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Rationed Attribution: Tellers, Authorship, and the Public Discourse around Vijaydan Detha's *Batan ri Phulwari*

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Abstract:
Vijaydan Detha (1926-2013) built the fourteen volumes of *Batan ri Phulwari* from folktales he heard in and around his village in western Rajasthan. Critics have read the women in these tales closely, and his translator Christi Merrill has shown that his authorship was plural. Less attention has been paid to how the people who told him the stories are credited once the tales circulate in public. This paper examines nineteen public sources on Detha's work: archival records, the founding institution's own accounts, publishers' descriptions, translators' interviews, reviews and criticism. Drawing on Gérard Genette's account of the paratext and on Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs's account of entextualisation, it records how each source refers to the tellers: by personal name, by role or relationship, as a community, under a general label, or not at all. It proposes the term *rationed attribution* for the uneven spread of identifying detail across these sources, without assuming that the unevenness is deliberate. In the sources examined, Detha is consistently named as author and often as a storyteller. The one source-teller named in person is a man. No female source-teller is identified by an individual name; women appear through relational descriptions such as "aunts" and through collective or general labels such as "rural women", "village women" and references to Meghwal communities. Read alongside Komal Kothari's account of Rajasthani narrators, and alongside Detha's own contested claim to be a writer, the pattern suggests that literary authorship and the recognition of oral tellers sit at different levels of detail rather than in competition. The paper closes by setting out what a study of the books' own prefaces and notes would still need to test.

Keywords: Vijaydan Detha; *Batan ri Phulwari*; pretext; entextualisation; attribution; oral narrative; women storytellers; translation; Rajasthani literature

1. Introduction

Vijaydan Detha is one of the best-known writers in Rajasthani. From the late 1950s, he listened to stories told in and around Borunda, his village in the Marwar region of western Rajasthan, and rewrote them as literary tales. The fourteen volumes of *Batan ri Phulwari* (Garden of Tales) are the main result. With the folklorist Komal Kothari, he also founded Rupayan Sansthan, an institute that documented the region's oral traditions. Detha's tales reached a wider public through translation and through films such as Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* (1973) and Amol Palekar's *Paheli* (2005).

The tales therefore had tellers before they had an author. This article asks how those tellers are acknowledged in what is publicly said about Detha's work. A small example shows what is at stake.

Published accounts of *Timeless Tales from Marwar* (2020), Vishes Kothari's English selection from *Batan ri Phulwari*, describe the stories as opening with remarks by Detha about their origins. In the remark that reviewers quote most often, Detha credits his literary education to "rural women" (qtd. in "Ageless Stories"). The women are thanked. They appear as a group, inside the author's memory, at the start of a book that carries his name.

The central question of the article follows from this. Across institutional records, scholarly translation and children's publishing, how is credit for these tales shared out among Detha, individual tellers and the communities the tales came from, and what does that sharing mean for who is publicly recognised as a storyteller? Two narrower questions guide the analysis. The first asks in what forms tellers are referred to: by name, by role or relationship, as a community, under a general label, or not at all. The second asks how each kind of source places Detha's authorship in relation to the oral traditions his work draws on.

The argument is that the public discourse around Detha does not simply erase his tellers. It gives them different degrees of visibility. Detha's identity as a writer, the collective recognition of oral tradition and the identification of particular narrators appear at different levels of detail in different places. The article calls this uneven pattern *rationed attribution* and defines the term in Section 3. The term describes an outcome. It does not assume that anyone set out to withhold credit.

Two limits frame the study. The first concerns Detha. His claim to be a writer, rather than a compiler of folktales, was disputed in Rajasthani literary circles, and the creative work he did on the tales was substantial. This article does not question his recognition; it asks how that recognition sits beside the recognition of others. The second concerns evidence. The study reads public discourse about the books: catalogue records, institutional accounts, publishers' descriptions, interviews, reviews and criticism. It does not read the Rajasthani volumes or the prefaces and notes inside the translated editions. Where it mentions such material, it does so only as other sources report it.

