

Forgotten Voices of Rural Women in Rajasthan: Oral Histories, Memory and Everyday Life in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract:

The history of Rajasthan has often been narrated through rulers, dynasties, wars, forts, political authority and heroic traditions, while the everyday lives of rural women have remained comparatively less visible. This paper examines the historical significance of rural women's voices in nineteenth century Rajasthan through the lens of oral history, memory, folk narratives and everyday social practices. It explores how women contributed to household economy, agricultural labour, water management, food preservation, family rituals, religious observances and the transmission of cultural knowledge. The study argues that oral histories are essential for understanding those experiences that were rarely recorded in formal political documents. Rural women carried memories through songs, stories, rituals, proverbs and community practices, making them important custodians of social and cultural history. The paper also discusses the silence surrounding women's labour, the limitations of official records and the need to reconstruct history from marginal and domestic spaces. By focusing on rural women, this study attempts to widen the meaning of history beyond kings, battles and administrative records. It concludes that the oral traditions of rural women in nineteenth century Rajasthan provide a valuable pathway for understanding gender, memory, labour and social life in the region.

Keywords: Rajasthan, rural women, oral history, nineteenth century, memory, gender, folk tradition.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan is widely known for its royal past, heroic legends, folk traditions, forts, palaces, fairs, festivals and rich cultural heritage. Much of the historical writing on the region has focused on Rajput rulers, political events, dynastic changes, architecture, warfare and elite cultural forms. Such themes are undoubtedly important, yet they do not fully represent the social history of the region. Beneath the visible world of courts, rulers and monuments existed another world shaped by ordinary people, especially rural women, whose labour and memory sustained families, communities and cultural practices. Existing cultural studies on Rajasthan show that folklore, oral narratives, festivals, paintings, puppetry and traditional performances are central to the identity of the region, but these traditions also carry the less documented experiences of common people. The nineteenth century was a period of social, economic and political transition in Rajasthan. Rural society was shaped by princely states, caste structures, agrarian relations, pastoral life, drought, scarcity, migration and customary practices. Within this setting, women played a major role in everyday survival, yet their experiences rarely appeared in formal records. State documents, revenue papers, political reports and court histories generally recorded the actions of rulers, officials, landlords and male elites. Rural women appeared only indirectly, often through references to family, marriage, customs or crisis. Their voices, emotions, struggles and knowledge remained outside the main frame of written history.

Oral history offers a way to recover these missing dimensions. Songs sung during marriage, childbirth, festivals, grinding grain, fetching water or seasonal labour often preserved women's feelings and social realities. Folktales, sayings, ritual songs and memories passed from one generation to another carried traces of women's work, sorrow, humour, resistance, devotion and practical wisdom. These materials are not merely cultural expressions; they are historical sources. They help us understand how rural women interpreted their world, negotiated social restrictions and contributed to the continuity of community life.

1.2 MEANING AND SCOPE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history refers to the study of the past through spoken memories, narratives, songs, interviews, stories and inherited recollections. It becomes especially important when written records are limited, biased or silent. In societies where literacy was restricted and formal documentation was controlled by elites, oral forms preserved the experiences of those who lived outside official power. Rural women in nineteenth century Rajasthan belonged largely to this category. Their lives were not usually recorded by historians, administrators or chroniclers, but their experiences survived in domestic speech, folk songs, ritual practices and community memory.

Oral sources require careful reading. They may not always provide exact dates or administrative details, but they reveal emotions, values, relationships and social conditions. They show how people remembered drought, marriage, migration, labour, widowhood, honour, motherhood, caste restrictions and village life. For women's history, this is particularly important because women's experiences were often embedded in everyday practices rather than formal public events.

In Rajasthan, oral tradition has long been an important cultural medium. Folk tales, heroic ballads, devotional songs, community stories and performance traditions have preserved social memory across generations. The cultural literature on Rajasthan highlights the importance of oral narratives, folklore and local performance in shaping regional identity. When such traditions are examined from a gender perspective, they reveal that rural women were not silent participants in history. They were active preservers and transmitters of memory.

1.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RURAL RAJASTHAN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nineteenth century Rajasthan was largely rural, with social life organised around agriculture, livestock, caste, kinship and local authority. Villages depended on seasonal rainfall, wells, tanks, common grazing lands and traditional systems of resource sharing. Drought and scarcity were recurrent features, particularly in western and desert areas. These conditions shaped the everyday lives of men and women, but women often carried a heavier domestic burden because they were responsible for water, fuel, food preparation, childcare, cattle care and household management.

The region was divided into several princely states such as Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Udaipur, Jaisalmer and others. Political authority remained in the hands of rulers and landed elites, while the majority of rural people lived through agrarian labour, pastoral occupations, artisanal work and small scale trade. Caste and gender norms regulated social relations. Women's mobility, marriage practices, domestic duties and public participation were shaped by community customs. However, these restrictions did not mean that women lacked agency. Their agency often appeared in quiet forms, such as managing household resources, preserving food, maintaining kinship relations, performing rituals and transmitting cultural knowledge.

