JHAVERCHAṄD MEGHĀṆI†

Elegiac *Chhaṅd* and *Duhā* in Charani Lore

Abstract

Saurashtra is a peninsula in western central India. (Long 68e-73e, Lat 20n-24n). Geer forest, in the southern part of Saurashtra, is the home of the Asiatic lion. Charan is a community of bards and minstrels claiming to have originated from the Mother Goddess of the Universe, that is, the divine manifestation of the vital force behind all creation. The Charans are supposed to be blessed by the Muse. *Diṅgal* is a phonetic devise of their poetry that includes many metric systems such as *chhaṅd* and *duhā* in which they compose odes, elegies, and legends. The text for this essay is an abbreviated compilation of various writings and speeches that were translated from Gujarati by Vinod Meghani. The translated passages of Charani lore introduce *chhaṅd*s and *duhā*s that convey the pathos of separated lovers.

Keywords: Charans—*duhā*—*chhaṅd*—*diṅgal*—lovelorn elegies

Asian Folklore Studies, Volume 59, 2000: 41–58

A CHĀRAN IS ALSO known as a Gadhavi, which means a custodian of the keys to a castle. A Charan was also a minstrel as well as a negotiator and guarantor of truces. If his patron king did not honor the terms he negotiated on the king's behalf, the Charan might even stab himself in the belly to express his outrage; a conscientious, noble act similar to *harakiri*. A bard as well as a balladeer, he sang to extol the brave and to invigorate the cowards on the battlefield. An apostle of nonviolence he was; yet he was intrepid enough never to flinch either from castigating the powerful or from providing protection to a victim of oppression or highhandedness and, to that end, readily took up arms if the situation so demanded.

The Charan regards himself as a *deviputra* (a direct descendent of the Mother Goddess of the Universe). As a holy man, he was considered worthy of worship; as a poet laureate of acclaiming verses, he was a rightful recipient of benefaction. His frankness to a fault made him fearsome. Striving against injustice, fraud, and the invasion of his rights—even against his own unjust deeds born of compulsions—he employed a variety of noble methods of self-immolation.

References to the Charans are found in *Rig-Veda, Rāmāyaṇ, Mahābhārat,* and *Shrimad Bhāgvad*[1] as well as in *Jain Prabaṅdha.*[2] Kālidas, a great Sanskrit poet-playwright of ancient times, has immortalized the Charans by casting them in his classical plays. In the *puraṇas*[3] the Charans have been described as chanters of paeans to the divine and as priests worshipping temple icons. The Charani tradition began in the historic age in the form of *rishi*—the institution of great sages who were supposedly running hermitage-boarding schools for princes while living in the forests, the Himalayas or other high mountains, on the seashores or riverbanks.

In *Padmapurāṇa,* a reference is found of King Pruthu helping the Charans to migrate from the Himalayan range to Āryāvart (the region between the Himalayan and Vindhya mountains where the Aryans are said to have first settled in the Indian subcontinent and which subsequently came to be known as Bhārat and then later as India). From here they trickled

through Mālwā, Kutchchh, Tharpākar, and Saurashtra into Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Up to the eighth century A.D. they seemed to have remained scattered all over the country. Around this time, a young daughter of a Charan named Mamad became prey to the lecherous eyes of Hamir Sumara, the then ruler of Sindh. Charan clans all over the country revolted and converged on Sindh. Hamir imprisoned the father of the girl. She and all six of her sisters fled. The youngest went to Saurashtra and the other six made their way to Rājpootānā, a region that is today a part of the province of Rajasthan.

FIGURE 1. Sketch by Arvind Joshi

Charan literature is as ancient as the Charan himself, dating back to the prehistoric era of Rāmāyaṇ. Through the ages he continued to adapt to the then prevalent contemporary languages—Sanskrit, Prakrit,[4] and Apabhraṅsha[5]—as his creative vehicle. Gradually, Apabhraṅsha was transformed into "Old Rājpootāni" from which was born *diṅgal,* a phonetic poetical medium based on sonorous flourish. In the fifteenth century, the invincibility of the nation was breached by waves of invasions and its cultural and religious homogeneity diversified. It was at this juncture that the etymology of the word *chāraṇ* was vindicated: *charaṅtiti chāraṇāhā*—those who keep roaming, and thus sustain the nation are Charans. The Charan stood tall as he moved over the region of Rajasthan, displaying his heroic vitality against alien invaders while tongue-lashing and inflaming the enfeebled Rajpoot warrior clans. The warrior clans roused by the Charan's clarion verses and his earnestness to share their afflictions reasserted themselves and revived their ancestral glory. The Charan encouraged them with his elegant orations and rhetoric, and made the weaponless kshatriya rise against the mighty enemies who were equipped with manifold more resourcefulness of weaponry and manpower.

