

THE FOLK LEGACY OF RAJASTHAN

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In 1960 my friend Vijaydan Detha and I decided to establish a Folklore Institute in a small village of Rajasthan. We selected the village of Borunda, which is about seventy miles east of Jodhpur, and right at the heart of the State's circular boundary. We wanted to identify ourselves as much as we possibly could with the daily life of the people. We wanted our institution, *Rupayan Sansthan*, to be wholly 'saturated' with the oral tradition of the inhabitants. Borunda is a small village of five thousand people and there are in all about six hundred families living there. We wanted to collect from this particular site one basic document. This was to be the foundation on which the variants collected from other areas in the State were to rest.

Our beginnings were tentative, but the work soon gathered momentum. We managed to collect 13,000 folk-tales, 10,000 songs, and literally thousands of proverbs and riddles. Every genre of the area's literary and musical heritage helped us to understand the rural 'man' in his totality.

Our explorations followed two main streams: *documentation*, through scripting the oral tradition or recording it; *dissemination* of this documented material by making it available to fellow researchers. We also tried to analyse and arrange our findings. We hoped to introduce a logical order into this documented material. And now we are looking forward to the day when we can formulate a few principles about the internal rules that guide the creative and aesthetic mind of our people.

We have published in all one thousand folk-tales in a series entitled *Batan-ri-Phulwadi*. Each of the ten volumes is about five hundred pages. And we plan to bring out another ten volumes. When we document a folk-tale, we use a tape-recorder or else we make elaborate notes and try to put down all the details. As a rule, the village folk relate a story in order to exemplify a principle or a social value. It always stems from a 'situation'. They find it hard to recollect a tale, just for the sake of a story.

The tales with a specific narrative interest have exponents who have evolved an individual style of their own. They tend to embellish the language, to make much of an emotional patch in the story and to use formularistic expressions to describe certain characters. The stories told by women are simpler and have their origins in a ritual. In fact, the motivation of a story has a determining influence on its style and form.



*Kammu Khan playing the satar.
Siddiqui playing the khardtal.*

A contemporary note is evident in the stories of Vijaydan Detha, since the world of his imagination is wholly absorbed in the modern man living in a rural habitat.

The tales which we collected were first published in Rajasthani. The Hindi renderings of these stories have been published in our monthly journal, *Lok Sanskriti*.

Folk Music

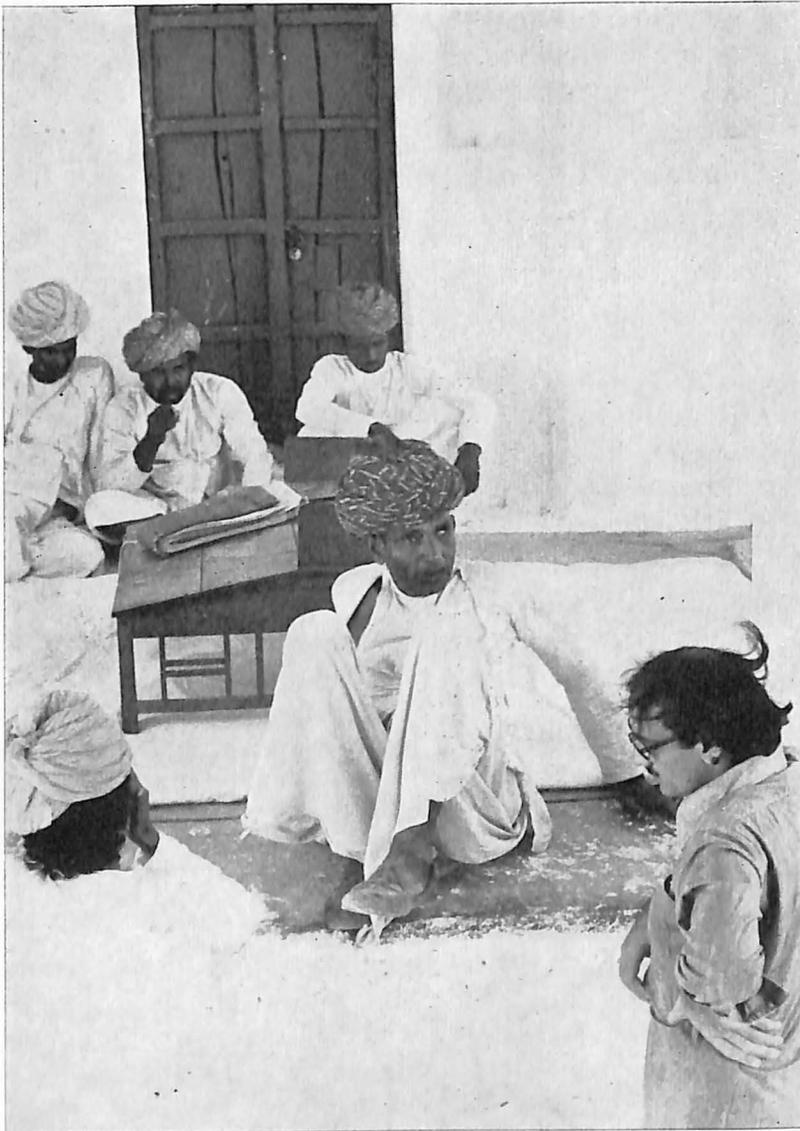
In this field we have documented thousands of songs. We were convinced that merely to publish the text of these songs and to analyse their poetic content, without in any way referring to their musical aspect, would convey no idea of their essential character. A folk song loses its flavour if it is not accompanied by melody and rhythm. We, therefore, worked out our own methods of documentation:

We record the songs. *Then* we prepare the text. When we write out the text, we note down every syllable uttered in the song. This means we leave out only the melogenic notes of the song. After this, we try and fix the lines of the song. We take into account the rhythmic cycle before determining the lines and the break. Punctuation, pauses, the use of silence all help to enhance the effectiveness of a rendering. The division of the stanzas is often suggested to us by the refrain, the burden lines. They affect the form of the song itself. Thus tradition has a role to play in influencing the structure of a song and the style in which it is rendered.

On the musical side we find songs with a single melodic line or two melodic lines. The shape and size of the stanza grooves the musical composition of the song. Songs with a single melodic line appear to have no beginning, no middle, and no end. They are sung for hours on end or even for days and without any fixed text.

Folk Music

To make our documentation more authentic and vivid, we decided to publish gramophone records. We recorded twelve songs. They were sung by three folk singers of the Langa community. No rehearsals of the songs were attempted; no music direction was provided: nothing was suggested to the performers about the text of the songs, the tempo to be maintained, the tonal note to be selected. No musical cues were decided upon before the recording started. We hoped to project the original plan of these folk songs—as visualized by these folk performers. All we did was to cut the song at three minutes and twenty seconds, the limit of a standard play record.



Mani Kaul working with the villagers of Borunda.

In association with the National Centre for the Performing Arts, we recently made a short film of fifteen minutes in black and white. Directed by the eminent young film-maker Mani Kaul, the film has been produced for strictly archival purposes. We had seven artists participating, and they sang two songs: *Dhumaldi*, a Manganiyar song, prompted by the arid conditions in the region of Jaisalmer, extols the virtues of a *raja* who constructed a water tank. *Papeya pyara ri* is the other Manganiyar melody sung by them. It describes the loneliness of the love-lorn heroine, Sorath.

The performers played on six instruments. The movie camera managed to capture the playing position of the artist and the way he handled the instrument in a manner no static picture could. For instance, the film manages to convey to the spectator a fair idea of the *murli* and the *surinda* which are both played by the Langas. The *murli* is a bagpipe with a gourd. The *surinda* is a chordophonic instrument; its bow is provided with bells (*ghunghroos*) which emphasize the time unit, with the beauty of the sound-texture emerging from the lightest jerk of the bow. The Langas also play on the *sarangi*, a type of improved fiddle which is played with a bow. They use two types of *sarangis*—the *Gujaratan sarangi* and the *Sindhi sarangi*. The names bring to mind the contiguous areas of Rajasthan and the *Sindhi sarangi* is still played in the Sindh areas of Pakistan. Here we have yet another example of the way in which cultural bonds transcend both administrative and national barriers.

Musical Styles

As a caste, the main profession of the Langas is to sing for the families of their patrons, the Sindh Sipahis. These Sindh Sipahis are cattle-owners or herdsmen, and they pay the Langas in cash or kind. The Langas, as a matter of duty, attend all the ceremonies held in the homes of their patrons. During a wedding they lead the procession to the bride's house.

