

A Women's Festival Taken Over

—The Gujarati Navratri



The Garba dance

UNTIL about 20 years ago, Navratri was a women's festival among Gujaratis. Unlike in north India, where Ramlila precedes Dasehra, in Gujarat the nine days before Dasehra are devoted to the worship of the mother goddess. The sacred *garba* (derived from the Sanskrit word *garbha* meaning uterus) was kept in a decorated corner of the house. The *garba* is a painted earthen pot with small holes in the sides. A lamp is placed in it which illuminates it. Every evening, the family would sit near it and sing Gujarati songs or sometimes Sanskrit verses of mother worship. Later in the night, the women would dance in the open around a *garba* placed in the centre of their circle. This dance too was known as *garba*. The dance was accompanied with hand movements such as clapping and snapping of fingers.

The songs sung with the dance by the women are also known as *garba*. These folk songs, addressed to the mother goddess, known as *mataji* or *ma*, have many themes.

Some are romantic, relating to Radha

and Krishna. Many express the hopes and aspirations, sorrows and complaints of women, describing their everyday lives. Some songs even curse the mother-in-law and fantasise beating her up. No one woman could be blamed for saying such things because the song was collectively composed and sung. As the women danced, one or two with powerful voices would lead and the others repeat the lines.

All this came to an end by the late 1960s and early 1970s. First of all, in Bombay, and, later, in Gujarat, young boys started standing on the edge to watch women and girls perform. After a while, they started participating in the last dance, the *dandia ras*, performed with small wooden sticks, to a fast beat. Older women would generally opt out of this number. Gradually, this last dance began to extend late into the night and acquire more importance. As the boys generally belonged to the same families and neighbourhoods as the girls, their participation was not objected to.

Before anyone realised it, Navratri

festival was taken over by these young men who began to shift it from the family to the public arena. They collected funds, installed microphones and replaced women's folksongs with taperecorded music or hired bands. Instead of different families in rotation providing *prasad* of a few sweets after the *puja*, expensive snacks were introduced. Navratri was gradually transformed into an extremely noisy and highly commercialised festival.

Today, *garbas* are held on a massive scale. Hundreds of tickets for each



Man dressed as woman dancing at contemporary celebration, Rupal village, Gujarat

—Jutta Jain

programme are sold in advance. *Garbas* in posh localities like Juhu are a status symbol and people from Delhi and other cities are known to come to Bombay to attend them. In this process, women's creativity and self expression have been repressed. Older women are completely pushed out. Their knowledge of old songs is devalued. There is no way they can cope with the fast beats and vigorous dancing. The circle expands to about 20 times the size of the original. The dance itself has become a cross between the *bhangra* and the *hijra* dance popularised by Amitabh Bachhan. The dancing is almost wordless, to the loud beat of drums and other instruments. Old songs are replaced by Gujarati film songs. These imitation *garba* songs have spread out from Bombay and reached even villages of Gujarat. The new vulgarised form of *garba* has been termed Disco Dandia. The bands play anything from film songs to *bhangra* to jazz or American pop.

Film stars are invited to participate in the dance and give away prizes to the best performer, best couple, best costume and so on. This manner of celebrating *garba* began in Bombay and soon became fashionable in Gujarat too. The only positive development in this process is the desegregation of boys and girls in the conservative middle class. But young girls have completely lost the initiative to organise the festival that their mothers had in the smaller celebrations of earlier years.

In the family based celebrations, women of different income groups could participate with others of the same community. Today, working class people dance in the open while the upper and middle class Gujaratis in Bombay hire large grounds, seal them and employ security guards to prevent outsiders from entering. There is quite a bit of rowdiness on the streets on Navratri nights. A lot of money is spent on erecting *pandals*, decorating the huge gates, lighting, music, food, security, buying spurious "traditional" costumes and jewellery.

Traders and businessmen happily patronise the festivities. They sponsor the shows, announce special gifts to the



Contemporary celebration, Rupal village – male takeover

performers. In return, they get free publicity for their shops and products on the banners, hoardings, tickets, and newsreports.

Commercialisation and stifling of women's creativity are not the only negative consequences of men's takeover of the Navratri festival. Another is an increase in aggressiveness.

