

# Epics of Rajasthan

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## *Introduction*

An oral epic consists of narration of a story in poetry and prose, song accompanied by a musical instrument (if sung in a group, the musical instrument is not necessary); it sometimes includes dance and dramatic enactment by the performer. Each of these elements requires independent and in-depth investigation. In any given society, traditions of story-telling, oral poetic compositions, melodic forms, musical instruments, dance and drama have their own history and a social relevance necessary for continuity. All the elements put together can be said to be a performance. Once designated as performance, two aspects become very important: the performer and the audience. On the performer's side, the question of his recruitment to the tradition has its own ramifications: Why does he attract an audience which is interested in participating in the performance? In finding answers to all such questions, one starts to discover a picture of the oral epic traditions in India.

For convenience of study, it may be necessary to isolate the epic and its performance from the whole of society; but as soon as this is achieved, it is necessary to place it again into the totality of society. Stuart Blackburn and Peter Claus rightly observe that "it is essential to collect, as well as to analyse their (folk epics') performance context." Blackburn has tried to analyse the actual performance, its deep ritualistic situations and relevant impact on the narration or enactment of the epic. Brenda Beck has sought to bring out the local folk epic's relationship with the Great Traditions emerging from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Folk epic scholars are trying to come to grips with the problems, with appropriate stress on one aspect or another.

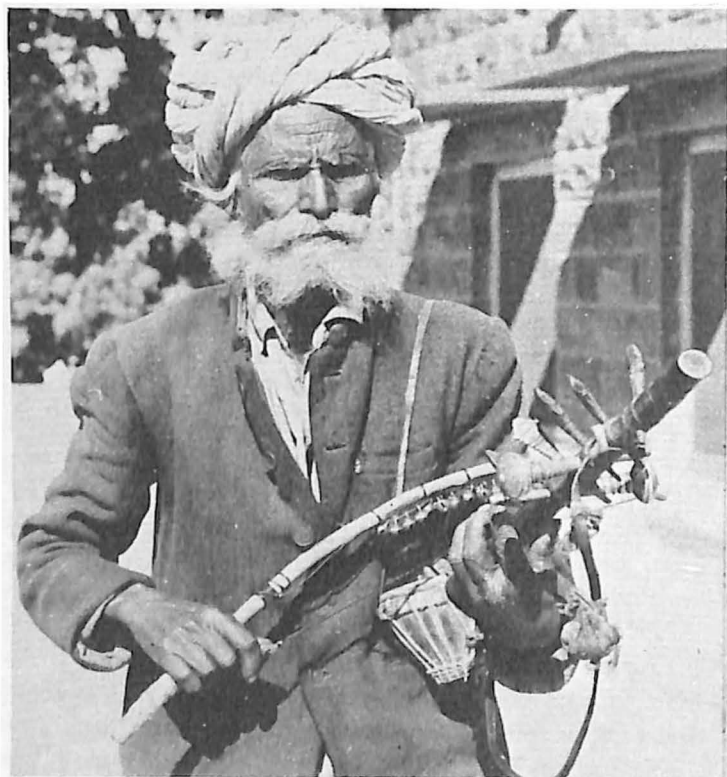
Living in Rajasthan as I do, the attempt to obtain an in-depth view of the folk epic genre in relation to folk music, folk musical instruments, folk narrative, folk performing arts, with due importance to the ethnologic groups involved in the activity, has widened the horizons of study. The problem of deification of the folk epic hero set me on the track of folk gods and goddesses and definitely provided certain clues to an understanding of the epics.

## *The Pre-performance Situation*

Let us begin by examining the pre-performance situation, the performance itself, the post-performance situation and the renewal of the cycle. The pre-performance situation takes us to the problem of who is going to perform, how and where he received the expertise, when is he expected to perform etc. The different traditions in Rajasthan suggest the following:

An individual or a team of two or more prepare themselves to render a performance of the epic, mainly because their society nurtures a religious, social or other need for it. The segmented and stratified society of India sometimes creates a specialized caste, a hereditary group for performance. In the case of the *Pabu* epic performance, Nayak or Thori is the hereditary caste-group functioning

as performer. But this is not entirely true even with the *Pabu* epic. The Raika group singers of the *Pabu* epic cannot be described as specialized epic singers, without any musical instrument. Again, with the *mata* (pot-drum) version, a specialized section comes into existence. An essential difference between caste hereditary groups and general caste groups as performers is inherent in performance-audience relations. Hereditary performers perform for an audience, whereas the general caste group sings for the group itself (it does not have an audience). But the general caste group definitely has its own leader, and the others join him in the singing. The leader has to imbibe a certain amount of expertise in the memorization of the epic. The leaders always emerge from the supportive groups; it is here that new lead-singers get their initial training. The recruitment procedure is as simple as a child learning its mother tongue. But this is not true of the professional hereditary caste performers. The new recruit has to learn to play the musical instrument, master it and perform for others who definitely have a preference for one performer. He has to compete to stay in the tradition with his own caste brethren. The same is true for the *Bagrawat* epic singers. We have till now been able to identify the castes of Nayak or Thori and Bhil performers of the *Pabu* epic as professionally engaged in *Pabu* epic singing. As for *Bagrawat*, there are professional groups (not necessarily hereditary), from the Gujar, Gayari, Kumhar, Mali, Bhand, Turi, Bhat and Balai castes. There may be several other castes who are engaged in this. For a general caste group, we have come across Gujar, Jat, Gayari and tribal Bhil.



*Bhopa Jawarji with Ravan hatha*  
(Courtesy: Rupayan Sansthan)

Epics like *Amarsingh Rathod*, *Nihalde-Sultan*, *Sivaji-ro-Biyavalo* are sung by the professional caste group of Jogis, accompanied by the *Jogia Sarangi* and the *Bhapang*, a rhythmic string instrument. These Jogis are confined to the eastern districts of Rajasthan, namely Alwar, Jhunjhunu, Bharatpur and Shekhawati.