Had the narrators lacked conviction and dodged involvement, mere sound and fury spewed by them would not have evoked a spirited response from the Rajpoots. The warrior communities' self-esteem was roused only when they were convinced of the divinity, the sacredness of the motives of the Charan clan. Charani culture and poetry sprouted in the flower bed of the warrior community and was nurtured by its patronage. The Charan was not a mere bystander manipulating spoken words; he stood shoulder to shoulder with the warrior clans, facing up to and fighting off harsh invasions.

For him poetry was more than just a profession or tradition; it was his heritage, a way of life; it came to him by instinct. It did not erupt from his head; rather, it surged from the veins of his fathers and flowed into those of his sons. Charani women—mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters—were revered by the Rajpoots as incarnations of the Mother Goddess of the Universe (i.e., the divine manifestation of the vital force behind all creations) and hence worthy of worship.

Although equipped only with *diṅgal* (a phonetic mode for rendering verses), the Charan could survive the overzealous cultural onslaughts of the Sanskrit eras and of the brahmin religious bigotry, for the Charan's adherence to the righteousness had added dignity to his integrity. The origin of *diṅgal* lies in Prakrit. The bardic Charani tongue that developed from Prakrit and Apabhraṅsha flowed freely and uninterrupted between Rajasthan and Saurashtra; it conformed to the contours of other phonetic tongues like Sindhi and Kutchhi and soaked itself with the cants of many a diverse alien community that came to India, and mingled and merged with the multitude in the Saurashtra region. *Diṅgal* is a by-product of all these influences.

This Charani language bifurcated. One of the streams rolled on toward the palaces of the kings and the manors of the vassal warriors; the other meandered, as though by gravity, toward the huts and hamlets of the foresters, villagers, and wandering shepherds, and spilled over the riverbanks and the mountain ridges. The minstrel in the court produced paeans brimming with hyperbole and rhetoric in praise of the divine or the brave; the people went about trilling pastorals, lauding largesse, valor, and romance of the nomads living in makeshift hamlets set up by them wherever they could find green pastures to graze their cattle. The laureate singers, who sang of the brave royal persons, indulged in metaphor, simile, and other figures of speech; the minstrel vocally portrayed afflictions, heartaches, and yearnings of the amorous in discriminating manner. The former churned out heroic lore in enormity; the latter produced prolific folklore.

FIGURE 2. Sketch by Pretapsinh Jadeja

Audiences in the villages and the towns of Gujarat sitting with unblinking eyes, spellbound by the torrents of verses streaming from the lusty lungs of the wandering Charan minstrels were common sights. The words were often incomprehensible, but their sounds

carved out a series of panoramic images, and yet, the very phraseology, when appearing in print, looked like a synthetic concoction and a meaningless jugglery of words; the rules of grammar ridiculed it, the science of rhetoric mocked it, and the sense of proportion evaded it.

The question lingers: what exactly is this *diṅgal*? It is neither a language nor a dialect. It is a mode of rendering poetry, a mode with a distinct flair of its own, a mode that has sprouted from the original Rajasthani and been shaped by historical events. The Charan, an ace artisan of poetical *diṅgal*, composed and sang paeans and hymns of the divine, ballads of the brave, eulogies of the saints, his noble patrons, and battle epics; he gave sardonic jobations, and flaunted himself in front of flinching warriors and mighty tyrants; he bemoaned travesty by the treacherous, narrated balladic legends of the lovelorn, quavered odes and elegies composed in memory of martyred warriors, dead benefactors, and friends; he trilled out pastorals depicting the bountiful nature, grandeur of the changing seasons, and the significance of festivals. He versified descriptions of arms and weaponry, immortalized the incredible feats of lions, horses, camels, and buffaloes. He chanted sermons, ancient epics, and dirges of those anguished by natural calamities. Whether he recounted the subtleties of varying climates, exuberant nature, festive gaieties, or the pining of parted lovers, he always sang out in a full-throated voice, like a lustily warbling peacock. Whether he lamented with grief or rendered the terrible, he did so with profound involvement, in a state of euphoria, in ecstatic animation.

The tradition of poetizing the elegance of nature and the associated human revelry dates back to the oldest school of folk literature, but the Charani versification of seasons is distinguished by its gusto and vigorous emotional extravaganza. Let us read aloud the thunderous and yet yearning poetic account of the spring in sonorous *diṅgal* in a *chhaṅd* metric form:

Ambā moriyā ji ke kesū koriyā,
Chitta chakoriyā ji ke fāgaṇ foriyā.
Foriyā fāgaṇ, pavan har-far, mahu ambā moriyā,
Gaṇ rāg ghar ghar fāg gāve, jhate pavvan joriyā;
Gallāl jholi, ramat holi, raṅg gop ramāvaṇāṅ,
Ākhant Rādhā, neh bādhā, vrajj Mādhā āvaṇāṅ!
Ji vrajj Mādhā āvaṇāṅ!

