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A historical and legendary profile of Gogaji, a popular folk deity of medieval Rajasthan

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Abstract

Gogaji is one of the most popular folk deities of Rajasthan. Around the deads and life of Gogaji, a cult-emerged during the medieval period in Rajasthan. Gogamedi was the main-centre of worship of this cult where followers from different class, caste, region assembled on different occasion to pay respect to their daily. Gogaji was a local Chauhan Bhumia who was supposed to have struggled for the cause and concerns of the pastoral and peasant communities of the region. After his death, with the passage of time, he was being venerated as local folk deity. Different images was created through legends by popular minds, connecting with their day to day problems. Now this cult has massive following.

Keywords: Folk deity, hagiography, Pir, Gogamedi, Jangaldesh, Gorakhnath

Introduction

Most of the folk-deities of Medieval western Rajasthan were historical figures who lives at one time or the other. While it is difficult to reconstruct the historical lives of these folk-gods as most of the accounts available combine facts with fiction, it is possible, on the basis of critical examination of the legendary and hagiographic narratives, to separate the historical elements from legendary details, and highlight the values and concerns which the heroes turned deities stood for. It is also possible to form a fairly good idea about their followers, friends and enemies.

Moreover, available information also enables us to learn the challenges facing these figures and the ways in which they sought to meet them. A note of caution, however, must be added here. Existence of a binary distinction between reality and myth, between facts and fiction, did not exist in the consciousness of those who valourised and venerated these celebrities. As the popularity of folk heroes such as Gogaji, Tejaji, Pabuji, Ramdevi, Karanji. etc grew the demand for more information about them led their admires and followers to imagine and refashion their lives in ways which were deeply rooted in their own daily concerns and aspirations. Hagiography, therefore, is not to be rejected as fictitious but to be traced as important source material for studying the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the ordinary followers of the deities.

Folk-deities and the Concept of Panch Pir

During the reign of Maharaja Abhai Singh of Jodhpur (1724-1749), a "gallery of heroes" (teintis Karor devta) was constructed at Mandor, the capital city of the Rathor rules before they founded Jodhpur in the fifteenth century. In this "gallery of heroes" sixteen figures have been cut in the rock. These figures include those of the Panch-Pirs or five hero-saints. These hero-saints or hero-gods are Gogaji, Pabuji, Ramdevji, Harabhuji and Mallinathji (the last one is sometimes substituted by Meha Mangalia whose figure has also been cut in the rock in the above mentioned gallery.)¹ Writing about this "gallery of heroes", Tod observes:

Here are displayed, in all 'the pomp and circumstances of war. the statues of the knights - errant of the desert, armed cap-a-pie, bestriding steeds whose names are deathless as their riders, all in the costume of the times in which they lived. They are cut off the rock, but entirely detached from it, and larger than life. Though more conspicuous for strength than symmetry, the grim visages of these worthies, apparently frowning defiance, each attended by his Pandhu, or squire, have a singularly pleasing effect ^[2].

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What is remarkable in Tod's observation in his way of looking at folk-deities such as Gogaji, Ramdevji, Pabuji, and Harabhu as archetypal Rajput heroes. There is no doubt that Tod's famous work which came to be widely read by the English knowing Indians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and also came to be translated subsequently in various Indian languages - contributed substantially to the Rajputization and Hinduization of many local and folk heroes of medieval Rajasthan. However, as Dominique - Sila Khan has pointed out in her recent study, the process of Rajputization of the folk-deities such as Gogaji, Pabuji and Randeviji was already underway in the later and late medieval centuries ^[3].

Maharaja Abhai Singh and his successors consciously projected these deities as Rajput hero- saints for ideological reasons and as an exercise in legitimizing their authority among the non-Rajput sections of the Marwar society. It is interesting that all the five (or six) folk deities who formed part of this Rajput myth of Parch-pir were known to be Rajputs by birth and lineage and the knowledge perhaps contributed to their easy appropriation by the ruling classes. However, it must be noted that during the period before the eighteenth century, folk-heroes such as Gogaji, Pabuji, Ramdevji and Harabhuji were not perceived primarily as Rajput warrior-heroes and their popularity among and their association with the non-Rajput sections of the society particularly among the oppressed peasant and pastoral groups was a more characteristic feature of their identity than their Rajput lineage.

The notion of 'Panch-pir' as it developed among the Rajputs during the late medieval period was a variant of the popular concept of 'Punch pir' prevalent in the Punjab and various parts of north western India ^[4]. The composition of these five saints changed from region to region (though Goga or Guga was a constant figure). It was only in Rajasthan that the belief grew from eighteenth century that all five of them were Rajputs and, therefore, they were suitably projected in Rajput iconography as mounted warriors, decorated with full armour and fighting for Rajput values of chivalry and honour.

