

In the days of maharajas, they performed in royal music rooms and were part of the entourage on wedding trips and hunts. Princes and nawabs paid them in silver coins and presented them jewels. Mujra artistes, in those days, were exponents of Kathak and classical music. Today, they wriggle about like film heroines before mafiosos and petty businessmen. Close to 500 mujra singers and dancers live in a group of crumbling buildings near Kennedy Bridge, continuing an ancient tradition that has been vulgarised by the impact of Hindi cinema in recent decades. Full of shame, anger and hurt at their degradation, the women of Kennedy Bridge are trapped by tradition and necessity.

THERE IS a row of dilapidated buildings at one end of Kennedy Bridge, and a quadrangle of tenements behind them, where women still sing and dance for money, continuing an age-old tradition of the princely courts. If you walk through the garbage-strewn compound at around eight in the evening, you can see young girls and women getting ready for the night in their small rooms, under the white glare of fluorescent lights. They powder their faces a few shades lighter than their skin tone, creating a slightly ghoulish effect, shadow their eyes heavily and paint on full lips in deep red or maroon. Silk salwars and saris, glittering with gold thread, iridescent beads or sequins, replace housecoats and cotton churidars. Then they begin their vigil—three, four, five girls to a room—hoping to catch someone's eye through the open doorway. But it is tawdry and pathetic, all this dressing up and making up, in a slum crawling with half-dressed children, stinking of sewage and blaring with filmi music.

Some rooms do not receive a visitor the whole night—sometimes for two to three weeks at a time. And the women, trapped in a way of life that should have died rather than allowed to degenerate into the vulgar form it has, keep waiting and hoping.

Between 400 to 500 girls perform the mujra in the Kennedy Bridge area. They are organised under the banner of the Bombay Sangeet Kalakar Mandal (BSKM), whose sign hangs above the tenement gates opposite Congress House on V.P. Road. Uttam Singh, a short, curly-haired tabalchi and dance master, has been President of the organisation for the last four years. Administered by a 22-member committee of men and women, the BSKM also regulates the mujra trade on Foras Road involving about 500 women.

Tawaifs, as the dancers are known, have remained separate from the organised flesh trade, although some engage in small-time prostitution. About forty per cent of the

tawaifs are kept as mistresses, a desirable position because it guarantees them financial security for some measure of time.

Mujra is performed in 84 rooms of the tenement compound. But what used to be art forms, Kathak and classical songs, have deteriorated into the decadent dance of Hindi films and popular ghazals. "No one comes to see Kathak anymore," says Farzana, an attractive dancer despite a weary look that prematurely ages her. "They only pay for 'light' dance." 'Light' dance is the provocative hip-shaking, bust-jiggling stuff of the movie screen; it includes *nagin*, a sinuous, writhing movement meant to expose the body's curves, and *bhangra*, the exuberant Punjabi folk dance.

For the dancers, the night peaks around 10.30 pm. Taxis bring in a clientele of petty businessmen, middle-level mafiosi, office clerks, and tradesmen. The era of royal patronage, by men who probably appreciated the women's art at least as well as their bodies, is long since over.

At a recent performance, two mustachioed, paan-chewing men, looking absurdly like filmi villians, watched a pudgy woman in her thirties strut and wriggle about a pink vinyl dance floor in a cramped, flood-lit room. Two adolescent girls, heavily made-up—their dark lips pouting—and a fat, gray-haired woman, in charge of the money, sat to one side on floor cushions. Beggars and vendors hawking soft drinks, snacks, and paan called out from the doorway. Charas and beer are sold outside in the courtyard. The dancer, her face expressionless, spun and shimmed to film songs played on the harmonium. Then one of the men placed two ten-rupee notes on the floor by his feet. She bent over backwards, lowering herself to the ground on all fours, her back arched, her head snapped back as she struggled to catch the bills between her teeth. The men smiled in amusement at how they had compelled the dancer to shame herself.

There is no fixed charge for a mujra

performance. The customer pays what he wants. On a good night, a woman may earn anything from Rs 500 to Rs 2,000, depending on her talent, beauty and location. (Women who have rooms facing the bridge command more than those who live inside the compound). About 15 years ago, the BSKM fought and won a case against licencing in Bombay High Court. While licencing would allow the dancers to charge an entrance fee, as is done in Calcutta, it would also mean paying an entertainment tax. The women don't earn steadily enough, says Uttam Singh, to bear the burden of taxation. And lately, trade has slumped with the opening of new discos and nightclubs, like Caesar's Palace in Khar, which have lured away the Arab clientele.

