

# Indian courtesans: from reality to the silver screen and back again

Nighttime. The shimmering air is filled with the scent of sweet perfume as the dim figures of visitors are seen in the shadows. Inside, the room is hung with draperies and chandeliers. Velvet cushions litter the floor while customers lie back, perhaps smoking a water pipe, listening to the sweet voices of the *mujarewali*. Women sing, mostly seated, subtly moving their bodies as the graceful gestures of their hands and suggestive looks from beneath their veils cast a spell on the male audience. Sometimes eyes meet and wordless messages are sent. Their outcome is easy to guess....

Jolanda Djaimala Boejharat

Ask any Indian about courtesans and the answer is something like the picture drawn above. Dancing girls have long been a part of India; courtesans were already mentioned in Vedic times (1000 B.C.). Over the centuries there have been all sorts of prostitutes, from simple whores who provided sexual services (*vesya*) to temple dancers who to a certain extent prostituted themselves (*devadasi*) to highly-respected courtesans (*mujarewali*, *mujara*-performer) educated in the arts of amusement. Traditionally, a *mujara* was a performance by a courtesan (*mujarewali*) before an audience, where she expressed herself through music, dance and poetry as well as painting and conversation. Although this tradition had its heyday about 200 years earlier, it continued to be popular until the early 20th century.

People today speak nostalgically about the golden age of courtesans, when their company was much appreciated and an accepted part of aristocratic life. Nevertheless, the current practice of this

seductive art as found in today's brothels (*kotha*) is despised, while its practitioners are considered outcasts operating on the margins of society. Of course there is great variety in India's red-light districts: from child prostitutes to call girls in modern city bars and women who still use the *mujarewali* tradition of dancing and singing as part of their seductive technique. Their daily lives and their nighttime practices place them

## worlds meet over the body of a prostitute

in a twilight zone, serving a male clientele without regard to caste or religion. Some artists and researchers say that traditional *mujarewali* no longer exist, as the artistic expressions of today's courtesans are in no way comparable to those of bygone days. Still, although their techniques have changed, these women perform the arts of seduction, and their customers visit them not only for their public services, but to return to an earlier time, to leave behind the cares of today and of the future.

### Safedabad 2005

In Safedabad, on the outskirts of Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, is a group of women still referred to as *mujarewali*. Safedabad is a very small village located on the busy road connecting Lucknow and Barabanki. At the main crossing is a small compound locally called *Bagica* (lit. garden) housing about 30 dancing girls, together with some family members and musicians.

Situated near the busy highway, their customers vary from truck drivers, passengers, and villagers to high-ranking VIPs including government ministers and their entourage whose identities are protected by the dark and remoteness of the place.

The clients come to the *Bagica* to enjoy a *mujara*, but outside the compound the girls perform at bachelor parties, fairs and festivals, using microphones and sometimes mime-singing to Bollywood tunes. Their dancing is a poor imitation of Bollywood dancing style, with hip and shoulder movements being the most important dancing techniques: some perform striptease as part of their act.

### Courtesan movies and brothel scenes

The Bollywood film industry, with 900 releases annually, is among the largest in the world. Many film producers' works feature both historical courtesans and their present-day representatives. The first Indian feature film, a silent religious movie entitled *Raja Harishchandra*, was produced in 1913 by Khumdiraj Phalke. The introduction of sound in the 1930s gave birth to a tradition of films featuring embedded music and dance sequences. Of these, the courtesan genre includes such well-known examples as *DevDas* (1955) *Pakeeza* (1971) and *Umrao Jan* (1981).

Early courtesan films idealized the beauty and artistic skills of the historical *mujarewali* and portrayed prostitutes restored to social respectability through marriage. The narratives were interspersed with song and dance sequences similar to what we assume to have been traditional *mujara* practice. This style of performance began as a blend of the *kathak* dance genre and the *thumri* singing style, both part of classical North Indian dance and music traditions. Initially the performer was seated while singing, and used seductive hand movements and facial expressions to illustrate the poetry. Used coincidentally at first, these expressive techniques gained importance over time; the dancer later came to perform standing up. Actresses in these early films often came from

the brothel culture – they were already trained in singing and dancing, and because they were public women, matters such as family honour or in-laws were unimportant.