Both the Langas and the Sindh Sipahis are Muslims, but many of their rites and festivals have their origins in Hindu customs.

Another community which depends for its livelihood on music alone is the Manganiyar community. The Manganiyars play on a chordophonic instrument, which has a belly very much like the *sarod's*. and which is called the *kamayacha*. They are known for their proficiency in playing the *khadtal* which consists of four strips of wood, two of which are held loosely in each hand.

The Meghvals of the Jaisalmer-Barmer area play the most complex patterns on an instrument known as the *satara*. They do so without the support of vocal music. They can reproduce intricate phrases on the instrument, but find it hard to play a single melody.

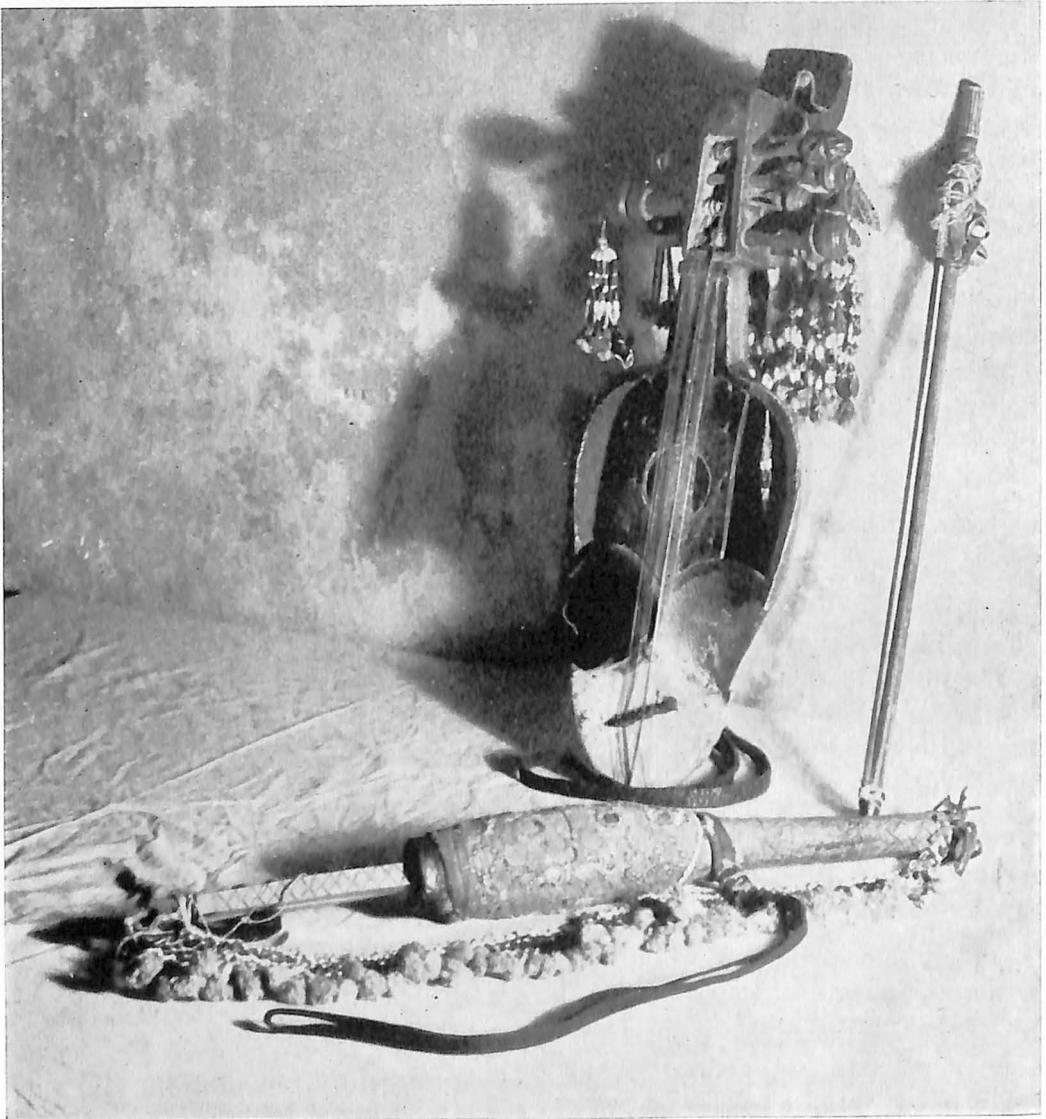
The shepherd community plays the *narh*, a type of *bansari* where one end is blown transversely. Once again the player is absorbed only in note patterns and not in melodies.

