

**Worlds Apart:  
Orality, Literacy, and the Rajasthani  
Folk-*Mahābhārata***

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It will be helpful to begin by quoting some sample statistics on levels of literacy in present-day India. The following are selected from the *India Literacy Atlas*, and relate to the 1971 census; it may be noted that in most categories these figures show an increase of around 5% over those for 1961.

Constituency	Percentage literacy
India as a whole	29.34
Rural India	23.60
Urban India	52.48
Indian men	39.51
Indian women	18.44
Men in rural Rajasthan	22.58
Women in rural Rajasthan	3.85
Tribals in India as a whole	11.30
Tribals in Rajasthan	6.47
Tribal men in Rajasthan	12.03
Tribal women in Rajasthan	0.49

These figures make it plain that literacy is very restricted in India, and also that it is very unevenly distributed, being lowest in the countryside, among women, and among tribals. There are regional variations also: the levels for the Western Indian state of Rajasthan are significantly lower than the national averages, no doubt reflecting the relative poverty of that state as well as earlier substandard provision for education in some of its constituent princely states.

It is a safe assumption that a larger proportion of Indians can read and write nowadays than at any time during the past; and few would take issue with the further proposition that literacy among rural people, women, and tribals has probably always been lower than average. In other words, the ability to participate in literate culture—whether actively by writing or passively by reading—has never been available to as much as one-third of

the population, and has been notably lacking among those whom the folklore-collector would regard as his richest sources. Whatever else Indian popular culture may be, it is thus overwhelmingly a culture of non-literate people.

No less important, for many who *can* read and write these skills are purely functional: they do not play any significant part in the transmission of verbal culture. The *dhobī* may be able to read a laundry list and write a bill, but this does not make him a reader, let alone writer, of novels or plays or poetry. Thus even where functional literacy exists the spoken word retains the importance it has always had as a cultural medium. It is instructive to read Lord's remarks on an evidently parallel situation among the "singers of tales" of Yugoslavia (1986:20-22, 28, 40, 50):

If a singer in Montenegro learned to read, was he immediately immersed in Russian literature? Of course not, because Russian letters influenced the literary elite in Montenegro, insofar as literary circles existed there, and the singer who learned to read would not readily enter into these circles. Singers are usually in rural areas. . .often among herders. The singer's world must change for the merger to take place, or else the singer himself must change worlds. . . the world of "literacy" is removed from that of orality. . . for [the epic singer] Nikola the world of literacy was not the written literature, abundant as it was, but the newspaper, including perhaps whatever of literature appeared in it. . . It is an intriguing question whether the world of literacy has as great a difficulty in comprehending the world of orality as we have found that the world of orality has in understanding the world of literacy. The gap is felt on both sides.

Lord's insistence on the existence of a "gap" between two "worlds" that are "removed" from one another is salutary, for highly literate scholars have a tendency to assume, with real but unconscious arrogance, that orality is merely literacy's unsophisticated twin. Non-literate peoples, it is presumed, have "texts" just as do literate peoples; but instead of committing them to paper they commit them to memory. Such assumptions ignore the large amount of work that has been done in many parts of the world on the nature of oral composition and transmission. While verbatim memorization of fixed texts is known in certain traditions,<sup>1</sup> it is very far from being the norm. This has been demonstrated in particular by the work of Parry and of Lord himself on South Slavic oral epic (esp. Parry 1971, Lord 1960), which showed that the performance of such an epic was simultaneously an exercise in composition. The bard creates his tale as he performs it, assembling it out of appropriate stock phrases ("formulae") and standard scenes ("themes"), but he does not aim to produce a single "correct" form of words on every occasion, and no two

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<sup>1</sup> The clearest example seems to be that of Somali oral poetry; see Finnegan 1977: 73-75 and the references cited there.

performances will be the same. In such traditions—that is to say, in almost all oral traditions—to speak of “texts” is meaningless. Texts belong to the other world, the world of literacy, for a text is something that cannot normally exist at all without being held in its fixed form by means of writing.

The “gap” between the two worlds, and Lord’s suggestion that “the world of literacy has as great a difficulty in comprehending the world of orality as we have found that the world of orality has in understanding the world of literacy,” raise problems for the scholar wishing to study a popular culture. The whole basis of most scholarship is books, manuscripts, and texts of other sorts; and this is inevitably particularly true of those who deal with the past rather than the present. For historians, texts are primary. But Indian popular culture does not generate texts, and texts relating to Indian popular culture are secondary with respect to that culture. Written sources dealing with lower-caste and tribal people are not merely relatively uncommon, they are also always the work of higher-caste, non-tribal people; and the information that they contain, valuable though it may be, is inevitably colored by that fact.

