

## On Folk Narratives

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A study of folk narratives can have many, many different directions. One could study the problem of folk motives, or study tale types to internationally put up the narrative into a particular socket - one should choose one direction to work. One works in the field of folk narratives to gather interesting stories, to write and publish them; another decides folktales are very interesting lessons in our jobs as teachers; yet another wants to collect stories and see who tells the story, why, and for whom, as well as the type of social significance or social message it contains. So, there are hundred of ways in which folk narratives can be studied, there is no one fixed way. Some people do not work with folk narratives as a distinct discipline. Rather, they collect whatever folk narratives they find interesting and integrate them in their work.

I believe that whatever one studies, one should try to get the whole out of the whole and from what remains, which is also a whole. This is apparent in folk narratives where even after studying it any number of ways, what will remain is a total whole. There would still be things to be told about it. What I shall talk about folk narratives here is the sum of my experiences after entering the world of folk narratives. The first important factor for me is: who is the narrator? Who is the teller of the tale? I shall list out people engaged in different types of folk narratives with whom we worked in Rajasthan and collected stories. I begin with professional storytellers. They expect some remuneration, some fee, and are professionally engaged in the *job* of storytelling. Shifting from this description, we have an entire class of people known as *bhat*, the genealogists. The role of these people is to keep track of your family line, specifically the male line. There are two types of *bhats* - *mukhavancha bhat* and *pothibancha bhat*. The *mukhavancha bhat* maintain genealogy records orally, not in writing. The *pothibancha bhat* keep a *bahi* or record in which they write down names.

Each family has to pay the *pothibancha bhat* for the writing of their names, without which their names will not be entered into his *bahi* or into the *bhat's* memory. The practice in Rajasthan is that the *bhats* visit families every three years and record

in the *bahi* the names of children born, if any, in the families in the interim years. People think that this kind of record of family history is kept only for kings and *jagirdars* and such, but that is not true. Any group in Rajasthan that claims a caste status has to have a genealogist. Today, this institution of recording genealogy is strong in the so-called low caste groups. Most of the art forms, too, are alive today because of this system which somehow or the other, has kept many traditions alive for us.

During their visit, the *bhats* stay for two or three days with a family or in the village and go from house to house. In the evenings, they tell stories. This is actually a full performance - they sit at a designated place, there is an audience comprising men and women, and they use highly ornate speech. There are also various formulae in the storytelling - for example, when they talk about a king, there is a lot of material about the king's appearance, the way he sat on his horse, about what happened to him, the ornaments that he wore. When they talk about a queen or a heroine, they use many formulae to describe her beauty. There are also ornamented descriptions of horses, camels, of drinking and of the elements.

The *mukhavancha bhats* are only available within the low caste groups. They are generally *nats* or acrobats. All the acrobats that we see on the streets are oral genealogists of other caste groups in Rajasthan. In their practice of genealogy, these *bhats* start with stories about how the birth of the Sun, the Moon and the Trees, how the various activities in society came into existence and how natural phenomena occur. We have recordings of some *mukhavancha bhats* and one can see a relation to the organisation of the *puranas*. *Puranas* have five chapters and the oral genealogists follow exactly the same format while narrating stories. As no society or group will survive without their own mythology, these stories are about low caste people.

Our problem while working was finding the mythology of the low caste people in society. Can their mythology be the same as classical mythology? They too survive on their mythology. Our general reaction was that it would be difficult for them to survive on classical mythology, so, what do they have with them? This led us to the institution of the *mukhavancha bhats*. These *mukhavancha bhats* have hundreds of stories to tell in the course of narrating the genealogy of people. I

shall tell you one about a tribe known as the *rauts*, a small group in the Mewad region. We heard the story inadvertently while passing through the area. There was this acrobatic group reciting the genealogy of the *rauts*. There was a crowd of about five hundred men and women. The story went thus:

There was a person named Punia. At that time, nobody knew agriculture. For the first time, Punia sowed the seeds of corn and it turned out to be a success. When he was to harvest his crop, the Sun and the Moon came and said, *Punia, you have grown something and it has turned out well. But would you have been able to do it without us?* Punia says, *No, I would not have been able to.* So they asked for their share in the yield. Punia told them that the whole field was theirs. They moved through the field and saw the beautiful flowers at the top of the corn plant. They also had not seen agriculture; they said they shall take the upper part and the lower part shall belong to Punia. So the sun and the moon got nothing and Punia got the full crop as the corn grows on the middle part of the plants.