Section 2 reviews earlier scholarship and states the gap this article addresses. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the setting in which the tales were collected. Section 5 explains how the sources were chosen and read. Sections 6, 7 and 8 present the findings for three kinds of sources, and Section 9 draws them together.

2. What Has Been Said about Detha and His Tellers

This review covers English-language scholarship. Hindi and Rajasthani criticism, including Pappu Ram Meena's doctoral thesis on Detha's fiction and Rajasthani folk life, was not examined in full, so the gap described below is claimed for the English-language discussion only.

Two conversations in that discussion matter here, and they have run largely in parallel.

The first reads the women in Detha's tales as characters. Reena Kumari surveys his translated collections and finds women who are witty, desiring and defiant inside a patriarchal and caste-bound society (31-36). An earlier essay by the present author, written with Soumya Sharma, reads the serpent tales of Volume 10 in a similar way, attending to the women whom the serpent protects, marries or calls his sisters (Sharma and Sharma 196-97). Both studies treat the tales as Detha's texts. Neither asks who told them. That is a legitimate choice for thematic criticism, but it means this line of work has nothing to say about the people behind the stories.

The second conversation deals directly with authorship, orality and translation, and this article builds on it. In a 2004 essay, Merrill follows one tale, "A True Calling", from an oral telling to Detha's Rajasthani and Hindi versions and then to her own English translation. She records that Detha remembered hearing

it from a neighbour, Jatan Singh Rathour, and that Kothari told her he had been present at that telling. She concludes that convention names Detha as the author even though "the creative process itself is decidedly plural", so that he is the author of such stories without being their only writer (What Is a Translator's True Calling?). Her book *Riddles of Belonging* (2009) develops a related idea of translation as "telling in turn", in which a text belongs to many hands. Two reviews of her two-volume translation, *Chouboli and Other Stories* (2010-11), take up the same theme. Nishat Zaidi, drawing on Foucault, argues that moving a tale from speech to writing involves "individualization" (1). Dev N. Pathak notes the translation's attention to "specific tellers and tellings" and its genealogies of each tale, while also praising the tales' respect for "the anonymity of the original authorship".

This body of work establishes two things: Detha's authorship was plural, and his translator tried to trace where his tales came from. The present article accepts both. What these studies do not do is compare how that plurality is *presented* across different kinds of public writing. Nor do they ask whether some tellers are described in more detail than others, or whether the difference follows gender and occupation. Merrill's 2004 essay is itself useful evidence here: the one teller it names is a man.

The gap, then, is narrow. The oral sources of Detha's work have not been ignored. What has not been studied is how credit for the tales is distributed among Detha, particular tellers and source communities across institutional, scholarly and publishing contexts, and the fact that this distribution has a gendered shape.

3. Framework

The framework has three parts. The idea of entextualisation explains how authority over a tale shift when it is written down and circulated. Genette's account of the paratext explains where that shift is shown to readers. A simple typology of attribution lets the shift be described source by source.

3.1 Entextualisation

Bauman and Briggs use the term *entextualisation* for the process by which speech is lifted out of the occasion in which it was performed and made into a text that can travel. Each new setting gives the text a new frame and assigns authority over it anew (59-88). For this study the useful point is simple: between a story told in a Borunda courtyard and a catalogue entry in London, someone is credited at each stage, and the question is who. The concept does not assume that writing a tale down must push its teller aside. Whether it does is a matter for evidence.

3.2 Paratext and public discourse

Genette describes the paratext as the means by which "a text makes a book of itself" and offers itself to readers, a threshold he calls "a zone not just of transition, but of *transaction*" (261). He divides it into the *peritext*, which sits inside the book (title, preface, epigraph, notes), and the *epitext*, which circulates outside it, as in interviews (263-64). He also asks who is speaking. A paratext may come from the author, from the publisher, or from a third party whom the author accepts, such as the writer of a preface (266). Genette separates *official* messages, for which the author or publisher must take responsibility, from *officious* ones, which include "anything the author says through a third person" (268). Finally, he describes a *factual* paratext: facts about a writer, such as a prize or a family background, that shape reading without being printed in the book (265).

