the consequent punishment was immediate and harsh. I dared not try to eat anything for that day or the next, for fear of instant reprisal.

For two days, I had to subsist only on water and by the third day, I was beginning to feel really weak and could barely stand on my legs. Still I made an effort to go out with the others and beg. However, my weakness made it difficult for me to make much effort and by evening, I had only accumulated a measly Rs 170. I had to give Gurumai Rs. 200 everyday and on the days that I could not pay her the full amount, the shortfall was carried over to the next day or until it was met after settling the daily dues. I was already about Rs. 70 in arrears and taking into consideration that day's shortfall of Rs. 30, my total arrears would amount to Rs. 100. I shuddered to think of what fate was awaiting me when I got home. That day, just before we reached our home, Farhana quietly thrust Rs. 100 into my hands and when I turned to thank her, she smiled and warned me to keep quiet. That night, I felt a bit relieved as I handed over all the money I had in this world – Rs. 270 – to Gurumai, which not only took care of that day's payment but also wiped out my arrears. Gurumai looked at me keenly and holding up the money I had given her, said in a loud voice for everyone to hear, "See, you can all earn if you put

your hearts into it. All it takes is a little effort on your part. You are my children and I need to discipline you from time to time, just like your parents did. You might have felt that my punishment to Salma was harsh but as you can see, it made her mend her ways and work better. In the end, it is she who has profited from my punishment.”

I did not have either the nerve or the energy to tell Gurumai that it was only she who had benefitted from my punishment and hard work. However, I kept a cool head and decided to concentrate on earning more, so that I could save some money. Next day onwards, I decided to force myself to visit more shops and approach more people in order to earn a few extra rupees. I had no savings of my own and did not have any money to even buy a few essential things, such as a toothbrush, let alone some new clothes which I needed sorely. I was desperately in need of money, in order to buy some clothes and makeup. I started to hassle people with extra vigour and it was during one such episode, when I pulled on a man’s shirt from behind that he turned around and I came face to face with my maternal uncle, Sushil. At first, he did not recognize me, since he was used to seeing me as a cherubic boy wearing boys’ clothes. I looked haggard and not much different than an ordinary beggar. My smile was gone, as was my cherubic countenance. My cheeks were sunken and my eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and ill health. However, recognition slowly dawned upon him and his jaw fell as his eyes scanned me from head to toe. With disbelief in his eyes, he said to me, “Nikhil, what has happened to you? What have you become and who did this to you? Your mother is heartbroken. *Lekin Bhagwan ki shayad yehi marji thi. Nahi to tumhare saath ye sab kyun hota* (this must be God’s will, otherwise why would such a thing happen to you)?”

I did not have the heart to tell him the truth and putting on a brave face, I told him that I was doing very well. We parted ways but I couldn’t get over the incident. I was forcefully reminded of the difference between my real mother and this so-called ‘mother’, Gurumai. Where my mother had never allowed me to lift a finger for work, Gurumai had no qualms about asking me to beg on the streets for a living. When I was running a fever, my mother had sat by my bedside throughout the night, putting cold compresses

on my forehead and gently massaging it. Gurumai summoned me to massage her arms and legs every other night, without once enquiring about my health. I was beset with doubt – had I done the right thing by running away from home? I wished I could find an easy answer, as I immersed myself in my work.

A couple of days later, as I returned home after the day's begging, I was informed that I had a visitor and was summoned by Gurumai. I stepped inside her room, to find a scowling Gurumai looking at me with stern eyes. Beckoning me to her side, she told me that my mother had come to see me. Perhaps noticing the look of joy in my eyes that had sprung up at the mention of my mother, Gurumai told me in a flat voice that I had come to her home through my own choice. For the past 6 months, she had tended to my needs and looked after me. When I didn't say anything, Gurumai continued that though she hadn't expected anything from me in return for all that she had done for me, it was customary in the eunuch world to show gratitude by working for the Gurumai and earning for her at least what she had spent for the eunuch's upkeep. This money that had been spent on the individual eunuch was more or less treated like a 'personal loan' by Gurumai to the eunuch. Though I was free to go with my mother or do as I liked, this loan had to be repaid.

Then, looking at me with a smile on her face but an evil look in her eyes, Gurumai said in a soft but steely voice that chilled me to the bone, "Salma, a couple of eunuchs had tried to run away without repaying the loan but we took care of them. I am sure that you wouldn't do anything of the sort because who knows what might happen. Besides, we know where to find you and your family, don't we?" I knew the full meaning of this veiled threat only too well.

