

Article

Veer Tejaji: A Deity of the Peasantry

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Rajasthan is rich in folk lore. There are innumerable narratives, songs, bhajans, dance-dramas, painting schools and bardic singers depicting the heroic feats of the folk – deities which form a strong tradition of an alternative faith which is rooted not as much in spiritualism as in the material and worldly aspects of the lives of the devotees. Popular among the masses these folk deities were those heroic individuals who served selflessly the cause of the people in their lives and because of their valour, virtues and sacrifice became dear to the people. These persons were then worshipped by the masses and assumed the status of Gods and Goddesses.

Tejaji is one of the major folk deities of Rajasthan. The exact date of his birth is not known but the traditional records maintained by the Bhats of their clan reveal that he was born in the village Khadnal of Nagaur Pargana in Marwar in Dholya sub-caste of the Jat community in 1073 A.D. (Bheru Bhat ki Bahi, Degana) His father was Tahadji and the name of his mother was Ramkunwari. He was married to Pernal, the daughter of Raimal Jagi of Paner village. There are references of Tejaji getting married five times before he married Pernal. There are other sources which put it slightly differently. Veer Tejaji, according to the sources, was born on Friday, maghashukla 14 samvat 1130 (29 January 1074), in the family of Dholyav Gotra Nagvanshi Jats. His mother's name was Sugna. Mother Sugna is believed to have got son Tejaji by the blessings of Naga-deity. (Wikipedia)

The life of Tejaji is known for his courage and bravery displayed in saving cows from plunderers. Also, he is known for his determination to keep his word. He would not let his

promise unfulfilled. In the pursuit of these, he made the supreme sacrifice and laid down his life. The narrative of his bravery in rescuing cows appears in literary forms, especially in folk songs.

Since the literary sources about the feats of Tejaji have origin in the oral tradition, there is no author who can be identified as the source of information. The songs and folk narratives have been compiled at a very later stage by scholars, therefore a number of narratives with slight differences in the course of events, details of dates and places occur in various texts.

One of the narratives describes the story of Tejaji's feat of rescuing cows as follows. There was a tradition in that area, the chieftain had to initiate the ploughing of fields after first rains. Tejaji's father and brother were out of the village at first rains so his mother asked Tejaji to do the *halsotiya* in the fields. Tejaji went to fields and started ploughing. His sister-in-law (bhabhi) became late in fetching his food locally called Chhak, which angered Tejaji. On Tejaji's expressing his anger she taunted that his wife was in her father's home and it was shame on his part. This prompted him to go to bring his wife from in-laws. His sister-in-law (Bhabhi) asked Tejaji that before he brings his wife Pemal, he should bring his sister Rajal so that she can receive Pemal on her first arrival to Kharnal. Tejājī was married to Pemal in early childhood at Pushkar with the daughter of Rai Mal Jat of Jhanjhargotra, chieftain of village Paner . After marriage there was a dispute between two families in which *māmā* of Pemal and father of Tejaji were killed. Tejaji did not know that he was married.

When Tejaji was on way to village Tabiji to bring his sister, he was attacked by Meena Sardar. There was a war and Tejaji was victorious. He reached village Tabiji, got permission of her sister's husband Jogaji Siyag and brought Rajal to Kharnal.

Next day early in the morning he mounted his mare Līlaṅ with palāṅ and started journey to Paner to bring his wife Pemal. It was a difficult journey, but he crossed all the Rivers running full of water due to heavy rains. He reached Paner by evening. At that time his mother-in-law was milking cows. The cows got disturbed due to Tejaji's brisk entry on his mare. His mother-in-law could not recognize Tejaji and cursed him that he be bitten by a black snake as he has disturbed her cows. Tejaji got angry over this comment and decided to return without Pemal.

LachhaGujari was a friend of Pernal. Her house was about two kilometers from Rupangarh. LachhaGujari helped Pernal to meet with Teja. For this Lachha rode on camel and went to Teja facing many clashes with Meena sardars en route. Lachha reached Teja and gave Pernal's message that if Tejaji does not come she will die. Parents of Pernal had decided to gether married with some other person. At this time Pernal was attempting suicide butwas saved by Lachhan. Tejaji came to Paner and saw her there. Pernal was a beautiful and attractive girl. They were talking with each other that they heard knock of Lachha Gujari. Lachha told Tejaji that thieves had taken away all her cows and there was no body to help. Tejaji mounted his mare Lilan and started alone to fight with dacoits, who had taken away Lachha's cows.

