

*How can I dance if my stage is broken?
How can I dance if my skirt is torn?*

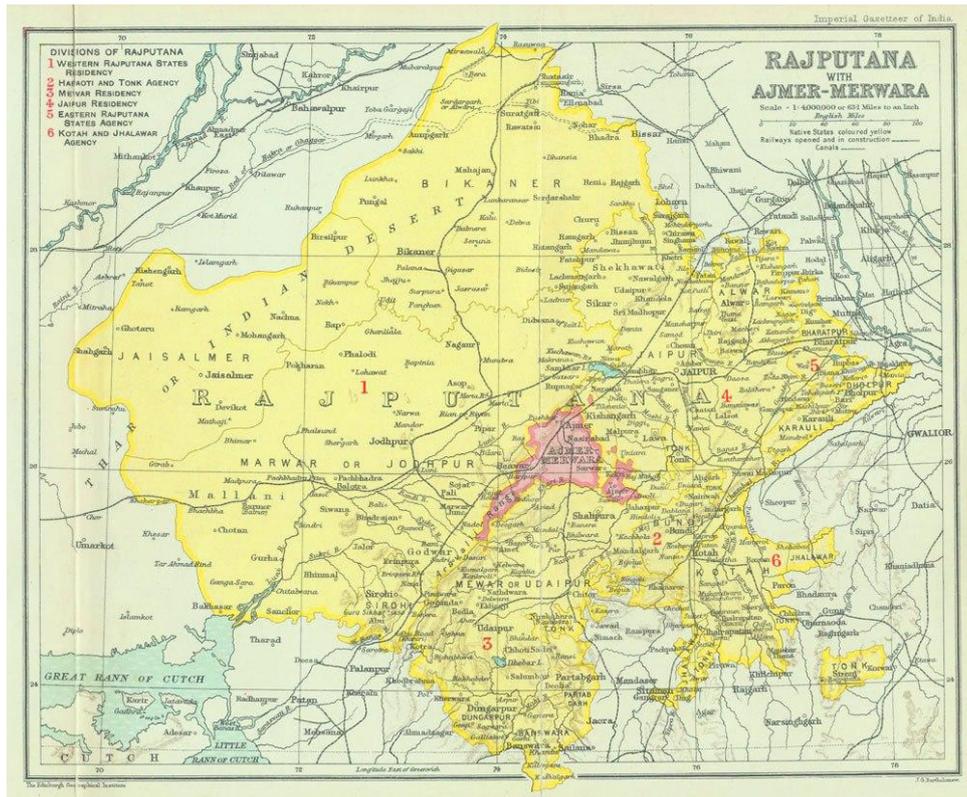
Songs of the Jogi Nath Kalbelia of Jaisalmer



Kalbelia dancer in her encampment, Jaisalmer, 2008

Introduction

I discovered the haunting songs of the Jogi Nath Kalbelia women of Jaisalmer in 2009 through the help of my colleague, Jethu Singh Bhatti, a local environmental activist and 'water warrior'. Jaisalmer is situated at the extreme west of Rajasthan (formerly Rajputana) in India in the sparsely populated Thar desert, on the border with Pakistan. The Jogi Nath Kalbelia nomads inhabit this terrain and once roamed through the huge expanse of the Thar desert into Sindh, what is now Pakistan, before Partition.



The Jogi Nath Kalbelia are an indigenous tribe of nomads¹ who used to roam the Thar desert. Women would wander through villages, 'singing for their supper', while the men would charm snakes for a living. Jogi men are now banned from snake charming but the women (known as 'Jogins'), still perform *feri*, their ancestral vocation, wandering through markets and villages 'singing for their supper'. What is new in Jaisalmer is that some young girls also dance on the sand dunes by day and in tourist tents by night, an income-generating venture which, in the eyes of some, is a transgression of the tribe's traditional values.

Intrigued by their unusual relationship to song, I undertook a project to make a series of documentary films archiving their traditional singing and dance traditions (which I hoped, could be sold on to promote their livelihood as professional singers) and to reveal how these groups have chosen to confront the moral quandaries and socio-economic challenges facing their community. This paper is designed to accompany the DVD made for this project, entitled '*Singing on Broken Ground*'.

II History of the Project



A Jogin from a traditional *dera* near Jaisalmer, 2008

The prime mover of the project was Jethu Singh Bhatti. I first met women from the Jogi Nath nomadic communities near Jaisalmer when working on an internationally funded project to improve access to water supply in Rajasthan in 2008 with Jethu. He had suggested that we drop in on one of their nomadic communities so we did, and heading out into the desert we found a series of thatched huts scattered around the encampment and a rush of children flooding out to greet us, their arms outstretched.

On arriving Jethu immediately asked the women to ‘dance’ and they cordially obliged.² ‘Dancing’ appeared to my naive eyes to be one of the main ways in which the Jogi Nath women sustained their livelihood. They seemed delighted to perform and I had no idea at that time of the connotations ‘dancing’ might suggest to others within the tribe.