*Deval* is a particular tradition of epics related to characters of the *Mahabharata* — Arjuna, Bhima, Abhimanyu. But common to the *Mahabharata* and *Deval* are only the names of the characters. All *Deval* episodes begin after the whole action of the *Mahabharata* has come to an end. An epic from Tamilnadu has recently been reported about *Shet-Konth Ravanam*. It continues after the end of the *Ramayana*. Here it says that finally Sita has to fight the Hundred-Headed Ravana because Rama was reluctant to embark on another major war. A similar epic has also been described in *Bundelkhand-ki-Sanskriti aur Sahitya* by Ramcharan Hayaran Mitra, where Sita ridicules Rama and Lakshmana for not killing the real Ravana. The brothers sought to fight the real Ravana, but he proved to be invincible. So Rama requested Sita to kill Ravana which she did by transforming herself into Kali or Mahashakti. These types of epics are mostly rendered by general groups of different regions. In some cases, certain castes alone join but usually the middle and low groups of the village participate in the singing, accompanied by musical instruments such as *Tandura*, *Dholak*, *Manjira* and *Khartal*.

The epics of *Goga*, *Teja* and *Bhabhoota Sidh* are sung by the general groups. *Goga's* life is recited with *Dhak* (an hourglass-shaped drum); *Teja* is rendered with the two-flute instrument (*Algoza*) and also without any instrument. *Bhabhoota Sidh* is rendered on *Sarangi* or *Kamayacha* in the western region.

The fourth group of epic-singers are again professional caste musicians but they render the epics during marriage and childbirth ceremonies. This ceremonial epic-singing has a religious or social significance and is sung for entertainment and enlightenment. Training for the rendering of these epics is rigorous because the new recruit has to master a complicated string instrument and learn the couplets by heart. The prosodic meter and musical composition follows well-knit rules. Most of the romantic tales are included in such epics: *Dhola-Maru*, *Jalal-Boobna*, *Moomal-Mahendra*, *Khinvji-Abhal de*, *Nagji-Nagwanti*, *Saichi*, *Jasma-Ratanpal*, *Saini-Bijanand* are a few examples.

In terms of the pre-performance situation, we have to conclude that whenever a chordophonic instrument intervenes, the professional groups have some sort of training. Where people in general render the epic with elementary rhythmic instruments (different types of autophones or membranophones), no formal training of any kind is envisaged. The professional epic-singers have to move from village to village to find their patrons. Unlike romantic epic-singers, *Pabu* or *Bagrawat* epic-singers do not have fixed *Jajman-s* (patrons). The caste group singers mainly assemble in their own village or arrive at fairs and sing the epic at night. Sometimes neighbouring village also invite them to a night-wake ceremony. None of the above-mentioned performers ever get possessed themselves. But there are a few exceptions. Sometimes, the epic-singer claims possession by either Bhaironji or Bhomiyaji but never the main deity related to the epic.

The pre-performance situation of the audience is thus the most important factor. Somebody has to decide to have a session of epic singing. It can be an individual, a family, a caste, a group of neighbours or the village as a whole. It never happens that singers start reciting the epic on their own in the hope of attracting an audience. A member or members of different group(s) feel a spiritual or material need to call for such sessions. This may arise from continuing illness in the family, deaths occurring in quick succession, chronic illness, a barren woman keen to bear a child, an epidemic or ailments among the caste, a financial disaster, a legal case pending in court, blindness, leprosy, impact of a witch, ghost or other malevolent spirits. Any sort of persisting difficulty initiates a desire to hold a session of an epic performance. A person may vow that once his difficulties are over he would arrange for a performance of a particular epic. He needs to have faith in the particular deified hero. Performances are always held at night. However, epic sessions are even held to earn spiritual merit. Among Gujars, it is an accepted practice to pay for the painted scroll and donate it to the performer. The first session of an epic performance has to be held at the patron's house and he has to pay for all the ceremonies to which the performer is bound.

It is important to note that the *Jagran* (night-wake) ceremony is an organic part of the belief system. *Jagran*-s are held during childbirth, marriage and death ceremonies and accompanied by sacred and devotional songs. These are described as *Ratijaga* for childbirth (during *mundan*) and marriage (*Maya*), and *Dangari-rat* for the night-wake for death. Any important happening in the family might result in a *Jagran* ceremony—the construction of a new house, excavation of a new well, acquisition of land for cultivation or winning a case in a law court. When no epic performance is held, *Jagran* sessions include devotional songs. Whenever a new shrine is established, *Jagran* has to be held; only after the ceremony is the efficacy of an icon accepted. Before night-wake, the idol is just an ordinary relief stone but after the ceremony it is bestowed with all the respect due to a god or goddess. Epic sessions in the form of night-wakes come within the boundary of religious merit.

### *The Performance Situation*

Once the decision to hold a night-wake is taken, the performance comes into the picture. The performers are invited either to the home or to the shrine or the temple or to the site of the well or the field. Members of the family, neighbours and friends are invited to join. The host has to provide tea at night to the audience and the performers who move in a leisurely way. Usually about fifty people attend. Early next morning *Lapsi* (a sweet prepared from wheat and sugar) is distributed.

During the performance of the *Pabu* epic, the marriages of Goga and Pabu himself are the two main occasions when the performer requests the audience to offer money for the ceremonies as is usually done during weddings. He announces each donor's name and blows his conch. The same types of offerings are made during the recitation of the *Bagrawat* epic. But in other *Jagran*-s one does not find such offerings. The performance then is part of the story, song and dance. It is true that long epics are not sung in full in these sessions. The *Pabu* epic is hardly recited till the marriage ceremony of Pabu and that leaves out more than half the epic. *Bagrawat* hardly arrives to the great war of the twenty-four Bagrawat brothers. Epics like *Deval*, *Tola-de-ri-Bel* or *Rupan-de-ri-Bel* are completed in one

night. Group singers usually continue to sing for two or three nights to complete the epics depending on the vow of the host. (I have not yet tried to observe different sessions from the point of view of editing or elaborating the version to suit the occasion. Some of the tribal epics are also rendered during the day, with a big group of male and female singers and dancers. Night-wake is important for them but the day is not ruled out for such recitations.)