Genette is clear that newspaper reviews and word of mouth "do not generally belong to the paratext", which for him depends on the author's intention and responsibility, although he groups them in for practical reasons (262). This article keeps that distinction. Material issued or authorised by the author, publisher or translator is treated as paratext in Genette's sense. Reviews, criticism and archival records are not; they are treated as reception, part of the wider *public discourse* that presents the books to readers. Later work on paratexts has drawn reviews and library catalogues into the same field of study (Smith and Wilson 1-3), and each such source is included here because it presents Detha's books to a public, not because it speaks for Detha.

3.3 Oral thresholds

Genette notes, almost in passing, that not only writing "but also of oral transmission" gives a text a form that can "induce" paratextual effects (263). A told story has its own thresholds. Kothari describes the *hoonkara*, the listener's repeated "yes" that keeps a tale going ("On Folk Narratives" 20), and Pathak observes that Detha's printed tales keep refrains such as *hunkara* and *chogua*. The occasion frames a telling too: a fast, a night-long vigil, an evening's wait. When a tale becomes a book, these thresholds may disappear, survive as a feature of style, or be replaced by printed ones. Where they survive as style, this article asks whose property they become, the teller's or the author's.

3.4 Two cautions

A. K. Ramanujan warns that the search for a fixed original is a habit of print culture: "Any fixity, any reconstructed archetype, is a fiction, a label, a convenience" (8). This article therefore makes no attempt to recover the "real" tellers of particular tales. Komal Kothari's account of Rajasthani narrators, summarised in Section 4, is used in the same spirit. It shows what distinctions *could* be drawn among tellers in this region. It is not evidence of who told Detha any particular story.

3.5 Rationed attribution

The paper uses *rationed attribution* to mean the uneven spread of identifying detail and recognition among the people credited with a body of oral-derived literature, across the public sources that present it. The term does not presume that the unevenness is intended. Table 1 sets out the forms that attribution takes in the sources examined.

Table 1. Forms of attribution

Form	What it does	Example from the sources
Personal name	Names an individual teller	Jatan Singh Rathour, the neighbour from whom Detha heard "A True Calling" (Merrill, "What Is")
Role, relationship or occupation	Identifies a teller by kinship, trade or vocation	"aunts" and "potters" (qtd. in Pathak); a Jain *sadhu* (Kumari 35)
Community	Names a caste, community or defined group	the Mukhbancha Bhats (Deo and Chandra); Meghwal communities (Nair)

Form	What it does	Example from the sources
General label	Uses a broad social description	"rural women"; "fellow villagers"
No attribution	Says nothing about tellers or where tales came from	British Library catalogue fields

These forms are not rungs on a single ladder. A caste name can tell a reader more about a teller's world than a bare personal name would, and a kin term such as "aunt" places a woman in relation to the collector without saying who she was. Each reference is therefore read for three things that are kept apart: how precisely a teller is identified; whether the description carries social information a reader can use; and whether the teller appears as someone who told and shaped the tale, or only as a place it was taken from. The absence of a personal name is not, by itself, treated as erasure. In many oral genres, stories pass on without individual credit, and Section 9 returns to this point.

4. Borunda, Rupayan and Kothari's Account of Rajasthani Narrators

Detha was born in 1926 into a Charan family, a community of hereditary bards and poets. According to his translator Vishes Kothari, he returned to Borunda in 1959 and began collecting stories there ("NAW Interview"; see Note 1). In 1960, he and Komal Kothari founded Rupayan Sansthan in the village ("Life and Works" 11). Tales first published in the institute's journal *Lok Sanskriti* were gathered into the volumes of *Batan ri Phulwari*, issued from the 1960s to the mid-1970s (Zaidi 2). Volume 10, which includes ten tales about serpents and an essay by Kothari, received the first Sahitya Akademi Award given for Rajasthani, in 1974 (British Library, EAP1153/1/4/46). Detha's son and Hindi translator, Kailash Kabir, has described two phases in his father's work: at first Detha wrote the tales up using the Charan bardic manner of telling, and later he began to retell them with a sharper critique of landlords, moneylenders, patriarchs and gods (Deo and Chandra).

