



Food and Emotion: Exploring Culinary Imagery and Cultural Expression in Rajasthani Folk Songs

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Abstract. Rajasthan holds an important place among the states of India because of its rich and eventful cultural past. The cultural aspects of the state are of great interest to people not only in India but across the world. A lot has been written about its glorious history, its unique architecture, its colourful folk music and delectable cuisines. Most importantly, for anyone travelling to Rajasthan, words like Gatte, sangri, Dal baati become an integral part of their stay and the process of acclimatising with its social and cultural vibes.

The food and hospitality in Rajasthan go hand in hand, since food is considered a medium of bonding among strangers and also helps them feel more natural and comfortable in their surroundings. While the hospitality in Rajasthan is considered to be one of the finest in the country, its folk songs are no less in bringing it to the fore with their meaningful lyrics and semi-classical compositions. They cherish the green fields of the state, the bittersweet relationships, the strong marital bonds and of course, food and its sumptuousness. We have many songs, where we find reference to food as a means of wooing or appeasement. The frequent mention of popular and exquisite Rajasthani dishes in these folk songs evokes the feeling of love and bonding because of the context in which they are used. They add to the language of love and affection in the songs.

The paper attempts to highlight these food expressions and their relevance in Rajasthani folk songs as an essential cultural element. By analysing representative folk songs, this study explores how food serves as a vital cultural element that sustains identity and fosters human connection in the Rajasthani socio-cultural milieu.

Keywords: Culture, Food, Folk Songs, Rajasthan

1 Introduction

Rajasthan, known for its history of bravery and geographical variations, has a special place in the list of states that have a rich social and cultural heritage. The stories of bravery associated with Rajasthan and the desert landscape of the state have been passed down through generations orally, thus adding to its rich oral tradition. “Oral

transmission, even of written texts, has been an important feature of traditional rural and urban life in most parts of Rajasthan. The public performance of the tale of Pabuji in villages, using the 'Pabu-ji ka Phad', or a painted scroll depicting the story of Pabuji, and entailing several nights of recitation, is an example of this. At another end of the social scale, it was common for the ruling groups to be entertained in their 'baithaks' and durbars after sunset by storytellers and bards, who related and re-told the heroic deeds of past (and occasionally contemporaneous) men and women." ("A History of Rajasthan | Exotic India Art")

These oral narratives further evolved as folk geets or folk songs, as harmony and rhythm blended with the words. They gained lots of popularity and emerged as vital sources of collective memory and identity. They are considered an integral part of any festival, celebration or, for that matter, any significant occasion in the family or society. "Folk songs in Rajasthan are not only related to life cycles like birth, marriage and death, and to different festivals, but are also part of the tradition of professional singing done by some performing caste musicians like the Langas, the Manganiyars, the Bhatias etc. The latter practice is peculiar to Rajasthan, in that the professional caste musicians are patronized by different castes, which continues till date." (Agarwal)

Among the themes that are reflected in the folk songs of Rajasthan, the most prominent ones are the heroic ballads that celebrate the courage and heroism of historical personalities like Tejaji, Pabuji, Gogaji, Prithviraj Chauhan, and Maharana Pratap. These Veer Ras songs celebrate the ideals of bravery, sacrifice, and loyalty, especially of the Rajput warriors, and are an important part of the social tradition that instills these qualities of courage and resilience in the people.

The second important thematic aspect is the devotional songs that are dedicated to the great deities like Krishna, Ramdevji, Meera Bai, Tejaji, and Pabuji. These songs offer spiritual solace, moral support, and social bonding across the lines of caste and religion, while reaffirming the faith in the omnipresence of the supreme power, which is believed to safeguard against diseases and disasters.

The Rajasthani folk songs also deal with the aspects of love, romance, and separation, which are predominantly based on the ras of shringar. The Viraha Geets of Rajasthani folk music are very popular, which are sung by women who are separated from their husbands who are engaged in trade, agriculture, and other activities in distant lands. These songs weave a social fabric of relationships while maintaining the local vocabulary of love and affection. "The people here compose very succulent and soulful songs to entertain the mind on this dry land. In these songs, along with folk songs, tales, puzzles, poetry, rain and other seasons are filled with feelings of animal, bird and social relations, stories of legendary battles, heroes and lovers engender a spirit of identity, expressed through music..... They cover every single thing in their daily life, household, nature, farming and from birth to death, every aspect of life in their music." (Dwivedi)

The unique natural features and arid environment of Rajasthan continue to fascinate people all over the world. In the folk music of Rajasthan, nature is not only a setting but a living and participating factor. Water, being a precious commodity in a dry state like Rajasthan, becomes a dominant theme in folk songs, and the rainy season or the month of Saavan is a period of celebration. The Panihari songs describe the women of

the land as making regular treks to the well to fetch water; this becomes a part of their daily routine, which is not only shown as an ordinary activity but also a necessary part of their perceived happiness.