An example will help to show the dangers involved. References to the low-caste Nāyaks of Rajasthan in two learned works, the seventeenth-century Chronicle (*Khyāta*) of Mūhato Naiṇasī and the twentieth-century *Ethnographic Atlas of Rajasthan*, are made under the name Thorī (Sākariyā 1964:58-79; Mathur 1969:84-85). This is indeed another name for members of the Nāyak caste, but it is an abusive term roughly equivalent to “Gyppo” or “Nigger.” The point here is not that Naiṇasī and the compilers of the *Atlas* (whose dedication quotes Gandhi on the evils of untouchability) are socially prejudiced, but that they are fundamentally ignorant, and thus historically unreliable. Wherever their information has come from, it has not come from Nāyaks. In such a situation errors are inevitable, and it comes as no surprise to discover that the *Atlas* takes a third synonym, *Āherī*, as denoting a separate caste-group (Mathur 1969:94-95). The moral would seem to be that written source-material on members of low castes is likely to be inaccurate; if it is contemporary it should be checked, and if it is historical it should be treated with extreme suspicion.

Once it is conceded that there *is* a gap between oral and literate cultures in India, the next task is to investigate its width. This is clearly something that will vary considerably from region to region, and the situation I describe here for Rajasthan should not necessarily be assumed to apply in other states. But the Rajasthani case does have general implications which it would be well not to overlook, for it illustrates just how extreme can be the divergence between related popular and high-culture traditions in a single region, and thus how dangerous the mutual ignorance and incomprehension of Lord’s two worlds can be. The gap

between the two can sometimes be a yawning chasm into which no one is more likely to tumble than the scholar who ventures into the realm of orality without first shedding the bundle of literate preconceptions he habitually carries about with him.

One reason for the degree of idiosyncrasy of Rajasthan's very rich and varied oral culture must lie in the low level of literacy referred to earlier, which reduces the numbers of those directly exposed to literate culture, and in doing so also weakens literate influence on the oral culture. There are other contributory factors. It is significant that the region never fell under direct central rule, whether Muslim or British, but was until recently governed by (often chauvinistic) local princes. Another factor is the nature of the terrain, a large proportion of which consists of inhospitable arid desert, inevitably reducing contact with the outside world. Finally there is Rajasthan's unusually large population of tribals: 12.13% of the total population in 1971, as compared with 6.94% for India as a whole (*Census* 1971:35). Their contribution to the oral culture of the state is a major one, but their relationship with mainstream Hindu culture is somewhat marginal.

Whatever the reasons, it is easy to find quite spectacular examples of Rajasthani oral culture diverging from literate norms. As an anecdotal illustration, I can refer to two brothers with whom I worked in 1973 and again in 1976, when I was engaged in making recordings of the epic of Pābūjī. This epic is performed by Nāyaks as a religious ritual in honor of its hero, who is a deity widely worshipped by Rebārī camel-herds and shepherds, and by rural Rajpūts.<sup>2</sup> Though low-caste, the performers are thus priests,<sup>3</sup> as is confirmed by the word *bhopo* that is used to describe them: a *bhopo* is normally a shamanistic folk-priest who is possessed by his deity. The two brothers<sup>4</sup> were performers of the epic of Pābūjī, and were very competent and very pious. Early in their performance they always included a song invoking various gods, including "the *avatāras*"—a group among whom turtle, fish, and man-lion were specifically mentioned. But when I asked them who these figures were *avatāras* of, they appeared not to understand the question; and when I suggested that they might be *avatāras* of Viṣṇu it became evident that that name was not familiar to them.

If Rajasthani popular culture can produce Hindu priests who have

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<sup>2</sup> For general information and a plot summary, see Smith 1986.

<sup>3</sup> It is not in fact unusual for non-Brahmin Hindu priests to be of lower caste than those who patronize them. See for example Pocock 1973:ch. 3, and—for another case associated with ritual performance of an epic—Roghair 1982:26-29, 32-34, 374 (s.v. *Māla*).

<sup>4</sup> Javārjī and Rāṇā, from the village of Caṭāliyo (26° 45', 73° 20').

never heard of Viṣṇu, it would obviously be interesting to see what it can do with one of Hinduism's great stories, that of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahābhārata* narrative is well known throughout India, normally in versions that clearly derive at no great distance from the original Sanskrit epic, but it has been known for some time that there exists a Rajasthani folk version which contains major deviations from the "standard" story. Kṛṣṇakumār Śarmā has published short descriptions of the Rajasthani folk-*Mahābhārata* (1968:44-52 and 1980:160-67), and Suśilā Guptā of Bikaner has produced a Ph.D. dissertation on the same topic (which I have unfortunately not been able to see); and in 1982 I was myself able, with the help of Komal Kothari, to make a recording of four of the episodes (*devāḥ*) as performed by a group of four men from near Jodhpur.<sup>5</sup> This recording is less than ideal, for the lead singer was an 80-year-old opium addict whose mind was mostly elsewhere, and his deputy, though charming and eloquent, was not particularly well-informed. But before leaving Jodhpur I was able to go through the material in fair detail with a native Rajasthani speaker, thus making it very much more accessible to me; and where there remain gaps or obscurities I have sometimes been able to remedy them by consulting the summaries published by Śarmā, which are generally very close to the versions I recorded.

