

**SOCIAL LIFE OF CHARANS IN MEDIEVAL  
RAJASTHAN IN THE 17<sup>TH</sup> AND 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

*Dissertation Submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of*

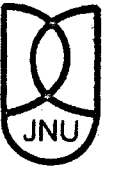
**Master of Philosophy**

**TRIPTI DEO**



**CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES  
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NEW DELHI-110067**

**2009**



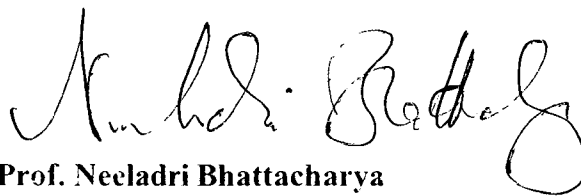
**DECLARATION**

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled '**Social Life of Charans in Medieval Rajasthan in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries**' submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university and is my original work.

  
**Tripti Deo**

**CERTIFICATE**

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



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*Dedicated*  
*to*  
*My Parents*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words seem to fall short to express if I show my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Nandita Prasad Sahai who initiated me into this study of Charan in Medieval Rajasthan. She not only showed me the destination but lighted the path too. Her valuable guidance, support and constant encouragement at all stages of my work were indispensable for the completion of my dissertation. Her calm and composed demeanour, methodical approach and confidence in me always encouraged me to push myself forward and wholeheartedly work for my dissertation.

I am deeply indebted to Prof. Dilbagh Singh who gave me all sorts of support with regards to his suggestions on the study, translations of the primary and archival sources and also for helping me arrange my accommodation at the time of my archival work to Bikaner, Rajasthan. I have my deepest regard for his concern, cooperation and valuable time.

A number of institutions have rendered useful assistance in collection of the primary and secondary data. I am beholden to Shri Poonam Chand Joiya, the research officer at the Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner who literally donned the mantle of my language teacher and guided me to the sources. I would be like to express my acknowledgements to the entire staff of Rajasthan State Archives especially Mr. Karni P. Joshi who so lovingly helped in every possible manner. Their support and concern is beyond what I can even imagine. I am also grateful to the Dean of Veterinary Girls Hostel who happily permitted me to stay in the hostel during the course of my archival work in Bikaner. My experience in the hostel was one of the most memorable moments of my life, where I made wonderful friends.

I am also thankful to the library staff at the National Archives, Sahitya Akademi, Indian Council for Historical Research and Jawaharlal Nehru University Library for their promptness in providing me with the required books, journals and other sources for this study.

I would like to express my gratefulness to the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) for providing me with generous

fellowship and study-cum-travel grant, which took care to see that my research never gets hampered due to monetary constraints.

At a personal level, without the support of my parents Mr Ashok Deo and Mrs Shobha Deo, this dissertation would not have seen its present form. They have been a constant inspiration and have probably struggled more than me to see this dissertation taking its best shape. Their confidence in me and their support by my side is beyond comprehension. My sisters Aditi and Annapurna constantly reminded me of my study targets and even helped me in translations of Hindi months to English. My brother Akhilesh time to time wholeheartedly encouraged me and made me computer literate. I find myself absolutely incompetent to put in words my gratitude for their patience and understanding. More appreciation than can be is due to them.

I feel blessed and am extremely grateful to my friends Rajinder, Anindita, Richa, Parul, Pooja who constantly supported me in many ways and encouraged me to keep working harder for my research.

Last but not the least I would be failing in my duties if I do not thank my mentor Dr. Daisaku Ikeda for his constant guidance and prayers that motivated me to keep giving my best at every step of this work. My debt of gratitude for my mentor and my friends for their constant encouragement and support helped me overcome the low phases of my life during the course of this dissertation. A number of other people directly or indirectly helped me. I am indebt to all of them even if their names have not been mentioned individually.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>IESHR:</i>	Indian Economic and Social Historical Review.
<i>IHR:</i>	Indian Historical Review
<i>JSPB:</i>	Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahi
<del><i>MAS:</i></del>	Modern Asian Studies
<i>PIHC:</i>	Proceedings of Indian Historical Congress
<i>PRHC:</i>	Proceedings of Rajasthan History Congress
<i>RSA:</i>	Rajasthan State Archives
<i>VS:</i>	Vikram Samvat

## INTRODUCTION

During the medieval period in Rajasthan the role of kinship and caste in legitimizing every deed of the ruler or a layman became crucial and it was important to maintain a specialized group of people who could maintain clan histories and genealogies to avoid disputes and legitimize positions and status at every juncture. Moreover there were many rulers with great and sometimes not so great lineages and these groups had to be accommodated and legitimized through myth building. This was accomplished by bardic communities like Charans, who enjoyed considerable power and prestige in Rajasthani society.

This study is about the Charans in Medieval Rajasthan in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (See Map on p.1a). Rajasthan<sup>1</sup>, the term is a sanskritised form of Dingal word 'Raythana'- both translating as "the abode of princess". In the local dialect, it was also termed as 'Rajwada', the country of Rajas.<sup>2</sup> If the Rajput states in the area shared a common history and culture, it was the Mughals who first drew the boundary around the region and instituted a 'subah of Ajmer' which represented the first formal delineation of Rajasthan as a political space.<sup>3</sup> In the British days 'Rajputana' was an administrative nomenclature for a great historical circle, which included eighteen native states, two chieftaincies and the British district of Ajmer Merwara.<sup>4</sup> Later James Tod used the expression in a larger and wider context, defining Rajasthan as "that part of the country where Rajput rulers reside."<sup>5</sup>

Charans of Rajasthan were famous as genealogists and bards for the royal elites and landed aristocratic families. Among the historical scholarship they were well known for the Bardic literature that they composed, which reflected the political, social and cultural life of the state and people of Rajasthan. As preservers of culture and legacy, Charans were the closest associates of Rajput rulers and as maintaining genealogies was important to the people of Rajasthan; they were famous and powerful among the

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<sup>1</sup> G.N.Sharma, *Social Life of Medieval Rajasthan*, (Agra, 1965), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or, The Central And Western Rajpoot States Of India*, vol I, (Delhi, 1971), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Deryok O Lodrick, 'Rajasthan as a Region: A Myth or Reality' in Lodrick, Schomer etc. (eds.) *The Idea of Rajasthan*, vol I, (Delhi, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Imperial Gazetteer of India, 'Provincial Series' Rajputana Calcutta, 1908, K. D. Erstine, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or, The Central And Western Rajpoot States Of India*, vol I, (Delhi, 1971), p. 1.



# RAJASTHAN 18TH CENTURY A.D.



common people as well. They sought and received respect, honour and privileges from all castes and communities. What we know of the charans is through their writings in the form of Khyat, Vigat, Bat, Vamsavalis etc.; however we scarcely know anything about their everyday social lives. Studying them as elites is not the aim of my research, knowing them as individuals and understanding the complexity of their daily lives is what I aspire to study through this dissertation.

Politically the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were periods of considerable internal conflict and change in Rajasthan. They encompassed both the rise of particular Rajput clan segments and ruling houses to positions of great local authority and centralized rule, and the imposition of Mughal dominance throughout this area. Significantly, the rise of bardic literature coincides with the increasing authority and prestige of Rajput ruling houses and indicates a greater effort on the part of local rulers to collect and preserve their traditions and histories. Many of the genealogies, such as those of Rathors of Marwar, which trace Rathor ancestry back to the illustrious Gahadavala dynasty of Kanauj and farther back to mythical Puranic beginnings, also appear in the early part of this period. D. P. Henige has recently argued with respect to these Rathor genealogies, that their primary aim was to 'elevate the status of the Jodhpur ruling line in the eyes of its suzerain (the Mughal, Akbar)'.<sup>6</sup> Illustrious ancestry was an important and necessary tool used to gain favour and position at the Mughal court, given Mughal and especially Akbar's emphasis on ancestry. Growing vested interest and the desire to insure and further rights and positions by meeting the expectations of authorities clearly seem prominent motivations behind the emergence of Charan literature. Such motivations are common to many emergent state societies. Ziegler too argues that the rise of the khyat literature can be seen as an adaptive response engendered by the need for re-interpretation and re-emphasis of basic values, rights and ideals in a changing society responding to Muslim conquest and domination.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cited by Zeigler in 'The Seventeenth Century Chronicles of Marwar: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Traditions in Western India', in David Henige (ed.) *History of Africa: A Journal of Method*, vol III, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Norman P. Ziegler. 'Marvari Historical Chronicle: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*, April-June, no. 2, 1976, pp. 234-35.

Richard Fox has argued that kinship withers as society passes from the primitive to complex, with lineage and clan getting by passed in favour of county, province and the state.<sup>8</sup> Even by the 18<sup>th</sup> century however clan had its role to play in Rajput polity, though there were other modes and mechanism of legitimization of power and expansion of sovereignty as well that were utilized by the Rajput rulers. With the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we see the coming up of these successor Rajput states in a new way which acted as a catalyst to the social formation of the region.

The gradual shift from Bhaibant<sup>9</sup> to Pattadari<sup>10</sup> system was strengthened and was much predominant during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As the territorial claims of the Rajput allies had to be limited and controlled, the pattadari system reduced the territorial claim of the thikanedars. The pattadari system was a move that loosened the clan system to some degree if not completely. There was, many a times usage of the principle of '*bhai-bandh chakar*' for submission of rulers both from the clan and outside. Tod suggested that Rajput nobility consisted of many chiefs outside their own clan. The heterogeneous and composite element of Mughal nobility did influence the Rajputs at the time of formation of their own nobilities. The rulers of Jodhpur, Kota, Bikaner either acted as subedhars of Mughal subhas or served in the Mughal army as important officers. Therefore they got familiarized with Mughal administrative structures replicating it in their own regions.

The reason for the emergence and growth of this kind of literature which increased powers and privileges of the writers as well is the impact of Mughal culture of writing. Most Rajasthani scholars argue that this development of written clan histories in the form of the khyat and vigat as they are found by the mid seventeenth century, matured only under the influence of Mughal court and the examples set by the Persian chronicles of this period. It is known that librarians and other men of literature from the Delhi courts did seek attachments in the darbars of Rajasthan as well. Mulla Surkh is one example of a former librarian of Humayun's court who served in Jodhpur in the time of Rao Maldeji (1532-1562). The Mughal Emperor, Akbar's efforts in the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule: State-Hinterland Relations in Pre-Industrial India*, (Berkeley, 1971), p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Bhaibant: brotherhood, fraternity, 'the bond of brothers'.

<sup>10</sup> Patta: formal document granting rights mostly on land.

historical field are also considered of particular importance. Under Akbar's direction, Abu'l-Fazl contacted many of the Rajas and prominent Thakurs of Rajasthan and had them submit their own histories, from which sections of his *Akbar-nama* and *A'in'i'Akbari* were composed. The fact that many Rajput rulers and nobles spent much of their lives at the imperial court in the service of the Mughals, where Mughal emphasis on historical writing and record keeping was in great evidence, is in turn felt to have induced the compilation of local clan histories.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of state formation, many historians believe that the maintenance of the caste order was a major component in the assertion of political supremacy, and therefore an essential ingredient in state-formation.<sup>12</sup> In the case of eighteenth century Maharashtra, Fukazawa pointed out that the Peshwai and its central bureaucracy sought to preserve the caste hierarchy in the areas under its control through the legal apparatus of the state.<sup>13</sup> Uma Chakravarti and Sumit Guha emphasized that the Peshwas, Brahmins by caste, sought to recreate the brahmanical Hindu kingdoms that strictly upheld the brahmanical social order after capturing power. In this situation, writes Chakravarti, privileging Brahmins and suppressing other lower castes, were complementary trends. Functioning self consciously as a *dharmarajya*, the Peshwa state privileged Shastric law over customary law and ensured that Brahmins retained the highest status by expressly forbidding lower castes from imitating customs practised by the former.<sup>14</sup>

However, Marwar in the same period reveals significant differences from this pattern. Being a Rajput-ruled state; affiliation to ritualistic Brahmanism seems much less rigid in the case of the Rathors. The state's attempt was restricted to broadly adhering to the caste system and its hierarchy – but rather than Brahmins alone, the system privileged a large spectrum of castes that were important and useful to society. Rajput landed potentates, wealthy mercantile castes and religious functionaries were of

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<sup>11</sup> Norman P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicle: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*, April-June, no. 2, 1976, pp. 233-34.

