

BALLADS AND FOLK NARRATIVES OF MADHYA PRADESH

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The recorded text of the Chhattisgarhi ballad — *Lorik and Chandaini* — is an instance of a literature before literature. The Chhattisgarhi version of this ballad was first recorded directly from a songster by H. Kavyopadhyaya in the early twenties.¹ Another version was scripted around Gaya in the latter part of the 19th century by J. D. Beglar, which appeared in the reports of the Archaeological Survey of India (Vol. VIII), in 1878. The story has a few more oral versions found in Bundelkhand, Bihar and Bengal. A trace of the same ballad is noticed even in South India. The Bhojpuri version is called *Loriki*, while in Bengal it is known as *Lor-Maini*. The South Indian tale depicts Lorik in love with Princess Mainavathi. In Chhattisgarhi and Bhojpuri versions Lorik's wife is named Manjari. Chandaini or Chanda appears as his beloved.

The legend of Lorik and Chanda is very old. In the *Varna-Ratnakar* of Jyotishwar Thakur (AD. 1325), the story is mentioned as *Lorik Nachyo*. Coincidentally, Mulla Daud's story of *Chandavan* (14th century) depends on the oral version of the *Lorik and Chandaini* of Chhattisgarh. In the early fifties, the *Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Prachar Parishad*, Patna, collected about five versions of the *Lorik Gatha* from different places in the state. Some years ago, yet another version of the same legend was collected by W. Crooke from a village near Mirzapur. Dr. Verrier Elwin's version of this story is not far from the Mirzapur version. The Chhattisgarhi legend collected by him begins with the arrival of Chandaini to her husband, Bir Bawan. "In the same city lives the 'sporting hero' Lorik and his beautiful wife Manjaria. Chandaini's virtue is attempted by a Chamar bully; Bir Bhatua and Lorik come to the rescue and defeat him. Chandaini watches the contest from a long distance and falls in love with Lorik and the rest of the tale is an account of their passion and the tragedies to which it led."²

Some of the versions of this ballad narrate adventures of Lorik with heroic reverence. Strangely enough, a few of them refer to a different person, named Seodhar as Chandaini's husband. The Chhattisgarhi legend relates the adventures of Lorik and Chandaini's elopment in detail. Sung in longer notes, the ballad holds a stirring appeal of the romance of the medieval type.

Folk songs and legends of the Banjara traders are little known to the world of letters. This writer had an occasion to take down a full version of a Banjara narrative — *Shri Maharaj Ri Bel* — in 1953 from an interior village of Nimar. The legend tells of the semi-historical episodes of Lamana Banjaras and their association with Tanwar Rajputs. Some other *Khyats* (ballads), too, are in vogue in which references to the encounters between Alha-Udal and Prithvi Raj Chauhan have been made. About half a dozen other songs, such as the *Rasturawan*, the *Dhabla*, the *Malapher*, the *Niwali* and the *Perawani* were also collected along with the text. After some years the late Shri Bhaskar Rao Anwle, a social worker, made a fresh effort to write down the tales and legends of the Rajput and Lamana Banjaras inhabiting Shajapur district.

There is a strange legend of Sitaram Naik, recorded by the late Dr. Elwin, from a Dewar minstrel of Raipur district. The narrative is sung during Dussehra festival by the Lamana Banjaras. In the song, Sitaram Naik is described as an owner of a large number of bullocks. Also a description of the sacred Banjara bullock, Hatadiya, occurs in between the song-text. It confirms the report made by Balfour in his *Migratory Tribes of Central India*: "On this animal," writes Balfour, "no burden is ever laid, but he is decorated with streamers of red-dyed silk, and tinkling bells with many brass chains and rings on neck and feet, and silken tassels hanging in all directions; he moves steadily at the head of the convoy, and at the place where he lies down when he is tired they pitch their camp for a day; at his feet they make their vows when difficulties overtake them; and in illness, they trust his worship for a cure."³

The ballad about Raja Birsingh is equally popular in Chhattisgarh. It is a long narrative. Rani Ramiliya is taken away by a Jogi as she comes to offer him alms. The Jogi turns her into a fly. Raja Birsingh with his large army now makes a hectic search for Ramuliya. He ultimately recovers her, but during his effort he happens to marry two other princesses. With many other side-stories, frequent battles, magic-motifs, mysticism, beliefs etc., the ballad runs for hours together.

