



***Akal* in Rajasthani Folktales: The Social Life of Famine**

Slow Violence, Caste, and the Making of Disaster

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Abstract:

This paper explores drought and famine, commonly called *akal*, in Rajasthani folklore as more than an environmental catastrophe. The folktales under study are: “Asha Amardhan” (“Eternal Hope”), “The Thakar’s Ghost,” and “Capturing the Clouds.” These stories present disaster as displaced across social life, featuring hunger, abandonment, greed, hoarding, caste power, and moral failure to show how Rajasthani imagination sees disaster as socially produced rather than purely natural. Their narrative forms mimic the slow, cumulative force of famine and the distinct vulnerability it produces.

Keywords: Akal, Rajasthani folklore, Vijaydan Detha, Drought, Famine, Caste, Slow Violence.

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Introduction

Disaster is usually seen as a sudden event, a kind of rupture, an overflow, that produces visible damage and disrupts the community in various ways (UNDRR). Famine falls under this definition, too; crops fail, food is inaccessible, normal life breaks down, and life falls apart. It is a condition of unequal access to resources in which people or certain groups lose the ability to obtain food due to economic, political and structural inequalities (Sen). However, in the Thar Desert, the driest region in Rajasthan, *akal* (drought or famine) is not just a single catastrophic event. In a region highly prone to drought, *akal* becomes an integral part of memory as a slower and recurring event. This paper argues that the folktales of Rajasthan, especially those of Vijaydan Detha, present famine as displaced across narrative structure. Detha was a Rajasthani writer best known for collecting and retelling folk stories, songs and proverbs. Countless folktales would still be in oral form without his dedication to preserving them. His folktales imagine famine and drought as socially mediated forms of suffering. In these stories, scarcity is related directly to control over water, grain, and labour; to the distribution of power; and to the unequal burdens borne by the poor and the socially marginal. A disaster like famine exposes the social reality of rural communities in these tales; it tests their moral values and exposes inequality.

Keeping the works of Kenneth Hewitt, Anthony Oliver-Smith, Rob Nixon, and Amartya Sen in mind, this paper places Detha's folktales within a broader understanding of disaster as socially produced rather than purely natural. Hewitt takes the early approaches to disasters as natural hazards towards the notion of vulnerability. He argues that disasters are shaped by historical and social conditions, and these conditions determine how they are experienced. Simply treating disasters as sudden events hides the social conditions that make certain populations more vulnerable. Oliver-Smith further adds to this shift from hazard to vulnerability by introducing the

notion of “processes” in place of one sudden event. Now, disasters are not just events, but processes that occur through long-term marginalisation and political abandonment. They are structural.

Amartya Sen, in *Poverty and Famines*, shows that while, in simpler terms, famine could suggest a break in the food supply chain, that is not all it is about. It is a problem of accessibility. Food may exist within the system, but people cannot access it. This inability to access food can be due to failure to get work, or price rises, or support systems failing. It becomes a matter of access and power. Finally, when it comes to the temporality of famine, it usually unfolds slowly, over months or years. What starts with failed crops, higher prices, falling wages, and scarcity of food ends with hunger, starvation and finally death. This slow and dispersed manner in which famines function is harder to see or recognise. Rob Nixon uses the term “slow violence” to depict such harm. Famine does not occur suddenly; it accumulates through daily conditions of deprivation. Hence, it resists the traditional narrative forms because of this absence of a clear starting point and ending point.

The folktales of Rajasthan that I have taken into consideration avoid the spectacle of a disaster; they concern themselves with the everyday realities: a gradual collapse of social order, a breakdown of morality. These folktales show the building pressure in the form of empty kitchens, weakened bodies, strained relationships and delayed rains. In an idealistic world, these would be imaginary tales, but they are not. They are a result of the cruel history of the people of Rajasthan. They capture their anxiety and reveal the social life of disaster. Suffering is not evenly distributed in these stories; it is structured. The poor and marginalised suffer first and longest. Class and caste play a huge role in that regard. In these stories, *akal* is a result of injustice, greed, immorality, corruption and the selfish accumulation of wealth. The collective sins of society lead to a disaster

and cause collective suffering. In the land of such stories, ethical disorder and ecological disaster are linked.

The question of suffering becomes clearer with a Bhil narrative of an upper-caste man who captures the clouds under a bhatti/millstone, resulting in *akal* (Bharucha). Here, the greed of a baniya, a powerful man, results in the suffering of the Bhils (Deepak).

