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## **Women in Tribal Folk Narrative of Rajasthan “Pabuji Ki Phad”**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Women’s contribution is significant in the origin and the development of Folk Culture. Folk Narratives provides a pavement to study and interpret the role of woman in shaping cultural patterns in little communities. Usually, the roles of rural women in Rajasthan remain unrecognized from historic times and their voices are seldom perceptible, if ever heard, it is only in folk songs & narratives. Although Folk epics are rarely found in tribal societies, but the case of Nayak Bhill in Rajasthan is exception. Bhill is the most commonly found Adivasi in desert. In spite of modern constitutional safeguards provided by Government of India, this low caste minority in Rajasthan is often denied it’s basic human rights and entitlements because of ignorance, displacement and lack of adaptability with modern trends.*

*The epic narrative of Pabuji ki Phad is an exclusive tradition found only in Nayak Bhill tribe of Rajasthan. In this Epic woman is the principal singer and the whole epic is woven around the heroic deeds of folk hero, Pabuji, an incarnation of God Laxmana from Ramayan. The epic of Pabuji is a popular narrative in Thar Desert. While singing the epic, principal reciters Bhopi, shed light on tribal’s perspective or world view about material aspects of life and the socio-religious perception of woman. So the study of Indian Epic Pabuji ki phad offered a unique opportunity to investigate not only the engendered epic traditions but also to record ‘women’s epic’ as a distinct sub-genre.*

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY:**

Performers of the epic are semi nomadic and may be found across the vast expanse of the Thar Desert. In this study I along with my colleague Dr. Elizabeth wicket and linguist Dr. Surajmal Rao travelled from Jaipur to Pabusar then Jaisalmer and Jodhpur. With the financial assistance of Firebird foundation, Australia, we were successful in making a Visual Anthropological Documentary Film (HD) of this endangered tradition, of folk narrative, among Nayak Bhill Tribe. The purpose of Firebird Foundation is to record the endangered folk tradition in Asian countries before it extinct and to Achieve them in international library of Firebird Foundation.

I along with my team is especially interested investigating: what is the Anthropological origin of Epic narration? What is gendered role of epic singing in tribal community? How a Bhopi, the woman epic reciter, develop ‘Ventriloquism’ for singing epic? How singing has changed the social and economic status of bhopi in Nayak Tribe? At what specific occasion do tribals recite this epic? What are different performance styles of Pabuji’s Epic? Are they possessed by the ‘Divine Spirit’ of Pabuji while singing? What social restrictions or taboos are associated with epic singing? How Bhopi build her ‘World View’ or perception about

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material and non material worldly entities through this epic? Does this Epic, in any way, have emancipated the status of tribal women in bhopa community? The study also tries to respond to a number of other queries, developed during ethnographic study.

To collect an authentic data Triangulation Research Method and Full HD visual techniques is used, supported by quasi structured interview schedule, group discussion, non participant observation method in ethnic tribal settlements.

### **BACKGROUND OF NAYAK BHILL TRIBE:**

Nayak Adivasis are located in eastern region of Rajasthan, categorized on the basis of their commitment to the divine ancestral heritage of Pabuji's Phad. They proudly enunciate themselves as *Bhopa Community*. Men and women engaged in musical tradition, define themselves as 'Bhopa' and 'Bhopi', a higher social status with in the community, construing their devotion and pledge to Pabuji. In this way, they differentiate themselves from the other much larger group of adivasi Bhils who live in remote forest and other regions of India surviving on traditional hunting, farming or pastoral livelihoods.

Before independence, this musician community used to take migratory routes across the vast expansion of Thar Desert, patronized by their feudal Lords called *Thakurs*. Bhopa communities also perform for other castes including camel rearing Raika community, but do not perform for *Meghwal* and *Chamar* as they are adhered to animal killing and flesh eating. Deity Pabuji was an animal savior. *Sansi* or *kalbelia community* is akin to bhopa community, engaged in dancing tradition rather than singing. Bhopa community was nomadic in prehistoric times, which took seasonal migratory routes, but in later period, specifically after India's independence, due to decline of princely states they adhere themselves to semi nomadic lifestyle. Some feudal lords donated them small pieces of land where they had setup small scattered helmets called *Dhani*. Each Bhopa community confined themselves to the regency of ten nearby villages which are often found on the edges of town. Bhopa community performs for those patrons, who invite them with in the boundary of predefined territory. Bhopas still move with in the territorial limits and entertain their patrons. The case of breach of territorial protocol is not found in whole observation.

