

**The Thar Desert: A Study of Polity, Ecology and Mobility (thirteenth to seventeenth
centuries CE)**

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PARO TOMAR



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Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi 110 067, India.

DATE: 20.6.2022

DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled "The Thar Desert: A Study of Polity, Ecology and Mobility (thirteenth to seventeenth centuries CE)", submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy to Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or elsewhere.

Paro
PARO TOMAR

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Heeraman Tiwari
20.6.22
PROF. HEERAMAN TIWARI
CHAIRPERSON

प्रो. हीरामन तिवारी / Prof. Heeraman Tiwari
अध्यक्ष / Chairperson
ऐतिहासिक अध्ययन केंद्र / Centre for Historical Studies
सामाजिक विज्ञान संस्थान / School of Social Sciences
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
Jawaharlal Nehru University
नई दिल्ली / New Delhi - 110067

Ranjeeta Dutta
20.06.22
DR. RANJEETA DUTTA
SUPERVISOR

 Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067

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Polity, Ecology, and Mobility in the Thar Desert, c. Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries

C.E.: An Introduction

Introduction

The history of the Thar is usually explored in the existing research through the lens of the various states that historically included the Thar Desert within their territories. These states were Marwar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Umarmkot, Kutch and parts of Sindh. Historiography has usually focussed on state formation, rural society, trade, and the economic history of these separate polities.¹ However, such an approach that was determined by the political map of which Thar was only a part has ignored the desert and its complexities that transcended these political boundaries. An independent examination, therefore, is warranted which views the desert as a continuum and a connected space not only in terms of the polities situated within it.

The main objective of this study is to trace the political, ecological, and cultural landscape of the Thar Desert from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. The study while discussing the geographical background of the Thar will attempt to go beyond an ecology-centric approach and also include an exploration of the Thar as a connecting space. Thus, this study aims to discuss various perceptions of the Thar as an empty sterile space to a space of intense dynamism characterized by its complex polity and ecology.

In this context, the various social and political groups situated within the desert and their linkages with the ecology and polity of the desert will be examined. These groups included

¹ See, for example, Dasharatha Sharma, *Rajasthan Through the Ages*, Rajasthan State Archives, 1966; G.H Ojha, *Bikaner Rajya ka Itihas*, Vyas and Sons, 1937; G.H Ojha, *Rajputane ka Itihas*, Rajasthani Granthaghar, 1927; L.F.R. Williams, *The Black Hills: Kutch in History and Legend*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958. Recent scholarship includes Nandita Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, OUP, 2006; Ghulam Nadri, *Eighteenth Century Gujarat : Dynamics of its Political Economy, 1750-1800*, Brill, 2008; Kanti Lal Mathur, *The Economy of Bikaner State, 1746-1828 A.D.*, Aakar, 2016.

martial communities, traders, nomads, pilgrims, saints, and so on who circulated within the desert space, travelling through it at various points in time irrespective of the defining limits of the various states in the desert. Some of these groups, for instance, the Rajputs, emerged politically dominant and transformed the desert into a landscape of power and control. The interactions of diverse groups of people with the desert were neither homogeneous nor static and kept changing over a period of time with the rise of polities within the desert and their relationship with the Delhi Sultanate (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) and Mughal Empire (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries). In addition to this, the ecology of the desert determined the dynamics of rural society, as well as the role differential access to resources played in rural stratification. Therefore, some of the important subjects of inquiry related to this would be an analysis of the interconnections between the afore-mentioned groups, the ways in which they perceived the space of the desert, and the manner in which the desert influenced their political and social trajectories, patterns of mobility and settlements.

I. Aims and Objectives

The dissertation attempts to study the Thar in totality, from Western Rajasthan to Kutch to Sindh, including its political, economic, ecological, and social diversity. The ecological conditions determined the ways in which the resources of the desert were utilized in trade and agriculture shaping the historical trajectories of various groups – from the dominant to the marginalized ones. In addition to this, it is important to analyze the different ways in which perceptions, engagements, and negotiations amongst the different communities in the desert led to the crystallization of multiple identities. Thus, the study would be a departure from the

traditional historiography of the desert, which has been Rajasthan-centric and has viewed the desert as an empty, barren and hostile frontier.

The inquiry will be conducted in three phases:

1. The first phase shall attempt to examine the political landscape of the desert in terms of the rise of groups like the Sodhas, Bhatias and Rathors as dominant and the subsequent establishment of states by them from the thirteenth century onwards. The Rathore state of Marwar and Bikaner, Bhati state of Jaisalmer, Sodha state of Umarkot, Jadeja state of Kutch and so on were established during this period. The relationship between these states and the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire will also be examined. This exercise would enable us to understand how the desert was perceived as a political space, how territorial claims were made, the basis of these claims and the changes brought about by the Sultanate and the Mughal Empire.

2. The second phase will first aim to examine the various ways in which the desert was perceived as a space. While historicizing the popular perception of the desert as a barren, hostile, and empty space, an attempt will be made to examine whether this perception was held by those who resided in the desert as opposed to those who travelled through it. Additionally, the ways in which different social groups accessed natural resources of the desert and how access to these resources determined social stratification leading to conflicts and contestations in the desert society are also examined in this phase of the study.

3. The third phase attempts to examine the desert as a connecting space bridging Central Asian regions with Gujarat and Northern India. This is hoped to be done by tracing the movements of various groups like foreign travellers, religious groups, pastoral groups, and imperial elites across the desert as well as examining the horse and camel trade in the desert.

The sources used in this endeavour are Persian texts, genealogical accounts, travel accounts, inscriptions, and oral traditions.²

II. Primary Sources

In order to examine the desert in its entirety, the scope of the study becomes vast and therefore primary sources are numerous. The study of different sources gives an insight into the different ways in which the desert was perceived and engaged with. The sources include literary texts, chronicles, texts and genealogies, archival sources like documents, foreign travel accounts, inscriptions as well as folk tales. Based on the range available, this study classifies the sources into four categories.

First are the Sultanate and Mughal chronicles and administrative texts written in Persian dating from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. These accounts give information on how the ruling powers based in Delhi/Agra perceived the desert, its landscape and people. Also, they give an insight into territory formations, trade and taxation and social conflicts in and around the desert. Listed chronologically, the first amongst these is *Taj-al-Maasir* dated between 1217-1229. Written by Nizami, it is an account of the political events in North India with the conquests of Muhammad b. Ghori and focuses on the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate under Qutbuddin Aibak (r. 1206-1210) and Iltutmish (r. 1210-1236). Following *Taj-al-Maasir*, the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* written by Minhaj Siraj is relevant for the history of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century. The *Khazain-ul-Futuh* composed by Amir Khusrou in 1311, gives an account of Alauddin Khilji's rule from 1296 to 1310. Khusrou describes Khilji's

² Due to the lockdown imposed because of the COVID 19 pandemic, I was unable to undertake field visits and study archival documents. The study is thus based on whatever sources – textual or inscriptional – were readily available.

various campaigns and administrative measures. This account is important as it gives details regarding the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate into Rajasthan and Gujarat. It offers a view of what the Delhi Sultan's perception of the desert was. Ziauddin Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, completed around 1357 delineates the history of the Delhi Sultanate, continuing from where the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* left off. This text provides details about the consolidation of the Sultanate and gives an account of Firuz Shah Tughlaq's (r. 1341-1388) campaigns in the areas of Sindh and Kutch. Describing the desert as an ecologically hostile space, *Tarikh* gives a vivid account of the hardships faced by the Sultan's soldiers while travelling through the desert, many losing their lives in the process.

The first text from the sixteenth century to be examined is *Baburnama*. The autobiography of Babur (r. 1526-1530) translated into Persian by Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khana in 1589-90 is an essential work, as it not only narrates Babur's campaigns in Central Asia and India and the foundation of the Mughal Empire, it also provides unique insights into Babur's perception and engagement with the geography and environment of the subcontinent. Babur gives vivid descriptions of everything from climate to flora and fauna to peoples. Thus, this text helps one understand early Mughal perception of India and the areas under study. The *Tazkirat ul-Waqiat* written by Jauhar in the sixteenth century is a first-hand account of Humayun's travels through the Thar and the difficulties faced by him. The *Humayunama* by Gulbadan Bano Begum in the sixteenth century also contains vivid descriptions of Humayun's unfortunate wanderings through the desert while attempting to find allies against Sher Shah Suri (r. 1540-1545). The *Tazkirat ul-Waqiat* and the *Humayunama* reveal to us a network of loyalties and betrayals as well as imperial notions of territory compromised and put at the mercy of regional kings. This account is significant because it also enables one to understand how Akbar consolidated these same territories later as narrated in the *Ain-i-Akbari*.

The *Ain* or the 'Administration of Akbar' was completed between 1590-98 and is an extensive record of the administration of the Mughal Empire. The *Ain* is important for a preliminary idea of Mughal Thar. Abul Fazl while situating the Thar in the *suba* of Ajmer and Multan (*sarkar* of Thatta) meticulously provides details of the type of soil, vegetation, climate and history of each *sarkar* in these *subas*. He has also recorded the extent of territory, the agricultural arrangements, the methods of assessment, the revenue collected and various other details of each *sarkar* and their major *parganas*, how Akbar got regions like Rajputana, Gujarat and Sindh under imperial control – *mansab* system, alliances, marriages, thus giving a picture of the consolidation of the empire. Apart from this, one can also compare the figures given in the *Ain* with those of other later sources to better understand the desert's economic and social trajectory over time. The *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, which, is the autobiography of Jahangir (r. 1605-1628), is an important source for the study of the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century. He has also given his views on geography and environment. Thus, this account becomes an important source to examine how the Mughal rulers engaged with the environment in the administration of the empire.

Second are the regional accounts written in various kingdoms like Marwar, Gujarat, Sindh, etc. in Persian or regional languages by those who were holding offices. These accounts give an insight into the formation and consolidation of regional states, their negotiations with each other and the imperial powers. They also provide information about the social structure prevalent in these kingdoms and the ways in which the ruling classes perceived marginal groups and interacted with them. Thar comprises older political entities like Marwar, Sindh, Kutch, Bikaner, Jaisalmer etc. Thus, important sources from these areas have also been examined to get a sense of how regional polities engaged with the desert. *Kanhadadeprabandha* written by Padmanabha in the fifteenth century is an account of the Jalore ruler Kanhadade and his battles with the Gujarat sultans and subsequently with Alauddin

Khilji. This account helps us establish the nature of relationship and links of polities in Rajasthan with Gujarat as well as contextualize the Delhi Sultanate's inroads into the Desert.

Mazhar-i-Shahjahani is another important source to examine. Written by Yusuf Mirak, probably completed in 1634, it is an important account of Sindh which highlights aspects of Mughal administration in areas like Bhakkar, Siwi and Thatta. Mirak describes the administrative divisions of each *sarkar*, and outlines the tribes living in them. He traces the origins of different local tribes and their branches. In this sense, his account is a valuable source of the native history of Sindh and considerably improves upon and supplements the information on this subject in the *Ain*. Thus, it is a mine of historical information about the imperial *jagirdars* of Sindh, administrative set up, revenue system, classification of lands, ethnic composition of society, trade and commerce, geography and topography and rites and customs of local people.

Munhata Nainsi ri Khyat is another valuable regional source. Any study of the seventeenth century Marwar is incomplete without this source. The oldest *khyat*, it is a collection of tales and genealogies of major Rajput clans. It is arranged according to the clan and gives an account of the history of the clan, often tracing its origin from Puranic myths up to the point of committing it to writing between 1648 and 1666. A primary account for the Rajput states in the region, it helps identify networks of caste, kinship, marriage and establishment of Rajput kingdoms. Along with Nainsi's *Khyat*, the *Marwar ra Pargana ri Vigat*, also compiled by Nainsi, is a *pargana*-wise description of the land and the people and can be considered to be a gazetteer of sorts. It also gives an account of the history of the Rathors of Marwar. This source is important because it provides a sense of the geographical lay of the *parganas* in late seventeenth century Marwar including information on the patterns of production and a description of towns and villages and the communities inhabiting them. The *Vigat*, however only gives information about the *khalisa* villages (imperial estate) and their

raiyyat (peasants). It does not give any information of the *patta* villages (land granted to individuals or groups) or the communities who did not figure within the purview of the state's system of taxation.

Third category is that of travel accounts. The Thar Desert played an important role in the pre-colonial history of the subcontinent on account of its geographic position. Groups travelling by land to and from Afghanistan and Central Asia to various parts of the subcontinent could either skirt around the desert or be compelled to cross it. Thus, the desert governed the travel itinerary of people to some extent. A number of travelers travelled across the desert. These included foreigners who came from different parts of the world, merchants as well as members of religious groups who made pilgrimages. Both foreign and local travel accounts have been included here provide perceptions of the travellers regarding the physical reality of the desert, the groups inhabiting it and trade and trading practices. In addition to this, they also give insights over how these perceptions came to be formed in the first place. This enables one to think of the desert in terms of a connected and cross-cultural space.

The travel accounts examined for this study are thus, diverse in nature of authorship. Chronologically, the first account examined is *Kharataragacchapatavali*, written by the Jaina monk Jinaprabhasuri of Kharataragaccha sect in the thirteenth/fourteenth century. It is an account of genealogies of various Jaina monks and also includes the travels of Jinaprabhasuri from Bikaner across the desert, giving a rare insight into Jaina religious networks and engagement with the environment and geography. *Mirat-al-Mamalik* or the *Mirror of Kingdoms* by Ottoman admiral Sidi Ali Reis is an important travel account. The text seems to have been drafted in early December 1557. Sidi Ali Reis was an unwilling and accidental traveller to India and his journey from Gujarat to Lahore and Delhi via Sindh gives us important information about these regions during Humayun's rule. *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia 1608-1667* by Peter Mundy is another important travel account. Mundy was an

English traveler who made three voyages to India in 1628, 1635 and 1655. The first visit was made under the employ of the English East India Company, wherein he stayed in India for five years. In these five years, he travelled from Surat to Agra, Agra to Patna, and from Agra to Ahmedabad via Marwar. It is important to closely examine Mundy's travel account as it gives valuable descriptions of the landscape of the desert, boundaries of local rulers, descriptions of flora and fauna as well as of different tribes and castes. Another important European account is *Travels in India* by Jean Baptiste Tavernier. Written in the seventeenth century, it also contains information of his travel from Agra to Surat via Marwar. It is interesting to contrast Tavernier's account with Mundy's.

Fourth category is that of inscriptions and archival records. Numerous inscriptions from Rajasthan and Gujarat found on mosques, gateways, wells, houses, temples etc. are direct evidences of activities and movements of people from different communities and social strata. They also give an insight to the negotiations of the people with local administrators. Numerous Persian inscriptions have been found in Rajasthan and Gujarat from the Sultanate as well as Mughal periods. A number of them have also been published in different volumes of the *Epigraphia Indica Arabic and Persian Supplement* as well as in the *Annual Report of Indian Epigraphy*. Epigraphists like S.A.I Tirmizi and Z.A Desai have also published numerous inscriptions in volumes like *Ajmer Through Inscriptions* (1968) and *Published Muslim Inscriptions of Rajasthan* (1971) respectively. Apart from these, volumes like the *Topographical List of Arabic, Persian and Urdu Inscriptions of West India* (1999), Dr. J Horowitz's 'List of Published Mohammadan Inscriptions of India,' and some earliest issues of *Epigraphia Indica* contain a number of inscriptions. However, the major source of Persian inscriptions with facsimile is the *Epigraphia Indica Arabic and Persian Supplement*. Persian inscriptions along with many Sanskrit inscriptions published in numerous volumes of *Epigraphia Indica* are an important source of social and political history. Inscriptions

commemorating building of mosques or digging up of tanks and wells allow us to create a social profile of many localities and micro regions.

Oral traditions for such a study as this are important to examine the various ways in which different communities interacted with each other and with the region they inhabited. Various oral traditions of the Thar include the seventeenth century epic *Dhola Maru ra Duha* which is a tale of romance between Prince Dhola and Princess Maru in the desert. The legend of the folk deity Pabuji is a living tradition in the arid regions of Rajasthan where his tale is performed by the Bhopa community. The narrative can be found in Nainsi's *khyat* as well as in the text *Pabu Prakash Mahavakavya*. Thus, folk tales many provide valuable evidence about community identities and their interactions with the state and environment.

Included in this category are also archival sources in the form of *bahis*, which give insight about the trading and marriage networks across the desert. The *Bikaner Bahis* are an important archival source. The Rajasthan State Archives houses the *Bikaner bahis*, which will be used for the present study. The *bahis* used here cover the period between the eighteenth and nineteenth century. They are written in the Marwari dialect using the Devanagari script. At some places Persian revenue terms are used. These various *bahis* enable one to obtain a clear picture of the rural economy of the sub region of Bikaner. In addition to this, the *bahis* giving details of migration of various groups and popular routes allow one to conceptualise the desert in terms of mobility of people from different strata of society. *Zagat Bahi* gives information about the commercial production and traditional trade routes of this area. *Kamthana Bahis* give an account of the artisans and skilled labourers as well as their wage structure and whether they migrated from other regions to Bikaner. *Vivah Bahis* reveal aspects of marriage practices like rituals, gift giving, ornaments worn and routes taken by marriage parties.

While imperial, regional and travel accounts give the perspective of ruling groups and travelers respectively, archival records, inscriptions and folk tales enable us to construct a deeper picture of social relations in the desert.

III. Chapterisation

While a detailed historiography and discussion on sources is provided in the next chapter, a brief note on the chapterisation of this study is warranted here. This study is divided into four chapters, apart from the *Introduction* and *Conclusion*. A discussion on each of the chapters is given below.

Chapter one titled as *The Thar Desert: Landscape, History and Environment* will set the tone for the rest of the dissertation by introducing the Thar Desert as a category for historical analysis. The chapter first discusses the prevalent historiography on the Thar. In discussing the trends in research on the Thar, the chapter argues that historical research on the Thar has remained Rajasthan centric due to a prevailing intellectual bias that has its roots in colonial constructions of the desert in the numerous gazetteers, survey reports and travel accounts produced in the nineteenth century. The chapter emphasises the need to visualise an alternative understanding of the space of the Thar which not only transcends the modern day international and state borders criss-crossing the desert, but also moves away from the popular perception of the Thar as a hostile, barren frontier. Second, the chapter highlights the geographical and ecological diversity of the Thar in detail in order to contextualise the environmental condition of the desert. Third, the chapter examines the various methodologies used in the dissertation.

Chapter two is titled *Polities in the Thar Desert: Control, Conflict and Mediation - c. Thirteenth to Seventeenth centuries C.E.* The core aims of this chapter can be defined thus.

First, the chapter attempts to historicise the Thar as a political space. This is done to argue against the notion of the Thar as a barren and empty ecological zone. Instead, the chapter contends that the ecological condition of the Thar provided mobility to disparate groups leading to a political culture which was based on migrations and acquisition of resources. Second, the chapter attempts to examine the territorial aspirations of various states from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries like Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Umarkot, Marwar, Kutch, and Sindh. However, steering clear of a narrative political history, this chapter attempts to examine the connections between the establishment of these states in terms of acquisition of resources through migrations, marriage and trading networks. This can be done only through an examination of the interconnectedness of various groups in the desert through caste and interclan networks based on matrimonial alliances and migrations.

Third, in addition to examining how the states in the desert related to each other and the ecology of the desert, attention has to be paid to inroads made by the Delhi Sultanate (the fourteenth century onwards) and the Mughal Empire (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The relationships and networks between the states in the desert and with these powers, which claimed supremacy, underwent a change. These changes were in terms of loyalties, identities, cultural exchanges etc. It is essential to examine the extent to which the desert influenced these changes. Thus, while examining why these paramount states attempted to control the desert, it is also important to examine how they sought to do so. Here, the emphasis is more on examining attempts to control the landscape and inhabitants of the desert through reorganization of territorial units, capture of forts, control over trade routes, imposition of cesses, assignment of imperial officials and extending matrimonial alliances to the states situated in the desert. Thus, the attempt here is to map out the differences in negotiations with the landscape of the desert by the kingdoms situated there and imperial powers of the Sultanate and the Mughals.

Chapter three is titled *Environment, Identities and Conflicts: Ecological Landscape of the Thar Desert*. This chapter aims to understand the ways in which different groups – pastoralists, peasants, occupational castes, negotiated the landscape of the desert. Communities were not isolated in the desert, which has been popularly imagined as a hostile, empty space. An important aspect to consider is how various communities in the desert utilized the ecological opportunities the desert gave them. This is done by examining the ways in which the desert provided space for these multiple groups to interact with each other. In addition, there will be a discussion on how they negotiated with the state in the distribution and control of resources.

This chapter revolves around three central lines of enquiry. First, it aims to explore the variety of ways in which the desert is represented in various texts. The texts studied include colonial accounts like James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, foreign traveller's accounts like those of Peter Mundy, Jean baptiste Tavernier etc., Persian accounts like Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* as well as regional accounts like *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat* and *Dhola Maru Ra Duhe*. This allows one to ponder over how the desert was perceived in popular imaginations and how these perceptions connected to each other. The chapter argues that the perception of the desert as a 'hostile', 'barren' and 'dangerous' space is not new but can in fact be traced in all the non-local accounts examined here. Thus, this perception of the desert became dominant as it was propagated by dominant groups who traversed the desert. This perception however, is challenged by descriptions of the desert in local accounts which present a different picture of the desert, thus, calling for an alternative indigenous understanding of the desert space. Thus, an examination of how certain images and understandings of the desert arose and how they became widely entrenched reveals how nature – in this case the natural environment of the desert – is also 'culturally constructed'.

Second, this chapter attempts to map out the ecological landscape of the desert in terms of power relations, identity and marginality. An important aspect of this would be to examine environmental factors behind the social position of a particular group. This entails investigating the ways a community used – or was allowed to use – the ecology of the desert. Thus, taxation system, rural stratification and differential access to resources are important points of enquiry here. Also, an examination into the relationship between settled agricultural groups and nomadic groups is relevant here. Third, this chapter attempts to examine the desert as a contested landscape. This is done by first investigating narratives of dominance and marginality; thus arguing that identities of groups like the Rajputs were constructed by marginalising other groups like the Meenas, Raikas, Bhils etc. However, narratives of dominance were challenged by counter-narratives by marginalised communities as well as their aspirations for social mobility. Violent conflicts between tribes and state have also been examined here.

Chapter four titled *Networks of Circulation and the Thar Desert as a Connected Space: Thirteenth to Seventeenth centuries C.E.* aims to locate the Thar as a locus of early modern interaction. The chapter attempts to challenge recent historiography on the Thar which while discussing the Thar as a mobile region has limited its scope to Rajasthan. This chapter aims to transcend modern boundaries and instead view the Thar as a connected space, connecting regions of Central Asia, Northern India and Gujarat. This is done by examining overlapping and intersecting networks of mobility within and beyond the Thar. These networks of mobility include agro-pastoral networks, trade, mercantile and fiscal networks, religious networks as well as networks of authority involving movements of manpower. The chapter also attempts to link these networks in the Thar to regions like Central Asia. This is done by examining the camel and horse trade between the subcontinent and Central Asia while locating the Thar

within this trade. Thus, the chapter will attempt to examine the Thar as a connecting space connecting regions of Central Asia and Afghanistan to the Indian Subcontinent.

The *Conclusion* follows this chapter encapsulating the discussion in the dissertation. While providing a synopsis of the various issues and problematics raised, the prospects and possibilities of the future research will be outlined.

Chapter One

The Thar Desert: Landscape, History and Environment

Introduction

This chapter attempts to discuss the historiography of the Thar Desert as well as its diverse geographical and ecological conditions with its different landscapes, flora and fauna in detail. It is emphasized here that the desert cannot be typified with the image of the sand dune and camel alone. The Thar Desert is popularly imagined in various terms. These include notions of it being a hostile natural environment, barren with no signs of life, extremely arid and full of shifting sand dunes. On the other hand, it is often held synonymous with modern Rajasthan that is typified as the land of kings, palaces and camels. While a large part of the desert does lie within modern day Rajasthan, it would be erroneous to attempt writing a history of the Thar while sticking to present day international and state boundaries. As discussed previously, the Thar geographically extends into Sindh and Kutch as well, beyond the present boundaries of the modern state of Rajasthan. Since these boundaries only came into being recently, it is important to transcend them and view the Thar Desert as a whole instead. Thus, this chapter aims to discuss the methodologies used in this dissertation along with providing a detailed exposition of Thar's geography and ecology.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section of this chapter will discuss the historiography of the Thar region commonly discussed within the frame of the history of Rajasthan. The second section will attempt to highlight the geographical landscape as well as ecological diversity of the Thar. The third section sets out the tone of this dissertation by highlighting the methodologies used in this study. These methodologies include examining the Thar as a landscape - political and ecological - as well as exploring the Thar as a connected space with various networks of mobility intersecting and operating within and beyond it. This

section attempts to underline the relevance of these approaches in writing a history of the Thar Desert as opposed to the historical methods used in previous researches on the Thar.

I. Historiographical Overview

i. Trends in the Historiography of Deserts

Scholars belonging to different disciplines have studied various deserts of the world extensively. Maximum studies are archaeological and paleontological in nature aiming to study the origins of the particular desert and delve deeper into the origin and activities of hunter-gatherer societies in increasingly arid conditions.¹

Another area of scholarship is how deserts have been portrayed in both ancient and colonial literature. For instance, scholars have studied deserts as a metaphor for detachment and pursuance of spiritual life in biblical and saintly literature from Egypt.¹ However, recent historiography on the Sahara Desert has attempted to move away from examining separate political units as they presently exist within the Sahara to examining the Sahara as a whole. An important aspect of this body of research is to explore the Sahara's location linking Africa to the Mediterranean and Arab worlds and the subsequent loss of its economic centrality with the

¹ See for instance works on Australian deserts like Mike Smith, *The Archaeology of Australia's Deserts*, Cambridge University Press, 2013

² See for instance works like Claudia Rapp, 'Desert, City and Countryside in Early Christian Imagination,' in *Church, History and Religious Culture*, Vol. 86, 2006, pp. 93-112; James E. Goehring, 'The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt,' in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 1, 1993, pp. 281-296; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Jitse Dijkstra and Mathilde van Dijk, *The Encroaching Desert: Egyptian Hagiography and the Medieval West*, Brill, 2006; among others.

arrival of Europeans and competition between the Atlantic and Saharan commerce.² This was a shift in the early 1970s when most studies on the Sahara Desert would be either by anthropologists studying pastoral societies or developmentalists addressing problems of aridity and desertification.

Drawing on Braudel's work on the Mediterranean, there is a growing body of research on pre-colonial Sahara which attempts to examine a connecting space between regions of Europe, North and West Africa, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. This research is conscious of the nexus between landscape, culture and regional studies in demonstrating how the physical environment shapes these networks of connectivity.³ Thus, studies looking at the Sahara as a space traversed over centuries by diverse groups of people indulging in trade and pilgrimage have attempted to go beyond the notion of the desert as an environmental barrier as well as transcend modern-day political boundaries. In addition to this, enquiries over the various oasis and settlements in the Sahara show how this connectivity was deeply connected to the localities in spite of the wide extension of the desert.⁴ Another important aspect of inquiry has been how the physical environment as well as the connected space of the desert shaped identities within as well as on its peripheries.

ii. Historiography of the Thar: Problems and Possibilities

a. The Thar Desert: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond

³ E. Ann McDougall, 'Research in Saharan History,' *Journal of African History*, Vol 39, No. 3, 1998, p. 468. Also, see for instance works like James L.A Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600-1850*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

⁴ Sarah Gilkerson, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Rethinking Saharan Studies as a Discipline,' in Lawrence Abrams and Kaleb Knoblauch (ed.), *Historians Without Borders - New Studies in Multidisciplinary History*, Routledge, 2019, p. 155.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 159

There is a lack of historical inquiry on the Thar as a home to the development of different identities as well as their negotiations with the environment. There is very little work on the Thar as a connected geographical space which premodern groups were not afraid to traverse. Instead, there is sizable research on political regions like Rajasthan, Gujarat and Sindh and their sub-regions with only an underlying assumption that the aridity of these areas due to being within the desert climate played a vital role in their historical trajectory. Thus, in attempting to trace the historiography of the Thar, one is confined to examining how the desert has been approached in writing the history of these regions, viz., Rajasthan, Sindh, Kutch. One reason for this is the solidification of modern-day political boundaries which crisscross the Thar.

A large part of the Thar lies in the modern-day state of Rajasthan. A much-neglected extension of the Thar, i.e., the Rann lies in Gujarat while a sizable portion of the desert lies in modern day Sindh in Pakistan. Thus, the Thar is divided by not only state boundaries but also by an international border. The presence of these borders raises significant questions over characterizing the space of the Thar. Is it a frontier? Is it a borderland? Is it a region in itself? These are significant questions which have been neglected by historiography.

It is only recently that the Thar has become an independent area of historical research.⁵ However, it is essential to examine in what ways the Thar has been imagined by historians in their scholarly pursuits as well as look into the biases informing their research. One such bias is the strict adherence to political boundaries and borders. While the Thar was home to a number of political entities like Marwar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Umarkot etc., their territorial boundaries were never fixed. These boundaries were porous with easy movements of people, livestock and commodities across the Thar taking place. In addition to this, territorial expansion was always a matter of intense negotiations and conflicts between these states as well as with

⁵ See for instance Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, and Manisha Chaudhary, *The History of the Thar: Environment, Culture and Society*, Primus, 2021.

other armed groups. The political histories of the ruling elite group - the Rajputs - is full of instances of different Rajput clans clashing over territories as well as multiple clans often migrating into or outside the desert to set up new states.

However, with colonial projects like the Trigonometric Survey, boundaries began to be measured and fixed.⁶ 'Border Disputes' is a term encountered in colonial accounts which referred to contestations over territories which the British took upon themselves to solve by fixing borders. These borders became a political fixity that influenced intellectual constructs and finally has been carried forward in historiography till the present day. Various gazetteers, census reports, ethnological accounts produced during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have served to solidify the borders between the aforementioned political states in the desert. Administrative divisions like 'Western Rajputana States', 'Province of Sindh', 'Bombay Presidency' divided the Thar and separated these units as complete entities in themselves.

b. Thar and Rajasthan: Projection of a Regional Identity

This notion of the fixed borders and boundaries was carried forward post-independence with Partition and the emergence of the modern-day states of Rajasthan and Gujarat in India. Thar as well as Kutch became distinct markers of these states and thus became important in formulating a state as well as a national identity. Rajasthan came to be increasingly identified with Rajputs, chronicles of bravery, forts, figures such as Rani Padmini and Maharana Pratap and most importantly, the Thar Desert. These also became markers of national identity as pride

⁶ See for instance A.H.E Boileau, *Personal Narrative of a Tour Through the Western States of Rajwarra in 1835*, Baptist Mission Press, 1837.

in one's motherland and the zest to sacrifice one's life for it became valuable characteristics in an ideal citizen. Rajputs began to be identified with these characteristics and were thought of as great patriots. Rajputs as a group also became attractive for historical inquiries which were informed by these characteristics of 'valour' and 'sacrifice'.

The identification of the Rajputs with Rajasthan can be traced to James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829), in which he first coined the term 'Rajasthan' as the land of the Rajputs. Subsequent reports, gazetteers, surveys, etc. throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries continuously placed the Rajputs on top of the social order in Rajasthan while marginalising other groups, especially nomadic, tribal and lower caste communities in intellectual discourse as well as legally with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Subsequent lists of 'rude tribes' and 'criminal tribes' further pushed these communities into marginality.

Historiographical trends from the nationalist historiography onwards did not examine the Thar as a unit in itself at all. Most research was focussed on Rajasthan and Rajputs. A subset of this research was Rajput histories of the various kingdoms in Rajasthan like Mewar, Amber, Marwar, Bikaner etc. The Thar became a stage on which the history of these kingdoms was played out. With the opening of the Rajasthan State Archives, there was a decisive turn away from these histories and instead, critical research on trade, agrarian system, peasantry, etc. were undertaken. This was not only a move away from the heavy reliance of past historiography on Persian accounts and accounts of foreign travellers towards regional sources, but also a move away from the state centric and elite histories that had been undertaken so far. Extensive research based on archival documents began to be carried out in areas like Eastern Rajasthan, Bikaner and Marwar.⁷ However, an important aspect that emerged out of these researches was the regionality of Rajasthan.

⁷ See for instance S.P Gupta, *Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan (c.1650-c.1750)*, Manohar Publications, 1986; B.L Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs: Economy of Marwar in the*

c. *Historiography Beyond Regional Biases: Commercial Connections*

The idea of Rajasthan in this historiography became further crystallised as a region with its own distinct history and identity typified by the presence of a regional archive. The Thar became subsumed in this historiography and lost its own identity. It became an intrinsic part of Rajasthan and its history; thus, it could not be reimagined in terms of a ‘connected space’ or a ‘frontier’ or a ‘borderland’ or any other concept that attempted to carve out its distinct character. Thus, even recent works which have attempted to study the Thar have adhered to the international and state border invariably naturalising these borders. The result has been a history of the Thar within Rajasthan.

While the notion of frontier has been used as a method to examine the Thar, the intense interconnections of the frontier with adjoining regions has not been looked at. While it is true that a large part of the Thar falls within modern day Rajasthan due to which the nature of most sources is such that they are from Rajput kingdoms within Rajasthan; it is essential to overcome this obstacle in terms of sources as well as method. It is anachronistic to fix the Thar’s history within Rajasthan’s history as this reflects a lingering colonial intellectual bias.

However, there have been some attempts to study the Thar Desert in its entirety, although most of these works focus on aspects of trade within the desert. One of the earliest works examining the Thar Desert in its entirety is G.S.L Devra’s article ‘A Study of The Trade Relations Between Rajasthan and Sindh/Multan 1650-1800 A.D.’ published in the *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* in 1978. In this article, Devra used various archival records present in the Rajasthan State Archives like *farmans* (an irrevocable royal decree) to the rulers

Seventeenth Century, Rawat Publication, 1999; Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords, and Peasants: Rajasthan in the 18th Century*, South Asia Books, 1990; G.S.L. Devra, *Rajasthan ki Prashasnik Vyastha – Bikaner Rajya ke Sandarbha Mein (1574-1818 A.D.)*, Dharti Prakashan, 1981.

of Bikaner as well as a number of Bikaner *bahis* (accounting ledgers) along with some inscriptions to examine the trade relations between various parts of the Thar Desert. He examined the connection between the various areas of the desert as well as between fertile plains and areas of arid land to understand the real economic character of this specific ecological zone.⁸ He attempted to study the various trade routes passing through the desert and connecting various other regions like Gujarat, Agra and Punjab as well as areas within the desert through archival sources and inscriptions rather than foreign travellers' accounts as was the norm. In addition to this, he also discussed the relevance of urban centres like Merta, Nagaur, Pali, Jaisalmer, Barmer etc. along with commodities traded, means of transportation as well as the taxes levied by the state on trade goods, thus giving a wholesome picture of trade across the desert.

Other works, which have examined the desert, have also looked at it through the perspective of trade. While almost nobody has examined the desert in totality the way Devra has done, nevertheless, there have been attempts to link specific urban centres like Jaisalmer to the silk routes of Central Asia. Notable amongst these are the essays of Mohammad Saquib and Syed Sumbul Arif which on the basis of travellers' accounts and archival documents like *sanad parwana bahi*, *zakat bahi*, *kharita*, *chhitthi*, etc., examine the development of Jaisalmer as an important urban centre and trading mart due to its central location on the trade routes passing through the Thar Desert.⁹ Saquib attempts to investigate the prosperity of Jaisalmer due to trade through the Thar through its architectural tradition. He contends that because Jaisalmer was in the middle of the desert, it was less prone to invasions which led to its

⁸ G.S.L Devra, 'A Study of Trade Relations Between Rajasthan and Sindh/Multan,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 39, 1978, pp. 581-594.

⁹ Mohammad Saquib, 'Layers of Silk Routes over Sands of Jaisalmer,' *ATEET*, 2012, p. 59. Similar works include Syed Sumbul Arif, 'Emergence and Growth of Jaisalmer: a Trading Mart in Medieval Rajasthan,' *Proceedings of Rajasthan History Congress*, Vol. 31, 2016, pp. 48-55; Ali Nadeem Rezavi, 'Kuldhara in Jaisalmer State - Social and Economic Implications of the Remains of a Medieval Settlement,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 56, 1995, pp. 312-324.

economic and cultural prosperity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is reflected in its art and architecture, especially the Jain architecture like Jain temples and Patwa *havelis*.

While the Thar has a marginal place in historiography, the Rann of Kutch is even more neglected. Maximum focus has been on the Gulf of Kutch and its ports.¹⁰ Not much attention has been paid to the hinterland and the desert which facilitated movements of caravans, traders and various other groups into the ports of Kutch as well as the rest of Gujarat.¹¹ However, there are works, which have examined the trade history of the Gulf of Kutch littoral. Ghulam A. Nadri has used VOC records to explore the regional economy and trade of the Gulf of Kutch in the eighteenth century in context of Gujarat.¹² A large part of the hinterland accessible from Kutch included Multan and Lahore in the northwest stretching almost up to Bengal in the east. Caravan trade to and from these areas and passing through the desert of Rajasthan, Sindh and Kutch was the lifeline of the sea trade from the Gulf. Rice, alum, borax, salomoniac etc. were acquired from Marwar, Sindh and Kashmir while cash crops like indigo and cotton as well as sea products, cowrie shells etc. were exported from Kutch. Sale and redistribution of merchandise depended upon the overland trade networks and the trading communities traversing them. These networks were affected whenever there were political disturbances in places like Marwar for instance. However, Nadri, while focusing on the Gulf of Kutch and the vast volume of trade which passed through the desert to reach Kutchhi ports only hints at the trading connections of the Kutch with Marwar, Sindh, Kashmir etc. and the role of the Sindhi

¹⁰ See Ghulam Nadri, 'Exploring the Gulf of Kutch: Regional Economy and Trade in the Eighteenth Century,' *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2008, pp. 460-486.

¹¹ For instance, L.F.R. Williams provided an overall history of Kutch and does not give much information apart from a general account of the past of Kutch. See Williams, *The Black Hills*, pp. 57-92.

¹² Nadri, 'Exploring the Gulf of Kutch', p. 462. According to him, trade along the Surat-Burhanpur-Agra and Surat-Ahmedabad-Agra axis declined due to political instability in the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century.

and Marwari merchants in it.¹³ Recent works on the Gulf of Kutch include the ivory and slave trade between Kutch and East Africa, the port of Mandvi, and the legend and worship of the Jakhs.¹⁴

The desert expands over the eastern part of modern Sindh stretching into modern Rajasthan and Gujarat. Historiography on medieval Sindh is quite rich as many aspects of its history like its incorporation into the Mughal Empire (late sixteenth century), local administration of Sindh, coinage and genealogy of the Jams who ruled Sindh before the Mughal annexation, trading communities, Sufism etc. have been widely worked on. Amita Paliwal has traced the political history of Sindh from its annexation into the Mughal Empire under Akbar by his commander Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana (1590-1591 A.D.).¹⁵ There was no *suba* (administrative division) of Sindh as the entire region came under the *suba* Multan. M. Afzal Khan has introduced a number of documents pertaining to the local administration of Sindh between seventeenth and eighteenth centuries like *farmans*, *arzdashts* (petitions), *mahzar* (public attestations), *tajwiznama* (recommendatory letters), *dastaks* (permits), *shikayat* (complaints) etc., thus highlighting the vast potential of writing a richer history of Mughal Sindh.¹⁶ Most scholars have largely relied upon the rich Persian accounts on Sindh like Yusuf Mirak's *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani* (seventeenth century), Mir Ma'asum Bhakkari's *Tarikh-i-Masumi* (sixteenth century), and Mir Tahir Muhammad Nisyani Thattavi's *Tarikh-i-Tahiri*

¹³ Ibid. p.466; See also Nadri, *Eighteenth Century Gujarat*.

¹⁴ See for instance Adhya Bharti Saxena, 'The Making of Pavagadh-Champaner City Complex: A Gaze into the Historical Geography from the Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 62, 2002, pp. 336-352; Adhya Bharti Saxena, 'Mandvi: Dynamic Port Town of Kachch-Gujarat,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 68, Part One, 2007, pp. 427-435. See also Chhaya R. Goswami, 'The Slave Trade at Zanzibar and the Role of Kutchis,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 64, 2003, pp. 1281-1294, also see Jawaid Akhtar, 'The Culture of Mercantile Communities of Gujarat in Mughal Times,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 71, 2010, pp. 409-416.

¹⁵ Amita Paliwal, 'The Transition of Sind into a Mughal Province – The Ghazi Beg Interlude, 1601-1612,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 61, Part 1, pp. 303-307.

¹⁶ M. Afzal Khan, 'Local Administration in Sindh: A Study of Some Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century Documents', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 52, 1991, pp. 284-291.

(seventeenth century) etc. Based on extensive use of Persian texts, scholars like Sunita Zaidi have argued that the numerous tribes inhabiting Mughal Sindh differed from each other in their social and economic organizations ranging from being nomadic and pastoral, sedentary and semi-sedentary and were in constant conflict with the Mughal Empire.¹⁷ Using primarily Mirak's *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*, Sunita Zaidi provides an in-depth enumeration of the tribes of Sindh, their geographical distribution, preoccupation with trade and relationships with the Mughal state which always tried to control them.

iii. Recent Historiography on the Thar

Tanuja Kothiyal's *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert* (2016) is perhaps the only attempt to conceptualize the Thar Desert as a region in itself. According to Kothiyal, the aspects that marked Thar as a region are the circulation of various narratives of communities that imagined the Thar geographically and the interconnections between them. Kothiyal further argues that the idea of the desert in various narratives travelled through the movement of its inhabitants trading in mobile wealth, like livestock and agro-pastoral products, thus creating circulatory networks in the Thar. Arguing for a rich history of movements and itinerant groups in the Thar, Kothiyal contends that the social identity of these groups was characterized by this mobility. In this respect, *Nomadic Narratives* breaks fresh ground by tracing the identity formation of various groups, for instance, the Rajput houses in the desert, that migrated from other regions. Kothiyal has also traced the various networks of mobility in the desert of both martial groups as well as pastoral groups,

¹⁷ Sunita Zaidi, 'Mughal State and Tribes in Seventeenth Century Sindh,' *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, Vol. 26, no. 3, 1989, p. 345.

emphasizing that sedentary and pastoral communities co-existed in the arid space of the desert, not as polar opposites but in a symbiotic relationship with each other.

While mobility and migrations are the significant highlights characterizing the desert as a region, it is pointed out that these two aspects also formed the basis of the crucial social phenomenon of marginalization of communities inhabiting the desert. For instance, the wave of Rajput migrations to the desert pushed out the already present communities to the peripheries of settlements, marginalizing them in the process. Further, we are told about the colonial policies of attempting to typecast the desert as isolated and hostile through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 that transformed the identities of various groups into criminality. Kothiyal points out that the Thar was characterized not only by the circulation of trade but also people who carried narratives of both conquest and marginalization with them. Her work is significant as it highlights how the movement of people across the Thar not only made it a conduit for trade but also how this movement of both people and narratives formed states as well as gave space to communities to challenge these very states for their place in history.

However, this work also has its own shortcomings. First, despite exploring the idea of Thar as a 'frontier' characterized by nomadism and mobility, the arguments for the desert as a continuum region in the *Nomadic Narratives* are unable to transcend modern political boundaries, confining the Thar to just western Rajasthan. Consequently, the significance of other geographical regions is ignored and the study of the desert is associated exclusively with the historiography of Rajasthan. Second, the excessive reliance on the nineteenth and twentieth century ethnographical records to understand a pre-modern region can be somewhat anachronistic. While only these records provided an account of many marginalized communities that navigated the desert and formed their respective social identity, the modern worldviews and sensibilities of these records have to be carefully analysed to avoid the trap of presupposing a historical region.

Nevertheless, Kothiyal still attempts to trace the changes that occurred under imperial rule. However, it would have been fruitful to consult other sources like the medieval foreign travellers' accounts, Jain and Sanskrit texts, the Mughal imperial chronicles and inscriptional sources. Third, the depiction of the Thar in this work is homogeneous, devoid of any complexities despite being characterized as a mobile region. While describing its physical environment, the heterogeneity and significance of the ecological diversities are hardly taken into account in the historical processes of the evolution of the desert as a region.

Manisha Choudhary in her book *The History of the Thar Desert: Environment, Culture and Society* (2021) examines the Thar as an environmental zone and subsequently, its economy based on the environment. She also highlights the ecological diversity of the Thar by characterising it as 'Dry Thar' and 'Wet Thar'; wherein, the 'Dry Thar' is the arid zone of the Thar while the 'Wet Thar' consists of marshes and swamps. Choudhary in her work focusses on 'Dry Thar' through the histories of states like Jaisalmer, Marwar and Bikaner. Approaching the desert from a geo-paleontological perspective, Choudhary analysis the bio-archives and geo-archives of the Thar which include fossils of plants as well sand fossils, rock formations etc. She traces environmental and climatic changes in the Thar and argues that the desert became increasingly dry from the fourth to the thirteenth centuries CE.

An important aspect raised by Choudhary is with regard to the economy of the Thar. She argues that major revenue came from trade since major trade routes passed through the Thar. From the Delhi Sultanate onwards, these routes led directly to the coast of the Arabian Sea. Transit of trade items through these routes rather than overland ones from Central Asia was easier. She uses Jain sources to highlight the importance of these trade routes from the coasts of Makran and Kutch to northern and central India. Using the same sources, she also examines important cities on these trade routes like Pali and argues that the the Rathor clan of Marwar started out primarily as protectors of these trade emporiums. She argues that the desert was an

economic zone which saw large trading activities. She further argues that states in the desert like Jaisalmer and Marwar were established to protect this trade and derive profits from this trade. Importantly, she highlights a continuity of trading activities in the desert from the eighth to the seventeenth centuries CE. Choudhary's work is important because she moves away from the idea of the desert as a hostile, barren space by highlighting its agricultural and trading activities over a long period of time. However, ironically, Choudhary also adheres to modern political boundaries while highlighting the connectivity of the Thar to Punjab, Gujarat and the Arabian Sea.

To sum up, there are major issues with the historiography of the Thar. First, the desert is seen as a given and uniform in any work on any region within it. It is never explicitly discussed as a major aspect of the historical trajectory of the area under study. Rather, there is often an underlying assumption or a vague reference to its arid environment. Second, its diverse ecological environment is never taken into account. The ways in which this diversity in ecology as well as plant and animal life shapes people's movements, narratives, sense of identity etc. are important aspects to consider. Third, the Thar Desert as a whole and its diverse environment, inhabitants, cultural connections, religion and society have never been examined. While Kothiyal attempts this kind of an approach, she however, stops at the modern-day international boundary of India and Pakistan as well as the state boundaries of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Fourth, the Thar desert in either Rajasthan, Gujarat or Sindh has only been examined from a trade or political history perspective. A social history highlighting the various networks of exchange and interaction between different castes, tribes and religious groups is yet to be undertaken.

