

Garba: The Sacred Circle of Symbolism, Oneness, and the Architecture of Community Bonding

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Abstract

This research article explores the sociological and ontological foundations of Garba, a traditional folk dance from Gujarat, Bharat, which was recently inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023. By examining the "sacred circle" as both a physical formation and a philosophical construct, this study analyzes how the dance functions as a "multi-dimensional site where theology, social structure, and aesthetic expression converge". Through an investigation of the etymology of "Garbha," the symbolism of the "womb lamp," the cyclical nature of Hindu time, and the social dilution of hierarchies, the article argues that Garba serves as a vital architectural framework for community bonding. The study further traces the evolution of the dance from rural village squares to global urban centres.

Keywords: Garba, Garbha Deep:, Navratri, Shakti, Oneness, Raas, Social Dilution

Introduction

In the heart of Gujarat, under the soft glow of oil lamps, an ancient rhythm stirs. This is Garba, a ritualistic and devotional dance performed primarily during the nine-night Hindu festival of Navratri, dedicated to the worship of the feminine energy known as *Shakti*. Beyond its status as a vibrant cultural spectacle, Garba represents an "all-encompassing participatory community event" that has navigated the challenges of colonialism, urbanization, and globalization.

The recent 2023 inscription of Garba by UNESCO recognizes it as a "living heritage" that is redefined by every generation through new performing styles, lyrics, and dress, while keeping the essential circle of feminine energy intact. As participants move in unison, their feet trace circles that have been danced for millennia, connecting the present community with both their ancestors and the generations to follow.

Ontological Foundations

The term "Garba" is rooted in the Sanskrit word *Garbha*, meaning "womb," which conceptually links the dance to themes of gestation, pregnancy, and the primordial source of life. The Garbha Deep. The performance is traditionally centred around a *Garbha Deep* (womb lamp)—an illuminated clay pot, often perforated, or a water-filled vessel known as a *Kalash*.

In the sacred symbolism of Garba, the earthenware vessel represents the human body, fragile yet purposeful, while the flame glowing within signifies the *jiva*—the soul, or the divine energy of the Goddess that lives inside every being. As devotees move rhythmically in circular patterns around this illuminated centre, their dance becomes an act of reverence, honouring the universal feminine force that sustains both the individual and the cosmos. The circle itself reflects the eternal cycle of creation, preservation, and dissolution, with the divine presence as the still point within motion. In contemporary celebrations, the traditional *Garbha Deep* is often replaced by an image or idol of Goddess Amba—a form of Durga—who remains the singular, unwavering constant at the heart of the swirling dance, embodying the eternal Shakti around which all life revolves. Philosophical Architecture: The Circle and Cyclical Time

The circular formation of Garba is a profound reflection of the Hindu conception of time. Unlike linear Western perspectives, time in Hindu cosmology is perceived as *Kalachakra*—a cyclical and infinite progression of birth, life, death, and rebirth.

Oneness in Motion

The revolving rings of dancers mirror the perpetual motion of the universe. Dr. Parul Shah notes that the circle represents oneness, where each dancer moves individually while remaining part of a "larger, universal rhythm". This formation embodies the philosophical truth that while the universe (*jagat*) is constantly changing, the divine centre remains unchanging and invincible

Grounding to the Earth

Garba is traditionally performed barefoot, regardless of the surface. This act is a ritual sign of reverence for the earth, considered the "sacred mother of all". The feet are viewed as conduits through which the "vital energy of the earth" flows into humans, creating a physical bond between the practitioner, the community, and the ground beneath them.

Mythological Origins

The roots of Garba and its sibling dance, Dandiya Raas, are deeply intertwined with epic narratives and theological texts like the *Devi Mahatmya*.

Gujarati culture expert Himanshu Raval traces Garba's origins to the *Mahabharata*. During his final year of exile, the hero Arjuna (disguised as the eunuch Bruhannala) learned the *hallisaka*—a circular movement symbolizing life and rebirth—which Lord Krishna later popularized, eventually evolving into the contemporary *Raas*.

While Garba focuses on maternal energy and fertility, Dandiya Raas symbolizes a "mock fight" between Goddess Durga and the demon king Mahishasura.

