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Occasional Paper 3



The Epic of *Pabuji ki par* in performance

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Cover design by Dora Kemp and Mark Turin.

The cover photo is a still from the film of the performance of *Pabuji ki par* by Patashi Devi Bhopi and Bhanwar Lal Bhopa in the village of Pabusar, Shekawati (Rajasthan) shot by Dr Elizabeth Wickett, in May 2009 as part of her research project to document the epic. While she sings the epic, Patashi holds the oil lamp to illuminate the hand-painted screen or *phad* on which the various exploits of *Pabuji* are depicted.

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Preface

The World Oral Literature Project is an urgent global initiative to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record. The project was established in early 2009 to support scholars and community researchers engaged in the collection and preservation of all forms of oral literature by funding original fieldwork, and by providing training in digital collection and archiving methods.

Through this series of Occasional Papers, the World Oral Literature Project is supporting the publication of research findings and methodological considerations that relate to scholarship on oral literature. Hosted for free on our website for immediate distribution, the series allows researchers to disseminate fieldwork findings and analyses through a streamlined, peer-review process. We welcome expressions of interest from any scholar seeking to publish original work.

It is with great pleasure that we continue our series of Occasional Papers with this timely contribution from Elizabeth Wickett on the spectacular Rajasthani performance tradition of *Pabuji ki par*. Dr Wickett draws on her ethnographic training and visual skill to explore the historical roots of this vivid pictorial narrative while at the same time foregrounding the important and often overlooked role of the woman's voice in the epic performance. Her enthusiasm for the content is compelling, and I am delighted to announce that Dr Wickett's recordings, photographs and texts will soon be hosted in our digital archive and that excerpts of performances will be available for online viewing and download.

*Dr Mark Turin
World Oral Literature Project
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October 2010*

The epic of *Pabuji ki par* in performance

Elizabeth Wickett¹

Introduction and research background

During a period of six-month's tenure as a consultant in Rajasthan,² I witnessed two 'husband and wife' performances of the vernacular epic known as *Pabuji ki par* against the backdrop of the *par/phad*³ (or painted scroll), one at the Amber Palace outside Jaipur and the second in Jaipur. While both performances were intriguing, the second was particularly rich. We in the audience could hear a high-pitched melody and volley of words, but despite scanning the faces of the drummer, the male instrumentalist cavorting about the stage and that of the woman standing rigidly before us (his wife), we could discern no

moving lips. Who was singing? Finally, when the husband responded with an audibly enthusiastic refrain: "Oh really?" it was clear: his wife, staring deadpan and motionless at the audience, was the principal performer of the tale.

In the world at large, women performers of folk epics are relatively rare. Studying the *Pabuji ki par*, therefore, offered a unique opportunity to investigate gendered epic traditions and 'women's epics' as a distinct sub-genre.⁴ The voice of rural women in Rajasthan is seldom, if ever, heard and my research sheds light on their perspectives and the socio-religious worldview of women of the *adivasi* Bhil tribe, a poor, low-caste minority in Rajasthan, often denied basic rights and entitlements.

Pabuji ki par is not an unstudied folk epic. Some Western linguists and literary historians including John D. Smith and Janet Kamphorst have tended to concentrate on linguistic aspects as well as the interpretation and translation of historical and literary manuscripts of the *Pabuji* epic, either in the version composed exclusively by men (*Pabuji ki mata*) or in Smith's case, a *bhopa's* (or male singer) performance of the epic.⁵ According to the Indian scholar, Rustom

1 This paper is designed to complement the anthropological documentary, 'To Earn Our Bread: Performing for Pabuji' (April 2010), produced by the author with funding from the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research. The documentary features interviews with the male *bhopas* and female *bhopis* as well as excerpts of performances, and concentrates on the social dynamics of the epic from the perspective of the musicians. Video recordings of the four complete live performances of the *Pabuji ki par* epic, filmed in high definition in May 2009 and completed in February 2010, plus the accompanying transcripts in Marwari and English (produced with the assistance of Rupayan Sansthan in Jodhpur), are stored on DVD and Blu-ray discs in the archive of the Firebird Foundation, in the USA.

2 From April to December 2008, the author worked on community mobilisation for the management of water supply throughout Rajasthan.

3 This epic is known as '*Pabuji ki par*' meaning 'Pabuji of the scroll' (*par* or *phad*). Rajasthanis pronounce the word scroll as '*phad*' so this phonetic transcription has been adopted in this paper.

4 Clear differences in emphasis and interpretation have been observed in studies of male and female versions of the Junjappa epic told in the Kannada-speaking community of south-central Karnataka. See Shankaranarayana (1995).

5 Bharucha (2003: 114) drew my attention to the fact that the text of the *Pabuji ki par* epic in Smith's book, 'The Epic of Pabuji' (1991) was based entirely on 'Parbu Bhopa's own

Bharucha, who published a compendium of the works of the most prominent Rajasthani folklorist, Komal Kothari in 2003, no one had studied the text and meaning of the epic from the vantage point of the *bhopis* (or women performers), despite their significant role in maintaining the tradition (Bharucha, 2003: 114). 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 (to whom they are married as children). As Bharucha noted, 'How a woman learns all the lines of the Pabuji epic... remains a mystery' (2003: 113).

Proposal to the Firebird Foundation

To answer these intriguing questions and to study the complementary nature of shared performance in the epic of Pabuji, I proposed a project to the Firebird Foundation to track down and film three husband and wife teams of performers of the *Pabuji ki par* epic at different venues in Rajasthan. My aim was to understand the female performer or *bhopi's* role in composition and performance.⁶ I wanted to solve this mystery by working closely with women singers and local collaborators. I also wanted to address the question of how women *bhopis* develop their poetic skill and memory to sing their own nuanced 'texts' (qualitatively different from those of their husband partners) and understand how they use the illustrated scroll or *phad* as a sacred object and *aide mémoire*. I hoped to penetrate some of the deeper psychological aspects of the woman's 'presentation of self' in performance (sometimes veiled, sometimes turned to the side, sometimes full frontal) and 'perceptions of self' during the act of performance. Do women use a form of ventriloquism when singing and if so, why? Moreover, what is the religious significance of

her performance? Does she become possessed by a spirit or a goddess? Answering these questions would shed light on the continuing popularity and significance of the epic to those women devotees of Pabuji living in nomadic communities across Rajasthan today.

There was an urgency in my desire to record and understand this tradition. These oral traditions that celebrate the lifestyle and valiant deeds of nomadic communities are now under considerable threat from television and the demands of the tourist industry to transform the mode of performance of the epic into a more accessible form. The *bhopas* of Rajasthan, who used to ply the pastoral migratory routes of the Raikas or Rabari tribes telling their tales, are now more sedentary. Their livelihoods are in jeopardy as their main patrons, the nomadic communities of the Thar desert, find their traditional pasture lands encroached upon by developers and their precious water resources diverted into private ownership. As the incidence of drought increases and the ecology of the Thar is subjected to the adverse impacts of climate change and urbanisation, many performers are moving to towns, aiming to perform in tourist venues. However, competition is stiff amongst *bhopas* to secure 'gigs' in folk festivals or to become members of folk troupes travelling abroad. In addition, other sources of employment have presented themselves to young women. As primary school education becomes more available, current trends indicate that over the next few decades, families from tribal communities will increasingly opt for an urban, cash-based livelihood, leaving behind their precarious and impoverished nomadic existence. The continuity of this tradition and its transmission from generation to generation, as with many oral traditions, is also imperilled by the advent of literacy and the desire of the rural poor to access more urban services. Cash based employment has become the new economic imperative, and for the *bhopa* communities, tourism is the new magnet.

explanation of the text rather than the *gav* (song) shared with his wife.'

6 I would like to express my thanks to the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research for providing the generous funding for this research and documentation project.

The structure of this paper⁷

Part I provides a brief introduction to *bhopa/bhopi* communities, their relation to the deified hero, Pabuji and their reverence for the vividly painted scroll, or *phad*. The tradition of 'Picture Showmen' and the historical roots of pictorial narrative across India are explored in the next section, followed by an analysis of the epic's ritual form: the prelude or offertory, known as *arthi*, the sung *gav* and chanted *arthav*. The emergence of the woman *bhopi* as the pre-eminent performer and communicator, and the divergence between what is *performed* in these opening episodes of the epic and what is *depicted* on the scroll, are considered. In the last two sections, I examine the striking diversity of performance styles recorded in this survey and what some scholars have termed the 'vernacularisation' of the sacred Hindu epic, the Ramayana, in the epic of Pabuji. These are followed by the conclusion.

Part II of the paper presents summaries of the four performances recorded in May 2009, a chronicle of each episode plus analysis and interpretation of the characters.

The Appendix includes the transcript of a popular folk song, 'The Banjari Nomad', performed by Man Bhari and Sugana Ram after singing the epic, as an illustration of how the secular and sacred are increasingly linked in professional performance.

PART 1

The *Bhopa/Bhopi* communities of Rajasthan

Performers of the epic are found across the vast expanse of the Western Thar desert region from Jaipur to Shekawati, from Jodhpur to Jaisalmer.

As members of the *adivasi* Eastern Rajput Bhil tribe of Rajasthan⁸ and its sub-group known as Nayak,⁹ these musicians define themselves as *bhopas* or 'devotee performers'. They are a distinct caste named after their profession and implicitly of higher status than Bhils who live in remote forest areas in Rajasthan (and other states of India) who continue to pursue traditional farming livelihoods.¹⁰ *Bhopas* and *bhopis* perform the epic of Pabuji as a divine vocation. The performance tradition of *Pabuji ki par* is a function of their ancestral heritage and the tradition is passed on from generation to generation.

