

Distinguishing Characteristics

As an ethnic minority who have always been treated as castaways by the mainstream, eunuchs have developed a unique lifestyle. They are different not only in terms of anatomy but also in terms of language and culture. They are easily identifiable because of their idiosyncratic style of adornment. Most eunuchs, though having a masculine body, are attired in flamboyant feminine attire and have gaudy makeup in public, in a blatant and eye-dazzling vein. Their feminine minds push them to overdress like that, though women rarely don such loud attire. Their difference from the mainstream society is well reflected in their idiosyncratic lifestyle, social, religious and cultural practices. For centuries eunuchs have retained these norms. Some of these distinctive traits of the eunuch society of India are succinctly delineated below:

a) Gender Association and Names

Upon starting their lives at the guru's home, eunuchs assume new names and discard their old family names. All relationships start and end with other eunuchs including the gurus, with whom they develop close bonds. All gurus of eunuchs are invariably eunuchs themselves. Eunuchs call each other *mausi* (mother's sister), *didi* (elder sister), *gurumai* (head), *chela* (disciple), *natichela* (disciple of disciple) or *amma* or *ma* (mother) etc. depending on relative age but do not relate to female relationships on the father's side, e.g. *chachi*, *tai*, *bua*, *dadi* etc.

In a similar fashion to commercial sex workers, eunuchs generally do not disclose their real names to the people that they meet. When the author met them and tried to find out some confidential and personal information, they gave out false names. Later, when he addressed them by their names, they did not respond, since the names were fake and they could not remember the names they had disclosed to him.

b) Caste, Creed and Religion

Eunuchs do not retain the caste identity of their parents but assume the caste of their guru, if any, e.g. Henna, a eunuch disciple of Guru Yasmin Amma alias Rasool Sheikh gives her name as Henna Rasool Sheikh. Similarly, Henna's disciple

Shakeela Bano gives her name as Shakeela Henna Sheikh. They are free to retain the faiths that they were born with, i.e. those of their parents or subsequently adopt the faith of the gurus they live with. Since most of the gurus tend to be Muslim, a majority of eunuchs, especially later in their lives, tend to be followers of the Islamic faith and have Muslim names. Prayers are in accordance with the religion followed by the individual or the guru. Many eunuchs worship fire. They consider fire as sacred, which purifies them of all the sins committed by them.

Like musical '*gharanas*', e.g. the Jaipur or Benares *gharanas*, eunuchs too are generally known by their *gharanas*. There are seven *hijra* clans or '*gharanas*' in Mumbai at the moment, i.e. Dongri, Lashkar, Chakla, Poonawala, Bhendi Bazar, Nagpada and Haji Malang. Each *gharana* is headed by a '*nayak*'. Local gurus get associated with them and train their disciples and protect them. It is said that the gurus, late gurus etc. who were once disciples of a guru who was based in the Dongri area of Mumbai considered themselves to be of Dongri descent. The disciples of these gurus also call themselves of Dongri descent. This tradition is carried on by subsequent additions to the *gharanas*.

Caste rivalry is common, just like in the regular Indian social fabric. Eunuchs feel superior or inferior, depending upon their descent or *gharana*. Eunuchs belonging to *Haji* descent consider themselves superior to all other eunuchs, similar to the Brahmins amongst Hindus or Sheikhs or Syeds amongst Muslims.

Contrary to their caste adherence, eunuchs are not fanatic in their religious belief. Religious animosity is unheard of amongst eunuchs and they celebrate all festivals with equal enthusiasm and fervour. During a journey from Bhopal to New Delhi in December 2008, the author happened to meet Samina, a 36 year old a Muslim eunuch from Bhopal. When her bags were frisked by security officials during a random check, she mentioned, "Ever heard of a eunuch terrorist? One can never find an Osama amongst eunuchs. Though eunuchs are strong hearted, they aren't fanatics or fundamentalist." A few weeks prior to this journey the economic capital of our country, Mumbai, had faced the worst terrorist attack ever carried out on Indian

soil. There was a red alert throughout India and the baggage of all passengers was being thoroughly checked by security officials.



During the process of research for this book, the author remembers attending two socio-religious eunuch gatherings and was impressed by their peaceful nature of co-existence. At one of the gatherings in *Dashmedh Ghat* (Varanasi), the author found eunuchs of various faiths offering *arti* (prayers) at the nearby Lord Shrirama temple, sharing '*roti*' and '*sabji*' (bread and vegetables) with each other and residing in the same camp. Their love, affection and care for each other were exemplary, like real brothers and sisters of a loving family.

