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Tejaji: A folk Hero worship

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Abstract

The story of the folk hero Tejaji is vital in fulfilling basic human needs such as knowledge, purpose, hope and inspiration. His life and work, preserved through oral traditions and community worship, serve as an inspiration for individual growth and collective preservice. Tejaji's legacy represents principles of courage, sacrifice and justice, making him an example of strength for his followers. The worship of Tejaji reflects the dual purpose of hero narratives. First, his story imparts wisdom and lessons about loyalty, bravery and ethical conduct, helping others deal with life's problems. Second, it inspires and encourages individuals and communities to work for improvement.

His story has a significant cultural impact, influencing the beliefs and identities of those who follow him. However, like many hero narratives, Tejaji's story also has the potential for different interpretations. While it generally promotes inspiration and hope, it can also be framed to serve certain social or cultural goals. Despite this, the ongoing worship of Tejaji reveals the timeless ability of folk heroes to connect with human emotions and needs, making their narratives a source of inspiration and strength for future generations. The worship of Tejaji demonstrates how folk heroes not only reflect cultural values, but also act as receptacles of wisdom and energy, preserving the spiritual and moral fabric of their communities. This article discusses how folk heroes have a profound impact on people's lives, explores the enduring significance of Tejaji's worship in Rajasthan, and highlights how his life and values remain deeply connected with the people. By examining the cultural, historical and moral dimensions of his legend, we uncover the profound role of folk heroes like Tejaji in shaping and sustaining community spirit and tradition.

Key words: folk Hero, narratives, Tejaji, worship, bravery

Introduction

The term “folk hero” comes from the Old English word *folc*, meaning people or tribe, and the Greek word *hērōs*, meaning protector or defender. Essentially, a folk hero is a “defender of the people” whose actions and values are celebrated in cultural stories passed down through generations. These individuals are praised for their heroic deeds and moral integrity, often representing the ideals of the community. Their legendary status is earned through their actions, which resonate with the people by embodying the

qualities most valued by society.

In the cultural landscape of Rajasthan, particularly in the districts of Nagaur and Ajmer, the legend of Tejaji continues to inspire people. He is not only a historical figure but also a cultural icon revered for his bravery, sacrifice, and commitment to justice. Born in a prominent Jat family in Kharnal village of Nagaur, Tejaji's life has been filled with experiences. His narratives include saving cattle from robbers despite being severely wounded and fulfilling a promise to let a snake bite him. Even after being wounded in a fierce battle, he kept his vow and offered his tongue to the snake, which is a testimony to his commitment to truth. These stories not only highlight his bravery, but also his selflessness and his dedication to moral values, qualities for which he is revered as a *Lok-devata* (folk deity).

Tejaji's worship is most prominent during the *Teja Dashami* festival, which celebrates his life and sacrifice. Folk ballads and rituals dedicated to him preserve the social and moral fabric of Rajasthan, serving as a medium to transmit cultural values. His story transcends caste and social divisions, promoting communal unity and a sense of identity. The pastoral and agricultural ethos of Rajasthan finds a divine protector in Tejaji, whose legacy guides communities through challenges.

Tejaji as a folk Hero

Tejaji's narratives is a powerful representation of traditional values such as loyalty, protection and sacrifice. His willingness to risk his life for others, keeping his promises and his embodiment of heroic characteristics of bravery and compassion all resonate strongly with Rajasthani culture. Tejaji's life reminds us that true greatness lies in serving others and upholding justice even in the face of adversity. The story begins with Tejaji's spiritual quest, which is interrupted by the hurtful taunt of a Gujri named Mana. She mocked him by asking why his wife suffered in her youth while he roamed around as a saint. This taunt ignited a deep sense of responsibility in Tejaji, prompting him to bring his wife Pemal back home. Another version of this story, found in Teja folklore, tells how an argument with his sister-in-law over a late meal infuriated him. When his sister-in-law taunted him for neglecting his wife, Tejaji first brought his sister back from her in-laws' house and then set out on a journey to bring his wife Pemal from Paner. The very night Tejaji reached his in-laws' house,

