

Literature of the Rural Life: Folk Deities in Indigenous Performing Arts

Shefali Martins & Rimika Singhvi

Abstract

Till a century ago, in rural Rajasthan, people knew about Ram and Krishna, but the details of their lives were not as familiar. On the other hand, rural celebrations, songs, and stories were rich with the legends of Tejaji, Ramdevji, Pabuji, Hadbuji, Jambhoji, and Gogoji. Their stories were told, recreated through music and drama, and preserved in oral tradition. Each of these were local saints, a greater part of life in the village than the gods that the villagers learned about later, when education and television brought the written word (in the form of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) to them. The songs also made for the unwritten literature of that era, comprising the details of daily life, and became a way of familiarising the villagers with age-old myths and life-lessons. Folk gods and goddesses were also a part of the daily confrontations and struggles of the villagers. Ramdevji set an example against casteism because he opened his doors to people of all castes, including women, at a time when they were not welcome in many temples. The caretakers of Rani Bhatiyani's temple are people from the performing communities instead of upper-caste priests. Then there is Pabuji, the saviour of cattle, whose story is painted on a *phad* (a piece of cloth) and told through local performers who hold night-long performances of his tale across villages. The Paper, therefore, will look at the rich poetry and songs on the culture and contexts of faith in local deities and folk gods of rural Rajasthan in a bid to explore why and how such means were adopted to preserve local stories and, thereby, transmit tradition.

Keywords: Folk deities; Inclusivity; Oral literature; Performance; Tradition; Villager.

Introduction

There is an ancient invocation in Rajasthan,

"Pabu, Hadbu, Ramde, Maangaliya Meha

Paachoon pir padhaarjyu, Gogade jeha!"

It calls out to the five folk deities of Rajasthan, who are also considered *pir* (spiritual leaders). A significant part of the rich repertoire of legends, folktales, and songs of rural Rajasthan is made up of the tales of folk gods and goddesses. Their stories have been told and recreated through music and drama, with each region of the state bringing its own local nuances and flavors, preserving and transmitting these tales for successive generations. And rightly so, Tejaji, Ramdevji, Pabuji, Hadbuji, Jambhoji, Dasha Mata, and such folk gods and goddesses have traditionally been more a part of the lives of the rural folk than Ram or Krishna. The latter were always well known, but their stories became more prominent only in the past four decades with the advent of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* on television and a greater emphasis on literacy which made these epics accessible to the common villager. Nandini Sahu proposes an examination of folklore to build insights on how social and religious identities take shape over a period of time and the way they are maintained and sustained (Sahu 2-3).

The local saints were a bigger part of the lives of the villagers because they were people who lived among them and like them — this is probably what made them 'folk'. In *Rajasthan: An Oral History: Conversations with Komal Kothari*, Rustom Bharucha shares this insight. "If a cow owned by a Rabari family is ill and is not able to give birth to a calf, neither Lord Krishna nor Lord Shiva is likely to be approached to deal with this problem. Likewise, if there is a family problem — more often than not related to child-bearing or some mental illness attributed to an evil spirit — it is assumed that the great gods are not likely to solve this problem. At such junctures, communities like the Rabari turn to folk gods and goddesses, who are believed to solve everyday human problems" (Bharucha 118-19). According to Ann G. Gold, the "desired ritual fruits" of shrine pilgrimage in Rajasthan reflect the "urgencies that press on everyday life" (Gold 154).

Universality in Contextuality

The local saints thus had a context in the happenings of everyday life. The unwritten literature associated with folk deities took the form of many oral epics, and a celebrated one among them is that of Pabuji, born in the desert village of Kohu. He is worshipped through a performance of the *phad*. A *phad* is a scroll made of cloth on which incidents from Pabuji's life are painted, and his tale is sung alongside highlighting these incidents.

Elizabeth Wickett calls the scroll a necessary element of the performance as it symbolises the historical and spiritual tradition of Pabuji. “Devotees also believe that it is a living temple to their deity” (Wickett 4).

Neuman et al say that these folk deities are seen as incarnations of Hindu gods and thus develop links with more general Hindu mythology (Neuman 77). Pabuji was considered an incarnation of Lakshman, and hence, in his life and death, he keeps up the famous observance written in Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*, “*Raghukul reet sada chali aayi, praan jaaye par vachan na jaaye,*” and gives up his life in an attempt to save cows because he promised to do so. The Rajasthani context is given when, during a *phad* performance, the *bhopa* (the man singing about incidents on the *phad*) says,

“Bai Deval abkhi padiyaan thoon karje Pabuji ne ghana keeje yaad

Ek chanvadi mein baithoda Paabuji thaari saayal keeje saamble.”