On another occasion, in an All India Eunuch Summit held in New Delhi, eunuchs from all over India were present. A traditional '*Kalash Yatra*' was undertaken to a Goddess Durga temple, 3 kilometres away. The *kalash* was carried by Padma, a eunuch from Tamil Nadu and decorated by Catholic eunuch members of coastal Goa and Muslim eunuchs from Ahmedabad. Everyone was singing songs in praise of the Goddess. When the author asked a Muslim eunuch how despite being a non-

Hindu she could chant '*shlokas*' very precisely and beautifully, she said, "It's people like you who discriminate between fellow human beings, not us. For us everyone is equal – only the religion of eunuchism can bring out this feeling." Truly, the borders of religion had melted away and they were all soaked in faith and solidarity of the Almighty. Whatever be their caste, creed or religion, they never differentiate between fellow eunuchs on this basis.

c) Language

Though most eunuchs of India speak Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam etc. they tend to communicate among themselves in a language that they term as '*gupti*' or '*ulti bhasa*' (clandestine or secret language). However, whether what they speak can be accorded the status of a language may be questioned, since it closely resembles Hindi, some of it distorted. This version is also spoken by the eunuchs of Pakistan and Bangladesh with minor dialectal variations. Though most eunuchs do not admit the existence of such a language to a non-eunuch, they often quickly resort to that tongue in the presence of outsiders.

The purpose of using this coded language is apparently to inhibit outsiders from fathoming their internal matters. At a deeper level this is also a manifestation of and resistance to the sexualized linguistic structures of Indian languages.

This arcane language also reflects vintage eunuch kinship patterns, belief systems and attitude towards outsiders and their world. Their kinship patterns and terminology revolve around feminine roles. This is suggestive of their explicit desire to identify themselves as females. When initiated into eunuch society, they are always renamed and given female names. Thus eunuch language has eunuch substitutes for words like *kothi* (sister), *naniguru* (grandma) etc. Though they have words to describe male characters like *chodda* (aged man), *tonna* (young male), *parik* (male lovers), *billa* (hooligan), *dengu* (police) etc.

In a number of eunuchs, there are no sexual feelings; it comes out in the form of their crass language and insensitivity to the ethical sexual feelings of other genders.

d) Education

The education level of eunuchs is abysmal. Approximately 9% have passed the 5th class. Of these, only 3% pass the 8th class. The author found much less than 1% to be graduates and the same percentage knew English. These few came from good families with their initial education in English medium schools, before leaving home for their new abode.

During early childhood, the difference between a eunuch and normal child is not clearly visible. Hence, discrimination against eunuch children is minimal and they are generally able to meld into the larger group of children and complete at least primary education. However, once they reach puberty, the difference between normal gendered and eunuch children is much more apparent and hence, as a result of social discrimination, a lot of them drop out of school.

Chart

e) Eunuch Habitat

During the last three years, the author had meetings with scores of eunuchs throughout India and was greatly saddened to note that not a single one resides in a colony of so-called normal gendered people. What is the reason behind this? Are they afraid of us and feel secure in slums or do they consider themselves to be inferior to 'normal' citizens? While this may be true to some extent, the main reason is that they are never allowed to settle in our gendered colonies. A highly qualified celebrity eunuch, who has appeared in a number of television shows, told the author, "If a Muslim is denied an opportunity to buy or rent a house in a Hindu colony, a large hue and cry is made and vice versa. At least they are better off, in the sense that people don't run behind them or treat them like animals. Look at us! I tried renting a flat in Salt Lake Area (a suburb in Kolkata) and though the flat owner was willing, other society members objected. If this can happen to me, who people consider a celebrity, then think of my fellow sisters who survive by begging, singing or soliciting." "For normal people, we are not human beings but animals suffering

from some contagious disease, which need to be isolated,” she added. That’s the reason eunuchs stay in small shanties away from civilised colonies, bereft of even basic amenities like water, electricity, lavatories etc.

The houses they live in are typical dilapidated shanties. Their rooms contain the bare essentials, typically a few stained mattresses and a naked bulb hung from a low ceiling. A corner of the room is used as a kitchen, with the basic necessities of cooking. Common, shared toilets defying cleanliness and sanitation are the rule rather than the exception.

f) Food Habits

Eunuchs prefer vegetarian and non-vegetarian food alike, though their preference is for non-vegetarian curries cooked at home. However, they are not finicky about their selection of food. They eat whatever is available, *dal-rice*, vegetables, *chapattis* or street foods like *vada-pav*, *pakode*, *jalebis*, *chhole bhature*, *samosas*, *machi jhol*, *idli*, *dosa*, *dabeli*, *dal bati* etc. The author has found them to be voracious eaters and eat three major meals and two small meals/snacks everyday. The average food intake of a eunuch is around 4000 calories per day. They like tea and drink it frequently, often a cup every hour or so, adding about a litre of beverage per day.

Another striking habit is that they never have their food sitting at a dining table. Even well-to-do eunuchs eat their food sitting on the ground, as do their Gurus. During eunuch social summits and other get-togethers as well, they have their food sitting on the ground. “*Mitti mein rehna hai, mitti mein chalna hai aur isi mitti mein mil jana hai* (here we are and here we stay, ultimately, we all turn into dust)” is the philosophical reply of some of the Gurus, who nevertheless have huge houses with all modern amenities. “*Hawa mein udne ki koshish karenge to paon tale zameen bhi nahi rahegi*. We have been cursed by the almighty, abused by your so-called civil society, let us remain grounded,” was the answer of late Guru Neelam who had a sprawling mansion in old Delhi.

