

OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

HOMER IN INDIA

The oral epics of Rajasthan.

BY WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

Sixteen years ago, I moved to the Indian state of Rajasthan to begin work on a book. Bruce Chatwin was then my hero, and his widow, Elizabeth, had told me about a remote fortress in the desert where Bruce had written his great study of restlessness, "The Songlines." Rohet Garh was built in the early seventeenth century by a Rajput chieftain who had

and peacocks in the trees at its side.

Though Rohet Garh was relatively close to the capital, New Delhi—only nine hours' drive to the west—it existed in an utterly different world, almost in a different century. In Delhi, the small Indian middle class among whom I lived inhabited a fragile aspirational bubble. On every side, new suburbs were

winding her way to the village well.

Rohet Garh was the home of a *thakur*—a Rajasthani gentleman landowner. Secluded in his oasis in the Thar Desert, he had preserved the quiet, ordered way of life he had inherited from his forebears, a way of life not wholly dissimilar to that enjoyed by those reclusive tsarist landlords immortalized by Chekhov and Turgenev. To enter the gates of Rohet Garh was to walk into a world familiar from "A Month in the Country" or "Sketches from a Hunter's Album." Lapdogs careered over croquet lawns. Long-widowed grandmothers and great-aunts held court from far-flung dowager wings. Unmarried daughters would blush into their silles while their father loudly discussed their suitors. Everyone dressed for dinner.



Mohan Bhopa, with his wife and his son, performing in front of the sacred phad. Photograph by Raghu Rai.

been given the land by the local maharaja as a reward for bravery on the battlefield. It was surrounded by a high, battlemented wall that faced out over a lake. In the morning, light would stream into the bedroom through cusped arches, and reflections from the lake would ripple across the ceiling beams. There were egrets nesting on an island in the lake,

springing up, on land that only a few years ago was billowing winter wheat. As you drove down the Jaipur Highway, however, cars and trucks gave way to camel and bullock carts, denim to dusty cotton dhotis. The farther you went, the drier it got, so that the color began to drain away from the landscape but for the occasional flash of a red sari: a woman

Only the fortnightly expedition into "town" would break the daily routine. The entire family, along with lapdogs, Labradors, and a full complement of servants, would pile into the family jeep. Then they would set off, over the scrubland, to the house in Jodhpur. There the great-aunts would be wheeled to their rival temples, the unmarried daughters and visiting

nieces would buy new saris, and the boys would stock up on cartridges for their sand-grouse and partridge shoots. Thakur Sahib would visit his bank manager, and his club. I would remain in the old fort, and I used to relish the solitude. From my desk, the desert scrub was flat and dry, and its very harshness concentrated the mind. In the following weeks, the pages of the new manuscript began to pile up.

Rajasthan was a profoundly conservative state, even by the standards of India, one of the most conservative countries in the world. During the Raj, around two-fifths of India's vast landmass remained under the nominal control of its indigeneous princely rulers, and much of this territory lay in Rajasthan, where semi-feudal rule had effectively continued up to 1971, when Indira Gandhi finally abolished the maharajas.

The absence of any overt forms of colonial British intrusion meant that many aspects of medieval Indian society had remained intact. On the one hand, this meant that the grip of the old landlords—like Thakur Sahib—was stronger here than elsewhere; cases of ritual widow-burning, or sati, were not unknown. On the other hand, castes of nomadic musicians, miniaturists and muralists, jugglers and acrobats, bards and mimes were still practicing their skills. Every prominent landholding family in the Rajput caste, I discovered, inherited a family of oral genealogists, musicians, and praise singers, who celebrated the family's lineage and deeds. It was considered a disgrace if these minstrels were forced by neglect to formally "divorce" their patrons. Then they would break the strings of their instruments and bury them in front of their patron's house, cutting the family off from the accumulated centuries of ancestral songs, stories, and traditions. It was the oral equivalent of a library or a family archive being burned to cinders.

