

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE NORTH INDIAN ORAL EPIC *DHOLA*

Throughout the region of western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and eastern Rajasthan, the epic *Dhola*, also called *Nal Purāṇa* and referred to in recent years as ‘our *Mahābhārata*’ by its singers, remains popular with rural (and recently rural) male audiences. It portrays a world of many castes, of goddesses and powerful women, of kings and magicians, as well as of husbands and wives who quarrel, and complex father-son and familial relations. In this, it presents one aspect of the worldviews of its usually lower caste male singers and their rural elite patrons. Increasingly found on tape cassettes, and hence moving from the arena of folklore to that of popular culture, *Dhola* remains popular because of its continuously changing content and its ability to adapt to ever-new performance styles. Seen in the wider context of other Indian textual traditions, *Dhola*’s king who often stumbles and his lower caste helpmates suggest a tradition that continues to be relevant to its rural audiences, for whom an affirmation of divine moral authority must be balanced by an affirmation of caste identities and loyalties.

In this paper, I briefly outline the history of *Dhola* and its main story line. Then by comparing the most traditional performance I have with the most innovative of the commercial recordings of *Dhola*, I will show how it is being transformed to meet the demands of an increasingly ‘modernized’ lower class male audience. I should note that by ‘modernized’, I am implying being attuned to films, radio, TV, current political issues, and a more urban lifestyle. Milton Singer noted a shift in India to a greater emphasis on aesthetic and entertainment values at the expense of values associated with religious merit in the 1970s (1980). The current transformations of *Dhola* can be seen as part of such a shift, as religion is increasingly merged in novel ways into an emerging popular culture.

The History of *Dhola*

As an oral epic, *Dhola* has a history that goes back only two hundred years or so which is said to have been composed in honour of the goddess of Nagarkot. Despite its possible ‘composition’ some 200-300 years ago, *Dhola* represents a complex weaving of classic Indian stories and oral and written traditions. Parts of it are known from the *Mahābhārata* in its Sanskrit rendition;

other sections are known from fifteenth century Rajasthani Jain ballads, while some pieces have clearly gained popularity through the oral traditions over a period of time. A version of the last two-thirds of the modern oral '*Dhola*' exists as long Braj poems, one attributed to Akbar's finance minister, the Hindu poet and administrator Todar Mal, dating to the late 16th century (Wadley 1999) while several long illustrated printed versions date to the late 1800s (Todarmal 1879; Varma 1883; Sharma 1924). Related oral versions are found in Chattisgarh (Grierson 1890), most likely a result of the eastern movement of the Rajputs and their retinues.

The story of *Dhola* becomes more interesting if we consider the political history of the time in which it was apparently consolidated, a period marked by the decline of the Mughal empire and a new political alignment in the Braj region. Apparently emerging in the late seventeenth century at the decline of Mughal rule, *Dhola*'s popularity coincides with the rise to power in the Braj region of the Jat caste of agriculturists, a caste that eventually ruled much of the area. The Mathura, Agra and Bharatpur region was heavily populated by the Jat farmers, as well as by Gujars, a caste of herdsmen, and Ahirs, another group of farmers/herdsmen. The first Jat rebellion in the Braj region was in 1669: by the late 1600s, the Mughal empire had begun to disintegrate under onslaughts from Marathas, Afghans, and Sikhs, amongst others. These Jat kingdoms from the late 1600s through 1827 were the same locales where *Dhola* developed and continues to be most popular. If the Braj scholars are correct in thinking that the epic coalesced, or gained affirmation, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then we are justified in seeking its roots in Jat rule. And in fact, in many episodes, the caste and kingly status of Nal are challenged, suggesting that it is indeed an epic about upstart kings who seek a status denied them by birth, but proven by battle. Before proceeding, let me introduce a story that takes some thirty nights to tell. While its singers refer to twenty or more *maidān* (fields) or *larāī* (battles), historically and narratively it has three major sections, each with a different oral and written history.