Medieval or pre-eighteenth century images of Gogaji, Pabuji, Ramdevji and many other folk- heroes were different. Even after the eighteenth century, popular images of these figures and popular sources of their popularity remained at variance with Rajput patterns of valorization and glorification. For a proper understanding of the differing and changing perceptions of these folk-heroes, it is important to give an account of their lives, historical as well as legendary. Historical as well as Legendary accounts of Gogaji has been discussed to frame out a brief critical profile of his life, deeds and images perceived or a period of time by people during Medieval Rajasthan.

Gogaji

The historicity of Gogaji is shrouded in mystery. Writing about him in the first half of the nineteenth century James Tod makes the following observation:

"Of many names familiar to the bard is Guga of Bhatinda, who with forty-seven sons 'drank of the stream of the sword' on the bank of Sutej, in opposing Mahmud ^[5].

Then by the time Tod reached Rajasthan in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the bardic tales about Gugaji were quite popular and it was believed that he died while fighting against Mahmud of Ghazni in the earlier century. Tod also

informs us about Gogaji Chauhan lineage ^[6]. However, as the editor of Tod's work, William Crooke has pointed out, Tod's accounts of Gugaji or Guga were contradictory ^[7].

At another place, Tod refers to Guga Chauhan as the 'chief of whole of Jangaldesh, or the forest lands from the Sutej to Hariana, his capital called Mahara, or, as pronounced, Guga Ku Malva, was on the Sutej. In defending this he fell, with forty-five sons and sixty nephews, and as it occurred on Sunday (Rabiwar), the ninth (naumi) of the month, that day is held sacred to the manel of Guga by the 'Thirty-six classes' throughout Rajputana, but especially in the desert, a portion of which is called Gugadeo katal. Even his steed, Javadia, has been immortalized and has become a favourite name for a war-horse throughout Rajputana, whose mighty men swear by the sctkha of Guga', for maintaining the Rajput fame when Mahmud crossed the Sutej ^[8].

From the detailed account of Gugaji or Guga by James Tod, it is clear that during the late medieval period, the Chauhan hero was already well-established as a cultic figure in western Rajasthan, so much so that even his horse Javadia came to be celebrated as an immortal figure. However, Tod's speculation that Gugaji was a contemporary of Mahmud of Ghazni and belonged to tenth-eleventh centuries has not been accepted by William Crooke. According to William Crooke, Gugaji or Guggaji is "said to have been killed in battle with Firoj Shah of Delhi, at the end of the thirteenth century A.D ^[9]. But no ruler of this name ruled as the Sultan of Delhi at the end of the thirteenth century. According to another account, Gugaji had heroically fought against, Ruknuddin Firuz Shah, the son of Iltutmish, who became Sultan of Delhi for a brief period after his father's death in 1236 ^[10].

Another theory treats Gugaji as a contemporary of Firuz Tughlaq (1351-1388) and it is believed that he fought against Firuz Tughlaq's general Abu Baquer. ^[11] However, most of the Rajasthan scholars tend to agree with Tod. On the basis of the testimony of fifteenth century narrative, Kyamkhan Rasau and Gujarati Jain source of the same period, Shrawak-Viatudi-Atichar, Dashrath Sharma reaches the conclusion that Gugaji must have been a contemporary of Muhammad of Ghajni ^[12]. Pemaram, after scrutinizing the evidence from poetical accounts such as Gogaji Pirra Chand, Gugapedi and Gogaji Chauhan ri Nisani, tends to agree with the period assigned to Gogaji by Dhasharath Sharma ^[13].

There is, therefore, no unanimity about Gugaji's period. What is more or less clear is that he was the Chauhan chief of the territory around Dadarewa in modern Churu district of Rajasthan. The main centre of his worship (gugaji ri medi) is also situated at Dadarewa and an annual religious fair is organized at this place in the month of Bhadrapada (August-September) to commemorate his memory. Pilgrims flock to this place on the occasion of this fair from various parts of Rajasthan. Apart from the main centre of Gogaji cult at Dadarewa there are many other centres of the cult in Rajasthan ^[14]. According to Bankidas, Gogaji's mother's name was Wacchag and his father was Jeevaraj ^[15].