<sup>12</sup> For caste *kachedis* in eighteenth century British Bengal, see Radhika Singh, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*, (Delhi, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Hiroshi Fukazawa, 'State and caste System (Jati) in the Eighteenth Century Maratha Kingdom', *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, vol 9, no.1, June 1968.

<sup>14</sup> See Sumit Guha, 'An Indian Penal Regime: Maharashtra in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 147, 1995, pp. 101-26; and Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi, 1998) p. 14.

course favoured groups who could manipulate the system, but even subordinate groups like artisans wielded power not always commensurate with their ritual status. Elite behaviour was assessed according to the prescriptions of Shastric laws but customary laws of different communities lower down the social scale enjoyed immense importance too, and the state made a deliberate attempt to enforce these and thus preserve distinct identities of specific groups.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence and role of Charans can be seen in this context. Charans enjoyed respect primarily because they were literary persons, historians and genealogists and rewards were showered on them mainly because they composed poems in praise of their warlords.<sup>16</sup> These communities in fact had a very significant role in the formation and conservation of Rajasthani society. They were the men of literature who documented every bit of details, be it in praise of the ruler or a critique of the ruler. They were also men who documented the details of everyday tensions and concerns in the form of court records of the contemporary Rajput states.

### *Charans in Historiography:*

Fairly a large number of secondary works have been done by historians. Krishan Singh Barheth<sup>17</sup> wrote one of the earliest works on charans. Basically this text traces the origins of charans from the Ramayana, Mahabharat, Bhagwad Gita etc. Further a discussion on the role of charans in the lives of Rajputs and the classification and branches of charans as Maru and Kachhela is highlighted in this narrative. Mohanlal Jigyasu<sup>18</sup>, in his work in two volumes on charans details the kaleidoscopic variety of literature that charans wrote in Medieval Rajasthan. He detailed the lives and works of about 275 charan poets highlighting their different genre of bardic writings. It is a voluminous work starting with description on the importance of Dingal language and its usage in the charan literature. Comparison of charan literature with other kind like Rajput, Jain, Brahmin, Bhat, Sant, Lok and other kinds of literature is also studied in his work. At the time when there were no writings on charan, this work of Jigyasu

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<sup>15</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai. *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, (Delhi, 2006). p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> Rajendra Joshi, 'Charans: The Contextual Dynamics of Caste in the Rajput System (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century)' in N. K. Singhi & Rajendra Joshi (eds.) *Religion, Ritual and Royalty*, (Jaipur, 1999), p. 305.

<sup>17</sup> Krishna Singh Barheth, *Charan Kul Prakash*, (Jodhpur, 1932).

<sup>18</sup> Mohanlal Jigyasu, *Charan Sahitya ka Itihas*, Part I. (Jodhpur, 1968).

was a repository of information on charans in Medieval Rajasthan. Based on the charan literature, both the above mentioned historians have only acknowledged the role and importance of charans vis-a-vis the Rajputs and their societies. Despite a limited study of charans in the above works, it cannot be disregarded that they were the earliest ventures on the study of charans in Rajasthan.

Manohar Prabhakar<sup>19</sup> further noticed the contribution of charan literature and wrote a critical analysis of their writings. His study offered an examination of the institution of charans and its multifarious role in medieval period. Moreover a study on the factors and forces that led to the evolution of this institution, its social position, religious beliefs and philosophy of life, the literary contributions made by charans from 1500-1800 is highlighted in this study of charans. This work has been particularly helpful in my research with regards to basic understanding of the social life of charans. It is an interesting study showcasing the life of charans as poets. With a detailed analysis of charan's social life, Prabhakar's work also focuses on their literature and its importance in the Rajasthani literature. Another work on their literature was undertaken by Norman P. Zeigler<sup>20</sup> whose essay is based on his reading of 17<sup>th</sup> century Marwari chronicles and remains the most authoritative essay on the social and political function as well as modes of Charan performances at least in the English language and is frequently cited by other authors who have written on this subject. Ziegler describes the various genres of Charan literature and their relationship to each other and gives a general account of their functions, such as the establishment of rank and descent outside of the ruling household at the imperial Mughal courts, the establishment of status within wider kinship networks, as well as pedagogic value for immediate members of Rajput households. He also provides some information on patterns of consumption of such texts. With regards to information on the charans literature I have drawn substantially from Ziegler's work. Here again as the focus of Ziegler's work is literature, the description and discussion of social life of charans is scarce. By and large all the above historical studies on charans have woven their

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<sup>19</sup> Manohar Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature (with exclusive reference to the contribution of charanas)*, (Jaipur, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Norman P. Zeigler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicle: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*, April-June, no. 2. 1976; 'The Seventeenth Century Chronicles of Marvara: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Traditions in Western India', in David Henige (ed.) *History of Africa: A Journal of Method*, vol III. 1976.

entire narrative around their literature thus leading us to understand them as poets only. They as 'individuals' and 'people' have not been highlighted in their writings on charans.

To fill the vacuums and voids on the social life of charans and to address this inadequacy to some extent Rajendra Joshi<sup>21</sup> contributed an article on the social life of charans with regards to their origin and social set up. Locating the charans in context to Rajput Dharm of Rajputs, he clarified the reasons for their attachments and close relations with the Rajputs, as compare to the Brahmins. He examined the phenomenon of the emergence of charans as a distinct caste and in context in which this caste earned respect and acquired a position equivalent to that of the Brahmin in Rajput society during 14<sup>th</sup>- 16<sup>th</sup> century. This helped in many ways in understanding the process of state formation in Rajasthan where the rulers evolved many relationships of cooperation and loyalty to assert their sovereign powers and come into prominence.

Many other studies have acknowledged the importance of charans in Rajasthani Society, thus referring them in their respective works like Jagmohan Singh Parihar<sup>22</sup> and K R Qanungo.<sup>23</sup> Parihar exclusively centred his book on the lives of seventy charans as poets and writers. He again details their lives vis-a-vis the rulers of Rajasthan. Expanding on the different genres of poems they wrote, Parihar elaborately writes their histories. Yet another intervention in the social construction of charans was attempted by K R Qanungo who writes a section on charans in his book on history of Rajputs. He further deepened our understanding and knowledge on charans in Medieval Rajasthan with regards to Rajputs and their role as genealogists.

More recently Rustom Bharucha<sup>24</sup>, Ramya Sreenivasan<sup>25</sup>, Dube, Skaria, Mayaram<sup>26</sup> in their works on Rajasthan has referred to charans in different contexts. Bharucha in his anthropological work on oral history in Rajasthan highlighted different genres of

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<sup>21</sup> Rajendra Joshi, 'Charans : The Contextual Dynamics of Caste in the Rajput System (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century)' in N. K. Singhi & Rajendra Joshi (eds.) *Religion, Ritual and Royalty*, (Jaipur, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Jagmohan Singh Parihar, *Madhyakaaleen Charan Kaya*. (Jodhpur, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> K. R. Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, (New Delhi, 1971).

<sup>24</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan an Oral History, Conversation with Komal Kothari*. (New Delhi, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives Of A Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India c. 1500-1900*, (USA, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar,, Renu; Dube, Reena Dube. 'A Poetics of Resistance: Investigating the Rhetoric of the Bardic Historians of Rajasthan' in Mayaram, Shail; Pandian, M.S.S.; Skaria, Ajay (eds.) *Subaltern Studies XII. Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*, (New Delhi, 2005).

musical and performative traditions like puppetry, Teratali and the folk songs of Langas and Manganiyars and its reflections on land, water, agriculture, irrigation, livestock, sati and shrines. While being a major contribution to the fields of folklore, ethnomusicology, and cultural and performative studies; this narrative most importantly highlights the role of women in recitation and poetry, thereby reflecting the charan women as co-partners in their poetic endeavours.

Sreenivasan's work on the other hand is a combination of historical research and literary analysis. According to Sreenivasan, historians of Rajasthan have tended to view 'Rajput' identity as relatively static between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and have instead focused more on the strategies employed by particular lineages for the expansion and consolidation such as marriages, monopolies over resource extraction, and trappings of kingship. She attempts to historicize the transmission and mutations of the Padmini legend, showing how crucial aspects of the narrative were re-imagined in crossing regional, socio-political, and linguistic-literary boundaries over a period of four centuries.<sup>27</sup> Most useful for this paper was her emphasis on the role of charans as narrators of the past and as genealogists.

With the erstwhile historiography, the perception that one gets of charans and their role in Rajput state and society is that of victimisers extorting large sum of money and gifts as genealogists and writers for transmitters of culture. Despite being closely associated with the Rajputs; they were often seen as victimising them by demanding huge *neg* etc. at the time of marriage. Going beyond this perception, Dube, Skaria and Shail Mayaram in their article on Bardic Historians of Rajasthan opined that it was rather to protect the rights of the daughters in Rajput household that the charan eulogised the dower through his poetry and made satires when enough dowry was not given. An interesting interpretation about the charans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is highlighted in this article.

Therefore as far as what we know about this community of Rajasthan is through their literary productions. Historical scholarship has made great efforts in unpacking the 'Bardic Literature' which indeed is a repository of information on the society and political formation of that period. But what I am interested to look at, is to know this

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<sup>27</sup> Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives Of A Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India c. 1500-1900*, 2007, p.12.



community who produced phenomenal amount of writing in Rajasthan. Clearly there have been scarce efforts to write their social history and to know the charans as people, with their problems and concerns in everyday life. It was these charans who created and transmitted standards of legitimacy for the Rajput society but ironically we know nothing about what was legitimate for them. My study focuses on these questions in an attempt to write about the socio-cultural aspects of their lives both through elitist discourse like the chronicles and also from the *bahi* documents reflective of their quotidian concerns and conduct.

I seek to understand this community in the backdrop of Marwar; the 'Land of Death'. This region was home to maximum population of the Charans. Traditionally Charans were classed into 2 divisions on the basis of their territorial settlements – Maru Charans, who settled in Maru or Marwar and the Kachhela Charans who settled in the Kutch area. The Maru Charans besides cultivating the land became chroniclers of various Rajput dynasties whereas the Kachhela Charans were shrewd merchants and mainly pursued trade and commerce.

Suspecting, however, that the state's concern were multi, rather than uni-dimensional, this work uses the case study of charans in their relations with the eighteenth-century Jodhpur state to suggest that the state had to be pragmatic in its dealings with the elite castes while functioning for larger state formation and for dealing with the popular protest in early modern Rajasthan. The focus of the study is to discern the multiple levels of social contestation in which a variety of agents participated to push their distinctive agendas in a dynamic, contentious society.

Groups were therefore wooed and incorporated for a broad-based stable state. Christopher Bayly and Sumit Guha have noticed in their studies that landed potentates recognized the potential value of commerce for their regimes, and that consequent eagerness to concentrate mercantile and artisanal forces in their territories saw them embroiled in an increasing competition for productive forces.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Christopher Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge, 1983). Sumit Guha's 'Potentates, Traders and Peasants: Western India, c.1700-1870', in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, (Delhi, 1996), pp. 71-84.

I will delve on many questions such as whether Charans were a homogeneous community or not? Were they uniformly powerful and moneyed or were they internally differentiated? What kind of gifts they received and how much control do they practically have on them? We are already familiar with their relationship with the Rajputs, however what I want to analyse is their relationship with other caste and communities of the Rajasthani society during the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are quite known in the political arena of the Rajput state but what I seek to look at is their social and domestic worlds. In this undertaking I have looked at the chronicles of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century which by and large reflect on the statist perspective of charans highlighting them as powerful, privileged and among the elites in Rajasthan. As a part of the study of primary sources, to look at charans from a different perspective, I have simultaneously analysed the petition records of Jodhpur in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Thereby making a comparison in the source material and understanding them from both state perspective and as individuals reflecting on their everyday complexities and tensions that they grappled with.