Mango trees have blossomed, *kesū*[6] flowers are in full bloom and their fragrance is in the air.
Hearts have become buoyant as *Fāgaṇ*[7]
The fragrance of *Fāgaṇ,* wafting breeze, blooming *mahu*[8] and mango trees,

Homes humming with motley *fāg*[9] songs, frequently gusting gales;
Sacks of powdery stains, revelry of smearing colors;
"You who lured the shepherd boys to the festive Holi,"[10] says Rādhā,[11]
Oh Madhav, you who is bound by love, come to Vraj,[12] oh, please do come!

This verse expresses the amorous anticipation and yearning of Radha for her Krishna, feelings which became more and more acute by the advent of spring. The verse above was part of a *barmasa,* a poem consisting of verses, each describing one of the twelve months of the year, each set to different metrical scheme and melodious rhythm depending on the season it depicted. A more vivid and attractive sub-category of the Charani poetry is the elegiac *barmasa* that renders dirges, a set for each month, composed and sung in the memory of a dead benefactor, a brave warrior, or a close friend. In these elegies, usually beginning with *Ashadh* (the first month of the rainy or monsoon season), Charan bards yearningly lamented not only the divine yearnings as described in the song above but at times also sang of their gratitude for their living patrons.

Let us exit from the region of complex metrical poetry that is afflicted, to an extent at least, by clumsiness, turgidity, and verbal grandiosity, and let us enter the arena of *duhā* poetry in *diṅgal.* It is an exhilarating experience, very similar to that of escaping into a lush rural expanse from the poisonously choking polluted air of an industrial city. It is like sighting light flowers and cotton puffs floating about! The pastorals and metrical poetry are like secured treasure chests: only those holding the key can access it. *Duhā*'s realm, however, captures our imagination, dominates emotion and fills our hearts with a scent of the Muse. *Duhā* is a poetical genre that, vis-a-vis the refined Prakrit, introduces the layman to the refreshing quality of poetry. There is no other poetical form as brief, as condensed, as compact, as composite, as vivid, or as lyrical as *duhā.* The finesse in the manifestation of the wisdom of the wise as well as the tearful sighs of the lovelorn reaches a climax in *duhā.* The basic two-lined verse is also capable of reproducing the battle blues effectively. The seed of contemplation and reflection readily impregnates the *duhā* shell that shapes and matures them into perfectly lustrous poetic pearls. And a hoary pilgrim is the tiny verse! Its poetic inception dates back to the ninth Vikram century. From then on, it gradually became a popular vehicle of the folk poetry. Research reveals that over the centuries *duhā* has increasingly endeared itself to the poets of folklore as well as the literary pundits and at the same time attained greater popularity. With the passage of time, as the language, literary as well as the day-to-day, changed its trappings and form, *duhā,* too, ran a parallel course by constantly changing its décor.

Sanskrit literature was at its zenith when *duhā*s composed in Apabhraṅsha began to dominate poetry. Where the Charan bard in the regal court, with his eulogies of the brave filled with scholarly pomposity, could not reach, the folklorist, either a Charan or a non-Charan, churned the folklore with the help of earthy Apabhraṅsha *duhā*-form as a churner and reached out to serve us with the cream he thus attained in the form of *duhā*s. Apabhraṅsha *duhā* could appear in the unlettered *diṅgal* with ease and, since *diṅgal* was already being refurbished by folk tongues, Apabhraṅsha was reborn in the local dialects of other provinces in an unchanged form. Like a wandering recluse, the *duhā*-form roamed at will, beamed with beauty, and shone with splendor.

Propped by twenty or fifty *duhā*s, many a saga of bravery and generosity, tales of love filled with the pinings of the lovelorn and the pathos of their tragic deaths have survived the passage of time simply because they were memorized verbatim from generation to generation. The allusive substance of each such stories has been reproduced and preserved in *duhā* form. As soon as one enters the realm of *duhā*, the courtly ostentation disappears and a natural redolence of the pastoral begins to exude all around. Human dignity has appeared in its true dimensions in these *duhā*s. Every head would bow before the world of letters in which subtle emotions received its due place and which stimulated the resolving process of enigmatic problems of the contemporary society. The Charan bard has assimilated these qualities in the *duhā*-bound stories wherein the characterizations have been carried out on the stage set by socio-emotional conflicts. There are hundreds of these *duhā*s that have immortalized these stories. Without *duhā*s the stories would not have survived and consequently the literary strains would not have been able to reach villages and hamlets, manors and shanties, mountain ranges and forest thickets. Fortunately, a large number of Charans was able to overcome the temptation of boons and bounties and, with self-respect intact, opted for the folklore. The Charan drew inspiration and found creative satisfaction from nature, birds, and beasts. He could decipher human emotions, and pampered them and raised them to poetic heights, making the balladic lore a lasting and cherished environmental heritage of the family of man. He turned these stories into shady groves of events for stricken souls and soothing salves for bruised hearts.