The following year, I went back to Jaisalmer and at Jethu’s request,³ filmed songs and interviews with two famous Jogin⁴ singers in Jaisalmer, Dabaa and Biki, in the *dera* (or encampment) of the headman, Jawar Nath.⁵ This is the first time that I was confronted by their plangent melodies and unique performance tradition..

The interview soon meshed with performance and Dabaa and Biki began by singing hymns to their own deity, Kanipau and then to Mataji, the mother goddess, whose shrines are found all over Rajasthan. The lyrics seemed to suggest that the singers were witnessing a vision of the incarnation of the goddess Deval, accompanied by *joganai*, the ‘Seven Sisters’, the local deities believed to govern the gift of fertility. In the vision, the goddess herself appears bedecked in splendid accoutrements: bangles of oyster shell and a golden head ornament (*borla*), gifts which bestow fertility and wealth as plants are said to ‘bloom with pearls’.

The Jogins then sang *Morubai*, a song in Jaisalmer which has attained the status of a ‘signature song’ for the Jogi Nath. *Morubai* means ‘peahen’ and is the affectionate name for a Jogin, in this case, a woman from the region of Dhat in Sindh. This song

tells a story: a Jogin has married a man who lives far away from home. In their society, marriage for a young girl is a sad departure. *Morubai* must leave Sindh where 'the mangoes and tamarind thrive', to come to 'the land of wild petunias', where 'the wind hurls the sand into the air'. She likens her plight to that of the Banjara nomad whose life is spent endlessly meandering across the Thar desert.

Intrigued by this spectacular introduction, I decided to come back the following year to find out more about the Jogis and their songs. I applied for a small grant to cover filming and documentation of the Jogi Nath singing traditions from the Firebird Foundation for Linguistic and Anthropological Research. The Jogi's language, a form of Rajasthani dialect, was difficult even for locals to understand and I wanted to unravel the meaning of the lyrics we had translated in 2009, this time in the company of the Jogis. What impressed me was the fact that these people had a zest for life and freedom which was tantalising and I loved the fact that singing was the Jogis' principal mode of cultural expression.

I decided to film groups of women singing, starting back again at Jawar Nath's *dera*. I was again accompanied by my anthropologist colleague, Priyanka Mathur, our interpreter, Suraj Rao, and our local expert, Jethu Singh. By this time, Dabaa and Biki had migrated away and instead, we met Kamla, Mira and Dhana, Jawar's wife. They sang together, with musical accompaniment supplied by Jawar playing a *bim*, the Jogi flute.



Portrait of Jawar Nath and Mira, *Jawar nath ki dera*, 2011

Jethu explained to us that all songs begin with an invocation, like a prayer. When we asked, 'Kamla, what's your favourite song?' she and the other members of the group replied, '*Awluri*', to which Mira said, 'Go ahead... initiate! *Okhil!*' This was the signal to begin. And as we gradually came to realise, the act of singing is a form of devotional performance, and therefore, a kind of prayer.

After each song, I tried to elicit commentaries from the performers about its meaning and when it would be sung. Each woman offered a personal interpretation of the song, not always the same, and this seemed to illustrate the diversity and range of interpretations of songs within the traditional repertoire.

After this long recording session and discussion, we set off over the gravelly desert into the hinterlands of Jaisalmer and quite by chance, bumped into two Jogins crossing the road. We asked if they would sing for us. They would.

Their names were Shanti and Mohini and they led us into a circle of sand, ringed by a low stone wall. This was their encampment for the time being as their houses had been bulldozed by the municipality. They sang heartily and enthusiastically, though clearly singing was a habit of the past. Their vocation as singers had been eclipsed by their new profession: working nights in hotel kitchens.

We then went searching for Dabaa. She had moved to a temporary encampment in the desert near her daughter-in-law's place about forty kilometres away from Jaisalmer. The place was denuded of trees and indistinguishable as a campsite. As she sat there on the sand with her daughter and grandchildren, Dabaa explained the meaning of the Jogi songs with her usual candour and enthusiasm.



Dabaa and her children in their desert encampment

As part of the last stage of the research project, we interviewed the head man, Jawar Nath. It was during this interview that I realised how I had misconstrued the complex relationship of the Jogis to dance.

Dancing has traditionally been a private activity of the Jogis. It is known as *chalcot* and is usually performed by these communities at their own celebrations. Mature women like Dabaa and Biki told us that they would dance at their own weddings and celebrations as part of the rituals for the bride and groom, but not for tourists. Moreover, dancing has not proved very lucrative and as we learnt, is tainted as women who dance in public are morally suspect. Outsiders suggested to us that 'women who dance' indulged in prostitution, a blot on their reputation the Jogis naturally wished to avoid. As we discovered, these issues created conflict and placed dance in an ambiguous cultural category for the Jogi Nath Kalbelia, an issue about which tourists are blissfully unaware.