The *Dhola* Story: Section I (Nal's Birth and First Marriage)

This section tells the history of Rājā Pratham of Narvargarh and his wife Rāṇī Manjha. Pratham is childless, despite 101 queens, which causes even his sweeper woman to turn away at the sight of him. After many sacrifices, a *guru* rewards Pratham for his devotion with a rice grain that will give him an heir. Scraping the bottom of a pot, Manjha gets the rice kernel. Because his other hundred queens are incensed at the pregnancy of only Rāṇī Manjha,

they bribe a *brāhmaṇa* priest to kill her and her unborn child. But the sweeper called to kill her leaves her naked in the forest, where Nal is born with the help of *Durgā* and *Nārada* who act as midwives. A passing merchant hears the baby crying and, adopting Manjha as his daughter, takes the two to his home. Nal grows to adulthood in the merchant's home, unaware of his true origin. He excels in school as well as in sports: at his sacred thread ceremony, his own father, *Rāja Pratham* attends, unaware that the merchant's grandson is his own son. Later, Nal meets and saves his father (*Rāja Pratham*) from the jaws of a lion when hunting in the forbidden forest of *Śāntiban*. Then to aid his uncles who must find a missing cowrie shell that will save his grandfather's life, he goes to a faraway island where he meets and marries *Motini*, raised as the daughter of a demon but in reality an *apsara* from *Indra's* heavenly kingdom. Before Nal can marry *Motini*, they must kill the demon father who seeks the human in his house: this requires finding and wringing the neck of the demon's life index (a bird) locked inside of seven rooms guarded by various ferocious beings. *Durgā* and *Kālī*, serve as bride's kin and groom's kin respectively at their wedding. Nal and *Motini* then return to the seashore to meet the ship of Nal's merchant uncles. These two immediately desire the beautiful *Motini* and manage to toss Nal overboard where he descends to *pātāla loka*, the kingdom of *Bāsukdeva* (*Vāsuki*, King of snakes). There he becomes *Bāsuk's* 'dharma brother'. Meanwhile, *Bāsuk's* daughter falls in love with Nal, but he says he cannot marry her as she is the daughter of a snake and he already has one non-human wife. She vows to take birth as a human and marry him in her next life. She also presents him with a flower which, when he smells it, can make him old instead of young. Nal eventually returns to the shore where a magical horse obtained from *Motini's* demon father awaits him.

Motini is carried by the wicked uncles back to the merchant's house. She reminds them that they are her uncles and rejects them, only to be taken to *Rāja Pratham* who himself desires her. In *Pratham's* court, *Motini* says that she will only consider becoming his wife after she has heard the *Nal kathā*, the story of Nal. Searching far and wide, no one can be found who can tell the *Nal kathā*. Then an old *Paṇḍit* arrives in court (Nal in disguise, using the snake daughter's magical flower). He tells his own story, and both father (*Rāja Pratham*) and son (*Rāja Nal*) realise Nal's identity (for up until now, Nal has been adamant that he is a merchant's son). The family is reunited, but *Manjha* refuses to go to *Narvar* until she has bathed in the *Ganges*, having lived so many years in a trader's house.

Rāja Pratham and his wife *Manjha* proceed to the *Ganges* where they fight with *Phūl Singh Panjābi* about who should bathe first.

Pratham's army is turned to stone and Pratham and Manjha jailed, Pratham to press oil seed and Manjha to guard the roof against crows. Motini and Nal, with the help of Nal's friend Mansukh Gujar, then go to rescue them. Disguising themselves as acrobats, they enter Phūl Singh's court and eventually release Pratham and Manjha, although Motini must first battle against the magic of Phūl Singh's daughter. Feeling completely shamed, Pratham seeks his death in the Ganges and Manjha commits *sati*, but only after Nal has one more battle finding sandalwood for her pyre.

