1 Introduction

*Colonialism, Orientalism, Nationalism and the Shaping of Popular History and Religion**

Three Moments

An epic encounter took place with a meeting between Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1909. The students of Savarkar (1883–1966) had invited Gandhi for a discussion of the Ramayana on the occasion of Dashehra, the festival commemorating Rama's victory over Ravana. Each interpreted the figure of Rama differently. For Gandhi Rama represented ethical sacrifice, for Savarkar Rama epitomised the warrior ethic; Rama would violently eliminate evil for the cause of the nation.[1]

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[1] *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 37 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India), 53, 97, https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi, accessed 20 September 2020. Dhananjay Keer, a Savarkar biographer, and historian David Hardiman read Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj,* or Indian Home Rule, as a response to Savarkar. Anthony Parel complicates the picture of Gandhi's interlocutors as consisting of his opponents: advocates of a Hindu state and violence (V.D. Savarkar and Shyamji Krishna Varma); Marxists who believe in revolutionary violence (Virendranath Chattopadhyaya who was Sarojini Naidu's brother), Muslim separatists (no names being mentioned) and his supporters (Pranjivan Mehta and Tarak Nath Das). 'Introduction', in *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6n. Vinayak Chaturvedi, 'Rethinking Knowledge with Action: V.D. Savarkar, the Bhagavad Gita, and Histories of Warfare', in *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*, ed. Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji, 155–76 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rochona Majumdar emphasise the confrontation between the satyagrahi

The meaning of this epic encounter has to do with the transformation of the political for over a century and has continued to unravel to date as India grapples with hyper-nationalism that harbours a range of approaches from being majoritarian to being viciously anti-minority. Gandhi undertook one of the great experiments in the possibility of an ethical nationalism, one which could strive to be non-violent and other-oriented, its foundations being truth and inner transformation. Even Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892–1963), who publicly acknowledged his responsibility for the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946, would be transformed by Gandhi's practice. Indeed, the killers of Gandhi had also intended the assassination of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) and Suhrawardy. The only such grand attempt at non-violence preceding Gandhi's was that of Emperor Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE), who renounced war even though he had achieved victory on the battlefield.

In Gandhi's assassination in 1948 two kinds of nationalism confronted each other directly. Savarkar saw Gandhi as destroying any possibility of a grand future vision for an ancient civilisation. He saw non-violence as something that would weaken rather than empower India, and articulated a nationalism based on exclusion. His *Essentials of Hindutva* became a foundational text for the ideology that is often called political Hinduism or Hindu nationalism but is best referred to as Hindutva. Gandhi had hoped to transform his interlocutor and had gone to meet him after his release from the Cellular Jail. Savarkar remained unmoved.[2]

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and the political missionary of the Extremists that was Gandhi's *purvapaksha*. 'Gandhi's Gita and Politics as Such', in *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*, ed. Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji, 66–87 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Dhananjay Keer, *Savarkar and His Times* (Bombay: A.V. Keer, 1950); see also David Hardiman on *Hind Swaraj* as a record of Gandhi's dialogues with the Indian House group, *Gandhi: In His Time and Ours: The Global Legacy of His Ideas*, 67–8 (London: Hurst, 2003). While Hardiman foregrounds Gandhi's radical politics, Uday Mehta emphasises the anti-political stance of the author refusing instrumentalist reasoning and practice. 'Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life', in *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*, 88–106.

[2] Vinayak Chaturvedi makes three important points regarding Savarkar's reading of the Gita, namely that he read it as history and as a justification for war. Gandhi's allegorical reading in contrast to Savarkar's emphasised two contrary moral tendencies within the human self.