Accounts of where the stories came from vary. Detha told Merrill that he had heard them from "aunts and neighbouring potters and peasants and courtly servants, visiting holy men and thieves" (qtd. in Pathak). Journalistic and translators' accounts stress village women, some of them from marginalised communities such as the Meghwals (Nair; Kothari, Vishes, "NAW Interview").

Komal Kothari's essay "On Folk Narratives", published in 2004 and apparently based on a lecture (see Note 2), describes who told stories in the region where Rupayan worked. He distinguishes genealogists, or *bhats*, among them the *mukhavancha* bhats of acrobat communities, who recite origin stories in full evening performances (14-15). He describes professional storytellers who narrate through the night (15), and people who say they know no stories but tell one when an occasion calls for a point to be made (15-16). Women's storytelling, in his account, was itself varied. In the households he observed, mothers were, in his words, "never storytellers", because evening work left them no time; the family's teller was more often a widow who looked after the children (17). Women also told *vrat kathas*, the stories attached to fasting days, and sang narrative ballads at *ratijaga*, the night-long vigils held at births, marriages and deaths (17-19). He adds that women's household tales left the moral unstated, so that children worked out meanings for themselves (17).

These observations come from Rupayan's own fieldwork and should not be taken as a description of storytelling across all of Rajasthan. Their use here is narrower. They show that women's storytelling in this region could be told apart by role, genre and occasion. A public account that reduces Detha's

sources to "rural women" therefore gives a coarser picture than the one available to his closest collaborator. Whether these finer distinctions were known for particular tales is a different question, and this study cannot answer it.

5. How the Sources Were Chosen and Read

The study draws on nineteen publicly available sources that present Detha's tales to readers. They were chosen because they are the sources a reader, student or librarian is most likely to meet: the archival catalogue, the founding institute's own accounts, publishers' and translators' statements, reviews of the two most widely circulated English translations, and the criticism discussed in Section 2. The count refers to sources as units of analysis rather than to separate documents. Where two documents did the same job, they were read together and counted once: the two British Library catalogue records, which share a format, and the two volumes of *Chouboli and Other Stories*, which reviewers discuss as a single translation.

The sources fall into three groups, which correspond to the three findings sections: the archive and the institute; the scholarly translation and its reviewers; and the children's edition with the discussion around it. Criticism is read alongside them for context. Material printed inside the books, such as Merrill's genealogies or the Puffin epigraphs, enters only as other sources describe it, and is identified as such.

Each source was read with the same questions in mind. Who is speaking, when, for which institution and for what readers? How is Detha described: as author, writer, storyteller, collector, compiler, reteller or folklorist? In which of the forms set out in Table 1 do tellers appear? Who is shown hearing, telling, writing, translating or publishing the tales? And does detail present in one source disappear or turn general in another? Table 2 summarises the answers. It is a guide to the close reading that follows, not a statistical sample.

Table 2. How the sources describe Detha and his tellers

Source (date)	Kind of source	How Detha is described	How tellers appear
British Library catalogue records, vols. 8 and 10 (accessed 2026)	Archive	Author of "short stories"	No attribution
Komal Kothari, On Folk Narratives (2004)	Essay by the institute's co-founder	The friend who writes and publishes folktales	None for Detha's collection; roles and communities for the region in general
Mayaram, "On Komal Kothari" (2004)	Memoir in a folklore journal	Writer and "collector of folktales"	None for Detha's sources
Deo and Chandra, *Sahapedia* (n.d.)	Institutional history	"The storyteller"	A community, for a tale outside Detha's volumes; none for his sources
Katha author page	Publisher	Chooser and reteller	General label

