

From Oral Memory to Digital Screen: Reimagining Rajasthani Folktales through Literature, Cinema and Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

Rajasthani folktales form an important part of the oral cultural heritage of India, which preserves collective memory, regional identity, gender relations, belief systems and performance traditions. However, their contemporary circulation is increasingly happening outside the oral context in literary collections, feature films, stop-motion animation and digital platforms. At the heart of this movement is a question: what happens to a folktale when it moves to a new medium? This paper tries to answer that question through a comparative study of four cases: Vijaydan Detha's *Duvidha* and its cinematic adaptation *Paheli* (2005); Detha's *Dohri Joon* and its stop-motion adaptation *Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan / Every Now and Then Girls...* (2025); the *Dhola-Maru* tradition and its cinematic version in Gujarati in 1983; and the audio-visual documentation of the *Pabuji* oral epic performed by *Bhopa-Bhopi* performers.

Combining adaptation studies, folklore studies, cultural memory theory and remediation theory, the paper argues, following Linda Hutcheon, that the movement of Rajasthani folklore across media is better understood through reinterpretation and cultural negotiation than through fidelity to a fixed original. Reading the corpus through a qualitative, comparative framework attentive to narrative structure, gender agency, language, landscape, music, the supernatural and performance, the paper shows that contemporary adaptations simultaneously preserve, transform, aestheticise and at times commodify Rajasthani cultural memory. It proposes the concept of folkloric remediation to describe this process, and concludes that the contemporary relevance of Rajasthani folklore lies not only in its preservation but in its capacity for renewed cultural negotiation as it travels across media, languages, technologies and audiences.

Keywords Rajasthani folklore; folktales; film adaptation; digital media; cultural memory; oral tradition; Vijaydan Detha; *Paheli*; *Duvidha*; *Dohri Joon*; *Dhola-Maru*; *Pabuji*; remediation

INTRODUCTION

Folktales have a special place in the cultural memory, because they are narrative, performance and a store of collective knowledge. An oral folktale, unlike a literary text by a single author, usually has many tellings and regional versions, and its meaning is shaped not only by the plot but also by the relationship between the storyteller, the audience, the language, gestures, music and the community context.

Rajasthan is an especially fertile site to examine such a relationship between folklore and contemporary media. Its narrative traditions include heroic legends, romantic tales, devotional narratives and oral epics. Figures such as *Dhola-Maru*, *Moomal*, *Pabuji* and *Tejaji* have circulated for generations through performance, ballad and community memory. The current circulation of these narratives has radically changed their communicative context: stories once passed from one person to another are now found in printed collections, feature films, stop-motion animation, documentary cinema and networked digital platforms.

This change raises a question that cannot be answered by simply asking whether the film is faithful to its source. Adaptation is always selection, compression, expansion and reinterpretation. Hutcheon (2013) conceptualises adaptation as repetition without replication, stressing the fact that adaptation is an act of recreation rather than mechanical reproduction. This framing is particularly appropriate for folklore, where the source is not typically a single, fixed text but rather exists in a variety of oral and regional versions. Thus, the migration of Rajasthani folklore across media is not a transfer between two stable texts, but a migration between different cultural and communicative contexts. In this paper, movement is taken as a process of cultural remediation, and the literary mediations of oral folklore by Vijaydan Detha are taken as its main thread.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarship on Detha's folklore and its cinematic afterlives is impressive, but most of it has looked at individual adaptations in isolation, rather than in the larger comparative framework of media transformation. Jangid (2021) studies the issues of caste and gender in Detha's *Duvidha* and *Kenchuli* and argues that the village is repeatedly used in Detha's fiction to expose the interconnected systems of caste hierarchy and patriarchal domination that affect women's lives. This reading firmly places Detha's folklore within the social hierarchy of Rajasthan and not as a timeless romance.

Shrivastava (2023) traces the precise textual genealogy from Detha's *Duvidha* to Mani Kaul's 1973 film and then to Amol Palekar's *Paheli*. *Paheli* is a millennial retelling that makes Lachchi's dilemma legible to a new generation through the commercial idiom of mainstream Hindi cinema. Her account remains largely descriptive, tracing continuity across the three versions rather than developing a systematic comparative method, but it is valuable in establishing the adaptation chain that this paper also uses as its principal case.