I walked with heavy steps to greet my mother who was waiting for me outside. Upon seeing me, my mother burst into tears and cried profusely. For a while, she said nothing but just continued to look at me and caress and hug me, shedding tears all the while. She was horrified to see me in that condition. Gone was my smiling, cherubic countenance, which had been replaced by a thin, haggard look. For close to an hour,

we sat and chatted about me, her and my father. My mother told me about how my uncle Sushil had informed all our relatives and friends that I had become a '*hijra*' and was begging on the streets. Due to this, my parents were being laughed at and shunned by everyone. Some heartless people even went to the extent of proclaiming loudly before my parents that I should be invited along with my other *hijra* friends to dance during weddings and other occasions. Due to all this constant harassment, they had given up attending any ceremonies or social occasions. They were thinking of selling their ancestral home and relocating to far off Delhi. I felt really ashamed of all the trouble I had caused my parents. I thought that if I had relocated in another town, then my parents would have been spared the agony. I resolved to relocate to another town far away where I would not be recognized by anyone. I would also like to advise anyone who wishes to follow the path that I have chosen that they should relocate to a distant place where they will not be recognized by anyone, in order to spare their family and friends from undergoing similar shame and harassment.

When the time came to part, my mother said that she was not at all angry with me and sought my forgiveness for any injustice that she or my father might have done to me. She took my hands in her own and begged me to come back. I dared not divulge the details of my conversation with Gurumai to my mother and merely promised her that I would think about it. My mother got up slowly and turning to leave, she took my hand in hers and slid a thousand rupees into them. I could see the other eunuchs looking keenly at me and whispering amongst themselves.

After my mother had departed, Gurumai again summoned me to her presence. As soon as I entered, Gurumai noticed my hand clutching the money and remarked that I was indeed fortunate to have had such a mother. Then, caressing my face and patting me gently on the back, Gurumai turned to the assembled eunuchs and said loudly that now that I had moved in with them (the eunuchs), I was even more fortunate to find a mother like her (Gurumai) who loved me more than anyone else in the world. She said that she would do anything for me and boasted that in return I would also do anything for her. She proved so forceful that I had to nod my approval. Then looking at the money in my

hand, Gurumai remarked in a thrilled voice, “Look what my *bachcha* (child) has brought for her mother – a gift!” She proceeded to take all the money from my hand and thanked me without really meaning it. I dared not ask Gurumai about the money but assumed that she would keep it safely and give it to me for my use later on when I asked her for it since this was not a part of my earnings but a parting gift from my mother. I felt happy at receiving the money and thought of the lovely dress that I had seen hanging in a dress shop during my rounds. I would buy that tomorrow, I told myself. I would also buy some makeup and other cosmetics, so that I could feel better about myself. While I was thinking of all this, Farhana came into the room and I told her of my plans. Farhana looked at me with sad eyes and asked me to forget about the money. When I asked her the reason for this, Farhana asked me to go to Gurumai’s room and take a look. I was scared but also eager to find out what Farhana had meant and with quiet footsteps proceeded towards Gurumai’s room. The door was slightly open and I caught sight of Gurumai sitting with a bottle of liquor and some *tandoori* chicken and fried fish on a plate. I quickly came back to my room before I was noticed. Next day came and went without me seeing the money. That night, when I haltingly requested Gurumai to give me the money, telling her what I had planned to do with it, she told me that the money would be adjusted against all my dues. Besides, what need did I have for money when she was there to look after me, Gurumai asked. A couple of days later, I found out that Gurumai had bought a bottle of expensive whisky and sumptuous food from the money that she had taken from me. I never saw a paisa out of the Rs 1000 that my mother had so lovingly given me from her own hard earned savings.

Days went by and I once again settled down into my daily routine of begging. I would be abused and beaten up on days that I failed to give the mandatory Rs 200 to Gurumai. If the arrears climbed above Rs 1000, I would not get food from that day onwards till I had settled the dues. On such days, I was not allowed to eat anything or even drink tea, coffee etc. outside either. Thus it continued for a while until about 9 months later, I was going through a particularly bad patch. I had not been able to earn enough money for nearly a week and had faced abuse and beatings on almost every day of the week. One day, I was particularly tense and apprehensive about going back in the evening and

facing Gurumai's wrath and abuse. I was at my wits end about what to do in order to earn enough money and escape the torture and humiliation. When Farhana noticed my dejected look, she enquired about what was troubling me and I told her about my apprehensions. I also told her about how fervently I wished that I could make more money and avoid the daily torture, just like the other eunuchs at home seemed to do. Farhana gave me a sideways glance and asked me in a low voice if I really thought that the others made enough money by begging to lead a life without torture. I blurted out that they must be particularly skilled at begging or identifying potential alms givers, since they always seemed to have enough money to give Gurumai. Not only that but some of them even used to buy good clothes and branded cosmetics for themselves. They seemed to have a carefree attitude about them and were apparently not even concerned about begging. However, they invariably dressed up flashily and wore heavy makeup. One did not see them much during our outings but they invariably seemed to have more than enough earnings at the end of the day.

