

Name of the Element: Chaar Bayt: A Muslim tradition in lyrical oral poetry, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, India

Community/ies: Chaar Bayt is performed by the members of the Muslim communities of Tonk in the State of Rajasthan, Bhopal in the State of Madhya Pradesh, and Rampur, Chandpur, Malihabad and Amroha districts in the State of Uttar Pradesh. Many of the Chaar Bayt singers draw their lineage from the Afghans who came to India in the 18th century.

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Brief Description: Chaar Bayt are a four line sequence of verses sung to the beat of the "duff" (a percussion instrument) It is performed in States of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. It is believed that Chaar Bayt originated from an Arab poetic form called Rajeez and its origin can be traced back to the 7th century. These songs were sung by the soldiers. In the war camps they would sing songs in the evenings to instill valour and courage in their ranks. Songs at a high pitch with fast beats. These songs later travelled eastwards along with the soldiers to Persia and Afghanistan, where they came to be sung in the local language. In 18th century India, many states had their private armies, which recruited Pathan and Afghani soldiers. These soldiers brought along with them the tradition of Chaar Bayt, which is still alive. A Chaar Bayt troupe is referred to as an 'akhara' (arena) which is headed by an 'ustad' (teacher/guru). The groups sing in the evenings, and compete with each other in a didactic style of question and answer. Often the poet sits with the group and writes new verses on the spot. The highly involved and deeply participatory performances would go on till late in the night. The singers of Chaar Bayt are generally unlettered people from economically weak backgrounds.