During big festivals, eunuchs hire huge cooking utensils and cook jointly for a large group of their community. Though they also enjoy serving / distributing food to the

outside public, acceptance of their offer is rare. The following example serves to highlight this fact.

Khadija, a 16 year old eunuch lives in the Kurla area, a Central Suburb of Mumbai. A very pleasing personality, she is easily mistaken for a normal woman. Still people shun her company when learn about her true identity. Once, Khadija was waiting at the Kurla railway station at 11.30 pm, when she spotted another person, who also seemed to be waiting for a train. Khadija started chatting with him and it being late at night, Khadija offered Ramesh the stranger, a cup of tea which he accepted. After having the tea together, Ramesh asked her for *Pathani Surti* (chewing tobacco), which she was happy sharing and exclaimed, "How nice of you to accept this from me!" indicating such acceptance was rare and short lived till her sex identity is disclosed.

g) Dress



Eunuchs are very picky and selective about their dresses trying many different shades before making a choice. Often, the advice of fellow eunuchs is trusted in matters of dress, hair styles, jewellery and other items of personal use. They tend to go in for fast and dark colours. Eunuchs accept old or used

clothes in alms. Gurus never accept used clothes from their disciples but disciples often accept and wear the old clothes discarded by their gurus.

Some Muslim eunuchs do the Haj pilgrimage and visit Mecca and Madina. Their attire consists of white *salwar-kameez* (loose trousers and half-button shirt) or *lungi* (loose cloth tied around the hips) and it mandatory to wear a scarf blessed from Mecca/Madina on their head or shoulders. Eunuchs other than the *hajjis* are

supposed to wear only *salwar-kameez* and *saris*. They do not wear jeans, T-shirts or other western outfits.

Once, a young eunuch came to meet Guru Shabnam in the Byculla area of Mumbai, dressed in T-shirt and jeans. Shabnam was standing with two of her eunuch friends at the entrance. On seeing the smartly clad young eunuch, the Guru clapped in their usual style and taunted, “*Tu hijra hai ya heroine?*” (Are you a eunuch or an actress?), indicating disapproval.

h) Undergarments

Eunuchs usually do not wear undergarments, viz. panties and brassieres at home. Panties are seldom used since they neither have testicles to support nor a vagina which exudes a discharge. When they are travelling outside their homes, they wear bras to support their breasts, regardless of the size, i.e. small, medium or large, to make them look sexier. Whenever they are worn, undergarments are brightly coloured, in order to attract people.

i) Toilet Practices

Contrary to common perception, eunuchs rarely get rid of their natural urges in the open. In India, where more than half of the population urinate and defecate in the open, one can rarely see a eunuch doing so. They use public toilets instead. The reason behind this is that eunuchs think that the cause of their sufferings is their unclear genitals. They are neither men nor women and thus, they do not want others to see their genitals.

When using public toilets, the women’s section is used and they urinate in a squatting position like normal Indian women. They do not use western style toilets and prefer Indian style commodes.

j) Ornaments



Eunuchs, especially *gurus* and *nayaks* wear jewellery a lot, including heavy necklaces, chains, bracelets, anklets (*payal*), rings etc. during *Urs* and other festivals. However, they do not wear *mangalsutras* (matrimonial necklaces which adorn married Indian women). Haji eunuchs shun wearing ornaments or makeup as per Islamic tenets. The ornaments are generally of artificial type made up of cheap metals. But this is not the case with cash rich *Gurus* and eunuchs from Delhi and Punjab. They wear jewellery made up of gold, silver, and occasionally diamonds. It is rumoured that eunuchs have intuitional powers by which they are able to recognize the purity of gold. Like others, eunuchs do not like to be cheated when buying jewellery. Hence they buy jewellery only from preferred and trusted shops. In Vijaynagar, Tarsali, Baroda one jeweller mixed more copper in the necklace of a eunuch. When the eunuch found out about this, she went to the shop, accompanied by 4-5 of her eunuch friends and created a noisy scene at the shop. The jeweller was forced to shut the door to avoid embarrassment and later apologised and replaced the ornament with pure metal.

Eunuchs do not pawn ornaments even in times of dire need, in contrast to the habits of regular Indians. They pay higher interest on loans they take but do not generally raise money by pawning ornaments. Before her death, a eunuch donates her jewellery and other belongings to the peer next in seniority in the group.

k) Cosmetics and Toiletries



A beauty parlour run by a eunuch



We are accustomed to thinking that people try to look their best with intent to

attract the opposite sex. Since this is not applicable to eunuchs, one may wrongly conclude they are not bothered about their looks and appearance. However, the truth is that very much like the rest of us, eunuchs also want to look good. As they themselves say, “Not to attract the other sex, just to feel good and fresh and to get more alms.”

