



Religion and Local Deities of Rajasthan: A Cultural Exploration

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Abstract:

Rajasthan's cultural landscape is enriched by a multitude of religious beliefs and practices, many of which are intertwined with the worship of local deities. These deities, often associated with specific communities or regions, hold a significant place in the spiritual lives of the people. This paper explores the religious diversity of Rajasthan, focusing on the worship of local deities and the songs dedicated to them. Drawing upon ethnographic research and musical analysis, the paper illuminates the role of music in the veneration of local deities and its cultural significance.

Keywords: Rajasthan, religion, local deities, folk songs, cultural heritage

What is 'folk' about 'folk gods and goddesses'? What makes them 'folk'? Remember what I had said about Pabuji—he is no great god in the Hindu pantheon, but a bhomiya god who has the power to intervene in the problems of everyday life faced by nomadic communities like the Rabari of Rajasthan... Likewise, if there is a family problem—more often than not related to child-bearing or some mental illness attributed to an evil spirit—it is assumed that the great gods are not likely to solve the problem. At such junctures, communities like the Rabari turn to folk gods and goddesses, who are believed to solve every day human problems... (“Kothari Rajasthan and Oral History”)

India, with its rich and diverse cultural heritage, is home to numerous local deities, each with unique stories of origin and associated miracles. These deities are deeply ingrained in the regional traditions and customs, and their worship often predates organized religion. Ayyanar (Tamil Nadu) Khandoba or Martanda Bhairava (Maharashtra and Karnataka), Mariamman (South India), Manasa Devi (Bengal, Assam, Odisha), Shiv Bhairav and Khir Bhawani (Kashmir), Meldi Mata and Khodiyar Mata (Gujrat), Goga Ji, Mata Chandi, Sheetla Mata (Madhya Pradesh) are few examples of local deities that serve various roles and functions within their communities as in warning them of impending dangers like natural disasters or epidemics, barren lands turning fertile and businesses flourishing, rainfalls, curing of diseases, especially smallpox and other skin diseases often reflecting the specific needs, beliefs, and cultural practices of the people who worship them.

Religion permeates every aspect of life in Rajasthan too, shaping its cultural practices, social structures, and artistic expressions. Amidst the pantheon of gods and goddesses worshipped in the region, local deities hold a special place, embodying the spiritual connection between communities and their land. This paper examines the religious landscape of Rajasthan, with a focus on the worship of local deities and the songs dedicated to them. Through an exploration of the cultural practices and songs, we uncover the diverse manifestations of religious belief and practice in Rajasthan. Rajasthan is home to a diverse array of religious beliefs and practices, ranging from Hinduism and Islam to Jainism and Sikhism. Within the framework of

these major religions, numerous local deities are venerated by different communities across the state. These deities often have specific roles and attributes, reflecting the cultural and historical contexts in which they emerged. The worship of local deities is deeply rooted in the folk traditions of Rajasthan, providing a lens through which to understand the religious syncretism and pluralism of the region.

Local deities play multifaceted roles in the social and religious life of Rajasthan. They are believed to protect communities from harm, bestow blessings, and ensure prosperity. Festivals and rituals dedicated to these deities are integral to the social calendar of Rajasthan, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds in shared acts of devotion and celebration. The worship of local deities also fosters a sense of belonging and identity among communities, reinforcing their cultural heritage and collective memory. Pabu Ji, Veer Teja Ji, and Rawal Mallinath are some of the greatest warriors idolized as heroic deities, bhomiyas all over Rajasthan. The veneration of folk deities is a widespread practice throughout Rajasthan, alongside the adoration of gods from the Hindu pantheon. Some deities are revered across extensive geographical areas, as Ramdevji exemplifies, while others' worship is confined to specific localities, such as the regional bhomiyas and satis. Ancestral deities, or pitar, are exclusively worshipped within a single family or clan. As articulated by Komal Kothari, people turn to folk deities to seek solutions for their everyday challenges. Various deities are believed to possess unique abilities, like Gogaji, who is thought to heal snake bites; Sitala Mata, who safeguards against smallpox; Behruji, who aids in infertility issues; and those worshipped during crop sowing, like Tejaji.