Each tawaif household, comprising two rooms and housing as many as 15 to 20 people—not always relatives—operates independently. Earnings are controlled by the eldest woman. She receives 25 per cent of a night's income, while the performer gets 62.5 per cent and the musicians 12.5 per cent. Despite sluggish business, signs of prosperity show in the squalid surroundings: TV sets, video recorders, refrigerators. Saira, a raven-haired, puffy-cheeked danseuse, commutes from Bandra in a car she has bought herself. She belongs to a privileged group who have moved out of the Kennedy Bridge tenements to suburban apartments, where they are kept as mistresses. Like her, most mistresses continue to perform the mujra.

Nath utarwai, the deflowering of a virgin, is a tremendous boost to the tawaifs' income. A girl may command anything from Rs 5,000 to Rs 20,000, depending on her beauty. Her nose ring, which she begins wearing when she enters puberty, is removed by mutual agreement between her family and the highest bidder. The man is usually an elderly tradesman or a wealthy underworld don. The event itself resembles a marriage. The girl is bedecked with jewellery and dressed in a birde's red sari.

Her bedroom is perfumed and strewn with flowers. For most tawaifs, it is the closest they will come to a real marriage. But once it's over, the man who paid thousands for the thrill of having a virgin, might not care even to see her again. If there are any emotional scars, they are well-hidden. Business is business, tawaifs have learned, and they cannot afford to let anything stand in its way.

Only women who enter into legal marriages are bound to give up the profession and take the purdah. However, a large number of *deredars*—descendants of the original line of tawaifs who used to travel from home to home of the aristocracy—have abandoned the profession, disgusted by the decline of the art. They have been replaced by *bahairyas*, a community of street dancers from Agra and the border towns of Madhya Pradesh. *Bahairyas*, in fact, now comprise 80 per cent of the city's tawaif population, which has grown steadily over the years. The remaining *deredars* lament the influx of *bahairyas* and the subsequent degeneration of the arts.

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Attempting to curb this decline, the BSMK together with committees from mujra centres nation-wide, appealed to the central government last month to help preserve their tradition. It was decided that auditions for joining the community would be held at major centres around the country.

The mujra culture, a hybrid of Hindu and Muslim dance traditions, reached its height in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the patronage of nawabs and the landed aristocracy. Centred in northern and central India—primarily Lucknow, Badayun, Faizabad, Saharanpur, Meerut and Jaunpur—the tawaif culture integrated Hindus and Muslims. The tawaifs at Kennedy Bridge observe the holidays of both religions: Gokul ashtmi, Holi and Moharrum, during which business is shut down for the entire two-week period of mourning.

Tawaifs settled in Bombay more than a hundred years ago, and in the era of silent cinema, many became film heroines. Por-

traits of their mothers and grandmothers, dressed in full dance costume, adorn the walls of their dingy rooms. These pictures, representing a family tradition, are one of their few sources of pride.

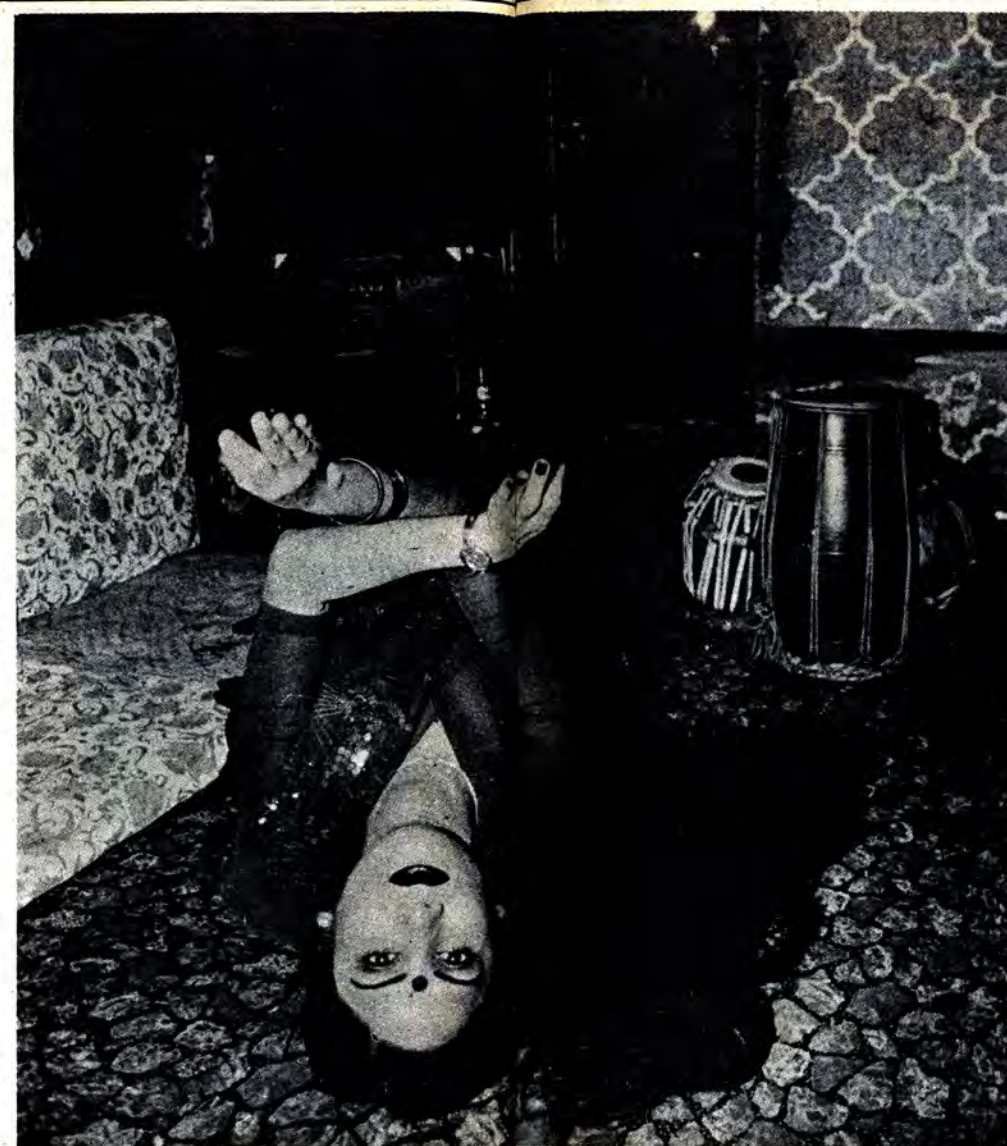
Neelam Bai, a former tawaif and actress, still fiesty at 84, boasts, "I danced for maharajas on wedding trips and shikars. I was once given Rs 2,000 in silver coins for a four-night programme." Her earnings enabled her to buy an entire building opposite Roxy Cinema, where she still lives.