Next year, Punia sowed sorghum or *jowar*. Again, the Sun and the Moon came by. They said this time they would take the middle part and Punia can take the upper part. Punia again got all the grain and the Sun and the Moon got none.

At this part of the story, the storyteller beat his drum very vigorously and asked if anybody could tell him who is Surya (the Sun) and Chandra (the Moon)? The audience answered in one voice that they were Chandravanshi and Suryavanshi. These were the rulers of that place. In the twelve hours of recording that we have (at Rupayan Sansthan), there are many such tales, if the high caste people listen to them, they will be angry and unhappy. So, one way or the other, a type of a big narrative lore of very important life aspect of lot of people is available at this point. We consider both types of *bhats* as professional storytellers - they prepare themselves for the job, the particular way of storytelling is transmitted to them, they learn it, and narrate it. So, *bhats* form one group of storytellers. The second group is made up of the known professional storytellers. But we found in Rajasthan that these people mostly work at night - they have to work for the entire night and they have a lot of free time in between. When the people gather before them, they tell stories to pass the time. Not everybody can tell these stories; a few people in the village specialise in narrating them. And they are always long - the stories last for an hour or two.

Similarly, when people in the villages are sitting and doing nothing, waiting for something or the other, they will ask the storyteller from that place to narrate a story and he would do so. These are very compact stories. Again, these storytellers also use heightened speech as well as theatricality, a sort of organised performing situation.

The third situation is when we ask any person to tell a story, he says that he does not know. Have you listened to something? He says no, I have not. But the same person, if some occasion happens, would tell a story to establish his point. Out of many stories that came to mind, I tell you this story.

Somebody has taken a loan from another person which he was unable to repay. In Indian situations, when a person takes a private loan, it is repaid even in fourteen generations or twenty generations; they do not feel totally free until they repay the loan. The loan, indigenously given, is on exorbitant interest. I might have taken a loan of Rs. 200 and I might have paid Rs. 2,000 or Rs. 20,000 on interest but yet another Rs. 2,000 might be left to repay. This is the situation today, I do not know about any other parts of India, but it is so in Rajasthan. So, people feel that if we have taken a loan from you, we would repay by washing in the milk, and this would be the expression they use.

So, this is the situation for the person who has taken the loan. And then, somebody would come up with a story. The story would be: a person who took a loan died and the person who gave the loan also died. The person who took the loan was reborn as an elephant and the person who gave the loan was reborn as a bull. Both of them are in the same kingdom. It so happened that one day, the elephant became mad and started killing people and rummaging through the kingdom. So, the king offered half of the kingdom to any person who would be able to tame this elephant. Everybody was afraid of the mad elephant but the bull told the peasant who owned him, *Let me go. I shall go and defeat him.* The peasant was sceptical but allowed the bull to try. As soon as the elephant saw the person who had given him the loan in the form of a bull, he ran away. A number of stories are told in this way to establish some point or the other. But these stories will never come to us if you ask them to tell a story. Most of our collections are from my friend who works, writes and publishes folktales - he has published fourteen volumes of folktales collected from various places. Most

stories actually come from situations where the storytellers try to make a point. When we were living with them in the village, such situations would arise. We see a lot of proverbs used in similar situations. Most of the proverbs actually have stories behind them - we call them proverbial tales. Let me tell you a story that comes to mind: there is a proverb in Rajasthani that translates to, *I am the person who can say no, who are you to say no*. This is used in a number of situations. Proverbs, like words, don't have a single meaning, and they are used according to the context and give meaning to that particular situation; and the context is never the same. The story in this case is that of an old woman who had gone to the jungle to collect firewood. As she was coming home with a heavy load on her head, a *sadhu* passing that way saw her and said, *you are an old lady and you are carrying so much weight. Give me the load; I shall carry it to your home*. She appreciated his gesture and said, *carry it for me, and when we reach home, I shall give you something for it*. When they reached her place, she went inside and did not come out because then she would have to give him something for helping her bring the wood. Meanwhile, the old woman's daughter-in-law came out and the *sadhu* asked her for something. She said, *No, we would not give you anything*. Then the angry mother-in-law came out and asked, *what right did you have to say no? Only I have the right to say no*. Hence the above-mentioned proverb.