While I was staying at Rohet, I heard about what seemed to be the most remarkable survival of all: the existence of several orally transmitted epic poems. Unlike the ancient epics of Europe—the Iliad, the Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Nibelungenlied (the basis of Wagner's "Ring Cycle")—which were now the province only of academics and literature classes, the epics of Rajasthan were still very much alive. They were preserved by a caste of wandering *bhopas*—shamans and bards—

who travelled from village to village, staging performances.

"The *bhopa* is a normal villager until the god Pabuji comes to him," one of the aunts explained. "Then he has great power. People bring him the possessed, and Pabuji cures them."

"How?" I asked.

"Sometimes the *bhopa* just says a mantra over them. He tries to make the spirit speak—to reveal who he is. But," she added ominously, "sometimes he has to beat the possessed person with his rods, or cut him and draw blood."

One afternoon, during a long walk through the desert, I met a *bhopa*. He was very old and dressed in a tatty white kurta-dhoti. He had a catamnet in his left eye, and he parted his great fan of beard outward at the center of his chin. This man worked as a village exorcist, but I had heard that there were still many other *bhopas*, out in the wild places of the desert, whose job it was to recite the great epics, some of them many thousands of stanzas long. They were the men I wanted to meet.

In the summer of 1933, a young Harvard classicist named Milman Parry caught a ship to Yugoslavia. Parry set off on his travels intending to prove in the field a brilliant theory he had dreamed up when he was a student in Paris: that Homer's works, the foundation upon which all subsequent European literature rested, must have originally been oral poems, and that they contained certain recurring formulas that he thought were a product of traditions of oral transmission. He believed that to study Homer properly you had first to understand how oral poetry worked, and that Yugoslavia was the place in Europe where such traditions had best survived.

On and off for the next two years, Parry toured the cafés of the Balkans. One of his assistants, Albert Lord, described the approach they adopted:

The best method of finding singers was to visit a Turkish coffee house, and make enquiries there. This is the center for the peasant on the market day, and the scene of entertainment during the evening of the month of Ramazan. We found such a place on a side street, dropped in, and ordered coffee. Lying on a bench not far from us was a Turk smoking a cigarette in an antique silver "cigarluk" (cigarette holder)... He knew of singers. The best, he said, was a certain Avdo Mededovic, a peasant farmer who lived an hour away. How old is he? Sixty, sixty-five.

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Does he know how to read or write? *Ne zna, brate!* (No, brother!) . . .

Finally Avdo came, and he sang for us old Salih's favorite of the taking of Bagdad in the days of Sultan Selim. We listened with increasing interest to this short homely farmer, whose throat was disfigured by a large goiter. He sat cross-legged on a bench, sawing the *gusle*, swaying in rhythm with the music. . . .

The next few days were a revelation. Avdo's songs were longer and finer than any we had heard before. He could prolong one for days, and some of them reached fifteen or sixteen thousand lines.

What Parry found in the months that followed exceeded all his hopes. By the time he returned to America, in September, 1935, he had collected no fewer than twelve thousand five hundred epics and other songs—tales of the great Serbian defeat by the Ottomans at Kosovo, of the deeds of long-dead Balkan heroes—and had accumulated a ton of aluminum recording disks.

Parry, once described as "the Darwin of oral literature," died shortly afterward, in a shooting accident, at the age of thirty-three; but his work revolutionized understanding of the Greek classics. Yet even while Parry was at work the oral tradition was beginning to die out in the cities and the more developed parts of Yugoslavia. Since then, it has all but disappeared as a living institution.

In India, however, an even more elaborate tradition had managed to survive, relatively intact. An anthropologist friend had told me how he once met a travelling

storyteller in a village in southern India. The bard knew the Mahabharata—India's equivalent of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Bible, all rolled into one. The epic is the story of the rivalry of two sets of princely cousins whose enmity culminates in an Armageddon-like war on the battlefield of Kurukshetra; at its heart lies the Bhagavad Gita, for many Hinduism's most profound and holy text, a dialogue, on the eve of battle, between the god Krishna and one of the princely heroes about duty, illusion, and reality.

