

Dhamal: an Afro-Indian dance

Folk dances are the dance of everyday life as compared to sophisticated and stylised 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 Ratanpur near Bharuch, in Jambur near Junagadh, 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 Hazrat Baba Gaur, along with his Siddi clan, migrated to the village of Ratanpur in Gujarat, from his home in East Africa. Travelling in search of business, the Siddis never went back to their home and Baba Hazrat who breathed his last in Ratanpur slowly gained the status of a Pir.

In Maharashtra, at Murud-Janjira in the bay area of the sea, is a fort overlooking an island. This fort is traced back to warriors who came and settled there along with their leader Malik Amber during the 16th century. This Abyssinian warrior became the regent of



Dhamal dancers: Munna Badshah (centre)

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 crested by a dhow in full sail — perhaps symbolising the vessel which brought the warriors to the shores of India.

Clans of Siddis are settled in Kachh, Talala Gir, Rajpipala, Ahmedabad, Bharuch, Ratanpur, Jhagadia and Surat. They are also to be found in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, 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 of warriors. Every year Siddis from all over India congregate on the 9th and

10th days of the month of Rajjab (August), at Ratanpur 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 Amba.

When the Siddis gather together, Ratanpur 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 dhamal (drum), misra, conch, nobat, cochindo and mogarban. 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 in the air and then take a position resembling the araimandi. The energetic movement reveals the dancer's energy and control over his body, which, accompanied by various facial

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expressions and the gait of birds and animals, creates a magical atmosphere. A vigorous dance, Siddi Dhamal has a unique feature of throwing a 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. "Zindagi mein ek hi khwaab hai, Dhamal ko oonchaai tak leyjama hai," says Munna the reigning badshah of Dhamal.

Munna, who has performed in 36 countries in the last 26 years, recollects an incident when he danced before former President of India K.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 a terrorist 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 codify the movements of the dance and given it a degree of stylisation. 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 karmabhoomi. He hopes Dhamal will one day acquire the same status as the Garba and Dandiya.

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