Jhāṛū Kathā
Broom Stories
Over the years he interacted with a wide spectrum of communities living in the desert, observing their cultural practices and listening to their music and stories. In the process, he became something of a ‘living archive’ - not an academic scholar, but a contemporary seer whose knowledge was shared through epic conversations which could extend for hours on end.¹

For Kothari, the resources of the ‘folk’ were intrinsically contemporary, deeply linked to some of the most critical issues of our times - political, social, economic, and ecological. Whether it concerned traditional water-harvesting systems or indigenous modes of agriculture or irrigation, he was able to recognize the value of traditional knowledge and its possibilities of re-invention in our times. The ‘folk’ for him was never stuck in the past: it was very much part of our turbulent present.

Significantly, towards the end of his life, when he envisioned the formation of Arna-Jharna: The Desert Museum of Rajasthan (www.arnajharna.org), he was clear that this museum, a unit of Rupayan Sansthan, had to begin with the broom. For him, the broom was not just an object or tool, but a repository of relationships.

It is these relationships that Jhāṛū-Kathā documents in its representation of broom-makers, traders, municipal sweepers, scavengers and street vendors - those marginalized communities, whose voices are rarely heard in public discourse, and from whom there is much to learn. Their stories form the very structure and narrative of the film.

One could argue that the broom is the very quintessence of the ordinary. It is what one takes for granted in the cultures of everyday life. Lurking in corners, tucked away under the bed, it is an invisible presence. In its absence, the world would be less ordered, more chaotic. The broom brings us back to earth, to reality, to the daily labor that goes into the task of living.

Jhāṛū-Kathā is an attempt to call attention to the broom’s everyday significance. It does this through visual evidence of how the broom is used in diverse spaces, in rooms and shrines, in courtyards, in the workshops of makeshift broom factories, and in the rough terrain of streets. For each space, a separate broom, with a specific material, size, design, and function.

In addition to the kinetics of the broom, where the body of the user is inextricably linked to the movement of the broom at gestural and rhythmic levels, Jhāṛū-Kathā prioritizes the voices of all those multiple agents involved in the production, use, trade, and even worship of the broom. It is their stories that form the basic script of the film, which resolutely avoids any voice-over or commentary in the tradition of many grassroot documentary films made today. However, even as there was no predetermined script for Jhāṛū-Kathā, there were motifs that contributed to the editing and sequence
of events represented in the film. With Jodhpur serving as the hub of the film, the camera wanders into remote corners of rural Rajasthan, drawing on different stories, and then returns to the by-lanes and inner city of Jodhpur towards the end of the film. Neither a travelogue nor a documentation of a particular city, Jhārū-Kathā is structured around a grid of motifs:

- the raw materials used for brooms - grass (panni), date-palm (khejur), bamboo (baans), among other indigenous shrubs and grasses;
- the beliefs, customs and superstitions associated with the broom primarily among women in rural areas;
- the dimensions of caste relating to different groups of broom-makers, and the complications resulting from the politics of reservations;
- shamanic practices relating to the syncretic worship of the broom, and its use in brushing away evil forces and skin-related diseases;
- the huge business generated around the broom trade, and its monopoly by a few trading families;
- the urban squalor and realities of waste and plastic faced by municipal sweepers and superintendents of dumping sites.

All these motifs come alive in the film through stories shared by diverse individuals interviewed in the film. Despite their often desperate economic situations, their voices come through loud and clear in a range of registers - devotional, irreverent, critical, abusive, communal, argumentative, and invariably, down-to-earth and matter-of-fact. They provide precisely the kind of evidence at ground levels that Komal Kothari valued in his search for people's knowledge.
Inevitably, within the specific language of documentary cinema, the orality of Jhārū-Kathā registers with a different immediacy from the narrative of a book. Here the details of everyday life and the misgivings and tensions across communities are captured with a combination of surprise, cunning and risk. Making the film was a learning process in its own right, whereby the earlier research leading to the film was constantly questioned and challenged by the immediacies of the here and now.

Contradictions

The world of the broom is not fixed. Rather, it is constantly changing, dealing with all kinds of crises. Even as its life appears to be threatened, it remains robust and resilient. This is one of the primary contradictions of the broom.

The other contradiction can be linked to the very ontology of the broom: While the broom brushes away dirt and dust in its search for cleanliness, it can also be regarded as the very essence of filth and pollution. In this regard, the broom can be regarded as auspicious, the embodiment of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, but it can also be demeaned in the larger context of untouchability. For whom is the broom a source of auspicious energy, and for whom is it the very symbol of dehumanization?