The *Dhola* Story: Section II (Nal and Damayanti)

Nal meets and marries Damayanti whose father Bhīm Singh wishes to have Indra as a son-in-law. But Damayanti, in reality the incarnation of the snake king Bāsuk's daughter has taken birth as a human only in order to win Nal's hand. When Nal leaves to marry a second time, Motini ascends to heaven, from where she can continue to help Nal in his many travails. At her *svayamvara*, Damayanti chooses Nal over Indra. Angered that Nal has won Damayanti, Indra with the help of *Śanideva* brings misfortune to Nal's kingdom. Banished, Nal and Damayanti seek various kinds of help in their distress: they go to her sister's where a hook eats a necklace worth nine lakhs, they ask a milkmaid for milk and cause her son to die when she leaves him in their care (he is given life after they depart), they go to Mansukh Gujar's where their food is spoiled by dogs, and eventually, they part ways in the forest after the fish they catch dive back into the lake and the birds fly from the fire. Damayanti makes her way back to her father's kingdom. Meanwhile, Nal is bitten by a snake that he rescues from a fire (which causes him deformities/ leprosy) and eventually obtains work as a keeper of horses for a king. Damayanti seeks her missing husband and holds a second *svayamvara* that Nal attends as the horseman for his patron. Given his ability to cook without fire and to light the lamps in the town, Damayanti recognizes her husband despite his deformities and they are reunited. But Nal refuses to bring his ill-fortune back to Narvar, so they return to the forest. This time they find work in an oil press (where *Śanideva*, who has brought them their troubles, cannot enter as his powers are ineffective around sesame). Given Nal's powers, the oil presser, Raghu, quickly becomes one of the richest men in Pingal/Marwar, ruled by Budh Singh. Nal teaches Raghu (renamed Raghunandan given his increased stature) to defeat Budh Singh at dice. Meanwhile, Nal defeats Budh's guards at the tank called Bhamartal. Called to court, he bets the product of his wife's womb against Budh's impending child. Nal has a son Dhola who is to be married to Maru, Budh's newly born daughter.

But before that can happen, Nal must prove his rightful status as king several more times, first by feats of skill and then by obtaining sugarcane after defeating the demons in the forest of Lakhyan. Then Nal-Damayanti and their newly born (and married) son *Dhola* return to Narvar.

The *Dhola* Story: Section III (*Dhola*-maru)

The third section is the story of *Dhola* and his child-wife *Maru*. Married while infants, *Dhola* and *Maru* are separated when Nal's parents return to Narvar. Meanwhile, *Maru* is cursed: any man who seeks to be her groom will be killed by the gate of her father's fort falling on him. Given this curse, Nal and *Damayanti* do not tell *Dhola* of his child-bride. Later he meets *Rewa*, the daughter of a gardener who entices him into a second marriage. Kept partially drugged by his parents and *Rewa*, *Dhola* is happy with her. But as *Maru* grows, she wonders about her husband and eventually finds a way to send a letter to him (by attaching it to a parrot or giving it to a travelling bard). *Rewa* finds the letter and thwarts *Maru*'s efforts at union with her husband. Finally, *Dhola* learns of his first wife and escapes Narvar on the back of a flying camel. Various troubles befall him on the way, though he eventually reaches *Maru*. But first he must defeat the demons in Lakhyan (who are delighted to meet the son of Nal!) and kill a man-eating tiger. He also escapes death at the gateway and is reunited with *Maru*. They return to Narvar where *Rewa*'s jealousy puts more barriers in their way. Finally, Nal and *Dhola* enter the pond, *Maghotal*, and end the lineage of *Pratham*. (An alternate ending is that *Dhola*'s son *Chandrapal* must defeat a demon in order to marry a nearby king's daughter and while he is successful, Nal and *Dhola* are killed.) Thus ends the story of *Dhola*.

