

Routing the Rootless: Orality and the Meo Identity

Abhay Chawla

Introduction

Meos are the inhabitants of a region in North-west India in between the cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, a region which was called Mewat (IGI, 1909:313). Formerly Hindus, most of them belong to Rajput families who embraced Islam four centuries ago (Shamsh 17), although a lot of the Hindu customs were still practiced as late as the mid-20th century! In answer to the question, “What’s your religion?” a present-day Meo answers, “Islam”. Yet the whole Meo society is divided into Pals and Gotras, with clear exogamous rules. The cultural articulation of the Meo identity is thus deeply contestatory (Mayaram, 2004).

Mewati is the spoken language of the region. Termed a dialect, it has no script of its own and can be written in both Persian-Arabic and Devanagiri scripts. The language, therefore, has an indeterminate status (Grierson, 1908).

Origin of the Meos

There are various theories about the Meos and their inhabiting the area called Mewat. Their mythological origins are described in Colonel James Skinner’s (1778-1841) illustrated *Tashrih-ul-Aqwam* (an account of the origins and occupations of some of the sects, castes, and tribes of India). The Meos could have been the Mids, a pastoral-nomadic migratory group of North-west India between the seventh and eleventh centuries, or they could be the offspring of the men who constituted the army of Alexander the Great, who were left back under his governor Seleucus Nicator to guard the conquered Indian territory of Sind, or the progenies of Raja Jaswant as described by Crooke in his book, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh, Volume III*,

History of Marginality

The starting point for the marginality of the Meos, in the absence of any other records, can be taken as their displacement from the Doab by the Rajput clans of Dors, Tomars, Bargujars and Chauhan as enumerated in the Gazetteers of the United Provinces (UP). There is no written record of the Meos (except during Qutabal-Din's period) and, as a result, their above mentioned displacement has been conjectured by scholars (Mayaram, 2004: 22). From various documented accounts it is quite apparent that Meos were constantly viewed as a problem for the state of Delhi as well as Ullwar. They were known to indulge in criminal activities like looting and thieving and were in general known to maintain a rebellious stance towards the state and were looked upon as the "Other". However, from their perspective, it was their lands which had been occupied; the state of Delhi was the usurper.

Hunter, in the Imperial Gazetteer of India, writes: "They gave much trouble to Lord Lake's forces in the Maratha War of 1803, while in the mutiny they and the Goojars were conspicuous for their readiness to take advantage of disorder" (314).

There is also the matter of their mixed culture, curious to outsiders in general. The Meo conversion from Hinduism to Islam explains their cultural practices straddling the two religions. Diverse explanations are available regarding Meo conversions, and it is unclear if the conversion was a one-time process, a complete movement associated with conquest, or whether it occurred as a gradual process over an extended period of time. Jagga records in Rajasthan show that by the early eighteenth century, Meos had started to keep Muslim names for their babies, though the process was still fragile, and Major Powlett observed in the second half of the nineteenth century that "Meos are now Musalmaan in name but their village deities are the same as those of the Hindus" (Alwar Gazetteer).

In fact, this tenuous process continued until Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi started the Tablighi Jama'at movement in Mewat in 1926.

The movement caused the Meos to gradually distance themselves from Hindu customs and to adopt Islamic customs. This was further accelerated by the rise of communal forces, and subsequent communal riots in the run up to the independence of the country. All this occurred over a span of a few decades in the early 20th century.

Most information in the public domain came from British authors who based their understanding of the Meos on the writings of one Major Powlett who in turn based his understanding on Persian texts containing the then state's perspective of the Meos. The Meos never got their side of the picture into any written text. In fact, towards the end of the British rule the Meos again seemed to be at the wrong end of the political spectrum. With independence looming on the horizon and the hardening of the communal forces, there were riots that broke out in Alwar, Bharatpur and adjoining areas. There was a mass migration of Meos from Bharatpur into Alwar and Gurgaon, and some of them migrated to Pakistan.

Oral Traditions

These stories were composed by bards or mirasis of various Meo Pals¹ in the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century. Dariya Khan, Gurchari Mev Khan, Kaularii k larai and Panch Pahar ki larai are some of the popular stories. Mayaram (2004) feels the story 'Kaulani ki larai' is a Meo creation unlike the other stories which were mirasi creations.

Kaulani ki larai²

The background narrative of the story is as follows: Meos were notorious for their turbulence and predatory habits till their subjugation by Bhakhtawar Singh and Viney Singh of the Alwar Kingdom who broke up large turbulent villages into a number of small hamlets; thereafter the Meos became docile (Shamsh, 34).

