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Aleksandra Turek
a.turek@uw.edu.pl
(University of Warsaw, Poland)

Between Tradition and Innovation
Girdhardān Ratnū's *Phog ikīsī** as Contemporary Dingal Verse

ABSTRACT: This article explores the cultural and literary significance of *Calligonum polygonoides*, locally known as *phog*, an endemic shrub of Rajasthan's Thar Desert. The subject of analysis is the poem, *Phog ikīsī*, by a contemporary Rajasthani poet Girdhardān Ratnū (b. 1970), which serves as a lens to examine the broader cultural landscapes of Rajasthan. The poem bridges tradition and modernity, employing the literary form of Marwari known as Dingal. Through a close reading of this work, the article reveals the enduring connection between people and their environment, highlighting the ecological and cultural consciousness embedded in local literary traditions. Ultimately, the analysis argues that *Phog ikīsī* expresses a profound sense of Rajasthani identity (Rajasthani-ness) and affirms the value of locality.

KEYWORDS: *Calligonum polygonoides*, Dingal, *phog* plant, Rajasthani poetry, Thar Desert

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* I am indebted to Styrbjörn Alström (Uppsala University), who in 2015 kindly shared with me an unpublished copy of *Phog ikīsī*. The manuscript included a note indicating that Alström had received the poem in 2005 from the author's family in the village of Dāsoṛī. In July 2025, I received direct permission from Girdhardān Ratnū, in personal communication, to publish the poem. The translation presented here is my own. An effort was made to render a rhymed version that could, at least to some extent, echo the original rhyme scheme at the end of each line. This approach, however, occasionally required addition of certain words in order to preserve the overall tone or the meaning of a given line.

The starting point of this article, referencing the theme of the current volume, *Landscapes of Rajasthan*, is, strictly speaking, a plant that is both typical and endemic to the desert topography of Rajasthan. However, the article is only seemingly about a common shrub of the Thar Desert, *Calligonum polygonoides*, known locally as *phog* or *phok*. Rather, an in-depth analysis of the so far unpublished poem with *phog* at its centre—*Phog ikīsī* authored by a renowned contemporary poet, Girdhardān Ratnū of Dāsoṛī village (b. 1970)—will serve to reveal the less travelled literary and cultural landscapes of Rajasthan, or the land's culturescape to use terminology introduced by Clifford Geertz (2000: 21). In its essence, *Phog ikīsī* is a short, finely honed work that builds a bridge between tradition and modernity. Though an example of contemporary Rajasthani poetry, it remains deeply rooted in the centuries-old literary tradition of the region and sustains a literary heritage that might otherwise appear to have already faded into obscurity. The poem's very language serves as a bridge between the past and the present: Marwari in its literary form known as Dingal—one of the principal literary languages of Rajasthan for over five centuries (Maheshwari 1980: 7–10; Menāriyā 1999: 18). And finally, as I will try to show, the work reveals a strong and profound connection between human beings and their immediate environment, an issue that is gaining new significance amid the growing ecological awareness seeking to rediscover harmony between humans and nature in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world. In view of this, a poem devoted to a humble desert shrub is also a deep immersion in locality—and an affirmation of its value. Keeping in mind all these aspects, I argue that the *Phog ikīsī* embodies a deep sense of Rajasthani-ness.

The very title of the work reflects a long-standing Indian literary tradition of indicating the number of stanzas comprising a composition. In this instance, the title may be rendered as *Twenty-One Couplets on the Phog Plant*. It is thus a relatively short work composed in the *dohā* metre, which has for centuries been one of the most prominent and enduring poetic forms in the early modern literature of North India (cf. Nagasaki 2012: 107–129). Characteristic of *dohā*s is their concise structure: they convey rich and evocative imagery through a minimal use of words. The text of the poem is presented below:

Phog ikīsī by Girdhardān Ratnū "Dāsoṛī"

Having seen how nature stirs the heart, even gods yield to desire.
The gleaming dunes with beauty glow as *Phog* appears on them in full attire. [1]
The high dunes shine where worthy as a tree.
Praised by countless tongues, the desert *Phog* gleams. [2]
Amid the lofty dunes a splendid beauty beams.
You shine, O *Phog*, in the desert land—a matchless tree upon the sands. [3]
Though you are cherished across the world, admired by every soul.
Your love remains with the desert, for which your beauty glows whole. [4]
O great *Phog*, among desert trees you're famed far and wide.
O fruit-giving benefactor *Phog*, we witness the boundless benefits you provide. [5]
O fruitful *Phog*, the desert is your abode indeed.
The whole world knows you nurture many in need. [6]
O benevolent *Phog*! You gave your every might.
Seen as the fear destroyer, in the desert lies heart's delight. [7]
In hard times, be a companion none could trust more true.
You, the useful and mighty tree, you fulfil all desires too. [8]
When times of trouble come, you remain our life-giving bread.
Countless mouths, in delight, O *Phog*, to you are led. [9]
You alone prevent the famine, never refusing in times of pain.
You share our burdens, O *Phog*, and our praise and admiration you gain. [10]
When the scorching *lū* winds blow, fierce and wild the scene.
O *Phog*, by your tangled roots' strength, you alone stand boldly firm. [11]
In the fierce, blazing heat of the desert land, you burn like a matted-haired meditating sage.
Then, O *Phog*! How could I, with mortal lips, give your penance its rightful praise. [12]
O Phog, you shine in the desert land, like a *jogī* meditating on Jagannāth in sacred chants.
You endure the sun's relentless blaze, yet bless farmers with wealth and sustenance. [13]
You burn your body in the fierce heat, yet protect each soul you meet.
Praiseworthy you are, O *Phog*, in the desert your greatness none can beat. [14]
Among desert trees, you appear like a king with honour.

