



Folk Songs and Music of Alwar: A Study of Cultural Expression

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Abstract

This study explores the rich tradition of folk songs and music in Alwar as vital expressions of its cultural identity. It examines how these oral and musical traditions reflect the social structure, beliefs, customs, and everyday life of the local communities. The paper highlights various genres of folk songs such as those related to festivals, rituals, marriage, and agrarian life and analyses their thematic and symbolic significance. It also considers the role of folk music in preserving collective memory and transmitting cultural values across generations. Furthermore, the study addresses the impact of modernization on these traditions and emphasizes the need for their preservation as an essential component of intangible cultural heritage.

Key Words: Alwar, Folk Songs, Folk Music, Cultural Expression, Oral Tradition, Social Life, Rituals, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Folk songs and music constitute an essential component of any region's cultural heritage, serving as living expressions of its collective memory, traditions, and social values. In the context of Alwar, a historically rich region of Rajasthan, folk music and song traditions play a significant role in reflecting the cultural ethos and everyday life of its people. Rooted in oral tradition, these songs are not merely artistic expressions but also repositories of history, emotions, beliefs and community experiences that have been transmitted from one generation to another.

Alwar's folk music tradition is deeply intertwined with its social structure, seasonal cycles, and ritual practices. From birth and marriage ceremonies to agricultural activities and religious festivals, folk songs accompany almost every phase of life, marking transitions and reinforcing cultural continuity. These songs often depict themes of love, devotion, heroism, nature, and social relationships, thereby offering valuable insights into the worldview of the local populace. The simplicity of language, rhythmic patterns, and emotional depth make them accessible and meaningful to all sections of society.

Moreover, the folk music of Alwar reflects the region's cultural diversity and historical interactions. Influences of various communities, including Rajputs, Meos, and other local groups, are evident in the styles, instruments, and themes of the songs. Musical instruments such as dholak, sarangi, manjeera, and algoza commonly

accompany these performances, enhancing their aesthetic appeal and communal participation. In many instances, folk performances also serve as a medium of social cohesion, bringing people together during festivals, fairs, and communal gatherings.

In the contemporary era, however, the traditional forms of folk songs and music are facing challenges due to rapid modernization, urbanization, and the influence of popular media. Despite these pressures, they continue to survive as powerful symbols of identity and cultural resilience. Therefore, a systematic study of Alwar's folk songs and music is crucial not only for understanding its cultural expression but also for preserving and revitalizing these invaluable traditions.

Folk culture of Alwar

The folk culture of Alwar has remained distinctive since ancient times owing to its multidimensional and composite character. Geographically and culturally divided into the regions of Mewat and Rath, Alwar has historically exhibited a vibrant and dynamic cultural life, deeply infused with rich musical traditions. The continuous engagement of communities such as the Mirasis, Jogis, Pirs, and Fakirs, along with itinerant Nautanki troupes, has significantly contributed to the vitality and continuity of this cultural landscape. Their performances have not only preserved oral traditions but have also served as important vehicles of social memory and collective identity.

The ecological and natural environment of Alwar has played an important role in shaping its cultural ethos. The presence of dense forests, flowing rivers, and the picturesque ranges of the Aravalli hills created a conducive environment for spiritual practices. These surroundings attracted sages, ascetics, and yogis, who engaged in prolonged penance and contemplation. Their presence and teachings deeply influenced the local population, fostering a strong tradition of spirituality and philosophical reflection. The intimate relationship between nature and culture is vividly reflected in the region's folk expressions, where human emotions are articulated through natural imagery.

