

How Meos Shape Their Identity

Orality and Community

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The Meos, a Muslim-Rajput tribe staying around Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, have a rich oral tradition and have several popular tales sung to this day. This article explores how these stories contribute to the formation of the Meo identity through the prevalent folklore within this community.

Mirasi Sirajuddin singing a Meo tale. Video Courtesy: Abhay Chawla.

Meos are the inhabitants of Mewat, a region in North-West India situated between the cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur¹. Most of them belong to Rajput families and embraced Islam four centuries ago (Shamsh 1983: 17) though a lot of Hindu customs were practised as late as the mid-20th century. Meo society is still divided into *pals* and *gotras*, as in Hindus, with clear exogamous rules. The religious orientation of the Meo identity is thus deeply contested (Mayaram 2004).

Mewati is the spoken language of the region and is considered 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 Mewat, the place they inhabited. Colonel James Skinner's (1778-1841) illustrated *Tashriḥ-ul-Aqwām* (An Account of Origins and Occupations of Some of the Sects, Castes, and Tribes of India) mentions the community in a mythological context. The genealogy of their migration can be traced back to an Indo-Scythian group settled beyond the Danube. The Meos could have been the Mids, a pastoral-nomadic migratory group of North-West India between the 7th and 11th centuries. They could also have been the descendants of Alexander's army who stayed back under his governor Seleucus Nicator to guard the conquered Indian territory of Sind. Other theories

suggest that they could be related to Raja Jaswant as described by Crooke (1896) in his book *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Volume III*.

The Gazetteer on Gurgaon district 1883–84 says

In Tod's Rajasthan, Vol II, page 76, I find it stated that Mewasso is a name given to the fastnesses in the Aravalli hills to which tribes like Meos retreat. Pal is, on the same authority, the term for a community of any of the aboriginal mountain races; its import is a defile or valley, fitted for cultivation and defense; and Pal is the term given to the main sub-divisions of the Meos. (p 60)

History of Marginality

According to the Gazetteers of the United Provinces (UP), Meos were first displaced from the Doab by the Rajput clans of Dors, Tomars, Bargujars and Chauhan (Mayaram 2004: 22). There is no written record of the life of Meos (except during Qutab-Din's period) and, as a result, scholars have had to rely on this one source alone (Mayaram 2004: 22).

From various documented accounts (not directly connected to the Meos) it is apparent that Meos were perceived as a problem for the state in Delhi as well as at Ulwar (present day Alwar in Rajasthan). They were known to indulge in "criminal" activities like looting and maintain a rebellious stance towards the state and were looked upon as the "other." However from their perspective, it was their land that had been occupied by those in power, and they were fighting against this injustice.

Outsiders were unable to understand their syncretistic practices. Diverse explanations are available regarding the Meos converting from Hinduism to Islam. It is unclear if the conversion was a one-time process, a complete movement associated with conquest, or if it occurred as a gradual process over an extended period of time. Based on various Meo accounts it seems that the conversion was gradual and could be attributed to rulers like Sultan Balban, Timur, Sultan Firoz Tughlaq and Aurangzeb.

Jagga records in Rajasthan show that, by the early 18th century, Meos had started keeping Muslim names for their babies though the process was still fragile. Major Powlett observed in the second half of the 19th century that "Meos are now Musalman in name but their village deities are the same as those of the Hindus" (Alwar Gazetteer 1878).

In fact this tenuous process continued till 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 adopt Islamic customs. This was further accelerated by the rise of communal forces, and subsequent communal riots in the run up to Indian independence. All this occurred over a span of a few decades, in the early 20th century.

In fact towards the end of the British rule the Meos seemed to be at the wrong end of the political spectrum. With independence looming on the horizon and the hardening of communal forces, riots broke out in Alwar, Bharatpur and adjoining areas. There was a mass migration of Meos from Bharatpur to Alwar and Gurgaon. Some of them are believed to have migrated to Pakistan.

