

*Rasa and Garba in the Arts of Gujarat*¹

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I

Rasa and *garba* are two interrelated and exceedingly popular forms of dance in Gujarat. The purpose of this article is not so much to trace the general chronology of *rasa* and *garba* from literary evidence as to examine the local Gujarati varieties of these dance forms in relation to their plastic and pictorial depictions. Literary sources, however graphic in description, do not always provide an accurate picture of the visual aspects of dance. Therefore *rasa* and *garba* as depicted in the visual arts of Gujarat might serve as a guide to an understanding of some features of these dances otherwise not easy to construe.

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan² has given a sufficiently exhaustive and analytical account of *rasa* as described in the *Harivamsha*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Shrimad Bhagavata* and *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* as well as the commentaries of Nilakantha on the Puranas. Vasant Yamadagni³ and Ramanarayana Agrawal⁴ have published full-fledged monographs on the *rasaleela* of Vraja and other related subjects. The aspects covered by them will not be dealt with in this article.

The descriptions of *rasa* in the Puranas make it clear that it is a circle-dance in which the participants move with hands interlocked. It appears that *rasa* included several types of circle-dances:

- (1) Those where several *gopi*-s formed a circle with Krishna in the centre;⁵
- (2) Those where Radha and Krishna danced as a pair together with other *gopi*-s or other pairs of *gopa*-s and *gopi*-s;⁶
- (3) Those where Krishna multiplied himself and actually danced between two *gopi*-s thus forming a ring with one *gopi* and one Krishna.⁷

The Puranas and many other works of classical literature also refer to a dance form called *hallishaka* (*hallisaka*). This was supposed to have been similar to *rasa* wherein, according to one description, all the *gopi*-s danced in a circle. But Bhasa⁸ also describes Krishna's dance on the hoods of the snake Kaliya as *hallishaka* and, therefore, it is difficult to define accurately the nature of *hallishaka* dance.

The Gujarati Traditions

Gujarati literature from the 15th century onwards is full of descriptions of *rasa* which follow the Puranic tradition as well as the local forms of the living traditions of these dances.

The major Gujarati literary works with significant descriptions of *rasa* include⁹ Nayarshi's *Phagu* (15th century), Narsi Mehta's *Rasa Sahasrapadi* (16th century), Vasanadasa's *Krishna Vrindavana Rasa* (16th century), Devidasa's *Rasa Panchadhyayino Sara* (17th century) and Vaikunthadasa's *Rasaleela* (17th century). Moreover Bhalana's *Dashamaskandha* and Bhima's *Harileela Shodashakala* (both 15th century), Keshavadasa's *Krishna Krida Kavya* (16th

century) and the works of Premananda, Madhavadasa, Ratneshvara, Lakshmidasa (all 17th century) contain descriptions of *rasa*.¹⁰

In the living tradition of Gujarat there are *rasa*-s performed by men alone, or by women alone or by men and women together. Sometimes a *rasa* called *dandia-rasa* is performed where each participant holds a pair of sticks in his or her hands and claps them to maintain a *tala*. Some *rasa*-s are performed without sticks. Sharadatanaya¹¹ (12th century) in his *Bhavaprakashana* enumerates three forms of *rasa*, namely, *latarasaka*, *dandarasaka* and *mandalarasaka*. Of these *dandarasaka* was surely the *dandia-rasa* mentioned above. About *latarasaka* two types of interpretations are possible. Either it was a dance of couples, each entwined in an embrace like the *lata* or creeper, or it was a dance in a circle in which all participants held hands to form a running 'creeper'. The latter type is frequently represented in painting and embroidery. *Mandalarasaka* was certainly exclusive of these two types, and, therefore, was perhaps a *tali-nritya* or a dance with *tala* indicated by the clapping of hands. As we shall see later, all these forms have been described in literature and depicted in the arts of Gujarat.

In this context it would be relevant to refer to Pandit Pundarika Vitthala's *Nrityanirnaya*¹² (16th century). Here *dandarasaka* is described in detail. Vitthala says, 'the sticks should be as thick as the thumb, sixteen fingers long, straight, without knots, rounded, of good quality wood, decorated with shellack and wrapped in silken cloth for smooth handling while dancing'.

It would also be appropriate here to mention other Gujarati dance forms such as *kuddana*, *hinch* and *hamchi*.¹³ Hemachandra¹⁴ explains *kuddana* as *rasa*. The word is related to the Gujarati *kudavun* meaning to jump. This must have been a dance form with rhythmic jumps. In *hinch*, which is performed, even today, in the month of Shravana, in the Vaishnava temples of Gujarat, two or more women dance in a circle, moving with extremely swift movements. The word *hinch* is related to Gujarati *hinchavun*, to swing, and therefore is indicative of the swinging movement of the dance. *Hamchi*, as a literary form and as a form of dance, is mentioned frequently in Gujarati literature. One of the earliest references is in Narsi Mehta¹⁵ (15th century): "Radha and Hari are in the centre and the *gopi*-s are in a circle around them, (she) performs *hamchi* with Hari and 'takes' clapping from hand to hand." Another related expression is *hamchi khundavi* meaning 'to take strong jumps of *hamchi*'. This indicates a dance form in which jumping movements were involved. This author has seen a ritual in Surat in connection with the goddess Randal,¹⁶ the wife of Surya. The ritual dance was called *randalno ghodo khundavo*, literally 'to jump forcefully like the horse of Randal'. Here two women, in a half-squatting position, jumped, moving swiftly in a circle. Perhaps *hamchi khundavi* was one such form.

