

THE EPIC OF PABUJI

Overview and Genre The Pabuji story is one of the many oral epics sung in India. Epic, of course, is a genre normally associated in India with the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, but ever since the 1960s field workers have documented dozens of other stories that are epic in scope, theme and characters. The main theme is either martial, along the lines of the *Iliad* and *Mahabharata*, or romantic, closer to *Roland* and the *Ramayana*, or sacrificial, a more distinctly Indian theme, which focuses on self-sacrifice, usually leading to death, by a man or (more typically) a woman. Oral epics, then, resemble other epics, but what defines them is their continuing tradition of oral performance and their close relationship with a community of performers and audience. They are also, usually, very long, requiring several nights to sing. They are typically composed in simple verse form with interspersed dialogue, which the performers sometimes enact as a separate drama. Although these oral epics form a separate category from the Sanskrit epics, they borrow story material from those texts that they then often localise with specific place names. In the same manner, oral epics also use the familiar Hindu pantheon of deities, but, again, usually identifying a 'great god,' say Siva, with a local deity. In many instances, the performance of an oral epic is actually a form of worship dedicated to the local deity, which is why the story means so much to the community.

History Set in the western, dry region of Rajasthan, or Rajputana, the Pabuji epic has a distinct regional flavour. Rajasthan takes its name from the Rajput clans who dominate local society and whose martial nature is legendary. Also reflected in the epic story is the dry, half-desert landscape, with its camels and cattle. Pabuji, the hero, is a Rajput by caste but he forms links with cattle and camel herders, which are also the castes that have historically performed this epic. From limited evidence (mostly historical chronicles held in Oriental Research Institute in Jodhpur, Rajasthan), it appears that Pabuji was an historical person. Although the earliest surviving manuscript of the story is dated to the 16th century, Pabuji probably lived in the early 14th century CE, near the village of Kolu on the edge of the western desert.

He is said to have been a notorious cattle and camel thief (a role conveniently transferred to his enemies in the story). The early written texts do not present him as a god, which is a status he seems to have acquired in the process of his story becoming a ritual performance. From other accounts, for example, we do know that he has been worshipped as a local deity since at least the 17th century and that his story has been sung by a special sub-caste of Bhopos (see section on 'performance' below). In a chronicle of the history of Marwar (another region of Rajasthan), dated to about 1650 CE, we see that Pabuji has supernatural powers, although he is not exactly a god. Over time, though, he did acquire a divine ancestry (as the son of a nymph) in a process of deification that is completed by his ascent to heaven. Today Pabuji is widely worshipped by the Rebari caste of cattle and camel herders, both in small temples and in performance by the itinerant Bhopos.

Cultural Significance This oral epic, like the many others in India, has a multi-layered significance. At the local level, in the villages and towns of western Rajasthan, the epic provides entertainment when it is performed overnight for more than a week. As a story, it tells local people, who are mainly camel and cattle herders, about the exploits of a medieval hero who lived in their region. To western readers and listeners, the story may appear fantastical, but to local people it represents continuity with the past. Local audiences would also marvel at the supernatural elements in the story, but they would take heart at its ethos. It dramatises the Rajput warrior code by showing that Pabuji is kind-hearted but stout and fiercely loyal. As in a good television thriller, the plot has a central dramatic moment: just at the most personal point in the story—when Pabuji is about to be married—he is called into action by his promise to defend someone. The hero is a man of his word, but he is also a tragic hero, who dies in the righteous cause of defending a woman. Revenge for his unjust death is then deflected to the next generation, to his nephew Rupnath, who slays his uncle's killers. And like a good Indian story, it ends with the heroic nephew fading into the sunset as a holy man.

But why does Pabuji have to die? This question leads us to the larger, pan-Indian layer of the story's importance. This epic story, its plot and especially the deification of its hero, illustrates the complex process of how local culture feeds into and is, in turn, nurtured by Indian culture as a whole. This interaction between the 'little tradition' and the 'great tradition' (as it has been described) is the crux of understanding Indian culture. The point is that Pabuji must die in order to become a god, and the

process of deification can be identified from texts and from field work. First, we need a dead hero because he is a figure worthy of admiration, which then generates stories about his life and death. Over time, those stories expand and coalesce into a local epic: the place of the hero's death is marked by a stone or a tree, which becomes upgraded to a small shrine and then a temple. An image of the deified hero is installed in the shrine and singers are hired to perform his story at an annual festival. This process, in roughly this sequence of stages, has occurred in hundreds of localities across India, producing a host of local gods and goddesses, historical figures who died and were deified for their death. Some of these local deities, in a later stage, become identified with a 'great' god or goddess such as Vishnu or Parvati. Sometimes the local hero/god is provided with a previous existence, in which he or she was an incarnation of a great god. In other instances, the reverse happens and a local figure merges with a great god. In either case, the local figure is deified through identification with a figure in pan-Indian Hindu mythology.