Gandhi and Savarkar met after eighteen years in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. Dhananjay Keer records their conversation on Shuddhi (the reconversion programme of the Arya Samaj) in which Savarkar tells him of his support for reconversion and Gandhi responds that he is 'not for reconversions of persons whose ancestors have changed faiths decades

The story of Indian nationalism is variously told and most often associated with the freedom struggle. Ashis Nandy relates it to the publication of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* in 1910, a novel in Bengali that according to him brought together two selves that augured Gandhi and Savarkar in the protagonist Gora.[3]

The beginnings of exclusive nationalism, however, go back a near century earlier as the fields of Indian literatures and history are stirred by a colonial intellectual's account of an Indian past. The publication of James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han* in two volumes, in 1829 and 1832, and its vibrant afterlife is then the first moment of a subterranean and popular nationalism. The title of this book refers to a 'secret history' because of its effort to connect a distinctive textual genealogy and my ethnography. In recent years there has been much writing on colonialism, orientalism and nationalism and on masculinity and history. The Bengal story has been detailed in several monographs, but not that in other regions.[4]

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ago' nor does he support any efforts at persuasion 'to change his or her faith. It should be left to the will of the person'. See Keer, *Savarkar and His Times*, 176. Savarkar had expressed appreciation for Swami Shraddhanand. The British allowed him to support reconversion in Ratnagiri.

[3] Ashis Nandy, Gandhi Matters, a dialogue with James W. Douglass on *Gandhi and the Unspeakable: His Final Experiment with Truth*, organised by the Raza Foundation, India International Centre, Delhi, 21 December 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6gK3VdbGak, accessed 8 May 2019. In his earlier work Nandy sees the three men profiled in three of Tagore's novels, namely Gora, Indranath and Sandip of *Gora*, *Char Adhyay* and *Ghare Baire*, respectively, as modelled on Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861–1907), the Catholic theologian who first deployed the term 'Hindutva'.

My question to Nandy would be whether Nikhil and Sandip, two characters in *Ghare Baire*, represent two kinds of nationalism, given Sandip's commitment to the Swadeshi style of revolutionary nationalism representing Upadhyay or the early Rabindranath Tagore himself in contrast to Nikhil's more eclectic nationalism. Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67.

[4] Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar have explored the ways in which nineteenth-century categories of race, orient and nation continue to exercise enormous influence in the twenty-first century. 'Introduction', in *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation*, ed. Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar, 1–12 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); also in the same volume Vasant Kaiwar, 'The Aryan Model of History and the Oriental Renaissance: The Politics of Identity in an Age of Revolutions, Colonialism, and Nationalism', 13–61. While history is an important component for Kaiwar, religion is also a central category for my ethnography, particularly the ways in which religiosities and lived religions are being transformed. Hinduism and Hindutva are

Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han belongs to the field of popular history as does *Essentials of Hindutva* that signals the second moment of our genealogy. The third moment of AnOther Indian nationalism and its pop history that is explored in these pages is the working of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (henceforth VHP) and its modernist remaking of a sixteenth-century text, the *Pṛthvīrāja-Rāso,* deployed in its Paravartan, or reconversion programme so-called. Ideas originally from Tod of Prithviraj as the 'last Hindu emperor' affected the Savarkarite understanding of Indian history and surface in the VHP's attempt to use Prithviraj as a symbol of Hindu hurt that must be avenged.

These are three moments of transition then of exclusivist Indian nationalism, of popular history as also of popular religion. As the story culminates over two centuries its denouement is the transformation of Hinduism with varied religiosities rendered monochromatic, spirits exiled from the world, and the cosmos denuded of magic and miracle. The VHP dismisses all such phenomenon as 'superstition' as will be detailed in later chapters. Savarkar had similarly castigated Gandhi's 'superstitions' such as fasting and listening to one's inner voice. We will see through the vantage point of the community the remaking of the self. But to merely see people as putty for ideologies would be a travesty. Indeed, as I tracked individual biographies for several years what became more and more clear was the limits of exclusivist nationalism. In certain cases resistance seemed to be Indic civilisation's struggle against narrow nationalism with two women healers virtually contesting the very categories of hyper-nationalism: one, a 'Muslim' woman who was spirit medium to a collective goddess and the other, a 'Hindu' woman and spirit medium of Imam Husain, the grandson of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Needless to say, Hindu and Muslim are categories that were not deployed by these women. Let us, before we venture into these enchanted worlds, backtrack and explore a community's encounter with colonialism and modernity as it enters the new fields of history and religion.