With its hundred thousand *slokas* (stanzas), the Mahabharata was more than six times the length of the Bible. My friend had asked the bard how he could possibly remember it. The minstrel replied that each stanza was written on a pebble in his mind. He simply had to recall the order of the pebbles and "read" from one after another.

India's population may not be particularly literate—the literacy rate is sixty per cent—but it remains surprisingly erudite culturally, as Wendy Doniger, an American Sanskrit scholar, has pointed out. Anthony Lane noted in this magazine in 2001, in the aftermath of the attacks on the United States, that the people of New York again and again compared what had happened to them to films: "It was like 'Independence Day';" "It was like 'Die Hard';" "No, 'Die Hard 2.'" In contrast, when the tsunami struck at the end of 2004, Indians were able to reach for a

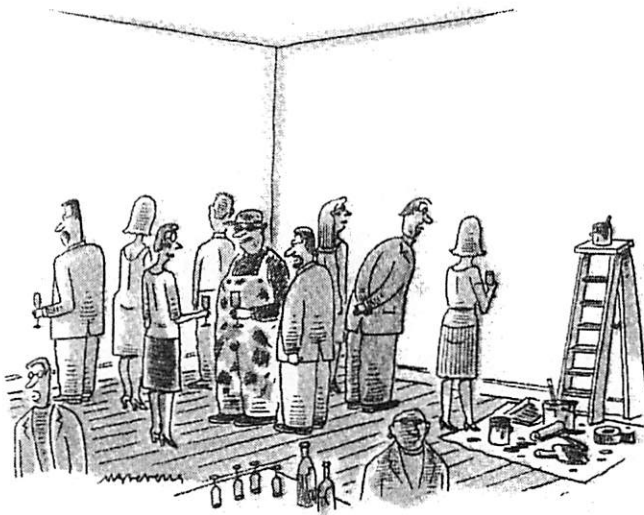
more sustaining narrative than disaster movies: the catastrophic calamities and floods that fill the Mahabharata and the Hindu tradition in general. As Doniger puts it, "The myths pick up the pieces where philosophy throws up its hands. The great myths may help survivors to think through this unthinkable catastrophe, to make a kind of sense by analogy."

While the Mahabharata is today the most famous of the Indian epics, it was originally only one of a large number. During the Mogul period, for example, one of the most popular was the Muslim epic *Dastan-i Amir Hamza*, or the Story of Hamza. The brave and chivalrous Hamza, the paternal uncle of the Prophet, journeys from Iraq to Sri Lanka, via Mecca, Tangiers, and Byzantium, on the way falling in love with various beautiful Persian and Greek princesses, and all the while avoiding the traps laid for him by his terrible foe, the dastardly magician Zumurrud Shah.

Over the centuries, the factual underpinning of the story was covered in layers of fantastic subplots and a cast of dragons, giants, and sorcerers—in one of its most popular forms, the tale encompassed three hundred and sixty stories. Today, however, while children in Persia, Pakistan, and parts of India may be acquainted with some episodes, the Story of Hamza as a whole no longer really exists as an oral epic. There are fears that the Mahabharata and other Hindu epics could share that fate in the twenty-first century, surviving in written or recorded forms only.

Given all this, it seemed extraordinary to find in modern Rajasthan performers who were still the guardians of an entire self-contained oral culture. Apart from anything else, I longed to know how the *bhopas*, who were always simple villagers—ploughmen, cowherds, and so on—and often illiterate, could remember such colossal quantities of verse. Recently, having moved back to Delhi after an absence of ten years, I decided to go in search of the *bhopas* who had preserved this ancient tradition. It would, I felt, be a little like meeting Homer in the flesh.