Bhopa communities marry only with each other. Young girls, would-be *bhopis*, are pledged in marriage to young men aspiring to become *bhopas* at a very early age. At this point, they enter into their life partnerships as performing duos. 'Empowered by the blessing of Pabuji', as they describe it, they begin to entertain audiences, and once they are able to sing the epic in high pitch and volume, they become (as they describe themselves) 'earners of their own bread', assured of enhanced social and economic status within the community.

Until the independence of India in 1947, *bhopas* worked as itinerant musicians moving within a domain or regency of up to ten villages, controlled by a *thakur*, the title given to a feudal ruler of an area of Rajasthan.¹¹ Since then, *bhopas* have become more sedentary and have established homesteads in *dhanis*, small enclaves of nomadic tribal groups, often situated at the edge of towns. *Bhopas* still travel to other villages when invited to perform by patrons, most often Raika or Rebari camel-rearing nomads, and may resort to a nomadic lifestyle at certain seasons of the year if patrons are in short supply. *Bhopas* declare that they adhere to their ancestral tradition and therefore still do not perform for

⁷ I am grateful to my colleagues and collaborators, anthropologist Dr Priyanka Mathur of the Department of Law, University of Rajasthan, and Dr Surajmal Rao, now Professor of Linguistics of the Department of Rajasthani language, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur, formerly of Rupayan Sansthan, for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁸ So-called since they were employed by ruling Rajputs.

⁹ As an indigenous tribe of India, they refer to themselves as *adivasi* and in some cases, Dalit, obviating the use of the invidious and insulting term, 'Untouchable'.

¹⁰ In northern Gujarat and northern Maharashtra.

¹¹ Personal communication, Hari Ram *Bhopa* in Jaisalmer.



Fig. 1. Patashi Devi Bhopi performing in Pabusar.

patrons against whom there are injunctions, including Meghwal, cobblers who deal with the flesh and hides of dead animals, and concubine caste (Sansi) dancers, among others.

Bhopas are called to perform the epic in a community if animals become ill or die. On these occasions, the performers are believed to invoke the spiritual presence of Pabuji. Devotees, and occasionally *bhopas*, may become possessed by the spirit of Pabuji during these performances and 'read' the cause of supernatural afflictions and pronounce healing remedies. *Bhopis* are never possessed by the Rajput deity, Pabuji; their counterpart deity is the female goddess, Mataji.

The painted scroll or *phad* in the epic of Pabuji ki par

The epic performance mode known as *Pabuji ki par* or 'Pabuji of the painted scroll' is the most prominent of the several performed epic traditions (Fig. 2).¹² As is evident from the name,

the painted scroll or *phad* is a red textile on which the principal characters, turreted castles, fantastic animals, horsemen and myriad battle scenes from the epic are depicted along a series of horizontal planes. The scroll is a vital element in the performance as it embodies the historical and spiritual tradition of Pabuji and portrays his exploits. Devotees also believe that it is a living temple to their deity and once they have performed the ritual offerings, censing and prayers, that Pabuji descends from heaven and is present in the *phad*.

In ritual performances, the veiled *bhopi* stands singing to the left of the *phad*, sometimes illuminating the scroll with an oil lamp, while her husband *bhopa* stands to the right, strumming his *ravanhatta* (a two-stringed stick fiddle) and occasionally re-enacting the events being described. Despite this vivid recreation of events, in recognition of its symbolic and strategic importance to the performance, *bhopas* and *bhopis* describe their vocal, musical and kinesic renderings of events on the scroll as 'reading the *phad*' (Figs. 1, 2).

¹² Other performance variants of the same epic exist, of which the most common is *Pabuji mata* performed by

two male performers and drum, and on occasion, by one male singer.



Fig. 2. Hari Ram Bhopa performing in Jaisalmer.

Most *phads* seem to follow conventional schematic formulations in their representation of the hero's battles and famed encounters. Pabuji is placed in profile as the 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 (Fig. 3). According to Smith's analysis, each *phad* in principle comprises one hundred different scenes or clusters, displayed in synoptic rather than chronological order and stretched along four to five metres of cloth, one and a half metres high.¹³ Despite the convention, however, the *phads* featured in the four documented performances reveal a certain degree of variation, both in the style and content of scenes depicted, and in the artistic style and licence of *phad* artists. The visualisation of characters would seem to vary from area to area.¹⁴ The

13 Smith's excellent 1991 dissection of the *phad*, facilitated by Joseph C. Miller's beautiful line drawings of the one hundred composite scenes, pairs each episode with a 'scene', so rendering them clearly visible to those unfamiliar with the complex scroll paintings.

14 The artistic and tonal variations in these *phads* would seem to show that the artists who painted these scrolls

scroll and its myriad scenes are well-known to performers and to the audience, and yet despite its ritual importance to the epic, the majority of *bhops* in the performances filmed (with the exception of Bhanwar Lal), make only cursory reference to the scenes on the *phad*, appearing to treat it more as a backdrop than, as some researchers have suggested, a mnemonic.

Most importantly, the *phad* forms part of the epic's mythic heritage. *Bhops* believe that they have inherited the *phad* and the splendid red robe that they wear in performance from their Bhil ancestors, 'Chandoji' and 'Dheboji', two of Pabuji's courtiers depicted on the scroll, at the moment of the god's ascension to heaven. The story is told that Pabuji gave the cloth on his palanquin to his courtiers. In his memory, these textiles are treated as sacred and have become integral elements in the ritual performance of the epic.

(traditionally those from the Joshi caste but resident in different parts of Rajasthan) developed individual styles of *phad* representation.



Fig. 3. Pabuji's 'phad'.

'Picture showmen': pictorial narrative in India

Telling stories from pictures is a practice deeply embedded in South Asian artistic and folk tradition. Some scholars trace its roots to pre-Buddhist pictorial narrative though 'picture showmen', wandering bards (*mankha*, *magadha*) who made their livelihood from telling religious and moral tales using a picture board, first recorded in India in the eleventh century. An artisanal caste of itinerant story tellers-cum-teachers subsequently emerged, whose self-proclaimed vocation was to narrate mythical stories using a pictorial guide (Jain 1998: 10). Pictorial narrative traditions are found in Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina literature (in particular, the so-called *pata chitras*, a type of religious painting that originated as an art form in Orissa) and some scholars see analogies in the folk narrative-cum-painting customs practised by various *adivasi* tribes and sub-tribes in the central Indian states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan.¹⁵

¹⁵ As illustrated by the existence of at least eight independent pictorial traditions in the magnificent volume

Members of the *adivasi* tribe of Bhilalas in West Andhra Pradesh, for example, are said to paint creation myths on the walls of their houses and invoke characters from the story to descend into the wall and reside there for the duration of the paintings (Jain 1998: 12). These customs and conceptions are analogous to those at the heart of the pictorial narrative tradition of Pabuji in Rajasthan: the *phad* is a sacred textile in which the god may be embodied during performance.¹⁶

As the text of the offertory hymn sung by Bhanwar Lal reveals, the hero is entreated to 'come down from his palanquin and receive *arthi*' in order to be present and reside there, in his image, during the performance. His representation becomes vital, embodied in the two-dimensional *phad*. As a result, the *bhopa* and *bhopi* should not stand with their backs to the *phad*,

entitled 'Picture Showmen' edited by J. Jain (1998).

¹⁶ The scroll's investment with spiritual power and sacred presence can also be seen in the fact that when old and worn painted scrolls of Pabuji are taken to Pushkar Lake, in an act of pilgrimage, they are cremated and their ashes scattered across the water as if remains of once-animate bodies.



Fig. 4. Statues in Pabuji's abandoned temple, Koriya near Jaisalmer.

and in ritual performance, *bhopis* are required to veil their face in deference to the presence of the Rajput, Pabuji, in the *phad*.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Anna Dallapiccola has noted that people who listen to stories recited by *chitrakathis* (literally, 'picture story-makers') and who view images of their local deities depicted on scrolls (as in the Paithai painting tradition of Maharashtra, for example) state that they do so to derive the benefit of *darshan*: viewing a divine image, while at the same time, becoming 'one' with it. In other words, the image becomes venerated and simultaneously embodied through the gaze of the viewer (1998: 66-73).

The desire for refraction and reflection of gaze may also be visible in other related stylistic variants of the sacred pictorial tradition. At the five hundred-year old abandoned shrine of Pabuji at Koriya near Jaisalmer (but also in evidence elsewhere in Rajasthan), two clay effigies

of Pabuji are wrapped in iridescent and highly reflective, dazzling pink, silver, green and polka-dot aluminium foil, perhaps to encourage the simultaneous reflection, transmission and inter-subjectivity of gaze (Fig. 4).¹⁸

Other intriguing complementarities can be found in the mythological scenes painted by *adivasi* tribes in India on the walls of houses, and in ancient petroglyphs, many of which can be found in rock caves of central India and in the Chambal Valley which straddles parts of Rajasthan (Sawai Madhopur) and Madhya Pradesh. 'Cultural' scenes including exotic animals and bovines, humans and the more familiar hunting encounters have been found on the walls of rock caves dating to the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods.

17 In fact, Patashi Devi was forcibly pushed to the side at one point in the performance by her son, a would-be priest of Pabuji, when she inadvertently stood facing the audience rather than at right angles to it.

18 I am grateful to my colleague Vimal Gopa of Jaisalmer Fort for leading my colleagues and me to the site of this ancient and abandoned temple erected to Pabuji. Situated in the middle of stony desert and believed to be haunted, Koriya is little known. The site is strewn with stones and shards of ancient habitations and locals maintain that eighty-four villages 'disappeared in that place in a single night.' It is now the site of a bi-annual festival to Pabuji.



