

Punjabi Folk Dances

Analysis & Classification



Folk dance is a unit of popular folk tradition. Folk dance is a genre of performing-art of some cultural area or of one of the folk-circle within that specific cultural area. Even assuming that folk dance is only a 'performing-art' is restricting its meaning in a limited way. Folk dance itself is more descriptive concept than one art-form which has a specific role and significance related to that culture. Because of this special cultural role, folk dance is related to more than artistic needs of folk-mass. Any folk-mass, while performing its dance, is getting emotional, mental, physical and spiritual satisfaction on different levels at one time. Folk mass is performing its folk dance as an entertainment and assuage on emotional and mental level, as a play on physical level and the same dance as a form of prayer on the spiritual level. That is why it is important to discernible both social and spiritual aspects of its folk-mass while analyzing any dance.

Proper survey and analysis of folk dances of any area is only possible if we understand the existence of different folk-circles within that area and caste, region, religion and historic bases of those circles in right context. At the same time, we also have to keep this fact in mind, for related folklore, that there is always a continuous flow of dynamic changes to cultural genres.

Under changing historical and cultural references, these genres should be taken as dynamic chapters or else there will always be danger of misinterpretation of meaning. For example, after partition those folk dances of Punjab that have established on the stage are looked at and accepted purely as entertaining arts. Sometimes, by mistake, their present form is accepted as the authentic form. It is correct that these folk dances, especially Bhangra and Giddha, have gain importance currently as performing form of the stage art and during historic process, they have come long way from folk-performance and folk-elements of their folk-circles. But it is not correct to make them subject of analysis merely as stage art. On other hand, we have to keep this fact in mind that any folk dance, moving from their origin, perform various cultural roles at different states of history and folk-tradition, hence it is improper and out of context to position the current form of those folk dances as their original form.

Authentication of folk-dance is determined through its folk-tradition, that tradition which, while residing with its folks, is continuously transforming. That's how any dance can be understood in historical context from the available contemporary presenting-form. This way we understand that a simple action within a dance, one simple rhythm or traditional utterance of cultural context is deeply related to the past. Tradition is always gaining new articulations in new contexts and absorbs the past deep within itself. That is why, while analyzing any folk dance, where art, aesthetic sense, music and dramaturgy are important pre-requisite, popular tradition and anthropology are also not less important pre-requisite.

Folk dance is also important as it expresses the creative intellect of the related folk-mass. These folk dances are danced in utter joy, happiness, ecstasy and engrossed in mental intoxication. In such moments, related folk mass expresses such impulses, dreams, propensities that are not apparent in its day to day normal working. These feelings, as expressed with such intensity and keenness in a dance arena through special movements, are not possible through any other medium of that cultural manifestation. For example socially suppressed woman, through the artistic medium of dance movements in Giddha, speaks of her body and mind that she otherwise can not talk of. Analysis, based on psychological findings of clapping in Giddha and dancing

stance, might conclude that man-woman's physical-spiritual fusion's happiness, on imaginative level, is attained through clapping in Giddha. Hence those mysteries of Punjabi women that open in Giddha are possible only through this dance-form. This is true for other dances too. That is why folk dance is cultural/artistic medium for expressing the deep-down feelings of folk-mass. Hence through analysis of any folk dance, once can understand the conscious and unconscious of any folk-mass.

It is an accepted fact that most of the folk dances came into being during the prayer activities included in magic meditation of magical age. In preceding historical stages, these dances transformed and attached with religious meditation and people started associated their dances with their religion faith. In modern age, these dances are consumed as performance and entertainment arts. Presently, our folk dances are related to consumerist attitude. Peculiarity of folk dances of the related folk-masses is that it is fully linked to the life-conditions on factual surface.

Tradition of Punjabi folk dances has still not been discovered. It can be predicted from the available traditional elements of folk dances of Punjab that some dances are really primordial. These dances have centuries old traditions. Some lines of Rig Veda tell about a dance danced by pairs in round circle. Although Bhangra in its root-form is a peasantry dance but one can find many elements of pre-peasantry society apprising us that it might have been linked with magical rituals at some time. Linking of Bhangra with Lord Shiva is also indicative of the fact that one strand is linked to the Dravidian culture.