There were several full-fledged Rajasthani epic poems that the *bhopas* performed, but two were especially popular. One told the tale of the deeds, feuds, life, death, and avenging of Pabuji, a semi-divine warrior and incarnate god who died



protecting a goddess's cattle against demonic rustlers. The other—four times its size, much more ambitious, and with similarities to both the Iliad and "Once Upon a Time in the West"—was the tale of a humble cattle herder named Sawai Bhoj, of the Bagavat clan; he eloped with an incarnate goddess, who had taken the form of a beautiful young wife of an elderly Rajput raja, and so sparked a monumental caste war. This ultimately led to the bloody death of Sawai Bhoj and twenty-two of his twenty-three brothers—deaths that were avenged, Sicilian style, by Sawai Bhoj's son, Dev Narayan, the legend's hero. Both epics—like the Dastan-i Amir Hamza and the Mahabharata—seemed to be based on a kernel of historical truth and revolved around figures who may once have lived, before the mythological process began to elaborate their stories and turn them into gods. Significantly, the divinity of both figures is not usually accepted by the Hindu priestly caste, the Brahmins, and the gods' priests and *bhopas* are drawn from among villagers of the lower castes.

According to the Rohet aunts, the Dev Narayan epic—which, recited in full, could take almost a month of eight-hour, nightlong performances—had been written down only some thirty years ago. The person who did this was a distant neighbor and friend of the aunts, an elderly but feisty-sounding Rajasthani rani (or princess) named Laxmi Kumari Chundawat. I discovered that Laxmi Chundawat was still living in Jaipur, and we arranged to meet there, in her family's town house.

I found the old lady sitting on a cane chair on the veranda of an inner courtyard. She was a poised and intelligent octogenarian, whose fine bones were obscured by thick librarian glasses, which perched heavily on her nose and gave her expression a rather owlish gleam. She told me that she had been born in the family palace at Deogarh, from which her father had ruled a huge semi-desert principality. The purdah system—the seclusion of women—still operated then as much for Hindu aristocratic women as for Muslim ones, but in 1957 the Rani had shocked her family by emerging from the *zanana* and standing for the Rajasthan Assembly.

"The area where the story of Dev Narayan was set was in my father's principality and in my own constituency," she

said. It was during her time in the assembly that she became interested in the epic, but she also became increasingly fearful that it was under threat from television and the cinema. "When I realized that the epic about him was beginning to die out," she added, "I determined to do something about it."

In the early nineteen-seventies, the Rani began inquiring if any of the local *bhopas* still knew the entire saga by heart. Many knew the outlines, she discovered, and some knew parts in detail, but none seemed to know the entire story. Eventually, however, she was directed to a village near Jaipur where an old gray-bearded *bhopa* named Lakshminarayan lived. She persuaded him to come to her house, along with another *bhopa* ("to encourage him"), while she went to Delhi and bought a tape recorder.

"He came to stay with me for ten or twelve weeks," she said. "He used to sing and I used to write. We did nothing else except this, six or seven hours at a time. It is astonishing that any individual could remember such a long work. In my printed edition, it takes six hundred and twenty-six pages."

"The *bhopa* told me he was only four years old when his father began to teach him to learn it by heart," the Rani continued. "Every day, he had to learn ten or twenty lines by rote. His father gave him buffalo milk so that his memory would improve."

"Anyway," she added, "I've arranged a performance of the Pabuji epic for you tonight. Mohan Bhopa is coming here at seven. So you can ask him all about it then."

That night, when I returned to Rani Chundawat's mansion, the courtyard had been transformed. Lamps had been hung around the arches, amid tangling bougainvillea. Thin white mattresses had been laid out on the ground, along with round silk bolsters to lean on, and at the end of the cloister, stretched between two poles, a long painted hanging had been unfurled.

It was like a fresco transferred to textile: a vibrant, apparently chaotic seventeen-foot-long panorama of medieval India—women, horses, peacocks, carts, archers, battles, washermen and fishermen, kings and queens, huge gray elephants and herds of white cows, many-armed demons and blue-skinned gods,

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all arranged around the central outsized figures of Pabuji, his magnificent black mare, and his four brothers-in-arms. This, I knew, must be the *phad*.