In ancient times, when empowered with direct access to harems and *ranivaas* (*queen's residence*) of kings, they used to spend a lot of time on their looks. One comes across numerous occasions where kings were so fond of eunuchs that queens plotted to eliminate them. Even in present times of hardship, the desire and extreme fondness of dressing and make-up has not worn off.

Eunuchs are fond of cosmetic items like cream, powder, foundation, lipsticks, *kajal* or eyeliners, nail polish, eye lashes etc. The majority of eunuchs buy locally made low quality cosmetic products and their make-up often looks gaudy and cheap. Well to do eunuchs who are dancers, attractive and are part of the prostitution racket, spend a fortune on cosmetics. Some of them even avoid any make-up and prefer to stay natural.

Considering the social and financial levels of eunuchs, it is seen that level 1 and 2 eunuchs (levels explained below on page _____) use high quality cosmetics.

They try out many different shades to match the colour of their skin, and with clothes as well. Level 3 eunuchs use ordinary lipsticks and talcum powder to beautify themselves. They use scents during worship and prayer and *attar* (liquid scent) is preferred.

The personal hygiene maintained by eunuchs is noteworthy in comparison to that of gendered people of equal socio-economic strata. They brush teeth regularly, using toothpaste or burnt tobacco powder. The tobacco helps to clear their stomachs and improves bowel movement. Rich and poor alike, they keep their bodies clean by bathing regularly, bad sweaty odour rarely being noticed. Baths are taken in private and eunuchs as a rule, never visit public swimming pools or common baths. The author has been to many swimming pools but he found no eunuchs in any of the pools. Also, facial hair is removed by using a plucker in the privacy of their homes.

Photo of plucker

l) Hair style

Eunuchs like doing their hair in attractive styles but do not like to pay for getting it done at a parlour. Instead, they use the help of others within their community; any one accomplished with a beautician's course or even just familiar with a makeover volunteers. Preference to colour hair is with natural *mehndi* (henna) instead of regular dyes. Sometimes, they adorn their hair with *gajra* (decorative flower garland).

m) Footwear

They mostly wear *chappals* (open sandals). High heels or pointed shoes are avoided, as are canvas / sport shoes. Monetarily better off Level 1 & 2 eunuchs wear costly sandals. However, the upkeep of the footwear is quite poor and they are rarely polished. It is observed that some eunuchs walk barefoot on certain days, in fulfilment of an oath that they may have taken. Normally, they suffer from cracked feet, since they walk a lot and do not take proper care of their feet.

n) Spectacles

Most eunuchs do not wear spectacles. The reason is that they do not need to do fine jobs e.g. reading and writing etc. Neither do they indulge in any activities requiring good eyesight, such as driving, sports, manufacturing etc. Secondly for minor weakness of eyes they try to manage so that they do not need to incur costs.

o) Dancing and Singing



In most cases eunuchs are neither good singers nor dancers. This may be due to lack of any training and physical ability, as well as psychological reasons. Eunuchs consider themselves closer to females in nature. They tend to dance and sing like women but their bodies are neither flexible nor are their voices as melodious as women's. Thus, one

finds their body movements awkward while dancing and the pitch of the sound quite rough and male like while singing. Rather than the rhythmic and synchronized movements of regular dancing, eunuchs emphasize pelvic thrusts. Their voice is monotonous and they depend on a minimum of musical instruments to support singing. *Dholaks*, harmoniums and in some cases, *tablas* and other sundry musical instruments are spotted to support them with singing. Rarely, well-versed with using electronic and other musical instruments, the effort is more a make-do one, but looking at their enthusiasm, viewers often make belief the harmony. Castrated eunuchs, as also those who have undergone gonadectomy, can never spread their legs fully due to the surgery. This fact vigorously affects their dance performance.

Eunuchs still have their own unique style of dancing. Moving to the tune of movie songs, imitating the styles of popular actors, they enjoy themselves thoroughly. Dancing for them also does not involve any traits of established dance forms. Merely amounting to the tossing of hips and breasts, their movements are not

choreographed, each eunuch gyrating and beating the drum in her own style. Eunuchs do not include classical music in their choice, only the loud raucous kind.

At a few 'eunuchs only' social gatherings, the author was shocked to hear their songs and witness their attitude and behaviour with one another in private.