II. Geography and Ecology of the Thar Desert

i. Geographical Backdrop

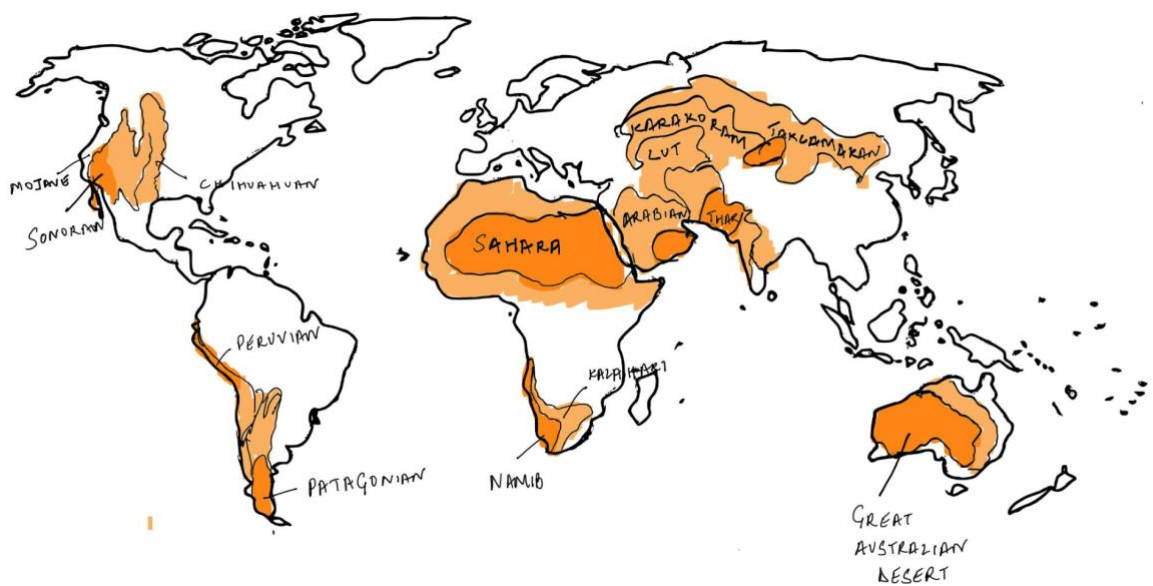
An account of the geographical and ecological background in the Thar Desert is necessary here to historically contextualise the desert as an ecological zone, and also to understand the intersectionality among political history, landscape studies and environmental studies. The Thar Desert is a large tract of nearly 200,000 sq. km in the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent. It stretches from the Aravallis in the east to the Indus in the west. Most of it lies in modern day Rajasthan while parts of the Thar extend into modern day Sindh. The Rann of Kutch is an extension of the Thar Desert, being a salt marsh in present-day Gujarat. The Thar itself can be divided into two parts - the Great Desert and the Little Desert. The Great Desert runs from the edge of the Rann of Kutch to the Luni river which lies in the north of the Rann. The Little Desert runs from the Luni between Jaisalmer and Jodhpur into the northern areas of Bikaner and Shekhawati.¹⁸ To understand the geography and geomorphology of the Thar Desert in greater detail, it is essential to factor in not only the desert but also its surrounding areas.

The Western Asiatic desert region lying on the west of the Aravallis forms the Thar desert, lying in both modern day Rajasthan and parts of modern-day Sindh. In a wider context, this area is part of a larger desert zone extending beyond Sindh, Balochistan, Afghan Seistan and Iranian Plateau almost to the Zagros Mountains in the west, and northward towards the Hindu-Kush and beyond.¹⁹ This whole desert region is in turn part of the great Saharan-Arabian Desert belt. (Map 1.) However, the Thar is unique because while on one hand it is a

¹⁸ K.D Erskine, *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series: Rajputana*, Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908, p. 2.

¹⁹ Bridget Allchin, Andrew Goudie and Kurnarkara Hegde, *Prehistory and Palaeogeography of the Great Indian Desert*, Academic Press, 1979, p. 5.

part of this larger desert region, on the other hand it is also an island surrounded by the fertile plains of Sindh, Punjab, Gujarat and Peninsular India, thus forming an important link in the subcontinent's relationship with the world. It is emphasized in the discussion below that the physical landscape of the desert is diverse and complex unlike its popular perception of being a homogeneous, seamless wasteland.



MAP 1. GLOBAL DESERTS AND THEIR OUTLYING ARID ZONES²⁰

a. Relief Features, Landscape and Sand Dunes

There is great diversity of relief in the Thar. The desert is surrounded on all sides by alluvial plains watered by the Indus and the Ganges systems, and mainland Gujarat. Beyond the Rann of Kutch to the south lie the fertile plains and hills of Kathiawar and Saurashtra. Running north-eastwards from Northern Gujarat are the Aravallis which stretch on up to Delhi.

²⁰ Map based on information from Google Maps and *Oxford Student Atlas for India*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

The Aravallis form a division between the sands of the Thar and the non-aeolian (non-windblown) terrains of the east.²¹ The range is also the major Indian watershed separating the drainage of the Bay of Bengal through rivers like Chambal and tributaries of the Yamuna, from the drainage of the Arabian Sea through rivers like Mahi, Luni, Sabarmati etc.²² The Aravallis also mark the division between the Western Asiatic Desert Region, i.e., the Thar and peninsular India. This is marked by the pattern of rainfall in the region. West of the Aravallis is an area of low and uncertain rainfall and extremes of climate both seasonal and diurnal. South-east of the Aravalli is the region of higher and less variable rainfall and less variations in temperature, making this area more conducive for agriculture.

The Thar, which is water deficit topography lying to the west of the Aravallis, shows variations in landforms. In terms of regions of the Thar, the southern and north-eastern part of the desert is a vast sandy tract comprising parts of Marwar and Amber known as Bagar.²³ Shekhawati, Bidawati, Pugal, Asigarh, Beniwal and Bhatner are the northern parts of the desert.²⁴ The north-western part of the desert is called Chitrang. These areas are in modern day Rajasthan. The land surrounding Umarkot in the western parts of the desert is known as Dhat, with neighbouring regions like Thalaicha, Tarel, Tirrud, Khawar, Khairalu, Khadal and Sam.²⁵ South of Dhat is Deorawati, Endowati, Mahewa, Sewanchi and Bhakar. These regions are partly in western Rajasthan and partly in present day Sindh, divided by the international border.

It is essential to closely examine the diversity of relief in the Thar to move away from a romantic notion which imagines the Thar as synonymous with sand dunes. The desert landscape derives its character from extreme dryness and sparse vegetation and also from topographical features like sand dunes, blocked water courses and seasonal and saline lakes.²⁶

²¹ Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeography*, p. 9

²² Ibid.

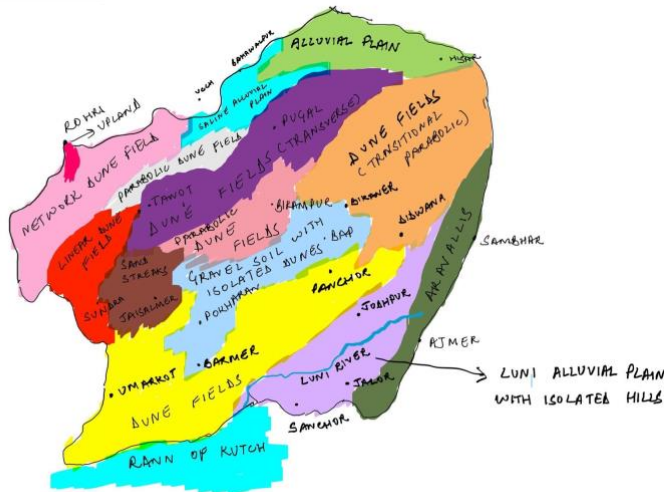
²³ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 28

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 11

These are results of past and present climates. An exposition of the topography of the desert is important in order to write a history of the desert.



MAP 2. THE THAR DESERT - PHYSICAL FEATURES²⁷

Directly to the west of the Aravallis is the region known as Marwar. The name itself means ‘land of death’ signifying its extreme arid conditions. A large part of the region is covered by sand dunes of the transverse type, i.e, with their longer axis at right angles to the prevailing wind. Isolated hills of solid rock are scattered over the plain.²⁸ On the south-eastern edge of Marwar are the Aravallis. Right upto the edge of the Aravallis are metamorphic rocks rising precipitously from the plains. These rocks are chiefly gneiss, hornblende, quartz and mica-slate, basalt, porphyry and occasionally granite.²⁹ The land west of the Aravallis is sandy

²⁷ Information for the map based on Amal Kar, ‘The Thar of The Great Indian Sand Desert,’ in Vishwas S. Kale (ed.), *Landscapes and Landforms of India*, Springer, 2014, p. 80

²⁸ Erskine, *Imperial Gazetteers*, p. 171

²⁹ Archibald Adams, *The Western Rajputana States : A Medico-Topographical and General Account of Marwar, Sirohi and Jaisalmir*, Junior Army and Navy Stores, 1899, p. 4.

with a substratum of the aforementioned rocks which at places rise up through the sand. The major river passing through Marwar is the Luni which divides the region into two unequal parts. The land upto the Luni is sandy with canonical hills called *mers*, chief of which are at Bhadrajun, Jalore, Nadolai, Sojhat, Jasole and Sanderao.³⁰ North of Jodhpur city the land is a vast sandy plain or *thal*, with sand dunes - *tebas* – which, commencing from Marwar stretch north into Bikaner and west and south into Jaisalmer and Sindh. Mallani is the site of a large number of silica rich igneous volcanic rocks called rhyolites.

The sandy desert extends upto Jaisalmer. However, the land around Jaisalmer is stony, being a continuation of the rocky outcrops of Mallani.³¹ East of Jaisalmer is also rocky ground indicated by stony hills which appear at places as far as Pokharan and Phalodi in Marwar.³² To the west of Jaisalmer are sand dunes that keep shifting due to wind action. These are locally called *dhrian*.³³ These sand dunes vary in size from two or three miles across to ten to twelve miles. The land is stony towards the south, north-east and north-west from Jaisalmer. In several places there are limestone and sandstone rocks on the surface of the land.³⁴ Northwards from Jaisalmer lies the territory of Bikaner. The southern and eastern parts of the territory lie within the vast sandy tract known as Bagad.³⁵ Parts of Marwar and Amber also fall within Bagad.

From Jaisalmer, in the north-westerly direction, is a range of small hills with an elevation of 150 feet. This range runs up to the Indus and almost exclusively forms the rocks on which the town of Rohri and the island fortress of Bhakkar stand.³⁶ Pat is the part of the desert which lies around Shikarpur and is sandy in nature. This desert lies in the north-eastern part of Upper

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. p. 22

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. p. 24

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Erskine, *Imperial Gazetteers*, p. 309

³⁶ A.W Hughes, *A Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, George Bell and Sons, 1876, p. 3.

Sindh and consists of clay deposits.³⁷ The desert extends into the Thar and Parkar regions of Sindh and up to eastern portions of Khairpur. The Thar is much similar to Pat with extensive tracts covered with sand hills. These sand hills continuing from Rohri to Alor bent southwards separating the Hakra and the Indus valley. To the south of Thar and Parkar areas of Sindh lies the Rann of Kutch. It is a saltwater marsh with an area of nearly 100,000 sq. km.³⁸ Part of the Rann becomes a salt lake for six months of the year due to the influx of the sea from Kutch and Kathiawar. For the remaining six months the water evaporates and the salt desert remains.

b. Water Sources in the Thar

Rivers flowing through the Thar Desert and its surrounding areas generally arise from the Aravallis with the exception of the Indus. The most important river is the Luni which flows through Marwar. Its name means 'salt river' as the water is sweet upto Balotra and then turns salty and brackish near its mouth.³⁹ It arises from the Ana Sagar lake - which lies 5km south west of Ajmer - and flows 450 km westwards before entering the Rann of Kutch.⁴⁰ It had a larger discharge in the past, but today the Luni is a seasonal torrent flowing for a few days in sandy and shallow beds, and occasionally flooding widely.⁴¹ Its tributaries include the Lilri, Raipur Luni, Guhiya, Bandi, Sukri, and Jawai on the left bank and Jojri on the right.⁴² None of these are perennial. The Kakni is a stream which rises near Jaisalmer city and flows in a northerly and westerly direction before forming a lake called Bhuj *jhil*.⁴³ Another small rivulet called Lathi ki Nadi entered Jaisalmer from Jodhpur but has long since dried up. The Indus

³⁷ Amita Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire (1591-1740): A Study of Its Administration, Society, Economy and Culture,' Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Aligarh Muslim University, 2010, p. 5

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 2

³⁹ Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeography*, p. 14

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Adams, *The Western Rajputana States*, p. 44

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 6

flows through Sindh dividing it into two parts. In Sindh, its own bed is above the general level of the plain - thus, Sindh is said to be a low-lying region. On the eastern side of the river, the Indus Alluvial Plain merges into the sand desert of the Thar.⁴⁴

The Kantli or Katli arises in the hills near Jaipur and after flowing northerly for around sixty miles through Shekhawati, loses itself in the sand dunes around Bikaner.⁴⁵ The Ghaggar rises in the lower slopes of the Himalayas near Sirmur and after flowing through Patiala and Hisar enters the Bikaner region from the north-east.⁴⁶ It is mostly dry and has some water only during the rainy season. Along with seasonal rivers, the desert is also home to a number of lakes both freshwater and saline. Dunes and alluvium interdigitate causing saline and freshwater lakes - *dhands* - to occur on the alluvium floor between high sand ridges (*bhits*).⁴⁷ Most of the lakes occur due to blockage of drainage lines due to aeolian (wind) deposits or by a decrease in discharge which has disrupted the flow in a complete river system.⁴⁸

The largest lake is the Sambhar with an area of 233 sq. km. It is seasonal, drying out completely during the dry season. It is saline and has been the largest source of salt in the region. Sambhar is drained by four streams - the Rupnagar, Mendha, Kharia and Khandal.⁴⁹ North of Sambhar are the depressions of Didwana and Kuchaman - also saline. These fall within modern day Bikaner district with Lunkaransar being the largest lake in the area. Freshwater lakes in Bikaner territory include those at Gajner and Kolayat, both of which are dependent on rains and tend to dry up in years of less rainfall.⁵⁰ West of Jodhpur, near the Luni, are a series of old river courses which have become blocked and in these salt deposits have accumulated.⁵¹ These include Pachpadra, Thob, Didas and Samuja. Other smaller depressions

⁴⁴ Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeography*, p. 16

⁴⁵ Adams, *A Gazetteer*, p. 309

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 310

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 17

⁴⁸ Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeography*, p. 11

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Adams, *The Western Rajputana States*, p. 310

⁵¹ Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeography*, p. 11

include Kuchawan, Phalodi and Pokharan. Allchin argues that the Jaisalmer and Pokharan Ranns may not be the result of simple disruption of drainage. These Ranns include the Mitha, Kharia and Kamodwala saline depressions. These Ranns appear to be independent basins interrupted by uplands of different rocks on their extremities which are not part of any past river bed.⁵² While the reason for the salinity of the aforementioned lakes has been a topic of heated debate, the most acceptable explanation is that these lakes are the result of Late Holocene or Pleistocene disruption of drainage by dunes.⁵³

c. Soil Types in the Thar

In the Thar Desert, alluvial soils are less extensive than in neighboring Gujarat, being mostly concentrated around the Luni basin. Major part of the land surface consists of aeolian sand which has accumulated over the past 1.8 million years.⁵⁴ The majority of various desert soils have low clay content, high sand content and sometimes have a lime pan - *kankar* - locally called *rotha*.⁵⁵ Soils in the Thar Desert can be classified into various categories. In modern day Bikaner district, three types of soil have been identified. The desert non-calcic soil has less calcium content and is found in Lunkaransar and north-western parts of Bikaner district. The desert calcic brown soil is found in south-east Bikaner and west of Kolayat. The desert sand dune soils are found east of Kolayat. The character of the three soils in Bikaner is that they are level, firm and stony but can be productive in years of good rainfall.⁵⁶

Near Jodhpur, the calcium carbonate content of the soil increases resulting in *kankar* bed formation. Grey brown soil occurs near areas west of the Aravallis like Barmer, Jalore, Nagaur,

⁵² Ibid. p. 12.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 13

⁵⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Thar-Desert>. Accessed on 11.09.2021.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 26

⁵⁶ Sunita, 'Phytogeographical and Ecological Studies of Western Rajasthan with Particular Reference to Bikaner District', Unpublished PhD Diss., Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner, 2009, p. 57

Jodhpur, Sirohi, Pali etc. This soil is saline with high calcium and phosphate contents. In Western Thar towards Jaisalmer and onwards to Sindh, the soil is both the shifting sandy type (in the deeper desert areas) and the clayey floodplain type (closer to the Indus). These soils are moderately calcareous and include wind-blown soils from Kutch and Kathiawar.⁵⁷ The Rann of Kutch has clayey loam type soil which forms hard clusters and is not conducive to plant growth. The salinity of this soil and its phosphorus content is also very high.

d. Climate of the Thar

Having discussed the water sources and soil types in the desert, it is imperative to examine the climate prevalent in the desert. These factors include temperature and rainfall variations. The Thar is often described as a monsoon desert as the region is under the sway of the monsoonal system, thus having highly seasonal rainfall.⁵⁸ Bulk of the rainfall occurs during the months of June to September. However, the amount of rainfall varies in the Thar with Jaisalmer and Barmer receiving the lowest mean rainfall. South and south-east Marwar receive more rainfall than western and northern parts of the region. In Bikaner, rainfall varies from less than six inches annually in the west to up to fourteen inches in the east and southeast.⁵⁹ This pattern of rainfall continues into upper Sindh which receives scanty precipitation, generally violent and of short duration.⁶⁰

Just like rainfall there is variability of temperature as well. The months from March to May are the hot weather season which experiences the highest temperatures. Temperatures in the Jaisalmer region range from 17°C to 47°C during the hot season while they dip below

⁵⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan/The-desert-areas>. Accessed on 11.09.2021

⁵⁸ Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeography*, p. 28

⁵⁹ Adams, *The Western Rajputana States*, p. 313

⁶⁰ Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire', p. 7

freezing point during the winter month of January.⁶¹ In Marwar and Bikaner the summer months experience intense heat with daily variations in temperature leading to hot days and cool nights. Bikaner experiences sandstorms during the summer months while winters are extremely cold.⁶² This daily and seasonal temperature variation continues into Sindh with summer temperatures during the day rising up to 43°C and winter temperatures being below freezing at night.⁶³

e. Flora and Fauna of the Thar

As with precipitation and temperature, the flora and fauna of the desert also shows great variation. Forested areas and woodlands are found in south and south-east Marwar and near the Aravallis where rainfall is quantitatively higher. A considerable area of Sirohi is covered in trees and bush forests with the most common tree being the *dhao*. Other trees include the *neem*, *gular*, *karel*, *ber* and *bar*.⁶⁴ The land in Bikaner, Jaisalmer and the rest of Marwar is scarcely forested. Bikaner possesses no forests and due to lack of water trees are scanty. Most common are *khejra*, *jhal*, *khair*, and *babul*. Other bushes and scrubs include the *phog*, the *sajji*, the *lana*, the *karel* and the flowering *akra*.⁶⁵ While the area in north and north west Marwar, including Mallani and Jaisalmer is a vast sandy tract, belts of *khejra* grow at various places in these tracts. Other parts of Marwar have growth of *khejri*, *babul*, *dhao* as well as fruit trees like *anar*, *nimbu* etc. Timber is also grown in the more fertile tracts to the east and south east. Jaisalmer region abounds in scrub growth with the most common being *thor*, *rohira*, *bavli*, *hingota*. Trees are scarce but *khejra* can be found along with bushes like *phog*, *lana*, *akra* etc.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Adams, *The Western Rajputana States*, p. 8.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 310

⁶³ Hughes, *A Gazetteer*, p. 6

⁶⁴ Adams, *The Western Rajputana States*, p. 232

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 311

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 7

In the Thar and Parkar areas of Sindh, which form the western portions of the Great Desert, there is cultivation and growth of vegetation on the extensive range of sand dunes.⁶⁷ In the alluvial soil near the Indus are tracts of *babul* while green foliage of acacia and dates are found near Bhakkar. South, towards the Rann of Kutch, the land abounds in acacia, mesquite, *gando bawal*, as well as *thor*, *neem*, *pipal*, *ber* etc.

Fauna in Kutch includes wild ass, wild boar, *nilgai*, striped hyena, crocodiles etc. The hyena and the wild ass (*gurkhar*) are also found in the adjoining areas of Thar and Parkar in Sindh. The one humped camel is found across the Thar Desert. Camels along with sheep and goat are reared and herded in all parts of the desert in great numbers. Lions, which are now extinct in the desert, could still be found in the Jalore region of Marwar along with the *sambhar*, black bear, and wild ass. The last lion was found in the region in 1872.⁶⁸ The *chital* and the Great Indian Bustard are also endemic to the region.⁶⁹ Varieties of the bustard along with hyena, wild pigs, *nilgai*, black buck and even panthers can be found in the desert around Jaisalmer. Wild ass as well as a variety of cougar used to be found in Bikaner but have long since disappeared.⁷⁰ *Chinkara*, hyena, wild hogs, Great Indian Bustard, as well as sand-grouse are now found here. Varieties of snakes both poisonous and non-poisonous can also be found throughout the Thar Desert.

Thus, the above discussion provides a detailed exposition of the geographical and ecological condition of the Thar. It is clear from this analysis that the Thar has a wide range of topographical, climatological and ecological diversity. Such a discussion is relevant because it is helpful in contextualising the specific ecological zone i.e. the Thar as well as enables one to critically engage with its environment while conducting a historical inquiry on it.

⁶⁷ Hughes, *A Gazetteer*, p. 5

⁶⁸ Adams, *The Western Rajputana States*, p. 50

⁶⁹ Other animals found in the wooded areas of Marwar include panthers, hyenas, black buck, ravine deer, *nilgai*, etc. Ibid. p. 50

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 310

III. Research Methodology

The Thar desert is nearly 200,000 km² in area with 85% of it located in modern day India while the rest 15% lies in modern day Pakistan.⁷¹ Thus, the Thar is divided by the international boundary in the present day. However, since this boundary only came into being recently, it is important to transcend it and view the Thar Desert as a whole instead. It is crucial to situate the desert in its geographical setting and elaborate upon its relations with the areas that surrounded it – the Indus Valley, Ganges Plains, Malwa Plateau and the Gujarat Plains.

Scholars characterize a Dry Zone around the desert.⁷² This Dry Zone is a broad belt of areas of low and uncertain rainfall around the eastern and south eastern margins of the desert. It has been argued that it is here that evidence of past climatic and landscape changes can be found. The presence of remains of the pre-historic man, Stone Age sites of all periods and settlements of later prehistoric times points to the desert as the locus of these changes.⁷³ Thus, it can be inferred that the interaction between human beings and the environment at the margins of the desert is a crucial aspect of any attempts at writing a history of the desert.

Having explored the existing historiography on the Thar and the issues within it, it is important to examine the various approaches and methods that this research has been based upon while conducting a historical inquiry into the Thar Desert itself. The questions, defining the problematics and analysis have derived their understanding from the methods used in the areas of regional studies, landscape studies, connected history and environmental history. In

⁷¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Thar-Desert>. Accessed on 12.10.2019

⁷² Allchin, *Prehistory and Palaeogeography*, p. 5

⁷³ *Ibid.*

the following sections, these areas of research with their respective methodologies have been discussed. In what ways the dissertation uses these approaches will also be explained.

i. Regional Approach

Before starting to examine any space as a ‘region’, it is important to question the category itself as well as question how and why a certain space should be characterized as a region. Thus, it becomes relevant to examine this method in order to ascertain its suitability in the current research. Tanuja Kothiyal’s *Nomadic Narratives* (2016) attempted to examine the Thar as a region characterised by the mobility of narratives, people and commodities. However, since there is no universally accepted definition of a ‘region’, it becomes a difficult task to conceptualise a specific ecological zone like the Thar which has great social diversity as a distinct region. Bernard Cohn raises the significant question of examining the circumstances that warrant the emphasis on a ‘total entity’ and when it makes sense to examine regional differences.⁷⁴ Most definitions of a region arise out of specific geographical features and man’s adaptations to these. However, while the idea of a ‘natural region’ is one way to characterize a region, over the years, human geographers have also been looking at relationships within and with spaces which encompass physical and human conditions.⁷⁵ However, Cohn suggests that it is also important to conceptualize regions in non-physical terms, i.e., historical, linguistic, cultural, and social and the interrelations between these variables.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Bernard S. Cohn (ed), *An Anthropologist Amongst Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 101

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 102

Although the category ‘historical region’ may seem enduring, it is actually changing over time. So, the question of a historical region also has to be historicized as various circumstances can change boundaries and the very nature and conception of a region. Thus, one has to be wary of essentializing a region as well as projecting modern conceptions and assumptions back in time. In addition to these, while defining a region, it is also important to identify and examine networks of relationships and relationships of these networks with centres in order to better understand how a region is integrated.⁷⁷ Thus, while a region may be defined in various ways – geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic, it is important to understand the relationships which integrate it into one entity. It becomes important to move away from ecological determinism when defining a certain eco zone as a region. The cultural-historical identities and the relative presence of political states and their boundaries have also to be taken into account, without which the region will be reduced to its natural element only.⁷⁸

Various works on formulation of a pre-modern region have attempted to examine the different ways in which the idea of a region may be formed. Notable examples are Samira Sheikh’s *Forging A Region* (2010), Tanuja Kothiyal’s *Nomadic Narratives* (2016), and Karine Schomer’s edited volume *Idea of Rajasthan* (1998). Sheikh raises important questions in her study of Gujarat as a region. What is Gujarat? What is Gujarati linguistic region? How did it come into being and who propagated it? Who are Gujaratis? Where did they come from and where did they settle? How is the region named? How did its geophysical features shape its history? Sheikh historicises these questions and locates the creation of a regional unity during the Chalukya period which witnessed a series of interconnected processes like the rise of the

⁷⁷ Bernard S. Cohn, ‘Networks and Centres in the Integration of Indian Civilisation,’ in Richard Fox (ed.), *Regions and Regionalism in Traditional India*, Vikas, 1977, pp. 78-87.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p 108.

Rajputs and their migration from Sindh and Rajasthan along with other pastoralist groups, clearing of land for agriculture, interactions between merchants and pastoralists etc.⁷⁹

However, while Sheikh conceptualizes Gujarat as a historical region, she presumes its existence through time from the twelfth century. This is obvious in her tracing of a regional identity through the rise of the Gujarati language. The rise of Gujarati language, Sheikh argues, was a function of the religious market where preachers and missionaries needed to commute with a diverse population. Gujarati became the lingua franca for a region of migrants to communicate with each other. However, this again raises the question of defining a particular linguistic region specifically in an area with differing geographic zones as well as prone to large migrations. In historicizing the Gujarat region, Sheikh ends up projecting modern day boundaries and conceptions of Gujarat to the premodern period. However, her work is important because she also tries to locate multiple relationships between warriors, traders, pastoralists, religious communities etc. In doing so, she tries to locate networks of relationships between these groups and the rural society to civilizational centres like administrative, commercial and religious ones in urban areas. Thus, she tries to follow Cohn's argument of examining several levels of the economic, political and social structure as well as looking at the centres which act as a source of diversity and integration of various levels of civilisation.

Idea of Rajasthan (1994) is an important work, which problematizes the identification of Rajasthan as a region. The editors point out how scholarships on regions and regionalism in the social sciences have been broadly concerned with theoretical formulations and definitions rather than focusing on questions of regional distinctiveness and regional identity.⁸⁰ They point out the importance of examining the subjective connection of human collectives to their natural

⁷⁹ Samira Sheikh, *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200-1500*, OUP, p. 5

⁸⁰ Deryck O' Lodrick, 'Rajasthan as a Region: Myth or Reality,' in Karine Schomer, Joan L. Erdmann and Deryck O' Lodrick (eds.), *The Idea of Rajasthan : Explorations in Regional Identity*, Vol. 1, Manohar, 1994, p. 5

and man-made environment, thus arguing that while regions are grounded in objective realities, they are also subjective constructs for both outsiders and insiders.⁸¹ Thus, to explore a regional identity is to explore an idea which cannot really be boxed into definitive categories, especially when speaking in a pre-modern context. It is not enough to examine how a regional identity is formed but it is also important to question how it is performed. Thus, when thinking of a region, it is important to not only take into cognizance its geographical reality but also to examine how it is experienced, how various structures are constituted here and how adaptations to these structures have shaped lives and thought. Derrick O'Lodrick raised important questions about recognizing a particular space as a region in his contribution to the volume, 'Rajasthan as a Region: Myth or Reality?' He contends that it is important to examine the ways in which Rajasthan has been viewed as a region. By doing so, he raises questions regarding the basis of recognition of a place as a region, and how the concept of a region was applied to that place.

According to him, there are two concepts of a region. First, a priori and self-evident existence of a region. Second, the existence of the region as a myth. While in lay terms a region can be a given spatial unit distinct from others that surround it, however, a region is not self-defined or nature given. It is an intellectual concept. Thus, there arise several typologies of the region. Amongst these, O'Lodrick underlines three: instituted, denoted and naively given. While the first two are objective, the last is a subjective category.⁸² Instituted and denoted regions are conscious creations designed at a particular moment for a particular purpose and presented to the world as de facto regions.⁸³ For instance, a Mughal *suba* is an instituted region created for administrative purposes; invariably perceived and defined by outsiders. Thus, it is an observed region. A naively given region, on the other hand, is a perceived space, an experienced region rooted in people's perception of the space they occupy. It is a shared

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 12

⁸² Ibid. p. 15

⁸³ Ibid. p. 16

reaction to their particular segment of space or its specific features which leads to an awareness of its distinctiveness.⁸⁴ This gives birth to a distinctive regional identity.

In the context of defining Rajasthan as a region, O'Lodrick highlights many issues that need to be addressed. While the administrative boundaries of Rajasthan have remained more or less unchanged since the Mughals denoted it as a *suba*, how can it be thought of as a cultural region? According to O' Lodrick, the basis and extent of a Rajasthani's perception of Rajasthan as a subjective space needs to be determined. This throws up a number of methodological issues. First, how do Rajasthanis relate to the environment and culture in which they live and function? Second, the concept of Rajasthan as a region differs from community to community. Are such perceptions different for individuals than as a member of a caste or community? Third, what are the elements that shape the subjective perceptions of Rajasthan's distinctiveness? How can one identify these elements? People mentally order subjective space according to criteria that include landholders, caste, history, physical environment, economic patterns etc. All these need to be examined. Thus, while O'Lodrick raises important questions about the study of regions and the *Idea of Rajasthan* is certainly a leap forward when it comes to regional studies, however, this attempt also suffers from the basic error of exoticizing Rajasthan and imposing a certain continuity to it. Modern Rajasthan is full of sub-regions which have had their own historical and cultural trajectories.

An important question to address must be related to the relations between regions and sub regions. Cohn attempts to delve into this but only superficially. This then brings one to the question of the Thar Desert. When we think about the Thar Desert, we must think of it as a geographic as well as historical entity. It also holds a cultural identity as the desert orders the lives and lifestyles of communities, administration, religion etc. However, the question is not

⁸⁴ Ibid.

about the reality of the desert but rather can we identify it as a holistic entity at all? It then becomes important to not only examine the ways in which communities have negotiated with the ecology of the desert but also to identify and examine other networks of relationships. However, works like that of Kothiyal's presuppose a modern region when discussing pre-modern Thar by situating it within Rajasthan. Thus, while her work characterises the Thar as a mobile region, this mobility is limited within modern boundaries of western Rajasthan. This has the effect of socially and ecologically homogenizing the Thar, thus, ignoring its diversity. The notion of 'region' may help one to identify characteristics which make the Thar distinct. However, it alone cannot be used to examine the Thar in totality.

ii. Landscape Approach

While the concept of landscape has been in much use in the fields of cultural geography and history particularly in Europe and North America, there is relatively less engagement with landscape as a tool for historical analysis in the Indian context. The concept of landscape is a heavily contested one throughout the fields of cultural geography, history, archaeology, philosophy and sociology. Cultural geographers like JB Jackson and philosophers like W.J.T Mitchell have criticized the traditional idea of landscape as a portion of land that can be seen at a glance. Jackson argued that landscape is not a natural feature of the environment but a synthetic space created by man and superimposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community.⁸⁵ Subsequent theorists have criticized Jackson and approached the concept of landscape through various angles – as a 'way

⁸⁵ Tullio Pagano, 'Reclaiming Landscape.' *Annali d'Italianistica*, vol. 29, *Italian Critical Theory*, 2011, p. 402.

of seeing', as a product of material conditions of the society, as an outcome of colonial conquests etc.

There are many questions surrounding the concept of landscape. Is landscape a specific cultural and historical genre – a set of visual strategies and devices for distancing and observing? Or is it shaped by the lived experiences and everyday activities of the people inhabiting it? To put it simply, do we observe or do we inhabit the landscape? It is this particular question, which has led to different ways of studying landscape. Earlier work by landscape historians like Carl Sauer and W.G Hoskins was based primarily on the 'field science' model.⁸⁶ This involves extensive field surveys and collecting empirical data in order to have any notion of the landscape. Thus, according to this approach, landscape is primarily factual and objective, an external and independent field and not a contrivance of one's perception. It follows that the landscape is synonymous with geography in this strand of scholarship. However, while Sauer talks about the materiality of the landscape, he also understands it as a cultural entity, crafted by humans rather than a natural environment. Thus, for him, any landscape is a 'material cultural landscape' fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is agent, nature is medium, cultural landscape is the result.'⁸⁷ An extremely relevant scholarship in this regard is that of J.B Jackson. His main argument is that 'landscape' is the everyday material world of ordinary inhabitants – he terms this as the 'vernacular landscape'. According to him, these landscapes are those, which people inhabit and work in and are produced through routine practice in everyday sense.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ See for instance W.G Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, Penguin, 1954; Carl Sauer, 'The Agency of Man on Earth,' in W. Thomas, *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*, University of Chicago Press, 1956. Also See Carl Sauer, *Land and Life*, University of California Press, 1963.

⁸⁷ John Wylie, *Landscape*, Routledge, 2018, p. 20.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 43. See also J.B Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, Yale University Press, 1984.

While J.B Jackson's ideas challenged the notion of landscape as inherently visual, most major scholarship post Jackson identified landscape with landscape art.⁸⁹ Here, the history of landscape and perspective art from the fifteenth century to the present become important parameters to consider. The notion of landscape is associated with the visualization of the relationship between nature and culture. Importantly, in thinking of the landscape as a system of producing and transmitting meaning through visual symbols and representations, landscape art alongside cartography, photography, poetry and literature becomes a key medium through which the West, particularly Europe, historically understood itself and its relationship with other cultures and the natural world. Landscape art, which is based on principles of linear perspective, has had a decisive impact on the European sense of self as well as perception of the world. Thus, ideas of linear perspective have great cultural significance in terms of studying the landscape and its perception. With the flourishing of perspective in landscape art in mid-fifteenth century Italy, landscape became a 'way of seeing' the world. Perspective came to be understood as a realistic, truthful and authoritative representation of space. It became attractive because it enabled a commanding, objective and controlled grasp of space and spatial relations.

Scholars like Denis Cosgrove have explored the socio-historical implications of perspective, and by extension, landscape as a 'way of seeing' the world.⁹⁰ According to Cosgrove, since 'perspective' was regarded as the discovery of inherent properties of space itself, then 'landscape' is a way of seeing, composing and structuring the world so that it may be appropriated by a detached individual spectator to whom an illusion of order and control is offered by organizing space according to principles of geometry. In this sense, Cosgrove

⁸⁹ Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 55.

⁹⁰ See Denis Cosgrove, 'Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,' *Transactions of Institution of British Geographers*, Vol. 10, No. 1985, pp. 45-62; Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson, 'New Directions in Cultural Geography,' *Area*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1987, pp. 95-101. See also Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

attempts to underline the relationship between perspectival vision and the materiality of property relations within capitalist and mercantile economies. Thus, according to Cosgrove, if ‘perspective’ renders space as visual property of the spectator, then ‘landscape way of seeing’ involves control and domination over space as an absolute, objective entity transforming it into the property of the individual or the state. It thus presents a picture of a particular landscape as an unchanging status quo and suppresses tensions between groups in the said landscape. In this sense, Cosgrove situates art and literature within evolving capitalist systems of production and property ownership.

This idea fits into the larger cultural Marxist notion of recognizing the historicity of perception, which allows interpretation not from an aesthetic but a political point of view. This line of argument has also led scholars like Stephen Daniels to contend that landscape, as a way of seeing, is duplicitous because it offers a transcendent and aesthetic vision of unity with nature while concealing the underlying truth of material conditions.⁹¹ Thus, it manipulates our vision such that we are unaware of the distancing, which separates us from the natural world. This is in essence the cultural Marxist critique of landscape.

The cultural Marxist idea of landscape has three central positions. First, landscape is understood as being always already a representation – whether as a material record of man’s role in shaping the environment or as products of cultural imagination (poems, prose, art etc). Second, the landscape is inherently visual in the sense that the landscape way of seeing produces a subject and fixes the relationship between the subject and the object by situating the subject outside the relations being depicted. Third, the landscape way of seeing is understood to be the preserve of the elite symbolising their dominion over land in the very act of ‘naturalising’ it by making its particular representation seem the natural order of things.⁹²

⁹¹ Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 100.

⁹² *Ibid.*

While the cultural Marxist notion of landscape as a ‘way of seeing’ opened up new interpretations into the concept of landscape, scholars in the 1980s and 1990s began using theories from critical and literary theory to think of landscape as text.⁹³ Here the landscape as text - consisting of both its materiality and representations – is understood as organized around questions of power and authority. The idea here is to understand landscape as an expression of cultural power. Thus, using the metaphor of landscape as text, scholars attempted to explore how dominant ideas and beliefs are reproduced via the landscape. The idea of landscape as a ‘way of seeing’ and landscape as ‘text’ paved the way for new scholarship on the notion of cultures of landscape. The ‘cultures of landscape’ notion is based on exploring primarily the materiality of landscape. This new scholarship on landscape instead sought to look at a people’s history of landscape rather than the elite viewpoint. However, scholars like Don Mitchell have criticized the ideas of landscape as text as having neglected the question of how landscapes are produced in the first place.⁹⁴ Thus, Mitchell argues that Cosgrove and others only address the question of how landscapes are consumed, not how they are produced. He argues that landscape is not the setting of human activity, rather, it is the product and outcome of such activity. Therefore, study of landscapes may reveal the nature of human social and economic relations. According to Mitchell, the landscape is never fully produced but is always in production, i.e., open to change, alteration and contestation. Thus, Mitchell opines that ‘social groups with differing access to power, financial and social resources, and ideological legitimacy, contend over issues of production and reproduction in place. It is out of these contestations that landscape is produced.

Scholars of Indian history have more traditionally turned towards historical geography and environmental history than landscape studies. There has also been a recent trend of

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ See Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*, Blackwell, 1998.

historicizing 'space'. Works like Chitralkha Zutshi's *Kashmir's Contested Pasts* (2014) and Tanuja Kothiyal's *Nomadic Narratives* attempt to explore sacred and mobile landscapes respectively. However, they take up a region with modern boundaries and attempt to historicise it, thus rendering the region as natural and 'always there.' A recent work, which aims to deeply question the idea of frontiers, borders, identities in the context of colonial North East India, is Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L.K Pachuau's *Landscape, Culture and Belonging* (2020). While the time period they have referred to is different, the questions they raise are relevant to this study as well. In discussing the jurisdictions imposed by the colonial states over the hills in the north east, it is importantly argued that boundaries are acts of the state which reterritorialize a region, thus creating new spatial identities.⁹⁵ However, the people living in these areas have conflicts with the imposition of territoriality by the state. Identity and sense of belonging do not necessarily align with the state and groups may operate with alternative notions of space in their everyday life.⁹⁶

Taking this argument forward, one may attempt to understand landscapes in terms of embodied practices and a sense of being. In this context social conflicts acquire new meanings in terms of how various groups strive to protect their identities derived from the spaces they inhabit and their ways of living. Bhattacharya and Pachuau discuss how the idea of 'space' becomes critical in any such analyses. Spatial history has to negotiate two distinct ideas of space – one demarcated by the state in the form of territories and borders and the other sustained by older histories of mobility which form an alternative idea of space.⁹⁷ Thus, it becomes imperative to question the inviolability of territorial boundaries. This can be done by critically examining how the state perceived the landscape and how it sought to define and control it as

⁹⁵ Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L.K Pachuau (eds), *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India*, Cambridge University Press, 2019 , p. 4

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 5

⁹⁷ Ibid.

well as impose newer political and fiscal regimes over it. In addition to this, examining the ways in which the state attempts to control landscapes also brings to focus how the state defines groups and individuals, in essence fashioning a new identity for them. One can thus begin to examine the social landscape by exploring the encounters between different groups – settled and mobile – and the state.

iii. Environmental Approach

Andre Wink, in the context of the Indian Ocean area, stresses the importance of the geographical dimension of history arguing that this method helps one to account for continuities and changes in social and economic organization over extended periods of time.⁹⁸ Such an approach is important if one is aiming to study a specific ecological zone historically characterized as a frontier. It is only by factoring geomorphological changes that a historian can attempt to study human-nature interactions over time and attempt to write a more nuanced history. However, it is imperative to explain what exactly this interaction between human action and the environment entails. ‘Human-nature interactions’ differs significantly from ‘human use of the environment.’ ‘Human use of the environment’ may mean how diverse communities utilised natural resources in distinct but complementary ways.⁹⁹ Diverse resources having varying demand were also regulated in diverse ways. For instance, use of resources was majorly regulated by caste. Caste was the main factor in determining a

⁹⁸ Andre Wink, ‘From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 44, No. 3, July 2002, p. 416.

⁹⁹ Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, University of California Press, 1993, p. 1

community's social position and the privileges accorded to it and thus determined the extent of access it had to the resources.

While most studies on resource use have focussed on categories like relations of production and productive forces as tools of analysis, scholars like Madhav Gadgil and Ram Guha have stressed upon the idea of 'modes of resource use' as more appropriate to determine the 'ecological infrastructure' of human society - i.e., how the use of resources was regulated between communities.¹⁰⁰ These modes are hunting-gathering, nomadic pastoralism, settled agriculture and industrial production. The concept of 'modes of resource use' includes the question of ecological resources within the framework of modes of production. In addition to this, it raises two more questions. First, it examines the ideological basis of the various modes of resource use. Second, it assesses the ecological impact of these modes. While this concept is useful to some extent to analyse the human use of the environment, it still assumes a one way relationship between humans and the environment. Rather than the phrase 'human use of environment', the phrase 'human-nature interactions' would be more prudent.

In this context then one can attempt to analyse the relationship between the environment and diverse communities. Thus, a further question that arises is how communities organised themselves and interacted with others and to what extent did natural conditions govern this interaction between communities and conversely, how did this interaction modify natural conditions. Any attempt at examining human-nature interactions has to acknowledge that these interactions are not static but dynamic over time. Human-nature interactions over a long period of time changes both the landscape and the ways and means of social interactions.¹⁰¹ This is

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 11

¹⁰¹ Mayank Kumar, *Monsoon Ecologies: Irrigation, Agriculture, and Settlement Patterns in Rajasthan during the Pre-colonial Period*, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2013, p. 22

visible in patterns of land use, irrigation, agrarian practices, settlement patterns, conservation practices etc. which also have social implications.

Another aspect of the dynamism of human-nature interactions is the construction of belief systems, perceptions, myths etc. which constitute a major part of a community's dialogue with nature.¹⁰² Thus, a community's perception of the natural environment is essential to map out the various ways in which it has adapted to the said environment over a period of time. Diversity of communities will give rise to a plethora of differing perceptions of the environment which will further lead to diverse ways of engaging with it. This may also lead to conflicts over resources which may have economical, social as well as political implications. In fact, the question of how political powers negotiated with the vagaries of nature has been stressed as an important area of historical enquiry.¹⁰³

An important aspect of human-nature interactions is how communities organised themselves in relation to nature and also with respect to each other. The relations which human beings had with each other were ordered in specific ways and gave rise to a hierarchical social structure. Implicit in this social structure is the question of identity. Sumit Guha calls this 'ethnicity' and argues that it was the basis of organisation in pre-modern societies. This organisation of society was surely not without sources of tensions and conflicts. Thus, human-nature interactions allow us to understand the construction of dominance and marginality within this hierarchical social structure in a different way than already attempted through social histories.

Access to and tussle over resources has often been cited as one of the reasons behind social tensions between communities. While this is true, these conflicts are based over diverse ways of perceiving the natural environment and one's relationship with it. This perception and

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 21

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 39

relationship is often contested by a variety of other differing perceptions. Diverse ways of relating and unrelating with the land also play an important part in identity formations and contestations. Thus, examined this way, the natural environment stops being a background or a stage upon which historical processes occur, but becomes an important actor itself.

Mayank Kumar has taken this line of argument to revisit and recontextualise the centrality of monsoons in human settlements with respect to variations in human negotiations with the climate and the environment.¹⁰⁴ He has also argued elsewhere that during the early medieval period society had understood the vagaries of the monsoon and were thus able to adapt to increasing aridity. This gave rise to states even in the interior of the Thar Desert.¹⁰⁵ Co-existence of agriculture and pastoralism might have helped local communities mitigate climatic variability.¹⁰⁶ This is completely opposite to expectations of migrations from an area with increased aridity. He points out importantly that human perceptions of climatic changes are specific to individual societies and influence how populations respond to climatic changes.¹⁰⁷

These arguments are also given out in great detail by Jos Gommans and applied by Tanujha Kothiyal in context of the Thar.¹⁰⁸ Sedentary and pastoral communities interacted to give rise to flourishing mixed economies. With artificial irrigation technologies peasants managed to bring more arid land under cultivation while pastoralists sought a share in the riches of the settled world. Thus, Wink and Kumar incorporate geographical and environmental factors to examine the interactions between people and write a history of adaptation and accommodation.¹⁰⁹ The Thar is part of the Arid Zone which stretches across Eurasia and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 15

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 62

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 64

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 20. See also Jos Gommans, 'The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c. AD 1100-1800,' *Journal of World History*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 1-23.

¹⁰⁹ Gommans, 'Silent Frontier,' p. 16

Northern Africa. In order to use the desert as a historical category it is important to redefine spatial and temporal boundaries of the civilisations, which converge and overlap in this interstitial region. In context of the Indian Ocean, Wink characterizes its 'unity' as a form of 'regional interrelatedness' which was often tenuous and open ended.¹¹⁰ However, he contends that in the geographical perspective, it is important to locate the major sources of social change in the 'frontiers of settled society', i.e. in the desert and in the arid zone.¹¹¹ These sources of social change are located in the movements of the nomadic and seafaring people of the desert and the ocean respectively. Their penetration and extension of control over settled society needs to be further examined. Tanuja Kothiyal, in *Nomadic Narratives* outlines the mobility of the Thar in terms of people and narratives. She postulates that the major polities of Marwar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer etc. were actually set up by migrant groups of Rajputs who acquired legitimacy by utilizing the mobile region for wealth as well as circulation of their narratives.

Such an approach leads us to view the desert and its polities as connectors rather than confined in fixed boundaries.¹¹² While Wink and others have contended that it was with the Islamic conquests that South Asia became more integrated with the arid zone of Central Asia, Gommans contends that it was not Islam itself but a general enlivening of arid zone which increased its people's mobility.¹¹³ Hence, another way to examine the Thar Desert can be in terms of characterizing it as a connecting space. This approach leads us to examine the interactions between sedentary and itinerant groups as well as the state's attempts to control them.

¹¹⁰ Wink, 'From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean,' p. 421

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 432

¹¹² Jos Gommans, 'Eurasian Frontier After the First Millennium A.D.: Reflections on the Fringe of Time and Space', *Medieval History Journal*, Vol 1, Part 1, 1998, p. 129

¹¹³ Gommans, 'Silent Frontier of South Asia', p. 10.

iv. Methods Used in this Dissertation

An important aspect of the Thar is its geographical position which is such that the principal trade routes from Surat and Cambay in Gujarat to Delhi and Agra passed through it. In addition to this, routes connecting the Ganga-Yamuna Doab to Multan and beyond to the North-West frontier of the subcontinent also passed through the northern part of the desert. Anyone wishing to travel to or from Sindh would also have to transit through the desert. In addition to connecting various regions within the subcontinent, the Thar also connected the subcontinent to Central Asia and beyond. For instance, routes from Kandahar, Multan as well as Bhakkar, Thatta and Ahmedabad passed through Jaisalmer.¹¹⁴ These routes went via Merta and Nagaur onwards to Delhi, Agra and beyond to Awadh and Bengal. Another set of routes from Ahmedabad passed through Jodhpur to meet the routes enumerated above. Most of these routes had a port city like Thatta or Surat as one end point and merged into routes going towards Awadh from Delhi. Thus, it is clear that major routes passed through the Thar connecting it to regions far beyond it. It is also clear from the above description of trade routes through the Thar that the regional approach, landscape approach and environmental approach alone are not enough to satisfactorily study the Thar Desert in totality. An alternative understanding of the space of the desert is required, which can be arrived upon through a nexus of the three above mentioned approaches, linked together by an exploration of the Thar's connections with adjoining and far off regions.