"The *bhopas* use the *phad* as part of their performance," the Rani had explained. "It's a very ancient tradition. If you look at the paintings from the caves in Central Asia, such as those at Dunhuang, you'll see images of itinerant monks and storytellers with the scrolls they used then. The *phads* are the last survival of that tradition. The *bhopas* like to say that the *phad* of Dev Narayan is so full of bravery that when you tell the tale the grass gets burned around it."

The Rani told me that once the *phad* was complete and the eyes of the hero were painted in, neither the artist nor the *bhopa* regarded it as a piece of art. Instead, it became a mobile temple: as Pabuji's devotees were semi-nomadic herders, his temple—the *phad*—visited the worshippers rather than the other way around. It was believed that the spirit of the god was now in residence, and that henceforth the *phad* was a ford linking one world with the next, a crossing place from the realm of the human to the realm of the divine. The *bhopas* treated the *phad* with the greatest reverence, making daily offerings to it, and passing it on to their child once they became too old to perform. If it got ripped or faded, they would take it to the holy lake at Pushkar and decommission it, or, as they put it, *thanda karna*—make it cool, remove the power of the deity—before consigning it to the holy waters, rather like Excalibur being returned to the lake, in the legend of King Arthur.

At first, I didn't notice the *bhopa* and his family, squatting in the shadows. Mohan Bhopa was a tall, dark-skinned man of about sixty, with a bristling gray handlebar mustache. He wore a long red robe and a tightly tied red turban. He was barefoot and there were bells attached to his ankles. Beside Mohan was his wife, Patasi, her face shrouded in a red peaked veil. As Mohan supervised, she swept the ground around the *phad* and sprinkled it with water. Then she prepared the wick of an oil lamp and both of them raised their palms in reverence to the deity of the scroll.

Before long, Laxmi Chundawat arrived with her guests, and she gave the

signal for Mohan to begin. He picked up his fiddle—an instrument called a *ra-vanhattha*—as his wife held up the lamp to illuminate the *phad*. Mohan played an instrumental overture, then, accompanied by his son on the *dbolak* (a drum), he began to sing in a voice full of solemnity and sadness. Every so often, as Patasi held up the lamp, he would stop, point with his bow to an illustration on the *phad*, and then recite a line of explanatory verse, all the while plucking at the string with his thumb.

At the end of each *sloka*, Patasi would step forward, fully veiled, and sing the next stanza, before handing the song back to her husband. As the story unfolded, and the husband and wife passed the *slokas* back and forth, the tempo increased, and Mohan began to whirl and dance, jiggling his hips and stamping his feet so as to ring the bells, and shouting out, "Aa-ha! Hai! Wa-hai!"

During the performance, I asked another guest, who understood Mewari, one of the five major dialects of Rajasthan, if he could check Mohan Bhopa's rendition against a transcription by John D. Smith, of Cambridge University, of a version performed in a different part of Rajasthan in the nineteen-seventies. Give or take a couple of turns of phrase, the two versions were identical, he said. And there was nothing homespun about Mohan Bhopa's language, he added. It was delivered in a fine and courtly diction.

In Yugoslavia, Milman Parry had been excited by the way that his poets recomposed and improvised their tales as they recited them: each performance was unique. Yet, from what I could gather of the Rajasthani epics, they were regarded as sacred works, their form relatively fixed. *Bhopas* such as Mohan were barely more free to tamper with the compositions than, say, a Catholic priest was free to alter the words of consecration at the holiest moment of the Mass. In this sense, they were like Homer's epics, for both the Iliad and the Odyssey invoke the gods at the beginning.