The nineteenth century also witnessed changes caused by colonial influence, revenue arrangements, trade expansion and administrative documentation. Yet rural women remained marginal in these records. Their history must therefore be reconstructed through alternative sources such as folk songs, oral testimonies, customary practices, family memories and regional literature.

1.4 WOMEN'S LABOUR IN RURAL SOCIETY

The labour of rural women was central to village life in nineteenth century Rajasthan. Women worked inside and outside the household, though much of this labour was not formally recognised. They cooked, cleaned, cared for children, looked after elderly family members, processed grain, prepared dairy products, collected fuel, fetched water and helped in agricultural work. In many communities, women participated in sowing, weeding, harvesting, storing grain and tending livestock. Their contribution was essential for survival, especially in areas affected by drought and limited resources.

Water collection was one of the most demanding tasks. In dry regions, women often walked long distances to wells, tanks or other water sources. This daily journey was not only physical labour but also a social

experience. Women exchanged news, sang songs, shared worries and maintained community ties around water spaces. These everyday practices rarely entered formal history, yet they shaped the emotional and social world of rural women.

Food related labour was equally significant. Women preserved grains, dried vegetables, prepared buttermilk, made ghee, stored pulses and managed household food during scarcity. Their practical knowledge helped families survive difficult seasons. In desert and semi arid areas, where resources were uncertain, this knowledge was a form of silent expertise. It linked women directly to ecology, climate and household economy.

1.5 SONGS, MEMORY AND WOMEN'S VOICES

Songs were among the most powerful forms through which rural women expressed their experiences. Marriage songs, childbirth songs, devotional songs, seasonal songs and work songs carried emotional meanings that official records could never capture. Through songs, women expressed affection, longing, separation, complaint, humour and criticism. A bride leaving her parental home, a woman waiting for her husband, a mother blessing her child or a daughter in law speaking of household pressures could all find voice through song.

These songs also reflected social structures. They revealed the importance of kinship, marriage alliances, caste expectations, honour, fertility, devotion and family duty. At the same time, they sometimes offered subtle criticism of patriarchal control, harsh in laws, unequal treatment or emotional loneliness. The language of song gave women a culturally accepted space to express what could not always be spoken directly.

Oral memories preserved through women's songs were not fixed records. They changed with time, performance and context. Yet this flexibility made them living sources of history. They show not only what happened but how women felt, remembered and interpreted their lives. In this sense, songs provide access to the inner history of rural society.

1.6 MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Marriage was one of the most important institutions shaping women's lives in nineteenth century Rajasthan. It determined residence, kinship duties, social identity and domestic responsibilities. Many women moved from their natal village to their husband's household, where they had to adjust to new family structures and expectations. Oral traditions often preserve the emotional pain of this transition. Songs of departure, known in many regions as bidai songs, expressed grief, uncertainty and attachment to the maternal home.

Family life was structured through hierarchy. Age, gender and marital status influenced women's position within the household. A young daughter in law often had limited authority, while older women could exercise greater influence in domestic matters. Women's relationships with mothers in law, sisters in law, husbands, brothers and children formed an important part of their everyday world. These relationships were frequently represented in songs, stories and proverbs.

Rituals connected with childbirth, naming, festivals, fasting and household worship also gave women important cultural roles. They prepared offerings, observed vows, organised domestic ceremonies and transmitted religious stories. Through these practices, women shaped the moral and spiritual life of the household. Although public religious authority often belonged to men, domestic ritual culture depended heavily on women.

1.7 WOMEN, SCARCITY AND SURVIVAL

Drought and scarcity were recurring realities in rural Rajasthan. During such times, women's responsibilities increased sharply. They had to manage limited grain, stretch food supplies, care for children, maintain livestock where possible and cope with emotional distress within the household. Men might migrate temporarily for work or join labour routes, leaving women with greater responsibility for domestic survival. Oral memories of scarcity often survive through stories of hunger, migration, reduced meals, use of wild foods and community support. Women remembered which grains could last longer, how to cook with fewer

ingredients, how to preserve food and how to feed children during shortage. Such knowledge was practical, inherited and deeply connected with local ecology.

The history of famine and drought is often written through rainfall figures, revenue reports and administrative relief records. These are useful, but they do not fully show how scarcity was experienced inside the household. Women's oral histories add this missing layer. They reveal fear, adjustment, sacrifice and resilience. They also show how survival depended on domestic management as much as on formal relief.

1.8 FOLK NARRATIVES AND HIDDEN RESISTANCE

Rural women's oral traditions were not only records of suffering. They also contained humour, intelligence and resistance. Folktales often included clever women, brave mothers, loyal wives, wronged daughters, wise queens or ordinary women who challenged injustice through wit and moral strength. These stories may not always describe actual individuals, but they reflect social imagination. They show how communities understood women's strength within the boundaries of tradition.

Resistance in rural women's history was often quiet rather than openly political. A woman might resist through speech, silence, song, ritual choice, emotional solidarity or the preservation of memory. Folk narratives allowed women to comment on power without directly confronting it. Through symbolic language, stories could question cruelty, greed, injustice or gender inequality.

