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Introduction

What will you do with a mare? You should just live off your land. But now that you have the mare, it looks like you will raid and plunder.[1]

The Thar Desert in South Asia is at present divided by an international boundary between India and Pakistan. However, the Thar has historically existed as a frontier connecting regions like Punjab, Multan, Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan with each other. The Thar desert can be defined as a region through the mobility of its inhabitants, who were warriors, pastoralists, traders, ascetics and bards, often in overlapping capacities, exchanging mobile wealth and equally mobile narratives.[2] The historical understanding of the Thar Desert, like that of other such spaces, is couched in familiar frames of barrenness and waste. Yet, a closer look at the Thar Desert reveals a rich history of movements of a large number of itinerant groups, of settlements and depopulations, as well as of a cultural milieu where memories of movements have been immortalized in the rich folkloric traditions of the region.

[1] Badri Prasad Sakaria, (Ed.) *Nainsi Ri Khyat,* Vol III, Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur, 1962, (Reprint 1993), 63, *Vat Pabu ji ri.* In the epic of Pabuji when he acquires a mare coveted by all other Rajputs around him, his sister-in-law chides him fearing that now he would engage in raiding and pillage.

[2] I carry the argument forward from Jos Gommans' idea of frontiers in South Asia. Jos Gommans, 'The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c AD 1100–1800', *JWH,* Vol 9, No 1, 1998, 1–23.

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A wide corpus of historical research on the Thar focuses on 'Rajputana' as the physical and intellectual area of study.[3] The former refers to definitive political spaces divided by fixed boundaries and ruled by Rajput clans. The latter alludes to Rajputs as the pre-dominant reference to its socio-historical identity as well as, to a misplaced emphasis on land, agrarianism and territoriality as the basis of social and political relations in the region. Both identifications are misplaced and highly problematic. The arid desert of the Thar has historically existed as a frontier region that could be defined better through the mobility of its peripatetic residents than through the political boundaries that divided it. The recurrent patterns of circulation of people, resources and lore united the Thar as a region encompassing several political states with shared histories of mobility. From the sixteenth century onwards, the overarching endogamous category of 'Rajput' increasingly focused on land and territoriality as means for extending control. Bardic traditions patronized by Rajputs reiterated protection of land and forts, particularly against Muslim invaders, as being central to 'Rajput ethos'.[4] Poetic and prose compositions like *Raso, Vachanika, Khyat, Vat* etc focused on bravery as well as generosity as attributes of Rajputs. In the writing of later histories of Rajasthan, these were read and interpreted as accounts of heroic Rajput struggles against expanding Muslim polities. The idea of a Rajput struggle against Muslim invaders became the axis around which histories of Rajasthan like G H Ojha's volumes of *Rajputane ka Itihas* and Dasratha Sharma's *Rajasthan through the Ages* were written. As Ramya Sreenivsan argues, selective appropriations from earlier traditions like *Padmavat* became instrumental in "reformulation of new national identities along tacitly communal lines".[5]

By the nineteenth century, the Thar was primarily identified as 'Rajputana', an assortment of princely states ruled by the Rajputs. James Tod viewed Rajput

[3] I would like to mention G H Ojha's *Rajputane Ka Itihas* (1927), J S Gehlot, *History of Rajputana* (1937), V N Reu, *Glories of Marwar and the Glorious Rathors* (1943), J N Asopa, *Origin of Rajputs*, Dasratha Sharma, *Rajasthan through the Ages* (1966) and Shiv Dutt Dan Barhat, *Jodhpur Rajya ka Itihas, 1753–1800* (1991) as representatives of this idea over a long period of time.

[4] Texts like *Gora Badal Padmini Chaupai, Kanhadde Prabandh, Hammir Mahakavya, Achaldas Khichi ri Vachanika* can be seen as examples of texts that focus on narratives of protection of forts against Muslim invasions.