A third layer of significance for this epic is that it illuminates the interaction between oral and written traditions. In the case of the Pabuji epic, for instance, we see that there is a 16th-century manuscript, of only 370 lines, that contains the core of the story. And now, today, we have performances of more than 4,000 lines. In between, there are several other manuscript versions, from which we can trace the evolution of the story, especially the acquisition of the hero's divinity. The presumption must be that an original story, or group of related stories, about a real person named Pabuji was written down while, at the same time, the story was orally performed. Over time, the performances would keep the story alive and also provide scribes with more material to include in their manuscripts, which, in turn, would provide authenticity for the performances. Song and manuscript thus interweave, each prompting changes in the other, in a process of cultural development. For the Pabuji epic, that process continues into the 21st century. Today, the singers from Rajasthan perform on Indian television and around the world in festivals and conferences.

Story Pabuji, the hero, is the son of a Rajput warrior and a nymph, who disappears at his birth with the promise that she will return, when he is twelve years old, in the form of a horse for him to ride into battle. Pabuji has an older brother (Buro) and two sisters. He also has three close friends: Cado and Debo (who are brothers) and Harmal, a herdsman of another caste. The drama kicks off when Buro quarrels with members of the Khici clan over the spoils of a hunt. One of the Khicis is killed in a fight and peace is only restored when Pabuji offers one of his sisters as a wife to a Khici man.

Hostility with the Khicis is renewed when Pabuji, prompted by a dream, rides off to visit a woman named Deval (an incarnation of a local goddess) and asks her to give him a special horse named Kesar. The problem is that Deval has already promised the horse to the Khicis, who say they will plunder all her cattle if she gives it to anyone else. Pabuji then assures her that he will protect her no matter what happens. Satisfied, she hands over the horse, who is none other than his mother, and together they ride off into the sky.

In a series of incidents, Pabuji wins the support of a snake-god, defeats the demon Ravana in Sri Lanka (as did Rama in the *Ramayana*), where he plunders Ravana's she-camels (no, there are no camels in Sri Lanka, although they are plentiful in Rajasthan). Then he falls in love with a princess on his way home. Undaunted by the bad omens he encounters, Pabuji plans to marry her and arrives at the wedding pavilion. Just as the ceremony begins, however, a bird informs him that the Khicis have stolen cattle from Deval, the lady who gave him his horse and whom he has pledged to protect. His honour at stake, Pabuji leaves the wedding guests astonished as he rides off, with his brother Debo, to confront their enemies. In a nice touch, he gives his bride-to-be a little parrot that will let her know what happens to him. In the battle with the Khicis, brother Debo is killed, but Pabuji is able to recapture the cattle and return them to Deval.

All is not well, however, because the Khicis ambush Pabuji, killing all his men and sending him to heaven with a blow to the head. Debo's widowed wife and Pabuji's fiancé commit sati, by burning themselves. Just before entering the flames, however, Debo's widow rips open her stomach and rescues her unborn baby, whom she names Rupnath. Rupnath grows up ignorant of his origins until he meets the lady Deval, who tells him the story of his father and his uncle (Pabuji). Set on revenge, he kills the Khicis responsible for killing his father and uncle, and then renounces the world and becomes a wandering holy man.

Performance The Pabuji epic is performed by a special group of itinerant bards called Bhopos, who come from an untouchable caste called Nayaks. The Bhopos travel around the state of Rajasthan in pairs, one man and one woman, usually married. They take with them a large painted cloth, about 15

feet long, which depicts the key events of the story and also functions as a portable temple for Pabuji, whom they worship as a god. When night falls, they light their lamps, tune their instrument (a simple spike fiddle) and begin to sing. The man and woman sing in duet, with the man also pointing out the relevant scenes on the cloth. In brief intervals, the man dances, swinging the skirts of his long, red ornamental robe and jingling the bells on his ankles. The story is performed in this way, in front of village audiences, for a series of nights, usually eight or nine, which add up to a total of about 36 hours. The performed text, once it has been recorded and written down, comprises about 4000 lines of song and dialogue. It is interesting to note that the performed text is roughly ten times longer than the written manuscripts of the story.



