The Oral Tradition of Mewat*

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THE NORTH-EASTERN REGION of Rajasthan—the districts of Alwar and Bharatpur—is notable for its concentration of folk epics and ballads. Unfortunately, this area has been neglected by folklore scholarship which has generally concentrated on Marwar and Mewar, and to some extent Harauti. Even such a well known folklorist as Devilal Samar deals with Rajasthan only up to Shekhawati and omits mention of the eastern districts in his *Folk Entertainments in Rajasthan* (1979). But whereas in western Rajasthan there are few and scattered singers of oral epics, nearly all the communities in Alwar and Bharatpur districts have their characteristic narratives. I have been involved in documentation which helped in listing a dozen epics of the Hindu *jogis*; the Muslim *jogis* (an apparently contradictory group) also sing epics like *Gopichand-Bhartrihari and Pandun ka kada*; the *chamars* recite *Jhar Peer*; and from the Meo singers so far I have been able to collect 14 oral narratives, most of which have a dominantly historical content and a highly political orientation.

Mewat, as the land the Meos is called, is spread over the states of Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Most of Mewat is in Alwar, covering the *tehsils* of Tijara, Alwar, Laxmangarh and Kishangarh; part of it is included in the Bharatpur *tehsils* of Deeg, Nagar, and Kaman; a part lies in the Gurgaon *tehsils* of Nuh and Ferozepur Jhirka; and a bit extends to Chatta *tehsil* in Uttar Pradesh.

Approximately 400,000 Meos live in Mewat, an area of 7,910 square kilometres according to the 1971 census, in which they constitute the dominant community. The Meos are also the most interesting community of the area, and possess a fascinating composite culture. Although they profess Islam, having been converted in stages over the medieval period (12th – 16th century), ethnographers like Crooke, Sherring and Russell refer to the strong Hindu components of their tradition: their folklore which attributes their origin to Arjuna, Krishna and Rama; their celebration of Hindu festivals like Holi and Dussehra; their marriage customs

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which combine the *nikah* with Hindu ceremonies; their mixed names such as Fateh Singh, and so on.

Thus the Meos as a community have a distinct identity, differentiating them from both Hindus and Muslims. A strong social structure vertically divided into several *pals* and exogamous *gotras* with a high degree of internal decision-making and self-regulation through the auspices of a *panchayat* has characterized the Meos for some centuries. Besides, a living and vital genealogical and oral tradition cements the strong ties that bind the community.

The oral tradition of Mewat, like the community to which it belongs, is quite distinct from the dominant tradition of Rajasthan. The oral literature of the Marwar and Mewar cultural zones focusses primarily on legendary and devotional themes. The Meo, on the other hand, seems to have a strong aversion to romantic themes and a propensity towards historical subjects. Thus, perceived history is a strong component of Mewat's oral tradition.

The contrast between Meo and non-Meo traditions becomes evident on examining the other alternative tradition perpetuated in the same area, but sustained by a different audience and transmitted by the *jogis*. The latter, perhaps because of the religious nature of their role in Hindu society, sing epics with devotional and Puranic themes[1]. From Onkarnath and Indernath I have heard *Gopichand-Bhartrihari;* Bhagwan Nath sings of the exploits of *Nihalde;* and from the Muslim *jogis* in Alwar such as Dinanath can be heard the oral epics called *Shivji ka byavla* and *Narsiji ka bhāt*[2]. Gorakhnath is a central figure in *jogi* epics and his characteristic quality is his ability to grant boons[3].

Elsewhere in Rajasthan folk epics centre around the exploits of Pabuji, Gogaji, and Tejaji, heroes who have been deified[4]. Pabu, Goga and Deva Narayan, as has been pointed out, were insignificant persons who achieved prominence only in folk oral memory[5]. Themes both epic and Puranic with devotional content form the core of folk epics such as *Shivji ka byavla,* the numerous variations of the *Mahabharata,* the lays of *Krishna-Rukmini, Ravana-Mandodari* and *Gopichand-Bhartrihari.* Romantic folk epics and ballads such as *Moomal, Heer-Ranjha* and *Dhola-Maru* are extremely popular but, as in the heroic epics, the supernatural element frequently prevails[6]. In the *Alha-Udal* story, sorcerers and witches are often mentioned, using battle magic and the *mohini mantra*[7]. In *Nala-Damayanti* Nala, born of a mother exiled in a forest, is married to Gajmotin who uses magic to reunite him with his father. Likewise in *Dhola-Maru* obstacles are magically overcome[8]. Similar exploits characterize the 52 acts of bravery extolled in the folk epic *Nihalde*[9]; and in epics on