There is another proverb, *Even when a doomani weeps, there is some melody in it*. (A *doomani* is a woman from the musician community). But the proverb is not restricted to women and musicians. For example, somebody meets me and I immediately start talking about folklore, and even if he or she talks about something else, I bring the conversation back to folklore. The person might recount that whenever you meet Komal, he talks about one thing only. And then the person might quote this proverb. Then there are the jokes that are prevalent in hundreds of ways in the villages. Some are honourable; some can't be talked about freely. These again fall into the category of narrative.

And then we have the women's narratives of stories. The women tell stories to their children. In this way, we work a little more in detail. Again the problem that comes up is about who is the bearer of the tradition, as was discussed in our first lecture by Henry Glassie. In my childhood, too, I heard stories - if I stress my memory, I might be able to remember a few, may be in a skeletal form. Every

child hears stories. As far as rural Rajasthan is concerned, no child grows up without stories. It is as important as mother's milk. But a child who never retells these stories is not the bearer of the tale. The other important thing to remember is that when women tell stories to their children, it is an adult addressing a child. The format of the story is adult format, not children's format. Therefore, the child would never be able to express himself or herself through that story. Up to the age of seven, we found that children never tell stories to other children or to anybody else, so they never become the bearers of the stories.

What I tell you now is absolutely personal. Whenever I try to work in any particular field, whether it is folk narratives, or songs or gods and goddesses, the first thing I do is to do it in my family and try to see the situation there and try to ascertain because I can ask them hundreds of questions in hundreds of ways and I would get some kind of reply or no reply at all. I started trying to remember stories I'd heard in my childhood. I was brought up in my maternal family. I mostly grew there and it was in the Mewad and Udaipur region.

Only one story comes to mind, and my maternal aunt told me that one. I remember we were a lot of boys of the same age in my group and we would ask her to tell the story again and again and therefore it might have remained in my memory. The story was simple and short. There was a pair of birds. They decided to put up a swing on a well. The birds used to swing on it. But it was made of very thin thread and the thin thread broke. She never said anything more than that. But we always felt sorry for this pair of birds. After a very long time, when I was working on folktales, this story came back to me. By this time I was about fifty-five years old. When I retold the story to myself, I realised that the birds did not fall in the well but they flew away. As soon as I realised that the birds flew, it was as if a great burden had been taken off my heart.

I enquired why people who tell the story do not immediately tell the moral of the story. This puts up a very different attitude to the women's storytelling. They would never, never tell the moral of story to the child they will leave it to the child to grow and understand not only one moral but different shades of meaning out of a story. This is what was happening in the traditional society. But when we tried to bring these stories to the schools, we found that we begin with the moral of the story, and then tell the story. Or after telling the story, we try to explain the

moral. Not only that, the children never retold the stories they had been told. The format was such that it was not possible for the child to come out with the story; like the lullaby that is sung to the child by an adult and cannot be sung by a child to another child. Nowadays, we tell a child a story in the night before sleeping and in the morning, at breakfast, we ask the child what the lion did and what the fox did. If the child is able to answer, we feel very happy that the child has learnt the story. But this was not the purpose in traditional society - to examine whether the child knows the story or not. Now, we learned that no child under the age of eight or nine ever gets a story that has to do with religion. It may appear in some families - may be in Brahmin families. But, in general, only after the child is seven does religion appear in stories. The child never retells the story. So, again, who is the bearer of the tale? In the case of the professional and other storytellers, they have a particular type of recruitment for particular types of tradition. They learn the stories from those sources. But these stories that women narrate, how do they move on?