Like our folk and wedding songs with their usually overpowering sexual obsession and sensuality giving expression to the suppressed feelings of women, eunuchs also use a lot of expletives in their songs. Full of words that are cheap Hindi substitutes for genitals, every second line in their songs treats these with vulgarity and venom.

p) Clapping

Eunuchs clap loudly in their own distinctive way, the open palms hitting each other in crossed manner and resulting in a large popping clap. They say that their distinctive way of clapping is natural and God's gift to them, not a tutored one. However, in reality they are taught this art by their gurus when they move into the guru's home. It's their different way of clapping through which one can recognize that they are not normal gendered people. When eunuchs interact with each other, only gurus are entitled to clap. Any violator of this norm is fined. Prohibited from clapping unnecessarily and causing nuisance to others, it is looked upon as sinful behaviour.

q) Shopping and Bargaining

Eunuchs normally do not bargain while buying products or services, contrary to the customary Indian shrewdness which this practice exhibits. If someone offers them a concession, they criticise the seller for treating eunuchs like common people or think that the shopkeeper may have lustful intentions towards them and hence the discount.

r) Photographs

Eunuchs love to be photographed. They are quite willing to give various poses and as soon as a picture is taken, they often come running and ask, "How do I look?" before peeping into the camera monitor. If they are not satisfied, they request to be photographed again. Not being familiar with digital cameras, they feel that the

photographer has spent extra money on film by taking another photograph and are thankful for this.

s) **Beauty Contest**

Of late, eunuchs stage at least one popular beauty contest for themselves every year in every major city of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma and Sri Lanka. This annual event is enjoyed a lot. Many contestants are drawn from all over the country and the occasion is attended by an even larger eunuch audience. Criteria for judgment are face-features, figure, gait, dress, height, weight, complexion, wit, humour, intellectual talent and response to judges' questions etc. Though happy with the beauty contest, they are against being judged by regular males or females. Normally gendered people do not associate eunuchs with beauty and therefore, only fellow community members of repute, activists sympathetic to their cause or film personalities, who are conversant with a 'eunuch's perception of beauty', can judge the same.

During the recently held eunuch beauty contest in Goa, a journalist questioned a eunuch on how it felt to be a part of a beauty pageant being just a eunuch. In response, the participant said, "*Kya tumhara jaisa aurat log hi khubsurat ho sakta hai, hum hijra log nahin?*" (Can only womenfolk like you be beautiful, not us eunuchs?). This sarcasm was too much to accept for the journalist who left the event without covering it. Being present as a guest, the author told the eunuch, "You missed the chance to be on TV." Directing unprintable crass words at the journalist, the contestant replied, "Look this *ch**t* (whore)!! If she has got breasts and a butt, so do we. Yet, she thinks only girls like her can be beautiful. Is she more beautiful just because she has a *c**t* (vagina)? If a man can be handsome, a woman sensuous and pretty, why can't a eunuch be beautiful? We may be deprived of genitals but God has still been kind enough to bestow on us a face, body and limbs. So why not a beauty contest for us also?"

Eunuchs participating in this contest were well to do. Vocal in their anger towards people who do not give sufficient respect to them, they lambasted the odious TV

journalist, 'for making '*tamasha*' (mockery) of their community and being void of journalistic ethics of equality'.

t) Hormones

A few Level 3 eunuchs use estrogen hormones for temporary breast enhancement. However, eunuchs undergo this to enhance their looks and earn a bigger livelihood through begging, dancing and prostitution. Breasts are the most elastic organs of the human body. The softness is derived from the elasticity of the capillary network present. Hormones harden these capillaries gradually making the breasts less supple. Hormones enhance the size of the breasts as well as impart some hardness. Such hormone injections are given in the hips and come with a weekly schedule. These injections cost up to Rs. 200/- (US\$ 4) per dose. Desirous eunuchs spend around Rs Ten thousand each annually and bear constant pain in the injected areas.

u) Travelling

Though eunuchs are fond of travelling, they rarely get a chance to do so. Lack of resources, fear of security at unknown places and common people's attitude stops them from doing so. Travel modes are in accordance with affordability. They travel by bus, train, taxi or car and rarely by air. Like children, they prefer window seats. Those eunuchs who have so far not taken a flight feel that flying is for someone more privileged in life. During a long journey, a group of eunuchs will exchange seats among themselves, so that everyone gets the window seat in turn and a fair chance to enjoy the view.

Gurus, as well as level 1 eunuchs travel by A.C. or sleeper class compartments in trains. Level 2 and 3 eunuchs travel by trains in 2nd sleeper class. Frequently travelling without a ticket, they argue that they do not need one since they are neither male nor female. No train ticket examiner dares to check their ticket.

In Delhi, Kolkata and other metropolitan centres they enjoy the privilege of free rides on local suburban trains as a matter of right. They generally travel in ladies compartments.

v) Vices



The author found that most eunuchs indulge in some form of intoxication or drug abuse. They drink *toddy* (made from fermented date or palm fruits) or other intoxicating drinks such as arrack. They do not use drugs like cocaine and heroin because they cannot afford costly intoxicants. However, smoking of marijuana (*ganja*), *charas*, *afeem* (opium) and regular tobacco, cigarettes (mostly *beedies*) or consumption of *paan* (betel leaf), *gutka* (mixture of tobacco, areca nut), *jarda* (chewing tobacco) etc. is fairly common. Consumption of these is mostly in the evenings. The intoxication provides a means of escape from

the harsh realities of their lives. Centres of entertainment like cinema, theatre, parks etc., frequented by normal people are out of bounds and hence, drugs serve to lessen the turmoil they face.