Fig. 5. Bhimbetka rider, found in the caves situated 45 km from Bhopal, from the website 'The Rock Art of Central India' <www.bradshawfoundation.com> by Dr Jean Clottes, The Bradshaw Foundation, with permission of the photographer

As both Pabuji and Gogaji, the wily snake god, are depicted on the *phad* as warriors on horseback, early representations of equestrian figures are of interest, particularly because both *bhopas* and *bhopis* wear silver medals of Pabuji astride his horse as the defining emblem of their devotion. Of this group, the two-toned figure of the sword-waving equestrian warrior from Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh, explicitly painted in outline, is especially striking. The technique deployed in this drawing emulates styles used in petroglyphs dating from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic eras even though that particular painting is dated to what archaeologists refer to as 'the historic period', i.e. the first millennium BCE (Fig. 5).

Other more 'primitive' depictions of the equestrian Pabuji, including some which appear to draw upon this unique petroglyph style, can also be seen in the wall paintings of the abandoned medieval shrine of Pabuji at Koriya near Jaisalmer. Two flamboyant sketches, drawn in

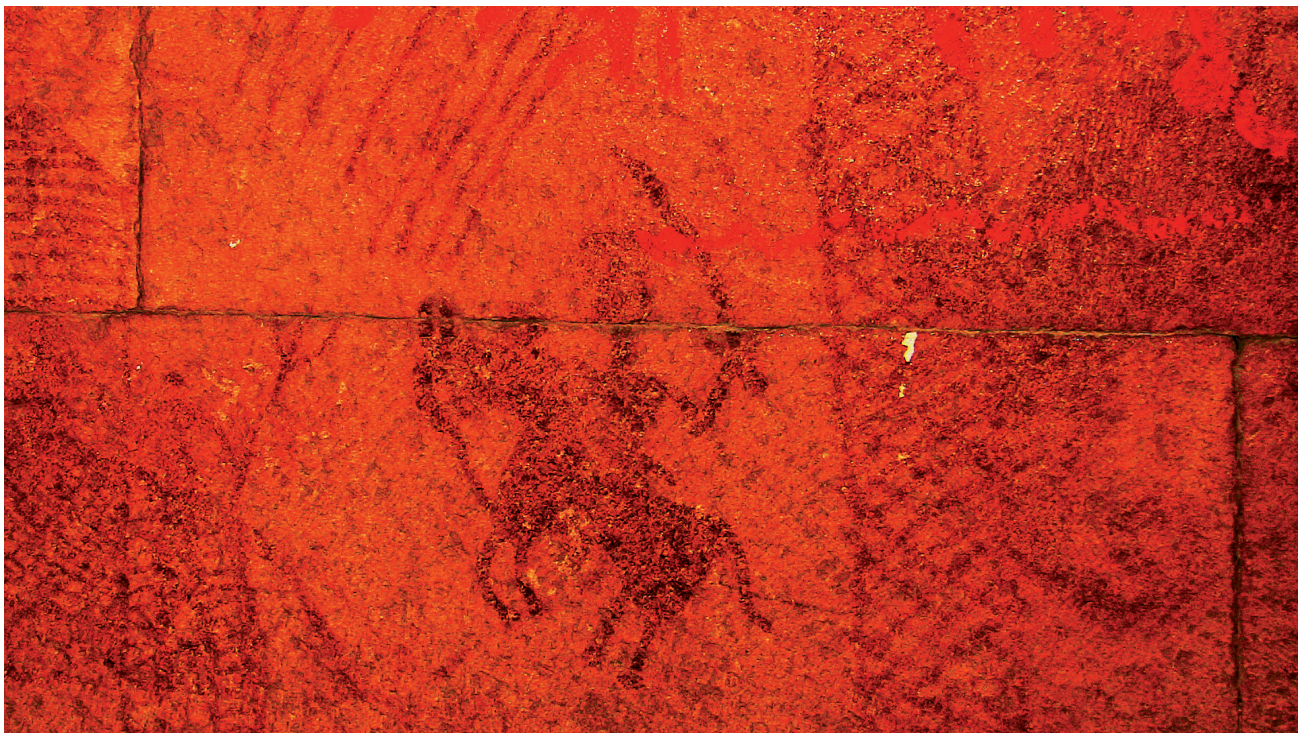


Fig. 6. Equestrian Pabuji, Koriya temple (1).



Fig. 7. Equestrian Pabuji, Koriya temple (2).



Fig. 8. The equestrian Pabuji flanked by 'the tree of life' and a peacock, Koriya temple.



Fig. 9. Facing peacocks around a stylised 'tree of life' in Sawai Madhopur.

hematite or ochre, show Pabuji sitting astride his horse (Figs. 6 & 7), while another, situated under the painting of a gigantic elephant, portrays him in a more geometric form, flanked by the tree of life and a fanning peacock (Fig. 8).

Symbols central to the *phad* are also replicated in *adivasi* wall paintings in an area of Rajasthan bordering the Chambal valley: the two fanning peacocks which face each other in the central upper register 'crown' and enclose the regal palanquin of Pabuji on the *phad*, for example. In Sawai Madhopur, a pair of facing male peacocks, painted in glaring white lime onto a dun-coloured mud wall (one in the act of copulation with a female, plus a random series of growling cats), would seem to form part of the repertoire of symbolic icons of the Meena tribe's

Mandana folk art tradition (Fig. 9). Another striking Meena Mandana design, documented during fieldwork, features a highly stylised but still anthropomorphic tree of life at its centre (Fig. 10). In this painting, elements of both wall paintings seem to bear some similarity to the symbolic representations of Pabuji visible in the interior of the ancient Koriya temple.

In that fifteenth century temple in the heart of the Thar desert, three images of an equestrian Pabuji have been painted in ochre and contextualised within a larger cosmological scene. The central figure is flanked by a tree of life and surrounded by peacocks and other riders (Fig. 11), while another wall displays red hand prints (commonly found in rock cave petroglyphs) and a mysterious ship bearing three tower



Fig. 10. Stylised tree of life, Sawai Madhopur.

shrines (Fig. 12). Just as the Mandana paintings are believed to represent configurations of Meena cosmological conceptions, these images would appear to embody elements of Pabuji's mythological world as conceived in the minds of devotees, to whom their significance extends far beyond that to which they refer (Arnheim 1969: 108).

The *Pabuji ki par* tradition

Pabuji ki par is a sacred epic performed in devotion to the patron deity, Pabuji, reputed to have been a fourteenth century hero. According to the

bhopas, Pabuji is revered because 'he sacrificed his life to save cows', the mainstay of their existence. In consequence, Pabuji is worshipped as a local deity by herdsman, nomads and those who pursue a livelihood based on animal husbandry in the harsh terrain of the Thar desert.

Pabuji is also acknowledged to be a healer of ailments affecting both animals and the environment, and therefore *bhopas* 'read the *phad*' in a village when a patron wishes to invoke the blessing of Pabuji to heal his animals, to bring the rain or to transform brackish water into sweet. As Patashi Devi describes the sequence of events, a symbolic offering of food, known as *akha*, is offered to the deity himself. This may comprise



Fig. 11. Detail of Pabuji with peacock and hand prints, Koriya temple.

either a handful of *bajra* or pearl millet (the staple food of desert dwellers in the Thar desert, and the only rain-fed crop that can be grown there), *gur* (jaggery) or the ritual offering of 51 rupees. By these token offerings (subsequently fed to wild peacocks, their own domestic animals, or consumed by the family) the *bhopa/bhopi* duo is invited to perform the epic of Pabuji.

In the performance, the *bhopa* and *bhopi* act as priests, intermediaries and catalysts in the process of incarnating Pabuji's presence. They do this by erecting the *phad*, his mobile temple, and by invoking his spiritual presence through the performance of *puja* (offerings of coconut oil and incense).¹⁹ 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 a day that 'Pabuji does not fast', and thus, specifically excludes the

11th day of the lunar calendar.²⁰ The performers receive the offering but it is directly offered as 'food' to the god before being circulated back to his *bhopas* and their families. Richard Schechner argues that at the core of *puja* is the offering of food (*prasada*). Food is sanctified by the gods and then eaten by the faithful (1985). In the symbolic realm of *Pabuji ki par*, the tangible offering of food would seem to highlight both his corporeality in death and the seminal role he is believed to play in ensuring the sustainability of human and animal livelihood in the Thar desert.

After waving a flame in front of the *phad* and performing other acts of devotion, the male *bhopa* begins with the 'offertory hymn' known as *arhi*, performed in dedication to their patron deity, Pabuji.

19 Parvati Devi from Nagaur explained that they would normally offer *pan* or betel nut and corn flour to Pabuji in *puja*, while *bhopas* in the other performances offered coconuts, another instance of regional variations in rituals associated with the Pabuji epic tradition.

20 Tradition determines on which days the epic may be performed. These are known as moon days: the days before, after and including the full moon are considered the most auspicious.



Fig. 12. Tower shrines on a ship, Koriya temple.

The offertory or arthi

We admire and honour Pabuji who has come
to this world

Pabuji, you are great to have come

You are the son of Rao Dhamdal, the royal
king, as powerful as a royal elephant
Powerful son of Gaj Dhamdal, as strong as
regal Pim

Fly your mare in the sky to defeat the enemy!
Defeat your enemy and protect your dynasty!