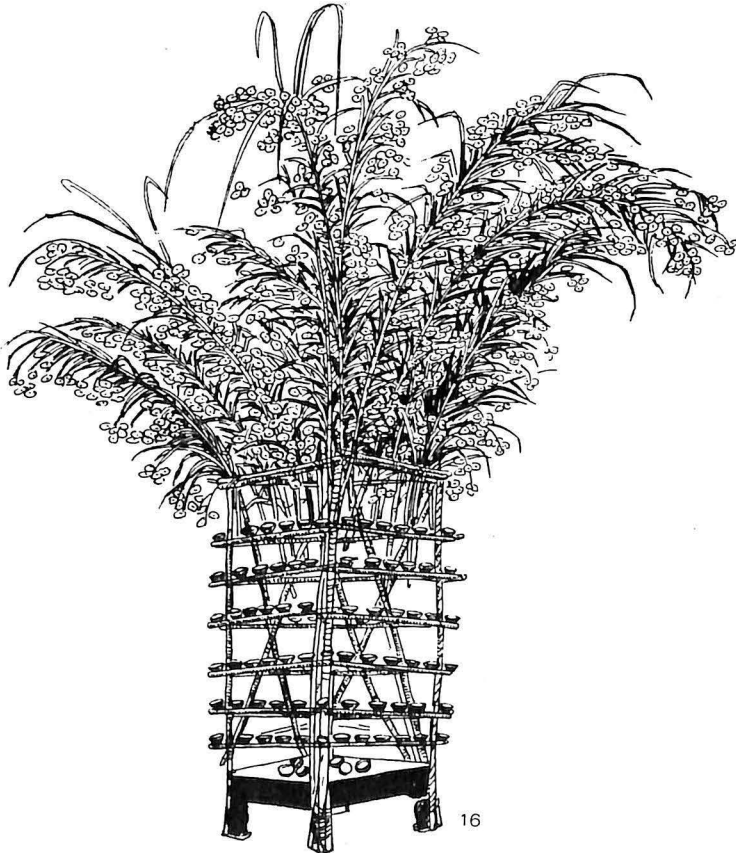
Closely related to *rasa* is the *garba* form of dance. This form is peculiar only to Gujarat and no mention of it has been made in any literature outside Gujarat. *Garba* is mainly performed by a group of women moving in a circle and maintaining *tala* by the clapping of hands.¹⁷ It can be broadly generalised that *rasa* is more connected with the cult of Krishna and *garba* with that of the Goddess. Originally these two forms had these cultic affiliations. But it must be pointed out that though this is generally true, occasionally there have been instances where the Krishna cult is connected with *garba* and the Devi cult with *rasa*. Famous lines

such as *Radha gori garbe ramva chalo*¹⁸ ('O Radha, the fair one, come to perform *garba*. . .') or . . . *Rami Bhavani rasa gaun guna garbi re*¹⁹ ('I sing the glory of *garbi* (wherein) Bhavani performed the *rasa*') can serve as examples of the phenomenon.

It should be noted that *garbo* refers to an earthen pot, its surface pierced by several holes, and with a wick-lamp inside. After placing such a pot in the middle, the women dance around it in a circle singing the *garbo* form of songs. Thus *garbo*, the special type of earthen pot, also provides the name for the forms of literature and dance.

Several conjectures have been made by scholars about the etymology of the word *garbo*. Usually it is attempted to derive the word from Sanskrit *garbha-deepa* (inner lamp) or *deepa garbho ghata*²⁰ (pot with a lamp inside). These are only conjectures and it is highly probable that the origin of the word was not in Sanskrit but in local usage.

The word *garbi* also deserves to be discussed in this context. In some areas of Gujarat, a wooden structure, with shelves or platforms for holding multiple earthen lamps, is placed in the centre and a circle dance is performed around it. This wooden structure is called *garbi*. (Illus. 16.) When excited by the rhythm of the dance or possessed by the goddess, a few of the men lift the *garbi* on their head and dance in that position.



Apart from being a wooden structure of a special kind, *garbi* is also a special form of literature. The *garbo* songs are generally elaborate, narrative in character and vigorous whereas *garbi* is supposed to be compact and delicate. But this distinction does not hold good if we analyse examples of these literary forms.

Narsi Mehta was one of the earliest poets to use the word *garbo* in place of *rasa* in the Vaishnava context. For instance, *Garbe rame shri gokulnatha ke sange gopi bani re lo?*¹ ('The Lord of Gokul performs *garba* (dance) along with *gopi*-s'). *Garba* and *rasa* truly merge in Narsi Mehta. In almost all literary descriptions of *rasa*, the only source of light is the moon. But Narsi Mehta refers to himself as *divatia* or the holder of the lamp in the *rasa* of Krishna and the *gopi*-s.²² This holding or placing of lamps in the middle is more associated with *garba* and, therefore, seems to indicate an influence (on the poet) of the local dance form of that name.

II

Depictions in the Arts of Gujarat

A large variety of *rasa* and *garba* dances are depicted in the painting, sculpture, wood-carving, embroidery, tie-dyed fabrics and printed textiles of Gujarat. An analysis of some of these will contribute to a deeper understanding of the visual forms of the dances and their variations.