the Mer or Meena people stole the cows of Lachha Gujri. Lachha Gujri lived in Rangwadi. This village is one and a half kos from Paner and one and a half miles from Rupangarh. There is a big and beautiful stepwell named after it between Rupangarh and Sursara. Lachha Gujri went to Tejaji's father-in-law Raimalji, but at that time he had gone out somewhere. At Gujri's request, Tejaji chased the Mer people and after a tough struggle, succeeded in freeing the cows. Tejaji had snatched Lachha Gujri's cows from the Mer people near Mandavariya village. Gujri said that you have freed the cows, but did not bring my *Kerda* (Nagauri bull), without it how will my cows calve? Hearing Gujri's words, Tejaji immediately went back. Although he was tired and injured, he ran after the Mer people on his mare named Leelan. This time there was a war again. Tejaji faced the Mer people, defeated them and retrieved *Kerda*, thereby establishing his image as a protector of the weak and helpless. Despite being injured during this battle, Tejaji's courage spread his fame far and wide.

Folk tales reveal that while going to his in-laws' house, Tejaji had given a promise to the snakes and to fulfill that promise, Tejaji returned with his wife by the same route. In the forest of Sursara, a snake named Balu and his companions blocked their path. They considered this to be the best opportunity to continue the enmity. It is said that while going to her in-laws' house, she challenged Tejaji, then Tejaji told her that he would definitely come here after meeting his wife at her in-laws' house. The injured Tejaji and his wife Pemal fought with Balu Nag and his companions. Tejaji was killed, but he also defeated Balu Nag.

Tejaji's story goes beyond his martyrdom to the intense sacrifice of his wife Pemal, who became a sati after his death. Her last words were marked by a powerful address to the gathered community, where she said:

“Bhaaya rai utarta Bhaduda Navami ki raat jagavjyo, Dasam ne dhokjyo dhaulya ri devali. Kacha doodh roodh bhogjyo. Thara manpasand kaaj siddh hosi. Aa hi mhari amar aashirwad hai.” (Ram and Chaudhary, 12)

Pemal's words resonate deeply in the cultural psyche, reflecting the belief that offerings and prayers made to Tejaji on the specified night of Teja Dashami not only honour his memory but also fulfil one's desires. Her invocation also reflects the

cultural tradition that blessings given by a devoted wife during sati have immense power, often considered effectual. This underlines the reverence given to her sacrifice, though ultimately it is integrated into the honour and worship of Tejaji himself.

This aspect of the legend highlights an important cultural reflection. Despite Pemal's immense sacrifice, her act of sati is subsumed into the narrative of Tejaji's bravery and altruism. While her sacrifice is acknowledged, the focus of worship remains solely on Tejaji. The belief that her words during sati were not only a reflection of her devotion but also a continuation of Tejaji's legacy demonstrates the cultural virtue of masculine heroism. Tejaji's deeds and the rituals associated with his worship are seen as a means of divine blessing and communal well-being. The narrative also emphasizes the cultural maxim that the words of a dying man contain profound truth and are destined to be realized. The integration of Pemal's blessings into Tejaji's worship demonstrates how folk traditions associate personal sacrifice with the perpetuation of heroic legacies. Additionally, it demonstrates how her final act of devotion is used to elevate Tejaji's honor and ensure his continued worship as a symbol of bravery, sacrifice, and justice within the cultural framework.

Tejaji's story recounts a man's journey from spiritual seeker to beloved folk hero whose actions are rooted in the virtues of loyalty, bravery and self-sacrifice. His story not only depicts human feelings like anger and irritation, but it also demonstrates how those emotions may be turned into acts of great kindness. His legend serves as a potent reminder of the human capacity for sacrifice, the value of honoring one's word, and the imprint of heroism on community memory.

Tejaji's worship

Tejaji's stories is a rich blend of spiritual, moral, and cultural dimensions, deeply embedded in the fabric of Rajasthani identity. His image as a warrior on horseback, his role as a protector of cattle, and his connection with agriculture and nature are central to the sense of security, moral guidance, and cultural unity that his worship fosters in the region.