The regional approach coupled with the idea of the desert as a 'frontier' naturalised modern boundary and failed to examine the desert as a whole or in relation with other adjoining areas. While scholars argued that the Thar was a region in itself characterised by the circulation

¹¹⁴ Irfan Habib, *Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1982, sheet 5B.

of narratives, people and commodities across it, there has been no attempt to connect the Thar to larger histories of mobility across the subcontinent and beyond. Another point is that the desert has been examined as a 'frontier' mainly because of its ecological character. However, as highlighted by scholars like Jos Gommans, it is by studying the interaction between pastoral and sedentary societies that can enable one to locate connections of the desert with surrounding regions. These connections can be then used to trace networks of circulation which comprised movements of people, narratives and commodities.

The first step then entails examining what were these networks of circulation and how they developed. 'Networks of circulation' is distinct from 'routes of circulation.' While a route is a course from point A to point B, a network comprises not only the physical route but also the communities involved, their social identities, the commodities exchanged which can be tangible or intangible as well as a perception formed of all groups involved. In addition to this, the state's role in controlling these networks is also an important aspect to examine. In case of the Thar, there were multiple networks of circulation operating within it. These networks connected the Thar to neighbouring as well as far off regions. These networks included trading networks, fiscal networks, religious networks, agro-pastoral networks as well as networks of authority. It is clear that these networks often intersected and overlapped. It would be erroneous to think that their networks remained unchanged over time. Thus, all the circulations occurring in a society - the desert in this case - at a particular time period may be considered as a 'circulatory regime' which is also prone to change over time.¹¹⁵

Historiographically, there have been three ways in which historians have approached the issue of circulation. First, was the study of South Asia's connections with the world economy - thus, attention was paid to movements of men, labour and goods. Second, was the way in

¹¹⁵ Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950*, Anthem Press, 2006, p. 3

which nomadic frontiers were affected by the process of peasantisation due to the process of demilitarisation in the colonial period. The third was the 'subaltern' school which attempted to study the circulation of knowledge between the West and India, arguing that the Western knowledge processes were imposed on the subcontinent as a result of colonial rule.¹¹⁶ To understand the circulatory regime of the desert, it is imperative to examine the interactions over a long period of time between different social formations in the desert including sedentary agriculture in regions around Sindh and eastern Marwar, pastoralism in the deserts around Jaisalmer, western Marwar and Bikaner as well as the mixed agro-pastoral system in other areas of the desert. Thus, the interactions between different societal formations in the Thar have to be examined in terms of a regular pattern of circulation of manpower, goods, capital, techniques, ideas etc. from the 'dry' areas to the 'wet' areas.¹¹⁷ Additionally, any analysis of the circulatory regime of the Thar needs to take into account not only the links forged with Central Asia but also with the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to set the tone of the dissertation. A detailed geographical and environmental account of the Thar was given in order to contextualise its topographical, ecological and climatic diversity. This exercise enabled one to move away from a singular notion of the Thar as a barren and hostile ecological zone. This chapter also attempted to analyse in detail the existing historical research on the Thar. While most studies on deserts like the Sahara have begun to employ diverse and innovative methodologies in order to transcend modern day political borders, that is not the case with studies on the Thar. First, there is a dearth of scholarship on the Thar Desert as a whole. Second, whatever scholarship is there often ends

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 8

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 10

up naturalising the political borders which pass through the Thar. Thus, the entire existing scholarship on the Thar is Rajasthan centric. While this is partly because of the nature of primary sources which are almost all from modern day Rajasthan, this is also because of a colonial intellectual bias. It was colonial practices of demarcating and fixing borders, compiling census lists, surveys of different caste, tribal and religious groups as well as placing Rajputs on top of the social hierarchy in the desert which influenced early studies on Rajasthan and consequently, the Thar. These notions have persisted into more recent scholarship as well. A brief survey in the previous as well as the current chapter of some important historical works has attempted to highlight this issue. Methodology used in the dissertation has also been discussed in detail in order to address the gaps in the current historiography on the Thar. Different methods like the concept of 'region', 'landscape', 'environment' as well as 'circulation' have been explored and their suitability for the current project has been discussed.

Chapter Two

The Political Landscape of The Thar: Control, Conflict and Mediations - c. Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries C.E.

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to map out the political landscape of the Thar Desert from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. An attempt is made here to examine the constitution and evolution of different states and the mechanism of political power in the desert throughout the period under study. This period witnessed the rise of the Rajputs in the desert as the politically dominant social group. The various clans of the Rajputs acquired political supremacy by establishing major states in the Thar like Marwar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Sindh and Kutch. Another crucial feature of this period is the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate and later, the Mughal Empire. It is essential to map out the relationships and networks between the states in the desert and with these larger imperial powers, which claimed supremacy. This is because while at one end different Rajput clans were competing for supremacy with each other and attempting to establish their own kingdoms, at the other end they were also constantly negotiating with expansionary powers in Delhi.

However, the aim here is not to examine these states as central actors and write their political histories. Rather, the aim is to keep the Thar Desert as the central actor and map out its political landscape, i.e., to analyse how the political dynamics between these states were unique by virtue of them being located in and around the desert. Thus, there are two primary objectives of this chapter. First, the aim is to examine the historical processes that led to the rise of different Rajput states, and negotiations and conflicts between different political groups for assertion of power and political control. Second, how did these states negotiate with the

Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire in maintaining their political authority is an important aspect to be examined. In addition to this, it is also important to enquire how inroads by these larger imperial powers changed the political landscape of the desert.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section examines the political landscape of the Thar till the end of the twelfth century. This is done to historicise politics in the Thar by arguing against the notion of the desert being hostile, barren and devoid of any human activity, thus contending that the Thar had a vibrant political culture. The second section traces the upward mobility of major Rajput clans of the desert like the Rathors, Bhatias, Jarejas etc. upto the sixteenth century and the quest of these groups to establish their own seats of power and authority in the desert. The third section examines the attempts of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire to assert their supremacy over the political landscape of the desert, while negotiating and interacting with the various states established there. Thus, this section also attempts to compare how the Delhi Sultanate affected the political landscape of the Thar vis-a-vis the Mughal Empire. The fourth section analyses how the Rajput groups acquired legitimacy to rule. These include a discussion of the relationship between the Rajputs and the Charans, the significance of genealogical accounts about the Rajputs which the Charans composed, memorised and recited, as well as the adoption of Charanic goddesses as *kuldevis* (family goddess) by various Rajput clans. Rajput claims to legitimacy to rule underwent a change with the expansion of the Mughal Empire, which has also been examined in this section.

The main sources used in the chapter are Rajasthani bardic accounts like *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat* and *Dalpat Vilas*. In addition to these, Persian sources like *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani* as well as the *Ain-i-Akbari* have also been used. At places Sanskrit accounts like *Kanhadadeprabandha* as well as epigraphs and inscriptions have also been referred to.

I. Political Landscape of the Thar: The Twelfth century C.E.

The history of the Thar Desert has been written either as a part of the history of various political states like Marwar, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Sindh etc. or as a part of the larger corpus of history of 'Rajputana' or Rajasthan. Thus, it has been implicitly implied in historiography that the Thar was divided between these aforementioned states and constituted part of their territories. However, recent historiography has moved away from this idea and has instead focused on examining the Thar as a frontier region connecting these states. Projecting the Thar as a frontier region in geographical and political terms, Tanuja Kothiyal has argued that the Thar Desert historically existed as a frontier region and can be better defined by the circulation of peripatetic groups, resources and narratives within and beyond it rather than in terms of political boundaries dividing it.¹ Further Kothiyal asserts that the Rajput clan migrations into and within the Thar defined its political culture from roughly the fifteenth century, as it was difficult to visualize a singular Rajput polity within the Thar before this time.²

This chapter argues that the Thar was a site of intense political negotiations prior to the fifteenth century as well. Contrary to popular imagination of a desert being an arid wasteland completely devoid of any settlements or movements, the Thar was always a dynamic space which witnessed large scale mobility of various social groups. It also comprised older political divisions within it which can be traced to centuries before the establishment of the Rajput states in the fifteenth century. For instance, an examination of the terms used to denote territories held by politically dominant groups, like the Gurjara-Pratiharas, in the period upto the twelfth century reveals that there were continuous political negotiations taking place in the Thar.

¹ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 2

² *Ibid.* p. 65

The earliest reference to the Thar is found in the *Rig Veda* where it is called *maru* or 'death'.³ *Maru* is also mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, Rudradaman's Rock Inscription (150 C.E), the *Brihatsamhita* (sixth century C.E), to name a few sources.⁴ The seventh and eight centuries saw the rise of the Gurjaras and hence many terms identifying the Gurjara territory are found in sources from this period. The term 'gurjara' included parts of Jodhpur and Gujarat state which fell within the desert areas. Yuan Chwang (seventh century C.E) mentions Pi-Lo-Mi-Lo which is Bhinmal and the *Kuvalyamalakatha* of Uddyotana Suri, a Jain text (778 C.E) mentions 'Gurjaradesa' and 'Bhillamalla' (Bhinmal).⁵ According to Dasaratha Sharma, by the time of Jinaprabha Suri's *Kharataragacchapatavali* (thirteenth century) the term was limited to Gujarat.⁶ Various terms found like *gurjaradesa*, *gurjararatra*, *gurjaravani*, *gurjarabhumi* associate the land with the Gurjaras.⁷ In the period of the Gurjara-Pratiharas – i.e. from the eighth to the eleventh centuries – one finds references to areas occupied by diverse groups in the Thar, for instance, the Saindhavas, Latas, Maravars, Malavars etc. The *Kuvalyamalakatha* of Uddyotana Suri also mentions these groups while differentiating them from the Gurjaras.⁸

This period also witnessed a proliferation of groups which B.D Chattopadhyaya classifies as 'early Rajputs'. It should be noted that Chattopadhyaya does not explicitly state that these groups also came up in the Thar Desert. However, from the names of the places related to these groups that he mentions, it can be logically surmised that they were located within and around the desert. For instance, in tracing the origins of the Rajputs, he refers to the Mandor Pratiharas who ruled in areas in what came to be known as Marwar.⁹ Another reference that

³ Sharma, *Rajasthan Through the Ages*, Vol. 1, p. 11

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 15

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Vol.1, p. 110

⁹ Chattopadyaya provides evidence of irrigation and extension of agriculture, establishment of markets as well as resettlement of the tribal Abhiras from the Ghatiyala inscription of Kakkuka (eight century

Chattopadhyaya gives is of the Cahamanas of Nadol who established themselves in south-eastern Marwar (Pali district).¹⁰ While Chattopadhyaya limited his study only to the Guhilas, Mandor Pratiharas and the Nadol Cahamas, it can be surmised from his research that the process of the origin of early Rajputs geographically occurred in areas which fall within the Thar Desert as well as its outlying areas like south-eastern Rajasthan, Malwa and Gujarat. Thus, in order to understand the political landscape of the Thar in this period, it is essential to examine the rise of the early Rajputs and their transition to a socially and politically dominant group in the subsequent period, which also affected the Thar.

According to Chattopadhyay, though the twelfth century sources including epigraphs as well as texts like *Kumarapalacharita* (roughly the eleventh century C.E) and *Rajatarangini* (twelfth century C.E) contain references to *rajaputras*, it was the seventh century CE that witnessed the emergence of Rajputs.¹¹ Further it is argued that during this period, the term *rajput* denoted an assimilative category, reflecting the transition from tribal to state polity with the colonisation of new areas and mobility to the *kshatriya* status, which in this period was not based on descent.¹² Chattopadhyaya argues that territorial expansion, increase in number of settlements coupled with expansion of agrarian economy were markers of transition from tribal to state polity.¹³ This process is evidenced in epigraphs of the Pratiharas, Cahamanas and localised kingdoms.¹⁴ Along with this process of territorial expansion, Chattopadhyaya explains that there was simultaneously an upward mobility from feudatory to independent status by claiming a *kshatriya* lineage.¹⁵ Describing these historical developments as a process

C.E) found in the region. See B.D Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 61-62

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 63

¹¹ Ibid. p. 60

¹² Ibid. p. 60-64

¹³ Ibid. p. 62

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 74

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 74

of Rajputisation, it is contended that claims to *kshatriya* status essential for assumption of political power also went through various stages of lineage evolution. One such stage recorded in the genealogies was the *brahma-kshatriya status*, in which the newly emerging royal lines claimed to be the progenies of both *brahmana* and *kshatriya* ancestors. This 'brahma-kshatriya' status was only transitional in the process of legitimizing the new *kshatriya* lineage, which these groups ultimately aspired for.¹⁶ Chattopadhyay cites from elaborate genealogies which were composed, according to him only at the transition stage from feudatory to independent status and hence provided evidence for the above process of upward social mobility and claims to political power.¹⁷ The two aspects of the process of Rajputisation - colonisation of new areas and acquisition of *kshatriya* status - were facilitated by parallel processes of fort building, increasing military strength and spread of the Rajput network through matrimonial alliances. All these consolidated the clan structure and the territorial expansion of the Rajputs.

An important point, which emerges from the above discussion, is that the emergence and spread of various Rajput groups occurred due to mobility of different groups over a wide area. This mobility occurred due to expansion of settlements, breaking away from a dominant branch, migrations, marriage networks and most importantly, political aspirations. As a result, the various Rajput clan groups spread over a large area encompassing the Thar Desert as well as the regions of Gujarat, eastern Rajasthan and Sindh. Their mobility influenced their political trajectories with some groups acquiring political supremacy over others. For instance, various sub-clans belonging to the Guhila Rajput clan spread over Gujarat and Rajasthan and had differing political status. While the Rajasthan branch became independent and founded their own kingdom, the Gujarat branch remained feudatories of the Vallabhi kings (seventh-eighth centuries C.E).¹⁸ Similarly, several branches of the Cahamanas existed either as independent

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 71

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 77-92

¹⁸ Ibid.

ruling groups (in case of Nadol and Sakambhari) or as feudatories of the Mandor Pratiharas. The Cahamanas of Nadol and Sakambhari once powerful were defeated by the Chalukyas of Anhilvada and reduced to a tributary status in 1094.¹⁹

During the reign of Kumarapala, Chalukya territories extended from Tapti to Saurashtra, Chittor to Jaisalmer including Udaipur and Jodhpur.²⁰ Another instance is of Kutch, where in the thirteenth century, the Jadejas were the ruling group. They were actually the Sammas who had fled from Sindh and taken refuge in Kutch under the ruling Cavadas, later supplanting them and taking control of the area.²¹ There was constant tussle for territories between the Jams of Sindh, Jadejas of Kutch and other Rajput kingdoms. The aforementioned examples illustrate how a number of groups contested over political territory in a bid to increase social dominance in various ways. In expanding agriculture, setting up villages and constructing forts, they were able to create a political landscape which remained highly contested until the nineteenth century.

While scholars read the history of the Thar desert in terms of history of dominant Rajput groups, from the above discussion it is clear that the Thar desert played a crucial role in the emergence and dominance of these very groups. The Thar Desert, which pre-existed as a political space, provided the much crucial mobility to these groups, which, in turn, enabled them to politically establish themselves. These groups in turn constantly engaged with and contested the political landscape of the Thar often changing it as a result. The 'territorial system', which according to Chattopadhyaya was the basis of emergence of various 'Rajput' groups, is the building block of this political landscape. By the eleventh century, territorial designation norms had changed such that rulers were referred to not by their clan names but by

¹⁹ Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, p. 16

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

their territorial possessions.²² Extent of territory covered by a state or region accounted for names of several important areas of Rajasthan – for example, Chauhan state of Sakambhari also referred to as Sapadalaksa (*sawalakh*) due to the large number of villages it was believed to have contained.²³

Thus, the landscape was constantly ‘in production’, i.e., it was open to change, alteration and contestation. It needs to be re-emphasized that the most characteristic feature of the Thar desert was the mobility it provided to various groups necessary for creating their political fortunes. The Thar facilitated these groups to establish themselves not only within the desert but also beyond it. At the same time, it connected these groups in marriages, warfare and migrations.

II. Political Landscape of the Thar Desert – Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries C.E

Munhata Nainsi, in his *Khyat* as well as his *Vigat*, describes a landscape defined by the movement and establishment of various Rajput clans in the Thar. This landscape is expressed in terms of the nine forts of the Paramaras - Mandovar, Ajmer, Pugal, Ludrava, Umarkot, Parkar, Abu and Jalor.²⁴

²² Sharma, *Rajasthan Through the Ages*, Vol. 1, p. 113

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Munhata Nainsi and Narayan Singh Bhati, *Munhata Nainsi Ri Likhi Marwar Ra Pargana Ri Vigat*, Vol. 1, 1968, p. 1. Henceforth Nainsi, *Vigat*.



MAP 3 - POLITICAL DIVISIONS WITHIN THE THAR DESERT²⁵

In addition to these, he also refers to the nine forts of the Bhatīs - Jaisalmer, Pugal, Bikampur, Barsalpur, Mamanvahan, Barmer, Marot, Deravar, Asanikot and Kehror.²⁶ If plotted on a map, the nine forts of the Paramaras along with the nine forts of the Bhatīs circumscribe the entire Thar Desert as we understand it today.²⁷ However, his entire account gives a much larger ‘Rajput landscape’ - wherein the Rajput clan network was spread much beyond the Thar or even modern day Rajasthan. It stretched from the Sodha territory in Umarnkot, Bhati territories in Deraval, Ludrava and Jaisalmer, lying in the western parts of the desert straddling present day boundaries of Western Rajasthan and Eastern Sindh. The Rathors ruled over Marwar and the Chauhans ruled in Jalor, which largely make up Western Rajasthan.

²⁵ Information for this map is gathered from Google Maps as well as Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, Map of Thar Desert.

²⁶ Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat*, Vol. 2, Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1968, p. 261. Henceforth Nainsi, *Khyat*.

²⁷ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 29

Southern, South-Eastern and Eastern Rajasthan were the domains of the Sisodias of Mewar, Hadas of Bundi, Kachhwahas of Amber and the Shekhawats of Shekhawati. Another branch of the Rathors ruled over Bikaner in the northern and north-western portions of the Thar. Sammas and Jarechas were dominant in Kutch, Bhuj and Jamnagar while the Solankis ruled over Anhilvada- all in present day Gujarat. Lastly, Nainsi also gives an account of the Bundelas in Malwa.

Thus, the political landscape of the Thar Desert as described by Nainsi goes much beyond the geographical area inscribed by it, extending into neighbouring areas of Gujarat, Malwa and Sindh. Nainsi's understanding of the political landscape comes from older traditions. The nine forts of 'Maruada' are also mentioned in *Kanhadadeprabandha* (fifteenth century C.E) which precedes Nainsi's account by more than a century.²⁸ Nainsi's *khyat* itself is also a compendium of much older oral traditions in circulation amongst the bards who recited them at various places. Thus, the Thar as a political space had existed for a long period of time. It thus becomes important to trace the nature of this political space.

The period from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries witnessed the rise of new centres of power like Jodhpur and Bikaner and their negotiations with existing political centres like Ludrava, Umarkot, Parkar, Jalor and Anhilvada. In addition to this, the political fortunes of some groups fluctuated in relation to the rise of these new centres of power. Kin and clan networks, marriage alliances, migrations and warfare, mark these negotiations. The material basis for these negotiations was control over land and resources. In order to understand all these processes, the following is an account of the political geographies of various ruling clans located in the Thar from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Some of the clans discussed

²⁸ V.S Bhatnagar (trans.), *Kanhadadeprabandha*, Aditya Prakashan, 1991, p. 1. Henceforth *Kanhadadeprabandha*.

here are the Rathors of Marwar and Bikaner, the Bhatias of Jaisalmer, the Sodhas of Umarkot and the Jarejas of Kutch.

i. Rathors in Marwar – Narratives of Political Supremacy

a. The Establishment of a Power Centre in the Thar

Nainsi while writing in the seventeenth century gives an account of the political geography of the Thar by tracing the interconnected political trajectories of various Rajput clans in this period. The Rathors of Marwar are given much importance by Nainsi as he was situated in the court of the Marwar ruler Maharaja Jaswant Singh at the time of writing his account. Nainsi thus traces the growth and spread of the Rathor clan in the Marwar region by giving their genealogy. Nainsi records that the Rathor clan had thirteen different branches.²⁹

He identifies Rao Siha as the founder of the Marwar Rathors in roughly the thirteenth century.³⁰ According to Nainsi's narrative, Siha travelled from Kannauj to Dwarka to atone for the sin of *gotra hatya* (murder of fellow caste members). While in Gujarat, he helped the Chavda rulers of Anhilvada-Patan there to win a land dispute against the Jams of Sindh and in return was given a Chavdi princess in marriage.³¹ Siha's son, Asthan, left Anhilvada-Patan to seek his fortunes elsewhere and reached Pali (in the Marwar region) where a Mer called Kanh used to loot, terrorise and tax the people.³² The Mers in Nainsi's account figure as a local tribal group. Asthan defeated the Mer and conquered Pali along with eighty four villages and thus established his line. He eventually allied with Dabhi Rajputs and defeated the Guhilas to

²⁹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 47

³⁰ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 50

³¹ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 52

³² *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 55

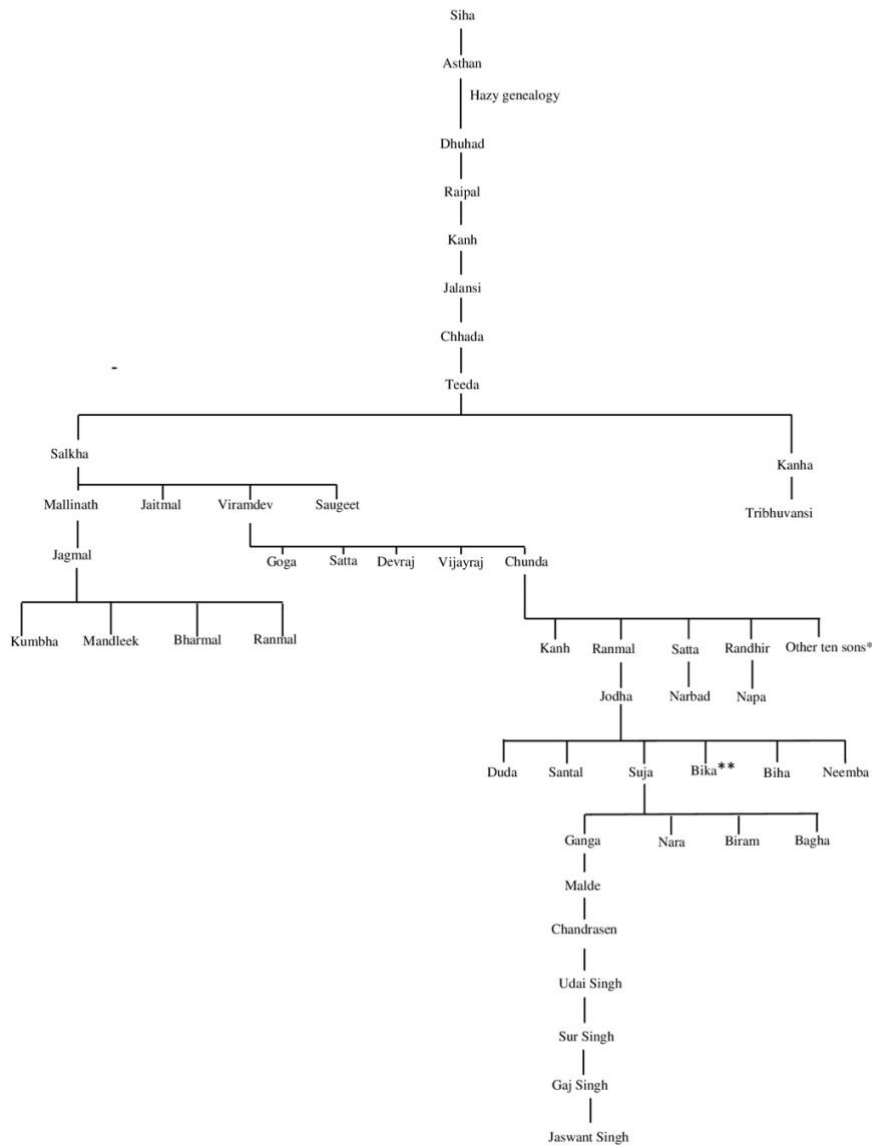


Figure 1 - Family Tree of the Rathors of Marwar c. Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries CE ³³

³³ Information for Figure 1 is gathered from *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat*, Vol. 2. *These ten sons were Arkamal, Sahasmal, Ajmal, Bhim, Pouna, Ram, Lumbha, Lala, Surtan and Bagha. Bika established the kingdom of Bikaner and started the line of Bikawat Rathors. ** Bika was the founder of the Bikaner kingdom and the Bikawat Rathors clan.

conquer Khed in modern day Gujarat.³⁴ His brother, Sonig, evicted the Bhils from Idar also in modern day Gujarat.³⁵ He identifies Rao Siha as the founder of the Marwar Rathors in roughly the thirteenth century.³⁶ According to Nainsi's narrative, Siha travelled from Kannauj to Dwarka to atone for the sin of *gotra hatya* (murder of fellow caste members). While in Gujarat, he helped the Chavda rulers of Anhilvada-Patan there to win a land dispute against the Jams of Sindh and in return was given a Chavdi princess in marriage.³⁷ Siha's son, Asthan, left Anhilvada-Patan to seek his fortunes elsewhere and reached Pali (in the Marwar region) where a Mer called Kanh used to loot, terrorise and tax the people.³⁸ The Mers in Nainsi's account figure as a local tribal group. Asthan defeated the Mer and conquered Pali along with eighty four villages and thus established his line. He eventually allied with Dabhi Rajputs and defeated the Guhilas to conquer Khed in modern day Gujarat.³⁹ His brother, Sonig, evicted the Bhils from Idar also in modern day Gujarat.⁴⁰

After this, the Rathors eventually extended their rule over Bhinmal by ousting the Sonigira Chauhans. The Rathors further appropriated the areas of Maheva and Barmer by defeating the Paramaras, and seized Kothada from the Chauhans. It was Rao Chunda, an important hero of the Rathor clan who acquired the fort of Mandor in 1395 which became the seat of power of the Rathors till Jodhpur was established as the capital.⁴¹ Nagaur was also conquered, probably from the Gujarat Sultans in the fifteenth century. Nainsi further tells us that for a brief period of time Mandor was captured by the Sisodiyas of Chittor. By the mid-

³⁴ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 57

³⁵ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 74

³⁶ Ibid. p. 50

³⁷ Ibid. p. 52

³⁸ Nainsi, *Khyat* Vol. 2, p. 55

³⁹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 57

⁴⁰ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 74

⁴¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 90. While the *khyat* says that Chunda wrested Mandor from the Turks with the help of Eenda Rajputs, other bardic accounts say that Chunda got Mandor as dowry from the Eendas as they could not defend it against the Turks.

fifteenth century, Rao Jodha - a descendant of Rao Chunda - in alliance with the Sankhla and Bhatias from Pugal and Jaisalmer was able to vanquish the Sisodiyas and take back Mandor. He then established Jodhpur in 1459.⁴² Thus, it can be said that by the middle of the fifteenth century the Marwar Rathors established themselves as a major ruling house with the conquest of Mandor and the subsequent establishment of Jodhpur.



MAP 4 - MAP OF MARWAR⁴³

However, the establishment of Mandor and subsequently Jodhpur as seats of power in the fifteenth century was preceded by nearly two centuries of intense inter and intra clan negotiations. While the accounts given by Nainsi for this period are narratives based on older bardic traditions, they can still be used to construct an idea of the politics of this period. For instance, Asthan was able to establish his rule over Pali only after looting the Mers and taking over eighty-four villages.⁴⁴ However, the genealogy from Asthan onwards in Nainsi's account is hazy, suggesting a period of confusion and ambiguity for the political trajectory of the

⁴² Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 131

⁴³ This map is based on information from various *Survey of India Maps* as well as Google Maps.

Map not to scale.

⁴⁴ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 57

Rathors. Thus it stands to reason that the Rathors were still a minor group after the period of Asthan. However, Nainsi gives definite ancestry of Rao Jodha with details going back up to four generations. The only date that Nainsi gives in this timeline is the establishment of Jodhpur in V.S 1515 (C.E. 1459).

b. Material Resources and Clan Rivalries Amongst the Rathors

The aforementioned narratives give a sense of mobility of various Rathor descendants over a vast geographical area with numerous instances of alliance formation/breakdown, rivalries, trickery as well as quarrel over material resources like land and cattle. It needs to be emphasized here that material resources were crucial bases for political power and domination. For instance, according to Nainsi, Rao Salkha was a direct ancestor of Rao Jodha. However, he was disinherited from the throne at Maheva, the capital of the Rathors then - and his younger brother – Rao Kanha - became the ruler instead. Salkha's son Rao Mallinath did *chakari* (service) of his uncle for many years. In return, he demanded land from his uncle who only gave him a third of what he asked.⁴⁵ After his uncle's death, his cousin, Tribhuvansi, ascended the throne. Mallinath then acquired legitimacy as the rightful ruler from the Turks in Delhi and employed Padma Singh, the brother of Tribhuvansi to poison him and become the ruler of Rathor territories.⁴⁶ Thus, these instances throw light on intra-clan tensions with control over land as the main bone of contention.

....Mala (Mallinath) thought – ‘So what if the Badshah has crowned me? As long as Tribhuvansi is alive, I will never be able to rule.’ He (Mala) then hatched a plot with Tribhuvansi's brother Padma Singh promising him that if he assassinates Tribhuvansi, Mala will have him crowned as the ruler of Maheva. Greedy for power, Padma Singh mixed poison into the neem bandages used by Tribhuvansi. Slowly,

⁴⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 70

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the poison spread throughout Tribhuvansi's body and he died. Padma then approached Mala and demanded that he be coronated. Mala replied that this is not how one becomes a ruler and gave Padma two villages for sustenance. Mala was then crowned Rao on an auspicious occasion and became the ruler of Maheva. All the Rajputs came and paid him homage and his rule (thakurai) increased day by day.⁴⁷

Control over territories in this period was fluid and one did not need legitimacy to wrest a territory and retain it. Absolute force was enough. Thus, amassing a large enough army was the main agenda of many clansmen desirous of attaining political control. We have instances of rivalries within the clan of the Rathors. For instance, Nainsi tells us that Rao Chunda was Rao Mallinath's nephew and in his *chakari*. He looted a horse merchant and distributed the horses amongst his soldiers. Mallinath exiled him for this act. Chunda allied with Eenda Rajputs and began looting villages. The Turks, who had wrested control over Mandor from the Pariharas at this time, began demanding two wagons of grass from nearby villages. It was when the Turks made the same demand from the Eenda Rajputs, that they suggested that Chunda should take over Mandor by ousting the Turks. Thus, it has to be remembered that acquiring allies for political ascendancy was tied to control over resources as well. The Eenda Rajputs agreed to ally with Chunda and help him take over Mandor because they did not want to surrender their resources to the Turks.⁴⁸

Chunda was successful in conquering Mandor and hence established a separate centre of Rathor power.⁴⁹ Mallinath's descendents had allied with the Sodhas of Umarkot and had extended Rathor control upto Barmer and Kothada.⁵⁰ However, with Chunda acquiring control over Mandor, the Maheva branch began to decline and Mandor became the main base of the Rathor clan. Their territories included the ones acquired by Mallinath and his descendants in

⁴⁷ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 71

⁴⁸ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 89

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 75

addition to Nagaur, which Chunda had wrested from the Turks.⁵¹ Thus, these instances point out how loyalties within the clan shifted in response to political aspirations. These political aspirations could only be fulfilled by acquiring material power. Clan structure was fluid enough in this period to break into multiple branches with one acquiring political and economic supremacy over the others.

Inter-clan loyalties were also shifting in this period. For example, Hema was a *chakar* of Jagmal, the son of Mallinath. Jagmal demanded that Hema should give his horses to him. But Hema refused and consequently was dismissed from Jagmal's *chakari*. He left Maheva and fled to the hills of Ghughrot. From there, he proceeded to loot the territories of Maheva, looting nearly one hundred and forty villages and causing the population to flee to Jaisalmer.⁵² He could only be defeated with the help of the Sodhas of Umarkot when the Sodha chief, Rana Mandan, brokered a marriage alliance with the Rathors.

Another example is of Jagmal who ascended the throne of Maheva after Mallinath. He entered a marriage alliance with the Chauhans of Barmer. However, Jagmal looted Barmer disregarding the marriage alliance. The Chauhans retaliated by chopping off the tails of the Rathor's horses and by pouring burning oil on his cattle. This led the Rathors to depose off the Chauhans and add Barmer and Kothada to their territories.⁵³

After Rawal Mallinath's demise, Jagmal became the ruler of Maheva. He had three sons from his queen who belonged to the Chauhan clan. These sons were Mandlik, Bharmal and Raimal. However, when he married again for a second time, the Chauhan queen left with her sons for nearby Talvad. When Jagmal went to pacify her, she left for her maternal home in Barmer. Jagmal had a lot of men with him and they started looting Chauhan territories. Seeing this, the ruler of the Chauhans, who was also the queen's brother, told his nephews to go live elsewhere. When they refused to leave, he chopped off the tails of Mandlik's horses and put boiling oil on his buffalos. Insulted by this, Mandlik gathered his friends and assassinated his uncle. He then proceeded to take over Barmer and Kothada. He informed Rao

⁵¹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 92

⁵² Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 74

⁵³ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 80

Jagmal about these developments. Jagmal gave the territories of Maheva to Mandlik, Barmer to Bharmal and Kothada to Raimal as a reward.⁵⁴

These examples show that loyalties were based on access to resources. Essential resources like horses and cattle could become sources of tension leading to war and acquisition of territories, irrespective of the kinship relations.

Even social relations like clan service (*chakari*) and marriage alliances were based on possession of resources. For example, Chunda's son Arkamal killed the Bhati prince of Jaisalmer. This led the Jaisalmer Rao to attack the Sankhla who were allies of the Rathors. The Sankhla approached Chunda and requested his intervention in return promising marriage to their daughter plus hundred horses as dowry.⁵⁵ Chunda subsequently defeated the Bhatias and looted Pugal. Chunda's mother was a Bhati. However, Chunda's loyalty was never towards the Bhatias. In return for resources like horses and an opportunity to extend his political influence, he agreed to attack the Bhatias. Thus, we can surmise that political dominance was the result of attempts to extend control over resources – land, animals and wealth. Social relations were subject to these economic interests. This aspect becomes especially relevant in the environmental context of the Thar which was not a core agrarian area. Access and exclusive control of resources like cattle, horses and land was extremely essential to not only establish but also maintain political superiority.

Intra clan rivalries and bid for territorial control can be seen amongst Chunda's descendants. According to Nainsi, Chunda had fourteen sons.⁵⁶ Out of these, he gave Mandor to his son Kanh, superseding the eldest Ranmal. Ranmal left Mandor and went to Chittor to do *chakari* of the Rana of Mewar. According to Nainsi, thirty six different Rajput clans did the

⁵⁴ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 81

⁵⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 92

⁵⁶ Ibid. Vol.2, p. 90

Rana's *chakari*.⁵⁷ Ranmal looted Bhati territories under the protection of Mewar rulers.⁵⁸ However, on intervention by the Charans, he stopped looting and instead formed a marriage alliance with the Bhatias.⁵⁹ He even married off his sister to the Rana, thus forming an alliance with them. Another one of Chunda's sons, Satta, snatched Mandor from Kanh. Satta, along with his brother Randhir ruled over Mandor. However, Randhir and Satta's son, Narbad did not get along. They quarreled over share of taxes.⁶⁰ Randhir then approached Ranmal, who with the help of Rana Mokal of Chittor was able to take Mandor. In this way Ranmal allied with Chittor to take control of Mandor.

However, the narrative also reveals complexities of inter clan alliances. Ranmal's increasing interference in the affairs of Mewar led to his assassination in Chittor.⁶¹ It has been postulated that Mandor came under Sisodiya rule after Ranmal's assassination.⁶² Jodha, Ranmal's son fled from Chittor to Mandor. On the way he looted various villages and subordinated the local Rajputs.⁶³ To avoid loot, the Sankhals formed a marriage alliance with Jodha. After amassing an army, resources and powerful allies, Jodha looted Mewar and retook Mandor from the Sisodiyas. Subsequently, he laid the foundation for Jodhpur. According to Nainsi, the descendents of Ranmal remained dominant among the Jodhpur Rathors for generations thereafter.⁶⁴

The above instances reinforce the arguments regarding the material basis behind political dynamics. But they also show how established political powers sought to check the rise of new groups. This is evident from the above narratives about tensions between the Sisodiyas of

⁵⁷ Ibid. Vol.2, p. 105

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Vol.2, p. 106 – Narbad refused to share the revenues of Mandor with Randhir and his son Napa, who staked equal claim over them.

⁶¹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 109

⁶² Ibid. Vol.2, p. 112*n*

⁶³ Ibid. Vol.2, p. 130

⁶⁴ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 282

Mewar and the Rathors. It should be noted that the Sisodiyas were already an established and powerful ruling group since the twelfth century. The Sisodiyas not only held territories in the fertile and resource rich areas of south eastern Rajasthan, they also benefited from the trade between Gujarat and Delhi. Their influence is evident in Nainsi's statement that thirty six Rajput clans did their *chakari*.⁶⁵ *Chakari* or service was an essential aspect of politics in this period. Subordinate clans entered in *chakari* or service of superior clans. Their loyalty ensured a stable supply of manpower to the superior clan while they got resources like horses as well as political patronage in return. The fact that Nainsi records thirty six Rajput clans in the service of the Rana of Mewar may be an exaggeration, yet, this shows that numerous clans were bidding for patronage from Mewar. Hence, Mewar and its political configurations dominated the political landscape of the Thar in this period.

However, the Rathors challenged this dominance. Rathors gained enough power under Chunda only in the fourteenth century with the occupation of Mandor which was an old and strategic fort dating from the times of Pratiharas from the eight to the eleventh centuries. However, post Chunda, intra clan rivalries weakened the Rathor influence. There was a constant tussle for resources which led to shifts in loyalties and thus, affected the political trajectory of the Rathors. As enumerated above, this challenge was only successful with large scale amassing of resources – land, cattle, horses, wealth and most importantly people. Thus, in case of the Rathors we find that the political landscape involved a quest for resources. This was possible only through interactions and negotiations with other groups. These groups like the Bhatias, the Sodhas, the Sankhals, the Sisodiyas, the Chauhans, the Mohilas, the Guhilas, the Paramaras, the Chavdas etc. played an instrumental role in the political trajectory of the Rathors. The nature of these interactions was based on loyalties. However, these loyalties

⁶⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 105

shifted continuously with the promise of more resources and territories. The political landscape, hence, was continuously evolving and in flux.

An important component of this landscape were forts. Capture of a strategic and symbolic fort cemented a group's position within this landscape. Thus, the first fort the Rathors captured was Pali, which had always been an important centre of trade with a sizable Brahmin and Jain population. Subsequent capture of Bhinmal, Nagaur and Mandor further led to the rise of the Rathors. While the Rathors were still on an uncertain footing post Rao Chunda, with the foundation of Jodhpur they truly established themselves as a house at par with the Sisodiyas. This led to a further restructuring of the political landscape of the Thar towards Jodhpur.

ii. Bikawat Rathors - Narratives of Colonisation and Conquest

Jodhpur's position as a centre of power in the Thar Desert became further entrenched with the establishment of Bikaner. Rao Jodha had five sons. Out of these, Suja became the ruler of Jodhpur.⁶⁶ However, it was his eldest son, Bika, who took control of territory in Janglu towards the north west of Jodhpur. It was here, at Kodamdesar, that he declared his independence from Jodhpur in the year 1473 and founded Bikaner in 1487.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Vol.2, p. 196

Ruler	Period	Reign
Rao Bika	Coronated 1529 V.S	Established Bikaner in 1545 V.S/1487 CE. Marital alliance with Bhatias of Pugal
Rao Lunkaran	Coronated 1554 V.S	Expanded Bikaner kingdom upto Dronpur, Narnaul and contested the territories of Hisar and Sirsa. Also came into conflicts over territories with Bhatias of Jaisalmer.
Rao Jaitsi	Coronated 1581 V.S	
Rao Kalyanmal	Coronated 1599 V.S	Accepted Mughal suzerainty under Akbar. Married off his niece to the Emperor. Received a <i>mansab</i> of 2000.
Raja Rai Singh	Coronated 1630 V.S	Received a <i>mansab</i> of 5000 under Jahangir.
Raja Dalpat Singh	Coronated 1668 V.S	
Raja Sur Singh	Coronated 1670 V.S	
Raja Karan Singh	Coronated 1688 V.S	
Maharaja Anup Singh	Coronated 1726 V.S	Granted the title of <i>Maharaja</i> under Aurangzeb.

Table 1 - Rulers of Bikaner c. Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries CE ⁶⁷

While Maru was the desert, ‘Janglu’ or ‘Jangaldhar’ was an extension of the desert where the sky is clear, vegetation and water are scarce and lands abound in *sami*, *pilu* and *karkandhu* trees.⁶⁸ This leads one to assume that Bika extended his control over wilderness. However, Nainsi records that this area was inhabited by Saharan and Godhara Jats. According to him, they quarreled with each other and the Godharas approached Bika for help. He narrates that the Jats approached Bika in return for territory. Thus, he portrays Bika’s conquest of Janglu as a transaction in return for allying with a faction of the Jats.⁶⁹

...the Saharan Jats reached the conclusion that they could not vanquish the Godharas on their own. They thus approached Narsingh Jat in Siwani and requested his help to deal with the Godharas. In return, they promised to give him their lands. Narsingh arrived with his armies at Laghariya, looted villages and killed twenty-seven Godharas. Word reached Rao Bika who retaliated by killing Narsingh and looting his armies. On his way back, Bika was approached by the Jat Dasu Beniwal who requested his help to vanquish Sohar Jats who lived in Sohrani Kheda in return for his lands and territories.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Information in Table 1 is based on *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat*, *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Dayaldas Ri Khyat*.

⁶⁸ Sharma, *Rajasthan Through the Ages*, Vol. 1, p. 11

⁶⁹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 203

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Vol.2, p. 204



MAP 5 - Map of Bikaner⁷¹

However, a closer reading reveals the establishment of Bikaner territory as a process of colonization wherein the Rathors headed by Bika subjugated the Jats and took over their territories. Bikaner's position is on the trade routes from the Northwest to Delhi and towards Sindh. Thus, one branch of the Rathors in Jodhpur and the other at Bikaner controlling strategically important territories immediately changed the dynamics of the politics of the Thar in favour of the Rathors. This was a problem for the Bhatias of Jaisalmer whose political and economic influence in this region was threatened by the increasing power of the Rathors under Bika and the establishment of Bikaner in this region. Therefore, the Bhatias of Jaisalmer attempted to either establish marriage alliances with the Bikaner Rathors or directly subjugate them with force. For instance, Rao Bika was in a marriage alliance with the Bhatias of Pugal.⁷² However, the Bhatias immediately attacked him once Bikaner was established.⁷³

⁷¹ This map is based on information from various *Survey of India* maps and Google Maps. Map not to scale.

⁷² Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 200

⁷³ *Ibid.* Vol.2, p. 205

Kalkaran Bhati heard about the establishment of Bikaner. He proceeded to attack the newly established fort. However, Napa Sankhla (Rao Bika's aid) declared that the omens foretell that Bika and his descendents will rule here for generations, will fight the Bhatias and will be victorious. Rao Bika and the Bhatias met in battle, and despite having a small force, Bika was able to kill Kalkaran Bhati and vanquish his armies.⁷⁴

Rao Lunkaran, son of Rao Bika, attacked and subjugated the Bhatias in Jaisalmer.⁷⁵

Another tradition states that Rao Lunkaran attacked Rawal Devidas of Jaisalmer but the Rawal managed to avoid warfare by brokering marriage relations. However, he eventually attacked the Rao with the help of the ruler of Sindh.⁷⁶ There are multiple narratives about Lunkaran warring with different kingdoms. This was the period when Lunkaran was extending and consolidating the territories of Bikaner. This extension was strategic given Bikaner's location in North Western Thar.

Bikaner lies on the meeting point of four different trade routes from Sindh, Hisar, Nagaur and Phalodi.⁷⁷ With the establishment of Bikaner, trade through the desert intensified and Bikaner became a major trading centre.⁷⁸ New trading centres also came up in Bikaner territory like Morkhana.⁷⁹ Thus, the trade which earlier passed through Bhatner and Derawar, deep in the desert which were under Bhati control, now passed through Bikaner. This is clear in repeated attempts by the Bikaner Rathors to control Bhatner.⁸⁰ Those who controlled the forts were able to control and tax the trade passing through their forts.⁸¹ Bikaner fort itself was

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 207

⁷⁶ Ibid. Elsewhere, it is noted that Lunkaran was killed in warfare with the Pathans of Narnaul.

⁷⁷ Devra, 'A Study of Trade Relations,' p. 582

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 208

⁸¹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 93 For instance, Nagaur lies on the principal trade routes from the West and the North West. Major trade routes include the one from Bhakkar to Sikandra via Merta and the one from Ahmedabad via Marwar. Thus, control over Nagaur was intensely contested between the Turks, the Bhatias, the Rathors and the Sisodiyas. See Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 5B.

contested in the earlier days of its foundation between the Bhatias and the Bikawat Rathors as noted above.⁸²

However, Rao Lunkaran was able to consolidate his territories of Bikaner mainly due to two reasons. First, he was able to receive help from the Marwar branch of the Rathors.⁸³ Second, since the central power at Delhi was weakening with the Afghans at the helm in this period, the territorial boundaries set by them were not heeded by Lunkaran and he was able to expand his territories up to Narnaul and Dronpur by fighting off the Afghans.⁸⁴

The Pathan rulers of Delhi were setting imperial boundaries. However, Rao (Lunkaran) did not accept these boundaries. He proclaimed that if the boundaries pass through Narnaul, then we will take over Narnaul by force. Lunkaran then fought a battle with the Pathans. He and his son Pratpsingh were killed. Subsequently, Rao Jaitsingh was coronated as the ruler of Bikaner.⁸⁵

Thus, the political landscape of the Thar underwent a shift in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century with the establishment of the kingdom of Bikaner. It became increasingly geared towards the Rathors in both Marwar and Bikaner with their control over major routes and forts. Marriage alliances were also increasingly made with both the branches of the Rathors.

iii. The Bhatias and the Sodhas: Narratives in the Western Thar

a. The Bhatias

⁸² Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 208

⁸³ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 207

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid. The Afghan rulers of Delhi are called 'pathans' in Nainsi's *Khyat*.

The Bhatīs trace their ancestry from Krishna and claim descent from the moon.⁸⁶ A closer look at the Bhati genealogy compiled by Ratnu Charan and recorded in Nainsi's *khyat* reveals several sub clans of the Bhatīs. These are the Ardhabhatis, Pahubhatīs, Aboharyabhatis, Banarbhatis, Mangaliyabhatis etc.⁸⁷

Branch	Sub-Branches	Territories
Mangaliya Bhati	Charanude, Viramde, Dhedhiya	Mangaliya <i>thal</i> – lies 25 <i>kos</i> west of Jaisalmer, bordering Umarmkot <i>khadal</i> and village of Hingol in Sindh.
Rahariya Bhati		3 villages in Jaisalmer kingdom. 2 villages in Khadal region. 20 villages near Derasar tank. Additionally, one settlement of 50-60 houses in village Maligada in Umarmkot, 15 <i>kos</i> from Jaisalmer. Some clan members also settled in Bikaner.
Gahid Bhatīs		Banad village in Jodhpur, Gahidvala village in Bikaner.
Pahu Bhatīs		3 villages in Jaisalmer. 40-50 villages which earlier belonged to Kisnavat Bhatīs now taken over by Pahu Bhatīs. These villages were earlier in Pugal but now fall under Bikaner territories.
Kelan Bhatīs	Multiple branches from descendents of Rawal Kalkaran (Kelan) : Palan, Lakhamsi, Chachagde, Lakshmansan	Villages near Umarmkot, one village 10 <i>kos</i> north of Jaisalmer, other villages in Binkupur and Bikaner.
Arjunot Bhatīs	Descendents of Hamir, son of Rawal Devraj of Jaisalmer	Hamir was granted a <i>jagir</i> in Maroth. One branch of Arjunot Bhatīs settled in Pokharan, other did <i>chakari</i> in Jodhpur.
Aboharyiya Bhati		Areas near Abohar Vithanda*
Banar Bhatīs (Dabhlevale)	Descendents of Kelan	
Ardha Bhatīs	Descendents of Chhachu, who was descended from Vijay Rao Chudala.	