Most directly relevant is Bunkar's (2026) recent reading of *Paheli* through the lens of caste, class and gender, which argues that Lachchi's apparent autonomy as an upper-caste woman is not rebellion but a negotiated agency constrained by patriarchal and caste-bound norms, and that the film's altered ending — in which the ghost is absorbed back into the husband's body rather than destroyed, as in Detha's and Kaul's versions — reinscribes Lachchi within a socially legible marital framework even as it gestures toward her desire. Bunkar's single-film, caste-attentive close reading substantially advances the interpretation of *Paheli* specifically, but it does not extend its method to Detha's other folkloric mediations, to contemporary animation, to cross-linguistic adaptation, or to the audiovisual documentation of oral performance.

Research Gap

Taken together, this literature demonstrates sustained and increasingly sophisticated attention to the *Duvidha*–*Paheli* case specifically, particularly with regard to gender, caste and class. What remains absent is a comparative study that places this case alongside other, differently mediated instances of Rajasthani folklore's contemporary circulation — a 2025 stop-motion animation, a cross-regional Gujarati-language film, and an ethnographic audiovisual archive of oral epic performance — in order to ask how the specific affordances of each medium shape what a folktale can become. No existing study develops a single comparative framework capable of distinguishing adaptation proper from audiovisual remediation/documentation, or of tracing how narrative, cultural and medial transformation operate differently across cinema, animation and archival recording. This is the gap the present paper addresses.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Adaptation Theory

The central theoretical model for this paper is derived from Hutcheon's (2013) concept of adaptation as a repetition without replication. Therefore, adaptation is not parasitic derivation nor simple translation, but rather a form of creative and interpretive labour in its own right, one that establishes a deliberate, palimpsestic relationship with an adapted text while producing new meaning in a new context. This framing gives the study a way of moving beyond the fidelity question — is the film faithful to its source? — to the more productive question of what new cultural work an adaptation performs.

3.2 Folklore Theory

Folklore theory offers a vocabulary for oral transmission, variation, collective authorship, performance and community memory, and considers the folktale not as a fixed literary object but as a living practice that continues through repeated retelling and regional variation. This perspective is vital for a corpus in which the very idea of a single 'original' folktale is already unstable.

3.3 Cultural Memory

This paper builds on Assmann's (2008) distinction between communicative and cultural memory to treat Rajasthani folktales as repositories for the transmission of ideas of place, identity, gender, morality and belief across generations — a form of memory actively maintained and reactivated through retelling, rather than passively stored.

3.4 Remediation

Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of remediation refers to the ways in which a new medium represents and reorganises the expressive resources of an older medium, moving between immediacy (the desire to erase the medium and present content directly) and hypermediacy (the foregrounding of the medium itself). Applied to this corpus, remediation makes clear that the movement from oral voice to literary text, to cinematic image, to

animated image, to digital circulation does not simply change the container of a story, it changes the very ways the story is able to communicate.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

This research adopts a qualitative, comparative and interpretive methodological framework which combines textual analysis, visual and sound analysis and discourse analysis. This is appropriate for exploring how cultural meaning is constructed through narrative, image, performance and cultural context rather than through quantifiable variables.

4.1 Corpus

The corpus consists of four interrelated cases, three of which are primarily approached as adaptation and one as audiovisual remediation/documentation:

Case I — Vijaydan Detha's *Duvidha* to Amol Palekar's feature film *Paheli* (2005): literary folktale to mainstream cinema

Case II — Detha's *Dohri Joon* (collected in *Baatan Ri Phulwari*) and Shefalee Jain and Shivi Bhatnagar's stop-motion animation *Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan / Every Now and Then Girls...* (2025) folktale to modern animation

Case III — the *Dhola-Maru* tradition and the 1983 Gujarati-language film *Dhola Maru*, directed by Mehul Kumar: folklore to cross-regional and cross-linguistic cinema

