New fields, no hope: Waiters, orchestra girls

BATHINDA (Haryana): In the early 1990s, young boys would often gather at the Bathinda railway station in the evenings, in time for the train from Delhi, to catch a glimpse of the orchestra dancers getting off.

Today, "we have local orchestra dancers, our village girls," Pushed out of agriculture, the quest for survival has turned the GenNext of many Dalit rural labourers into waiters and dancers. Even into prostitution. Considered vocation not appropriate to pursue, the view has still not changed in villages, the reality has.

"Hundreds of years of knowledge of seasons and understanding of soil, which the rural workforce was always proud of, has become useless. Now they fall in the category of the unskilled," says Lachman Singh, general secretary, Punjab Khel Mandir Union.

Even heroes in the rural folklore used to be based on the capacity to work and knowledge of the field. But circumstances have forced people to do something they are even ashamed to disclose.

Gurpreet Kaur, divorced from her farm labourer husband, is the daughter of a Dalit daily-wage farmer from a near village. She was barred from coming home for two years after her father came to know she was an orchestra dancer.

Today, she is the sole hope of her elderly parents — their breadwinner. The village folks have been told she works with a cultural group where girls and boys are fully clothed. "I have been told not to perform around our village," says Gurpreet.

"Till the late 1990s, these dancers were arranged from Desh Vahini Ladihans or some girls from cities who would work quietly," says Major Khan, a singer from Bathinda who has worked with orchestras for many years.

Over the past few years, Bathinda has come up as a hub of orchestra girls. With the beginning of the wedding season, girls from nearby villages on average are hired for Rs 150. Most girls who are members of orchestras are not even married.

"They come to become singers but end up as dancers." The work goes on for five to seven years. Later, he says, many enter prostitution.

Apart from orchestras, children of rural labourers work as waiters too.

Kuldeep Sood, a marriage palace owner from Bawala, proudly tells how a year-and-a half back at his son's wedding, he had hired 10 girls for Rs 1,000 each to serve the VIPs. "They come from Bathinda. Apart from girls, a huge army of boys can be found working as waiters in small towns. Most come from nearby villages and are paid anywhere from Rs 100 to Rs 250 a day," tells Sood. One can also find them running errands in front of larger shops in villages and washing utensils.

"Have you ever heard of rural labourers working as waiters and girls as dancers prior to 1990? They would prefer hard labour. Now they are left with no option," says Serewala.