

Beyond the Holy Trinity of Vyajanthimala, Waheeda Rahman and Madhuri Dixit: A Case for the Lesser Known Women Dancers of Bombay Cinema

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“Me: Jeevankala ji, how do you feel when you dance?”

Jeevankala : Kya maloom music sunte hi badan mein bijli si aati hai” (I don’t know it feels like lightning enters my body when I hear music)

As she said this, her seventy-eight year old bent spine became straight, eyebrows rose and eyes shone. I was stumped to see this physical transformation unfold before my eyes. Trained in Kathak by Balasaheb Gokhale in Pune, Jeevankala was a highly sought after dancer-actress, working in 500+ films in various languages (personal interview, Jeevankala, 2022). Her famous dance songs include the massive hit ‘*hansta hua noorani chehra*’, from *Parasmani* (1963), ‘*meri mitti mein mil gayi jawani*’, a duet with Helen from *Khandan* (1965) and the delightful all women qawwali ‘*sharma ye kyun sab pardanasheen*’ from *Chaudhvin ka Chand* (1960) where she is seen right next to Waheeda Rahman.

To say that dance is an integral part of Bombay Cinema would be an understatement, it is its pulse, its beating heart. Working hand in glove with the film song, film dance exists less in abstraction but more in conjunction with lyrics, melody, rhythm, and most importantly in tandem with the storytelling of the film.

My research on the presence of Kathak dance and dancers in Bombay Cinema began with the premise that there is a deep and beautiful tradition of dance in Bombay Cinema, as much as there is a deep and beautiful tradition of dance in the Indian classical dance world. The use of the word ‘tradition’ is conscious, and carries within it generations of film dancers, directors, choreographers and actors who have enriched this tradition with their unique touch decade after decade.

The dance tradition of Bombay Cinema has an identifiable arc, an evolution nurtured by evolving technology and design and also shows a continuous flow that has reinvented itself time and again. This article however is not about analysing the dance sequences from this time period, but on the ecosystem of dancers and choreographers, who had trained in Kathak, and entered the film industry to work, with a special focus on the women dancers.

In Bombay cinema, especially from early cinema in late 1930s up to the 1970s, film songs contributed to the storytelling of the film by taking its story forward. The songs would come at an opportune moment, either expressing the emotions of the characters or where the story was headed. The accompanying dance was thus important, as it was attached to a larger purpose of lyrics and meaning making, apart from being a visual treat.

In this article, I will be focusing on the period from 1940s to 1960s in Bombay Cinema, with a little spillover to the 1970s. It is widely considered among film enthusiasts that the 1960s were the aesthetic peak of dance in Bombay Cinema, which had begun to take shape in the 1950s. In this decade, one notices the development of a distinct language of film dance that is identifiable as ‘bollywood filmi dance’, a combination of Kathak, Bharatnatyam, folk, semi classical and mixed western forms resulting in a hybrid form greater than the sum of its parts. Before that, in the 1940s and 50s while individual dancers like Bhagwan Dada or Kathak exponents Sitara Devi and Roshan Kumari had their signature styles, as a community the ‘Bollywood’ dance style was beginning to get formed.



Figure 1. Jeevankala in the song 'hansta hua noornani chehra' from Parasmani (1963). YouTube screenshot



Figure 2. (L-R) Jeevankala and Helen in the song 'meri mitti mein mil gayi jawani' from Khandan (1965). Youtube screenshot

During these decades, there was a trend of ‘solo dancers’, or dancer actresses whose primary work in the film was to dance. The dancer could be a village belle, a courtesan whose kotha is visited often by the hero (Minoo Mumtaz in *Chaudhvin ka Chand*, 1960), a court dancer if its a period film (Bela Bose in *Chitralekha*, 1964), a *banjaran* dancer (Aruna Irani in ‘*dilbar dil se pyare*’, *Caravan* 1971) or part of an all female qawwali song (Shakeela Bano Bhopali in ‘*kehte hain jisko ishq*, *Aaj aur Kal* 1963) one of my favourite genres unfortunately extinct in Hindi language films now.