Śarmā gives no background information on the tradition of performance, so all that can be said here is what Komal Kothari and I could extract from the performers we recorded. These consisted of two Megvāḥ (traditionally a leather-worker caste), one Rajpūt, and one Hīrāgar (status not known). The lead singer said he had learned from a Kāmar, and my assistant Parbū, a Nāyak, told me that members of his family used to perform the *devāḥ*, so there is evidently no caste-exclusivity. Most of the *devāḥ* are said to have been composed by one Pāco, who lived in a remote but evidently mythical past. In the version we recorded, they were performed to the accompaniment of a drum, finger-cymbals, and a drone provided by a string-instrument, with interspersed passages of spoken *arthāv* "explanation." The singers, who do not regularly perform together, said that performances were normally commissioned as part of a religious night-wake: any occasion might prompt a request to perform, but especially a wedding-procession, a return from pilgrimage, or a death. One of them had most recently performed at a caste-fellow's house, another at the house of a Kumār (potter caste); so again there is evidence of non-caste-exclusivity.

From these performers we recorded four *devāḥ*, two of which correspond to narratives summarized by Śarmā. The first, not found in

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<sup>5</sup> Māgīlāl, a Megvāl! from the village of Ḍigārī; Gokuljī, a Megvāl, and Sāgismh, a Rajpūt, both from the village of Nādaṛī; and Jasārām, a Hīrāgar from the village of Nādaṛā. (These are all small villages about six miles east of Jodhpur.)

Śarmā's work, is called *urjan bhārat*, “the story of Arjuna”: it tells of Arjuna's hazardous mission to locate the remains of his father Pāṇḍu (here called “Piṇḍ”) so that the last rites can be properly performed, and of his single-handed defeat of a demon army. Next comes *āvalī bhārat*, apparently, though very obscurely, “the myrobalan story,” corresponding to the two parts of Śarmā's *bhīmā bhārat*: a plot-summary of this episode is given below. The third *devālī* we recorded was *ṭṭori bhārat*, “the story of the sandpiper,” corresponding to Śarmā's *dropad ro avatār*: Bhīma is afforded a vision of Draupadī being venerated by all the gods and granting a sandpiper a boon of safety for her eggs in the coming battle. Lastly there is *karaṇāvalī*, a story with no equivalent in Śarmā, telling of the great generosity of Karṇa and his wife, and of Karṇa's death.

Of these stories, the first and third constitute “extra” episodes built around familiar characters: they are not associated with any particular part of the main *Mahābhārata* story, and consequently do not contradict elements of that story. The fourth, the story of Karṇa, tells of events wholly unknown to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*,<sup>6</sup> but can reasonably be seen as amplifying, rather than contradicting, the story found there. It is the *āvalī bhārat* that stands in sharpest contrast to the standard Sanskrit-derived story, for it contains what is clearly a reflex of a very significant section of the main narrative, but in a weirdly distorted version.

The simplest way to indicate the degree of this distortion is to summarize the relevant part of the story in both the Sanskrit and Rajasthani versions. In the Sanskrit text the passages in question are a short part of the *Ādi-parvan*, running from 1.139 to 1.144, and the whole of Books 2, 3, and 4—the *Sabhā*-, *Āraṇyaka*- and *Virāṭa-parvans*. The essential lines of the story are as follows. The Pāṇḍava brothers Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakuta, and Sahadeva have incurred the bitter enmity of their hundred Kaurava cousins, the eldest of whom is the wicked Duryodhana. While the Pāṇḍavas are hiding in the forest after Duryodhana's unsuccessful attempt to burn them to death in an inflammable house of lac, a *rākṣasī* (female demon) named Hiḍimbā sees and falls in love with Bhīma. Her brother Hiḍimba appears: Bhīma fights and kills him, but Hiḍimbā begs to be allowed to marry Bhīma, and Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to this on condition she returns him to his family every night. Soon a child is born to them, a boy named Ghaṭotkaca, demonic in appearance but good at heart. Not long after this, the Pāṇḍavas acquire their joint wife, Draupadī. But soon their cousins the Kauravas, jealous of the Pāṇḍavas' prosperity, challenge them to a gambling match in which Śakuni plays Yudhiṣṭhira and cheats him of all his wealth and power, finally taking away even his liberty and that of his family. The Pāṇḍavas are sent into exile in the forest for twelve years with a thirteenth year to be spent incognito. They have

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<sup>6</sup> But not unknown in other parts of India—see further below.

various adventures in the forest, then travel to Virāṭa where they live disguised for a year in the King's palace. The Queen's brother Kīcaka tries to rape Draupadī, who summons Bhīma to her aid. Bhīma tells her to make a false assignation with Kīcaka, and then goes in her place; when Kīcaka comes hoping for embraces, he kills him.