Ethical Collapse and Survival in “Asha Amardhan” (“Eternal Hope”)

Detha calls “Asha Amardhan” “a tale of immense hardship and sorrow.” The story is set on the outskirts of a village, in a settlement of Seervis, a caste that survives through farming (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 133). We follow the family of a farmer whose farmland is barren. Drought and famine serve as the backdrop of this tale, and because of the ongoing drought, the farmer is deeply in debt. Detha underscores the inescapability of this condition when he asks, “Can a goat caught between the knees of a butcher escape his knife that a farmer of Marwar would escape from the books of a baniya?” (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 134). The family is broken up in the very beginning of the tale; the wife dies and leaves behind two children. The father remarries, and the stepmother is cruel to the children. The children cry endlessly, and nature reacts to their sorrows appropriately: “Seeing the sister and brother shed such tears every day, even Saavan-Bhadua got scared of raining” (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 134-135). The family is hungry and desperate, and in that desperation, they decide to go to the Malwa region where there is some hope for rain and cultivation. The stepmother suggests killing the children and then leaving, but the farmer is appalled by the idea. He does not wish to commit such a grave sin, but she is adamant. In defeat, he proposes a gentler alternative: abandonment. They tell the children they will return by evening and leave just enough food for a single day, hoping starvation will do their bidding. They leave.

After a year has passed, both of them return with a child. The farmer is not brave enough to face the remains of his children and asks his wife to open the door and get rid of whatever is left of them. When the wife opens the door, she finds the children still alive, and they begin dancing around her in joy. She gets angry and says, “Villains! You still live? Haven’t died yet! Even death will not hug vermin such as you!” (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 145). At these words, the children collapse and die, as though her cruelty finally breaks what hunger and abandonment could not.

If one looks beyond the obvious cruelty of the parents, it becomes clear that the narrative focuses more on the moral and social consequences of famine. Here, a family is pushed to the brink, where scarcity is so extreme that parents have to abandon their children to survive. What I wish to point out is that it throws light on the social aspect of a famine rather than environmental description. Details of drought or famine are rare in the story; there is no sustained portrayal of failed crops or ecological collapse. Instead, *akal* appears indirectly, through its consequences: absence of food, breakdown of care, and restructuring of kinship. The sacred bond between a parent and child is challenged and dismantled completely. This narrative displacement is important; it shifts focus from famine as an environmental event to famine as a social condition.

Famine strikes the most vulnerable most cruelly. The decision to abandon the children is a sign of ethical collapse resulting from scarcity. Their abandonment reflects what scholars describe as differential vulnerability, whereby pre-existing inequalities determine how individuals experience crisis (Hewitt). The father is still aware of his obligations, yet he suspends them. Hunger creates this dilemma. As Sen argues, famine arises from a failure of access; here, access is denied to the children, but before that, also to the Seervis. They lose their ability to secure resources through social or agricultural means. The cold logic of famine is that resources are limited or insufficient, and survival must be redistributed. This logic is internalised in the Seervi

household. “Asha Amardhan” locates disaster within the domain of human relations. This can also be seen in other Rajasthani folktales in which scarcity is often attached to questions of power and control, as well as moral conduct. Hence, the decision to leave is not simply an instance of unimaginable cruelty, but a result of a condition in which survival requires exclusion. Ethical certainty is destroyed when famine strikes because society is stratified, and the burden of famine falls disproportionately on those with fewer means.

The children do not die immediately; their endurance reflects the kind of resilience required during a famine. While it is evident that the story employs magical realism to keep the children alive and force the parents to confront their sins to send a broader message about an equally destructive moral famine, the children’s endurance can be read as mirroring the prolonged, unresolved, and uneven nature of famine. The children endure in the same way famine persists, without restoration or renewal. The story thus captures what one might call the lived texture of *akal*, a prolonged condition where hope becomes both necessary and insufficient.

Scarcity, Labour, and Entitlement in “The Thakar’s Ghost”

“The Thakar’s Ghost” has what “Asha Amardhan” glosses over: the structures that make famine possible. This story does not conventionally depict famine through visible drought or starvation. On the contrary, it shows abundance: there is plentiful rainfall and the possibility of a huge yield. As Detha writes, “with the arrival of the monsoon, Inder Bhagwaan was so generous that the drains overflowed. As if the clouds forgot to stop pouring. Water and more water!” (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 153). The story starts with the death of its antagonist, the thakar. The thakar, a caste identity associated with social power, is a feudal authority whose riches depend on taxes, unpaid labour and the continuous exploitation of the villagers’ resources. This exploitative system does not die

with the thakar. He returns in the form of a ghost and appears before an honest and laborious farmer, the choudhary. The ghost, at first, does not seem evil; he regrets the excessive taxes the choudhary has had to pay his entire life. The farmer still has to pay his debts to the thakar's family, and so will his descendants. It is an exploitative and unjust system; out of the "thousand maunds," the farmer is only left with a "hundred maunds" (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 150). A maund is a unit of weight that roughly equals 38 kg.