Depending on the skills of the dancer, they would often play a small acting role in the film as well. Figures such as Bela Bose, Minoo Mumtaz, Nimmi, Kumkum, were regular actors, while others such as Rani, Habiba Rahman worked more as dancers. Producers often insisted on putting their dances in films because they became so popular (personal interview, Jeevankala, 2022). Not just active on screen, many of these women were also an integral part of dance performances in concerts of singers such Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and toured extensively. (personal interview, Jayshree T., 2022).

Bela Bose, Minoo Mumtaz, Laxmi Chhaya, Helen, Sheila Vaz, Kumkum, Jayshree T, Padma Khanna, Rani, Jeevankala, Heera Sawant are only some of the absolutely stellar, electrifying performers who lit up the film screen from 1950s-70s. They also form our earliest association of watching film dance aka watching vivacious, vibrant and

skilled dancers on screen. Some like Chanda, Meenaxi, Alka Noopur were also background dancers, and starred in small acting roles next to the heroine. Some doubled up as assistants to more well known dance masterjis, and some unfortunately remained uncredited.

Most of them had trained in Kathak and some came from hereditary song and dance lineage. Dancer actress Nimmi’s mother Wahidan was a famous singer¹, Kumkum learned Kathak from Shambhu Maharaj of Lucknow, Rani from Ram Narayan Mishra of Kolkata and Krishna Maharaj², and Padma Khanna and Helen (briefly) had learned from Gopi Krishna.³ Habiba Rahman had learned Kathak from Lacchu Maharaj, Sitara Devi, Mohanrao Kallianpurkar before becoming a regular dance partner of Gopi Krishna.⁴ Anjana Mumtaz has been a disciple of Gauri Shanker.⁵ Habiba Rahman’s mother Bibi Almaas too was an actor in the silent cinema in Bombay and had learned Kathak from Lacchu Maharaj and Sitara Devi.⁶ Gopi Krishna and Lacchu Maharaj both being Kathak exponents and popular dance directors in Bombay cinema, hailing from the Banaras and Lucknow Gharana respectively.

Most studies of Bombay film dance have focussed on star dancing actors like Waheeda Rahman, Vyjayanthimala, Madhuri Dixit, Hema Malini, Asha Parekh, etc. While their contribution to Bombay film dance is immense, I argue that the glorious tradition of dance in Bombay cinema has been built on the shoulders of not only a few star actresses and choreographers, but on these countless

1 Sharma, Shishir Krishna “Sitara Devi talks about actress Nimmi’s mother Wahidan, a well known actress/singer in 1930s.” YouTube, uploaded by Beete Hue Din, 12 June 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39HF9Qok-3TM>

2 Tabassum “Dancer Rani and her Life Long Troubles | Tabassum Talkies.” YouTube, uploaded by Tabassum Talkies, 20 April 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2glmXtoi5M&t=235s>

3 Kelkar, Jeevankala. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

4 Rahman, Habiba. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

5 Mumtaz, Anjana. Personal interview. 12 July 2022

6 Rahman, Habiba. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

nameless faces of women dancers. Faces that lit up the screens with their technical prowess, charm and *adakari*.

Who gets forgotten and who is remembered reflects a value system that prioritises certain histories over others. Eclipsed by the towering presence of their male gurus who define lineage, as well hierarchies within the film industry, these marginal histories need to be documented, for the sheer force of their artistic value and contribution to films.

Part 1: Training, Labour, Hierarchy

When one looks at them dancing on screen, it is clear that these are not untrained bodies. That these women dancers come from years of *taleem* (deeper word for learning in the Indian classical music-dance tradition), rigour and rehearsal. Jeevankala spoke to me about how she would train for hours during the day, attend night school, dance in Ganesh Utsav as a child in Pune, and also travel with group dancing parties for shows before coming into films.

Although there are countless examples of their dancing prowess, one quite relevant here is this electrifying dance competition duet between dancer Rani and established star actress-trained classical dancer Asha Parekh. It is the song 'dekho bijli dole bin badal' from the film *Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon* (1963).

