



CULTURE
MUSIC

A Kaafila To Andalusia

Flamenco and Rajasthani gypsy music meet, measure each other up, then braid effortlessly

by **Namrata Joshi** in Jodhpur



IT IS Spanish flamenco guitarist and composer Agustin Carbonell El Bola's first meeting with the Langa and Kalbelia group of musicians from Rajasthan. And he has nothing to say to them! El Bola doesn't understand Hindi, the Langas can't

speak Spanish, and neither side knows English. An awkward silence fills the sprawling, stately hall of the Sukh Sagar Haveli in Jodhpur where the Spanish and Indian musicians have been thrown together for six days to create a fusion

piece linking flamenco with Rajasthani gypsy folk tradition. Finally, music breaks the ice. El Bola plucks at his guitar, plays a few riffs. Zakir Khan responds by teasing out the same notes on his sarangi. As if on cue, dancer Karen Lugo begins

to swirl to the sounds; soon, Asha Sapera joins her. They exchange smiles, you know a creative journey has begun.

"Music has its own signs and gestures to make you know and understand each other. Art is ultimately all about feelings, rather than a language," says Zakir. As the day progresses and the noon sun shines brightly through the haveli's little latticed windows, their feeling for, and understanding of, each other's traditions grows before our fascinated eyes. On the first day, they lay out their musical wares, singing and dancing for each other with unstinted enthusiasm. The idea is to find

and build on common ground; to figure out how Sadiq Khan's dholak and Eklash Khan's kartal can link up with the percussive cajon of Jose Manuel Munoz Serrano; to see if the voices of Abdul Rasheed and Jose Antonio de Los Reyes Planton can come together in a jugalbandi; to find out whether the dholak's dhaap can match the tapping of feet, and if the guitar's melody can complement the dancers' fluidity. It seems to be all about choosing rhythmic patterns and movements that translate well across two diverse traditions, and leaving out those that don't; about retaining the organic

Fresh echoes Spanish Flamenco musicians with Langa and Kalbelia artistes

individuality of each form while creating a new one. No wonder, then, that by the second day the dissonances have gone, the interaction has become more comfortable, the blend smoother.

This collaborative exercise, whose formative stages we are witnessing, is the brainchild of Roberto and Cathy Nieddu, who run CRN Productions, a performing arts centre in Jodhpur. "We wanted this dialogue between two gypsy cultures, from Spain and Rajasthan," says Roberto. The show opened in Jodhpur at the Rajasthan folk festival and is travelling to Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai. The plan is to expand it by hosting other gypsy and flamenco artistes in India. "The reunion is here to stay," says Roberto.

For the musicians, the most striking aspect of this collaboration is the similarities in their art forms. "The musical structures are the same," says El Bola. So, the 12-beat "buleria" rhythm of flamenco felt like a familiar "taal" for Rajasthani artistes and proved easy for them to roll into. "There are common codes and concepts. The vocal expressions, melodies and rhythmic patterns are similar," says Francesca Cassio, music and management director at CRN.

For the dancers, however, the experience is different. Flamenco has vigour and tension; the Kalbelia dancers are used to smoother gestures. When Tamar Gonzalez and Karen Lugo tap their wooden shoes hard on the timber floor, Asha Sapera follows the beats with her bare, ghungroo-clad feet. While Asha's body flows gently like water, a smile playing on her face, Tamar and Karen move with sudden, dramatic shakes, tugs and jerks, forceful, assertive expressions and an inward-looking, intense gaze. But, in the

Flamenco artistes have historical links with Indian culture. Their gypsy ancestors had origins in Rajasthan.

end, they play off beautifully against each other to build superb tempo, infectious enough to pull the watching audience to the floor. What they do have in common are lithe dancers' bodies: posture ever graceful, spine always straight.

The artistic similarities don't just manifest themselves at the level of performance, they go back a long way in history too. There is a theory that flamenco gypsy artistes have their roots in India, that their ancestors were nomadic tribes from Rajasthan and Punjab who migrated to Europe in the early 11th century. "The two cultures may be far apart geographically but there's a definite closeness," says Francesca. "The social structure of Spanish gypsy societies, the professions they follow over generations are quite like practices among nomadic tribes in India," says Roberto. Both communities are close-knit, and set great store by marriage, family and kids. In each case, folklore and music is passed down the generations orally, through stories and songs. El Bola, who like the Langas comes from a family of musicians, is quick to point out: "I have travelled to forty countries but this is the first place that feels like a home away from home."

Exploring these connections was the prime objective for the show. "The idea was to take flamenco back to its roots and have it performed in its original setting and context," says Francesca. "For us this performance has been like building a bridge between two shared cultures," says Roberto. The deepest commonality, however, is in the reverent way the artistes respond to music. You see that in the impromptu jamming sessions that keep happening at the haveli; in the park, by the swimming pool, at the dining table. Planton and Serrano use forks and spoons for constantly playing out beats, at times clapping and snapping their fingers to create new sounds. Eklash is ever-ready to join in with his kartal. "Music is a way of life. It's not just what they play on stage. They are like this for real," says Francesca. "Music has to have a soul, otherwise it has no meaning," says Abdul. And Planton puts the same thought in different words: "Music has to emerge from the heart." That's what they call a perfect duet. □