Epic performance of caste-groups have a definite yearly cycle to follow. Practically three-fourths of the area of rural Rajasthan has *Heed* sessions (another name for the *Bagrawat* or *Dev-Narayan* story) during Divali (October). Immediately after the end of the Divali festival period, another epic, *Hiraman*, is sung in the Kota-Bundi-Tonk region. The *Teja* epic is sung during Savan and Bhadva (July-August-September) in several parts of Rajasthan. All the fairs and festivals during this period have young groups moving and singing *Teja*. The tribal Bhils say that they sing *Ambav Bharat* during Navratri, in September, followed by *Heed* (*Bagrawat*) during Divali. Later on they move to the story of Rama. This annual cycle has yet to be finally identified in different regions with different groups. The compulsion of this cycle may have a lot to do with the epic performance itself.

The two important festivals of Divali and Holi arrive just before the harvesting season and involve a long period of celebrations. In the month of Asoj (Ashwin: September), the *Shradh* fortnight marks the beginning of Divali. This fortnight is devoted to ancestor worship. Any member of the family dying at any period of the year is ritually remembered. The following fortnight is Navratri which is followed by Dashara. It is believed that during Navratri all the gods and goddesses are at the peak of their power and bestow their strength to the people. All the shrines of gods in the rural areas come alive and start functioning. Most of the complicated cases of family discord are mediated through trance during this period, and particularly on the eighth night of Navratri. Dashara marks the end of Navratri. It signifies the victory of Rama over Ravana; but when one examines the rural festival of these fifteen days, one realises that it has mostly to do with the multifarious gods of the region. All new religious shrines (*Than*) come into existence in this period and replacement of icons is also accomplished during Navratri after a night-wake ceremony. These fifteen days have also to do with the growing of seeds (*Javara*) which are ceremonially immersed in the lake, river or well. *Javara*-growing is repeated in the month of Chaitra with the Gangore festival or Chaitri-Navratri; it marks the death ceremony as well. The day the family members leave their village to immerse the mortal remains (after cremation) in the river Ganga, the seeds are put in an earthen pot or at Pathwari. The growing seedlings are ritually immersed at some water source. It seems that *Javara* is related to the death ritual and becomes important during the fortnight of the Divali and Holi period marked for ancestor worship. Dashara takes us to the final Divali festival which is celebrated on *Amavasya*. Similarly, the Holi festival culminates on *Purnima* after a series of other festivals and is followed by another set of festivals. The long duration of these festivals and the invocations to the ancestors, as well as to the various godlings of the villages, are important religious occasions reserved for the recitation of epics which, in turn, are related to the invocation of certain deified human beings.



(I have yet to work out the whole calendar of epic performances in different regions of Rajasthan. The tribal people of this region strongly adhere to this calendar for their epic performances. In some cases, the cycle is very strictly observed: the epic is prohibited from being enacted except during the designated period.)

### *Death as a Salient Feature*

Stuart Blackburn touched a very important aspect of the epic performance by recognizing 'death' as its salient feature. While describing the performance, its intensity and ritual depth, he has recognized the birth story of god and the death story related to ordinary human beings. Both types of stories have a different movement and yet merge into each other.

Death is recognized as an important element by all scholars of the oral epic tradition. Words like 'hero', 'heroic deeds' and 'heroic death' always arrive in a sequence. A hero, who achieves his aim or the object for which he performed heroic deeds and yet lives on in the story, is never deified. Romantic tales ending in comedy or tragedy do not find a place in ritualistic or sociological epic-lore. Let us see whether the element of violent death has anything to do with our epic performances.

The general belief in India is that a dead person's spirit roams in space for twenty years after his death. His spirit moves in different *Loka*-s and only if it is properly propitiated by his living relatives, does he achieve *Moksha*. The elaborate death and *Shraddha* ceremonies designed by Brahmins, with the recitation of the *Garuda Purana*, establish the point. At the folk level, different beliefs and rituals surround the efficacy of the dead person's spirit. The first cognizance of a dead person's spirit appears in the concept of *Pitar* or *Pitrani*, also designated as *Purvaj*. Among higher castes or *Savarna* caste groups (whose family structures are strongly geared to a patriarchal format), it is mostly the male members who achieve the status of *Pitar*. Dead female members are known as *Pitrani* but, in most cases, this is so in case of the premature death of a woman. Then her husband is allowed a second marriage. The second wife has to propitiate the dead wife who is recognized as *Pitrani*. Unmarried girls are never propitiated after their death. But, in the case of male members in the family, a married boy or a young man who dies is propitiated as *Pitar* or *Purvaj*. But all the deaths in society do not enter family worship as *Pitar*. The dead man's spirit has to manifest itself, in some form or other, to the living members of the family. The spirit of the dead person starts possessing a member in the kin-group and expresses desires which remain to be fulfilled. This is a very powerful possession. Sometimes this spirit does not possess any particular person but starts functioning malevolently causing harm to the immediate family group. The family, unable to find a reason for the tragedy, approach a shrine of the folk god and the possessed *Bhopa* explains the unsatiated condition of the dead person's spirit. Sometimes, the dead person appears in a dream and demands propitiation. This feature is evident in life-cycle rituals, ceremonies and folk-songs but what I would like to stress here is that all *agat maut* (accidental, violent deaths), or those spirits of dead men who do not find salvation, retain their existence and power on the earth. *Pitar* or *Pitrani* or *Purvaj* are effective godlings in a limited family group. To begin with, these spirits are malevolent, but after propitiation they become benevolent and the family continues to invoke them for its welfare.

Among tribals, dead males and females both appear as godlings and are known as *Moga* (male) and *Mogi* (female) among Garasiyas, and as *Sura* (male) and *Matlok* (female) among Bhils. There are long formulaic songs for *Moga-Mogi* and *Sura-Matlok*. Death ritual among these groups is very elaborate and a *Bhopa* performance in which the life of the recently dead person is enacted is an important element. One must note here that the hourglass-shaped drum (*Dhak*) is played with songs for the invocation of a dead person's spirit.