Like Bhangra, Sammi is also very ancient dance related to worship of Fire. Dr. Wanjara Bedi writes, "In Sanskrit, Sammi is called 'Tree of Jand' (*prosopis cineraria*). In ancient times, Hindus considered the fire resulting from rubbing of Sammi scared. It seems like in ancient times, when fire was worshiped as god and symbol of light, Sammi was danced around the 'Jand' to persuade Fire god." To call Sammi as fire-worship dance, Wanjara Bedi's reasons that till recent times, Sammi used to be danced in winter around fire...in Sammi's song, the popular line, "Sammi meri wannha dee (ਸੰਮੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਵਣਾਂ ਦੀ)", verifies the above conception.

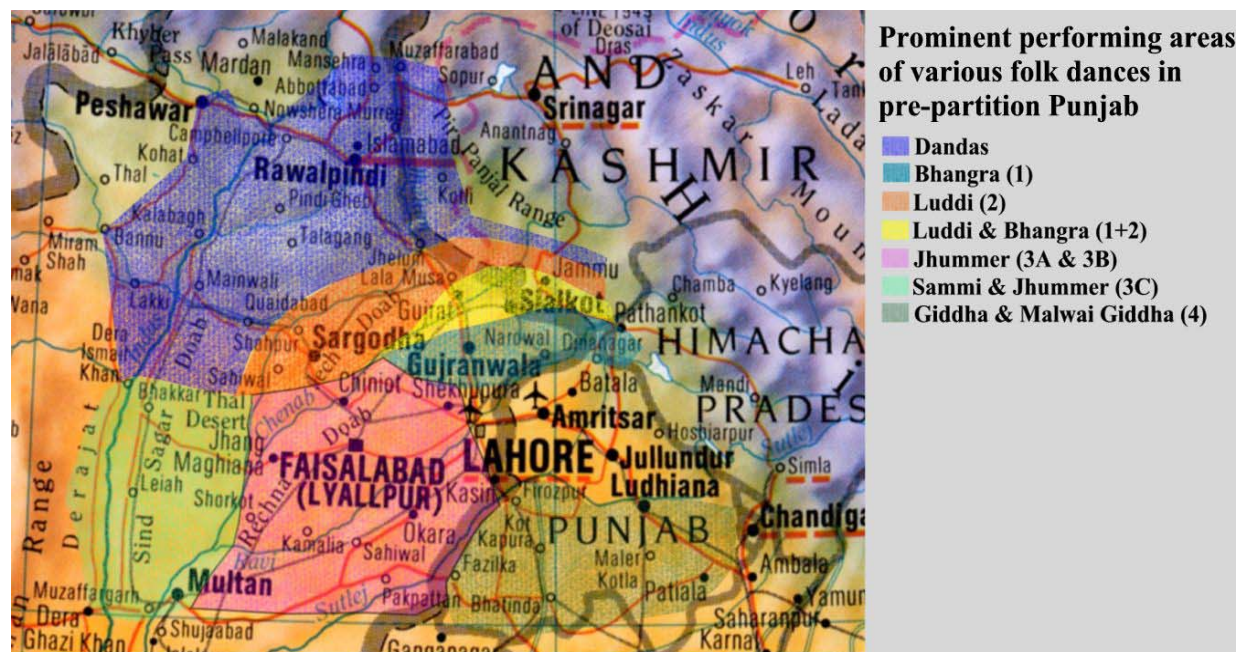
Giddha's of Punjabi women is usually taken as an expression of happiness during marriage. Cultural roots of this dance of Punjabi women are very deep. The current presentation of Giddha dance does not show any influence of religion but still one can find many traditions and elements that tell about the possible association of Giddha with rituals of Earth's worship. The biggest fact of relating Giddha with Earth's worship is association of Giddha with festival of "Teeyan" because "Teeyan" or "Saawey", in reality, is festival celebrating fertility of the earth. To disseminate the fertility elements in them, women dance Giddha on "Teeyan" to create yearning for mother Earth. Basic notions of magical meditation are active behind this action.

