

The Monsoon Festival Teej in Rajasthan

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Teej is one of those rare festivals of Rajasthan which has not gone out of fashion. As a living tradition it receives much appreciation and praise from the common people. Being a monsoon celebration, it rejoices in the bounty of nature with social activity, rituals, and customs. Teej symbolizes the harmony of clouds and rain, greenery and birds, sand and desert. All of these are highlighted in the multi-colored scenery of this festival. It is celebrated for two days on the third and fourth days of the month of Shrawan (July-August). It is called the green Teej because of the abundance of greenery during this time. For millions of Rajasthanis, Teej means dancing, singing, telling stories, swinging, wearing new clothes, and cooking festive food.

Teej is a day for women to worship Goddess Pārvatī. On this day long ago she was reunited with her long separated husband, Lord Śiva. According to mythology, she declared this day holy and proclaimed that whoever invokes her on this day will be blessed with whatever one desires. On these two days married women worship the Goddess for long and happy married lives, and the peace and prosperity of their children. Wearing green, red, or yellow dresses, hands and feet painted in delicate designs of red (*henna*), they worship Pārvatī and sing songs in her praise. Afterwards they amuse themselves on swings. This celebration has special meaning for a newly married woman who does this worship very religiously. Devotion to the Goddess and self-decoration of women are the two dominant themes of the festival. On this occasion parents send gifts to their married daughters, which is called *sindhara*.

Literally *sindhara* is from the Sanskrit word *śrīngar* which means

the decoration of women and their charming beauty. These gifts include sweets, *henna*, new bangles, and a new dress. The rich send expensive gifts. The unmarried girls also receive new clothes and articles of decoration. Special festival food is prepared for sisters and daughters of the family to enjoy together. According to tradition the married girls go to their parents' house on this occasion. Sometimes they cannot go due to certain reasons. The brothers put up swings for their sisters. Thus Teej reunites married women with their parents' families. Much merrymaking is done by the women folk during this festival, perhaps the reason for its great following.

Gaiety and merrymaking give this festival tremendous importance. It is a monsoon festival. In India, especially in the deserts of Rajasthan, a good monsoon means hundreds of auspicious things, a bumper harvest, and a good life ahead. Thus this day expresses the happiness and enjoyment of the people. All this is reflected in specially cooked food, new clothes, new decorations in the form of bangles of glass and lacquer with colorful designs, *henna* paint, putting on collyrium in the eyes and the *tikka* (red dot) on the forehead, wearing of the best pieces of jewelry, etc. These things symbolize a woman's happy married life. Therefore to wear them at the time of worshipping Devi Pārvatī has great significance. It is a sort of wish to have these decorations always in the life of the worshiper. "As today is, so should all my life be" is one of the boons asked from the Goddess on this day. Pārvatī is the patron Goddess of Hindu women. From the Vedic era to the modern age she has been very popular, in the urban as well as in the rural areas, as a protector of family health and happiness.

Putting *henna* on hands and feet is done to express the auspicious festive mood. It is supposed to bring good luck to the person and it also symbolizes happiness. The most popular designs made on this festival are those of *lehariya* (vertical lines of *henna* on palms), *ghevar* (the form of a round sweet dish specially made for this festival) and *chaupar* (design of a game of dice), besides other regular designs of flowers and leaves. It is a great art with its own symbols. The design of vertical lines is also found on the clothes typically worn in this season. It depicts the showers, the falling of rain. Besides its religious meaning, *henna* also has medicinal properties for cooling the skin of the body.

There are many folk songs sung during this festival which reveal a woman's feelings who has not come to her parents' house for this occasion. She sings:

O my dear brother! Why are you sleeping?

Your mother's daughter is pining in her in-laws' house.