Overpowering the State

Oral tradition gives glimpses of a society that is bereft of written records. Meo tales were composed by different *mirasis* (bards) working for various Meo Pals² in the late 18th or early 19th century. Dariyā Khāñ, Gurcharī Mev Khāñ, Kaulānī kī larāī and Pāñch Pāhar kī larāī are some of the popular stories. As one studies these tales as transcribed by Mayaram (2004) one notices a repetition of certain keywords. Keeping in mind that these stories were scripted by different *mirasis* (bards) working for different Pal groups, it is interesting that there are some surprising similarities between the stories irrespective of the text and context of the stories themselves.



Mirasi Amin. Courtesy: Abhay Chawla.

Keywords found repeated across stories are—Pal, brother, kill/killed, loot, avenge, maharaja, camels, soldiers/army, queen, goddess, pir, reward, hills, Alwar kingdom and sword. Other words frequently found in the stories are—Minas, rob, escape, destruction, Rajputs, treasure, rejected, roaming, enmity, feud, Brahman, escape, thief, treasure, destruction, defeat, victory, surrender and wealth.

The subjects that are robbed seem to be people with wealth or power—Kasai, Baniya, the dancer, goldsmith and the English. It could also happen that they were targeting the very people they were exploited by.

The Meos wanted to overpower not only the princely state, but also colonial power.

“Gurchari and Mev not only kill the tiger that was to be the hunt of the Maharaja, Gurchari then goes and introduces himself as a bandit of the state” and “Gurchari cuts the wire belonging to the English and leaves a message that he will capture and stop the train the following day”—goes the legend of Gurchari.



Mirasis use an improvised harmonium in accompaniment to their songs. Courtesy: Abhay Chawla.

The songs depicting the anti-state stance of the Meos also suggest that other communities like the Minas (possibly of the same stock who later converted to the Hindu faith) shared a

similar sentiment. Several tales reveal that both these communities were railing against the state and both had been charged with similar acts of criminality. Abstract concepts like “brotherhood” and “criminality” are important in the song, as they signify close social linkages with other non-Muslim castes, even if the connection is through their “criminal” disposition. It only goes to show that Meos had a syncretic culture, that drew from many different communities and sources.

Self and Society

Besides the concept of representation and culture another element playing a part in the discourse of oral tradition is the concept of identity.

Patterns of behaviour between individuals have different levels of analysis, and this is the key to understanding the link between self and society. One way is to look at the patterns of behaviour across individuals to see how these patterns fit with the patterns of others to create larger patterns of behaviour. It is these larger, inter-individual patterns that constitute social structure (Stets and Burke 2005).

In the narrative of Gurchari Mev Khan, he exhibits fearlessness against a more powerful adversary, by looting with impunity and indulging in anti-state behaviour. At the same time the protagonist is shown to have a very clear understanding of right from wrong. Upon closer examination, one finds this pattern repeating itself across stories thereby creating a larger pattern of behaviour. This larger pattern created is internalised by the individual and goes on to form his/her identity.

Others perceive Meos as criminal and rebellious. This is clear when one talks to and interviews people on the street, both within and outside Mewat. In the government primary school seeing a Meo boys climb the school building with aplomb gets the non Meo teacher, one who does not hail from Mewat comments “these people learn this criminal traits right from a young age, to climb walls and to steal.”

The Meo self-perception meanwhile is diametrically opposite. The Meo considers himself to be the true son of the soil, one who defended the country and fought various invaders who dared to attack and impose their rule, right from Balban to the British. The proof of this patriotism is the massive destruction of life and property experienced by the Meos.

Conclusions

Marshall McLuhan (1964) had coined the phrase “medium is the message.” It meant that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. The songs of the Meos embody this very concept in their renditions.

As the story of valour sung by the mirasis progresses, their voice intonation and the speed of

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

Notes

¹ *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 1909, page 313

² Meo society is divided into 12 Pals. Then there is a 13th Pallakra or having an inferior status with respect to other Pals. In addition there are the Nepaliyas who do not fall into any Pal.

³ As documented by Mayaram (2004), an abridged version.

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