[5] Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India, 1500–1900*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007, 14.

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ethos as central to the polity and culture of the Rajput kingdoms and thereby of Rajputana in the nineteenth century, literally the land of the Rajputs. He saw 'Rajast'han' as "the collective and classical denomination of that portion of India which is 'the abode of (Rajpoot) princes'. In the common dialect it is termed as Rajwarra, but by the more refined Raéthana, corrupted to Rajpootana, the common designation amongst the British to denote the Rajpoot principalities".[6] Jason Freitag points out that between 1872 and 1998, Tod's *Annals* have been translated into five major Indian languages that is Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Marathi and Bengali, signalling an Indian appropriation of British valourization of Rajputs.[7] First to use the word 'Rajast'han', Tod became instrumental in defining both Rajputs and their land.

On March 25, 1948, after bitter negotiations between the Rajput states, the formation of the state of Rajasthan was announced, though it would take another eight years for the state to take its present form.[8] After the end of princely rule, there appears to be an increasing awareness of common heritage based on Rajasthan's broader political, historical and cultural traditions among the residents of former princely states.[9] Today this identification is further bolstered by the projection of Rajputs as the proud protectors of this land of shifting sand dunes, *dharati dhoran ri*.[10] The phrase *dharati dhoran ri* rather than allude to dry barren stretches actually refers to an ingrained sense of pride in identification with a land that bred bravery and chivalry in circumstances of adversity.

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[6] James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India*, (Ed.) Douglas Sladen, Rupa and Co., Delhi, 1997, (First Pub. London, 1929), Vol 2, 1. Henceforth, *AAR*.

[7] Jason Freitag, *Serving Empire Serving Nation: James Tod and the Rajputs of Rajasthan*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, 174–179.

[8] The first union of Rajasthan contained nine princely states of Banswara, Bundi, Dungarpur, Jhalawar, Kishangarh, Kota, Pratapgarh, Shahpura and Tonk. The larger states of Jaipur, Mewar, Marwar, Bikaner and Jaisalmer joined over the next two years after considerable persuasion.

[9] Deryck O Lodrick, 'Rajasthan as a Region: Myth or Reality' in *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*, Vol I, Karine Schomer, Joan L Erdman, Deryck O Lodrick and Llyod I Rudolph, (Eds.) Manohar, 2001, 1–35.

[10] Joan L Erdman, 'Becoming Rajasthani: Pluralism and the Production of Dharti Dhoran Ri' in *The Idea of Rajasthan*, I, 45–79. Erdman argues that cultural idioms like *Dharti Dhoran Ri* were used to encapsulate the vitally and conceptually important features of Rajasthan including forts, chronicles of bravery, Padmini, Chetak and Maharana Pratap.

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However, while the awareness of Rajasthan as a region draws heavily on its heroic 'Rajput' past, erstwhile rulers of the princely states, the Rajputs, have increasingly taken a backseat in the contemporary political milieu. With demographic strength and control over land ensuring political control, a number of non-Rajput groups, including lower caste groups have edged Rajputs out of the political arena. As Rajputs increasingly turn to hospitality sector, turning their palaces and *havelis* into heritage hotels, it is other castes like Jats and Gujars that reconstruct heroic pasts for themselves, while increasingly challenging the tribe/caste status ascribed to them.[11] These challenges emanate from an increasing awareness of a past, contested as well as shared with Rajputs. In a state that is suffused with history, with its forts, palaces, temples, water bodies, inscriptions and manuscripts, this increasing awareness relies on oral narratives, the only references to history that these communities have. It is this historical and historiographical lacuna that motivates this work.