Sati, spirits of the dead are shown to wield power over human beings. The degree of poetic imagination and literary symbolism is exteremely high in these folk epics and ballads. The atmosphere created is of an age of chivalry, the protagonists are larger than life, their acts incredible[10].

The Meo tradition also has its share of folk epics based on epic-Puranic lore. A primary example is the *Pandun ka kada*, a Mewati version of the *Mahabharata*. This narrative incorporates the origin myth of the Meos, and its constituent, *the Pandun ki janampatri*, traces Meo genealogy to Arjuna. The supernatural plays a prominent role in this folk epic—Bhima slays 105 *kichakas*; Arjuna uses the *lakhandani bana* (bow) obtained from Indra to win the Kurukshetra war; and from a single drop of Shalya's blood, it is said, a hundred Shalyas can be reborn. *Pandun ka kada* confirms the strong component of Hindu lore in the Meo tradition. Certain counter-myths, however, are gaining hold on the Meos suggesting their origin from Arabia. Among the new narratives, growing in popularity with the new generation of bards, are *Behram Badshah, Shamsher Pathan* and *Jaitun Jodhya*. The growing currency of these works point at the changing perception of identity within the community.

Nevertheless, the major component of Meo oral tradition derives from non-religious and historical themes. This genre of Mewati narratives is representative of the culture in general, for it is characterized by a realistic as opposed to a supernatural treatment of events and personalities. These narratives also suggest the existence of a strong and well developed social structure. The question of the nature of an oral tradition, thus, draws one to a complex network of interrelations. Not only are the questions of who sings what, to whom, and in what context important; the interplay of factors relating to social structure, historical development and culture also need to be studied.

The Meo oral tradition is transmitted by a hereditary specialist group called the Mirasis. They are distinct from the Meo Jāgās or genealogists who possess enormous material in their *pothis*. It is not quite correct to term the Mirasis bards or folk singers, they are so much more—simultaneously entertainers, story-tellers, historians and tradition sustainers who play an indispensable role at all life-cycle ceremonies. In particular the older generation of Mirasis possess a vast but unfortunately fading knowledge of oral literature committed to memory in the form of *dohas* or four-lined rhymed verse. These are sung in a style called *doha dhani*, with alternating long explanatory comment, accompanied by the instruments Chi-

kara, Bhapang, Dholak and harmonium. The *dohas* might be as many as to constitute a narrative or *bhāt*, though sometimes only a few *dohas* can be found with a particular Mirasi on a certain subject. Mirasis have a well established client or *jajman* system, for each Mirasi is linked, like the Jāgas, to one of the *gotras*, and performs exclusively in villages of that *gotra*.

The divergent nature of Mewat's oral tradition is a consequence not only of the fact that it is purely a folk, and not a court, tradition but also of its political ecology and direction of historical development. The proximity of Mewat to Delhi led to this 'gate' being incessantly sought by its neighbours. Mughal and British forces from Delhi, as also the Chauhans, Ahirs, Kachhawahas, Pathans, Jats and Marathas made constant incursions. The Mughals were able to bring Mewat under direct rule after many centuries of conflict. Later the weakening of the central empire helped the establishment of a Rajput state by the Narukas[11]. But even after the establishment of a stable state the struggle of the Meos continued. This historical experience is very important to understand why there is a substantial secular and historical component in the Meo oral tradition. Basically the Meo oral tradition evolved as the tradition of a people in constant antagonism with both the central and regional powers of Alwar and Bharatpur. In the *bhāt* or narratives sung by the Mirasis there is thus a strong cultural motif of independence, which is also found in Meo ritual, custom, social practice and visual art.