Thus, in very brief summary, the events as recounted in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*; now follows the narrative of the *āvalī bhārat*. The Pāṇḍavas had planted a very fine banyan tree, which had grown to enormous size. One day the hundred Kauravas came and challenged Nakula, youngest of the Pāṇḍavas, to a stick-game; the rule was that one person would throw a stick, and whoever was "it" had first to touch someone else and then pick the stick up. Nakula agreed, and Duryodhana threw the stick. But then the Kauravas all climbed into the tree: every time Nakula climbed up to touch one of them, another would get down and take the stick and say, "It's still your turn." Since the Kauravas specified that whoever was "it" could not eat, Nakula began to grow very hungry as the months passed and the unending game went on. Eventually Bhīma noticed that Nakula looked unwell, and when he heard what had happened he decided to play in his stead. Armed with the beam from an oil-press by way of a stick he went to challenge the Kauravas. On the way, Kṛṣṇa, who was worried that Bhīma might not be able to think out a way to defeat the Kauravas, arranged a demonstration for him: he assumed the form of a monkey and began shaking fruit down from a tree. Bhīma took the hint, and when the game began and the Kauravas climbed up into the banyan tree he shook it until they all fell out again. At this point the Kauravas' mother Gāndhārī arrived, and, seeing her hundred sons all lying there dead [*sic*], she appealed to Kṛṣṇa to punish the Pāṇḍavas by banishing them to the forest for twelve years. After various adventures in the forest, including an encounter with Śiva, the Pāṇḍavas found themselves near Kairāṭa-nagarī where there lived a mighty demon called Kīcaka. Kīcaka had a curious habit: every day he would tell his wife to stand still and then shoot an arrow through her nose-ring, and after doing this he would ask her if there was anyone else as mighty as he in the world. Every day the Queen would answer no. Eventually she wearied of this, and, on her father's advice, the next day she answered Kīcaka that the Pāṇḍavas were stronger than he. He tested their strength by subterfuge and found out that Bhīma was indeed stronger than himself, so he sent Bhīma off on a pretext, wrapped the other Pāṇḍavas in a bundle, and took them off to Kairāṭa-nagarī, where he intended to sacrifice the four remaining brothers to the Goddess and make Draupadī his wife. Bhīma realized what had happened and began to trace his abducted family. On the way he encountered Kīcaka's sister Hurmā, who made him marry her and at once gave birth to Ghaṭokaca, as strong as Bhīma himself. When Bhīma and Ghaṭokaca reached Kairāṭa-nagarī,

they found their family living in disguise. Draupadī told Bhīma that Kīcaka had evil designs on her. Bhīma told her to make a false assignation with Kīcaka in the temple to the Goddess, and he disguised himself as a woman and went there in her place. When Kīcaka arrived he was killed by Bhīma with the help of Ghaṭotkaca.

This is quite different from the “extra” episodes which have been tacked on to existing characters, for the narrative of the *āvalī bhārat* is a variant of, and clearly ultimately derives from, the standard classical narrative, many of whose elements it preserves. The characters who occur are almost without exception major figures in the Sanskrit epic, and stand in the same relationships to one another that they do there. The five Pāṇḍava brothers, their mother Kuntī and wife Draupadī, the hundred Kauravas led by Duryodhana, their mother Gāndhārī, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, Ghaṭotkaca, Kīcaka—all these appear and are recognizably the same people/gods as appear in the Sanskrit text. Their names too are with few exceptions the same names, merely normalized to Rajasthani pronunciation (Urjan for Arjuna, Bhīv for Bhīma, etc.). Ghaṭotkaca’s demonic mother, originally Hiḍimbā, has been further normalized to the Muslim female name Hurmā, but that is the most deviant case.<sup>7</sup> Most important, the overall sweep of the story is the same: the Pāṇḍavas are exiled to the forest for twelve years after being cheated by the Kauravas in a game; Bhīma, who has acquired a son named Ghaṭotkaca by a female demon, subsequently kills Kīcaka, who intends to rape Draupadī while she and her brothers are living in disguise in Virāṭa/Kairāṭa-nagarī, by impersonating her and keeping a false assignation with him.

The main lines of the *āvalī bhārat* narrative may be closely related to the story told early in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, but its details are wildly discrepant. The Kauravas challenge the Pāṇḍavas to a game, but it is a children’s game, not a gambling-match;<sup>8</sup> the Pāṇḍavas’ banishment is a punishment for Bhīma’s excesses, not the stake played for in the game; the Kauravas do not live to fight another day; Kīcaka and Hiḍimba have been fused into a single character. Moreover, this list gives little hint of the real

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<sup>7</sup> In three other cases the form of name used is actually an etymological derivative of the Sanskrit name, a point of some interest in that it suggests a long and continuous tradition of oral *Mahābhārata* performance in the region. Abhimanyu appears as Ahamno or Ahamdo, Ghaṭotkaca as Ghaṛūko; Yudhiṣṭhira appears in Śarmā’s summaries as Jahuṭhal (presumably = Jahuṭhal), with typical Rajasthani vowel-change and early substitution of *-l-* for *-r-*. In the version I recorded this name had been further modified by analogy to become Jeṭhal, “eldest brother,” which is of course what Yudhiṣṭhira is.

