

# Songs in Circles: Gujaratis in America

by Gordon Thompson

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The state of Gujarat, on India's western shoreline, is historically known for its textiles and merchants. Gujaratis have also been among South Asia's most skillful seafarers and were the guides for the first Europeans arriving in India's ports. They have plied the waters of the Indian Ocean for more than a millenium and have established settlements in such diverse places as Fiji, Hong Kong and South Africa.

Today, Gujaratis are one of the largest South Asian ethnic groups in the United States. Against a seemingly incongruous southern California backdrop of fast-food restaurants, gas stations and freeways, one night every month as well as once each autumn for nine consecutive nights, Gujarati-Americans congregate in their temples, in high school auditoriums and in community centers to perform songs and circle dances that have survived and flourished wherever Gujaratis have settled.

Performances of *garbā* and *rās*—circle dances accompanied by singing—figure prominently in Gujarati communal worship. Through these forms Gujaratis worship, socialize and reaffirm their heritage. In the United States, despite the variety of their geographic backgrounds, all Gujaratis can participate in these dances which provide, among other things, an opportunity for adolescents and young adults to meet and to discuss common problems and concerns. The dances are also a chance for parents and grandparents to exercise their religious beliefs, to renew old friendships and to relive memories.

Perhaps the more important of the two dances to Gujaratis is *garbā*. During the autumnal festival of Navrātrī ("Nine Nights"), *garbā* is performed in almost every city, town and village of Gujarati-speaking western India. Hindu (and many Jain) women congregate after sundown to dance and sing until late at night in local courtyards or squares, or sometimes even in cordoned-off streets festooned with lights. Singers and instrumentalists are usually drawn from within the community, but sometimes specialists are hired to help lead and accompany.

Navrātrī is celebrated in many American cities, although less dramatically than in some parts of Gujarat. At an October 1984 celebration behind the Gujarati community's temple in Norwalk, California, several hundred women and men crowded onto a carpeted parking lot for *garbā*. Similar celebrations took place elsewhere in Los Angeles and Orange Counties on the same night and, just as in Gujarat, some individuals traveled between events to dance, to sing and to socialize.

Traditionally, in the middle of the *garbā* dance area a platform is erected with an image or representation of the community's mother goddess. Figurines found among the ruins of the second millenium B.C. suggest that the worship of mother goddesses in South Asia antedates Hinduism. Some female deities, such as Kālī, are pan-Indian and



worshipped in regions other than western India. Goddesses like Khodiyār are more provincial and thus evoke local themes.

When garbā is performed, the mother goddess is represented in a lithograph or by some symbol of her power — possibly a pot or a lamp. On rare occasions, the spirit of a mother goddess may possess a dancer or dancers; because the hypnotic repetition of steps and music by dancers moving in a circle sometimes for hours gives garbā a certain mesmerizing nature, it is not surprising that dancers can succumb to a trance-like state.

For the dance a special costume worn by some women consists of a short blouse (*choli* or *odhani*) and a long skirt (*chaniyā* or *ghāgharo*). These are sometimes embroidered with silver thread and composed of strips of brightly colored silk and may also have small circular mirrors stitched into the pattern. In some garbā performance traditions, women dance with small pots or lanterns on their heads; more rarely, males may dance carrying a scaffold adorned by small lamps.

Traditionally, the dancers were the singers and were led by a senior woman who selected the songs, texts, dance steps and their tempo. Today, because garbā celebrations are larger, sound amplification is often used. Singers and dancers are now separate groups, each led by a different woman. However, the basic dance steps remain simple, and the separation of singing and dancing roles has not diminished the popularity of the genre.

The choreography for garbā is based on a cycle of four steps and a hand clap. In the most popular version of the dance, the devotee takes three steps forward and on the fourth, bends and claps towards the center of the circle. Taking a step towards the outside, the dancer/singer repeats the pattern.

The music is organized into a call-and-response pattern. The woman leading the dance sings the identifying chorus of the garbā, and others repeat it. The leader then sings the first verse, is again echoed by the others, and starts the process over again with the identifying chorus before proceeding to the second verse.

Navarātrī garbā at a temple in Norwalk, California, October, 1984. Photo by Gordon Thompson.



The melody and dance steps are economical, allowing attention to be focused on the texts, which generally praise the mother goddesses and recount stories about them. As garbā is most often performed only by women, some texts describe the plights of the wife in the joint household.

Musically and choreographically similar to garbā, rās is a sung circle dance performed in Gujarat as well as in other parts of central and western India. Gujarati versions of rās are famous for their vigor and intricacy and for the distinctive use of *dandiyā*, brightly painted and lacquered wooden rods. Each performer holds two dandiyā and, while dancing in a circle, strikes them together and against the dandiyā of other dancers. These complex step and stick patterns are often performed by two concentric circles of dancers interweaving in opposite directions.

Rās is particularly associated with Saurashtra, the peninsular region of Gujarat, and with men of cattle-rearing castes. In the years before India gained independence, these men were also the principal local rulers responsible for the protection of land, livestock and life in their districts. Among the skills required of them was adeptness in hand-to-hand combat – skills which the movements of rās seem to parallel. If dandiyā are pictured as replacing swords, then the movements of the dancers – crossing weapons with one participant, spinning, and then facing the next – suggest the actions of battle.

The relationship between the martial arts and rās is underscored by the medieval *rāso*, a form of epic poetry detailing the lives and battles of western and central India's warrior princes. It is from the *rāso* that some scholars believe rās has developed.

Today, however, rās is more popularly a women's dance in celebration of one of Gujarat's most famous former residents, Krishna. According to Hindu texts, after the wars of the *Mahābhārata* (a seminal Hindu epic), Krishna and his followers came to live in Saurashtra. There he is said to have taught rās to the women of the cattle herders. In the version known as *rās līlā*, a child imitates Krishna at the center of the circle, while women, who represent the milkmaids of Krishna's childhood home, Vrindavan, dance in a circle around him.

Garbā and rās are examples of music and dance which support communal integrity. In India, these sung circle dances symbolize Gujarat to other Indians; today, on foreign soil, these songs, performed by women and men in moving circles around a communally worshipped figure, represent Gujarati-Americans to other Americans.

*Suggested reading*

Thompson, Gordon and Medha Yodh. "Garbā and the Gujaratis of Southern California." In *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 6 (1985). Nazir Jairazbhoy and Susan DeVale, eds. (forthcoming).

Yodh, Medha. "Garbā: A Social Dance of Gujarati Women." *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 1 (1984):65-70.