Origins

A dense, impenetrable forest once clad the double range of hills of Merwara inhabited by tigers, leopards, wolves, deer, wild boar and rabbits. Trees of dhok (Anogeissus pendula), burnt orange, flame of the forest dhak (butea) and yellow-flowered jhand (acacia) covered the Aravalli mountains that extend from Delhi, reach the highest point in the plains at Ajmer in Rajasthan on which the fort Taragarh was built, and

explored in this work and I hope to eventually also publish another volume on political/non-political Islam.

then go on to meet the Vindhya mountains near Mount Abu. The hills between Ajmer and Nasirabad mark the watershed of India between the Chambal River flowing into the Bay of Bengal and the dry salt river, the Luni, that flows into the Gulf at Kutch.[5] The Aravallis separate the north Indian plains hills from the desert, the Marwar plains to the west and the high table-land of Mewar to the south.

This was no terrain of wildness, as the colonial civilising narrative would later highlight projecting a story that Beawar was derived from the sign stating 'Beware' at the railway station, referring to threat of raids by bandits. Indeed, the region called Magra was traversed by Shaivas, Shaktas, Sufis and Banjara gypsy traders whose caravans loaded with salt and grain connected via Jaisalmer with the overland trade of the Silk Road.[6] It harboured the villages of Chang, Jhak and Sarah, some of whose chiefs had built small fortresses and had a vibrant political and religious life marked by sacred places that were often also the political and social sites of the (inter)communal meetings of clans.

What is it that makes colonialism different from other imperialisms? Let us review this question from the perspective of Merwara. The villages of Chang, Jhak and Chetar were levelled in the 1820s—their entire crops and forest burnt, they were forced to face a famine. This was surely not a new phenomenon for conquerors—the Sultans of Delhi were also known to have performed similar reprisals against insurgents.[7]

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[5] This account draws upon the following accounts: Wilder's eyewitness account of 1819; Colonel Hall's *Sketch of Merwara*, 1834; Charles George Dixon, *Sketch of Mairwara: Giving a Brief Account of the Origin and Habits of the Mairs; Their Subjugation by a British force; Their Civilisation and Conversion into an Industrious Peasantry: With Descriptions of Various Works of Irrigation in Mairwara and Ajmeer, Constructed to Facilitate the Operations of Agriculture, and Guard the Districts against Drought and Famine* (London: Smith Elder and Co., 1850); James Digges La Touche, *Gazetteer of Ajmer-Merwara in Rajputana* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1875). Ethnographic intertextuality is notable as images are transferred: La Touche draws upon Tod for his 'history'. Watson's later Gazetteer is based on La Touche. C.C. Watson, *Ajmer-Merwara I-A*, Rajputana District Gazetteers (Ajmer: Scottish Mission Industries Co. Ltd., 1904).

[6] The cities of Jodhpur, Bikaner and Jaisalmer were known for their rich bankers and trading firms in the eighteenth century, which was the golden age of the Rajputana banker. See *Rajputana Gazetteer*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1879), 69.

[7] On the violence of pre-modern imperialism see my *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins* (New York and London: Columbia University Press; Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004 [2003]).

What made colonialism novel was the combination of territorial conquest, state control and civilisational discourse involving race, which by identifying 'savagery' launched a project for the 'perfect reform' of the Mer/Mair. The two Scotsmen, James Tod (1782–1835) and David Octerlony (1758–1825) associated with the conquest were certainly rivals and Tod's eventual resignation is attributed to Octerlony's intrigues. But they clearly worked in concert to colonise the insurgent hill subjects of Merwara.[8] Tod had become Political Agent of the Western Rajput States at Udaipur in 1818 while Octerlony was Resident at the Mughal court.