The idea of the 'cosmic' *rasa/garba* was the theme of several of the late medieval poetic works of Gujarat. Poet Bhanadasa composed a *garba* which became known as *gagan mandalni gagardi* meaning 'the pitcher of the heavenly hemisphere'. In the first four lines the poet says:

'O glorious *garbi*, the pitcher of the heavenly hemisphere!
I sing the glory of *garbi*, (wherein) Bhavani performed the *rasa* (dance).
O glorious *garbi*, the sun, the jewel of the day, is the lamp (inside).
I sing the glory of *garbi*, the light is provided by the moon.'²³

As mentioned earlier, it is customary among the devotees of the Goddess in Gujarat to place *garba* or a perforated earthen pot, with a burning lamp inside, in the centre and perform a circle dance around it. As has also been noted before, Narsi Mehta pictures himself as 'a holder of the lamp' in the *rasa* of Krishna and *gopi*-s. In the 'cosmic' image of the above-quoted *garba* of Bhanadasa, the place of the burning lamp is taken by the Sun and the Moon forming the lamp-bowl and the flame respectively.

Amazingly enough, the idea of 'cosmic' *rasa* or *garba* has been beautifully depicted in a Kathi embroidery of Saurashtra, belonging to about the first quarter of this century. Its Saurashtrian owner described it in a significant sentence: *Chanda-surajni sakhe kahn-gopi rasa rame chhe* (Krishna and the *gopi*-s are performing *rasa* in the presence of the Sun and the Moon). The *rasa-mandala* in this embroidered piece is conceived in the background of greyish blue satin, indicating the sky. Inside the *mandala* is patched a large red satin disc to represent the Sun and a yellow satin crescent form to represent the Moon. (Illus. 1.)

The tradition of depicting this type of cosmic *rasa* in art is rare but, combined with literary and popular expressions, it seems the idea was deeply rooted in the minds of the people.

Latarasaka is (as has been stated before) another form mentioned in literature. In all probability it was a circle dance in which the participants formed a running 'creeper' by holding each other's hands. In the various media of arts such as tie-dye, embroidery, painting, etc. *lata* or the creeper of participants can be seen formed, not only by joining hands, but sometimes by holding a shawl or a *dupatta* between each of the two participants and thus forming an unbroken circle. (Illus. 2.) The concept of the 'creeper-dance' has been expressed more literally in an embroidered Chamba-rumal. (Illus. 3.) Here, each pair, of Krishna and a *gopi*, moves in a circle and all the dancers hold between them a lotus with a long stem, thus forming a running 'creeper' of lotuses.

Gujarati literature refers to *phudadi*, a play of Radha and Krishna in which the two participants stretch out their hands in a crossed position at about 90 degrees from the torso and, after obtaining a tight grip of each other's palms by interlocking them, they speedily revolve in a circle. Premananda²⁴ (17th century), describing a *rasa* on the bank of the river Jamuna, says, '(Krishna) revolves in *phudadi*, holds her close and leaves nail-marks on the thighs.' The *phudadi* type of dance finds ample expression in art. In one of the embroidered wall hangings of the Kathis of Saurashtra, Radha and Krishna are shown engaged in *phudadi* in the centre, while other *gopa*-s and *gopi*-s perform *rasa* around them. (Illus. 4.) The Kathis inhabited, in the main, the central region of the peninsula of Saurashtra which was once known as Kathiavad after the Kathis. Kathi women were skilled embroiderers; their work was marked by charming figurative work in herringbone and chain stitches. Religious themes, including *rasa* and *garba*, frequently figured in their textiles.





The dance had widespread popularity. In a Rajsthani painting done on a *tambura*, Krishna and Radha are shown revolving in *phudadi*, and attended by musicians. (Illus. 5.)

In the *bandhani*-s, the tie-dyed veilcloths, of Kutch and Saurashtra, specially the silken ones, it was customary to have, in the field, a large circle formed by dancing women. One such *bandhani* from the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad, shows sixteen women in a circle, each one with one hand fully raised upwards and another slightly extended frontwards. (Illus. 6.) A *rasa* performed by sixteen women has been mentioned in *Bhavaprakashana*.²⁵ In the tie-dye technique, the motifs are constructed by dots and are, therefore, stylised rather than realistic. The silk veilcloths of the women of the Bhatias, Lohanas, Bhansalis, and the Hindu Khatri of Kutch usually contained depictions of *rasa/garba*. In these depictions there are no sticks in the hands of the participants, who are all women, and so it is possible that the dance shown here is *garba* where the *tala* is kept by the clapping of the hands.

Another example of such a dance with *tali* conducted extensively by women is in an embroidered skirt. (Illus. 7.) Here each participant is shown in motion with hands parted to clap rhythmically. The dancing figures appear just above the hem border of the skirt, thus forming a circle along the border. Each figure is framed in an arched *torana* and delicately worked out with fine detail of costume and ornaments.