Tejaji found that dacoits who had stolen the cows of Lachha Gujari were Meena sardar's people. Tejaji, who was made for helping others, decided to bring those cows. The myth is that he encountered a snake burning in fire that was saved by Teja. That snake cursed Teja and wanted to bite Teja. In fact he had encountered with a Nagavanshi chieftain and he had a war with him. He promised to come back after bringing his wife Pernal. He was badly wounded in the process to bring Gujari's cows back from dacoits. Veer Teja was man of words. While returning he kept his words and produced himself before the snake. The snake did not find unwounded place on the body of Teja so he offered to bite on tongue. The snake bit on his tongue which caused his death on 28 August 1103.(Wikipedia)

While Tejaji was returning from Paner with his wife he was attacked jointly by Meenas, who were defeated earlier and Nagavanshi chieftains. Tejaji and his wife fought bravely. Tejaji was killed in the war and Pernal committed Sati at place called Sursura. Tejaji's sister Rajal had also committed sati. (Report *Murdumshumari* 61)

In other narratives it is stated differently. The cows of Lachha Gujari are stated to be stolen by Mers. (Swami 67) Gurjars are a community of peasants and cowherds. Their main occupation is rearing cattle. They are one of the backward communities of Rajasthan even today. When Gurjars approached Tejaji and requested him to rescue the cows driven away by the Mers, he was going to fetch his wife Pernal from her parental village back to his home. He immediately decided to rescue the cows first. In this pursuit he had to fight a tough battle with the Mers and was fatally wounded. There are a number of stories associated with this act of valour and

ultimate death of Tejaji. All these stories, however, depict an incidence of snake bite at the tongue of Tejaji finally leading to his death. These stories are narrated in a number of folksongs and hymns which are sung at the shrines and temples constructed at various places in central, western and eastern Rajasthan.

Each of these narratives depicts his taking up of the responsibility of rescuing the cows, preferring it to his domestic responsibility and successfully accomplishing the heroic task of liberating the cows. It may be treated as a sign of his religious faith, but more than being so, it is his sense of duty towards his fellow beings. As a member of the peasantry, the economic worth of cows as a source of livelihood is equally important to him.

Another feature that appears prominently in all the narratives is his commitment to honour his word. He returns to the snake, though wounded, to fulfil the promise that he had made to the snake. These kind of heroic characteristics are found in almost all heroes who are sung in oral literature. This can be understood as a trait of personality of those unlettered heroes who belong to a society where the script could not reach due to various socio-economic and political reasons.

According to another tale when Tejaji was going to his in-law's place, he tried to save a pair of snakes. The snake was saved but his paramour could not be saved. He grew furious and wanted to bite Tejaji. Tejaji promised the snake that he will return to him after visiting his in-laws and then the snake could bite him. After reaching his in-laws he got injured while trying to rescue the cows of Lachha Gujar. Still he did not forget his promise. He went to the snake. All parts of his body were full of wounds. The snake asked where to bite. Tejaji then offered his tongue. The snake bit him on his tongue and he passed away.

In yet another tale, it is said that as a cowherd Tejaji used to drive his cattle to the grazing grounds. In the fields, he observed that one of the cows used to get estranged and reached near a hole from where a snake used to come and drink the milk. When Tejaji came to know of this, he promised to offer milk to the snake every day. Once, somehow he forgot to do so. The snake grew furious and wanted to bite him. He said that he will return to him after visiting his in-laws and then the snake could bite him. When he returned, he was wounded so much that the only place left was the tongue where the snake bit Tejaji and as a consequence he passed away

(Vyas6). One more tale which appears more realistic narrates the battle with the Mers and states that Tejaji was seriously wounded and he fell down at a place where a snake was present. The snake bit him on his tongue which caused his death.

Tejaji passed away at a place called Sursara near Kishangarh. A temple was built at that place and a cattle fare used to be held every year. (Jodhpur Records) But in 1734 A.D. during the reign of Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur, the chieftain of Parbatsar took the statue of Tejaji from Sursara, Kishangarh to Parbatsar and installed it there. Since then Parbatsar is the main shrine of Tejaji. Every year for ten days in rainy season (From Bhadrapad Shukla 5-15) a cattle fare is held in which traders, peasants and devotees of Tejaji gather in huge numbers. (Adams 138) Similar fares are held at his birth place Khadnal, Sursara, the place of his death, Beawer and Chittorgarh. His temples are found, besides other places, at many places in the erstwhile states of Bundi, Ajmer, Kishangarh and Chittorgarh. In fact, almost every village in Rajasthan has a small place of worship called Devra with the icon of Tejaji riding a horse, with a naked sword in his hand, his wife by his side and a snake biting at his tongue. Similar figurines carved on leaf-shaped silver plates are worn by the Jat peasants round their neck.

Folk deities of Rajasthan are worshipped by the masses across regions and religions. There are songs, hymns, plays and folk form of oral literature like “Katha”, “Khayal” and “Beawal”. Tejaji is worshipped almost all over the state. On the tenth day of the month of Bhadrapad people organize the recital of “Beawala” of Tejaji, some others organise his “Katha” and at places people play his “Khayal” depicting important events of his life. Hundreds of people gather to watch these performances. Besides these, numerous songs depicting the valour, determination and promise-keeping are sung in the peasantry. The songs describe his life-style, his love for the peasantry and cattle-rearing communities, his promise made to rescue cows, his willingness and ready acceptance to fight the Mers, his promise made to the snake and the supreme sacrifice he made to honour his word. They also depict his domestic chores.