The main dance-gesture of Giddha is to thump the heel on the earth and dance while clapping. Thwacking heel and toe against the earth is symbol of awakening and appeasing mother Earth. When the dance-action starts after the 'boli' is over, first of all hands are bend towards right-hand side and clapped towards the earth. Clearly it is a gesture of greeting the earth. Most of the actions of this dance are addressed to the earth. Based on these and many other dance traditions, it can be likely said that Giddha might have started from the rituals associated with worship of

mother Earth. But slowly during the centuries-long cultural travel, this dance might have acquired mundane worldly color. Transforming according to the new needs of life, this dance might have come forward as a good medium of folk-entertainment. Being part of folk-entertainment, Giddha might have associated with marriage and birth of son because both activities are associated with social acceptance to man-woman procreative act and its celebration.

Based on presentation, folk dances of Punjab can be divided into three categories. But before we look at this categorization of each folk dance of Punjab, one fact conspicuously comes out that three categories, even though based on presentation style, can still be well categorized on geographic and historic bases.

The provided map is drawing a high-level geographical division of main folk dances of Punjab. Only that geographical area of the dance is considered that was the bastion of that dance. In many areas of Punjab more than one dance was performed but in the map, the main dance of the related area is taken in consideration.



Area No.1 belongs to Bhangra. Although it is very important from geographical, historical and cultural point of view but area of Bhangra is smaller than the rest of areas of other folk dances. In Area No. 1+2, both Bhangra and Luddi were equally popular. Area No. 2 is sub-montane region of Punjab having popular belt of ‘Patti’ Luddi dance.

Jhummer used to be danced in Area 3A, 3B & 3C. Area of Jhummer dance is larger than rest of folk-dances area. Area 3A lies between river Ravi and Chenab that is usually known as “Ravi Bar” and “Sandal Bar”. In same way, Jhummer between these two ‘bars’ is known as “Ravi Da Jhummer”. Belt in Area 3B lies between river Sutlej and Ravi. At sometime, river Beas used to flow through this belt and later falls into Sutlej. Area from the old flow of Sutlej and Beas to Ravi used to be called “Ganji Bar”. Like this, between Area 3B of “Ganji Bar” and “Neeli Bar”, special form of Jhummer used to be popular, known as “Neeli Da Jhummer”. Area shown under

3C comes between Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum. This variety of Jhummer of Baluch's (people of Baluchistan) is remembered as "Lambian Da Jhummer".

Falling under Area 4, Malwai Giddha was popular. This is the area where a dialect of Punjabi - 'Malwai' is spoken. Being related to one dialectal-area, adjective 'Malwai' is associated with this dance.

Area of Giddha is not shown in this map as it is popular in both east and west Punjab. This dance of women was popular from river Ghaggar to Indus i.e. popular in entire 'Sapt Sindhu'.¹ When Malwa is called the cultural centre of Giddha, we mean Malwa as "the" centre of Giddha because festival of "Teej" or "Teeian", related with Giddha, is most recognized in Malwa till 1947 and even after. Otherwise, all over in Punjab, Giddha is danced on marriage occasions.

People of different areas of Punjab always had folk game, folk dance, folk singing etc. as medium of folk-entertainment. Though these medium of entertainment or folk tastes kept on changing, there was never void in this area. From folk singing perspective, 'Dhadi' tradition in Mahja and Doaba, tradition of 'Jalsaa' in Puadh², 'Kavishri' and 'Akhara' in Malwa were popular. No area in Mahja and Doaba are shown as the centre of any folk dance in this map. This area has been the centre of Kabaddi and Wrestling arenas. In pre-1947 era, there was no rich tradition of Bhangra in this region.

Based on geographical proximity and sharing of presentation, folk dances of Punjab can be divided into three classes. All three classes of folk dances of Punjab can be independently identified based on geography, history and culture.