We found that mothers in rural areas are never storytellers. We also found that the grandmother does not tell stories if the grandfather is alive. Then we looked into the way of life in which the mother is engaged for the evening prepare food, wash things, ready the beds, do the things necessary for the next morning and so on. This is the time when children would sleep and she had no time to attend to the child. So, she never told stories. Most adults, when asked to remember bedtime stories they'd heard in their childhood, would say, *who will tell us stories? Mother would give us a good slap and ask us to go to sleep.* But this is not true. They were told stories. They need to be goaded again and again to remember something.

In such a situation in rural areas, we found that if there was a widow in the family, she is the one who tells the stories. She is usually the one who looks after the children in the family after the husband's death. She is in contact with the children all the time. Any family we visit, we learn about the family members. If there is a widow, we ask her to tell us stories. She is able to tell us many, many tales. So, here is the bearer of a very different generic type of a story. We ask these widows the source of these stories. They say they heard the stories from their families. But they had also collected stories later on. When asked if she told the stories when her husband was alive, the answer is no. Another thing

becomes important: when a professional storyteller talks to other people, he is professionally prepared and tells the story to many people. But it is different in stories narrated in houses. For example, if a mother tells a story to her five children say, three daughters and two sons- all five may not come and listen to the story. They may be of different ages. And even if all of them are present, only one or two might be listening. And it is a personal, conversational mode of storytelling. A different type of language is used - the theme, the way of talking, how the story begins and ends. This is the type of stories children hear from women in the family.

Then there is another genre of stories narrated by women. These are the *vrat kathas*. There are certain fasting days in a year, certain time cycles, in which they eat only once a day or not eat throughout the day. They have to observe certain rituals, such as they'd eat only after the moon rises. The *vrat* stories are told on these occasions. The same story is narrated every year for that particular *vrat*, but there are variations according to the region. This type of storytelling led us to another type of problem. How is time divided in a given society or group? My wife and I use different calendars. In her calendar, it does not hold that one has to get the salary on the first day of the month or that Sundays or second Saturdays are holidays. She is always working and there are no holidays for her. She lives according to the Indian calendar, which is the *tithi*. She has to have a calendar of her own in which she sees the eighth, ninth days of the fortnight or that the eleventh is cut off, only twelfth day is there and on these calculations, the *vrat* day is determined.

The format of '*vrat* stories' is that a situation arises in which a family gets into difficulty because somebody in the family was not observing this *vrat*. They have to face a lot of tragedies, but finally the gods would come when this particular *vrat* is observed, and everything would be alright. So the *vrat* is something to please the deity. The factor that became important for us in the study of the *vrats* is the time divided among the women's groups of Indian society? They might have a weekly *vrat*, a Monday *vrat* or a Saturday *vrat* - it will appear every week. Some *vrats* are done, say, on the eleventh of every fortnight, so there would be two *vrats* in a month. Others are observed on *amavasya* or the night of no moon. Then, the *vrat* would be once a month. Then we have *vrats* that move in two-

monthly, three-monthly, four-monthly, six-monthly or yearly cycle. Finally, we found that the *vrat* is the absolute clue to the working time-frame for the women. It is this that keeps them aware of what we call *date*. Most of the time when I am in my village, I do not wear a watch; I do not even know the date or the day. It is not needed there. But when I come to Jodhpur, date does matter. So, the *vrat* stories are to be looked into in conjunction with the *tithis*. There are also many folktales that refer to this type of time division in people's lives.

So far, the narratives I have been talking about are the prose narratives and normal speech. There are sung narratives, as well. There are ballads. Unfortunately, in Indian folklore studies, we do not see the proper understanding of the ballad type. People only talk about the epic type where there is a long narration and the canvas is bigger. But, ballads receive the least possible cognizance. Among the women's songs are hundreds of ballads. In one of the studies we are conducting now about women's songs, we came across a particular ceremony called night-wake (*ratijaga*) done in families at childbirth, marriage and death, in which these songs are sung. Some of the songs are lyrical, but some are total narratives. These songs contain a story line, but there is no mention of the name of the place, or names of characters and there is no time prescribed in the story.