Here, Pabuji is assuring Deval, the cattle herd lady, who gave him the beautiful black mare Kesar Kalmi, on which Pabuji rode to his wedding procession. He is promising her that when danger befalls, she should remember Pabuji, who will hear her request in every condition, even if he is seated in the wedding pavilion. This precisely happens in the story, and Pabuji leaves his wedding midway to save Deval’s cows.

The night-long performance of this tale, besides highlighting its value, brings the relatable aspects of Pabuji’s life alive in the oral tradition — the names are local, and so are the contexts. Pabuji is also famed for having brought a particular variety of camels to Rajasthan because of a promise he made at his niece’s wedding, and so he is prayed to by the Raikas (traditional camel keepers) when a camel falls ill. Once the camel recovers, the Raikas call the *bhopa* and *bhopi* and hold a *phad baachan* to give thanks to the deity. Similarly, a performance is also sought in case Pabuji’s help is needed to solve a problem in the family. The entire village community participates in this night-long celebration, much like a *jagrata*, and in this way, a local tradition is preserved.

The value of keeping one’s promise also abounds in the legend of Tejaji, another folk hero, born in Nagaur’s Kharnal, who too was a saviour of cattle and kept his promise at the cost of his life. His stories are often told through the *Marwari Khel*, a form of a local play staged across villages. According to Seema Gupta, there are numerous songs depicting Tejaji’s valour, determination, and promise-keeping that are sung in the peasant-

ry (Gupta 44).

Tejaji had promised a snake that he encountered that he would return after freeing the cattle from a particular group that had stolen them. According to the legend, he tells the snake,

"Jaa pagaan jyaasun baa pagaan paacho aasyun

Pehli gaayan lyaa, paacho thaaso jhagdo karsyun."

I will return on the same feet that carry me. Let me first get the cows, and then I will address this issue with you, adding,

"Kol pooro kiyaan bina jaaun, toh mhaari maa ro doodh koni chungyo."

If I go back to my home without completing my promise to you, it would be an insult to my mother's milk. The sense of *dharm* (duty) associated with fulfilling one's promise is quite telling in the tales of both Pabuji and Tejaji.

Beyond Caste and Religious Barriers

In his foreword to *Pabu Prakash*, Narayan Singh Bhati writes how Pabuji felt proud to fight alongside the Bhils as they were his fellow warriors in the battle to save the cows. Pabuji says, "*O ragat mil jaavga de saavla de ragat maay*" – his blood will mix with the blood of the Bhils in this supreme fight (Bhati). This also explains why Pabuji, born a Rajput, is worshipped extensively by the Bhils, considered a lower caste in the caste hierarchy, and his *phad* is performed by Nayaks, a sub-caste of the Bhil community. Gold also speaks about the inclusivity of the folk tradition of worship. "There are rituals that everyone follows such as the Sitala Mata which is also performed by the Muslims! These rituals are for the benefit of the whole village" (Gold).

These folk gods thus don't come from an exotic, distant place but are among the masses. We also see this narrative in the legend of Ramdevji, born as a Tomar Rajput and considered an incarnation of Vishnu by some schools of thought. Dali Bai Meghwal, a woman of the Meghwanshi community, was his *dharam behen*. Besides tiding over dominant caste equations, the idea of Hindu-Muslim harmony is deeply enshrined in the story of this deity, as he is worshipped equally by people of both faiths. A 1963 film in Rajasthani titled *Ramdev*, directed by Nawal Mathur and Manibhai Vyas, has a song that the title character sings before taking his *samadhi* in

Ramdevra. The lyrics are,

*“Mhe toh chaalya mhaare gaon, tha sagla ne ram ram,
Jag mein chamke thaaro naam, karjyon chokha chokha kaam
Ooncho na neechon koi, sarkho sagla mein lohi
Kun Baaman ne kun Chamar, sagla mein vo hi kartaar
Ke Hindu ke Musalmaan, ek bararar sab insaan
Ishwar Allah unra naam, bhajta rahijyon subah-shaam.”*

I now return to my home. Greetings to all of you. May your name shine in the world through your good deeds. There is no one high or low; the same blood runs through everyone’s veins. Who’s a Brahmin, who’s a Chamar, when one God resides in everyone? Who’s a Hindu and who is a Muslim when all human beings are equal? He goes by the names of Ishwar and Allah, which you must chant in the mornings and evenings.