The Bhopas of Pabuji are renowned for their renderings of the ballad of the local hero, Pabuji. The instrument on which they perform is known as the *ravanahatha*. They use a coconut gourd and a bamboo stick. For the playing string of the bow, hair from a horse's tail is used.

As a result, the texture of the music and its tonal quality differs from the sounds produced by a steel string or gut.

The Bhopas of Gujjar have their own distinctive instrument, the *jantar*. It is a little like the *veena* for it has two gourds. An interesting feature of the playing is that the strings are struck in an upward direction.

As a rule, the instrument itself seems closely bound with the musical styles of a caste. And so one feels that the standardization of



The murli and the surinda.

the music and even the style of composition is often determined by the potentialities of the instrument. The *gorbund* is sung both by the Manganiyars and the Langas but the melody differs, for it appears that the instrument used by the caste influences the style of their singing.

Sometimes the musicians sing for their own pleasure, without any reference to audiences. But there are certain songs which are sung by the community itself e.g. the *rambhanat* cycle of songs sung at the time of harvesting. Jaggery is freely distributed in the village; the whole village arrives on the scene. In the fields they sing as they work. One leader picks up the refrain from the other. The rhythm patterns are vigorous. The words are *improvised* and have a specific reference to the day's activities.

The sun has paused in his run to watch us toil.

The moon has paused to watch us toil.

The stars have paused to watch us toil.

The basic pattern of the music remains the same for it seems to have no beginning, middle, or end. Only the words change.

In fact the quality of the *rambhanat* of an area is a sure measure of the texture of its folk music. If the *rambhanat* is rich (as it is in Jaisalmer), then one can be fairly certain that the music of the area will reveal an unexpected variety.

The Holi festival is rich in colour and music. The men sing the *fag*; the women folk sing the *loor*. Both have a fixed melodic form and a text which is subject to alterations. We collected two thousand such songs. But since the content is quite overtly erotic, we could publish only two hundred of these, for our journal goes to schools and other educational institutions.

We have in our collection at least a hundred songs sung by children—with a great deal of meaningless sound—play in them; and we also have their riddles with the stress on common verbs which rhyme.

Then there are the lullabies sung by adults for infants. The women who sing them do not treat them as songs. So though they have a large repertoire in their possession, they find it hard to recall the music and the text.

The songs which girls sing are usually full of references to the tyranny of the mother-in-law and the awe-inspiring presence of the father-in-law. Strangely enough, once a girl is actually married, her songs contain scant references to the in-laws and their authority.

Folk Ballads

Folk ballads, like those that relate the heroic exploits of those pastoral heroes, Pabuji and Bagdavat, are sung in villages night after night. *Bagdavat-ri-pad* is an eleventh century tale; *Pabuji-ri-pad* belongs to the fourteenth century. The singers use the accompaniment of the *ravanahatha* and the *jantar*. They carry with them a scroll painting, twenty feet long and three feet wide, illustrating nearly two hundred and fifty incidents in the story. The music is accompanied by dance and the musician who plays the instrument dances in tune with the rhythm he creates.

The Rajputs of Mewar sing the *bharat* which deals with Pauranic themes, or myths, or superstition and magic.

The Nath Babas of Godwad recite a special form of narrative called the *byavalo*. It relates incidents in the life of an individual, right from the moment of birth to that dramatic moment during his wedding when he circles the sacrificial fire seven times with his bride. At that point the song ends since the hero becomes a *yogi* and renounces the world. *Bhajans* follow this climactic moment.

In addition to all these forms, there is the rich world of folk beliefs, Brahmanical lore, and linguistic proverbs.

The strands are all interwoven, and in their totality, they offer us a glimpse of the folk legacy of this region.