O *Phog*, you reign with strength through trials, embodying Rajput valour. [15]

Violent sandstorms rise, other shrubs they fiercely swing.
But you do not falter a single step, you rule bravely like a king. [16]
The storms howl loudly, the sky roars thunder. Today,
Yet upright in the desert, O *Phog*, you stand firm, no fear, no sway. [17]
The other trees, poor beings, stand deep, withered within the desert sand.
O *Phog*, may you forever bear fruit, your branches are the desert's grand ornament. [18]

O vow-bound *Phog*, you pledged to love no soil but this desert land.
You uphold this promise patiently, you are indeed the desert's true friend. [19]

But had you, O *Phog*, not stood as sheltering shield in their poor state?
Who among the desert folk would care for their fate? [20]
Among all the trees of the desert, none remains but you alone.
Who else, O *Phog*, could rival your heart—your protective nature shown? [21][1]

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[1]
पेख प्रकत मन मोहणी, ललचावै सुर लोग ।
उजळ धोरा ओपवै, फबै उणां पर फोग ॥१॥
ऊंचे धोरा ओपवै, जेथ तरवर जोग ।
लाख मुख जस लाटणों, फबतो थळवट फोग ॥२॥
ऊंचे धोरां ओपतो, रळियावणों हद रूप ।
तुं दिपें फोग थळ देसमें, इळ पर रुंख अनूप ॥३॥
सुप्यारो वसुधा सकळ, लहै वारणा लोग ।
पण धारी तुं प्रीत कर, फबेज थळवट फोग ॥४॥
थळवट ठावो तरु, चावो है चहुं खूट ।
फळदायक दायक तुं फोगड़ा, इखां लाभ अखूट ॥५॥
फळदायक तुं फोगड़ा, थळवट थारो थान ।
प्राणी विधि विधि पेखणो, जाणी बात जहान ॥६॥
फळदायक तुं फोगड़ा, हिव तन दिनो होम ।
भय भंजण तो भाळियो, मन रंजण मरुभोम ॥७॥
बळू रह विखमी बगत, विसवासी तिणवार ।
जोगो तरवर तुं जबर, सै वाता रो सार ॥८॥
वळिय दुखियारी वगत, रखै जियारी जोग ।
लां बळियारी लाख मुखां, फेर तिंहारी फोग ॥९॥
दाटै अेम दुकाळ नै, नटै दुखमें नाह ।
फाटै विपति फोगड़ा, वळ लाटै जस वाह ॥१०॥
बळती लूं बाजै जादै, दूठ दपट्टां देख ।
जटाधारी रै जोर में, अडर फोग तूं एक ॥११॥
मुदै तपै मरु देस में, जटियाळै मुनी जेम ।
फेर मुखां सूं फोगड़ा, करां बडाई केम ॥१२॥
दिपै फोग मरुदेस में, जपै जेम जगनाथ ।
तपै इमत इम तावड़ै, अपै किसाणां आथ ॥१३॥
तन बाळै तप तावड़ै, जन जन पाळै जोय ।
धिनो फोग मरुधर धरा, करै न समबड़ कोय ॥१४॥
विरछ थळवट रां बिचै, भाळ प्रगट में भूप ।
संकट फोग सह सबळ, राजै रजवट रूप ॥१५॥
आवै इधकी आंधियां, जबर अटारी जूट ।
डिगै न को डग हेक तूं, राजै रजवट रूप ॥१६॥
अरडाटा दे आंधिया, गड़डाटां नभ गाज ।
ऊभो मरुधर में अडर, अडग फोग तूं आज ॥१७॥
बाकी विरछ सै बापड़ा, मरु धर देस मंजार ।
फळियो रह नित फोगड़ा, साख थळू सिंणगार ॥१८॥
पणधर साचो पैखियो, पर धर करै न प्रीत ।
सधर फोग तूं सांप्रत, मरूधर हंदो मीत ॥१९॥
फैर होतो न फोगड़ा, ढकण दुखारी ढाल ।
मुरधर रै मिनखां माही, होत कवण हवाल ॥२०॥
मुरधर रै विरछा मही, छतो एक तो छोड़ ।
करै फोग बीजो कवण, हिव विध थारौ होड़ ॥२१॥

Useful *phog* plant

Phog is a common plant that thrives in sandy, arid soils and on sand dunes (Fig. 1). It is a prostrate, medium-sized shrub, typically reaching a height of 4 to 6 feet, though it can grow up to 10 feet under favourable conditions. The leaves are simple and needle-like, an adaptation well suited to arid environments. The plant develops an extensive system of outward-spreading roots which are massively branching out enhancing thus stability in the sandy terrain (Megwal et al. 2024: 162). This feature enables *phog* to play a vital functional role in the desert ecosystem, namely stabilizing sand dunes and binding loose sand. The *phog* produces root suckers and is propagated by cutting and layering (*Plants of Rajasthan*). The shrub has small, white flowers, and its flower buds—known locally as *phogḷā*—are available for only one to two weeks. The flowering period typically occurs between April and June (Megwal et al. 2024: 162). In the desert region (both in Rajasthan and the neighbouring Sindh in Pakistan), the flowers of *phog* are consumed as food (*Flowers of India*).

Fig. 1. *Calligonum polygonoides*. Photo: A. Turek.

Although *Calligonum polygonoides* thrives also in the arid landscapes of northeastern Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, and Armenia (Megwal et al. 2024: 162), probably it was in India that Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859), as one of the first Europeans, observed and described this plant at length. This happened in 1808 during his travel through the Thar Desert on his way to Afghanistan. In his *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* he recorded a note on the "phoke" in the following manner:

> It is a plant four to five feet high, quite green although it has no leaves. Its branches run into tender twigs, which terminate in bunches of the same material, but still softer and fuller of sap. It bears clusters of flowers, which are eaten by the natives, and has its seed in a pod. It is the favourite food of the camel, whom it in some measure indemnifies for the long privation of water which he is obliged to suffer in the desert. It was first seen to the west of Canoud,[2] and continued throughout the whole of the desert. (Elphinstone 1842: 5)

The better-known 19th-century author of a major compendium on Rajasthan, James Tod (1782–1835), also mentions *phog* (1997 [1832]: 235). In his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han*, Tod adopts an approach that contemporary cultural anthropology would term "thick description," that is, considering every detail, even the most seemingly insignificant element of culture and observation, in the study of a given society. All such details contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the culture under investigation (Geertz 2000: 3–30). However, given Tod's role in Rajasthan as an official of the East India Company, this "thick description" might also be interpreted as a form of intelligence gathering (see Bayly 1996). In his *Sketch of the Indian Desert*, Tod devotes considerable space to the descriptions of desert flora.