Case IV — the *Pabuji* epic as performed by Bhopa-Bhopi performers and documented in Elizabeth Wickett's (2010) audiovisual and photographic archive: oral performance to audiovisual archive

Paheli is considered the principal case because it is a multilayered adaptation trajectory: an oral narrative reworked by Detha as the literary *Duvidha*, adapted by Mani Kaul into the minimalist 1973 film *Duvidha*, and subsequently transformed into Palekar's visually elaborate, star-driven 2005 feature. This layered history allows adaptation to be examined as a chain of successive transformations rather than a single transfer. *Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan* provides the sharpest contemporary counterpoint: the filmmakers explicitly identify it as an adaptation of Detha's *Dohri Joon*, relocated to the contemporary town of Sheoganj and narrated through three non-human figures — a locust, a succulent plant, and a Sarus crane — using nonlinear storytelling and magical realism to address patriarchal structure, female friendship and imagined futures.

The *Pabuji* case is methodologically distinct and is deliberately not analysed as a conventional adaptation. Wickett's (2010) documentation records filmed performances by Bhopa-Bhopi performers together with the sung narrative, the *ravanhatta* instrument, the painted *phad* scroll, performer interviews and Marwari-to-English translation. Because this material captures an embodied oral performance rather than reworking a story for a new fictional narrative, this paper categorises it as audiovisual remediation: the analytical question shifts from how a filmmaker has reinterpreted a story to what happens when a camera captures, frames and thereby recontextualises a living ritual performance.

4.2 Methods of Analysis

Textual analysis attends to narrative structure, characterisation and dialogue in both the literary source texts and their audiovisual adaptations. Visual analysis attends to *mise-en-scène*, camera movement, lighting, colour and costume, with particular attention to how landscape and architecture construct a visual idea of Rajasthan. Sound and performance analysis attends to folk music, the *ravanhatta*, sung narration, and the conversion of oral storytelling conventions into cinematic sound design. Discourse analysis identifies the competing framings — of gender, community, tradition and modernity — that a given adaptation adopts, retains or displaces from its source.

4.3 An Adaptation-Operations Framework

Rather than evaluating adaptations against a standard of fidelity, this paper classifies major transformations using five adaptation operations: retention, where a source element is substantially preserved; modification, where an existing element is altered without changing its basic function; omission, where a source element is removed; addition, where new material absent from the source is introduced; and inversion, where the original function or meaning of an element is substantially reversed. These operations are descriptive rather than evaluative: an addition is not automatically an enrichment, and an omission is not automatically a loss. Each transformation is instead read for its narrative, cultural and medium-specific consequences.

4.4 A Note on Evidentiary Scope

A methodological caveat is necessary. A fully verified, timecoded scene-by-scene dataset — locating each narrative beat in a specific release print, recording exact durations, and cross-referencing every source-text page — requires direct, repeated viewing of the specific film copies analysed and careful collation against a specific edition of Detha's *Baatan Ri Phulwari*. That level of verification exceeds what can be responsibly claimed in the present analysis. The discussion that follows therefore proceeds sequentially through each film's narrative

structure — describing the order in which sequences occur rather than asserting exact timecodes — and reserves the construction of a fully timecoded, page-referenced dataset as the paper's proposed next stage of empirical work, discussed further in Section 10 and the Conclusion.

5. FROM FOLKLORE TO LITERARY TEXT: DETHA'S MEDIATION

Vijaydan Detha occupies a pivotal position in the modern literary mediation of Rajasthani folklore. Working through the Rupayan Sansthan, the institution he co-founded with the ethnomusicologist Komal Kothari, Detha spent decades gathering oral narratives from Rajasthan's villages and reworking them into the fourteen-volume anthology *Baatan Ri Phulwari*, written in Rajasthani/Marwari rather than Hindi. His literary retellings are not neutral transcriptions of oral material: as Jangid (2021) and subsequent scholarship on Detha have demonstrated, his stories always sharpen the folktale's latent critique of caste hierarchy and patriarchal constraint, using the village setting to uncover rather than simply document social structure.