In the vibrant tradition of Dandiya Raas, the wooden sticks—*dandiya*—symbolize the swords of the Goddess, transforming the rhythmic dance into a stylized reenactment of divine combat. According to legend, the demon king Mahishasura obtained a boon that no man or god could defeat him, unleashing tyranny across the heavens and earth. In response, the cosmic trinity—Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma—united their divine energies to manifest the invincible Durga. The nine nights of dance during Navratri symbolically recreate her celestial battle against the demon, culminating in the triumph of *Dharma* (righteousness) over *Adharma* (unrighteousness), a victory celebrated through movement, rhythm, and devotion.

The Rhythms of Garba

The rhythmic foundation of Garba is built upon specific cycles known as *Taals*. The most characteristic is the *Hinch Taal*, a six-beat rhythmic cycle (divided 3+3) that creates the driving energy necessary for the dance's escalating speed. Musical accompaniment involves the *Dhol* (double-headed drum), cymbals, and the *Shehnai* (Indian flute)

The Sociology of Inclusion

Sociologically, the "sacred circle" of Garba functions as a powerful social leveler, dissolving visible hierarchies as participants move together in shared rhythm and devotion. Within the circular formation, distinctions of class, caste, gender, and status blur, replaced by a collective identity centered on the divine. Recognizing this unifying force, UNESCO has highlighted that the practice "fosters social equality by diluting socio-economic, gender and religious structures," affirming Garba not only as a spiritual expression but also as a living cultural tradition that strengthens communal harmony and inclusivity.

Social Assertion

Garba has also evolved into a meaningful space for social expression and identity across diverse communities. In many urban centres, Dalit groups have embraced Garba as a form of cultural assertion, organizing independent celebrations that challenge and reject historical caste exclusions, transforming the dance into a declaration of dignity and visibility. Among Adivasi (tribal) communities, distinctive forms such as Divasa Garba remain closely intertwined with nature, featuring drum rhythms that echo the sounds of the forest and movements that symbolically recount agricultural cycles and seasonal change. Meanwhile, in Ahmedabad, the Barot community preserves a 200-year-old tradition known as Sheri Garba, in which men don sarees to honour the spirit of a woman named Saduba and ritually seek forgiveness for past injustices—demonstrating how Garba continues to serve as a living medium for memory, reconciliation, and social reflection.

A Mosaic of Regional Typologies

Garba is truly a "mosaic of community-specific practices," reflecting the rich social and cultural tapestry of Gujarat through distinct regional expressions. In Saurashtra, Koli Garba—performed by the fishing community—is exceptionally energetic and fast-paced, incorporating *besani* (crouching) movements that mirror the postures of fishermen balancing and working on boats. In North Gujarat, Rabari Garba embodies a slower, more graceful rhythm, with women balancing a *bedu* (metal pot) on their heads, its weight naturally guiding the measured elegance of their steps. Within the Nagar community, Betha Garba developed as a unique seated devotional form; historically, as Nagar women were considered delicate, this "sitting Garba" enabled participation through expressive melody and intricate hand gestures rather than vigorous movement.

Among the Meher community, Maniaro Raas stands out as an all-male dance marked by powerful jumps and a distinctive 11-beat cycle, highlighted by the *chabakhi*—a swift whirl in which dancers leap nearly three feet into the air before landing lightly on their toes. Meanwhile, Padhar Raas, performed by the Padhar tribe near Nalsarovar Lake, draws direct inspiration from the surrounding waters, with movements that evoke the rowing of boats and the rhythmic ebb and flow of the tide. Together, these varied forms demonstrate how Garba adapts to the occupations, histories, and environments of different communities while remaining rooted in shared devotional spirit.

Conclusion

The architecture of Garba—defined by the central womb lamp and the infinite circular formation—creates a space where the divine and the community become one. It is an enduring power that connects the human soul to the cyclical rhythms of the earth and the cosmos. Despite the pressures of commercialization, the "sacred circle" remains a potent symbol of unity in diversity and the resilience of the divine feminine energy. As participants move in their counter-clockwise rings, they reaffirm that in a "constantly changing universe," the bond of community is an unchanging constant.

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