Mohan sang one of the most famous episodes: the Story of the She-Camels. This follows the wedding of Pabuji's favorite niece, Kelam. The wedding guests give fabulous gifts: gold bangles, pearls, and "a fine dress of best Deccany cloth to wear," carriages and gold pendants for

Kelam's horses, herds of white cows and "swaying elephants." Then comes Pabuji's turn. Instead of producing a gift, he makes a vow. "I shall plunder the reddish-brown she-camels," he says, from Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. The wedding guests all laugh, because no one in Rajasthan has ever seen a camel, and they are not quite sure whether such a beast exists. Kelam's husband is asked, "What kind of wedding gift did Pabuji give you?" and he replies:

Pabuji's wedding-gift wanders and grazes in Lanka. Who knows whether it is like a hill, who knows whether it is like a mountain, who knows whether it has five heads or ten feet? But he has given me a kind of animal that I have never seen.

After Mohan had sung for a couple of hours, there was a break while the Rani's guests headed off for dinner. I asked Mohan whom he normally performed for—the local landowners, perhaps? No, he said, it was usually cowherds and his fellow-villagers. Their motives, as he described them, were less to hear the poetry than to use him as a sort of supernatural veterinary service.

"People call me in whenever their animals fall sick," he said. "Camels, sheep, buffalo, cows—any of these. Pabuji is very powerful at curing sickness in beasts. He is also good at curing any child who is possessed by a djinn."

"So does Pabuji enter you while you perform?"

"How can I do it unless the spirit comes?" Mohan said. "You are educated. I am not, but I never forget the words, thanks to Pabuji. As long as I invoke him at the beginning, all will be well. Whenever we perform, the demons run away. No ghosts, no spirits can withstand the power of this story."

Mohan smiled, and twirled the ends of his mustache. "The *phad* is the temple. Even rolled up, it keeps evil influences at bay," he said. "The deity resides there, asleep until I wake him with the dance. Sometimes, when we recite the epic, toward dawn the lamp glows white. It happens when we reach the crux of the story—when Pabuji gives water to the stolen cattle that he has saved. Then I can glimpse the future. But it's very rare and happens only when we do a complete performance."

He added, "The lampblack from the lamp that glows in this way is very pow-

erful. It can be used to heal anything."

It was the old primeval link between storytellers and magic, the shaman and the teller of tales, still intact in twenty-first-century Rajasthan. "So you are as much a healer, a curer of the sick, as a storyteller?" I asked.

"Of course," Mohan said. "Thanks to Pabuji. It is he who cures. Not me."

In the course of our conversation, Mohan mentioned that the great fair of Dev Narayan was currently taking place in the hero's remote home village of Sawai Bhoj, a hundred and fifty miles away in the arid badlands of the Bhilwara district. Tomorrow was the last day. The roads were not good and it was at least a seven-hour drive, he said, but if I left early I should be able to get there in time to see the biggest annual gathering of *bhopas* in all Rajasthan.

Crossing the scrub in a taxi early the next morning, I looked out on a far drier landscape than anything I had yet come across: a white, sun-blasted planisphere of desert plains and camel-thorn. Occasionally, the emptiness was broken by cowherds in yellow turbans patiently leading their beasts through the dust, or a slow convoy of nomads in camel carts, followed by a phalanx of barking dogs.

On the potholed single-track road to Sawai Bhoj, the driver and I began to meet other pilgrims. Some were on foot: lonely figures trudging through the white midnight of the desert. Other villagers rode together in tractors, pulling trailers full of women in deep-blue saris. Occasionally, we would pass through a village where we would see pilgrims taking their rest in the shade of the wells beside the temples. As we drove, the settlements grew poorer; the camel-thorn closed in.

In this landscape, and in the ultra-conservative society which clings to it, caste can still define not only what you wear but where you live, what trade you follow, whom you marry, even the color you paint your house. Beneath India's apparent chaos lies a fairly rigid network of thousands of minutely graduated castes and subcastes. Everyone knows his place, and what is expected of him. This is one reason that Rajasthan has proved relatively unchanging and has succeeded in preserving so many of its ancient rituals and arts intact: if your father was a *bhopa*, then you will probably be one, too. More-

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over, individual gods have become associated with individual castes. Thus Dev Narayan was believed to be from the Cujar herding castes, and had become the patron deity of that community, while his epic was their myth of religious identity. The festival was the great annual gathering of the caste, and every Cujar village in India sent representatives, along with their cattle.