However, the aspect that makes these folk songs bind the community together, irrespective of gender, caste and locale, is the topic of food and the culinary imageries that bring people together, and are a source of warmth and attachment for the families. Food everywhere is an expression of love and hospitality, and Rajasthani culture stands supreme in that. "Rajasthan is defined by its culture, and the culture is exemplified by its colour, festivity, significance and of course, spice, often literally from the diverse and exquisite cuisine here. The delicacies of the state are indeed some of the richest, unique and most loved preparations of India. Names such as Dal Bati Churma, Moong Dal ka Halwa, Ghevar, Rabdi and numerous more are popular all across, especially in North India, with their popularity spreading beyond the confines of the state" (Srivastava et al.)

In Rajasthan, the tourism industry is increasingly using local cuisine as a cultural icon that helps tourists connect with the culture of the region. For example, in the context of Teej celebrations, ghevar becomes not only a sweet dish but also a representation of an offering that symbolizes the social rituals associated with marriage and fertility. The food courts of Jaipur Literature Festival are also a hybrid zone of cultural negotiations since they both present modern interpretations of Rajasthani cuisine and traditional. This is in line with the international literature that asserts that gastronomy is not just consumed, but also experienced, interpreted, and remembered (Bessière, 2013).

In folk songs of the area, the culinary culture of Rajasthani is depicted, as the food items symbolize the issues of love, welcome, and celebration. Songs of marital love, wit and humour surrounding it are filled with culinary imagery, and the welcome songs are characterized by the positive affect of food symbols. As a symbolic element of the Rajasthani folk songs, food symbolizes material reality of the culinary culture as well as those undertones of the culture that are affective. Food and Emotions are viewed as prime categories in the sign language research due to being the fundamental elements of socialization and identity, and core categories in communication and language acquisition (Micieli et al., 2025). On the same note, food terms, ingredients, and foodways frequently find their way into the Rajasthani folk songs as a form of metaphor about nostalgia, longing or happiness. The use of food words is also a sign of material and social prosperity of celebration events or their own absence in times of crisis, bringing materiality and affect into contact.

The concern with food imagery, including the terms bajra roti (pearl millet bread), ker-sangri (desert beans), and ghee (clarified butter), reflects real-life circumstances and reflects on the matters of social status, generosity, and identification. The emotional power of such imagery is also enhanced in the songs describing the separation, reunion, or homesickness, where eating or cooking together is employed as an allegory of the emotional attachments and social ties.

2 Theoretical Framework

The folk songs form a fundamental ingredient of the Indian culture and literature. They are not merely songs, they kind of living storehouse of knowledge, they bear stories and folklores between generations. These songs in Rajasthan are an outcome of a culture, which is characterized by arid lands, grazing, agriculture, and old-fashioned ways. Food is invariably presented, so too are bajra roti, chaach, ghee, churma, ker-sangri, and all sorts of festival sweets, which have a highly symbolic significance that transcends the referential and goes towards issues of survival, gender, rituals, social position, and how people are being socialized to adapt and fit into their surroundings. The food in Rajasthani folklore songs is also a cultural signifier, not an item that is eaten, but a lingo. This study will demonstrate how food is a language of expression of identity, experience, and community in these oral traditions through the analysis of songs that are built upon labour, celebrations, weddings, and feelings of longing or loss. To decipher the meaning of food in these oral traditions, the study employs diverse theoretical lenses, namely Cultural Materialism, anthropological and Ethnographic theory and ecocriticism. The role of food in folk songs is more than merely decoding the wording and needs a complicated theoretical approach.

2.1 Cultural Materialism

The effects of material conditions of everyday life, including diet, labour patterns, and agricultural production, on literary production is the study of Cultural Materialism. The folk songs of the Rajasthani people are based on the life of the deserts, where there is not much access to water and other resources, and survival is determined by the land resources (millet, buttermilk, and vegetables). The folk songs express this in a material need, and not a circumstantial consideration. Generally, the representation of food in the folk songs, therefore, has some value in terms of the way communities survive and social organization.