### *Charans in History:*

To address my concerns, I have interfaced traditional sources like chronicles with unused archival documents. Nainsi's *Khyat*<sup>29</sup> is a chronicle that highlights the social set up and the culture of politics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly the stories and genealogies in it give us a great deal of information on the origin and political, social history of different clan and lineages of Rajputs. The material for this compilation was drawn from a wide variety of informants including Charans, Bhats and others. With the coming of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, penetrations to deeper level of Marwari society led to further cataloguing information on the significant assets of the region. This formed the major components of a new political rationality.<sup>30</sup> Towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century, another form of collating information on the state heralded in the era of the 'record culture', starting with *Rukka Parwana Bahis*<sup>31</sup>, *Ohada Bahis*<sup>32</sup>, *Hath Bahis*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), 4 vols, Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, (Jodhpur, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Hiralal Maheshwari, *A History of Rajasthani Literature*. (New Delhi, 1980), pp. 68-76.

<sup>31</sup> *Rukka Parwana Bahis* comprises letters written by the rulers of Jodhpur to important traders in and around Marwar.

<sup>32</sup> *Jodhpur Ohada Bahiyān* records the recruitment of different officials to different posts in the state workshops at kilikhana, farrashkhana, and kapraha ka kotha, etc. with the dates of their appointment.

and *Patta Bahis*<sup>34</sup> that documented details on the political, social and economic affairs of the state.

It is difficult to get a sense of 'Total history' about the charans however the use of different genre of sources would help in engaging in multiple perspectives and larger range of issues. For studying the 17<sup>th</sup> century Marwar large part of my research is based on the 17<sup>th</sup> century chronicle popularly known as *Nainsi-ri-khyat* by Muhnot Nainsi under whom the compilation of this khyat begun around 1648. He was an Osval Jain in the administrative service of Jodhpur under Jaswant Singh I. It is the oldest extant work of its kind in Rajasthan, and is precisely datable unlike many other old Rajasthani sources. A magnum opus comprising of 4 volumes that includes histories of all the major ruling houses of Rajasthan is firmly centered in the genealogical mode, worked into a frame constituted by genealogical family and its appanages. Nainsi's compilation certainly recognizes that the different clan and lineage histories he recounts were occurring simultaneously; the link between them was that all the protagonists were Rajputs (though this term occurs infrequently). It is often noted, for example, that such and such tale was recorded from the recitation of a particular Charan bard, was 'heard' in the manner recorded, or that a genealogy had been noted down from information supplied by a certain Bhat genealogist, or other knowledgeable person.<sup>35</sup> He makes a clear distinction between a historical fact and an oral tradition. I agree with Sumit Guha's observation on the conscious adoption of the genealogical mode by Nainsi which he suggests is related to genealogical sources of legitimacy and clan based structures of authority in the Rajasthan macro-region – a structure that ultimately circumscribed the power of literati officials like him.<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly the charan's oral and written literature was also powerful enough to give authentic legitimacy to the rajas of Rajasthan who's only desire was to be famous for all posterity with their predecessors in the genealogical history of their region. There are voluminous details in this khyat that can be harnessed to produce a good body of narrative however we must not overlook the fact that the state commissioned

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<sup>33</sup> Jodhpur Hath Bahi (starting from VS 1828/1771), are like personal pocket diaries of the rulers.

<sup>34</sup> *Jodhpur Patta Bahis*, details the grant of land assignments by the state to the subject.

<sup>35</sup> Norman P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicle: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*, April-June, no. 2, 1976, p. 232.

<sup>36</sup> Sumit Guha, 'Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400- 1900', *American Historical Review*, vol 109, no. 4-5, 2004, p. 1092.

chronicles like these suffer from drawbacks as they were written with the specific aim of celebrating the mighty. The common subjects remain nameless anonymous units. For my research there were many evidences that I found relevant in Nainsi's *khyat* however all were in context with the Rajputs regarding their loyalty, valour, patronage, culture etc.

A similar genre of source that highlighted the comprehensive history of various regions in Rajasthan during the medieval period was Shyamaldas's *Vir Vinod*<sup>37</sup>. Although written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, huge mass of its details belong to the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century. Kaviraj Shyamaldas was a charan himself and undertook this endeavour under Maharana Sajjan Singh of Mewar. Intensive and beautiful description is given of geography and morphology of the Indian subcontinent, political, social and cultural history of the rulers. We get large amount of information on the status, role, and position of the charans in many stories that gets unfolded in this classic chronicle. Shyamaldas used modern methods of research while writing, accurate and authentic information coming from these volumes enhance our perspective and knowledge about the charans and their relations vis-a-vis the state and the society.

Nainsi's *khyat* and Shyamaldas's *Vir Vinod*, by and large highlighted the relationship of the charans with the elites like the Rajputs. However to understand different issues relating to charans and other groups of communities in Rajasthani society it is essential to look at those sources where their voices are represented and a window into their everyday lives available. Before initiating a critical analysis of the petition records that forms a major part of my primary source material, I would take a moment to clearly differentiate between those *bahis* that are written privately by the various charan and bhat genealogists for their specific clients who maintain genealogies and keep in large *bahis* (registers) which are considered the property of the Bhat themselves. They are recited in periodic occasions when a Bhat would appear at the home of the family whose genealogy he keeps in order to make appropriate new entries into his *bahis*. This is followed by full recitation of the genealogy. On the other hand the other kind of *bahis* is collation of details of state's administration and dealings with people in everyday context. They are categorized under various

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<sup>37</sup> Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, 5 vols, reprint, (Delhi, 1986).

categories like *Byav Bahis*<sup>38</sup>, *Patta Bahis*<sup>39</sup>, *Haqiqat Bahis*<sup>40</sup>, *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahis* and many more.

I have made an attempt to analyse the various forms of disputes between the constituents of social life of the inter relationships between charans and simultaneously the nature of contradictions inherent within their lives in chronicles and petition records of everyday lives. Such a study assumes greater significance in context of the historiography that is generally prevalent about the charans, which solely portrays them as people of high caste, class and a dominant social group. The multiple polarities and spaces shared by different social groups in Rajasthani society influenced the position of charans.

A critical analysis and a complex thought process is thus relevant for an investigation of various elements and aspects of charan's social life. To obtain a clearer understanding of the dynamics of charan's social relations, it is essential that comprehensive micro-level studies of petition records are undertaken. We have looked at disputes as being primarily manifested of underlying contradiction and tensions that existed within charan society. This would have an impact on the intensity and nature of conflict and cooperative relationships that they share with others in the society. Thus a study of disputes within charan's social life would seem to provide a reliable indicator of their exact and unexaggerated position and their contribution to the social order of Marwar in Medieval Rajasthan.

With this perspective I have utilized the evidences on social life of charans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to study various forms of conflict between them and various constituents of different parganas of Jodhpur state. *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahis*<sup>41</sup> (JSPB) preserved at Jodhpur records section, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner is collation of judicial records that summarized the disputes brought by people to the different levels of conflict-resolution authorities of the state. Each bahi contains numerous petitions

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<sup>38</sup> *Jodhpur Byav ri Bahis*, contain detailed accounts of the expenditure incurred on royal marriages.

<sup>39</sup> *Jodhpur Patta Bahis*, details the grant of land assignments by the state to the subject.

<sup>40</sup> *Jodhpur Haqiqat Bahis*, contains newsletters from different part of the kingdom.

<sup>41</sup> *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahis*, is a collection of about 156 bahis (nos. 1- 54, 1764-1800/ VS 1827-57). They are chronologically arranged year wise. A majority of them follow a similar format, recoded as petitions from people and the state response to them. These judicial records cover a very wide range of issues, from petitions against taxes and elite exactions to disputes over flouting of normative behavioural patterns of different communities. It also includes news reports that kasids brought to diwan's office, along with the state orders in this regard.

that highlight the substance of complaint received by the state kachedi, followed by ruler's instructions (*wajabi*) on the matter. The *JSPB* represents the articulation of different identities and their engagements and contestations with other identities. This *bahi* series records *arzees* from the subjects, regardless of their provenance. Many of these *arzees* constitute petitions against the state and its functionaries, while others are inter-caste or intra-caste dispute cases brought for resolution to judicial agencies of the state. They often reveal differences between the state's ideas of governance when juxtaposed against those of the people.<sup>42</sup> This clearly underscores the importance of these *bahis* that helps us to understand the social order from various vantage points. In this regard there were many cases that were registered by the charans, against the charans, by the state to the charans, by different communities against the charans for getting justice. Many voices are there but not necessarily all of them are represented as they were. Terms like *dodhidar* were used for these official scribes of the state and it is evident that most of these scribes were literate charans whom state had engaged for documentation and recording. State decisions in response to petitions are recorded too.

It is undoubtedly worthwhile to study these petition record that throw information on the 'informants' and the 'informer', it is critical to note that these petitions were transcribed by state notaries, therefore to an extent they authored elite authored evidence, inextricable from the discourse of the state. It is rather important to read between the lines and not just draw simplistic inferences by looking at the face value of these petition records.

My primary concerns and questions that I seek to raise and deal with during the course of my essay are firstly to identify the major areas of conflict and the frequency of various kind of disputes. Secondly to analyse the contradictions existing between various classes and also within section of charans, in order to establish the existence of a trend in the intensity of existing social contradictions. I also propose to study the disputes both in class and caste terms and determine whether class and caste ties were being consolidated or broken. An interesting field of enquiry would be to study the nature of their power, position and privileges within the political, social, economic

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<sup>42</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, (Delhi, 2006), p. 33.

and cultural spheres of the Jodhpur state and their impact on their social life. Further the role and position of the charan women as portrayed in the chronicles and also them as a petitioner would be looked at. Moreover we intend to examine the attitude of the state towards various forms of conflicts and disputes regarding charans. Finally the role played by the state judiciary, the local administrative bodies and the village panchayat in the administration of justice will be other questions that I would explore in this work.

- Rather than attempt a purely descriptive and quantitative study of the disputes of charans, I have endeavoured to place the conflicts within the framework of what is already known about the charans from the chronicles in the past historiographies and other secondary works, thus aiming to see the reality of their social status and their relation to the socio-economic, political processes and the relation with other communities prevalent in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Although the petitions as a primary source of data are valuable in details and varieties of information, I must point out the inadequacies of relying solely on this type of records for a comprehensive study. Firstly in a number of cases the background information on the reasons for dispute are not explicit, which makes it difficult to grasp the complexities of the case or to analyse it in terms of the power structure within the village. Secondly, we have no means of cross checking whether the instructions issued by the state authority (*huzur*) to the pargana kachedis were in fact implemented. The possibility that very often the official at the pargana failed to act on the recommendations of the state is reinforced by a fairly large number of complaints being referred back repeatedly for action by the pargana head. Moreover while giving orders the state many times told the official that this particular case should not come back to the Kachedi (*nivaed dijiyo*). Thirdly, often the state referred the dispute to the village caste panchayat or a reliable local respected person for arbitration. In such cases it is impossible to obtain reliable information regarding the composition of the panchayat, the method of decision making or the final decision. Further, considering the importance assigned to the panchayats in resolving local disputes, it is very likely that a large number of disputes must have been settled by them without reference to state authority. As no records were maintained of the panchayat proceedings we are totally dependent on a mere fraction of the number of cases which

are officially reported. Fourthly, we have noted that maximum number of disputes in the bahis is economic and property-related in origin; i.e. related to litigation over land revenue, jurisdictional rights, ownership of land etc. Number of disputes viz., disputes on crime and women on the other hand are meagre.

Despite these limitations, however the importance of the bahi records as a primary source material cannot be under-estimated. The wealth and variety of information on every aspect of charan's everyday lives, the nature of rights and privileges and the social economic relationships between the various strata of rural society, local and regional variations in customary practices, is essential to reconstruct a complete and inter-related picture of the medieval society in all its complexity.

Corroborative methods and use of both the oral and written literature would polish our perspectives and understanding about the collective psychology, value systems and inter personal tensions among the charans and other communities. If scrutinized carefully, *JSPB* enables us to see interesting relations of constant negotiations over legitimacy through mapping 'everyday relations'. It was observed that at times when legitimacy was transgressed, even the subordinate did not hesitate to challenge the violators, although mostly within the dominant discourse and the elites.<sup>43</sup> Charans were also challenged in these discourses.