One of the most popular songs is the *panihari*. Anywhere in Rajasthan, if you request, he or she would sing this song. *Panihari* is a narrative song. The story line is something like this: A man riding a camel came to a water hole, *nadi* as we call it, where anyone could come and drink water. A girl is also drinking water there, and the camel rider asks her some questions and praises her beauty. The girl gets angry that a stranger should talk to her in this manner and goes home ruffled. The man follows her. Reaching home, she complains to her mother that the man has been harassing her. Her mother comes out, sees the man and finally says that this is the man to whom the girl has been betrothed. This is the story - no place is mentioned, no names of the persons.

We asked the people what other songs they sing about in the *night-wake* (*ratijaga*) ceremony, and they said they sing about gods and goddesses. We came across sixteen songs about gods and goddesses. We didn't get into these gods and goddesses, but we went into the details of the whole night sessions. We found

that right up to midnight, people would sing songs related to gods and goddesses. After that, they would sing *singaru* songs, or songs of romance. One story comes in here: A girl is being married off. Her father wants to give her *dahej* (dowry). He tells her to take gold, take cattle, take buffaloes, take ornaments or take money. All the time, the girl says she would not take any of these, that she wants only one thing. When the father asks her what it is, she asks for her beautiful maidservant who works for the family, with whom the father had got involved. So, to save her mother and to give her mother a good life, the girl asks for the maidservant. The father says okay but warns her that she has to be careful. The girl insists, and so she takes the maidservant along with her. The new bride prescribed a lot of rules for the maidservant; the maid was not allowed to take a bath everyday, she could not wear good clothes or ornaments nor could she wear any makeup. And she kept a strict watch on the maid to see that the maid followed all this. But one day she was invited to attend a *night-wake (ratijaga)* ceremony that she could not avoid. Before going, she again instructed the maid not to do anything that would make her look beautiful. At the ceremony at around midnight when she looked at her palace she saw lights in the part of the palace where she slept. She rushed back immediately and found her husband involved with the maidservant.

These types of stories come in the nature of a ballad. Why are they sung? What is their message? This is difficult for me to discuss now.

In another situation, another story is about a girl who gets married and goes to her in-laws' house. The next morning she goes to a small lake near her house to fetch water and she sees a peacock. When she tries to fill her pot, the peacock comes and puts its feathers at that spot and does not allow her to fill water, and says, *you are a beautiful bride. Why don't you come with me? I, too, am beautiful.* The bride decides to elope with the peacock. But her younger sister-in-law, who has come with the bride, goes back and tells everyone that the bride has eloped with the peacock. The people pursue her, kill the peacock, and bring the new bride back home. In the evening, she is served food. After she finishes eating, they inform her that she has eaten the peacock's meat. This is another *night-wake (ratijaga)* song. We now have more than forty songs in our archive. As far as the narrative part is concerned, these ballad types have

not been studied generically in any part of India.

We have hundreds and hundreds of ballads. In our collection, we would have five hundred. Otherwise, most of the time, these stories rarely get into folk songs and they fall into categories other than merely folk songs. The narrative element starts guiding them in a different way.

Let's come to oral epics, again narrative. There are different types of oral epics. We have oral epics where there is a long scroll, nearly two hundred episodes of the epic painted on it - a man and woman sing before the particular scroll and tell the story of *Pabu*. The musical instrument played along with it is the *Ravanhatha*. Then there is another scroll that goes by the name of Bagdawat or Dev Narayan, and the instrument played with it is the *jantar*. These stories are very long. In our recordings, we have about five, six versions of the *Pabu* story. None of them moves for less than twenty to thirty two hours: The Bagdawat moves from thirty to forty eight hours.

There is this particular epic of Heer and Ranjha, sung in the eastern parts of Rajasthan like Alwar and Bharatpur. It is also found in Haryana, in Agra and in Manipur. As soon as I say Heer-Ranjha, everybody thinks of a romantic tale. A Sufi poet Wajid Ali Shah took this story and wrote it in the Sufi mould. That is the Heer-Ranjha story that became famous from Punjab. It is sung to prevent the cattle epidemic from spreading. There is a particular disease that affects cattle, buffaloes and horses, in which the foot splits into two. It is contagious and moves quickly like an epidemic and affects thousands of animals. In this region, the people would say that when such an epidemic occurs, we do the *patha* of Heer-Ranjha. Now this *patha* is very peculiar.