In the Meo oral tradition one frequently finds a historical event at the core of a saga. This is not to claim that oral narratives have the status of history, for certain limitations are inherent in the very context of the narrator. As just mentioned, Mirasis sing for a certain *pal*. Their living is dependent on their occupation, hence the practice of extolling *dān*, from which arises a process of historical selection.

Perhaps the oldest material in the Mirasi repertoire is the *Palon ki vanshavali*. It describes the twelve *pals* and half *palakra* of the Meos, tracing the lineage of each. The *Vanshavali* is particularly significant in the context of theories of Meo origin and conversion to Islam. Five of the Meo *pals* are known as 'Yaduvanshi' *kshatriyas*, said to have been led by Krishna. Some writers have suggested that this claim is merly a way of achieving a higher status, yet it is significant to note that history records that following the defeat of Kunwarpala, Rai of Thangarh, by Mohammed Ghori in 1196, "the lords of the Yaduvanshi Rajputs left that area, and scattered in the Mewat region. It is these Jadon Bhatti Rajputs of Bayans settled in Kohpayah of Mewat who are regarded as the progenitors of the

Meos and the Khanzadas[12]. Evidently some sense of historical chronology is conveyed through *dohas* or couplets and also in the *ustad's* training. Thus, I have found highly dubious the assertion made by some analysts that such traditional sources do not exhibit a sense of time[13]. Mirasis, on the contrary, particularly the rigorously trained ones of the older generation, have a strong sense of history. Old Abdul emphatically asserted, in an interview, the derivation of the Meos from both the Rajputs and tribes such as the Meenas, and claimed that conversion took place in stages, after Ghori's arrival, assisted particularly by Muslim saints such as Chishti.

Darya Khan is a rare ballad, infrequently sung and known, but extremely significant in the context of the theory of the origin of the Moes from the Meenas, particularly since six Meo *gotras* are in common with the Meenas. *Darya Khan* describes the childhood marriage of Darya Khan, a Meo boy, and Sasabadini, a Meena girl, arranged by their fathers at the court of Emperor Akbar. Differences between the parents, however, arose and when Sasabadini came of age, her *gauna* did not take place. The ballad is seemingly romantic. Like the *Dhola-Maru* story, we find the portrayal of a woman's grief, her repeated messages to her husband, and his subsequent capture of her by force. But at the core of *Darya Khan* is the historic battle between the Meos and the Meenas, following which intermarriage between the two was suspended.

Conflict is the central theme in saga after saga. *Saimath* and *Panch pahar ki ladai* describe the brutal battles of the Meo chiefs with the Mughal armies, ending in mutual slaughter. In the tale of *Dada Bahad* Emperor Akbar marries a Mevni, an act fiercely resented by the Meo *panchayat.* The clan leaders forthwith declare the girl's hand in marriage to whoever can rescue her. The story details one young Meo's clever rescue of the unfortunate queen from Akbar's well guarded fort, their escape, the hero's subsequent capture and hanging.

The *dohas* of *Akhey Singh Chowdhary* highlight a Meo chief's retaliation against Maharaja Vinay Singh of Alwar (1811 – 1858) by destroying the entire standing *bajra* crop in his fields. *Ghurchari Meo Khan* is a kind of Robin Hood story in the heroic genre. Ghurchari and Meo Khan were two brothers who lived in the 19th century. They cut the telegraph cables and threaten to sunder the newly laid rail tracks of Alwar, acts symbolic of the defiant stance of the Meos towards authority. The narratives of *Rajpal* and *Govindgarh* describe Meo opposition to revenue taxes and customs duties and the mobilization of the Meo population in protest leading to battles with the armies of the Bharatpur and Alwar princely states

respectively. The saga of Nawab Shamsuddin Ahmed Baksh of Ferozepur Jhirka, who was tried and hanged for the muder of the British Commissioner of Gurgaon, Colonel Fraser, is also recited by the Mirasis. And in *Harsana ki bhāt* we find that the Muslim driver is able to dupe the British colonel sent on a mission to restore peace to the riot-torn area.

Mewat is thus an instance of a strong counter-culture oral tradition. The Mirasis never composed panegyrics for the Alwar court. On the contrary the narratives of this people-sustained oral tradition are expressly hostile to central imperial tendencies as also to the regional powers. Heroism is defined by the criterion of defiance of authority, and acts which flout the legitimacy of state power.