Gazetteers and Census reports are authentic and nuanced genres of sources for reconstructing the history of any community. The 1891 Hindi census of Marwar, the *Mardumshumari Raj Marwar*<sup>44</sup> provides detailed information on the customs, legends and popular stories as well as myths of origins associated with a number of Charan groups.

Among the European traveller's account, James Tod's<sup>45</sup> work forms the basis for modern scholars, writing on Medieval Rajasthan. He constructs Rajputs as a race including glorification and chivalry, heroic deeds and spirit of self sacrifice of both men and women and their sense of loyalty for their master. Surprisingly he came to be popularly known as the modern *charan* (bard) of the Rajputs.<sup>46</sup> His work has become

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, 2 vols, Jodhpur.

<sup>45</sup> James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or, The Central And Western Rajpoot States Of India*. vol 1&2, by W. Crooke (ed.). (London, 1920).

<sup>46</sup> Madhu Tandon Sethia, *Rajput Polity: Warriors, Peasants and Merchants*, (Jaipur, 2003), p.1.



an immensely popular writing for the later scholars to get an insight about the polity, society and culture of the Rajputs. It is a dynastic history of various Rajput principalities focusing upon the political and military achievements and virtues of the individual rulers. The work in its three volumes is a treasure trove for scholars. He analyzed the writings of the charans, bards, folklores and heroic poems, poems written by the charans etc. and based large part of his writing on these sources. According to him these heroic poems constitute an important source for history. Bards may be regarded as the primitive historians of mankind. Before fiction began to engross the attention of poets, or rather before the province of history was dignified by a class of writers who made it a distinct department of literature, the function of the bards were doubtless, employed in recording real events and in commemorating real personages.<sup>47</sup>

The poets are the chief, though not the sole, historians of Western India;...they speak in peculiar tongue, which requires to be translated into the sober language of probability. To compensate for their magniloquence and obscurity, their pen is free: the despotism of the Rajput princes does not extend to the poet's lay, which flows unconfined except by the shackles of the *chhund bhojunga*, or "Serpentine stanza".... On the other hand, there is a sort of compact or understanding between the bard and the prince, a barter of "solid pudding against empty praise," whereby the fidelity of the poetic chronicle is somewhat impaired. The sale of "fame" as the bards term it, by the court laureates and historiographers of Rajasthan, will continue until there shall arise in the community a class sufficiently enlightened and independent to look for no other recompense for literary labor than public distinction.<sup>48</sup>

Despite open to all kinds of objections to the writings of the bards, Tod reiterates that the works of the native bards afford many valuable data. He has cited the oldest authentic bard known to history Chund Bardai (the famous bard of Prithwiraj Chauhan), at many places in his work who was a Brahmin and was a Bhat. According to him it is surprising that epic of Prithwiraja, given by Chund, is neglected as a historical source which can be a great source of knowledge. The domestic habits, manners and culture can be accurately understood through the study of these oral traditions. Haimendorf<sup>49</sup> is critical of Tod's work and opines that Tod's work which is largely based on Bardic literature failed to undertake a critical analysis of his sources that comprised of oral histories narrated by the bards. Shymaldas in his chronicle

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<sup>47</sup> James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or, The Central And Western Rajput States Of India*, vol 1, (Delhi, 1971), intro xv.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. xv-xvi.

<sup>49</sup> C. Von Furer- Haimendorf, ' The Historical Value of Indian Bardic Literature ', in C. H. Phillips (ed.) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, (London, 1967).

critiqued Tod at number of places citing evidences for mentioning unauthentic and wrong facts.<sup>50</sup> This proves Tod's excessive reliability on the oral sources like the bards in Rajasthan whose information needs to be cross checked.

Such an analysis is contained in a systematic effort to collect and preserve the poetry of the bards attached to the Rajputs began in 1914, when Asiatic Society of Bengal sponsored a 'Bardic and Historical Survey of Rajputana'. This survey was directed by Dr. L. P. Tessitori<sup>51</sup> and it is to his reports and notes published periodically in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal during the year 1914 to 1919 that we owe a great deal of information on the bardic poetry of Rajputana. He has made a clear distinction between the bardic poetry and the prose chronicles of Rajasthan. While analyzing the *vacanikas* and Bardic poetry, Tessitori warns us of not taking literal interpretation of the *vacanika* tradition, as it might be misleading. He critically opines that it is a common practice with the bards to exaggerate the importance of any ruler or enemy.

### **Chapterization:**

What I seek to do through my study is to understand the social history of the charan community through the focus on the court records that reflect on everyday lives of subjects – including that of the charans. Chapter 1 will begin with the discussion on the origins of the charans, mapping the historical trajectory and locating them as a heterogeneous community in Rajasthan and a further understanding of their social structures and systems that they were interwoven in. The construction of the social and political formation by the charans for the Rajputs and other elites through strategies like 'Legitimation' and 'Loyalty' will be studied and references to it from *Nainsi's Khyat*, *Vir Vinod* and Charan Bardic Literature would be useful to understand the rationale due to which charans functioned as an indispensable community for the Rajput social formation. Literature written by the charans would also be analysed with regards to the construction of legitimacy and building cultural standards. My emphasis on referring only to the chronicles in this chapter, along with

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<sup>50</sup> Vir Vinod, vol I. p. 302.

<sup>51</sup> L. P. Tessitori, A Descriptive Catalogue of Bardic and Historical Manuscripts Section 1: Prose Chronicle: Part 1: Jodhpur State, fasc. 1 (Bibliotheca Indica, 1917).

\_\_\_\_\_, Idem. Section 1: Prose Chronicles: Part I; Bikaner State fasc I (Bibliotheca Indica, 1918).

\_\_\_\_\_, Vacanika Rathore Ratan Singhaji ri Mahesadasota ri, Khiriya Jaga ri Kahi, part I : Dingala Text with Notes and Glossary (Bibliotheca Indica, 1917).

\_\_\_\_\_, Chandarau Jeta Siro Vithu Suje ro Kiyu, part I : Dingala Text (Bibliotheca Indica, 1920).

the secondary sources is to highlight the difference in perspective of writing of the chronicles and the archival material of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (that I will be referring to in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> chapters).

Chapter 2 constructs the Sociology of Power, Position and Privileges of the Charans. With reference to the dialogues that unfold in the petition records, the above issues will be explored. Charan's position and power in the state, royal court, as a trader, as a jagirdar, moneylender, and genealogist will be examined along with their privilege as a *sasan* grant and *dohli* grant holder, recipients of *neg* and *tyag*, recipients of trade concessions and exemptions. The notion of 'powerful' that is attached to the charans initiates an interesting discussion on how powerful they were vis-a-vis other communities. What strategies did charans employ in the play of politics of power and privileges? How did their rights unfold in an environment of competing rights and interests? How did the rulers respond in situations of tension and conflict with the charan community? These questions get partly addressed through a careful study of the petition records which describe the dialogue and negotiations between the 'weak' and the 'powerful'.

This leads me to a discussion in Chapter 3 on the Endogenous Social and Domestic Worlds of Charans. Intensive and careful study of the petition records in *JSPB* indicate several issues that led to disputes. Disputes are an inevitable feature of any dynamic society. It reflects the changing social formation of the region. There were many tensions in the lives of charans like conflicting issues of adoption, inheritance, over land and boundaries, property disputes, crimes against their women. The nature of complexities between charans and people of other castes would also be reflected on. What was the reaction of state in case of criminal activity by charans? What was the social space of charan women? Whether visible or invisible? The rhetoric and nature of petitions, its tone and language highlights the position of charans in the eyes of the people and the state. All these issues along with the notion of *wajabi* and the methods of arbitration and adjudication with the State, at the apex, that played a major role in the negotiations and contestations, placing customary traditions of the communities as the most important yardstick for resolving conflicts; would be analysed to enhance and nuance our understanding of the charans in Medieval Rajasthan.

## CHAPTER 1

### LEGITIMATION AND LOYALTY

What is Legitimacy? Why does it get so important for any state in order to be functional? This chapter will focus on Charans and their role in Rajput state particularly in context of legitimating the authority of Rajputs and some specific ruling dynasty. The importance of clan genealogies in the lives of Rajputs enhanced the position Charans as they were critical in writing and maintaining genealogies of both the rulers and lay. Based on the chronicle literature of 17<sup>th</sup> century Nainsi-ri-khyat and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Vir Vinod I seek to reflect on the strategies and means of legitimation that charans employed in their interface with the Rajputs. The importance of clan, kinship and genealogy is well known among the Rajputs. It was this requirement among the Rajputs, which the charans supported and on occasions even preyed on. As genealogists and poets they fulfilled the desire of the Rajputs to write, recite and celebrate their genealogies.

This chapter also deals with the origin and social structure of the charan community and their function as legitimisers of the Rajput clan. The way they were incorporated in the Rajput system and were held with high respect is evident in many instances cited by Shyamaldas and Nainsi in their respective chronicles. One of the most important tools of legitimation was literature penned by charans, quite frequently referred by the scholars as Bardic literature. A detailed analysis on the variety of genres of bardic literature, and their importance in the lives of the Rajputs, is discussed. Charans were also known as transmitters of knowledge, values and cultural standards. In this regard an interesting discussion on their role in propelling social practises like female infanticide and sati is engaged into. Historians have contested on this aspect of the role of charans which I would highlight during the course of this chapter. I thereby hope to understand and analyse the role of charans in legitimising the Rajputs in medieval Rajasthan.

Since this chapter is based on chronicle literature often penned by charans themselves it would acquaint me with the ways they wanted to project themselves. Since these works were written by state commissioned charan writers, we see the statist

perspective that describes the interface with Charans from above, and highlights issues of charan loyalty and legitimation of royal authority. Charan's relationship with elites like the Rajputs differs as we delve in different kind of sources. Issues other than legitimacy, like the issues of conflict and negotiations comes forth when we refer to different sort of sources like court records and petition documents where the state subjects also have a voice. While decoding these petition records (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter) I will unpack a number of issues that were central and specific to daily lives of charans. This is a very important aspect that we need to engage in while studying the social history of any community. The reason that I have engaged in different kind of primary sources on the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century charans is to have a clear understanding from different perspectives on the various aspects of charans in medieval Rajasthan. This chapter only focuses on their relationship with their foremost patrons' i.e. the Rajputs. The importance of both in the process of legitimation and state formation is what I seek to elaborate here.

### *Situating Charans in Rajput Society: Importance of Kinship & Genealogy:*

Rajasthani society, as any other represented a distinct system of values, norms, styles of life, institutions and patterns of hierarchical and distance relationships. The different groups and sections in the society contributed in making and unmaking of different traditions prevalent within the society. By and large caste and clan played an extremely important role in the polity and society of Rajasthan.

The role of kinship and caste in the definition of north Indian political groups is very important. The preservation of unilineal kinship and its extension, caste, has often been taken as a unique characteristic of Indian civilization. This unilineal kin organization of locally dominant castes claiming "Kshatriya" or "Rajput" status performed many political and military functions.<sup>1</sup> The kin organization was usually headed by a Clan Raja who represented both their kin group and the state. Partly through the ascriptive office of the lineage Raja and partly through their investiture with state power the elite of such kin and clan groups often presented both the greatest

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<sup>1</sup> Richard G Fox. *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule, State-Hinterland Relations in Pre-Industrial India*, (Berkeley, 1971), pp. 14-16.

threat of local revolt and acted as the most potent guardians for the preservation of central authority.<sup>2</sup>

Different clans of Rajputs were fragmented and they were not homogenous groups. The clan loyalties were strictly maintained. Membership in a lineage identified as Rajputs was a claim to a political status for rationalizing a political alliance. Because their internal cohesion and external recognition often hinged on political and economic roles in state administrative machinery such kin bodies depended as much on political incorporation as genealogical continuity for their existences.<sup>3</sup> The ruling class belonged to one particular clan. The state in fact did not belong to the ruler rather it belonged to the clan as a whole. Much of the literature of the region indicates that Marwar was ruled by the Rathors; Mewar was under Sisodiyas and Jaipur under the Kachhwahas. The identification of the clan with the state was the most important characteristic feature of medieval Rajput polity. The sixteen major Rajput states may be arranged according to the different clans which founded them, and to which the ruling family belonged in the following manner:

CLAN	SUBDIVISION	STATE
Rathore	.....	Jodhpur (Marwar) Bikaner Kishangarh
Sisodia	.....	Mewar (Udaipur) Banswara Dungarpur Partabgarh Shahpura
Chauhan	Hara Deoria	Bundi Kota Sirohi
Jadaun	Bhattis	Karauli Jaisalmer
Kachhwaha	Naruka	Jaipur Alwar
Jhala	.....	Jhalawar

*Source: Chiefs and Leading Families in Rajputana, p.2*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

Tod further gives the list of the 36 royal races of Rajasthan (See Appendix 1, p.151), which formed important clan groups and developed their regions with the help of their clansmen.