Usually it is the *patha* of Ramayan or the *patha* of Mahabharat or the *patha* of Geeta - only religious treatises are known as *paths*. But here, they talk about the *patha* of Heer-Ranjha. This story is sung for this purpose by professional musicians of a particular caste of that region as well as by peasants. An important group of this kind is the *jogi*. This leads to another problem. The area that I am talking about is Mathura, Brindavan, Bharatpur and Alwar. This is the area of the cows, the area of Krishna. But for curing the cows today, Krishna is not the effective god. So, who can cure a cow or a buffalo today? It is Ranjha. Ranjha was Mahiwal, which

means *mahish paal*, the buffalo-keeper. He became the saviour of cows and buffaloes. He is also a flute player like Krishna. Then there is another situation. Which are the societies that consume the milk of buffaloes. If you go to Manipur, Meghalaya, China or Tibet, the people there do not consume buffalo milk. Here, the buffalo is mainly a sacrificial animal. Gradually, we found that we can divide even the peasant groups depending on whether they rear cows or buffaloes. Now, we have started talking about buffalo culture and cow culture. So, this Heer-Ranjha is sung in a particular way and this version is not well known. It is very different from the Wajid Ali Shah's version.

In the same category comes the tradition of Dewal or Pandav or Mahabharat stories. But except for the names and characters, the stories have nothing to do with the Mahabharat. All stories of Dewal or Garath or Pandav actually begin after the narrative of Mahabharat ends. A new situation turns up; a new story unfolds, while the characters remain the same. These type of stories are called *Pandavon ki Katha*, *Pandavon ki Phaliyan* and *Pandun ke Kade*. They run absolutely parallel to Mahabharat situations.

One story is known as the *Draupad Puran*. The Great War is over. The Pandavas are in one camp and the Kauravas in the other, and everything is fine. In the Pandava camp, Draupadi arrives. As soon as she enters, Yudhishtra gets up and touches her feet. Bheema gets angry and says that whatever Draupadi is, Yudhishtra is her husband. Why does he touch her feet? Yudhishtra tries to calm him down but Bheema wants an explanation. Knowing Bheema's anger, Yudhishtra does not want to get into an argument. Instead, he asks Bheema if he has heard that in a particular forest there is a demon that comes every night and destroys the people there. Bheema immediately gets interested and wants to know where the demon is. Yudhishtra tells him where the forest is and tells him that the demon would come at midnight and that Bheema was to destroy it. Bheema goes to the forest, climbs a tall, thick tree and waits for the demon. But at midnight, he sees a big group of people who clean a spot, spread beautiful, costly carpets and arrange chairs made of gold, silver and precious stones. All the gods and goddesses start coming and they take their respective places. Bheema, who is watching from the tree, sees that a lady arrives and occupies the main chair. The lady is none other than Draupadi.

As soon as Draupadi takes her seat, the gods start complaining that she had taken birth in the world to destroy the Pandavas. But the Mahabharat is over and the Pandavas are still alive. She had taken a vow in Vaikunt to eliminate the Pandavas. Draupadi admits this fact and says that she could not do it because whenever she said anything, the five brothers accepted it like a law. So, she did not get a chance to be angry with them or do anything to them. But she asks the gods and goddesses not to worry and says that only that morning, Bheema tried to question Yudhishtra for the first time. Now the time has come for her to destroy them. The story goes on - it's a long story. But it adds a whole frame of such a story to the Pandava tale that moves on a very different line. The narratives that I describe are what I could remember at this moment. There are many other ways in which narratives are told. Most of the time, I feel that what is our world but a narrative. Can we survive without stories?

To conclude, let me tell you a story. There was a king and he wanted to be told a story that would tire him of saying *yes*, what we call the *hoonkara*. He promised half of his kingdom to any storyteller who could do this to him. One storyteller approached. He started by saying that a peasant had a big house and grain was stored in one part. The king said yes. Then a bird came and took one seed and went off. The king said yes. Then he said the bird came and took another seed, and then another. The king said alright the bird came and took away all the seeds. The storyteller said the bird came and took away all the grain in the granary and I shall proceed with the story. So, I end here - the story would never end.