<sup>8</sup> It is also an old game, for it is plainly the same as that described by G. N. Sharma from a seventeenth century painting which depicts “a game... played by a group of boys. One of the boys who could not climb the tree in time had to stay on the ground and was to catch others who succeeded in climbing the tree. This game is played with a staff in hand” (1968:134).

nature of the changes that the folk version of the story has introduced, which do not become apparent from a straightforward plot-summary. Qualitatively, the narrative has been altered beyond recognition. From being a story of heroism, of the conflict between good and evil, of the problems caused for man by the ill-will of the gods (see Smith 1989), it has become a collection of hyperbolic, often comic, tales of magic and the miraculous, enacted by two-dimensional characters and with no apparent claim to any deeper meaning. So extreme is the transformation that, in another environment, we might reasonably suspect deliberate parody; but this is an explanation that cannot hold up in the face of Hindu attitudes toward stories of Hindu antiquity, and which anyway has no support from those who sang and listened to the *devals*.

In this respect there is no distinction between the various episodes, which all share a similar ethos: the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas have been transplanted into the world inhabited by Rāmdev, Pābūjī, Devnārāyaṇ, Gogo, and the other medieval heroes of present-day Rajasthani epic and miracle-song. This makes itself plain in the characters of the heroes and those of the gods, and also in the events out of which the stories are built.

The heroes have become paper-thin: Bhīma is overwhelmingly strong but also stupid, Karṇa is generous to the point of self-destruction, and Draupadī is venerable, gracious, and dangerous; the others are mostly nonentities. We know that the Pāṇḍavas are heroic fighters because we are told, but there is little in their deeds to indicate heroism. Where the Sanskrit text revels in detailed blow-by-blow and arrow-by-arrow accounts of warfare, and culminates in the slaughter of 1,660,020,000 people (O’Flaherty 1976:260-61, quoting Zaehner), the Rajasthani narratives contain no real fighting at all. There are frequent references in the *urjan bhārat* to a mysterious “war in Māsul,” but the only combat that is described as occurring there or anywhere else is a war which Arjuna fights single-handed against an army of demons, and which he wins with a single arrow. In the same way “the war at Kurukṣetra”—the centerpiece of the Sanskrit epic—is mentioned from time to time but is never actually described. This is presumably because the *āvalī bhārat*’s reworking of the story kills the Kauravas off prematurely, so that there is actually no one left for the Pāṇḍavas to fight. Bhīma’s solo conflict with Kīcaka is described, but the usual hyperbole and miraculous elements make their appearance: Bhīma repeatedly tears Kīcaka’s body in two, but the two halves keep coming together until Ghaṭokaca teaches his father a rather silly spell to prevent this happening.<sup>9</sup> Warfare is retained as part of the heroes’ characters, but not as part of their actions: fighting is not what this version of the *Mahābhārata* is about.

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<sup>9</sup> It is a phrase spoken when one snaps and throws away a used toothbrush-twig: *dātaṇ phāṭā ar pāp nāṭā* (“twigs are snapped, sins are fled”).

The picture of the gods that the *devāls* create is also very different from that found in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Those who appear are Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and the Goddess (i.e. Śiva's consort Pārvatī/Śakti), and of these the Goddess is all-powerful, as she is in many Rajasthani stories. The *devāl* called *ṭītorī bhārat* begins with a heavenly conversation between Śiva and his wife in which Śiva asks how the strength and merit of Bhīma and the other Pāṇḍavas can be destroyed, and the Goddess offers to be born as Draupadī to bring about a great war and annihilate them. (It is later in the same episode that Bhīma, who has not realized who Draupadī really is, sees her honored by all the gods in turn.) This is a truly typical Rajasthani motif: in both the Pābūjī and Devnārāyaṇ epics the Goddess takes incarnation as a woman to destroy the heroes, and a song sung by my informant Parbū Bhopo as part of his performance of the Pābūjī epic makes it clear that this is repeatedly her task. Parbū was explicit that the meaning of the verb “dupe” (*chal-*) in this passage was “exterminate” (*khapā-*):

You duped Pābūjī son of Dhādhā  
 when you were called Deval;  
 old lady, you were called Deval.  
 You duped Rāma and Rāvaṇa,  
 Jagadambā, when you were called Sītā.  
 In the *kaliyuga* you are known as Kālī;  
 in the *kaliyuga* you are known as Kālī:  
 you have a great abode in Calcutta.  
 You drink blood;  
 you eat men.  
 Jagadambā, you duped the twenty-four Bagaṛāvats<sup>10</sup>  
 when your name was Jeḷū-Jaimī.  
 Your discuses fly through the air.  
 You have duped the great and the great.  
 You duped the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas,  
 old lady, when your name was Draupadī. . .<sup>11</sup>

Śiva, by contrast, when anything more than a conversational foil for his all-powerful wife, is represented as a cowardly buffoon: when the Pāṇḍavas approach him during their forest exile he first hides from them, assuming the form of a small buffalo-calf, and then runs away when his disguise is penetrated. As for Kṛṣṇa, the great god of the Sanskrit epic, he is reduced in most of his appearances in the *devāls* to a sort of divine odd-job man, called into the narrative when blessings or curses are needed. There is, however, one episode in which he figures more prominently, and with something of the same dubious morality for which he is notorious in

<sup>10</sup> The brother-heroes who form the subject of the first half of the epic of Devnārāyaṇ.