For the final phase (transcription of the songs in Marwari and translation into basic English), we wished to engage the Jogis in the interpretation process. Because of the communications afforded by mobile phone technology, we were able to phone them and request their presence at the transcription and interpretation exercise. They obliged us by coming into Jaisalmer from the desert, and then, by using the audio/video playback as 'text', we were able to recreate the performance event. Moving backwards and forwards between Rajasthani, Hindi and English, Suraj, Jethu, Priyanka and myself were able to agree on an interpretation of the lyrics and an initial translation in English which would convey as accurately as possible the meaning of their songs.

During this session, Jethu Singh informed us that musicologists who had studied the songs of the Jogi Nath Kalbelia from Jaisalmer thought that they were, in many ways, unique. ⁶ According to them, these songs should be described as 'transboundary' -more 'Sindh (the region which is now in Pakistan) than Hind' (i.e. Hindustan or India), perhaps because they reflect the culture of the Thar desert and the enclave known as Dhat. Since the Thar desert is a huge expanse of sand and scrub at the intersection of what are now two separate political domains, it is logical that these ancient songs should reflect the geographical integrity of the desert before Partition.

The Jogis regard the practice of singing for alms to be a sacred vocation of their tribe, devotees of the ascetic Nath. But this conviction is not accepted amongst the tribe of Kalbelia as a whole. Miriam Robertson's field study of Jaipur-based Kalbelia snake-charmers in 1998 suggests that women of the tribe known as the Delhivale Kalbelia do not sing songs as a vocation, nor do they deem it a sacred profession. Robertson asserts that this group does not allow its womenfolk to go into the streets to beg, sing or dance. She writes:

'...the women seen in the streets of Jaipur are *sanperins* [women snake charmers] from other regions, or of the Chakkivale [grindstone makers] or the Chabdivale [basket-makers] sub-castes... [and are] considered by these Kalbelia to be their ritual inferiors "because of their behaviour and profession..." (1998: 101)

Perceptions of status and caste distinctions within the Kalbelia community play a large part in determining which groups may be allowed to marry their daughters to sons as Jawar Nath informed us when we asked about how marriage arrangements were conducted:

'We snake charmers (*sapera*) are different from other Kalbelia tribes. We Kalbelia are different from the ones who make the clay toys. There are those *Jogis* who make the clay toys, and those who make the stone grinders, but they are a different caste from us. We marry our sons to their daughters, but not the reverse. We acquire wives from them and also animals.'

Engagement and marriage is, therefore, hierarchically determined according to perceptions of caste amongst the *Jogis*, and such contracts are negotiated as part of a reciprocal arrangement.

'When we want to marry our daughter, first, we go to the groom and to his family. We go to them and them to us. If there's no exchange of brides, then we go to the [prospective] groom's family and ask them for a young groom. If they accept, they will plead with the elders to accept the proposal. If they accept, then the wedding will take place.'

Bayli explained clearly that the circumstances of marriage are now changed in that now women seek husbands who have a proven chance of a good income. The trial marriage arrangement known as bride service is no longer practised, according to Bayli. This fragment from the Holi song, *Arrarrarrarra*, sheds some light on women's rationale:

'Mother, marry me off to a civil servant
Mother, marry me off to a civil servant
If you did, he would take me round the country
Arrarrarrarra

Mother, marry me to a miller who grinds flour
Mother, marry me to a miller who grinds flour
And I will give you a lot of flour

The guy you chose for me is not worth two cowries!
He's good-looking but...
He's good-looking but he's not worth two cowries
Arrarrarrarra

Mother, don't marry me off to a tall man
He will fall and break his leg! [*and so become a liability!*] ...etc.

Singing for alms is not regarded as shameful for the Jogi Nath Kalbelia of Jaisalmer though poverty is increasingly considered a shame. During the late 1990s when

Robertson did her field work in Jaipur and wrote her ethnography, *saperas* or snake charmers were still allowed to practise their profession in public places, a situation which has changed radically in the interim, with some exceptions.⁷ What the men consider shameful is that their ancestral vocation of charming snakes and curing snake bite is denied to them and they must demean themselves by quarrying stone.



Snake charmer in Jaipur, charming snakes for tourists, 2012

III The art of *feri* : the Jogi Nath Kalbelia's ascetic tradition in transition

The name Jogi derives from the word *yogi* and suggests an ascetic and spiritually-oriented devotee, like the *sadhu* of India, in their case, the lineage of Nath. *Feri* or 'singing for their supper' is how the older women define the profession they continue to practise. They also earn cash by 'cracking' stones to make gravel, a poorly paid and exhausting job at a very low hourly wage. The ascetic's creed is the one by which they have traditionally lived, and while the precepts of asceticism and denial have sustained their communities materially and spiritually for centuries in the extremely harsh and arid environment of the Thar, the spectre of poverty and disenfranchisement now hangs over their very survival.