In the rainy season when the peasants begin to plough the fields, they begin by singing the songs devoted to Tejaji called Teja-ter. They have a belief that this will be a good omen for the crops and the yield will be good. (Swami 83) **The peasants are able to identify themselves with Tejaji as their lives are also like that of Tejaji. They have to undergo situations similar to**

those faced by Tejaji. Therefore the songs are a source of inspiration for the worldly life, the daily chores that they are involved in. They do not relate to the spiritual world, the idea of emancipation or the supernatural. Tejaji is worshipped as an icon of human virtues and even when the devotees approach him through his worship it is to gain some material accomplishment.

Like Gogaji, another folk deity of Rajasthan, Tejaji is also worshipped as a god of snakes. There is a popular belief that if a string of Tejaji called Tejaji ki Tant is tied to the right leg of a person bit by a snake, the poison does not affect him. (Rajputana District Gazeteers 34) Such a person is, then taken to a shrine of Tejaji and after proper offerings and prayers, the string is cut. In some of the songs sung by women, Tejaji is requested to remove the effect of the poison of Black Cobra. (Choyal 5) Another song narrates that just by taking the name of Tejaji the poison of the snake in victim's body loses its effect.

Dr. Kalyan Singh Shekhawat, an expert on Rajasthani language, literature and culture talks of the folk deities of Rajasthan, "These folk gods and goddesses have never been supernatural creatures, but were a part of this human world and they devoted their lives for the welfare of the society. That is why they were also called "Peer". (Shekhawat 360) They were the ideals of their time and attained such height that they were treated as gods and goddesses. They are men as well as women like Ramdevji, Pabuji, Tejaji, Hadbuji, Mallinathji, Gogaji, Bheruji, Kesariya Kanwarji, Mehaji, among gods and Satiji, Jeen Mataji, Karniji, and Nine goddesses of the Charans. Folk deities have been described as "Peers":

Pabu, Hadbu, Ramdev, Mangaliya Meha,

Paanchu Peer Padharjyo, Gogajijeha.

The couplet welcomes the folk deities namely Pabuji, Hadbuji, Ramdevji, Mangaliyaji, Mehaji and Gogaji. They are all addressed as Peer which literally means "An old wise man".

Tejaji belonged to a Jat family which is a community primarily of peasants. In Rajasthan, agriculture is supported and supplemented by animal husbandry and therefore cattle are unconditionally regarded as important an asset as land is. Therefore Tejaji's popularity as a deity roots from his selfless sacrifice to rescue cows. Another deity Gogaji also died while rescuing

cows though in his case the cows belonged to him only and he died defending them against his own kith and kin. He is also revered by the peasantry and a string with nine knots called “Goga–Rakhdi” is tied to the plough and at the wrist of the plougher in the hope of better crops. (Report Murdumshumari 14) Like Tejaji, Gogaji is also associated with snakes and it is said that just by remembering Gogaji as a “Jahir Peer”, the poison loses its effect.

Wherever Tejaji’s temples and shrines exist, annual fares are held. At Parbatsar , the main shrine of Tejaji, a cattle-fare is held. **Fares are a very important embodiment of the cultural and economic life of a region. The fares are occasions of expressing collectively the faith, beliefs, joys and interests of people. In the case of festivals the rejoicing is more confined to individual families or communities while fares are more carnivalesce in nature. There is greater intermingling of heterogeneous populations across class, caste, religion, gender and political affiliation. The economic activity becomes primary though people gather in the name of a deity, their activities revolve round economic and social concerns.**

Tejaji’s fare at Parbatsar is a huge cattle fare. For ten days cattle– rearers from far and wide gather at Parbatsar with thousands of cows, oxen, camels, horses, donkeys and mules etc. which are bought and sold there. It is a huge trade fare for peasantry where nowadays agricultural equipments, high yielding varieties of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides are also available. These fares underline the importance of livestock in the life of rural Rajasthan. Nagori Oxen, Sanchori cows, horses and camels from Gudha Malani are famous in the region. These days hybrid species are also available. **Dr. Kalyan Singh Shekhawat writes about these fares, “They have cultural value but their economic significance also cannot be ignored. Cattle have been described as wealth. It is also a sign of one’s prosperity.”(Shekhawat 365)**

Tejaji and other folk deities, besides being icons of the faith of peasantry have also played a role of social reformers. There are several historical evidences that society was then divided into social strata determined by caste and there were many communities which were treated as untouchables. These folk deities adopted a very liberal and cordial attitude towards these communities and unlike the orthodox Brahminical order, allowed them all religious freedom to be a part of their faith. Most of the folk deities , thus became presiding

deities of the toiling masses and helped the peasantry in particular to assert their identity and independence.

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