Jhārū-Kathā is keenly aware that the broom has multiple and conflicting significances to different sectors of the population. Hence, it prioritizes a counterpoint of voices, rather than an elaboration of one 'broom story' embedded within a particular context.

Survival

Despite its contradictions, the broom remains the only source of livelihood for thousands of broom-making families, who belong to one of the most economically vulnerable and deeply neglected sectors of Indian labour. This is a reality that cannot be forgotten even as some broom-makers supplement their living by working as daily laborers in construction sites or through other temporary jobs. While some broom-makers sustain their precarious lives by holding on to their traditional materials, techniques and practices, others are more pragmatic in their search for alternatives.

For instance, ever since they faced difficulties in accessing the raw material of khejur (date-palm), some broom-makers from the Bargunda community have switched to the more commercially viable phul-jhadu, the material of which is imported from the North Eastern states of India, primarily from Meghalaya. Another less lucrative option has been the experimentation with the plastic broom, despite its limited demand outside the metropolis. Plastic is not the ideal
material for absorbing dust, though new technologies could make a difference in the future.

In such a changing scenario, the traditions of broom-making are becoming steadily demystified and linked to new strategies of survival, with all the inevitable conflicts as communities encroach on each other's territories. For instance, as Jhārū-Kathā shows vividly, there are growing tensions between the downtrodden Bagaria community and the more entrepreneurial Bargunda community, who are competing over the availability of khejur in the forest.

Caste

These material and economic tensions are intensified by the deeply embedded contexts of caste to which all broom-makers are linked at complex levels. Each of the broom-making communities highlighted in Jhārū-Kathā - Banjara, Bagaria, Bargunda/Koli, Harijan - have specific constituencies in the larger broom economy controlled by a small coterie of Bania traders.

Earlier there were clear correspondences between these communities and their use of specific materials: the erstwhile nomadic Banjara community in Jodhpur was associated primarily with brooms made out of different grasses; the migrant Bargunda community (also known as Koli and Verma in their relocations) produced brooms made out of date-palm; and the Harijan community (self-identified as Harijan, and not dalit, in the Rajasthani context) had an exclusive control over brooms made out of bamboo, a tradition which continues to this day.

Almost all these relations between caste and broom production have been complicated over time with the dearth of traditional materials and the demand for new products in the market. The dimensions of caste are further complicated through the politics of reservations. Tellingly, there is no direct correspondence between levels of income
and caste status, both inherited and designated by the State. Some of the broom-makers featured in Jhārū-Kathā, notably the Bagaria, who are the most economically downtrodden community represented in the film, are from the Other Backward Caste (OBC) group, which is higher in the caste hierarchy than the more prosperous Harijan broom-making community, which nonetheless continues to suffer the stigma of untouchability. This stigma is inextricably linked to their 'right' not only to make brooms, but to use brooms in their professional capacity as municipal sweepers. Tellingly, while other broom-making communities may be poorer than the Harijans, they would not choose to be sweepers.

Inevitably, the broom stories of Jhārū-Kathā are also stories of pain and humiliation linked to caste, and, more specifically, to the confusions arising from the actual implementation of reservations at ground levels.

In this regard, the film provides concrete evidence that while low-caste groups are keenly aware of the social and economic opportunities available through reservations, these opportunities are constantly short-circuited by bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of unity among the communities themselves. Indeed, some of the broom-makers interviewed in the film are as scathing about the apathy and ignorance of their own communities as they are of the greed and corruption represented by the agencies of the State.

**Urban squalor and waste**

The realities of caste become more vivid and harsh in the documentation of the lives of municipal sweepers, manhole-cleaners, and superintendents of waste dumps. Almost without exception, these individuals represent themselves as ‘Harijan’ – a politically incorrect category within the larger *dalitization* of Indian politics. However, what needs to be emphasized is that the Dalit movement in other parts of India has yet to challenge the predominantly feudal caste structure of Rajasthan. While Jhārū-Kathā does not attempt to impose a *dalit* viewpoint on those who identify themselves as ‘Harijan’, it takes pains to record how people from these most humiliated sectors in the caste hierarchy voice their grievances and shame. The articulation of their condition provides a critical ground of *how things are* and *why they need to change*.