2.2 Anthropological and Ethnographic Theory

Folk songs are recognized anthropological texts. Food is not just an object associated with hunger, but it is inalienably closely related to significant moments in life, including births, weddings, celebrations, and funerals, is an attribute of hospitality, fertility, honour, and feeling. The folk songs are a treasure trove of culinary knowledge, and they are transmitted across generations, without the application of written material, and notably via the voice of women.

2.3 Ecocriticism

Ecocritical interpretations examine the relationships between food and the environments in which it is produced and consumed. In Rajasthan, due to difficult environmental conditions, there is a need for particular approaches to food, such as drought-resistant food and the use of wild plants. The food motifs found in folk songs are evidence of this expert knowledge. By using the motif of food, folk songs tell stories of human existence and cohabitation with nature, imparting environmental knowledge from one generation to the next. Taken together, these readings suggest that food in Rajasthani folk songs is more than its nutritional aspect; it is an object and a symbol, with gender and environment intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life.

3 Food and Emotion in Rajasthani Folk

The most popular folk genre of Rajasthan is Maand, and the most admired composition in it is ‘Kesariya Balam’. It is a welcome song sung by Allah Jilal Bai, “who was a trailblazer of folk music from the Bikaner state of Rajasthan. She belonged to a traditional family of musicians.....Her forte was Maand and Lok Sangeet. Her reflection of ‘Mharo rangeelo Rajasthan’ and ‘Kesariya baalam, aao ni padharo mharey des’ is unrivalled”. (Kar)

In earlier days, it would be sung by ladies to welcome their warrior husbands from war, but now, it is more generic and defines Rajasthani hospitality all over the world. “It has now almost become customary for performers to start their programme by singing ‘Kesariya Balam Avo Ni, Padharo Mhare Des’, with the song acquiring the meaning of a welcome song rather than a song of Viraha (longing for one’s lover), which is its original content and intent. Meghwal explains that the song was sung in the royal courts by professional singers like Allah Jilal Bai, on behalf of the queens, entreating the king to come to her instead of going to the other queens.” (Agarwal)

The lyrics of the song are loaded with warmth and affection to lure people to visit the state and admire its beauty and richness. However, food is not mentioned in this song as a meal item, but as a sweet metaphor to charm the visitors.

केसरिया बालम आओ नि पधारो म्हारे देस
नि केसरिया बालम आओ सा पधारो म्हारे देस

पधारो म्हारे देस, आओ म्हारे देस नि
केसरिया बालम आओ सा पधारो म्हारे देस

मारू थारे देस में निपूजे तीन रतन-2
एक ढोलो, दूजी मारवन, तीजो कसूमल रंग

In the similar context, we find these lines as comparisons to convey what is most cherished in the singer's life and land.

आंबा मीठी आमरी,
(आम से भी मीठी ईमली.)
चोसर मीठी छाछ.
(और सबसे मीठी छाछ)

The buttermilk, or chhachh, which is not normally considered a dessert, is described as the "most apparent sweetness in everyday foods" and is thus a metaphor for the "deepest and most precious sweetness experienced in love and in courage." The use of sweets is a simple and direct metaphor to convey the true sweetness and value of human relationships and honour in Rajasthani culture.

Using the principles of cultural symbolic analysis, as described by Clifford Geertz in symbolic anthropology, meals are a symbol of hospitality and respect. In the context of Rajasthan, the arrival of a guest or a person returning home is symbolically linked to the presentation of dishes such as dal-baati-churma, ghewar, or bajre ki roti. This is more than a longing for a person; it is a longing to taste those moments again. Going back brings the person back to the family table, where a meal is shared to bring them closer. When the loved one is away, the meal that would have been shared is also missing, showing how much food is a part of those intimate moments.

Another equally melodious and witty composition in Rajasthani folk music is

म्हारी हथेळ्या रे बीच छाळा पड़ गया म्हारा मारुजी

पड़ गया म्हारा मारुजी, मैं पालो कईयाँ काटुली

ए ए ए राबडी तो म्हारे पिहरिये में खाई

राबडी तो म्हारे पिहरिये में खाई, म्हाने खीर खांड री

म्हाने खीर खांड री गहरी मन में, आवे म्हारा मारुजी

आवे म्हारा मारुजी, मैं पालो कईयाँ काटुली

The song “Mhari Hatheliya Re Beech” begins with a beautiful introduction into the realms of love, longing, and the pain of being away from a loved one. The lyrics of the song beautifully express a woman’s longing for her beloved and her struggle to cope with the pain of being away from him. The title itself, “In the middle of my palms,” says a lot. It is like she is cradling something precious, whether that is his love or just the thought of him. To express her longing for him, the woman is drawing all sorts of comparisons to show how, despite the greatest of pleasures, her life seems devoid of joy in her beloved’s absence. She refers to Rabri, a traditional Rajasthani delicacy, and yearns for kheer khaand because it is the presence of her husband only that will bring sweetness to her life.