Farhana led me away with her to a secluded spot and made me sit down next to her on a bench. Taking my hand in hers, she said, "Salma, you are almost too young and innocent to know about some facts about our lives – in fact, if you were living with your parents, you would not have known about these things till much later. However, if you are to have any peace in your life as a eunuch, then you need to bear what I'm about to say."

Farhana then proceeded to tell me about something that at first I could hardly understand but as realization dawned on me, I was shocked and horrified beyond words. She told me about how those eunuchs in our group, who I had been wondering about – those who hardly seemed to beg but still had money and good clothes nevertheless – earned their money by selling their bodies. That explained why they wore flashy attire and gaudy makeup. I recoiled in horror as realization finally dawned on me that the only way to make ends meet and fulfil gurumai's exorbitant demands in this so-called 'home' was to sell my body. I had never even been out with a member of the opposite sex (a girl when I was living with my parents or a boy when I moved in with

the eunuchs), let alone have sexual contact. Besides, I had no sexual feelings towards either boys or girls and was not aroused by the thought of sex. How was I to indulge in sex with strangers, when I hesitated to even take off my clothes in front of others?

For the next few days, I faced an inner turmoil as I again failed to meet my daily target and had to endure beatings and starvation. I was angry with myself at having landed myself in such a sorry situation and reasoned that I was now getting just punishment for having acted like this.

Still, I decided to make an effort to break free from these bonds. One night, when everyone had retired to bed, I silently crept out of my room and went to gurumai's room. Her door was shut but I could see from the light shining through the gap at the bottom that she was still awake. My courage began to falter and I half turned to go back towards my room when suddenly, summoning the last ounce of courage from within, I knocked lightly on the door. I heard gurumai's gruff voice beckoning me to come in and with trembling hands, I opened the door slowly. Gurumai was sprawled on her bed, smoking what I suspected was *charas*. The pungent smoke of the drug had filled the room and I almost choked on the fumes. Gurumai looked at me through the haze and with narrowed eyes, asked me why I had disturbed her at such a late hour when she was resting. I hesitatingly said that I needed to discuss something important with her. "Something that can't wait until the morning?" gurumai said with irritation and rising anger. Summoning my last reserves of courage, I blurted out, "I want to leave, Gurumai." Gurumai gave me a blank stare and I didn't know if she had heard me correctly, so I was about to repeat my statement when she held up a hand. "So you want to leave, eh? I picked you off the streets when you were alone, starving and had no one to turn to for help. I fed you, clothed you, gave you shelter to stay and gave you a family to turn to for support. In return, I have asked for nothing but a measly sum in return, which was more to instil discipline in you and make you self sufficient rather than make a profit. And now that you are able to stand on your feet and have no need for me, you think nothing of going off on your own and leaving me high and dry? Still, it's your life and your choice and I won't stop you from leaving."

I was so taken aback to get this instant permission from gurumai that I stood still for a couple of minutes, trying to grasp the full import of what gurumai had said. When I settled down, I blurted out my thanks to gurumai and also thanked her for everything that she had done for me.

Thanking my lucky stars for having got off more easily than I thought, I turned to leave and was almost at the door, when I heard Gurumai say, “Oh, by the way, don’t forget to give me Rs 50,000 before you leave. Now go and be happy.” At first, I thought that I hadn’t heard gurumai correctly, so hesitated a bit at the door. Seeing my perplexed look, gurumai added, “Of course, you remember that I have spent more than this amount on your upkeep. I was hoping to recover it from your work. Now you are leaving me and I have no hope of recovering that money. Just make sure to repay me the amount before you leave me, that’s all. Otherwise, you know what I am capable of and what fate will befall you and your family.” These last words were uttered in a low but terribly threatening voice. My blood turned cold. How would I ever get this huge amount – me who struggled to earn the pittance of Rs 200 that I had to give to gurumai everyday? I tried to make sense of gurumai’s demand. How did I come to owe gurumai Rs 50,000, when all the eunuchs in our home were getting only the basic necessities of food and shelter? In return, we were paying gurumai Rs 200 each everyday, which more than made up for whatever expenses gurumai may have incurred for us. We had to buy everything else ourselves. If someone did owe money, then it was gurumai who owed us but I did not have the courage to confront gurumai.