The following is the story of the Conquest of Merwara that took two years to accomplish from 1819 to 1821 and is detailed in the handwritten correspondence of the Board's collections. To begin with, James Tod advocates three small forts for controlling the 'disorderly and thieving race, disarming the population….'[9]

David Octerlony, in turn, urged the Governor General to take necessary action on the basis of the advice of the Superintendent of Ajmer detailing 'the ungovernable and turbulent spirit of our subjects in the Hills' with a 'savage thirst for blood' despite the severe chastisement that had been inflicted a year ago by levelling their villages along with the destruction of their entire crop and any possessions having reduced them to famine and distress that they gave up their arms and horses'.[10]

Depositions of the insurgents describe the uprising of the combined villages of Jhak, Laolaoah (modern Lulwa), Cheetao, Maunpaorah and Shamgarh, and their meetings that led to the planned attack on the police post. An attack of some 5,000–6,000 persons is detailed including their killing of Captain Tod's mutsaddi (accountant/clerk), Chunee Lall.[11] Given the 'savagery and backwardness of the lawless banditti and reluctance to accept the subjugation that Captain Hall and

[8] From Major General Sir David Octerlony, Resident at Delhi, to Chief Secretary Metcalf, 19 December 1821. The Board's collections are part of the archives of the East India Company (1600–1858), the India Office Library and Records (IOR) being housed in the British Library in London, and the Board being the Board of Control or Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India (1784–1858).

[9] From James Tod, Political Agent of the Western Rajpoot States, Martha near Oodipore, 29 November 1820, Extract Bengal, Political Consultations, 6 January 1821.

[10] From J. Wilder, Superintendent of Ajmair, to Major General Sir David Octerlony, Resident at Delhi, Naseerabad, 12 November 1820. Forwarded by Major General Sir David Octerlony, Resident at Delhi, to Chief Secretary Metcalf, Delhi, 21 November 1821.

[11] Translation of deposition of Phooah Khan, taken on oath before J. Wilder, Ajmer, 9 December 1820; translation of a Report from Nupur Ulla Khan, From J. Wilder,

the Superintendent of Ajmer have imposed, Octerlony recommends a small corps to keep the turbulent Mairs in order. The Mhairwara Corps was "*formed upon grounds exclusively political*"' (author's emphasis). The 'arrangement was proposed with the hope of civilizing a barbarous race of men by means of military discipline, and employment, in the manner adopted many years ago in the instance of the Bhogulpore Hill Rangars'. Octerlony also asserts the claim over the States being the 'Lords paramount' and urges Udaipur and Jodhpur to surrender their share of Merwara as also pay Rs 15,000 as support to local corps under Captain Hall in order to ensure the 'perfect reform' of the Mairs.[12]

A local tract reveals an extraordinary narrative of colonial conquest unavailable in either the official record or in later accounts in which the familiar colonial narrative of primitivity and crime prevails for the colonised and civilisation for the coloniser. Its author, Kalu Khan Kathat, recounts the setting up of the Nasirabad Cantonment and the first attack made by Captain Wilder with a large regiment and, when it failed, Captain Hall being sent with additional reinforcements. After spies informed Hall en route about the Mer preparations for war and a blockade, he ordered a retreat to Kharva but was attacked by the Mer and forced to return to Nasirabad. Once again a contingent of 6,000 was despatched from the Nasirabad cantonment with canon mounted on elephants. It was in this third and final war in 1821 that defeat was inflicted through a three-pronged attack on the villages of Jhak, Shamgarh and Lulwa, which were reduced to ruins. Hatoon, under Khan Bhopat Singh, was also attacked. In the final battle at Ramgarh (Saindra) the Rawat–Merat were defeated, the Khan killed, his son and 200 others taken hostage, and English sovereignty established.[13]

Contrast this heroic shared history of the Merat and Rawat, the two sections of the Mer divided by religion, with two other accounts of colonial 'collaborators'. One is by Tripathi who was Registrar Qanungo, Beawar tahsil, and the second is by Har Bilas

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Superintendent of Ajmair, to Major General Sir David Octerlony, Resident at Delhi, Delhi, 10 December 1820.

[12] Extract Military Letter to Bengal, 13 September 1824; Extract, Political letter from Bengal, 10 September 1924, India Office Library and Records, F/810 nd. The letter significantly mentions that the Mair entertain hereditary feelings of hatred for the Rajputs. One might note that Captain Hall was then undertaking the cartographic mapping of the region resulting in his 'Map of Ajmeer'.

[13] Kalu Khan Kathat, 'Vir Kāṭhāt vā Rāvat Svatantratā ke Purṇa Hāmī Rahe (The Brave Kathat and Rawat Were Great Supporters of Freedom)', *Kāṭhāt Sandesh* (Kathat Message), no. 3 (Hindi) (Beawar: Ganesh Printing Press, nd, approx. 1995).