A Brief Literary History

Epic singers and poets are like the bricoleur made famous by Levi-Strauss. Working with the bits and pieces of their cultural knowledge, they weld together old themes in new packages. Certainly the epic *Dhola* follows this pattern. The story of *Pratham* and *Manjha* and Nal's early years and marriage to *Motini* appears to have no connection to earlier written works, nor have I found clear connections to other folk stories. Nevertheless, various motifs do have deep resonance in Indian cultural traditions, including the use of a life index to kill a demon, the childless king who wins a child through his many sacrifices (King *Dasaratha*) and the telling of one's own story to learn one's true identity as well as reveal it to the father (as do *Lava* and *Kusa* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*). So while this portion of the story builds on various pieces of cultural knowledge, it apparently is unique as a compilation.

The second section, that of Nal and Damayanti, is one of the most famous and best known of India's stories, appearing in a variety of renditions over a period of time. Extremely adaptable, in part because of its 'separateness' as a story even in the *Mahābhārata* where it is known as the *Nalopākhyāna*, it has been used as a Jain didactic story, as a Sanskrit love poem (the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* by Śrīharaṣa), as the basis for Pahari miniature drawings (Goswamy 1975), as a Braj poem attributed to the sixteenth century (Todarmal 1975; Wadley 1999), as a dance-drama in the *kathakali* and *yakṣagāna* traditions (Rich Freeman, personal communication), as a Tamil folk tale (Zvelebil 1987), and as women's folk tales in Rajasthan and much more. There are, nevertheless, many differences between any one of these variants and the one most common to Dhola, including the absence of the fatal dice game and the role of *Śanideva* as the helpmate of *Indra* in his battle with Nal. The latter portion, that of the oil presser, has no written vernacular versions that I have yet found, but is common in oral traditions, where the episode of the oil presser might be variously attributed to Nal as here, to *Harischand* (Stokes 1880), or to *Vikramāditya* (Wadley 1978) or to no named king (Narayan 1997). Here, however, the ending is different, as Nal is connected to Dhola and thus to early Hindi and Jain writings.

The third section is closely related to the Jain ballad *Dhola*-maru studied by Charlotte Vaudeville (1962) and Richard Williams (1976) and found today in *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. The Jain ballad, called by McGregor one of the first instances of extant Hindi literary work (McGregor 1984), dates to the sixteenth century when it was allegedly composed and written by a Jain poet, *Kuśalalabh*, who notes that Dhola's father's name was Nal and alludes to the *Mahābhārata* story (Williams 1976). Extremely popular in western Rajasthan and Gujarat, it continued to be written and illustrated over the coming centuries. Many later versions of the Rajasthani *Dhola*-maru, including beautifully illustrated manuscripts, exist in collections in Rajasthan. Composed in medieval Rajasthani dialects, these ballads are still sung by Manganiyar musicians in the western desert regions. Other versions of *Dhola*-maru were, and are being, performed by *khyāl* (folk opera) troupes throughout Rajasthan since at least the early nineteenth century and some *khyāl* scripts are also found in manuscript form. These Rajasthani written versions of *Dhola*-maru can be seen as original compilations by given authors of lyrics and verses familiar to them or newly created following known metrical and stylistic conventions. Almost surely oral versions of *Dhola*-maru co-existed, as they do today.

The result is a modern oral epic which also exists in some written forms, woven together from the strands of various written and oral stories and cultural scraps of meaning, as well as different performance styles, each connecting to and reinforcing themes and issues of most concern to the current author/singer. Rushdie's description of the Ocean of Stories (in his book *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*) is apt here:

Different parts of the Ocean [of stories] contained different sorts of stories, and . . . because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and to become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive. (1990:72)

Dhola and its Modernization via tape cassettes

The rest of my comments will focus on two aspects of the modernisation of *Dhola*-content and performance. But first, let us meet two singing groups. These represent the most traditional and most modern groups that I have encountered. The traditional troupe is led by Harphul, a Brāhmaṇa singer now in his sixties, who claims to sing a memorized version of the original composition by Madari. Even he departs from the traditional style of a singing voice that mimics the *cikara*, the two-stringed bowed instrument that is the marking instrument for this tradition, although his partner retains it. But he uses only one melody, that known in the region as *dhola*, and has no apparent innovation. In this traditional style, *dhola* is sung strophically to a distinctive, relatively simple melody (in part because the *cikara* has only four notes).