Detha's mediation is thus an intermediate stage between oral tradition and its later audiovisual adaptations, which already do much of the interpretive work before any frame of film is shot. The passage from oral folktale to Detha's literary *Duvidha* to Mani Kaul's film of 1973 to Palekar's *Paheli* of 2005 is a rare opportunity to observe adaptation as a chain of successive reinterpretation, rather than a single transfer between two fixed texts, where each stage inherits and reworks the interpretive choices of the previous one.

6. DUVIDHA TO PAHELI: CINEMATIC TRANSFORMATION

The main case of this study is *Paheli*. The story concerns a bride, Lachchi, whose merchant husband, Kishanlal, departs on a five-year trading trip after their marriage, and a lovelorn ghost who assumes Kishanlal's form and enters the household in his stead, providing Lachchi with an intimacy her arranged marriage had denied her. Thus, the double or phantom lover is reconfigured as a kind of cinematic narrative of desire, identity and ambiguity.

6.1 From Oral Narration to Visual Narration

Storytelling by word of mouth allows the listener to imagine the physical appearance, but cinema has to visualise the story. Thus Rajasthan becomes not merely a setting but a significant element of the film's visual language, created through architecture, costume, colour, choreography and landscape. The film opens with an explicit narrative frame that sets up Lachchi's marriage and departure prior to the ghost's appearance. This framing device serves as a cinematic analogue of oral narration: the audience is situated not simply as spectators of events but as listeners to a story, preserving something of the performative logic of folklore even as its medium changes.

6.2 From Folktale Ambiguity to Psychological Representation

Both in the literary and in the earlier cinematic versions the double is mainly a supernatural narrative device. Palekar's *Paheli* externalises questions of identity, absence and emotional fulfilment that the ambiguity of the folktale largely leaves implicit. The male lead is doubled (one actor plays both roles). Thus, the supernatural acquires a psychological as well as a fantastic register and the ghost's motivation is narratively grounded in the prolonged absence of Kishanlal rather than as an unmotivated intrusion.

6.3 From Community Narrative to Individual Desire

The traditional narrative functions in a social universe governed by marriage and community expectation. Palekar's version gives considerably greater narrative visibility to the emotional relationship between Lachchi and the ghost, most explicitly in the sequence in which the ghost asks Lachchi what she herself wishes for — a question the film's dialogue frames as one no one, including her own husband, has previously asked her. This sequence shifts the adaptation's emphasis from social duty toward individual desire, a shift Bunkar (2026) reads as significant but ultimately bounded: Lachchi's autonomy, on this account, is a negotiated agency legible within, rather than opposed to, the patriarchal and caste-bound norms of the haveli she inhabits. The film's altered ending, which reabsorbs the ghost into Kishanlal's identity rather than destroying it as Detha's story and Kaul's 1973 film do, further channels the story's transgressive potential back into a socially legible marital resolution.

7. DOHRI JOON TO AVAAR NAVAAR CHHORIYAAN: CONTEMPORARY ANIMATION AND GENDER

Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan / *Every Now and Then Girls...* offers a markedly different mode of adaptation. Directed by Shefalee Jain and Shivi Bhatnagar and completed in 2025 as a hand-drawn, hand-cut stop-motion animation, the filmmakers explicitly identify the work as an adaptation of Detha's *Dohri Joon* from *Baatan Ri Phulwari*, relocated to the contemporary town of Sheoganj — Jain's own paternal hometown, and the site of extended research and conversation with local women that fed directly into the screenplay.

7.1 Transformation of the Narrator

Where the traditional folktale moves from a human storyteller to an audience, the film substitutes three non-human narrators — a locust (Tiddi), a succulent plant (Danda Thhor), and a Sarus crane — each of whom tells the story of two girls to a group of young listeners. This device introduces an ecological dimension into the storytelling process, decentring human narrative authority and connecting the folktale's imaginative logic to the non-human environment of the Thar landscape.

7.2 Transformation of Gender

The filmmakers describe the resulting stories as revolving around oppressive patriarchal structures, the desire to challenge or leave behind those structures, friendship between women, and the possibility of new imagined futures. The adaptation therefore does not merely update the folktale's setting; it updates the social questions through which the story is interpreted, foregrounding female friendship and self-authored futures in a way the source folktale, collected within a more constrained social frame, does not foreground as explicitly.

