

Dhambali and Daastan: Kashmiri styles of singing and folk dances

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Abstract

Dhambali is a devotional dance performed by males in Kashmir to invoke the blessings of Reshis or deities at particular shrines known as Ziyarats. The occasions of the dance are ceremonial only but is very popular with the pilgrims going on Ziyarat (A religious Pilgrimage) to a shrine (locally known as Ziyarat). Generally this dance was performed by, saints (reshis) of Kashmir, wearing long colourful robes and tall conical caps, which are usually studded with beads and shells. Apart from dancing, the performers also sang in chorus, tuned with music by various drums. In this dance, group, the performers move in a ritual manner and fix religious flags into the ground on such occasions. After fixing the flag in ground, the performers, continue dancing around the flag. Daastan is the conveying of events in words and sounds. Daastan have been shared in the culture of Kashmir as a means of entertainment, education, cultural presentations and to instill moral values. Daastan is a means of sharing and interpreting experience.

Keywords: Dhambali, Daastan, Kashmiri styles, singing, folk dances

Introduction

Dhambali

The "Urs" at these shrines is looked forward with enthusiasm by the simple folk of this beautiful valley. Lakhs of people gather to watch and be part of the impassioned Dervish dance, a hallmark of Sufi tradition. Scores of dervish groups pay obeisance by way of dancing into a sufist trance to the wild beating of drums.

Dervish dances have mostly faded into oblivion elsewhere, but in Kashmir, with its mystical mornings, the tradition is still alive. The spectacle of scores of such dancers, invariably dressed in their colourful attire, enthrall the audience. The mystive dance, which begins slowly, soon reaches a crescendo with the recitation of religious hymns, accompanying music and the feverish steps of the performers. The dancers soon attain a higher level of consciousness and become oblivious of their surroundings. The darveshs, known locally as fakirs, perform, the traditional dance, known as Dhambali. The fakirs then shake the legs and danced to the tune of musical tones of various instruments. It is a unique pleasure to witness, as the Dervishes first assemble into circle and then performs there sufi dance. These performers have been following the tradition of their murshid (Guru) by performing Dhambali.

The Dhambali festival is every year held to celebrate the birth anniversary of some sufi saints like Baba Naseeb ud-din Gazi, whose tomb lies in the old town, Baba Buhalla Baba Khan Sahib etc. etc.

The tradition of Dhambali dance has actually evolved from the famous tomb of Moulana Rumi which is situated in the town of Konya in Turkey. It is said that his followers and his son Sultan Walad Sultan founded the Mawlawiyah Sufi order, also known as the order, of the whirling Dervishes, that is famous for its sufi dance known as the sama ceremony. The people

who perform this sama are called Dervishes and are held in high regard by the sufis of Turkey^[1].

It is at this centre that the followers of Rumi's school of thought, gather at his tomb and present sama. The followers first make circle and then dance while standing in circular queues. It is said that from here, this sufi practice travelled to central Asian Stalls and at last reached Kashmir. In Kashmir it lost its name to Dervish dance and came to be known as Dhambali dance. Many Kashmiri sufis followed it and promoted in their respective Khanqaks (Shrines).



Fig 1

This is a particular kind of devotional dance or in other words it is a ritual practice, defined as a concert of music, poetry recital and dance, which leads the participants to a mystical experience where they seem to hear the music of the heavenly spares and the voice of God Himself. It attunes the heart to communion with God and is thought to remove all veils hiding

¹ During discussion with Er. Roop Kishen Magazine on 23rd of March 2013 at 1:30 pm. Jammu.

God from man's inner version. This type of dance in Kashmir is full of Bhakti Rasa.

The aesthetics of Dhambali is in its devotional dance and drum beating. The darvaishes beats the drums in such a way that this kind of drum beating is only seen in this style of folk music of Kashmir. The drum beating begins slowly soon it reaches a crescendo with the recitation of religious hymns with feverish steps of performers. The transaction from slow to fast rhythm is the another aesthetic sense of this type of music. The dancers strike sticks with each other which create a sounds, followed by drum beating, creating a melodious sound which is full of enthusiasm, which is the main aesthetic in Dhambali.