Many believe that the construction of a *duhā* is unruly and therefore requires no effort. Some researchers too are under the illusion that one can put together a *duhā* verse by rhyming a couple of metrical lines. Not true. *Duhā* is a poetic mould, a sensitive precision scale, a self-sufficient versified form of poetry. Its artistic assertion will not permit the slightest flaccidity; thought, imagination, and emotion must blend into homogeneity, crystalline

as a faceted gem. *Duhā* has proved capable of seizing universal wisdom and philosophies, the magnificence of seasonally ever-changing nature, ecstasy of romance, anguish of the parted, and the inevitability of death, all in photoflash brevity. It has thus stood the test of modern poetic décor and shone out as a perfect artifice.

At its inception, this form of utterance might have sounded like a fragmented jumble. But *duhā* went along at a romping pace, from mouth to mouth and from lungs to lungs, all along being shaped by thousands of tongues as if being furbished on an assembly line of precision lathes. It went on to acquire the facets, one after the other, of poetical grace, rhyme, and rhythm, the characteristics absolutely essential in formulaic oral lore. The sound is the heart and soul of formulaic oral lore; only a glimpse of its light, a mere consolation, can be had from its script form. We earlier relished the ecstatic sound of the blossoming spring in *chhaṅd* form. Let us experience the pathos that a two-lined *duhā* can fill the world with.

Prince Māṅgadā and a commoner named Padmā were in love. Just as they were being married, bandits struck and herded away the village cows. Māṅgadā stood up from amid the wedding ceremony, pursued the cattle thieves and died fighting them. His unfulfilled desires took a spectral form and settled in the grove of a banyan tree on the outskirts of the village. At home, Padmā grieved to no end but her parents ultimately prevailed upon her to remarry. The wedding party, while returning home, paused to spend the night under the banyan tree, haunted by the lamenting ghost of Māṅgadā. With tears of blood dripping from his eyes, Māṅgadā appeared as an apparition before Padmā; she decided then and there not to go with the new groom and to live under the banyan tree with the ghost of the one she loved. Folk-poets have employed the *duhā* form to describe the ghost's pathetic condition in these apt words:

Sau roto saṅsār, ene pāṅpaṇiye pāṇi pade,
Paṇ bhūt rūve bheṅkār, ene lochaniye lohi jhare

All the earthlings weep at one time or the other, and when they weep, tears roll out of their eyes, but when a ghost weeps, blood drips from his eyes.

Night after night, she lived in an atmosphere haunted by acute desire, and during the daylight listened to the pining dirges of the ungratified spirit. This is how the folk poets make her relate her terrified innermost emotions, once again in a *duhā* form:

Vadalā tāri varāl, pāne pāne parajhali,
Kise jhampāvuṅ jhāl, mane bhadaḳā lāge bhūt-nā.

O banyan tree, fumes rising from your anguished sighs have ignited your every leaf. The inferno of unfulfilled desires is raging and singeing to me from all around. Where shall I go to quell the flame that has caused the fire?

These legends are not entirely in the form of verses. In every legend, each *duhā* is a stanza of an independent lyric. In every story, *duhā*s do not always recount events. A key event revealing the heart of the story triggers a string of *duhā*s. The stories can be classified into various categories such as eulogies of the brave, anguish of the lovelorn, dirges of dead friends or lovers, and so on. Ideal elegies are found in the *duhā*s of Porasa Wala.

About six hundred years ago, a nomadic Charan man named Māṅdaṇ with his newly married wife and a buffalo calf had straggled into a village named Sagālā. During a dry monsoon season in the preceding year in the native Sorath region, the couple had loaded their meager belongings on a buffalo and wandered off to Gujarat in search of greener pastures. Now that the next rainy season had set in, they were looking for a kindhearted landlord in whose village they could build a home. Having thus halted on the outskirts of Sagālā, Māṅdaṇ asked his wife to wait for him on the sandy riverbank while he went to the village to sound out the laird of the village, Porasa Wala.

The court was festive. Deep red opium extract was being served to the courtiers in silver goblets. Strapping intrepid men of the warrior clan held the red extract in their palms and were offering it to one another while making incantational salutations to the Sun God. Māṅdaṇ could not but join the spree. The intoxicant soon tinged the corners of his eyes, and he began narrating a story. His full-throated voice rose to a crescendo and the atmosphere began to reverberate with the echoes of the relishing courtiers' boisterous hails. Even the breeze stood still as if spellbound by the story that the bard embellished with robust *chhaṅds* and *duhā*s. In the silence that prevailed, only the Charan's voice and the heartbeats of the brave could be heard. He, too, was totally lost in the moment as his rendering gushed in torrents.