Sense of Security

One of the most prominent aspects of Tejaji's legacy is his role as a protector of his community,

which offers a profound sense of security. Revered as *gau-rakshak* (protector of cattle), Tejaji dedicated his life to safeguarding the livelihood of his people, particularly those whose survival depended on livestock and agriculture. His bravery in rescuing cattle from raiders forms the foundation of his divine persona, resonating deeply with the rural communities of Rajasthan.

Tejaji's most iconic image—a warrior on horseback, holding a spear, with a snake poised to bite his tongue—is symbolic not only of his strength but also of his sacrifice. His commitment to fulfilling his promises, even at the cost of his own life, is reflected in the poignant quote from the *Tejaji Gatha*:-

“Kol pooro kiyaan bina jaaun, toh mhaari maa ro doodh koni chungyo.” (Meena) “If I go back to my home without fulfilling the promise made to you, it would be an insult to my mother's milk.”

This declaration encapsulates Tejaji's dedication to *dharma* (duty), reinforcing his role as a protector who values his community's needs above his own life.

Beyond his role as a *Nag-Devta* (snake deity), Tejaji also holds a revered position as a *Krishhi-Devta* (deity of agriculture). Before beginning agricultural activities, farmers in Rajasthan honor him, seeking his divine blessings for a fruitful harvest. It is a customary tradition for farmers to chant “*Teja Ter*” before ploughing their fields or sowing seeds, as they believe it brings a bountiful harvest. Songs sung in his praise, often called *Teja Geet*, are seen as *swasti vachan* (auspicious invocations), linking agricultural prosperity to his divine protection. For instance, the popular lines:

*Gajyo gajyo Jeth Aashadh, Kanwar Teja re,
Lagtoda lagya re, Saawan Bhadwa,
Atro kaain suto gehri neend,
Kanwar Teja re,
Thara to sathida beeje, Baajro,
Jhoothi jhooth mat ne bolo,
Bolo bhaavaj mhari ne,
Mhara to saathida khele, Gaur mein,
Kathe padi raas perani, Bhaavaj mhari re,
Kathe to padya hai, Hali haaliya,
Khutya padi ras perani, kanwar teja re. (Devi)*

These practices emphasize the deep connection between Tejaji's blessings and the agrarian lifestyle, offering farmers a sense of security in their endeavors.

The annual *Teja-Dashami* festival amplifies Tejaji's protective role. During this celebration, a *Bhopa* (ritual performer) reenacts Tejaji's legendary act of allowing a snake to bite his tongue, symbolizing his divine power and unwavering faith. This ritual, where even the venom does not harm the priest, strengthens the community's belief in Tejaji's miraculous protective abilities. As one popular saying goes:

"Tejaji ke aashirwad se zahar bhi asar nahi karta" (*Teja geet*, n.d.)

"By Tejaji's blessings, even venom loses its effect."

Moral Guidance

Tejaji's life offers moral guidance through his principles of loyalty, courage, and responsibility. His willingness to endure pain in order to honor a promise epitomizes his deep commitment to duty. This is especially exemplified in the tale of Tejaji returning to the snake, *Baloo Nag*, despite his injuries, to fulfill his vow. The exchange between Tejaji and the snake encapsulates the moral lesson that commitments must be honored at all costs. As Tejaji states:

"I am not a beggar or a petitioner, but I have fulfilled my promise. Now, you must fulfill yours." (Burdak)

The snake, acknowledging Tejaji's bravery, grants him a blessing: from that moment on, anyone bitten by a black snake who ties a thread with Tejaji's name will be freed from venom. This act symbolizes Tejaji's moral victory-his unwavering commitment to his word is rewarded with divine protection for his followers.

Tejaji's interactions with his wife, *Pemal*, and his sister-in-law also underline his respect for familial and societal duties. Despite initial mockery for neglecting his marital responsibilities, this transformation-from a spiritual seeker to a protector of familial and societal values-highlights Tejaji as a moral exemplar, bridging personal responsibilities with broader social obligations. His journey to rescue *Lachha Gujri's* cows further demonstrates his commitment to the welfare of his community, even at great personal risk. These actions offer

guidance on balancing individual duties with societal responsibilities.