The modern version that I refer to here is a commercial cassette made by a singer named Kailash and his co-singer Laturi Lal. The cassette jacket suggests that Kailash and Laturi are from Farrukhabad, U.P., about 80 miles straight east of Agra on the Ganges river. I purchased this tape in Delhi and was told by the cassette company there that I would not be able to meet Kailash as he travelled all around and was often in Bombay. I have no way of authenticating this statement. These versions were recorded in 1988 by Max, a company noted for the small-scale production of cassettes in the regional languages/dialects surrounding Delhi (Manuel 1993). These cassettes can be bought in small shops along all the major highways of North India. On one minor road outside of Delhi, we even found a shop specifically advertising '*Dhola and Alha*' tapes. Recently, I discovered that the stalls next to the tea-shops on the Grand Trunk road are lined with cassettes, in addition to candies,

cigarettes, and condoms. These shops sell primarily to travellers, especially truck drivers.

I have three episodes sung by Kailash, and will mention portions of two here. One of the most famous episodes of *Dhola* is usually named *phūl singh panjābī kī larāī*, the battle of Phūl Singh Panjābī. After Rāja Nal and his father are reunited, his parents decide to bathe in the Ganges to remove any sins that they might have incurred in the proceeding events. But Phūl Singh Panjābī has also come to the Ganges to bathe and the two kings fight over who shall bathe first. Nal's parents are captured and he and Motini, left behind in Narbar, must come to their rescue. After Durgā aids them in defeating the goddess (Kālī) supporting Phūl Singh's devoted daughter, they free the parents.

Kailash uses a three-piece set for this episode. The title is changed to 'Panjab Battle' and the tanks and *khāki* uniforms are fast removed from the realms of traditional Hindu kings. The story and its presentation are also carefully modernized to appeal to audiences that are familiar with current social and political issues, as well as with film music and popular sayings. Let me first deal with issues of content per se before going on to discuss equally important performance styles. I argue that modernizing of performance style is at least as important as modernizing content, for the aesthetic judgments of listeners are crucial to the success of any oral tradition, and these aesthetic judgments are based as much on performative features as on mere text. Textually, Kailash's performance captures the growing Hindu movement, which by the year 1988 did not have the force it has today. Some versions of *Dhola* that I have recorded, by more 'traditional' artists, have a line, 'Listen, all you brothers who are sitting here'. In Kailash's recording, the line goes, 'Listen carefully, warriors of this great Hindustan,' or 'Listen carefully, my warrior of Hindustan' thus calling upon the Hindu revival movement.

It is harder to grasp the 'modernity' or modern politics of other aspects of the tale, except to say that it is often more explicit about traditional values than the oral versions. For example, Nal and Motini become dancers, *naṭs*, and Nal climbs a magical rope thrown by Motini. She then turns him into a dead body and dismembers him, tossing his legs and arms into the houses of the Panjābī. Then Motini, claiming that Phūl Singh has killed her husband, commits *sati*, saying, "I just want to die. I don't want to live without my beloved. I want to die with him. I want to burn with him. This is my wish." It is worth noting that this version was recorded around the time of Roop Kanwar's *sati* in Rajasthan.