Table 2 – Various branches of the Bhatīs, their sub branches and their territories.⁸⁸

Nainsi also records the various forts built by the Bhatīs like Kehror, Tanot, Deraval and Jaisalmer.⁸⁹ Thus, it appears that the Bhati political landscape spanned across the Western Thar. Bhati narratives place Jaisalmer at par with Ghazni and Delhi.⁹⁰ As mentioned previously, the

⁸⁶ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 289

⁸⁷ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 260

* Vithanda is probably modern-day Bhatinda

⁸⁸ Information for Table 1 gathered from *Munhata Nainsi Ri Khyat*. Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, pp. 250-320

⁸⁹ Ibid. Vol. 2, pp. 260 - 300

⁹⁰ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 291

Bhatis also imagine their political space in terms of their nine forts – Jaisalmer, Pugal, Bikampur, Barsalpur, Mammanvahan, Maroth, Derawar, Asnikot and Kehror.⁹¹ In addition to this, Bhati narratives claim responsibility for the establishment and prosperity of Bhatner.⁹²

Scholars like G.S.L Devra have traced the early history of the Bhatis. According to him, the Bhatis were natives of Punjab and north western regions of India.⁹³ He contends that after the Bhatis were defeated by the Arabs in 655, they moved into the Panjnad and upper Sindh areas.⁹⁴ Here, they established the fort of Marot on the banks of the Hakra with the help of the Pawars of Pugal.⁹⁵ They thus became lords of the region between Sindh and Hind. Devra argues that this kingdom of the Bhatis in the early medieval period was known as ‘Ramel’.⁹⁶ However, with constant inroads by the Arabs and another group that Devra identifies as the ‘Varhas’, the Bhatis moved into the Thar and constructed the fort of Tanot.⁹⁷ It was under Vijay Rao Chudala, probably in the tenth century, that the Bhatis resurfaced as a dominant group by (re)capturing forts like Bhatner, Kehror, Marot and Mammanvahan. However, after Vijay Rao Chudala, the Bhatis constantly suffered attacks from both the ‘Varhas’ and the Turks under Mahmud Gazni. Thus, under Devraj Bhati, they moved further into the Thar and took over the fort of Ludrava from the Parmars.⁹⁸ This consolidated their power and they now controlled Western Thar and Upper Sindh.⁹⁹

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 292

⁹³ G.S.L Devra, ‘Political Wilderness and Social Dismemberment: Varhas – A Forgotten Clan of North West India (Pre Medieval Period)’, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 64, 2003, p. 216

⁹⁴ G.S.L Devra, ‘Identification of Ramel – A Forgotten Kingdom of Early Medieval India,’ *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 62, 2001, p. 1099

⁹⁵ Devra, ‘Political Wilderness,’ p. 218

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 219

⁹⁸ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 271

⁹⁹ Nainsi records that Devraj vanquished the ‘Varhas’ and took control of parts of Sindh including the fort of Derawar and the Mad region of the Thar. See Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 270



MAP 6 - Map of Jaisalmer¹⁰⁰

The Bhati territory was positioned in such a way that it came into constant contact with the territories of the ruling houses of Umarmkot, Bikaner, Jodhpur and Sindh. For instance, Nainsi records that sub clans of the BhatIs like the Mangaliyas lived to the west of Jaisalmer bordering the territories of Umarmkot on one side and Bhakkar on the other.¹⁰¹ Another group, the Rahadiya BhatIs were spread towards Umarmkot in the west and Bikaner in the north.¹⁰² Gahid BhatIs were established well within Jodhpur and Bikaner territories.¹⁰³ Pahu BhatIs inhabited the area from Pugal to Bikaner.¹⁰⁴ Thus, by Nainsi's time at least, the BhatIs had established an intricate clan network across the Thar. In consequence, the Thar had become a political arena where intense negotiations over territory and resources took place and the BhatIs had become central actors of these negotiations. For instance, Jaisalmer was built in the year

¹⁰⁰ This map is based on various *Survey of India* maps and Google Maps. Map not to scale. The boundaries of Jaisalmer state in the map are those in place by the nineteenth and twentieth century. Hence, they have been dotted. Forts like Derawar, Maroth and Pugal were earlier under Bhati control but subsequently passed on to the Bikawat and Marwar Rathors.

¹⁰¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 273

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 274

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

1156 after the Turks attacked Ludrovo.¹⁰⁵ This further established the Bhatias as the dominant power in Western Thar. Jaisalmer connected the routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia as well as to Thatta.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the Bhatias controlled a large volume of trade.¹⁰⁷ This strategic positioning gave the Bhatias access to both resources and monetary wealth. Every political group looking to dominate the Thar had to factor in the Bhatias. That is the reason why we find many marital alliances taking place between the Bhatias and several Rajput groups, for instance, the Rathors of Jodhpur and Bikaner.

Tanuja Kothiyal has argued that the Bhatias were pushed further into the desert with the rise of Jodhpur and Bikaner Rathors in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries respectively. However, earlier scholarship shows that the Bhatias have existed from at least the fifth century and existence of Jaisalmer and other Bhati forts like Ludrava, Derawar, Asnikot, Maroth etc. deep into the desert was much before the Rathors came onto the political scene. As mentioned above, G.S.L Devra argues that the Bhatias were pushed deep into the desert by the ‘Varhas’, the Arabs in Sindh and later on the Ghaznavids from the seventh to the tenth/eleventh centuries.¹⁰⁸ Thus the desert was the space left for the Bhatias to establish their political domination.

It seems that at least from the tenth century onwards the Bhatias started establishing their political dominance in the western Thar after vanquishing the ‘Varhas’, and emerged as the most prominent group in the region. They continued to exert their influence in the period under study by warring with the Sodhas as well as making inroads into Marwar and Bikaner.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the political landscape of western Thar – and Upper Sindh upto some extent – was oriented

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 276

¹⁰⁶ Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 6B

¹⁰⁷ Syed Sumbul Arif, ‘Jaisalmer as a Trading Mart,’ pp. 50-52

¹⁰⁸ Devra, ‘Political Wilderness,’ p. 220

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. For instance, Nainsi describes Rawal Devidas as constantly picking quarrels with all the nearby kingdoms – See Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2., p. 285

towards the Bhatīs. The subsequent rise of the Jodhpur and Bikaner kingdoms of the Rathors was with respect to the balance of power with the Bhatīs.

b. The Sodhas

Another group, which established themselves in the Thar at approximately the same time as the Bhatīs were the Sodhas. The Sodhas were a branch of the Paramars. According to Nainsi, the Paramars had 36 branches. Out of these, there were two major branches of the Paramars in the Thar desert— the Sodhas and the Sankhlas.¹¹⁰ The Sodhas allied with the Sumras and established Umarkot in the Thar in probably the eleventh or the twelfth centuries. The Sodhas had two branches – the major one was established in Umarkot while the minor one was in Parkar.¹¹¹ The Sodhas in Umarkot constantly competed with the Bhatīs in Jaisalmer.¹¹² They were constantly negotiating with the Bhatīs – either marrying into them or warring with them. They also attempted to establish alliances with the upcoming Rathors. However, their political influence declined considerably probably in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, when Rawal Devidas Bhati of Jaisalmer defeated the Sodha chief Rana Mandar and dismantled the fort of Umarkot.¹¹³ Another branch of the Paramars in the Thar desert were the Sankhlas who established themselves in Janglu, eventually accepting the suzerainty of the Rathor chief Bika in the fifteenth century after the latter established Bikaner.¹¹⁴ The relationship between the Sankhlas and the Rathors preceded Bika's colonization of Janglu. Mahiraj Sankhla, an early chief of the Sankhla Paramara clan was killed by the Rathors when he got entangled in the politics between Rao Chunda Rathor of Marwar and Bhati Ranagde. However, his son,

¹¹⁰ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 1, p. 235

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 246

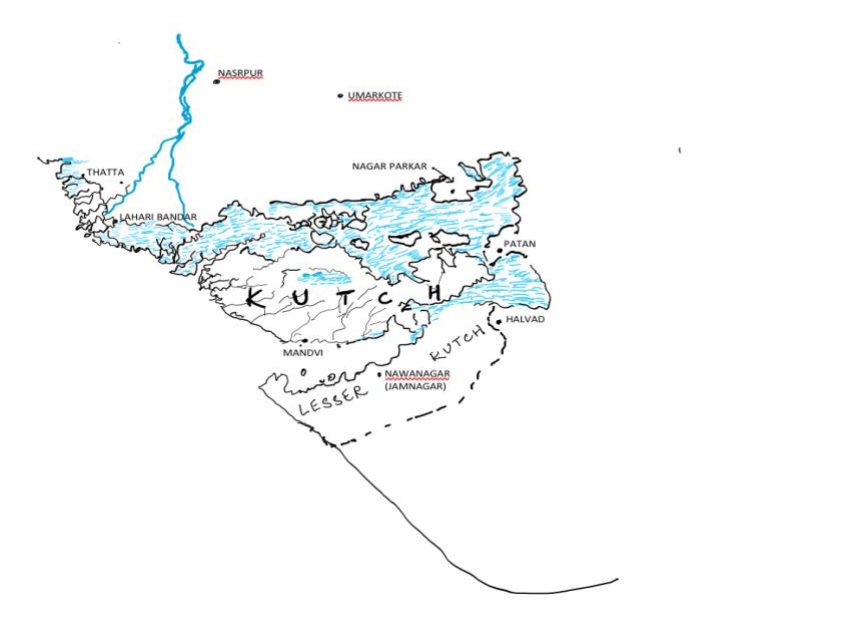
¹¹² *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 324

¹¹³ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 327

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 240

Harbhum Sankhla was given a *jagir* by Rao Jodha Rathor.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, the Sankhla remained a subordinate branch of the Paramars with small *jagirs* in Marwar and Bikaner territories.

iv. The Jarejas of Sindh and Kutch: Narratives of Migration and Political Negotiations



MAP 7 - Map of Lower Sindh and Kutch¹¹⁶

The Thar geographically extends into Sindh and parts of Kutch. Thus, any discussion on the political geography of the Thar during the period under study has to take into account the political configurations of Sindh and Kutch as well. This area from the eleventh century onwards witnessed the political activities of various groups vying for ascendancy in this part of the Thar. Some of these groups were the Sumras, the Sammas, and the Jarejas. There is an

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 243

¹¹⁶ This map is based on various *Survey of India* maps and Google Maps. Map not to scale.

immense lack of certainty over the identities of these groups as well as their migrations into Kutch from Sindh. Nainsi conflates the identities of the Sammas and the Jarejas, considering them as one and the same.¹¹⁷ While the chronology of their respective period of rule is hazy, Mir Ma'sum Bhakkari's *Tarikh-i-Masumi* (sixteenth century) gives an account of the Sumra and Samma rule in Sindh before the Arghun period in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries. However, the text does not give any dates about the presence of the Sumra and Samma rule. However, it can be postulated that the Sumras ruled Sindh from roughly the eleventh to the mid-fourteenth centuries. They were supplanted by the Sammas who ruled Sindh and parts of Kutch from the late fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries. The Sammas were replaced by the Arghuns in the late fifteenth century. Although the *Tarikh* was written in 1600, it is the closest in time period to Samma rule - any contemporaneous account of which does not exist.

Sindh came under Ghaznavid rule from around 1025 with the fall of the last Habbari ruler in Mansura.¹¹⁸ It was during Ghaznavid rule that the Sumras declared independence at Thari which is in the 'little desert' separating Sindh and Kutch.¹¹⁹ The Sumras ruled for nearly three centuries - from 1050-1360 - and controlled territories in lower Sindh as well as extended their authority northwards towards Multan and Janglu and southwards towards Kutch. According to the *Tarikh*, the Sumras, who ruled lower Sindh in the first three centuries of the second millennium C.E., were constantly trying to extend their control into Kutch and repeatedly came into conflict with the Sodhas, Jats, Baluchis and Jarejas. The Sodhas were probably subjugated by the Sumras at some point.¹²⁰ Lower Sindh was also occupied by the Parkar clan, a minor

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 218

¹¹⁸ N. A. Baloch and A. Q. Rafiki, 'The Regions of Sind, Baluchistan, Multan and Kashmir: The Historical, Social and Economic Setting,' in M.S Asimov and C.E Bosworth (eds.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Vol. IV*, UNESCO Publishing, 1998, p. 301

¹¹⁹ Mir Masum Bhakkari, *Tarikh-i-Masumi*, in Elliot and Dawson, *A History of India as Told by its own Historians*, Vol. 1., Trubner and Co., London, 1867, p. 216. Henceforth *Tarikh-i-Masumi*.

¹²⁰ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 218

branch of the Sodha Rajputs. It was the Parkar branch that was constantly in conflict with the Sumras and then the Sammas.

The Sumras were supplanted by the Sammas who established their rule in Upper Sindh and expanded their control upto Thatta. Nainsi, while telling us about the genealogy of the Sumras, informs us that Sammas and Jaisalmer Bhatias (also called Jaisa Bhatias) were descendents of Lord Krishna. Masumi states that some members of the Samma tribe had migrated from Kutch into Sindh and formed alliances with the locals. Soon, they overthrew the Sumras and established their control over lower Sindh. With the first Samma ruler, Unnar, the Sammas styled themselves as the *jams* of Sindh.¹²¹

While Nainsi states that the Jarejas were the same as the Sammas, references in the *Tarikh* point to a separate group which came into conflict with the Sammas. However, scholars argue that branches of the Sammas migrated into Kutch from Sindh and became Jarejas and Chudasamas.¹²² It has been opined that the Jarejas took on Rajput identity by marrying into the Sodhas.¹²³ Nainsi gives evidence to this by recording that Rao Khengar, the Jareja ruler of Kutch, married his son Hamir to a Sodhi princess of Umarmkot.¹²⁴ However, the *Tarikh* records conflicts between the Sodhas and Jarejas as well. Nainsi records that the Jarejas split into two branches - one that ruled Kutch and styled themselves as 'Rao' while the other which was pushed into Halvad and established Nawanager (Jamnagar), also styling themselves as 'Jam'.

While there is scant reference of direct relations between Rajput groups like Bhatias, Rathors and Jarejas in the Thar; there are other points of reference which can be used as evidence to examine the place of Sindh and Kutch in the political landscape of the Thar desert.

¹²¹ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 224

¹²² Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, p. 106

¹²³ Farhana Ibrahim, *Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation in Western India*, Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 127

¹²⁴ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 234

Major trade routes passed through Sindh into Kutch. Important routes from Thatta and Ahmedabad also joined together in lower Sindh via Kutch and connected the desert to Gujarat.¹²⁵ Major items of trade were Kutchi horses, camels, bajra as well as cotton from Bhuj. These routes were also used for migrations of various groups to and from the desert into Kutch and Gujarat. These migrations were instrumental in not only shaping the political landscape of the desert areas of Sindh and Kutch, known as the 'Little Desert' but also influenced the political landscape of the Great Desert, connecting them both.

This interconnectedness is not only political and economic in character, but also creates a continuum in the social traditions of marriages and kinship network. For instance, Jarejas in Kutch, like the other groups in the Thar claimed Rajput status through marriage as well as by tracing their genealogy to Krishna, thus brahmanising their pastoral past. Another instance is the adoption of Asapuri Devi as the *kuldevi* by the Jarejas of both Kutch and Nawanagar. She was also the *kuldevi* of the Sonigara Chauhans of Jalore. This pattern of adopting these goddesses as *kuldevi* was an attempt at legitimising claims to kingship and authority along with tracing ancestry to mythical figures. Goddesses like Karni, Shakambari, Hinglaj, Asapuri, Deval etc. point to a tradition of assimilation of local religious cults especially shaktic traditions into brahmanical dynastic myths emerging in this period in the Thar that influenced practically all the political groups situated here. These helped in consolidation of community identities as well as legitimising attempts to control territory, commodities, people and narratives.¹²⁶ This aspect will be discussed later in the chapter.

Thus, it can be surmised that the political tradition emerging in the Great Desert in this period was characterised by acquiring Rajput status and cementing individual clan identities within the Rajput fold through loyalty networks based on marriage and service. Acquisition of

¹²⁵ Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 6B and 7B

¹²⁶ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 80

territory and resources like cattle and manpower were the other side of the same coin. Legitimacy acquired through the dual process of assimilating local and brahmanical traditions were also essential. Due to the mobile character of the Thar which facilitated migrations of groups across and beyond it, these political traditions spread into Sindh and Kutch and furthermore into other regions of Gujarat. Thus, the political landscape of the Thar extended far beyond the Great Desert and incorporated parts of Sindh and Kutch as well. It was thus in this period that establishment of different states with decidedly similar characteristics in various parts of the Thar was taking place.

Therefore, in context of the Thar, it has been argued that the desert became the stage for intense political interactions because of its existence as a frontier. Because it has been imagined by scholars as a frontier, it was argued that the desert was able to provide these new upcoming groups with spatial and social mobility.¹²⁷ Arguing for the Thar as a political frontier from the fifteenth century onwards Tanuja Kothiyal also argues that the space of the Thar was controlled through exerting control over mobile resources like cattle and merchandise which circulated throughout the Thar.¹²⁸ Further we are told that as the political fortunes of these groups grew, they began to extend their control over so-called frontier areas like Bhatner, Pugal and Pokharan in order to control the flow of resources.¹²⁹ Another point that Kothiyal makes is that as newer groups attained political dominance by controlling resources, colonizing land and appropriating cults like Charanic goddess worship, they came into conflict with pre-existing dominant groups like the Bhatias.¹³⁰ According to her, groups like the Bhatias were further pushed into the desert due to the rise of the Jodhpur and Bikaner Rathors. In addition to this, she argues that with the establishment of alternate power centres like Bikaner and Jodhpur, the

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 81

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

importance of Umarkot under the Sodhas and Jaisalmer under the Bhatias declined. Hence Kothiyal concludes that the frontier, by virtue of being a frontier, allowed groups which could not achieve a foothold elsewhere, gain prominence.

While Tanuja Kothiyal makes an important argument, she bases it on the perception of the Thar Desert as a frontier space. In her arguments, the desert is a geographical frontier, which turns it into a political frontier as well. However, recent studies of various other desert landscapes like the Sahara have aimed to move away from the idea of the desert as a frontier. They have instead tried to demonstrate the presence of the Sahara as a connecting region playing a vital part in the economic, political and social trajectories of the Middle East, Mediterranean and North Africa. Thus, the idea here is that instead of examining the desert as a hostile ecological and political frontier, one can also look at it in terms of an arena of hectic political activities of intense socio-economic and political negotiations.¹³¹ If we use this idea to trace the political landscape of the Thar Desert from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, an alternative understanding of the desert emerges wherein the desert becomes a vibrant political space rather than a sterile, barren and hostile frontier. The Thar had various groups competing for social and political superiority as well as control over resources. To imagine the desert in this alternative paradigm, forces one to question the formation of states in the Thar. If the desert was indeed a frontier then why did it witness continuous formation of sedentary states from roughly the seventh century CE? The answer to this complex question can be sought if one stops examining the desert as a frontier and instead examines its political landscape in terms of wide mobility of disparate groups as well as tussle over resources. The period from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries which witnessed intense political negotiations in the desert can certainly be explained in this fashion.

¹³¹ McDougall, 'Research in Saharan History,' p. 468

III. The Thar, the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire: Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries C.E.

The political landscape of the Thar until the fifteenth century has been discussed in terms of various Rajput groups negotiating with each other for political supremacy and dominance. However, this discussion is incomplete without taking into account the expansion of territories undertaken by the Delhi Sultanate. The Turks had been a part of the political landscape of the Thar since the time of Mahmud of Ghazni. Thus, the various political groups coming up in the Thar during the period under consideration had to negotiate with the Turks as well. However, the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries witnessed a significant change in the political landscape of the Thar with the establishment of the Mughal Empire, particularly with the consolidation of the Empire under Akbar. This shift is mapped out subsequently in this section.

ii. *The Delhi Sultanate and the Thar – c. Thirteenth to Fifteenth centuries C.E*

The Thar Desert had been prone to attacks by the Turks since the time of Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century. It is postulated that in 1004-05, the Ghaznavids passed through Bhati territories and faced stiff resistance from them.¹³² It is recorded that Mahmud conquered the town of 'Bhatia', which is often conflated with Bhatner by scholars.¹³³ According to Satish Chandra, the period between the death of Mahmud of Ghazni and the Ghorid invasions in the twelfth century was a period of great political flux.¹³⁴ We have already discussed the changing

¹³² Devra, 'Varhas,' p. 220

¹³³ See editor's comment in Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 205

¹³⁴ Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals Vol 1*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 2015, p. 21. Prof. Chandra discusses the rise of various new Rajput powers like the Gahadvars of Kannauj and the Cahamanas of Sakambhari during this period.

political trajectory of the Bhatīs in this period. With the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century, the Turks became major actors in the political landscape of the Thar.

However, there are sketchy references to the Delhi Sultanate's expansion into the Thar before the fourteenth century. Scholars have argued that by 1228 Iltutmish had consolidated the territories of the Delhi Sultanate upto Multan and Sindh right upto the Arabian Sea coast.¹³⁵ Barani records that Balban's cousin Sher Khan held the fort of Bhatner.¹³⁶ Sher Khan held all the territories including Sannam, Lahore and Dipalpur which were susceptible to attacks by the Mongols. He was also able to control the Jats, the Minas, the Bhatīs and the Mandahars in the area.¹³⁷

Some concrete references of Turkish inroads into the region under study are obtained from the Khalji period towards the end of the thirteenth century onwards. Since the sources of this period are contradictory and vague in their presentation of the conquest of the Thar by the Khaljis, it is difficult to map out the areas of their conquest. However, an attempt is being made here to trace a cogent political geography of the Khalji occupation in the Thar.

An inscription dated 1292 from a mosque in Mandor gives reference of Alauddin's campaign against a Songira Chauhan ruler named Samant Singh.¹³⁸ This inscription is from Jalaluddin Khilji's reign, when Alauddin was a general in his army. According to this inscription, Jalore fort, the seat of the Sonigra Chauhanas was attacked and occupied by Alauddin Khilji. However, literary sources, most of which belong to Alauddin's period as the Sultan, post-dating the 1292 inscription though attest to his campaigns against the Songira

¹³⁵ Ibid. p. 40

¹³⁶ Ziyauddin Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, in Elliot and Dawson, *A History of India as Told by its own Historians*, Vol 3., Trubner and Co., London, 1867, p. 109. Henceforth *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*. See also Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol 2., p. 205.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Syed Jabir Raza, 'Epigraphical Evidence for Khalji Dynasty,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 58, 1997, p. 867

Chauhans, do not mention the seige of Jalore at all. For instance, Amir Khusrou in *Khazain-ul Futuh* (completed 1298) gives a description of the conquest of Siwana in Marwar region by Alauddin Khilji. During this period Siwana was dominated by the feudatories of the Sonigra Chauhans.¹³⁹ Khusrou records that the campaign to Siwana took place in 1310 because the fort was an ‘asylum of wild robbers.’¹⁴⁰ Jalore is referred only as a refuge of the fleeing soldiers. Barani in his *Tarikh-i-Ferozshahi* (completed 1357), on the other hand, explicitly mentions that Alauddin intended to expand his territories from Siwalik to Jalore, but there is no reference here to the seige of Jalore by the Khaljis.¹⁴¹

A detailed description of the seige of Jalore can be found in Padmanabha’s *Kanhadadeprabandha*, written more than a century after Alauddin Khilji’s times in 1455. According to Padmanabha, Rao Kanhadade of Jalore had not allowed Alauddin’s army under the commander Ulugh Khan passage through his territories while on their way to Gujarat.¹⁴² This irked the Turks and they decided to subjugate Jalore. The reason for Alauddin’s campaign in Jalore thus seems to be both territorial expansion as well as control over strategically situated forts as Jalore lay directly on the route to Patan region of Gujarat, which opened up the way to Sorath and Kutch.¹⁴³ Padmanabha describes that Rajputs of all thirty six clans assembled to defend Jalore.¹⁴⁴

It is quite curious that the siege of Jalore is mentioned in an earlier inscription of Alauddin Khilji but not in any of the texts which were produced during his reign. However, the siege

¹³⁹ *Kanhadadeprabandha*, p. 9

¹⁴⁰ Mohammad Habib (trans.), *Khaza'inul Futuh*, D.B Taraporevala Sons and Co., Madras, 1931, p. 53. Henceforth *Khaza'inul Futuh*.

¹⁴¹ *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, p. 271- Barani states that after the Gujarat campaign, Alauddin remarked that his wealth and horses had no use if he was to only sit contented in Delhi and undertake no new campaigns. To this Ala-ul Mulk replied that the king ought to conquer and subjugate all of Hindustan from such places as Ranthambore, Chittor, Chanderi, Malwa, Dhar and Ujjain, as far east as ‘Saru’, from Siwalik to Jalor, from Multan to ‘Marila’, from Palam to Lahore and Divalpur.

¹⁴² *Kanhadadeprabandha*, p. 11

¹⁴³ Habib, *Atlas*, 7B

¹⁴⁴ *Kanhadadeprabandha*, p. 19

becomes legendary from the fifteenth century onwards after the *Kanhadadeprabandha* is compiled. Later accounts like Nainsi's *khyat* and Ferishta's *Tarikh* also recount the incident. Contemporary sources from Alauddin Khilji's reign do not mention the siege because it was probably a short lived conquest. Another reason can be that it was not important enough to be mentioned in these sources at all. However, the siege is mentioned in great detail attributing the status of a hero to Rao Kanhadade in many later accounts. Perhaps it can be surmised that this was an attempt by an upstart Rajput group to show themselves in a grand light. According to Nainsi, the Sonigara Chauhans were a breakaway branch of the Chauhans of Nadol.¹⁴⁵ They, in all probability, were a less important clan as one does not find many marital alliances with them either. They were eventually subordinated by the Marwar Rathors and became their *chakar* (subordinates obligated to provide service).¹⁴⁶ Thus, it can be conjectured that the Sonigara Chauhans attempted to hold their ground and project themselves as an important group in the intensely dynamic and shifting political landscape of the Thar in this period.

Along with the *Khazain ul Futuh*, later accounts like the *Tarikh-i-Ferozshahi*, *Tarikh-i-Ferishta* and Nainsi's *Khyat* also mention the fall of Siwana at the hands of Alauddin Khilji. Padmanabha and Nainsi both record that Santal Deo, a cousin of Rao Kanhadade, held Siwana. Thus, Siwana was probably within the territories of the Sonigira Chauhans. With the conquest of both Siwana and Jalor, Alauddin established a foothold in south-western Rajasthan and controlled the principal routes to Patan in Gujarat. The Turks also took control of Mandor from the Pariharas in probably the fourteenth century.¹⁴⁷ (It should be noted that the Pariharas predated the Rathors.). Nainsi also records that Alauddin Khilji sent his forces under Kamaluddin

¹⁴⁵ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 1, p. 151

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 155

¹⁴⁷ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 88 Also inscriptional evidence of Alauddin's reign in Mandor has been found in a Pandu inscription dated 1301 C.E from Jodhpur. See Syed Jabir Raza, 'Epigraphical Evidence for Khalji Dynasty,' p. 868

Gurg to establish control over Jaisalmer fort.¹⁴⁸ Scholars have doubted the authenticity of this incident as no Persian chronicle mentions this campaign. However, Nainsi claims that Jaisalmer remained under the control of the Turks for atleast a hundred years upto the fourteenth century when Rawal Gharsi, the Bhati ruler took back Jaisalmer fort from the Tughlaqs.¹⁴⁹ However, details of this incident are also sketchy.

By the time of the Tughlaqs in the mid fourteenth century, Sindh, Thatta and Gujarat had been brought under the control of the Sultanate. The Delhi Sultanate under the Khiljis and the Tughlaqs thereafter ambitiously sought to expand into the area under study. The idea was to control the principal trade routes to Gujarat and Sindh. This brought the Turkish Sultans in conflict with the territorial Rajput groups in the desert. Epigraphical evidence suggests that the Khiljis and subsequently the Tughlaqs had established some control in Marwar.¹⁵⁰ However, they faced stiff opposition from various Rajput groups despite the fact the Rajput groups themselves were vying for political power in the desert. As discussed in previous sections, groups like the Rathors were attempting to establish their political supremacy in the region by contesting with others like the Bhatias, Sisodiyas and Chauhans.

The reason for the Delhi Sultans' inability to establish a strong hold over these territories was that the Turks routinely got embroiled in the political contestations between these disparate Rajput groups. For instance, Nainsi records that Rao Chunda vanquished the Turks and made Mandor the Rathor seat of power.¹⁵¹ It is not clear which ruler of the Delhi Sultanate is Nainsi referring to here but epigraphical evidence suggests that this incident probably took place

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. Vol. 2, pp. 291-298

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 320

¹⁵⁰ G. Yazdani, 'Some unpublished inscriptions from Jaipur state,' *Epigraphia Indica Arabic and Persian Supplement*, 1921-30, Archaeological Survey of India, 1987, p. 17. Also see A. Chaghatai, 'Some Inscriptions from Jodhpur State, Rajputana,' *Epigraphia Indica Arabic and Persian Supplement*, 1949-50, Archaeological Survey of India, 1987, pp. 18-53.

¹⁵¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 89

during or after the time of the Tughlaqs.¹⁵² Nainsi also records that Chunda extended the Rathod control over Nagaur.¹⁵³ Nagaur had been under the Tughlaqs for a long time.¹⁵⁴ It has been argued that the Rathors under Rao Chunda constantly contested with the Gujarat Sultans for control over Nagaur.¹⁵⁵ After the Rathors took Nagaur from the Gujarat Sultans, the Bhatias took help of the *subedar* of Multan to vanquish Rao Chunda from Nagaur.¹⁵⁶

Another instance is when the Kandhal, brother of Rao Jodha took over the area of Dronpur from the Mohilas. The Mohilas approached the *faujdar* of the Sultanate at Hansi. The *faujdar* ruled in favour of the Mohilas. At this instance, Kandhal decided to attack the *faujdar* but his forces were not superior. Ultimately, it was Rao Jodha who defeated the *faujdar*.¹⁵⁷

When Rao Bika heard about the Kandhal's defeat and death at the hands of the *faujdar* Sarang Khan, he decided to launch an offensive against the *faujdar*. However, Napa Sankhla (Bika's aid) advised him to first inform Rao Jodha. When Rao Jodha received news of the *faujdar*'s victory over Kandhal's forces, he decided to meet Sarang Khan in battle and avenge Kandhal's death. Rao Jodha and his armies emerged victorious and Sarang Khan along with many of his men was killed.¹⁵⁸

Here we see an interaction with the Sultanate wherein while one group – the Mohilas – considered them an authority, the other group – the Rathors – did not. Even amongst the Rathors, it was the more politically and militarily powerful Rao Jodha of Marwar who contested with the *faujdar* rather than the Rao Bika, the ruler of the newly established state of Bikaner. This can again be attributed to the weakened state of the Delhi Sultanate by the end fifteenth century and the increased political and military influence of the Rathors. Another

¹⁵² *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report 1909-10*, p. 98

¹⁵³ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 81

¹⁵⁴ A. Chaghatai, 'Some Inscriptions from Jodhpur State, Rajputana,' p. 35

¹⁵⁵ B.S Mathur, 'Side Lights on Medieval History of Nagaur,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 28, 1966, p. 141

¹⁵⁶ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 95

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 206

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

instance is when Rao Lunkaran of Bikaner disagreed with the territorial boundaries set by the Pathan rulers of Delhi, which has been mentioned before.¹⁵⁹

From the above discussion, it is clear that the Delhi Sultanate made numerous efforts to extend territorial control over the Thar. Barani has given two reasons for expansion in this direction. First, the king must aspire to expand his territories and quash any possibilities of rebellions. Second, all the roads which can lead the Mongols to Multan and Delhi should be blocked.¹⁶⁰ This is evident in Timur's attack a century later when he ransacked Bhatner on his way to Multan.¹⁶¹ However, the Sultanate could not extend absolute control over the Thar Desert. Even the regions in the subcontinent it did manage to conquer kept rebelling continuously. It is a well-established fact that this was due to weak centralizing power of the Sultanate because of frequent dynastic changes.

In the Thar, the Sultanate encountered a highly contested political landscape. This landscape, as discussed above, was characterized by intense conflicts over territories and resources and in turn, political supremacy amongst various established as well as upcoming Rajput groups. While it became difficult for the Sultanate to exercise full control over this landscape, it did however manage to become a part of it. The Sultanate became a crucial negotiating partner for these groups. As has been illustrated above, not only did these Rajput groups come into conflict with the Sultanate, they also at times allied with it to vanquish a rival group. However, as the above example of the conflict between the Mohilas and the Rathors shows, the Sultanate did retain a vestige of authority amongst these groups. Thus, while the political landscape of the Thar was geared heavily towards the Rajput groups, the Sultanate also became an important part of it.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 207

¹⁶⁰ *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, p. 171

¹⁶¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 315

iii. *The Mughal Empire and the Thar— c. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century C.E*

There was a shift in the political landscape of the Thar Desert with the establishment of the Mughal Empire. By the mid sixteenth century, the Rathors of Marwar had become politically supreme. This is attributed to the fact that Rao Malde (r. 1531-1562) expanded the Rathor territories and carried out a number of fortifications.¹⁶² Tanuja Kothiyal argues that there was a change in the nature of Rajput polity in this period as there was a shift from clan-based polity to monarchical polity.¹⁶³ While major polities like Marwar, Bikaner and Jaisalmer were established, the nature of resource sharing within the clan underwent a change. Earlier, it was a *bhai-bant* system which operated on mutual recognition of authority between the clansmen and the chief, the clansmen being recognized as *bhai-bandh* (kinsmen).¹⁶⁴ Territories were granted on the basis of patrimonial relations of the clansmen with the chief.

However, during the reign of Rao Malde, there was a shift from the *bhai-bandh* system to *bhai-bandh-chakar*, i.e., a system of kinship service. The nature of territorial control shifted from patrimonial to prebendal with the grant of *patta* in exchange for military service. This converted the chief into a monarch who controlled his territories and could grant land to non-clan members in order to garner support to counter the claims of clansmen.¹⁶⁵ It has been argued that this shift in the nature of polity coupled with an increased supply of horses made the Rathor state politically supreme amongst all other states in the region.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 84. Malde fortified Pokharan, and Siwana and carried out repairs in Jodhpur, Nagaur, Ajmer, Merta, Jalor and Sojhat forts.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 83

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 85. Also see Norman P. Zeigler, 'Evolution of Rathor State of Marwar: Horses, Structural Change and Warfare,' in Schomer, Erdman, Lodrick and Rudolph (eds.), *The Idea of Rajasthan*, pp. 192-216.

The political and military supremacy of the Rathors brought them in conflict with other states like Bikaner as well as the Surs and the Mughals. In addition to this, the changing nature of the Rathor polity also created internal rifts between clansmen. This is illustrated in the incidence of Viramde who was Rao Malde's clansmen in Merta. According to Nainsi, Malde drove off Viram from Merta and exiled him to Ajmer.¹⁶⁷ Viram then approached Sher Shah who contested over Ajmer and Nagaur with Malde. When Humayun was escaping Delhi, he sought refuge with Malde. Malde agreed to ally with Humayun.¹⁶⁸ However, Malde soon realised that Humayun was weak and decided to imprison him and hand him over to Sher Shah.¹⁶⁹ Humayun came to know of this plot and escaped to Umarkot. Malde also besieged Bikaner and forced the ruler, Rao Kalyanmal into exile to Sirsa where he sought patronage of Sher Shah.¹⁷⁰ This was the peak of Malde's political and military power. However, Sher Shah soon subdued Malde and took over Jodhpur.¹⁷¹

When Shershah heard that Rao Malde had taken over Nagaur and Ajmer, he decided to pursue Malde with the full force of his armies. Malde also left for Ajmer with over fifty thousand Rajput warriors. After facing off for one month without physically fighting, Malde left for Jodhpur. Shershah followed him. He was challenged by petty Rathor chiefs in Jaitaran. After vanquishing the local Rathor chiefs in Jaitaran, Shershah continued his pursuit of Malde. Malde deserted Jodhpur and sought refuge in the fort of Siwana. Shershah then took over Jodhpur and appointed Khvas Khan as the hakim of Jodhpur. Khavas Khan established the village of Khvaspur near the Jodhpur fort.¹⁷²

After the death of Sher Shah, Malde recovered most of his territories but was now in a weakened state. Thus, the political landscape of the Thar on the eve of Akbar's expansion of the Mughal Empire was in a state of great flux. Akbar took advantage of this and was able to

¹⁶⁷ Nainsi, *Khyat* Vol. 2, p. 154

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 160

¹⁶⁹ Annette Beveridge (trans.), *The History of Humayun*, Royal Asiatic Society, 1902, p. 154. Henceforth *Humayunama*. See also Charles Stewart (trans.), *Tazkireh al Waqiat or The Private Memoirs of The Moghul Emperor Humayun*, London, 1832, pp. 29-49. Henceforth *Tazkireh al Waqiat*.

¹⁷⁰ Rawat Saraswat (ed.), *Dalpat Vilas*, Sadul Rajasthani Research Institute, Bikaner, 1960, p. 6. Henceforth *Dalpat Vilas*.

¹⁷¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 161

¹⁷² *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 159-161

shift the power dynamics of the region in his favour. Kingdoms like Bikaner which were until now inferior in power and prestige to Marwar and Mewar also attempted to increase their standing by allying with the Mughals early on.¹⁷³ By 1557, Akbar had annexed Ajmer and Nagaur and by 1562 took control of Jaitaran and Parbatsar.¹⁷⁴ The Rathors were reduced to subordinate allies of the Mughal Empire by the time of Malde's death in 1562.

Akbar's expansion of the Mughal Empire into the Thar Desert completely changed the political landscape of the desert. Assimilation of the Rajput states into the Mughal Empire was a politico-administrative transition.¹⁷⁵ First, all the independent kingdoms like Bikaner, Marwar, Amber, Mewar, Jaisalmer, Kutch, Sindh etc. were converted into *sarkars* and *parganas* and assigned to a *suba*. Bikaner, Marwar, Jaisalmer were assigned to the *suba* of Ajmer, Kutch went to *suba* of Gujarat while the region of Sindh was assimilated into the *suba* of Multan.¹⁷⁶ Thus, here one finds central control being exerted in the formation of imperial territories. S. Inayet Zaidi postulates that it was imperative for Akbar to assimilate these rulers, especially the Rajputs, because of the large territories and armies they held.¹⁷⁷ This is particularly evident in Abul Fazl's description of the region of Marwar. He states that Marwar has many important forts like Ajmer, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Abugarh, Umarmkot and Jalor.¹⁷⁸ It is clear that polities like Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Umarmkot were assembled as *sarkars* within Marwar. Abul Fazl also gives count of the cavalry and infantry in each *sarkar*. For instance, Jodhpur is recorded to have fifteen thousand cavalry, fifty thousand infantry, Bikaner

¹⁷³ *Dalpat Vilas*, p. 12. Dalpat Vilas records that Rao Kalyanmal was one of the first Rajput rulers to ally with the Mughals represented by Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana.

¹⁷⁴ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 86

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 88

¹⁷⁶ See 'Account of the Twelve Subahs' in, H. S. Jarrett (trans.), *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol 2, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1949. Henceforth known as *Ain*.

¹⁷⁷ S. Inayet Zaidi, 'Akbar's Relations with the Rajput Chiefs and their Role in the Expansion of the Empire,' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 7/8, 1994, p. 75

¹⁷⁸ *Ain*, Vol. 2, p. 271

has twelve thousand cavalry and fifty thousand infantry, and Nagaur has four thousand five hundred cavalry and twenty two thousand infantry.¹⁷⁹

Second, while these kingdoms were assimilated into the Empire, they were not left free to handle their own affairs. Tanuja Kothiyal states that by administratively reorganizing these kingdoms as *sarkars*, the Mughals perceived these territories as *jagirs* which could be granted to *mansabdars*.¹⁸⁰ The Rajput rulers were made *mansabdars* and were granted high ranks. This was to have access to their large military resources as well as to keep them strictly under imperial control. It was for this reason that they were brought to the centre stage of empire building, given high bureaucratic roles and put at the head of important military campaigns. This also meant that the Mughal Emperor became the authority in intra-Rajput relationships.¹⁸¹ This is borne out by the fact that *mansabs* and *jagirs* were granted to clan members who were not chiefs or rulers.¹⁸² In addition to this, the Emperor was also approached to mediate intra-Rajput conflicts. For instance, Rao Kalyanmal approached Akbar to depose off Rao Mana of Sirohi and thus acquired the territories of Sirohi for himself.¹⁸³ On the other hand, succession to the throne had to be approved by the Emperor. A case in point is the conflict between the Rathors of Marwar and Aurangzeb after the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh over the next succession.

Third, networks of loyalty became more complex. While the issue of Rajput loyalties to the Mughals is a complex one, intra-Rajput loyalties also underwent a change. According to Norman Zeigler, the question of Rajput loyalties is complicated with the variation in Rajput

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 276

¹⁸⁰ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 89

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Zaidi, 'Akbar's Relations with Rajput Chiefs,' p. 78

¹⁸³ *Dalpat Vilas*, p. 16

response, both of individuals and through time.¹⁸⁴ He argues that the Rajputs dealt with Mughal authority on the basis of locally derived sentiments. Responses to Mughal contact included Rajput efforts to reinterpret local values and ideology as well as defend local positions of rank and authority.¹⁸⁵

While Mughals made the rulers their *mansabdars*, this impacted kin relationships and clan loyalties within the Rajput states. These now shifted to service relationships of *chakari* where the *chakar* swore allegiance and military support to the ruler in return for *patta*.¹⁸⁶ These *pattas* could be assigned to clansmen and even to non-clansmen. This system replaced the *bhai-bant* system to enable the Rajput ruler to raise military resources and revenues as required by his *mansab* rank. The Mughal Emperor was seen as the source for enforcing the *pattadari* tenures in case of conflicts. Thus, nature of polity in these Rajput states now completely mirrored that of the Mughal state.¹⁸⁷

Fourth, matrimonial relations between the Mughals and these Rajput states became a focal point of this politico-administrative transition. There already existed a network of matrimonial alliances amongst these Rajput groups which mostly (not always) ensured loyalty during war as well as access to territories and resources. The Mughal rulers, beginning with Akbar, took advantage of this system of matrimonial relations, which brought together the political trajectories of these groups. It has been argued by a variety of scholars that he entered this matrimonial system to not only secure the alliance and loyalty of the dominant Rajput groups, but also to portray the Mughals as a part of the Rajput kin network. Kothiyal argues that these matrimonial relations were a tool for the Rajputs to justify their political relationship

¹⁸⁴ Norman Zeigler, 'Some notes on Rajput Loyalties during the Mughal Period,' in J.F Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Madison Wisconsin, South Asian Studies, No. 3, 1978, p. 170

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 172

¹⁸⁶ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 90

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

with the Mughals.¹⁸⁸ Thus, the Mughals were portrayed as their kin. However, it is important to understand that while the Mughals may have been incorporated into the clan network of the major Rajput groups, this was never an alliance of equals. The Mughals brokered these alliances to extend imperial control over the extensive Rajput territories as well as utilize their military resources. While both sides benefited from the alliance, the benefit derived by the Mughals was much greater than the benefit derived by the Rajput groups.

Kothiyal argues that with the expansion of the Mughal Empire, the Rajput kingdoms became more stable as the Emperor secured and ratified the position of the ruling line.¹⁸⁹ Authority to even grant and take away land now rested with the Emperor. While all kingdoms were subordinated to the Mughals, some like Marwar rose to greater prominence. Kothiyal argues that in this process, groups like the Bhatias who had established their kingdom deep into the desert became more and more politically marginalized. She argues that while the activities of Marwar were geared towards the centre of power of the Empire, Jaisalmer was more involved in the affairs of Multan and Sindh. This was, according to Kothiyal, because the north-centricity of the Empire perceived the Thar as a frontier and as a result Jaisalmer never became an active participant in the affairs of the Empire.¹⁹⁰ This was also the case with Kutch where the older political systems of the Jams was never brought under direct imperial control. It functioned independently and only tributes were paid to the Mughal Emperor.

This is evident in the conspicuous lack of historical data on the Mughal administration in Kutch. The only references one finds in imperial accounts are of trade in Kutchi horses. Thus, for the imperial Mughals, the western Thar and Kutch were politically marginal. However, they were still relevant to establish greater control on eastern and coastal Sindh. For instance, Yusuf

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 98

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 91

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 92

Mirak in *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani* (seventeenth century) opines that when Thatta was conquered, Jahangir appeased the Rana of Jaisalmer and the Jam of Kutch with petty *mansabs* and allowed them to stay in their respective areas rather than posting them elsewhere.¹⁹¹ It was necessary to appease the rulers of Jaisalmer and Kutch because of the long history of migration of tribes in these regions. Many tribes of the desert circulated in Sindh, Kutch and Jaisalmer. Since these regions were now being brought under imperial control, the local administration attempted to extract maximum revenue.

This entailed controlling and taxing the tribes of these regions as well. Even in the desert where cultivation was dependent on rainfall and irrigation, revenue was charged in accordance with *zabt* regulation.¹⁹² This entailed forcibly settling down many tribes which made them recalcitrant. For the recalcitrant tribes, the desert was a space in which they could escape from imperial control. This is evident in their repeated movements from Sindh towards the sand hills of Jaisalmer. For instance, the Unar branch of the Sameja tribe of Sindh would clash with the administration and then escape into the desert. They would often be chased but in vain as the desert came under the formal territory of Jaisalmer.¹⁹³ Thus, to control these tribes as well as to extract maximum revenue from fertile areas on the fringes of the desert, it was essential to appease the rulers of Jaisalmer and Kutch. However, Jaisalmer and Kutch remained politically marginal to Bikaner and Marwar (during Mughal rule) which became the dominant powers in the desert.

¹⁹¹ Muḥammad Saleem Akhtar, *Sind under the Mughals: an Introduction to, Translation of and Commentary on the Mazhar-i Shahjahani of Yusuf Mirak*, National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1990, p. 250. Henceforth *Mazhar-i Shahjahani*.

¹⁹² Ibid. p. 255

¹⁹³ Ibid. p. 269

IV. Kinship, Loyalty and the Ideological Apparatus in the Thar - c. Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries C.E.

