

## Means of Livelihood

In traditional and medieval societies, a young woman without any supporting family or any means of financial support became a social outcast. Eunuchs in India lead a similar dire existence being unable to earn a minimal living. Means of income are restricted to singing, dancing, begging and prostitution. Some find work as entertainers in social gatherings and bewitch people to extract money from them.

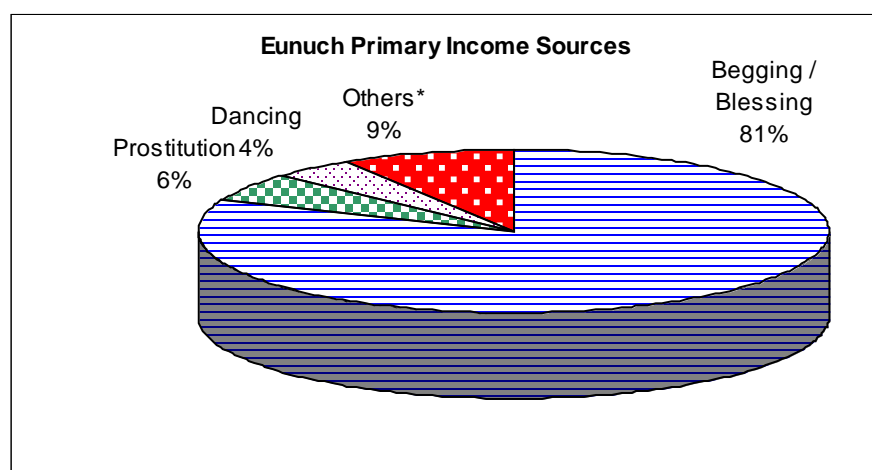
Livelihood strategies have been handed down to eunuchs from past generations. In olden days, employment as cooks in palace kitchens, bodyguards to queens, dance tutors to princesses and many other highly sought after duties were taken up by them. Not a single incident is recorded where they failed to perform duties assigned. Traditionally eunuchs are invited to sing and dance at the domicile of a new-born child. Even when not asked, they drop in uninvited at the house of a newborn and dance with fanfare. They are also found to sing and dance at marriages and other social gatherings in exchange for a few hundred rupees.

However, in recent times their demand as entertainers is on the wane. They are no longer called upon to celebrate the arrival of the new-born or perform at wedding functions. Previously singing and dancing supplemented their income substantially. However, this declining popularity as entertainers has left them with little option other than begging and prostitution.

Also one of the major reasons behind eunuchs working as commercial sex workers is not getting an opportunity to work in regular trades. The general thought of society is they will beg, borrow, steal or do some other shabby job to earn easy money but not work at regular, respectful jobs.

Interestingly unlike many other least advantaged groups, eunuchs are not found to have diversified their livelihood strategies. The unwillingness of the larger mainstream society

to accept them as normal humans has an equal hand in barring eunuchs from seeking new sources of income. Hence, they get rare opportunity in regular avenues of employment, such as manufacturing, retail, marketing, service sectors etc. Movies and fashion are two industries where transsexuals are making an entry, though restricted to a select few. However, by and large, India's development has bypassed the eunuch community. Recently, however, the author found eunuch owned and operated fast food stalls, especially in Tamil Nadu and people have responded favourably by patronizing such eateries.



\* Others category include blessing on demand e.g. newborn, wedding ceremony or inauguration of shops or other establishments.

### **Begging by Eunuchs**

Eunuchs are regular collectors of alms from market places, shops, hotels etc. When denied or refused they almost force the shopkeepers to part with money. They often gatecrash weddings, newborn celebrations and other festive occasions, threatening to disrupt the celebrations with vulgar behaviour and bring bad luck unless paid off handsomely. Such intimidation sometimes amounts to a mild form of extortion.

Alms are also collected by begging door to door. Usually people are irritated when they see eunuchs at their door and shun them. The territory (area of operation) of each

group is not well defined. Since there is no formal demarcation for each group, this results in an occasional overlapping of visits by different groups. However, some kind of automatic mechanism and allocation based on a demand and supply basis provides the necessary balancing. When density of eunuchs is higher in an area, then they automatically spread out to locations with a lower density of eunuchs.

However, eunuchs usually follow a code of conduct and each group visits a particular area on a particular day. Other groups do not visit the same area on the same day but are free to do so on other days. Eunuchs observe a day of rest each week, which may be Monday or the day the market is closed. They normally visit the market about once a week.

At times eunuchs are found to lose their temper while begging, since they may not have earned sufficiently during the day. Threatening to flash their private parts, which is prohibited by their community may also be resorted to. Having done so, they beg the pardon of the guru and Bahuchara Devi in the evening. There is a designated prayer area in the eunuchs' home. They assemble there late in the evening after returning home from the day's work and apologise for the sins and irregularities committed during the day.