Rajshree Dhali notes the two phrases commonly associated with Ramdevji, “*Ramdev ne milya Dhedh hi Dhedh*” (Ramdev had the company of untouchables), and that he is the God of untouchables – “*Dhedho ka Dev*” (Dhali 27). Ramdevji was called a *pir* by five Muslim *pir* from Mecca who came to test his miraculous powers. They wanted to be served food on their own plates, which they claimed to have left behind in Mecca. Using his miraculous powers, Ramdevji managed to transport those plates and serve them (Bharucha 189). After being convinced of his powers, the *pir* paid their homage to him. Since then, he has been venerated by Muslims as Ramshahpir or Ramapir.

If Pabuji and Devnarayanji have a *phad* dedicated to them, Ramdevji has night-long vigils titled *jama* for his worship. Moreover, a distinct art form dedicated to the worship of this folk deity is the *teratali*, a dance-related performance tradition where the women play a number of *manjira* (cymbals) tied to various parts of their bodies with elaborate gestures. The widely popular hymn used in the *teratali* dance is,

*“O Runich ra dhaniya, Ajmal ji ra kanwara
Mata Menade ra lal, Rani Netal ra bhartar,
Mharo helo suno ji Ramapir ji.”*

The hymn gives his address to say. He is from Runicha; he is the son of Ajmal and Menade, married to Netal, and goes on to invoke him as Rama-

pir, as christened by the Muslim *pir*. The refrain is: Listen to my prayer, Ramapir.

Then, there is the folk goddess Bhatiyani of Jasol, who is hailed as a *kul-devi* by the Muslim communities of Manganiyars and Mirasis. It is believed that when she became a *sati*, she gave her wealth to the performing communities, which is why they worship her and sing of her praises. Rani Bhatiyani holds a special place in the hearts of the Manganiyar. "They also consider it significant that she appeared first in a vision to one of them" (Neumen 72).

It is also noteworthy that her temple is not maintained by a Brahmin priest but by a person of the Dholi community, hence challenging both religious and caste barriers. Her praises are widely sung across communities, and a very popular women's song, sung at the time of weddings in Rajput households, also talks of her in a stanza.

"Jalla sain raanya maayli, rani bhali Bhatiyani re

Mhari jodi ra Jalla, O mirganaini ra Jalla

Raanya maayli, rani bhali Bhatiyani re, Jalla."

In this song, the woman is familiarising her bridegroom with the culture of her native place, and herein she mentions Rani Bhatiyani as an ideal queen. She says that among all the queens, Rani Bhatiyani is the most kind and beautiful saviour queen. You are the king in our lovely pair; you are the king of the doe-eyed queen. (The song then goes on to repeat) Among all the queens, Rani Bhatiyani is the most kind and beautiful saviour queen.

The Early Environmentalists

Another stanza of the *Jalla* song talks about the sweetness of the water of the *baaori*. It is important to note that these legends involve the earthiness of life around them and protect life and livestock in every space. Their relationship with nature is also significant, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call these folk deities early environmentalists.

The simplicity of the colloquial language makes the legends relatable. There are folk songs dedicated to another saviour of the cows, Gogoji, who was a relative of Pabuji. Some of them have the lucidity of a nursery rhyme. Let us take this song, for instance:

“Gigan-bhavan soon kurja utari, kaayi yak laayi vaat o
 Kun-kun thakar joojhiya, kun-kun aaya hai kaam o
 Gogo nae dharmi beyi joojhiya
 Gogo aayo hai kaam o.”

A flock of *kurja* birds came down from the skies, and what news did they get? Who all fought for the cows, and who all contributed? It was the righteous Gogoji who fought for the cows. The local *kurja* or demoiselle crane, heightens the sense of association and the importance of the bird in the life of Rajasthan.

Going back to the story of Tejaji, it is not only believed that he was an incarnation of Shiv, but, since he saved a snake from fire and later offered his life to the snake, keeping up a promise, praying to him would render snake poison ineffective. Somewhere, this also leads to a sense of protection towards snakes, hence aligning with the idea of keeping the ecosystem intact.

In fact, since the 10th century, it has been a tradition in Nagaur to sing about Tejaji to pray for rainfall. Farmers usually leave their houses with an umbrella even when there is no sign of rain and sing of Tejaji while standing in the fields. They believe that when they sing without stopping, it will surely rain. This has even been taken up as a research project by Cambridge University.

The environmentalist Bishnoi community of western Rajasthan reveres the blackbuck and believes it to be a manifestation of their folk god Jambhoji, who made his followers swear that they would never cut a green tree. It is a well-known fact that the first women’s environmental movement in India was led by Amrita Devi Bishnoi, who sacrificed her life along with other Bishnois while protecting *khejri* trees. Bikku Rathod explains how, according to Bishnoi philosophy, the treatment of wildlife determines the good and bad karma of people. (Rathod 54).