Rani's agility, swiftness, and execution of complex, fast movements is in perfect tandem and in some places even better than that of Parekh. To each challenge from Parekh, Rani's movements give equal replies, a *jugalbandi* in which none is less than the other. Rani's beautiful face, expressive eyes lend her a pleasing screen presence as she is framed alongside Parekh.



Figure 3. Rani, YouTube screenshot

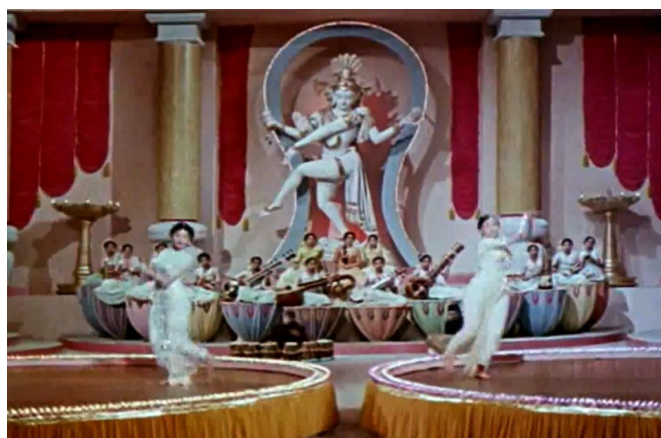


Figure 4 (above) and Figure 5 (below). L-R: Rani, Asha Parekh in the song 'dekho bijli dole bin dadal' from *Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon* (1963). YouTube screenshot





Figure 6 : Fun spotting! Extreme left : Chanda (also seen in the song Chalte Chalte (Pakeezah, 1972) behind Meena Kumari) Extreme right : Saroj Khan, from the song 'dekho bijli dole bin dadal' from Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon (1963). YouTube screenshot

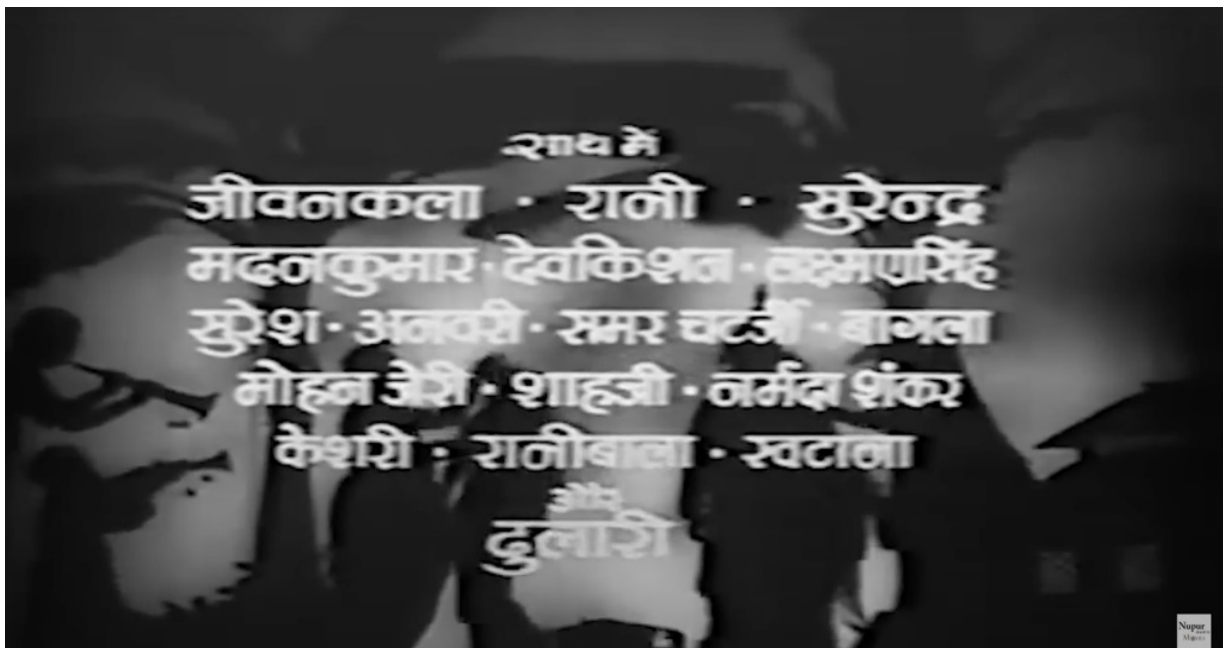


Figure 7. Jeevankala and Rani mentioned in the film credits of Sautela Bhai (1962), YouTube screenshot