At the age of 10-14 years young girls or bhopi is pledged in marriage to young boy or bhopa. At this point, both bhopi and bhopa enter into their life partnerships and gradually as performers. At the age when bhopa or bhopi or both became well versed in one or more then one episode of the epic, 'Empowered by the blessing of Pabuji', as they describe it, they begin to entertain audiences. Once bhopi is able to sing the epic solely in dramatic high pitch and volume, the bhopa-bhopi couple become 'earners of their own bread', automatically persuaded to an enhanced social status within the community.

Some western linguists and literary historians including John D. Smith, Janet Kamphorst, Rustom Bharucha<sup>1</sup> an Indian folklorist and Komal Kothari earlier studied this epic and their performance style, but surprisingly no one had studied the text and meaning of the epic from the vantage point of the women performers, despite their recognizably significant role in the tradition. In the version of earlier scholar, Bharucha<sup>2</sup> wrote in the book *The Epic of Pabuji: a study, transcription and translation*, "...it is known that men are formally indoctrinated in epic recitation as boys, but women are only allowed to sing after beginning to live with their husbands .....". Contrastingly in my study I found that bhopi is a principal singer and bhopa only initiate the epic. Mostly bhopa learn to play epic on *rawanhatta*, from his father and

bhopi learn the musical notes of most commonly known episodes of the epic from her mother-in-law since childhood. Epic learning process is a part of socialization process in bhopa community.

### **PERFORMANCE & PERFORMANCE STYLES OF PABUJI'S EPIC :**

The actual origin of the lyrical singing of this vernacular epic is unknown but it was first recorded in 11<sup>th</sup> century. The *Phad* and *Rawanhatta* are essential elements in the performance as it embodies the ancestral tradition of bhopa community and portrays the alluring deeds of divine hero. In the Pabuji's epic performance 'Phad' is the red colored painted scroll with a complex schematic pictorial showing of multiple episodes of charismatic actions of Pabuji, described in the epic, along a series of horizontal planes. Although one may find various version of phad having different schematic arrangements of events but in each case the picture of Pabuji is always located at the centre. Bhilwara's Joshi caste is patronize in printing and designing traditional phad. In principle, each phad comprises 100 different scenes or clusters, displayed in synoptic rather than chronological order, stretching along four to five meters of cloth, one and a half meters high.



(Fig. 1 Traditional design of Pabuji's 'phad').

I found that there are two popular performance styles: Touristic and Ritual performance. Broadly speaking, a touristic performance is an amalgamation of tradition and modern fashion trends performs at auditorium or opera, to lure tourist attention. Contrary to this, a ritual performance is a pure traditional style, performs at local temple of pabuji or the central location of village, to invoke the blessings of pabuji. In Touristic performance episodes can be recited at any time and place, according to the choice and pleasure of audience, as the performance and satisfaction of audience are unified to cash based trade. In Contrast to the above Ritual Performance is usually occasional i.e. excluding the 11<sup>th</sup> day of lunar calendar. The main purpose of epic narration is not only entertainment or gratitude to divine hero but also for celestial healing of ailing animals, prosperity and purity of house by emitting evil forces.



In both the performances, after an initial *Arti* and offerings, red painted scroll, the phad, is believed to become the living temple to their deity. The bhopa (husband) and bhopi (wife) duos define their various vocal, musical and kinesic renderings of the events on the scroll in performance as ‘recitation of the phad’.

### **Phad Tradition :**

The tradition of ‘picture showmen’ or wandering bards (mankha; magadha) who made their livelihood from telling religious and moral tales using a picture board, is first recorded in India from the 11th century and subsequently, an artisanal caste of itinerant story tellers-cum-teachers emerged who said that it was their vocation to narrate mythical stories using a pictorial guide. The *pata chitra tradition*<sup>3</sup>, akin to picture showmen, is also found in Buddhist and Jain literature<sup>4</sup> and is perpetuation now in the contemporary traditions of folk narrative cum painting of various tribes and sub-tribes in the central Indian states including Rajasthan. It is called *Parochilisation* of tradition.

In Pabuji ki phad the distinctive picture of Pabuji is the central focal point of the scroll, flanked on the right by his courtiers and below by the prominent prancing mare, his re-incarnated mother, Kesar Kalmi.