Other modern textual features are subtle, and I must thank my Delhi-raised friends for pointing them out to me. At one point, Nal says, “I do not want to be a *namakharām*, I am a *namakhalāl*” Here he refers to two famous movies by Amitabh Bachaan—*Namakharām* being one who bites the hand that feeds and *namakhalāl* meaning the opposite. At another point, Motini uses a phrase from a famous film song sung by K.L. Sehgal, saying ‘When the heart is broken, now what will I do [in this world]?’ (*jab dil hī tūt gaya tab jī ke kyā kareñge*)

A final textual piece comes at the very end of the episode, where Kailash is comparing *Nal* and *Mansukh* with *Rāma* and *Lakṣmaṇa*. On the bank of the Ganges, *Rāma* started shivering with cold; becoming angry, *Lakṣmaṇa* said, ‘Why are you shaking like your sister’s—’? He leaves the final word unspoken, but the rhyme is clear: to rhyme with *ṭhaṇḍ* (cold), the missing term must be *laṇḍ* (penis). Here we move into the sexually explicit world of modern cassettes, explored by Peter Manuel (1993) in his chapter on *rasiya*, another genre of the Braj region. Let me now briefly note examples of changing performance styles. As noted above, *Dhola* has a particular tune associated with it also called *dhola* and used as the sole tune in Harphul’s rendition. This rather simple tune is typical of a pre-twentieth century style of singing. As the twentieth century proceeded, many Indian musical styles became more sophisticated and complex (Manuel 1993:132). One way in which this complexity was engendered is through the practice of parody (Marcus, *personal communication*). (The ethnomusicologist’s use of parody is not that of *Bakhtin* (1981), although I think that we must see *Dhola* as a parody in the Bakhtinian sense as well.) In Indian folk and light classical traditions, borrowing of tunes from popular music, is widely practiced. This practice of lifting tunes is not new to *Dhola* performances, since many performers borrow melodies from folk music: I have looked at examples of this practice elsewhere. (see Wadley 1989.) What is distinctive about Kailash’s performance is his use of film tunes, for the same aesthetic purposes that older singers might use folk tunes. For example, one older singer that I know will use the melody for *Alha*, the martial epic of northern India, when his heroes go off to battle. Kailash, however, uses music from a Hindi film, ‘*Hindustān kī kasam*’ (literally, ‘the Oath of Hindustan’), music that connotes patriotism and war to its hearers. What we have here is a shift from the use of easily recognized folk melodies, and hence their connotations, to the use of easily recognized film tunes, with comparable connotations.

Kailash sometimes uses film songs in their entirety, as in an example from the episode, ‘*Rājā Nal’s Second Marriage*.’ Here he borrows a film tune associated with marriage, which itself was originally a folk song.

But to the modern cinema attendee, the mental connection is to the film tune, not the folk song. This is a more extreme use of film songs than the borrowing of a melody, but one that recurs in many singers' performances, although older singers are more likely to borrow a *bhajan* or *kīrtan* than a film song.

I recently spoke to the publisher of the best known of the many pamphlets that contain *Dhola* scripts: these scripts are sold in *bazaars* and on pavements throughout northern India. I was told that the earlier 'popular' script was no longer in print, in favour of that of one Matol Singh, a Gujar from Bharatpur in Rajasthan, because Matol had written a script for harmonium tunes (possibly including film tunes), whereas Gajadhar's was for the *cikara*. I should note even Gajadhar's script departed from the most conservative norm, that of the *Dhola* melody only, still practiced by Harphūl and his troupe. My point is that the process of 'modernization' is an extended one: an 'unchanged' *Dhola*, if we can even conceive of such a thing, must have existed for a rather brief period. The most recent innovations, however, tie *Dhola* more closely to current popular culture, a culture known to its lower class male patrons, now as likely to be truck drivers as farmers. Singers use the resources of popular culture—tunes, phrases, jokes, puns, sexual innuendos, to continue to sing *Dhola*, retaining the story line, while changing the details. In these ways, modern media and technology are now giving new birth to old traditions. These creative adaptations challenge us to rethink the meaning of cultural change: I end with a question. Does using film tunes in *Dhola* mark the homogenisation of Indian folk traditions such as *Dhola*, or a new burst of creativity, one that provides a continuity between old traditions and new, rather than a sharp break, a break that might possibly lead to greater alienation?

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