Another notable song of Rani is the duet *mujra 'ja main tose nahi bolun'* from the movie *Sautela Bhai* (1962) performed by Rani and Jeevankala, both trained Kathak dancers.

They flirt with and tease the hero, keep the space dynamised with their smooth floor movements and pointed expressions. There is a cleanliness in their hand movements (*haath ki safai*), hallmark of trained *riyazi* (dedicated practise) dancers. The charm, *nakhra* (flirty, playful), and *teekhapan* (spiciness) of their expressions show a familiarity with the lost world of intimate *baithaks-mehfils*, integral elements of *haav-bhaav* from the courtesan repertoire and Kathak, but remain very much rooted in the 'bombay-ness' of the film dance. Duet *mujras* can be hard to pull off, especially in the 1960s where you didn't have fast paced camera editing to enhance the effects. But it is to the credit of the dancers and choreographer (uncredited in the film) who hold the tension and keep passing the ball from one to another, never letting it drop.

Rani, her close friend Saroj (Khan), Padma Khanna, Habiba Rahman are working in close proximity in the film industry around the same time. While Rani, Saroj were also assistants to Gopi Krishna, Padma Khanna had previously learned Kathak in Banaras before training under Gopi Krishna after coming to Bombay (personal interview, Padma Khanna, 2022). During my interviews with Kathak trained dancer actresses Padma Khanna, Habiba Rahman, Jayshree T, Anjana Mumtaz, etc as they narrated experiences from their days of working, one witnesses what must have been a rich exchange of knowledge, tips and tricks between the artists, which existed despite possible competition among peers, and existed outside formalised learning spaces of *guru shishya parampara*.



Figure 8. Padma Khanna, image credit : unknown

Notably, Rani taught Kathak to Kamal Master, who not only became a big dance master but choreographed most of Rekha's songs including the massive hit '*salam-e-ishq meri jan*' from the movie *Muqaddar ka Sikandar* (1978). (personal interview, Habiba Rahman, 2022).

Rani and PL Raj too worked in proximity. PL Raj, who choreographed most of Helen's cabarets, was initially given shelter at Kathak & film dancer Habiba Rahman's home by Habiba's mother when he arrived in Bombay. Habiba tells me her mother Bibi Almaas was a mother hen kind of figure who would extend



Figure 9. Habiba Rahman in opening film credits of *Abhimaan* (1973). YouTube screenshot



Figure 10. (L-R) Amitabh Bachchan, Jayshree T., Habiba Rahman, Rajesh Khanna in the song 'sooni re sejariya' from *Namak Haraam* (1973)

support to artists. “We always had people in the house, some would be rehearsing on the terrace, some would be learning from each other”, she recalls.

PL Raj too received some Kathak training from his female peers, apart from learning Bharatnatyam and dance ballet with Guru Acharya Parvathy Kumar.⁷ “He (Raj) would often compose his film dances first on me,” Habiba recalls (personal interview, Habiba Rahman, 2022).

Through working in close proximity with male choreographers as well as assisting some of them, the women dancers also became bodies on whom choreographies were made before they were taught to actors. Rani had worked as a dance assistant to Gopi Krishna in films, and is remembered by her colleagues as being strict, exacting, a problem solver and helpful in teaching actors on set (personal interview, Padma Khanna, 2022).



Figure 11. Rani’s name as dance assistant in film credits of Khubsoorat (1980). Youtube screenshot

While actors and actresses, famously even Vyjayanthimala would sometimes arrive on set to shoot a dance song without prior rehearsal, long hours of rehearsal was the norm for these dancers.