Daastaan

A distinguished social scientists and historian Elizabeth white comb has propounded a sublime view regarding the intimate relationship between artistic expression and historical narration. According to author "the evolution, and growth of individual can be tagged to his effort, to rediscover himself amidst specific social confinement". It may either be through painting, sculpture, drama or poetry that an artist toils for rediscovering his past. Although an artist never lets his audience know his true self, but at the same time he cannot hide his inner predispositions while conceiving a piece of art. The entire gamut of periodical crises which a genuine artist stands witness to, somehow, find space in the artistic composition [2].



Fig 2: Mohd. Ismail and Party

A careful review of folk literature reveals that during the months of extreme cold when all passages for outdoor entertainment got paralyzed due to heavy snowfall, the only source of recreation left for Kashmiri people was to listen the adventures, romantic tales of Arabian Knights, Persian heroes and tales of legendary heroes of ancient Kashmir [3].

When the professional singers in Kashmir sing the ancient stories in the form of song and then narrates its meaning is known as "Daastaan". As less literature is written on Daastaan, I collected all information through interviews. I interviewed an old lady of 87 named Khatija Begum who lived in the old town of Shopian, she gave me a vast

information about the aesthetics of "Daastaan". She said that, in older days, there were less source of entertainment. During days people were busy with their daily works but during nights everybody wanted some entertainment in order to relax. There were some professional story tellers whose services were sought to entertain the common folk, assembled together somewhere for this purpose. This process continued for nights together until the story or tale reached to its end. The Professional Daastaan teller or story teller were in great demand as they were paid in both cash and kind [4].

This perhaps may be the main reason that during that period good number of Persian epics like Shahnama of Firdousi and other romantic tales like Gulrez, Yousuf Zuleikha, Laila Majnu etc were translated into Kashmir language [5].

She added that in older days people in villages were in worries and agonies, the folk over there wanted to forget all worries, caused by corrupt revenue and police officials, and other exploiting agents, that is why they did those recreational gatherings. The folk were fond of such tales like Akanandun, Heemal Nagray, Bomber Yamberzal, Zohra Khaton and Hayabund, she added. These tales were enjoyed by local folk.

A group with the professional leader or story teller with instruments like harmonium, Rabab, Naut, Sarangi and Tumbaknari perform this art. The leader or main story teller starts and other group mates accompany him. The Daastaan teller tells the story in the form of singing and a pause is taken, instruments are stopped, then the leader narrates the story in simple language and the rest of the group listens to him.

I viewed live performance of "Daastaan" in Wathora. I saw how people there were aesthetically attached with the performance. When I heard the first note of the tale, it is like as if I was in the fairy land. The whole picture came in front of me.

Nowadays "Daastaan" is seen less in the villages but only through media, it is still in existence. Doordarshan and radio Kashmir plays a great role in preserving such folk lore's the Daastaan artists are seen less. According to me young generation has to work hard to preserve such traditions of Kashmir.

Daastans are based on folklores which are based on values passed down by older generation to shape the foundation of the community.

In Daastans each and every type of emotions are seen. In this type of singing the singer depicts all type of emotions of every character, present in the tale, through his singing. In different tales different characters shows different emotions. Different Bhavas are seen, like delight, laughter, sorrow, anger, heroious, fear, disgust, wonderous, peace, parental love and spiritual devotion. Every Rasas are touched in such tales, like, Shringar, Hasya, Karuna, Rudra, veer, Bhayanaka, Bibhats, Adbuta, Shanta, Vatsalya and Bhakti Rasa.

Dastaan is a unique folk form of music in Kashmir. The compositions of Dastaans are simple but melodious. The simplicity in the composition is the aesthetics of the Dastaans. When the Dastaan teller starts singing and after the singing takes pause and during that pause he narrates the story he sung, then again start a singing and then again pause, creates an aesthetic sense in Dastaan. When the leader of Dastaan

² Folk lore of Kashmir by Farroq Fayaz Page NO. 129.

