

The Maldhari Touch to Kutchi Performing Arts

(The Kutch Maldhari Lok-kala Mahotsava, Bhuj, February 22-27, 1983)

Mohan Nadkarni

A vast tract of land, exposed since time immemorial to the vagaries of the elements—that is Kutch, a region bound by the Gulf of Kutch on the south, the Arabian Sea on the west and separated from the mainland by the 8,000 square miles of the Rann of Kutch on the north and the east.

Geographically speaking, the Kutch territory, often mentioned as Ahir Desha in ancient literature, is one of the most segregated areas of the State of Gujarat as it is constituted today. With an annual rainfall of only 400 millimetres, the territory is arid. The climate, though, is conducive to cultivation of grass to feed cattle.

The history of Kutch is traced to the Harappan period of the Indus Valley Civilization. On the basis of available data, it would appear that Kutch had a riverine culture since the Indus once flowed through the region. The Harappans, it would seem, had found this region suitable for the development of agriculture and animal husbandry.

Through the centuries, however, Kutch gradually became a land of immigrants, who came from Sind, Rajasthan and Kathiawad (Saurashtra). It is now inhabited by several nomadic tribes and communities such as Ahirs, Rabaris, Bharwads, Langas, Kolis, Charans and Kheduts.

It is also a region where a large number of Hindus and Muslims, known as Maldharis, live in complete harmony. So much so, that there has not been a single instance of communal rioting anywhere in Kutch. What is more, the Hindus and the Muslims even share a common genealogy.

The term *Maldhari* has an inseparable association with Kutch. It has an interesting etymology. *Mal* connotes wealth, while *Dhari* means its owner. Cattle, camels, sheep and goats are regarded as wealth by the community. But mere ownership of animals does not make for a true Maldhari who showers on them the same affection that he would on members of his own family. If, for example, a cow or a buffalo dies during occasions of rejoicing (like a wedding), the celebration will be cut short to observe mourning. A Maldhari would claim to recognise even the footmarks of every animal in his herd. He can name his animal, it is said, by the taste of its milk or the particular smell associated with it.

Some Maldharis have subsisted entirely on camel's milk. They are said to have never consumed cereals and pulses in their lifetime. The animals, too, are said to reciprocate the affection of their masters and it is believed that if strangers try to steal them, the cattle prefer to jump into the sea than be caught and waylaid by intruders!

This kind of social cohesion (between the Hindus and the Muslims of Kutch) is a phenomenon that is not to be witnessed anywhere else. The Muslim Maldharis do not eat beef, for they regard the cattle as their fellowbeings. The Muslim Langas play the *shahnai* and the *naubat* in all the Hindu temples. A Muslim musician shelters both Hindu and Muslim students in his home. If the Hindus migrate from a village, the Muslims take care of their Hindu shrine. Members of both communities also play *Raasa* together on festive occasions.

Kutchi culture, needless to say, is heterogeneous in character. As a spoken language (Kutchi does not have a script of its own), it has a variety of dialects, revealing, in varying degrees, a curious mixture of Gujarati, Sindhi, Persian and Arabic, depending on the regions which are contiguous to the different borders of Kutch.

Since the Gujarati script is the medium of writing for spoken Kutchi, most of its literary compositions are still handed down as oral traditions of songs, verses, legends, etc. There is rich and variegated colour in the proverbs and idioms, because they represent a legacy to which the Hindus and the Muslims have contributed in equal measure. Another notable feature of Kutchi tradition is that references to cattle and their products form a recurring motif in the names of places and in the spoken idiom.

The people of Kutch have for centuries remained somewhat at a distance from civilization. Water is their major problem as there are no rivers in the region. Famine is a regular occurrence and Nature has, on the whole, been unkind to this tract. Yet the Kutchis are a hardy people, endowed with a rare spirit of courage. They are, in fact, proud of their land and they seek to forget the daily grind of privation in their music and dance. Even in an inhospitable environment, they have managed to maintain their distinctive cultural traditions.

The six-day festival of folk and tribal music and dance, held at Bhuj, from February 22 to 27, 1983, was jointly sponsored by the Indian National Theatre's Research Centre for the Performing Folk Arts and Excel Industries Limited. The festival was a revelation because it unfolded before us the brilliant panorama of the performing arts of the region on a common platform. This Kutch Maldhari Lok-kala Mahotsava involved the participation of over 500 artistes drawn from the region and a few from neighbouring Saurashtra. Their presentations comprised songs, colourful dances, *bhajan*-s, performances on instruments, story-telling sessions and several other forms of entertainment.

The Mahotsava was a resounding success. The spacious *shamiana*, specially erected for the event, had 5,000 people witnessing the programme on the opening night. The attendance increased with each succeeding session, and on the final night more than 10,000 people, quite a large proportion of whom remained standing, watched the proceedings.

Spread over twenty hours, the Mahotsava fare included more than 60 presentations which afforded many significant vignettes of the Kutchi performing arts with their regional variations. Of these, as many as 25 were *Raasa* dance items; 21 featured vocal programmes; six were instrumental music recitals

and there were seven items of poetry recitations, *kirtana*-s in prose and verse and narration of stories.

To mark the inauguration, the proceedings appropriately began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp by ninety-year-old Suleman Jumma, the veteran *naubat* player, who also then presented the opening item of the Mahotsava. He produced an exciting variety of percussion patterns, often of great subtlety and complexity, to accompany the *shahnai* notes of his son Kamarbhai. The tunes were devotional in character and based on a number of local melodies known as Mada, Karai, Kutchi Kafi and Basant, the last of which, incidentally, was strikingly similar to the Hindustani *raga* Bahar.