Meo society is divided into 12 Pals. Then there is a 13th Pallakra having an inferior status with respect to other Pals. In addition there are the Nepaliyas who don't fall into any Pal.

As documented by Mayaram (2004), abridged.

The story is from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century and shows the tense relationship between the Meos and the Naruka Rajput state of Alwar.

It was after the 1803 Maratha war that Alwar signed an alliance with the British which allowed Mewat to be divided into two territories, one administered by the princely states under British Paramountcy and the other administered directly. Kaulani is situated in northern Alwar around Ramgarh and Ghata near the present day town of Firojpur Jhirka.

The story is divided into three parts with the first part called the “Battle of Hathi Singh or Jhir Ki Larai” while the second part is called “Battle of Bhopal Singh or Kaulani ki larai” and the third part, the “Battle of Kanvar Jahaj”.

Two brothers, Jabbar and Jhangir Khan, who are Khanzadas chaudharis live at Mubarakpur and are informers for the government. They have the power to give up to six months imprisonment or punishment of kath koyra. The maharaja of the Alwar State, Bhaktawar Singh, gifts Jabbar with a siropav, horse, woollen shawl and a turban for his work as an informer.

Jabbar’s horse is stolen by Ravat Mev of Sivana. He thinks the Kaulani Meos of Baghora Pal have taken it. Jabbar captures Jalam, a Baghora Meo in the bazaar. Rai Khan, a chaudhari of Baghora Mens, and is angered when Jabbar collects all the Khanzadas of Mubarakpur and takes the matter to the Alwar court. Rai Khan threatens to take revenge unless Jalam is released but Jabbar refuses to release him.

Fourteen Meo thamas capture the Khanzadas’ cattle in retaliation. In the resulting battle at Kaulani, the seven brothers of the Khanzada chaudhari are killed.

The Rajput general Hathi Singh is sent to avenge the Khanzadas' defeat. Hathi Singh's army reaches Firozpur and pitches its tents. Ahmad Bakas, the nawab of Firozpur, belongs to the Mughal qaum. Mansa Meo a Daimrot Meo of Ghata Basi called the Rao Sahib of Ghata takes the horse of Hathi Singh thinking it belongs to a gypsy. Ghata had been refusing to pay revenue to the state. 200 girls, 900 cows and 70 are captured by Nawab Ahmad Bakas' army and shut in the fortress of Firozpur. Among the captured are Musi and Maddi, the daughters of the Daimrot Meo, Mansa of Ghata. Hathi Singh shuts Musi in a palanquin and sends her to Tijara while Maddi is made to undergo nikah with the nawab despite her protests and sent to Loharu.

The Diwan of Alwar commands that Kaulani Baksa, the chief of Ratnagarh and Kehargarh return the Khanzadas cows, or else his village will be attacked after the Rajputs take their ritual bath. While the army bathes at the temple of the goddess at Jhir, the Meos close all routes and attack them from four sides. The Gorval, Baghora and Ravat Meo clans join forces, and Hathi Singh is killed. The Daimrot Meos have ever since been grateful to the Baghora Meos for this. This is the battle of Hathi Singh or Jhir. The headless Corpse of Hathi Singh is buried at Jhir where a cenotaph has been erected.

In the second part of the narrative called "Battle of Kaulani", Raja Bakhtawar Singh's mother's brother, Bhopal Singh takes up the challenge to conquer the wild or the region of Baghora Pal. His army camps at Pata and he calls his informers Syalti and Bhagmal who are Nai Meos to tell him the name of the Meo leaders and to spy on the Meos. Syalti and Bhagmal arrive at Kaulani and suggest that the Meos pay the government the rate of eight annas per plow, and the rest would be absolved. At first, the entire village collects eight annas per plow. However Sale Khan Meo refuses to give the eight annas or accept another's authority. The other Meos also take their money back. Bhopal Singh now attacks Kaulani. Mahadev predicts in a conversation with his wife Gora that the Meos will win. The battle is waged for three days until Bhopal Singh is killed.

The third part of the story is called “Kanvar Jahaj ki Larai”. It begins with Baktawar Singh writing to his nephew, Kanwar Jahaj, a Rao of Jaipur to take up the challenge of avenging Bhopal Singh. Jahaj declares that he will break up the Meo pals, defeat Kaulani and establish a fortress there.