At the riverbank, too, the air became charged with thunder and lightning. Clouds converged and a deluge poured forth from the sky. Soon, the waters began to rapidly rise in the rivers. People called out to the Charan woman to move to the upper ridge. But how could she? Before striding away to the village, he had made her promise not to move from where she had stood with her cattle. She lifted her sash that veiled her attractive face and looked with anxious and anticipating eyes in the direction of the village, but her man was nowhere in sight. The bard euphorically singing at the court suddenly heard the panicky shouts and, waking up to the reality, raced

toward the riverbank. Speeding torrents were dragging her seaward just when Māṅdaṇ approached the bank. He desperately called out for her, beseeching her not to leave him alone, but the woman disappeared in the deluge. He could only catch a momentary glimpse of her red sash on the convulsing water surface before the sash too was sucked in by a whirlpool. The grief made him lose his mind and once again alienated him from reality.

"It swallowed my woman, Porasa Wala! Your bewitching outskirts lured us and swallowed her alive!" he raved in a deranged fit. In a state of delirium he broke into whimpering elegies. In all, there are thirty heart-rending *duhā*s. Below a literal translation of some of these are given in italics, followed by a more interpretive translation in plain type.

Robbed of all I had, I've lost the treasure mine;
Bewitching they are, the outskirts of your town; oh Porasa!

Oh Porasa Wala, the vicinity of your town is like an enchantress. It has surreptitiously snatched all my wealth, little that I, a poor man, had possessed. The treasure-trove of my life has been stolen from me.

A body aglow as a vermilion drip, I'd cherished it as if of gold;
Poor and meek, I'm sponged, in the outskirts of your town; oh Porasa!

I had cherished my beloved, who was as dazzling and dainty as a drip of vermilion salve, but by coming to your town I was robbed of her.

Like a cowering rabbit hiding from the hound,
My heart flutters with fright, on the outskirts of your town; oh Porasa!

Oh Porasa Wala, like a hounded rabbit breathlessly hiding in a burrow, poor I had sought refuge in the love of my woman. But death pounced and left me bereft of my only solace. I too am fleeing from death like a desperate rabbit pursued by a hunter.

Purring and soughing, when snug slept a flock of kunj,[13]
In the night one was slain, on the outskirts of your town; oh Porasa!

Oh Porasa Wala, when a flock of *kunj* birds stops flying and rests for the night in a forest tree, each bird takes a turn to keep vigil over the gently squeaking, sleeping flock. I was too relaxed in a similar sense of security when suddenly came a stealthy hunter and impaled my heart when it was in a deep slumber.

Like a pair of chakwa[14] *birds, my eyes keep scanning the sky;*
But glowers an eternal night, horizons loom unlit; oh Porasa!

From the moment the sun dips, each of the pair of *chakrawaak* birds keeps flitting about the sky, peering into the horizon looking for a glimmer of the dawn, or for sufficient light to seek its mate who parted during the day. My heart too keeps gazing at the desolate horizons of my future and searching for a ray of hope that would put an end to this long dark night of misery, but nowhere do I glimpse the dawn that would herald a reunion with my loved one.

Thirstily, when I went to a lake, it suddenly went dry;
How to quell an inferno when there isn't a drop to drink; oh Porasa!

Oh Porasa Wala, I was very thirsty and I saw a lake, but as I approached the water's edge, the lake that was brimming with water a moment earlier suddenly dried up in front of my eyes. My love has disappeared as suddenly. Now how can I extinguish the flames of my burning heart?

Loving, neat, and cute she was; brimming was my bliss;
Now life is all woe and reproach, on the outskirts of your town; oh Porasa!

The union with such a smart, attractive, and loving woman had brought me gratifying bliss. But now, without her—oh Porasa Wala!—I am condemned to writhe in a chasm of struggles and conflicts of a lonely life.

Flame 's out, desires remain, heart 's engulfed in turmoil;
Alas! A ruby lies shattered, on the outskirts of your town; oh Porasa!

My life companion has left me. My desire for marital bliss has turned into a mirage. My desolate heart is racked by loneliness in the same manner as a floundered boat is battered by the high seas.

Another set of yearning dirges in *duhā* form are bound together in the legend of Meh and Ujali, wherein compulsions of a class-based society, and not an accidental death, result in a pathetic parting and ultimately in a ghastly end.