Inevitably, as the last part of the film concentrates on the urban squalor of the inner streets and by-lanes of Jodhpur, there is a strategic, yet inevitable, shift from the uses of the broom to the larger, more oppressive reality of waste. This is not just the material waste of everyday life including the detritus of vegetables, food, and the toxic accumulation of non-biodegradable plastic, but the human waste that is most movingly and disturbingly embodied in scavengers and manhole cleaners who toil in drains and manholes.

For these workers, there is no broom that can effectively remove the dirt: it is their very hands that serve as brooms, indicating the depths of degradation and humiliation that continue to exist in an ostensibly Shining India, whose technological expertise has yet to confront the
basic logistics of waste management.  

*Jhārū-Kathā* ends its journey in the largest waste dump of Jodhpur city in Keri. Here, surrounded by mounds of junk and putrefying plastic, which serves as food for emaciated cows, the film draws its last story from a quiet and dignified superintendent, who casually mentions Gandhi in the course of his conversation.

It seems that the Father of the Nation had once said that if everybody could take care of his or her garbage, there would be no accumulation of waste. We would all be responsible for our own waste. Sadly, this is not the case in contemporary India, where the removal of dirt still continues to be relegated to and equated with the most downtrodden groups in our society. This is the oppressively familiar reality that continues to elude the attention of most citizens, in addition to the agencies of civil society and the State.

Hopefully, in its limited way, the documentation of broom stories in *Jhārū-Kathā* will stimulate this much-needed critical attention in the wider public. Through their interweaving of ecology, livelihood, exploitation, and survival, these stories could also contribute towards a more robust dialogue in addressing the condition of broom-makers, sweepers and garbage collectors in India today. This dialogue is the first step in arriving at solutions for which we are all responsible as citizens.

In the interim, the broom shows no signs of dying. Its life continues to draw on a dynamic national market and the basic need to sustain the cultures of everyday life with an illusion of order and cleanliness. Through its sheer resilience, the broom continues to challenge the deepest assumptions of what it means to be human.

Rustom Bharucha
CREDITS

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People interviewed in the film:
Mohamad Ayub Gohri - Dher Baba Pir shrine, Barmer
Navli Chaudhary - Lolawas, Barmer district
Surti Bishnoi - Kancheli, Jalore district
Natharam Meghwal - Kalindri, Sirohi district
Lakhmi Rebari - Ranela, Sirohi district
Lakshmi, Ratni, Onkar Lal, Amarchand (Bagaria family) - Mangrope, Bhilwara district.
Kaluram Jaganath Bargunda - Mandal, Bhilwara district
Bhil Bhopa - Sadri, Pali district
Shiv Bhagwan Modi - Broom trader, Jodhpur
Rahul Jain - Broom trader, Kota
Gopal Banjara and family - Jodhpur
Madan Lal (Bargunda) - Jodhpur

Durga Devi - Salwa Kalan, Jodhpur district
Durga Bai, Pappu Devi - Jodhpur
Govind Solanki - Ghantaghar, Jodhpur
Rajendra - Jodhpur
Amar Jawda - Keru dumping site, Jodhpur
Raju - Jodhpur

Musicians: Rukma Bai (dhol), Chanan Khan (kamaicha), Bhungar Khan (kamaicha), Anwar Khan (kamaicha), Kutla Khan (dholak)
Captions of photographs:

Cover & back: Broom shop, Ghaans Mandi, Jodhpur.
1. Gopal Banjara and family, Banjara Colony, Badwasia, Jodhpur.
2. Komal Kothari
4. Bagaria family collecting khejur leaves from jungle, village Mangrope, Mandalgarh, Bhilwara district.
5. Brooms with colourful plastic handles.
7. Onkarlal Bagaria (right), village Mangrope, Mandalgarh, Bhilwara district.
8. Manganiar woman offering broom at Dher Baba Pir shrine, Barmer.
10. Municipality sweeper women dumping garbage at Ghantagarh, Jodhpur.
11. Pappu Devi and fellow sweeper women cleaning the streets of Cycle Bazaar, Mertya Gate, Jodhpur.
12. Bargunda woman making khejur brooms, Mandalgarh, Bhilwara district.
13. Bagaria family making khejur brooms, village Mangrope, Mandalgarh, Bhilwara district.
17. Interviewing Lakhmi Rebari, Ranela, Sirohi district.
18. Navroze Contractor with Bargunda children watching the playback, Mandalgarh, Bhilwara district.

Cover photograph: Navroze Contractor. Photograph of Komal Kothari: Daniel Neuman. All other photographs by Madan Meena.