Having interacted with alcoholics at a personal level, the author has witnessed that they feel alive only when intoxicated. Fully aware of the irreparable damage to health caused due to excess use, they care little and have made addiction more of a lifestyle. Drowning sobriety and the misery of life, they take refuge in intoxication to heights and live out their fantasies, if only for a while.

The author is a teetotaler but has no criticism for their addiction and can remember a cancer patient friend who drank every odd hour. He had a conviction that he lives only so long as he drinks. There is not life without a kick for him. Perhaps these are the only pleasures which they can draw out of life.

w) Sickness

Though their vices put them at a higher risk, their active lifestyle decreases the occurrence of major illnesses such as heart problems, blood pressure, diabetes etc. These are generally found among elders or Gurus who do not walk much and are

confined to the comfort of their homes. Lower level eunuchs suffer from the occasional fever and TB but do not normally fall prey to lifestyle diseases. Nowadays, many of them are found to be HIV positive, since many of them practice unsafe sex with their clients.

x) Massage

Eunuchs are very good masseurs. Often, they are hired by elderly people to give them massage. They acquire knowledge of this art from their peers in the guru's home. Gurus are very fond of being massaged and they insist on being given whole body massages every day. The disciples, who are forced to give the message after they return home from a hard day's work often curse the gurus under their breath but have to comply out of fear.

There are also some disciples who give massage to their gurus in order to gain favour with them and avoid the physical and mental torture that is meted out to others.

y) Duties of Disciples

Gurus are highly venerated by eunuchs and carry an air of superiority about them. They consider her their mother, father, elder brother and sister etc. The strongest and strangest bond between a Guru and her disciple is somewhat similar to the traditional relationship between a husband and wife but devoid of any physical or sexual relationship. It may be one of the reasons that eunuch never wear a white sari or *salwar-kameez* as it is a symbol of widowhood. Eunuch disciples are always ready to serve their Gurus. They cook food for gurus, wash her clothes and spittoon. When Gurus become old and infirm, their disciples relieve them of work but provide psychological and monetary support for their sustenance and well being.

z) Duties and Habits of Guru

The guru is responsible for the welfare of all the eunuchs living at her home. The guru provides food and shelter to her 'wards' and in return, receives a part of their daily income. The guru is also responsible for sorting out any issues, such as rivalries or the occasional brush with the law. If a eunuch falls ill, the guru gets her

medical treatment and nurses her till the sick eunuch regains her health. This is done primarily so that the sick disciple starts earning as soon as possible.

Gurus are fond of wearing expensive clothes and jewellery. They flaunt their wealth during eunuch meetings and social gatherings. They also love to get massage from their disciples. With easy money accruing to them through the earnings of the disciples, most gurus are addicted to liquor and drugs.

aa) Eunuch Organisational Structure

The community has a complex network system, which informs them of every happy event in the normal neighbourhood. Not a single birth in the country comprising a sixth of the global population goes unmonitored by the local eunuch community, which is a testimony to this. No sooner is a baby born than a tinkle of ankle-bells of eunuchs is heard, demanding an examination of the newborn. They beat drums (*dholak*), dance and create a commotion outside the house until the mother has allowed them to look at the baby. Blessing the child is followed by a demand for an exorbitant sum of money, clothes etc. in lieu of their good wishes. The inspection also ensures that in the rare possibility of a eunuch being born, the baby is handed over to them to be carried away. However, contrary to regular belief, eunuchs never take away a child by force, despite its being a eunuch. Many families comply to avoid humiliation in society and the group takes the child away to raise her as she should be, as one of their own.

A hierarchical guru-disciple structure exists in the eunuch society. Each band has its own guru. These gurus also have gurus above them, called '*Nayak*'. A eunuch becomes a guru on the basis of age, seniority (counted from the date of initiation into a band), wisdom and one's ability to lead and troubleshoot. Many a times the Guru takes the initiative to take care of new entrants. This is her investment. Such Gurus need not be old or a senior person.

Their society is strictly hierarchical and a eunuch's life is governed by regulations laid down by her immediate superior. For example, in Mumbai, a senior guru Saira, aged 75 lives in Virar (East) near the Railway Station. She in turn reports to Farid

Nayak who is the Head Guru of Maharashtra and lives in Lucky Compound, Byculla. She is 95 years old and in deteriorating health. A trusted eunuch named Haseena takes care of all matters pertaining to eunuchs in Maharashtra on behalf of Farid Nayak.

Eunuch homes all over India send a particular amount of fund to their leaders every month. These top leaders do not earn by begging etc. Funds raised are through contributions. The amount collected is significant, a part of which goes to charity. In many festivals, *niyaz (free food)* is distributed for the local poor, doors always open for the needy. They are also an extremely hospitable society and lavishly treat visiting eunuchs of a different area.