From a linguistic and literary perspective, Alwar occupies a position of considerable significance due to its location as a border district of Rajasthan.¹ It shares its boundaries with Gurgaon in the north, Jaipur in the south, Mahendragarh (Haryana) in the west, and Bharatpur, Mathura, and Agra in the east. This geographical positioning has resulted in a rich cultural intermingling, wherein multiple linguistic and cultural traditions converge. Consequently, the eastern regions exhibit the influence of Braj culture, the western parts reflect Ahirwati traditions, the northern areas are shaped by Mewati culture, and the southern regions display elements of Dhundhari culture. More specifically, Mewati cultural predominance is observed in Tijara, Kishangarh, Ramgarh, and Alwar; Dhundhari influence is evident in Rajgarh, Thanagazi, and Bansur; while Braj cultural traits are prominent in Laxmangarh.²

Historically, the Alwar region has functioned as an important centre of cultural and religious activity. Several sites such as Trigarta (Tijara), Matsya (Mancheri), Vyaghra-raj (Rajgarh), Abhaneri, Rajorgarh, Bhartrihari, Pandupol, Talavriksha, Ravan Devara, Kul ke Kund, and the banks of the Sahibi River—have served as significant cultural nodes. Within the broader historical framework of Matsya Pradesh, the region exhibits a rich and illustrious cultural background. It has continuously participated in processes of cultural change and development since ancient times. During the period associated with the *Mahabharata*, Matsya and Viratnagar emerged as prominent centres of political and cultural activity.³

The contribution of Alwar State to the domains of music and dance is particularly noteworthy. Royal patronage played a crucial role in nurturing these traditions.

Maharaja Shivdan Singh extended significant support to musical activities, and his court became a flourishing centre for accomplished musicians. He actively promoted musical forms such as *Thumri*, *Dadra*, and *Ghazal*, thereby encouraging both classical and semi-classical traditions. The development of classical music received further impetus under Maharaja Jai Singh, whose patronage strengthened institutional and performative aspects of the tradition.⁴

In Alwar, classical music developed under the aegis of royal patronage, while folk music continued to thrive through the efforts of local communities and hereditary performers. Groups such as the Mirasis and Jogis played a pivotal role in sustaining folk theatre traditions, ensuring their transmission across generations. Popular musical and narrative forms such as Alibaksh's Khyal, Mewati Ratwai, Rane-Doom, Heer-Ranjha, and Ghurchadhi Mev Khan have remained integral to the cultural life of the region and continue to be performed in rural settings.

Folk narratives and ballads, including the legends of Gopichand-Bhartrihari and Pandun ka Kada, function as powerful symbols of local faith, devotion, and moral instruction. Performative traditions such as Ramlila and Raslila, along with the narrative cycles associated with Maharaja Bhartrihari, have acquired a form comparable to the popular idiom of Parsi theatre, blending devotional, dramatic, and entertainment elements.⁵

The uninterrupted flow of musical expression within the collective consciousness of the people has sustained the vibrancy of Alwar's cultural landscape, enlivening its valleys, fields, streets, and settlements. Music in Alwar, therefore, is not merely an artistic pursuit but a pervasive cultural force that permeates everyday life. Broadly, the musical tradition of Alwar may be categorized into two principal streams:

1. Folk Music
2. Classical Music

Thus, the cultural heritage of Alwar represents a harmonious synthesis of ecological influences, historical developments, and artistic expressions, wherein music and performance traditions serve as vital instruments for the preservation and transmission of collective identity.

Folk Songs and Folk Dances

In Alwar State, several traditional communities such as the Rane, Doom, Mirasi⁶, Kalbelia, Natni, and Berdi have historically adopted folk singing and dance not only as cultural expressions but also as hereditary professions. These communities have played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the rich oral and performative traditions of the region across generations. Their artistic practices represent a living continuum of cultural memory, deeply rooted in the socio-economic and ritual life of the people.

Folk songs in Alwar are profoundly embedded in the everyday life of the community and serve as a vital medium for the articulation of collective consciousness. Through these songs, the aspirations, emotions, and lived experiences of the people find vivid and meaningful expression. The lyrical and sonic qualities of these compositions possess a distinctive aesthetic charm, wherein the experience of *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) becomes directly perceptible. Sung with emotional openness and sincerity, these songs transcend individual expression and come to represent the shared emotional universe of the community. Having been rendered through countless voices over generations, they have become an inseparable component of the cultural psyche, reflecting the desires, struggles, and aspirations of society through the ages.