Then, there are the mythological legends like the *Pandawani* and the *Sarvan*. The *Phul-Ruwari*, full of *puranic* cliches, is curiously primitive in folkloristic traits, also needs to be referred to here.

The story of Dhola has, however, come to stay in Chhattisgarh. Besides the original story that exists in Rajasthan, it has many other versions in different parts of India. The reports of the Archaeological Survey associate Dhola with the tale of Nala and Damyanti. H. Kavyopadhyaya's version is not very far from this version. The story sung in the Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh has little variations in names and certain situations. Like the traditional romances, the beauty of this long narrative lies in its poetic content and lively characterisation. It describes the adventures of Prince Dhola who claims his love-lorn bride Marwan after a period of twelve years.

The *Kalyan Sahai Gatha* of this region is partly historical. Kalyan Singh, the chief character of the ballad, was a contemporary of Jahangir (1546 AD). He was the ruler of Ratanpur, once the famous town of Chhattisgarh. At that time Ratanpur was not under the Mughals. Kalyan Singh received an invitation from Jahangir to pay a visit to Delhi. To go or not to go was the question before him. After a good deal of thought,

Kalyan Singh proceeded with twenty-two subordinate rulers and eighteen princes. Among his personal attendants was Vilaso Diwaran — the legendary woman who is associated as the founder of Bilaspur. Also Bheron Dube, the person known for his art of breaking coconuts by pressing them under his arm, as well as Gopal Rai, the athlete happened to join Kalyan Singh.

The ballad describes in detail how Kalyan Singh reached Delhi and lead the life of an honoured guest for seven long years. During his stay the Mughal monarch treated him as a friend. That is the substance the ballad tells.

Of the other popular narratives *Ahiman Rani*, *Reva Rani*, *Kevala Rai* and *Phul Basan* are equally significant.

In Bundelkhand, the *Alha* still continues to have its impact on the people because of its theme and the captivating art of narration. Originally, this narrative was composed in the Bundelkhandi dialect and attributed to the poet Jagnik. Unfortunately, the text is no more on record. About a century ago, Waterfield had attempted the translation of the then available oral version of this ballad. He could not complete the full translation and died before doing so. His work was resumed by Dr. Grierson who translated the rest of the ballad into prose, and not in the same metre as his predecessor had done. Despite many variants of extravagance and folk-like ornamentations, the structural story of the narrative has not changed. It has kept in full the stereotype episodal sequences which move around the two characters — Alha and Udal. Throughout Bundelkhand, this narrative of a semi-literary texture is sung with gusto, zeal and expressive voice.

In the same region, we have the lay of Jagdeo and the ballad of Jaimal Phatta. These ballads are of intrinsic importance. Particularly the *Panwara of Jagdeo* is endowed with fabulous episodes, similar to the story of Dhola. Being highly dramatic, the basic story of the ballad has its roots in history. According to the *Ragmala*, Jagdeo was the son of Udayaditya of Malwa (1059-87). He left his country and came to serve at the court of Siddharaj Jaisingh of Gujarat following some family fueds.

The famous incident of Hardaul's sacrifice has inspired several songs around his character. In fact, these songs neither sing of any struggle nor mention any courtship or elopement. They are simply connected with domestic affairs and especially endowed with a belief that Hardaul Lala was a godlike person. His self-sacrifice to save the honour of his brother's wife lent a touch of magic and a kind of meaningfulness to the incident. History tells us that "Hardaul was a brother of Raja Jujharsingh (1626-35) of Orchha, who suspected him, without cause, of criminal intimacy with his wife, and made him drink a cup of poison. His unhappy end roused public indignation and he was deified. This form of worship is universal throughout Bundelkhand, and has even spread to the Punjab."⁴

In Chhattisgarh, besides the ballads previously mentioned in this article, one may also hear the *Bans Geet*. The peculiarity of this traditional form is remarkable. Usually a group of singers gather for performance. One or two of the participants recite the episodes, while the others play on long bamboo stems. The ballads are rare and indigenous, mostly woven

around the incidents of local history. The performers of *Bans-geet* are always agriculturists or cowherds. The Ahirs of Sarangarh are fond of the tales of the *Garh Gaura* village, *Raja Mahari* and *Lorik-Manjar*. These narratives are chosen to be sung on special occasions. When a child is born the story of *Chhahura Mukunda* is sung. At a marriage the *Lorik-Manjar* is recited. On a betrothal ceremony, one may hear the *Bhujbal Parimal*, and when a bride finally goes to her husband's home (the ceremony popularly known as *Gavana*), the *Kanwa Digambar Raut* is sung. On the thirtieth day after an elderly person's death, they sing the *Gujaraj Raut* ballad. Other narratives worth recording are — the *Muhara Raut*, the *Singoor Pahadiya* and the *Thag Sutwa Raut*.