This book explores the relationships between mobility, martiality, memory and identity in the frontiers of the Thar Desert, arguing that emergence of social identities was closely entwined with mobility on circulatory networks in the Thar. Exploring multiple narratives of itinerants in the desert, I trace a long history of relationships between martiality and mobility in the Thar. I map out networks of mobility and circulation in the Thar region from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries to demonstrate how these networks were sites of struggle for authority and control. This long period of four hundred years becomes significant given the political shifts that occurred in this region. The early sixteenth century witnessed the rise of Rajput polity, as it contested with several powers along with the emerging Mughals to claim a central position. By late sixteenth century, a major part of the Thar had been incorporated into the Mughal empire and the early nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of indirect rule in Rajput states of the Thar region.

In the following discussion I will take up four distinct strands that connect in the arid frontiers of Thar and allow us to imagine identities differently from what historiography of Thar has permitted us to.

[11] In 2007 Gujars of Rajasthan launched a movement demanding to be placed in the Schedule for Tribes rather than in the Schedule for Other Backward Castes that they were in. While the stir was largely motivated by the politics of reservations, it nevertheless raised important questions about the manner in which tribe/caste identities had been ascribed in the state.

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The Frontiers of Thar

Deserts, like oceans, are frontier zones providing passage to people, commodities and ideas essential for the existence of states. However, much of our understanding of socio-political processes like state formation and emergence of social hierarchies has emerged from core agrarian regions. Deserts and other non-agrarian spaces like oceans, mountains and forests have often been used to engage with ideas like statelessness, the absence of agrarian surplus appearing to signify the absence of state in the most conventional sense. Deserts have been understood as dangerous territories harbouring inhabitants hostile to states. Considering that large parts of the earth are either hot or cold deserts, the representation of such spaces poses a methodological question about the way in which these have been understood.

In recent years understanding of political and ecological frontiers and their relationship with state formation has received considerable attention, particularly in Central and West Asia and North Africa. Sinologist Owen Lattimore suggests frontier represents a paradox between the need for exercise of centralized control as well as the expression of centrifugal forces of separation.[12] Frontiers, while present opportunities of expansion for core agrarian polities, also transform the core by introducing 'unsettled' elements into it. This has been true of frontiers in South Asia, that Jos Gommans views as a "wide, open ended zone which not only favoured circulation of people, animals, goods and ideas but also agricultural expansion".[13] The openness of these frontiers generated social, cultural and political flux, transforming societies with emergence of newer forms of organization and control, with agrarian expansion following tribal conquest in an Ibn Khaldunian cycle. Ernest Gellner suggests, "peripheral areas harbour cohesive participatory, segmentary communities, endowed with great military potential. Thus, they constitute a kind of political womb, a source of new rulers".[14] But what was the nature of these 'new' polities? Were the forms of authority and control exercised by the emerging polities any different from the older?

[12] Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers,* OUP, 1962, www.archives.org/details/ studiesinfrontie017780mbp.

[13] Jos Gommans, 'The Eurasian Frontier after the First Millennium AD : Reflections along the fringe of Time and Space 1', *MHJ,* 1998; 1, 125–143, 142.

[14] Ernest Gellner, 'War and Violence', in *Anthropology and Politics: Revolutions in the Sacred Grove,* Oxford, 1995, 160–179, 164.

