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POTENTIAL BEYOND BOUNDARIES



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*BEST FOOT FORWARD*

## Dancing to a different tune

### A city organisation recently held a dance competition for eunuchs, cross-dressers and transgenders

*Aditi Utpat*

It was a warm afternoon on the fourth day of Ganeshotsav. A few metres away from the Dagdusheth Halwai temple, where millions throng everyday to seek blessings through the ten-day festival, a dance competition is on.

With the participants dancing with gusto, the event could be easily mistaken for yet-another celebration of Ganeshotsav. But, it is different, because the dancers are eunuchs, cross-dressers, or transgenders from the lanes of Budhwar Peth, the city's red-light district.

Members of the community-outreach organisation, Udaan, they share an easy camaraderie among themselves. They walk into the crowd in-between the dance moves to give someone a peck, or to collect money from someone. They love the whistles and claps, and often a member of the audience joins the dancer for a few moves.

Siddhi, an outreach worker (ORW) for Udaan, is one of the popular dancers in the group. Dressed in a casual T-shirt with a saris tied below the waist, Siddhi narrates the story of her entry into the world of eunuchs. "At the age of fourteen, I realised I was different. By the age of fifteen, I started wearing saris. Thankfully, I got a good support from my family. Though it was difficult to convince them initially, they eventually realised that I am a human and have the right to live with dignity," she says.

Siddhi has had a male partner since class V. "But I forced him to get married. I may be beautiful, I may dress up like a woman, but I can never substitute a real woman in his life. He is now happily married and has a kid too."

Siddhi is now pursuing a BA degree, and proudly says her friends have accepted her as she is. "I don't face any problems among my peers," says Siddhi.

One of the founder members of Udaan in the city, Soni, popularly known as Shabnam, is the star dancer. "I always felt I was a woman. I dropped out of school in class ten because I was teased incessantly. After that, I worked in a laundry, later joined Udaan," she narrates. "I separated from my family about six years back. While my mother does not have a problem with me, my father does not like it. I now visit them once a month."

Confident, forthright, and beautifully dressed, Soni is quick to whip out a visiting card from her purse. "I dance in various parties and weddings. I have performed in Pune, Bangalore, Gulbarga, Vijapur..."

The dancers swing to the tunes of popular Hindi and regional songs, with a finesse akin to the item girls of Bollywood. Sayyad Rauf Ahemad, co-ordinator of the organisation, says the trust has been celebrating Ganeshotsav for the last six years. "We use the festival to get all of them together, educate them about health hazards, and give them a feeling of kinship."

Explaining the working of the organisation, Rauf narrates, "Our ORWs hang out in public toilets, etc in certain parts of the city. When men come there, they educate them, create awareness and inform about Udaan. They also distribute condoms and give demonstrations." Most of the Udaan members have joined the organisation through ORWs.

This year, Udaan trust organised various competitions, including essay, mehendi, self-esteem and dance, for its members. The essay entries received a huge response, as most members poured their hearts out. "There are 3,200 members of Udaan in the city, and 50,000 in the entire state," informs Rauf.

"We used to earlier shy away from the public eye. But now, we are coming out in the open, demanding abolition of section 377 of the IPC which declares homosexuality illegal. We were even present for a conference in Mexico where health minister Ramadoss agreed to look into the issue," says Rauf.

As the dance gather momentum, hoots and claps drown our voices. Leaving aside all inhibitions, we join the group in their celebrations, enjoying the festival as a break from everything else.