A narrative about a clan's origin was often a rhetorical occasion for a discussion of the clan's values. The bardic recitation of genealogies generated imaginings, not only of the geographical and mythic origins of the patron's clan but of the values practised or violated by the clan's descendents. However these legitimating myths were not fixed narratives of a static society. The fluid, strategic, rhetorically and politically significant part of the bard's recitation of Rajput genealogies lay in the discussion guided by the bard on what it means to be a true Rajput. The performance of the tale permitted an enormous range of different and contradictory meanings. Analysis of the Bardic narratives regarding the origin of various Rajput clans highlights, not so much where they came from and who they were, but rather indicated who they wished to be and what were the claims on land and power that they wished to make on the basis of their genealogy. That is why the tale of origins in the *khyat*, as means for constant reinvention, did not have one function but several functions. Moreover the function of the origin story kept changing, depending on how the claim to ruler status through ancestral rights was accepted by the dominant political players in Rajputana and North India as a whole.<sup>4</sup> In relation to this the role of women in the origin tales will be discussed in reference to *Nainsi-ri-Khyat* in the last section of this chapter.

These peculiar clan relationships had webbed the Rajput society into fixed and rigid spheres within which different communities functioned. In many parts of the country professional bards and genealogists were attached to communities of varying status. There are many studies done on different communities in Rajasthani society like the warriors<sup>5</sup>, traders<sup>6</sup>, peasants<sup>7</sup>, artisans<sup>8</sup> etc. however we see very little work done on one of the very important community which had a direct influence on all the other social groups. These are the Charans and the Bhats who were men of literature and drew up caste and kinship genealogies of their patrons as genealogists. It is probably

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<sup>4</sup> Richard G Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule, State-Hinterland Relations in Pre-Industrial India*. 1971, pp. 263-64.

<sup>5</sup> Madhu Tandon Sethia, *Rajput Polity: Warriors, Peasants and Merchants*, (Jaipur, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> V. K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India AD 1000-1300*, (New Delhi, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Dilbagh Singh, *State, Landlord and Peasants: Rajasthan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century*, (Columbia, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, (Delhi, 2006).

because their study is partially based on oral traditions and sources, whose importance many historians treat with scepticism. However Vansina highlights in her writings that oral traditions are not necessarily untrustworthy as a historical source, but, on the contrary, merit a certain amount of credence within certain limits.<sup>9</sup> The use of oral traditions, when checked against written documents and compared with present day ethnographical data, enables us to reconstruct a detailed picture of any kind of culture and changes that have undergone over a period of time.

Another feature of the Rajput society that the Rajputs had to grapple with was the overlapping influence of Brahmin and Kshatriya status in its state-society formation. The 'Rajput Dharma'<sup>10</sup> and value system defined their aspirations and characterized the society. The social structure in Medieval Rajasthan was therefore under different kinds of pulls and push, influences and developments which shaped the emergence and survival of different social groups.

Moreover in terms of the politics of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the political opportunities of the Mughal court and the emphasis the Mughals placed on genealogy gave impetus and vigour to the process of legitimising through descent and kinship. The tendency to interpret Rajput history in genealogical terms was inherited by many like Muhta Nainsi, and by other bardic poets and chroniclers while writing and preserving the literary traditions of the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, something like a new Rajput Great tradition emerged which could recognize little else than unilineal kin bodies as the elements of which genuine Rajput history ought to be made up. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Rajasthan and particularly Mewar became a seat of this new Rajput orthodoxy. Outside this region, to be accepted as fitting marriage partners of the great Rajput families of Rajasthan and to be recognized as genealogically pure in Rajasthani bardic literature was valued by many as among the marks of the highest stage of Rajputisation.

There was a great deal of obscurity about the formation and identification of Rajputs of pre 17<sup>th</sup> century as literary traditions are silent on this issue. There were many clans with tradition of service and fighting who were no longer recognised as fit marriage

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Traditions: A Study in Historical Methodology*, translated by H.M. Wright, (London, 1965), p.1.

<sup>10</sup> *Rajput Dharm*: The code of conduct and moral values evolved to support Rajputs political and military system and their military activities can be called "Rajput Dharm".



partners by the aristocracy. They were the ‘spurious’ Rajputs, whose rajputisation never seemed fully achieved.<sup>11</sup> There was a grave need for official writers who could consciously legitimise these ‘spurious’ Rajputs by tracing and writing successful lineages. The bards (charans and the bhats) interpreted the issues of ranks, values and ideals and formulated the new Great tradition that dominates the Rajput historiography to the present day.

### ‘Rajput Dharm’ & Charans:

Charans need to be understood in the context of the nature of Rajasthani social structure. As custodians of both Speech and History, they occupied the second rank in the hierarchical order, above their Rajput patrons. As the saying goes, *aage brahman piche bhat / take piche aor jat* (“first the Brahman, then the Bhat, and after them the other castes”).<sup>12</sup> Without a bard to sing his praises or a genealogist to exalt his ancestors, it was impossible for a Rajput to assert his rank in the old society. Whenever questions arose over ancestral rights, privileges, inheritances, land, or titles - or forming new alliances – a Rajput was dependent on charans knowledge, which was transmitted through genealogies (*pidhiavalis* or “generational lines” and *vamsavalis* or “lines of descendents”) and recorded in *bahis* (“registers”).

He was also dependent on their savoir-faire: as certified mythographers, Bhats and Charans were capable of finding connections between a given clan or lineage and this or that prestigious dynasty of adapting myth of history, and of weaving small and great traditions into seamless narrative whole. Thus, they were simultaneously guardians of caste institutions and craftsmen of a social mobility.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover in the process of creating territorial kingdoms, the Rajputs were continuously engaged in battles. This necessitated formation of, and adaptation to, newer values, norms, social categories and institutions. The classical-ideal and textualised social structures could not cope with the emerging and changing realities. Although Brahmins were placed higher in hierarchy than the Rajputs but since

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<sup>11</sup> Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, (Cambridge. 1990), pp. 72-74.

<sup>12</sup> R. V. Russel, and Hiralal, *The Tribes of the Central Provinces of India*, Vol II, (Delhi, 1997), p. 255.

<sup>13</sup> A. M. Shah & R. G. Shroff, ‘The Vahivanca Barots Of Gujarat : A Caste Of Genealogists and Mythographers’ in Milton Singer (ed.), *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, (Jaipur, 1975), pp. 40-68.

Brahmins could not respond to Rajput aspirations and needs associated with victory, defeat, valor and glory, the Charans took over this role for this warrior class. The charans occupied an important position in Rajput society as historians, men of literature and genealogists. Most of the *Khyats* and *Batas* were written by them as they were equipped with skills.<sup>14</sup> In his discussion on the emergence of Charans as a distinct caste who acquired a position equivalent to that of the Brahmins in Rajput society, Joshi noted that the reason for this change was the changing needs of the Rajputs military class who were taking shape into a caste and needed a Brahmin of a different sort to legitimize their process of conquest and military activities. For this class neither the Brahminic Religion nor the Brahmins as the interpreters of the sacred law had much relevance. They needed a value system that was military in nature and principles.

The Rajput attitude towards basic principles of life was different. For example, for a Rajput, salvation was not attained through good deeds, charity or bathing in the holy rivers but by heroic death in the battlefield. Thus the very notion of salvation got altered for this class.

*ka ganga- jamna karo, kahan gomati sanan,  
ei dhara teerath karyo, Haldighati maan*<sup>15</sup>

[Why talk of pilgrimages to the rivers Ganga & Jamuna and of bathing in the holy waters of river Gomti? For a warrior, a battle-field like Haldighati, is the best pilgrimage site, where a heroic death bestows honor and salvation.]

The Rajputs were guided by different notions of death, auspiciousness and education. They delighted in bloodshed and offered blood and wine to their deities. Durga and Kali were popular Goddesses who had martial temperament. For Brahmanic literature and education were unimportant for them, they needed an education which made them dependent on personal valor and courage. Therefore we can see that the Rajputs needed a new 'Dharm' to support their military and warlike activities and a new class of Pandits to legitimize their military actions and to encourage and inspire them for such activities. A charan was an embodiment of bravery.<sup>16</sup> The religious sanctity,

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<sup>14</sup> Rajendra Joshi, 'Charans : The Contextual Dynamics of Caste in the Rajput System (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century)' in N. K. Singhi & Rajendra Joshi (eds.), *Religion, Ritual and Royalty*, (Jaipur, 1999), p. 304.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 307.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 309.

legitimacy, identification, glorification and perpetuation of the clans and this kind of value structure which characterized Rajput polity was assigned to the Charans, they evolved a code of conduct for both Rajput men and women. Joshi highlights 16 features of the 'Rajput Dharma' that were not aligned with the Hindu Shastras and were found in the couplets of Charans.<sup>17</sup>

1. Avenging the death of one's father: Revenge as a value.
2. Fulfilling one's moral duty of fighting and dying in the service of one's master: Personal loyalty.
3. A warrior can go to heaven only if he dies in the battlefield: The alternative of salvation.
4. A Rajput has only three friends- courage, sword and hand: The skills.
5. A Rajput's food is not digested without war: War as a value.
6. A true Rajput warlord is one for whom his kinsmen die without any hesitation: Strong kinship bonds.
7. A Rajput should not ring shame to his mother's milk and wife's bangles: the notion of shame.
8. When Rajput goes to the battlefield he should not look back towards home: Detachment.
9. Dynasties do not continue through sons but by achieving glory in war: Glory superseded continuity of dynasty.
10. A Rajput should not derive pleasure in the company of children or progeny at home. His real happiness lies in the battlefield.
11. A Rajput should not allow even an inch of territory to go in the enemies' hands: Territorial integrity.
12. A warrior's sword should never hang on a nail: Ever preparedness.
13. For a Rajput the marriage ceremony is less important than war. They had evolved the Kharag and Dola marriages: Marriage by proxy.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 310-311.

14. Even when in bed with wife a Rajput should think of war: Subordination of sexual desire.
15. Becoming sati is the happiest moment in the life of a Rajput woman: Glorification through immolation.
16. A Rajput woman should learn to handle weapons and horse riding to face any eventuality: Beyond gender.

A similar observation was made by Kolff when he writes that the crucial point of difference with brahmanical theory was that the Rajputs and the numerous semi-tribal clans that took to the rajputising model were not inspired by the ideal of renunciation as an otherworldly, transcendent aim worth pursuing for its own sake. For them ascetic sacrifice was the necessary complement of the politics of settlement and family life. It bore fruit at home and especially in the epitome of homely politics; the marriage alliance of foremost importance. Therefore, for those who left home as *naukar*, or service men was not the irrevocable renunciation of primordial ties, but the hope of earning the ability to ascetically fight one's way back home.<sup>18</sup> The psychology and aspiration of a Rajput was very different and needed different set of motivations that could help them achieve it. The charans became the upholders of Rajput Dharma, tutors of the Rajput children and expressed values through their poetry and *dohas*. They occupied the same higher position in Rajput society that the Brahmins had under the Kshatriyas.<sup>19</sup>

### **Origins and Social Structure of the Charans:**

What was highlighted above was the reason for emergence of charans as an important social group in the medieval period. However there are indications and references of Charans since the ancient times. This was a common tendency in every caste in Indian society to cite evidence of its higher status.<sup>20</sup> The idea of antiquity has always appealed to mankind and this fired the imagination of myth-makers. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that the caste of Charans, like hundred others, also created many

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<sup>18</sup> Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, 1990, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Rajendra Joshi, 'Charans: The Contextual Dynamics of Caste in the Rajput System (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century)', p. 312.

