

Interview Parvati Devi, Jaisalmer

My name is Parvati.

What is your caste?

Bhopa. We are actually Nayak. But in our own village we are called '*bhopa*'... because from earliest times, we have been engaged in recitation of the epic of Pabuji. In other places, we are called Bhil.

How old are you?

40/50.

How long have you been reciting?

From the beginning since my father and brother were both reciters. My caste is Nayak. Kahane Ram was a good reciter.

Who taught you the techniques of recitation?

Although my mother and father were reciters, they did not teach us how to do it. I watched them do it and learnt from that. When I came to my inlaws' house after marriage, my father-in-law taught me.

After you got married, when was your first performance?

I don't remember. When I first performed, it was with my husband and father-in-law, Natthu Ram. My mother and father-in-law were good reciters of *Pabuji ki par*. My father-in-law always took me to performances, whenever they were on, and gradually, in this way, I came to know how to recite.

Did you ever perform without your mother and father-in-law? Yes, at Rupayan Sansthan. I recited when Komal Kothari and John Singh were there. Thereafter, my husband and I started to perform together. If I had known you were coming, I would have gone to my brother-in-law who lives in Nagaur and brought him to sing with me.

What other members of your family were reciters?

When my father-in law was alive, all my brothers and sisters engaged in recitation. When I didn't know the *phad* or the legend of Pabuji, I would sing folk songs including Banjari Nomad, Raja Phardala, and Morubhai.

4:38 *How did you learn to sing Pabuji?* How do you mean? Like a student goes to school and you learn every day... just like going to school?

Which part did you learn first from your mother-in-law? Gogaji *parvaso*.

Sing a bit of Gogaji for us (Parvati describes the story: Kelam was very young and Gogaji was much older than her. He played a trick on her. Gogaji incarnates himself as *Vasu nag* (the sacred cobra) and bites Kelam. Then Gogaji heals her and they get married.

What was the first section of Pabuji that you learnt? The *olakh* of Pabuji or '*arthi*': invocation. We are used to offering Pabuji *pan* instead of flour and *kari* (cornflour) at recitation.

[On head jewel] What is the difference between singing folksongs like Banjari and the epic? Banjari is just a song while Pabuji is an epic. People much prefer Pabuji ki par to ordinary songs. Anyone can sing songs but epic is special. You need good breath control.

When you sing Pabuji, how do you control your breath and alternate the melody? If a bhopa is a professional reciter, then he throws a word to the bhopi, which she can use to pull up her melody to a higher pitch. When you recite words in high pitch and then shift to low pitch, remembering the words helps to determine the pitch. I learnt these things from my father-in-law and mother-in-law.

What is the procedure in learning to recite? Regular practice.

How do you perform in public, that is, how do you decide on the pitch? We sing from 7 to midnight. We normally raised our pitch after midnight.

What is the difference between those who sing high or low pitch? No difference as ultimately we sing in honour of Pabuji.

Does any patron ask for the traditional way of singing the epic? Yes sometimes. Although not everyone can be a singer of epic, and if someone can't sing it properly, it is no longer harmonious and there is a mismatch between the instrumentation and the singing. The epic demands a systematic way of learning and singing.

How did you learn breath control? I saw my father and mother doing it and learnt from watching them.

How did you learn? I saw that you start with a word sung at low pitch and then raise it to a higher pitch. The ravanbatta helps in raising pitch and volume.

Do you know when the ravanbatta is playing a certain note? Yes, that is my cue. The tune matches a certain section of the lyrics so when I get the cue I go ahead and sing.

Did you ever experience a mismatch between the speed of the strings and her singing? Yes, it happened initially when I started but not now.

I don't understand how you control your breath. If there is a 'heavy' word, we need to pull it out from our throat for the audience. This is the ultimate effort we have to make. The music becomes melodious if the word emerges from the vocal chords; otherwise it will not sound right. My brother-in-law, Hari Ram, does not know the instrumentation of the epic so well so it will be difficult to sing with him. Compared to Hari Ram, my brother is a better reciter. I initially declined your proposal to sing because it is difficult to match with Hari Ram. Since my husband died, I usually decline all invitations to perform but I decided to come because of your project.

When your mother-in-law used to sing the epic, did she manage to sing high pitch? Yes, I learnt how to do it from her.

How many children do you have? Six, three of each

Did you teach your daughters to sing epic? No.

Why not? If your mother hadn't taught you, you wouldn't be here now! In my youth, everyone had to learn epic recitation. Nowadays, people don't understand the importance of singing epic. If you sing

the epic nowadays, people just leave and go to the fields. So my daughters work as manual labourers.

Are your family members still singing the epic? Yes, they are.

Did you ever see a bhopi who sang a single melody? Many people recite and all in different ways. When a person who is devoted to Pabuji sings at high pitch, it is the devotion that motivates us to do this. I am devoted to Pabuji and so I can sing like that for days on end.

14:34 Do you ever feel physical discomfort when you sign at high pitch? No, I like doing this.

How long can you hold your breath for? It depends on the tune. If it's short, I can do it. If it's long, we can do that too. The *ravanhatta* has an important role to play. If the tune goes up, we follow it and if it goes down, we go down as well.

Have you ever experienced the spirit of Pabuji in you? I have seen that once in a Rajput priest who was possessed by Pabuji. Although in earlier days, it was not a usual event. Nowadays, so many people around do not believe in Pabuji so Pabuji's spirit does not come. 15:50 Nowadays, people do 'drama'. They cannot cure any problem because these people are just using their bodies to attract attention.

Have you ever experienced that a bhopa's body was possessed by a spirit? Yes, in earlier days. It happened to Mangheji Ram who is one of our caste.

What village does he belong to? He travels from one to another. 16:39 He was a very charismatic person and healed someone on his death bed. He used to take the sick person to the temple and pray to Pabuji and the spirit would appear and so he could heal people.

How does one prepare to call Pabuji's spirit? No special preparation. One must be clean and after bathing, one must light incense and the spirit may appear.

As you used to go from village to village to recite, did you ever see the appearance of this spirit? Have you ever seen a bhopa possessed by a spirit? Yes. When his body is possessed, his body stiffens. We give him some wheat grains (*akha*) and then he gives us details of our problems.

17:47 How does this spirit get released from a person's body? We sprinkle cow's urine (*mutra*) on his face. In our Bhil community, there was a *bhopa* who died, whose body was possessed by a spirit (not sure which one).

Do you know of any temple of Pabuji nearby Manopia? No.

Do you know any temple of Pabuji where people go to be possessed by Pabuji? Maybe Jagdish (her companion) does.