Pabuji, you are lying on a palanquin, covered
by a sheet
People say, 'Come to us,
We offer you an earthenware lamp, incense
and prayers
Please come to us and help us'

A hen will incubate her chickens
An aquatic animal will protect her children
in water
But a barren woman is powerless

A parrot sits on a branch of the mango tree
So adorned in multi-coloured plumes he
cannot fly

Greed is evil

Kolu temple is your place of sanctuary, your
place of ritual
Pabuji, we pray to you each morning and
evening

Napasar and Bilasar are also places we per-
form rituals
To you, incarnation of *Lakshmana jatti*, 'ascetic
deity of the Thar desert',²¹
We pray to you each morning and evening

The dusky-coloured *bhopa* speaks to Pabuji
'I pray for you with perfumed sticks of incense
each morning and evening'

Chandaji and Dabaji are the courtiers of Pabuji
in this world
We pray for you each morning and evening

The fame of this work,
Like a light that shines forth,
Will endure forever on this planet²²

21 A phrase coined in translation by Smith (1991) in his recording of the epic by Parbo *Bhopa*.

22 The transcription of the performances from video and live performance was done by Dr Surajmal Rao, formerly of the Department of Linguistics, University of Jodhpur,

The offertory or *arthi* is sung by the *bhopa* to Pabuji (who is believed to be present in the *phad*), to a slow but rhythmic pulse. As clearly evinced in the performance cited above, *Bhopa* Bhanwar Lal calls to Pabuji to come down from his palanquin to the performance of the *phad*.

Of all the *bhopas'* hymns recorded, Bhanwar Lal's rendering of the *arthi* is the most poetic. He raises the mysterious issue of fertility: 'a barren woman is powerless', he sings, and so she must pray to Pabuji for help. His offertory hymn also sounds a moral note: the rich are bedecked in glittering costumes but seemingly cannot act to improve the human condition. They are greedy: 'greed is evil', he proclaims.

This hymn embodies a message of advocacy. As becomes clear from the 'texts' of the episodes, this epic enshrines the voice of the poor and articulates a critique cloaked in metaphor.

Modes of performance: gav and arthav

The *Pabuji ki par* epic is comprised of two performance modes: *gav* (song) and *arthav* (recitative). The bulk of the singing is done by the *bhopi*, accompanied by her husband *bhopa* on his *ravanhatta*, and this is the longest and most exciting part of the epic performance. The *bhopi* does not merely 'hold the lamp in front of the screen', but she designs and moulds the narrative through her vocal power and emotional force after a musical prompt and introductory phrase from the *bhopa*. Singing at increasingly higher and higher volume and pitch, the *bhopi* creates an atmosphere of emotional intensity through the vibrancy and timbre of her voice. As the *bhopi* sings, the *bhopa* provides the melodic lead and often strives to emulate the exploits of the hero, prancing around the stage as if he were a rider on horseback, or dancing or striding regally,

his head erect, as if he were one of his ancestral courtiers at Pabuji's grand wedding procession.

The second style of performance is called *arthav*, a high-pitched or chanted recitative performed by the *bhopa* alone. During this section of the epic recitation, the *phad*, lit by moonlight and rendered almost incandescent in the light of flickering lamps, acquires prominence. Standing in front of the scroll, the *bhopa* declaims and announces the events as they unfold, but this time, in prose, while at the same time pointing to images and characters on the scroll with the tip of his instrument. To punctuate his narrative, and to sustain the listener's attention, he often adds a series of musical flourishes on his *ravanhatta*. There is a lull in the flow of the epic during *arthav* and whereas the performance of *gav* seems to embody the emotion inherent in the elaborate conflicts and encounters between principal characters in the epic, this narrative acts as an interlude and moment of reflection between the more emotionally charged conflicts around which the epic revolves.

At the first two performances of the epic I saw in Jaipur, the *bhopi's* face remained uncovered. However, during the first part of the filmed sequences, in all cases, the *bhopis* covered their faces completely with their veils. This was unexpected, and after some discussion, I managed to persuade the *bhopis* to unveil their faces in view of our research motive: to discover how the *bhopi* vocalises and projects her voice in the epic. These unveiled sessions were termed by the performers secular or 'tourist' performances as opposed to the more conventional, 'ritual performance'.

All performances of the epic revolve around *parvaros* or 'episodes of miraculous events' (Kamphorst 2008: 31). Various performers have suggested that there is a general consensus as to which *parvaro* is chosen to open the performance and while in Jaipur, Pabasar and Jaisalmer, the 'Wedding of Gogaji' was performed first, in Jodhpur, the performers began with the 'Wed-

and Rupayan Sansthan, now a Post Doctoral Fellow of the Department of Rajasthani, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur, Rajasthan. The translations of the epic from Marwari into Hindi, and then into English, were provided by Dr Priyanka Mathur, in discussion with Dr Rao and the author.

ding of Pabuji'.²³ On this basis, we may surmise that there was no ritually-defined standard (it might vary according to the confidence and knowledge base of the *bhopa* and *bhopi*), but by virtue of his appearance in three of the four recorded performances of the initial episodes of the epic, we concluded that Gogaji, the wily snake god, was an extremely popular folk hero whose prominence and role in the epic had been deliberately emphasised.²⁴

In historical manuscripts of the epic, 'The Wedding of Gogaji' is given less prominence than in modern day Rajasthani epic performance, so this would appear to be a modern revamping of events in response to popular demand. Yet, on perusing ancient versions of the epic, it seems remarkable to find that the main protagonists in these stories, the Bhil courtiers, Dheboji (also written 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 the epic, preserved in libraries and private collections. According to scholars who have studied the epic's earliest known precursors and evidence for Pabuji's existence as a historical figure,²⁵ there may be some justification to the *bhopas'* claims that Bhil courtiers served Pabuji in his army. Pabuji and his courtiers are worshipped through images of equestrian figures, sculpted in relief on ancient 'hero' stones found scattered throughout the Thar desert and present in his various shrines. Their representation gives credence to the epic stories and the collective memory of their exploits is passed from generation to generation. As to why Chandoji and Dheboji are represented on the *phad* along with Pabuji, and on the question of why *bhopas* may have inherited their divine vocation from

their ancestors, Chandoji and Dheboji, Parbo *Bhopa* provided an explanation. He told Smith that both Chandoji (Camda/Cada) and Dheboji (Dhembo) were 'Rajputs by birth and Nayaks by upbringing', a factor that would explain their high status representation on the *phad* dressed as Mughal courtiers, and account for their exalted status in the epic (Smith 1991: 391). It also makes clear why subsequent generations would claim descent and seek to emulate them.

In the epic, Pabuji is eulogised in a wealth of epithets describing him as 'King of the Rathore clan of Rajput' and 'King of Kolu', the site of his original palace and main temple near Phalodi in Western Rajasthan. He is also described as a 'provider of food', possibly a more significant marker to his devotees than 'king'. Pabuji is honoured as *thakur* and *sardar*, titles meaning 'feudal lord', as he would have been perceived in the Middle Ages, as *Pal* or *Pal Balala*, 'Life' or the 'Spear of Life', 'the foundation stone of our religion on earth', and in mythological terms, as the descendant and *avatar* (living embodiment) of Lord Lakshmana, the ascetic brother of the god, Ram in the ancient Hindu religious epic, the Ramayana. The fundamental role of the epic in praising the deity Pabuji is clear.

The role of the bhopi in Pabuji ki par

What distinguishes *Pabuji ki par* from other versions of the epic (and many other epic traditions) is the fact that the bulk of the epic 'song' or *gav* is sung by the *bhopi*. Women compose and perform the episodes in tandem with their male partners but the 'voice' of the principal character in the episodes recorded, in most cases, is that of a woman rather than a man.²⁶ The voices of Kelam Dé (short for Devi) and the Goddess Deval Charni, for example, are privileged above those of male characters. The women speak whereas the male heroes remain mute. This would seem

23 The recording time was limited in the case of 2009 Pabuji research due to budget constraints. Therefore, the temporal and textual extent of the epic in terms of each performer's repertoire is not known, though reference was made by some performers to a continuous stint of performances lasting all night over a period of several days.

24 The same episode is included in the compendium by Smith (1991).

25 See Smith (1991) and Kamphorst (2008).

26 While it is not known if this would apply in battle episodes, other transcriptions of the epic do point to a general predominance of female characters.

to suggest that the *gav* section is not only sung by a woman but articulates the concerns of women who listen to and patronise epic performance. *Arthav*, on the other hand, the chanted prose section performed by the *bhopa*, chronicles events of the epic in a more emotionally neutral 'past tense.'

The *bhopa* and *bhopi* perform distinct and 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 is also 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.

Some Western scholars have tended to concentrate on the mediaeval origins of the text and manuscript versions of the epic of Pabuji rather than its performed versions and therefore may have ignored the pivotal role of the *bhopi*. Perceptions of gender protocols and perhaps, as one scholar of Pabuji told me, an inadvertent but evident 'gender bias', as well as a focus on documentation of the complete chronicle, may have obscured this important aspect of this gendered tradition.

Parbo *Bhopa's* version of the epic, cited by Smith as a complete text, for example, excludes any renditions by the *bhopi*. Clearly, this has influenced the nature of the text, as he himself notes.²⁷ The traditional performance modes are indisputable, as Bharucha notes: 'in the husband-wife rendition of *Pabuji ki par*, the man sings the first lines of each verse in the narrative, playing the *ravanhatta*, while his wife sings the rest of the verse' (2003: 113). In our survey of the *Pabuji ki par* tradition across Rajasthan, the same pattern was observed: the bulk of the performance was

devoted to *gav*, sung by the *bhopi*, with the *bhopa* providing a one or two word introduction to the verse. The *arthav* section, chanted by the *bhopa*, constituted less than 25% of the epic in the four performances filmed. Parbo *Bhopa's* 'complete text of the epic of *Pabuji ki par*' is, therefore, a hybrid, qualitatively different from the epic as normally performed by a *bhopa* and *bhopi* in tandem (Bharucha 2003: 113). For this reason, or perhaps because it was a performance recorded artificially, away from a traditional audience, Parbo *Bhopa's* text is strangely devoid of the type of social commentary or critique evinced in the four performances recorded. Performance by a single male performer in isolation would be expected to lack the fundamental element of collaboration which distinguishes the *Pabuji ki par* tradition from others: the enactment of the performance on stage by the *bhopa* and *bhopi* and the creation of a multi-vocal text. As the Pabuser and Jaisalmer performances show, the appointed 'spectator-cum-respondent' known as the *hunkariyya* speaks out during the performance to 'converse' with the *bhopa* and *bhopi*, to praise their performance and to comment on events as they unfold. The participation of this interlocutor, as other scholars have observed, is an essential component of the performance event. He, and often a gaggle of others, interject important asides that help the performers to create a more exciting, collaborative, and to a certain extent, jointly produced 'text'.²⁸ Moreover, as seen in the performances, as the belligerent voice of the audience signals its support or disdain for events unfolding, the tale is transformed from a well known story into 'a kind of reality TV show', in which the audience's opinion influences the tenure of events.