Characterized by their vibrancy, melodiousness, and spontaneity, folk songs are

marked by a striking simplicity and clarity that enhances their emotional impact. They function as resonant expressions of inner emotional states, particularly reflecting the sensibilities of women. In many instances, these songs serve as lyrical embodiments of desire, longing, and emotional nuance, effectively sketching the contours of human experience.⁷ By providing a medium for the articulation of suppressed or unexpressed emotions, folk songs enable individuals to experience emotional release and psychological relief. In contexts of separation or longing, especially in relation to love and marital relationships, these songs offer a means of coping with emotional distress.

For women in particular, folk songs constitute a powerful and socially sanctioned medium of self-expression. Within a socio-cultural framework that often restricts direct articulation of personal emotions, these songs provide an alternative expressive space. Through them, women communicate complex emotional states ranging from love, attachment, and devotion to resentment, sorrow, and even subtle resistance without inhibition or fear. Their expression remains spontaneous, unembellished, and free from artificiality, thereby preserving an authenticity that is central to the folk tradition.

In Alwar State, folk songs are performed not only as part of occupational traditions but also as integral elements of cultural and religious festivities. On specific occasions and festivals, particular types of songs are performed that correspond to the ritual and emotional context. Notable examples include the *Jhedi* songs sung by the Koli community during *Guga Naumi*, devotional songs performed by the Jagenas, and *Dhamar* songs associated with the festival of Holi. Within the Meena community, both men and women participate collectively in singing during special occasions, reflecting a strong sense of communal participation. Similarly, women of the Mali community, during marriage ceremonies and *Pach-Pej* rituals, perform songs such as “Firangi Nal Mat Lagvavai,” which subtly reflect changing social realities and an awareness of modernity.

The cultural fabric of Alwar is thus richly interwoven with a diverse and dynamic tradition of folk songs, which accompany individuals throughout the entire life cycle from birth to death. In addition to life-cycle rituals, these songs are also performed during festivals, seasonal transitions, agricultural activities, and local fairs. This wide functional range underscores their centrality in the socio-cultural life of the region.

Folk songs in Alwar may be broadly categorized into the following types: (1) Ritual songs (*Sanskar Geet*) (2) Religious songs (3) Festival songs (4) Seasonal songs (5) Social songs (6) Agricultural songs (7) Songs reflecting political consciousness (8) *Ratwai* (9) *Pad* (10) *Jas*, etc. Among these, ritual songs occupy a position of primary importance, as they are closely associated with key transitions in human life. These may be further classified into three major categories: Songs related to childbirth, Marriage songs & Death songs (*Harjas*).

Thus, the tradition of folk songs and dances in Alwar represents not merely an artistic expression but a comprehensive cultural system that integrates emotion, ritual, social structure, and collective identity into a cohesive and enduring form.

1. Songs Related to Birth

Across most regions of India, the birth of a child particularly a son in traditional contexts has historically been regarded as an occasion of great joy and social celebration. In Alwar State, this cultural sentiment finds rich expression through a variety of folk songs performed by women during and after childbirth. These include *Ojana* (associated with prenatal cravings or *dohad*), *Jamna*, *Syawad*, *Chhathi*, *Peela* (rituals connected with well worship and purification), and *Jachcha* songs. These songs are not merely celebratory in nature but serve as profound expressions of maternal experience, emotional fulfillment, and familial continuity. They articulate the psychological and

cultural dimensions of motherhood, often blending themes of fertility, divine blessing, and social identity. The performative aspect collective singing by women also reinforces bonds of kinship and shared female experience. Thus, birth-related songs in Alwar represent an important cultural medium through which maternal emotions and community values are symbolically communicated and preserved.

