



DANCE-DRAMA OF RAJASTHAN

By MAYA RAO

OUT of the five open-air dramas of Rajasthan, Gouri is one which is performed during the daytime. Gouri, as the name suggests, is called after Parvati, the heroine of the play. It is a religious dance-drama based on a folk lore which has a remote resemblance to Mohini-Bhasmasura story. The Bhils perform it as a thanksgiving to Parvati, their patron deity, after a happy harvest. Hence the dancers are staunch devotees who observe certain austerities, like living on a strictly vegetarian diet for a month, and sleeping on hard beds in the Bhaironji temple till the Gouri ritual is over. They do not change the costume once donned for the dance till the ceremony is over. The performance takes place in a village where the daughter of the Bhil is given in marriage. The dancers do not take any money for the performances but if contributions are made by spectators the money is used for purchasing food and clothing for the participants.

The theme of Gouri is woven round an episode from Bhaironji's life. Bhaironji, or Bhudiya, is the local name for Shiva. Gouri is represented by three characters simultaneously as Rayi, Parvati and Devi Kalka, probably, to represent different aspects of her. Rayi is harassed by a demon, Bhyavad (corresponds to Bhasmasura) who wants to carry her away with him. Bhudiya is helpless so Amba comes to his rescue and tries in vain to deter him. Finally Bhudiya fights a duel with him and saves Rayi. The death of the demon is an occasion for rejoicing so the devotees of Shiva celebrate it with great gusto.

The story is simple but the presentation of it by the Bhils is unique. It reminds one of the ancient Greek and Roman plays, or the miracle plays of England. For instance, there is the Chakri or group of Ganas (devotees) of Bhudiya, who move in a circle from the beginning of the play till the end linking up

sequences in the main plot and sub-plots, there is a master of ceremonies called Kuttukudiya who introduces the characters to each other, etc.

Before the performance starts a *puja* is offered to Gouri on the maidan where the dance is to take place. As the *puja* is being performed the favourite devotee of Bhairav is possessed by the spirit of the deity. He shakes from head to foot in a frenzy, holding a bunch of peacock feathers: this is used for curing persons physically indisposed. The dancers enter and make their obeisance to Gouri and form a circle round the place of worship and start dancing. This is Chakri. The two best dancers who take the roles of Parvati and Rayi also join the circle. While the rest of the dancers are dressed in their normal costumes except for the swords, Rayi and Parvati are dressed in a bright red *ghagra-sari* outfit.

The Chakri does not leave the 'stage' till the end of the play, so the scenes are enacted outside the circle. For the recreation of a number of villagers who come to watch the dance a few side attractions are introduced, nevertheless the Chakri maintains the serene atmosphere allowing no room for diversion from the main story.

The following is the sequence of a Gouri performance:

1. A robber and his mother enter, dancing vigorously making criss-cross patterns outside the Chakri. They find a beehive, which is represented by a flat basket held by two men. The boy and his mother steal the honey from it and make a hasty retreat home.

2. A fisher-man enters carrying a long pole which represents an angling rod. His wife accompanies him in their dance.

The fisher couple leave the stage as the tempo is raised by the drummers.

The drums beat louder suggesting the beginning of the main story—the dancers are also warmed up.

3. Devi Kalka is brought escorted by two men. She carries two swords which rest on her shoulders. The Bhyavad enters brandishing his sword to attack Kalka. He is dressed in a pair of bright green pyjamas, and on his head are fixed horns with the support of a bright pink scarf. As he is about to strike, Amba appears on the scene holding incense in one hand and a sword in the other. She has an eerie appearance with her hair let loose and her tongue (made of red shiny paper!) sticking out. The two characters go round



Bhudiya

the Chakri chasing each other. When the Demon becomes too unruly Bhudiya, who has so far been a silent observer steps in to rescue his wife. A fight ensues and Bhyavad is killed. The Chakri celebrates the triumph of Good over Evil and the spectators applaud Bhudiya.

4. The jubilant mood is conveyed through more scenes outside the Chakri.

5. A group of men representing the army of the Emperor enter dancing supporting long poles on their hips.

6. As the army leaves, a snake-charmer and his wife enter performing "Shankeria", which is evidently a favourite item among the spectators.



The robber and the Banjara dancing outside the Chakri

The theme of the dance is very romantic and the costumes also are very colourful and gay. The snake-charmer sings announcing his departure from that village to the next.

7. More entertainment is provided by a Banjara and his two wives. The Banjara is exceptionally rich because he carries precious gems for Bhudiya. As the Banjara proceeds on his journey he is waylaid by the Customs officer who instead of demanding a duty for the goods woos one of the wives of the Banjara ! The jealous husband naturally fights his rival with all his might. To make matters worse the robber enters with his mother and his followers to loot the Banjara. The duel between the Banjara and the robber is terrific and creates a genuine anxiety among the spectators because both of them dance in frantic fury till they fall down exhausted.

8. Some comic relief is introduced to enliven the people by a few idiotic devotees of Bhudiya. One of them wants to take Rayi home. The Kuttukudiya permits him to do so on condition he fulfils some of the hard tasks set for him. He is asked to pound corn and make chapattis on the back of another devotee. The Baba does it religiously and rolls the boy on the ground. When he finishes he dances joyfully carrying Parvati on his shoulder. As he tries to run away with her Kuttukudiya stops him in spite of his entreaties. A bear comes in and drives the Baba away.

9. The last scene depicts a fight between Bhudiya and a lion in which the lion is subdued and the victory of Bhudiya is again celebrated by the Ganas.

Musical accompaniment is provided for the

performance by a drummer and *thali* player who sit in the centre of the Chakri.

Masks made of wood decorated with Gunja seeds form the main attraction of Bhudiya's and the robber's mother's costume. Quite a few modern elements are introduced in the costumes of the dancers like military caps, hats, trousers, etc.

The Gouri ritual is interpreted by Bhils of every village in Udaipur depending upon their local conditions. So there is a difference in the arrangement as well as presentation of the scenes in the dance-dramas accordingly.

The description given here refers to the Gouri dance seen in Udaipur performed by the Bhils of Dewali village.

Baba carries the Rayi away

