

New fields, no hope: Waiters, orchestra girls



bitterharvest

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BATHINDA/MOGA: 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 vocations 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 working class was always proud of, has become useless. Now they fall in the category of the unskilled," says Lachman Singh Seewala, general secretary, Punjab Khet Mazdoor 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-wager from a Lambi 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 are fully clad. "I have been told not to perform around our village," says Gurpreet.

"Till the late 1990s, these

QUEST FOR SURVIVAL PUSHES DALIT RURAL LABOURERS' GEN-NEXT INTO JOBS WHICH OFFER LITTLE, HOLD LESSER FOR FUTURE

RS 125 FOR SURVIVAL

To understand the condition of labourers, five years back, Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union conducted a survey of three districts: Jalandhar, Bathinda and Muktsar. They found that a family of five needs at least Rs 125 a day for survival. It does not include spending on construction, ailment or marriages

dancers were arranged from Delhi or Ludhiana or some girls from cities 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 rent apartments in the riot victims' colony. Most, says Bathinda-based orchestra group owner Sanjeev, come from extremely poor families. "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 orchestra, children of rural labourers work as waiters too.

Kuldeep Sood, a marriage palace owner from Barnala, 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 came 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 150 a day, tells Sood. One can also find them running *rehris* in front of liquor shops in villages and washing utensils.

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

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