Various elements of their lifestyle have dramatically changed. The Jogis' traditional pattern of nomadic migration is constrained by the erection of a barbed wire fence across the expanse of the Thar desert separating Pakistan and India; the tribe has become mainly sedentarised; men are forced to work in quarries doing hard labour and public performances of singing and dancing for foreigners have become a

lucrative source of income for young women. The art of *feri* is now being professionalised.

We asked the older Jogins how they first learned their songs. The elder women, Dabaa and Biki, performed as children with their mothers and sisters, accompanied by their father on the *bim*. As Dabaa says,

'I learnt to sing to feed myself... to satisfy my stomach. When we roam from village to village singing for money, we learn how to sing...When one's heart and mind has the desire to learn, one will learn!'

The traditional Jogi repertoire includes a range of songs, some tragic, some humorous and many poignant and nostalgic. *Morubai*, *Jeder*, *Lalusa*, *Awluri* and *Neruri* are known best by older women, while the *Jermatiyya* (i.e. modern or 'fusion') songs such as *Kamli*, *Chandiyya* and *Arrarrarrarra* are popular with younger performers. As they are more rhythmic, these have become the natural sung accompaniment to celebratory dances on the feast of Holi or in entertainment venues.

What is fascinating is that these traditional songs are constantly being re-invented and re-performed. The repertoire of songs is known to older women across the region by the same titles but their lyrics are in constant flux. As we witnessed, they are being re-composed by women in their separate encampments, so acquiring different inflections. Jogins mould their lyrics and alter the melodies of these songs to suit their own mood and inclinations, and in so doing, devise their own poetic and musical creations. This spontaneous, innovative quality and antiphonal performance mode are their distinctive features.

The classic Jogi song, *Neruri*: 'How can I dance if the ground is broken?' for example, which was sung for us on two occasions, is a case in point. It is named after the girl called *Neruri* but the lyrics have been substantially modified by each group of individual singers.

I first heard *Neruri* sung by Kamla, Mira and Dhana and interpreted it as a nostalgic song about the changing landscape of Jaisalmer ... but when I heard it sung by Shanti and Mohini, I realised that it had been reworked as a song of unrequited love and longing, replete with the same anxiety about the future and longing for the past, but with a different tone and emphasis. Such songs, therefore, act as frames onto which new variants, stanzas and metaphors may be interposed. They become vehicles for individual as well as collective folk expression.

Most Jogi women and children know the basic repertoire of songs (*Jeder*, *Morubai*, *Lalusa* and so on) but as becomes clear, many of these songs, suggestive of a remote past and relegated to an ancient time, are, nevertheless, amplified with contemporary lyrical annotations and additions, as the next section reveals.

IV Songs of anguish, songs of joy...



Ekli and Bayli sing on the sand dunes as a tourist camel passes by

As we discovered, the traditional songs of the Jogi community in Jaisalmer seemed to divide into two distinct categories, songs of anguish and songs of joy. The first category seems to be evocative of a past age and past longings. The song, *Jeder*, for example, invokes memories of departures across the desert sands to Sindh (a voyage that used to be undertaken freely before the construction of the barbed wire fence along the length of the Pakistan/India border) and expresses a longing for the beloved to return. As Dabaa sings, 'Nearby... nearby... have a job nearby...' The song is about a wife or mother seeking the return of her son or lover who has gone off to a foreign country for work. It can be sung 'by anyone who wishes for the return of loved ones', she insists, and functions as a plea for the return. The song tries to cajole and in some cases, bribe the loved one into agreeing to return and, as he travels his 'desolate path, bells jingle on the horse's neck'. But the mood of this song and its underlying theme varies between singers. Ekli and Bayli sing a happy and enthusiastic version of *Jeder* while sitting on the sand dunes, while Kamla perceives the song as embodying the sad lament of a married woman trapped in an alien environment:

'*Jeder* is a woman who was married and whose in-laws would not allow her to go home and meet her parents. She is weeping... lamenting'.

In their version of the song, the singers try to persuade the husband to come home and stay home. They entice the husband with delicacies such as *halva* and *labsi*, promise fantastic gifts such as pearls served up 'in a bowl of gold; and remind him of the image that lingers of his departure: 'the gleaming hump of his camel saddle'.

Kamla suggests that the meaning of the song could also be the fulfilment of a wish: 'If their daughters were not coming home to visit', she said, 'the parents would call upon them (the girl's in-laws) to sing *Jeder*'. This song, therefore, is also an invocation, even perhaps a spell, and a propitious wish.

Awluri (also known as *Dhiyabhai*) is another nostalgic song about brothers and sisters which again invokes the theme of departure for Sindh across the expanse of the Thar. From their lyrics, we can perceive the nostalgia the Jogis feel when they contemplate how they once roamed the vast expanse of the Thar. The ancient traditions of their nomadic culture, which encouraged intermarriage between distant communities and required families to cross the Thar, have now been destroyed by barbed wire. The political chaos which prompted turmoil and division in 1947 and since has reaped its toll.