<sup>11</sup> Translated from a performance by Parbū recorded in Jodhpur in 1976.

the *Mahābhārata*: this, the story of the death of Karna recounted in the *devāl* called *karaṇāvalī*, is summarized below.

Like their human and divine dramatis personae, the events out of which the *devāls* are constructed are in general far removed from those found in the Sanskrit epic. This is true not merely of the broad sweep of the stories, as with the *āvalī bhārat* described above, but also of the very numerous small motifs which form the basic narrative building-blocks, and which are in general thoroughly typical of those occurring in local epic and miracle-song. The *urjan bhārat* alone, for example, contains the following: lying once before speaking the truth; a horse kept in an underground place; the sea speaking and granting passage to a hero; the sun concealed by dust from the hooves of a hero's horse; a parrot acting as messenger; bad omens before an ordeal; destroying an enemy army single-handed leaving only a sole survivor; female relatives of the enemy becoming vultures and haunting battlefields; an impossible request. Some—certainly not all—of these conventional story-motifs may possibly occur in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* also, but in present-day Rajasthan these and others like them are the commonplaces of oral epic narrative.

The Rajasthani folk-*Mahābhārata* thus shares a great deal with other contemporary Rajasthani heroic songs, and indeed it seems to have a particularly close relationship with the *parcos* or miracle-songs of another local Rajasthani deity, Rāmdev.<sup>12</sup> To begin with, Rāmdev's disciple Hārjī Bhāṭī is credited as the composer of the *ṭṭorī bhārat*. Then the *ṭṭorī bhārat* itself contains a narrative element that recurs identically in one of Rāmdev's *parcos*:<sup>13</sup> the eggs of a sandpiper are protected in a battle by a bell falling over them from the throat of an elephant. Finally, the *parco* telling the story of Hārjī Bhāṭī contains a sequence very similar indeed to one occurring in a *devāl* not recorded by me but summarized by Śarmā (1980:160-61) under the title *ābāras kī kathā* ("the story of the mango-juice"): as a test the heroes have to make *khīr* (rice-pudding) with milk from immature animals and sand or stones.

The *devāls* thus have a great deal in common with other oral narratives performed in Rajasthan; but they also share narrative elements with other oral traditions from elsewhere in India. In particular, the story of Karna's death recounted in the *devāl* called *karaṇāvalī* is closely similar to versions of this story found in Central and South India, though it does not occur in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. There is nothing especially surprising about this; it is not unknown for stories related to the Sanskrit

<sup>12</sup> See Binford 1976; Rāmdev is an interesting case of a local deity who is beginning to achieve quite widespread acceptance, with temples in many major cities of India.

<sup>13</sup> At the end of *billī ro parco*, "the story of the cat" in my recording of a performance by the wife and brother-in-law of Parbū Bhopo made in Jodhpur in 1976.

epics or Purāṇas to be widespread throughout South Asia without there being any Sanskrit “original” to trace them back to—a good example is the story of the ash-demon Bhaṣmāsura (=Tamil Vallarakkaṇ: Blackburn 1988:48-8, n.2, and 230-31; also Ackerley 1983:70-78), which has been recorded in several parts of Central and South India, and even in Sri Lanka, and which I recorded from my Rajasthani informant Parbū Bhopo in 1976. Though a similar story appears in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (10.88.14-36), it cannot be regarded as the source of the various oral stories told today, for there are many elements common to most or all of these that are not found there. The story of Karṇa’s death is apparently another similar case.

According to the version recounted in the *devāl*, Duḥśāsana once trod on Draupadī’s dress:<sup>14</sup> Karṇa saw him do so and laughed, and Draupadī, enraged, vowed to break Karṇa’s teeth. She appealed to Kṛṣṇa to help her take her revenge, and Kṛṣṇa replied that he would destroy Karṇa’s celebrated nobility of character. He went to the war at Kurukṣetra,<sup>15</sup> assumed the form of a poor weak Brahmin and approached Karṇa. Lying to convince Karṇa that he was who he claimed, Kṛṣṇa begged from him. Karṇa replied that he was involved in a battle and not in a position to give him anything; and he told him instead to go and make the same request to his wife Karaṇāvalī, who would treat him as generously as he would himself. Kṛṣṇa went to see Karaṇāvalī, and told her that her husband had died four days previously in the war at Kurukṣetra; Karaṇāvalī, delighted that he had met such a noble end, prepared to distribute all his wealth among the poor. Kṛṣṇa told her that he had himself come to beg for a gift, and she went off to fetch one for him. As soon as she had gone Kṛṣṇa left; he went back to Karṇa and told him that he had received no honor and no gift from Karaṇāvalī. Karṇa told him to fetch a stone and break out his teeth, which contained two jewels; Kṛṣṇa did so, and Karṇa presented the jewels to him. Kṛṣṇa was not yet satisfied, and complained that it was wrong to offer a gift defiled with blood, so Karṇa called upon the river Gaṅgā to come and wash the jewels, and she did so. Karṇa also said that he recognized Kṛṣṇa for who he was, and requested to see him in his full divine form. Kṛṣṇa granted this request, and gave Karṇa various blessings for his generosity and nobility, including a promise to cremate his body in a place where no one had ever died or been born—a promise which he later carried out, though with difficulty—whereupon Karṇa died.