Having discussed the political landscape of the Thar desert in terms of the rise of the politically and socially dominant Rajputs, their negotiations with each other as well as with the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, a brief note on the ideological apparatus operating in the Thar is warranted. Any argument on kingship and authority has to address a basic question. How did the ruler make the claim to royal status and therefore their right to rule and how did others interpret these claims? How the Rajputs became socially and politically dominant has already been explained by various scholars. However, in the period under study which saw establishment of Rajput polities in the Thar Desert the notion of kingship and ideology become significant aspects of enquiry. A number of Rajput groups across the Thar had pastoral backgrounds as is clear from their narratives. The Sammas which later split into the Jarejas and the Chudasamas were probably pastoral groups who migrated from Sindh into Kutch. In the period under study one finds innumerable narratives of migration, loot of horses, camels and cattle, colonisation of territory and plunder of villages in attempts by particular groups to establish themselves as politically dominant. An essential part of ideologically justifying a group's bid for political supremacy were constructing narratives and genealogies. These narratives and genealogies first sought to erase the pastoral past of these groups by tracing their genealogies to mythical figures or groups from the Brahmanical pantheon. For instance, the Bhatias, Jarejas and Sammas trace their genealogy from the Yadavas. The Rathors trace their genealogy from Vishnu, Sage Marichi and directly from Surya, thus calling themselves 'Suryavanshi'.¹⁹⁴ They also attempt to trace Siha's ancestry (founder of the Rathor clan) to

¹⁹⁴ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 47

Prithviraj Chauhan. The places where initial capitals were established were also projected to have mythical significance, a case in point being Mandor which Nainsi states was established by Bhogshil, the son of Mount Meru. In another narrative, he states that it was established by the demon Mandodar, father of Mandodari.¹⁹⁵

Another aspect of the narratives is the manner in which the identity of the Rajput was constructed. The identity of the Rajput was formulated by othering the various communities of the region and portraying them either as villains, or as mute subjects to be patronised, or not portraying them at all. Whatever few references that could be found in bardic accounts referred to in this work conform to this trope. For instance, in an account of the Rathor clan, Nainsi discusses a Mer raja who levied heavy taxes, was corrupt and moreover, demanded that every new bride had to spend three days with him.¹⁹⁶ He was finally vanquished by the Rathor prince Asthanji. In another instance, Nainsi portrays the Nais as a very cunning caste. A nai would always observe everything and incite his Rajput overlord into wrongful action.¹⁹⁷ Thus, while the Rajput in many narratives appears as the valorous hero who upholds the moral order, other communities appear either as facilitators in his narrative or as villains. The Rajput appears as a figure with definite characteristics - honor, valor, presence of mind, martial strength etc. Other identities are reconstructed vis-a-vis these markers. The Nai is cunning and jealous, the Raibari is distrustful, the Mer is a lecherous savage, the Bhil is a skilful warrior always at the service of the Rajput. This is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

These narratives, while justifying why the Rajputs should be the ruling group, also reflect their relationship with the Charans who were composers and narrators of these bardic traditions. When Nainsi compiled the narratives and genealogies of the various Rajput ruling

¹⁹⁵ Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 1, p. 1

¹⁹⁶ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 56

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 82

families; he referred to an ancient bardic oral tradition which had been in circulation for centuries. He also referred to other *khyats* in writing his account. This points towards a constant circulation of narratives across the desert and beyond in an oral form. Thus, these narratives can be said to have been popular in general. These narratives were probably circulating in the desert before extension of Mughal control in the sixteenth century. This circulation of narratives was done by the Charans and the Bhats who were itinerant bardic groups who sought patronage in local courts as well as accompanied caravans, protecting them from robbers.¹⁹⁸ Since most Rajput groups were militarised nomadic pastoral groups, the Charans and the Bhats functioned as their priests, genealogists and guarantors.¹⁹⁹ In return, they depended on the Rajputs for patronage.

An essential aspect of this relationship was the Charanic goddesses. According to Samira Sheikh, the Charans guaranteed a mutually accepted legal system between clans which was couched in the vocabulary of negotiation and alliance. This was enforced by the sacrality of the mother goddess and any violation or disrespect of the Charans or any alliance brokered by them brought about the curse of the goddess.²⁰⁰ Charanic goddesses were incorporated into the Saivite traditions and became *kuladevis*. Every success or defeat was attributed to the goddess. If the goddess was pleased, the ruler and his descendents acquired large territories, ruled prosperously and became ‘vado rajput’/ ‘vir rajput’. Defeat was also attributed to the goddess’ displeasure. The most striking example is of the Bhati king Vijai Rao who acquired the suffix ‘choodalo’ because the goddess was pleased with him and granted him victory against Sindh by giving him her gold bangle (*chood/choodi*).²⁰¹

Vijai Rao was a brave (vir) Rajput. His reign (thakurai) was peaceful until he was attacked by armies from Sindh. Vijai Rao was a great devotee of the

¹⁹⁸ See next chapter for details.

¹⁹⁹ Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, p. 108

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 263

goddess. He prayed that if he wins this battle, then he would sacrifice his head to the goddess. In the battle, the goddess appeared on a chariot and helped Vijai Rao gain victory. After the battle, Vijai Rao went to the goddess' temple alone and was just about to behead himself when the goddess appeared and stopped him from doing so. However, Vijai Rao was adamant in performing his sacrifice. To pacify him, the goddess removed a gold bangle from her wrist and gifted it to Vijai Rao. Since Vijai Rao always wore this gold bangle (chood), he was called Vijai Rao 'Choodalo' or 'the one with the bangle'.²⁰²

Thus, incorporation of local goddess tradition into the brahmanical fold was a way of acquiring legitimacy by the Rajputs. Patronage of the Charans thus included awarding them with cattle wealth as well as social status by the incorporation of their religious traditions.

The above processes of acquiring legitimation were taking place prior to the sixteenth century, when Rajput groups were still in the process of establishing their supremacy and stabilizing their political states in the Thar desert. With the establishment of Mughal control, ideas of kingship and authority also underwent a change. The narratives which were providing the required legitimacy to the Rajputs were compiled and put down into written form in this period. Nainsi's *kyat*, *Dalpat Vilas*, etc. were compiled on the orders of the Marwar and Bikaner states. Since they were compiled in the court of the local ruler - in Nainsi's case Maharaja Jaswant Singh - they acquired a special significance and served various functions. Narratives like those in the *kyat* try to justify conquest, acquire legitimacy but most importantly, try to situate the Rajput vis-a-vis the Mughal. By constantly eulogising the Rajput clan, these narratives bring in symbols of honor, prestige, loyalty, rank etc. which become important tools to glorify the hero and impart honor to not only him but also his entire community. In context of the Rajput subordination to the Mughals, these narratives acquired special significance as means of covert resistance, ethnic and clan cohesion as well as assertion by the Rajputs as a social group and specific clans within them.

²⁰² Ibid.

However, in articulation of kingship vis-a-vis the Mughals, the Mughals were also incorporated within the Rajput fold and service was extended to them. Titles like *maharajadhiraj* began to be acquired after Mughal assertion of supreme authority. Marriage alliances with the Mughals were another way of acquiring prestige in addition to being strategic political alliances. Tanuja Kothiyal points out Rajput-Mughal marriages became exclusive as the Mughals only married into Rajputs and not other castes. Rajputs and Mughals began to mirror each other in their social mores.²⁰³ Rajputs were brought up in Mughal households and some were given the title of *mirza raja*. Akbar even called the Bikaner prince Dalpat his son after the death of his brother Bhupat.

‘hib rajaji re tu vado beto re paat ro tesu tu mharo hi beto chhe,’ - ‘You are the eldest son of Rajaji so you are my son as well.’²⁰⁴

Thus, the Rajputs became a part of the familial world of the Mughals and vice versa. The sources provide evidence contrary to the view which reduces Rajput-Mughal relations to mere Hindu-Muslim dynamics. This is evident in the portrayal of the Mughals in bardic literature. The emperors are referred to as ‘Shriji’ or with their titles.²⁰⁵

Thus, the construction of kingship and authority by the Rajput groups who sought to establish political dominance in the Thar had many dimensions. Construction of narratives and genealogies played a crucial role in this endeavor. First, an erasure of their pastoral past was essential. Second, their hegemony had to be established vis-a-vis other groups. Third, a symbiotic relationship with the Charans and Bhats had to be maintained to construct and propagate the said narratives. This was done by not only awarding them with material wealth but also by appropriating local goddess traditions. Mughal-Rajput relations further complicated

²⁰³ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 101

²⁰⁴ *Dalpat Vilas*, p. 89

²⁰⁵ *Dalpat Vilas*, p. 100

notions of kingship, the most important manifestations of which were the compiling of bardic accounts and Mughal-Rajput marriage alliances.

Conclusion

Thus, on examining the Thar as a political landscape, we find that it was highly dynamic and full of inter and intra clan negotiations. Right from the tenth/eleventh century, the Thar had become a space where one clan or the other was attempting to establish their dominance. With the rise of the Rathors first in Maheva, then Mandor and finally Jodhpur in addition to their subsequent branching out to Bikaner, the political landscape of the Thar became more contested than ever before. An important question to ask is what role did the ecology of the Thar play in making it an arena of such intense political negotiations.

First, as implied previously, the location of the Thar Desert is strategic. It serves as a connecting space in four directions – to Punjab and the north west frontier of the subcontinent onwards to Central Asia, to Thatta and Arabian Sea, to Gujarat, and towards the Indo-Gangetic plains. A large volume of trade passed through the Thar in items like salt, horses, camels, wool, textiles, indigo, marble, metals etc.²⁰⁶ The existence of this trade was also possible due to the Thar being a political space with large kingdoms established within it. The political space of the Thar and the existence of these kingdoms, in turn, was highly dependent on the trade. Thus, the Thar was able to provide a sound material base for any political formation to take place.

Second, these political formations were based on the mobility of Rajput individuals and groups. This was also possible due to the ecology of the Thar which allowed such spatial movements which in turn led to social mobility. One may think of the Thar as a barren, hostile

²⁰⁶ Irfan Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 4B, 5B, 6B, 7B

desert where minimum human activity takes place. However, this is far from the truth. The aridity and barrenness itself set the stage for political activity in the Thar and determined its nature. This is evident from various instances of tank construction for political gains.²⁰⁷ Political influence and power was also exerted through looting and plunder. Nainsi gives numerous instances of plunder of villages and loot especially of cattle and horses.

Third, the Rajput system was based on grant of territory to clansmen as well as those doing service/*chakari*. It has been argued that the Rajputs became a dominant social group based on this system. The rise of groups like the Rathors depended on territory to disburse to their clansmen. The vast space of the Thar made it attractive for these groups to make inroads into the Desert. Nainsi gives a ton of information on the *patta* and *jagir* granted to various clan members of the Rathors, Bhatias, Chauhans, Sisodiyas etc as well as members of other groups who came into the service a particular clan. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries the Turks too became important players in the political dynamics of the region.

However, with the rise of the Mughals, the political landscape of the Thar changed completely. The Mughals' perception of the Thar as a frontier politically marginalized groups like the Bhatias. Kothiyal also argues that this period witnessed the binary between the sedentarised 'Mughal' Rajput and the nomadic and outlawed 'frontier' Rajput in the desert. As the desert was increasingly viewed as a frontier, it became a safe haven for groups escaping imperial control. However, in mapping out the political landscape of the Thar, the central point that emerges is that the Thar Desert was far from an empty, barren, hostile frontier. It was a vibrant political space, which enabled the rise of various kingdoms by providing a mobile space to a number of groups. It is clear that a difference of perception of the Thar Desert existed between the Rajput groups surveyed in this chapter and the imperial Mughals. The Rajput

²⁰⁷ See next chapter for more details.

groups, which rose to prominence, always viewed the Thar as a space where they could try out their political luck. The Mughals on the other hand viewed it as an ecological frontier where their centralized control could not extend.

Chapter Three

Environment, Identities and Conflicts: Ecological Landscape of the Thar Desert

Introduction

While the previous chapter (Chapter Two) attempted to map out the political landscape of the Thar Desert, this chapter will aim to examine its ecological landscape. This chapter argues that the political landscape of the Thar cannot be divorced from its ecological landscape. The previous chapter also focused on the political ascendancy of the Rajputs. However, the Thar was home to a large number of diverse communities. These included pastoral and mobile groups like the Raibaris, Banjaras, Mers, Abhiras, Kolis, Bhils etc.; occupational groups like Nais, Mochis, Telis, blacksmiths, indigo dyers as well as wandering occupational groups like Nats, Kalbelias, Kanjars etc. Also residing in the desert were the Jats, Rajputs, Patels, Paliwals, Bishnois, Sirvis etc. who practiced agriculture, while there were also groups who were moneylenders like the Bohras and Mahajans. Socially dominant communities like the Rajputs and the Jats engaged in agriculture while marginalised communities like the Bhils and Raibaris resorted to animal rearing, pastoral production and artisanal activities.

The desert is characterised by scarcity of essential resources like water and fertile land. However, the role of social stratification - i.e., caste - in ordering access to resources cannot be underplayed. The social position of a particular group often determined its right to control over ecological resources, which further complemented the power status of these groups. Amongst these many groups in the Thar, the Rajputs became politically and socially dominant by availing the ecological opportunities offered by the desert, often at the cost of other communities. Conflicts over resources can be conceptualised as multiple identities playing out on the ecological landscape of the desert raising questions over the process of identity formation. Thus, moving away from a superficial account of the Thar's ecology, it is

essential to examine the various ways in which the desert ordered interaction differentially between communities - seen as adaptations to draw on already scarce resources.

This chapter attempts to analyse human-nature interactions and the power dynamics implicit within it. It is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to explore the variety of ways in which the Thar Desert is presented in various textual sources. This enables us to understand the ways in which certain images and understandings of the desert evolved in popular imaginations, became widely entrenched and connected to each other. Thus, an attempt is made to examine the ways in which the desert was culturally constructed. The second section attempts to map out the relationship between different groups and the desert as well as the role of environmental factors in determining the social position of various communities in the desert. The resources offered by the desert as well as the differential access of the communities of the Thar to these resources, the land revenue system as well as the rural social structure will be discussed in this context as they were relevant in the ordering and re-ordering of power and hierarchies amongst different communities of the desert. The third section attempts to examine social conflicts in the desert. Thus, this helps us to trace the landscape of the desert in terms of power relations, identity and marginality. Hence, conflicts arising out of differential access to resources reveal how the landscape became contested.

I. Multiple Representations of the Thar Desert in Textual Sources

i. Accounts of Travel through the Thar Desert – Thirteenth to Nineteenth Centuries C.E.

The ecological landscape of the desert held different meanings for different communities. While it is easy to imagine the desert as barren, empty and having harsh living conditions, it is important to examine how this notion came into being as well as how did diverse communities

perceive the landscape of the desert. An important aspect of this is the visualisation of the relationship between nature and culture and the ways in which different groups understood their relationship with the desert landscape. This can be examined by representations of the desert in literature and folklore. Such representations can also enable an exploration of the desert landscape as the site on which issues of social exclusion, stratification and inequalities in conjunction with natural resources played out. Thus, such an approach allows us to view the desert landscape as active and experienced rather than hostile, harsh and barren.

A. *Colonial Perception of the Great Desert - The Thar as recounted by James Tod in Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan (1829).*

It is imperative to historicise the popular notion of the Thar Desert as a fearful, inhospitable landscape devoid of human activity. This perception of the Thar Desert as a space where nothing can survive gained traction in the colonial period from James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (first published in 1829). James Tod called the region *marusthali* or the 'region of death'.¹ The word, according to him, comprises the Sanskrit terms *mri* meaning 'to die' and *sthala* meaning 'arid or dry land'. Thus, Tod right away characterised the desert as a frontier of human civilisation. He geographically defined the region as,

bounded on the north with a flat skirting the Ghara, on the south by that grand salt marsh, the Ran, and Koliwara; on the east by the Aravalli; and on the west by the valley of Sind.²

His main objective was to accurately map out the abode of the Rajputs, which he called 'Rajasthan' or 'Rajwarra' and affix boundaries to it using whatever 'superabundant material' that might be available to him. Thus, he attempted to subjugate a space and define a landscape

¹ James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Vol. 3, London, 1920, p. 1258

² Ibid.

in terms of a colonial understanding of boundaries, latitudes, geography as well as the idea of 'royal', 'martial' and 'pure-blood' Rajputs.³ This was done to acquire geographical and topographical knowledge of the region to politically subjugate indigenous regimes.⁴ Interestingly though, after describing the geographical limits of the Thar, he also defined its natural divisions as well as gave an account of indigenous notions of the land. He stated clearly that,

we purpose to follow the natural divisions of the country, or those employed by the natives...⁵

In defining the natural divisions of the desert, Tod subscribed to indigenous notions of the geography of the desert like the *thals* (barren parts of the desert) and the oasis as well as mentioning the seasonal variations which occur in the desert. He described the desert as beginning from Kanorh, encompassing the whole of Bikaner and parts of Shekhavati north of the Aravalli, crossing hills and valleys of sand to Pugal to Jaisalmer.⁶ Jaisalmer is an oasis insulated from all sides from the desert. From Jaisalmer, his description crosses over to Marwar and without crossing the Luni, onto Jalor and Siwanchi and from there to the 'almost unknown Raj of Parkar and Virawah.'⁷ Further, Tod informs us that the Thar extends into Dhat and Umarsumra which 'skirt the political limits of modern Rajputana' into Sindh and the valley of Indus.⁸

Interestingly, Tod in his *Annals* also subscribed to the older historical notions of political geography and ecology of the desert. For instance, he referred to the older notion of Jaisalmer

³ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 2. Tod claims at the outset that his work is the first to map out the geographical extent of the habitat of the (royal) Rajputs. He states that the region of Bundelkhand cannot be considered here as the Rajputs there are not 'pure-blood'.

⁴ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 61

⁵ Tod, *Annals*, Vol. 3, p. 1259

⁶ Ibid. Vol. 3, p.1260

⁷ Ibid. Vol. 3, p. 1261

⁸ Ibid. Vol. 3, p. 1262

as the ‘centre of the desert’ because it is an oasis. It should be noted that Nainsi had also called Jaisalmer as the ‘centre of Hindustan’.⁹ Jaisalmer was called the ‘centre’ because it was on the route connecting Gujarat to Multan. It was thus an important transit point for traders, travellers and peripatetic groups traversing the Thar. Tod also gave an account of the numerous terms used for the oasis like *dah* (pool) and refers to different types of *dah*, an example being the *hathi dah* -enough to drown an elephant.¹⁰ In his *Annals*, Tod referred to the ‘lost river’ of the desert - the Ghaggar - and the salt river - the Luni. The Luni is a ‘remarkable feature’ of the desert which forms the barrier between the fertile regions and the desert in Marwar and...

...as it leaves that region for the thal of Chauhans, it divides that community, and forms a geographical demarcation; the eastern portion being the Raj of Suigam and the western part Parkar, or beyond the Khar, or Luni.¹¹

From the above description of the desert by Tod, it is clear that he was attempting to map out the region based on both modern cartographic notions as well as the historically older ecological perceptions of the desert. However, while attempting to do so, he was also continuously referring to the desert-centric notions of geography like the *thal* and the oasis. *Thal* and *ruj* are two terms he frequently used and quantified them as ‘arid and bare desert’ and ‘desert with natural vegetation/jungle of the desert’ respectively.¹²

While Tod stated that his *Annals* is a work on geography, he also attempted to compare and correlate his modern imagination of geography with ancient geography “extracted from the Puranas and other Hindu authorities” wherever possible.¹³ For instance, he tries to situate place names in the ancient context like *marusthali* for the desert and Marwar, *aranya* for the

⁹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 257

¹⁰ Tod, *Annals*, Vol. 3, p.1262

¹¹ Ibid. Vol. 3, p. 1264

¹² Ibid. Vol. 3, p. 1265

¹³ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 2

Rann etc.¹⁴ While Kothiyal argues that Tod was trying to map out the desert and ‘Rajputana’ using modern methods and at the same time also referring to ancient texts, it is argued here that he was trying to fit indigenous desert notions of geography and ecology into the ‘modern scientific’ method adhered to by the colonialists. By combining both the ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ notions of geography, he was also trying to accord legitimacy to the colonial project of mapping territories and people in the eyes of the local Hindu Rajput ruling elite.

However, being a colonial surveyor, Tod created a notion of frontier attributing the Thar with a hostile terrain. Tod proclaimed that the number of cultivated tracts in comparison to the sterile ones were scanty.¹⁵ By comparing the Thar to a tiger whose stripes indicated the stretches of hostile sandy desert elevated on an equally hostile but less sandy stretch over whose surface thinly populated towns and hamlets were scattered; he successfully creates a perception of the Thar as a hostile frontier teeming with unsettled elements. Interestingly however, while he talked about the bandits and the robbers on the routes in the desert, he never associated the desert landscape with the Rajputs. They, in his account, are a minority in most towns which are inhabited by the ‘rude castes’ or are restricted to the political centres like Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Umarkot etc.

James Tod’s notion of the Thar as a hostile frontier space and his attempts to accord significance to only political centres while negating the importance of the entire desert space resulted in a perception of the Thar which has carried on till day. The desert and its uncivilized people made it a frontier, an unsettled space which could not be controlled. Such a negative delineation of the Thar complemented the British imperial agenda of ‘civilizing’ an area allegedly savage and intractable, thus enabling them to eventually control it.

¹⁴ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 867

¹⁵ Ibid. Vol. 3, p. 1258

B. *Accounts of Pre-colonial European Travelers in the Thar*

James Tod's writings are a part of a long tradition of European writings on the 'orient'. An important aspect that is essential to understand is the ways in which colonialism shaped the way Europeans perceived non-European landscapes and people. First, the concept of landscape and its evolution is European. Cultural geographers have sought to show how certain ideal European landscape forms have been used to characterize, appropriate and judge non-European spaces.¹⁶ However, scholars have also shown that local and indigenous knowledge and practices constantly disrupted the 'detached' and 'observatory' European gaze.¹⁷ Edward Said's work provides an important tool for critical analyses in this regard. He argues that the West created the discourse of 'Orientalism' and thus produced a rational, authoritarian Western self in contrast to the savage, backward and degenerate Oriental. Said thus described orientalism as an 'imaginative geography', a set of moral mapping of the world in which non-Western cultures and lands are described through negative contrasts with a pre-given and pre-eminent western self.¹⁸ This is an important argument to consider as it shows how indigenous voices are silenced and erased by forms of imperial discourse such as landscape representation.

a. *Formation of an Idea of India in Europe*

Every traveller who travelled to India already had some pre-existing notion of the subcontinent. This was because there was already a tradition in Europe - from the fifteenth century when the Portuguese first arrived in India - to collect artifacts and written materials

¹⁶ See Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 123. See also W.J.T Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Routledge, London, 1994.

¹⁷ See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India: Words, People, Empires, 1500-1800*, Harvard University Press, 2017.

¹⁸ Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 125. For in depth discussion on Orientalism, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, 1979.

from the subcontinent and transport them back to Europe.¹⁹ These objects included spices, textiles as well as manuscripts in different languages like Persian, Malayalam, Konkani, Tamil etc.²⁰ This practice of collecting materials from the subcontinent became part of a process of forming a perception about India in Europe. The first half of the sixteenth century saw the beginning of this process, which by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became more complex as more actors participated in it. While the sixteenth century saw more Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese merchants, traders, courtiers, intellectuals and missionaries; the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries witnessed increased role of the English, the Dutch and the French. Asian traders and intellectuals were also a part of this process. Thus, Sanjay Subrahmanyam highlights the formation of a knowledge complex in Europe about what India is.²¹

Joannes de Laet's *De Imporio Magni Mogolis* (1631) or *The Empire of the Great Mogol* is an interesting account in the sense that it provides insight on how India was represented in Europe. De Laet was a Flemish geographer, philologist and naturalist who was born in Antwerp in 1593. In 1625 he became the Director of the Company of the West Indies and later was one of the Directors of the Dutch East India Company. Therefore, he was in constant touch with the political scenario of the subcontinent. De Laet had never been to India and wrote *De Imporio* based upon various travelers' accounts as well as from his dealings within the VOC. He was thus part of the process of knowledge formation about India in Europe that Subrahmanyam has highlighted.

The first part of De Laet's work is labelled 'The Geography and Administration of the Mughal Empire'. He begins with a topographical description of India. De Laet discusses the various provinces of the Mughal Empire in his second chapter. Particularly relevant for the

¹⁹ Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India*, p. 15

²⁰ Ibid. p. 19

²¹ Ibid.

purpose of this study are his descriptions of Bhakkar, Jaisalmer, Gujarat, Bhagore and Kutch. He describes Bhakkar as 'Buckor Suckor' lying on the banks of the Indus. It is divided into two by the Indus and owes its fertility to it. According to him, Bhakkar stretches from the north and east of Thatta.²² The only description of Jaisalmer is that 'Soret', 'Buckor' and 'Tatta' bound it on the east.²³ Gujarat is described as the most beautiful and opulent region, richly watered by various rivers like the 'Nardabah', 'Tapte' and others.²⁴ He also mentions that Gujarat is penetrated by a 'huge gulf of sea into which ancient geographers thought (wrongly) the Indus flowed'.²⁵

He cursorily mentions 'Bakar' (Bhagore) as known by its capital Bikaner. However, he wrongly declares that it is situated on the west bank of the Ganges.²⁶ He mentions Kutch in reference to how other geographers described it –that it produces 'most excellent' horses which are called 'Cachy' after the kingdom they are found in. He situates Kutch as north of Cambay.²⁷ He describes the desert at Nagar Parkar as arid and waterless where live many wild asses, stags, foxes and other wild beasts.²⁸ De Laet declares that the country as inhabited by 'savages' who recognize no ruler, but plundered travellers. He also mentions merchandise being brought to Thatta from Agra on camels. The route from Agra to Thatta via the Indus is shorter than that from Agra to Surat. However, according to De Laet, this route is less preferred because of robbers.²⁹

De Laet mentions these regions very cursorily. However, since he never visited India, thus, his physical viewpoint is restricted to giving only geographical references. He only

²² Hoyland, J.S (trans.), *The Empire of the Great Mogol / Translated by J.S. Hoyland and Annotated by S.N. Banerjee*, Oriental Books Reprint Corp., 1974, p. 6

²³ Ibid. p. 7

²⁴ Ibid. p. 10

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 11

²⁷ Ibid. p. 15

²⁸ Ibid. p. 67

²⁹ Ibid. p. 69

describes those landscapes, which his sources describe. In another instance, he discusses Sindh as ‘that province which the ancients called Carmania’ and Indus as ‘that river was called by the ancients as Indus is called by the Persians and Mogols as Pangab’.³⁰ Thus, he gives a spatial reference as well as how the ancients remembered the place, in process reminding the reader of these particular spaces as well as highlighting how the ‘Persians’ and ‘Mogols’ have categorized them differently. Another point to be noted is that by continuously referring to how ancient thinkers characterized India, Sindh, Indus etc., he is appealing to his European audience for whom names like Pliny, Erasthenes etc., are culturally specific. They carry a certain weight which de Laet uses to introduce India to his readers, thus, giving them a lens through which they can imagine the physical reality of the subcontinent.³¹

By compiling information about India from different sources and organizing it into chapters dealing with various ‘secular’ subjects like topography, provinces, climate and soil, ‘Indian character and customs’ etc., De Laet constructs an empirical profile of India under the Mughals. This is done not only for the benefit of his readers or for the aid of future travellers but also to create an image of India in a rational manner, devoid of hyperbole and present it to his readers as a land familiar to Europeans from time immemorial.

b. Travel Through the Desert – An Analysis of the accounts of Peter Mundy and Jean Baptiste Tavernier

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ De Laet, in the introduction of *De Emporio*, quotes descriptions of India by Pliny and Erasthenes to show that the land ‘both on this side of and beyond the Ganges’ was known to the ancient historians, especially ‘after the time of Alexander the Great.’ Ibid. p. 2

It was important to consider De Laet's work because it gives us an insight into how European travelers perceived the subcontinent. Moreover, one can also examine whether their pre-conceived notions were challenged by the realities they faced while travelling. Every traveler carried with him a set of 'mental maps', often dogmatic and condescending about the outlandish cultural worlds to be encountered. These mental maps were predicated upon the idea of landscape as an objective and scientific gaze as well as having landscape itself as an impetus for travel.³² Thus, a traveler's 'desire' to travel and 'see' distant, foreign lands is not completely divorced from the way the traveler viewed the 'Orient' in relation to himself.

An analysis of some European travelers' accounts is warranted here. Peter Mundy was an English traveler who made three voyages to India – in 1628, 1635 and 1655 – under the employment of the English East India Company. Not much is known about his family except that his father was a pilchard trader who intended Mundy to follow the same business. It is during his first voyage to India – from 1628 to 1634 – that he travelled through parts of the desert while travelling from Agra to Surat. Jean Baptiste Tavernier was born in Paris in 1605. His uncle and brother were cartographers, his father was a merchant. Therefore, he was influenced by geography from an early age and had a strong desire to travel and see foreign countries. He made his voyage to India in 1638, during which he traversed the desert

Although European travelers like Mundy already had knowledge about India, which gave birth to a certain perception, they were still discovering the subcontinent on their own.³³ Thus, they were also uncovering the geography of the country on their own terms. This is evident in the one basic formula travel literatures are full of – the number of miles travelled from one point to another. This appears to be a purely topographical statement. However, one also finds

³² Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India*, p. 32

³³ *Ibid.* p. 50

narrative braided into it. While recording the number of miles between one point and another, the traveller also records the landscape, the people, the customs, any special occurrence etc.

For instance, Peter Mundy calculated the distance travelled between each point in his journeys. However, he described his experiences, the places passed and the people encountered before calculating the number of miles between one point and another. Thus, he transforms the simple statement – from A to B there are X miles – into a newly discovered landscape having voices and stories, which are perceived, reflected and shared as a new experience.³⁴ For example, he stated the distance between Merta and the previous stop Rea as ‘7 course’. He described Merta as standing on a little rising and ‘faire to see too’. He also described it as the *jagir* of Raja Gaj Singh who kept it ‘in good order so people pass without molestation.’ He recounts the inhabitants as ‘Rajputs which go after a more free and soldier like manner than other Hindus, rather like masters than subjects.’ The statement, thus, reflects not just geography but due to the braiding of space, time and point of view, links physical geography with the experience of life.

Tavernier, however, only gives descriptions of sights and incidents he considers relevant, unlike Mundy, who noted the minutest details. Tavernier does not subscribe to Mundy’s method of noting distances. However, he also provides some physical description of the places he visited. While describing the route from Surat to Agra via Merta, he undoubtedly passed through Marwar. He describes Jalor as a formerly strong place but now an ancient town upon a mountain surrounded by walls and difficult to access.³⁵ He describes Merta as a ‘mountainous

³⁴ George Prokhorov and Sergey Saveliev, ‘Narrating and mapping Russia: From Terra Incognita to a charted space on the road to Cathay’, *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, No. 4, Vol. 2, p. 278.

³⁵ William Crooke (ed.), *Travels in India by Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Baron of Aubonne*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 1925. Henceforth Tavernier, *Travels*.
p. 71

country' and as a as 'a large town, badly built.' Tavernier also gives a detailed account of the Banjaras, although it is unclear whether he embellished some details of the description.³⁶

These types of narratives are also based upon the larger discourse of orientalism, which requires the traveler to objectively 'map' the landscape and give an almost ethnographical account of the people and customs. This thus places the traveler as the subject, as the detached observer rendering the landscape as visible and legible. This constitutes an imperial gaze that precedes the actual colonial empires by centuries. It has to be seen in context of the age of exploration, which was based on a new found scientific daring. This enabled the perceiving and picturing of far-flung landscapes in view of the growth of European geographical and scientific knowledge under imperialism. James Tod is the culmination of this process.

While De Laet gave an account of Rajputana with some description of the desert, it was Mundy who gave an account of the ecological diversity of the desert. He described the way to Ajmer as 'hilly and stony' and onwards to Rea as 'sandy'.³⁷ From Rea to Merta, he described the landscape as plain, with little wood or water but better 'cultivated' (better peopled and watered). The land around Pipar is described as fertile with fields of corn, wheat, barley, poppy and bhang. Some way ahead at Jogi ka Talao, there is scarcity of trees with only 'thorne' trees (acacia trees).³⁸ Mundy also observed small towns and villages surrounded by hedges of thorns to keep thieves away.³⁹ He described the landscape as 'the countrie all this way is scarce one part of a hundred manured (cultivated) or put to use, the rest lying desert and waste, although very good ground.'⁴⁰ Thus, he described the landscape as changing from stony, ragged and

³⁶ Tavernier describes the Banjaras as those 'tribes' who drive hundreds of oxen, have no permanent homes, and transport different types of grain, rice, pulses, salt. He also described them as 'superstitious', wearing a 'small box of silver' around their necks in which 'superstitious writing' is kept. Ibid. Vol.1 p. 35

³⁷ Richard Temple (ed.), *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, Vol. 2, Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1907, p. 242. Henceforth Mundy, *Travels*.

³⁸ Ibid. Vol. 2.

³⁹ Ibid. Vol. 2. p. 248

⁴⁰ Ibid. Vol. 2.

uninhabited to overgrown with bushes yet cloyed with sand. There are hills at Jalor but they are ‘highest, steepest, craggiest, barrenest and rockie.’⁴¹ There is scarcity of water with wells about twenty fathoms deep. Passing over rocks and clefts Mundy witnesses ‘the true patterne of a fearefull barren desert.’⁴² There were no men and no water, only owls, wild peacocks, wild cats, hares, snakes etc.⁴³ He described the change in landscape from Marwar to Gujarat where, there was an abundance of fruit trees and water.⁴⁴ He summarises the entire route from Agra to Ahmedabad as ‘a desert, barren and theevish country, no sarai, meat or drink, except grain and water, the latter very scarce.’⁴⁵

Thus, for Mundy, the desert is not a uniform sandy ocean but ecologically and topographically diverse. He notes the diversity in landscape from stony to hilly to sandy to bushy. He notes the flora and fauna of the arid region as well as changes in the quality of water from brackish to salty to fresh. Most importantly, he viewed the route through the desert in terms of convenience of travel – in terms of the nature of roads, availability of water, vulnerability to thieves etc. He also mentions at points that although barren, the land was good. However, despite the diversity of the desert, he explicitly states that the desert was ‘fearefull’ and ‘barren’. This was probably because he was aware beforehand that passage through the desert would not be easy.⁴⁶

An analysis of Mundy’s account reveals a different perception of the desert than the ones encountered in the accounts of Tavernier and De Laet. Travelling through the desert was a deliberate decision taken by Mundy. Mundy’s account reflects the curiosity of navigating a

⁴¹ Ibid. Vol. 2. p. 250

⁴² Ibid. Vol. 2. p. 252

⁴³ Ibid. Vol. 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Vol. 2. p.256

⁴⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2. p. 264

⁴⁶ This was why he preferred to travel with the caravan of the Mughal noble Bakir Khan rather than traverse the desert alone. Ibid. Vol. 2. p. 236

never before seen landscape. In other accounts of travel through the desert, especially non-European ones, one finds a sense of desperate escapism. This is discussed in the next section. Mundy's account, however, is that of exploration rather than survival. His experiences are full of negotiations with the geographical as well as the human landscape. Thus, while on one hand he describes the physical landscape, on the other hand he also gives an account of how people lived in the desert. Mundy's account is full of descriptions of the local jagirdars, their system of extracting custom duty, descriptions of inhabitants as well as groups like Bhils, Kolis, and Banjaras in addition to Rajputs.

For both Tavernier and Mundy, the desert is a fearful, hostile, and a difficult to navigate space. However, Tavernier does not give a descriptive account of the desert the same way that Mundy does. In fact, there are many differences of opinion between the two. For instance, Tavernier finds Merta a badly built town, whereas Mundy finds it quite pleasant. Tavernier also describes how the Rajputs have been inducted in the *mansab* system by the Mughals. He does not mention any troubles he may have faced, like theft or water scarcity. While Tavernier states in the beginning that deserts are unnavigable, one gets the sense of an easy passage from his account.

Mundy, on the other hand, viewed the route through the desert in terms of convenience of travel – in terms of the way, availability of water, vulnerability to thieves etc. This difference in opinion may be due to the fact that Tavernier travelled with relative comfort since he came from a higher social stratum and could also afford to pay for amenities like palanquins, personal guards etc. He never actually faced adversities in the desert, unlike Mundy, and instead based his perception on what he already knew. Thus, he did not find it relevant to engage with the space of the desert and probably that is why we find little to no descriptions in his account. Mundy, however, travelled with Bakir Khan's caravan but could not keep up with him. Thus,

he had to navigate most of the way on his own. Here we find a complex relationship between the traveler and the landscape in both Tavernier and Mundy's cases.

While Mundy describes the desert landscape and the people in great detail, he still writes off the desert as 'barren and fearefull'. This was probably because he considered the desert to be a hostile space because of the danger of travelling through it. This also may be because he already carried a perception that the native people did not recognize the Englishman as superior and instead looked for opportunities to extort from him.⁴⁷ Thus, there was a notion that protection would be needed while travelling through the desert.

While the lens of orientalism is certainly an important tool of analysis, in Mundy's case one finds instances of a different sort of encounter and negotiation. His observations regarding the Englishman in India is accurately applied in desperate situations. While in one instance Mundy himself resorted to kidnapping to get back stolen property, in another instance he approached the state to dispense justice.⁴⁸ In these instances, he had an acute understanding of how to navigate different situations. An important point in this context raised by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam is the question of how 'ethnographic information' present in so many travel accounts was digested and whether it was capable of shifting the basic matrix of perception. They argue that while reading travel accounts, it is imperative to understand the delicate interplay between accumulation of empirical information and the formation and transformation of the categories of perception themselves.⁴⁹ This is evident in Mundy's case in when even though he found some customs and laws strange, like the trial by ordeal, he never once resorted to categorising any group as 'savage', thus, moving away from the popular European perception of the 'orient' being full of 'savages'.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Vol. 2, 'Introduction', p. 1

⁴⁸ Ibid. Vol. 2. p. 259

⁴⁹ Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subramanian, *Indo Persian Travel in the Age of Discoveries 1400-1800*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 19

Scholars argue that the landscape gaze is complex and ambivalent in the sense that it is not a totally imperializing gaze but full of fractures and fissures⁵⁰. This can be clearly seen in Peter Mundy's account where on one hand he attempts to objectively describe the landscape and people in a systematic and dispassionate manner. However, on the other hand, his descriptions of encounters with indigenous people is not one sided. Their agency is not stripped away and neither are they painted with one homogenizing brush. He recognizes that encounters are a two way street and the Englishman has to be aware of language, customs and climate to survive. Despite this, there is still an underlying current in Mundy's account that the natives will try to extort from the Englishman in the first instance. This notion shapes his perceptions and actions while travelling through the desert which, makes him write off the landscape as fearful and hostile.

Thus, an analyses of European travel accounts in this section reveals that while the totalizing gaze of the white man is certainly there, it is still characterized by negotiations and encounters where the onus of survival lies with the European. The European model of landscape in this case was not easily projected onto non-European spaces but is an account of encounters between the European and the non-European. This ambivalence is clearly visible in Mundy's account. Hence, in Peter Mundy's account the picture of the landscape of the Thar Desert that emerges is a complex one. While on one hand Mundy attempts to make sense of the desert on his own terms, he also falls back upon his preconceived notions at the same time. Thus, while he ends up perceiving the desert as a fearful and hostile space, this perception is tendentious as he engages extensively with the topography and the inhabitants of the desert. Thus, after examining Peter Mundy's and Jean Baptiste Tavernier's accounts one can conclude that while an outside observer may characterize the desert in a particular manner, this

⁵⁰ Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 128

characterization is open to contestation. This enables us to think of the desert in terms other than ‘barren’, ‘fearfull’ and ‘hostile’.

C. Accounts of Pre-Colonial Non-European Travellers in the Thar

While sixteenth and seventeenth century European travellers’ accounts and Tod’s colonial gaze in the nineteenth century highlighted the barrenness, emptiness and savagery of the desert, these accounts were not the first ones to characterize the Thar as literally the ‘land of death.’ In the period of our study, i.e., from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the Thar has been perceived in a similar manner by almost every class of person who was compelled to pass through it - ruler, nobility, or traveller. Thus, the landscape of the Thar when viewed by an ‘outsider’s’ gaze has been constructed in a particular sense, i.e., of nature in its most fearful and unforgiving form. For instance, Barani describes the troubles faced by Muhammad bin Tughlaq’s army when he fell fatally sick near Thatta in his *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*. The thought of being encamped with the enemy on one side and the wilderness and desert on the other led to much despair within the army.⁵¹

During the last two or three days that he was encamped near Thatta, the Sultan’s malady had grown worse, and his army was in great trouble, for they were a thousand kos distant from Dehli and their wives and children, they were near the enemy and in a wilderness and desert, so they were sorely distressed, and looking upon the Sultan’s expected death as preliminary to their own, they quite despaired of returning home.⁵²

Shams Siraj Afif in his account describes that Firoz Shah Tughlaq’s army was misled by guides into ‘Kunchi-Ran’ i.e., the Rann of Kutch. He describes the Rann as ‘being completely

⁵¹*Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, p. 265

⁵² *Ibid.*

saturated with salt, where water would immediately evaporate leaving salt behind. No wind blew and nothing flew in the sky.’ The reason, according to Afif, is the land’s proximity to the sea which makes the district ‘deadly’.⁵³ On leaving the Rann the army marched into the desert where ‘no bird laid its egg or flapped its wing, where no tree was to be seen, where no blade of grass grew.’⁵⁴

Similar descriptions can also be found in other accounts within the period under study. For instance, the *Mirat-al-Mamalik* - a travel account written by the Ottoman general Sidi Ali Reis in the sixteenth century- describes the desert as sandy with no water where many succumbed to heat and thirst.⁵⁵ The author of the text deemed the desert unnavigable and passed through the forests instead. Jauhar in *Tazkirat ul Waqiat*, also a sixteenth century text, similarly describes the hardships faced by Humayun and his retinue on their journey across the desert. Lack of water was the greatest hurdle faced by them and their desperate rationing of the precious resource takes up much of Jauhar’s description of the desert.⁵⁶

The next day we marched at noon, and marched for twenty-seven astronomical hours before we again found water: during this horrid journey many of our people died and we all suffered exceedingly.⁵⁷

All the above mentioned descriptions describe the desert landscape while positioning the self outside of it. Here, the human is separated from nature. The landscape is described as wild, harsh and unforgiving and most importantly, empty. Thus, one gets the sense that nothing can survive this harsh desert and hence there is no point in trying to exert control over it. In all the

⁵³ Shams Siraj Afif, *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, in Elliot and Dawson, *A History of India*, Vol. 3, p. 324. Henceforth Afif, *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 325.

⁵⁵ Vambery Armin (trans.), *Mira’at al-Mamalik: The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral Sidi Ali Reis*, IDC, 1985, p.44. Henceforth *Mira’at*.

⁵⁶ *Tazkireh al Waqiat*, p.36

⁵⁷ Ibid.

above mentioned descriptions of the desert, while there is an acute sense of harsh survival conditions, the intention behind the description is not to control the landscape. Rather, here, the intention is to desperately survive and escape. Thus, it can be surmised that this idea of the desert was constructed and propagated long before Tod's time by groups who belonged to the dominant strata of the society. This then became the dominant perception of the desert held by people outside the desert.

ii. Descriptions of the Thar Desert in Local Accounts: c. Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries C.E.

Having examined the accounts written by those who traversed the desert including the foreign travellers, it needs to be restated here that their perceptions were shaped by their past experiences and their respective social location in the society. In addition, their accounts exposed their subjectivities which were already informed by the understanding of the orient and pre-existing notions about the subcontinent.

However, our assessment of travel accounts has compelled us to move away from the idea of the desert as a harsh, unforgiving and empty space. To fully understand the complexity of the desert as a cultural entity, it is imperative to analyse the ways it is represented in local accounts, for travellers were socially detached from the landscape they travelled through. It is important to note that often colonial notions of geography based on definite landmarks do not match with a folk and rural understanding of the space and in many ways is an artificial imposition. An important question that arises is how did various communities relate to the desert. These understandings are often steeped in power relations or according to access to resources in the region.

For instance, Nainsi uses political landmarks to explain the magnitude of the desert. He defines the space of the Thar by referring to nine forts established by the Parmaras and Bhatias in each case across the length and breadth of the desert as mentioned in the previous chapter. In another instance, he traces the origins of Mandor, the capital of the Parmaras to legends from the *Padmapurana* and the *Ramayana*. In the *Padmapurana*, Bhogshil, the son of Mount Meru, established Mandor. In the *Ramayana*, Mandor was established by the demon Mandodari, father of Mandodari.⁵⁸ These notions ascribed to by Nainsi were based on the political geography of the Thar in the seventeenth century and reflected the power relations and hierarchies which Nainsi adopted in his narratives in an attempt to legitimise them.

Scarcity is a recurring theme in many narratives which feature the desert and Nainsi engages with it through an account of the origin myths of the Thar. For instance, Nainsi affirms that the region was never barren because the Sutlej used to flow through it. According to him, when Umar Sumra, the ruler of Parkar, expressed the desire to marry the local Charani goddess Sangviyan, she cursed him and the people that the river would now change its course and flow through Multan. That is how the Thar came to be a desert, according to Nainsi.⁵⁹

Another myth that Nainsi describes is how the people of Pokharan were forever condemned to scarcity because of a certain curse. When the Thakur of Pokharan performed the first worship towards Shri Lakshmi Shrimali, instead of Pushkar Rishi who had established Pokharan, the Rishi was slighted and cursed the Thakur and his people that they would forever be denied of the *vedas*, always be corrupt in their actions, be inferior of mind and be forever denied of water.⁶⁰ It was only after the people appeased Varuna, the god of ocean, that

⁵⁸Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 1, p. 1.

⁵⁹Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 3., p. 88

⁶⁰Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 2, p. 288.

they were granted water, though not easily accessible as it was available only at a great depth underground.⁶¹

Thus, Nainsi attempts to explain why people were inhabiting a region devoid of the basic necessity of life - water. People related to the desert by explaining and justifying its scarcity, thereby validating it and accepting it as an integral condition of their existence. Nainsi records multiple ways by which people - especially ruling groups - perceived the desert. These included legitimising claims to territories by linking them to mythological characters, making sense of the desert through origin myths as well as identifying particular territories with particular communities.

An interesting instance of an argument regarding the desert can be seen in the folktale of *Dhola Maru* compiled in written form in the seventeenth century. Malvani - the princess of Malwa - repeatedly warned Dhola from travelling into the desert by telling him that it is so hot that the land burns and *loo* attacks one on the face.⁶² Later in the tale, she remarks that Maru *desh* (the desert) is a horrible place to live in.

All countries are fine, but Maru desh is barren. O Lord, burn such a land where water can only be found in deep wells. O Lord, burn such a country where it is so difficult to find water that the beloved has to leave at midnight to draw it from the wells. O Lord, do not marry me off to the simple sheep herders of Maru, where one will have to carry an axe on the shoulders, a water-pot on the head and live in the middle of the desert.⁶³

Malvani argues that the desert land is full of hardships - heat, lack of rainfall and repeated locust attacks. The land is such that only *kareel* trees grow, shade can only be obtained under *phog* trees and only thorny bushes like *bhurat* are available to eat.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *Dhola Maru Ra Duha*, Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Varanasi, 1962, p. 100. Henceforth *Dhola Maru*.

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 158-159

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 160

This land is such that one can only get woolen blankets to wear and wrap around oneself, water is only found deep underground, people themselves are nomadic and the only milk available is that of sheep and goat.

In response, Marvani - the princess of Pugal (in the desert)- replies that the land of Marwar is beautiful and the desert cannot be condemned for its supposed lack of natural resources.⁶⁵

The land is fertile, water is fresh, clean, healthy and sweet, just like the people of Maru who speak sweetly. Maru desh is bountiful. Don't blame the desert. Just like a lotus blooming in water, you will find moon-faced women in every house.⁶⁶

Thus, here we see how the dominant perception of the desert encountered in the sources discussed and enunciated by Malvani is countered by Marvani who defends the desert land. There is a sense of identifying and relating to the desert despite its hardships. It is what Marvani calls home and she refuses to hear any reasoning against it. Thus, Marvani challenges the received image of the desert that had become culturally entrenched in the minds of many who never resided in it. Same is the case with the origin myths narrated by Nainsi wherein people find ways to relate to the landscape of the desert. Thus, the very presence of such narratives points towards a larger corpus of knowledge circulating across the region. For Nainsi, thus, one way of engaging with the desert landscape was through its narratives which discussed its origins and tried to understand its ecology.