The town called Umarkot (in Sindh) is the Jogi's destination in the song but it is now in alien territory... in what is now Pakistan. To arrive there, one must tread a 'bleak' and 'desolate' path. This song expresses the anguish of separation as the beloved brother and sister sit on the train, regaled in wedding finery ('her arm bracelet gleaming... her nine-chain-pendant gleaming... as beautiful as a female parrot') and they are weeping. The train then disappears beyond the vanishing horizon. Kamla then suggests another occasion for the song:

'In the past, daughters could not go home for a visit if their blood brothers did not come and pick them up.'

This scene of the parting is emotionally charged. The girl's half-brother reacts to his sister's departure with nonchalance: he behaves as if he were not related... 'like guests', she says. The issue is that 'in another village she will now reside' and on singing this song, Kamla, Mira and Jawar admit that their eyes 'become bedewed with tears' while in a more lively version of this song, Ekli and Bayli sing of their brother who was 'born of the same womb' (i.e. the 'blood-brother') who is crossing the black hills and moving 'to a foreign land'. They urge their brother to wake up and take notice, and what is noteworthy in this version is the constant invocation to 'Allah'. The Jogi Nath Kalbelia worship their distinctive deities (in particular, Kanni Pau), have their own origin myths and practise their own unique religious rituals at their own temples. But from the lyrics it is clear that they feel some affinity to Islam, perhaps because of their historic links to Sindh.⁸

The linguist, Suraj Rao described the performance of this song as being in 'Sindhi style'. Perhaps the song has more in common with ancient Dhat culture on the Western edge of the Thar, than with Jaisalmer. The magnificent citadel of Jaisalmer, a World Heritage Site, was built by a Maharaja called Jaisal 870 years ago, but Lodurva was originally the capital. It is situated about sixteen kilometres away from Jaisalmer on the site of an early Jain temple and was a prominent stop on the camel trains and caravan route between India and what is now Pakistan, long travelled by nomads such as the Jogi Nath Kalbelia.

Another song expressive of existential anguish is *Neruri*. This song is revelatory of remorse and their deep feelings of shame. In the Jawar Nath version, *Neruri*, a woman, is living in the city but in the song, expresses her longing for the taste of wild *gangariyya* fruit, one of many fruits of the forest enjoyed traditionally by the Jogis in the deserts of Jaisalmer, and other rare delicacies. Dhana, mother of Kamla, describes this song was 'a nostalgic song, composed by an old woman' while others suggest that it was 'invented by Ekli and Bayli'.

Dhana, Kamla and Mira sing, 'How can I dance if my stage is broken? How can I dance if my head veil/ skirt is torn?' In a similar refrain, Shanti and Mohini bemoan their poverty and low status: 'How can I dance? How can I dance? The mirrors on my *ghaghra* are too shiny...' Shanti and Mohini feel ashamed by their poverty and their ground is indeed broken. Shanti and Mohini's *dera* has been destroyed. The 'municipality' has razed their encampment to the ground so this song has greater poignancy when they sing it. They have re-erected a low wall of stones within which they will sleep, but their future is in doubt. They have a home base elsewhere where they have built *pukka* houses but that is too far away for them to live in and do the type of work they do... and as they declare, they intend to defy the public edict and rebuild this encampment after the harvest.

While the universal theme in this song, despite its variations, is the changing landscape of Jaisalmer, Shanti and Mohini see it more as a song of unrequited love and longing. The Jogins gaze at the men of Barmer and contemplate how their aspirations have changed. They dream of chewing the betel nut of Barmer, two hundred kilometres away, and of drinking a little 'wine', a concoction traditionally made from fermented desert fruits. Though Shanti and Mohini produce a polished performance, it is ironic that they no longer perform publically. They have given this up to work in tourist haunts for the prospect of greater revenues.

Kamla, Mira, and Dhana, on the other hand, after singing this song, expressed frankly their own sense of alienation. They fear that they do not belong and are ashamed of their ascetic lifestyle. While for the filming, the women wore their best dresses and jewellery, unlike the Jogis I met in their traditional encampment in 2008 this family has transformed itself and is on the path to become more affluent. This family's new approach to livelihood and materialism, therefore, in many ways, is emblematic of the new, conflicted but globalised, Jogi identity.

Lalusa is another song about resentment and failed love, this time, about a Rajput who fell in love with a Jogin.