The *rasa* dance in which Krishna multiplied himself to be able to make



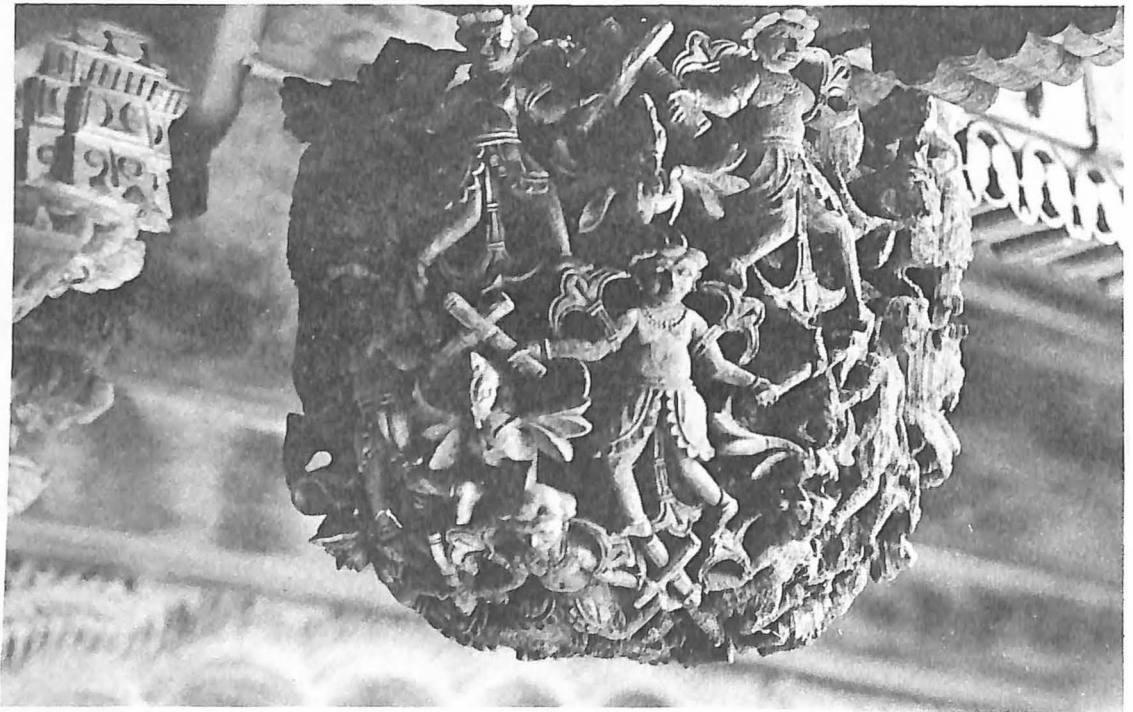




every *gopi* feel that Krishna was dancing with her alone has found profuse expression in the wall paintings of Gujarat. The domes of the entrance halls of dozens of Mahadeva temples in Gujarat are adorned with paintings. The circular dome is usually divided into many concentric circles or hands, which are ideally suited for the depiction of *rasa* and *garba*. (Illus. 8, 9, 10.) In the wall paintings of the dome of Vajjnatha Mahadeva temple, near Gandhinagar, this type of *rasa* is depicted but curiously enough each *gopi* is shown as a winged fairy. (Illus. 9.) Such figures started to appear in the local art forms of Gujarat under the influence of Islamic and Christian cultures. The variety of textiles and costumes depicted in the *rasa* scenes in the wall paintings of Gujarat is truly amazing.

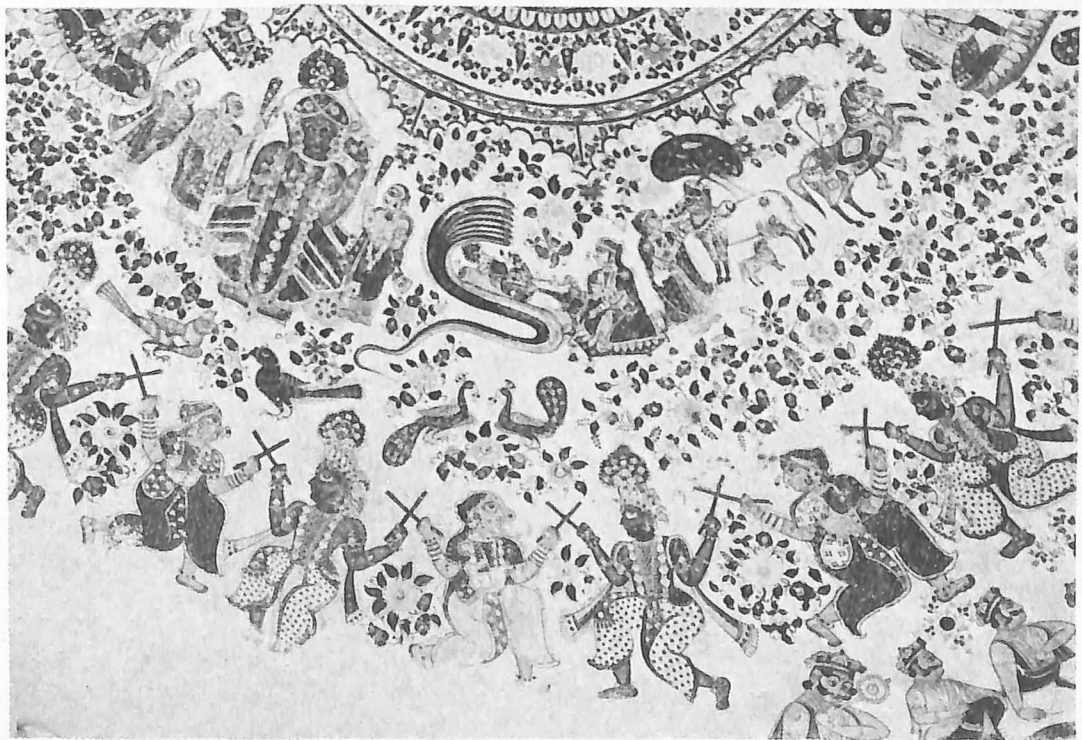
Many wall paintings, wood carvings and textiles also show *dandia-rasa*. In a carved wooden bracket in the Swaminarayana Temple at Muli (in Saurashtra) three tiers of *dandia-rasa* of men are shown in a space not bigger than 2 x 2 feet. (Illus. 11.) *Dandia-rasa*, as depicted in the arts, shows that the participants could all be women (Illus. 12), all men (Illus. 11) or men and women together (Illus. 10).