The ghost of the thakar offers the choudhary "two thousand maunds" of grain without the need of tilling, sowing or harvesting. He offers abundance without labour. Such abundance of grain looks like the opposite of famine, but the farmer follows a different logic. He insists again and again that he cannot consume what he has not earned with toil. He believes he is not entitled to unearned grain the way the thakar is, or his family is; it is ethically and physically indigestible to him. This refusal is central to my argument, which is informed by the work of Amartya Sen, that scarcity is not defined just by the absence of food but also by entitlement. Another important thing that matters along with access is legitimacy. The system that produces such a psyche runs on entitlement. Certain groups of people are more entitled than others. This entitlement has less to do with labour and more with social structure, such as caste and class. From a disaster-studies perspective, a disaster is the outcome of long-standing social arrangements that produce vulnerability over time. It is easy to identify who the vulnerable character is here.

Caste is a ranked and hereditary social system which is tied to occupation, diet, access to education, and access to power among other things (Srinivas). In rural India, dominant or upper castes have typically owned much of the land while the lower castes performed the agricultural labour. The thakar's rule in the story, and historically, depends on the extraction and subsequent exploitation, while the villagers' survival depends on labour. From a Marxist perspective, labour

creates value, but the ruling owner appropriates the surplus (“Marxian Surplus-Value Theory”). On one hand, we have those who command resources and on the other, those who produce them. One class consumes what the other class produces. So, when the thakar’s ghost insists that the grains will miraculously appear in his granary, he attempts to control the terms on which grain will exist, even in death.

The story ends with the ghost revealing his true colours: he lied to the farmer, no grains appear. The farmer and his wife, however, are relieved, and his wife says, “As long as he lived, he looted us with the excuse of taxes; after dying he didn’t let us farm a single grain. What else could he even do! God saved us that not a single grain of no toil went down the throats of our children!” (Detha, *Timeless Tales* 161). In the end, the farmer goes to sleep morally restored. Hence, in a way, the story moves from entitlement in the legal economic sense to the right of the labouring body to receive what it made. It is a critique of extraction, exploitation and hoarding, and any system that separates food from work. The story also expands the understanding of disaster beyond hunger and deprivation. It shows that *akal* also operates through the concentration of resources in the hands of a few.

“Capturing the Clouds”

“Capturing the Clouds” is a Bhil narrative. The Bhils are a tribal (Adivasi) community whose presence spans Rajasthan and extends into neighbouring regions of western and central India (“The Bhils”). It is different from the folktales of Detha as it does not have a fixed plot in a conventional manner. Instead, this narrative appears as a part of a web of songs and oral histories that communities in Rajasthan use to remember *akal*. I stumbled upon this work while researching Detha. It was recounted by Komal Kothari in conversations later compiled and published by

Rustom Bharucha. Komal Kothari and Vijaydan Detha worked together to document Rajasthan's folklore. Their organisation, Rupayan Sansthan, has been an important centre for the preservation of oral traditions.

This is how the story unfolds: the Bhil community faces a “terrible plague” involving drought and famine; the whole community is starving, and survival becomes uncertain. The only source of water left is their wet eyes as they cry out of hunger and disease. The community seeks out their mother goddess for relief. They wish to find out the cause of this disaster and how to resolve it. This narrative does not take *akal* as an inexplicable event; it has an explanation, and they seek it out.

The goddess, in order to find out the cause of this disaster, goes to the house of a baniya. Baniya or bania is a caste, a community historically involved in trade and moneylending (“Bania”). She discovers that the baniya has captured the clouds and hidden them under a millstone or grindstone in his house. He is deliberately withholding rain, and it becomes an object that can be possessed and controlled. This image of clouds trapped by a powerful man collapses the divide between environment and economy. The millstone is a tool linked to grain production and ultimately survival; here, it becomes a tool of enclosure. The narrative thus reimagines *akal* as a consequence of hoarding, of greed. Once the clouds are released, rain returns, the land rejuvenates, and the people are relieved.

The story does not end with restoration. The goddess demands a sacrifice from the baniya: a ritual sacrifice of a buffalo as appeasement. The baniya refuses; he is not willing to go against his caste norms associated with vegetarianism and the prohibition of animal slaughter, even if it means death (“Birds of Hunger”).