[2] Most likely this refers to Kanorh, a small village near Narnaul in the present-day state of Haryana. Historically, this area formed part of the Mewati region. James Tod marked the village on the map attached to his *Annals* (1997 [1832]: 235). At that time, it was situated within the East India Company-governed territory bordering Rajasthan.

However, he contributes no new insights regarding the *phog* plant. Instead, he relies on the information provided by Elphinstone, who had visited the desert regions of Rajasthan shortly before Tod. It must be noted, however, that Tod's work reached a much broader readership than Elphinstone's writings and remains one of the canonical sources on Rajasthan to this day.

Thus concludes the botanical description of the plant. Let us now examine how the plant is represented in the poem *Phog ikīsī*.

The first four couplets function as an introduction to the subject matter, resembling a botanical description that begins with an indication of the plant's natural habitat. The reader is informed that *phog* is a desert species typically found growing on sand dunes. Furthermore, it is suggested that these dunes attain their full aesthetic appeal only when they are adorned with *phog*. The positive valorisation of *phog* is further reinforced by the frequent use in the poem of the verbs *opṇo*, *dipṇo*, *phabṇo*, conveying meanings such as 'to look beautiful,' 'to appear attractive,' 'to decorate,' 'to add beauty,' 'to match well,' and 'to adorn.' These verbs also carry connotations of luminosity, radiance, shining, and gleaming (cf. Lāḷas 1967–1973. I: 367; *ibid*. II: 1712, 1744; *ibid*. III: 2712, 2736)—qualities traditionally associated with beauty in Indian culture. For this reason, I have chosen to retain the literal sense of "shining" in the translation, as the poem further emphasizes the image of gleaming in the scorching desert sun. In Indian tradition, and particularly in the bardic heroic poetry of Rajasthan, heroes (*śūrvīr*) are described as radiant, or more precisely, as shining with glory (*kīrti*), a quality often symbolized by the colour white. In this poem, it is *phog* that assumes the role of the hero, further emphasized through its personification and even deification. As early as the third *dohā*, the use of the second-person pronoun "you" (*tũ*) is introduced, marking a shift whereby the lyrical subject begins to address the plant directly. To highlight this sense of intimacy and personhood, I have chosen to capitalize the name of the plant throughout the translation, as though it were the name of a beloved or a revered person. The sense of intimacy is also heightened through the use of a diminutive form later in the poem—*phogṛā* instead of simply *phog*—which

appears in the vocative case. This stylistic choice is characteristic of Rajasthani, where the suffix *-ṛo* (to masculines; *-ṛī* to feminines) is commonly added to nouns to form diminutives, serving both grammatical and emotive functions.

There is more than one technique used to elevate the status of *phog* in the passage under study. One such tactic appears in the second couplet, where the shrub is described as being as valuable as a tree (*tarvar jog*). In the remaining part of the poem, *phog* is consistently equated with a tree, referred to by nouns such as *rũkh*, *taru*, *tarvar*, and *birch* (from Skt. *vṛkṣa*), and not just any tree, but an exceptional one, described as a "matchless tree" (*rũkh anūp*). The fourth couplet continues the botanical characterization of the plant by emphasizing its endemic feature, highlighting its exclusive association with arid soil. This is expressed poetically through the idea that it remains faithful, loving only the desert (*paṇ dhārī tũ̃ prīt kar*).

Stanza 5 initiates a laudatory enumeration of *phog*'s usefulness, resembling a form of prayer. It acquires a quasi-religious dimension through the use of the vocative. The plant is directly addressed, and the listing of its epithets evokes the structure of a Hindu *nāmāvalī* (*lit.* 'garland of names'), a sequence of divine names chanted in praise of a deity, or that of a *stotra*, which similarly comprises a list of attributes (cf. Edelmann 2017: 303–307). The couplets also underscore the plant's beneficial qualities through the repeated use of the epithet *phaḷdāyak* ('fruitful,' 'productive,' 'rewarding'), while also highlighting its broad and multifaceted utility, perceived by the poet as infinite (*lābh akhūṭ*). Couplet 6 opens the praise of *phog*'s usefulness as a nurturer, emphasizing its ability to satiate the hunger of many beings (*prāṇī vidhi vidhi*). For this reason, it is portrayed as the destroyer of the fear of hunger, a theme developed further in the following stanza. *Dohā* 7 displays much originality and inventiveness and continues to situate the plant within a sacred dimension. To convey that *phog* is useful in its entirety, the author poetically asserts that the plant has offered itself—both heart and body—as a sacrifice, burning in the holy fire that is the heat of the desert (*tũ phogṛā hiv tan dino hom*). *Hom* or *havan* fire ritual has been one of the most ancient and

central rites in Hindu traditions since Vedic times. During the ritual, offerings (*āhuti*) are thrown into the consecrated fire while Sanskrit mantras are chanted (Monier-Williams 1964: 1293, 1306). This act is performed for the purposes of purification and invoking blessings. In the poem under study, *phog* itself becomes the *āhuti*, thus assuming the indispensable role in conferring blessings within the context of desert culture. Returning to its diverse functions, one such utility is the use of *phog* wood as fuel (*Flowers of India*). This idea, in turn, naturally evokes associations with *phog*'s self-sacrifice as it is cast into the fire.

The next three couplets (8–10) praise the *phog* tree as a symbol of resilience, reliability, and honour—standing firm in times of famine, sorrow, and disaster. In the passage, we find an accumulation of nouns such as *vikhamī bagat*, *dukhiyārī vagat*, *dukāḷ*, *dukh*, *vipati* ('difficult time'). It is worthwhile to turn to some historical records to better imagine the hardships people had faced in the desert for centuries. Here, I return once again to Elphinstone's account and the hardships experienced by his caravan as it crossed through Pūgal (present-day Bikaner district), the very region from which the author of *Phog ikīsī* hails.