³ Folk lore of Kashmir by Farroq Fayaz P-186.

⁴ Interview with Khatija Begum at 11:00 a.m. on 4th of June 2012 at Shopian in Kashmir.

⁵ Folk lore of Kashmir by Farroq Fayaz P-186.

stops singing, the instrumentalists also stop playing musical instruments but during singing they follow the singing composition in a simple way, which creates a soft and soothing atmosphere.

Famous Dastaan of Kashmir

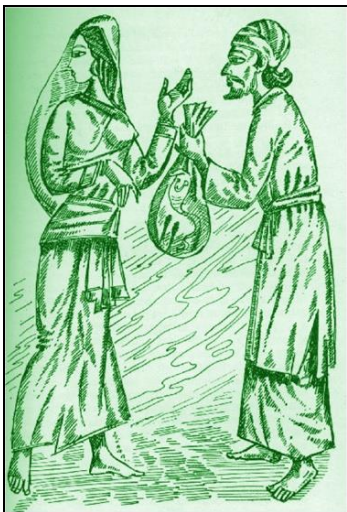


Fig 3

Himal and Nagrai

Long long ago there lived a poor Brahman in Kashmir named Soda Ram. Fortune had yoked him to a wife who was ambitious and discontented. She always grumbled for lack of the many requirements of material prosperity and called her husband a foolish drone. She had a terrible tongue which was used to a devastating effect against her husband and became sharper and progressively vitriolic in that exercise. Soda Ram was sick of her and would very much have liked to get rid of her but found no way out. One day when his wife asked him to go to a not distant place to receive alms from a king, he jumped at the proposal, as that would give him a welcome respite for a few days.

He left his home carrying a little food in a small wallet. Travelling some distance in the hot sun he felt tired. Luckily he came to a shady grove of trees near a spring. He put down his small bundle, took his rough meal and lay down for a little rest. Before Soda Ram resumed his journey he saw a serpent come out of the spring and enter the little wallet he carried. An idea flashed across his mind he would carry the serpent home to sting his wife and thus get rid of her. With trembling hands he closed the mouth of the wallet with a string and returned home with a light heart.

"I have got a precious gift for you," Soda Ram shouted to his wife when he reached home. At first she would not believe it as her husband was the last man to do things that pleased her heart. However, having persuaded her that his bag held the gift, he gave it to her, stepped out of the room and closed the door from outside. When the Brahman lady opened the bag the serpent popped its head out. She shrieked and ran to the door. But it did not open and Soda Ram said, "Let it sting you for aught I care!" The serpent apparently spared the woman and a miracle room and the serpent changed into a little male baby. Even Soda Ram was wonderstruck against his better knowledge. It was a piece of good fortune beyond the wildest dreams of his wife.

In course of time the baby grew into a boy, the beloved of his foster parents to whom he brought great prosperity. He came to be known as Nagrai, the king of serpents. One day he asked his father to take him to a spring of pure water where he wanted to take a bath. His father told him that there was only one such spring but that belonged to the princess and was surrounded by lofty walls. It was so heavily guarded, he told him, that not even a bird was permitted to take flight over it. But Nagrai's curiosity was fanned and he persuaded his father to take him to the outer wall. Reaching there the boy turned into a serpent, crept in through a crevice into the wall, satisfied his craving for a bath in the limpid spring and returned quietly unobserved.