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A frontier polity that has been widely studied and has important implications for studying a non-agrarian frontier like the Thar, is the Mongol empire. The Mongol Empire stretching from Central Asia to Poland was a land empire larger than any other in history, and one created by a pastoral nomadic group. However, according to Thomas Barfield, the Mongols were 'tamed' by the very societies they conquered. The accounts of visitors to the courts of the Khans underline the enormous wealth and sophistication that they had accumulated over time and the ferocious means that they employed to maintain their authority intact. Barfield argues that both 'stable sedentary' and 'nomadic political' structures were necessary preconditions for the existence of both, the sedentary Chinese states and the Mongol empires in Central Asia. In Chinese Turkestan, extensive Mongol hordes controlled important trade routes like the silk route while the Manchu state controlled the commodities.[15] In Anatoly Khazanov's framework 'nomadic feudalism' seems to be an appropriate milestone in the journey of nomadic societies towards state formation whereby nomadic societies successfully managed to synthesize tenets of kinship with retainership, thereby reorganizing community forces into a bureaucracy. In the process, newer forms of social organization emerged. Once a pastoral nomadic society evolved beyond clan and lineage-based organization, it was forced to develop elaborate hierarchical structures.[16] Nikolay Kradin explains that the politico-cultural integration of frontier societies can be understood at three levels. The first, of segmentary clan and tribal formations, second, of tribe and chiefdom and the third, of nomadic empires and quasi-nomadic polities of smaller sizes. He explains 'nomadic empires' were "actually 'peripheries' in themselves, organized on the military-hierarchical principle, occupying a quite large space and exploiting the nearby territories, as a rule, by external forms of exploitation (robbery, war and indemnity, extortion of "presents", non-equivalent trade and tribute)".[17] Kradin also claims that the nomadic societies were doomed to remain peripheral, as to become a 'centre' it was necessary to cease to be a nomad. Citing the Mongol example he reiterates the ancient Chinese wisdom, "although you inherited the Chinese Empire on horseback, you cannot rule it from that position".[18] However, in a study of state in nomadic

[15] Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier - Nomadic Empires and China,* Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, vii-ix.

[16] Anatoly Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World,* tr. Julia Crookenden, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1984, 29.

[17] Nikolay N. Kradin, 'Nomadism, Evolution And World-Systems: Pastoral Societies in Theories Of Historical Development', *JWSR*, Viii, 1ii, Fall 2002, 368–388, 373–4.

[18] Ibid., 380.

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inner Asia, David Sneath argues that the "history of region shows no clear dichotomy between highly centralized, stratified 'state' society and egalitarian, kin based 'tribal' society, but rather displays principles of descent deployed as technologies of power in a range of more or less centralized polities, ruling subjects engaged in various kinds of productive practices- pastoral, artisanal, and even agricultural".[19]

All these positions have some relevance to the study of frontier societies in South Asia as well. As Jos Gommans demonstrates, a large part of the Indian subcontinent stretching from Sindh and Rajasthan towards Deccan was arid and semi arid.[20] The Thar Desert, while historically has had a high component of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralist population however differs significantly from both Central Asia and North Africa in the scale of pastoralism practised. While studying frontier regions in India, Andre Wink argues that the lack of sufficient pasture prevented the Indian plains from being occupied and nomadized by Mongols.[21] The development of Indo-Islamic polity took the route of purposeful agrarian-fiscal-military formulation. However, the Thar was a frontier crossed by a large number of "vigorous inhabitants.... in their often overlapping capacities of nomads, warriors and ascetics".[22] As an arid frontier while the Thar Desert connected sedentary centres, its fringes also provided space for settlement as well as mobility. According to Gommans around the first millennium AD, the arid frontiers of South Asia witnessed the emergence of nomadic and semi-nomadic warrior-pastoralist groups exercising control over mobile wealth.[23] The emergence of these warriors, identified under the umbrella category of Rajputs, unsettled older power sharing arrangements, marginalising groups like Bhils, Mers, Minas, Gujars and Jats.

Rajputs in the Frontiers

The question of origin of Rajputs has received considerable attention in the historiography of Rajput kingdoms of the Thar. Summarising some of these

[19] David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia,* Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, 4.

[20] Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500–1700,* Routledge, London, 2002, 11.

[21] Andre Wink, *Al Hind The Making of the Indo Islamic World: The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest,* (Vol II) Brill, Leiden, 1997, 3.

[22] Gommans, 'The Eurasian Frontier', 131.

[23] Ibid., 134.