> The annoyance of the march was greatly increased by the incredible number of a sort of small burs, which stuck to every thing that touched them, and occasioned great uneasiness. They are however useful, inasmuch as they form a favourite food for horses, and the seed is eaten even by men. The want of water, and the quality of that which we met with, was also a great hardship to our men, and followers; and, though the abundance of water melons afforded occasional relief to their thirst, its effect on their health was by no means salutary. Such were the combined effects of fatigue, bad water, and the excessive use of water melons, that a great proportion of the natives who accompanied us became afflicted with a low fever, accompanied by a dysentery; and to such a degree did this extend, that thirty Sepoys, without reckoning followers, were taken ill (…), and forty persons of all descriptions expired during the first week of our halt at Bikaner. (Elphinstone 1842: 12)

Returning to the analysis of the poem's fragment, special emphasis is placed on the plant's capacity to alleviate hunger. The hardship

referenced in this context evokes not merely general difficulty, but the spectre of famine. In the harsh conditions of the desert, the fruits and flowers of local vegetation become vital for survival—for both humans and animals. *Phog*, in particular, is not only edible and fit for human consumption but also serves as fodder for animals (Fig. 2), especially for camels as it was also observed by Elphinstone. The verse 9 is particularly powerful in its expression, addressing *phog* as a remedy for hunger (*rakhai jiyārī jog*, the latter meaning 'herb,' 'medicine,' or 'cure,' but also standing for *yogya*, 'worthy' or 'suitable,' as daily food that is life-giving, *jiyārī*). The poet envisions *phog* as a plant toward which thousands of hungry mouths might turn (*lākh mukhā̃ pher*). In this context, *dohā* 10 reads as a prayer to *phog*, invoked as a deity to whom one turns for protection.

Fig. 2. Harvesting *phog* shrub for fodder. Photo: A. Turek.

The next set of four stanzas (11–14) centres on the theme of heat and dust in a powerful and evocative manner. The resonance of locality, conveyed through vivid imagery, is particularly evident in couplet 11, where the local winds, *lū*, are evoked—a force that, in Rajasthani poetry, consistently symbolizes the fiery and fierce power of nature (cf. Candrasiṁh 2015). *Lū* are dry, hot, gusty, and dust-laden summer winds that originate in the Thar Desert of India and Pakistan, carrying masses of scorching air across the Gangetic Plain. They prevail during the months of May and June, marking the peak of dry season in northern India, and often give rise to dust storms (Rana 2009: 57). The poet praises the plant's resilience in withstanding such harsh conditions. The final line of the *dohā* 11 (the third and fourth *pada*) highlights the qualities of *phog* as a desert-adapted plant, emphasizing that its strength lies in its physical structure, specifically in the system of tangled roots (*jaṭādhārī rai jor mẽ*). Owing to this resilience, *phog* is described literally as "fearless" (*aḍar*) in the hostile environment shaped by the scorching *lū* winds and dust storms.

However, beyond the aspect of locality, this stanza presents another remarkably vivid and evocative image. Through the key term *jaṭādhārī* ('the bearer of twisted, braided hair'), the poet bridges local imagery with the pan-Indian Hindu symbolism by invoking the figure of Shiva. *Phog*, with its tangled root systems, is likened to Shiva with matted hair tied in a topknot. According to Hindu tradition, Shiva saves the world from the force of Ganges descending from heavens, by channelling the river through his hair. In a similar fashion, *phog* protects the world from the destructive force of the *lū* by filtering sand and dust through its twisted, hair-like roots. Just as Shiva in his ascetic form covers his body in ash, *phog* is veiled in desert dust. The mention of violent and wild forces (*dūṭh dapaṭṭã*) also echoes the fierce and unpredictable aspects of Shiva's character. Additionally, it also alludes to the idea that just as Shiva remains untouched and unaffected while absorbed in meditation, so too does the *phog* remain unmoved (unafraid) during a dust storm. This passage serves in fact as a poetic tribute to *phog*'s role in binding sand and stabilizing sand dunes (cf. Elphinstone 1842: 7, 9).

The verse's reference to the plant's resilience points to another important aspect of *phog*'s utility in the lives of the Rajasthani people—its use in constructing hedges to protect wells from the encroaching sand.[3] It is worth noting that in the contemporary usage, dry shrubs of *phog* are also placed along local roads to form hedgerows which act as natural barriers separating the roadway from adjacent fields. These natural fences protect agricultural land from dust clouds stirred up by passing vehicles and effectively prevent animals from straying onto the road. This practical utility is, in fact, proverbial. In Rajasthan, the following folk saying circulates widely. Although it carries a tone of sarcasm, it enumerates elements characteristic of the region, thus capturing the very essence of the desert landscape and its life:

> Huts of *āk*,[4] and hedges of *phog*,
> Bread of millet, lentils of mung —
> Look, O raja, this is your Marwar![5]

The overwhelming resilience of the *phog* plant, its strength coming from a deep and firmly anchored root system that renders it fixed and immobile to the assault of any natural forces, undaunted when all else is in turmoil, is likewise celebrated in the subsequent verses: *saṅkaṭ phog sah sabaḷ* ("having endured all hardship") in stanza 15; *ḍigai na ko ḍag hek* ("does not sway or bend even a single step") during fierce sand storms (*idhakī ãdhiyã̃*) in *dohā* 16; and *ūbho marudhar*

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[3] Cf. "The p'hok is the most useful of all these as with its twigs they frame a wicker-work to line their wells, and prevent the sand from falling in" (Tod 1997 [1832]: 156, 265).

[4] *Āk*, a swallowwort (*Calotropis gigantea* or *Calotropis procera*), is another common shrub found in desert and arid regions across northern India, known for its multifaceted usefulness. Its strong fibres are used to make ropes for drawing water from the wells, and it is also employed in the preparation of medicinal remedies. For more, see Turek 2018: 43; Dastur 1988: 43.

[5] आक रा झोंपड़ा, फोग रा बाड़ ।
बाजरा रा रोटी, मोठ रा दाल ।
देखो हो राजा, तेरा मारवाड़ ! (Ahuja 1980: 16).

mẽ aḍar aḍag ("you stand in the desert fearless and firm, unaffected") in couplet 17.