Sarda, Diwan Bahadur and second generation Arya Samajist, who was employed in the Judicial Department of Ajmer-Merwara. Merwara had been carved into the parganas of Beawar and Jawaja and a city called Nayanagar—literally New City (later renamed Beawar)—established under a Superintendent. The two distinct regions of Ajmer and Merwara were combined in 1842 under a Deputy Commissioner and in 1871 brought under the Foreign Department of the Government of India with the Agent to the Governor General for Rajputana also becoming Chief Commissioner.[14] Ajmer had been a Mughal suba to enable imperial control over the Rajput kingdoms and was likewise kept under direct British control.

While both Sarda and Tripathi demonstrate the collaboration between Tod and Octerlony, they have clearly internalised the colonial account of 'primitivity' and crime used to legitimate conquest. The significance of the later accounts is apropos the discussion of native agency as partners in colonialism—the point that needs emphasis is that collaboration came largely at a later stage, in particular, as new Indians were produced by the colonial state and knowledge apparatus.

The 'civilisation' of Merwara involved massive tree felling and sedentarisation in the wake of colonial conquest, introduction of the cultivation of corn and cotton, the most unsuitable of crops, the building of some thirty-two irrigation embankments.[15] Not a single embankment was filled as the rains failed in the very first year. Human and plant worlds were domesticated as also the magical. Nasirabad had been named after a Muslim ascetic fakir called Nasir Shah. Ironically the cantonment of Nasirabad was established at this very site and, along with the Beawar cantonment, it played a major role in the suppression of Indian resistance in 1857. Beawar had a major shrine dedicated to the snake deity Teja. In Beawar a new annual ritual was instituted, the spirit medium would make a gift of one rupee to the Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) who would return the presentation signifying the acknowledgement of sovereign power.[16]

[14] Vaidyanath Shivprasad Tripathi, *Magrā Mervāḍā kā Itihās* (Hindi, A History of Magra Merwara) (Ajmer: Shri Jain Sudharak Press, 1917); Har Bilas Sarda, *Ajmer: Historical and Descriptive* (Ajmer: Fine Art Printing Press, 1941), 423–33.

[15] Charles George Dixon, *Report on Tank Embankments Constructed in Ajmere District during 1844* (Agra: Agra Orphan Press, 1845).

[16] This is a story I owe to my husband, Arvind Mayaram, who was Subdivisional Magistrate when I first went to live in Beawar in 1981.

Deep within a lovely forested enclave in Upper Merwara is the village Todgarh where Colonel James Tod possibly came to recover from an active life involved in the formation of the Pax Britannica; to think and reflect about material he had collected as Political Agent of the Western Rajput States. Did Tod dream here of Rajput blood 'which the arms of conversion shed'—the thought that he beheld when he first saw the Ajmer fort? Although, we know today that it was Sufis who were largely responsible for peaceful conversion to Islam. The Sufis were locally regarded as exemplars given their asceticism and the openness of the khanaqah, the Sufi hospice. Tod's encampment where he is said to have been comforted by a Gujar woman is now a Jain Centre for Wisdom. It would have better served as a Memorial cum Museum marking Empire! (See Figures 1.1–1.8).

