

What is Dhamaal?

February 11, 2023

In news— Recently, a new documentary has focused on the music and dance performances of the Siddis community in Gujarat, called Dhamaals.

About Dhamaals

- **Dhamaal is a mix of Sufi and African (mostly East African) musical and dance traditions.**
- It refers particularly to the **spiritual practices of the Siddis of Gujarat.**
- The Siddis **begin almost every Dhamaal song by blowing into a conch shell.** This is often followed by the slow playing of East African percussion **instruments like the musindo** and the **slow thumping of feet** that marks the onset of the singing and dancing Dhamaals.
- The ritual of foot thumping is a crucial part of spiritual East African dance and musical traditions.
- **The Siddis are followers of Islam** and arrived in India from Muslim communities in East and Central Africa.
- **Dhamaals are performed in memory of their spiritual leaders, among them Bava Gor, Mai Misra, Baba Habash and Sidi Nabi Sultan.**
- According to Siddi folklore they arrived from Ethiopia through the Nubian Valley, Syria and the Indian Ocean to the coast of Kuda in the Bhavnagar district of Gujarat.
- Usually, **Dhamaal songs and dances are performed to celebrate the anniversary of the birth and death of spiritual leaders.**
- They are **performed in two ways** –
 - Dance Dhamaal and
 - Baithaaki Dhamaal.
- The Baithaaki Dhamaal is performed in the sitting position and the Dance Dhamaal is performed in both sitting and dance positions.

- During the performance of Baithaaki Dhamaal the focus is more on the lyrics and less on the musical instruments.
- **During Dance Dhamaal the focus is more on the sounds of the instruments.** These are often played in a frenzied manner and accompanied by frenzied dance movements.
- **The spiritual songs that are sung during the Dhamaals are known as zikrs.**
 - The creole cultural aspects of Dhamaals are broadly reflected through the **Swahili Creole language used to sing the zikrs**, the Indian and African musical instruments used to perform them and the Afro-Indian body movements of Dance Dhamaals.
 - Historically, **the Swahili Creole language in India emerged among the Siddis** through the mixing of Kiswahili from East Africa with Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu languages from India.
 - **Zikr is sung in the praise of Siddi spiritual leader Nabi Sultan**, believed to have arrived in Gujarat from the Nubian Valley.
 - The Swahili words that have been used are “hu” (a common expression of consent) and “sabaya” (meaning that everything is alright).
- **The zikr means that with the blessings of Nabi Sultan no evil can befall the Siddis of Gujarat.**
- The musical instruments used to perform the zikrs are East African percussion instruments. They are:
 1. The musindo, for example, is a cylinder-shaped, two-sided drum from Kenya.
 2. The misr kanga is a small, funnel-shaped instrument from Ethiopia, containing small stones.
 3. The mugarman is a large, cylinder-shaped, one-sided drum from Tanzania.
- These are played along with traditional Indian musical

instruments. These include the harmonium (a keyboard instrument) and the dholak (a two-headed hand drum).

- The intermingling of Indian and African musical instruments generates creole rhythms which are traditionally African and Indian at the same time.
- During the **Dance Dhamaal, the hand and the body movements of the Dhamaal dancers in Gujarat are very similar to the Ngoma dancers of East Africa.**
- The Ngoma dancers thump their feet and swing their arms sideways to the rhythm of drums. The Dhamaal dancers also swing their arms sideways, but the thumping of feet depends on the context of their dance.
- During religious occasions, for example, the foot thumping is slow. This is because the Siddis follow many spiritual aspects of the Sufi tradition.
- For Sufis, heavy and frenzied feet thumping is prohibited when worshipping spiritual leaders.

About Siddi Tribe-

- The Siddi also known as Sidi, Siddhi, Sheedi or Habshi.
- Sometimes referred to as Afro-Indians.
- They are descended from the Bantu peoples of the East African region.
- It is believed that they are of African origin because they clearly show the Negroid racial strain in their physical features.
- Another term for Siddis, habshi, is held to be derived from the common name for the captains of the Abyssinian ships that also first delivered Siddi slaves to the subcontinent.
- They are primarily Muslims, although some are Hindus and others belong to the Catholic Church.

Further reading: <https://journalsofindia.com/siddi-tribes/>