The baniya's refusal to perform the ritual sheds light on a deeper structure of inequality: the system that allows certain groups to hoard resources also allows the preservation of caste privilege, even when faced with the suffering of others. The baniya's caste identity determines what he can do ritually, while his position as the one who possesses the clouds gives him complete control over a resource on which the Bhil community depends. This brings out the relationship between caste and power (Gupta). As scholars have pointed out, caste structures access to resources, labour and social power (Srinivas; B  teille). In this story, the ability of a man who belongs to an upper caste to capture the clouds represents this concentration of control, and the Bhil community's suffering represents their marginal existence. Once again, it shows how drought or famine is embedded in systems of power.

The Experience of *Akal*

An important aspect of these folktales is how time itself is experienced. If one sees famine only as a crisis event, then its temporality appears abrupt and exceptional. However, in these narratives, *akal* is repetitive, uncertain and extended. This peculiar temporality is most obvious in the first tale, "Asha Amardhan" or "Eternal Hope." It resists moving from crisis to resolution instantly; instead, it dwells on the condition of hunger. The children's survival prolongs the experience of deprivation; time is stretched. For the children, it is still the same day, and they are waiting for the day to end, but for the reader and the parents, a year has passed. In this sense, famine produces a kind of suspended time. Life goes on without the expectation of improvement. Suffering is not reserved for a single moment, it accumulates. This temporal suspension resembles what Rob Nixon identifies as slow violence.

“The Thakar’s Ghost” explores this temporal dimension via the motif of return. The ghost’s reappearance throws into disarray the apparent stability, suggesting how the effects of inequality persist over time. The consequences of unequal distribution cannot be contained within a single moment. This uneven temporality supports the argument that disaster unfolds through social relations, and the experience of time under famine is determined by access to resources. For those who possess resources, like the thakar and his family, time appears more stable. But for those who lack them, time is marked by waiting, repetition, and uncertainty. In this sense, temporality becomes another dimension of the social life of disaster.

A broader pattern emerges in these tales in how they treat hunger, labour, and inequality: *akal* is not just the backdrop of these tales; it actually circulates through them, shaping relationships, decisions, morality, and forms of life. To call this the social life of disaster is to emphasise that disaster gets embedded in the everyday practices of people. In “Eternal Hope,” it enters the family, exposing the fragility of kinship. In “The Thakar’s Ghost,” the control of grain reveals how power operates via accumulation and entitlement, raising questions about legitimacy and justice. In “Capturing the Clouds,” it exposes the structures that enable disasters. Altogether, the social life of disaster is therefore a differentiated life. Characters experience famine in different ways. This prevents disaster from being seen as a universal experience alone and instead locates it within the relations of power in a local context.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn the conclusion that the folktales of Rajasthan present *akal* as a condition that permeates everyday life; it shapes relations, labour, moral judgment, and the distribution of vulnerability. This supports the already established move from seeing disaster as simply an

environmental crisis to a social crisis in disaster studies. By reading selected tales such as “Eternal Hope,” “The Thakar’s Ghost,” and “Capturing the Clouds,” the paper has shown that famine in these narratives is neither sudden nor isolated. It unfolds gradually, persists over time, and is experienced unevenly across social positions. Disaster, in these stories, is inseparable from social structure, but they resist boiling down disaster to a purely structural phenomenon. They pay attention to the individual experience, and also to the emotional and ethical dimension of living under scarcity. This attention to individual experience stops the analysis from going into overly abstract territories, it demands focus on how disaster is lived as well as how it is structured. This is why the concept of the social life of disaster is integral to this paper; it allows the paper to examine famine within social relations and individual experience.

Narrative is important in shaping how disaster is perceived and understood. By paying attention to everyday experiences of rural Rajasthan, folktales in Detha’s retellings offer an alternative way of thinking about catastrophe. This way emphasises persistence, inequality, and the interplay between environment and society. Often treated as repositories of tradition or moral instruction, they illuminate how communities understand and negotiate disaster, how they interpret the causes and consequences of famine, and how they imagine the possibilities of survival.

Some accounts suggest that members of the Bhil community still follow the tradition of saving the clouds from the baniya. During drought, they go to baniya households and ask for the release of the clouds. The baniya then gives them jaggery and vows not to capture any clouds (Singh Deo and Chandra). The persistence of this practice most clearly indicates that famine is not confined to the past. This practice must not be minimised to merely a superstition or a residue of past belief; it represents a continued engagement with social meanings of scarcity. The

convergence of story, ritual, and the lived experiences of the people of Rajasthan underscores the central claim of this paper: *akal* is a socially structured condition.

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