Dhamal: an Afro-Indian dance

Folk dances are the dance of everyday life as compared to sophisticated and stylized classical dances. They form part of every occasion from birth to death, and are expressions of joy and overcoming sorrow. Folk dance is community dance; each community has its own dances to herald different events and festivals.

Gujarat's Gir area, famous for its lions, is also famous for its Dhamal dance performed by the Siddis, originally from the African continent. No written records are available about them, but it is believed the Siddis of Africa travelled to India about three hundred years ago and settled in Ratnapur near Bharuch, in Jalore near Jodhpur, and in Ahmedabad. About 700 years old, Dhamal dance is today performed with many modifications although the flavour of African dance has been kept intact. The story goes that Hazarat Baba Gaur, along with his Siddi clan, migrated to the village of Ramrampur in Gujarat, from his home in East Africa. Travelling in search of business, the Siddis never went back to their home and Baba Hazarat who breathed his last in Ramrampur slowly gained the status of a Pir.

In Maharastra, at Murud-Janjira in the Bay area of the sea, is a fort overlooking an island. The fort is traced back to warriors who came and settled there along with their leader Malik Ambas during the 16th century. This Abyssinian warrior became the regent of Ahmednagar. These Siddis established their own little state. The locked palace in the fort still bears the crest of the Siddis of Janjira on the iron gate. It is a shield supported by two turbaned and bearded warriors created by a bow in full sail — perhaps symbolizing the vessel which brought the warriors to the shores of India.

Class of Siddis are settled in Kutch, Talala Gir, Raippada, Ahmedabad, Bharuch, Ratnapur, Jhagadia and Surat. They are also to be found in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnatka, and Andaman and Nicobar islands.

There are two main stories about the coming of the Siddis. One is that of businessmen coming in search of fortune, and the other is that of warriors. Every year Siddis from all over India congregate on the 9th and 10th days of the month of Rajab (August), at Ratnapur to pay their respect at the Pir's Dargah. The Siddis are Muslims by religion but they also worship Hindu gods and goddesses. They sing songs in praise of Goddess Aruna.

When the Siddis gather together, Ratnapur wears the look of an African village and for two whole nights they perform the Dhamal to the beats of their traditional instruments like the dhol (drum), mela, conda, napt, cundim and mogarwun. The dancers play the dhol and sing and shout in ecstasy as they dance in a circle. One or two dancers come forward and dance in the middle of the circle, they jump and circle to the air and then take a position resembling the asanandi. The energetic movement reveals the dancer’s energy and control over his body, which is accompanied by various facial expressions and the gait of birds and animals, creates a magical atmosphere. A rigorous dance, Siddi Dhamal has a unique feature of throwing the coconut up in the air and breaking it with the head as it falls. Another breathtaking act is dancing on fire.

The Dhamal costume is colourful yet very simple. It comprises a peacock-feather skirt tied around the waist, anklets of peacock feathers and necklace made of beads. Water-colour applied on the face substitutes the ash, which used to be smeared on the cheeks.

Tall, dark and handsome Munna Badshah is a leading Dhamal dancer. His sole ambition is to take Dhamal to great heights. "Zarangi mein ek khwaab hai, Dhamal ko sambandh tak lokaana hai," says Munna the reigning badshah of Dhamal.

Munna, who has performed in 36 countries in the last 26 years, recalls an incident when he danced before former President of India R.R. Narayanan. The coconut he threw up, missed landing on his head and instead landed at the feet of the President. Munna was instantly surrounded by security men who mistook him for an intruder in disguise out to murder the President with a coconut.

A school dropout, Munna has written and composed songs for Dhamal in Swahili. He has tried to modify the movements of the dance and given it a degree of stylization. Siddi women perform Dhamal but never on stage. Munna feels initiating women into mainstream Dhamal will strengthen its continuity.

Munna says that though their ancestors belonged to East Africa, Siddis now regard India as their home and Gujarat as their karma-bhoomi. He hopes Dhamal will one day attain the same status as the Ghehra and Danida.

SAPNA RANGASWAMY