Ujali was a young pretty maiden, an only daughter of a nomadic Charan cattleman. During the monsoon months they built a thatched hut on the lush plateau of a hill and grazed their cattle. On a dark, rainy, stormy night, from nowhere appeared a horse at their doorstep carrying a rain-drenched, unconscious, feverishly shivering young man. The girl and her father carried him inside, dried him and tried to contain the shivering by igniting firewood, but to no avail. Finally the girl volunteered to give the delirious man her body-warmth by lying in embrace with him in his bed. The man recovered and revealed that he was the prince of a town named

Ghoomali. He continued living at their hut and shared intimacies with the girl until he fully recovered. Before leaving for his native town, Meh, the prince, promised to return soon to wed her. He never returned. Back in Ghoomali, he was told by his parents and the dignitaries of the clan that being a Rajpoot, he could not marry a Charan girl, that he was a prince while the girl was a tramping nomad. Although disturbed, he gradually and dutifully accepted the situation. Ujali on the mountain top at first waited for him, then sent messages, and finally began to grieve. An unknown bard has been able to put in spoken words the pathetic pining of a "rejected" Charan girl and the silent anguish of the earnest, though misunderstood as perfidious, prince who was fettered by rigid insensitive traditions. Ujali had revived Meh from an almost certain death by offering him the warmth of her body. Her action had led her to experience the thrill of the culmination of love; she had shared a bed with him, and only he could be her lover, nobody else. But Meh withstood the emotional onslaught of the event and adhered to the ideals set down by the traditions for the heir to the throne. Neither her entreaties nor her charm, not even a sense of obligation, deterred him from carrying out his duty as a king-to-be. The more he avoided her, the more she yearned for him. How strikingly expressed are her efforts to entice Meh back! How rich the poetic excellence! How delicate and exquisite the messages woven in the *duhā*s rendered in *barmasa* form! A few specimen are as follows:

The winter chill!

In the month of Kartak,[15] *everyone feels the cold;*
Chill's pierced my bones; warm me, o Master of Abhpara!

Oh Meh, the emperor of mount Abhpara, winter has come. Parted lovers remember the wintry nights spent together and feel the chill of the loneliness. Please come and cover me with your warmth!

In the month of Magsar,[16] *together we had breathed;*
Presumed I had, the pillow-talk you won't forget, oh Jethava!

Oh son of the Jethava clan, in the month of *Magshar,* the lovers not only live together, they even breathe as one. Do you remember our loving prattles? Why have you forsaken me?

At least in Posh,[17] *you would come 'n love me, so I had hoped;*
Oh king of Barada mount, honor your word and do your duty!

and

In the month of Maha,[18] *thunder the coppery drums;*
Come with a wedding band, hail you I will, oh Master of Vinoi!

The month of *Maha* is here. It is an auspicious month for weddings. Joyous beats of drums resound everywhere while men and women marry and unite. Oh sovereign of this mount Vinoi, please do come and wed me!

And oh, behold the spring!

In the month of Fāgaṇ, *flowers are a feast for the eyes;*
But the price the lovelorn pay is too high, oh Master of Vinoi!

Spring is here. Flowers are blossoming everywhere, but o loved one, for a lovelorn like me the sight brings no joy. In fact, while languishing in loneliness it is very painful to see spring racing away.

It was as if they sat lamenting their ill-luck on the opposite banks of the river of class segregation. They could not meet. Driven by despair and outraged, Ujali invoked the Mother Goddess of the Universe and cursed Meh to suffer the agony of white leprosy. After suffering terribly from the disease, Meh finally died. When his body was placed on a pyre of sandalwood and the pyre was ignited, Ujali came and immolated herself on the very same pyre. Ujali's *duhā*s do not recount events. They constitute an integrated and graceful poem, a profound poetic impression of Ujali's intense emotions—love, despair, and outrage.

As a finale to this essay, let me present the story of Sheni and Vijanand, which in contrast to the story above is an example of a balladic recount of events as well as emotions. Vijanand in the story was an orphaned Charan youth. He earned his daily food by grazing other herdsmen's cattle and lived by himself, all alone. He finally created a companion; he improvised, and made a string instrument by putting together two dried up wild gourds and a hollowed bamboo piece with a horsetail hair, and crowning it with a peacock's feather, which were all obtained from the thickets of Geer in the southwestern part of Saurashtra. He learned to play the instrument and recite stories in accompaniment. Soon, his fingertips were able to evoke many different melodies from this lute-like instrument called *jantar*.

Grazing his five buffaloes from pasture to pasture, he once halted on the outskirts of a village named Goraviali and sighted a maiden drawing water from a well. The thirsty youth joined his palms to form a basin and asked her to pour water into it for him to drink, but the girl, frightened by his ugly face, fled back to the village. The youth entered the village and,

purely by coincidence, walked into the house of none other than the girl's father, a well-to-do Charan herdsman named Veda.

After the evening meal, village folks gathered at Veda's house and clustered around Vijanand under the open sky to hear him strum his lute and recite a story or two. He touched the chords and invoked the mood of the deepening night through a melody full of so much pathos that the listeners were as if mesmerized by the atmosphere he created. Inside the house, Veda's darling daughter sitting behind a curtain listened to the magical strains of music accompanied by Vijanand's voice narrating an ancient story of love, bravery, and nobility. His artistry and style captivated her and the ugliness of his face that had terrified her a few hours earlier on the rim of the village well was erased from her mind. Vijanand's narration cast a spell over her to the extent that she was afraid to breath as the sound of her breathing might disturb the narration! She fell in love with Vijanand and regarded herself already married to him! Vijanand began to frequently visit Veda's home, and one day Veda was so pleased with the young bard that he was offered whatever he wished!