In some printed domestic floor-spreads, canopies and ritual wall hangings from Gujarat, one often sees *rasa* depicted in a straight line rather than in a circle. One such *dandia-rasa* occurs in a printed canopy from Saurashtra, now in the collection of the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad. (Illus. 13.) In all





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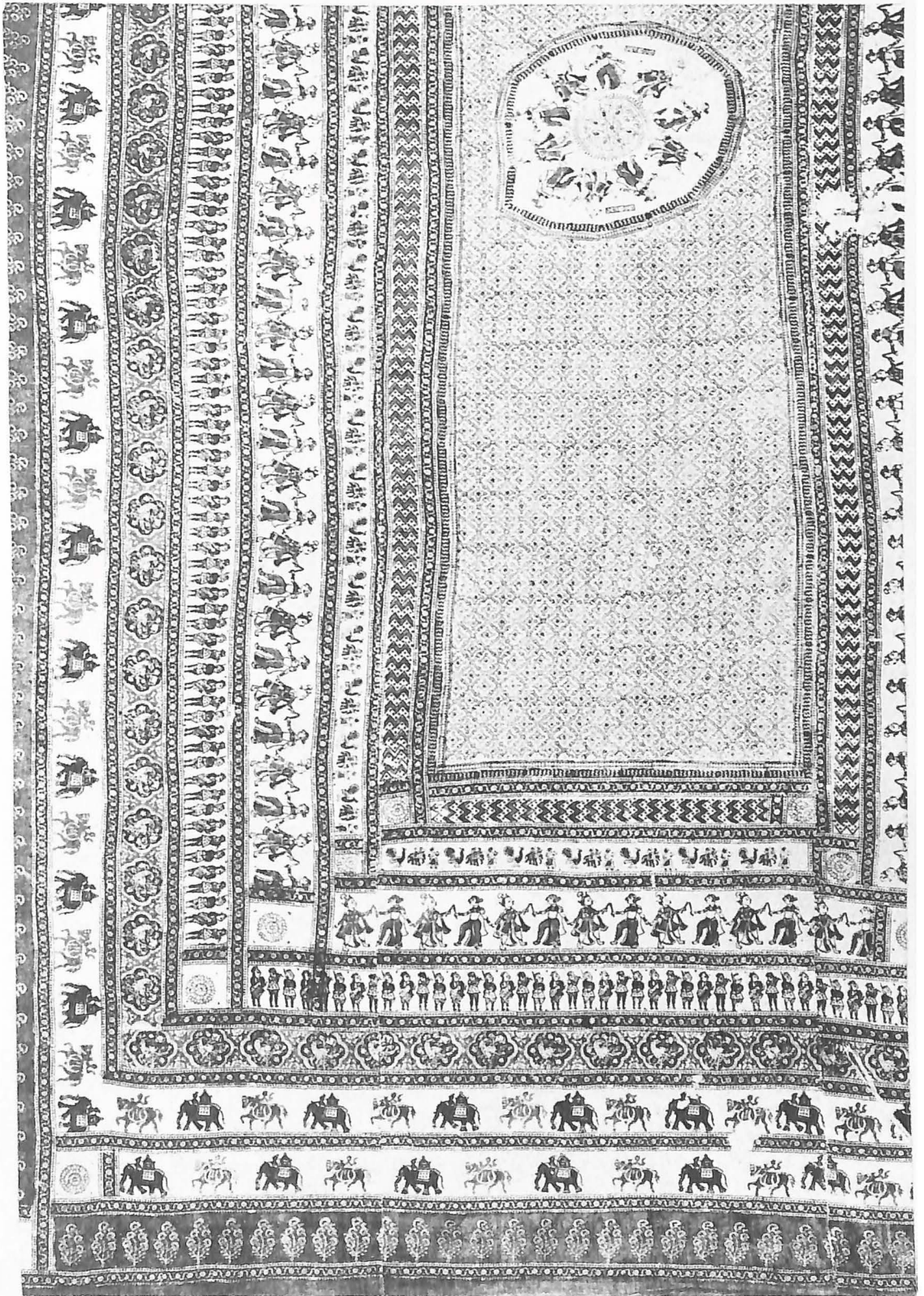
probability the linear depiction of *rasa* is only a manner of pictorial expression, but actually represents the circle dance. The most interesting feature of this depiction of *rasa*, however, is that each participant is holding only one stick instead of the usual two. The line is formed by alternate figures of Krishna and *gopi*. Each Krishna holds with his right hand the left hand of the next *gopi* and each *gopi* claps the stick held in her right hand with that held (in his left hand) by the next Krishna. This form of dance, with one stick, was probably in vogue in earlier times in Gujarat. It is not described in literature or seen any more in actual practice. Once again, we have here an example to demonstrate that the depictions of dance in the visual arts can bring to light those forms which are either extinct or not perceptible through any other source.