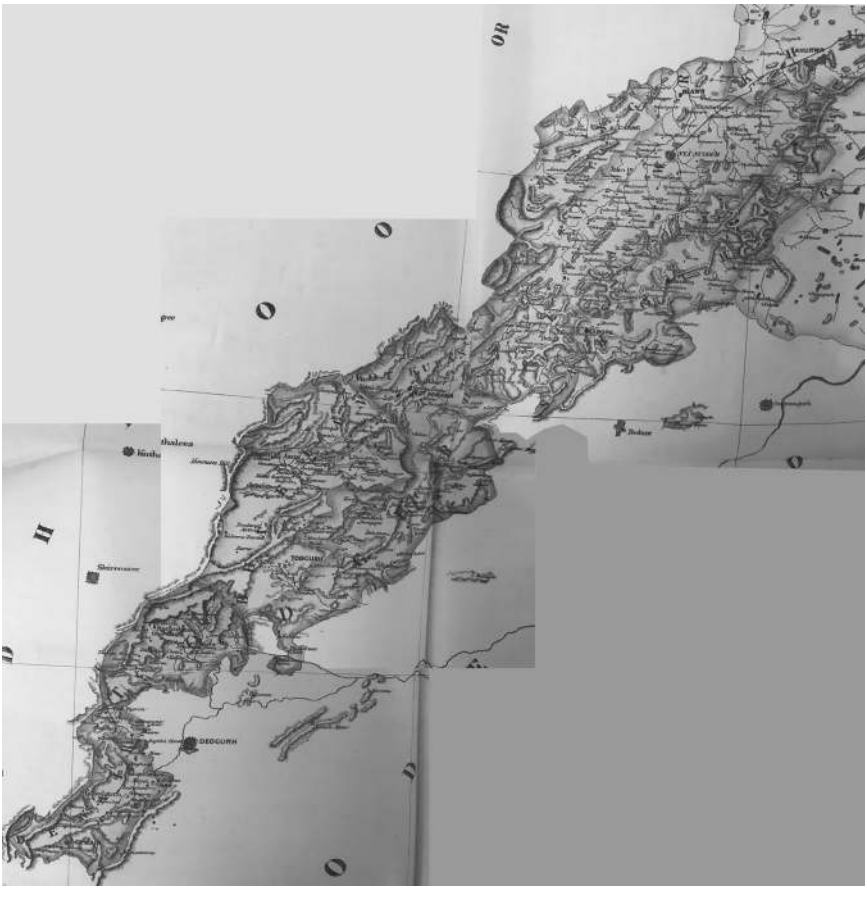

Figure 1.1 Map of Ajmer and Merwara (Charles George Dixon, *Sketch of Mairwara* [London: Smith, Elder and Co Smith, 1850], IOL. 1947.b. 99; British Library Historical Print editions, 2017, p. 232)

Figure 1.2 Ajmer from Mir Shah Ali garden (Dixon, *Sketch of Mairwara*, frontspiece)

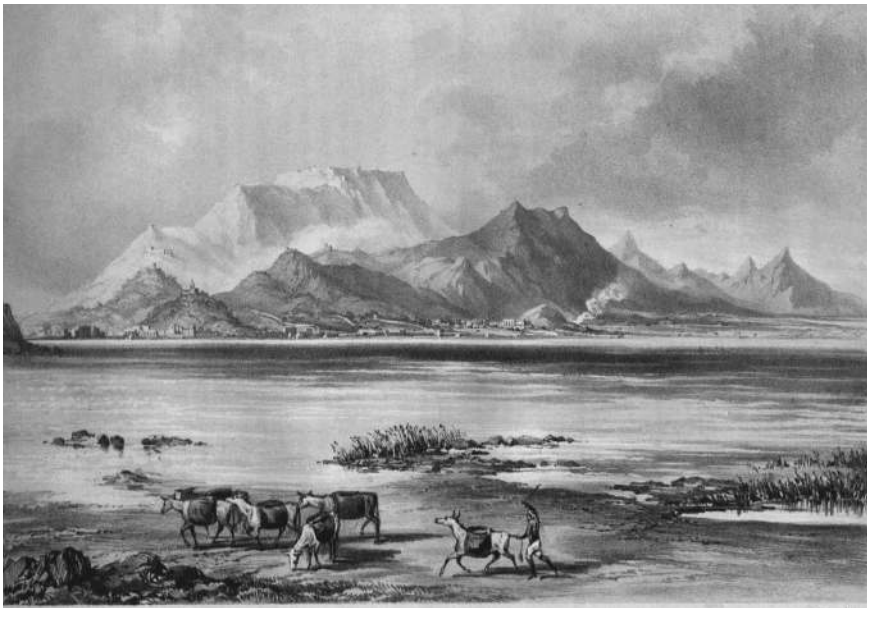

Figure 1.3 Ajmer Lake, with Fort and Hill of Taragarh from the North (Dixon, *Sketch of Mairwara*, facing p. 200)