Komal Kothari points out that a region need not have geographical or political boundaries but can have ethno-geographic boundaries as well.⁶⁷ He points out that a people's geography means the intimate ways in which the people identify the geography of their own locations. This is evident in Yusuf Mirak's *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*. Mirak, lived in Sindh in the seventeenth century in the region of Bhakkar and belonged to a family of *mansabdars*. In his account, he

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 162

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Rustam Bharucha, *Rajasthan, An Oral History: Conversations with Komal Kothari*, Penguin, 2003, p. 59

gives detailed descriptions of the region of Sindh. Bhakkar, in Sindh, is an island on the Indus and after crossing this island one reaches the desert. Thus, Bhakkar was a threshold straddling both riverine and desert areas. Mirak while describing the eight parganas of Bhakkar gives descriptions of various tribes inhabiting this region. For instance, he states that parganas of Matila, Lada Kakan and Alor are homes to the Darja clan. He also informs us that Alor was inhabited by the Pawar clans who were powerful as they owned a large number of camels and plied them on lease to Jaisalmer, Multan and Qandahar.⁶⁸ Mangijas inhabit the region of Kakari; Darbela is inhabited by the Sahata tribe while two clans of the Samejas – Rajpal and Bahan – engage in cultivation of the desert (*dasht*) of this pargana.⁶⁹ Chanduka was inhabited by clans of Bukya, Samejas, Sanghis, Abrass and Mahdja Shaykhs while Takar was inhabited by Bukya and Lakiyar Samejas. Nainsi also identifies indigenous notions of the geography like the *thals* – which were essentially arid and bare desert spaces deprived of any vegetation - with various communities. While referring to the Mangaliya Bhatīs, he gives an account of how they reside in the Mangaliya *thal* which can only be navigated by a person who is familiar with it as due to frequently shifting sand dunes, only those who were familiar with the terrain could travel through it, those who were unfamiliar could not survive it.⁷⁰

Thus, a comparison of how the Thar desert has been represented in the sources under study reveals differences in the perceptions of the ecology and geography of the desert. The idea of the desert as an unforgiving, inhospitable landscape was specifically constructed by dominant groups who passed through it. As the Persian accounts as well as European travel accounts examined above reveal, this notion of the desert was transmitted through the ages and had acquired a certain currency. However, popular geographical descriptions emerging from the narratives of various communities residing in the desert while identified the land with the

⁶⁸ *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*, p. 215

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 217

⁷⁰ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 275

people, created a sense of belonging that adapted itself to the terrain of scarcity and hardship. For instance, Nainsi while consigning the oral genealogical narratives to writing records different imaginations of the desert as evident in them. While on one hand he refers to Puranic geography in order to legitimise territorial expansion by the Rathors, on the other hand he refers to popular understandings of the desert by recounting origin myths as well as identifying places with communities. Similar narratives of land and people in the frame of ethno-geography can be explicitly observed in the epic of *Dhola Maru* wherein both Marvani and Malvani imagine the desert in terms of their experiences as women.

Thus, the perceptions of the desert communities often considered as counter narratives should be prioritised while understanding the landscape of the desert. It is argued that the perceptions of foreign travellers, Persian chroniclers and colonial ethnographers that dominated the discourse on the desert and acquired a certain validity because of their association with power networks should be considered as the alternate understanding to that of the perceptions of the communities belonging to the desert.

II. Environment, Rural Economy and Social Structure of the Thar Desert

Having examined the ways in which the desert landscape was imagined and perceived, it is imperative to understand the manner in which ecological opportunities offered by the desert were utilised by different communities. The space of the Thar desert while presented in textual sources in a particular way was also being constantly recreated and reimagined between communities in their tussle over resources. This tussle also shaped identities and created the spectrum of dominance and marginality. Thus, it is imperative to examine the relational nature

of environment, economy and identity formation. The relationships between nature, economy and identity do not occur in space, rather they make spaces.⁷¹

Despite their inhospitable natural conditions, deserts like the Thar have a unique ecosystem and an exclusive flora and fauna. The Thar, although the smallest desert, is the most densely populated desert of the world with a human population density of 84 per sq. Km as compared to 3-9 per sq. Km in other deserts.⁷² Rivers in the Thar are mostly ephemeral with canals, tanks and reservoirs as the main aquatic habitats. Grasses are the main vegetation in the sandy parts of the desert while xeromorphic woodlands are found around rivers and halophytic species are found in saline flats.⁷³ Isolated hilly and rocky outcrops covered with thorn forests are present in the Eastern Thar. The term 'ruderal habitats' has been used by scientists to refer to feral and scattered vegetation near human settlements - these types of vegetation are found around villages across the Thar.⁷⁴ Western Thar is mostly sandy desert with a few tracts of thorny bushes. Towards Nagarparkar and Northern Kutch the soil is saline. The Rann is distinct from the desert in the sense that it is a flat land at sea level. During the monsoons it is reclaimed by the sea and during the dry season it dries up leaving a thick layer of salt behind.

There is scanty information about the ecological conditions of the Thar in the Mughal imperial sources. However, one can get a sense of the natural conditions of various parts of the desert by piecing together scattered references. For instance, the *Ain* gives an important breakdown of the desert landscape. While Abul Fazl does not directly mention the desert, the Thar may be said to fall within the *suba* of Ajmer, Gujarat and Multan. Abul Fazl divides each

⁷¹ Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 200

⁷² K.K Sharma and S.P Mehra, 'The Thar of Rajasthan(India): Ecology and Conservation of a Desert Ecosystem,' in C. Sivaperuman et al. (eds.), *Faunal Ecology and Conservation of the Great Indian Desert*, Springer, 2009, p. 2

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 4

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

suba according to the Islamic notion of climates ‘*iqlim*’.⁷⁵ Each *suba* of the Empire fell under the second or the fourth climate. Ajmer and Gujarat are situated in the second climate, while Multan is said to be situated in the first, second, and third climates simultaneously.⁷⁶

Abul Fazl describes the *suba* of Ajmer as having sandy soil with water obtainable only at a great depth.⁷⁷ He informs us that winter in Ajmer is temperate and summer intensely hot. Crops are dependent on rain and mostly *jwar*, *bajra* and *moth* are grown.⁷⁸ He describes the Rann of Kutch as a low lying tract roughly 90 kos in length and 70 to 30 in breadth, between Jhalwarah in the Sarkar of Ahmedabad and Patan.⁷⁹ The Rann is covered with salt, the duties of which are collected in *pargana* Jhalwarah. Kutch is barren and sandy and boasts of an excellent breed of horses, camels and goats. Elsewhere, he discusses the various breeds of horses and camels from these regions. For instance, the horses of Kutch are at par with the Arabian horses while camels are in great abundance in Sindh.⁸⁰ Swiftest camels are those in Ajmer while those that are the best for burden are from Thatta. Abul Fazl also gives information on the fruits, flowers and plants from these regions. Sindh is described as having the finest muskmelons, which are plentiful in the season except in winter while mangoes and the *sewti* as well as *kewra* flowers are found in Gujarat.⁸¹ Abul Fazl also gives the prices of these varieties of flowers, fruits and animals.

⁷⁵ Many Arab geographical works from the medieval period divide ecumene – or the habitable world – into seven latitudinal climates. These climes were defined as latitudinal bands running across the earth and established according to the length of the longest day of summer. It was imagined that the first clime began where the longest day was 12.5 hours and ran from South-Easterly China to West coast of Africa while the seventh clime was where the longest day was 16.5 hours and ran through unnamed territories of Slavs and Turks. This division allowed the world to be divided into regions of lesser or greater civilization. It was believed that most civilizations fell in the second, third and fourth climes which had temperate to hot weather. – See J.T Olsson, ‘The world in Arab eyes: A reassessment of the climes in medieval Islamic scholarship,’ *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 77, 2014, pp. 487-508.

⁷⁶ *Ain*, Vol. 2, p. 327

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 268

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 250

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 152

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 68

i. *Scarcity and Differential Access to Resources*

The ecological landscape was married to the political landscape discussed in the previous chapter wherein establishment of certain groups as politically dominant was predicated upon their being able to successfully exploit the resources offered by the desert. The sources which are heavily biased towards the victors also give us an insight into the construction of marginality of the subjugated groups whose access to ecological resources was controlled by dominant groups. The desert, where scarcity is a permanent feature, common resources become essential for survival. However, access to resources has often been determined by social status. Upper castes as well as politically dominant groups have historically appropriated more resources than other subordinated communities.

However, the link between caste, political power and appropriation of resources is not straightforward. State as well as social institutions worked in tandem to retain and reinforce ideological and political dominance. Appropriation and distribution of resources formed an integral part of this political project. Thus, while on one hand the state granted loans and concessions to extend cultivation or to ease distress in times of scarcity, on the other hand the entire system of resource appropriation in the form of taxation was hierarchical in nature, i.e., tax rates differed according to caste, favouring the upper castes. Additionally, lower castes were taxed by the state as well as the *jagirdar* on whose estates they worked and were also expected to render unpaid services in the form of *begar*⁸² In an ecological zone characterised by scarce resources, differential access to said resources created stratification based on privilege and marginality amongst various groups in the desert. Identities of caste groups became cemented in this way with specific groups being identified with specific occupations.

⁸² Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*, p. 138

Thus, any enquiry into the interconnections between the rural economy and the environment has to factor in the question of differential access to resources based on caste.

a. Water

The most essential resource is water. Due to scarcity of water, water preservation was (and still is) a way of life. Access to water was highly contested, and politicised. Acquisition or installation of water systems was considered a heroic act par excellence. Conversely, destroying the water works in an enemy territory and depriving the enemy's access to water were considered important strategies during conflicts. For instance, Devraj Bhati schemed to conquer Ludrava from the Paramars by building three ponds - Vijaysar, Tannusar and Devrajsar in the water scarce region of Khadal.⁸³

The Paramars of Ludrova had a huge kingdom and also extended their authority to other places. He (Devraj Bhati) wanted to take over Ludrova. For the first few months he showered the Paramars with gifts. After a few months, he sent four of his trusted men to Ludrova with the message that he wished to construct three tanks in Khadal where there is no source of water. At first the Paramars refused, but after continuously sending his men to the Paramara court, they finally agreed. Devraj built three tanks – Vijaysar, Tannusar and Devrajsar. Devraj showered gifts on the population and became extremely well-loved. He then asked for the hand of the Paramara princess. On the pretext of marriage, Devraj entered the twelve gates of Ludrova with twelve hundred men and slaughtered all the Paramars and took over Ludrova.⁸⁴

Another instance is when Rawal Gharsi took back Jaisalmer from the Turks and built the Gharsisar pond to commemorate his victory.

⁸³ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 271

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

After consulting with the soothsayer (shakuni), it was decided that the Rawal should do something that would immortalise his name. Rawal then had the Gharsisar pond constructed in his name.⁸⁵

Jauhar, in his *Tazkirat ul Waqiat*, records that Rao Malde of Jodhpur ordered all the wells enroute to Umarkot to be filled with sand so that Humayun and his retinue would perish from thirst.⁸⁶

About this period the Raja ordered his son, who was also named Maldeo, to precede our march, and to fill up all the wells with sand, so that we might perish from want of water.⁸⁷

In exchange for a truce, Malde offered Humayun bullocks and buckets to draw water from the remaining wells.⁸⁸

It was around water resources that maximum agriculture took place. Nainsi records that crops like wheat, gram, sugarcane, *jwar* etc. were grown around the water sources near Jaisalmer.⁸⁹ When these water sources would dry up, the precious resource could be obtained from deep wells called *beri* which could be up to twenty kos deep.⁹⁰ Nainsi in *Vigat* also records the sources of water in villages of *parganas* lying on the fringes of the Thar like Pokharan and Phalodhi.⁹¹ Water sources included tanks and wells. He records no population in areas where there are no sources of water. These villages were termed as *Soona Ganv* - 'empty villages'.⁹²

Irrigation techniques, thus, became essential for survival and the state often took initiative for the construction and maintenance of water systems. Apart from rain fed cultivation, surface drainage as well as construction of water bodies also took place. The landscape was understood

⁸⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 313

⁸⁶ *Tazkireh al Waqiat*, p. 41

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 42

⁸⁹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 257

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 2, pp. 9-30

⁹² Ibid. p. 23

in relation to sources of water as a number of places have the suffix *sar, tal, talai, beri* to their names - which refer to water bodies.⁹³ Different kinds of well systems - *chanch, kosita, dhimra* etc. - as well as the Persian wheel were used. Reservoirs - *tankas* - were constructed by kings like the Sur Sagar, Farasat Sagar, Vasant Sagar etc.

However, ownership and rights to water varied. In the rural areas, construction of irrigation devices was an individual or collective effort aided by the state. While various sources of water existed, *kaccha* wells outnumbered the *pakka* wells.⁹⁴ However, construction was often done by upper castes. Nainsi records villages in Phalodhi where the tanks were constructed by Brahmins.⁹⁵

But did only the upper castes have access to the direct source of water? Komal Kothari gives an instance of how caste groups still remember that the well was for the upper castes, a water container (*kundia*) for the next caste group, and further on, another container used by cattle and untouchables.⁹⁶ Kothari's ethnographical work does point to a tradition of unequal access to water. Most lined tanks and reservoirs were made by the zamindars and the peasantry had to build unlined tanks for themselves or depend on *kaccha* wells which easily collapsed in a few years. Rajputs owned sixty seven percent of all Persian wheels, Brahmins controlled twenty-six percent and carpenters owned seven percent as they fashioned the wheel.⁹⁷ The peasants probably used the Persian wheel on rent. However, amongst the *asami* cultivators, artisan castes had a larger share in the water machine than the ordinary peasant.⁹⁸

⁹³ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 37

⁹⁴ B.L Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs: The Economy of Marwar in the Seventeenth Century*, Rawat Publications, 1999, p. 52.

⁹⁵ Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol 2, p. 16

⁹⁶ Bharucha, *Rajasthan: An Oral History*, p. 69

⁹⁷ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p.116

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

b. Livestock, Grain and Common Land

Just like water, access and possession of resources like cattle, horses, camels, grain etc. was also highly contested and political. Camels were the main source of livelihood for many communities in the Thar. The Raika community were the camel herders and specifically among them, the Maru specialised in herding camels exclusively.⁹⁹ Different breeds of camel were bred in different areas. In Khadal, in Jaisalmer area, camels were bred for riding while in other regions like Chitrang and Nachna, camels were bred for other purposes like meat and hide.¹⁰⁰ Major trade routes passed through the desert with numerous caravans plying them. Robberies and theft were common on these routes. Mundy decided to travel with the Mughal noble Bakir Khan's caravan to avoid getting robbed yet he still had an encounter with thieves.¹⁰¹ Mundy also records the theft of camels laden with indigo from a Dutch caravan.¹⁰²

However, while it is easy to dismiss these routes as 'unsafe' and the robbers as 'savages', our sources suggest a complex relationship between people and resources in the desert. Nainsi records several instances of Rajput clans stealing, looting or plundering the resources belonging to rival clans. This was done to increase political influence as well gather more economic resources like land, horses, cattle and manpower. When Rao Jagmal demanded to use his *chakar* Hema's horse, Hema refused and was dismissed from service. In exile, he plundered the territories around Maheva to such an extent that people from over one hundred and forty villages had to migrate to Jaisalmer.¹⁰³ Another instance is of Rao Chunda looting the horses of a horse merchant from Gujarat and distributing them amongst his Rajput clansmen.¹⁰⁴ Yet

⁹⁹ Bharucha, *Rajasthan: An Oral History*, p. 57

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 59

¹⁰¹ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p. 242

¹⁰² *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p.246

¹⁰³ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 75

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p.88

another instance is of Rao Jodha looting the wealth and horses of Rawat Luna, a lesser landlord, to take control of his land and territories.¹⁰⁵

While returning from Maheva, Rao Jodha stopped at Rawat Luna's village, Seterva. Rawat Luna met him with much fanfare. However, Jodha did not like this showmanship and became resentful of Luna. Rawat Luna's wife, who belonged to the Songira clan, was related to Jodha from his maternal side of the family. She welcomed him and later, invited him to her private chambers. There, she said to him, 'whatever land and wealth we have is all yours. Everything will be fine.' The Rao got ready to leave, but he still resented Luna. Luna retired to his chambers after bidding Jodha farewell. However, while he was asleep, his Songira wife locked his chambers from outside and informed Rao Jodha. Rao Jodha then proceeded to loot all the wealth and horses belonging to Rawat Luna. Seeing this, all the other bhomias also accepted Jodha's authority out of fear.¹⁰⁶

An important aspect especially in the desert zone is that of common land. There are two kinds of words for this land - *oran* and *an*. *Orans* are sacred groves, a defined area named after a god or goddess whose shrine is placed within the precincts of this land.¹⁰⁷ Within the *oran*, grazing or cutting wood was strictly prohibited and allowed only in the times of famine and scarcity. Specific areas of land were designated as *oran* outside every village and since they were only ceremonial, they had a rich plant diversity. *An* were the uncultivated grasslands which were used for grazing cattle. Thus, for rural folk, the *oran* and *an* were important features of the desert as they held cultural as well as practical significance for them.

c. Nature of Taxation and Rural Stratification

Having examined the major resources offered by the desert, it is imperative to examine the rural social structure. The rural society had a twofold stratification - caste based and class

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 130

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Bharucha, *Rajasthan: An Oral History*, p. 42

based. There were three categories of peasants - resident (*ganveti*), non resident (*pahi*) and subject (*basi*).¹⁰⁸ Any enquiry into rural stratification has to first examine the land revenue system in place. This is a difficult exercise in case of the Thar where a number of polities extended control. For the sake of convenience, the land revenue system of Marwar, Sindh, Bikaner as well as their amalgamation into the Mughal land revenue system has been considered here.

According to Irfan Habib, the main feature of Mughal agrarian system was the transfer of the peasant's surplus produce to the state through extraction of land revenue.¹⁰⁹ He opines that due to differences in soil productivity as well as climatic and social conditions, the size of surplus produce varied from region to region.¹¹⁰ Thus, land revenue also varied according to local conditions. In the desert areas the proportion taken as land revenue was probably only one-seventh or one-eighth of the crop produced during Akbar's reign.¹¹¹ By the late seventeenth century, the land tax was half the produce under crop sharing in parts of Marwar.¹¹² Habib opines on the basis of Mirak's account that nearly half the produce was taken on the basis of crop sharing in Sindh.¹¹³ There were various methods of assessment of land revenue. Mirak records that even in desert *parganas* of the *sarkar* of Bhakkar where cultivation was dependent on rainfall and irrigation, the revenue was extracted according to *zabt* regulation.¹¹⁴ However, Habib contends that mixed assessment according to both *zabt* and crop-sharing existed here.¹¹⁵ The *Ain* does not give data for the *sarkars* of Bikaner, Jodhpur and Sirohi.

¹⁰⁸ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p.114

¹⁰⁹ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 230

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 231

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 233

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 234

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 234

¹¹⁴ *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*, p. 255

¹¹⁵ Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 264

However, Habib contends that these areas must have been under crop sharing leading to less incidence of cash payments in the *suba* of Ajmer.¹¹⁶

Crop sharing became prevalent in areas of Marwar like Merta, Sirohi, Jalore by the seventeenth century. According to B.L Bhadani, in Marwar, the land revenue comprised *bhog* (tax on crops), *kharch bhog* (expenses incurred in collection of land revenue), and other miscellaneous taxes.¹¹⁷ In Bikaner, the land was assessed at the rate of one-fourth of the produce.¹¹⁸ Due to the aridity of the region, its agricultural potential was limited and instead of *bhog*, *rokad-rakam* – non agricultural cess - was the main source of revenue. *Rokad-rakam* constituted a number of taxes collected in cash and was nearly forty-eight or fifty percent of the total income of *hasil*.¹¹⁹ Thus, as enumerated above, no single system of realising land revenue existed in the area under study.

However, the land revenue demand was realised according to the caste of the peasant. The resident cultivators in Marwar were further categorised into *muqata* and *karsa*. The peasants who were upper castes - Rajputs, Brahmins, Baniyas and Mahajans - mostly formed the *muqata* class. The *karsas* were generally the *nais*, *dhedhs*, *kunbhars* etc. who cultivated the *muqata*'s land on rent. Other castes within the *karsa* were the Jat, Sirvi, Bishnoi, Pital and Mali. Bhadani records that in Pokharan, *kharif bhog* (revenue during *kharif* season) as well as *kharch bhog* were fixed at a higher rate for *karsas* than the Baniyas and the Mahajans.¹²⁰ The state's share on vegetables, tobacco and onions was one-fourth on crop sharing while on Brahmins it was one-seventh.¹²¹ In the *pargana* of Jalore, the land revenue demand along with expenses was fixed at one-third on Baniyas, *ghanchis* (oil-pressers), *pinjaras* (cotton carders), *kunbhars*

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 265

¹¹⁷ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p. 199

¹¹⁸ Mayank Kumar, *Monsoon Ecologies*, p. 249

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p. 201

¹²¹ Ibid.

while on Rajputs it was one-fourth and one-fifth on *malis*.¹²² There was further stratification among peasants in terms concessions offered by the state. The *muqata* paid revenue at concessional rates while the *karsa* paid revenue at the actual rates. The other class of peasants - *pahi* - were those who took up cultivation in villages other than their own. Bhadani ventures on to say that *pahis* were mostly found in *parganas* which were less fertile and sparsely populated.¹²³

There was a growing control over land by the superior castes as most *pahis* were of high castes like Rajputs, Brahmans and Banias and occasionally middle castes like Bishnoi and Mali. Another class of rural inhabitants were the *basi* which included persons with whom the new landholder settled in his holding.¹²⁴ They were the holder's retainers and servants and moved with him to newer settlements. The fiscal demand on the Rajput *muqata* was often paid by his *basis*. Castes like Gujars, Jats and Rajputs comprised the *basi* class - thus, Bhadani points out that prominent agrarian castes also held the status of subordinate peasants. Menial castes did not have the privilege of having *basi* status.¹²⁵

Another interesting fact is that the lower strata of peasants were also the rural servants and artisans. The *kunbhar* (potter), *bhambhi*, (leather worker), *nai* (barber), *lohar* (iron smith) etc. also comprised the *karsa* class of the peasantry and were mostly landless. The term *pawan jaat* occurs at numerous places in the *Vigat*.¹²⁶ This term was specifically employed for artisanal groups both rural and urban.¹²⁷ The menial artisans combined their caste occupation with agriculture. Bhadani interestingly points out that the menial castes were mostly in the high

¹²² Ibid. p. 204

¹²³ Ibid. p. 118

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 125

¹²⁵ Ibid. p.132

¹²⁶ Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 2 - For instance, the term 'pawan jaat' is used to categorise castes like Bambhar, Mahajan, Mali, Sagli, in the *qasba* of Phalodhi, p. 11

¹²⁷ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p. 138

agricultural zone of Marwar and very low in the desert zone.¹²⁸ This suggests that the menial castes were linked to agriculture without controlling the land. Bhadani contends that there were three kinds of remunerations to these castes for their services. First was in cash, second was in terms of miscellaneous supplementary collections and the third was assignment of land on concessional rates or revenue free.¹²⁹ The modes of payment to rural servants corresponded with mode of revenue collection and could be in both cash and kind.

In Bikaner, out of the number of cesses in *rokad-rakam*, the *talibab* levied on the non-agriculturalist castes stands out. This was a cess of Rs. 4 per family and points to attempts by the state to encourage agriculture. Goods brought in by merchants were also taxed at the rate of eight annas per camel load. The peasant stratification was similar to Marwar. Rajputs and Brahmins were levied a *bhog* of one-fifth or one-eighth of the produce while the Jats, Malis etc paid one-third or one-fourth of the produce as *bhog*. *Rokad-rakam*, which formed the bulk of the *hasil* as more people indulged in animal husbandry and pastoralism than agriculture increased the tax burden on the cultivator.

Nainsi gives a brief account of the number of taxes levied in Jaisalmer region. He records that near the Kak river, there are twelve villages of Brahmins from whom *kunta*, which is one-fifth of *bhog*, is extracted.¹³⁰ Nainsi records that *hasil* from villages was around 31000 rupees.¹³¹ There were sixty or seventy Brahmin villages who gave *bhog* amounting to one and a half *man* for each *man* harvested.¹³² In Sindh, the peasantry was as stratified as elsewhere in the Mughal Empire. The peasantry was categorised as *raiyyat-i-khalis* (pure peasants), *ahsam-i-raiyyat* (peasants of settled tribes) and *raiyyat-i-rezah* (petty peasants).¹³³ The first two

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 168 - However, Nainsi mentions that the *nais* of the village of Siyal in Ludrova paid the agrarian tax *bhog*. See Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2., p. 257

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 140

¹³⁰ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2., p. 258

¹³¹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 259

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire', p. 138

categories of peasants were the tribal people who had taken up cultivation and became land owners while the third category was of small peasants belonging to the same clan as their *zamindars*.¹³⁴ The landless agricultural labourers who cultivated other peasants' lands were called *haris*. The tribal chiefs who settled and became *zamindars* received tax concessions from the local Mughal administration for expansion of agriculture by increasing irrigation facilities or repopulating deserted areas.¹³⁵

Thus, from the above analysis one finds that access to resources like land and water as well as agricultural surplus was regulated on the basis of caste. The rural society was deeply stratified and this stratification was further cemented by the land revenue system which gave more concessions to the upper castes and put the maximum burden of taxation on the lowest classes of cultivators.

d. Agro-Pastoralism in the Thar

The Thar Desert was dependent on the monsoon and had an agro-pastoral economy. Due to the aridity of the region, the pastoral component was more significant than the agrarian one. However, there has never been a completely sedentised peasant or a completely mobile pastoralist. Thus, the agrarian and the pastoral component regularly interacted and negotiated with each other. Livestock rearing was as important as growing crops. Sheo, Sankara, Phalodi, Pokharan, Malani were some areas which had large pastures and grazing grounds along with herders' villages.¹³⁶ Gujars and Raibaris/Raikas were the pastoral castes who reared cattle, buffalos and goats for milk, camels and bullocks as draft animals and sheep for wool.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 66

The relationship between the peasants and mobile groups remains complex as pastoralists and nomads have been marginalised in the village society. In the caste stratified village where taxation was also differential, pastoralists were always taxed heavily.¹³⁷ Apart from *jhumpi*, other taxes like *ghasmari* (grazing tax), *pancharai* (tax on animals feeding on leaves like camels), *singhoti* (grazing tax on sheep and goats) were also realised.¹³⁸ However, peasants could also easily turn mobile during situations of famine. Nainsi gives an instance of when famine affected Thalvat, the entire population deserted the village and only returned when the famine ended.¹³⁹

Thus, when attempting to examine the interaction between peasants and pastoralists, it has to be kept in mind that agriculture and pastoralism were complimentary, not oppositional, in an area which was scarce in resources. Pastoralists were dependent on commons like the *oran* and *an* as they owned no or (minimal) land and needed large pastures for their herds.

The village society was dependent on many products produced by the pastoralists like *ghee*, milk, leather and wool. *Ghee* was a major product which was taxed at the rate of twelve dams for twenty *seris*. There is evidence that manufactured wool, in the form of blankets, was also taxed.¹⁴⁰ Leatherworkers like *khatik* and *bhambhi* paid a tax on tanning. Cattle formed the largest commodity traded amongst the products mentioned above. These products circulated widely across the desert and pre-dominated trade networks. Camels were taxed both in Bikaner and Jaisalmer. Goods coming into Jaisalmer like cotton, silk, camels, coconut, alum, wax, salt, tobacco etc. were also taxed.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 133

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 136

¹³⁹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 96

¹⁴⁰ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p. 96

¹⁴¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 258

However, these products could only be produced if the pastoral communities had access to resources of the commons. The fact that these communities and their products were so heavily taxed points to a thriving circulation of these groups across the desert as well as a flourishing pastoral economy and trade. In Bikaner, due to the aridity of the region, more people indulged in pastoralism than agriculture. A number of Bikaner *bahis* give details of pastoral goods and people traversing the space of the desert. There is description of various goods like wheat, rice, salt, *til*, *bajra*, *dhan*, *ghrit*, turmeric, sugar, jaggery, cloth, wool, tobacco etc. being imported as well as exported from villages within the area.¹⁴² In Sindh, due to nomadic character of the population, revenue was realised in kind as well. The tribes and nomads of Sindh paid *falsana* and *salami*, i.e., taxes in the form of camels and goats.¹⁴³

e. Social Structure of the Thar

Having examined the interconnections between the rural economy and the environment in the Thar, it is imperative to examine the social structure operative here. This exercise is imperative because all the aspects of rural economy and environment are determined by the social structure of caste hierarchy. As mentioned before, the Thar Desert has the highest population density amongst the deserts of the world. This present-day population density can be historicised as there have historically been a number of social groups in the desert. These groups can be classified in a variety of ways. On the basis of movement they can be sedentary, mobile or both. However, no particular group can be called completely sedentary. Every group had a mobile character in the desert. Tanuja Kothiyal discusses this dichotomy in terms of control

¹⁴² *Zagat Bahi* dated V.S 1805, Sno. 2. Information about the *Bahi* is taken from Descriptive Lists available on the website of Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner as I was unable to visit the archives due to the pandemic.

¹⁴³ Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire,' p. 102

over mobile cattle wealth in the desert. The ability to loot as well as protect caravans signified the true location of authority in the desert.¹⁴⁴ Kothiyal argues that because these groups in the desert continued to exert control over the mobile resources circulating across the Thar, they were constantly in opposition to the polities in the Thar as well as the Mughal Empire and were hence labelled as outlaws and bandits.¹⁴⁵ While Kothiyal uses eighteenth century documents to illustrate this point, our sources give earlier evidence of this process.

For instance, it has already been argued that the various clans of Rajputs established themselves in the desert by being mobile. However, they also looted on the basis of their armed strength. These Rajput groups in the desert were increasingly dissociated from the sedentarised Rajputs in the core areas of Rajput polities.¹⁴⁶ However, the ‘Rajput’ itself is not a homogenous category. There were the ruling groups on one hand and the itinerant or peasant Rajput on the other. Nainsi records this dichotomy in the instance of Rao Jagmal when he approached the father of a Solanki Rajput woman for her hand in marriage. The father replied that ‘we are peasants who live in the ‘jungle’. How can we interact with important Rajputs like you? You are a king and we are simple folks who do not understand royal customs.’¹⁴⁷ Mundy also gives evidence of ‘poor Rajputs who lived in beehive huts.’¹⁴⁸

An important description of the Rajputs is given by Sidi Ali Reis. Reis makes a distinction between two kinds of Rajputs. First, those who are hostile and need to be protected against. Second, those who are friendly and can guarantee safety for many miles away purely through clan and kinship networks.¹⁴⁹ These evidences point towards a glaring distinction

¹⁴⁴ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 110

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 73

¹⁴⁸ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p. 238

¹⁴⁹ *Mira'at*, p. 36 - In Parkar too he is attacked by a band of hostile Rajputs but is let go after showing a letter of protection from ‘friendly’ Rajputs. Next day also he is attacked by Rajputs but they had only come to extract passage money.

between the sedentary ruling Rajput groups and the Rajput in the desert who may or may not be mobile. However, what is evident is that the common Rajput in the desert was aware of his social position vis-a-vis the royal Rajput and did not identify with him as Nainsi's account suggests. The Rajput in the desert also resorted to robbing caravans of travellers; however, there was a nexus between different Rajput groups as is evident from Reis's narrative.

While the above arguments highlight the dichotomy between the mobile and the sedentarised Rajput, an important point that further emerges is that of control over the mobile resources of the desert. Whether sedentary or mobile, it was the socially dominant Rajput who could exercise his authority over these resources. Some groups like the Charans and the Bhats allied with the Rajputs while others like the Jats, Mers, Bhils etc. lost out and were either subjugated or had to migrate. For instance, the Mers were displaced from Pali by the fledgling Rathor clan, the Jats were subjugated by the Bikawat Rathors in Janglu, the Bhils too often came into conflict with various Rajput clans. Even amongst Rajputs, the competition for control over resources was intense and many clans were forced to migrate. For instance, the Jhalas who were a branch of Makwana Rajputs were pushed out from Marwar and settled in the territory between lesser Rann and the Gulf of Cambay. This territory came to be known as Jhalavad.¹⁵⁰ The Gohils were also originally from Marwar and settled in Saurashtra on land taken from the Bhils.¹⁵¹ Most groups migrated within or from the desert. Samira Sheikh points out that there were two kinds of migrations into Gujarat from the desert. First, there were migrations by small bands of warriors in search of patrons to offer their military services.¹⁵² Second, there was an

¹⁵⁰ *Report on the Census of 1891: The Castes of Marwar*, Published by the Marwar Darbar, 1894, p. 32; See also Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, p. 102

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 103

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

incursion of clans with cattle and wealth who were driven south due to famine or local oppression. These groups were given lands by local chieftains to graze and inhabit.¹⁵³

Caste and sub-caste were the main markers of hierarchy in the desert. Nainsi records that communities of Brahmins and Mahajans occupied the villages near water sources in Jaisalmer.¹⁵⁴ Sources also record Bhinmal and Pali as cities having sizeable Brahmin populations. The desert was also home to many Jain sects, notable amongst them was the *Kharataragachcha* sect. Many Jain communities like the Oswals and the Munhnots became socially dominant, reaching high political positions in Rajput courts. A prime example is Munhata Nainsi, an Oswal Jain, who went on to become the diwan in Jaswant Singh's court.

Lower down the social strata were the itinerant groups as well as rural servants and artisans. The Raibaris and Gujars formed the pastoral castes in Marwar and were breeders of sheep, camel and other cattle. Their presence in large numbers especially in areas like Jaitaran and Jalor indicates that camel breeding and sheep rearing was an important part of the local economy here.¹⁵⁵ Terms like *khadchar* and *gowali* were used for these groups.¹⁵⁶ Despite being nomads, they were taxed for constructing shelters which were generally in the form of thatched huts, thus suggesting a continuous migration of man and cattle.¹⁵⁷ Other itinerant castes include the Nats, Kanjars, Kalbelias etc. who were services providers and lived on the fringes of settlement. Other groups which combined agriculture with pastoralism were the Jats, Bishnois, Sirvis and Charans. The Banjaras indulged in agrarian trade across the desert. Tavernier gives a detailed description of the Banjaras noting that they transported corn, rice, salt, pulses etc.¹⁵⁸ Nainsi records the settlement of Jats in Janglu while Mundy records Jats and Balochis as

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2., p. 250

¹⁵⁵ Bhadani, *Peasants, Artisans and Entrepreneurs*, p. 100

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 83

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Tavernier, *Travels*, Vol. 1, p. 34

accompanying his caravan along with their cattle, offering protection against thieves and robbers.¹⁵⁹

Major trade routes passed through the Thar. The towns which came up on these trade routes housed many artisanal castes like shoe-makers (*kafshduzan*), fruit-sellers (*sabzi-farosh*), weavers, indigo dyers, blacksmiths, gold smiths, leather workers etc. A number of inscriptions from Nagaur, Merta, Jodhpur, Ajmer give evidence of these communities. Numerous inscriptions recording building of mosques by members of these communities indicate a permanent presence of these occupational castes in urban spaces as many of these inscriptions are generational in nature.¹⁶⁰ Blending craft production with agriculture also increased the position of the landowning artisan vis-à-vis the landless one. It also provided a measure of economic security plus some control over the means of production. A major question that arises is over how artisans owned land. Nandita Sahai outlines two processes. First, were groups like the *khatis*, *kumhars*, *lohars* etc. which accompanied a *bhomia* in settling agrarian land, i.e. they became the original colonisers of a village with proprietary rights over grants of land given to them for maintenance. Second, were those groups who settled depopulated villages and thus owned land in the process.¹⁶¹ Thus, from the above discussion one can surmise that the social structure of the Thar was highly stratified in terms of caste. However, this stratification was often resisted both materially and ideologically. This has been discussed in the next section.

III. Contested Landscape of The Thar Desert

¹⁵⁹ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol.2, p. 255

¹⁶⁰ Paro Tomar, 'Nagaur Through Inscriptions – A Study of Local Inscriptions of Nagaur- c. Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries CE,' *Proceedings of Rajasthan History Congress*, Vol. 35, 2021, p. 173.

¹⁶¹ Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*, p. 129

Having discussed the interconnections between the environment, rural society and economy in the Thar Desert, it is now essential to discuss how social stratification based on differential access to resources created an implicit tension that often led to conflicts between various groups. Presence of different states in the desert and their various strategies of taxation made the desert landscape a contested one, with numerous groups not only competing for resources but also social mobility. The desert landscape, therefore, needs to be historicised not only from an aesthetic but a political perspective.

The desert was not a seamless homogeneous area with a harmonious relationship with nature.¹⁶² The desert landscape was organised around questions of power and authority and thus should not be romanticised as an idyllic space. This can be understood from the representation of dominant ideas and beliefs and related to it, ideas of marginality and subordination that were produced through the landscape and became the basis of social representation of the desert in various sources, ranging from state, administrative and folk narratives.

i. Narratives of Dominance – Making of the ‘Rajput’

Narratives in the Thar region were based on folk tales and bardic traditions. When Nainsi compiled the narratives and genealogies of the various Rajput ruling families, he referred to an ancient bardic oral tradition which had been in circulation for centuries. He also referred to other *khyats* in writing his account.¹⁶³ This points towards a constant circulation of narratives across the desert and beyond in an oral and written form. Thus, these narratives can be said to have been popular in general, and were probably circulating in the desert before extension of

¹⁶² Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 67

¹⁶³ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 256. He begins the chapter on the Bhatias by referring to their history as written by Vithaldas.

the Mughal control in the sixteenth century. Since they were compiled in the court of the local ruler - in Nainsi's case Maharaja Jaswant Singh - they acquired a special significance and served various functions. Narratives like those in the *khyat* try to justify conquest and acquire legitimacy. By constantly eulogising the Rajput clan, these narratives bring in symbols of honor, prestige, loyalty, rank etc. which become important tools to glorify the hero and impart honor to not only him but also his entire community.

As the administrative as well as fiscal penetration of the Rajput and Mughal states in the desert to the lowest level of the village became more pronounced, there was a concerted attempt to figure out the landscape in great detail in socially empirical terms.¹⁶⁴ Various scholars have argued that such accounts represent a politico-administrative mechanism that undertook the physical and social mapping and re-mapping of the realm.¹⁶⁵ The *Ain*, the first such endeavour to gather information on the Mughal Empire, while giving the physical attributes of various regions, also gives revenue statistics as well as information of how various territories came to be part of the empire. Land is classified into *polaj*, *parauti*, *chachar* and *banjar* according to productivity in the *Ain* and is measured and taxed accordingly.¹⁶⁶ An account of ecology as well as resources available from each *suba* is also given. The *Vigat* closely follows the *Ain* and gives information on Marwar. According to the *Vigat*, Marwar had seven *parganas* - Jodhpur, Phalodi, Merta, Siwana, Sojhat, Jaitaran and Pokhran. It also gives information on the patterns of production and a description of towns and villages and the communities inhabiting them. The *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*, (eighteenth century) gives similar information for Gujarat. The *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani* also gives similar descriptions of the regions of the *suba* of Sindh as well as the taxation structure applied by the Mughals there.

¹⁶⁴ Kumar, *Monsoon Ecologies*, p. 238

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ *Ain*, Vol. 2, p. 58

It is in this context the descriptions in the state records reflected a certain worldview which in many ways essentialised the non-Rajput as well as Rajput communities. As enumerated previously, the Rajputs were the dominant social and political caste in the desert. Rajput states along with the Mughal state institutionally configured resource extraction through differential taxation on the basis of caste, thus consolidating and strengthening social hierarchies already operative in the desert. While the administrative/state sources aimed to treat the landscape of the desert as a political territory, they also identified the land with the dominant community of the Rajputs. This played a pivotal role in the making of the 'Rajput'.¹⁶⁷

The identity of the Rajput was formulated by othering the various communities of the desert and portraying them either as villains, or as mute subjects to be patronised, or not portraying them at all. Whatever few references that could be found in Nainsi's work conform to this trope. For instance, in an account of the Rathor clan, Nainsi discusses a Mer ruler who levied heavy taxes, was corrupt and moreover, demanded that every new bride in the village had to spend three days with him.¹⁶⁸ He was finally vanquished by the Rathor prince Asthanji. In another instance, Nainsi portrays the Nai as a very cunning caste. A nai would always observe everything and incite his Rajput overlord into wrongful action.¹⁶⁹ In another instance, Devraj Bhati joined the forces of the Turks. However, his in-laws thought that he had deserted his wife since he was gone for long periods of time. But the news of his well being was brought by a Raibari named Sangi.

Once a Raibari called Sangi visited the village of the Varhas, where the mother-in-law of Devraj, Rawai, called him 'brother' and began expressing her sorrow to him. The Raibari asked her, "why are you sad?" To this she replied, "my daughter has grown up but the whereabouts of her husband (Devraj Bhati) are not known. We do not know whether he is dead or has become a sanyasi." The Raibari said, "Congratulate me, your son-in-law is alive and well, has reached adulthood and has become very capable." Rawai was glad to hear this and requested the Raibari to bring Devraj to her village.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 219

¹⁶⁸ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 56

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 82

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 265

However, the Raibari expressed distrust of the Rajputs.

The Raibari replied, "I do not trust you or your husband." Rawai took many oaths and promised the Raibari that no harm would ever come to him. The Raibari finally agreed and brought Devraj to Rawai through secret means.¹⁷¹

An interesting aspect that emerges in Nainsi's account is a multiplicity of narratives. He repeats the same story with different characters or in a different way. For instance, in the story of Rao Ranmal's campaigns against Chacha Sisodiya and Mera, in his intrications against the Rana of Mewar, he is informed that Chacha is hiding on a hill but a tigress has given birth on the route to the hill. At one point Nainsi says that a Mer gave him this information and helped him and his army to reach Chacha. In another part of the *khyat*, this assistance is provided by a Bhil whose father was murdered by Ranmal.¹⁷² The Bhil extends hospitality to Ranmal and helps him find Chacha despite the fact that he had murdered his father.

Thus, in constructing the identity of the Rajput, Nainsi reconfigures the identities of various other communities. Thus, while the Rajput in many narratives appears as the valorous hero who upholds the moral order, other communities appear either as facilitators in his narrative or as villains. Thus, the Rajput appears as a figure with definite characteristics -honor, valor, presence of mind, martial strength etc. And other identities are reconstructed vis-a-vis these markers. The Nai is cunning and jealous, the Raibari is distrustful, the Mer is a lecherous savage, the Bhil is a skilful warrior always at the service of the Rajput. Thus, the role of these communities in history is reduced to mere convenience or patronage and can be twisted to suit the needs of the dominant group. They become side-actors in the dominant narratives and are hence marginalised as there is a construction of their characteristics vis-a-vis the Rajput.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 266

¹⁷² Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 118

ii. *Counter Narratives of Subordinated Groups*

It is clear that the story of Rajput hegemony is a constructive and fictive one. Rajput hegemony was constructed by subordinating and marginalising lower caste groups - especially the menial castes and non-sedentary pastoral tribes - on one hand, and perpetuating violence on the body of women on the other. Nainsi's *Khyat* is full of narratives where after a Rajput's death, his wife commits *sati*. There are also narratives in which the Rajput or Jat husband beats the wife. For instance:

Jat Saharan Bhadang and Jat Godaro Pande lived in Ladharva. Godara was very charitable. One day, the wife of Saharan, Beniwal Malki, said, "Godara's fame has spread far and wide; a Choudhary (leader of Jats) should be like him." Saharan was intoxicated. Hearing this, he beat his wife with a stick and exclaimed, "if you like Godara so much, then go to him!"¹⁷³

Through the subordination of both these groups, the classic Rajput imagery of a hypermasculine man which Tod so fondly compared to European knights was constructed and propagated. It is to be noted that this phenomenon is not colonial in its origin but rather started out in the early medieval period when 'Rajput' as a social category first came into being. By the medieval period, 'Rajput' became a closed caste but remained an open social category with many groups aspiring to it. For instance, the Gujars traced their origins to Rajput clans like Tunwars, Chauhans and Chandels; Jats traced their origins to Rajputs, the Kalbis claimed to have originated from the union of a Rajput man with a Brahmin woman, the Bishnois traced descent to Jambhaji - a Panwar Rajput who was born in 1451, the Sirvis derived descent from twenty four Rajputs of Kolhapur, Mewatis traced descent from Yadu Rajput clans, Mers traced

¹⁷³ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 201

descent to Rajputs who married Mina girls, Minas were said to spring from an illegitimate son of a Rajput, etc.¹⁷⁴

While examining the various origin myths of these castes, numerous points emerge. First, the fact that most of them trace descent from Rajputs, even if they pre-dated them, points to an attempt at not only upward mobilisation but also a resistance to the marginality that they have been subjected to within the Rajput narratives. Thus, on one hand the Minas claim that they originally ruled Jaipur and adjoining areas before the Rajputs took away their kingdoms. On the other hand, they are a highly hierarchised group where one faction claims purity and superiority over others based on Rajput descent. Thus, the Minas in the north-eastern region of Marwar claim superiority as they are the same as the original Minas of Jaipur. The Khart Minas claim descent from Gujars but also incorporate Rajput social customs of marriage. The Parihar Minas claim descent from the Raja of Mandor. The Jawatra and Khoda Minas claim to be *asli* or unmixed tribes. Godwar and Jalor Minas, also called the Dhedhia Minas are the lowest social group within the Minas because they eat cow flesh.¹⁷⁵

What is interesting is a constant negotiation for superiority between those who claim Rajput status and those who claim to be *asli*. It thus seems that there is an inbuilt contradiction in resisting the Rajputs as well as aspiring to their status. Second, there is a reason given as to why these groups are no longer Rajput despite being their descendants. For instance, many groups like the Minas and the Gujars claim that their Rajput status was lost because their ancestors intermarried and lost purity of blood. Another reason given is that they accidentally ate cow meat consequently losing their caste status. An interesting account is given of the Sirvis who claimed descent from the twenty-four Rajputs of Kolhapur who failed to defend their ruler.

¹⁷⁴ *Castes of Marwar*, p. 52

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 53

Ashamed of having survived him, they threw away their swords and picked up the plough instead.¹⁷⁶

Thus, there emerges a story of constant struggle with marginalisation - in terms of resistance, aspirations for upward mobility as well as reasoning behind the current material situation. From these origin stories, what comes to light is that the subalternity of a particular caste is relative and not a permanent feature. This position of subalternity is constantly under negotiation with different groups continuously reshaping their identities vis-a-vis the dominant groups.

Another way by which these groups claim their place in history is by reappropriating martial heroes and deities and bringing them into the folk context. For instance, the epic of Pabuji - which is about a Rajput martyr who sacrificed his life to protect cattle - is always performed by a Bhil couple. In the epic, Pabuji is a Rajput warrior but his friends are Bhils. Along with the Bhils, a Raika named Harmal is also his companion. This epic is significant because it represents the relations between Rajputs, Bhils and Raikas. According to Kothiyal, as the narratives of the Charans were taken up by the dominant groups and disappeared from popular culture, other narratives flourished in the rural space which was inhabited by tribal, pastoral and artisanal groups.¹⁷⁷ In the mobile space of the Thar, all the communities mentioned in the epic - Rajputs, Charans, Bhils, Raikas - are occupationally linked to each other. Kothiyal points out that with the sedentarisation of the Rajputs the Charans became a part of the emerging court culture receiving *sasan* grants as well as patronage as poets and historians. The Charan shared a close relationship with the Rajput. His duty was to guide the Rajput to his true dharma.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 48

¹⁷⁷ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 231

The Charans acquired a position of importance because of their control over desert routes. The presence of shrines of Charani goddesses on these routes and the appropriation of these goddesses in the Rajput pantheon – goddesses like Karni, Deval etc. – point towards a mutual relationship between Charans and Rajputs. However, while the Charan eulogised the Rajput, it was in the oral epics of the marginalised communities that the traditional continuities between all these groups was visible.¹⁷⁸ Thus, when Bhils and Raikas reinterpret the Pabuji legend, they do so on their own terms according to their understanding of social relations in the desert. Thus, for the mobile groups, it was only through the oral traditions that they could remember what was deliberately obliterated. These oral epics and their performance then became a way for these groups to counter the dominant narratives.

iii. Violent Opposition and Dissent – Tribes and Pastoralists

While resistance to the hegemony of the Rajputs was offered by several castes in terms of appropriating dominant narratives and reclaiming their place in history, violent opposition also occurred in many instances. An appropriation of narratives can be said to counter the ideological system of caste hegemony. However, instances of violent opposition occurred against institutionalization of this hegemony by the state. There were many groups who either occupied the lowest section of society or did not fall within the caste structure at all. These were the itinerant and semi-itinerant tribes of the desert who often came into conflict with the state authorities for plundering as well as refusing to pay taxes.