'O my Lalusa,
In Jodhpur jail,
For you
The handcuffs are being readied



Portrait of Shanti singing near Jaisalmer, 2010

O my Lalusa,
Tied in your handcuffs,
Your leg in irons

O my Lalusa,
If you open up your pockets and give us money,
We will cut off your handcuffs and release you

O my Lalusa, this is my necklace
I shall sacrifice for you
So that you may be released

O my Lalusa,
You sit in this green police car, arrested
And you are leaving

O my Lalusa,
Pull back the curtain
So that we can see your radiant face

[*Lalusa replies*]: O women, why do you want me to pull back the curtain?
I shall be back tomorrow

O my Lalusa
In the shade of the dunes at sunset

And the shade of the *khejari*¹ tree

O my Lalusa
In the shade of the *khejari* tree
You unrolled a royal *dhurri* (carpet)

O my Lalusa
You unrolled a royal carpet
In the shade of the *khejari* tree

There you melted opium
And then sipped it

O my Lalusa
The place you unrolled your carpet...
Is now studded with crimson blooms

O my Lalusa
The inspector [*munshi*] is saying:
'Don't arrange any meeting...
These two are under surveillance by the Royal family'

O my Lalusa
It's as if a thorn has pierced my leg
I feel the same pain you are suffering

O my Lalusa
The *kharak* ['the sweet, dried date'] has been lost
Our love is also lost
O my Lalusa'

This esteemed Rajput was incarcerated for consorting with a Jogin and his memory is 'as if a thorn has pierced her leg'. In Shanti and Mohini's poetic narrative, the handcuffs are readied and Lalusa is arrested in front of her eyes but she offers to bribe the policeman by offering to give up her precious dowry, the jewellery she wears on her person. The singers describe his radiant face, how he 'melted opium' at their assignation, and conclude with two enduring images:

'The place you unrolled your carpet is now studded with crimson blooms...
The *kharak* (the sweet dried date, symbol of her delicious lover) has been lost'

¹ The *khejari* tree is of the species *Prosopis cineraria*, also called *sangri* in Rajasthani language. This is a sacred tree in Vedic literature which grows in the Thar desert and is regarded as a miracle tree for its nutritive and healing properties.

A different version is sung by Dabaa. On the surface, the song appears to be a romantic idyll, set on the sand dunes: a breeze is 'gently wafting' and the two lovers meet to imbibe opium and liquor on a carpet which has been spread under the sacred *khejari* tree. But resentment seethes underneath. In her commentary, Dabaa reveals her revulsion at this callous arrest and the law of enforced disassociation. During the Raj, inter-caste relations were prohibited and local people could, and did, inform the police of secret liaisons between higher and lower castes.

But for Jawar Nath and family, as we learn from their commentary, Lalusa is remembered as a generous Rajput. Mira recounts the story,

'Once, in one of his fields in which they were working, there was a good harvest of pearl millet, groundnuts and *guwar*... and when we sang to him, he gave us a share of that crop.'

Kamla chimes in to say,

'Lalusa was a very prosperous Rajput who was very fond of taking opium and when they used to harvest the opium, we would sing Lalusa and the effect would double!'

Clearly, in their view, singing the song engenders a beneficial impact, despite its sad theme. I asked Jawar Nath, 'Why did you choose to sing Lalusa? He said,

'These are songs of our ancestors. In this song, we sing about the *dhoti* and red turban of this Rajput...'

Thus, they honour their ancestors in the recitation of these traditional songs.

The Jawar Nath family also chose to sing a song entitled Vardha Charan. This song, both a historical narrative and a lament, was sung only by them and is another account of injustice caused by caste discrimination and unfair laws. In the song, a Charan named Vardha, (that is, a man from the Charan caste, a higher caste notably associated with poets and scholars), falls in love with a Jogin and is determined to marry her. To do so, he must 'become a Jogi'. But in this song, the Charan is jailed for his 'crime', and as a result, the encampment is dismantled and the Jogis move on. The themes of abandonment, both physical and emotional, are paramount. Vardha Charan is imprisoned: people have spied on them and informed on them to the police. He must go back and pick up his belongings, left behind in the open desert. The Jogis have migrated away and their love 'has disappeared like a raindrop evaporating'. His voice was as sweet as that of the *Papaaya*, a Rajasthani bird which traps the first raindrop in its beak', so the lyrics go, and the melody is plangent. In the end, Vardha goes to court. He is offered wine by the Jogin before he goes, but he refuses and smashes the bottle on a stone in anger. This woman has lost Vardha, her lover, and yet is left wearing his gold ring, an ironic and bitter reminder of the love which has been lost.

The Jogis' joyful song repertoire includes ditties, rounds, celebratory songs and liltily rhythmic dancing songs. *Rohiro*, for example, is sung at weddings and revolves around a singular glorious image, a blossom from the flame tree known as *Rohiro*. In the rainy season, this huge shade tree known as *Rohiro* produces a mass of gorgeous crimson blooms which 'cast shadows like a dark cloud'. The symbolic character of this blossom is at the heart of this wedding song. As the bride and groom encircle the sacred fire in the ritual known as the *phera*, Jogins sing this joyful round, inserting multiple verse variants about how the wedding was conceived, how the father and mother gave their agreement and finally, how 'the crimson blossom' is 'plucked' by the groom at the nuptials.