7 Ramnath, Nandini. “Flashback: PL Raj, the ace choreographer who helped the stars to find their feet”, Scroll.in, 9 October 2023, <https://scroll.in/reel/1057253/flashback-pl-raj-the-ace-choreographer-who-made-the-stars-find-their-feet>

“Pehle ke guru khade hoke bahut kam batate the. Assistant hi zyada batate the”, (earlier gurus mostly taught while sitting, it was their assistants who stood and helped in their teaching), remarked Padma Khanna. Assistants would be responsible for first becoming the bodies on whom the choreography is made, learning it, and then teaching it to actors, conducting rehearsals, being at the receiving end of star tantrums, and being on their toes for long hours.

Lacchu Maharaj, who choreographed in Mughal-E-Azam (1960), Pakeezah (1972) among others, was often assisted by his partner and disciple Kathak dancer Rama Devi. Popular dancer actress Padma Khanna credits her understanding of camera based dancing almost entirely to a young Saroj Khan, her colleague at the time (personal interview, Padma Khanna, 2022). Khanna famously played Meena Kumari’s body double in Pakeezah (1972) in the song ‘teer-e-nazar’ and was famous for both her cabaret songs as well semi classical hybrid dances such as ‘husn ke lakhon rang’ from Johny Mera Naam (1970) and ‘ni main yaar manana ni’ from Daag (1973). She elaborates that while she had taken extensive training in Kathak in Banaras before entering films, dancing for the camera is very different from dancing on stage. In order to be a good film dancer, it was not enough to be a good dancer, but required reorienting how the body is supposed to move along with the camera. Understand how camera frames one’s body, accentuate the bends, side profile, silhouettes, how to move, where to look, adjust the hand if the movement is getting cut from the camera frame- Saroj Khan understood the importance of all this as a young girl much earlier than many others

It was Saroj who taught Khanna how to adapt her dance for the screen. Khanna remembers Saroj as being a keen observer on sets often standing next to the cameraman, asking '*dada isko aise karein to? (dada what if we shoot it like this?)*'. "She always had her eye on the future", Khanna adds. Khanna also shares how many trained dancers struggled to 'open up their body' to the hybridity of film dance. Indeed, what happens when a restrained classical dance conditioned body meets the boisterous, open, rule breaking bollywood filmi dance. Bela Bose in an interview remarks that she saw many classical dancer actresses fall flat on their face when they encountered filmi dance, "*bade badon ki chhutti ho jaati thi*" she says. (Tabassum Talkies, YouTube 2020)

Padma credits Gopi Krishna, from whom she learned and was associated with for many years for 'opening up her body,' making it ready to embrace the film dance vocabulary. '*Gopi bhaiya ne shareer ki jhijhak nikaal di, body ke har joint ko khol diya*' (he removed the hesitation in my body and opened up all joints of my body for film dance). She remembers how they would dance for hours, and how the dance sequences required sitting, standing, jumping, leading to their knees and elbows getting bruised. Together with the male dance directors these women dancers created a language that set the tone for Bollywood dancing at one time. They had a participatory role in the process of movement production, choreography and the larger aesthetic of Bombay cinema.

As solo dancers in films, it was their ability to execute even the toughest movements that gave choreographers the freedom to devise challenging, hybrid and experimental movements. Any choreographer would agree that having a skilled dancing body opens up infinite possibilities and allows the choreographer to bring out his/her own

creativity into the dance. A not so skilled dancer on the other hand would present limitations on what the choreographer can achieve. Thus, the presence of these women dancers, with their highly skilled, flexible and strong bodies is actually the carrier of the tradition of Bombay filmi dance. It is what allowed the influential male choreographers such as B.Sohanlal, Gopi Krishna to unleash their full creativity.