Let us now look at those dead men's spirits invoked or worshipped by a whole village or a defined region. In the western desert part of Rajasthan, the name for a god is *Bhomiya*. Another similar god is known by the name of *Mama*. *Bhomiya* or *Mama* or generic names for those warriors who pursue the robbers of village cows and die in the fight. The story would be as follows:

Cows owned by different families are collected at one place in the village and then taken by an appointed *Gwala* (cowherd) for grazing in nearby fields. Robbers find it easy to kill or frighten away the cowherd. The message is received in the village. The war drum is played; the villagers assemble and request a brave man to pursue the robbers and bring back the cows. Usually a Rajput, who is properly armed, volunteers to do so. A fight ensues. If he dies in the fight, he is propitiated as a *Bhomiya* or *Mama* god and worshipped by all. This story will invariably say that the warrior was beheaded by the robbers but he still continued to fight, sitting on horseback and with swords in both his hands. There grew a lotus flower in place of his head and eyes appeared on his chest. He returned victorious, riding his horse but headless. Some known group of women must express wonder at this headless warrior and then alone will his body fall from the horse. Another effective method of bringing him down would be to throw cold water mixed in indigo colour.

In most of the villages of the desert region, one finds a shrine for a known or unknown *Bhomiya*. The same god appears in Gujarat as *Palya*. In the second part of the story, *Bhomiya*, *Mama* or *Palya* manifests himself through a medium, that is, by possessing somebody. The possessed person is known as *Bhopa*. Once the *Bhomiya* shrine becomes active through this medium, it starts solving the problems of the people around. The effective and truthful disposition of a *Bhopa* in trance spreads his fame far and wide and people start arriving from different regions. Songs are composed on *Bhomiya* and he becomes the most popular god of the region. As soon as the *Bhopa* institution comes to end, the shrine is abandoned and forgotten except for the icon and the platform on which he was once installed.

The *Pabu* epic is the elaborate story of a *Bhomiya* god; so also, *Teja*. The *Teja* story says that though Teja was married as a child, he did not know about his marriage till his sister-in-law satirically referred to it. Teja, as a young man, proceeds to fetch his wife from the village of his in-laws. On the way he sees a huge fire in the forest and a snake struggling on a burning tree. He takes pity on the creature and, with his spear, removes it from the fire. But the snake is angry. It wanted to die because it was tired of moving on its belly. The enraged snake wants to bite its saviour. Teja promises to return after meeting his wife for the first time. The snake relents. Teja goes to the in-laws, is received well by

his father-in-law and his brother-in-law but insulted by his mother-in-law. He is offended and ready to leave. But his wife and her girl-friend Hira manage to cool his temper. That same night, Hira cries out that her cows have been robbed. The feudal chief, who would have saved her from this calamity, is not in the village and Teja offers to fight. He pursues the robbers, overpowers them and leads back the cows. But Hira complains that her one-eyed bull has not come back with the herd. Teja says that Hira cannot be normal; why is she asking him to risk his life for a worthless bull? Hira explains that she is an incarnation of Shakti and Teja has to go again. He returns with the bull. He is so badly wounded that no part of his body is free of injuries. He then leaves to fulfil his promise to the snake, who wants to know where it can bite Teja since no part of the body is free of wounds. Teja offers his tongue. The snake bites him and he dies with the blessings of the snake: "Teja will rule over snake-poison." Teja is now worshipped as a snake-cure god in practically three-fourths of Rajasthan. But he is again a form of the *Bhomiya* god.



Pabuji's *Bhopa* and his wife with *Parh*  
(Courtesy: Rupayan Sansthan)



It is important to note that the same motif from the Tamilnadu epic *Muttupattan* is reported by Blackburn. Cattle-grazing or the cattle-keeping activity of a pastoral society has a lot to do with such deifications. For instance, a god like *Jhunjhar*. A person enters into an argument, which is followed by a clash with another individual or group of people, and then he dies a violent death and manifests himself through dreams, possession or is recognized by another *Bhopa* as one to be propitiated. Sometimes the spirit of a dead warrior may also manifest itself and win the respect of the region. For *Bhomiya*, the identification is complete and true; for *Jhunjhar*, it may be anonymous at certain places. A similar god is also known as *Sagas* in the southern region of Rajasthan. In the case of a dead Muslim, he is designated as *Khaiis*. In the central area of Rajasthan, *Jhunjhar* is not a god born of a person who faced violent death, but just an ordinary ancestor.

There are many beliefs around the mode of death and after-death which conjure an army of gods and goddesses. *Sati* is treated on par with the Mother Goddess (*Shakti*) and is traditionally worshipped, but not all *Sati*-s are categorised as goddesses. Women who go through the *Sati* ritual for social or political reasons or as a result of the husband's death on the battlefield are not part of the hierarchy of goddesses. Only those *Sati*-s are remembered, worshipped and deified who manifest themselves in some form or other after their immolation. As long as they remain thus effective in the timescale, they survive. The others are forgotten. Narayani Sati of Alwar, who belonged to the barber caste, has a short epic on her. Her husband died due to a snake-bite. An intense desire to become *Sati* overpowered her. This is known as *Sat-ugano*. With the help of a stranger, she immolated herself with her husband's dead body. She later appeared in a dream to the ruler of Alwar and expressed the wish that a shrine be erected for her, with a temple of Lord Shiva nearby. This was done and Narayani Sati has a huge fair held in her name and a large section of the population believe in her powers. There is a similar story about a *Dholan* (a caste of professional musicians). A woman was once crossing a forest with her husband. A stranger tried to molest her in a secluded spot, but right at that moment a Rajput suddenly appeared, challenged the stranger and died in the fight. The *Dholi* husband had by then run away. *Dholan* decided to immolate herself with the Rajput saviour. She is worshipped around the Beawar region of Rajasthan. There are many such *Sati* shrines with long narrative songs describing the episode and the powers a *Sati* wields over human beings after her death. Rani Sati of Jhunjhunu and Rani Bhatiyani of Jasol and Jaisalmer are two important *Sati* shrines in Rajasthan.