### **Begging in Railway trains**

Trains are a major source of income generation. Normally, a group of 8 to 10 eunuchs enter a train. Division of the bogies is made amongst themselves, i.e. 2 bogies or 3 bogies per pair and these then proceed to collect alms from the passengers. Here too, their territory of operation is fixed on railway routes. Hence, if one group begs from one station to another say Dadar to Kalyan, it will get off at Kalyan and another group will take over from there and so on.

### **Prostitution**

While eunuchs support themselves to a major extent by begging, a more lucrative source of income apparently is prostitution, for which they are much in demand by the

lower classes in society. While this mode of earning supplements the income of the eunuch to a large extent, it is generally not encouraged by the gurus.

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

During a survey of some eunuchs willing to engage in prostitution to earn supplemental income, the author discussed their modus operandi.

Author: Do you engage in sexual activity in order to earn extra income?

Eunuch: Occasionally.

Author: What are your charges?

Eunuch: Whatever you are willing to pay.

Author: But how would one arrive at a figure for payment?

Eunuch: It depends on our looks, age, type of service provided etc.

Author: How long do you entertain each customer?

Eunuch: Up to 2 hours or even more, until they are satisfied.

Author: How do you do it?

Eunuch: I give massage. I can give you full body massage.

Author: But...?

Eunuch: Sir, my whole body is at your disposal. You may use it as you like.

Author: .....

Eunuch: Sir, don't worry, oral, between the breasts, anal or by hand whatever you want, you will get complete satisfaction.

Charges of a street eunuch depend on the type of service starting from Rs. 100/- and going upto to Rs. 250/- per call.

Some eunuch prostitutes claimed that once a man enjoys sex with them, he seldom goes back to women. An explanation for this could be the tireless service provided by eunuchs as also innovative sex positions such as sandwich sex. This is a position where the male customer is between two eunuch prostitutes. This is quite common among eunuchs but a rarity among regular female prostitutes. This is practiced by eunuchs because they live together so they serve together. Sex with a prostitute has no attachments. As soon as the sexual act is over, she says bye-bye. A eunuch cares. She enquires about her customer - How are you? Are you happy and satisfied? Sometimes she gives credit facility too, whereas a prostitute always demands advance payment.

Sometimes, eunuchs have orgasms too. (See page \_\_\_\_\_ for some details).<sup>1</sup>

Although prostitution by eunuchs is a fairly common practice, authorities rarely arrest or fine them under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956. The authorities concerned prefer to let them go and avoid the nuisance or in return for sexual favours.

Since many of them are extremely vulnerable to HIV, given their social isolation and low literacy levels, documentaries and modern parables are used to improve their social skills and highlight health issues, such as the importance of using condoms and other protective measures. Govt. departments looking after public health, social justice and NGOs etc. working in the red light area train them about safe sex and the utility of condoms.

## **Blessings**

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<sup>1</sup> Details of achievement of an orgasm in a eunuch cannot be delved into here; however, if one wishes to research this aspect, the author can provide guidance on the subject.

'*Hijda*' or '*Hijra*' is an insulting and derogatory remark directed towards eunuchs in India, as is generally known. But it has one more meaning – the thing which has so far not come to pass. If a eunuch says something, it is bound to happen. This may only be superstition, but because of this, people are fearful of eunuchs cursing. The belief is that if a eunuch curses a man, the person may become impotent for life or he may incur major financial or business losses or he may lose health. In the case of women, the curse can make her even infertile.

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

### **Blessing Newborns**

Eunuchs get news of auspicious and celebratory events from local people, hospitals, chemists, shopkeepers or even infants' clothes drying in balconies, etc.

A group of 5-6 eunuchs reach the home of the newborn. They dance, beat drums, sing and pass the baby among themselves and put the baby in their laps. They lift the child to their breasts and cover it with their sarees, as if they are breast feeding the child. They pray for the long life of the child and say in unison, "*Jug jug jeeyo mere lalla* (May you live long)." The eunuchs bless the mother with the exclamation, "*Doodho nahao, pooto falo* (May you lead a long and prosperous life). You can be a father, you can be a mother but not us." Eunuchs behave as if it was their own child and experience motherhood in the act. That is the child's gift to them. The parents, who are a witness to the proceedings, confer that privilege to the eunuchs for the moment. Parents and elderly persons of the house offer them clothes, utensils etc., as also any money they wish to give, usually ranging from Rs. 101/- upto Rs 2500/-. Once they collect the tip, a mark like the ones shown below is put on the wall near the entrance of the house visited.