While some dancers could do it, others struggled. Dancer actress Anjana Mumtaz who trained in Kathak under Gauri Shanker, Mangal Master and Gopi Krishna recalled feeling very stuck once her classically trained body encountered the filmi hybrid choreographies in the 1950s-70s. While working on a particular '*mela*' song dance with fellow dancer actress Jayshree T. who could navigate the movements easily, Mumtaz found herself stuck. Masterji would scold her asking why she is not able to do it?

"*Tum to dancer ho na? Kholo body ko!*", he would say. (Why are you not able to dance? You're a dancer right? Open your body!)

"*Ab main khul kaise jaun...?*", (how do I open my body?) she would wonder. (personal interview, Anjana Mumtaz, 2022)

What did that mean? Viscerally? In her body? How does a classically trained conditioned body break out of the grammar it is used to follow? It is clearly not easy, and requires extraordinary labour of learning, unlearning and relearning to open up their bodies to embrace hybrid film dance. Thus, becoming a successful dancer in the film industry required a host of skills beyond the traditional repertoire of Kathak. Versatility was not just key, it was survival. In other words, an entirely new dancing persona had to be refashioned, one that could dance for the camera and not just for stage, and that could break the conditioning of a classically trained body.



Figure 12. Padma Khanna as Meena Kumari's body double in the song '*teer-e-nazar*' from *Pakeezah* (1972). Youtube screenshot



Figure 13. Dancer Actress Roopmala in the song '*Bajooband khul khul jaaye*' from *Bazooband* (1954). YouTube screenshot

Eventually, Mumtaz found an ally in comedian actor Mehmood, who helped her and she slowly found her footing in film dance. It is noteworthy that though Mehmood was no professional dancer, his father Mumtaz Ali was a highly established dancer of the 1930s-40s Bombay film industry.

Part 2 : Legacy

Who gets remembered and who doesn't is the slightly malicious nature of legacy.

With the revival of Indian classical dance in late 19th and early 20th century the symbol of legacy and upholders of tradition rested on the shoulders of male hereditary dancers.⁸ They came to be regarded as the source of knowledge, the last word, and while there is no doubt about their expertise, it is the expertise of many lesser known dancers, musicians, courtesans that got undermined in the process. The names of male choreographers, such as Gopi Krishna, B.Sohanlal, B.Hiralal, Lachhu Maharaj, find a mention owing to their status as male *gharanedar* dancers, however it is the women dancers/dance assistants who get doubly marginalised as they are neither male, nor *gharanedar*, but they embodied a sensibility of dance that could embrace the classical as well as the experimental.

The Bombay film industry has perhaps the largest workforce of Kathak dancers outside of the classical dance world- yet, most mainstream Kathak dance institutes or higher certification bodies do not have a dedicated study in their curriculum or even regular open classroom conversations devoted to Kathak

dancers in films. The conversations that do happen remain restricted to canonical topics such as *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981), Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Madhuri Dixit, etc despite a huge body of work outside of these known names.

But apart from hierarchies of gharana, gender and lineage, there seems to be a lack of respect within the film industry regarding the status of dancers. When actor director Guru Dutt approached dancer Minoo Mumtaz to dance in the song '*saqiya aaj mujhe*' from *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962), she initially wanted to refuse citing how she had stopped dancing in films and wanted to graduate to more serious acting roles.⁹

Baaje Payal, a highly popular and important TV Doordarshan series on dancers, choreographers and actors in Bombay Cinema (produced by dancer actress Asha Parekh) does not prominently feature these women Kathak/film dancers. Even as it has entire episodes dedicated to actresses such as Saira Banu, who is not the most known for her dance (Prasar Bharati Archives, YouTube).

However, the dancers themselves too, seem to leave their careers after marriage. Some got tired of working, some like Rani complained of relatives who used their labour for making money¹⁰ and some like Jeevankala shared how their husbands didn't like their dancing post marriage.¹¹ Most resorted to a quiet family life away from the limelight or turned into teachers, and opened dance institutes such as Indianica Academy by Padma Khanna in the USA, imparting training in Indian dance styles.