Dadrewa, the birthplace of Gogaji, is called Shirshmedi, and his memorial is called Ghurmedi. Bhadrpada Krishna Navami is celebrated as Goga Navami in Gogamedi (Hanumangarh) and all over Rajasthan in the memory of Gogaji. Gogaji is said to have performed many miracles during his lifetime, protecting the innocent, curing diseases, and battling evil forces. His followers believe that he is a protector of cattle and is especially invoked for relief from snake bites and other ailments. Gogaji's worship is often accompanied by music, dance, and rituals performed by his devotees. Today, he is worshiped as a warrior with a spear in hand or as a snake demigod. His place of worship, with a snake idol engraved on stone, is usually under the tree of Khejdi in villages. It is believed that by worshipping Gogaji as 'Pir,' the poison of snakebite becomes ineffective. He is honored as 'Nagaraja' by the Hindus and 'Gogapir' by the Muslims.

The legend of Gogaji is narrated through traditional ballads known as "Gogaji ki Katha." These ballads recount the heroic deeds of Gogaji, who is believed to protect cattle and bless his devotees with courage and prosperity. One such song begins with the verse:

Gogaji ki mahima anant,
Rajasthani jan jan ke mann.
Kahan sukh paave, kahan sukh paave,
Jo koi Gogaji ka jani.
(The glory of Gogaji is endless,
In the hearts of every Rajasthani.
Where can one find happiness,
If they know Gogaji?)

Tejaji, like Gogaji, is revered as the god of serpents. Tejaji is depicted as a warrior riding a horse and holding a sword whose tongue is bitten by a snake. It is believed that the poison becomes ineffective if a *Tant* (chord) is tied to the right leg of the person bitten by a snake. The legend of Tejaji, also known as Veer Teja, is an integral part of Rajasthani folklore and culture. Tejaji is revered as a folk deity and a symbol of bravery, sacrifice, and compassion. His story is passed down through generations via oral traditions, songs, dances, and various art forms in Rajasthan. Tejaji was born in the 14th century in the village of Kharnal in present-day Nagaur district of Rajasthan. His parents were Sarangdev and Queen Piroji. According to legend, his birth was prophesied to bring prosperity and protect the people from evil. Tejaji's bravery and selflessness became evident at a young age. He was known for his love for animals, especially his loyal horse, Sursingh. One of the most famous tales associated with Tejaji is the story of his battle with the evil serpent goddess, Mehaji.

Legend has it that Mehaji terrorized the villagers by demanding offerings of milk, which she consumed along with the village's children. Tejaji, upon hearing about this, decided to confront Mehaji to save his village. He mounted his horse, Sursingh, armed himself with a spear, and went to the serpent's lair. In the fierce battle that ensued, Tejaji fought bravely, eventually defeating Mehaji and saving the village from her tyranny. However, during the battle, Mehaji bit Tejaji's leg, causing a mortal wound. Despite his injuries, Tejaji continued to fight until Mehaji was vanquished. Before his death, Tejaji instructed the villagers to bury him where his horse, Sursingh, would stop. Sursingh, grief-stricken at his master's demise, wandered for miles until he finally stopped at a place called Khetelwada. There, Tejaji was laid to rest, and a temple was built in his honor. The story of Tejaji is not just a tale of bravery and valor but also embodies the values of sacrifice, loyalty, and compassion. Even today, Tejaji is venerated by the people of Rajasthan, and his story continues to inspire countless folk songs, dances, and cultural expressions in the region.

Pabuji is worshiped as the god of camels. He is credited with being the first to bring camels to Marwar. The Bhopas sing 'Pabuji ki phad' when the camels regain health. The villagers consider him to be an incarnation of Lakshman, the younger brother of Lord Rama. The central place where Devnarayanji is worshipped is Asind (Bhilwara), where a fair is held annually on Bhadrapad Shukla Saptami. His followers mainly are Gujjars who worship him by singing the 'phad of Devji' and the poetry of 'Bagadavat' related to Devji and Bagadavats. It is believed that if sung for nine hours every night, it is completed in six months.

Mallinathji collected all the saints of Marwar and organized a vast Hari kirtan in 1399 AD. In the same year, on Chaitra Shukla Dwitiya, he died. He has a temple in Tilwara village (Barmer) on the banks of the Luni River, where a vast cattle fair is held every year from Chaitra Krishna Ekadashi to Chaitra Shukla Ekadashi. The western pargana of Jodhpur was named Malani after him. He is still highly revered in Malani (Barmer).