Regarding the period to which Gogaji belonged, we can only say that he may have flourished any time during the period between eleventh and fourteenth centuries. What can be said with a greater degree of certainty is that he was perhaps one of the earliest folk-deities of medieval western Rajasthan- definitely a predecessor of Pabuji and Ramdevji. It is also evident that he was one of those Chauhan chiefs of

north-western Rajasthan who came into conflict with the Turkish invaders and rulers of northern India. As is well known, the Ghorids captured Delhi and Ajmer at the end of the Twelfth century after vanquishing the Chauhan king, Prithviraj Chauhan ^[16]. Later Alauddin Khalji captured Randhanbhor after defeating Hammirdev, another Chauhan chieftain ^[17]. Gogaji's heroic struggle against the Turkish invaders or the armies of the Delhi Sultanate became deeply embedded in popular memory and in course of time became one of the factors in his glorification and subsequent deification.

However, it would be wrong to attribute the popularity of Gogaji solely, even primarily, to his acts of valour against the Turks and the Sultanate armies. Other factors, emerging from the concerns and needs of pastoral peasant communities of Rajasthan played more crucial role in the process of valorization and deification of Gogaji. Modern scholars who have communalized the memory of Gogaji and have projected him as Hindu or Rajput hero fighting against Muslim invaders have failed to take into account the multiple identities associated with him.

Gogaji have been venerated and worshipped in various forms: as a pastoral defender of cattle wealth, as a snake-god coming to the rescue of peasants and the cattle, as a Muslim saint (Pir) pilgrimage to whose shrine would lead to the fulfillment of various martial aspirations and finally as a Nathpandhi Jogi. Although issues concerning the deification and multiple identities of the folk-deities are the other aspects, suffice it to say here that the historical and legendary details concerning the life and deeds of Gogaji in no way warrant us to project him solely as a Rajput hero fighting against the Turks or Muslims.

One of the earliest bardic accounts of Gogaji - Gogaji ra Rasawala by Vithu Meha (written in the later part of the sixteenth century) - look upon him as a rescuer of cows from his step-brothers or cousins Arjan and Sarjan ^[18]. This account also highlights a feud between Gogaji and his opponents (i.e Arjan and Sarjan) over land and territory. The conflict - centering around capture of cows by Arjan and Sarjan - acquire wider dimensions as the later receive support from certain unnamed Muslims warriors of the region. Gogaji's is shown as killing his rivals, rescuing the cows and sacrificing his life for the welfare of the community ^[19]. Thus, defence of cattle wealth by Gogaji in what was essentially a family feud became an important ingredient in his glorification and eventual deification. As G.N. Sharma has pointed out, Gogaji and his Jawadia have been immortalized for the cause of pastoral interest.

Gogaji is also worshipped as a snake-god. Various thans (temples) of Gogaji in Rajasthan contain the image of a snake inscribed on a stone. To save the life of a victim of snake-bite, a ritual is performed which includes recitation of Goga's name and tying a thread on the affected part of the victim's body ^[20]. How did popular memory link Gogaji with the cure for snake-bite? In the various legendary accounts of Gogaji, he is either shown as keeping the company of snakes frequently conversing with them and doing them various favours and at times even assuming the form of a snake himself ^[21].

It may be pointed out here that in various pastoral and agricultural operations in the desert regions of western Rajasthan, the fear of snakes and of death resulting from snake bites was a real and mortal fear. Reciting the name of Gogaji became an important ceremony among the peasants

at the time of the beginning of agricultural season and ploughing of Land. The idea perhaps was to save the peasants and his bullocks from snake-bite. Gogaji was seen as the protector of both the ploughman and his bullocks.²² The peasants recited the saying, "Guga is the protector of both the ploughman and bullocks" ^[23].

The multiple personality of Gogaji also find manifestation as a Nathpanthi Jogi and a Muslim saint (Pir) ^[24]. The Jogis used to sing songs of various Nathpandhis teachers including those of 'Goga Pir'. Gorakhnath is depicted as being helpful to Goga in the Nathpandhi legends. According to one such legend, Gorakhnath once sent an invisible army to the help of Goga against Prithvi Raj ^[25]. But the legend is not clear about the identity of this Prithvi Raj. The Nathpanthis also believe that Guga or Goga received his power over snake by becoming a disciple of Gorakhnath ^[26].

The Nathpanthi hagiography also depict Gorakhnath as participating in Goga's wedding in Assam with his carriages, horses and palkis and followers ^[27]. Though it can be definitely argued that relationship between the two personalities who belonged to different historical periods - has been part of the imagined history of the Nathpanthis or of Gogaji's followers, it is clear from these legends account that these groups did see him in the role of a Jogi.