In the desert region of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Sindh (now in Pakistan), there are other types of *Sati*-s (*Shakti*-s) who immolated themselves before their marriage. Goddesses like Avad, Temdaray, Bhaderiya Ray, etc., are referred to as seven sisters who transformed themselves into birds and flew away. Malan is another type of goddess, who has teeth and can speak and eat like an adult right from the moment of her birth. She seems to be like a demoniac child and is burned by her parents in the hut itself. She manages to survive and, finally, before her marriage, declares herself a goddess. For such goddesses we have long poetic compositions by medieval poets.

These long descriptions are necessary for an understanding of the sociological aspects of epics as they move in the format of death sequence, followed by possession, songs, rituals and also epics.

We have yet to describe these epic performance situations, (as has been done by Stuart Blackburn), to reveal the underlying relation between performance and deep ritual. Through experience and observation, I am convinced of the intimate and organic relationship between enacted scene and ritual. But I am not able to understand one element in his description: whether it is the singers of epics who go into trances, or whether somebody else gets possessed. It seems from his description that the possessed one is not from among the epic-singers. In that case, it might be important to know who this person is and how he goes into a trance. What is his role while he is possessed, and otherwise? The person who is possessed is known as *Bhopa* (priest) or *Ghodla* (horse). At some shrines, the line of the *Bhopa*-s is hereditary; elsewhere, the new *Bhopa* is appointed by the god or goddess during a night-wake ceremony of the village.

The role of *Bhopa* does not end with going into a trance; at this moment, believers start asking for mediation for their problems: illness, family troubles, partition of property, rights over lands, epidemics among cattle, the weather forecasts, the appropriate time for sowing seeds to ensure the success of the crop, etc. If the oracles of a *Bhopa* in a trance situation make him effective and popular, then, in turn, that particular god or goddess will become more acceptable than others of the same region.

The deified heroes of epics who have their shrines in different villages and belong to the tradition of trance and mediation can be listed thus: Dev-Narayan (trance of Bhairoon); Pabu; Teja; Goga; and Bhabhoota Sidh (in many forms). There should be many others, but the data about them has yet to be collected. There are a number of epics about the Mother Goddess (Mataji), but they are all of mythical origin, although trance does appear. Especially among the tribals and those living in the desert areas, there are many such goddesses with various names (Ambav, Chamunda, Amali, Peeplaji) and episodes woven round them. Most of the tribal goddesses are represented as Kul Devi, progenitor of the distinct family line. We have been able to record the *Ambav Bharat* epic from a Bhil group, but it has yet to be scripted and analysed. These *Bharat*-s (epics) seem more on the lines of the 'Birth' stories of Tamilnadu reported by Blackburn, with the difference that these stories do not draw much from classical epics or Vedic or Pauranic mythology.

### *Caste Factors*

Peter J. Claus raises an important question regarding the hero. He says: "The central characters of the four epics (*Kamba-Toihi*, *Madeswer*, *Koti Chenayya* and *Katamaraju*) range from low caste warriors to kings; from religious saints to devoted lovers." He adds: "There is more consistency in the fact that the heroes become deified and in that the epics form a part of the performance tradition". Another allied question has been raised about the epics being rendered and attended by low caste groups, with Brahmins missing from the scene.



*Bhopa Dhanji of Dev-Narayan (Bagrawat) in dance form*  
(Courtesy: Rupayan Sansthan)

With the exception of mythical epics, all others come under the title of legend or history. The heroes of such epics are referred to as though they lived at some or other point in time. The dimension of time or historical period and the space or region in which they operated are important. Most of the epics of Rajasthan date from the tenth century onwards. No epic refers to a hero before this century. Why has this happened? Can we find any answer to it? Once we attach the concept of history to the hero, there are heroic deeds, his sacrifices, his achievements and all he did in his lifetime. How does he find his place in oral folk memory? Classical and bardic historians of the medieval period mention

hundreds of kings, thousands of incendiary wars, bravery, victory which did result in carving out new sovereign territories, kingdoms and royal lineage but none of them entered folk memory. These heroic figures are barely remembered in epic performance. On the other hand, we have a long list of heroes never mentioned in classical history. Though they are referred to as kings in the epic, it is difficult to place them in a proper historical perspective in their own time. Pabu is said to be the son of Rao Dhandhal or Rao Asthan, both of whom are in the direct line of the rulers of Marwar. But what was the area ruled by Dhandhal and Asthan in their own time? A very insignificant area, not even recognized by the neighbouring kings. If Pabu or his elder brother belonged to the main line of the rulers of Marwar, their position would have been different. According to the law of primogeniture, Buda and Pabu had no place in the lineage of the main ruling family. Their status could not have been more than that of ordinary brave Rajputs. Yet each becomes the hero in folk oral memory. His adventures and exploits are sung. Dev-Narayan comes from a Gujar family, which can at no stage be recognized as the reigning line in any area. Dev-Narayan's father, Bhoja, was a cowherd. But he receives prominence, represents all the heroic elements, and finds a place in oral memory. Teja or Goga are again insignificant persons in terms of social standing, but appear as formidable gods against snake-poison.

Can we conclude that medieval heroism, as recognized and approved by its time, did not reveal itself in epic heroes of the oral tradition? Were there sociological, religious or other causes which created these heroes? Heroes who came into existence *not* on account of their social status or because they sought to establish themselves as great kings or emperors? This can clearly be seen from the list of their heirs who never occupied the position of kings or rulers. Here, we need to examine those deep social and religious metaphors which are created from the structural aspect of a given society in which birth, marriage and death are ritualized in one way or another.

### *The Inner World of Social Reality*

It is the capacity, the effective nature and supernatural power of the hero to mediate after his death which makes him what he is in the oral epic. The epic takes us to the inner world of social reality and not to the mundane fighting capacity of an earthly human being.

This also applies to the saints or the historically recognized *Sati*-s of any region. The Queen of Chittore, Padmini, was a *Sati* who immolated herself with hundreds of other women and is eulogised by bardic poets. But she never found a place in the inner world of faith or belief in Rajasthan's society. As opposed to her, ordinary women from the barber or musician caste entered oral memory because of their efficacious handling of worldly problems in a timeless dimension.