The Dasha Mata festival is an important religious observance across the state. It gets women to offer prayers under a *peepal* tree and listen to and exchange stories – a sign of their relationship with the environment. Here, it is important to note that, like many folk festivals and observances, the Dasha Mata festival preserves traditional knowledge systems within the religious traditions.

Learnings for Contemporary Times

An important value of the performing tradition of folk deities is its unmissable inclusivity. If the Manganiyars sing of Mata Bhatiyani, the *phad* of Pabuji is sung by the Bhil community, the *teratali* is performed by the women of the Kamad tribe, and the ballad of Tejaji is sung by the Mali community. These folk deities are extremely inclusive in their ways of worship and hence a source of livelihood for many performing communities like the Rana, Dholi, Damami, Nat, Mirasi, Manganiyar, and Bhaat, who keep the oral tradition alive.

The legends, songs, and conversations around folk gods and goddesses are educational in format, decoding the values of life as relevant today as they were in medieval times. Ramnivas, communication coordinator, Barefoot College, Tilonia, explains, "The core idea of the narrative in the Dasha Mata festival is that one's *dasha* or situation in life has its highs and lows. One can't take the current situation as permanent and compromise on one's principles" (Ramnivas Interview). He elaborates on this with an example. King Nal and his wife, Damyanti, had lost their fortunes and were roaming around in search of food. Damyanti goes to a Gurjar woman to ask for buttermilk that she was churning in the process of making ghee. The woman was rather boastful about her produce of buttermilk, so Damyanti says to her,

"Garbamati Gujari, dekh mathuna chaach

Nau nau haathi ghoomta, koi Nal raja ke haath."

Don't be proud, dear lady; watch as you separate ghee from buttermilk. Even the great King Nal, who had nine elephants to ferry him, lost everything. The couplet gives us not only the equation of life but also indicates the caste role of Gurjars being associated with milk. Multiple meanings abide in this one couplet, which brings out a reference to mythology as well.

Raidas, the mystic saint-poet of the Bhakti Movement, also spoke about the temporariness of situations as he reflected on the caste issues of his time.

"Jaat bhi ochi, karm bhi ocha, ocha kasab humara

Neech se prabhu oonch kare hai, kahe Raidas chamara."

Yes, I am of a lower caste, my work is considered low, and my family profession is also looked down upon, but God lifts the downtrodden to

a better life. This is what Raidas from the Chamar community has to say.

Folk songs around deities can play a significant role in the much-sought-after environmental awareness of contemporary times. Many of the folk heroes assume that position because they save cattle that are essential to survival in Rajasthan, and so protecting the lands and forests in which they graze becomes imperative. Motifs of birds, clouds, and elements of nature abound in folk hymns, thus pointing out the primal role played by the environment in daily life and promoting a tradition of sustainability and living in harmony with nature.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the songs and hymns surrounding the various performance traditions related to the folk deities of Rajasthan abound in the wisdom of life, universal principles, and a code of ethics decoded in a language and setting relatable to local people. They also contain important life lessons for present-day urban folks. This worship is an inclusive tradition, and caste hierarchy often takes a backseat in the otherwise feudal system, especially in the context of medieval times.

The intertwining of a deity with the daily lives of villagers is thus an essential aspect of this faith; the deity is not a larger-than-life presence but an intimate and venerated member of the family. For example, Rani Bhatiyani is addressed as *Maajisa* (mother) in Jasol and *Buajisa* (father's sister) in her birthplace, Jogidas village in Jaisalmer. According to Rajasthani language, literature, and culture expert Kalyan Singh Shekhawat, "These folk gods and goddesses have never been supernatural creatures but were part of this human world, and they devoted their lives to the welfare of the society" (Shekhawat 360). The welfare of the masses is what makes them eternally relevant.

Notes:

- i. This is a famous Indian proverb that means: This is the tradition in King Raghu's lineage, which has been kept from generation to generation, that you cannot go back on your promise even if you have to give up your life.
- ii. The bhopi is the wife of the bhopa who performs alongside him.
- iii. A recital of the phad is called phad baachan.
- iv. A jagrata is a common practice across North India where a night-long vigil is held in honour of a deity.
- v. The Meghwanshi community comes under the Dalit caste category.
- vi. Dharam behen means adoptive sister, a person you choose as your sister before

- God.
- vii. In the practice of Hinduism, kul-devi means the goddess of the family lineage who protects the family and is prayed to, especially on important occasions.
- viii. The act of a woman burning herself to death on the funeral pyre of her husband is called sati. It was widely prevalent in Rajasthan in the medieval times. However, it is important to note that not all women who committed sati were hailed as goddesses.
- ix. A baori is a stepwell traditionally used to store water.
- x. According to the Indian astrological system, a dasha is the major period of a planet. A dasha indicates which planet would be influential during a particular time and hence be beneficial or disadvantageous for a particular person.