It would take many years to make up this amount – and this assumed that I would have enough money left over after paying gurumai her daily dues. Also, how was I going to survive during these years without any clothes and other necessities? How would I make enough money to cover all these expenses? My head began to spin as I crawled back to bed.

The next day, I told Farhana about this incident. She looked at me kindly and said that the sooner I realized that there was no escaping gurumai's clutches, the better off I would be. However, I was determined to buy my way out of this living hell and thus it came to pass that I forced myself to join the flesh trade. One evening, I set out with Farhana, dressed up in revealing clothes borrowed from her and my face plastered with makeup. She took me to the city bus depot, where some other eunuchs and female prostitutes were waiting for 'customers'. Two of them were from our home. Upon seeing them, I became nervous at the thought that they would report my deeds to gurumai. I conveyed my fears to Farhana who assured me that they would not dare to report about me, since they were sailing in the same boat. Besides, gurumai was only bothered about making as much money from us as she could, without bothering to care about how we earned it. "*Chhinal ko paise chahiye, c***a ke do ya chura ke do* (the bitch merely wants money at all costs)," Farhana added. I felt reassured after this and we stood in a corner, while Farhana scanned passersby. In a little while, Farhana came to me accompanied by a man and told him that this was my first time. Hence, he should be gentle with me and pay more. The man asked me to accompany him but I was scared. Farhana reassured me and told me that she knew the man well and that I need not worry. He took me to a deserted railway yard nearby and after hastily performing the act, thrust Rs. 200 into my hands. I had bartered away any little dignity and self esteem that I had left for a little money. After coming home that night, I took a bath and scrubbed myself over and over, as if trying to make myself 'pure' again. However, my innocence was shattered forever.

I was sickened to my ears and disgusted with myself but reasoned that I would stop once I had enough money to pay off gurumai and return home. However, even these earnings were not accumulating fast enough. I accumulated enough money to buy some nice clothes and cosmetics etc. but hardly for me to be able to pay gurumai the Rs 50,000 in the foreseeable future. As time passed, I grew increasingly more desperate and was willing to try anything including running away. However, I had heard horror stories about what happened to eunuchs who ran away and were subsequently caught. It seemed that there was a countrywide network of eunuchs that was linked

together by a common thread and anything that happened in one area was instantly reported to others. Hence, even if a eunuch ran away from a particular area and started begging in a different area under another gurumai, it was only a matter of time before the eunuch was discovered and reported to her original gurumai, who would then dispatch her goons to forcibly bring back the escapee. **The only remedy of sorts seemed to be to approach another gurumai and strike a deal with her to pay off the amount owed to the original gurumai for providing me shelter and food during my initial stay with her before I started earning (though she had already taken Rs 200 every day from my earnings).**

I decided to explore this opportunity and roped in Farhana to find a solution. She made enquiries and finally settled on a gurumai called Benazir from the big city of Rohtak, which was a little above 50 kms from our home. We had heard that Benazir was a 'good' gurumai and she was fair and kind in her dealings with the eunuchs living in her home. One day I pretended to be sick and Farhana told gurumai that she would like to take me to a skilled '*ojha*' (faith healer) in Rohtak, so that I could be free from my constant illness. Since this would have the effect of enhancing my earnings, thus benefitting gurumai in the long run, she agreed to give us the day off, provided of course, that we made up for the shortfall in our daily dues the next day.

Thus we landed at the door of Benazir on a sunny afternoon and were welcomed by her disciples. We were offered tea and snacks and about half an hour later, we were ushered into Benazir's presence. At first, I was struck by the similarity in bearing and the environs between Benazir and my own gurumai but Benazir smiled at us and invited us to sit beside her in a warm voice that dispelled my doubts. Patting our heads and backs, she enquired about us, our gurumai and our home in a kind voice. Her soft demeanour soon put us at ease and after a while, Farhana told Benazir hesitatingly that we had come to see her on a private matter. Benazir told the others to leave the room and asked us to speak to her without fear. Farhana told Benazir that both she and I wished to join her home. Benazir sat still for a few minutes and then asked me why we wished to run away from our home. She asked us if we were doing this because our gurumai

was ill treating us. I replied that it was not so but that we were confident of making more money in her town and wished to do better. I also told her that I belonged to the same town where I was begging, i.e. Bhiwani. During my daily rounds, I often ran into my family, relatives or friends, which proved to be a constant source of embarrassment for all of us. Benazir asked us what each of us owed to our gurumai and we replied in turn that each of us owed Rs 50,000. After asking us some questions regarding our health and habits, Benazir called out to one of her disciples who was waiting outside. When the eunuch entered the room, Benazir informed her of our intention. She also told her what our outstanding dues were and asked for her opinion. The eunuch gave each one of us a cold, long, hard stare from head to toe in turn, as if assessing our worth. She turned us around slowly and looked us over thoroughly for about 5 minutes each, then came over and pinched our waists.