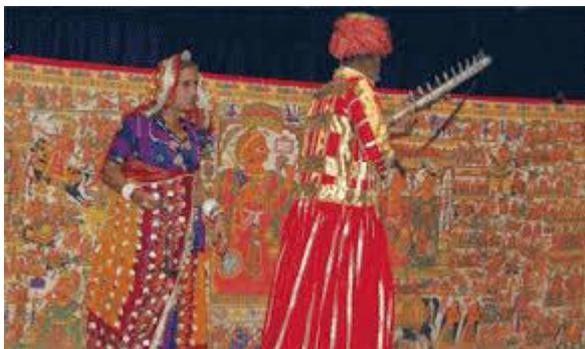
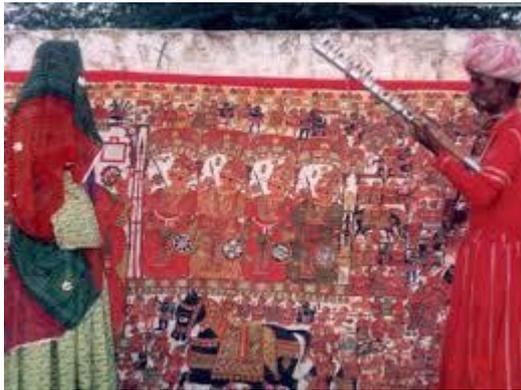
(a painted scroll used in performance; Pabuji is shown to the right of centre, facing a snake; late 20th century)



(the performer's spike fiddle, called a *ravanhatta*, made of bamboo with a coconut shell resonator, and a wooden bow with bells attached)



(a painted scroll showing the figure of Pabuji, late 20th c.)



(singers performing the epic in front of the painted scroll; date unknown, probably late 20th century).

Text in translation (excerpts from performances of the epic, translated by J D Smith)

1. Invocation

The performers (*bhapos*) begin their performance with a prayer to Pabuji. They mention his royal ancestry, his powers and his victories. The invocation asks that Pabuji protect the worshippers (the audience listening to the singing in an isolated desert village), offering several similes from the natural world.

We admire and honour Pabuji who has come to this world
 Pabuji, you are great to have come
 You are the son of Rao Dhamdal, the royal king, as powerful as a royal elephant
 Fly your mare in the sky to defeat the enemy!
 Defeat your enemy and protect your dynasty!
 Pabuji, you are lying on a palanquin, covered by a sheet
 People say, 'Come to us, We offer you an earthenware lamp, incense and prayers
 Please come to us and help us'.
 A hen will incubate her chickens

An aquatic animal will protect her children in water
But a barren woman is powerless
A parrot sits on a branch of the mango tree
So adorned in multi-coloured plumes he cannot fly
Greed is evil
Kolu temple is your place of sanctuary, your place of ritual
Pabuji, we pray to you each morning and evening
Napasar and Bilasar are also places we perform rituals
To you, incarnation of Lakshmana 'ascetic deity of the Thar desert',

We pray to you each morning and evening
The dusky-coloured bhopa [singer] speaks to Pabuji
'I pray for you with perfumed sticks of incense
each morning and evening'
Chandaji and Dabaji are the courtiers of Pabuji in this world
We pray for you each morning and evening
The fame of this work, like a light that shines forth,
Will endure forever on this earth.

2. Pabuji's wedding

This second, longer excerpt is taken from the night that describes Pabuji's wedding, which is interrupted. Learning that Deval's cattle are threatened by the Khicis, Pabuji leaves the ceremony and goes to battle against the Khicis. As this is a literal translation, there are many repetitions, but we can follow the wedding list, which includes Ganesa, the elephant god, who comes to the wedding on his familiar rat; then comes Krishna, Hanuman with his monkey army and Ramdev [Rama]. Note that Pabuji belongs to the Rathor tribe or caste. On his way to the wedding, Pabuji is stopped by Deval, who wants to know who will protect her from the Khicis. Pabuji assures her that he will, and that her enemies 'will take food from his sword.'

As (Pabuji) sat on his throne the brahmin put the garland of flowers round his throat;
as Pabuji turned round he tied on him the bridal threads dyed with turmeric.
Pabuji was seated on a tasselled rug which he had spread out;
close in front of him were seated his brave leading warriors.