According to G.W. Briggs, Goga or 'Zahra Pir' as a Rajput who finally became a Muslim ^[28]. Many Chauhan Rajputs who converted to Islam in the medieval period consider themselves descendents of Gogaji and call themselves Gogawants ^[29]. Dominique Silakhan in a recent work, has examined the 'dual' identity of Gogaji and many other medieval folk-deities as both Hindu gods and Muslim Pirs in terms of process of interaction between the two religions. She argues that saint-heroes or pir, such as Ramdev and Gupta had disciples cutting across various religious identities. She has also tried to prove that religious ambiguous figures such as Gogaji and Ramdevji may have been connected with Ismailism. It is only during the post-eighteenth century period that these folk heroes underwent a process of "Rajputization" ^[30].

Therefore, we can trace, through the multiple identities of Gogaji discussed above three different stages first stage earliest when he was considered as hero, Second stage when he was accepted as deified God and the last stage, Rajputization and Hinduization when Gogaji was projected a typical Hindu God massively accepted cutting across boundaries of colour, caste and community.

Gogaji Cult: Geographical Expansion and Centres of Worship

Gogaji and his steed Jawadia have been immortalized for defending the pastoral interests. Main festival associated with him is called Goganavami which is celebrated on the dark-half of 9th Bhadrpada and is celebrated with much devotion among the lower caste communities ^[30]. The author of Mardumshumari Raj Marwar which was written in the last decade of the nineteenth century but which gives detailed account of past cultural practices and traditions, informs us that the Kumhars (potters) make small clay images of Gogaji and exchange them with peasants who offer them food and grains ^[31].

The peasants, on the occasion of the beginning of agricultural operations in the rainy season, recite his name and tie a thread (Gogarakhdi) on their forehands and recite the saying, "Goga is the protector of the peasant and the

oxen" ("hal baladi Goga Rakhnwala")^[32]. On the day of the Festival, Goga ji also worshiped as the god of snakes among peasants. The peasant-women sing the songs of Gogaji and religious congregations are organized at Gogaji's 'than' (Goga's shrine), Gogji is also venerated as 'Jahar Pir' i.e. as a saint who saves people from snake bite.

The main shrine of Gogaji is at Gogamedi in the Ganganagar district of Rajasthan. But there are other shrines scattered all over Marwar. There is another 'medi' associated with Gogaji at Dadareva in Churu district^[33]. In that it seems that before the Rathor ruler of Bikailer popularized Goga's worship at the Ganganagar 'medi' in the 20th century, the Dadarawa 'medi' was the main shrine visited primarily by the lower caste followers^[34]. The fair organized at Gogaji's medi at Ganganagar also takes the shape of a cattle fair^[35], which clearly shows the peasant character of the cult. Other places where annual fairs are organized in memory of Gogaji are Rajgarh, Taranagar, Churu, Jharya, Ratangarh and Lunchh, etc^[36].

The Gogaji-cult is also popular among the non-Brahmanical groups in various other regions of northern India and also in Gujarat. The early popularity of Gogaji (or Goga) is clear from a Gujrati Jain source of the early fifteenth century Sravukavratadi - atichar, which dissuades the Jain shravaks from worshipping village gods including Gogaji. Belief in the worship of Gogaji was considered a deviation from the Jain doctrines^[37]. The proverb that wherever there was a Khejari tree, there was bound to be a shrine of Goga also indicates the widespread popularity of Gogacult in Marwar^[38].

The popularity of Gugga or Goga Pir also spread far and wide outside Rajasthan in the regions of Punjab, Gangetic valley and central provinces (modern Madhya Pradesh). Referring to the popularity of Gogaji in 19th century Punjab as a saint or god, known for curing snake-bites among all various religious communities such as Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, R.C. Temple writes "the whole story of Gugga is involved in the greatest obscurity, He is now-a-days one of the chief Muhammedan saints or objects of worship of the lower castes of all sorts.

In life he appears to have been a Hindu and a leader of the Chauhan Rajputs against Mahmud of Ghazni about A.D. 1000^[39]. He drew his followers mainly from the peasant population of Punjab^[40]. G.W. Briggs also testifies to the popularity of Goga among the lower castes in various parts of northern India^[41]. is popularity in western Uttar Pradesh is evident from an independent 'Bijnor version' about him. According to this version. Goga was the son of Prithviraj Chauhan (the last Chauhan ruler of Delhi at the time of Ghurrid conquest at the end of 12th century). The Chauhan converts to Islam called Gogawats look upon themselves as his descendants.

Thus a critical description of historical as well as legendary life of Gogaji reveal that Gogaji acquired different images with the passage of time as his followers started imagining and perceiving his life and deeds in relation to day to day problems and concerns giving ways rise of different images of Gogaji and process with which the cult of Gogaji developed later on.

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