Source (date)	Kind of source	How Detha is described	How tellers appear
(n.d.)		of tales	("fellow villagers")
Merrill, *Words Without Borders* (2004)	Translator's essay	Author by convention, though not the only writer	Personal name (Jatan Singh Rathour)
Merrill and Kabir, *Chouboli*, 2 vols. (2010-11), as described by reviewers	Translation	Author	Roles and relationships (aunts, potters, peasants and others); a genealogy for each tale, contents not examined
Zaidi, *H-Asia* review (2012)	Review	"Self-proclaimed folklorist"; author	No teller named
Pathak, *Journal of Folklore Research Reviews* (2012)	Review	Recreator of the storytellers' worldview	Roles quoted from Merrill; no teller named
Merrill, *M-Dash* interview (2017)	Translator's interview	Author ambivalent about authorship	Not discussed in the passages consulted
Nair, *Scroll* (2017)	Journalism	Writer	Community (village women, many from Meghwal communities)
Penguin catalogue description (2020)	Publisher	"One of the foremost storytellers"	No attribution; regional origin only
Vishes Kothari, *GLLI* interview (2020)	Translator's interview	Collector who shaped stories in writing	Community and general labels (women, farmers, bards, minstrels, monks)
Vishes Kothari, *NAW* interview (2020)	Translator's interview	Collector and writer	General label ("primarily from women")
Puffin epigraphs (2020), as described by reviewers	Author's remarks printed in the book	Detha's own voice	General label ("rural women")
Purple Pencil Project review (2020)	Review	Explainer of each tale's origin	No teller named
"Ageless Stories", *Marwar.com* (2024)	Review	Collector and writer	Community and general labels (genealogists, musicians, bards, monks; village

Source (date)	Kind of source	How Detha is described	How tellers appear
			women)
Kumari (2019)	Criticism	Author; the "compiler" debate	General label; one role (a Jain *sadhu*)
Sharma and Sharma (2024)	Criticism	"Compilation"; "Detha's folktales"	No attribution

The design has three limits. The sources were chosen on purpose and are all public, so the findings describe this body of writing rather than everything written about Detha. Material inside the books is known only at second hand. Most importantly, a name missing from a source does not show that the name was known and left out. The analysis can show which forms of attribution appear where, and for whom. It cannot show intention, and where another explanation is available, such as the conventions of a genre, the length of a review or the information a writer had, that explanation is stated.

6. The Archive and the Institution

In the archival and institutional sources, Detha is named as author or storyteller, and the people he heard the tales from are either not mentioned or mentioned only in general terms. The same sources do name tellers when the tale in question lies outside his volumes.

The British Library's catalogue of the Rupayan Sansthan collection describes *Batan ri Phulwari* as "a series of collections of short stories written by Vijaydan Detha", and lists Detha under "Author(s)" and Kothari under "Editor" (EAP1153/1/4/46). The record has no field for oral sources, so in the archive's terms there is no one to name. The catalogue also records an article on snakes by Stith Thompson in Volume 8 (EAP1153/1/4/43). Its presence establishes that comparative motif scholarship formed part of the collection's documented contents, although the catalogue entry alone cannot establish how far this approach shaped the series' editorial practice.

The institute's own accounts divide titles between its two founders. Deo and Chandra open their history of Rupayan by calling them "Komal Kothari, the oral historian, and Vijaydan Detha, the storyteller". Shail Mayaram, in her memoir of Kothari, describes Detha as "the writer, social commentator and collector of folktales" (8). Kothari's own essay is especially revealing because it holds two ways of thinking about a tale side by side. He calls the teller the first question of any study of folk narrative (14). Yet when he explains where Rupayan's stories came from, he says that most of the collections "are from my friend who works, writes and publishes folktales" (16). Katha's author page, for its part, praises Detha's gift for choosing "the most provocative tales he hears from his fellow villagers". The villagers are present, but as a single collective noun.

Genette's idea of the factual paratext helps explain why the title of storyteller attaches so easily to Detha. Facts known about an author shape how a book is read even when they are not printed in it (265), and Detha's birth into the Charan community of bards is such a fact. Zaidi traces his gift to the legacy of his poet grandfather and father (2), and Deo and Chandra credit him with using the Charan manner of telling to keep the tales' performative quality. Orality, framed this way, becomes an inheritance of the author's family. Lineage is recognised when it belongs to the writer. The women of the courtyard have no comparable lineage in the sources examined.