As the screen, scenes and its connecting episodes are well-known to performers but in the performances I studied, the majority of bhopas made only brief reference to the different scenes on the phad, treating it more as a backdrop than a mnemonic. Out of four different performances observed in Jaipur, Pabusaar, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur, bhopi Patasi devi from Pabusaar indicated various episodes via a lamp while epic narration to connect audience, which is an essential pattern of story telling in phad tradition.



*(Fig. 2 Bhopi Patashi Devi singing in Pabusaar at Pabuji’s Temple)*

This mode of story-telling from pictorial aids is deeply embedded in South Asian art and story-telling and may derive from pre-Buddhist pictorial narrative traditions. The Bhilalas tribe (West Andhra Pradesh) paint mythical symbols and characters on the outer walls of their houses. The other version is that, they invoke some of the characters of the painted myth to descend into the wall and reside there while the paintings last and shower blessing for health, happiness and prosperity. This concept may also be at the root of reverence for the pictorial

narrative in Pabuji in Rajasthan and veneration of the phad. As the offertory hymn sung by Bhopa reveals, the hero is entreated to ‘come down from his palanquin and receive arti, and implicitly, to reside there, in his image, shower blessings during the performance. His representation is incorporated on the two dimensional phad. As a result, the bhopa and bhopi should not stand with their backs to the phad and bhopi



(Fig. 3 Hari Ram bhopa in Jaisalmer at his dhani ).

is required in ritual performance to veil their face in deference to the presence of the Rajput hero, Pabuji, in the phad. Prof. Anna Dallapiccola<sup>5</sup> noted similarly that people who listen to stories recited by *chitrakatha* and view images of their local deities depicted on scrolls, state that they get the benefit of *Darshan*, that is, the spiritual feeling of the presence of divine deity while looking at the image physically at the same time, unifying with it.

Gogaji, the Snake God, is another popular deity embraces huge number of devotees all across Thar Desert. In Pabuji’s epic a big section of episodes are devoted to Gogaji’s divine deeds and his strong commitment to Pabuji. Devotees extol both the deities equally.

Both Pabuji and Gogaji are depicted on the phad as equestrian warriors, and therefore, of interest to this study are the early equestrian figures, in particular, the two-toned figure of the sword-waving equestrian warrior from Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh, painted explicitly in outline. This technique emulates styles used in petroglyphs originating from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods even though that particular painting is dated to ‘the historic period’, the 1st millennium BCE.



(Fig. 4 Bhimbetka Rider)



In Bhopa Community the performers of the epic i.e. Bhopa and bhopi, wear silver medals of Pabuji, astride his horse, as insignia of their devotion to Pabuji. Wearing pabuji's bage is pre-eminent symbolizing of their ancestral heritage.



( Fig. 5 Other symbols central to the phad are also replicated in adivasi wall paintings in Sawai Madopur area of Rajasthan bordering the Chambal valley)

### **The Epic Performance:**

In the traditional context, a performance of the phad will take place when a patron wishes to invoke the blessing of Pabuji to heal his animals, help in bringing the rain or making brackish water sweet. A symbolic offering of food, known as Akha, either a handful of bajra or pearl millet gur (jaggery), or the ritual offering of 51 rupees, is the token by which the bhopa couple is invited to perform the epic of Pabuji. The bhopa couple act as intermediaries and catalysts in the process of incarnating Pabuji's presence for the purposes of healing by erecting the phad, his mobile temple, and so, invoking his spiritual presence, by doing puja and accomplishing other required rituals before the performance takes place. The process of re-corporealisation of the deity begins with the token offering of food as puja to Pabuji via his devotee, the bhopa. This offering must be made on the 11th day of the lunar calendar, a day 'Pabuji does not fast', and admit offerings. Food or *Prasad* is sacred by the gods and then eaten by the devotees. In the symbolic realm of Pabuji ki phad, the tangible offering of food would seem to highlight both his corporeality in death and the influential role he is believed to play in ensuring the sustainability of human and animal livelihood in the Thar desert.

After waving of a flame in front of the phad and performing other acts of devotion, the male bhopa begins performance with the 'offertory hymn' known as arthi. The arthi is sung to a slow but rhythmic pulse by the bhopa to Pabuji to invoke Pabuji to come to the performance of phad from his palanquin. This hymn also sends a message of advocacy. This epic enshrines the voice of the poor and their critique is cloaked in metaphor.