Among the Bhils of Madhya Pradesh, there are songs, still current, which bear traces of age-old reminiscences. These songs are legendary in content and are recited by the village sorcerer (*bhopa*) of the community. Incidentally, the cluster of these songs include the famous love-tale of Usha-Aniruddha of Hindu mythology. In the Bhil dialect, it is entitled *Okhan Androon*. The story of Dhola and Maru also from the part of the Bhil folklore. Under the category of the *Mandol* songs of the Bhils, there is a ballad about Kasumar Damar, who seems to have been a favourite leader in the past. In this narrative, a reference about Raja Bhoj of Dhar occurs at places. Interestingly enough, the legend of the *Kasumar Damar* describes how the Bhils were uprooted from a place, in times of a famine, and came to settle in the jungle around Dhar district.

Songs attributed to the river Mahi are purely of the ballad type which have deeply absorbed the Bhil folklore. "According to the legends, the Mahi is the daughter of the sweat that ran from the body of Indradyumna, the king of Ujjain. Another legend explains the name thus: A young woman was churning curds one day. An importunate lover, of whom she had tried to rid herself, but who would not be denied, found her thus engaged, and his attention becoming unbearable, the girl threw herself into the pot. She was at once turned into water, and a clear stream flowed from the jar and, wandering down the hill-side, formed the Mahi or 'curd' river." For the Bhils, the river Mahi is a celebrated spirit. Ptolemy has mentioned this river as Mophis and Periplus called it as Mais. "The river has given rise to the term Mehwas — a hilly stronghold and Mehvasi — a turbulent or theiving person. The word was Mahivasi, a dweller on the Mahi, and in Mughal times was imported into Delhi by the army, and is used by Muhammadan writers as general term to denote hill chiefs, and those living in mountain fastnesses."⁶

Two decades ago, this writer collected a specimen of the Mahi legend from Jhabua district. With a little difference that the importunate lover is substituted here by the father-in-law of the Gujar girl.

The narrative about Bhartrahari, the philosopher king who renounced his kingdom to lead a life of renunciation in quest of the eternal has certain overtones of the *Gopichander gan* of Bengal. The ballad is widely sung by wandering minstrels of the Nath cult. The Malwi version of the song, *Pingla Jhurapo*, relates to the dialogue between Raja Bhartrahari and his wife, Rani Pingla, who entreats her husband not to renounce the world and leave her.

Of recent origin is the *Lay of Prince Chain Singh* of Narsingharh.

It is a short ballad describing how the prince fought against the British in 1857, at Sehore, and finally how he met his tragic death along with his two companions — Haider Khan and Bahadar Khan. The *Dhargardi* is again worthy of reference here. This ballad sings of the episodes of the Mutiny around Dhar, a small town near the famous monuments of Mandu and relates some historical deeds of Bakhtawar Singh of Amzera, who was later hanged by the British at Indore.

A speculiar narrative called *Balabau* is often sung in a plaintive tune by the women folk of the country-side of Malwa. Like some of the gypsy folksongs of the West, the *Balabau* is close to the motif of the 'foundation sacrifice', which was probably a practice in early times. A similar song was recorded by Devendra Satyarthi from the Punjab. The song is identified as 'The bride and the well'. We have another song touching the same motif — *Rulla di Kool* — from Kashmir. In Malwa, it is said that the song acquired its name three hundred years ago after the village Balon of the Shajapur district. In Nimar, too, we find an identical song. There is a belief that childless women blossom if they worship the lake of this village. The song is also treated as a rain-making song.

During the reign of Ahilya Bai Holkar, the *Lavani* singers of Nimar were inspired by Khanderao, a devotee from Maharashtra. The ballad about Khanderao could be heard along the banks of the Narbada soon after the harvesting was over.

I happened to collect a mytho-romantic type of ballad from the Kanjar tribe of acrobats near Shajapur. The ballad is partly historical in intent and sings about a Kanjar girl, Bijori, who refuses to comply with the evil intentions of one of the rulers of Narwargarh.

Exquisite in description is the ballad about a boat that capsized with several people who drowned over a century ago in the river Narbada, near Khalghat in Nimar.