I felt like some animal on display in a zoo. I was reminded of various incidents in school when during our visits to the local zoo, we were asked to examine the animals on display from various angles in an attempt to learn about them. I had witnessed goats being similarly examined before the ritualistic sacrifice on *Eid*. I felt worse than any of these animals. Even animals have organizations like PETA who look after their interests and insist on fair and ethical treatment for them. There are many organisations to argue for human rights but we are not covered because they do not consider us to be human beings entitled to their help. I would not have wished such treatment to befall my worst enemy. How I wished that the earth opened up beneath me and swallowed me like Sita *Mata*! Alas, this was not to be and I had to suffer the utter humiliation of being mentally stripped of all dignity and assessed for my value, just like a piece of meat at the local market. After she had finished with us, the eunuch whispered something into Benazir's ear.

What Benazir said next dispelled all notions of love and caring that I had thought she harboured for us. Looking at us, she said that she could offer me Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 30,000 to Farhana. As my world crumbled around me, I could only stammer out, "But we owe gurumai Rs. 50,000 each. How are we going to repay the rest of the money?"

And why am I getting only Rs 25,000 while Farhana is getting Rs 30,000?" Benazir said in a consoling voice, "Salma, I have to make my decision regarding payment based upon the earning potential of the person. What you are asking for is a huge amount and even I have to be able to recover that money somehow. Do not feel bad about it, it's merely a business decision." Before I could ask her what business she meant, when the eunuch world boasted about love and caring that was supposed to be abundant in their homes, the eunuch standing next to her pointed out that I was rather flat chested and my face had a lean, haggard look. Besides, I had a crooked smile and had a manly figure. In comparison, Farhana had a rounded face and had a curvaceous body. Though neither of us could be called 'beautiful', Farhana was more desirable than me for a potential customer. My looks, which were so precious to my mother, alas, did not pass the cold test of the marketplace and I was assessed at a very low value. The amount that was offered by Benazir was nowhere close to meeting the requirements of either Farhana or me and with heavy hearts, we retraced our steps to our home. I steeled myself mentally to live this life full of abuse and torture and consoled myself that I was suffering due to the sins I had committed in a previous life. When Farhana and I took leave, we begged Benazir not to inform our gurumai about our visit. Benazir had anticipated this and assured us that our meeting would remain secret and be safe with her as long as she lived. Then she casually asked me to massage her legs before we left.

Therefore, 'Salma' could not be sold. This incident changed my outlook towards life. Now I don't fear the abuse and beatings at the hands of gurumai and her 'henchmen'. "*Kya karegi ... maregi hi ... maar to nahi dalegi..*(what will she do ... beat me ... not kill me)," – is the constant thought in my head. "Even if gurumai kills me, it will come as a welcome release from the travails of this tortured life. Committing suicide is a sin and only human beings like you, Dr Saxena, think of committing suicide over small failures in examinations, job, relationship, health etc. So being killed would be a blessing for me and the best thing that anyone could do for me."

As a child, I loved to paint. I had a natural flair for the art and even my teachers in school used to praise my creations. I particularly enjoyed painting portraits and loved to capture the smiles on people's faces and the sparkle in their eyes that reflected their joy. Now, that smile has been wiped off my face and gone forever is the sparkle in my eyes. I continue to live a miserable life, walking the streets with a smile on my lips but tears in my eyes, dreading the day when I cannot pay my daily dues to gurumai.

My desperation makes me accost total strangers and hassle them for a few measly rupees or offer my body to a vegetable vendor for a few extra bucks in order to make up for a previous day's shortfall. I can see the loathing in people's eyes but I cannot tell them that given half a chance, I would gladly give this up and become a 'normal' person like them. I am here because of 'normal' people like you. If your society had accepted me, employed me or shown sympathy to me, I might have still been Nikhil instead of Salma.

I wish to let people know that when I go out to beg, I need a minimum of Rs. 300 daily for my survival and to avoid beatings and torture. However, people do not know this and roll up the windows of their air-conditioned cars when they see my approach. Dr Saab, trust me and tell the high and mighty people in cars that their one rupee coin may save me from a cruel evening."²

² The author would like to implore readers to think of Salma and her fate when a princely sum of Rs 1-2 is being 'extorted' from them at a traffic light. It may be well for all of us to remember that there are 14 lakh 'Salmas' all over India who share her fate.