The same sources can be specific about tellers when the tale lies outside Detha's books. The story of Punia, in which a peasant outwits the Sun and the Moon over the harvest and so mocks rulers who claim descent from them, is credited to a named community, the Mukhbancha Bhats, genealogists from acrobat castes (Deo and Chandra; compare Kothari, "On Folk Narratives" 15). Mayaram's own essay on a Mirasi performer, which she dedicates to Kothari, carries its teller's name in its title: "Abdul, the storyteller" (10).

Other explanations for this pattern deserve weight. Catalogue records follow bibliographic conventions in which "author" and "editor" are standard fields, and no catalogue entry can be expected to list sources. Institutional histories are written to honour founders. These conventions account for much of what is observed. They do not change its effect. Across these sources, Detha's tales enter the public record with no teller attached, while a professional male community documented by Kothari's fieldwork can be named. More specific attribution was clearly a known practice at Rupayan; in the sources examined, it is not extended to the tellers of *Batan ri Phulwari*.

7. The Scholarly Translation and Its Reviewers

The writing around Merrill and Kabir's translation contains the most specific attribution in the sources examined. Its reviewers acknowledge that attribution, but they do not pass its details on.

Merrill's 2004 essay is the only source that names one of Detha's tellers: Jatan Singh Rathour, the neighbour from whom Detha remembered hearing "A True Calling". According to the reviewers, her introduction to *Chouboli* records Detha's list of sources, from aunts and potters to holy men and thieves (qtd. in Pathak), and the second volume "charts the genealogies of each tale" (Pathak). Zaidi calls this a "diligently charted genealogy that attempts to give the source of each story retold by Detha" (2). Merrill has said that she would not publish the translations unless she could write a critical introduction ("Translation Talk"). In Genette's terms, the introduction and genealogies are a third-party preface built partly to make the tales' origins visible. What the genealogies record for each tale is beyond the scope of this study.

The two reviews respond to this material differently, and it helps to keep the reviewers' own words apart from the reading offered here. Zaidi opens with Foucault and agrees that writing down oral tales "inevitably involves a process of individualization" (1). She then describes "the obsession with the 'original' author both by Detha and Merrill" as seeming "ironic", since both regard themselves as re-creators rather than transcribers (2). She ends by observing that if Detha is the author of the Rajasthani tales, the English edition "belongs to the two translators" (4). Pathak does not call the effort ironic. He credits Detha with attention to "specific tellers and tellings" and says the tales bridge "anonymous folk and recognizable individual teller". But he also writes that translation brings the question of "who the original tellers of these stories were" to "a creative halt", and he praises the tales' "respect for the anonymity of the original authorship".

Neither reviewer treats the effort to trace sources as illegitimate, and both report that it was made. What changes between the translation and its reviews is the level of detail. Neither review names a single teller, whether from the genealogies or from Merrill's earlier essay. Zaidi's account of ownership moves from Detha to the translators. Pathak settles the question of origins in a valued anonymity. Read together, the reviews give their readers authorship, translation and anonymity, but not names.

Ownership deserves a closer look, because it is where the reviews are most explicit. Zaidi's chain runs from Detha, as author of the Rajasthani tales, to the translators, as owners of the English book. Kothari's

essay on folk copyright poses a question that this chain never reaches: “Who owns folk music?” (“Copyright” 6). His answer was that folk material had long been “treated as ‘anonymous’,” but that “in our times we can carefully identify creative individuals" ("Copyright" 7). He was writing about music and crafts, not tales, so the comparison marks a difference of position rather than a direct rebuttal. One further detail bears on ownership. Zaidi and Kumari describe Kailash Kabir as Detha's Hindi translator (Zaidi 2; Kumari 33); Deo and Chandra identify him as Detha’s son. The translation, in other words, also passed through the author’s family. Whether Merrill’s introduction discusses this is a question for a study of the book itself.

The form of the review offers another explanation. Pathak’s review runs to under 900 words, and a reviewer’s task is to judge a book, not to reproduce its notes. This limits how much can be read into what reviews leave out. It does not change the observation that the most specific attribution anywhere in these sources does not travel into their reception, and that the one source-teller named in person is a man.