Works Cited:

- Ashiya, Modji. *Pabu Prakash*. 1st ed. Edited by Narayan Singh Bhati, Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash, Jodhpur, 1983.
- Bharucha, Rustom. *Rajasthan: An Oral History: Conversations with Komal Kothari*. Penguin Books India, 2003.
- Chouhan, D. S. "Marwari Folklore and Romanticism." *marwarifolklore.blogspot*, 3 Dec. 2020, marwadifolklore.blogspot.com/2020/12/jalla-sain-lyrics-english.html. Accessed 27 Nov. 2023.
- Dhali, Rajshree. "Perspectives on Pilgrimage to Folk Deities." *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, vol. 8, no. 1, Feb. 2020, pp. 24-32. <https://doi.org/10.21427/k3cb-y703>.
- Gold, Ann Grodzins. "Deep Beauty: Rajasthani Goddess Shrines above and below the Surface." *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 153-79. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40343829>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2024.
- Gupta, Seema. "Veer Tejaji - The Symbol of Folk Faith." *Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, Oct. 2020, pp. 40-46. <https://cajipc.centralasianstudies.org/index.php/CAJLPC/article/view/58>.
- IANS. "It rains when farmers sing Tejaji songs in Raj: Cambridge to pursue research." *The Morung Express*, 22 Aug. 2021, morungexpress.com/it-rains-when-farmers-sing-tejaji-songs-in-raj-cambridge-to-pursue-research. Accessed 26 Nov. 2023.
- Kothari, Vishes. "In Conversation with Ann Gold and Bhojram Gujar: Women Who Sing to the Gods in Rajasthan." *Sahapedia*, 30 Dec.

- 2019, www.sahapedia.org/conversation-ann-gold-and-bhojura-gujar-women-who-sing-gods-rajasthan. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
- Kumar, Manoj. *Exploration in Folk Literature*. Yking Books, Jaipur, 2016.
- Manchala, Moinuddin et al. "Mharo Helo Suno Ji." *Sugna Uubi Dagaliye*, Shree Krishna Cassettes, 2022. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6rAXASejDU5vM2M9kxIbBl>.
- Meena, Madan. *Tejaji Gatha*. E-book, Kota Heritage Society, Kota, 2012.
- Mishra, Seema. "Jalla Sain." *Hathlewa*, vol. 3, Veena Music, 2002. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azfrg__ILZQ&list=RDMMAzfrg__ILZQ&start_radio=1.
- Neuman, Daniel M., et al. *Bards, Ballads, and Boundaries: An Ethnographic Atlas of Music Traditions in West Rajasthan*. Seagull Books, 2006.
- Pareek Suryakaran, Swami Narottamdas, Ramsingh. *Rajasthan ke Lok Geet*. Rajasthani Granthagar, Jodhpur, 2019.
- Paswan, Rajesh. "Mirabai se lekar Baba Saheb ke shraddheya kyon hain Guru Ravidas." *ThePrint Hindi*, 26 Aug. 2019, hindi.theprint.in/opinion/from-mirabai-to-baba-saheb-ambekar-all-were-devotees-of-saint-ravidas/81682/. Accessed 27 Nov. 2023.
- Ramnivas. Personal interview. 27 Nov. 2023.
- Rathod, Bikku. "Climate Change and Culture of Conservation among the Bishnois of Rajasthan." *Climate Change: Combating through Science and Technology*, edited by G.A. Kinhal et al, Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, 2016, pp. 47–62.
- Sahu, Nandini. "Folk Deities As the Alternative Myths in India". *Creative Saplings*, vol. 1, no. 07, Oct. 2022, pp. 1-8, doi:10.56062/gtrs.2022.1.7.1.
- Shekhawat, Kalyan Singh. *Rajasthani Bhasha Evam Sahitya*, Rajasthani Granthagar, 1989.
- Smith, John D. *The Epic of Pabuji: A Study, Transcription and Translation*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Wickett, Elizabeth. *The Epic of Pabuji Ki Par in Performance*. World Oral Literature Project, 2010, api.repository.cam.ac.uk/server/api/core/bitstreams/5fc9ed40-764b-4ea5-92c6-1aafb805f2de/content.