In Maharashtra, Tilak had encouraged public celebration of Hindu festivals as a strategy to politicise the masses. This, however, strengthened communal politics.

In the last few years, all Hindu festivals are being celebrated in a noisier and more aggressive way. Earlier, *garba* used to be celebrated only by Gujaratis, and was despised by Maharashtrians, who complained about the "silly Gujju songs" being sung at night. Conversely, Gujaratis would complain of the disturbance caused by the Maharashtrian Ganesh Chaturthi festival when the immersion processions blocked the streets. Gujaratis do worship Ganpati but he is not the main deity as he is in Maharashtra. For a while in the 1960s,

the two communities competed with each other in public display at their respective festivals.

There is a history of tension between the two communities because, earlier, Bombay was the capital of a bilingual state comprising present day Gujarat and Maharashtra and language riots had taken place. Gujaratis were the target of the slogan "*Mumbai Amchi*" (Bombay is ours) at that time. After the formation of Gujarat state in 1960, the sentiment subsided somewhat. The hostility of organisations like Shiv Sena, founded in 1967, which stand for a Maharashtrian Bombay, is directed more against poor migrants from the south and Muslims. Gujaratis also are viewed as second class citizens but being relatively prosperous, they are influential and there is hardly any migration of the poor from Gujarat villages to Bombay.

In the last few years, both Maharashtrians and Gujaratis have begun to celebrate both festivals. They have come closer together through this, but, unfortunately, political parties and communal bodies make use of the festivals to demonstrate "*Hindu Ekta*." The character of the festivals and the worship has undergone significant changes.

When *garba* was celebrated in the home, the *puja* used to be conducted by the women. Men were usually not interested in the worship and used to come after a couple of hours. They were more interested in the dancing. But as the celebration moved into the public arena, the planning, financing and management were taken over by men. They began to instal actual statues of goddesses instead of the original smallish pot which symbolised the uterus. They also began to spend a lot of money on the *puja*. Brahmins are called to perform *havan* like rituals which had no place in the original worship. They recite Sanskrit verses. Many more men participate in the *puja* now.

Last year, large sized idols of Durga and various other goddesses were installed during Navratri and immersed on Dasehra day. This was in imitation of the Bengali Durga Puja and the Maharashtrian Ganpati immersion. It has nothing to do

with the *garba* worship of the mother goddess.

It is noteworthy that the Ganpati festival is a very male dominated affair. Men dance all the way to the immersion site in front of the idol while women follow, walking demurely. Now, Gujarati communities have started celebrating the Ganpati festival in a similar way, with perhaps more participation by women in the dance. This has led to Gujaratis dancing in wedding processions too, which was never part of the tradition.

The two festivals, Navratri and Ganpati happen to fall in the same /month. There is no direct connection between them but the celebrations now extend into one another. Many Maharashtra Ganeshotsav committees have started having their own Navratri festivities. This year a claim was made that Navratri in Bombay is a 100 year old "Hindu tradition". Thus the religious identity is being made to supercede community cultural identity. The way they have incorporated the idea of goddess worship into their tradition is through the legend that goddess Bhavani gave her sword to Shivaji, the warrior hero. Bhavani has in fact never been a major deity in Maharashtra. There is not much goddess worship in Maharashtra. Goddesses exist more as wives of various gods. For example, Saraswati, who is not seen as



Priest and men in costume, with swords, proceeding for puja. Contemporary celebration by Gujarat Association, New Delhi

married in many other traditions, is considered one of the wives of Ganpati in this tradition.

Bhavani's connection with Shivaji is now highlighted by Shiv Sena and others who have adopted Shivaji as a symbol of militant Hinduism. Shivaji had a saffron flag because he had donated his kingdom to Guru Ramdas who returned it to him, saying

he should reign in the name of his *dharma*. Shiv Sena today interprets this in a limited and anti Muslim way, translating *dharma* as "Hindu religion."