“Thare na mhare” is another beautiful maand-based composition showing the bitter-sweet relationship between lovers and the attempts of the beloved to appease her lover through various offerings. Again, no appeasement is complete without gratification of the palate, and the song here amply states how beautiful and precious it is for lovers to eat together and forget their disagreements.

Very lovingly and charmingly, the woman offers to feed her husband half a chapati, an expression of sharing in love, with a lemon slice, thus illustrating that even such bitter-sour experiences are full of taste in a relationship, marked by true love and bonding.

“Ud ud re kala re kagla” is another immensely popular Rajasthani folk composition addressed to a crow. “In Hinduism, crows are known for their social nature, often living in large, closely-knit communities. This behaviour is interpreted as an indication of a united family system, where members support and care for one another. The crow is regarded as a manifestation of the desired Hindu family, where the harmony, cooperation, and mutual respect are the key values.

Hindu culture has the strong belief in the crows being viewed as a symbol of family cohesion, and it also affects a number of rituals and practices. According to Rajasthani culture, crows are believed to be very faithful messengers, and they are greatly respected. The woman in the song is waiting to be met by her lover, and she is laying various baits for the crow, hoping to receive some information as to the entry of her husband or lover.

उड़	उड़	रे	म्हारा	काळा	रे	कागला
कद		म्हारा	पीळ्जी		घर	आवे
आवे र आवे कद म्हारा पिळ्जी घर आवे						

खीर	खांड	रा	जीमण	जीमाऊँ
सोना	री		चौच	मंढाऊँ
कागा जद म्हारा पिळ्जी घर आवे				

The play between the speaker and the crow in the song is based on a complicated dialogue: the crow features the news about the lover of the speaker, and the speaker invites him to a feast of sweets: kheer khand mostly. This further solidifies the notion of desserts being the staple of Rajasthani kindness, warmth and festivities as a cultural expression.

The song, in ecocriticism, mentions the crow, known as kagla, and propagates the message that the Rajasthanis feed the crow. This is the testimony of the cultural closeness to the ecological responsibility and the necessity to coexist with nature. The Rajasthan desert scenery has made the cultural sense sensitive to worship the earth and animals on it, including the crow. The crow, also known as the kagla, in the song *Ud Ud Re Mhara Kala Se Kagla* is considered an essential tool that reminds us of the need to take care of the earth.

The crow plays a major role in the story, other than the fact that it is a bird; it is a symbol that serves as a link between people, their ancestors and the earth. The calling of the crow by the woman in the song and feeding them on sweets, specifically *Kheer Khaand*, is a gesture of love and affection to the crow. The crow and human society are in the same world, and the woman is giving the crow food as she is showing her benevolence and care for the well-being of the crow. The crow is a representation of an element of the ecological system, where the existence of human beings relies on the connections among various species.

The sustenance provision in the song is not presented as a luxurious act but as a considerate one, and this is a symbol of sustainable living. This is depicted in the song as an ecological perspective in which human beings understand their limitations and decide to live within them. The act of providing sustenance to the crow in the song is in line with the practices of Rajasthan culture, in which offering grains to birds is an important part of maintaining ecological and spiritual balance.

Ecocritical readings of this practice do not consider it to be a form of superstition but a cultural practice that ensures biodiversity and survivability. Another Rajasthani song “*Kanya re Manya Kurr*”, is a fun conversation between a boy and a girl, who are planning a trip to Jodhpur. The teasing elements in the song and the onomatopoeia in the words like *furr furr* for pigeon and *durr durr* for motor, add to the lyrical and thymic quality of the song. The song features all the delicacies of Rajasthan, which are a symbol of Rajasthani hospitality, especially *Dal Bati* and *Mirchi Bada*

ल्याया मोटर गाड़ी ल्याया मोटरगाड़ी
 ल्याया मोटर गाड़ी , रंग में राती , शहर जोधाणे चाला ला।
 खास्या दाल और बाटी , घी और लाफी भुआ ठिकाणे चालाला।
 पर पड़े खबर ना नानी ने , भुआ ने आ समझानी है।