It is difficult to agree with Jan Vansina who writes:

> The history of segmentary societies will not go so so far back into the past, will be less accurately transmitted and will be almost exclusively based on genealogies and family traditions in addition to which some lists concerning migrations and some myths will also be found. But great difficulty will be encountered in reconstructing the tribal history because the traditions will be so stereotyped as to be almost meaningless.[14]

Mewat is a test case for precisely the opposite, having not a state tradition, but the tradition of a segmentary society, and yet an extremely vigorous one. Here is no typically 'tribal' poetry which scholars profess characterize segmentary societies which have not achieved statehood. There is no romantic element as in Malay or Gond poetry, no eloquent description of nature or tendency to ponder over creation as in the Polynesian tradition[15].

Instead we find verse that is terse, yet narrative; themes that are heroic and historical; epics that extol bravery but do not relate fantastic happenings; and heroes that are idealized but whose acts rarely transcend the realm of the plausible. Both the style of narration and the content of the *bhāt* help to create an atmosphere of protest, a highly political orientation, and a will to confront authority. Little wonder that this was the frame for the continuous hostility that characterized Meo relations with both state and empire, the centuries of guerilla warfare, and the continuous severe suppression both state and empire exerted to subdue the Meos. A history of Mewat which does not use the oral tradition as a source cannot by definition be a complete historical work at all. □

NOTES

1. Komal Kothari: 'Epics of Rajasthan', *Journal of the National Centre for the Performing Arts*, September 1984.
2. Recorded on various occasions at Oochar, Gothda, Alwar Khairthal and Bhartrihari in 1987.
3. S.P. Arya: *A Sociological Study of Folklore*, Calcutta, Indian Publications, 1975, p.61.
4. Mahendra Bhanawat: *Lokdevta Tejaji*, Udaipur, Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal, p. 41. Dr Satyendra: *Lokvarta ki Pagdandiyan*, Udaipur, Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal, 1984. Devilal Samar: *Folk Entertainments in Rajasthan*, Udaipur, Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal, p. 34. K.K. Sharma: *Rajasthan Lokgatha ka Adhyayan*, Jaipur, Rajasthan Prakashan, 1972.
5. Komal Kothari,: *Journal of the NCPA*, pp. 6–8.
6. Mahendra Bhanawat: *Lok Kala, Udaipur, Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal*, 1974. Gehlot: *Dhola Maru ra Duha*, Jodhpur, Rajasthani Granthagar, 1985.
7. S.P. Arya, p. 61.
8. Dr Satyendra, pp. 36 – 7.
9. Manohar Prabhakar: *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature*, Jaipur, Panchsheel Prakashan, p. 3. He states that a historical figure might become the core of a folk epic as in the case of *Amar Singh Rathor* and *Veer Vikramaditya ri Bhât*, but "the imaginary and supernatural elements are so freely interwoven into the structure of the stories that their historical value is diminished". Thus "the bardic poetry of Rajasthan is so much marked by fiction or so disfigured by hyperboles that it requires a rigorous process to find out the kernel of truth". pp. 61, 64. According to Dashrath Sharma and G.N. Sharma the *rasos* too are fictional, with greater literary than historical value. G.N. Sharma: *Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan*, Agra, Lakshmi Narain, 1968, pp. 257, 261. D. Sharma: *Rajasthan Through the Ages*, Vol. I, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner, 1968, p. 32.
10. The same is true of Bhât and Châran panegyrics.
11. Edward Haynes: 'Imperial Impact on Rajputana: The Case of Alwar 1775 – 1850' (MS 1975), p.1 – 3.
12. Mayaram: *Alwar*, Rajasthan District Gazetteers, Jaipur, 1968, p. 46. Dashrath Sharma mentions that they settled at Kama and sections moved towards Tijara and Sarhetta, pp. 699. See also Cunningham *Reports*, XX, pp. 10 – 11.
13. Jan Vansina: *Oral Tradition; A Study in Historical Methodology*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.
14. *Ibid.*: p. 171.
15. Ruth Finnegan: *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry*, London, 1982.