Although these movies are about the seductive arts and lives of courtesans, the heroes are the men who save them. These films, then, are largely the product of the male fantasies of Indian film producers. Even the choreographers and dance teachers (as was the custom in the whole of India) were mostly men, who dictated how women should behave and move to depict seductiveness. This was 'the male gaze', a term introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. According to Mulvey, in a patriarchal society the pleasure of looking is split between the active/male and the passive/female. Nevertheless, if in the movies the male gaze determines much of the action, in real life the courtesan knows how to play this male gaze to get what she wants.

Another trend involves movies about call girls and forced prostitutes, such as *Mandi* (1983) and *Chameli* (2003). These films portray the harsh realities of women working in the flesh trade, showing how they ended up in brothels, the agonies they endure, and the inescapability of their fate. Most Bollywood movies include a bar scene. In a scene in *Bunty aur Babli* (2005), we find ourselves in a very chic club, with famous film *mujaras* as background music. Then, without any relation to the story, the newly-released song *Kajara re* is staged and the audience is treated to the sudden appearance of Bollywood beauty queen Aishwarya Rai dancing in the *mujara* style. This combination allows choreographers to showcase their ability to combine modern Bollywood dancing and old *mujara* techniques. It also gives scriptwriters the opportunity to introduce another world into which decent people are not supposed to enter and where women are no part of the audience. In this way the anonymity of the cinema hall allows a kind of erotic voyeurism: as the adage has it, contrasting worlds meet over the body of a prostitute.

### Safedabad: changing art of seduction

Times have changed for the *mujarewali* of Safedabad and their arts of seduction. The traditional way of singing a *thumri* is nearly forgotten. The older ones, who by now usually act as procurers, still remember some of the original repertoire, but even they are starting to forget the words or confuse the tune (*raga*). Their technical ability to cope with the difficult rhythms is also almost gone. Dance techniques have changed as well – only the sound of the ankle bells and the pirouettes remind us of the former *kathak*-based style. When asked why the



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old techniques have not been preserved, they answer: 'Why should we? Times have changed. Before, our clients were learned people who knew how to appreciate the classical arts. But now our clients are very common men who no longer know how to enjoy those things. So what is the use?'

Many of the songs performed today originate from courtesan movies; the repertoire includes *ghazals*, *mujara* hits, and general film songs. The young girls dream of being discovered and becoming Bollywood stars; they take their inspiration from Bollywood movies and enjoy imitating Bollywood hip and shoulder movements. The incorporation of these movements into their repertoire creates a circle where representation becomes source for the original.

So what are these seductive techniques? When the women dance they move only certain parts of their bodies, as if a camera is zooming in on the belly or the bosom, disregarding the movements of the rest of the body. The conveyance of mood – as relayed through the actress' performance or the dancer's complete involvement – is absent. The *mujarewali* submits to the customers' gaze, as if she herself is no longer part of the interaction. Her eyes are empty and no romantic or sensual looks are exchanged – a defense mechanism, perhaps, by which the women are able to mentally detach themselves from the actual scene.

What is left is the typical way of performing a *mujara* seated, in a one-to-one setting, physically very close to the customer. The *mujarewali* still give one the feeling that they are singing and moving their body just for you. No matter what she looks like or whatever the sound of her voice, at that moment you feel transported to centuries past. And that is the true art of seduction. <

Jolanda Boejharat is an Indologist and independent dance scholar. She and her students perform in both *bharata natyam* as well as *kathak* style. At present she is working on a dissertation on the *mujarewali* of Safedabad. [jolandaboeharat@xs4all.nl](mailto:jolandaboeharat@xs4all.nl)



Courtesan of Lucknow, ca.1880

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