Kangasiyya, on the other hand, is a frivolous ditty recorded with a larger group of Jogins led by Dabaa and Biki in 2009. The word *Kangasiyya* means a wooden comb, decorated with mirrors and bells that jingle, 'gifted to her by her husband'. The possessions acquired by Jogins are few and mainly consist of dowry gifts from parents and in-laws. A gift from a husband is, therefore, to be cherished.

In the song, a woman rues the fact she has lost this highly valued comb. She is so worried about how this loss may be interpreted that she 'forgets to buy flour to cook with', forgets 'to eat wild fruit' (which would protect her skin from sunburn) and so on. She keeps forgetting all the normal routine tasks she would undertake to keep life going smoothly for fear that this loss will be taken as a sign that she does not love him anymore.

According to the Jogins, the song is sung as a valedictory when the bride goes off to her in-laws' house. Women also sing this antiphonal round when sitting together to amuse themselves and any singer may compose new verses in this game, interrupting the others and starting new stanzas in order to keep the song flowing as long as possible.

Hari Mari Kamli, another 'women's song' is a slightly risqué song about a casual flirtation and female promiscuity, so-called 'boisterous women', which Jawar Nath's daughters were too embarrassed to sing in front of men. Ekli and Bayli, on the other hand, happily sang this song on the sand dunes for the tourists, saying that it was 'one of their favourites', along with another about a lover's betrayal called *Chandiya*.



Portrait of Mohini giving an interview, Jaisalmer 2010

V To dance or not to dance...



Ekli dancing on the sand dunes of Sam

The quandary of whether or not to dance is fuelling controversy amongst the Jogi Nath Community in Jaisalmer. Kalbelia women in Rajasthan are associated with public dance performances and Kalbelia dance has become famous due to the success of a famous Jogi dancer named Gulabi. And yet, amongst some elders within this Jogi Nath community dancing is regarded as shameful even though dancers are chaperoned by their musician husbands (as is the case with Ekli and Bayli). Dhana, the eldest woman in the *Jawar Nath ki Dera* is quite clear. She said, 'We don't dance for other people'. Dabaa, although of a younger generation, is also quite explicit about dance. 'We don't do it'. It is problematic and they fear they may not get paid, she argues. Jogis dance within the community on the last day of a marriage and for Holi and such celebrations could last 3-4 hours. As Jawar Nath put it,

'Those who are ready to dance, dance. Those who know how to dance, dance. We don't like our daughters to dance.'

But it would appear that, of late, the economic imperative has prevailed. According to Bayli, 'tourists want to see dancing, not singing' and thus, during the three month tourist season, Ekli and Bayli and their respective families leave their traditional *dera* and migrate fifty kilometres away to the sand dunes of Sam where they set up a temporary encampment. In this place, many of their husbands will hire out camels to tourists while the women will be contracted to perform at desert resorts in the evening.

VI Life in a Jogi *dera*



The Jogis' temporary encampment (*dera*) in Sam 2011

Jawar Nath and his family have lived in the same *dera* in the desert for ten years. Most families have built a one-room house of mud-brick and increasingly, a *pukka* house (i.e. a house built from cement blocks), often with grant money from the Indira Gandhi Foundation or NGOs. Despite this, Jogis have no security of tenure: life is precarious and they possess few assets other than goats, those things they have constructed, a *charpoy* perhaps, and what they carry on their person.

The house is more a symbolic structure, indicative of sedentarisation than a house to live in, however. The tradition still, even for married couples, is to sleep under open skies. A slender wooden frame of the wild petunia plant is erected (as the photo above illustrates) and should rain or a wind storm come, the Jogis will cover it with plastic to shelter their children. As Dabaa says,

'Here we sleep in the open. We don't build any structures. We only dig pits for the baby goats...'

And in her temporary encampment, the only vestige of habitation to be seen was a shade shelter for the goats and a single *charpoi* under which they could rest. Kamla confirmed this by saying that in the rainy season (which, in the Thar desert, may be as brief as one day), they live inside. Jethu asked Jawar, 'But what happens when you live in the open?'

'Well, when we live in the open, sometimes the *chapra* (cover) flies off and sometimes, our children die.'

Jogis own no land but as they perceive the amenities of the city - access to education for their children, safe water and health care - they are anxious to move closer to Jaisalmer. Jogins have often been banned from drawing water from traditional sources as higher castes view them to be 'untouchables' and ban them for using water from the upper caste's 'purer' sources for fear of 'pollution'. Thus, having free access to government-supplied tanks that provide safe water to the public is highly desirable. However, the ancient citadel town of Jaisalmer is currently enjoying a tourist boom with an influx of Indian and foreign tourists, and desert land is constantly being snapped up for hotels. As a result, the Jogi Nath are increasingly liable to displacement by the municipal authorities.