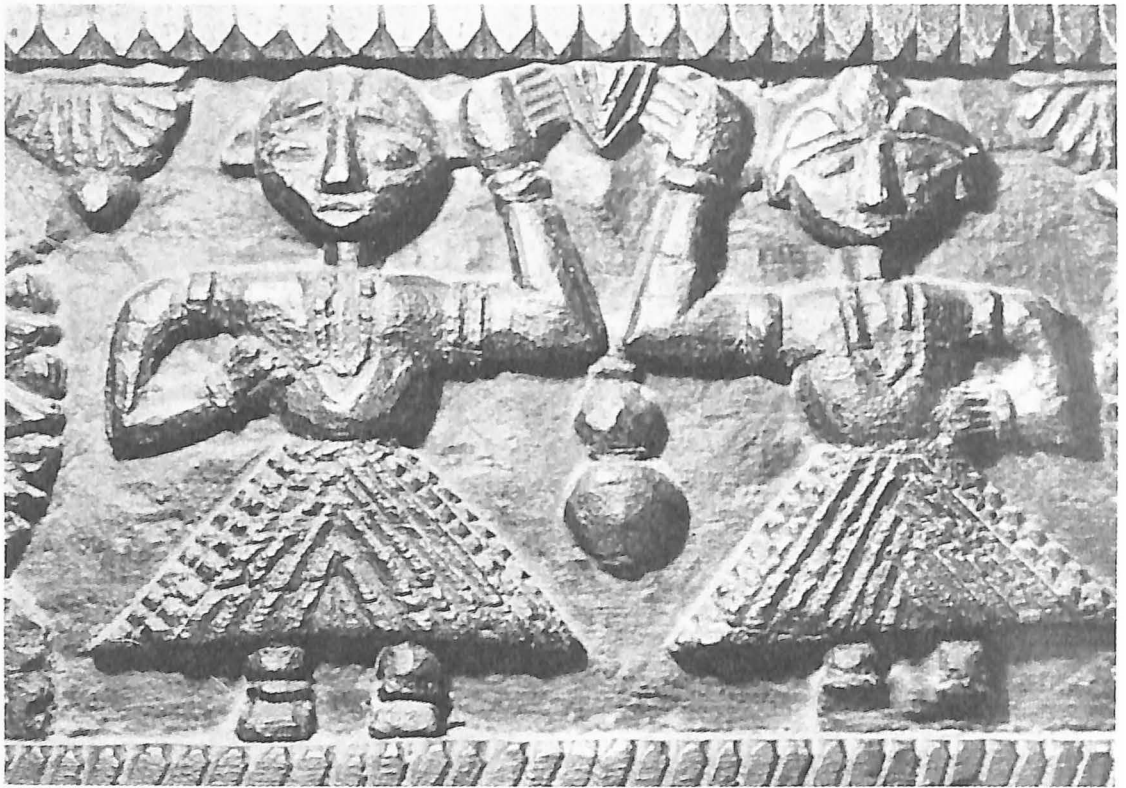
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It is only very rarely that the *garba* dance with *garba* pots placed in the centre finds depiction in art. One such depiction is on a carved wooden chest from Saurashtra: only two *garba* dancers are shown flanking the *garba* pots. The two dancers are *pars pro toto* and, therefore, actually represent the whole dance. (Illus. 14.)

The nine pots of *garba*, representing *navadurga*, have been carved in a niche in the stepwell of Adalaj, near Ahmedabad. (Illus. 15.) Quite often the villagers come here to complete the marriage ceremony in front of this sculpture. They open the knots tied to the shoulder-cloths of the bride and the groom in front of this depiction of the Goddess Durga. After this they perform *garba* dance in the entrance pavilion of the well.²⁶