Dohā 12 continues the topic of Shiva, but here it develops the concept of a *śaiva* ascetic, as evoked in the second quarter (*jaṭiyāḷai munī jem*, "like a matted-haired sage"). It is particularly noteworthy for the beautiful and original way in which the poet draws upon the ancient Indian concept of meditation, understood here in its literal, physical sense as the ignition of inner heat (*tapas*). The shrub is portrayed as an ascetic in deep penance: on one hand, enduring bodily mortification under the merciless heat of the desert, and on the other, gaining supernatural power through the practice of asceticism. If the shrub possesses divine powers, how can a mere mortal possibly do justice to its magnificence?

The theme of divine and meditative presence continues in couplet 13. *Phog* shines in the harsh desert like an ascetic reciting sacred chants on Jagannāth (*japai jem jagnāth*; 'Lord of the World,' the epithet of Vishnu). Despite the scorching heat, it remains the sole source of support and sustenance for farmers, symbolizing not only spiritual strength and blessing but also practical utility. In this context, it is the farmers who are in need of the superpower acquired by *phog* through penance. *Phog* manifests in the desert soil for their welfare (*apai kisāṇ̃ āth*, "provides prosperity to farmers"). The motif of chanting opens additional interpretive possibilities, for instance, connecting the resonant recitation of mantras with the sound of *phog*'s twigs swaying in the *lū* winds.

This motif of self-sacrifice and self-immolation, both physical and mystical, for the benefit of others, is further developed in *dohā* 14. The focus here is on enlightenment attained through the heat of asceticism. *Phog*, like an ascetic, burns itself, but does not use the resulting supernatural powers for its own sake; instead, it offers them for the good of others (*jan jan pāḷe*).

The next four stanzas (15–18) draw upon the theme of kingship. *Phog* possesses all the qualities of a sovereign (*pragaṭ mẽ bhūp*) in *dohā* 15. It is strong and resilient enough (*sabaḷ*) to endure hardship (*saṅkaṭ sahai*) and to conquer and maintain control over its

kingdom—the desert. These qualities are integral to rulership and embody the essence of Rajput identity (*rājai rajvaṭ rūp*; cf. Saran 1978). In times of violence and turmoil, like a true Rajput, it never retreats nor yields even an inch of land to hostile forces. It thus embodies Rajput heroism (*dohā* 16). At the same time, the stanza presents an image of a sandstorm sweeping everything away. Other plants are shaken by the gale; they waver and bend. Only the *phog*, unwavering, holds back the vanishing beauty of the desert. *Phog* confronts danger heroically, as befits a Rajput warrior: standing upright, fearless, and unwavering in the subsequent *dohā* 17. The king-*phog* is *primus inter pares*: the other plants cannot rival it, for generosity is both the mark and the privilege of a ruler (see Borek 2016)—*phaḷiyo rah nit phogṛā*, ("O *Phog*, may you fruit forever"). It is the king who adorns the land, just as the branches of *phog* adorn the desert (*dohā* 18). Although the imagery of kingship is generally characteristic of Indian culture, its presence in a Rajasthani poem is almost inevitable, given that the region's cultural history has been deeply shaped by a Rajput worldview and a literary tradition that celebrates Rajput ethos (Vyas 2001: 1–6). This perspective was most strongly reinforced by the Cāraṇs, traditional bards, who historically reserved their services exclusively for Rajput patrons, particularly from Marwar (Bhargava 2001: 26; Maheshwari 1980: 10). It is important to note that the author of the poem under discussion is himself a Cāraṇ. For this reason, interpreting the storm imagery in stanzas 16 and 17 as a metaphor for battle is not an overly speculative reading, but one well-grounded in the cultural and literary context of the region (see also below).

Dohā 19 praises the reliability and steadfastness of *phog*, emphasizing that it can always be counted on. Human nature, by contrast, is often changeable. One who makes a promise (*paṇdhar*) not to love other lands (*par dhar karai na prīt*) remains trustworthy. To fully grasp the message of this verse, one must once again consider the cultural context of Rajasthan as a region with a long-standing tradition of migration. Whether due to drought or famine common in the arid zone, the nomadic lifestyle of various social groups, or travel in search of employment, migration has historically shaped Rajasthani

life. In the past, it was primarily men who left their homes to serve as mercenaries. This phenomenon, prevalent across North India, has been insightfully analysed by Dirk Kolff (1990). The same theme has also found expression in literature, Rajasthani folk literature in particular, where the figure of the woman left behind, the one pining in separation (*virahiṇī*), became a recurring motif. Her husband has departed in search of work and fails to return, despite having promised to come back within a certain time. The marital bed remains empty, and the one who once expressed love at home is absent. While this motif belongs to the genre of love poetry, it also carries a deeper implication: the absence of a protector, someone who would care for and defend the more vulnerable in the household. This is precisely the context that explains why the poem emphasizes *phog* as a loyal friend of the desert (*marūdhar hando mīt*), one that will never betray it. One may also discern here yet another protective function of this plant: it provides a suitable habitat for the desert and semi-desert wildlife.

The final two verses (stanzas 20 and 21) constitute a culminating tribute (*stotra*) to *phog* as the primary and incomparable protector of the people of Marwar. The poem's conclusion gains additional impact through the use of direct address in the second person and the employment of conditional and interrogative forms, which invite reflection on the hypothetical absence of *phog*, thus evoking a sense of loss and vulnerability without this plant in the desert (*hoto na phogṛā … hot kavaṇ havāl*, "if you were not, O *Phog*, what condition would there be?"). The final *dohā* (21) underscores *phog*'s irreplaceable role by introducing a rhetorical question (*bījo kavaṇ*, "who else?"). As a result, the reverent and solemn tone prevails, as if a true hero were being eulogized and his legacy defended—an effect that aligns perfectly with the tradition of heroic and commemorative poetry (*ḍiṅgaḷ gīt*) so deeply rooted in the literary heritage of Rajasthan (see Sārasvat 1986).