Though the eunuch community has a strong internal organizational structure, they rarely become members of non-government organizations (NGOs) working for their upliftment. They do not have faith on these organizations. As Saahiba a eunuch from Balaghat district of Orissa – the land of NGOs – says, “These NGOs organize eunuch meets, distribute caps and condoms and then showcase these events to international donors but do nothing to improve our lives. If the international funds for eunuchs had been distributed to them as intended, every eunuch of India would have been a *lakhpati* if not a *crorepati*.”

bb) Social Level

We may classify them in distinct levels 1, 2 and 3, merely for the sake of enhancement of our understanding.

Level 1 consists of those eunuchs who are in the top position (comprising about 1% of the total eunuch population), consisting of district head gurus, nayaks and heads of eunuch *gharanas*. They receive funds from a part of the collection done by eunuchs in categories 2 and 3 down the line and are rich people.



She is level 1 eunuch



They are level 3 eunuchs

Mark the class difference

Level 2 eunuchs (about 11%) deal and manage Level 3 ones directly and receive a part of their income. They are gurus who maintain local homes and earn from the eunuchs living there. A portion of it is sent to Level 1 eunuchs.

Level 3 consists of the majority of eunuchs of the eunuch population (about 88%) falls in this category. They earn money through begging, dancing and prostitution. At least one third of their meagre daily earnings go to the gurus of the houses where they reside.

cc) Contented Nature of Eunuchs



During various interactions with eunuchs at their social gatherings, author found that gurus of eunuchs from various parts of India, like all the ruling classes, were displaying their illegally earned wealth in vulgar manner. Even though the eunuchs are aware of the truth, they hardly have any grudge or feeling of jealousy towards their Gurus. During leisure, they sit together in a close group, discussing income and expenditure. The inescapable conclusion is despite each of them contributing about Rs. 200/- per day, the guru spends only about Rs. 50/- per day on each of them. They never complain about food, accommodation and other facilities provided to them. They are content with what they have got. As a eunuch has quoted “the biggest wealth for a human being is to produce a baby, to be able to be part of reproduction process. When God has deprived us of this precious wealth, then where is the need for this temporary and movable wealth. We are happy of being what we are and what we have.”

dd) Eunuchs and Marriage



Eunuchs as a rule do not marry. Even if they do, it is not legally recognized. “We can’t have a registered marriage. Nobody recognizes us because we are eunuchs,” says Sunita, a eunuch from Sonagachi, red light area of Kolkata. However, they do have live-in relationships, where they live like married couples with regular men, women or even other members of their community, as per their convenience. Sunita represents the new brand of married eunuchs in India who have found husbands in unscrupulous, pleasure seeking men, who promise them love, respect and acceptance but abandon them often within weeks of marriage.

ee) *Bahurupias* (Eunuch Impostors)

There also exist a different variety of eunuch look alike called ‘*bahurupias*’ (impersonators). These so-called eunuchs are married and may have children too. They are not associated with an home or a guru. Regular men shave and wear clothes in such manner so as to resemble and be mistaken for eunuchs. Upon being asked, “Why do you do this?”, some *bahurupias* replied “What to do? We too have stomachs to feed.” *Bahurupias* hail mainly from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. When pure eunuchs spot them, they beat them up and shoo them away.

On asking the eunuchs, “Why do you quarrel with *bahurupias*?”, the Guru enumerated them as duplicates. “They feign being eunuchs to earn money from people. Worse, they go from door to door in our guise and commit crimes, e.g. robbery or even rape, quashing our good will in the bargain. Our strict discipline, of not crossing the threshold of anybody’s door goes unnoticed and crimes of these fake makes us the suspect.”

ff) Eunuch Children and Adoption

The birth of a baby is always considered to be a joyous event for everyone but not if the new born is devoid of a clear gender. In such cases, the birth becomes a troublesome and traumatic event for parents in any society. An event of mourning, not of celebration. Parents often curse themselves for giving birth to such a baby. In an orthodox and conservative society like ours which is clearly biased against the third gender, the parents of such kids do not have the courage to tell society that the baby born to them is a eunuch. In contrast, eunuch gurus are always eager to adopt such unwanted kids. Why is such a child that is disowned by its own people, eagerly awaited by eunuch gurus to enter their clan? Many theories are suggested to answer this. It is often said that like eunuchs, these kids too are not clear in their gender and that brings them closer to the eunuchs. Another theory states eunuch gurus have felt the pain of being a eunuch, being unwanted by their own people, and do not want these kids to go through the pain and suffering and are willing to adopt them at the earliest. This may be true to an extent but a grim picture lurks behind this rosy view.