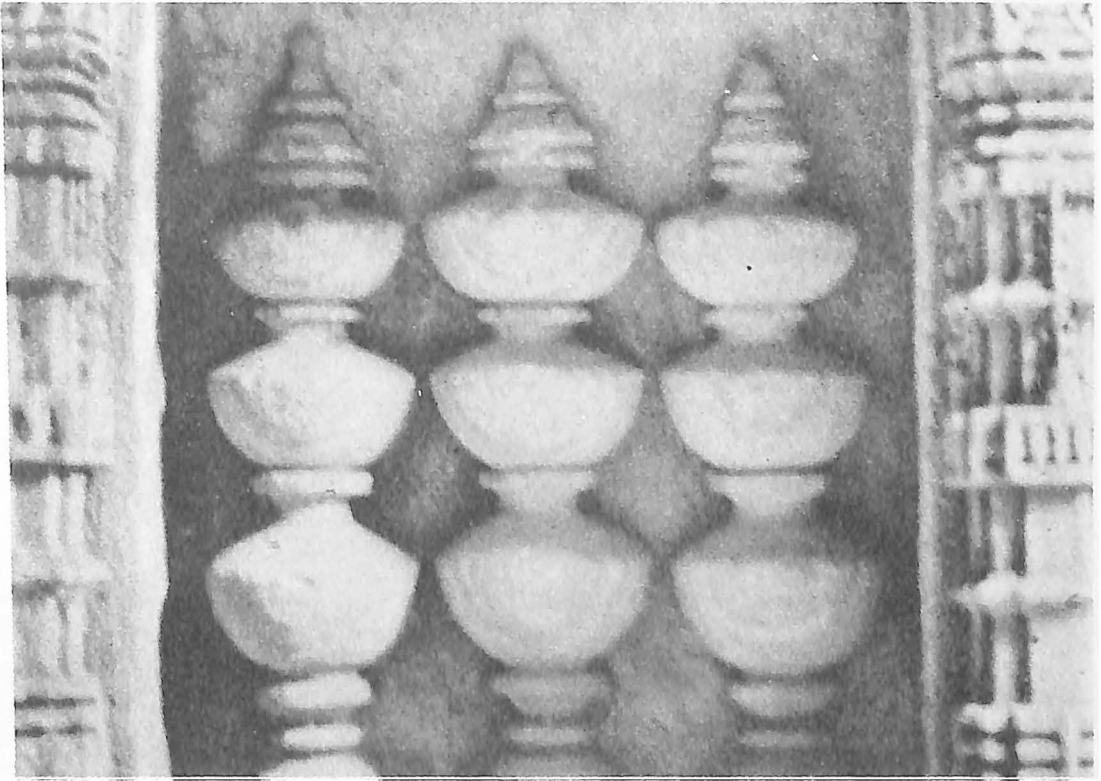




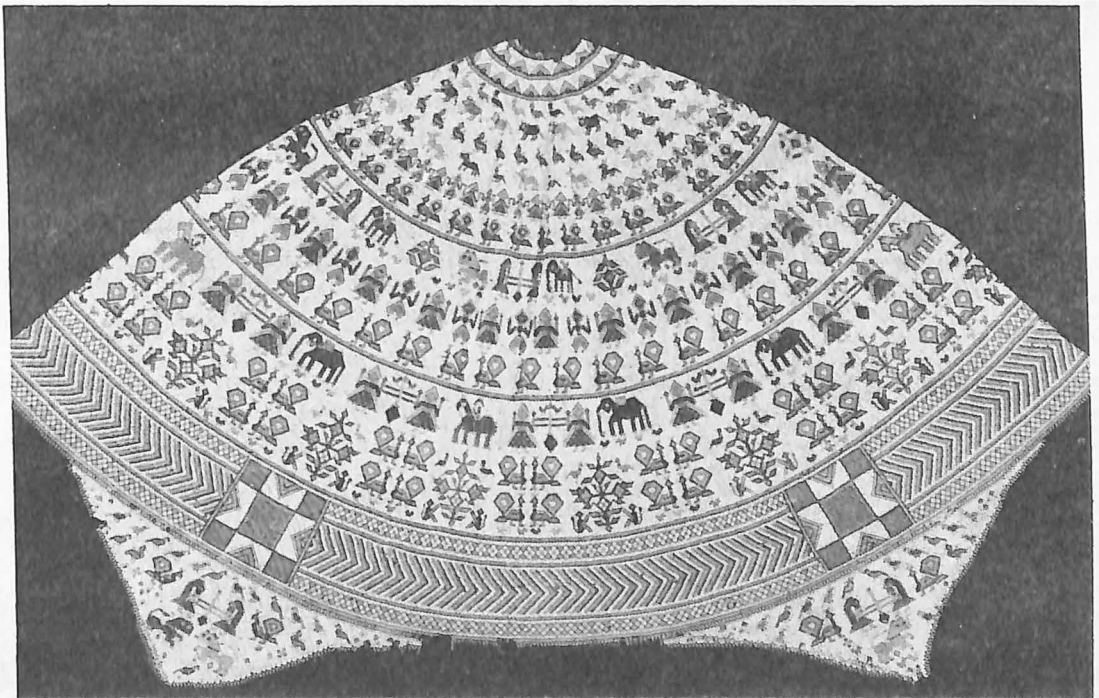
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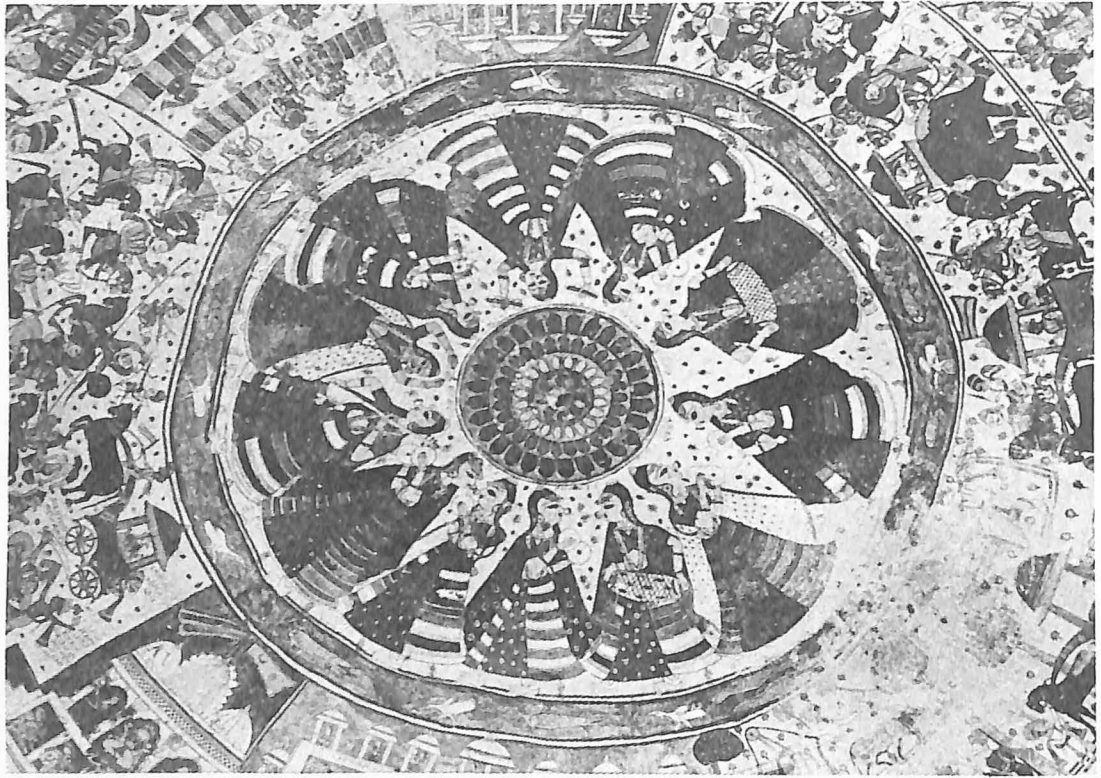
1. The material for this article has been collected during my tenure as a Homi Bhabha Fellow. I am grateful to Dr. H. C. Bhayani for his guidance; to Shri Martand Singh and Shri Subrata Bhowmik of the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad, and Dr. Eberhard Fischer of Museum Rietberg, Zurich, for drawing my attention to and providing photographs of some depictions of *rasa*.
2. Vatsyayan, Kapila, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 171-176.
3. *Rasaleela Tatha Rasanukarana Vikasa* (in Hindi), New Delhi, 1980.
4. *Vraja Ka Rasa Rangamancha* (in Hindi), New Delhi, 1981.
5. Vatsyayan, Kapila, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
6. Gupta, Jagdish, *Gujarati Aur Vrajabhasha Krishnakavya: Ek Tulnatmak Adhyayan* (in Hindi), Allahabad, 1957, p. 132.
7. Vatsyayan, Kapila, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
8. Bhasa, *Balacharitam*, edited by Ganapati Shastri, Trivandrum Series, Trivandrum, 1912, Part III.
9. Gupta, Jagdish, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Bhavaprakashana*, Gaekwad Oriental Series, No. 45, Baroda, 1929, p. 294.
12. *Nrityanirnaya*, unpublished manuscript in the Oriental Institute, Baroda, quoted in Majmudar, M. R., *Gujarati Sahityana Svarupo* (in Gujarati), Baroda, 1954.
13. I am grateful to Dr. H. C. Bhayani for drawing my attention to these.
14. *Deshinamamala*, edited by R. Pischel, Poona, 1938, p. 97.
15. *Narsi Mehtani Kavya Krutio* (in Gujarati), edited by S. Jesalpura, Ahmedabad, 1981, p. 146.
16. Surya's wife Chhaya, unable to bear his brilliance, left him and went into the forest, where she assumed the form of a mare and stood under a tree. Surya, hoping to persuade her to return to him, took the form of a horse and danced in front of her. In imitation of this event, even today, in the rituals of Randal (also known as Rannade, the wife of Surya, in the Gujarati tradition) the custom of dancing like the horse of Surya still prevails. This is done by the chief priest of the ritual, often in trance, or by other women. In fact in one of the songs of Randal the dance is described as *hamchi*, see *Randalna Geeto* (in Gujarati), edited by M. Jodhani, V. Jodhani, Ahmedabad, 1967, p. 162.