When Vijanand asked for Sheni's hand, Veda foamed with rage at the audacity of the vagrant begging youth. He expelled Vijanand from his house, but afraid of being castigated for not honoring his word, he set a condition to be fulfilled by Vijanand for deserving Sheni's hand: "Within a year," he said, "bring one hundred and one buffaloes, each of them of a nine-blazed variety (*nav-chandari*), and prove that you have means to support a family. If you return, marry her on the spot. If you cannot, do not show your face ever again."

With confidence and zeal, Vijanand set out on his mission. Roaming from hamlet to hamlet, house to house, he entertained the livestock raisers with his stories accompanied with the strains of his lute. Whenever an overjoyed patron pledged him the boon of his choice, Vijanand asked for a buffalo with nine white marks. But this was a rarity; not many possessed a buffalo of this type. He underestimated the difficulty of the task. Herding the buffaloes he could thus acquire, and looking for more, he roamed deeper into the thickets of Geer.

On the last day of the twelfth month, Sheni went up to the village well and waited with her eyes fixed to the horizon and heard in her heartbeats the thuds of Vijanand's footsteps. When the darkness came, she returned home. After a sleepless night, at dawn she went up to her father and sought his permission to proceed to the Himalayas to freeze herself to death for she believed that what one could not attain during this life could be attained during the next if one ended life in a way specified in the scriptures; one of which was to freeze to death in the sacred Himalaya mountains. Veda tried

to reason with her by mentioning many other worthy Charan young men, but Sheni declined:

Vijanand's wedding lace, I shall offer to nobody else,
Four lacs are Charan men; as my brothers I regard them all.

She began to walk northward. All along the journey by foot she hopefully kept looking for and asking the wayfarers about "a swarthy complexioned youth with a *jantar* in his hand." Anxiously, she followed his trail but losing it in the end, made her way to the foothills of the Himalaya region. After leaving behind places inhabited by humans, she trudged into a snowbound range, found a desolate frozen water basin, and took up the final sitting posture. Time ticked by but her delicate body remained unaffected by the icy chill. She invoked the sacred mountain and asked why her limbs were not benumbed by the cold. The Himalayan mountains reverberated as if saying: "You must perform this ritual of death in the company of the one you aspire to unite with in your next life." Scooping up frozen ice, she shaped it into a snowman, placed him by herself, and invoked the memory of Vijanand. Her body began to freeze. When the freezing process reached her knees, she heard a faint sound of someone calling out: "Sheni! Sheni! Sheni!" It was a familiar voice. After a while a remote silhouette of Vijanand appeared standing on top of the ridge of the embankment. From a distance he cried hoarsely: "Sheni, let's go home. I have haltered one hundred and one nine-blazed buffaloes in your father's barn. I was late, but only by a day. Let's go home.'

In the bard's vision, Sheni responds:

Frostbitten are my bones, all the way to the shins;
Oh my precious Vijanand, please return home alone.

Vijanand persisted:

Return, oh Veda's girl, I'll tend to you even if you are crippled;
I'll seat you on a lath and cart you to all the sacred shrines.

But neither Sheni could go back to where Vijanand stood nor could Vijanand summon the courage to join her on the pilgrimage of death that would have secured him her company during the lives to come. In a dim icy diffusion of light, Sheni could faintly perceive the silhouetted figure of Vijanand who was now descending the ridge to approach her, hesitating and then retracing his ascent to the ridge, again and again, as if unable to make up his mind. With deep understanding she urged him to indeed go back, but also expressed her last wish to listen to him play his instrument.

Vijanand, play your *jantar!* Hark! Himalayas resound!
Fishermen gape spellbound, fish are flocking to the lake's surface!

Vijanand began to strum on his *jantar.* Himalayan gorges began to echo the music. Fishermen stood, holding their nets in their hands, thus allowing multicolored fish, which were captivated by the symphony, to flock to the surface of the lake and peep out their heads to listen without fear. Chanting of "Ram! Ram!" rising from Sheni's soul created a perfectly divine rhythm to fill the melody erupting from the anguished heart of Vijanand. Just then,

The *jantar* fell, the gourd cracked, and snapped the major chord;
Veda's girl Sheni departed; died the song, but not the singer.

And the end:

Forsaking Sheni, a precious mate, Vijanand returned home,
When hungry, he ate crumbs, and lived forever like a tramp.