The mark indicates a particular group having collected alms from such residence. After this mark is made, no other group of eunuchs will ask for a tip for the birth of that newborn. If two or more different groups reach the home of the newborn at the same time, then they will distribute the money or gifts in equal proportion. They do not fight or argue amongst themselves on such issues. If the eunuchs learn well in advance about the expected arrival of a baby, they visit the house even as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy and put a mark. This mark is indicative of their first right to collect alms from that house after the baby is born.

### **Blessing of Hotels, Shops etc.**

Before starting a new business or the inauguration of restaurants, hotels, shops etc. entrepreneurs sometimes invite eunuchs for their blessings, before the ritual *pooja* (prayers). Eunuchs visit the location and sing and dance. On such occasions, they expect as well as receive much larger amounts as tip.

### **Blessing at Weddings**

Occasionally, people invite eunuchs to invoke their blessings during the weddings of their sons or daughters. When eunuchs visit these ceremonies, they first bless the *pandals*, then the hosts and finally visitors. Starting with a small prayer, they start dancing with *payals* (ankle bracelets) in their ankles on the beat of drums. This dance may last upto 1 hour and is executed in one corner of the hall. After the dance they bless the newly wed couple.

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

### **Overseas Entertainment**

Bollywood biggies, struggling starlets and dancers from Mumbai bars performing at private parties overseas is a common phenomenon. But lesser known is the fact Eunuchs are much in demand in the Gulf and African countries as entertainers and dancers at private parties. Various recruitment agencies and event management companies in Cochin, a coastal city of Kerala and Hyderabad, capital city of Andhra Pradesh, supply eunuch dancers to overseas countries, specially the Middle-East. The charge to the customer works out to around Rs. Three lakhs to Rs. Five lakhs for a single or maximum of two events. Sadly eunuchs get only peanuts from this amount. A few of them like Bhavna, a well groomed and educated dancer from Bandra, Mumbai are paid handsomely, i.e. Rs. Fifty thousand to Rs. One lakh for a single event. On the contrary, recruitment agents and Gurus have made lakhs through these means.

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

### **Business Funding**

"For me they are Mohini (a form of Lord Vishnu) and Goddess Laxmi", says Anand Shetty, the owner of a hip and happening eatery. Starting August 15, 2005, due to change in governmental policies, dance bars spread across Mumbai and its surroundings were shut down. Many lost their jobs. Eunuch Huma and Anand were few of them. Huma though eunuch but stunningly beautiful was working as a dancer to a dance-bar at Dahisar, Mumbai where Anand Shetty was Manager.

Huma along with some other eunuchs helped Anand to start a food joint on partnership basis. The hotel has flourished within few years of its opening and Anand and his venture capitalist eunuchs are having plans to open such more joints. Similarly, Sandeep Agrawal owner of a famous sweet shop at Panipat, Haryana, owns his

success to eunuchs. He was thrown out of home and businesses by his elder brothers after the sudden demise of their father. Neither his friends nor his relatives came forward to help him. Fed up with all these troubles, he had decided to end his life. On a gloomy evening, he threw himself on the nearby railway tracks. But fate had something else in store for him.

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

One can find hundreds of Sandeeps and Anands who have been helped by eunuchs to start-up a venture and are successful businessman.

### **Sharing of Income**

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

The distribution of the eunuch’s earnings (approximately Rs. 300/- per day in a metro) is pre-determined. The Guru’s entitlement is around Rs. 200/- or two-thirds of the daily earnings, and the collecting individual gets the balance. However, if the collection is below the minimum submission amount for the guru, viz, if earnings are a meagre Rs.150/- then the eunuch is negative Rs 50/- vis-à-vis the guru, which is to be compensated from the next day’s earnings. Alternatively, the Guru gives the eunuch Rs. 100/- per day as allowance and retains the balance.

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

S.	Total daily	Arrangement 1 (rare)	Arrangement 2 (common)
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No.	earnings (Rs.)				
		for Guru (variable) (Rs.)	for eunuch (fixed) (Rs.)	for Guru (fixed) (Rs.)	for eunuch (variable) (Rs.)
1	200	100	100	200	0
2	250	150	100	200	50
3	300	200	100	200	100
4	350	250	100	200	150
5	400	300	100	200	200

In lieu of the daily contribution, the guru provides them food and shelter. Other necessities like clothes, make-up kits etc. are to be managed by the eunuch from her share of the earnings. The loyal ones also keep their share of earnings if any, with the guru, and hope the guru is loyal to them in turn. Many a times, the interest of the Guru is only limited to what the eunuch earns –against food and shelter provided by her, but does not permit any savings of her own to the eunuch. Savings, if any, are retained by the eunuch for use when she goes to her native place or visits festivals at places like Ajmer (*Khwaja Gharib Nawaz*), Belgaum (*Yellamma*), Nagapattinam (Mother *Vailankanni*), Koovagam (*Kuttantavar*) festival etc. or when a medical need arises.