The force reaches Baghor, near Tijara, located thirty two miles northeast of Alwar. Jahaj attacks Kaulani along with 500 men. The Meos surround the Rajput force. Wave after wave of Rajput onslaught is repulsed, and Kanvar Jahaz retreats.

Bhakhtawar Singh calls for an astrologer asking him how he might repair the enmity with Mewat. The pandit predicts a battle for twelve years and peace after twenty four. The Rajput thakur, Bhairu Singh, lives in Kotijhana in the Jaipur kingdom. Bhakhtawar sends Bhairu to Kaulani. He lives among the Meos disguised for twelve years. He becomes a pagdi bhai. The palace at Kaulani is repaired.

Bhaktawar’s successor Banni Singh later sends an army of 12000 to Kaulani. A statue of Raghunath (Rama) is placed in the temple in the fort. Ever since then, the village has been known as Raghunathgarh government records.

Culture, Representation and Identity

Oral traditions give a glimpse of a society bereft of written records. As one studies the stores as well as the transcripts of various other stories one notices a repetition of certain keywords. Keeping in mind that these stories were scripted by different mirasis (bards) working for different Pal groups with this story possibly scripted by Meos themselves, it is quite a coincidence that there are surprising similarities between the stories. These similarities are irrespective of the time and context in which the stories were composed and sung.

The overall theme of the story is about Meo identity, that of being a fearless warrior. It is a subaltern narrative of the valor of the Meos in the

face of a cunning and powerful enemy. It is about their honor, their land and the injustice meted out to them.

While the state texts about the event read as, “Refractory Mewattee subjects who were in constant rebellion. . .” (ASSR, 25), in the subaltern narration the Meos describe themselves as “markhana” or brave. A petty feud between the Khanzadas and Meos blows into a war between the Rajputs and Meos, and shows the resentment in Alwar establishment against the wild Meos. The categorical story narration categorical states that when the Khanzadas took their complaint to the Alwar King, the king’s diwan cautioned him against interfering in the intra community feud as Khanzadas and Meos stay together. However his advice is overlooked and the state intervenes. The war is a zero sum game with the victor taking it all i.e. land, women and cows, who become trophies of the victor while the vanquished men are generally expendable and hence killed.

The motifs used in the story are that of feuds and battles; treachery and betrayal, honor and revenge.

The Dhol or drum and nishan or the flag are shown as symbols of power, pagdi or turban exchange as a sign of brotherhood and ritual baths, prayers and mahadev as symbols of righteousness and faith.

The notion of rebellion and seeing themselves as rebels comes out during the course of the story but is highlighted by the particular incident in the third part of the story when a Rajput disguised as a rebel comes and stays with them for twelve years and they are ready to make him a pagdi bhai.

Some key aspects of the above story are:

The story is centered on the Bhagoria Pal of the Meos. Their area of habitation is referred as ‘bihar bhum’ or the ‘wild land’ and its chief or chaudhari as the ‘bihar pat rav’ or ‘Rao of the forest’. Hence Kaulani, a major village of the Bhagorias has topography of hills, and ravines crisscrossed by streams, giving a sense of inaccessibility.

In all the three parts of the story, Meos are able to outsmart a superior enemy.

Meos are innately trusting and are ready to make a pagdi bhai of the Rajput Bhairu, who has stayed with them for 12 years inspite of them fighting a war with the Rajputs. The story does mention that Bhairu comes with loads of wealth and convinces the Meos that he is a rebel.

A Meo will not bear injustice. “Fourteen Meo thamas advance and capture the Khanzadas’ cattle in retaliation for Jabbar’s act of injustice.”

The shared religion between Khanzadas and Meos doesn’t seem to be a critical factor in defining the community. Group interests are shown in shifting loyalties.

Meos had close social linkages with the other non-Muslim castes. In the second part of the story Bhopal Singh is killed by the spear of Moti Brahman who is fighting alongside the Meos.

There is an intra - Pal political angle to the story where the Bhagoria is shown obliging the Daimrot Pal by freeing their women, cows and men from the fort of Firozpur. So even in a common enemy, intra - Pal politics is exhibited in the story.

The fight between the Meos and Rajputs about land and revenue can be gleaned from various references i.e. “Ghata has been refusing to pay the revenue of the state”, “Baksa refuses to pay revenue for Mohammadpur”, “Syalti and Bhagmal arrive at Kaulani and suggest that the Meos pay the government the rate of eight annas per plow”. The land and revenue is an indirect reference to who subjugates whom.