Another question can be raised in this context: Do characters of the folk epics represent models to be followed? Ramachandra and Sita are models. He who is truthful, keeps his word and remains firm against demoniac values is designated under the Rama syndrome. Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Draupadi are regarded as ideal characters in Indian society. Is this true about characters of the oral epic? By no means. Nobody would say, "Become like Pabu or Bhoja or Teja

or Goga." Nor would women be blessed and expected to behave like Deval, Jaimati or any other female character in the oral epic. We have the following proverbs:

1. *Pabu ne mile jaka Thori-i-Thori*

(Thori is a low, untouchable caste. Pabu gets only Thori-s around him.)

2. *Bai ra bhag vhe-i to Pabu to Bhopo ban ja i*

(Refers to the poverty of a person who cannot even get a daughter married. The proverb says that if the daughter is lucky, her husband might become a *Bhopa*.)

3. *Jaya rand Jaimati*

(Jaimati is a heroine and the incarnation of a goddess in the *Bagrawat* epic. But she is referred to as a woman who destroys the family and gets her kith and kin killed. *Rand* is an abusive term for a widow. As also for a woman who keeps the family in turmoil.)

4. *Jaimati Bhoja Khapavani or Bhoja Khapavani Jelu*

(The proverb refers to a woman who manoeuvres the death of her husband as was done by Jaimati in the *Bagrawat* epic.)

These are but a few samples of the attitude to important characters of oral epics. We have not been able to procure more material or information on this aspect from villagers. But generally the characters are not referred to as models. They are feared rather than respected as a measure of human achievement. There seems to be a reason for this. All the folk gods and goddesses are benevolent as well as malevolent. Once they are happy, they make you happy, wealthy and healthy. But show them the slightest disrespect and they become vindictive. The term for such a character is *Rusth hovano aur Tusth hovano*. Stories about religious fasts, as related by women folk, always stress the negative and positive role of the god or goddess. The story is completed with a sentence: 'As you were kind and benevolent to such and such, be kind to me.'

### *The Female as a Moving Force*

It is important to note that the hero is always directed by another deeply-involved personality who prompts him to undertake one venture after another. The moving force is always a female character. In the *Pabu* epic, Deval plays this role. Jaimati does the same in *Bagrawat*, Kankali in *Jagdeo Panwar*, Hira in *Teja*, Kachal in *Goga*, and Sorath in *Rao Khangar*. It is explicitly stated in these epics that all these women were born to eliminate or annihilate the heroes and they are always referred to as having come from a supernatural world. The Rajasthani words for elimination or annihilation are *Chalano* (to hatch a plot for the eventual deception of someone) and *Khapano* (to annihilate). These epic performers say that Sita was born to ensure that Rama was annihilated and Draupadi to have the Pandavas annihilated. All these female powers are placed on par with the concept of *Chalano* or *Khapano* of the great heroes. They are designated as *Sagati*, which is Rajasthani for *Shakti*. Deval, Kankali, Hira, Kachal, and Sorath were fairies from Indralok, who had to take birth to complete the task of eliminating the heroes. Jaimati of *Bagrawat* is also a *Shakti* but has come from Baikunth, the abode of Lord Vishnu.



If we examine the classical concept of *Shakti*, we find that *Shakti* took birth at the request of gods harassed by a demon or demons, who had received the boon of immortality from Lord Shiva. Whether it is Bhasmasur or Mahishasur, their demoniac actions disturbed the peace and calm of the abode of the gods. The gods parted with their powers and weapons individually in a sacrificial ritual and thus was born *Shakti* with immeasurable power. She annihilates (*Khapano*) the demon or demoniac power. Durga, Amba, Uma and other *Shakti*-s have a similar mythical background.

But the question which emerges from the oral epic is: Why did *Shakti* take birth to eliminate from the world just, good and brave heroes? Whether it was Rama or the Pandavas, Pabu, the Bagrawat brothers, Teja, Goga or Jagdeo Panwar? All of them were noble souls. But the truth is that these *Sagati*-s importune the heroes to move as they want. They can be cunning, even crooked, in the pursuit of their aims. All these epics refer to the wilful actions of these *Sagati*-s and speak of the responsibility they assumed when they took birth on earth. Next to the hero, the most important character of each epic is this *Sagati*. This supernatural element of the villainous female character places the epic story on a remarkably different plane from that of historical reality.

Brenda F. Beck's exposition regarding the Great and Little Traditions or the process of Sanskritization raises many important points. Her search for a pan-Indian epic performance tradition needs to be thoroughly examined, but this search might need a different route than its direct relationship with the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. It is quite true that these two great tales are epics and the works which we are trying to understand are also epics. But the life and the vicissitudes of these classical epics are beyond the scope of our imagination. We notice continuous additions, alterations, different philosophical and mythical manipulations, narrow interpretations of the main characters and episodes to suit a particular faith or religion and the impact of time and changing values. The same stories appearing, in parts, in the *Dharma Shashtra*-s, the *Upanishad*-s, the *Purana*-s and other classical or Brahmanical treatises have so submerged reality that it has become almost impossible to thread them into contemporary epic performance. Both the classical epics exist in a literary and written tradition and they continue simultaneously in the oral tradition but on a very different plane and value system. I shall cite only one example from the tribal people of Rajasthan. The Bhils and Garasiyas sing the *Ramayana* epic. Now the classical epic presents Sita as a demi-goddess, full of virtue, faithful to her husband, and establishes strongly the monogamic format of the family. Among the tribals, monogamy is not a great virtue by any standards. Premarital sex is not prohibited nor is any social stigma attached to it. In such a society, can Sita play the same role as in the classical tradition? The *Ramayana* of the Bhils says that, after Sita's abduction, Rama was quite diffident and did not know what to do. Ravana's wife, Mandodari, says to Ravana, "By abducting Sita you have created a powerful enemy but presently he is alone in the forest. Why don't you kill him when he is far away from his seat of power?" Ravana accepts her wise counsel and sends an army to attack Rama in the forest. Rama is depicted as shaking with fear in the face of Ravana's army. And then comes Hanuman, from nowhere, to protect Rama. It is Hanuman who defeats Ravana's army. The same episode is related in the Garasiya *Ramayana*.