Perusal of the sung 'texts' reveals that the *bhopis* interject many of the problems of daily life, specifically family relationships and alliances into the epic recitation, while at the same time

27 'A transcription of the entire 36 hour event [originally performed in *gav* and *arthav*] would have been unpublishable and unreadable... there could be no serious doubt that the form in which the material should be presented was the *arthav* alone—the spoken, loosely metrical version which the *bhopa* declaims between songs while he points to the relevant pictures on the *par* behind him' (Smith, 1991: 105).

28 Ann Grodzins Gold observed that the *hunkar* / *hunkariyya* is not a spontaneous, casual or extraneous adjunct but 'a formalised element of performance-audience interaction' (1993: 21).

praising Pabuji as their divine patron and source of empowerment. In these outbursts, milk-based metaphors predominate: 'We scarcely get the whey let alone the curd!' say two different *bhopis*. The singers stress the torment women feel when dowries promised are not paid; the sadness they endure; how men continue to promise unrealistic dowries they can never pay to clinch 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-in-law of unseemly behaviour, often without cause, and so on.

The epic and the phad: what is said and what is depicted

What is fascinating about the epic is what is said (or *not* said), and what is depicted (or *not* depicted) on the *phad*. Most of the audience knows the saga of Pabuji, and so some factors crucial to outsiders' understanding of the story are omitted. However, from the majority of the performances witnessed in this study, it is clear that Pabuji's exploits do not always appear to be the central preoccupation of the *bhopa/bhopi*, though his image dominates the scroll. Rather, Pabuji's actions often appear tangential (in terms of narrative emphasis) to what appears to be the more critical roles played by his Bhil courtiers (such as Harmal Devasi) in performance of their required duties.

Moreover, differences in the way the epic is performed as opposed to visualised in the *phad* should also be noted. Several *bhopas* begin by singing the episode of Gogaji, the snake god, focusing on his devious character and scheme to secure marriage to Pabuji's niece, Kelam Dé. These incidents are featured on the *phads* but as minor inserts: they are not accorded the central prominence one would expect from the elaborate telling of this story. Moreover, Pabuji's feat of making

grass grow is important in the *parvaro* of his failed nuptials as it bears important witness to his charismatic power, and yet this does not appear on the *phad*. His wedding scene is, however, depicted on the *phad*, along with the Goddess Deval as a bird, though it appears under-illustrated in terms of its importance to the narrative. The issue of who will look after her precious cows lies at the crux of the epic. As their abduction is the cause of the future conflict that will ultimately lead to the death of the hero Pabuji, this incident might be expected to command more strategic prominence and size on the *phad*.

Also converse to expectations, many of the issues highlighted in the oral epic are inherently conflictual and pertain to negotiations and solutions to various pressing social problems, but these are not portrayed on the *phad*: for example, the concern expressed by Kelam Dé for the outlandishness of her dowry gift. The characters are depicted formulaically with stereotypical physiognomy and in profile. They are consequently devoid of any distinctive personality features or expressions. It remains for the *bhopi* to infuse them with life and contemporary relevance through an emotionally invigorated *gav*. While the *phad* portrays a myriad of social interactions, it remains emotionally and dramatically neutral. In fact, the 'reading' of the *phad* can be interpreted as the way in which the *bhopis*, with assistance from the *bhopas*, re-incarnate their favourite characters and their deity through the grace afforded by the empowering presence of Pabuji.

Diversity and variation in performance: the language and music of the epic

The language of the performances of *Pabuji ki par* is Marwari, one of six dialects of Rajasthani, at one time linked to the archaic poetic koiné known as Dimgal reputedly used by Charan poets to compose the ancient epic. Some dialectical differences are evident in the performances, however. The musicians from Shekawati and

Nagaur (who performed in Jaisalmer) each speak their own dialect, distinct from the Marwari spoken by the *bhopa/bhopi* in Jodhpur, for example.

Understanding the epic of Pabuji requires some tutoring, moreover, even for native speakers of Marwari. As became apparent during the course of the research project, those unfamiliar with the formulaic style and language of the epic are not necessarily able to understand the archaic language of the poetic 'text' of the epic of Pabuji.

The musical styles of the various performers also vary considerably, both in tonal quality and in instrumentation. The musical refrains and fleeting interludes performed by *bhopas* on their *ravanhattas* differ markedly from one another, as do the vocal range and melodic structure of the *bhopis'* individual 'arias', some sweet and some raucous. 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. According to Hari Ram *Bhopa*, each family would have been assigned a particular cluster of villages in which to perform. Consequently, there would have been little possibility of communication between competing families of bards except in marriage alliances and thus, ample room for creative diversification by *bhopas* within the area assigned. Many *bhopa/bhopi* families have expanded their income base from ritual performances to tourist venues over the years and this contact with other musicians may also have acted as an incentive in the development of new melodic compositions. While the tribes of Rajasthan are adapting themselves more and more to tourism as a main source of employment, it is clear that over the decades, the highest calibre performers have succeeded in raising their standard of living and wealth quotient by exploring new domains of performance, while the less talented have fallen by the wayside and have drifted involuntarily into the unskilled labour market.

In general, therefore, the four performances of the epic of Pabuji display considerable diver-

sity of style and form. In some individual cases, the presentation is enlivened by spontaneous injections of sarcasm and humour. Santera and Parvati from Jaisalmer, in particular, introduce colloquialisms and direct dialogue in the first person as they perform. These exchanges inflect the characters with personality and voice, and ground the drama of the scene in the present. Parvati would seem to have developed her own distinctive and confident style as she alone punctuates her stanzas with exhortative outbursts, 'Long may he live!', 'May the poet live long!' and interlaces excerpts from the two wedding episodes into a single performance, perhaps as part of the increasing trend to condense the epic into a shorter, more manageable and more appealing form. Repetition of the same phrase for emotional effect is also a technique often exploited by the *bhopis*. They stretch out the episode with longer and more and more dramatic renderings and because of the divergence in styles and language between *gav* and *arthav*, it would appear to be the *bhopis* who have the license, via prior agreement with the *bhopas*, to create the greatest immediacy and affect through dialogue.

The epic of Pabuji and the Ramayana

In the recitation of the epic, we discover that Pabuji is described as Lakhshmana, brother of the god Ram, and a character renowned in sacred Hindu mythology from the epic known as the Ramayana. This trend of Ramayanisation, or rather, the vernacularisation of classical epics has been analysed and debated at length by other scholars including Alf Hiltebeitel (1999) who has pointed out that these oral epics differ from the classical in that in general they depict local goddesses and minor kings from the landed classes rather than gods.

In the case of the epic of Pabuji, the main character is, indeed, a Rajput warrior and so, a minor king. However, his Bhil courtiers, Chandoji, Dheboji and Harmal Devasi, are also featured

in the epic and depicted on the *phad* as being of equal rank and status as Kshatriyyas, members of the superior warrior caste, even though they are ethnically *adivasi* and employed as servants to the Rajput king.²⁹ Therefore, as Hildebeitel (1999) has elaborated at length, the distinction in this folk epic is not only one of depiction of local vs. mythical or national vs. universal characters from Hindu mythology. In this epic, the status of the low-caste courtiers has been inverted and transformed so that they, too, now occupy the rank and eminence of Kshatriyyas. The artist has depicted the courtiers on the same horizontal plane as the hero, and painted their skin the same pale colour. Moreover, the centrality of their acts of valour in the performed episodes would seem not only to reflect the desire of the musicians to stress this transformation lyrically, but also a determination on behalf of the Joshi caste (traditional designers and artisanal craftsmen endowed with the right to paint the *phad*) to represent such transformations pictorially. What seems apparent now is that *bhopas* are telling 'their own story.' The phenomenon of the 'vernacularisation' of the Ramayana—the introduction of important characters from this sacred epic into the popular oral performance of Pabuji—would seem to suggest that over the centuries, reciters may have incorporated re-incarnations of mythical and religious heroes from the Ramayana into their stories to add credibility and historical weight to their hero's profiles, in keeping with their own view of history. 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 reincarnation present in Hindu mythology and religious tradition. As such, this process is not part of a conscious 're-invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992), but may be

evidence of a historical trend by disenfranchised groups to politicise and democratise folk tradition in pursuit of equal libertarian goals.

Conclusion

The narrative range of the Pabuji epic is vast and its significance cannot be examined in a research project that has recorded only the introductory episodes of an epic which may stretch to many nights in its telling. However, in consideration of the recorded episodes and the musicians' own commentaries, it is clear that some conclusions can be drawn about the epic and its meaning to contemporary audiences.