Although tawaifs are now ostracised, they were once treated with a measure of respect and were accepted by society. A clientele of nawabs and later, wealthy businessmen, has been replaced by men from the lower social strata and the underworld. But the women find it difficult to admit their shame. "If we treat people with respect, they will show us respect," insists Nargis, an old, heavy-set woman who has lost her singing voice. Uttam Singh adds: "Our girls have their *izzat*. They do not perform without their clothes on, like those society dancers (call-girls). You will never find them without a *dupatta* on; and they never leave the compound unaccompanied, even if by just a child. Look at these society girls. They walk about the streets all alone in mini skirts."

Like any community, tawaifs live by a shared code of ethics, which does not always jibe with conventional values. To become a mistress, for instance, is not disgraceful but desirable. It provides a woman economic and, perhaps, emotional security. But it is an abominably unequal relationship, the man being supremely powerful because he controls the purse. Sometimes he may adopt the stance of a pimp, extorting money from the woman. And he may abandon her at whim. "It's always the man who leaves the woman," observes Mehboob, a dance teacher. "She never leaves him."

Farzana, who is a mother and has been the mistress of several men, appears caloused by her experiences. "We leave our men whenever we want," she says, too flippantly to be believed. In a quieter moment, she adds: "If you know in your heart that you are a good person, then nothing can hurt you." But this is a platitude. When pressed, she admits it disgraces her to perform filmi-style dances, to slither on the floor and pick up money with her mouth. "Of course I feel bad," she says. "I am angry at those men. But what can I do? This is what they pay, to see."

Because their profession has been vulgarised by commercial cinema and a low-level clientele, tawaifs cloak their humiliation in the guise of art. Their only solace is religion (most of them are very devout) and pride in the knowledge that they are part of an ancient family tradition. There is a certain



pride, too, in being able to support families without husbands. The subject of marriage, in fact, is often a bitter issue for them.

"Two of my sisters were married and what did it get them?" asks Nargis. "When their husbands died they got nothing." Very few tawaifs marry—mostly because society shuns them—and those who do, generally become second wives. Their husbands, usually men who had once kept them, never seem to overcome the feeling that they are somehow unacceptable. So, when widowed, they may be left penniless, and are compelled to rejoin the community they thought they had escaped.

The tawaif community is essentially matriarchal. Men are only patrons and visitors. Male children often break out of the closed-in world, becoming office peons and, in some cases, even advocates and doctors. Many do, however, train in playing the tabla or harmonium for mujras. Some fall into hustling, drug-peddling and gambling. Tawaifs generally prefer female babies

because they will be the wage-earners in the family.

Kinship ties appear hopelessly confused within households. Although women living together may be unrelated, they are reluctant to admit this, claiming to be each other's aunt, cousin, mother and daughter. But inconsistencies in age and vast differences in physical appearance belie their claims. Since a woman may be mistress to a series of men, her children may bear no resemblance to each other. It becomes difficult, therefore, to delineate families. But this may not be important to the tawaifs, who seem to live harmoniously in a large groups.