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positions helps in contextualising Rajput identity in the Thar. Genealogical traditions emerging from Rajput courts as well as the historiography of the Rajputs, link their origins to celestial sources of light, the sun, the moon and the fire, older *kshatriya* clans as well as Vedic Aryans, and Central Asian Scythians.[24] However, as recent work suggests, emergence of Rajputs as landed aristocrats involved the transformation of tribal and nomadic groups into royal lineages. B D Chattopadhyaya's extensive work on emergence of Rajputs in early medieval Rajasthan points towards tribal and nomadic origins of Rajputs. In the initial stages of these transformative processes he views 'Rajput' as a category that was assimilative in nature and could be seen as a recognizable channel of transition from tribal to state polity.[25] Richard Fox in his early study of Rajput kinship structures in northern India identifies 'Rajput' as a 'class' or 'status' category rather than a 'caste'.[26] Norman Zeigler points out that, complex codes of service and kinship structures, as well as marital alliances helped in the formulation of Rajput identity in the Mughal period.[27] D H A Kolff views 'Rajput' as a social category subscribed to by lineages of varied social origins through the practice of *naukari* or military entrepreneurship. He suggests that, however by late sixteenth century, a 'Great Rajput Tradition' representing a genealogical orthodoxy emerged, which focused on ideas of blood purity and linkages with older *kshatriya* traditions. Nevertheless, the peregrinations of adventurous young men with claims to Rajputhood, in the

[24] Detailed genealogies form part of Rajput historical narratives like *Munhata Nainsi ri Khyat*, which traces the origins of various Rajput clans to celestial sources as well as older Kshatriya clans like Gahadwalas. Among colonial and modern histories of Rajputs, while James Tod forwards the Scythian origin theory, Dasaratha Sharma, G N Ojha and J N Asopa's early works focus on celestial origins and older Kshatriya lineages. Dasaratha Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties,* (Second Revised Edition), New Delhi, 1975. J N Asopa, *Origin of the Rajputs,* Bharatiya Vidyapith, New Delhi, 1976. James Tod, *AAR,* I, 49–50, 450, 471.

[25] B D Chattopadhyaya 'Origin of the Rajputs: The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval India' in *The Making of Early Medieval India*, Second Edition OUP, Delhi, 2012, 59–92. A comprehensive review of these processes for Mewar can be seen in Nandini Sinha Kapur, *State Formation in Rajasthan: Mewar during the Seventh-Fifteenth Centuries*, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 2002.

[26] R G Fox, *King, Clan, Raja and Rule: State-Hinterland Relations in Preindustrial India,* University of California Press, 1971, 16–23.

[27] Norman Zeigler, *'Action Power and Service in Rajasthani Culture: A Social History of the Rajputs of Middle Period Rajasthan'*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, Illinois, 1973.

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form of errant migrant soldiers remained in practice even till as late as the nineteenth century.[28] Stewart Gordon views the development of 'Rajput' martial ideology as developing through service to the Mughal Empire, though "hypergamous pattern of Rajput marriage tacitly acknowledged that it was somewhat open caste category".[29]

However, with the coming of the Mughal empire the open category of 'Rajput' was replaced by a 'genealogical orthodoxy' with Mewar as its seat.[30] The resultant overarching endogamous category of 'Rajput' is increasingly understood to have focused on land and territoriality as means for extending control through kin networks. An important part of these traditions were the genealogies, which stressed on direct descent and affinal relationships, contemporaneous to the genealogies that were becoming a part of Mughal identity. Besides, chronicles like the Padmini narratives explored by Ramya Sreenivasan, were instrumental in constituting and preserving glorious pasts of Rajputs, even though as she demonstrates that these narratives also underline the complexities of the Rajput responses to Turkish and Mughal advances.[31] In fact, varied vernacular forms like *kavya* or *masnavi* were used to foreground claims to Rajputhood in the interregnum between the Sultanate and the Mughal Empire.[32] Cynthia Talbot's examination of the Kyamkhani lineage and *Kyamkhan raso* composed in mid seventeenth century illustrates

[28] D H A Kolff, 'The Rajput of pre-Mughal North India', in *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, 2007, 73.

