

Final Report of the Tagore Scholarship on the
Project

Cultural Construct
of the
Dhola-Maru Narrative

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FINAL REPORT ON THE PROJECT 'CULTURAL CONSTRUCT OF DHOLA MARU NARRATIVE'

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The project, *Cultural Construct of Dhola Maru Narrative*, originally submitted for the Tagore National Fellowship was formally started two years back with a grant under the Tagore Scholarship.

Dhola-Marū is a popular narrative of North India. The origins of the narrative date back to almost a thousand years. We find traces and mentions of the characters of the narrative in other epigraphic sources from tenth century onwards. Malwa and Marwar were the regions where the narrative would have germinated. Its initial proliferation was through the pastoralist-nomadic tribes who carried the story with their sonorous songs and traditional bardic performances from places to places, year after year as they travelled regularly with the vacillations and vagaries of the nature. Thus, a single, innocuous event of a common happening - a forgotten marriage solemnized in infancy when even the reminiscences of close relations are difficult to hold; the realization of the existence of a duly married consort on attaining adulthood by both the partners; the agony, anguish and helplessness of separation due to innocent remarriage of one partner; the efforts and struggles to be together again; the ecstasy of reunion and the final reconciliation of all the characters leading to a happy ending, was sung and enacted in pieces episodically in the region.

Gradually, with time, various episodes and folk themes seamlessly merged and subsumed into the narrative evolving it into a literary genre with epical dimensions. Well metered verses – *duha* and *chaupai* formats and the fertile grounds created by the Jain manuscript writing traditions resulted in the narrative being converted into manuscripts and from manuscripts to illustrated manuscripts. By the end of the sixteenth century, the narrative was resting on the firm pillars of literature, painting, music, and bardic-folk performances.

Leveraging on the roaming tribes, traders and other **seekers** of the economic sector, the geographical spread of the narrative engulfed the far flung regions of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and some parts of Maharashtra and also Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab in Pakistan.

The audience also was not limited to the local village communities alone. With performances also before the ruling class, the elite business community and the nobles, towns, fairs, celebrations and specially convened occasions like marriage, the artists started refining the art of presentation.

With the stream of time, different art forms - visual and performing - dramatics, sculpture, handicrafts, puppetry, musical and stage performances like *khyal*, stage performances like *nautanki*, enjoined the media **rendering** the cultural expanse of the narrative deeper into the traditions of the society. Dhola now had started symbolizing an admixture of love, ethics and devotion.

By the twentieth century Dhola Maru narrative was widely performed. With the advent of recording and cinematography, hundreds of audio cassettes were rolled out in different parts of the region. Second half of the preceding century witnessed full length films on Dhola Maru narrative, in Hindi in 1956 and a super hit in Gujarati in 1983. The shops on the highways started stocking the cassettes and CDs of the episodes in orchestrated verses, and the truck and taxi drivers also added to the growing list of the audience oblivious of the historicity and roots of the theme. From Balochistan to Chhattisgarh, and from Punjab to Maharashtra, a very large number of songs and full length narratives have been produced commercially.

Greater surge came after independence, with the traditional forms of arts being promoted by different civil and Governmental initiatives. Alai Jille Bai, Vijay Detha, Komal Kothari, Dadi D. Pudumjee, Puran Bhat, to name a few and ICCR, Zonal Cultural Centers, Departments of Tourism and Culture of the Central and State Governments stepped in for creating an enabling environment. Langa and Manganiyar troupes reverberated the musical tunes of narrative worldwide, puppet shows of Puran Bhat and many others gave a new dimension to the performance of the Dhola legend, commercial production of the replicas of the themes of Dhola Maru paintings led to the couple on camel back in different postures and vibrant colors adorning the walls of private and public corridors alike.

Dhola started subliming into a brand. Hotel rooms, restaurants, eateries, *dhabas*, thalis, textiles, apparels, shoes, handicrafts, tea, and even alcoholic drinks were named after Dhola Maru. The digitization proliferated the Dhola Maru brand into juke boxes, with a genre of songs named Dhola Maru, and even the Valentine Days of the recent years branded after the narrative.

The methodology involved identifying the public and private collections of the narrative. There are more than 500 manuscripts of Dhola Maru, several of these illustrated, numerous fragmented folios in the public and private collections in India and abroad, thousands of recordings of the performances, and equally substantial segmental studies are available. After the review of the literature, as the next step, discussions were held with scholars, curators and performers, and live performances were recorded.

Several personal visits were made and materials collected earlier also were collated from the rich libraries and holdings in Jodhpur, Chittorgarh, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Jaipur,

Kota, Sikar, Churu, Jhunjhunu, Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Rajkot, Mumbai, several towns of Braj and Chhattisgarh. The material collected earlier from meetings, conferences and visits to London, New York, Washington DC, Milan and Prague were equally useful. The discussions with East European Indologists gave a valuable insight into the Western perception of the Indian literature. The libraries and holdings with the National Museum, American Institute for Indian Studies and IGNC in Delhi were very useful. The study, exploration, search and journeys led to an awe-inspiring and astonishing experience of the vast cultural expanse of the Dhola Maru narrative, so far unexplored.

The study has given rise to a number of other possible areas, which have escaped the attention of the researchers so far. There is also a need to document and record the performing art forms of the Dhola Maru narrative, before it fades away, both – due to the onslaught of the digital reproductions and also due to the shrinking audience and economic opportunities to many village and town level troupes, who find continuing with the family tradition not sufficiently remunerative.

It is therefore, hoped that newer projects would also emerge from this study.