O mother! Other girls are going to swing,
To me my mother-in-law has given lots to grind (Song 1)¹

Swinging on this occasion has special meaning. In folklore and mythology the swinging is done by gods and goddesses because they also have fun and frolic like human beings. Primarily this festival is for women and girls so only they do this swinging. But small boys also swing. Out of the whole year's hard life studded with personal sacrifice, Hinduism does provide for the women some particular occasions for enjoyment, entertainment, and carefree relaxed moments. According to folklore the gods and goddesses come to earth to swing during the Teej festival. One song says:

On the branch of the magnolia tree I have put a swing,
Its rope is of silk, I have put a swing,

On the branch of the magnolia tree I have put a swing,
Its plank is of sandal wood, I have put a swing,

To swing on my swing, the Sun and Moon have come,
They have brought their queens to swing on my swing,

While swinging they stopped and said, we like red bangles.
Their mothers will buy them red bangles, I have put a swing
(Song 2)

Like ordinary women, goddesses also wish for the things of decoration as described in this song.

Another popular theme of Teej songs is a woman's wish to meet her husband who has gone out of town to earn his living. In such songs a woman calls her husband to be with her, to enjoy the rainy season and especially the festival of Teej. Here is an example:

O my King: When you know [the date of] Teej, come back home,
O my sweetheart: leave your service.

Bring a *mehmand* for my forehead and earrings for my ears, come
back home.

Bring a neckband for my neck and bangles for my hands, come
back home (Song 3)

Yet another song depicts the separated wife's youth as a flourishing

pipali tree. In this popular song the wife was too young when the husband went on service. The symbolism used here shows the vivid imagination of country folk. It says:

O Bhanwarji!² The pipali which you planted before going is flourishing.

O Dhola!³ When the occasion came to sit [under it] you went away on service.

O Bhanwarji! I will become cash and rupees and the yellow gold coins.

O Dhola! Do not go on your service to the east . . . (Song 4)

Teej is an important festival for husbands and wives. The burdens of household work are forgotten at this time. Through this celebration a social stamp is provided to gatherings and customs. Worship and singing make Teej a psychological necessity. It performs many functions at individual, social, and cultural levels. Teej is also a mark of time. It is the welcoming of rains. Through this festival the desert folk express their thankfulness to the god of rain. Rain is considered as a blessing from the gods. This calendrical ritual comes after the scorching heat of the summer months, and it marks the coming of the rainy season. The creative energy of mother earth is symbolized in the form of the Goddess Teej (Pārvati), the consort of Śiva. This festival is very closely related to the sowing season. Thus the folk sing, "who is sowing *moth* (lentil) and *bajra* (millet) which are sweet like sugar candy and rich like nuts?" The songs show that gods and goddesses are doing plantation work. For them it is a natural obligation to farm. The excitement of the season is very clear in such folk songs:

From the direction of the north, clouds are coming,
It is raining in all four directions.

O clouds! Who is sowing millet and who is sowing *moth* like nuts
and candy?

Kanha is sowing millet and Isar is sowing *moth* like nuts and candy.

A multicolored season has come to my state,
A beneficial season has come to my state. (Song 5)

Here Kanha is Kṛṣṇa and Isar is Mahadev, consort of the Goddess Teej.

On the third and fourth days of Shrawan, processions of Teej go

their way with great pomp from the palaces of Jaipur and Bundi through the main bazaars of these two towns. Images of Pārvatī made of solid gold and pure silver are taken out in silver palanquins. They are escorted by bedecked elephants, horses, bullocks, and camels. These animals are decorated with painted designs on their bodies and silver jewelry. There are many ornaments made specially for these animals. These decorated elephants, horses, camels and bullocks show the prosperity of the king in particular and the people in general. Many high officials in colorful clothes also accompany the images. This procession signifies Pārvatī leaving her parents' home for her husband's. (Going through the main bazaar, the procession returns back to the palace.) To watch the procession is considered auspicious and lucky, hence thousands of people come to Jaipur and Bundi to watch it as a religious obligation. A folk song sung during this time illustrates this point, where a wife tells her husband that:

O Bhanwar! the Teej of *sawan* has come, let me go to Jaipur.
In Jaipur let me bathe in Galtaji, let me roam in Ramniwas garden.