The *phad* is 'read' for the purposes of healing and as stressed in the performances, Pabuji's most vital role in the epic is that of healer, a source of *pal* or 'life', a protector of cows and guardian of the precarious but life-giving environment of the Thar desert. Devotees become possessed and intercede to bring blessing from Pabuji, and although many researchers of the epic have suggested that *bhopas* may become possessed and act as healers, those interviewed in this research project have suggested that it is rare for *bhopas* to play this role. Moreover, they do not have this gift. Only male devotees may become possessed by Pabuji's paternal spirit; *bhopis'* counterpart deity is the maternal figure-head, Mataji.³⁰

In the imaginative and symbolic universe inhabited by Pabuji and his courtiers that emerges in the performance of the epic (perhaps not surprisingly, as it takes place in the arid environment of the great Thar desert), Pabuji's most potent image remains 'the garden'. Emblematic of paradise and a state of well-being, the garden is the idyllic setting in which Rajput maidens cavort on swings, and through the blessing of the god, trees bloom and grass sprouts. But these images are not only intended as metaphors. Just

29 Parbo Bhopa has argued as to why *bhopas* and their clan may lay claim to be Rajputs but none of the *bhopas* interviewed mentioned this particular ethnic origin or linkage.

30 In Pabusar, a separate priest of the village temple performed the devotional offering ceremonies before the performance of the *phad*. He was not a *bhopa*.

as the 'hero stones' concretise the memory of Pabuji and his courtiers within Bhil communities, devotees create gardens in the name of Pabuji. Local herdsmen designate plots of land as *orans* or sacred gardens (in which grazing is prohibited) as a votive tribute to Pabuji and his ability to generate greenery in the barren desert.³¹ Seen in its wider manifestation, the power of Pabuji as invoked in the epic thus becomes visible, and the epic and its deified hero gain in credibility and contemporary relevance.

Not unusually perhaps, in the context of this and many other epic narratives, exaggeration is also one of the epic's most significant features. Landscapes and monuments are described in terms of lavish expenditure and grandeur (i.e. 'nine-lakh'³² gardens and palaces) and women in the epic scenes are often draped in 'sixteen and thirty-two strands of jewels'.³³ Yet beyond the effusively described décor, mediaeval pomp and circumstance, is the epic's most alluring feature: its social commentary. The conscious intent of the performers to interweave social critique into the historic context and frame of the episodes is the most striking aspect of the epic. The historical epic of *Pabuji ki par* comprises a matrix of ritual and religious elements, stories of mediaeval chivalry and war which unfold in the frame of a Mughal court, but the social message of the oral epic is clear.

The early episodes of this contemporary version of the epic are more about spinning fantasies of the imagination and exploring the nexus of caste relations pivoting around marriage contracts, patronage and labour, and less about conquests and wars, despite the predominant depiction on the *phad* of phalanxes of horsemen engaged in battle. It can be argued on the basis

of these performances that within the frame of this historical epic, ostensibly based on the exploits of Pabuji in the fourteenth century, a reworked, contemporary narrative has emerged which revolves around local deities who intervene and contrive to help *adivasi* communities manage their environment and rise above caste constraints and the discriminative practices that affect them. The epic reinforces devotees' belief in the divine intervention of Pabuji and illustrates how the local gods Pabuji and Gogaji may be called upon to enact miracles such as causing the grass to grow, healing animals and humans (in the case of a snakebite, intercession by Gogaji) and inducing the monsoon rain. Alf Hiltebeitel has argued that the interrelationship of contemporary and classical epics is more complex than the simple transposition of tradition from 'Great' to 'Little,' or the absorption and transformation of myth and history from their Classical counterparts (1999: 211). He contends that oral epics should be analysed as socio-cultural expressions of contemporary significance, shaped by the conceptions and worldview of its proponents, valid for their own sake, and not demeaned as derivative re-workings of classical Hindu epics. Wendy Doniger, moreover, has set out clear arguments delineating what she perceives to be the current trend across India: a movement in which subaltern interpretations of sacred texts, including the Ramayana, have continued to evolve and develop since independence as a function of gradual changes in Dalit's perceptions of their rights of resistance to discrimination (2009: 563-564). The impact of this socio-political trend on traditional Indian folk narrative, as manifested in the transformation of the story of Pabuji from its historical underpinnings to a vernacular epic, appears to form part of a much wider, transformative process taking place across India and should therefore be recognised as such.

31 At the suggestion of Jethu Singh Bhatti, revenues from the performance of the epic of Pabuji in Manopia were to be given to sponsor the creation of an *oran* to Pabuji in Manopia, a settlement near Jaisalmer.

32 One *lakh* is equal to 100,000.

33 This is translated by Smith (1991) as sixteen 'fold' and thirty-two 'fold' in an attempt to be faithful to the original Marwari formulation.

Part 2

The second part of this paper presents four episodes of the epic as performed by the *bhopi* and *bhopa* in Jaipur, Pabugar, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer respectively. In each case, the sequence of events in each episode is summarised and an interpretation proposed which aims to expose the subtext or underlying social meaning of each incident and its framing by the *bhopi*.

(A) Jaipur: The Wedding of Gogaji³⁴

The singers, Bhanwar Lal and Santera Devi, begin the performance with the 'Wedding of Gogaji', an episode set in the real world of conflictual social relations, featuring Gogaji Maharaj (also known as Goga Chauhan), a popular folk deity in Rajasthani tribal communities.³⁵ Gogaji is venerated as a warrior saint and famous healer of snakebites across Rajasthan.³⁶ In this episode, he reveals his intent to marry an upper class princess, Kelam Dé (or Devi), the Rajput niece of Pabuji, an audacious bride who challenges her elders.

In this Jaipur performance, the sometimes strident and truculent voice of women and their concerns emerge as paramount, rather than the grand exploits of Pabuji. This gives the epic a

contemporary and human edge, and frames it in a social world dominated by the pursuit of wealth and the active discrimination and exploitation of the poor by the upper class.

In the first hint of a feminist agenda, Kelam Dé insinuates that the dowry gift proposed by her uncle is irrational and extravagant; do the she-camels that Pabuji has promised her actually exist?³⁷ Moreover, the issue of the bride's social stratum is raised: What is her social position? She then asks 'What are you doing marrying her?' ('We are discriminated against', is the underlying meaning), 'We scarcely get the 'whey' let alone the 'curd'!'

When the god Gogaji decides to take things into his own hands and bite Kelam Dé (hereafter Kelam), he is rejected by the family. The drama unfolds in the garden, as does the scene in which Kelam is taunted mercilessly by her friends when the dowry is not paid. She then decides to 'write a letter to him,' summoning a Brahman scribe who is depicted as poor, weak and subservient in this version of the episode.

Pabuji responds to her anguished letter with a flippant and dismissive reply: 'Haven't we done this already?', again an implicit critique but indicative of how elder patrons in Rajasthan might respond to a challenge levied by a young bride.

The next hint of social critique occurs in the epic when Harmal Raika and his companions are requested to choose from a tray of *pan* distributed by the goddess Deval. There is an element of pre-destination in this particular event. Who of the courtiers shall go to the dangerous land of Lanka? Lanka is the mystical land featured in the Ramayana; in the *phad*, it is shown only as accessible only by crossing a large 'sea.'

As if he were compelled to take up the gauntlet, Harmal observes that 'dealing with Rajputs is a double-edged sword.' The nomad bravely

34 It should be noted that these performances were filmed in their entirety and unedited, apart from brief cuts in the event of camera error.

35 Gogaji Maharaj or Goga Chauhan (as he is sometimes called) is a folk deity of some historical veracity. He is reputed to have lived in the twelfth century during the reign of Prithvi Raj Chauhan, the last Hindu king of Delhi (circa 1168-1192) or in the time of the last great Mughal, Aurangzeb (1658-1707), and is believed to embody both a Muslim *fakir* (or *pir*) and a Chauhan Rajput. In the recorded episodes, he is called a variety of titles: 'Goga Pir' (Jodhpur), 'Goga Chauhan' (Jaipur) and King Chauhan (Jaisalmer). Most important is his ability to heal snakebites rather than his religious orientation.

36 He is honoured by Muslims and Hindus alike and according to Kamphorst (2008), almost all Rajasthani villages have a *than* set under a *khejari* tree which is dedicated to him as he is believed to cure other diseases also. Kamphorst adds that he is particularly worshipped by Nath priests who carry whips.

37 In the earlier version of the epic recorded with Parbo *Bhopa* and translated by Smith (1991: 323), the same question is raised, an indication that Kelam Dé's querulous stance had already become integrated into the story as part of a recognised performance formula.

agrees to go, but at home, at his mother's suggestion, he changes his mind and decides to see what an alternative patron might offer him as a labour contract.

Buddho Rao, Pabuji's evil half-brother, suggests that he could take him on, but as an annual salary he would only receive four *taka* (the currency of Bangladesh and implicitly less than a rupee). Moreover, the year would not last 12 months but 24 and he would have to leave his salary in his bank and withdraw the interest only. In addition, he would have to pay 25% tax, donate an additional 25% as alms to beggars and the tasks that he would have to execute would be impossibly physically demanding and demeaning. The harshly exploitative practices of this landlord (both in feudal and modern times known as a *thakur* or regent) in some respects resembles the work and payment regime of the recent Government-sponsored *Rojkar* employment project, portrayed as unfair by many unskilled labourers, mainly women, because their money is often siphoned off by unscrupulous contractors. This amusing and elaborate portrayal of the relationship between patron and worker is a contemporary interpolation, intended to show the determination of the rich and powerful to exploit and demand superhuman efforts from the lowest social castes, and as such functions as an overt critique.

Harmal Raika disguises himself as a mendicant or *jogi* to conduct reconnaissance on the island of Lanka, after which he sets out. He meets a guru on the path, Baba Balinath, a devotee of the ascetic Nath tradition,³⁸ once highly respected

38 In Parbo *Bhopa's* version of the episode, the guru in question was called Guru Gorakhnath who started the Nath ascetic movement in the 12th century. As Debra Diamond writes, 'The Naths initiated the practice of Nath yoga and over succeeding centuries gained a broad popular base to become India's paradigmatic *yogins*...covering their bodies with sacred ash, clad in rough saffron-coloured garments and wearing unkempt dread locks and large earrings (*kundal*) through holes bored into their ears' inner cartilage. They introduced a systematic set of meditation and somatic practices that enables mortals to achieve immortality and gain supernatural powers. These include the ability to foretell the future, fly, hear and see over great distances and

and pervasive across Rajasthan. But the guru is presented as an arrogant and greedy holy man: he will only give Harmal Raika his magic blessings and endowments if he promises remuneration in the form of a she-camel from Lanka. She-camels, as the personification of fertility to Raika/Ribari nomads, constitute the most desirable gift. Then, in a stanza structured like a traditional folk tale, Baba warns of the dangers of drinking milk from these she-camels: the milk will bewitch him and transform his body into that of a she-camel.