7.3 Transformation of Temporality

The film retains nonlinear storytelling as a structural principle, a mode the filmmakers describe as taking a cue directly from the folktale form itself, while combining it with magical realism and contemporary stop-motion animation technique. The result is a hybrid in which a traditional narrative logic is not simply modernised away but actively reactivated through a new visual medium.

8. DHOLA-MARU: LINGUISTIC AND REGIONAL REMEDIATION

The Dhola-Maru tradition offers a third, differently inflected mode of transformation. The 1983 film *Dhola Maru*, directed by Mehul Kumar and produced by Govindbhai Patel, is a Gujarati-language feature, starring Naresh Kanodia and Snehlata, that adapts the Rajasthani-associated romance of Dhola and Maru for a Gujarati commercial cinema audience.

This case is useful precisely because it moves a Rajasthani-associated narrative across linguistic and regional rather than purely medial boundaries, raising a distinct set of questions: what happens when a Rajasthani narrative enters Gujarati cinema; does linguistic translation alter cultural meaning; which elements of Rajasthan are retained and which are absorbed into a broader western Indian commercial idiom; and does a romantic folk narrative become, in the process, commercial melodrama? Here adaptation is not only intermedial but interregional, moving from Rajasthani folklore through Gujarati language into Gujarati cinema and a broader regional audience, and demonstrating that adaptation can involve geographical and linguistic relocation in addition to a change of medium.

9. PABUJI: FROM ORAL PERFORMANCE TO AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVE

The Pabuji case is methodologically distinct from the preceding three. Wickett's (2010) *Epic of Pabuji ki par in Performance* documents the Pabuji ki par tradition as performed by Bhopa-Bhopi performers in relation to a painted phad scroll, accompanied by the ravanhatta and sung narrative, recorded across sites including Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Jaipur and Pabasar, together with performer interviews, Marwari transcripts and English translation. Wickett's account identifies the performance as simultaneously aesthetic, religious, historical and socially meaningful, and gives particular attention to the bhopi's vocal role in articulating a woman's voice within an epic otherwise centred on a male hero.

Rather than treating this material as a conventional adaptation, this paper categorises it as audiovisual remediation, a distinction this study regards as methodologically important. A feature-film adaptation asks how a filmmaker has reinterpreted a story for a new fictional narrative; an audiovisual archive instead asks what happens when an embodied, ritually situated oral performance is captured by a camera. That question raises its own set of concerns — camera position, performer and audience visibility, the politics of translation, editing, archival selection, and the ritual context from which a performance is necessarily abstracted once recorded. The camera does not simply document the Pabuji performance; it recontextualises it, turning a communally embedded ritual event into a portable, repeatable archival object.

10. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Read together, the four cases present different modes of transformation rather than a single logic of adaptation. *Paheli* turns a literary retelling into a mainstream cinematic spectacle, expanding the emotional interiority of the folktale, but ultimately re-domesticating the transgressive charge of the folktale within a socially legible ending. *Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan* relocates a traditional narrative into contemporary Rajasthan, substituting non-human narrators and nonlinear structure for linear cinematic narration, and foregrounding female friendship and imagined futures over marital resolution. *Dhola-Maru* demonstrates that adaptation can involve linguistic and regional relocation as much as a change of medium, raising questions about what is lost and gained when a narrative

associated with one region is absorbed into another region's commercial cinema. Pabuji, finally, demonstrates a different process altogether: the conversion of embodied, ritually situated oral performance into portable audiovisual and digital archive.

The comparison suggests that Indian cinema's engagement with Rajasthani folklore should not be organised around a single question of fidelity but around at least three distinguishable layers of transformation operating together in every case: a narrative layer (what changes in the plot, characterisation and structure), a cultural layer (what changes in the social meanings attached to gender, community, tradition and modernity), and a medial layer (what becomes possible, or impossible, because the story has entered cinema, animation or archival recording). Paheli's central transformation is best read across all three layers at once: narratively, the ghost's motivation and Lachchi's desire are considerably expanded; culturally, marriage and female desire are renegotiated, if ultimately re-contained; medially, the double becomes a visual spectacle made possible by a single actor performing both roles for the camera. Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan's transformation is comparably legible across the same three layers, but resolves them differently: narratively, multiple stories and a contemporary setting replace a single linear plot; culturally, patriarchal structure is reframed through female friendship rather than marital renegotiation; medially, non-human narration and stop-motion animation create a storytelling form unavailable to live-action cinema.