Shiv Bhoj, when we finally got there, was a scrappy, dusty place, nothing about the village itself prepared one for the fair. The temple to Dev Narayan, in the fields outside the village, had become the center of a vast encampment. As far as the eye could see, there were cows and humped Brahmin bulls and their herders: thin, wiry men in white homespun cloth, squatting in circles, stripping chat or smolking bidis, their white bulls beside them chewing their cud. Although the fair took place around the temple, and was opened by an elaborate ceremony invoking the god, it quickly became clear that the festival—like many of those in medieval Europe—was as much about cattle trading as it was about religion.

During the day, the pilgrims would make their livestock and swap gossip. Then, deals done, they would give thanks to Dev Narayan, and ten thousand of them would settle down after sunset to hear the *bhops* sing the epic of their god, each night taking the story slowly forward.

When I had asked Ravi Laxmi Chundawat why she thought that the epics were beginning to die, she had been very clear. "When the stories used to be told, everyone had a horse and some cattle," she said. "Now, when a *bhopa* tells stories about the beauty of a horse, it doesn't make the same connection with the audience. By the same logic, it was easy to see why the tradition had survived here: the pastoral context of the story—of cows and horses and heroic cattle herders—was still intact.

Moreover, the Cujars are very often illiterate, and literacy seems an essential condition for preserving the performance. It was the ability of the bard to read, rather than changes in the castes of his audience, that rounded the death knell for the oral tradition. Just as the blind can develop a heightened sense

of hearing, smell, and touch to compensate for their loss of vision, so it seems that the illiterate have a capacity to remember in a way that the literate simply do not.

This was certainly the conclusion of the Indian folklorist Koral Kohari. In the nineteen-fifties, Kohari came up with the idea of sending one of his principal sources, a singer from the Langra caste named Lakha, to adult-education classes. The idea was that he would learn to read and write, thus making it easier to collect the many songs he had preserved. Soon Kohari noticed that Lakha needed to consult his diary before he began to sing. Yet the rest of the Langra singers were able to remember hundreds of songs—an ability that Lakha had somehow begun to lose as he slowly learned to write.

Walking along the line of stalls selling balloons and casseres and spicy samosas, I got into conversation with Shiv Narayan Cujar. He had come some five hundred miles from his village, in eastern Madhya Pradesh, deep in central India. "All of us Cujars believe we are descendants of Swai Bhoj and his twenty-three brothers," he said. "So this is like a family reunion. Every Cujar must make this pilgrimage once. This is our tradition."

His friend Pratab Singh Cujar, standing to one side, nodded. "A lot of miracles took place in our village thanks to Dev Narayan," he said. "This year we prayed to him that it would rain, and it did. We gave a tike of what I made."

"As Cujars, we always pray first to Dev Narayan," Shiv Narayan said. "All gods are one, but Dev Narayan is our exclusive god. He answers all our wishes—from the richest to the poorest."

As we were speaking, there was a sound of loud rhythmic drumming. A large group of Cujar pilgrims from a village in Jodhpur district, a hundred miles away, were arriving on foot, carrying the huge colorful heraldic flag of their village—



It took some time to locate the *bhops* who was giving the performance. It was night before, had only just risen from his mid-afternoon, but Bhero Ram Cujar in his late thirties, with a raffish jewel was a tall, handsome, strongly built man stripping chat from a small white cup. He found him sitting cross-legged on a bench in a tea stall, yawning broadly and flashing in each cadence. "It's like a night shift," he explained. "I began the recitation at nine-fifteen and continue through until dawn."

"You must be exhausted," I said. "God gives you the power," he replied. "When I recite, I feel that I am Dev Narayan. He gives me the power to concentrate. Only those who are fully possessed can worship the deity with full vigor. If you don't feel that energy and don't feel the god within you, you get tired very quickly."