<sup>20</sup> Cited by Manohar Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature (with exclusive reference to the contribution of charanas)*, (Jaipur, 1976). p. 17 from Indian Social Structure (Government of India Pub.), (Delhi, 1969), p. 5.

myths and legends that gave them currency. They deliberately aimed at tracing or associating their pedigree to some divine origin. One of the versions claim celestial origin and charans deemed themselves among the Hindu deities, declaring Himalaya region as their original habitat. John Wilson opines that they got the nomenclature (Charan) from feeding or tending the cattle.<sup>21</sup> Sir John Malcolm in his traveller's account opined that this extraordinary community appears to have arisen out of that condition of society into which their kindred tribe had fallen. He quotes the following fable on their origin:

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*“Mahadeva first created Bhats to attend his lion and bull; but these could not prevent the former killing the latter, which was a source of infinite vexation and trouble, as it compelled Mahadeva to create new ones. He therefore formed Charun equally devout as the Bhat, but of bolder spirit, and gave him in charge these favourite animals. From that period no bull was destroyed by the lion.”*

In the above allegorical fiction, the lion is the type of savage violence; and the bull is the personification of justice. Here the feeble Bhat, though especially created for the purpose, was unable to protect justice from the assaults of violence, that God was in consequence continually obliged to exert himself for its restoration; and that he therefore made Charun with a bolder nature, who so effectually answered the intention for which he has been created, that justice has never since been destroyed by violence.<sup>22</sup>

There are references of charan in Jain literature and the Puranas as well. The Charans do not claim emergence from any limbs of Brahma like other castes of Hindu society. Surajmal Mishan, the great Charan Poet-Laureate of Bundi court in second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century traced origin of the Charans to the epic Mahabharata; others claim that charans were heavenly beings and they came down to earth with the company of Kshatriyas. Krishna Singh Barheth has cited many references of Charans in Bhagwad Gita where they are associated with the Gods. They pray at the time of birth of Lord Krishna, pray to destroy demons etc. Their habits and conduct are associated with the Gods and deities. While citing references from Ramayana, Barheth interestingly mentioned this incident where Hanuman after blazing Lanka got worried about Sita

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<sup>21</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, Jodhpur, pp. 327-328.

<sup>22</sup> John Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India including Malwa & Adjoining Provinces*, vol I, (Delhi, 2001), p. 132.

and was about to commit suicide because of the guilt that he might have caused harm to Sita. It was only after hearing from the Charan Rishis about the wellbeing of Sita that Hanuman was relieved and was at peace.<sup>23</sup> This reflects on the surety, purity and reliability of the words of charans. The reference from the epic Mahabharata establishes the sanctity and importance of charans as a group who had great influence on people. The Kshtriya king Pandu at the time of his death, gave responsibility of protection and safety of his wife Kunti and his children to a charan.<sup>24</sup>

Such myths and legendary accounts<sup>25</sup> hardly deserve any credence. In fact, they are nothing more than the creation of the imaginative brains of the bards who in their hunt for a lofty pedigree concocted such stories. If we look at the geography, population and migration patterns of Rajasthan in early medieval era, there was a lot of transplantation of masses and bands of migratory people from the desert and steppe-land of Central Asia and Iranian plateau. There were successive penetrations by various tribes over the centuries which make it difficult to define the authentic character of the people of Rajasthan. In the face of these complex circumstances, it is difficult to decide about the racial stock of the Charans. It is quite relevant to point out in this context that the community of Charans in its early stages has been frequently named a nomadic tribe. The very name Charan derived from Sanskrit *char* – suggests their wandering character. In the lore's and legends of Rajasthan, the Charans have often been portrayed as traders of cattle and horses.<sup>26</sup> Charan in the Hindi Sabda Sagar, an important lexicon, has been defined as one who is a singer of the praise of various families and their genealogies.<sup>27</sup> These charans owed their name to the fact that they belonged to schools or branches of the Veda. The charan represented an ideal succession of pupils and teachers of the Veda.<sup>28</sup>

What seems most probable amidst the varying opinions about the origins of the charans is that this group is present in the Indian social fabric since time immemorial. As such they could not escape the complex character of the Indian caste system which

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<sup>23</sup> Krishna Singh Barheth, *Charan Kul Prakash*, (Jodhpur, 1932), p. 14. Also see Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, vol 1, reprint, (Delhi, 1986), pp. 170-171.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> For more evidences from myths and legends see Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, vol I, reprint, 1986, pp. 168-175. Also see Krishan Singh Barheth, *Charan kul prakash*, 1932.

<sup>26</sup> Manohar Prabhakar, *Rajasthani Baten*, (Jaipur, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> S. S. Das. *Hindi Shabd Sagar*, (Benaras, 1967), p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> J. Garret, *A Classical Dictionary of India*, (Delhi, 1971), p. 131.

divides a caste into several sub castes. The bards belonging to the Rohriya Sept are said to have originally been Bhati Rajputs. Their ancestor named Canda, who was a Bhati Rajput was made a Charan bard by Raipal Rathora and was married to a Charan.<sup>29</sup> The Tiwaris were a kind of Charan in Marwar with two principle clans of the tribe in that State: Bankedas and the Chaendas. In Mallani, there were two clans of Charans, namely: Barath Charans and Garwi Charans (both classes of Charans consider themselves to be above the law, and pay no dues.)<sup>30</sup> Therefore, a brief study above, of the construction of the origins of the charans reflects on the modes and methods employed for construction of various myths to authenticate and strengthen their position and authority in the society.

By and large the most prominent division of the charans between Maru Charans and Kacchela Charans is traditionally known. The Maru Charans were divided into 120 *khamps*<sup>31</sup> (clans) such as Rohria, Ratnu, Soda, Asia, Lalus, Kaviya etc. The Kacchela Charans also had several clans such as the Balsi, Karwa, Bhojak etc. The most important vocation of the Maru Charan was to compose ballads recounting glories of the Rajput dynasties to which they were attached and to preserve and recite these in high pitch on appropriate occasion. During peace and war to enthuse and arouse passions among the coward of the cowards as well as the valorous ones in the thickest of battlefield exhorting them to prove themselves as worthy scions of their worthy ancestors. They wrote *khyats* (chronicles), *vartas* or *vatas* (stories), *raso* (martial episodes) and *vamsavalis* (descriptive genealogies). The *Dingal*<sup>32</sup> literature in Rajasthan owes its origin and enrichment to them<sup>33</sup> as the charans narrated in Dingal which the Rajputs could easily comprehend.

There were seven categories of persons and communities, who in turn have hereditary claim on Charan bounty, they were held close to charans. They were the *kul-guru* (family of Brahmins living in Ujjain till today), *purohit* (family priest), *Rao Bhat* of Chandisa sept of Marwar, the *Rawal* Brahmins, the *Goind-pota* and the *Viram-pota*

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<sup>29</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, p. 336.

<sup>30</sup> M. A. Sherring, *The Tribes & Castes of Rajasthan*, vol 8, (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 53-54.

<sup>31</sup> Krishna Singh Barheth, *Charan Kul Prakash*, 1932, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> The term Dingal designates the Marvari or western Rajasthanian dialect of the late medieval period in Rajasthan (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries). Only in the fifteenth century did Marvari or Dingal develop in its own characteristics which mark it today as regional dialect in its own right.

<sup>33</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal Sharma. *Essays on Bardic Literature*, (Jaipur, 2001), p. 477.

and the *Motisar* community.<sup>34</sup> These communities were in close relation to the Charans.

The whole class of bards enjoyed such reputation of sanctity that their women and particularly small unmarried girls came to be regarded as Goddesses whose curses and blessings were of great effectiveness. In the chronicles they are mentioned as respected for their sacral and holy position in the society and very often rulers consulted them for resolving political issues. In the dispute between Maharana Raimal's sons Prithviraj, Jaimal and Sangram Singh over inheritance, their uncle Surajmal suggested them to go to charani Biri who was supposedly an avatar of Goddess Shakti. The Charani answered to their dispute and predicted Sangram Singh to be the ruler which, eventually happened.<sup>35</sup> Female Charans were known as *Lurials* (so called because they wore *loi* or woolen blankets) and were much respected. The Maru Charan women observed *Purdah* (veil) but the Kacchela women did not. The latter formed a large proportion of *Shaktis* or personification of female energy and were distinguished by black clothes that they always wore.<sup>36</sup>

By the virtue of her very birth into the caste every Charan girl is a potential sakti. And like the ideal of "sati-hood", the powers of the sakti are transmitted from mother to daughter, according to Kishor Singh Varhaspaty, historiographer of Ganga Singh, the Maharajah of Patiala:

From earliest childhood onwards, girls born into this caste are schooled in their divine nature by their mothers. The mother repeats to her daughter such sayings as: "You are the Devi in person; Bhagvati [another name for the Goddess] created you out of a part of herself. By virtue of this continuous schooling, the little Charan girl considers herself at a very early age to be the '*suasani*' of Mata-ji, in other words the "sister of the Devi."<sup>37</sup> This tendency, which becomes an acquired mental disposition (*samskara*) inherited from childhood, attains its fullness at the time of adolescence, when the Charan girl's love for the Great Sakti quite naturally reaches the climax. That is why Bhagavati – Mahasakti or Sri Jagdisvar [Siva]

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<sup>34</sup> Krishna Singh Barbeth . *Charan Kul Prakash*, 1932. pp. 74-75, also see K. R Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, (New Delhi, 1971), p. 43 and *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, pp. 345-363.

<sup>35</sup> Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*. vol I, reprint, (Delhi, 1986), p. 343.

<sup>36</sup> Shyama Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p. 478.

<sup>37</sup> The Charans consider themselves "children of the Goddess" (*deviputras*), so much so that the word *suasani*, can be understood here as Mata-ji's daughter rather than sister.



considered the Charan to be the most suitable caste in which to take incarnation in the form of a woman. Thus one periodically finds *avatars* of the Goddess in this caste.<sup>38</sup>

Deified Charan women are frequently depicted in groups of seven, with the principal sakti being one of the “Seven Mothers” (saptamatrkas), another basic theme of the Goddess’s mythology stemming from her early history. Karni Mata, the deified Charan woman of Deshnok near Bikaner, was revered as Goddess during her own lifetime and her temple attracts lakhs of devotees even today. Prior to Karni Devi; the famous goddesses among the Rajputs were Bakal and Aavad.<sup>39</sup>

It would be interesting here to briefly mention the importance of Karni Mata in the lives of the Charan and the Rajput community. The longstanding conflict between the Bikaner and Jodhpur rulers was resolved by Karni Mata.<sup>40</sup> The revered Karni Mata was a charan who was a Godmother for miserable people,<sup>41</sup> during her lifetime she gained respect because of her miraculous powers and after her death devotees fondly go to the Karni temple with a vow called *bolma*.<sup>42</sup> This temple of Karaniji remains to this day a veritable paradise of rats that are fondly called the Kabas<sup>43</sup> of Karaniji<sup>44</sup>. There is a huge amount of bardic literature written on Karni Mata who is revered in the Rajasthani society. She was seen as a form of Shakti who used her powers in a benevolent way to protect especially the charan community in Rajasthan. We are aware of the role of *kuldevi* in the religious lives of Rajput men and women; she is the foremost divine guardian of their fortune and honour.

### **Charan, Rajputs and Strategies of Legitimation:**

One of the primary ways in which charans were incorporated in the court was the treatment of rulers towards them where they were given positions of honour and prestige. Several references in Vir Vinod and Nainsi indicate the important position of charans in the Rajput court where they were influential in court proceedings and issues. Charans were allowed to intervene and also suggest solutions and ideas to

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<sup>38</sup> K. Singh Varhaspaty, *Karni – Caritr*, (Deshnok, 1938) p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal Sharma. *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p. 145.

<sup>40</sup> Krishna Singh Barheth, *Charan Kul Prakash*. 1932, p. 76.