Hindus worship Ramdevji as an incarnation of Shri Krishna, and Muslims worship him as Ramsa-pir. Generally, Ramdevji's 'pagliye' (footprints) are installed in villages on a high platform under a tree. These places are called 'Than'. Harbhujji was considered a good Shakun Shastri, vachansiddh (the one whose words always come true), and a great man with magical powers. His main center is at Bengti (Phalodi). To fulfill their wishes, devotees offer prayers at 'Harbhujji ki gaadi' in his temple here. The reverence for these deities is closely intertwined with diverse musical traditions. Much research has been conducted on musician and performing communities' devotional music and narratives. The singers of ceremonial music of non-musician communities hailing from the Thali-Shekhawati region in Rajasthan are women, and their performances occur during events such as births, weddings, and various festivals. The songs may recount episodes from the deities' lives, provide instructions for worship practices or present supplications for the welfare of families or clans. This ritualistic singing pervades all castes in the region, displaying variations influenced by family, clan, caste, and locality.

Kaila Devi is a revered goddess worshipped by devotees across Rajasthan. Devotional songs, known as "Kaila Devi bhajans," are sung in her honor during the annual fair held at the Kaila Devi temple in Karauli district. One such bhajan invokes the blessings of Kaila Devi:

Kaila mata ke bhajan sunlo,
 Kaila mata ke bhajan sunlo.
 Man ki mange pura karlo,
 Kaila mata ke bhajan sunlo.
 (Listen to the bhajans of Kaila Mata,
 Fulfill the desires of the heart,
 Listen to the bhajans of Kaila Mata.)

An exploration of these genres uncovers that the invocation of Gods and Goddesses serves the collective well-being of the community, nation, and cosmos, rather than individual interests. Deities such as Bhaironji, Vinayakji, and Sheetlamata are called upon for the betterment of the public, including health and prosperity. Additionally, the songs performed during fairs and festivals reflect the shared experiences of the masses, rather than focusing on individual concerns. The analysis of the songs and narratives dedicated to folk deities like Pabuji, Gogaji, Ramdevji, Tejaji, and Jambhoji affirms that folk traditions prioritize the collective identity over individual ones, aiming for the advancement of the group, nation, or the entirety of existence.

Folk songs/bhajans form an integral part of the devotional practices associated with local deities in Rajasthan. These songs, often sung in local dialects and regional melodies, serve as expressions of reverence, gratitude, and supplication. Through lyrical compositions, devotees praise the virtues and powers of the deity, recount mythical narratives, and invoke blessings for various purposes. The melodies and rhythms of these songs vary across different regions of Rajasthan, reflecting the distinct cultural contexts in which they are performed. The musical structure, including melody, rhythm, and instrumentation, is deeply rooted in the local traditions. The Khyals also aim at invoking a sense of conscientiousness in masses, and faith in God. There are Khyals that focus on the life and deeds of historical heroes, folk deities, saints and satis (female saints). Such Khyals establish the protagonist as an upholder of traditions, philanthropist and protector. Khyals of this category include stories of demagogues like king Vikramaditya, Jagdev Kankali, Amar Singh Rathore, and folk deities Pabu, Teja and Goga.

Instruments like the dholak, harmonium, and ravanhatta are commonly used, each adding a distinctive sound that is characteristic of Rajasthani music. The performance of these songs is often ritualistic, taking place during festivals, religious ceremonies, and communal gatherings. The context of the performance, including the setting, audience, and purpose, influences the interpretation and impact of the music. These songs play a crucial role in reinforcing community identity and cohesion. They are not only expressions of devotion but also act as a means of preserving and asserting cultural heritage and local identity. This perspective can be used to analyze how these songs function as symbols that carry specific meanings within the community. The interactions during performances, the shared understanding of the narratives, and the communal participation contribute to the collective identity and continuity of tradition. From a functionalist viewpoint, the songs can be seen as fulfilling various social and cultural functions. They promote social cohesion, provide moral education, and serve as a means of cultural preservation and transmission. Postcolonial theories and debates can help in understanding how these musical traditions have been affected by historical processes of colonization and globalization. It can explore issues of cultural hybridity, resistance, and the revival of local traditions in the face of external influences. Analyzing these songs through the lens of ritual theory highlights their role in the enactment of religious and cultural rituals. The songs are not only integral to the ritual process, serving as a bridge between the human and the divine, but also facilitate the communal experience of the sacred. The songs dedicated to local deities in Rajasthan are a rich subject for ethnomusicological analysis and research. Through these devotional expressions, communities reaffirm their spiritual beliefs, celebrate their cultural heritage, and forge bonds of solidarity. By studying the songs dedicated to local deities, we gain valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between religion, music, and society in Rajasthan.

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