Dhana said,

'We used to be well-off but we were not part of the cash economy...in earlier times, we used to roam from one village to another, sometimes into as many as four villages to get food. We used to sell toys for money, dresses, flour and utensils to Bania, Bhil, Rajput and Meghwal people also...and buy soil, flour, tea and spices. We don't dance for money. We do *feri* in order to get alms by singing songs. Men neither sell nor sing for alms.'

In Dhana's view, that lifestyle provided them with a reasonably sufficient livelihood but now, a generational and ideological gap is opening up. Jogis earn more cash as a result of their engagement with manual labour and the tourist industry, money that is required for dowries. At marriage, women traditionally would receive dowries consisting of jewellery from their mothers and in-laws but now cash earnings fund the purchase of dresses and other accoutrements. In addition, from the State, the Jogis now receive ration cards, entitling them to some basic foodstuffs.

Jogis haven't abandoned the principle of 'roaming' but instead of moving on to their traditional pastures and encampments over the period of a year, they migrate to find jobs share-cropping, doing manual labour, or working in hotels for tourists.

Jethu asked Jawar how they used to establish their *deras*...

'When we were nomadic, we would look around and when we found a big tree, we would camp underneath it. In that way we would extend our settlement...'

' In earlier times, we used to migrate to Amar Sagar, then to Mar Sagar... Today we would be here, and another day we would be there. In earlier times, we would roam around the Khadal area from Jaisalmer up to Ramgarh on the Pakistani border and in summertime, we would live in the Khatru area in Rupsi village, 27 kms north of Ramkut.'

Now, he says that they are 'happy to be sedentary'. In Jaisalmer now, for women, the practice of *feri* continues or has been transformed into tourist performance. As the tourist industry prospers in Jaisalmer, the Jogis realise that they can attract additional audiences for such performances. Young women are honing their vocal skills and practising their songs as a group in order to improve the quality of their public performances. Jogi Nath communities are now experiencing a moment of cultural conflict but they realise that they must acquire cash to survive in this money-oriented modern world.

When asked how he felt about staying in this *dera*, Jawar Nath said,

'We would like to stay in this place. In our *Jogi* community now, people select the village they want to live in and move to it. Most of our relatives are settled in Masourdi and Damudra.

Jethu Singh asked him, 'Why don't you farm?' to which he replied,

'We don't know how to farm. Rajputs have land, we don't. If we had land, we would settle down and harvest a crop.'

Jethu asked him, 'But would you know how to farm?'

Jawar said, 'Yes, if someone gave me the land, I would farm.' I would grow barley, *guwar...*'

At the moment, they survive with goats and by share-cropping to obtain *bajra* (pearl millet), the staple grain.

While the livelihood of the Jogi Nath Kalbelia has undergone drastic transition in the last few decades, their perception of what is socially appropriate has also changed. Yet the Jogi community continues to compose and perform their own songs. The songs speak of their own resentment at marginalisation and persecution as so-called 'Untouchables' in the past and present. They reflect a love of the desert landscape and the menagerie that inhabits it, nostalgia for the old ways, a longing for the taste of desert fruits and memories of illicit trysts 'under the *khejari* tree'. The question remains; will this end and will they become citizens of the new India, as entitled to livelihood, education and land holdings as any other people? For the 'world's largest democracy', this is one of the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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V Bibliography

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VI Endnotes

¹ They are classified by the Indian government as belonging to the category 'Other Backward Classes', or as Jawar Nath calls it, 'OBC'. are classified by the Indian government as belonging to the category 'Other Backward Classes', or 'OBC'.

² Jethu was trying to help the Jogi community survive and brought us to witness a dancing performance so we would contribute to their welfare. He has since established a performance venue where Jogi troupes may perform for tourists in the desert at Manopia.

³ Jethu was anxious to record the tradition of Jogi Nath Kalbelia songs of Jaisalmer as he had loved them since childhood and was afraid that they might disappear without trace.

⁴ The feminine of Jogi

⁵ As I later learned, Kalbelia women, known as 'Jogins', are given only one single first name at birth by which they are known throughout their lives whereas men's names are always appended with the tribal name 'Nath'.

⁶ This was the comment made by the BBC Urdu service ten years ago when they did a programme on the Jogi songs of Jaisalmer.

⁷ Whereas Jawar Nath in Jaisalmer was punished and left by police a hundred kilometres from his encampment for charming snakes, in Jaipur, near the City palace where tourists congregate, snake charming, nevertheless, was still being practised (in contravention of prevailing laws) as recently as January 2012. This seems an unjust and unevenly applied proscription, therefore, even if the ban were devised originally to stop the inhumane treatment of snakes, known to be practised by a few.

⁸ In fact, when describing the ethnicity of the Jogi Nath under the category 'Other Backward Classes' (the category in which the Muslim population of India is normally placed), the Indian government identifies the Jogi Nath of Rajasthan as being 'partly Muslim', which seems an exaggeration.