This year, the three weeks of celebration of Ganpati and Navratri festivals brought out the aggressive chauvinistic quality of such events. The illegal use of loudspeakers after 11 p.m. was challenged in court. A fierce and highly publicised legal battle ensued. The Shiv Sena, the BJP and one Nitin Mavani, a Congress (I) leader, who is the moving spirit of the Sagar Friends' Circle, which had violated the law in the matter of loudspeakers, claimed that Hindus were being prevented from "traditional" observance of their festivals. BJP workers staged a black gag protest, claiming their cultural expression was being stifled.

On Dasehra, Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray, at a public meeting at Shivaji Park, suggested that Hindus should arm themselves and take steps against what he termed provocation. This section of opinion also said that if Hindus were not allowed to have loudspeakers until late at night, then no community should be allowed to undertake commercial activity



Priest performs havan at contemporary celebration, Rural village, Gujarat

late at night during their festivals. This was a clear reference to the sweetshops and restaurants in Muslim areas which are allowed to remain open, all night during the month of Ramadan when devout Muslims can only consume food and water between sunset and sunrise.

The immersion processions on Dasehra this year were ominous. The dancing, as always on such occasions, was obscene and bizarre. It was reminiscent of the *yatras* in Ahmedabad. The annual *rathiyatra* in Ahmedabad was banned in 1985 because of the tense communal situation. Despite the ban, the procession was taken out and violence broke out. The same thing happened again in 1986. The procession is becoming bigger each year. Anti Muslim slogans are shouted and violence erupts. A month later, Gujarati Hindu bodies planned a procession for Janmashtami even though such processions have never been heard of in Gujarat. When the proposed procession was disallowed, leaders called for a protest *bandh* which was very successful.

Similarly, in Bombay, the introduction of Durga worship and immersion procession, among Gujaratis, is for emphasising so called Hindu culture. It is a dangerous trend and intended to be a show of Hindu strength and militancy.

Today, in Gujarat, a picture of the goddess Amba (Bhavani) riding on a tiger is placed in every bus. In Bombay, every police station has pictures of Ganapati prominently displayed. Minorities are supposed to respect this communalisation



Worship at Rupal village. Note pictures of Shiva, Durga, Krishna in the background.

of public institutions and view it as "Indian culture."

Quiet worship at home does not have the potential to explode into violence, as large scale public worship in public places has. The new enthusiasm in the Gujarati community for large scale *puja* and religious discourses has coincided with the male takeover and commercialisation of the festival. It has created a fertile atmosphere for the reception of such teachers as Murari Babu, who has made the *Tulsi Ramayan* very popular amongst the generally *Gita* reading Gujaratis. He also propagates the liberation of *Ram Janmabhumi*.

Another preacher with a large fanatical following propagates the concept of Yogeshwar Krishna who is free of all female connections like Yasodha or Radha, and whose chief role is to prepare Arjun for *dharma yuddha* interpreted as war to save religion.

It is hard to counter the wave of communal chauvinism in the guise of culture and tradition. Some attempts are being made, in Ahmedabad and Vadodara, by women's groups. However, these and other anticomunalist groups are quite small, while parties organising *garbas* to expand their mass base are large and influential. The picture is grim and depressing. □

Students Demand Justice

In June 1986, Rajni Parasher, a research scholar working for her PhD at the botany department, Delhi University, died after consuming mercuric chloride in the laboratory. It was widely believed that harassment by her supervisor, Dr. S.C. Maheswari had driven her to suicide.

Dr. Maheswari had made Rajni change her research topic many times. It is also alleged that he took no interest in her work. Dr. Maheswari did not come out of his chamber when Rajni consumed poison on

June 16 nor did he visit her in hospital where she lay for a week, fighting for life.

The CBI report states that Rajni was driven to suicide and holds Dr. Maheswari responsible for this. The report also hints that attempts were made by Dr. Maheswari and his wife to misguide the investigators. A slip of paper with the telephone number of an abortion clinic was attached to Rajni's notebook. The CBI team wasted a lot of time following up this lead which proved a red herring.

In February 1987, the vice chancellor, in consultation with former chief justice Bhagwati, appointed Mr. Harbans Lal, retired judge of Chandigarh high court, to advise the university on the action it should take. Students continue to agitate for suspension of Dr. Maheswari and initiation of criminal proceedings against him on the basis of the CBI report. They see the case as typical of the harassment faced by research scholars in scientific institutes and university departments. □