O fair woman! In Jaipur you will be pushed around in the crowd.
Forget going to Jaipur. (Song 6)

If one observes this festival in the pink city of Jaipur, one will surely understand the mystery and popularity of Teej. Common folk are bewitched by the size of huge crowds which convene to watch the procession of the Goddess. They may wait for long hours to observe all of the ceremonial activities. The togetherness of a big crowd attracts others to come and watch this procession. The fervor of the crowd is to be seen to be believed. The ordinary people view this festival amidst great rejoicing. The bazaars become a combination of different scents and sounds, human as well as musical. Musical instruments like *sehnai* and *nagaras* (drums) are played to the tune of folk songs from the center of the bazaar. Besides observing this fair and procession, visitors are also interested in sightseeing in Jaipur. The city attracts countryside folk to loiter through the lanes, the crowded shopping areas, noisy roads, and the hustle and bustle of the festive occasion.

To the villagers who come from a quiet area, the lighting, decorations, the novelties in the shops, the fashion, the city carts with sweet delicacies, all present a unique experience in itself. They make the visit to this festival an otherworldly event. It is the hard life of the rural population which bestows greatest meaning to this celebration of the rainy season. To the farmers after laborious work in the fields the

festival is a boon of nature. And common men dissipate their hurry, worry, poverty and other problems through this auspicious occasion. Traditional worship combined with a solemn procession, a fair, music, and other attractions provide to the country folk an immense opportunity for enjoyment. Similarly, city-dwellers also look forward to these days. Apart from the festival's socio-religious significance, there is much buying and selling on this occasion. The sellers of clothes, bangles, decorations, and jewelry, and the sweetmeat shops, restaurants, movie theaters and transporters all do brisk business on Teej. Buses, autorickshaws, cycle-rickshaw pullers, *tongas*, and taxi drivers also benefit from peoples' movement during this festival.

Teej instills in people new vigor and strength to live the routine of life which is their daily fare. This ability of the Indian masses to forget their tension and mental problems at the time of celebration is a remarkable quality which city-bred, educated people have lost. For the general public, taking part in the fairs and festivals increases social interaction within family and friends. It also means following age-old beliefs and feeling proud of one's folkloric heritage. The exchange of gifts on Teej gives satisfaction to the giver as well as to the receiver. The grand style of celebration reveals the peoples' deep faith in their religious beliefs and traditional values and norms. It has the popular support of the common man as well as of the royalty. At present the Indian Government has joined hands with former Maharajas in taking out multicolored processions and making other arrangements.

After the independence of India in 1947, the celebration of Teej has become a combined effort of the Government and the royal families of Jaipur, Bundi, and other cities. Royalty provides the traditional image of the Goddess Pārvatī which is made of solid silver with many gold and jewel ornaments and fully clothed with a silk dress set consisting of a large petticoat, a head scarf, and a blouse embroidered with silver and gold thread and flowers, and so forth. Decorated horses, elephants, camels and bullock carts, and their uniformed attendants also come from the royal household. The Government arranges all other things such as the decoration of streets, lighting, and looks after law and order. Folk musicians are invited to perform for the entertainment of devotees and tourists who come in the thousands to see the procession of the Mother Goddess. They also perform to pay their respects to her. Besides recorded music, different instruments are played from a centrally located high platform built on the square of the crossing of four roads. The Department of Tourism has organized this festival on a large scale for the past few years to further popularize it among non-Rajasthanis and foreign travelers. Apart from this fair and the celebration in the

evening where all people—men and women, young and old—all take part, in the morning only women and girls perform the worship of the Goddess Pārvatī with full devotion in their homes. In the evening people enjoy and entertain themselves by buying lots of food, village handicrafts, toys of paper, wood, and clay, decorative objects and fancy things to wear like costume jewelry, glass bangles, multicolored cotton and silk bands to braid the hair, and ribbons, and so forth.

I have observed this festival since childhood. I have attended the morning *puja* as well as the evening procession. In our house we worship the Goddess Pārvatī to be blessed with a happy married family life. (In Hindu belief conjugal bliss is not complete until the couple has children.) I have personally received special Teej *sindhara* for my first Teej after my engagement. Even today my parents and in-laws send me money to buy sweets and clothes for this auspicious occasion. Beside new bangles and clothes, one's best ornaments are worn to celebrate this day. The place of worship is cleaned, good festive food is cooked consisting of poori-puffed fried bread made from whole wheat flour, the best vegetables, sweets and curd *raita* with gram flour fried drippings or cucumber, onions, tomatoes, and so forth. A day earlier a woman washes her hair and oil is put in the hair, and *henna* is applied to hands and feet. All these are part of this celebration.