8 Chakravorty, Pallabi. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*. Seagull Books, 2008

9 Raheja, Dinesh, and Jitendra Kothari. *Sahib, Bibi, Aur Ghulam: The Original Screenplay*. Om Books International, 2012

10 Tabassum "Dancer Rani and her Life Long Troubles | Tabassum Talkies." YouTube, uploaded by Tabassum Talkies, 20 April 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2glmXtoi5M&t=235s>

11 Kelkar, Jeevankala. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

Working on women Kathak dancers of Bombay Cinema felt like accessing a part of my own history that was yet unknown to me. While the names and information about *gharanedar* dancers is relatively easier to find due to documentation of lineage and family trees (in oral and written history), it proved far trickier to find information about these women dancers. Official sources were scant, except for a few features here and there. I have mostly relied on watching a lot of films combined with personal interviews with surviving dancers, journalists, film industry members, to piece together narratives from what they remember about themselves and their colleagues.

For a long time, I wanted to find information on the background dancers in the song ‘*chalte chalte*’ from *Pakeezah* (1972). I love their soft dancing in the song, as well as their presence, gentle and beautiful but never overpowering. In my fieldwork I was able to meet a lot of people directly/indirectly associated with the film, including Anjana Mumtaz, who spent a lot of time on the sets of *Pakeezah*, as a young girl. Mumtaz very kindly shared memories of her time at the set during my interview with her. Her Kathak guru Gauri Shanker was a choreographer in the film, and she would accompany him on set for rehearsal, along with her mother. She watched rehearsals for months very closely, and remembers the two background dancers as being very friendly. There were many background dancers in *Pakeezah*, if one looks at the ‘Bazar-E-Husn’ set from the song ‘*inhi logon ne*’. Each dancer in the background of Meena Kumari had a separate dance master assigned who would be directing her. It was a big group, and many young dance directors got informally launched into the film industry from *Pakeezah*, she remembers. She especially remembers the two background dancers, though details were hazy as she was very young at the time of shooting.

12 Singh, Professor Surjit, et al. *Background Dancers in Hindi Films (1952-68)*. Notion Press, 2021

“*The women dancers on Pakeezah sets took me under their wing. They would share their tiffin with me, play with me, teach me todas-tukdas (kathak compositions), they were all very sweet*”, she says.

I asked her if she remembered their names. I asked Padma Khanna and many others who worked on the film if they remembered. From hazy memories, I got four names that repeated themselves- Sujata, Leela, Chanda, Meenaxi. Though no one could match the name and face with clarity.



Figure 14. Image compiled by the author

I went on Imdb, typed ‘Meenaxi’, and made a list of films that had ‘Meenaxi’ mentioned as an additional cast. I watched the credits and a few scenes of all those films. Eventually, I was able to correlate the name and the face. Films that had a common face and name of Meenaxi. The one on the right of the screen with the round face was Meenaxi for sure. I was so satisfied with myself.

Regarding the other one, I had seen her in *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962) as Meena Kumari’s maidservant Chinta and as per Prof Surjit Singh’s book on background dancers her name is Chanda.¹²

But, the final word by Anjana Mumtaz sank my



Figure 15. Image compiled by the author



Figure 16. Image compiled by the author



Figure 17. Image compiled by the author

enthusiasm. She said to me, *“they were likely Muslim women from Uttar Pradesh who had changed their name to work in films.”*

Oh, I thought to myself.
Will I ever know their real names now?
I don’t know, I don’t think so.

Regardless, a study of women dancers in Bombay Cinema takes one down an absolutely delightful road of beautiful dance, beautiful expressions, and a sense of primal joy and happiness one feels towards Bombay film song and dance. It is also a reminder of the many histories of dance in the world of Kathak and Bombay Cinema that are yet to be written, some of which I have tried to discover and write through this research.



Figure 18. (L-R) Minoo Mumtaz, Kumkum in the song '*reshmi salwar kurta jali ka*' from *Naya Daur* (1957). YouTube screenshot



Figure 19. (L-R) Alka Noopur, uncredited Kathak dancer, Amitabh Bachchan in the song '*apni to jaise taise*' from *Lawaris* (1981). Youtube screenshot

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