Yusuf Mirak gives detailed descriptions of various tribes of Sindh, details of which have been given previously. These tribes were mostly pastoral but to increase revenue were

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 245

frequently sedentised. Those who settled in the desert became *ahsam-i-raiyyat*.¹⁷⁹ The various tribes inhabiting western parts of the Thar, the fertile plains of Indus and the hills of Upper Sindh often resisted these attempts at sedentisation. As mentioned before, even in the desert where cultivation was dependent on rainfall and irrigation, revenue was charged in accordance with *zabt* regulation. Sedentisation and obligation to pay taxes - mostly in kind - often made these groups recalcitrant and they rebelled against the state. Mirak opines that when Thatta was conquered, Jahangir appeased the Rana of Jaisalmer and the Jam of Kutch with petty *mansabs* and allowed them to stay in their respective areas so as to keep a check on these tribes. Another instance is of the Samejas, who belonged to the region of Sehwan, extended their deprivations right upto Ubawra which lies within the boundary of Multan and Jaisalmer. They carried away cattle and devastated villages.¹⁸⁰ Peasants always lived in fear of such tribes.

For the recalcitrant tribes, the desert was a space in which they could escape from imperial control. This is evident in their repeated movements towards the sand hills of Jaisalmer. For instance, the Unar branch of the Sameja tribe was called 'criminal'. They had enmity with tribes from all eight *parganas* of Sindh as well as the administration. Often, they would clash with the administration and then escape into the desert. They would often be chased, but in vain, as the desert came under the formal territory of Jaisalmer. Once, chased by Atiq Allah, the local administrator, the Samejas sent their families and cattle into the desert and themselves decided to face his army. According to Mirak, the Raja of Jaisalmer would remain in constant fear of them. Mirak gives a solution to this issue. He argues that to quell and kill the Samejas of Unar, the *jagirdar* of Bhakkar, the *subedar* of Thatta, Raja of Jaisalmer and the *jagirdar* of Sehwan should join forces against them.¹⁸¹ Nainsi also records communities who often came in conflict with ruling groups. These included the Mers, the Jats and the Joiyyas.

¹⁷⁹ Paliwal, 'Sindh in Mughal Empire,' p. 154

¹⁸⁰ *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*, p. 219

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 308

These conflicts were often for resources like cattle, wealth, land and horses. Instances of their conflicts with the expanding Rajput states have already been discussed.

The state accounts, it should be noted were characterized by a glaring silence on the representation of communities other than the Rajputs. The deliberate forgetting or exclusion of certain communities (or even their vilification) is an integral part of the administrative history. Representation of these communities existed only when they were stigmatised as the other, thus consigning them to a marginalised status. Thus, state institutions became the sites of reemphasizing marginality of groups already lower in the social hierarchy and reconfiguring it further with the natural environment in a particular manner to extract maximum benefits in the form of taxation. Subordinate groups are either completely absent, nameless, or are given a very vague reference in the *Khyat*. Nainsi's account gives the history of various clans of Rajputs and was produced in a powerful regional court. The history it referred to and wrote was controlled in every aspect - its composition, recitation, circulation and reception - by the Rajputs. Since Rajputs controlled history writing, they consciously erased narratives of other communities from history and in this, constructed their marginalisation. Kothiyal points out that the history writing traditions of the Bhat and the Charans - who composed the panegyric accounts of the Rajputs - played a pivotal role in the making of the 'Rajput'.¹⁸²

It needs to be acknowledged that marginality arises from a comprehensive association between writing, state, history and religion.¹⁸³ In this sense then, unequal position in fields of power and knowledge makes a community 'marginal'. Marginality then becomes a source of both powerlessness and power as it results in subordination and resistance.¹⁸⁴ This marginality is created through violence and historical narratives become the instrument of that violence.

¹⁸² Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 219

¹⁸³ Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counter Perspectives from the Margins*, Permanent Black, 2004, p. 13

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Thus, the landscape of the Thar Desert was a highly contested one. The political and social structure governed access to resources. Differential access to resources was also supported through the narratives which cemented the identities of various communities in subordination to the politically dominant Rajputs. However, opposition and dissent to social hierarchies as well as the institution of rural taxation occurred both in terms of counter hegemonic narratives as well as violent rebellions. Thus, it can be surmised that the environmental condition of the Thar characterised by scarcity of resources was a key component in the existence of a highly stratified and contested social and political structure in the desert.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to examine the ecological landscape of the Thar Desert. An attempt was made to debunk the popular understanding of the desert as a barren, inhospitable and hostile ecological zone by examining the cultural construction of the environment of the desert in textual sources. Such a perception of the desert can be historicised from the Persian sources from the thirteenth century to colonial sources from the nineteenth century. However, an examination of local sources revealed counter perspectives enabling one to better comprehend the relationship between nature and people. The Thar by virtue of being a desert is characterised by aridity and scarcity of resources like water and fertile land. Any enquiry into the ecological landscape of the Thar has to take into account not only the resources offered by the desert but also their access to different communities. Access to resources was based on caste and the rural taxation structure also functioned in tandem with it. Thus, institutional and social factors governed differential access to resources which further led to a highly stratified and hierarchised rural social structure in the desert. This was also supported by narratives which

cemented the hegemony of dominant caste groups like the Rajputs and constructed marginal identities of other caste group.

However, the ecological landscape of the Thar was also a contested one. It was characterised by tussle over resources as evidenced in multiple instances of highway robberies. In addition to this, various communities lower down the social order contested hegemonic narratives which identified them as subordinated to the Rajputs and instead offered their own counter narratives. Violent opposition to the rural taxation structure was also carried out by many tribes who contested sedentarisation and state appropriation of their resources. Thus, it can be surmised that the ecological landscape of the Thar was highly political with various communities vying for access to resources as well as resisting the fashioning of their identities by the dominant forces.

Chapter Four

Networks of Circulation and the Thar Desert as a Connected Space: Thirteenth to Seventeenth centuries CE.

Introduction

The previous two chapters argued for a fresh view of the Thar Desert as a political and ecological landscape. An attempt was made in these chapters to move away from the notion of the Thar as a hostile, empty space and instead highlight a vibrant political culture as well as an agro-pastoral economy which thrived in it. This method of examining the desert moved away from the regional approach applied by scholars in the past. The regional approach coupled with the idea of the desert as a 'frontier' mainly because of its ecological character naturalised modern boundaries and failed to examine the desert as a whole or in relation with other adjoining areas. While scholars argued that the Thar was a region in itself characterised by the circulation of narratives, people and commodities across it, there has been no attempt to connect the Thar to larger histories of mobility across the subcontinent and beyond

While definitely not 'empty' and 'hostile', the desert was on the edge of settled agrarian societies and instead had a mixed economy comprising both mobile and sedentary characteristics. Along with agro-pastoralism, trading activities were also an integral part of the economy of the Thar and contributed significantly to the rise of urban centres in the desert like Jaisalmer and Nagaur as well as proliferation of trading communities like Mahajans, Bohras and Oswals. Movement of travellers, religious groups and nobility also occurred throughout the desert. In addition to this, famines and wars forced people to migrate within and beyond the desert. The question that follows is in what ways do we characterise the Thar as a locus of early modern interaction between various groups of people and how do we trace these diverse networks of mobility not only within the Thar but also beyond it.

Any preliminary understanding of the Thar will take into account the circulation of groups within it wherein the nature of this circulation would be determined by the desert's aridity. In examining the various forms of circulation operating in the Thar desert, the aim of the present chapter is to examine the circulatory regime of the desert.¹ However, circulation within the Thar was not only of groups but also of commodities, which reflected an intensive trading network. Circulation of money accompanied trading activities, hence, there was a robust fiscal system in place as well. This trading network was also married to movements of pastoral groups in the desert which complimented the agrarian economy. The circulation of groups was also motivated by political ambitions and network of alliances, further facilitated by the trading network which provided these groups with necessary resources of horses, camels, money, and manpower.

This chapter contends that there is no 'outside' when discussing the Thar because the Thar has never been a closed region with definite boundaries. It is argued here that the Thar has to be examined in terms of patterns of circulation of people, agro-pastoral produce, commercial goods, animals, etc. between the 'dry', i.e., arid areas to the 'wet' i.e., fertile areas connecting the local with the supra-local as well as the factors that made these movements possible. Thus, the chapter attempts to conceptualise the Thar as 'mobile space' by tracing the various networks of circulation operating within the Thar. In doing so, the chapter also attempts to view the Thar not as a closed region with definite boundaries, but as a 'connected space', connecting the regions of Central Asia, Northern India, Central India and Gujarat through these varied networks of circulation.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section discusses the agro-pastoral migratory networks in the Thar. This section attempts to trace as well as historicise patterns of

¹ By 'circulatory regime' I mean the intersections and overlapping of the numerous networks of circulations operative within the Thar.

pastoral circulation prevalent in the Thar as well as examine its link with agriculture. Thus, routes of pastoral migration within and beyond the Thar as well as trade in agro-pastoral products become important aspects of enquiry. The second section examines trade, mercantile and fiscal networks in the Thar. Beginning with grain trade, the section traces networks of exchange from village markets to transregional trade routes, thus, attempting to link the local to the global. In addition, the section also attempts to examine networks of merchants, traders and moneylenders in the Thar as well as flow of money and the role of financial communities like the Mahajans and Marwaris in facilitating this trading network. The third section deals with religious networks primarily discussing movements of saints and establishment of places of worship. The fourth section examines networks of authority in the Thar. This entails exploring the issue of extension of political authority into the desert by examining the movements of political groups, transportation networks as well as the availability of armed manpower. The fifth section argues the need to re-imagine the Thar as a connected space, connecting the regions of Central Asia, Northern India and Gujarat. This is done by analysing notions of the desert's historical connections with these areas, horse and camel trade as well as the movements of disparate groups in the desert.

I. Agro-Pastoral and Migratory Networks in the Thar

Any examination of the circulatory networks of the Thar has to begin with an investigation into the networks of pastoral circulation. In addition to this, it is also important to look at its relationship with agriculture. Agriculture and animal herding are complementary and not spatially separate forms of land use.² According to Shereen Ratnagar, agriculture and

² Shereen Ratnagar, 'Pastoralism as an issue in Historical Research', *Studies in History*, Vol. 7, Issue. 2, p. 187.

pastoralism are 'interdigitating'- intimately connected with scarcity of grain, increasing importance of livestock, and the ability of people to move long distances with their cattle.³ This is more so in arid and semi-arid areas like the Thar.

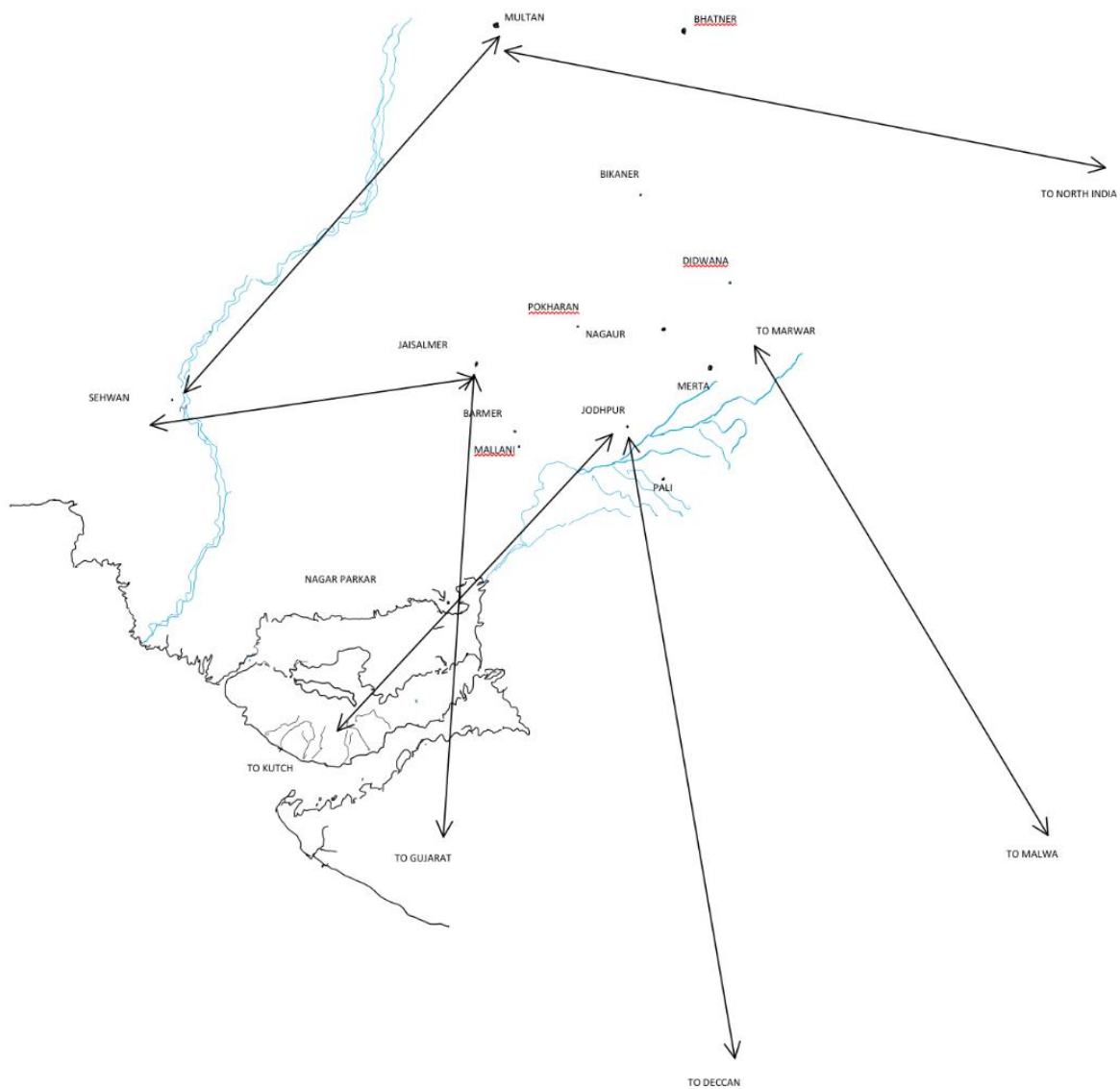
The basis of the pastoral migration system operative in the desert was the use of unarable land along with seasonally fallow rain crop tracts as pasture.⁴ These lands were utilised for grazing as well as used as common resource pools. In the Thar, when rainfall was good, tracts of Barmer, Jaisalmer and Bikaner turned into good pasture lands while cultivation was done only for fodder in the more arid parts.⁵ On these grazing grounds cattle of superior breeds were bred to export to agricultural zones across the subcontinent. Sheep was bred for wool and camels for transport. Lands on the fringe of the desert as well as bordering the oases within the desert were excellent zones for pastoralists to utilise.⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kavoori, 'Transhumance in Western Rajasthan: Trends and Transformations', *Studies in History*, Vol. 7, Issue. 2, p. 256

⁵ Ibid. p. 257

⁶ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 81



MAP 8 - Important patterns of Movements of Agro-pastoral Groups in the Thar⁷

⁷ Map not to scale.

i. Patterns of migration into and from the Thar

Migration was an integral part of the agro-pastoral economy of the Thar desert, which due to scarcity of rainfall relied heavily on pastoral networks of movement. At times, entire villages deserted by peasants were used as grazing grounds.⁸ Circuits of migration would be based on the size of the herd and the availability of grazing land and water. Scholars have pointed out that monsoon was also a major factor in determining the length of the migratory circuit. In years of normal monsoon, the migratory circuit would be short while it would have to be long in years of scarce monsoon.⁹ Those who migrated over long distances would also migrate for a longer time period. Three patterns of seasonal (long distance) migrations of nomadic pastoralists have been identified by scholars. The first pattern was of groups who stayed permanently in the pastures and never went back to their villages, migrating from pasture to pasture instead. The second pattern was of those who migrated locally, within 100 kilometres. The third pattern was of those who practiced transhumance to regions beyond the Thar.¹⁰ These three patterns have led either to migrations within the Thar or to neighbouring regions of Punjab, Multan, Sindh, Gujarat and Malwa.¹¹

There is a need to historicise the dominant pastoral networks in the Thar as well as trace changes in the patterns of movements of man and livestock in the period under study. It has been suggested that pastoralism became widespread in Gujarat and Rajasthan during the end of the fourth and early third millennium B.C.¹² This was probably due to the fact that the wetter mid Holocene created a more potential grazing area.¹³ Supriya Varma has argued that a shift

⁸ Ibid. p. 95

⁹ Supriya Varma, 'The Case for Mobile Pastoralism in Post Harappan Gujarat,' *Studies in History*, Vol. 7, Issue. 2, p. 298

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 131

¹² Kumar, *Monsoon Ecologies*, p. 161

¹³ Ibid.

occurred from farming to herding in post Harappan Gujarat based on changes in settlement patterns in the second millennium.¹⁴ It has been argued that evidences of 'hero-stones' in Rajasthan point towards growing importance of pastoralism in the region in the early medieval period. Clusters of hero stones depicting cattle raids found around the most arid parts of the Thar like Jaisalmer, lower Sindh and Kutch point towards these areas historically having a dominant pastoral component. Many of these stones commemorate victims of cattle raids. While evidence of cattle raids points towards the economic significance of drought animals in an early medieval economy with an important pastoral component, the spatial distribution of such stones can give an indication of the extent of the pastoral network in the desert. Such stones have been found in Bayana (8th century C.E), Pokharan (11th century C.E), Jaisalmer (14th century C.E) etc. Stones found in Kutch and Sindh generally depict a row of animals being driven by a man.¹⁵

Some stones found in Kutch, Saurashtra and parts of Nagarparkar bordering the Rann in the early medieval period depict one or more camel riders.¹⁶ Hero stones depicting camel riders have been identified as belonging to the Raibari community who traditionally have been camel rearers. Migrations of Raibaris have been traced from Marwar into Sindh and Kutch from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries as well.¹⁷ Thus, movement of groups like Raibaris along with cattle and camel wealth can be attested to from these parts of the desert into Gujarat from the early medieval period.

¹⁴ Varma, 'The Case for Mobile Pastoralism', p. 30

¹⁵ B.D Chattopadhyaya, 'Early Memorial Stones of Rajasthan,' in S. Settar and G.D Sontheimer (ed.), *Memorial Stones : A Study of their Origins, Significance and Variety*, I.A. H Series, No. 2, South Asian Studies, No. XI/11, Heidelberg, 1982, p.145

¹⁶ Jyotindra Jain, 'Ethnic Background of some Hero Stones in Gujarat,' in Settar and Sontheimer (ed.), *Memorial Stones*, p. 85

¹⁷ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 129

Therefore, it is contended here that hero stones in general connected to each other in some ways whereby the different pastoral communities in these various places interacted with each other in the early medieval period. It then follows that the entire space of the desert encompassing these areas can be imagined as a 'pastoral highway' with many groups crossing this zone to move into parts of Gujarat like Kathiawad and Saurashtra at least from this period. While one migratory circuit can be identified as going into Gujarat via Kutch on the basis of hero stones discussed above, other migratory circuits have to be identified through sources other than hero stones.

In addition to the areas west of the Aravallis in the Thar, there is evidence of cattle pastoralism in the Mesolithic period in areas east of the Aravallis like Bagor and Bhilwara. Scholars argue that this subsistence pattern in the eastern areas diffused into northern and southern parts of the Thar in this period itself. Farming began in the region two thousand years ago and pastoralism co-existed along with it.¹⁸ According to nineteenth century census reports like the *Mardumshumari Raj Marwar* (1891) and colonial ethnographic accounts like R.E Enthoven's *Tribes and Castes of Bombay* (1920), Denzil Ibbetson's *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of The Punjab and North West Frontier Provinces* (1919), a number of pastoral groups trace their origins to the east of the Aravallis. Their origin myths give accounts of migrations into western Rajasthan as well as Gujarat. This can be corroborated with the Ghatiyala inscription of Jodhpur (861 C.E) in the ninth century that described the presence of the Ahirs in Marwar, who were herdsmen rearing cattle and selling butter and curd.¹⁹ This group is believed to have come to Marwar from Mathura and then spread throughout western

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 13. See also B.D Chattopadhyaya, 'Irrigation in Early Medieval Rajasthan,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vo. 16, No. 2/3, Dec. 1973, p. 300

¹⁹ The Ghatiyala Inscription, also called the Jodhpur Inscription gives information about Kakkuka, an initial ruler of the Pratiharas. This inscriptions records that Kakkuka brought the areas around present day Jodhpur under his control by wresting them from the Abhiras who have been identified as the Ahirs. See Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, p. 64.

Rajasthan as well as Kutch and Kathiawar.²⁰ However, Enthoven argues that the Ahirs migrated from the frontiers of Punjab to upper Sindh, Kutch, Kathiawar, Deccan, United Provinces etc.²¹ While it is difficult to state exactly what the migration pattern of the Ahirs was, it cannot be doubted that long distance migrations to and from the Thar occurred in both eastern and western directions in the early medieval period.

While these routes were also active after the thirteenth century, one can discern newer routes emerging, despite the difficulty in finding evidences for the same. An attempt has been made to map out these new routes by piecing together scanty references gathered from the various textual sources used in this study. For instance, *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani* in the seventeenth century mentions clearly a route from Sehwan in Sindh to Multan and Jaisalmer and possibly beyond, in the context of the Samejas who belonged to the region of Sehwan. It states that the Samejas would devastate villages and carry away cattle right up to Matila and Ubawra which lie within the territories of Multan and Jaisalmer.²² Another group, the Alitkars who were traditionally dyers of goat skins, trace their migrations from Marwar into Deccan.²³ Barani mentions the presence of Jats, Khokkars, Minas and Mandahars in northern and western frontiers of the desert at Bhatnir, Lahore and Dipalpur.²⁴ Afif also records the presence of Minas and Bhattis near Abohar and Dipalpur.²⁵ Minas were also present in Jalor and Godwar regions of Marwar.²⁶ They also lived in Marot, Nawa and Sambhar in the north-eastern part of Marwar. The Minas in Marot claimed to have migrated from the Ganga-Jamuna doab.²⁷ Thus, movements of Minas can be traced both on the eastern and western margins of the Thar.

²⁰ *Castes of Marwar*, p. 156. See also Denzil Ibbetson, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of Punjab and North West Frontier Provinces*, Vol 1, Lahore, p. 17.

²¹ R.E Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, Vol. 1, Government Central Press, 1920, p. 23.

²² *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*, p. 219

²³ Enthoven, *Tribes and Castes*, p. 35

²⁴ *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, p. 109.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 272

²⁶ *Castes of Marwar*, p. 45

²⁷ *Ibid.*

ii. Patterns of migrations within the Thar

While a preliminary enquiry into movements of pastoral groups into and from the Thar is important, it is also imperative to examine migrations within the Thar. On the basis of archaeological and geomorphological research it has been shown that increasing aridity in northern Thar in the Middle Palaeolithic period forced migrations into the Luni basin in southern Thar.²⁸ However, whenever conditions got better in the northern areas, these groups of hunter-gatherers would migrate back to this area. This was a period when the environmental conditions of the Thar were in a flux. Despite the commencement of farming in the region in the middle of the second millennium BC, pastoralism with its migratory nature remained the dominant mode of subsistence in the desert. This dominance of pastoralism can be surmised from B.D Chattopadhyaya's argument that evidence related to crop production and emergence of settlements in water scarce areas like Marwar does not date back to earlier than the early medieval period.²⁹

However, evidence of pastoral groups and more so of their migratory circuits within the Thar is difficult to gather like in the case of places outside the Thar. Based on tangential reference from inscriptions, it can be argued that within the Thar, major circuits passed through Marwar and Mewar where popular commercial towns like Pali, Nadaul, Merta, Barmer etc. existed.³⁰ Evidence of historical migration of pastoral groups which would indicate the routes within the Thar in the period under study is also indirect at best. Nainsi gives us some information about temporary migrations in the Thar due to famine or war. For instance, in the narrative of Goga Biramdevot, entire villages migrated from Thalvat during a famine but came

²⁸ V.N Misra and S.N Rajguru, 'History of Environment and Man in the Thar Desert,' *Journal of Ecological Society*, Vol. 1, 1988, p. 13

²⁹ Chattopadhyaya, 'Irrigation in Early Medieval Rajasthan,' p. 310

³⁰ Devra, 'Study of Trade Relations,' p. 582

back when conditions got better.³¹ Folk narratives also give some indirect evidence of movements of agro-pastoral groups. In the legend of Pabuji, it is mentioned that a group of Kutchhi Charans came to Marwar and gave horses to Pabu in return for protection in any future disputes.³² There is also a narrative of theft of camels from the Raibaris in Didwana as well as from the Sumras in Sindh which confirms the presence of these groups in these parts of the desert.³³

The nineteenth century texts while documenting the origin myths of various pastoral communities mention some of the routes. For instance, the *Mardumshumari Raj Marwar* states that the Gujars who were traditionally cattle breeders trace their migrations into Marwar from Ajmer.³⁴ It also tells us that the Sindhis, who were an agro-pastoral group engaging in both cultivation and herding migrated from Sindh to areas like Sheo, Mallani, Sanchor etc.³⁵ A subgroup of Sindhis called Khudali traced their origin from the Khadal region of the desert and preferred living in temporary dwellings as they were constantly on the move.³⁶

Establishment of centres of political importance in the mid-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries like Jodhpur and Bikaner also facilitated pastoral migrations. This can be argued on the basis of the fact that with the establishment of these political centres, agriculture expanded in hitherto less sedentary parts of the desert as the states located here wanted to maximize their revenues. However, due to the ecological condition of the desert, primarily characterized by a perennial scarcity of water, extension of cultivation was not enough and was supported by pastoral networks that existed before the mid-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These pastoral networks also became geared towards these new polities.

³¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 1, p. 96

³² *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 171

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Castes of Marwar*, p. 33

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 40

³⁶ *Ibid.*

A brisk commerce in pastoral products began to take place. Camel, cattle, horse and livestock breeding for commercial purposes began to be done at a large scale.³⁷ For instance, Abul Fazl compares horses of Kutch as being equal in quality to Arabian horses.³⁸ He also records that the most numerous camels were in Ajmer, Bikaner, Nagaur, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Bhatinda and Bhatner. Sindh is recorded as having the greatest abundance of camels with Abul Fazl stating that ‘many inhabitants own ten thousand camels and upwards.’³⁹ While this may be an exaggeration, it nevertheless points towards a widespread practice of camel breeding especially for exports. This can be surmised from Abul Fazl’s statement that the best camels for burden were bred in Thatta. Mallani was famous for good quality horses which could bear heavy loads while large herds of sheep and goat could be found in Nagaur, Jodhpur and Pali.⁴⁰

Animal and animal products were consumed at the domestic level as well as exported to other parts of the subcontinent. Pastoral products which were widely in circulation included wool and *ghee*. According to B.L Bhadani, *ghee* was an important pastoral article in Marwar where the state had imposed a tax - *bad dan* - on it.⁴¹ *Ghee* was transported from villages to other areas within Marwar as well as to areas outside Marwar like Gujarat. Merta, Jodhpur, Siwana and Jodhpur produced most of the wool.⁴² Abul Fazl also records woollen broadcloth from Nagaur.⁴³ Production of leather was also another pastoral product which was mainly done by castes like *khatik* and *bhambhi*. Salt production was an important article in the agro-pastoral economy of the region. Major salt producing zones were from the eastern fringe of the desert, from Didwana through Sambhar lake and from Pachpadra salt basin to the Great Rann of Kutch. Salt was extracted by a special caste known as Kharwal while it was transported by Banjaras.⁴⁴

³⁷ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 84

³⁸ *Ain*, Vol. 1, p. 140

³⁹ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p.151

⁴⁰ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 84

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 96

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 98

⁴³ *Ain*, Vol. 1, p. 101

⁴⁴ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 104

Thus, from the above discussion one can surmise that the Thar was the sight of an expansive grid of agro-pastoral networks which were not only operative within the desert but also stretched beyond it. Varied tribes and castes, animals and animal products plied the routes outlined above.

II. Trading, Mercantile and Fiscal Network in the Thar

i. Agrarian Trade in the Thar Desert – Rural Urban Linkages

The agro-pastoral networks in the Thar formed the basis of the trading and mercantile networks which operated within and beyond the desert. Any examination of trade in agricultural production has to be linked to the system of land tax.⁴⁵ This is essential in order to determine the linkage between agrarian production, mercantile networks, state, and cash flows. B.L Bhadani points out that it is important to find out the form of tax appropriation prevalent before attempting to examine the nature of agrarian trade. Either the peasant would pay the tax in money or the merchant would collect the tax in kind and pay the state in money.⁴⁶ In either case, agrarian produce would have to be sold within the village.

What is important to remember is that the Thar Desert was not a single administrative unit under a single taxation system. Many polities operated within the Thar; thus, the system of agrarian taxation would have varied within the desert. A brief account of agricultural taxation in Bikaner, Marwar, Jaisalmer and Sindh has already been given in the previous

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 285

⁴⁶ Ibid.

chapter (chapter-3). A short discussion of the cash revenue as well as the non-agricultural cesses extracted by the polities in the Thar is warranted here.

In Marwar, both *zabti* (cash revenue rates) and *batai* (crop sharing) were prevalent. While both systems were used in the more fertile parts of Marwar, *batai* was more prevalent in the *parganas* situated in the desert.⁴⁷ Cash crops catering to urban demand like cotton, wheat, opium, vegetables, melons etc. were assessed at *zabti* rates while for ordinary crops the method of tax assessment was *batai*.⁴⁸ In Bikaner, there were several kinds of cesses which together constituted *hasil* (actual revenue realisation). These were *rokad-rakam* (non-agricultural cess), *bijo rakme* (miscellaneous tax) and *bhog* (tax realised in kind). Due to the arid environment, *rokad-rakam* was realised in cash as a major part of the actual land revenue realisation (*hasil*) while *bhog* was realised in kind and *bijo rakame* (miscellaneous tax) in cash.⁴⁹ G.S.L Devra lists five methods of land revenue assessment in Bikaner. Under two methods *hali* and *baliyar*, *bhog* was realised with *rokad rakam* in cash and *bijo rakame* with the *hasil*. In the other three methods, viz., *bighere*, *pashayat* and *bhit-ki-bhach*, *bhog* was not realised as it was not included in the list of taxes under *hasil*.⁵⁰ Thus, *bhog* or tax collected in kind was not a major source of land revenue. Therefore, the pastoral sector was more dominant than the agrarian sector of the economy as the non-agricultural cess, i.e., *rokad rakam* was the main source of income from the countryside.

In Jaisalmer also due to arid conditions, *bhog* was the method of assessment only in villages which had access to waters of Kakani river and run-off from nearby hills.⁵¹ Nainsi records that *hasil* was extracted from villages with artificial irrigation measures like *beri* as

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 286-287

⁴⁹ G.S.L Devra, 'Nature and Incidence of Rokad Rakam (Non-Agricultural Taxes) in the Land Revenue System of Bikaner State (1650-1700),' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 37, 1976, p. 190

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 191

⁵¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 1, p. 256

there was more cultivation of crops like *saag*, *bhaji*, *eikh* etc.⁵² In other areas, a tax called *mal* was charged wherein it was collected in cash (*dugani*) from the Mahajans.⁵³ In northern Sindh, *zabt* was imposed while in the arid regions crop sharing was done.⁵⁴ Mirak points out instances when *zabt* was charged in desert areas even though the cultivation was based on rainfall and irrigation.⁵⁵ This often led the peasants into rebellion. Mirak suggests that it was of utmost importance to keep peasants in the desert areas happy by increasing cultivation and excavating more canals.⁵⁶ *Muqtai* (fixed demand) was imposed on tribesmen whose assessment was done with difficulty often with the use of force due to their nomadic ways.⁵⁷ While in some areas revenue realisation was in cash, it was done in kind in places with high nomadic populations often in the form of cattle and goats.⁵⁸ Thus, in the desert areas various methods of tax assessment existed. Whether in cash or kind, these methods formed the basis of agrarian and pastoral trade within and beyond the desert.

Grain trade was significant in the desert. Urban centres which flourished in the desert especially from the fifteenth century onwards were highly dependent on the grain trade from rural areas. Grain from villages of each *pargana* was directed to feed the population of its city headquarters.⁵⁹ These were dependent on local grain supplies rather than long distance trade. Main items of local trade were *til*, *gur*, *bajra*, wheat, gram, *moth*, *mung*, *ghee*, salt etc. They were taken from village to village as well as from one *pargana* to the other by peasants and traders on ox and camel carts.⁶⁰ While the question of surplus grain is relevant when discussing grain trade, B. L Bhadani argues that the trade in grain was not based on 'revenue grain' which

⁵² Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 257

⁵³ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 258

⁵⁴ Paliwal, 'Sindh in Mughal Empire,' p. 145

⁵⁵ *Mazhar-i-Shahjahani*, p. 255

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 221

⁵⁷ Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire,' p. 101

⁵⁸ Ibid. These methods of assessment were called *falsana* and *salami*.

⁵⁹ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 298

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 299

was collected by the state, rather it was based on supply by the peasants.⁶¹ Peasants sold their grain to merchants, traders and moneylenders to clear their debts taken for purchasing oxen, seed etc. Individual traders at village level organised sale of grain. These were called *sah*, *sahukar*, *baniya*, *fadiya*, *bichhayat* in Marwar.⁶² Generic term prevalent for the agrarian traders and moneylenders was *bania*. Grain from villages was probably transported by camels and ox carts to towns mostly by the Banjaras who were specialised grain carriers. A number of sources give references of Banjaras travelling with hundreds of cattle loaded with food grains from Marwar to Gujarat and onwards to Burhanpur.⁶³ Thus, grain trade was the basis of rural-urban linkages.

ii. Markets, Merchants and Money in the Thar Desert

The essential aspects of the grain trade were markets and traders. Markets should be viewed in all their complexity with various groups acting in varying capacities.⁶⁴ They were linked to both revenue and commercial networks. Markets became the meeting point of producers, traders and consumers. Bhadani highlights hierarchies of markets known as *chohta*, *haat*, *bazaar*, *mandi*, etc. There were grain markets in the village itself where peasants would sell their grain to dealers. Grain was then transported to *mandis* which were wholesale markets having many shops (*haats*) where transactions took place. Taxes were imposed on the sale of grain. *Chohta* and *bazaar* were also places where wholesale and retail transactions took place, though on a smaller scale than *mandis*.⁶⁵ The *bahis* give descriptions of *mandis* and *haats* where exchanges of goods occurred. Not only were goods exchanged but various other taxes like the

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 301

⁶² Ibid. p. 303

⁶³ Mundy, *Travels*, p. 55. See also Tavernier, *Travels*, p. 33

⁶⁴ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 145

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 305

zagat from all *zagat chowkis* , one-fourth land revenue, cesses on camels and bullocks, income from merchant fairs as well as *rokad-rakam* were collected here.⁶⁶ Growth of trade in the seventeenth century led to establishments of large markets. Fairs functioned alongside markets and were sites of sale of cattle, drought animals, grain etc. Fairs could be localised and at a small scale or they could be large, attracting people from far and wide. This ensured continuous supply of grain to urban areas. This grain was also transported to areas adjoining the Thar. For instance, Mundy records that during the great famine in Gujarat in 1630, oxen laden with grain were carried to Gujarat as relief.⁶⁷

It is important to discuss traders having discussed the markets. B.L Bhadani highlights an entire hierarchy of merchants starting with the *sah* who directly dealt with the peasants and purchased grain meant for revenue from them.⁶⁸ They were traders specialising in grain and pastoral products. In urban areas, traders and merchants engaged in wholesale and retail grain trade. The main meeting point of all these intermediary traders - *bantias, mahajans, seths, saudagars* - of rural areas were fairs and marts held periodically. Bhadani points out two categories of traders in Marwar - those who brought goods from outside Marwar and those who brought goods from rural areas within Marwar. Traders were taxed according to their status as well as where they brought the articles of trade from.⁶⁹

Having examined the local trading network in agrarian produce in the Thar desert, it is imperative to expand this enquiry further and examine the mercantile networks operating within and beyond the Thar. Supplementing the mercantile networks were also other networks - those of money and transportation. Thus, an enquiry into the circulation of money and operation of credit lines as well as the network of highways and taxation on passage of

⁶⁶ *Zagat Bahi* dated V.S 1843, S.no. 48

⁶⁷ Mundy, *Travels*, p. 236

⁶⁸ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 303

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

commodities is important. According to Nandita Sahai, in Marwar, diverse economic conditions necessitated a multifaceted and multi-tiered structure of distribution and exchange of commodities.⁷⁰ This entailed elaborate networks of trade routes, a nexus of small and large settlements, sophisticated credit and financial institutions and development of markets and mints. All of these were structural configurations for ensuring a thriving economy and were patronized by the state. The commercial groups involved in trade, moneylending and moneychanging were the *mahajans*, *bohras*, *banias*, *sahs* etc. who generally belonged to the Oswal caste. However, at times other castes also adopted these professions.⁷¹ According to B.L. Bhadani, *mahajan* was a broad category under which *bania* castes -Oswal, Agarwal, Maheshwari etc. - as well as Brahmins like Bhojag were included.⁷²

Major trade routes which passed through the desert converged and bifurcated at particular towns. These towns became the main centres of trade and circulation of commodities, people and currency. Major trading towns included Bhakkar, Jaisalmer, Merta, Jalor, Kaloj etc.⁷³ A number of smaller towns also lay on these trade routes. Important routes from the south of the desert culminated at the ports of Surat, Cambay and Lahari-Bandar. These routes facilitated movement of merchandise and grain from the hinterland to the ports. From the north-west, routes from Kandahar and Kabul converged at Multan and then went further to Bhakkar and Jaisalmer.⁷⁴ Thus, the crucial placement of the desert made it a highly viable commercial channel in the western part of the subcontinent and an essential aspect of the economy of not only the states in the desert but the Mughal Empire as well. The convergence of trade routes in the desert gave rise to an elaborate network of small and large urban centres populated with mercantile groups. Large numbers of *mahajans* have been recorded in such towns, examples

⁷⁰ Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*, p. 60

⁷¹ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 338

⁷² Ibid. p. 340

⁷³ Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 4B, 5B, 6B, 7B

⁷⁴ Ibid.

being Siwana, Jaitaran, Pokharan, Phalodhi, Jaisalmer etc.⁷⁵ This network supported and further steered the trading activities in the desert.



MAP 9 - Important Trade Routes in the Thar⁷⁶

The states in the desert were highly motivated to sustain this trading network in order to make profits out of it. Thus, for instance, the state in Marwar stood guarantee for loans taken by traders and were instrumental in the development of big financiers, bankers,

⁷⁵ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 347. See also Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, pp. 258-260; and Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 2, pp. 15-30

⁷⁶ Map not to scale.

moneychangers, exporters, wholesalers and retailers by extending state patronage to them.⁷⁷ In addition to this, taxation of trading items and caravans were important sources of revenue for the states - both regional and imperial. For instance, Nainsi records that in Jaisalmer, goods coming from Bikaner were taxed at the rate of 111 rupee per camel load while horse caravans passing through were charged at rupee 8 per horse.⁷⁸ Articles of trade which passed through the kingdom of Jaisalmer and on which taxes were levied included silk, coconut, cotton, wax, lac, alum, camels and horses.⁷⁹ Nainsi records that salt was an important article of trade and was produced in a number of villages in the *parganas* of Jodhpur, Siwana, Merta, Sojhat, Phalodhi and Pokharan. In Siwana, half of the salt produced was taken as tax while a third was taken in Pokharan.⁸⁰

Commodity	Tax
Silk	Rs. 34
Ghrit/Ghee	Rs. 5
Dry Dates	Rs. 5
Cotton	Rs. 5
Wax	Rs. 6
Coconut	Rs. 5
Alum	Rs. 4
Lac	Rs. 6
Camel on rent	Rs. 3

TABLE 3 – Tax rates on trade articles in Jaisalmer per *man*.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*, p. 70

⁷⁸ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 258

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 2, p. 36

⁸¹ Table based on Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, pp. 254-258

There were various transit points –*chowki*– in Bikaner where goods from various regions arrived and were taxed before being sent off to markets. There were a number of *chowkis* for different trade routes. For instance, Rajaldesar, Sandva, Vidya and Jaitpur were the *chowkis* where goods from Nagaur and Marwar arrived.⁸² Goods like wool from Nagaur, almonds from Multan, *hing* and wheat from Udaipur were brought into Bikaner while cloth, wool, oil and *bajri* were sent to Jaisalmer.⁸³ Salt was sent to Sarsa via the *chowki* at Bhadra Nohar.⁸⁴ The main trade routes through the area were those going towards Jaipur, Marwar and Jaisalmer.⁸⁵

The main characteristic of this trade network was mobility intermarried with locality. To elaborate, this trade network across the Thar could not function without the obvious movements of traders, merchants and caravans, the mobility of which was provided by the arid character of the desert. However, this trade was also facilitated by local centres and local producers which served as nodes on the trade routes. A number of trade articles were produced in the Thar like salt, wool, camels, marble, lead, silk and woollen textiles, dyes etc. The local artisans and merchants participated in this trade while credit lines and money lending activities operated at town and village level as well as across and beyond the Thar. For instance, while the *bohras* restricted their activities to towns and surrounding areas by providing credit to small shopkeepers, merchants and peasants⁸⁶, the Oswals and the Srimal Jains were part of the ‘Marwaris’ who formed wide ranging business networks across the subcontinent. Such activities were only possible due to the circulation of money which occurred due to a number of factors.

⁸² *Zagat Bahi* dated V.S 1805, Sno. 5

⁸³ *Zagat Bahi* dated V.S 1807, Sno. 7

⁸⁴ *Zagat Bahi* dated V.S 1818, Sno. 11

⁸⁵ *Zagat Bahi* dated V.S 1831, Sno. 32

⁸⁶ G.S Sharma, ‘Sources on Business History of Rajasthan (18th and 19th Centuries AD),’ *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 54, 1993, p. 900

First, agrarian taxation and trade as discussed previously led to commercialisation and monetisation down to the level of the smallest village.⁸⁷ Second, the establishment of major mints on trade routes passing through the desert also led to an increased circulation of money in the desert as well as connected the desert to important ports. For instance, imperial mints were established by the Mughals at Thatta, Bhakkar and Lahari-Bandar. The mint at Thatta minted silver as well as copper coins, a silver mint was established at Lahari-Bandar as well as at Bhakkar.⁸⁸ Copper mints were also established at Nagaur while rupee mints existed at Ajmer and Sambhar.⁸⁹ In addition to these, major mints at Multan, Lahore, Delhi, Agra, Ahmedabad, Surat, Cambay and Burhanpur as well as smaller mints at Raipur, Alwar, Singhana and Hisar, also fell within this network of money circulation.⁹⁰ However, since routes through the desert were infested with robbers, *hundi* system was operative here.⁹¹

This is where the sphere of the Marwari communities of the Oswals and the Srimals became operative. B.L Bhadani points out that especially the Oswal community had established an extensive credit network in many parts of the subcontinent with various individuals and families operating *hundi* transactions in major cities like Delhi, Agra, Ahmedabad, Aurangabad, Nagaur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Patna, Burhanpur etc.⁹² Large amounts of money were transferred from one place to another through important firms run by the Oswals, examples firms owned by being Ranchhoddas Udai Singh at Ahmedabad, Tikunji Gunraj and Narain Akhairaj at Aurangabad, Hiranand and Manik Chand in Bengal etc.⁹³ Thus, Bhadani contends that a robust network of money transfer was established between the cities in the

⁸⁷ For instance, Nainsi records that in villages of Phalodhi *pargana*, imperial *rekh* collected from 67 villages of the *pargana* was 2700000 *dam* and 67500 rupee. – See Nainsi, *Vigat*, Vol. 2, p. 11.

⁸⁸ Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire,' p. 203

⁸⁹ Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 6B

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Paliwal, 'Sindh in the Mughal Empire,' p. 185

⁹² B.L Bhadani, 'The Migration of the Oswals in Pre-British India – A Case Study of the *Kharataragachha* Sect', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 55, 1994, p. 264

⁹³ *Ibid.*

desert as well as adjoining parts of Gujarat and Deccan which was integrally connected despite appearing fractured at the surface.⁹⁴ Thus, in terms of commodities and people, the trade network of the Thar had a local element as well as extended far beyond it.

III. Religious Networks

Religion has historically been an important aspect behind migrations of individuals and communities across wide geographical spaces. It is a well-known fact that the spread and cultural assimilation of particular religious traditions took place due to movements and migrations of people from one place to another. While pilgrimages to sacred places are acts of religiosity, episodes of conquest, migrations, trade and extension of agriculture have also been traditionally couched in religious terms. Overlapping and intersecting religious networks have historically existed across the Thar and have also extended beyond it thus connecting it to larger networks of religious circulations. These religious networks have also been intimately linked to agro-pastoral, trading and mercantile networks outlined above.

Thar has been on the road map of Buddhist pilgrims and travellers. Yuan Chwang famously travelled through the Thar passing places like Kutch and Bhinmal. Yuan Chwang on travelling north west from Maharashtra describes Bharuch - Po-Lu-Ka-Che-Po - as having ten Buddhist monasteries with over three hundred brethren all students of Mahayanist Sthavira school.⁹⁵ He records that Kutch - Kie-Ta - had ten Buddhist monasteries with over one thousand Brethren who were adherents of both 'Vehicles' along with many non-Buddhists and several 'Deva Temples'.⁹⁶ However, Yuan Chwang describes Ku-Che-Lo (Gurjara country) and its

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Yuan Chwang and Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Vol. 2, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1905, p. 241

⁹⁶ Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 245

capital Pi-Lo-Mi-Lo (Bhinmal) as having only one Buddhist monastery with hundred Brethren adherents of Hinayanist Sarvastivadin school while there were many ‘Deva Temples’ and adherents of various religions.⁹⁷ He describes the people of Sindh as thorough believers in Buddhism. He records over hundred monasteries with thousands of Brethren of the Hinayanist Sammatiya school in Sindh.⁹⁸ The point that comes across from this discussion of Yuan Chwang’s travels is that there appears to have been an extensive network of Buddhist monasteries and pilgrims of various sects across and beyond the Thar. It was this network that enabled Yuan Chwang to travel through the Thar and move further into Sindh and Multan and then travel back to Nalanda. In addition to this, Yuan Chwang’s mention of people of various religions as well as ‘Deva temples’ points towards an intersecting network of Buddhism, Brahmanism and local religious cults existing in the desert. Thus, religious networks existing in and around the Thar can be identified from at least the seventh century C.E.

The Jaina text *Kharataragacchapatavali* (fourteenth century) gives valuable information on the establishment and expansion of the temple network of the *kharataragachcha* sect of *shvetambar* Jaina monks in the Thar. While the text itself can be dated to the fourteenth century, many of the accounts it narrates are from an earlier time period. The author - Jinaprabhasuri - explicitly states in the beginning of the account that all incidents that he is putting down in written form are either based on his memory or have been learned from the old keepers of tradition.⁹⁹ Thus, just like the *khyat*, this text also compiles older narratives that had been in circulation in Jaina religious circles. A reading of the text reveals an expanding religious network of Jaina monks through their travels as well as the establishment of temples across and beyond the region under study. For instance, the text begins by mentioning the presence of

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 249

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 253

⁹⁹ Jinaprabhasuri and Agarchand Nahta, *Kharataragachcha ka Itihas*, Vol. 1, Ajmer, p. 3

eighty four *devghars* in Abohar, located on the fringe of the deserts.¹⁰⁰ Monks from Abohar travelled to Delhi to gain more knowledge and subsequently travelled to Gurjaradesa to spread their teachings and preach. In this instance the monks travelled to Anhilvada Patan with the retinue of the merchant Bhama.¹⁰¹ This religious network could grow due to the involvement and donations by the mercantile and trading classes of the Thar as well as Gujarat and Mewar. For instance, the monks acquired sizeable donations to establish two temples in Chittor.¹⁰² Tracing their travels, one finds the religious network of the monks - now the *kharataragachcha* sect - extend from Abohar in the northern part of the desert to Delhi, Gujarat, Chittor, Didwana, Nagaur, Bikampur and Maroth on the westernmost end of the desert.