In first class come Dandas, Luddi and Bhangra. Dances of this chain were influenced by ethnic groups and cultural waves coming from the north and the west.

We can put Jhummer, Sammi and to some extent Jalli and Dhamal in second class. Where Jhummer and Jalli are related to Rajputi cultural background of Rajputana, Jalli and Dhamal are influenced by Sufi wave.

Giddha and Malwai Giddha come under third class. Whatever may be the origin of these dances or their ethnic background, they presentation is purely regional.

In first class all the three dances are brisk, vigorous and of combative nature. Deep passion of heroism and love is self-evident in them. Danced with deep thump, vigor and energy, muscular bodily movements are given preference in these dances. Cultural source or some basic elements of dances of this class are associated to other dances of Asia.

It is a well-known fact that through trade, cultural and language, Punjab, through North-West Frontier Province and Afghanistan, has been linked with mid-Asia. Most invaders use to enter

¹ Sapt Sindhu - The Aryans lived along the banks of seven rivers mainly due to easy accessibility to water. Of these seven rivers, five rivers currently flow through Punjab, sixth Saraswati and Sindhu (Indus).

² A region of erstwhile Punjab roughly comprising parts of Ropar, Patiala and Ambala districts.

areas of Dhan and Pothohar³ after moving through Khyber Pass and crossing river Attock via Peshawar. After this, they cross river Jhelum and Chenab to enter central Punjab. Once there, they use to establish their links with cultural, trade and political centers of Punjab like Rawalpindi, Gujarat, Wazirabad, Gujranwala, Sialkot and Lahore. Hence, trade relations of Punjab with mid-Asia through land kept the cultural exchanges on-going. Ethnic groups from mid-Asia like Mongols, Tatar, Turks, Pathans and Mughals use to come and settle in Punjab. Invaders from these ethnic groups never came here purely commercial and political reasons; religious preaching was also one of their main motives. Most of the invaders coming from this side used force to preach Islam. Influence of Islam from this side on Punjabi culture was one-sided and of rigid nature, less of a two-way exchange.

Although in Islam much importance is not given to dance and music but because of ethnic associations or commercial and cultural interaction, these three dances (Dandas, Luddi and Bhangra) are definitely influenced and motivated from mid-Asia. We can clearly see the influence of ethnic groups or waves, entering Punjab through north-western states and influencing Punjabi culture, on these three main dances of north-eastern region of Punjab. Sequence of these influences is like this.

Moving from north-western to central Punjab, if we analyze the dances of mid-east, Khatak, Dandas, Luddi and Sialkoti Bhangra, we can see increasing influence of regional color of Punjabi lifestyle on these dances. This concept can be understood in a concrete form on the bases of presentation similarities.

Many scholars agree that 'Khatak' dance of Pathans of Afghanistan is very similar to other dances of mid-Asia. 'Khatak' dance of Pathans has a special association with the 'Dandas' dance of people of Peshawar. 'Khatak' is Pathan's dance that is danced in Afghanistan and North-Western Frontier Provinces. This dance of combative dance movements is danced in circle with swords around the fire on beat of dhol and clashing sound of swords. Danced in open, it starts with slow rhythm and dance movements. Moving in circle, jumping and swaying swords, the dancers fight with an imaginary enemy. The drummer stands in the middle of the circle near fire. Khatak starts with the slow rhythms of the dhol. Moving further in circle, the dancers jump in middle and dance sword-play in pair face to face. When the pair finishes their sword-play act, they went back into the circle and two new dancers come into the circle. Like this, individual actions keep on going in the circle. As the beat of dhol becomes high and roaring, the speed of dance is faster and actions are sharper. Khatak dancers scream and imitate war cries. The dance ends in a frenzied ecstasy. Dancing and moving of sword by dancer in front of himself, in 8-shape, is the basic movement of this dance. Many scholars have described 'Khatak' as 'war-dance' related with preparation of war or celebration of victory.