Here, Rama is shown weeping when he finds that Sita is abducted. Laxmana argues with him. "Why do you weep for a woman? I will get you as many Sitas as you want!" But Rama is firm and Laxmana finally agrees to join Rama in the search for Sita. These examples can be multiplied and a conclusion will have to be drawn akin to the concept of parochialization. Even so, that would simplify the whole phenomena and the function of the epic in the life of different peoples with a different social reality and their own mythology.

The first step in an understanding of the phenomena of Sanskritization would be to recall the hundreds of 'parochialized' versions of the great epics. When Pabu is designated as an incarnation of Laxmana, he might have emerged from such versions and not from the classical tradition. *Pabu* epic singers do say why Laxmana had to be re-born. In the final war between Rama and Ravana, Ravana proves to be invincible. Laxmana plays a trick. He goes to Ravana in the disguise of Mandodari and worms out the secret of his life. Ravana confesses that his life exists in one of the eyes of the seven horses of the Sun. If somebody were to pierce this eye with an arrow and let it fall in a cauldron of boiling oil, then alone would he die. Laxmana, disguised as Mandodari, leaves and after a few moments the real Mandodari arrives. Ravana complains to her about her inquisitive query regarding his life-secret. Mandodari pleads complete ignorance and Ravana finally says that he will die on the following day. Rama and Laxmana are ready to kill Ravana the next morning. All is set, the bow and the arrow, the cauldron of boiling oil. They wait for the exact moment when the sun will arrive within the compass of the target. The dying Ravana hails Rama, who says that since he has uttered his name, his own revenge against Ravana is complete. But for Laxmana, this revenge is still due. Simultaneously, Ravana's sister tries to take a few rounds around Laxmana. Some epic-singers say that Mandodari did the rounds. These rounds are part of the marriage ritual. Laxmana then has to be born again as Pabu; Ravana as Jindrao (Pabu's brother-in-law); Surpankha or Mandodari as Phulmati (Pabu's wife).

This explanation of Laxmana's rebirth has nothing to do with the classical version of the *Ramayana*. Besides, when we go deeper, we find that Laxmana, like Pabu, did not kill Jindrao, though he was an adversary. Jindrao was finally killed by Zhardaji, the son of Budaji. The painting sequence of the *Pabu Parh* (the scroll), where the figure of Ravana is drawn in the region of Soomra, reveals that it was from this kingdom that Pabu robbed the camels. Why did Pabu incarnate have to complete his marriage with Surpankha or Mandodari? All these riddles cannot be solved through interpreting the classical epic. Our efforts must surely take us to the path of other oral epic traditions.

A closer examination reveals that the impact of the classical epics is often quite enigmatic and confusing. Could this have happened in a given society, as a result of its desire for a higher status? Perhaps. Status is something which is material and physical whereas the mythical lore of a given society has a deeper significance. These myths are their own charter. A group identified itself through these myths.

The question of hierarchy in the social structure has been stressed in several Indian area-studies and anthropological research. But most of the studies

have emerged as a result of looking at lower sectors from the vantage point of higher social segments. What has, at some stage or other, a lower caste to say about the higher caste? To seek an answer, we tried to find some oral generic tradition where this attitude of a lower group could come out openly, fearlessly and without any inhibition. We encountered the tradition of genealogists of lower castes who recite not only the names of the family-tree but reveal the mythical origin of the cosmos, the universe, the sky, the earth, water, vegetation, human beings and continue right down to the contemporary family. It is here that one finds that the close and hard grip of their own mythology is quite at variance with the classical tradition or the social stratification existing at that time. These aspects of myths would receive priority in future studies. Fortunately, a study of the oral epic tradition leads us directly to this path.

The characters of the epic grow from a deep mythical understanding or its own charter and their cunning and courage have direct roots in the situation. Pabu is a straightforward and brave person to start with. What he wants are faithful and courageous warriors to conduct robberies. He gets Chanda and Dhembha (twins) and Harmal and Salkha to help him. Thus prepared, he offers his niece to Goga Chauhan. But her parents reject this proposal. Pabu cunningly suggests to Goga that he should come in the form of a snake (as he is a snake-god himself) and bite the innocent girl. Then he should cure her so as to win her hand in marriage. Pabu is party to this deceitful action.

Bhoja, the hero of the first part of the *Bagrawat* epic, cleverly manages to throw Roopnath (a form of Lord Shiva) into a cauldron of boiling oil. Roopnath is not a simple person either. He had killed a lot of people who sought to reach his secret meditation site and had collected their heads in a cave. The heads could talk and warn Bhoja about his future. This was the reason for his cunning device of throwing the saint in the cauldron.

In *Pabu* and *Bagrawat*, the heroes resort to cunning in the very beginning of the stories, but as the action proceeds, both the heroes become puppets in the hands of other important characters who assume a more active role. In the *Pabu* epic, the Chanda-Dhembha-Harmal team stay with the hero and Deval conspires to create an intricate web of incidents to get Pabu in. Similarly, after the episode of the saint being put in the cauldron, the action passes on to Niha or Neva, Bhoja's younger brother, who always stays with him and his twenty-two brothers. Bhoja remains a tool in their hands and from then onwards Jaimati manoeuvres the story. The heroes play no significant and independent role. As for courage, both the heroes participate minimally in the ensuing wars. It is felt that their miraculous powers and blessings are enough to achieve victory. A significant point to note is that the heroes are not expected to take part in the battle and prove their mettle. However, both are transported to heaven with their horses.

But this may be the case with only a particular type of oral epic. In the other epics like *Nihalde-Sultan*, *Teja* or *Goga*, the heroes conduct most of the wars and display valour and cunning.