[29] Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas: 1600–1800*, The New Cambridge History of India II.4, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 16.

[30] Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy,* 73.

[31] Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives,* 202. In recent years Sreenivasan's engagement with Rajasthani heroic verse chronicles like *Kanhadde Prabandh* and *Kyamkhan Raso* underlines the complexity of Hindu-Muslim interactions in the Rajput context. She argues that sharper intra-Rajput hierarchies were being articulated through heroic poetry that has prima-facie been read only through the trope of resistance. See, Ramya Sreenivasan, 'The 'Marriage' of 'Hindu' and 'Turak': Medieval Rajput Histories of Jalor', *MHJ*, 7:1, 2004, 87–108. Also, Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Faith and Allegiance in Mughal Era', in *Religious Interactions in Mughal India,* (Eds.) Vasudha Dalmia and Munis Faruqui, OUP, New Delhi, 2014, 157–191.

[32] Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Warrior Tales in Hinterland Courts in North India, *c* 1370–1550' in *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth Century North India,* (Eds.) Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh, OUP, New Delhi, 2014, 111–130. For an illustration of the life of *Purbiya* warlord Silhadi and contestations for Rajputhood, see Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy,* 71–110.

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the ways in which seeking martial pasts and warrior lineages caused no contradiction in belonging both, to the communities of Rajput warriors as well as Muslim gentry, as warriorhood appears to be the common ideal for both identities.[33] In Rajput court chronicles, 'honour' was consciously constituted as a Rajput virtue, which then became the keystone of British construction of Rajput identity in the nineteenth century, as well as the trope through which nationalist imaginations of Rajput response to Muslim invasions were articulated.[34] However, Talbot's recent examination of the Sanskrit poem *Surajanacharita*, about the Rajput warrior Surjana Hada who surrendered the fort of Ranathambhor to Akbar in 1569, shows how the idea of dishonour as associated with defeat, was articulated in multiple ways in the Rajput as well as the Rajput-Mughal worlds.[35] In the same period, a number of elite Rajput lineages displayed increasing devotion towards *vaishanavism,* leading to the establishment of *Vallabha* deities in Rajput capitals. This allowed Rajputs to reinterpret the Rajput concept of *chakri* through the Vaishnava idea of *seva*.[36] Interestingly, while the idea of an honourable 'Rajput' death increasingly disappeared in later Rajput court chronicles, it continued to find space in oral narratives circulating in the Thar.[37] Dying the Rajput way, either in battles or while protecting cattle, continued to remain central to oral narratives like that of Pabuji and Tejaji foregrounding claims to Rajput status if not caste, on behalf of a number of non-Rajput groups.

Another turn in reconstruction of Rajput identity came about in the nineteenth century, when colonial administrators re-imagined the Rajput

[33] Cynthia Talbot, 'Becoming Turk the Rajput Way: Conversion and Identity in an Indian Warrior Narrative', *MAS,* 43, no. 01, 2009, 211–243.

[34] Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives,* 117–200. Also, see Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Honoring the Family: Narratives and Politics of Kinship in Pre-colonial Rajasthan' in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia,* (Ed.) Indrani Chatterjee, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2004, 46–73.

[35] Cynthia Talbot, 'Justifying Defeat : A Rajput Perspective on the Age of Akbar,' *JESHO,* 55, 2012, 329–68.

[36] Norbert Peabody's work on the relationship between the Kota Raos and Vallabha *sampradaya* demonstrates how in the eighteenth century the Rajput notion of *chakri* was decentered in Kota, in particular by Zalim Singh. Norbert Peabody, 'From 'royal service' to 'maternal devotion' during the Jhala Regency: Local politics at the end of the old regime' in *Hindu kingship and polity in precolonial India,* CUP, Cambridge, 2003, 112–147.

[37] Janet Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death: History and Poetry in Medieval Marwar,* Leiden University Press, 2008.

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