Dandas is danced in Punjab adjoining the 'Khatak' dance area, popular known as 'dance of Peshawari Bhapaas'. Dandas used to be popular in Peshawar, Kohat, Banhu, Kala Bagh, Attock, Hazara, Hasan Abdal, Haripur, Naushera etc. areas. Instead of swords, Dandas is danced with two wooden sticks in hands. Like 'Khatak', pair of dancers brings oneness in sound while sticking wooden sticks.

³ Northwestern region of the Punjab, particularly area around Rawalpindi.

As we move from Dhan Pothohar to semi-plain areas of the east, Luddi takes place of Dandas. In Luddi, clap takes place of striking of two sticks. Moving in circle, most of the shoulders and arms movements are those of Dandas. As dancing pairs produce harmonious rhythm by striking sticks in Dandas, in Luddi pair of dancers, clapping harmoniously and making enticing mirthful gestures, make eye contacts with other dancers. Irrespective of similar dance-gestures, moving from Khatak to Dandas and from Dandas to Luddi, clearly the dance changes from 'war-dance' to 'love-dance' and internal gist changes.

When we enter from area of Luddi dance to Bhangra dance, instead of bodily delicacy, bodily strength and muscularity elements start dominating again. Athletic gestures with wrestling elements and bodily thump takes priority. There can be many historical reasons, still to be explored, for nearness of Bhangra to Khatak rather than to Luddi.

In second class of Punjabi folk dances, we count Jhummer, Sammi etc. whose cultural background can be traced to forerunner of Rajputs of Rajputana. Danced in western region of western Punjab, these dances are influenced from two sides: one from Rajasthan and other from Multan via Baluchistan side. These dances accept this two-sided influence.

It is a well-known fact that before the inhabitation of 'Bars' in western Punjab, forest dwellers living there were related to Rajasthan. Many of these tribes moved here after deserting Rajputana. Rajasthan was once country of fertile land and verdant crops. As the rivers changed their course, the area changed to desert. Deserted from here, farming tribes settled in western Punjab, eastern Punjab, Haryana and Himachal. Most of the Jatt clans in Punjab are related with Rajputs. This fact is also verified from Punjabi folklore where both Jatt and Rajputs are related to Scythian race. Those races of Punjab that entered from Iran through Baluchistan via Multan have direct relation with western Punjab and Rajasthan. From this very route came, Greeks, Irani, Ghaznavi, Huns, Sakas, Kushans etc.

History of Multan, once the capital of Sind, tells in 327 BC, Alexander moved from the confluence of Jhelum and Chenab to deserts of Multan to fight with 'Maloies' near Kot Kamalia. In 326 BC, he again fought with 'Maloies' on the bank of Sutlej. Chandergupta (327 BC), Kushans (30 BC – 470 AD), Huns (470 AD – 550 AD), Vikramadutt (544 AD), Sakas (544 AD – 700 AD), Arabs (700 AD – 970 AD) and Mughals ruled Multan for a long time.

Western and southwestern regions of undivided Punjab gave very forceful response to the Sufi wave. As a result, both these dances were influenced by Islamic lifestyle. Jalli and Dhamal of Sufis were popular in these regions. For these dances of western and southwestern regions of undivided Punjab, is there any defined relationship between Rajasthan on one side and tribes coming from western Punjab like Greeks, Huns, Sakas, Kushans, especially Scythians on other side? This question needs research.

Both Giddha and Malwai Giddha, falling under the third class of Punjabi folk dances, are somewhat regional dances. It seems that men's Giddha is directly influenced and motivated from women's Giddha.

Due to some special historical reasons, after partition, some regional folk dances of Punjab like Dandas, Luddi, Jalli, Sammi, Jhummer and Malwai Giddha have almost vanished. From these dances, only Bhangra and Giddha have established identity of Punjabis on modern stage. Present stage Bhangra and Giddha have almost detached themselves from the traditional presentation of folk-circles.

Because of multifarious and diverse presentation of Punjabi culture, revival of all, or even some, folk dances of Punjab is the need of the hour.