The next day the illustrious Himal, the daughter of the king, observed that some one had taken a bath in the spring as she had heard the splashing of water. But neither the maids nor the guards had seen any one. Nagrai repeated his visit the next day undetected; but on the day after, Himal caught a glimpse of the intruder and was enthralled by his looks. She at once set a maid servant after him and came to know that he was the son of the Brahman Soda Ram. She was delighted to know that the young man who had won her heart belonged to the same city as she herself and made up her mind to marry no one except the Brahman boy. Discarding her modesty and the traditional good manners she approached her father in trepidation and broached the subject to him. Her father did not mind her marrying the young man of her own choice but it was ridiculous and humiliating for him to have a poor Brahman for his son-in-law. "How can I show my face to the fellow princes of my caste, or to the courtiers and wazirs?" he reprimanded her. But she was dead set on it. She refused to touch her food or make her toilet till the king granted her her boon. In a few days, realizing the futility of his resistance her father sent for Soda Ram. The latter was already appalled when he stepped into the palace but was utterly perplexed when the king mentioned the subject of the alliance. "I am a poor Brahman, Sire," he said, "and how can I be worthy of such a peerless daughter-in-law." But even he found himself helpless as Nagrai compelled him to give his consent to the alliance which he did reluctantly.

As the wedding day approached Soda Ram was enveloped in gloom. "What a sorry figure shall we cut," he told everyone "when we lead the wedding party into the palace!" But Nagrai told him not to have any anxiety on this score. On the wedding day he gave him a piece of birchbark inscribed with a message and asked him to drop it in a spring. When Soda Ram returned home he felt dazed as he saw a gorgeous palace where he expected his poor hut. He felt convinced that he had lost his way. He also heard the beating of drums and the skirting of pipes inside, and saw caparisoned horses and elephants, guards with glittering uniforms and retainers. From inside came Nagrai befittingly dressed as a princely bridegroom and assured him that all was ready. The whole city was agog with music, feasting and revelry in honour of the wedding of Himal and Nagrai. A new palace was built for them on the river bank where they lived happily.

They were, however, not destined to enjoy their happiness for long. The serpent wives of Nagrai felt forlorn in his absence in the nether world and made efforts to trace him out. One of them assumed the human form and made inquiries after her husband and learnt of his marriage with Himal. To remind him of his attachment to his serpent-wives she had carried with her

a few rare golden vessels of his. Approaching the mansion of Himal she began to hawk her wares. Himal was attracted by her curios and purchased them at a throw-away price. When Nagrai returned she displayed to him the curios. He at once understood the mischief of his serpent-wives, broke the vessels to splinters and warned Himal not to succumb to the tempting talk of such women again. She was puzzled but kept quiet.

Another serpent wife tried a different trick when the first failed. Disguising herself as a cobbler-woman she approached Himal and asked her if she knew of her husband Nagrai the cobbler. "Nagrai is my husband," replied Himal, "but he is a Brahman, son of Soda Ram." "I don't know about that," said the other, "what I know is that Nagrai is my husband and is a cobbler by caste." She saw from Himal's face that her words were beginning to have effect. She added, "You may ask him his caste. But to make sure you may set him the trial. Ask him to plunge into a spring of milk. His body will sink if he be a Brahman. A cobbler's body will float on the surface."

When Nagrai came home Himal asked him to state his caste. He understood that she had been befouled by the serpent-wives and told her so but she insisted that he should undergo the trial to convince her of his caste. All his arguments failed to convince her that it was a trap laid down by her enemies. Ultimately he was induced to face the trial to allay her misgivings. He dipped his feet in a spring full of milk and was pulled down by his serpent-wives. He resisted their pull in the hope that Himal might be satisfied but to no avail. When his knees were immersed he said, "Himal, are you satisfied?" She was not. When his thighs were also immersed he repeated the question but she said nothing. He appealed to Himal again and again when the surface of milk reached his navel, his chest and his chin but her misgivings about his caste were not cleared yet. She realized the gravity of the situation when he was immersed to his forehead. She sprang and tried to pull him out by the tuft of hair on his head. But it was too late. Nagrai disappeared under the milk and Himal was left only with a tuft of hair in her hand.