2. Marriage Songs

Marriage, as a central, social and cultural institution, is marked by a series of elaborate rituals, each accompanied by specific folk songs that reflect the emotional, symbolic, and ceremonial dimensions of the occasion. In Alwar State, a rich repertoire of marriage songs corresponds to different stages of the marriage process. These include songs associated with *Sagai* (engagement), *Lagan* (fixing of the marriage muhurta), *Haldataban* (turmeric ceremony), *Banra*, *Bhat* (maternal gift-giving ritual), *Chak*, *Banwara*, *Janeu*, *Nikasi* (departure of the groom's procession), *Sehra*, *Ratga Khodiya*, *Phera* (circumambulation of the sacred fire), *Kunwar Kaleva*, *Seethna*, *Peharavni*, *Bidai* (departure of the bride), *Nausi* (ritual welcoming of the bride), *Griha Pravesh*, *Sedh Chaura Pujan*, and *Jua*, among others. These songs serve multiple functions: they ritualize transitions, articulate emotions such as joy, separation, humor, and provide a performative space for social commentary. Women, in particular, use these songs to express nuanced feelings related to marriage, including affection, anxiety, satire, and even subtle resistance to patriarchal norms. The oral and performative tradition of marriage songs thus acts as a repository of cultural memory and social values, enriching every stage of the marriage ceremony with aesthetic and emotional depth.

3. Songs Related to Death (*Mrityu Geet/Harjas*)

Songs associated with death rituals in Alwar State reflect a deeply philosophical and culturally structured response to mortality. These songs, commonly referred to as *Harjas*, are typically sung only upon the death of an elderly person, whose life is perceived as complete and fulfilled. In contrast, in the case of a young one's death, singing is generally avoided; instead, the virtues and qualities of the deceased are recounted in a lamentative and emotional manner. *Harjas* songs embody a synthesis of grief, moral reflection, and spiritual contemplation. They often convey teachings related to religion, ethical conduct, the impermanence of life, and the inevitability of death. Through these songs, the community collectively processes loss while reaffirming cultural and religious values. The performative mourning expressed in *Harjas* thus transcends individual sorrow and becomes a shared cultural act that integrates emotional expression with philosophical insight.

Folk Instruments

Folk music is invariably associated with one or another folk instrument. In Alwar State, the Nathpanthi Jogis play the Sarangi (Jogiya Sarangi) on occasions of joy.⁸ People of this community also use the Sarangi as a means of livelihood, especially while seeking alms. The Kalbelia community plays the *Poongi* (wind instrument), which is made from a gourd shaped like a tubular vessel. This instrument is commonly used for snake charming, performing snake shows, and during festive occasions.

Within the Mev community, the Mirasis are traditional singers. They play instruments such as the *Chikara*, Jogiya Sarangi, and classical Sarangi. The Mirasis also play the *Bhapang*, an instrument made by covering a gourd with leather and attaching a single string, which produces sound through the tension of the string.⁹ The Mirasis have been engaged in singing and playing instruments for generations. Their lineage is comparable to that of the *Dholis*. Playing the Sarangi has also been

their traditional occupation. Like the *Bhats* among Hindus, they also recite genealogies. Among them are also *Nakkarchis*, *Tasha* players, and *Shehnai* performers.¹⁰

Members of the Mev community play the *Algoza* and *Tamak* during fairs such as that of Lord Jagannath.¹¹ The cowherds of the Gurjar community also play the *Algoza*. In Alwar State, along with folk singing, instruments such as the *Harmonium*, *Chang*, *Daf*, *Dhol*, *Ravanahatha*, *Ektara*, *Dhappli*, *Damru*, *Jhanjh-Manjira*, *Morchang*, *Khartal*, *Nagara*, *Tasha*, and bronze plates (*Kansi ki Thali*) are also widely used.

The tradition of classical music, which attained a highly refined and sophisticated form in the courts of the Mughal rulers, was not confined solely to imperial centers; rather, it was systematically adopted and nurtured within the princely states of India. These regional courts established institutional frameworks known as *Gunijan Khanas* (royal cultural establishments), which functioned as important centers for artistic production and patronage. Within these institutions, poets, vocalists, instrumentalists, and dancers were supported through state patronage, ensuring both continuity and innovation in classical traditions. In Alwar State, the *Gunijan Khana* emerged as a prominent cultural institution where distinguished musicians were appointed and trained, leading many artists to achieve recognition at the national level.