हाँ बळतो बळतो मिर्चिबड़ो और दूध की गुल्फ़ी खाणी हैं।

The song carries lots of humour and other elements of wit and fun while subtly giving one a view of the culture, especially the food, to show how any visit to a Rajasthani city is incomplete without gastronomic gratification

The Maand song “Umrao thari boli pyari” is a romantic musical piece that highlights the loving relationship between a husband and wife, with a special focus on the wife’s love for her husband. The lyrics of the song show the woman admiring her husband’s speech, his dialect, and the joy he brings to her life. Being a traditional musical piece belonging to the “Banna Banni” (bride and groom) folk musical genre, it normally deals with the issues, emotions, and interactions of newly married couples in a particular cultural setting.

Starting with admiration and love, the wife invites her husband to have a romantic dinner with her and offers to serve it to him using a silverware utensil with brown rice. Moreover, she expresses her deep love for her husband by sitting with him and waving a fan in front of him.

चाँदी को एक बाटको, ज्यामें भूरा भात,
 हुकुम देवों सरकार थे, जीमां दोन्यूं साथ,
 अजी सिरकार थाने, पंखियों ढुळाऊँ म्हारा राज,
 ओ जी उमराव, थारी बोली मीठी लागे म्हारा राज,
 उमराव थारी बोली मीठी लागे, म्हारा राज।
 उमराव जी, ओ जी उमराव।

The endearing moment of serving food and enjoying it together with him beautifully encapsulates the love she carries in her heart for him. The imagery in itself is very sensual and romantic, and food becomes a loving metaphor for it.

In terms of the theoretical application of Cultural Materialism by Marvin Harris, the song shows how music and art are connected to the way people live and how they mention the things they need to survive. For example, in the song "Umrao Thari Boli pyari Lage," there is the mention of serving a loved one food from a bright, shining silver plate and, simultaneously, brown rice. The items mentioned in this song are not just symbols; they are part and parcel of the elements that reflect the desert life and the concept of sharing what little is available in the desert.

Brown rice, which is so abundant in Rajasthan, gains significance due to its longer shelf life and due to the fact that it fits the environment, and it is therefore a preferable choice in relation to other types of rice. Its health and strength benefits are particularly important for those who are forced to work in an environment that is characterized by adverse climatic conditions.

The mention of brown rice in the song shows its incorporation into everyday life as a simple food source, not as something that only the wealthy have access to. Thus, brown rice is a source of food that is made available based on subsistence needs and availability, leading to survival in a hostile environment.

The mention of a silver utensil is an indication of controlled surplus and material success. Silver utensils, as opposed to gold, are valuable and practical. They are known for their durability, cleanliness, and long-standing association with food consumption. Rural economies that possess silver utensils are economically sound without being extravagant.

4 Conclusion

“Since time immemorial, Culinary has been an integral part of any culture. Any gathering of people will, in one way or another, involve the sharing of food in one form

or another. Culturally, sharing of food induces social bonding, and, as humans are social by nature, food becomes an integral part of society.” (Srivastava et al) Rajasthani culture stands supreme when it comes to culinary delicacies in terms of not only taste and flavours but also the immense variety. In Rajasthan, the food is a mix of pungent local dishes and indulgent sweets, thus catering to a broad range of tastes. However, what adds to its zest and flavour is the love and hospitality with which the dishes are served and presented. As has been stated in the research paper, the practice of cooking has always been the manifestation of love, appeasement, care, and celebration, and the Rajasthani folk songs are a musical testimony to this effect. The folk songs are full of allusions to food, and they merge the sweet and savoury in the culture and people of Rajasthan. Listening to the names of such cities as Jodhpur, Jaipur, and Bikaner, one is instantly taken to the place of gastronomic pleasures, i.e., mawa kachori, bhujia, and rasagulla.

The lok-geets in the Rajasthan desert are a living well of the cultural ethos of the desert, the social mores, feelings, and relations condensed in the rich imagery of culinary. Not only does the amalgamation of food and feelings in the lok-geets make the people of Rajasthan feel the same, but also the fact that culinary imagery is a metaphor for the complicated emotions that people feel, such as longing, love, deprivation and celebration. Thus, for the people of Rajasthan, all emotions—love, anger, sorrow, and happiness—are expressed in terms of food.

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