17. In Saurashtra, men perform the *garba* dance.
18. Majmudar, M. R., *op. cit.*, p. 535.
19. Published in *Prachin Kavya Manjari* (in Gujarati), edited by J. Trivedi, Ahmedabad, 1965, pp. 195-196.
20. Jani, Arunodaya, *Garbani Vyutpatti, Utpatti Ane Rahasya*, in *SVADHYAYA*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Baroda, 1978.
21. Jesalpura, S., *op. cit.*, p. 145.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 179.
23. Trivedi, J., *op. cit.*
24. *Premanandani Kavya Krutio* (in Gujarati), edited by K. Shastri and S. Jesalpura, Ahmedabad, 1979, p. 776.
25. *Bhavaprakashana*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.
26. Jain-Neubauer, Jutta, *Iconography of Sculpture in the Water-monuments of Gujarat*, in Prof. A. N. Jani Felicitation Volume, Baroda, in press.



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Illustrations:

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- Illus. 12 An illustration from the manuscript of *Madhu Malati*, Gujarat, 19th century. Picture: Jyotindra Jain.
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- Illus. 14 A panel from a carved wooden chest from Saurashtra, early 20th century. Collection and picture: Jyotindra Jain.
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- Illus. 16 Sketch of a *garbi* or *mandvi*, wooden structure for holding lamps. Courtesy: Census of India, 1961, Fairs and Festivals of Gujarat, Vol. V, part VII-B, Delhi, 1965.
- Illus. 17 Detail from an embroidered door-frieze, Saurashtra, early 20th century. It shows the *rasa* of Krishna and *gopi*s. Collection: Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad. Picture: Jyotindra Jain.
- Illus. 18 A bead embroidered canopy of a chariot, Saurashtra, early 20th century. It shows the *rasa*, once in the uppermost section and again in the middle band. Collection and picture: Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad.
- Illus. 19 Detail from a painted dome, Antalia Mahadeva Temple, near Lathi, Saurashtra, 19th century. Here the women participating in a circle dance are arranged in pairs and are shown playing musical instruments. The celestial dance is separated from the worldly events of wars and royal processions by an ocean. Picture: Eberhard Fischer, Zurich.