The epic singing is comprised of two distinct modes *Gav* and *Arthav*. In performance, the bulk of singing is done by the bhopi. Known as *gav*, this is the longest and most exciting part of the epic performance. It is sung exclusively by the bhopi, accompanied by the bhopa (her husband) on his ravanhatta. The bhopi does not simply 'hold the lamp in front of the screen' she also illuminated the scene which is being narrated by bhopi in the phad recitation. She articulates and moulds the narrative through her vocal power and emotional force, accompanied by her husband bhopa. Singing at increasingly high volume and pitch after a musical prompt and introductory phrase from the bhopa, the bhopi dramatists and galvanizes the performance with emotional warmth through her vocal power and skill.

*Arthhav* is the second mode of performance, a narrative mode, spoken not sung, in a high pitched recitative by the male bhopa alone, standing in front of the phad. He describes the anticipating sequence of events, simultaneously, pointing to images and characters on the scroll with the tip of his instrument. To punctuate his narrative, and to excite the listener's attention, he often adds a series of musical flourishes on his ravanhatta. Some devotees among audience, called *Haukariyaa*, follow the narrative with a loud voice to confirm bhopa-bhopi that they are connected with the melodrama. Whereas *gav* acts as an embodiment in song of the elaborate conflicts and encounters between principal characters over moral issues in the epic, this sequential narrative section or *arthhav* is purely descriptive and acts as an interlude and moment of reflection between the more emotionally charged episodes of the epic.

The poetic narration is in *dingal* language, used by Charan poets to compose the ancient epic. Although the narration was influenced by the regional dialects: Shekawati and Marwari at different places.

Epic performances are comprised of *parvaros* or 'episodes of miraculous events'. The episode of 'Wedding of Gogaji' is first. I found that this *parvaro* is most famous and cheered among all devotees, especially women. It is observed that selection of *parvaro* is based on audience choice, but in all cases initial *parvaro* is always coupled with Pabuji's *Arti*. Contrastingly, the Gogaji's wedding would seem to have been given less prominence in historical documents. The demand of the Gogaji wedding's episode is expected to be a modern day revamping in Rajasthan. But as evinced in surviving manuscripts, the main protagonists in these stories, the Bhil courtiers, Dheboji (Dhembo) and Chandoji (Camda) as well as the Raika nomad, Harmal Devasi, are the same as those named in the eighteenth century manuscript versions of this epic preserved in libraries and private collections. There may be, therefore, some historical veracity to the bhopas' claims of descent and inheritance of the divine vocation. Bhopa gave the explanation that both Cado/Chandoji and Dheboji were 'Rajputs by birth and Nayaks by upbringing' a factor which explains their grandiose appearance on the phad as Mughal courtiers and gives credence to their exalted status in the epic. It also makes clear why subsequent generations would seek to emulate them.

In metaphoric terms, Pabuji is described as 'provider of food', perhaps a more significant marker to his devotees perhaps than the wealth of epithets describing him as 'King of the Rathore clan of Rajput' or 'King of Kolu', site of his original palace and main temple near Phalodi in Rajasthan. He is also honoured as *thakur* and *sardar*, titles meaning 'feudal lord', as he would have been perceived in the Middle Ages, and in mythological terms as the descendant and avatar, (that is, living embodiment) of Lord Lakshmana, the ascetic brother of Ram in the ancient religious epic, the *Ramayana*.

### **GENDER SPECIFIC ROLES IN PERFORMANCE:**

What distinguishes this epic and makes it unique is the fact that the bulk of the epic song or *gav*, is sung by the bhopi. In essence, the voice of the epic is more of a woman's voice than a man's. In that way, women's expression and specifically, the voices of Kelam Dé and the Goddess Deval Charni are privileged above men's. The major portion of the epic or *gav* sung by the bhopi articulates the concerns of women who listen to and patronise epic performance while *arthhav*, the chant performed by the bhopa chronicles events of the epic in a more emotionally neutral 'past tense', as he stands in front of the sacred phad.

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The bhopa and bhopi perform distinct, gender-specific roles. They never sing together. Either one or the other sings. The bhopa performs the necessary devotional rituals before the performance, and sings the arthi. He also is the instrumentalist who provides the melodic and rhythmic accompaniment to the bhopi but it is she who sings the episodes with full coloratura and emotional inflection.

Other Western scholars have neglected and ignored this critical factor. It appears that the epic may have been misinterpreted in the past by male scholars, apparently constrained by perceptions of gender protocols and as one scholar told me, ‘gender bias’.