Harmal goes home to see if his disguise will pass muster and whether he will deceive his mother. She does not recognize him but his wife drops the plate of pearls she is offering to the *jogi* as alms in surprise. She also hurriedly shields her face with her veil, as if he were her husband or a relative. This gesture results in an unfair rebuke from her mother-in-law and the accusation, 'Does she 'know' or fancy this stranger?' This echoes the young bride's standard complaint: mothers-in-law launch unfair critiques of their behaviour on the slightest pretext. It also illustrates the complex etiquette attached to the issue of veiling in Rajasthan and how dropping a veil can imply desire and a breach of social propriety, or modesty.

(B) Pabusar: The Wedding of Gogaji II

The story continues in the village of Pabusar (Shekawati), and while the first half of the narrative highlights conflicts with a charlatan guru, an exploitative feudal patron, and even Pabuji, seemingly oblivious to his niece's social needs in his role as uncle of the bride, this latter section, performed by Patashi Devi³⁹ and her

achieve blissful awareness of the oneness between the self and the universe' (2008: 32). The powers attributed to Baba Balinath and his Nath sect in the epic recitation reflect the fact that these beliefs would seem to have endured in the realm of Rajasthani folklore centuries later.

39 Patashi Devi is the wife of Mohan *Bhopa* who died in December 2008.

son, Bhanwar Lal, takes on the flavour of a folk tale. The story is embellished with additional dramatic elements: disguise, subterfuge and fantastic feats, and invigorated with a cast of intriguing and terrifying supernatural beings, all of whom are female.

At first, we are told of the anxiety felt by Harmal Devasi's mother at the prospect of him not performing the required rituals at his sisters' weddings. The Raika courtier assuages her concern and heads off to Pabuji's court where he is immediately recognised by Pabuji, but not by the others. They try to give the mendicant alms in the form of grain. Soon afterwards, he sets off to cross 'the salty ocean' where he is set upon by haridans, Ramka and Jamka, who demand that they be accepted as pupil devotees. He manages to escape the teeth-gnashing she-devils by invoking the spirit of Baba Balinath.

He arrives at the ocean and is terrified at the prospect of crossing it. When he invokes the name of Pabuji, he is lifted miraculously across, an event re-enacted by Bhanwar Lal *Bhopa* who leaps dramatically across the stage during the performance.

Harmal Devasi arrives in Lanka and adopts the classic yoga position, pretending to be an ascetic, but all the time observing the area inhabited by the she-camels. His clandestine presence on the island is detected by the clairvoyant goddess, Sikotri Mata, who can read both the past and the future. In the context of the Ramayana, she is the mother of the demon Ravana, and so an ambivalent figure. Like Pabuji *aka* Lakhshmana, she shares a dual identity, simultaneously present in the epic of Pabuji and the Ramayana across time and space, but in this story, a character with a greater potentiality to exert power.

This ill-tempered goddess determines that he is not a true ascetic and so his true identity is revealed. At this point, the interlocutor or *hunkariyya* chimes in, 'So then what happens?' to which the *bhopa* responds, 'You will get your answer before your turban is unravelled.'

(C) Jodhpur: The Wedding of Pabuji

The Wedding of Pabuji sung by Man Bhari and Sugana Ram is a much more joyous episode, at least at the start. It opens with the *bhopa's* lavish description of the hero's wedding procession and the fortress of Sooda where his bride awaits him. As the clamorous procession advances, Sugana imitates the prancing of Kesar Kalmi (Black Saffron), Pabuji's magical mare, who is the reincarnation of his nymph mother, Kesar Pari (Nymph Saffron).⁴⁰ As the band of courtiers advances with pomp and circumstance, Sugana's *ravanhatta* emulates the sounds of wedding drums. One of the main emphases in this performance is the fear, constantly expressed, that characters may not be performing rituals adequately, or at least, in the manner required by tradition.

The first note of critique is levied at the goddess, Deval Charni, who is sanctioned because 'her most recent incarnations are too critical.' The nexus of the story revolves around the issue of who will protect her cows while Pabuji is away at his wedding. He had earlier pledged to protect them but by attending his own wedding, his ability to protect her cows has been compromised.

As the procession of Rajput courtiers tires after the long journey, the men seek rest and a place to chew opium. But the land of Sooda is desiccated and they refuse to halt there. It is beneath their dignity as Kshatriyyas, the great warrior caste. Instead, they call upon Pabuji's miraculous powers to transform the landscape

40 An important piece of the story which is known to the audiences but unstated here must be added. Pabuji is said to have been born from the union of a noble called Dhamdal and a nymph discovered bathing naked in a pool in the forest. She agreed to marry Dhamdal on the condition that he never enter her bedroom without knocking first. This situation prevailed until one day, he decided to barge in on Kesar unannounced and discovered a lioness breast-feeding his son. She departed, but later on in the evolution of the story, re-incarnated herself as a mare, Kesar Kalmi, 'Black Saffron', in order to act as his supernatural guardian and support him when facing adversity. Some analysts think that in the mythical realm of the epic, she may represent an *adivasi* or Bhil maiden endowed with supernatural powers, rather than a magical nymph, a factor which may enable Bhil devotees to identify more profoundly with the story.

from that of a barren desert to a verdant garden. Suddenly, the grass sprouts, birds chirp and trees bloom with scented flowers. At the same moment, in synchrony, the necklace that was being threaded by his future bride, the *Rana* or 'Queen' of Sooda, breaks. Its pearls fall to the ground, an omen that the rituals of marriage will never be fully performed. Threads of pearls often feature in the epic's wedding episodes as well as in the song of 'The Banjari Nomad' (included in the Appendix), both as fetishistic objects of desire and symbols of opulence, redolent of mediaeval Mughal wealth and glory. When the string breaks, this is evidence of metaphysical disruption and turmoil.

Pabuji starts to carry out the ritual acts required of a bridegroom in Rajasthan: he touches the *toran* at this bride's house and greets his future mother-in-law at the gate of her house. She waves the lamp and plate before him as she is required to do, but during the wedding ceremony, at the moment of Pabuji's third circumambulation around the sacred fire, Kesar Kalmi whinnies in distress. This upsets the festive atmosphere and Pabuji instructs his aide to lash her with a whip. She reminds him, 'Don't whip my body – it's as delicate as *kesar* (saffron). I am not used to this treatment. Please don't do this!'

This particular performance stresses the charismatic power of Pabuji to reinvigorate desiccated stretches of desert and make the earth bloom. It also tells the pivotal story of how his sacred responsibility to safeguard cows forces him to abandon marriage and go into battle against his enemies, one of the main reasons he is revered by desert nomads in the Thar desert region of Rajasthan.

(D) Jaisalmer

I The Wedding of Gogaji

The Wedding of Gogaji Maharaj, the snake deity revered by nomads and those who eke out a

livelihood from an annual crop of *bajra* (pearl millet) and animal husbandry in the Thar desert, is again the starting point for this performance of the epic by Parvati Devi and her brother, Hari Ram. In this version, Parvati, spurred on by Hari Ram is able to inject colloquialisms and spontaneous outbursts into the story, so giving this performance an immediacy, passion and vitality unlike any of the others.

In this version of the episode, Gogaji's wiles are clearly admired by the singers and little pity is shown for the supercilious Rajputs. The *bhopi* presses Gogaji, the snake-god, to say what he is thinking just before the hero Pabuji slips on the steps of Pushkar Lake and needs rescuing, as if to insinuate that the god has plotted to make Pabuji fall, only in order to be able to save him and receive a reward. By signalling Gogaji's blind determination to manipulate circumstances to his own ends, the *bhopi* prefigures the scene in which the snake god hatches his devious plot to secure Kelam Dé as his bride.

The story then shifts to the garden where the young maidens, dressed in wedding ornaments, celebrate the traditional feast of unmarried girls, the festival of Tij. Their beauty and innocence is stressed and yet, at the same time, the unreality of the scene, its idyllic and mythical character, lends a sense of foreboding. This excess of beauty augurs ill. The *bhopi* urges the gardener to 'open the gates' (in other versions of the epic, a large black snake has already been spotted 'disporting himself in the garden')⁴¹ and the *hunkariyya* in the audience cheers, apparently waiting gleefully for the snake god to bite his future wife.

The fascinating element in this performance is that the *hunkariyya* propels the story along, commenting on the plot as it evolves. In response to the homily, 'As far away as the place the sun rises, the starving will find food through the grace of Pabuji', the *hunkariyya* exclaims, 'May those we have praised (i.e. the singers) also be fed!' The *bhopa* then wishes the respondent the same. In a

41 In the episode of Gogo Chauhan recorded by Parbo Bhopa (Smith 1991).

sense, this verbal exchange replicates the cycle of sanctification and reciprocity embodied in the concept of *akha* and again seeks to emphasise the fact that the provision of food is divinely ordained.

Echoing the Jaipur performance, the *bhopi* asks, 'Who is your bride, Gogaji?' She warns him: 'You will not marry into the Rajput clan. You don't even get the whey, let alone the curd!' She taunts him with the phrase, 'You will not be able to marry her, O ji!' reiterating it not once, but four times.