There is a close parallel to this story at the end of the “Karaṇ parv”

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<sup>14</sup> This insult seems likely to be a reflex of the famous episode in the Sanskrit version where Duḥśāsana tries to strip Draupadī naked in the assembly-hall (2.61.40 ff.).

<sup>15</sup> As already noted, the war at Kurukṣetra is referred to but no actual fighting is described as taking place.

of the *Mahābhārata* story as performed by Tījan Bāī, a leading exponent of the oral tradition known as *Paṇḍavānī* which is popular in the Chhattisgarh area of Madhya Pradesh in Central India.<sup>16</sup> In this version Karṇa, severely wounded by Arjuna's arrows, is approached by Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa refuses the offer of the keys to Karṇa's treasury, and Karṇa replies that in that case he cannot give him anything; but Kṛṣṇa asks for Karṇa's diamond teeth, and requests an arrow with which to extract them. Karṇa himself takes up an arrow and removes his teeth, but Kṛṣṇa refuses them as they are blood-stained. Karṇa fires an arrow, and where it lands a stream of water gushes forth; he washes the teeth and presents them to Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa now offers to make him immortal, but Karṇa declines: since he has seen the god Kṛṣṇa before him, his life has no further point. Instead he asks to be cremated in a spot as pure as that where he was born, reminding Kṛṣṇa that his mother was a virgin. Kṛṣṇa agrees to this, adding that if he cannot find a pure enough place on Earth he will cremate him on the palm of his own hand.

Very similar to both these stories is one which is apparently well known in Andhra Pradesh, and which was the subject of a film entitled *Dāna Vīra Śūra Karṇa*.<sup>17</sup> As in the version from Madhya Pradesh the visit to Karṇa's wife does not occur, and in addition the gift Karṇa finally makes is of a single tooth which is covered in gold. More important, Kṛṣṇa's motivation for his deeds is different: instead of testing Karṇa he aims to teach Arjuna a lesson. As in the Sanskrit version of the story, Karṇa's chariot becomes stuck as he fights in the great battle, and Arjuna takes the opportunity to overwhelm him with arrows. Then Arjuna speaks boastfully of his great accomplishment, and Kṛṣṇa acts so as to quell his pride by demonstrating Karṇa's true greatness.

Also clearly related is the following episode from the fourteenth century Tamil version of the *Mahābhārata* by Villiputtūrār (8.2.236-58): "Karṇa is dying after being shot, when Kṛṣṇa takes the form of an old Brahmin and approaches him on the battlefield with a request for a boon. Karṇa rejoices at the opportunity of one final gift; the Brahmin requests that he give him all his *puṇya* "merit" earned throughout his life. Karṇa of course agrees without hesitation; the Brahmin demands that he perform the ritual sign of pouring water with the gift, and Karṇa pours out his blood, issuing from his wounds. Now the Brahmin asks what Karṇa would like as a dying boon, and Karṇa asks that if he has to be reborn, he be given a heart which is incapable of refusing any request for a gift. This is too much for Kṛṣṇa: he embraces the dying hero, bathes him in his tears, then reveals himself in his true form . . ." (David Shulman: personal

<sup>16</sup> I interviewed Tījan Bāī twice during her visit to England in June, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Information from B. Limbadri, a student at Oriental Sanskrit College, Bhimavaram, Andhra Pradesh

communication).