The origins of the *Gunijan Khana* in Alwar can be traced to the reign of Maharaja Bakhtawar Singh, under whose patronage a vibrant cultural environment began to flourish. His court became a center of literary and musical excellence, hosting eminent poets such as Mangilal, Medaram, and Murlidhar Bhatt, whose contributions significantly enriched the literary landscape.¹² Their works reflect both aesthetic sophistication and intellectual vitality fostered through royal encouragement. Subsequently, Maharaja Vinay Singh introduced administrative organization and structural discipline to the institution, thereby enhancing its efficiency and scope.

The reign of Maharaja Shivdan Singh represents a particularly significant phase in the development of Alwar's musical traditions. Despite his reputation for personal indulgence, his patronage of the arts was substantial and impactful. His court accommodated a large number of accomplished musicians, reflecting the extent of royal investment in cultural pursuits. A notable cultural event during his reign was the visit of the eminent Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib in 1867, to whom a monthly pension of 100 rupees was granted an act that highlights the court's respect for literary excellence. Distinguished instrumentalists such as Himmat Sen and Rahim Sen elevated the standard of sitar performance, and the Alwar court during this period became widely known for its discerning appreciation of music.¹³

During the mid-nineteenth century, Mubarak Ali Khan served as the principal court musician (1857–1874), contributing significantly to the consolidation of musical traditions within the state. The presence of accomplished *Khayal* singers such as Udbhat further enriched the musical environment; his subsequent invitation to the court of Jaipur ruler Ram Singh illustrates the inter-regional circulation of artistic talent.

The cultural zenith of Alwar's classical music tradition can be observed during the reign of Maharaja Jai Singh. Under his patronage, the *Gunijan Khana* reached a high level of artistic refinement. Eminent musicians such as Alabande Khan, a distinguished exponent of *Dhrupad*, occupied a position in his court comparable to that of Tansen in the court of Emperor Akbar. This comparison reflects both the stature of the artist and the high standards of musical excellence maintained in Alwar. Alongside him, artists such as Ashiq Ali, Abdul Wahab Khan, Inayat Husain Khan, and Mustaq Ali contributed to the enrichment of the court's musical repertoire. Instrumentalists like Jamruddin Khan and Kale Khan Sahib were renowned for their mastery of the sitar,

while vocalists such as Tansen Pandey of the Dagar *gharana* represented the continuity of classical traditions.¹⁴

Instrumental music also flourished during this period. Sadiq Ali Khan, an accomplished *Veena* player, was a prominent figure who received a monthly salary of 70 rupees, indicating the structured financial support provided to artists.¹⁵ Maharaja Jai Singh further institutionalized the promotion of music and dance by constructing three large halls dedicated to these arts, which now house the Government Museum. These spaces functioned as venues for cultural assemblies where artists from various princely states participated, fostering artistic exchange and dialogue. His patronage also extended to poets and literary figures, reflecting a comprehensive approach to cultural development.

The continuity of this tradition into the modern era is marked by the establishment of the *Lalit Kala Parishad* in 1943 under the patronage of Maharaja Tej Singh. This institution represents a transition from courtly patronage to organized cultural education. Eminent artist-teachers such as Dr. Ramprasad Shastri (violin), Sohanlal Gangani (tabla and dance), Ahmad Khan (tabla), Raghuvir Sharan (sitar), and Kanhaiyalal Marwari (sitar) were appointed to promote systematic musical training. Gopal Adhikari gained particular recognition for his excellence in *Dhrupad* and *Dhamar* singing.¹⁶

While royal patronage played a decisive role in shaping classical music traditions, it is equally important to recognize that the broader cultural ethos of Alwar was shaped by the lived experiences of its common people, including farmers, laborers, and other working communities. Their sustained engagement with cultural practices over generations contributed to the development of a rich and dynamic folk tradition. This culture is not only aesthetically appealing but also deeply rooted in ethical and social values.¹⁷ It emphasizes the dignity of labor, the importance of collective strength, respect for religious beliefs and traditions, the promotion of social harmony and fraternity, reverence for women, and a critical stance toward superficiality and social violence.

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