In the evenings, children can be seen studying as their mothers and older sisters dress and make-up. Perhaps the biggest change in the community, once completely self-contained and introverted, is that it now sends its children out to school. But these children never feel completely accepted by the outside world. Few go over

to the homes of friends they have made in school or invite them over, keeping their background a secret. Tawaifs are apprehensive about how others might treat them, and the children are burdened with their mothers' shame—shame that society, which patronises them, imposes on them with its professed morality.

Rukhsana, the orphaned daughter of a singer who died seven years ago, is an exceptional child. Friends visited her at home and she rarely felt ashamed of her mother's way of life, say the teenager, who has now enrolled in a secretarial course at Davar's College of Commerce. "But there was a teacher in school," she recalls, "who would ask the girls, 'Why are you going to her house? You shouldn't go there'" A soft-spoken young woman, Rukhsana said she pursued her education, never intending to join the family profession, even though she studied dance as a child. Her sister Farida, 22, finances her education and all the household expenses with her singing.

Like Rukhsana, Farida too, is trying to make a bid for legitimacy. But she is doing it through classical singing—the pure *mujra* art—not via education. She performs in her room every night for the money. But she has also given stage shows in the city, and recently in Surat as well. Last month she participated in the four-day Women Music Makers of India festival in New Delhi, a programme endorsed by Prime Minister Gandhi and other government officials. Sponsored by the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra and the Sahitya Kala Parishad, it was part of a movement initiated by the scholar, Rita Ganguli, to preserve the music of the tawaifs.

Illegitimacy is a hidden, but painful, issue for the sisters. They apparently have different fathers whom they know only from a distance. "My father (a Bombay businessman) comes to visit every month or two," Farida says shyly. "I call him uncleji, actually. He comes less often now, after my mother's death." Farida once saw one of her father's legitimate children, a grown-up son, through a window, but she felt no attachment: "Maybe if he had been a sweet little boy, I would have felt something. But when you've had no contact, you feel nothing." Rukhsana's father is a Jodhpur businessman who visits Bombay occasionally. She goes to his house during holidays, she says, and his family does not mind. Her voice softens and she looks away, embarrassed. It is difficult to tell where, in these painful circumstances, the truth leaves off and imagination and hope take over.

While Farida sings at night (the official curfew at Kennedy Bridge is 12.30 am), her younger brother and Rukhsana sleep in an adjoining room. They have learnt to sleep to the strains of *mujra* music since childhood. Most children in the compound are put to

bed either in adjacent rooms or on charpais in the courtyard, while their mothers perform. At times, the sound of abusive or argumentative male voices disturbs them. "I always think there is going to be a big fight."

The women, brought up to be polite and submissive to customers, rarely raise their voices. They are not bold enough to order a customer out if he misbehaves or fails to pay. "We can only fold our hands and say, please sahib, don't do this to us," says Nargis, folding her hands in a namaste and bowing her head. "But if they continue, then we ask them to please leave us alone." A humble *aap aur janaab* style of etiquette still prevails among tawaifs. Cold drinks and paan are always offered to a visitor, and served to him politely with both hands. But this code of manners, based on humility, stifles the women's anger. Perhaps they feel powerless against their customers because they have acted powerless all their lives. "We speak to people nicely," observes Nargis, "so people should speak nicely to us."

Although the community has taken a radical step by educating its children, the stress on old-world etiquette, hospitality, and dance training for young girls, preserves an archaic life-style. After school, most girls attend dance classes in the compound. One of the three dance teachers at Kennedy Bridge, Uttam Singh trains about 20 girls in Kathak and 'light' dance, for which he charges Rs 100 per month. You can see adolescents, with ghungroos weighing a kilo on each foot, strutting about to the tabla beat like film heroines, busts out, hips swaying. "We teach our girls dancing," Nargis says, "so that they can always earn a living."

Still dressed in a brown school uniform, her hair in plaits, six-year-old Subuhi is Uttam Singh's youngest student. Her feet work faster than the eye can follow and she spins around like a wind-up doll. She is incredibly skillful, but mechanical. Her movements show neither joy nor grace. Her forearms swing out robot-like from her elbows, her eyes are detached and lifeless. It is a quality many *mujra* dances share—a hard, distanced look and unsmiling lips.

Subuhi's grandmother insisted that she begin training, according to Uttam Singh. Although her mother is married, Subuhi—like many girls in her position—is still connected to the trade through other relatives. Even marriage, then, does not guarantee a complete break with the community. And young Subuhi, gazing blankly ahead, twirls round and round, filling the room with the jingle of ghungroos. Other girls tire and sit down. But she keeps spinning until the bells loosen and fall to her feet.

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