Cultural Identity

Tejaji's legend is not only a religious tale but also an expression of Rajasthan's cultural identity. His worship, especially during the *Teja Dashami* festival, highlights the region's agricultural roots and the unity among its people. The presence of Tejaji's temples, effigies, and images in homes and public spaces is a constant reminder of his significance as a unifying figure who embodies the values of Rajasthan's cultural heritage.

The rituals surrounding Tejaji, such as the offering of prayers and milk at his shrines, reflect a shared devotion that transcends personal faith, creating a collective identity. His legend also emphasizes the importance of loyalty and self-sacrifice. *Pemal's* decision to perform *sati* after Tejaji's death, and her final blessing:

"Thara manpasand kaaj siddh hosi" (Ram and Chaudhary, 12)

"Your desired tasks will be fulfilled."

further reinforces the ideals of devotion and sacrifice that resonate deeply in Rajasthani culture.

Tejaji's worship provides not only a sense of security but also moral guidance and cultural unity, ensuring that his legacy continues to inspire and shape communities across generations. His life and teachings remain integral to the spiritual and cultural fabric of Rajasthan, where his protective presence and commitment to duty continue to guide devotees.

Relevance in Modern Times

Tejaji's relevance in modern times extends far beyond his historical and cultural roots, resonating with contemporary values and societal needs. As a symbol of courage, selflessness, and duty, his legacy inspires individuals and communities to uphold these timeless principles in their daily lives. Tejaji's role as a protector of cattle and agriculture remains vital in today's rural economies, where livestock and farming are essential to livelihoods. His story emphasizes the importance of protecting natural resources, a lesson that aligns with current global efforts toward sustainability and environmental protection.

In addition to his cultural and moral impact, Tejaji's popularity has transcended traditional mediums and entered modern storytelling. Inspired by his

enduring legacy, filmmaker Ramraj Nahata created the Rajasthan film *Veer Tejaji*, which achieved remarkable success. This adaptation not only preserved his story for new generations but also demonstrated the potential of regional cinema to bring local legends into wider public consciousness. By combining historical narratives with cinematic expression, such works play a key role in revitalizing cultural heritage, while also making it accessible and relevant in modern times.

The celebration of Tejaji through festivals, rituals, and popular media reinforces community identity and strengthens social bonds, especially in regions such as Rajasthan, where his worship flourishes. His legend serves as a unifying force, connecting rural and urban audiences to shared values of bravery and moral integrity. Moreover, the story's portrayal of him fulfilling promises and maintaining ethical conduct resonates with contemporary social challenges, providing a moral compass for individuals grappling with personal and professional dilemmas.

Tejaji's legacy also highlights the potential of traditional narratives to inspire innovative forms of cultural expression and economic activity, from regional cinema to tourism associated with his temples and festivals. These activities not only preserve and promote local traditions but also contribute to economic development, especially in rural areas. Tejaji's story thus inspires resilience, cultural pride and collective commitment to values that are as relevant today as they were in his time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tejaji's enduring legacy reflects the eternal values of courage, loyalty, and duty that resonate across generations. These qualities symbolize widespread change, demonstrating Tejaji's ability to overcome personal challenges for the greater good, thus becoming a symbol of self-control and social responsibility. In a rapidly changing world, his story remains a guiding light for ethical conduct, community unity, and the preservation of cultural identity. As Rajasthan and society at large continue to evolve, Tejaji's role as a protector, moral guide, and cultural icon remains extremely relevant. His legend goes beyond mere individual heroism; it is a cultural epic that encapsulates the essence of Rajasthani life. Through his image, rituals, and teachings, Tejaji continues to inspire and lead his followers, securing his place as a cornerstone of Rajasthani culture and identity

for future generations. Seamlessly blending tradition and modernity, his legacy not only celebrates Rajasthani heritage but also serves as a beacon for values and practices that have endured over time. His narrative is a harmonious blend of the past and the present, reinforcing the continuing influence of folk heroes in shaping social values and strengthening communal bonds.

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