I asked whether his father was also a *bhopa*.

"Of course," he said. "And not just my father but my grandfather and his grandfather, too. We have six hundred years of tradition of reading the *pbad* in my family. When I was ten, I started playing the *dbolak*. My father used to teach me one story a day, then he would correct me as I recited it back. By the time I was sixteen, I knew most of the epic—and now my children are learning."

"But do you know the whole epic?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I don't think anyone does anymore—certainly not all the stories within the stories. I only know seven nights' worth—and I don't know any *bbopa* who knows more. It's like the Mahabharata. No one knows the whole of that, either."

"So do you think the *pbad* can survive?"

"Not the full version," he said. "That has gone already. People are still interested, but they want to enjoy other things, too. There is competition from films and TV, and these ugly DVDs—these are ruining the art."

I asked Bhero Ram what he could possibly do to hold out against such competition. He shrugged.

"I am always trying to improve my singing," he said. "And I try to put in a joke when people are getting sleepy. Nothing Bollywoodish or vulgar, just enough to grab attention in between scenes. It's not easy for people to concentrate for eight hours—though in the villages, where there are no distractions, no one ever gets up while I am performing."

"But you ask, will the *pbad* survive?" he continued. "Yes, it has to. It is still at the center of our life and our faith and our religion."

This, it seemed to me, was the key, and the answer to the question of how it was that the Rajasthani epics were still living in a way that the Iliad and the other epics of the West were not. The poems remained religious rituals, and the *bbopas* were still receptacles for the messages of the gods, able to penetrate the wall—in India always a fairly porous wall—between the divine and the mundane.

Moreover, the gods in question were not impossibly distant and metaphysical beings but deified locals with whom the herders could relate and who could understand their needs. The Gujars certainly took care to propitiate the great

"national" gods, like Shiva and Vishnu, whom they understood as controlling the continuation of the wider cosmos. For everyday needs, however, they prayed to the less remote, less awesome figures of their local herder gods and heroes who—along with the almost numberless pantheon of sprites and godlings, tree spirits and water nymphs that are worshipped and propitiated in every Indian village—know the things that the great gods cannot: the till and soil of the local fields and the sweet water of the wells, the needs and thirsts of the cattle and the goats; and they are believed to guard and regulate the ebb and flow of daily life.

This also had to be the reason that the Dastan-i Amir Hamza had died out: the last great performer of this Muslim epic passed away in Delhi in 1928. The Story of Hamza was always understood to be an entertainment, and so had died as fashions changed. But the *bbopas* and their religious rituals had survived as the needs that they served remained: if your child was sick or your wife unable to conceive, you summoned the *bbopa*.

"Will your children take on this tradition?" I asked Bhero Ram.

"Two of my three boys are interested," he said. "They can see that I am very satisfied with this life. When the gods are asleep—during the monsoon season—I stay at home and can do my farming. We have cows and buffalo and goats. In the other months, I travel with my *pbad* wherever I want. It's a good life."

The shadows were lengthening, and a large crowd was already beginning to gather. The cows had been given fodder, and, crucially for herders in a desert land, they had been given water—echoing the key episode and the climactic moment in the Pabuji epic:

- Pabuji, the cows' little calves are weeping;
- the cows' little calves are calling out to Pabuji. . . .
- Pabuji, may your name remain immortal in the land;
- Pabuji, may your brave leading warriors remain immortal!

Bhero Ram's assistant had now appeared with the furred *pbad*, and one of Bhero's sons was standing by impatiently, holding his *dbolak*.

"I must go," the *bbopa* said. "The performance must begin at sunset."

He paused, then added, "I have a long night ahead of me." ♦

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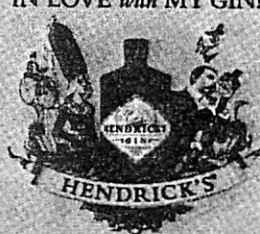
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