Between tradition and innovation

The author of *Phog ikīsī*, Girdhardān Ratnū, was born in and continues to reside in the small village of Dāsoṛī (tehsil Kolāyat),[6] located approximately 100 km southwest of Bikaner, in the heart of the Thar Desert. He belongs to the Cāraṇ community—a class of cultural custodians that has made one of the most profound contributions to Rajasthani literature. The profession of Cāraṇ was hereditary, and traditionally they served as the exclusive bards of Rajasthan's ruling class, the Rajputs (Menāriyā 1999: 20). It was the Cāraṇs who articulated and codified the Rajput ethos (*rājpūtī*), shaping its idealized model in literary form (for further discussion, see Ratnāvat and Śarmā 2001; Prabhakar 1976). This intimate and enduring relationship between Cāraṇs and Rajputs extended far beyond the realm of literary praise. Cāraṇs functioned as their patrons' confidants, messengers, mediators, negotiators, and tutor-cum-guardians of Rajput children, and they even fought alongside them in battle. Girdhardān Ratnū thus inherits a tradition that makes him especially well-suited to be among leading figures in contemporary Rajasthani-Dingal literature. He is not only a poet but also a teacher, essayist, editor, specialist in Rajasthani manuscripts, and performer.[7] While most Cāraṇ poets were traditionally trained from early childhood by observing their elders, Ratnū additionally pursued formal higher education. He holds an M. A. in Rajasthani literature from Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner, and a Bachelor of Education from Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur. He is currently employed as government schoolteacher in Rajasthan's Education Department.

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[6] According to the 2011 Census, the village has a total population of 3,580 (*Village DataBase*).

[7] He has been honoured by organizations like The Cāraṇ Comittee of Marwar (Jodhpur), The Cāraṇ Committee of the District of Bikaner, Rati Ghati National Research and Development Committee, and Śrī Karṇī Temple Private Trust (Deśnok). He has also been recognized by prominent Rajasthani literary figures, including Śaktidān Kaviyā and Akṣay Siṅgh Ratnū. The biographical summary is based on the poet's profile published on the *Charan Community Portal*.

Ratnū is an editor of seven books and has been an active contributor to the most significant literary magazines of Rajasthani language and literature such as, for example, *Marū Bhāratī* or *Rājasthānī Gaṅgā*.[8] His original works include two essays: *Marūdhar rī maṭhoṭh* (2003, *The Pride of the Desert*) and *Jaḷ ū̃ḍā, thaḷ ūjḷā* (2012, *Water Lies Deep, the Desert Shines Bright*), as well as two poetry collections: *Ḍhaḷgī rātā̃! Bahgī bātā̃!* (2017, *The Nights Faded! The Words Flowed!*; poems in modern Rajasthani) and *Chandā̃ rī chauḷ* (2006, *The Delight of Verses*; poetry in Dingal. *Ibid.*). It is noteworthy that the latter collection also includes another poem (seven quatrains) in praise of the *phog* plant—*Phog ro chand*—composed in *nārāc* metre, a form characteristic of Dingal poetry (see Ratnū 2006: 81–83).

Ratnū can thus be included among Dingal poets of the post-independence Rajasthani literature. He is praised for revitalising and reshaping traditional forms with the introduction of a modern sensibility. It is important to note that no critical study of the history of Rajasthani literature—a study that would encompass the 21st-century Rajasthani literary production or offer new conceptual framework for the field—has been published till date. Existing works discuss as "contemporary" only poets active up to, at most, the 1970s (cf. Maheshwari 1980: 214–231; Menāriyā 1996: 102–103; Menāriyā 1999: 223–224), with the exception of Mālī (2004), who includes poems composed up to 2002. Analysing how modern sensibility is to be understood within the context of literary trends popular in Rajasthan, and from a distinctly Rajasthani perspective, remains a challenge. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the poet Candrasiṁh "Birkāḷī" (1912–1992), through his short poem *Bādaḷī* (*Tiny Clouds*, 1941; composed of 130 *dohā*s), paved the way for the development of modern Rajasthani poetry. He gave a new direction to poetic expression in Rajasthan and added a new dimension to Indian literature in general (Maheshwari 1980: 214; Singh 2001: iv, x; Bora 2001: 8; Mālī 2004: 161; see also Candrasiṁh 2014). The spirit of Candrasiṁh's

[8] The works: *Karṇī kīrat* (1990), *Lok devtā pābūjī* (2013), *Mehā vīṭhū kāvya-sañcai* (2016), *Devī stuti ratnākar*, *Kāvya kalrav*, *Vijay vinod* and *Cāraṇ candrikā* (*ibid.*).

works can also be discerned in the poem by Ratnū discussed above, as Candrasiṁh is acknowledged to be the pioneer of modern Rajasthani nature poetry. *Bādaḷī* was among the first Rajasthani poems to exert significant influence on the post-1947 regional literature, successfully bridging folk traditions and literary expression. From the time of its publication, the poem attracted considerable attention and received acclaim beyond the borders of Rajasthan.[9] Since the days of Kālīdāsa and his *Meghadūta* (5th CE), clouds have remained a popular theme in Indian literature, yet Candrasiṁh introduced a new perspective to the established literary imagination (Singh 2001: x). In his poem, a cloud, or rather a cloudlet, is personified as a young, shy maiden, asked to come to the aid of a lover pleading at her door (see Candrasiṁh 2014).

Ten years after the *Bādaḷī*, Candrasiṁh published another outstanding work, a second masterpiece of modern regional poetry—the poem *Lū* (1951; consisting of 104 *dohā*s), which is regarded as more mature and majestic in tone (see Candrasiṁh 2015). The two poems are complementary: while the hot winds (*lū*) destroy the earth, the monsoon clouds revive it, as if embodying Shiva and Shakti, symbols of death and life (Singh 2001: xiii). Candrasiṁh employed the same literary strategy in *Lū* as in his earlier work, personifying the hot winds as a female figure. Despite their fierce and elemental nature, the central characters in both poems are simultaneously celestial and human. K. M. George reflects on this duality in the following way:

> Towards the end of the poem he gives a subtle hint, an indirect reference to his first book, Bādali, that Lū is the mother of Bādali. In other words, Bādali is the direct reward of Lū's fiery labour. Here at this point the dryness of the earth and loveliness of the sky meet. (Singh 2001: xvi)

[9] It earned the poet two prestigious awards: the Ratnākar Puraskār, conferred by the Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā, Kāśī, and the national Baldevdās Medal. These literary prizes substantially elevated his standing within Hindi literary circles. As a result, Candrasiṁh received praise from some of the most eminent Hindi poets including Sumitrānandan Pant, Mahādevī Varmā, and Sūryakānt Tripāṭhī "Nirālā" as well as from Rabindranath Tagore. See the poet's profile on *Bhāratkoś* (*Bharat Discovery*) and on the *Rekhta Foundation*, the digital platform dedicated to Rajasthani language, literature, art and culture.