Meo oral narratives answer the question “Who are we?” Without this information there is no identity. A narrative binds complete strangers who share a national space, and “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson).

Representation is the production of meaning through the use of language. According to the Oxford dictionary, to represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination, to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in our senses. For example, the statement: ‘The Meos release the cowgirls, cows and men after breaking into the fortress of Firozpur’, represents the audacity, ferocity or criminality of the Meos, depending on whose lens one is reading the text with. The way we understand complex and abstract concepts like ‘brotherhood’ and ‘criminality’ is through a system of representation. We organize, cluster, arrange and classify concepts, and establish complex relationships between them. When we see a statement *like Khanzada Jabbar ‘s horse is stolen by Ravat Mev of Sivana. He thinks the Kaulani Meos of Baghora Pal have taken it, Jabbar captures Jalam a Baghora Meo in the bazaar*, we are liable to forge a link between the Meos and Khanzadas, a link of enmity. It is therefore easy to infer that Meos and Khanzadas were from a different stock while in reality they were from the same stock and were just feuding.

Culture is defined as shared conceptual maps, languages, and codes that govern the relationship between concepts and signs. Codes are used to fix relationships between concepts and signs. So Meos breaking into the fortress of Firozpur to free their girls, cows and men would be defined as an act of dacoity/criminality but when the Nawab’s army captures them and shuts them in the fortress, it is defined as a ‘valid state response’. It all depends on whose code it is that we are employing to interpret the action.

The conceptual map being used by the reader or ethnographer can change the view drastically, so that the same action could be seen and from different angles. Besides a shared conceptual map, one needs a mechanism of exchanging meanings and concepts, and this purpose is fulfilled through the use of language. The shared conceptual map has to be translated into a common language that helps people of a community correlate concepts and ideas with words, sounds and images. Music and songs are such a

shared language. An oral tradition, with specific keywords, pitches, tones, styles and settings, makes for a very powerful representation of the shared conceptual map of a community and its social narrative, both for the community itself and for others.

In this instance, a pastoral-nomadic migratory group who, over time, has been displaced by stronger powers and has their lands usurped, does not wish to recognize the latter's superiority. Further this group views events around them as being unfair to them. Their self-image is that of a free and fearless people, and this image, they try to maintain at all costs. The additional complexity of religion needs to be negotiated. They worship both Islamic pirs and Hindu gods.

As Major Powlett writes; "In the second half of nineteenth century, Meos are Musalmaan in name but their village deities were the same as those of Hindus." This is apparent in our story where the narrative states that Mahadev predicts in a conversation with his wife Gora that the Meos will win.

The oral tradition further deepened this self-view in which each Pal showed off his bravery in shining word-images woven by the mirasis and added on to the corpus of the Meo oral traditions. In this text the additional facet of intra Pal politics is also shown where the Daimrots are shown to be eternally grateful to the Baghoras.

As a result, even when peasantization of the Meos was complete, the identity of rebellion, criminality and anti-state posturing as repeated in their oral traditions was deeply etched in the Meo ethos. The power of a story repeatedly retold is amply clear: a discourse revolving around a conceptual map of a fiercely independent people who will bow before no authority, who define their own rules, go where they wish, and take things they think are rightfully theirs. This social imprint from a scholar's perspective, one whose conceptual maps are generally statist are bound to give the community a stamp of being 'anti-state' or 'rebellious'.

Meos are an ethnic group. According R. A. Schermerhorn's (1970), the definition of an ethnic group is

An ethnic group is...a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypical features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group (Sollors 1981, p.262).

Kubayanda (1987, p. 128) notes that the primary function of minority discourse is

not to make an accurate description of historical events, but rather to raise the national conscience by addressing questions that have to do with the minor self vis-a-vis the national identity or sovereignty and with the perceived conflicts between freedom and autocracy, between Utopia and reality. Its purpose is to project a minority ethos.

What these stories were doing was not simply rescuing a silent history but rather a story, a narration with a deeper meaning. It was the Meo constructing a face for himself in a world that seemed to be always at odds with him.

Finally, as the Canadian philosopher of Communications Theory, Marshal McLuhan coined the phrase "medium is the message", the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. A story of valor sung by the mirasis, their voice intonation as the story progresses and the speed of rendition all add to the

message being delivered: “we the fearless unconquerable community who will not tolerate subordination even if we have to give our lives”.

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