Whatever the precise relationship of the *ḍevāḷs* with other narrative traditions from Rajasthan and elsewhere, the really remarkable thing about them must be that they tell a highly deviant version of the *Mahābhārata* story—a story whose “classical” version is well known throughout the whole of India. In doing so they provide a very clear warning about the extent to which oral traditions may diverge from literate norms. But the *ḍevāḷs* do not merely deviate from the story of *Mahābhārata*, they have also completely changed the narrative tone: heroism has been replaced by magic spells, the heroes have become two-dimensional figures, the gods are the subject of comic substories, and the narrative cuts its own throat by killing off the villains before the heroes go into exile, and thus eliminating the great war after which the *Mahābhārata* is named. My assistant Parbū, himself a performer of the non-Sanskritic epic of Pābūjī, clearly disapproved of the *ḍevāḷs*, and was worried at my interest in them: he asked me why I did not read the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* instead, and told me that parts of the Rajasthani stories were wrong. One is bound to wonder how much longer the folk-*Mahābhārata* can survive—when schools, radio, television, the film industry, even comic books, all constantly tell and retell the orthodox story, it seems unlikely that such a strange mutant of it can retain what status it has for much longer. Already there are clear signs of decreasing popularity: members of Parbū’s family no longer perform *ḍevāḷs*, and Komal Kothari and I had some difficulty in finding performers to record; of those whom we eventually found, one said that prior to our recording he had not performed for six or seven months, while another said he had not performed for four or five years. The Rajasthani folk-*Mahābhārata* appears to be dying as the result of increased dissemination of the orthodox narrative: the world of literacy, with its built-in greater prestige and with the aid of late twentieth-century communications technology, is overspreading one small region of the world of orality. One is bound to ask whether other oral traditions are in similar danger of extinction at the hands of high-caste literate culture and its standardizing influence.

To answer this question we have first to attempt to isolate the factors that serve to put any particular oral tradition under threat. In the case of the folk-*Mahābhārata* tradition two such factors are evident, and I believe that they are crucial in explaining why that tradition is in such severe decline. The first is the *ḍevāḷs*’ levity of narrative tone, noted above; the second is the lack of any ritual function for the tradition.

Hinduism is well known for its tolerance, and it comes as no surprise that a religion capable of accepting conflicting philosophies and conflicting claims for divine supremacy can also accept conflicting versions of mythological stories. Sanskrit sources for such stories frequently

contradict each other, sometimes seriously, and vernacular accounts often diverge yet more sharply, both from the Sanskrit “originals” and from one another; none of this seems to cause any problems to anyone. Folk—not to mention film—versions of such stories naturally contain their own idiosyncrasies, yet once again no offense is caused. Nor has there ever been any objection to humor forming an element in the telling of the stories, as witness the figure of the *vidūṣaka*—the Brahmin buffoon—in Sanskrit drama, including mythological drama. But where a tradition actually makes light of a well known narrative, it is likely to meet with disapproval. As an example from outside Rajasthan we may consider the *sāṅgs* or folk-dramas of Haryana, which are often based on stories from mythology, and whose light-hearted and sometimes bawdy treatment of such stories has provoked the hostility of the Arya Samaj: as a result, *sāṅgs* are nowadays performed less frequently than in the quite recent past. Revivalist Hindu movements like the Arya Samaj are nowhere near as strong in Rajasthan as in Haryana, and there is no evidence of orthodox attempts to suppress performance of *devāls*; but Parbū’s reaction to the *devāls* he heard suggests that for many Hindus the narratives of the folk-*Mahābhārata* must represent a trivializing of something that ought to be treated with greater respect.

At least as important a factor in the decline of the folk-*Mahābhārata* tradition is its lack of ritual function. If told as folktales, the stories might serve as acceptable entertainment; yet in fact they are performed in the manner of a religious observance—at night-wakes, with alternating passages of song and explanatory spoken *arthāv*. This is the standard, highly repetitive format of Rajasthani ritual performance, typified by the epics of the hero-deities Pābūjī and Devnārāyaṇ. But whereas in the epic traditions performance takes place for religious reasons, and may be used as a way of securing divine aid, the *devāls* seem to have no such *raison d’être*: their heroes are not gods, and the gods who do figure in them are normally propitiated in more orthodox ways. The folk-*Mahābhārata* is thus a set of myths that have lost their meanings, performed in the manner of a ritual that has no purpose, and it is not difficult to understand why its popularity has waned.

This should not be taken as suggesting that Rajasthani oral narrative traditions in general are in danger, but rather as indicating precisely what characteristics such traditions need to possess if they are to prosper: the epic traditions of Rajasthan are strikingly rich in mythic and ritual meaning and they continue to enjoy widespread popularity (see further Smith 1989). Indeed, it may be that the orality of these traditions is a strength rather than a potential weakness, for Hindu worship—including Vedic ritual—has always emphasized oral skills: books may be used for learning from, but they are not for use in ritual performance, and there is no “holy book” of

Hinduism to compare with the Bible, the Koran, or the *Gurū granth sāhib*. The Vedas are holy of course, but they are holy in performance, not as a manuscript or printed volume. The Rajasthani epic traditions thus square with expectations of how a ritual should be conducted, even if their “primary” orality is actually far removed from the secondary oral ability of the literate Brahmin who learns texts from a book. At the same time, however, a *bhopo* of Pābūjī like Parb, will insist that the epic he performs “really” derives from a big book composed by high-caste Cāraṇ poets and kept in Pābūjī’s native village of Koḷū: for him it is the *written* word that carries authority. It is an intriguing paradox that the two widely-separated worlds of orality and literacy should each seek legitimacy by claiming characteristics belonging to the other.

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