<sup>41</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal Sharma. *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p. 162.

<sup>42</sup> *Bolma*: a vow that is usually connected with the pilgrimage. Lindsey Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women; The Ethnic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives*, (New Delhi, 1994), p. 71.

<sup>43</sup> The Kabas are a predatory tribe claiming hereditary guardianship of the temple of Dwarka, where they levied blackmail from the pilgrims.

<sup>44</sup> K. R Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, (New Delhi, 1971), p. 42.

resolve political tension. They were often sent as state representative to other regions in Rajasthan for negotiating peace through arranging matrimonial alliances. Charan Khidia was sent to Rinmal by Rao Chunda Sisodia with a proposal that Rinmal should agree to give his daughter in marriage to Rana Lakha (Chunda's father).<sup>45</sup> A detailed study of the power, prestige and patronage that charans received from their Rajput patron would be discussed in the next section, on the basis of the facts furnished in the court chronicles.

It was a charan who sacrificed himself at the altar of his duty. To cite an incidence, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Aurangzeb sent an army to destroy Udaipur in the reign of Maharana Raj Singh, the Maharana sought shelter in some inaccessible hills. At this time, Charan Naru of Sauda Barhat family used to carry supplies and information from the palace of Udaipur to the hiding place of the Maharana. Once a friend in jest said, "Barhatji, how is it that you have now turned your back on the very gate of the palace where once you so haughtily stood to demand *neg* (customary gifts to the charans on the occasion of marriage)." Tortured by his taunt, Naru sent his family away to the passes in the Aravalli mountains and he himself, with twenty choicest comrades, took post at the first gate of the palace. When Taj Khan and Ruhullah Khan came to destroy the temples and idols, Naru rushed to the temple of Jagdisa situated opposite the palace gate and died there fighting gallantly against the enemy of his country and religion.<sup>46</sup>

The deep-rooted loyalty of the charan towards his Rajput patron is reflected in the incidence when charan Baru cut his head and sent it to his patron Maharana Shetra Singh. The story goes like this that, when Hada Lal Singh<sup>47</sup> felt offended and insulted with Charan Baru's claim that he would just serve his patron Maharana Shetra Singh and except for Maharana Shetra Singh, he could not see any other Rajput on this earth. Hada Lal Singh captured charan Baru. The charan thought to himself that his patron would come to his rescue but before that to avoid any insult to his patron by Hada Lal Singh, he decided to die. He cut his head and sent it to Maharana Shetra Singh. The Maharana got furious after seeing and hearing the entire incident and

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<sup>45</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol II, Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, (Jodhpur, 2003), p. 333.

<sup>46</sup> K. R. Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, 1960, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Ruler of Hada dynasty in Bundi.

attacked Bundi. In the battle, Maharana was killed.<sup>48</sup> In another instance, Nainsi cites Charan Thaharu Barheth of Chittor who stabbed himself to death as he could not stand insult of his patron Sisodiya Rana Ketha.<sup>49</sup>

The veneration of charan who dies in battle while accompanying his patron to the battlefield is hardly surprising, given that charans served as the bards who accompanied their Rajput patrons into battle and performed a variety of martial duties on their behalf. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Charan Naruji furiously fought and died in a battle and supposedly where his body fell; there is a memorial with a plaque erected there.<sup>50</sup> There are several incidences where Charan died in the battle along with the army of his patron. While fighting for Maharaja Jagmal, Barhat Isar Selhat and Charan Mahdujada were among the many that died.<sup>51</sup>

The above references reflect the intimate loyalty that charans had for their Rajput patrons. Their loyalty towards their master was undisputed; this gave them a great deal of legitimacy to behave out-rightedly while asserting their rights and claims in the society. The mutual source of legitimation by the Rajput and the Charan helped them carry out their activities in the state and society without much hindrance and opposition. The Rajput and the charan both belonged to the high echelon of the society and their mutual compact helped them in their survival. The exceptional political, social and economic power that was accrued to the Charans in medieval Rajasthan through their close identification with elite Rajput clans is the very thing that made them a significant site for examination.

It was not only the charans who wrote songs for their patrons. There were times when out of respect and love for the charan, the Rajput patron too wrote poems. When Bankidas, the doyen of Dingala poets of the mid seventeenth century passed away, his patron, Man Singh of Jodhpur, himself a poet of eminence, expressed his heartfelt grief in the following verse:

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<sup>48</sup> Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, vol I, reprint, (Delhi, 1986), pp. 302-03.

<sup>49</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol I, 1984, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> Lindsay Harlan, *The Goddesses Henchmen: Gender in Indian Hero worship*, (Delhi, 2003). pp. 58-59.

<sup>51</sup> Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part 1, reprint, (Delhi, 1986), p. 163.

*Vidya kul vikhyat rajkaj harrahsari  
Banka to bin bat kin agal manri kahan*<sup>52</sup>

(“Oh Bankidas; the poet perfect and profound scholar! In your absence before whom shall I pour out my heart?”)

Similarly, Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Marwar, also an ardent lover of poetry, burst out with sorrow at the sad demise of Charan Raj Singh and remarked:

*“No dearth is there of the flattering bards  
With folded hands who beg money and rewards;  
Gone is the great poet now dumb and mute  
Once made the crowned kings bow and salute”*<sup>53</sup>

Next to the Rajput, the Charan enjoyed the privilege of giving *saran*, protection under his roof. The inviolability of Charan’s home saved the seed of the clan when its adults were killed in insane feuds.<sup>54</sup> There are innumerable similar kinds of incidences where the king at the time of crisis took help from the charan who was known for his commitment and loyalty. It is said that Rao Chunda, the founder of Marwar, sought in his childhood ‘*sarana*’ under the roof of a charan, named Allha. He was looked after and brought him up as his own child by the charan. A popular bardic couplet which is ascribed to this event runs as follows:

*Cunda naval cit, kacar kalari tana  
Bhad thapau bhat bhiti mandovar ra maliya*<sup>55</sup>

(Oh Cunda; now living in the royal palace of Mandor you have completely forgotten the old days that you passed at Kalau.)

Similarly the responsibility of protecting the charan by the Rajput was considered mandatory. The charans in their poetry have eulogised Rajputs who protected them at the time of adversity or helped them at the hour of need. Pabuji narrative is one such example that is recited and sung by the charans and *bhopas* till today. Pabuji helped a charan woman to get her cattle back, there is a lot of drama and events in the story that suggests the deep commitment and sense of responsibility that Pabuji who was a Rajput had for honouring the promise that he had once made to the charan women.

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<sup>52</sup> Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, vol I, p. 179.

<sup>53</sup> M. Prabhakar, (English rendering from the original couplet). Cited in M. Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature (with exclusive reference to the contribution of caranas)*, 1976, p. 39.

<sup>54</sup> K. R. Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, 1971, p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> R. P. Vyas, *Role of Nobility in Marwar*, (New Delhi, 1969), p. 215.

For fulfilling that promise, Pabuji had to wage a war according to the story and he died in the end. Pabuji: the Rathore Rajput Hero of Rajasthan is still venerated and his praises are all well known in Rajasthan.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from this there were several obligations done by Kshatriyas on the Maru Charan whose references we would find in *Vamsh Bhaskar*.<sup>57</sup> The charans are known for their loyalty and the aura of sanctity that surrounded the bards, the Rajput princes continued to entrust him with the most confidential and private affairs even when the age of wars and battles had passed. Bards were employed for negotiation during marriage alliances<sup>58</sup> and for settling disputes. He was supposed to be above bribery and treachery. Charans in many wars intervened and resolved the issue of dispute. They with their strong and powerful words suggested mutual cooperation and remained wise and fair. What they sought was peace and for this attitude of theirs they commanded great deal of respect. They were transmitters of fame and renown and through their poetic compilations and power of words transmitted power of valor, bravery and heroic actions that enabled the Rajputs to fulfil his role in society of protecting and sustaining the moral order and in turn maintain their own rank.

Dursa Arha enjoys a unique place among the charan poets of Medieval India. He had a deep sense of patriotism and referred Rana Pratap of Mewar as a *Hinduan Dhani*, he looked upon the Rana as one who has maintained traditional Hindu values. He wrote that 'During Akbar's reign when darkness, he fell and all other began to doze, Pratap the *data* of the world remained at least on guard'. Dursa Arha had no illusions about the great might of Akbar who, he writes, was like a vast sea of unfathomable depth in which the Hindus and the Turks all had 'sunk'. Yet Pratap of Mewar, like a Lotus, is floating on its surface<sup>59</sup>:

*akbar samand athah tih dooba hindu turk  
mewrao tin maay, poyan phool pratapsi.*

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<sup>56</sup> For details on this see John D. Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, (New Delhi, 2005). Also see, Vinay Kumar Srivastava, 'The Rathore Rajput Hero of Rajasthan: Some Reflections on the John D. Smith's The Epic of Pabuji', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 28, no. 1-3, 1994.

<sup>57</sup> Surajmal Mishrana, *Vamsbhaskar*, 3 Volumes.

<sup>58</sup> Charan Khiriyia was sent to Rinmal by Rao Chunda Sisodia to plead him that Rinmal should agree to give his daughter in marriage to Rana Lakha (Chunda's father). Incidence cited in Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-r-khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol II, (Jodhpur, 1984), p. 333.

<sup>59</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal, Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p.11.

Nainsi is also replete with instances of glorification of the Rajput ruler by the Charans. Bithu Jhajan, a Charan in 15<sup>th</sup> century praised Prithi Raj who defeated the strong Muslim ruler of Mandu.<sup>60</sup> In the battle between Rana Amar Singh and Mughal Emperor Jahangir in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Charan of Amar Singh praised him for giving a tough fight to every attack of the enemy; this brought glory and honor to Amar Singh's sword and the region of Mewar.<sup>61</sup>

A true genuine charan taught four important values to Rajputs i.e. intelligence, —courage, pure heart and good conduct:

*vadta Rajput beech, charan bata chaar,  
aakli vidya cheet, ujla dhar sad aachar.*<sup>62</sup>

The Charan was not a beggarly wandering minstrel as the general impression goes. He was the esteemed and faithful companion of the Rajput and even the meanest of the charan would disdain gifts and charity of any other community except those of a Rajput. More than money and land, the charans commanded and desired for respect. As said:

*'maano hi mahta dhanam'*<sup>63</sup>

This meant 'respect is bigger than money'. Kshatriya rulers competed to give maximum respect and honour to the charan in order to be good in their eyes who indeed would glorify him.

Charan was synonymous to courage and chivalry. The courage of the charan is well exemplified by the episode of Rathora Ranmal of Bikaner whose body after his murder lay uncremated for the fear of the wrath of Rao Cunda. Nobody dared to perform the ceremony except a Charan named Candan who gave the dead body a befitting funeral in defiance of Cunda's order and courted exile from his ancestral home, leaving a silent lesson for Rajputs that hatred should not pursue the dead.<sup>64</sup>

It was not only glorification that was the job of the charans. The Rajput rulers dread the satires and criticism that the charans poured on them. Since the charan enjoyed

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<sup>60</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-r-khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol I, (Jodhpur, 1984), p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>62</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal, Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Krishna Singh Barheth, *Charan Kul Prakash*. 1932, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> K. R. Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, 1960, p. 36.

indiscriminate rights over his right of speech, there were few who embarrassed the Raja with their satirical poetry. Charan Karnidan unafraid of any consequences said the following for Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur and Maharaja Jai Singh of Amber, on one of the occasions when they were together, they asked Karnidan to decide which of them was the greater king. Charan Karnidan replied:

*pat Jaipur Jodhan pat, domu thaap uthaap  
kuram maaryo deekaro, kandhaj maaryo baap.*

The above poetry by Karnidan is a satire to the *kul* of both Jodhpur and Jaipur state. Charan Karnidan says that “what should I say about both of you. Nobody is less, because Amber’s Maharaja killed his son Shiv Singh and the brother of Maharaja Abhay Singh (Bakht Singh) of Jodhpur killed their father Ajit Singh for the sake of gaining or retaining power. It is difficult to under-rate either of you.”<sup>65</sup>

Charan Karnidan fearlessly spoke about the two big clans of Rajasthan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the court in front of everybody. The rulers could not do anything and just remained silent at this comment by Karnidan. It is interesting to study the satirical poetry that Karnidan composed for Bakht Singh after he killed his father Maharaja Ajit Singh of Jodhpur:

*Bakhta bakht bahira kyun maryo ajmaal  
Hindwani ro sevro, turkani ro saal  
Pratham taat mariyo, maat jivati jalai  
Asi thar aadmi, hatya jyari pan aayi  
Kar gaado iklaas, beg Jai Singh bulayo  
Meti dhram marjad, bharam gaanth ro gamayo  
Kaviyana huut keva kare, dhara udak levan dhari  
Bakht si jalam paya pache, kisi baat aachi kari.*

Karnidan criticizes Bakht Singh for killing his father. Karindan says “that you will always do malevolent work. You killed the protector of Hindus and a fighter against the Muslims.” He further says that “you are born for no good work! You killed your father first and later your mother also died as sati. You are also responsible for those eighty four women who committed sati on the funeral pyre of Ajit Singh. You befriended Amber’s Maharaja Jai Singh and therefore lost your dharma and respect.