And then suddenly, we are thrown back into the garden where the young virgins known as *tijanias* loll, bedecked in jewels and as stunning looking 'as a nine-lakh garden.' They loll about in the luxuriance of the garden, swinging on swings, when the *bhopi* observes that Kelam is swinging alone. Gogaji bites one of them, having assumed the form of a *Vasuki naga*,⁴² and the poison spreads through her body. She urges Gogaji to 'Do it!' in a vociferous outburst. Is she egging him on so that he will be able to reveal his healing power, and help break through the caste prohibition, or out of a sense of revenge?

Kelam stiffens and falls into a deep coma, the rhythm and timbre of her voice drops, and the music adopts a dark and sepulchral tone, signalling danger and death. Parvati interposes the phrase, 'These stories shall live forever,' a convenient refrain with which to round off this stanza and several others to come.

At once, we see Gogaji dressed as a groom, arriving at his own wedding, as if in a prophetic vision. His future is foreshadowed: 'He is going to marry Kelam... a member of the royal family.' Kelam is still unconscious and so far, no one has taken up the suggestion of tying a thread for Gogaji. Parvati urges, 'Accept what the people in the fort tell you to do: Tie the *tannti*, a magical thread, seven times around her finger, in the name of Gogaji!'

42 This expression stems from Sanskrit *vasuki*, meaning *naga*, the multi-headed serpent of Buddhist and Hindu mythology.

She describes the effects as if they had wrapped the *tannti*, stretching out the suspense, while suggesting that Pabuji as 'the ascetic deity of the sand desert, incarnation of Lakshmana,' will intervene to heal Kelam. The simultaneous linkage and identification of the epic hero, Pabuji, with Lakshmana, the brother of Ram, hero of the Ramayana, fuses these characters with those of the highly revered, sacred epic and accords Pabuji even greater charisma and divine power in this, his reincarnated form.

Parvati then switches tone. As if an echo of what people of his ilk might be saying to the Rajput family gathered all around the stricken Kelam, Parvati states: 'Do this, and if she survives, marry her to the 'pious' king Gogaji. If she does not, show her uncle (Pabuji) the heap of ashes that remain!' The decision is theirs. And here, with this brutally frank comment, the section ends.⁴³

II The Wedding of Pabuji

In a short intervening episode, the story shifts to one involving Pabuji. As in the Jodhpur version, the wedding procession of excited courtiers advances to the lands of Sooda. Here the landscape is parched and the courtiers refuse to chew opium in such an arid desert. 'Through the grace of Pabuji, his charismatic power and the magic of the Kshatriyya warrior clan, the arid lands become green, nightingales sing and blossoms exude perfumed scent.' Kesar Kalmi starts to graze on the newly sprouted grass, but there is a dispute between the courtiers as to whose horses are stronger. Although but a fragment, the episode is designed to spark the imagination and highlight the relevance of Pabuji's divine powers to desert dwellers.

43 It should be noted that in his version of the epic, Parbo *Bhopa* expresses the same blunt and seemingly callous attitude: 'If... after you tie the thread, the lady Kelam's fever comes down, marry her to Gogo Chauhan. If she dies, then let the lady Kelam go (to the burning ground) with her chaplet tied on her head' (Smith 1991).

III The Wedding of Gogaji

Parvati then fuses elements of the two stories together, first reverting to the tale of Gogaji's wedding and then re-invoking the memory of the she-camels and Pabuji's promise to provide them for Kelam's dowry. She urges Kelam to 'speak out' while concocting a vision of the she-camels 'spreading like rain clouds in the desert.' 'They are approaching... and will eat the fragrant grasses along the route.' The grass that has sprouted through the grace of Pabuji will feed the she-camels when they arrive.

Parvati flatters Pabuji through the voice of Kelam: 'Oh, my uncle (*Kakaji*), you are like my father! Please send herds of she-camels to my house,' and again interposes homilies in praise to Pabuji: 'Long may you live! You are the foundation stone of our religion on earth!'

IV The Wedding of Pabuji

Santosh *Bhopi* then appears to sing with her husband, Hari Ram. She repeats the miraculous transformation of the landscape in her description of the procession of the feudal lords to Pabuji's wedding. She sings of 'the gardens of Sooda, withered from drought' and the transformation of the desert before the feudal lords stop to chew opium.

After this short sojourn, we revert to Parvati who picks up the story. The nightingales are singing and the 'unmarried virgin,' Pabuji's future bride, sits threading a necklace of pearls. However, the thread breaks and the pearls scatter all over the ground. She queries, 'How will the bride make her chaplet and bracelet for the wedding now?'

Pabuji wraps his wedding turban in anticipation and Parvati describes the Charan and Bhat poets who recite praises and genealogies of the king as a prelude to the wedding. Goddesses appear and are also present. They include Bhawani, the ferocious aspect of the Hindu goddess,

Parvati, 'giver of life,' and 'the nine Durgas,' different incarnations of Durga, the mother goddess. But these goddesses behave inappropriately and beg for money, actions for which they are chastised by the singer/poets.

Then the voice of the goddess Deval Charni is heard, asking to whom Pabuji has assigned responsibility for her cattle? This is the crux of the issue, not directly stated in other versions of this episode, but understood to be the underlying problem. Various courtiers are suggested to take on the task, but none appears to be suitable. And then, in a very colloquial and nonchalant way, a warning is uttered: 'Hey, I saw Buddho Rao's animals grazing with Kichi's (the enemy's).'

Kesar Kalmi starts to leap around and someone is urged to hold her reins. To preserve the suspense, Parvati again invokes the memory of 'the incarnation of Lord Lakshmana' to remind the audience of the great honour and power attributed to him by devotees, far beyond that which would have been ascribed to a mere folk deity.

'Mother' Kesar then starts to whinny as Pabuji makes his third circumambulation of the fire and we hear that at the *charvi*, his warriors, have started to whip 'the beloved mare.' Pabuji asks Chandoji to go and convince Kesar Kalmi, 'Black Saffron,' 'the incarnation of power,' to stop whinnying. Kesar then says (in the first person): 'the whip you are using to flog me should be reserved for your enemies...my skin is as soft as silk/saffron.'⁴⁴ Her skin is thus that of a woman, and there is a subtle suggestion that she, the mare, represents all women in the narrative, like the mare, vulnerable to unreasonable beatings by men.

Appendix 1 The Banjari Nomad

As a postscript to the epic, Man Bhari and Sugana sat down in front of the *phad* and asked if they could sing the popular Rajasthani folk song,

⁴⁴ This is a pun on *kesar* (her name) which means 'saffron.'

The Banjari Nomad. In doing this, they reveal the popular trend to link the two separate traditions, one sacred and one secular, in a single performance.

This song chastises a young and innocent Banjari nomad for her insouciance, as she roams the desert and neglects her religious duty: she should acknowledge the role of God in instigating events and wreaking disasters on those who do not pray to him. The text again links the image of stringing the necklace, in this case, beads carved of wood on a silken thread, and the unfortunate event of the string breaking, a portent of future disaster.

The song begins with the refrain that is interposed throughout:

*The Banjari nomad is laughing and singing
Only her words remain*

You are so innocent
You were so indifferent to God in your life
Now...
Why are you sad that the whole field has been
devoured by birds?

*The Banjari girl is laughing and singing
Only her words remain*

On her neck are beads of a necklace made
of wood
Strung together with silken thread
Who is at fault if the thread should break?
What if the spinner knows not how to spin?

*The Banjari nomad is laughing, singing
Only her words remain*

The garden is full of fruit
In my greed to pluck all the fruit
I slipped...
And I fell from the tree

*The Banjari nomad is laughing and singing
Only her words remain.*

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In the spectacular performance tradition of *Pabuji ki par*, duos known as *bhopas* and *bhopis*, members of an indigenous musician caste of Rajasthan, sing the epic of Pabuji to nomadic communities in honour of their patron deity, a fourteenth-century hero, at venues across the Thar desert. Standing in front of a resplendent painted scroll called a *phad*, the husband *bhopa* strums his fiddle-like *ravanhatta*, providing lead rhythm and melody while his wife, the *bhopi*, veiled and normally silent, dominates the performance with her high-pitched, emotionally charged vocal power.

The *bhopas'* livelihoods are now under threat. Their main patrons, nomadic herders, still believe in Pabuji's divine ability to cure animals and bring rain to Thar desert dwellers, but pasture and water sources have been encroached upon and their survival is in jeopardy.

This study comprises two distinct parts. The first explores the aesthetic, religious and historical roots to this pictorial narrative tradition, how the *phad* functions as a sacred temple to its devotees for healing rituals and considers how the performance of Pabuji's epic has become a vehicle for social critique by the disempowered. The significant role of the *bhopi* in articulating the woman's voice, the reincarnation and incorporation of famous revered characters from the Ramayana in the epic of Pabuji and its socio-cultural transformations post Indian independence are considered in the wider context of Indian epics. The second part provides summaries of four live performances of the epic, illustrating its stylistic and textual diversity.

Dr Wickett is an independent scholar and filmmaker specialising in the study of oral traditions, folk epics and belief systems in Upper Egypt from the perspective of the ethnography of speaking, poetics and gender. A fervent advocate of the importance of visual documentation for the analysis of oral texts, Dr Wickett has produced several 'anthro docs', including For Those Who Sail to Heaven, a film that examines cultural legacy, beliefs and tradition at the festival of Luxor's patron saint, also accompanied by a monograph, published by the American Research Centre in Egypt.

Dr Wickett's doctoral research at the University of Pennsylvania on funerary lamentation is published by IB Tauris with the title For the Living and the Dead: The Funerary Laments of Upper Egypt, Ancient and Modern (2010), and future projects include a new compendium of Luxor legends and oral epics that will examine the enduring influence of ancient motifs on Egyptian folk memory.



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