Ordinary eunuchs are like slaves to these undemocratic eunuch gurus. Each Guru wants to make a certain amount of money every day. If she adds a new member to her clan, earning will get further enhanced after a few years. If the kid grows up to be a beautiful eunuch, she may even sell her to some other guru in exchange for a hefty amount, which depends upon the looks of the child. Thus, a eunuch kid is a future investment for the monetary need of eunuch gurus. They own and adopt such kids for future monetary benefits and not on humanitarian grounds, as may seem to be apparent.

gg) Orphan Eunuchs and Adoption by Church

Orphan eunuchs are born eunuchs, who have been disowned and given up for adoption by their natural parents. They are also called 'pure' eunuchs, since they do not have to undergo any medical procedure in order to become eunuchs.

Orphan eunuchs occur more in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. One explanation could be the prevalent custom in the region of donating orphans. Occasionally, when parents discover soon after the birth of their child that a clear gender is lacking and the child is not likely to grow up as a 'normal' male or female, they give up the child for adoption by the church. Even rich parents follow this system of turning over their eunuch child to the community at the age of 2-3, with the consent of family members to avoid a "shameful life" in an otherwise high profile society.

If a poor family gives birth to a eunuch, the family avoids contact with other people. On the child attaining the age of 2-3 years, they go to another village 10-15 km away and the child is handed over to the Church priest, with explanations on the child being a eunuch and their financial condition.

Accepting the child comes with some conditions set by the Church. The Church pastor informs the family that they can come back and reclaim their child within a period of 4 days, in case they regret their decision. After this, the family is requested not to request for the child's return, even if the donated one is not a eunuch. Subsequently, the church shifts the child to a nearby orphanage in the same or a nearby village. Parents have to give their consent letter before the church takes over the responsibility of the child.

The same conditions apply for everyone, the rich and the poor. However, the rich frequently offer donations to the church or an orphanage, to get their eunuch child admitted. The orphanage/church brings up such a child in the Christian faith. The child's education and other expenses are borne by the orphanage.

hh) Eunuchs as Philanthropists

Most people may not be considerate towards eunuchs – for them, they may not be human beings at all but when it's matter of charity or generosity, they are more human than us, regular people. During the *Urs* festival of Ajmer or *Kalash Yatras* to various temples or eunuch gatherings one can easily see and feel this. They help the people in need with open hands and heart. For sustenance eunuchs do all the odd jobs, beg, borrow, and steal! But they are not greedy and give least importance to accumulation of money. If they find any one in need of money, they hand over their hard earned money to him, without giving a second thought. The author has seen them providing financial assistance to the poor for medical emergencies, house repairs, weddings functions etc. Majority of the eunuchs may be illiterate but one can find them sponsoring educational expenses of number of kids. When the author asked a few of them how they could give money to others instead of saving it for their future, they replied, "*Saheb*, we do not give more importance to money than a piece of paper. And if this paper can make some difference to someone's life, then what's the harm in giving it to him."

As a eunuch Guru from Mumbai has said, "Our community has suffered so much that we can not bear to see others suffer. If needed, we can sell our clothes, belongings and bodies to help some suffering soul. In this way, we may get some goodwill and sins of our previous lives may be reduced and we will get rid of our sufferings in our next lives."

ii) Eunuchs as Income Tax Payers

Eunuchs, as the author has said, are exploited physically and economically. But few of them like eunuch gurus and their associates have made very good money by exploiting their disciples. Loaded with kilos of gold jewellery, they can be easily identified during festivals, eunuch summits, gatherings, beauty contests etc. They are financier to numerous hoteliers and builders in big cities. Some of them are having investments in highly organized corporate sector and also in other investor friendly countries. In spite of this, the author has not come across any single eunuch or their guru who has ever paid income-tax or filed an income tax return. Authorities

are aware of this fact but seem reluctant to book these third gendered offenders, fearing of their 'nuisance' value.

The Ten Commandments

Eunuchs have a well-defined code of conduct in accordance with which they ought to behave. Any breach of behavioural code is amenable to stringent penalty. Perpetrators are at best fined with payment or at worst excommunicated from the bands. The guru teaches her the principles of the so-called eunuch cult, salient points of which are as under:

1. Follow your own faith, good principles and avoid the bad.¹
2. Be polite while begging, never curse or abuse those who are not benevolent.
3. Do not lift saris and threaten to exhibit your private parts or clap to cause irritation to people.
4. Bless people who are the giver of your livelihood. Pray for them who need help.
5. Do not cross the threshold of any home, strictly staying outside while begging.
6. Never touch the body of another person, especially a lady in her menses.
7. Return home by a certain time after daily begging.
8. Share earnings with the Guru.
9. Wear proper clothes.
10. Do not use intoxicating substances.

¹ The primary religion is *hijraism* but members are free to follow their religion. No force or pressure is ever applied. Most of them convert to the religion of the guru. Smarter newcomers choose a guru who is from their own religion.

² Wearing of ornaments is permitted only for celebrations. Otherwise only a ring, earrings or a small chain in neck for regular wear is allowed.

These tenets are rarely practiced in real life however, since these principles are subservient to the overriding need of being able to provide for the hierarchical extortion of the gurus.