Sound is the soul of speech. Formulaic verse all over the world has acknowledged the effectiveness of sound. Today, the *duhā*s we unearth are in extremely mangled and distorted form because after the poetic era of the dominant sound ended, the lyrical element in poetry decreased. *Duhā* is no longer trilled; it is merely being babbled. The value of the sound in *duhā* inspires but a few, just as mantras and paeans inspire few today.

*Duhā*s have trickled down through time for no one knows how many centuries. Frantic searches are being made for the sites of the stories, names of places and characters, as well as of headstones that may reveal valuable information about these, but no effort is being made to establish the dates and the years of the compositions of *duhā*s or the historical validity of the events described in them. The oldest *duhā*s we know of are those recounting the romance of Son and Halaman, which is at least one thousand five hundred years old, probably older. The entire class of *duhā*s belong to the world of folk literature, of folksongs. *Duhā*s are like the islands rising from the ocean or like volcanoes erupting from the earth—self-sustaining, charmingly profound, and blazing with passion.

NOTES

1. One of the eighteen puranas in Sanskrit, which are collections of sacred poems in Hindu mythology.

2. A study of the compilation of history and legends in poetical form, especially in the Jain religion.

3. Eighteen collections of sacred Sanskrit poems of Hindu mythology.

4. Any of the dialects of northern and central India that existed alongside Sanskrit in ancient times, or which was derived from Sanskrit.

5. A simplified version of any of the Prakrit dialects.

6. *Butea frondosa*, a tree of saffron colored flowers, or its flowers.

7. The fifth month of the Vikram calendar year, or the advent of spring.

8. *Bassia Latifolia* or Mowra tree.

9. Gleeful, catchy tunes or amorous folk ditties that are at times suggestively obscene and full of fun and frolic.

10. A festival heralding the advent of spring and the completion of harvest when folks smear one another with colors. In mythology, Prahlad, a perfect devotee, was protected by God from being burnt alive by a tyrant atheist on this day.

11. Radha is a symbolic female manifestation of Krishna's beloved.

12. Vraj, or Brij (Hindi), is a region in northern India where Krishna was believed to be born and brought up.

13. A bird of the crane family.

14. Ruddy Goose or Sheldrake. In Sanskrit literature it is called *chakrawaak* and is used as a symbol of the eternal yearning of parted lovers.

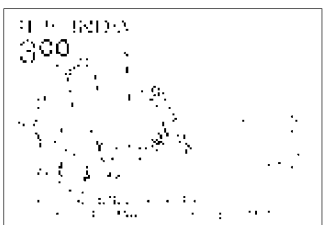
15. First month of winter in the Vikram calendar year.

16. Second month of winter

17. Third month of winter

18. Last month of winter

APPENDIX: ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A current Indian postage stamp honoring Jhaverchaṅd Meghāṇi.

Jhaverchaṅd Meghāṇi (1896–1947) is an illustrious name in Gujarati literature. A renowned folklorist and a pioneering researcher, he carried out painstaking research on the folklore of Saurashtra over a span of twenty five years by wandering on foot, riding horses and camels, and coasting aboard sailing ships. On the basis of the materials he collected and documented alone, he wrote many scholarly treatises on various aspects of the folk-literature that was preserved mostly by rote memory in Gujarat. Outlaws and their odes, saint-poets and their *bhajans* (hymns or paeans), the legends of the land, Charans and Charani literature, sailors' songs, lullabies, wedding songs, elegies, and propitiation tales were some of the topics he dealt with exhaustively from the perspective of universal folklore. Applying his deep knowledge of the folklore of Saurashtra, a highland located in peninsular Gujarat, he reconstructed about a hundred short stories depicting bravery, honesty, nobility, love, etc. from the fragmented fables and legends he had jotted down during his long quest. These stories were published during the 1920s in five volumes as *Saurashtra-ni Rasdhar,* which has been reprinted many times.

Blessed by the Muse, he contributed to his generation by responding to the burning issues of the era such as social disparity and the surge of nationalism. He also penned a number of novels, short stories, a few plays, as well as translated stories, poems, and plays from Bengali into Gujarati. Stirred by the national yearning for liberation from the yoke of alien powers as well as from oppressive fiefdoms, he participated in the freedom struggle and carried out relentless campaigns against oppression in the kingdoms, mainly in his role as a

respected journalist. Gifted with an expressive voice, he could render lyrics with intense emotional involvement, mainly to illustrate his own thoughts on particular topics. During his final years, he had begun to write in English about the folklore of Gujarat. In 1944, at the behest of Rabindranath Tagore, he visited Shantiniketan to give a series of lectures in English about the folk-literature of Gujarat.

In a comparatively short literary career of about twenty five years, he turned out more than eighty volumes of folktales, biographies of outlaws, short stories, novels, plays, and poems (original as well as translated), and critical essays containing valuable material for further research in the folk literature of Saurashtra.