Eunuchs demand basic rights

Bella Jaisinghani I TNN

Mumbai: The hoarse voice is in-
congruous with the pretty face.
The demure Mantra who rises
from her personal computer to
lead you inside her office is po-
liteness and grace personified.
She would aspire to rule more
than her domain in Malvani slum
if only she were a woman. Mantra
is a eunuch who works with a so-
cial organisation in the colony.
Members of the third gender,
who live at Malvani in Malad,
have been trying to draw atten-
tion to the innumerable problems
faced by the few thousand eu-
nuchs in Mumbai. Affiliated to
the Navnirman Samaj Vikas
Kendra, they staged a demon-
stration at Azad Maidan a few
days ago where they expressed
their disappointment with the
state machinery for ignoring their
basic rights.
Except in Tamil Nadu, which
recently granted official recog-
nition to the third gender, eu-
nuchs across the country are de-
nied ration cards or voters' I-
cards. At a time when working
households are crushed under the
burden of an inflation rate of
7.8%, an entire segment of the
population is debarred from ac-
cessing the public distribution
system (PDS).
Seated on the floor of a 10x15
sq ft room of their guru, Aarti
Gowda, the eunuchs of Malvani
say their existence is denied sim-
ply because they cannot tick the
box marked M/F (specifying sex)
in an application form. "Banks
do not encourage us to open ac-
counts because they fear their reg-
ular customers will be deterred
by our visits," says Mantra, whose
status as local Bipasha Basu is
challenged by officialdom.

Hemant Shirodkar

ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE: The eunuchs of Malvani at a chat session

STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

Banks do not

encourage us to open
accounts because

they fear their
regular customers
will be deterred by
our visits

Rakhee | RESIDENT OF MALVANI

"I could not even buy a cell-
phone in my own name and had
to create a false identity to do so,"
says Rakhee.
Interestingly, it is easier to get
a passport than a ration card—
authorities allow Muslim eunuchs
to perform the Hajj by declaring
them male.
A few minutes into the con-
versation, the empowered group
requests this correspondent not

to refer to the clan as eunuchs but
as members of the transgender
community, in spite of the former
being technically appropriate.
"Passersby often jeer at us or use
crude Hindi terms to describe us,"
says Gowda. "They should call us
kinnars. That is how Emperor Ak-
bar used to address the eunuchs
in his court."
The desire for social accept-
ance seems to be at variance with
the inhibited nature of this closed
community Malvani Colony is the
single largest habitation of eu-
nuchs in the city, where 1,500 of
them live as neighbours to the
city's bar girls. But most of them
remain discreet. In fact, seeing a
reporter at the home of their guru
discourages many of them from
stepping into the room.
Nowadays, they say, whether
they beg on local trains or visit
homes to bless new couples or ba-
bies, they have discovered the

virtues of persuasion over pres-
sure. "In fact, I compare their re-
lationship with the outside world
as that between man and snake:
each is afraid of the other," says
Shridhar Kshirsagar who found-
ed the Navnirman support group
in Malvani.
"You will be surprised to know
the various ways in which they
are humiliated. For instance, de-
spite the fact that they appear to
be women and dress like them,
have female names and relation-
ships, they are housed with male
prisoners if they are picked up
for begging or soliciting," Shrid-
har says. "The shame they un-
dergo when they are pawed at
by a bunch of leery men is the
same as a woman would feel in
the situation."
The work they do does not help
the emancipation process either.
Indian eunuchs traditionally
choose from one of three occupa-
tions. Begging, or 'basti' as they
say; 'badhai', where they visit
households that are celebrating a
marriage or the birth of a child,
and sing and dance for a fee; and
'pan' or prostitution.
"None of these are dignified
ways of earning a living, but even
the sensitive ones who want to
seek gainful employment are
thwarted by an unsympathetic so-
cial system," says Rakhee. "One
of our members, Narangi, worked
as a housemaid but was thrown
out by her employers once they
discovered she was a eunuch.
Then she tried selling potatoes
and onions on a handcart, but was
duped because she did not know
how to conduct business."
And what does she do now?
The group shrugs. The world's old-
est profession does not let them
down.
bella.jaisinghani@timesgroup.com

<title>Eunuchs demand basic rights</title>
<author>Bella Jaisinghani</author>
<keywords>LR1 Sexual Minorities & Laws</keywords>
<publication>The Times of India</publication>
<pubDate>20/05/2008</pubDate>
<description>The hoarse voice is incongruous with the pretty face. The demure Mantra who rises
from her personal computer to lead you inside her office is politeness and grace personified. She
would aspire to rule more than her domain in Malvani slum if only she were a woman. Mantra is a eunuch who works with a social organisation in the colony. Members of the third gender, who live at Malvani in Malad, have been trying to draw attention to the innumerable problems faced by the few thousand eunuchs in Mumbai.</description>
<classif>A01</classif>
<entrydt>31/05/2008</entrydt>
<sd>VD</sd>