The tradition can help us, beyond the analysis of episodes and characters from the epics, if we try to understand the circumstances in which the story

originates. And that will take us back to the circumstances of the death of the hero and death as generally understood in a given society. The concept hinges round life-after-death and its power to mediate, resolve and participate in the continuum of life. Pabu or Devji are popular today, not only because of their epics but on account of their power to cure camels, provide protection to cattle, safely chart the life of the family and so on. If their efficacy in these matters comes to an end, we will have to see whether they survive in their historical and natural environment.

### *The Romantic Epics*

The romantic epics have a very different context. Generally, the professional caste musicians sing these epics accompanied by developed musical instruments. These singers have a large repertoire of songs for a few romantic epics. The same stories are also told in prose and poetry by the *Bhat*-s (genealogists) and proficient story-tellers in the rural areas; they are never sung.

The professional caste musicians arrive at the houses of their patrons for life-cycle ceremonies and render ceremonial songs. In the evenings, special sessions (*Kacheri*) are held and the musicians either render songs or sing one or two tales, generally at the request of the audience which consists of not more than twenty to thirty people. Immediately, the family members and neighbours join in the session. The most important aspect of the performance is that each member of the audience listens attentively to the song and responds appreciatively in some way or other.

These epics cross all the boundaries of the caste hierarchy. No particular caste is identifiable with the epics. As each caste group has its own caste musicians, the epics move among all the groups and performances are usually held amongst well-knit and intimate family groups. Three important caste musician groups are Langa, Manganiyars or Dhadhi and Dholis. All the groups sing romantic tales but out of thirty active caste musicians only one or two are able to render the whole of the romantic epic.

The episodic material of the story is mainly in prose; the same is used only for long arguments between the characters or for emotional situations. The dialogue may be long and, in that case, song constitutes a good part of the tale. The description of the hero's beauty, his valour, his fort, his horse, and his accomplishments are also sung. Similarly, a description of the heroine, her lasting beauty, her qualities, is also to be sung. The separation situations provide the emotional grid for the musical and poetic expansion while the rest of the story is rendered in a somewhat high-pitched speech form. Parts of the epics are often sung as independent songs because they express an emotional incident or the pangs of separation. These independent parts, which are complete in themselves, have become very popular and most of the caste musicians are able to render these items. Some of the romantic epics are: *Dhola-Maru*, *Nagji-Nagwanti*, *Beenjha-Sorath*, *Jalal-Boobana*, *Khinvi-Abhal de*, *Saichi*, *Jasma de-Ratanpal*, *Saini-Bijanand*, *Mumal-Mahendra* and *Sasvi-Punu*, etc.

In contrast to the sociological epics, romantic epics have a literary flavour and have been composed by known or unknown poets in strict prosodic meters.

Though they are rendered by illiterate caste musicians, the poetry had appeared in written form. One can trace the literary tradition right from the twelfth century onwards. Some of the epics have been elaborately written in Prakrit and Apabhraṃś languages and have come down to the present Rajasthani language. However, the written form has not destroyed the variations of a given epic. Different regions or different caste musicians sing the same story differently with each, however, insisting that his version is the oldest and most authentic.

The favoured meters of all such epics are *Doha* and *Soratha*. A *Doha* would consist of 4 lines (each divided into four parts) consisting of 13, 11; 13, 11 *matra*-s respectively. The count is made on short and long syllables and there is a rule that the second and fourth line should rhyme. There is a pause after the second line. *Soratha* has the opposite combination of 11, 13; 11, 13 *matra*-s and the second and fourth line do not rhyme. Here is an example of a *Doha* (proverbial).

LAKH SAYANAP KOR BUDH,  
KAR DEKHO SAB KOY  
ANHUNI HONI NAHI,  
HONI HUVE SU HOY

(You may have thousands of good intentions or wisdom in millions; Do whatever you can; But nothing will happen if it has not to happen; finally what is destined will happen.)

One of the important aspects of the *Doha* is that the four lines should convey a complete image in itself, independent of the preceding or following *Doha*.

Similarly, a *Soratha* should convey an idea or image complete in itself. Here is an example from the love-story of Nagji and Nagwanti, where Nagwanti says:-

NAGA SAMO NA KOY,  
NAGAR SARO NIRAKHIYO  
NAYAN GUMAYA ROY,  
NEH TUMINE NAGJI

(None is like Nagji, I searched again and again in the whole city; weeping and weeping I lost my eyes, all for your love, Nagji.)

There are many types of *Doha*-s and *Soratha*-s. Change in rhyming rules, use of particular alliterations, and keeping or deleting the pause in the line can vary the form of the *Doha* and *Soratha*.

The process of memorization is by rote i.e. the performer has to learn the couplets by heart and should be able to recall them appropriately and exactly while rendering the story. A refrain line is added to these couplets in the songs to facilitate the musical composition, adhering to the rules of the rhythm and its inner variation. Such compositions allow for improvisatory melodic singing interspersed with the virtuosity of the rhythmic accompaniment.

These epics are rendered in many modes of the musical scale. Some of the scales are recognized by the name of the heroine. A *raga* is known as Maru (*Dhola-Maru*) and another as Sorath (*Beenjha-Sorath*). No narratives are sung



for heroines like Soob, Sameri and Asa but couplets identify them as heroines of some stories.

The whole process of training and performing and the social context is completely different from that of the *Pabu* or *Teja* epics. These romantic stories were composed in poetic form and the manuscripts are available right from the twelfth century onwards. However, it would not be true to say that the musicians render only a particular poet's compositions. It is a mixed fare drawn from many poets and some anonymous ones as well.

As one listens to the musical performance, one realises that the story line is very thin and does not embody any concept of religious merit or sanctity. However, I would not like to vouch for the sanctity or otherwise of *all* the romantic tales. On the border areas of western Rajasthan, romantic epics known as *Vait* are rendered among Muslims. They have a significant role to play among Sufi adherents. As for the well-known romantic tales, *Shirin-Farhad*, *Umar-Marvi*, *Sasi-Punno* and *Heer-Ranjha* etc., the liberal and humanist Sufi movement often inserted religious and symbolic metaphors in their narrative flow.

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