8. Children’s Publishing

The sources around *Timeless Tales from Marwar* do not erase the tellers. They divide the work of recognition between different voices. The publisher puts the author in front, the translator puts the oral tradition in front, and in both women appear only as a group.

Penguin's catalogue description, which in Genette’s terms is a message from the publisher, introduces Detha as “one of the foremost storytellers of all time” and presents the book as tales retold in Detha’s own style, drawn from the fables of the Thar region. The tales’ origin is given as a region; no teller or community is mentioned. The translator speaks differently. Asked why he chose the book, Vishes Kothari describes the tales as "the oral traditions of common people-women, farmers, wandering bards and minstrels, monks” (“South Asian Literature”). In another interview, he says Detha collected them from the common people of his village, “primarily from women” (“NAW Interview”). A later review extends the list to caste genealogists and musicians while repeating that most of the tales came from village women (“Ageless Stories”). Within one publishing project, then, an author-centred account and a source-centred account sit side by side.

The translator's description of his own method points the same way. When the eleven-volume Rajasthani dictionary could not help him, Vishes Kothari turned to the people around him, especially older people, whom he treats as a kind of living archive (“NAW Interview”). Ordinary speakers thus contributed to the English text as well, and they too appear only as a category.

Reviewers report that each story opens with a remark by Detha on its origin or on his interest in folktales (“Timeless Tales”, *Purple Pencil Project*). Genette’s distinction between official and officious messages helps describe what this arrangement does. Reminiscences of this kind begin as officious remarks, things an author says rather than publishes; printed at the head of each tale, they become part of the book’s official frame. The women enter the book through Detha’s voice and as a collective. They are acknowledged as his teachers. In the sources examined for this edition, no tale is credited to a particular teller or to a teller in a particular role, and no woman is named.

The edition’s title adds a further element. Kothari linked women’s storytelling to ritual time: to the fasting days on which *vrat kathas* are told and to the vigils held at birth, marriage and death (“On Folk Narratives” 17-18). The book promises tales that are *timeless*. The word is a common publisher's term and should not be over-read. It does, however, name the result of entextualisation in Bauman and

Briggs's sense. The stories are offered free of the occasions that, in Kothari's account, made some of them women's tales.

The publishers' wording also reaches literary criticism. Kumari's account of Detha's "flair for picking the most startling tales he hears from his fellow villagers" (32) closely follows Katha's description, and her paragraph on *Timeless Tales* follows Penguin's, down to its list of witches, *thakars*, *seths* and snakes (33). The point is not to fault an individual critic. It is that a publisher's general labels can pass into scholarship without being marked, and carry their level of attribution with them.

Other explanations apply here too. Children's publishing favours a single, recognisable author and a timeless register. A catalogue description is short. The translator, working from Detha's printed text, may have had no more specific information to give. All of this is consistent with the pattern observed. The evidence cannot show that the market or the genre causes the pattern, and that idea is offered as a possibility for further study rather than as a finding.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

Every form of attribution in Table 1 appears somewhere in these sources, but not for everyone. The one source-teller named in person is a man, Jatan Singh Rathour. Attribution by role or relationship appears in Detha's list of sources for Merrill, which places "aunts" beside potters, peasants, servants, holy men and thieves, and in the Jain *sadhu* from whom, Kumari reports, Detha took "Two Lives" (35). Communities are named for professional genealogists documented outside Detha's volumes, in a translator's list of common people, and in a journalist's reference to village women from Meghwal communities, the most socially specific description of women anywhere in the sources. General labels such as "rural women" and "fellow villagers", and the complete absence of attribution, account for the rest.

The answer to the first question is therefore clear within the sources examined. No female source-teller is identified by an individual name. Women appear through relational descriptions such as "aunts" and through collective or general labels such as "rural women", "village women" and references to Meghwal communities. This uneven pattern is what the article calls rationed attribution.

Two explanations have to be held together. The first comes from the oral tradition itself. Kothari's account suggests that some of the genres women used carried no claim to individual authorship: widows told stories they had heard within their families, and *vrat kathas* were retold every year (17-18). Collective anonymity may partly reflect how these tales lived before they were printed, and the absence of women's names is not, on its own, evidence that they were excluded. The second explanation comes from print. The same public discourse that leaves women as a group readily gives individual titles to Detha and, on occasion, to male tellers and specialist communities. Whatever the oral conventions, in these sources individual recognition is shared out unevenly, along lines of gender and occupation.