Himal was left forlorn. Her grief was beyond words and nothing could console her. She was in dismay and sorrow. The worst of it was that her own folly led to her undoing. To expiate her stupidity she decided to give all her wealth in charity. Everyday she relieved the distress of scores of men and women and gave away everything she had in silver, gold and jewels till only a golden mortar and pestle was left with her. Once an old man and his daughter came to her for alms. She served them food and he narrated to her a tale that filled her with excitement. He told her that one night he and his daughter lay under a tree near a spring. At midnight they heard a great noise as of an army on the march. Then came a number of servants out of the spring who cleaned the area and cooked a large feast which was served to many guests including a prince. They all disappeared within the spring except their chief. He left a little food under the tree saying "This is in the name of unlucky Himal" and disappeared within the spring.

Himal persuaded the old man to take her to the spring and rewarded him with the remnants of her wealth, the golden mortar and pestle. At night with her own eyes she saw the series of events narrated by the old man. Her nerves were tense and her heart was racing. When Nagrai came out of the spring she prostrated herself at his feet. Nagrai was overcome with emotion but he was afraid that his serpent wives would

kill Himal if he took her to his abode. He consoled her and advised her to wait for a month or so till he could make some arrangement for her stay. Himal would brook no further separation from him and coiled herself round his legs. Nagrai was in a pretty fix now. At last he turned her into a pebble, hid her in his turban and went back to his home in the serpent world. His wives began to look askance upon him and accused him of the smell of human flesh in his company. He could conceal the secret no longer and reconverted her into the human form after they had solemnly promised that they would not molest her. They were highly impressed with her beauty and tenderness and could not help being jealous. As they had solemnly promised Nagrai not to do her any harm they had their revenge by imposing all the culinary drudgery upon her. This princess brought up in a palace with maids and servants to carry out her every whim gladly undertook to look after the kitchen of the serpents. But she had no experience of these affairs and revealed herself to be a clumsy and uncouth cook. One day, while pouring boiled milk into basins to cool it for the serpent children, her ladle accidentally struck one of the vessels. The serpent children mistook it for the usual breakfast gong. They rushed to the kitchen and gulped the hot milk. As a result they died of burns. The serpent wives were overcome with grief. They stung Himal and she died immediately.

Nagrai was overwhelmed with grief but he was helpless. He washed the body of Himal and under presence of cremating it carried it through the spring. He was so moved by his affection for Himal that he could not stand the idea of consigning it to the flames. Instead, he embalmed it and stretched it on a bed which he placed in a tree nearby. Now and then he would come out of the spring and remorsefully look on the beauty of the dead form. Not long after, a holy man happened to come to the spring and saw the dead body. He was so impressed by the beauty of Himal and the devotion of Nagrai that he gave the body the gift of life. He then carried Himal to his home where the holy man's son was fascinated with her beauty and not knowing her story set his heart on marrying her.

A couple of days later Nagrai came once again out of the spring to draw consolation from a sight of Himal's body. He was grieved to find the body missing and sought to solve the mystery before retiring. He traced her ultimately to the holy man's hut where she was lying asleep and was delighted to find her living once again. He did not want to disturb her while asleep and, therefore, coiled himself near the bed of Himal till she would wake up. In the meantime, the holy man's son entered the cottage and was alarmed to see the snake. He at once killed the snake. Himal woke up in this commotion, realized the significance of the snake and bewailed its unnatural death. "Once again has he suffered for my sake" she mourned. She had the dead snake cremated and ascending the funeral pyre committed herself to the flames as sati. Everyone was moved by their devotion and the sacrifice they made for each other. The holy man was especially remorseful because it was in his hut where Nagrai out of love for Himal had lost his life and this had led to the self-immolation of Himal also. He felt deeply concerned. One day, while he was brooding over this question he heard two birds talking about the love, devotion and sacrifice of Himal and Nagrai. The female bird said to her consort, "Can they ever regain their human form?" "Verily so" replied the latter, "if their ashes are thrown into the spring." The holy man realized that the two birds were none

else than Shiva and Parvati. He at once threw the ashes into the spring. Himal and Nagrai came to life in their human form once again and lived without further mishap ever after ^[6].

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