11. DISCUSSION: CONTINUITY, TRANSFORMATION AND CULTURAL MEMORY

The comparative evidence assembled here suggests that the contemporary life of Rajasthani folklore is characterised by simultaneous continuity and transformation rather than by any straightforward preservation or loss. Oral narrative supplies cultural memory; Detha's literary mediation supplies textual stability and interpretive reworking; cinema converts narrative into visual and sonic experience; animation introduces new formal and imaginative possibilities; and audiovisual archiving preserves performance while inevitably changing its original ritual and communal context. Each transition produces both loss and gain: something of performance context, dialect, improvisation and community participation may recede, while wider circulation, visual accessibility, new interpretive possibilities, archival preservation and intergenerational transmission may be gained.

The value of a given adaptation therefore cannot be settled by asking how faithfully it reproduces its source. The more productive question, consistent with Hutcheon's (2013) framework, is what new cultural work a given adaptation performs — and, this paper adds, through which specific medium-enabled means it performs that work.

12. FOLKLORIC REMEDIATION AS A MODEL

On the basis of the comparative analysis, this paper proposes the concept of folkloric remediation: the process through which orally transmitted cultural narratives are reorganised, re-performed, translated, visualised, technologically mediated and circulated through new media, thereby acquiring new meanings within changing social and cultural contexts. The concept can be represented as a sequence moving from oral tradition through community performance, literary inscription, film adaptation, animation or digital media, networked circulation and audience reinterpretation, toward the production of new cultural memory.

This model deliberately moves beyond the binary of original versus adaptation. It treats every stage in the sequence — including Detha's own literary retellings, which are themselves already a mediation of oral material — as an active site of cultural production rather than as a derivative copy of some prior, more authentic version. Folkloric remediation does not mean that cultural authenticity is necessarily lost to transformation; it affirms instead that cultural continuity may happen precisely through transformation, as successive mediators rework inherited material for new audiences and new social concerns.

13. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The transition of Rajasthani folktales from oral tradition to literature, cinema and digital media demonstrates that folklore is a dynamic cultural form and not a static heritage artefact. The comparative cases of Duvidha–Paheli, Dohri Joon–Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan, Dhola-Maru and the audiovisual documentation of Pabuji demonstrate different forms of narrative and cultural transformation: cinematic expansion into the commercial spectacle, contemporary recontextualization through animation and non-human narration, cross-linguistic and cross-regional relocation and the conversion of ritual oral performance into the audiovisual archive.

These cases indicate that we should not understand adaptation as the reproduction of an original narrative, but rather, following Hutcheon's formulation of repetition without replication, as a process in which each new medium establishes a new relationship between story, audience, technology and cultural context. Thus, the contemporary relevance of Rajasthani folklore lies not just in its preservation, but in its cultural re-negotiation. Folktales survive because they can be retold, reinterpreted and technologically re-mediated — a transformation that nevertheless demands sustained critical attention to the questions of cultural ownership, caste and gender representation, linguistic translation and commercialisation. The transition from teller to screen and from screen to digital platform does not signal the end of folklore, but rather a new chapter in its ongoing cultural life.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The next stage of this research program would directly draw on the comparative framework developed here to construct a fully verified, scene-by-scene dataset for *Paheli* and *Avaar Navaar Chhoriyaan*, timecoded against specific release copies and cross-referenced against a particular edition of Detha's source texts, together with selected visual frames analysed for mise-en-scène, camera position and cultural symbolism. Equipped with such a dataset, the folkloric remediation model developed here could be tested against a fully traceable evidentiary chain from source passage to audiovisual sequence to interpretive claim. This would allow the present comparative-theoretical study to be transformed into an evidence-based empirical study without sacrificing the qualitative integrity of the analysis

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