The second question concerned Detha's own position, and here the evidence does not support a reading in which his authorship takes what belongs to his tellers. The sources describe him in at least seven ways: author, writer, storyteller, collector, compiler, folklorist and recreator of tales. These labels were disputed in his lifetime. Kumari quotes Vijaymohan Singh's preface, in which Detha recalls that "many writers in Rajasthan did not consider me as a writer at all" (36-37), and Merrill speaks of his ambivalence about authorship ("Translation Talk"). His standing as a writer was won against the charge of mere compilation, and the creative work it names is real. The findings suggest that Detha's literary authorship and the recognition of his tellers operate at different levels of detail rather than in

competition. Nothing in the sources suggests that fuller credit for the tellers would reduce his. Merrill's 2004 essay names a teller and affirms Detha's authorship in the same pages.

The present author's earlier essay on the serpent tales belongs to the pattern described here. It shows how easily a thematic reading of women as characters can proceed without asking who told the stories.

The study establishes a pattern of representation in a defined set of public sources. It does not establish intent, and it does not show that genre or market conditions cause the pattern; those remain possibilities. Three kinds of further work could test and extend the findings. A study of the books themselves, including Kothari's essay in Volume 10 and Merrill's genealogies, would show whether the same distribution holds inside them. A review of Hindi and Rajasthani criticism would show whether the gap identified in Section 2 holds beyond English-language scholarship. And Rupayan Sansthan's audio archive, built alongside Detha's volumes, may hold recordings of some of these tales in the voices of the people who told them.

Ramanujan opens "Who Needs Folklore?" with a parable. An old woman searches for her lost keys under a street lamp, though she lost them inside her house, because it is dark in there (3). Scholarship on India, he suggests, has long looked where the light is. The public discourse on *Batan ri Phulwari* has turned its light on the author, which is reasonable and, in many ways, deserved. The tellers remain, for the most part, inside the house.

Ramanujan ends the same lecture by suggesting that, if we listen, folk narrative carries the voice of "the woman, the peasant, the nonliterate" (13). Detha's tales are full of such voices, and much of their reputation rests on the women they portray. In the sources examined here, the women who contributed to these storytelling traditions are acknowledged, but none is individually named as a source-teller.

Notes

1. Accounts differ on when Detha returned to Borunda. Vishes Kothari gives 1959; Zaidi says only that he returned after a few years in Jodhpur (2). The founding of Rupayan Sansthan is dated to 1960 in the National Folklore Support Centre's profile of Kothari ("Life and Works" 11) and to 1960-65 by Deo and Chandra.
2. Kothari's "On Folk Narratives" refers to an earlier lecture in the same series by Henry Glassie, which suggests that it is a transcribed talk. It is cited here in its published form.
3. The title of Detha's series is spelled in several ways (*Batan*, *Bataan*, *Baatan* or *Bata*; *Phulwari*, *Fulwari* or *Phulwadi*). This article uses *Batan ri Phulwari* except in quotations and titles. Most sources give fourteen volumes. The British Library record attributes the 1974 Sahitya Akademi Award to Volume 10, while some secondary accounts attribute it to the series as a whole; the archival record is followed here.
4. *Chouboli and Other Stories* was published by Katha in New Delhi in 2010 and by Fordham University Press in 2011. Zaidi reviews the second volume of the Katha edition; Pathak reviews the Fordham edition.
5. Pathak's review is published online without page numbers.
6. All web sources were consulted on 11 October 2026. Catalogue descriptions and author pages change over time, so later readers may find different wording.
7. Kothari's essay on copyright concerns folk music and crafts. It is cited only for his general position on anonymity and attribution in folk forms.

8. Kailash Kabir's name is also spelled Kabeer, for example by Deo and Chandra. Each source's spelling is kept in quotations; the article otherwise uses Kabir.

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