(Pabuji said,) 'Cādo my chieftain, have nine maunds of rice prepared in turmeric; circulate invitations to all the gods and goddesses in the land! Summon all the other deities (to join) my wedding-procession, (but) do not send an invitation to Jindrāv Khici!
There is an ancient feud in progress between the Raṭhōṛs and the Khicis; he two brothers-in-law have no love for each other (and cannot sit) on the same rug.'
(Then Pabuji spoke to Deval:) 'O goddess, O lady Deval, take my wedding-rice in your hand; O goddess, go forth to give the rice!'
The Cāraṇ of Gaḍvāro took the rice in her hand; the goddess went forth to give the invitations.
The lady Deval took Pabuji's wedding-rice and set off to all the gods in the land to give the invitations.
The lady Deval went to give the first rice to Gaurī's son Gaṇeśa, who has two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi.
So what did Gaṇeśa say?
'O lady Deval, if you give me (one or) two grains of Pabuji's wedding-rice then I too shall come to Pabuji's wedding, riding on my rat!'
(Deval) gave some rice to the great lord Gaṇeśa; he was very happy to come in the Raṭhōṛs' wedding-procession.

[...]

'Kṛṣṇa plays a flute, Rādhā keeps time; many good folk played with him, when he was a cowherd in his childhood.
He seized Kaṃsa's lock of hair, he dealt blows with his club; Kṛṣṇa destroyed Kaṃsa's kingdom and established his own authority.'
(Deval) gave some rice to Kṛṣṇa; he was very happy to come in Pabuji's wedding-procession.
After him to whom should the rice be given?

'(Through the favour of) Hanumān the ascetic one is free from the slightest illness.'
So Hanumān considered, and what did he say?
'Mother (Deval), if you speak my name (once or) twice then I too shall come in the Raṭhoṛs'
wedding-procession, bringing my army of monkeys with me!
(Deval) gave some rice to Hanuman; he was very happy to come in the Raṭhoṛs' wedding-
procession.

After him to whom should the rice be given?
'Should I call him Ramo or Ramdev — should I call him a diamond or a ruby?
The person who meets Ramdev has his every wish granted in the twinkling of an eye.'
(Deval) gave some rice to Ramdev; he was very happy to come in Pabuji's wedding-
procession.

After him to whom should the rice be given?
[...]

The wedding-procession rode, and arrived outside the gate (of Koḷu); (there) the lady Deval,
the goddess, stopped (Pabuji) and addressed him.
The great lord Pabuj considered, and spoke out:
'Lady Deval, you are inauspicious by nature and birth!
How could you create a bad omen by blocking the way of my virgin wedding-procession?'
(Deval replied,) 'O Pabuji, you are travelling to Ūmarkoṭ to be married;

O Pābūjī, what man have you left behind to protect my fortress and my cows?
These days a feud is in progress between the Raṭhoṛs and the Khīcīs;
Khīcī of Jāyal will attack unprotected Gaḍvāro!

(Pabuji said,) 'Lady Deval, speak a little softly with your mouth;
lady Deval, speak a little softly with your mouth;
do not speak the name of Khīcī of Jāyal!
He does not ride within the borders of the Raṭhoṛs.
Lady Deval, now tell me what is on your mind!

How could you create a bad omen by blocking the road of my wedding-procession?
(Deval answered,) 'O Pabuji, you are travelling to Ūmarkoṭ to be married;
O Pabuji, what man have you left behind to protect my fortress and my cows?'
(Pabuji replied,) 'Lady Deval, I have left you the mighty heroes of the village; I have left
behind the village heroes hungry for (food from) my spear!'

(Deval said,) 'O Pabuji, what will the mighty heroes of the village do?
What will they, hungry for (food from) your spear, do?'
(Pabuji answered,) 'Lady Deval, the mighty heroes of the village will throw their discuses; the
heroes, hungry for (food from) my spear, will fill their drinking-gourds (with blood)!
Lady Deval, I have left you the spotless Sun(-god) with his rising rays;
I have left you my brother Buṛo, elder than all (of us).'
(Deval said,) 'O Pabuji, do not speak the name of King Buṛo with your mouth!

Reading

John D. Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, 1991

John D. Smith, 'The Ideology of Indian Epics,' In Stuart Blackburn et al (eds.), *Oral Epics in India*, 1989.

Jyotindra Jain, 'Painted Myths of Creation: Art and Ritual of an Indian Tribe,' In *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*, 1998