This form of resistance is difficult to locate in official records, but oral traditions preserve it in subtle ways. They remind us that marginalised groups do not always resist through formal movements. Sometimes they resist by remembering differently, telling stories differently and refusing to let certain experiences disappear.

1.9 CASTE, CLASS AND DIFFERENCES AMONG WOMEN

It is important not to treat rural women as one single group. Women's experiences varied according to caste, class, region, occupation and community. Women from landholding families, pastoral groups, artisan castes, labouring households and marginalised communities did not live under identical conditions. Some had more access to food, land, cattle and household authority, while others faced heavier labour and greater insecurity. Upper caste and elite women may have faced stricter controls on mobility and seclusion, while women from labouring or pastoral communities often moved more freely for work, water collection, grazing support and market activities. However, greater mobility did not necessarily mean greater power. Poorer women often carried heavier economic burdens and had fewer protections during crisis.

Oral history must therefore be read with attention to difference. Songs and memories from one community cannot automatically represent all women. A careful study of rural women in nineteenth century Rajasthan must include multiple voices, especially those from marginal castes and poorer households whose experiences were even less likely to enter written history.

1.10 CULTURAL TRANSMISSION AND WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF MEMORY

Rural women played a major role in transmitting culture from one generation to another. They taught children songs, stories, customs, food practices, moral values, ritual procedures and community memories. Grandmothers, mothers, aunts and elder women often acted as informal historians within the household. Their knowledge shaped how children understood family, caste, village, religion and region.

This transmission was not done through written texts. It happened through daily life: while cooking, grinding grain, drawing water, preparing for festivals, telling bedtime stories, singing at ceremonies or explaining rituals. Such forms of knowledge may appear ordinary, but they preserved cultural continuity. The study of Rajasthan's cultural heritage shows that oral practices, folk narratives and performance traditions remain essential to regional identity. Women were deeply involved in sustaining this identity at the domestic and community level.

In this sense, rural women were not outside history. They were among its carriers. Their memory preserved the social past in forms that formal archives often ignored.

1.11 LIMITATIONS OF WRITTEN RECORDS

Written records from nineteenth century Rajasthan are valuable, but they have limitations. Court documents, administrative reports, revenue papers, genealogies and political histories mainly reflect the concerns of rulers, officials, landlords and male record keepers. They rarely describe the feelings, labour and domestic lives of rural women in detail. When women appear, they are often mentioned in relation to marriage, property, custom, widowhood, crime or social regulation.

This imbalance creates a distorted picture of the past. If historians depend only on formal records, rural women appear almost invisible. Oral history helps correct this imbalance. It does not replace written sources, but it expands them. By combining oral narratives with social history, folklore, regional literature and cultural practices, a fuller understanding of nineteenth century Rajasthan becomes possible.

The challenge is to treat oral sources carefully and respectfully. They must be compared, contextualised and interpreted with awareness of memory, performance and social position. Even then, they remain indispensable for recovering the histories of those who were not given a place in formal archives.

1.12 METHODOLOGY

This paper is descriptive and historical in nature. It is based on secondary sources, oral history perspectives and thematic interpretation of Rajasthan's cultural and social traditions. The study uses books, journal articles and published research related to Rajasthan's history, folklore, culture, oral traditions and gendered social life. It also draws conceptual support from studies that highlight the role of folk narratives, cultural memory and traditional practices in preserving Rajasthan's identity. The approach is qualitative and interpretative. It does not use statistical data, but focuses on reconstructing the everyday experiences of rural women through available historical and cultural evidence.

1.13 DISCUSSION

The study shows that rural women in nineteenth century Rajasthan were central to household survival, cultural continuity and social memory. Their work supported agriculture, livestock care, food management, water collection, childcare and ritual life. Yet this labour remained largely invisible because formal records valued political events and elite male activities more than domestic and rural experience.

Oral histories help recover these hidden dimensions. Songs, stories, proverbs, rituals and memories reveal women's emotional worlds, social struggles and practical knowledge. They also show that women were not passive figures. They negotiated hardship, preserved culture, managed scarcity and transmitted values across generations. Their voices may not have been recorded in official archives, but they survived in the living traditions of the community.

The paper also shows that women's experiences were shaped by caste, class and ecology. Rural women did not share one uniform history. Their lives differed according to social location, economic condition and regional environment. A meaningful history of Rajasthan must therefore include these differences and move beyond the narrow focus on rulers and battles.

1.14 CONCLUSION

The history of nineteenth century Rajasthan remains incomplete without the voices of rural women. Their lives were woven into the everyday structures of labour, family, agriculture, water, food, ritual and memory. Although formal records rarely gave them space, oral traditions preserved many traces of their experiences. Songs, stories, customs and domestic practices show that women were active participants in shaping rural society and cultural continuity. They carried knowledge of survival, expressed emotions through oral forms, preserved community memory and sustained households through drought, scarcity and social change. Studying rural women through oral history therefore expands the meaning of history itself. It reminds us that

the past was not made only by rulers, warriors, officials and dynasties, but also by those who worked silently in homes, fields, courtyards, wells and village spaces. The forgotten voices of rural women are not marginal to Rajasthan's history; they are central to understanding its social and cultural life.

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