Since detailed comments on individual items cannot be included here, an attempt is made to draw attention to just the highlights of the Mahotsava.

In the category of vocal recitals, pride of place must go to the impassioned *Rasuda* songs that came from the sixty-year-old, yet ebullient, Dhanbai Kara. Accompanied by *dhol* and *manjira*, she used appropriate gestures and equally expressive *abhinaya* to cast a spell on the listeners. So profound was the impact of her three *lokgeet*-s on the audience that in response to an encore, she rounded off her recital with another melody based on Pahadi.

Madhawala and Poonjawala, two Bhil brothers, who gave two performances, were in their element in their first recital. The brief, breezy songs in Kutchi Kafi had their own appeal and charm. But they could not create the same impact during their second appearance. Ali Mohammad Alarkhia's Kutchi Kafi numbers were interesting and made more lively by their intervening verbal comments. Delightful *bhajan*-s were also offered by Narendrasinh Jadeja, Lakharam Ransi, Sangabhai, Bhasar Bhura and Party, and Asmat Ransi.

In the instrumental section, Gulam Musa's *Jodiya Pawa* recital will be long remembered. *Jodiya Pawa* is a double flute and the player is accompanied by a soloist who provides the drone. Percussion support is conspicuous by its absence, but the flutist renders his numbers in a manner marked by a sense of rhythm pleasant to the ear. The short melodies that emanated from this gaily-decorated instrument were quite bewitching. In some of the pieces, there was a strange combination of *raga*-s like Kafi, Zinzoti and Sarang. At times, one also sensed a Carnatic touch in many a sequence or phrase. In contrast, the double-flute item, heard at a later session from Hussein Bawla Mistry, proved to be dull and routine.

Musa Lal's playing of *Morchang*, a mouth instrument, was striking only for its novelty. The instrument has its counterpart in the Carnatic ensemble and is often employed during Bharata Natyam performances. Musa's percussion support came from a metal basin which was held upside down by the player to produce rhythmic effects.

Pleasing music also came from Sumarbhai Suleman's playing of *Sundri*, which is a variation of the popular *Shahnai*. It is much smaller in size and has a shrill and high tone. The artiste played tunes based on Mishra Khamaj, Pilu

and Bhimpalasi. Then there was an interlude which presented pure, simple music on an instrument known as *Morii*, which resembles the snake-charmer's *Pungi*. Jogji Velji, the artiste, played tunes which were based on Kafi, Jogiya and Bhairavi. Another instrument which compelled attention was *Dakla*, which can be described as a big-size *Daff*, familiar in Maharashtra. It is played in propitiation of Asapura Devi who is then believed to enter the body of one of her devotees. It is the rhythm of the instrument that is said to invoke the divine spirit. Narsi Mammu, who played the *Dakla*, also recited some verses which sounded like incantations.

Khodidan Payak's *Lokvarta* in Kutchi was a fine specimen of story-telling—eloquent, inspired and rhythmical. A similar item by Dulabhai Tarakia was far too brief. P. B. Gadhvi's narration about the life and work of the leading local poet, Raghavji, elicited warm response from the audience, while Husseinbhai's story, based on the *Jasma Odan* theme, came to an abrupt end because of booing from the same audience.

Now, about the dance performances. Opinions will differ sharply on whether the overwhelming preponderance of the *Raasa* repertoire generated the kind of monotony and listlessness which, this writer feels, sometimes dogged the proceedings. Frankly, in point of structure, design and presentation, the dance section did not unfold much variety, though the thematic basis of each item may have been different. For instance, movements by *dandiya*-wielding participants, conjuring different formations were an integral part of the presentation. But they did give rise to moments of boredom largely because four to five such items were featured at each session and sometimes in a row.

Even so, mention must be made of the few performances which were interesting and exciting. One was *Talwar Raasa*, in which Hindu and Muslim artistes, from the original Rajput and Jat communities, participated. It depicted how in earlier times two opposing groups employed their swords to settle their feuds.

Then there was a group of eighteen boys, all between the ages of six and twelve, garbed in spectacular male and female costumes. They swept the audience off its feet by their attractive presentations. In another item, the dancers created swirling patterns as they sat and stood even while making their movements. In between, two dancers came forward from the wings with a proper camouflage which resembled a deer. A hunter was shown trying to catch the deer, while another tried to stop him. Thus a semblance of a folk drama was created against the background of the regular *Raasa* performances.

There was also a composite presentation in which male and female artistes from the Harijan community participated. Their movements in a variety of formations sought to depict the various phases of agricultural activities.

But the most impressive performance in this category was probably the one presented by 25 dancers from the Negro colony near Bhuj. With black scarves tied round their heads and accompanied by five main drummers, the artistes sang and danced, each one playing his own small drum. And as they

proceeded to move in a crescendo, they created a mood that had a trance-like effect on the spectators. The dance had a compulsive, hypnotic tempo.

A four-day seminar on the cultural traditions of Kutch was held as part of the Mahotsava. The discussions covered the folk culture of Kutch, the history and the origin of Maldharis and the oral traditions of the region.

Among the recommendations made at the seminar were the urgent need for starting research projects in the field of the history, literature and the performing arts of Kutch, the setting up of a welfare centre for the Maldharis, and a periodic organization of festivals of folk and tribal music and dance to ensure preservation and perpetuation of the Kutchi cultural heritage.

The scholars who made significant contributions were Ramsinhji Rathod, Shambhu Prasad Desai, Shambhudanji Gadhvi, Nagjibhai Bhatti, Jyotindra Jain, Vijayalaxmi Kotak, Dilip Vaidya, Pratap Trivedi and Upendra Vora.