Lū and *Bādalī* have been celebrated for their evocative portrayal of nature and folk life, the simplicity of form, linguistic elegance, and deep regional identity. It is within this modern literary context that Ratnū's *Phog ikīsī* should be situated, and from which it draws a measure of inspiration. In a similar fashion, Ratnū places an ordinary desert shrub at the centre of his poetic vision. Like Candrasiṁh's wind and cloud, the plant is personified as an extraordinary figure that belongs simultaneously to two realms—the earthly and the divine. *Phog* functions both as a vehicle and as a component of the sacred *hom* offering, much like Candrasiṁh's *lū* which enacts the self-immolating sacrifice of the desert (*marudhar/murdharā*). Here, too, the fire sacrifice (*dīnhõ sab kuch hom*) is understood not only symbolically, but also in its literal sense: as the searing heat endured during ascetic practice (*tāv mẽ … karai tapasyā murdharā*):

> Marudhar gifts her all without thrift,
> O Lū, to your raging fire,
> Forever she leads a spartan life,
> So other lands bloom in her stead.[10]
> (translation by I. K. Sharma in: Singh 2001: 24)

Ratnū's poem can thus be situated within the broader current of the so-called nature poetry, a genre that remains popular in Rajasthani literature to this day. Despite its use of traditional metrical forms and classical language of literary Marwari, a significant shift has occurred in the figure of the central subject. Whereas the bardic literature of Rajasthan traditionally served to praise heroic figures, events or deities, in the post-independence period, that is after 1947, these roles were increasingly assumed by nature itself, celebrated for its own sake rather than solely in relation to human realm.[11] Perhaps the new socio-political reality, particularly the abolition of the *jāgīrdārī* and

[10] लूआं थारै ताव में दीन्हों सब कुछ होम ।
करै तपस्या मुरधरा बिलसै बीजी भोम ॥ (*Dohā* 102. Candrasiṁh 2015: 27).

[11] For information on other contemporary poets engaged with nature poetry, see Maheshwari 1980: 222–225 and Mālī 2004: 230–232.

zamīndārī systems in the 1950s (Sharma 1998: 175), which also resulted in the end of Rajput patronage over their bards, liberated poets from the constraints and traditional obligations that had previously restricted and controlled their literary creativity.

A notable example of this shift is *Rũkh satsaī* (1991, *A Hundred Couplets on Trees*) by Lakṣmaṇdān Kaviyā (b. 1951), also a member of Cāraṇ community. This work, composed in a traditional metrical scheme and in the literary Marwari, focuses exclusively on the flora of Rajasthan, and more precisely, on desert plants of the treeless landscape—fifteen *dohā*s are dedicated to the *phog* shrub alone (*dohā*s 571–585; Kaviyā 1991: 101–103). One such couplet is provided below as an example:

> Ever pleasing to all, cherished for its lush greenery.
> Beautiful *phogṛo* thrives with fruit, adorning the desert sands.[12]

It appears that Dingal found refuge, among other places, within this very literary current of nature poetry, despite claims by earlier generations of literary historians that Dingal poetry was productive only until the end of the 18th century and contributed nothing new thereafter (Prabhakar 1976: 144–147). I have argued elsewhere, by analysing Dingal compositions from the first half of the 19th century, that literary innovation was indeed taking place at that time, particularly through the introduction of new protagonists shaped by the emerging historical context of contact with the Europeans and their literary production (Turek 2024: 216). It may thus be argued that the Dingal style has survived into the present, evolving in tandem with the new themes addressed by contemporary writers,[13] as exemplified by *Phog ikīsī*, discussed here, as well as by the works of other post-independence Dingal poets such as Nānūrām Saṁskartā and Nārāyaṇ Siṅgh Bhāṭī

[12] सदा सुहाणी रै सरव, हरियाळी घण हेत ।
फळतो आछौ फोगडौ, राजै थळवट रेत ॥ (*Dohā* 572. *Ibid*.: 101).

[13] Innovations in the post-independence Rajasthani poetry, inaugurated by the new generation of poets starting in 1970s and primarily influenced by Hindi poetry, including the *naī kavitā* movement, are beyond the scope of this article.

(1930–1994), to name only some (Mālī 2004: 187–188). A noteworthy example is the poem *Das Dev* (1955, *Ten Gods*) by Saṁskartā, which portrays ten village deities: five of them embodied as trees, including *phog*, and the remaining five representing aspects of the earth in various conditions (Maheshwari 1980: 223).

Nature has been constantly present in Indian literature since its earliest beginnings, also during the classical Sanskrit period (notably through conventions such as *ṣad-ṛtu*) up to the literatures of the modern Indo-Aryan languages (e.g., the genre of *bārahmāsā*, the 'twelve-month' cycle). The literary traditions of Rajasthan have also made a significant contribution in this regard. In a land where the bond with nature has always been strong, the continuation of the tradition of nature poetry in the regional contemporary literature appears almost inevitable and "natural." It may be that the harsh conditions of life in the desert render nature inescapable, never allowing it to be forgotten. On the contrary, the continual struggle to adapt to the challenges fosters a deep sense of humility before the untamed forces of the natural world. Already in the early modern Rajasthani literature, we find references to hardships imposed by the environment, underscoring the importance of valuing what nature provides. For example, in the poem *Ḍhola māru rā dūhā*, the earliest extant manuscripts of which date to late 16th century, the protagonist addresses his camel in the following words:

> This is the land of venomous snakes, where thistles and thorny shrubs pass for trees.
> Only *āk* and *phog* offer shade, and the seeds of the *hũ̃c*[14] grass alone satiate hunger.[15]

Moreover, Rajasthan is the homeland of religious communities such as the Biṣṇoī panth—formed in 1485 by the saint Jāmbhojī, or Jā̃mbheśvar (1451–1536), from the village of Pīpāsar in the Bikaner region,

[14] A thorny grass whose tiny seeds are ground into flour and used to make bread (Lāḷas 1967–1973. III: 3403).