During performance, the appointed ‘spectator-cum-responder’ known as the hunkariyya (among audience) who speaks out during the performance to ‘converse’ with the bhopa and bhopi, praise their performance and comment on events as they unfold, is an essential component of the performance event they help the performers to create a more exciting, collaborative, and to a certain extent, jointly produced ‘text’.

In modern performance the bhopis focus in on many of the current problems of daily life revolving around family relationships and alliances while eulogizing Pabuji as a divine patron and the source of empowerment like: the stress the torment women feel when dowries promised are not paid, the sadness they endure, how men continue to agree impracticable dowries they can never pay to secure marriage contracts; how people may agree to take on work in honour of their feudal patron-thakur but feel exploited because they are not properly paid or treated with respect, how mothers-in-law make snide remarks and accuse their daughters of unseemly behaviour, often without cause, and so on. The phad also portrays a myriad of social interactions but is emotionally and dramatically neutral. Although many of the issues are inherently conflictual and pertain to negotiations and solutions to various pressing social problems, the concern expressed by Kelam Dé for the outlandishness of her dowry gift, for example, these are not portrayed on the phad.

The musical styles of the various performers are also remarkably different, both in tonal quality and in instrumentation. The musical refrains and fleeting interludes performed by bhopas on their ravanhattas vary remarkably one from the other as do the vocal range and melodic structure of the bhopis’ individual ‘arias’. The remarkable diversity and apparent freedom of bhopas to compose and develop melodic lines of this tradition across the Thar desert must be regarded as one of its hallmarks

Many bhopa/bhopi families have expanded their income base from ritual performances to tourist venues over the years and this may have acted as an incentive to develop new melodic compositions.

The tribes of Rajasthan are adapting themselves more and more to tourism as the main source of employment but what is clear is that over the decades, while performers of the highest calibre have succeeded in raising their standard of living and wealth quotient by entering new domains of performance, others may have fallen to the wayside and drifted instead into the unskilled labour market.

### **THE EPIC OF PABUJI AND THE RAMAYANA:**

The trend of Ramayanisation, or rather, the vernacularisation of classical epics has been dissected by other scholars including Alf Hiltebeitel<sup>6</sup> who suggests that these epics differ from the classical in that they depict ‘local goddesses and little kings from the landed classes’. In the case of epic of Pabuji, the main character is, indeed, a Rajput warrior and so, a ‘little



king'. His courtiers, however, known as Chandoji, Dheboji and Harmal Devasi are depicted on the phad as being of equal rank and status as Kshatriyyas, members of the superior warrior caste, even though they are ethnically Bhil, that is, of adivasi origin and employed as servants to the Rajput king<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, the distinction in this folk epic is not only one of depicting local vs. mythical/national/ universal characters from Hindu mythology. The status of the low-caste courtiers has been inverted and transformed so that they, too, now occupy the rank of Kshatriyyas. The phenomenon of vernacularisation of the Ramayana in the tradition of Pabuji and others suggests, moreover, that folk epic is essentially recursive, and that over the centuries, reciters may have incorporated re-incarnations of mythical and religious heroes from past epics at some stage to add credibility and historical weight to their hero's profiles. However, such a vernacularising process and attitude to time and historical determinism as we see manifest in this re-emergence of characters and cosmological events, would seem to be entirely consistent with the cyclical nature of incarnation and re-incarnation attributed to Hindu mythological and religious tradition and the process we know as the 're-invention of tradition'.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

In the recitation of the epic, we discover that Pabuji is described as being Lakhshmana, brother of Ram, and a character renowned in sacred Hindu mythology from the Ramayana. The Pabuji's most vital role in the epic would seem to be that of healer, source of pal or life, protector of cows and guardian of the precarious but life-giving environment of the Thar desert. Although many researchers have suggested while performance some times the body of bhopa is also possessed by the *sprit of pabuji*, and at this point bhopas acted as healers. But in this study none of the performer bhopa admit to being either priests or healers. Bhopis are never possessed by the spirit of Pabuji as it is considered disgraceful for pabuji to enter in female body, but their counterpart deity mother goddess, Mataji can enter in bhopi's body. The epic comprises oral compositions concocted from a matrix of elements, ritual acts and dramatic crises, set in grand and glorious contexts reminiscent of the glories of mediaeval chivalry and warfare and landscapes in which women, adorned with extravagant and valuable jewels appear bearing plates cascading with pearls. From these performances, It can be argued that within the frame of this six century old historical context, the contemporary story revolves around local deities who intervene and contrive to help adivasi communities rise above caste constraints and discriminative practices that affect them

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