

## Preserving the 'Fine Village': The Commodification of Rajasthani Folk Performance at Chokhi Dhani



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Abstract:

Billed as a “tasteful and authentic symbol of ethnic village life,” Chokhi Dhani or “Fine Village,” opened in Jaipur in 1989 as a theme restaurant celebrating traditional Rajasthani cuisine, and has expanded to include a huge 22-acre resort and event park in its original location, as well as numerous other resorts across the country. Chokhi Dhani’s founder, Gul Vaswani, started the enterprise with the intent of preserving and celebrating Rajasthani folk culture in a tourist-friendly environment. The rapid transition of the Indian economy into a competitive global presence has led to an increase in attractions like Chokhi Dhani; contained, imagined spaces of a shared cultural past. But where do the performers fit within these freshly drawn “historical” communities? Seeking a more nuanced understanding of the Rajasthani folk performer’s identity in the context of cultural tourism in India, 21 interviews were collected, involving roughly 40 participants. These interviews were analyzed in concert with ethnographic field notes to paint a portrait of the current state of folk performance in Jaipur and perhaps also in India as a whole. While it is evident that folk performers rely heavily on the tourism industry to support the continuation of their craft, the future of their art forms deviate in relation to what the art form entails, forming a dichotomy along the lines of two types of performances: storytellers, and dancers/musicians. A particularly striking example of this was found in the stories told by kathputli walas, or Indian puppeteers. Also called into question is the idea that folk performance had a “pure” form pre-tourism, like the authenticity performed by Chokhi Dhani’s careful representation of village life. Rather, the identity of Rajasthani folk performers evolves with the perceptions of what is authentic, placing them in a liminal space between “authentic” representations of the past and the present in which they very passionately practice their art.

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