In probably the mid-thirteenth century, the sect expanded into Marwar.¹⁰³ The author notes that this expansion was possible due to the help of *shravakas* (lay followers) from Marwar who were in Chittor for conducting trade. Thirteenth century wanderings of Jaina monks ranged from Chittor to Ajmer to Bagad and also from Girnar to Cambay and back into Chittor. The text also records the construction of three Jaina temples in Ajmer dedicated to Parthavnath, Rishabhdev and Neminath as in Cambay and Girnar. These temples made Ajmer a central node in the wandering routes of the monks and their devotees.¹⁰⁴ Jaina temples were established in Bikampur with the help of local *seths* in the same time period. A *seth*, Kshemdhar donated 500 *drams* to the Jaina temple in Marot.¹⁰⁵

According to Samira Sheikh, these Jaina merchants who patronised Jaina teachers and shrines did so to stake a claim in the trading as well as the political landscape of the desert.¹⁰⁶ For instance, she uses the case of the Jaina merchant Jagadu in Kutch to argue that the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 3

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 5

¹⁰² Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 24

¹⁰³ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 35

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 42

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Vol 1, p. 44

¹⁰⁶ Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, p. 122

distinguishing feature of politics in Kutch was the religious ethos behind the matrix of trading and pastoralist connections.¹⁰⁷ This argument can be extended to other parts of the desert as well. The *kharataragachha* sect expanded due to both political patronage and monetary support from local merchants. The *kharataragachchapatawali* is full of instances where leading Jaina teachers were invited by local *seths* but faced opposition from rival Jaina sects. Often the king would step in and accord a proper place of honour to the teachers of the *kharataragachcha* and would allow for Jaina temples to be built. Expanding Jaina religious network across the desert increased the importance of pilgrimage and ensured that trade routes were regularly traversed, existing pilgrimage sites became richer with a flux of pilgrims and new pilgrimage sites were established over time.¹⁰⁸

Throughout the period under study, there was never a sole religion which dictated trade and politics in the Thar. Trans-regional pilgrimage cycles of various religious traditions existed since at least the seventh century when Yuan Chwang passed through the area under study. The period from the twelfth to fifteenth century saw an expansion of the Jaina religious network in the Thar as well as Gujarat. Samira Sheikh points out that from the fifteenth century onwards sites like Dwarka began to be incorporated in a trans-regional pilgrimage cycle of Krishnaite Vaishnavism, which began to gain traction not only in courts but also in Bhakti worship especially among merchant groups. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw increased patronage to Bhakti tradition of worship by the Marwar state. Lavish patronage was extended to the Vallabha *sampradaya* of Krishna worship.¹⁰⁹ Nandita Sahai points out that large number of devotees would congregate in Jodhpur for festivals such as *annakut* and *mahotsav*. Nobles and rich merchants became the main devotees sponsoring the costly rituals of the deity.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 123

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 129

¹⁰⁹ Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*, p. 58

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Income from religion driven trade throughout the period under study was a major aspect of strengthening and sustaining royal power as well as a source of legitimacy.¹¹¹ Holding of fairs as enumerated previously not only attracted pilgrims but also became sites of trade in both grain and animals and also allowed the state to collect revenue. Thus, the religious network of the desert was intimately connected to the trading and political networks operating here.

IV. Networks of Authority

As discussed in the previous chapters, the political landscape of the Thar was predicated on the mobility of various political groups which competed with each other in a bid to establish political supremacy and dominance. The mobile nature of early Rajput clans and the manner in which the major clans established their authority has already been discussed in the previous chapter. As traced previously the geographical connections of the major ruling clans of the Thar extended far beyond it. These connections were not only in terms of origins but also in terms of service and marriages. These networks brought valuable resources of diplomatic alliance as well as manpower and material wealth to the ruling group. As the major ruling groups of the desert grew stronger in terms of political power and material resources, they sought to derive maximum profit from the extensive trading network operative in the desert. Another way of maintaining extensive authority was through maintenance of means of communication and transport.

B.L Bhadani points out that the Mughal system of *dak chaukis* (post stations) along key routes was significant politically, militarily and commercially.¹¹² There were numerous *chaukis* on the *patsahi marg* (imperial route) in places like Bargaon, Bhinmal, Jalor, Dundara, Pipar

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 59

¹¹² Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 327

and Merta.¹¹³ Bhadani points out that many villages which fell on or near the Mughal highway from Ahmedabad to Agra such as Majal, Palawasni, Sutlana, Jharau, Alaniawas had high *reeks* (revenue estimation) and had high revenue assigned to them and some villages on the routes raised both harvests *rabi* and *kharif*. The route thus provided these villages with a market that made agriculture extremely profitable.¹¹⁴ While the local rulers were given charge of managing and organising the Mughal *chaukis*, the Rathor rulers also organised their own *chaukis* and the person incharge was given revenue free land in lieu of salary.¹¹⁵ Bhadani points out that protection of the Mughal *chaukis* was the responsibility of the local *zamindars*. However, Mundy records that it was these *zamindars* who extracted much more than was mandated from the travellers.¹¹⁶

Mundy also records that Raja Gaj Singh under whose territory the route between Merta and Jalor lay ensured that travellers could pass without molestation.¹¹⁷ Apart from this, toll was collected on these *chaukis* which was then divided between the local *zamindar* and the ruler. These tolls were of primarily two types - one on goods for sale and the other on goods in transit.¹¹⁸ Mundy mentions how local *Banias* attempted to extract more *zakat* (toll tax) from him than was required. At another instance, he mentions that the local Raja took 3 rupees per camel while the prevailing rate was no more than 1/2 rupees per camel and 2 rupees per *man*.¹¹⁹

As enumerated in the previous chapter, there were numerous instances of robbery on the trade routes. These instances along with the tendency of local Rajas to extract more toll tax than was necessary point towards attempts to extend authority in the outlying areas of the desert which fell either on the fringes of kingdoms or did not fall under any state's jurisdiction at all.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 328

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 331

¹¹⁶ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p. 250

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Bhadani, *Peasants, Traders and Entrepreneurs*, p. 333

¹¹⁹ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p. 54

It was in these areas of contested territorial and economic control that various forms of authority were exercised in opposition to attempts at control by both regional kingdoms and the Mughals. This aspect has also been discussed in the previous chapter. Scholars like Kothiyal argue that as kingdoms in Bikaner, Marwar, Jaisalmer , Umarkot etc. sedentarised and became more agro-centric, Rajput *thikanadars* in the frontiers disassociated from the core Rajput-Mughal polity and instead exerted their political authority by attempting to control the resources circulating in the Thar on the agro-pastoral and trade routes.¹²⁰ Thus, these circulatory regimes of the Thar as enumerated above were a point of contestation between imperial as well as outlying groups for the material as well as cattle resources in circulation.

However, another valuable resource was constantly in circulation in the Thar which not only bolstered these alternative networks of authority but was also used to oppose them. This resource was manpower. As enumerated above, the Thar was home to a variety of circulatory regimes. In addition to these, the Thar was also geographically located on the cross roads of Central Asia, Arabian Sea and the Gangetic Plains. Important routes to and from these areas were located in or around the Thar. Thus, the desert saw immense footfall of a number of groups like Jats, Balochis, Afghans, Gujaratis, Multanis, Bhats etc., who could protect and fight on the behalf of travellers, local rulers as well as rulers of large regional kingdoms as armed men and were recruited by them. The Charans also fell in this category. For instance, Mundy recruited Balochis and Jats to travel with him and provide protection from highway robbers.¹²¹ Tavernier also recruited Charans and so did Sidi Ali Reis. The Charans and the Bhats were famous for their martial ethic and were often recruited to provide protection to caravans passing through the desert. Sidi Ali Reis records that it was the ‘business’ of the Bhats to escort merchants and travellers to their destination and guarantee their safety from marauding

¹²⁰ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 110

¹²¹ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p. 246

Rajputs.¹²² In case of an attack, the Bhats threatened to kill themselves if the travellers or their goods were harmed in the slightest. The Rajputs respected the Bhats as the suicide of a Bhat in this manner could mean great bad luck on the Rajput tribe. Reis recounts that in case a Bhat does commit suicide while protecting the caravan, people would demand that the offenders along with their sons and their daughters be put to death.¹²³

Dirk Kolff points out that many groups who made fighting their profession also settled down and acquired a stake in agriculture and administration of the region.¹²⁴ While he gives examples of the *qasbatis* in Gujarat, Nainsi records similar trajectories for groups like Joiyyas and Jats during the expansion of both the Marwar and Bikaner states. Another aspect outlined by Kolff to explain this military labour market is the nexus of conquests, horse trade and slave trade.¹²⁵ Norman Zeigler has highlighted how the horse trade was instrumental in the establishment and evolution of the Rathor state of Marwar. Jos Gommans has argued that from the twelfth century onwards, a 'Turco-Persian ecumene' - a cultural mix of Arabic, Persian and Turkic elements from Khorasan and Transoxiana - spread throughout northern and central parts of the subcontinent through conquering horse warriors.¹²⁶ This he contends made South Asia more mobile and open to the outside world. The Thar was an important connecting space in this dynamic. Gommans argues that the arid parts of the subcontinent were primary areas for stockbreeding and thus pastoralism flourished with pastoral groups raising huge herds of oxen, camels, goats and horses.¹²⁷ He contends that it was for this reason that this area gave impetus to north-south mobility of people for grazing as well as campaigns and trade. This aspect made the desert and its adjoining areas a major conductor of humans, animals, goods and ideas.¹²⁸

¹²² *Mira'at*, p. 34

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan, 1450-1850*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 6

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 11

¹²⁶ Jos Gommans, 'Silent Frontier', p. 5

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 7

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 8

Amir Khusrow in *Khazain-ul Futuh* as well as Padmanabha in *Kanhadadeprabhandha* have recorded conquests by Alauddin Khilji wherein large numbers of people were taken as slaves. While much can be said to be an exaggeration, what can be surmised is that conquests were excellent means to acquire animal as well as human resource from the desert. Padmanabha points out that Khilji needed control of the fort in Siwana and Jalore to access the routes to Gujarat.¹²⁹ Clearly the desert along with Gujarat was important enough to warrant control over the circulation of wealth occurring here. Nainsi records numerous instances where villages were plundered, cattle was looted, horse merchants were robbed by fledgling Rajput groups who aspired to acquire more control over the networks of circulation in the Thar.

Kolff argues that concepts of *namak* and *naukari* became increasingly important to sustain control over the military labour market.¹³⁰ Nainsi gives instances when loyalty of various Rajput clans to one powerful clan was important to sustain its position. He also gives instances of how before battles manpower was gathered through the loyalty network cemented by familial and marital bonds. In addition to this, battles were also fought to maintain and prove loyalties - i.e., a recurring logic that Nainsi gives behind most battles or conquests is to avenge any wrong committed to one's clansmen. Thus, there existed several networks of authority in the Thar to control the circulation of men and resources.

V. Thar as a Connected Space

Having discussed the various networks of circulation operating within the Thar, it is imperative to examine the Thar Desert's connections with the wider world. Ecological zones like deserts are often characterised as 'frontiers', as spaces where the state's authority is

¹²⁹ *Kanhadadeprabandha*, p. 11. See also *Khazain-ul-Futuh*, p. 53.

¹³⁰ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, p. 20

fractured, its reach limited and its control over territory, people and commodities contested. Scholars have characterised the Thar as a frontier due to its ecological condition, agro-pastoral economy as well as the fact that it connected many sedentary centres with settlements occurring on its fringes.¹³¹ An understanding of the Thar as a frontier also arises from imperial chronicles like the *Ain-i-Akbari* where the desert is not mentioned explicitly, despite detailed descriptions of the environment of those *subas* in which the desert was located.¹³² However, the idea of ‘frontier’ stems from state centric views and either denies agency to the landscape and its people or views ‘frontier’ landscapes as open spaces ripe for agricultural expansion while also simultaneously introducing ‘unsettled’ elements into the core sedentary zone.

In a desert like the Thar which was ecologically as well as socially diverse such approaches become overtly reductive. The Thar, in my view, was more of a connected space rather than a frontier or a region. While it physically connected the regions of Punjab and Sindh with Gujarat, Malwa and Northern India, these connections manifested in terms of agro-pastoral networks, merchant and fiscal networks, commodity networks as well as travel. Larger connections with Central Asia, Arabian Sea as well as the rest of the subcontinent should also be considered.

A useful starting point would be to examine the idea of the desert - in what terms has the desert been historically imagined? The previous chapter (chapter-4) dealt with this question at some length to understand how the idea of the desert as an empty, barren and hostile natural environment has been culturally constructed over the centuries. Such a perception of the desert makes it seem like a barrier between the fertile plains of Sindh, trade routes from Central Asia and the interiors of Gujarat, Malwa and Northern India. However, it has been argued above

¹³¹ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 7

¹³² Parts of the Thar Desert fell under *suba* Ajmer, Multan and Gujarat. While the *Ain* gives detailed descriptions of the *sarkars* and places within these *subas*, there is no explicit mention of the desert. - ‘Account of the Twelve Subahs’, see *Ain*, Vol. 2, pp. 246-349

that the Thar Desert was not a barrier but rather full of diverse and intersecting networks of mobility. Even in the historical literature of the polities in the Thar like Nainsi's *Khyat* and Diwan Nathmal's *Tawarikh Jaisalmer* (nineteenth century) the Thar is often imagined as having historic connections with Central Asia and Gujarat. Though a nineteenth century court chronicle commissioned by the raja of Jaisalmer, the *Tawarikh Jaisalmer* recounts the history of Jaisalmer pointing towards a recording of historical memory handed down from the past. This narrative on the past had a glorious history which legitimised the patron of the *Tawarikh*, the Raja of Jaisalmer. Though of doubtful historicity in many ways, the *Tawarikh* cannot be dismissed altogether as it recorded the Thar as a connected space.

For instance, Nathmal records conflicts between ancestors of the Bhati tribe of Jaisalmer and 'the ruler of Khorasan' in a historical past whose dates are unknown.¹³³ While this claim should not be taken as a historical 'fact', it does indicate some aspects of a received knowledge of connections with Central Asia. These include claims of control over Kabul, Multan and Punjab as well as conflicts over Ghazni and Kashmir.¹³⁴ Similarly, eastwards, the *Tawarikh* claims control by ancestors of the Bhati tribe over Mathura. Nathmal also traces connections with the Jadejas of Kutch and Jamnagar. In the *Tawarikh Jaisalmer* one can trace a Bhati political space which stretched from Ghazni to Mathura and southwards to Kutch and Sindh. The centre of this space was in the desert first at Bhatner, then at Abohar, Multan, Pugal, Ludrava, Mammanvahan, Marot, Tanot, Derawar and finally, Jaisalmer.¹³⁵

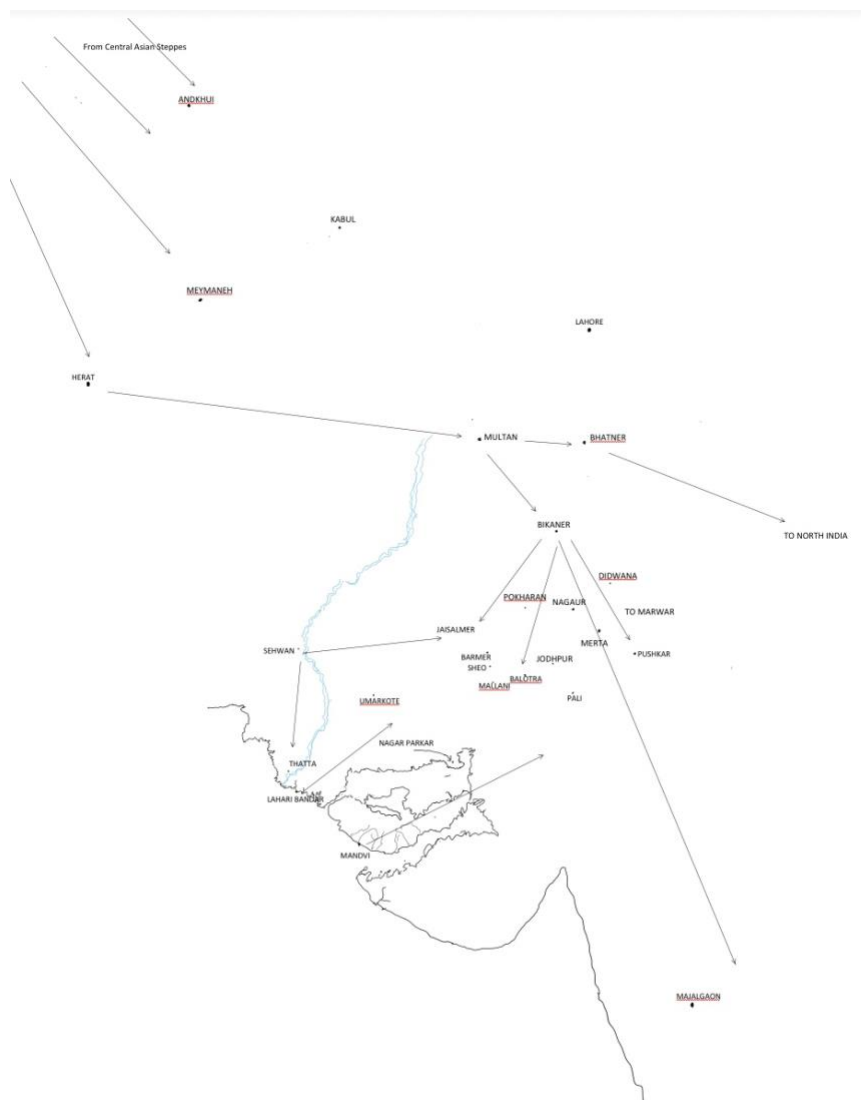
Thus, the Bhati political space described as centered in the desert and exerting claims to wider areas around it were probably made to legitimise the Bhatias who went on to acquire Rajput status and establish their own state in the desert in eleventh-twelfth century. These claims were further crystallised in the proclamation by the Bhatias that Jaisalmer was the centre

¹³³ Likhmi Chand, *Tawarikh Jaisalmer: Jaisalmer Rajya ka Itihas*, Rajasthan Granthaghar, 1964, p. 10.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid. pp. 10-15. See also Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 1, p. 16.

of Hindustan with Ghazni in the west and Delhi in the east. This is an older claim which one also finds in Nainsi's *Khyat*.¹³⁶ Thus, it can be surmised that there was already a notion of the desert not as a barrier but as having a strategic location between Central Asia and Northern India. In addition to this, the desert space was also politically imagined as connecting areas in Afghanistan, Punjab and Multan with Northern India.



MAP 10 - Important Horse Trade Routes¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Ibid. Vol. 2., p. 291.
¹³⁷ Map not to scale.

A crucial point which will enable one to imagine the Thar as a connecting space is the linkage between the agro-pastoral and trading networks operating across the geographical space from Central Asia to the plains of Northern India. These networks also facilitated state formation in the Thar Desert. An essential aspect of this trade is the horse and camel trade which also played an instrumental role in the establishment of Rajput political centres in the desert. In addition to this, the Delhi Sultanate and later, the Mughal Empire were also highly dependent on the supply of warhorses. Jos Gommans has argued that political centres came up in close proximity to dry-zones in order to ensure the supply of warhorses.¹³⁸ According to him, these dry zones form one unbroken Arid Zone of which the Thar is an integral part. It is in this Arid Zone that the nomadic way of life mixed with sedentary economies of river valleys and fertile plains.¹³⁹ He argues in context of the Mughal Empire that it built its power on a network of imperial highways bridging the empire's various 'inner frontiers'.¹⁴⁰ To write a connected history of the Thar Desert it is essential to trace this supply of horses as well as the movements of nomadic war bands across the arid zones of Central Asia into China, Europe, West and South Asia.¹⁴¹ It is in this context that the Thar has to be placed.

i. Horse Trade across the Thar Desert

The Thar was a part of the continental trade network across Eurasia including the merchant networks operating in this vast space. These merchants included communities of Jewish, Armenian, Kashmiri, Marwari, Afghan etc. merchants. Throughout the period under

¹³⁸ Jos J.L Gommans, *The Indian Frontier : Horse and Warband in the Making of Empires*, Routledge, 2018, p.19. See also Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare : Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, Routledge, 2002, and Jos Gommans, 'The Horse Trade in Eighteenth Century South Asia,' *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1994, pp. 228-250.

¹³⁹ Gommans, *The Indian Frontier*.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 22

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 24

study, India was part of a large network of livestock trade which originated in Central Asia where a large supply of horses along with cattle, goats and sheep was bred by pastoral nomads in the Kalmyn and Kazakh steppes.¹⁴² South Asia was one of the most important markets for the sale of this livestock, especially warhorses. Jos Gommans has traced the trade in warhorses from Central Asia to India in the eighteenth century. According to him, *Turki* horses were bred in the areas north of the Hindu-Kush, near Balkh as well as near Andkhui and Meymaneh. These horses were first sold in the markets of Balkh, Herat and Bukhara. These horses were bought by Afghan and other merchants either directly from nomads or from middlemen in fairs. In October and November, these merchants travelled with nomads across the Suleiman Range. They either took the southern routes crossing Bolan and other passes and onwards to Multan and Derajat, continuing via Bahawalpur to Bikaner, supplying warhorses to Jaipur, Deccan and Southern India.¹⁴³ The other route followed was northwards through the Khyber Pass and onwards to Punjab, Rohilkhand, Awadh and Bihar. Bulk of horses were left to graze at the extensive wastes of Jallandhar Doab and Lakhi Jungle before being taken to fairs and markets.¹⁴⁴

Gommans contends that while these merchants sold their horses in local fairs in Rajasthan, Punjab and Rohilkhand etc, they also bought indigenous horses from these fairs. Thus, many local fairs and marts became important outlets for indigenous horse breeds. Fairs at Bhatinda served as entrepôt of the Lakhi Jungle, Majalgaon in Deccan for the horses from Bhima valley and the *melas* at Pushkar and Balotra for indigenous horses from Sindh and Gujarat.¹⁴⁵ Pushkar was the major fair in Rajasthan where traders brought horses from Central Asia as well as indigenous horses. Customers were mostly army officers or court agents who

¹⁴² Ibid. p. 26

¹⁴³ Ibid. p. 27

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

had to buy horses on a large scale. Other autumn fairs included Mundwa near Nagaur and Balotra near Jodhpur.¹⁴⁶ Balotra also had a spring fair where regional breeds were bought and sold. Other markets included Ummedwar in Malwa, Haridwar in the north, Tirupati in the south and Benaras, Hajipur and Dudhri in the east.

The merchants from Afghanistan and Central Asia would return after the November fairs while local indigenous breeds like *gents* ponies from Kumaon and Garhwal, *tattus* and *tangans* from Nepal as well as local breeds from Punjab and Rohilkhand dominated the spring fairs just like in Balotra.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the horse trade integrated several overlapping market areas while fairs became outlets for local produce as well as ensured local states a continuous supply of horses for their cavalries. The overland trade in horses was complimented by overseas trade of *bahri* or sea horses from Iran and the Middle East. However, until the eighteenth century the overland trade dominated the trade in foreign horses while a bulk of the horses traded overseas originated from places like Kathiawad, Mandvi, Gogha, Porbander etc.¹⁴⁸

Having examined the broad dynamics of the functioning of the horse trade, it is essential to examine the place of the Thar within this vast trading network. The *Tawarikh Jaisalmer* records large scale fairs in Jaisalmer which were also attended by the ruler. These fairs were organised by various communities like the Oswals, Mehsaris, Pushkarna Brahmins and were mainly religious gatherings.¹⁴⁹ Large fairs were also held on Dussehra when horses and elephants would be worshiped while sheep and goat would be sacrificed. The *Tawarikh* also records fairs which attracted people from Marwar, Mallani, urban as well as rural areas. While most fairs were religious gatherings characterised by activities like large scale *pujas*, ritual baths in ponds like Gharsisar and immersion of ashes of the dead, these fairs were also the site

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 28

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 29

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 32

¹⁴⁹ *Tawarikh*, p. 252

of large-scale trade in horses as well as livestock. Similar fairs also took place in Sindh where traders and merchants came from all over the desert and beyond.¹⁵⁰

Abul Fazl opines that while fine horses were bred in every part of the Empire, those bred in Kutch were of the best quality; equal to Arabian horses.¹⁵¹ The *Tarikh-i-Masumi* records that areas in Siwistan bred horses finer than Iraqi horses.¹⁵² These horses were then transported through the desert or along its fringes with main trading cities being Bhakkar, Jaisalmer and Multan.¹⁵³ Kutchi horses were transported from Kutch and Saurashtra via Jalor and Merta.¹⁵⁴ Thus, a major proportion of the horse trade passed through the Thar. The horse was a commodity which was extremely important for state formation. Horses were thus obtained from merchants coming from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Western Sind and Kutch which sold these horses in open auctions.

ii. *Camel Trade Across the Thar Desert*

Another essential article of trade was camels. Camels were bred in parts of the desert as well as Western Sindh and Southern Kutch and were transported through major trade routes across the subcontinent. Abul Fazl states that the quality of Indian camels was much superior to those from Iran or Turan, thus, suggesting a trade in camels from these areas.¹⁵⁵ The camels from Central Asia were called *bughdi* while indigenous ones were called *lok*. He records that camels were found in large numbers in Ajmer, Nagaur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Bhatinda and Bhatner while the largest number of camels are found in Sindh. The best were bred in

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 256

¹⁵¹ *Ain*, Vol. 1, p. 133

¹⁵² *Tarikh-i-Masumi*, p. 238

¹⁵³ Habib, *Atlas*, Sheet 6B, 7B

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 143

Gujarat near Kutch.¹⁵⁶ Camels were used for travel and as beasts of burden. While the horse and the elephant were essential for warfare, camels were important for long distance trade.

Abul Fazl records the use of a special type of camels - the *alfi* - for foraging.¹⁵⁷ Camels were also bred by tribes like Kolis in Gir forests while Pawars bred camels in Sindh. Other groups like Nuhmardis, Jats and Balochis were also involved in camel rearing. The Raibaris were engaged by the Mughal state in breeding and care of the camels in imperial camel stables. Abul Fazl records that while relay horses and swift runners were on the routes from the capital to the farthest corners of the empire, camel riders were also kept at the palace in readiness.¹⁵⁸ Thus, along with camels, pastoral groups circulating in the Thar like the Raibaris were incorporated by the Mughal Empire to uphold its state apparatus. Camels were transported on much the same routes as horses. However, since most camels were bred in the desert, there was a more robust trade in camels than in horses. Camel rearing tribes often gave camels on hire for transporting goods to major trade centres like Jaisalmer, Multan and Qandahar.¹⁵⁹

The above discussion of trade in horses and camels points to the centrality of the Thar in transregional economic activities. In addition to this, the trade in horses and camels also points towards the interconnectedness of the agro-pastoral and mercantile networks operating in the Thar as well as beyond it. This brings one to the question of movement of people across the Thar - pastoralists, warriors, merchants, travellers, religious ascetics, elites and aristocrats. Previously, the dynamics of the circulation of all these groups within the Thar has been discussed. However, their movements far beyond the Thar are also essential in imagining the Thar as a connected space. Migrations of various groups often involves movements from site

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 146

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Nazir Aziz Anjum, 'Camel As Transport in Mughal India,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 67, 2006-07, p. 245

to site before settling down. Historically, the Thar has been a space through which movements and migrations occurred. For instance, as enumerated previously, Yuan Chwang travelled through the desert, stopping at places like Kutch and Bhinmal. Similarly, various narratives about Rajput groups point to their migrations to and from the desert. These have been discussed before.¹⁶⁰

Nainsi records that *jogis* like Ratnu Lun migrated from Ludrova to Sorath.¹⁶¹ Another instance is when Garibnath, a disciple of *jogi* Dhundhlimal in Kutch migrated from Lakhri to Ghirod.¹⁶² The *Kharataragachchapatavali* is also full of instances of travel of Jain monks across the desert and beyond into Gujarat, Southern Rajasthan and Eastern Rajasthan to establish monasteries and temples. As contended before, pastoral groups like Pawars, Raibaris, Balochis, Aheris etc. regularly crossed the space of the Thar with their goods and went on to Gujarat, Shiwaliks, Gangetic Plains etc.¹⁶³

While the space of the Thar desert was essential for horse and camel trade due to the pastoral character of its economy as well as the numerous fairs held at various places, it also held immense political and strategic importance. Any political campaign to Northern India, Gujarat or Sindh had to pass through the Thar. For instance, the Sanskrit text *Kanhadadeprabandha* (fourteenth century) states that the Turkish Sultan Alauddin Khilji wanted to campaign in Gujarat. To do so, he needed to pass through the territories of Siwana and Jalor. This is also corroborated in Amir Khusrou's *Khazain-ul-Futuh*.¹⁶⁴ Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* states the importance of securing areas around Bhatner and Abohar which lie on

¹⁶⁰ For instance, the narratives about the Rathods claim that they originally came from Ujjain. Rao Siha moved from Ujjain to Anhilvada Patan. Subsequently, his sons first established themselves at Pali and then the Rathod clan expanded with different seats of power like Maheva, Mandor and Jodhpur at different points in time. See Chapter Three of this dissertation.

¹⁶¹ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2, p. 265

¹⁶² *Ibid.* p. 216

¹⁶³ Ibbetson, *A Glossary*, p. 5

¹⁶⁴ *Kanhadadeprabandha*, p. 11. See also *Khaza'inul Futuh*, p. 53.

the fringes of the desert to defend against Mongol invasions.¹⁶⁵ Taimur's invasion of Bhatner and adjoining areas is mentioned in sources like the *Tuzuk-i-Taimuri*, as well as Nainsi's *Khyat*.¹⁶⁶ Turkish rulers of Delhi like Muhammad Bin Tughlaq's and Firoz Shah Tughlaq's campaigns in Sindh had to pass through Gujarat and had to pass through Kutch on the way back. Mughal campaigns to Gujarat and Sindh had to pass through parts of the desert. The Mughal Emperor Humayun had no choice but to cross the desert in search of asylum from Marwar and later, Umarmkot as is detailed in sixteenth century Mughal imperial accounts like the *Humayunama* and the *Tazkirat-ul Waqiat*.¹⁶⁷ Aristocrats appointed as governors to Gujarat and Sindh crossed the desert with large numbers of soldiers, traders as well as support staff. Peter Mundy records the movement of Bakir Khan who was appointed as the Mughal governor of Gujarat.¹⁶⁸ Tavernier also records the caravan of members of Mughal royal families passing through Marwar in order to reach Gujarat.¹⁶⁹ Mir Masum Bhakkari who was sent by Akbar as ambassador to Iran also went by way of the desert stopping at places like Nagaur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and Bhakkar. Trade and travel went hand in hand in the desert. Travellers like Peter Mundy often had to attach themselves to trading caravans or caravans of aristocrats in order to cross the desert. Tavernier and Sidi Ali Reis report seeing large caravans of Banjaras carrying grain and livestock. Travellers often travelled on the major trade routes as is evident from the itineraries of Mundy, Tavernier and Reis. Groups like Balochis, Jats, Pathans, Rajputs, Charans etc often not only carried their wares on these routes but also provided protection to travellers, traders and aristocrats.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, p. 171.

¹⁶⁶ Nainsi, *Khyat*, Vol. 2., p. 315.

¹⁶⁷ See *Humayunama*, pp. 147-157; Also see *Tazkireh al Waqiat*, pp. 36-48

¹⁶⁸ Mundy, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p. 258.

¹⁶⁹ Tavernier, *Travels*, Vol. 2, p.79.

¹⁷⁰ *Mira'at*, p. 137-38. See also accounts of Mundy and Tavernier previously referred to.

From the above discussion it is clear that the space of the Thar Desert was the site of numerous networks of mobility. These networks of mobility intersected and often sustained each other. At the same time, these networks - agro-pastoral, trade and mercantile, military and aristocratic, religious etc. - criss-crossed not only within the Thar but also beyond it. Thus, the Thar was the site of intense movements of people and commodities going to and from areas like Central Asia, Northern and Central India and Gujarat and was not a barrier to movements of mobile groups from these areas. Rather, it connected these areas into a large and intricate network of mobility.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to examine the Thar as a mobile space in which various networks of mobility circulated and intersected. These included agro-pastoral networks involving movements of pastoral groups and pastoral products. Another network examined were the trade and mercantile networks involving the grain, livestock and commodity trade, the market networks and circulations of money. This also included movements of traders and merchants within and beyond the Thar. Religious networks like Buddhist and Jain networks of pilgrimage were also examined in conjunction with the agro-pastoral and trade networks. Movements of political elites as well as groups like the Jats and the Balochis who offered their services as soldiers also gave rise to a robust military labour market in the Thar. Thus, it can be argued that the Thar was the site of intense movements of people and commodities. The basis of these movements was agro-pastoralism as many of the other networks of mobility in terms of trade, religion and politics often intersected with the agro-pastoral network. Thus, trade in livestock, horses and camels as well as livestock products in addition to agricultural produce was the crux of the market system as well as the fiscal system down to the village level. These also facilitated the rise of merchants and moneylenders who indulged in large scale trade and money transfers.

Pilgrimage sites were often established with the help of merchants. These became sites of large and small scale fairs and harts which attracted traders, pastoralists and pilgrims from across and beyond the Thar. States often extracted taxes from trade and trade centres thus profiting off from these circulations. Mints were established in important areas in the Thar, thus becoming an essential part of these networks as they ensured a continuous circulation of money. These networks of mobility also extended far beyond the Thar. The horse and the camel trade connected the Thar to areas like Central Asia, Gangetic Plains, Malwa as well as Gujarat. This also facilitated state formation in the desert with the war horse being essential to the establishment of the states of Marwar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer etc. The Thar thus was a space connecting these areas as major trade routes from these areas passed through the Thar. Travellers, elites and religious groups routinely travelled through the Thar. Thus, the Thar was the site of numerous networks of mobility which intersected each other leading to movements of diverse groups within and beyond the Thar. Thus, despite being a desert, the Thar connected far flung regions and was the locus of early modern interactions.

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to arrive at a fresh conception of the space of the Thar Desert. The Thar is unique in two aspects. First, it straddles two modern day nations, viz., India and Pakistan. Second, although it is a desert, it is a monsoonal desert and has the highest human density amongst all other deserts of the world. These two aspects have played an important role in any study on the Thar. The fact that the international border runs through the Thar has also divided research on the desert into those conducted on the Indian side and those on the Pakistani side. There are few researches, especially within the discipline of history, which have attempted to transcend this divide. This dissertation is a small attempt in writing a history of the Thar Desert as a whole, transcending this artificial border.

The second aspect, i.e., of the Thar having the highest human density, is a crucial aspect which makes the Thar a locus of human activities from the prehistoric period. This aspect has informed many archaeological, historical, sociological as well as anthropological studies on the Thar. However, such researches have often been informed by the presence of the international border. As a result, there is little research on the Thar as a whole and existing research while naturalizing the border, often also cements the various communities in the Thar within the respective nation states. This results in according national identities to the communities in the Thar, leading to an anachronistic view of the desert, its inhabitants and its society.

Another aspect which informs studies on the Thar is its environmental condition. As enumerated in previous chapters, traditional historiography has not viewed the Thar as a viable area of research. I believe that the aridity and the desert character of the Thar has often led to misconceptions that the Thar had no history. Whatever little historical enquiry that had been

carried out was entirely focussed on the political states within the Thar and not on the Thar per se. The specific ecological zone that is the Thar often served as a stage in which historical processes occurred but never as an actor in these processes. This dissertation has aimed to accord agency to the Thar and make it a subject of independent historical enquiry.

In order to fill the above mentioned gaps in historical research on the Thar, this dissertation endeavoured to conceptualise the space of the Thar in newer and fresher perspectives. In an attempt to transcend the international border passing through the desert, this study attempted to arrive at an alternate understanding of the space of the desert. It was important to take into account ecological perspectives in order to view the Thar as a whole. Thus, for the greater part of the dissertation, landscape approaches borrowed from the field of cultural geography seemed most appropriate.

While there are numerous approaches within landscape studies that scholars have utilised over the years, for this dissertation an attempt was made to understand the political, ecological and cultural landscape of the Thar in terms of power relations manifesting in tussle over material resources. This approach enabled one to place the state, dominant social groups as well as marginalised communities within a framework which not only placed the Thar as a central actor in the historical process but also enabled one to transcend modern day political boundaries and instead view the Thar as a land of intense political, ecological and social negotiations. In addition to this, this approach also enabled one to imagine the Thar not as a closed region but rather as an intensely mobile space traversed by a vast multitude of groups from different areas of the subcontinent. In this sense, this dissertation attempted to conceptualise the Thar as a space connecting various parts of the subcontinent and beyond as well as a space full of interactions between different groups of people. In doing so, this dissertation has attempted to move away from a conception of the Thar as a fearful, barren and hostile space which could never accommodate human societies or travel.

This study is distinct from other researches on the Thar in the sense that it has not attempted to view the Thar as a frontier. This study has remained conscious of the ecological diversity of the Thar which gave rise to differing negotiations of various communities with its ecology. As a result, this study has steered clear of viewing the Thar as an ‘unsettled’ and ‘savage’ and ‘unlawful’ frontier but rather has argued that it was the ecological condition of the desert which played an instrumental role in the rise of political states and formation of community identities; each having distinct characteristics. In this sense, this study has endeavoured to factor in the diverse nature of the desert and not homogenise it. Thus, this study has attempted to highlight diversity within the Thar and not just view it in singular terms.

The Thar Desert in the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries

The time period this dissertation focussed on was from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. This time period was chosen primarily because it was during this period that major states came up in the desert, and with the formation of these states as well as the Delhi Sultanate and subsequently the Mughal Empire, the desert acquired increased commercial significance as well. Another important factor behind taking up this time period was that the main sources like Nainsi’s *Khyat* are from this period. However, it is imperative to briefly discuss the desert in context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a post script to this dissertation.

By the late seventeenth century, the Rajput kingdoms of the Thar were fully integrated within the apparatus of the Mughal Empire. The major players in the political landscape of the Thar were the Rathors of Marwar and to a lesser extent, the Rathors of Bikaner. However, the main power was the Mughal Empire with powerful rulers like Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Marwar becoming close allies of the Mughal Emperors. However, the *mansab* system under

Aurangzeb was undergoing changes with the Rajput rulers being the most affected. Their power and independence was reducing as the number of *jagirs* they could hold outside their homeland was limited. In addition to this, the number of troops they could maintain was also reduced. Jaswant Singh himself lost two *jagirs* which he had held outside Marwar.¹

After the death of Jaswant Singh in 1678, the political landscape of the Thar was completely thrown into flux. Jaswant Singh had no heir at the time of his death. Since there was no rule of primogeniture amongst the Rajput rulers, this situation created immense confusion. The Mughal Emperors had also never laid down a succession rule for the Rajput kingdoms. Maharaja Gaj Singh in 1638 had set aside his older son Amar Singh and had instead nominated Jaswant Singh as his heir apparent. Amar Singh was given Nagaur which was then held by Rao Sur Singh of Bikaner. This was approved and ratified by the then Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan.² Thus, after Jaswant Singh's death, Aurangzeb converted all lands under Marwar including Jodhpur into *khalisa*. This has been seen as an 'annexation' of the kingdom of Marwar by the Mughals.

However scholars like Satish Chandra have opposed this view.³ According to Chandra, kingdoms like Jaisalmer, Marwar, Bikaner, Kutch were already within the Empire, although they enjoyed greater autonomy. When in 1650, Maharawal Manohardas of Jaisalmer died issueless, Shah Jahan had nominated Sabal Singh, a descendent of the eighth son of the Maharawal as the ruler. Thus, Chandra argues that disputed succession was not the only reason behind converting the lands of Marwar into *khalisa*. He contends that the main reason was that many *zamindars* subject to the Maharaja had withheld revenues from the Mughal State. Another reason was that *parganas* like Phalodhi and Pokharan which had been allotted as *jagirs*

¹ Robert C. Hallisey, *Rajput Rebellion Against Aurangzeb: A Study of the Mughal Empire in Seventeenth Century India*, University of Missouri Press, 1979, p. 38

² Chandra, *Medieval India*, Vol 2., p. 303

³ Ibid.

to the Maharaja were claimed by neighboring states, thus, making the road to Ahmedabad unsafe.⁴ Thus, the political landscape of the Thar once again became contested with tussle for resources being the crux of these contestations. However, the Mughal Empire attempted to check these contestations by penetrating further into the political landscape of the desert and exerting increased control over it.

While many actors like Indra Singh and Anup Singh who were Jaswant Singh's grand-nephews staked claim over Marwar, the main supporters of Jaswant Singh's immediate family as well as the Maharana of Mewar supported the claims of Jaswant Singh's posthumous sons. These claims were now also supported by Rao Anup Singh of Bikaner and Khan-i-Jahan, the Imperial Bakshi. Thus, we find that although the practice of the Emperor bypassing the traditional heir and appointed one himself was not new, major Rajput groups now rallied behind this cause against Mughal authority. This was done, I believe, to preserve their fortunes from dwindling further as the *mansab* system changed under Aurangzeb. The roots of Rathor rebellions of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries can be traced to these reasons.

With the Rathor rebellions, supported by the rulers of Mewar, the Mughal hold over the political landscape of the Thar began to weaken. With the decline of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century, the Rajput states acquired more independence. However, while the Rajput rulers saw themselves as inheritors of Mughal power, the petty rajas viewed themselves as sharers of power.⁵ The major Rajput polities of Bikaner, Marwar and Jaisalmer suffered from succession disputes, factions within the court, infighting as well as conflicts with each other. Much territory was lost and gained in this turbulent period.⁶ New groups like Afghans became

⁴ Ibid. p. 304

⁵ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 106

⁶ For instance, Bhatner fort was heavily contested between Johiyas, Bhatias and Bikawat Rathods. Similarly, Bhatias lost Pugal, Barmer, Phalodi to Rathods and Garah was lost to Afghan chief of Shikarpur. Derawal was taken by Afghans of Bahawalpur.

actors in the desert landscape, setting up new states like Bahawalpur in Upper Sindh. Instances of robberies on trade routes increased as local chieftains exerted their authority.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, internal dissension within Rajput states had reduced the authority of the ruler to a mere ceremonial one.⁷ In the middle of the eighteenth century, both Marathas and Pindaris had advanced into the Thar from Gujarat and Malwa and were conducting raids on the insistence of one claimant of power or another.⁸ Repeated hostilities between rival Rajput rulers provided the Marathas and Pindaris opportunities to plunder and loot. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Marathas under the Sindhias and the Holkars attacked Marwar and forced the Rathors to pay tribute and arrears.

The British in the nineteenth century understood the importance of the desert landscape in terms of its strategic and economic importance. The routes to Sindh lay through the desert. In addition to this, it was essential to control production of essential resources like salt in the region since this salt production competed with British salt from Bengal.⁹ The British took advantage of the political flux in the desert and imposed indirect rule in the Rajput states of the Thar following treaties signed between the British and these states between 1812 and 1818. Indirect rule implied that these states were incorporated within the Western Rajputana States Agency and the Bikanir Agency.

The British understood the space of the Thar as a hostile ecological barrier which was vacant and empty. They thus attempted to reorganise the landscape of the Thar into a comprehensible and ordered space.¹⁰ Kothiyal argues that the British attempted to control what they understood as the hostile and wild space of the Thar by extending cultivation, artificial irrigation through canals, construction of railway lines and roads, reorganisation of commercial

⁷ Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, p. 112

⁸ Ibid. p. 113

⁹ Ibid. p. 268

¹⁰ Ibid.

traffic, human and cattle census, forest conservation etc. This was done to make the ‘wasteland’ more ‘useful’.¹¹ Kothiyal also argues that these new networks of rails and roads ignored the older networks of mobility, resulting in the decline of older commercial towns and marginalisation of traditionally mobile groups like the Banjaras, Bhils, Minas, Kolis etc.¹² Thus, one finds the landscape of the Thar during the nineteenth century was engaged with in keeping with the idea of man’s supremacy over nature, which led to economic, political and ideological control over the landscape.

The construction of the Thar as a wild, savage and hostile frontier, full of criminal tribes was done along with the construction of the Rajput as a valorous, chivalrous and martially superior caste. While these constructions, especially those of the Rajputs, were present in the pre-colonial times, they became further entrenched in collective memory and intellectual traditions from the nineteenth century onwards. The Thar thus ceased to be a vibrant and dynamic space with multiple networks of mobility, intense political negotiations and a distinct economic character. It instead became what the British constructed it to be - a hostile ecological frontier, divided by boundaries, vacant and empty except for robbers and criminals.

Further Scope of the Research

While this dissertation aimed at arriving at an alternative understanding of the space of the Thar Desert, there are still many questions that have been left beyond the scope of this research. In terms of sources, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns, a number of archival sources in the Rajasthan State Archives could not be accessed. These archival sources have been mentioned in detail in the first chapter. They highlight important

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

aspects of trade, labour, governance, rural society, movements of diverse groups of people, etc. While this dissertation is based on an exhaustive survey of textual accounts, these archival records would have provided a deeper insight into the polity and economy of the desert and would have enabled one to provide a more detailed analysis. In the absence of these records, this dissertation is a more macro and broad level survey of the various dynamics operative within and beyond the Thar.

While the first chapter dealt with the political landscape of the Thar, tracing the political trajectories of various dominant groups in the desert, it focussed on the material basis of the intense political negotiations taking place in the period under study. A major aspect of this dynamic political landscape is its gendered character. An important aspect of all the political alliances formed in the desert which subsequently played a crucial role in the political fortunes of these competing groups was marriage alliances. Tracing marriage networks in the Thar points to four features of this political landscape. First, marriage networks were necessary to build strategic alliances and mobilise manpower to fulfill political aspirations. Second, they provided access to resources as well as legitimacy. Being linked maritally to a major ruling group increased political standing. Third, as is evident in the numerous instances of *jauhar* and *sati* described in accounts like that of Nainsi, it is clear that the political landscape of the Thar was based on the body of the woman. It was the woman whose transfer or exchange from one political group to another brought resources and legitimacy. When the political fortunes of the group were threatened, it was the woman who was made to immolate herself. Sati was an important practice as it controlled the sexuality of the woman, not allowing her to remarry or reproduce once the husband had passed. Fourth, following from this, marriage networks ensured caste purity of the Rajputs which enabled them to retain their socially superior status. Complexities in the gendered nature of the political landscape need to be researched further.

Another aspect that falls beyond the scope of this dissertation is religious traditions of the Thar and the network of pilgrimage sites within it. The Thar was home to a number of major religious groups like the Jains, the Vallabha *sampradaya*, Sufi sects like the Chishti, Madari, Qadari orders as well as numerous groups indulging in goddess worship. These religious sects were instrumental in shaping the political landscape of the Thar. In addition to this, the establishment of pilgrimage sites as well as the movements of pilgrims from near and far added to the circulatory regime of the Thar. These pilgrimage networks intersected with trading networks and played a crucial role in the rise of new urban centres in the desert. The intersection of religious and trading networks is an aspect which can become the subject of future research.

Another direction that future research on the Thar can take is an examination of the Thar's connections in world historical process. While a preliminary enquiry in this direction has been undertaken in this dissertation, it is crucial to expand this idea into larger questions of mobility of people, commodities and ideas between the Arid Zones in Eurasia and the Thar. A starting point can be tracing the movements of merchants from the western regions of the subcontinent to Central and Western Asia.

Thus, from the above brief overview, it is clear that the field of research on the Thar is extremely fertile and can lead to many fruitful studies on the desert, conceptualising its space in a more open and connected way. This dissertation has been my first step in this direction.

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