The present article is the combined result of my unconscious learning from childhood as well as a conscious effort to understand Teej in Rajasthan.

APPENDIX

The text of the songs, and some details about the informants:¹

SONG 1:

O my dear brother! Why are you sleeping?
Your mother's daughter is pining in her in-law's house.

O mother! Other girls are going to swing,
To me my mother-in-law has given lots to grind.

O mother! While preparing and grinding this lot, my shoulders
and joints ached.

O mother! My younger and elder brothers-in-law all partook.

O mother! My husband's sister served them all.

O mother! Others got four loaves, I got only one small loaf.

O mother! Others got a fist full of sugar, I got a fist full of salt!

(Chundawat Rani Laxhmi Kumari, *Rajasthani Lokgeet* [Rajasthani folk-songs]. Jaipur: Rajasthani Sanskriti Parished, 1961, p. 43.)

SONG 2:

On the branch of the magnolia tree I have put a swing,
Its rope is of silk, I have put a swing,

On the branch of the magnolia tree I have put a swing,
Its plank is of sandal wood, I have put a swing,

To swing on my swing, the Sun and Moon have come,
They have brought their queens to swing on my swing,

While swinging they stopped and said, we like red bangles.
Their mothers will buy them red bangles, I have put a swing.

To swing on my swing, Birmadasji [Brahman] has come.
He has brought his queens to swing on my swing.

While swinging they stopped and said, we like red bangles.
Their mothers will buy them red bangles, I have put a swing.

To swing on my swing, Isardasji [Śiva] has come.
He has brought his queens to swing on my swing.

While swinging they stopped and said, we like red bangles.
Their mothers will buy them red bangles, I have put a swing.

In subsequent verses only the names of other gods are added who come to swing (e.g. Kirsandasji [Kṛṣṇa]), the remaining parts of the song are the same. (Collected from Bhanwari Bai, 40 years, Daroga caste, Pa-granwali village, district Bundi, 1966.)

SONG 3:

O my King: When you know [the date of] Teej, come back home,
O my sweetheart: leave your service.

Bring a *mehmand* for my forehead and earrings for my ears, come
back home.

Bring a neckband for my neck and bangles for my hands, come
back home.

In the other verses of this song the woman requests her husband to bring more ornaments for different parts of the body, from head to toes. Traditional women wear ornaments of silver and gold in hair, forehead,

ears, nose, neck, chest, arms, wrists, fingers, waist, ankles, and toes.

(More than ten persons told this song from different cities and villages, belonging to variant castes. Heard in 1966 and in a later period also.)

SONG 4:

O Bhanwarji!² The pipali which you planted before going is flourishing.

O Dhola!³ When the occasion came to sit [under it] you went away on service.

O Bhanwarji! I will become cash and rupees and the yellow gold coins.

O Dhola! Do not go on your service to the east.

O Bhanwarji! Youth will not stay forever.

O Dhola! I am trying to keep it safely, do not go on your service in the east.

O Bhanwarji! The pipali which you planted before going is flourishing.

O Dhola! When the occasion came to sit [under it] you went away on service.

(Collected from Kamlesh, 50 years, and Bhuri, 20 years, Barber caste from Kota and Bundi, in 1965.)

SONG 5:

The full text of this song is as already given above. I have heard it in childhood from many folk women, at Bikaner in the 1950s.

SONG 6:

This song is part of a wayside-song made up of various couplets, each consisting of two lines. A couplet is in itself complete to convey a point. Couplets may be added or removed from a song at the singer's choice. However, in my collection I have only the two couplets given above for this song.

(Śivaji, 40 years, Nai Barber caste, Naile village, 1964.)

NOTES

1. The full text and other pertinent information concerning the collection of these songs are given, as available, in the appendix. Most of the songs I collected

personally in villages and cities of Rajasthan during fieldwork over almost three years from 1964 to 1966. The names of informants, their age, caste groups, and the names of places were recorded. However, after living and learning in this environment for twenty-five years, I find it impossible to point out and remember the names and details of all the informants who gave me information about this worship of mother Teej. Most of the time I quote folk songs and beliefs from memory.

2. An adjective of endearment used for husbands.
3. A legendary hero of Rajasthan.