[15] जिण भुइ पन्नग पीयणा, कयर-कंटाळा रूंख ।
आके फोगे छांहडी, हूंछां भांजइ भूख ॥ (*Dohā* 661. Rāmsiṁh et al. 1995: 186).

which today lies within the Nagaur district (Khan 2003 [1997]: 187, 194; Sahū 2005: 1–4). The Biṣṇoīs are well known for their commitment to non-violence and their ecological approach to life. One of their central principles is the preservation of biodiversity: within the Biṣṇoī-habited areas, the killing of animals, specifically the blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*), native to the Thar Desert, and the cutting of green trees have been strictly prohibited since the time of Jāmbhojī (Khan 2003 [1997]: 197). A particularly noteworthy event in their history is the so-called "Khejaṛlī massacre" or "Khejaṛlī sacrifice" of 1730, when members of the community physically attached themselves to *khejṛī* trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) in the village of Khejaṛlī to prevent their felling by the local ruler's men. As a result, 363 Biṣṇoīs, including women and children, were killed (*ibid.*). This tradition of "tree hugging" to protect forest life was later adopted by women in the mountainous region of Garhwal in the 20th century, thus giving rise to the Chipko ecological movement (Upadhyay 2021: 46–52). Interestingly, the central religious practice of the Biṣṇoīs is *hom* or *havan* fire ritual instead of a regular *pūjā* of the orthodox Hinduism (Khan 2003 [1997]: 197; Sahū 2005: 7). Thus, the imagery of the desert's heat as a fire ritual may not be merely a poetic trope in the works of Ratnū and Candrasiṁh—both poets originating from the same region—but rather a reflection of local traditions, the way of life of the native population, and a culture of environmental reverence. Rajasthani nature poetry is therefore deeply rooted in local experience and draws upon traditional imagery developed within the region.

Tradition is by no means absent in *Phog ikīsī*. *Nota bene*, the contemporary poets of the nature poetry current are regarded as traditional poets (Maheshwari 1980: 214–216, 222). *Phog ikīsī*, too, displays the characteristic Cāraṇ style, which is defined by a mixture of themes, particularly the following three: the religious, the heroic, and the romantic (*ibid*.: 40). This is something that contemporary Indian popular culture would describe using the term *masālā*. All three aspects are present in *Phog ikīsī*, as I have attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of the poem. A hallmark of this style is the celebration of local elements while simultaneously referencing the pan-Indian canon,

the so-called Great Hindu Tradition. Consequently, seemingly minor or insignificant aspects of local culture are, for instance, compared to the pan-Indian elements and the principal heroes and deities of the Hindu pantheon. Ratnū, as a highly qualified Cāraṇ, is unafraid to draw upon this entire wealth of literary tradition, shaped in no small part by his own community. In this way, *Phog ikīsī* engages in dialogue (in Bakhtinian terms of the notion) not only with modern works of Rajasthani poetry such as *Lū* or *Bādaḷī*, but also with the centuries -old Rajasthani literature. For example, in the images of dust-storm and monsoon storm as a battle where rain symbolises rain of arrows and the noise of thundering sky the turmoil clashing armies, one finds echoes of a similar motif present in the description of war in the 16th-century poem *Krisana rukamaṇī rī veli* by Pr̥thvīrāj Rāṭhoṛ (1549–1600) (Rāmsiṁh and Pārīk 1931: 182–189). Such a trend is characteristic of Dingal poetry: the creation of passages that exploit sound: evoking clamour, cries, and particularly noises associated with battle and weaponry, since it must not be forgotten that these poems were intended for oral recitation. The so invoked tradition is particularly evident in stanza 17 of *Phog ikīsī*.

Attention should also be paid to the carefully considered structure of the poem and to the sequence of the presented images, which ultimately form a year-round celebration of the *phog* plant, set against the backdrop of the four seasons. There is clear allusion to the traditional poetic convention of *bārahmāsā* even if it is not fully realised. In spring, the *phog* blossoms, and thus the poet begins by praising the plant, whose edible flowers save people from hunger and whose stems nourish livestock. In summer, when the relentless heat dominates, it protects both people and the desert from the scorching *lū* winds. Likewise, during the monsoon season, it offers a sense of stability. Despite the extensive exposition of the plant's usefulness, the poet has still not exhausted all possibilities. For instance, one could have attributed to the winter season the plant's resistance to frost. And even this is likely not the end of the list of its beneficial properties, as contemporary pharmacognostic exploration of *Calligonum polygonoides* in pharmaceutical research unveils promising prospects (Megwal et al. 2024: 165).

Conclusion

It is difficult to agree with Rām Candra Borā's assertion that in the post-independence period there "is not time for poetry in Rajasthan," and that, with the exhaustion of the bardic temperament, contemporary elder poets are fading away and appear to have lost their very *élan* (2001: 6–7). The poem *Phog ikīsī* discussed here serves as a compelling example of how this form of poetry based on the use of Dingal and exploiting early modern metres, has continued to evolve also in the 21st century, skilfully combining both traditional and contemporary elements.

The attempt to apply a "thick description" approach to literary analysis enabled a deeper excavation of the cultural substratum from which Girdhardān Ratnū's *Phog ikīsī* emerges. It is precisely for this reason that an otherwise ordinary desert shrub becomes extraordinary, as it serves as a synonym of Rajasthani identity. I may venture a literary parallel here: in this context, the *phog* holds for Rajasthan a significance comparable to that of the *cinār* tree (*Platanus orientalis*) for Kashmir—both deeply embedded in and celebrated by their respective literatures.[16]

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