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<sup>65</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal, Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p .301.

You have made all the poets your enemies and dared to resume all their jagirs and grants. You should be ashamed of yourself!”<sup>66</sup>

Therefore by extolling the virtues of a good ruler and satirizing those who were bad, the charan expressed both their loyalty and angst. He legitimised the ruler by handing him down for posterity by a genre of songs and poems that reflected the accolades of the ruler and his clan. On the other hand he also made sure that the rulers like Bakht Singh go down in history as an undesired ruler because of his deeds.

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The Charan was the Voice of the Desert and the soul of medieval history of the Rajputs. On the basis of various manuscripts available it can be said that although this literary tradition had emerged much earlier, most of it was penned down from 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. There was a prolific increase in the number of charans and their literature in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> centuries; evident from the rise of *khyats* and other related literature. Norman P. Zeigler opined that this was an adaptive response engendered by the need to re-interpret and re-emphasize the traditional values, ranks and Rajput ideals in a society that was vehemently responding to Muslim conquest and domination (Mughal rule).

Moreover besides this, there was also a concern to control territory and their claims to legitimate authority within areas of Rajasthan itself. As the Mughals asserted their dominance in the Marwara and over Rajasthan as a whole, there was a need to gain their legitimacy back, by emphasizing their traditional virtues. The mid 17<sup>th</sup> century *khyata* and *vigata* of Marwara were produced in the final form after nearly a century of Mughal rule. It seems clear that they were a result of a conscious process set in motion early in Mughal period to collect both traditions of the past and official state documents to support just such claims to ancestral domains. For example the chronicles of representations made to Mughal emperors by rulers of Marwara support this conclusion. These chronicles served a double purpose of justifying claims to position and rank on a local level among Rajputs themselves, and of providing evidence through a collected and organized body of traditions for presentation to outside authorities.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 302.

<sup>67</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, pp. 134-135.



All the major Rajput ruling families patronized court poets who composed *khyats*, or histories of their lineages. According to Joshi, such *khyats*, became increasingly important for Rajput ruling families in the 16<sup>th</sup> century since they were a means to establish the history of a noble's family ancestry at the Mughal courts.<sup>68</sup> Ziegler, however, points out that Charan texts were as much for internal consumption as for external, since "they are concerned not only with ancestry, but also with rank and caste order, right to control local territory, and with values and customs of the Rajputs, many of the latter of which were under challenge."<sup>69</sup>

According to Ziegler, 17<sup>th</sup> century chronicles studied by him<sup>70</sup> "fulfil central social and political functions. Both the tales and the genealogies serve the broad political ends of the Rajput, in his defence of rank and rights to land obtained by conquest, grant or inheritance, and in his claims of legitimacy to positions of authority based on descent."<sup>71</sup>

The image that Rajput rulers sought to project of themselves involved the construction of elaborate genealogies and an image of the past that fed into an ethics for contemporary politics. For instance, utmost loyalty to the overlord is a central theme identified by Sreenivasan<sup>72</sup> in Padmini narratives composed in the same period by Oswal Jains under patronage of the rulers of Mewar. Similarly, Dursa Arha's Hinduan Dhani is also a composition in praise of his patron Rana Pratap.

Among the most important primary sources for the study of the social and cultural history of medieval Rajasthan (c. 1500-1800) where lives of the Rajputs were configured and represented, are the traditions, clan histories and genealogies of the Rajputs. The bardic literature is very rich in its contents which we find in prose as well as in verse. The bardic historical prose literature may be classified in various branches i.e. *Khyat*, *Vigat*, *Pidhiavali*, *Vat*, *Vachanika*, *Davavait*, *Hal*, *Ahwal*, *Haqiqat*, *Yadadasta*, *Vamshavali*, *Vigat*, *Tahakikat* etc.<sup>73</sup> They are written predominantly in Dingal *bhasa* or Western Rajasthani. They represent a segment of a

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<sup>68</sup> Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among the Rajputs*, (Jaipur, 1995), p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> Norman. P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*, review 13, April – June, 1976, p. 235.

<sup>70</sup> For a detailed description of manuscripts studied by him see *Ibid*, pp. 246-250.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 237.

<sup>72</sup> Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen – Heroic Past in India c.1500 – 1900*, (USA, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p. 1.

wider body of Rajasthani literature in both prose and poetry which has its base in oral tradition and which is preserved and transmitted in Rajasthan by Charan, Bhats, Rao, Motisars and other specialist castes. The heroic deeds of the princes and the warriors of various states in Rajasthan, their valour, courage, sacrifice and patriotism together with many such noble qualities presented a popular theme for the writers. They composed songs in their praise and immortalized their names and fame in the literary creations.

Ziegler's work on Marvari historical chronicles lists the *bat*, *khyat*, *vigat*, *pidhiavalli*, and *vamsavalli*, all written predominantly in the Dingal language, which according to the *Mardumshumari* was especially suited for the expression of *vir rasa* or heroic ethics. All of the above genres appeared as major literary forms only in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>74</sup>

Some genres such as the *bat* were in prose form whereas others followed particular metres which were aimed at powerful and effective delivery. Ziegler characterizes *bat* as an 'inspirational biographical narrative'<sup>75</sup>, relating the life story of an important individual, such as the founder or leader of a particular clan (*kul*) or episodes in his life which were seen to be of consequence. For example, *Rao Jodha-ri-Vat*, *Rao Sathal-ri-Vat*, *Raoji Amar Singhji-ri-Vat* etc. Some even take the form of a diary of events, often with dates included. This is particularly true of *batam* (tales) of more recent origin, indicating influence from official written records. *Batam* was also concerned with the presentation of important events, such as battles, the settlement of hostilities (*vair*) between clans, and marriage alliances. *Batam* narratives often included partial genealogies around which events depicted in the text were structured. According to Ziegler, the recitation of *Batam* was dominated by specialized members of the Maru Charan caste that had hereditary attachments to particular Rajput groups. Recitations are said to have taken place in Rajput households frequently, as well as on religious occasions and important events.<sup>76</sup>

Such recitations would reiterate the patron's rank and status in front of his kinsmen and while the above mentioned genres contained elements of genealogies; *pidhiavalli*

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<sup>74</sup> Norman. P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *JESHR*, review 13, April – June, 1976, p. 233.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 221.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 221.

and *vasmavalli* were specifically geared towards maintenance of genealogies. *Pidhiavalli* were maintained by Bhats, and were kept in large *bahis*, or registers, and considered property of the Bhats themselves. They were recited periodically when Bhats would visit families for whom they kept genealogies in order to record new births, deaths and marriages.<sup>77</sup> Bhats were referred to in matters of adoption, inheritance or defence of rights to land.

*Vasmavalli* were kept by the families themselves and were maintained by genealogists who visited the home of their patrons in order to make new entries. According to Ziegler, *Vasmavalli* were kept by especially important and powerful households and were more elaborate than *Pidhiavalli*. Apart from lines of male descent, they contained information leading back to the founders of particular lineages, as well as events that occurred in past family members' lives that were deemed to be important. *Vasmavalli* contained short biographical sketches of distant ancestors as well and in many cases dated information on grants of land, battles, and the service of local rulers. *Khyat* and *Vigat* were derivatives and elaboration.

*Khyat* was concerned with the history of a particular clan or lineage such as for instance the Rathors of Marwar and could comprise of a collection of *batam* and *pidhiavalli*. These *khyats* gives us biographical data of the princes and the history of dynasty. These *khyats* were of 2 types – the court *khyats* and the *khyats* which were known after the name of persons who wrote them. The court *khyats* were written under the supervision of the state. *Jodhpur-ra– Rathoron-ri-Khyats* is an example of a court *khyat*. A number of *khyats* on individual rulers are also available viz. *Maharaja Ajit Singhji-ri-Khyat*, *Maharaja Abhaya Singhji-ri-Khyat* and so forth. The *khyats* which are known after the name of their writers may be quoted as *Muhta Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, *Bankidas-ri-Khyat*, *Dayaldas-ri-Khyat* etc. According to Ziegler the oldest extant *Khyat* in Rajasthan, the *Nainsi-ri-Khyat* can be dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>78</sup>

Women's role loses much of its vitality in the written version of the origin tales in the bardic literature that gets metamorphosed into a repetitive, male centred and male-defined account of battles, warriors and kings. However there are few tales that

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 227.

<sup>78</sup> Norman. P. Ziegler. 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*. review 13, April – June, 1976, pp. 227-231.

narrate how the female ancestor ensured the preservation of the next generation. One such origin story is *Nainsi-ri- Khyat*, a seventeenth century bardic chronicle about the origins of the Sisodiya Rajputs. Here the female ancestor's function in the story is not simply the begetting of a son. She comes to life as a character after her husband's death. The *khyat* focuses largely on her actions and speeches as she takes refuge with some Brahmins and uses her resourcefulness and power of persuasion to convince the Brahmins to take care of her child after her death. This story of origin celebrates the survival of the female ancestor much more than the male founder of the Sisodiya clan, and indicates that the *khyat* was a genre in which women did not simply appear as passive daughters and son-bearing wives.<sup>79</sup>

The *Vigat* was a source of information for understanding the life of the people of that age. In other words it was a sort of gazetteer. The most important example of *Vigat* is *Marwar-Ra-Pargana-Ri-Vigat* (1664 A.D.) by Nainsi, the Abul Fazal of Rajasthan. The *Vigat* dealt with the seven parganas – Jodhpur, Sojat, Jaitaran, Phalodi, Merta, Siwana and Pokaran. The early history of these parganas as given by Nainsi may not be authentic, but reliability in its account increases as we approach Nainsi's own time.

The *Vachanika* was another very important branch of bardic prose literature. They also deal with some important events of the lives of princes, warriors, saints etc. Like *Kavyas* we find in them rhymes in phrases or sentences used. In these *vachanikas* bards also make use of an *Alankar* (metre) called *vanasagai*, a term which literally means 'affinity of words'. There are a few famous *vachanikas*, viz. *Achaldas Khichi-Ri-Vachanika* (*Shivdas*), *Ratan Singh Mahesadasota-ri-Vachanika* by Khiriya Jagga etc.

Tessitori researched on this *vachanika* and according to him it is amongst the most popular bardic works of Rajputana. Jagga (Jagamal) in his work deals with the exploits of Ratan Singh the Raja of Ratlam, kindred of Maharaja Jaswant Singh I of Jodhpur. Ratan Singh met a glorious death in the battle of Ujjain in V.S. 1715. This battle was fought between Maharaja Jaswant Singh and the combined forces of Aurangzeb and Murad, the sons of Shah Jahan. Interesting information that we get in

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<sup>79</sup> Rashmi Dube, Renu Dube, Reena Dube., 'A Poetics of Resistance: Investigating the Rhetoric of the Bardic Historians of Rajasthan' in Shail Mayaram, M.S.S Pandian, Ajay Skaria (eds.), *Subaltern Studies XII, Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*, (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 265-67.

this *vachanika* is, when Jaswant Singh realized that Aurangzeb would win the battle of Ujjain, on the advice of the sardars he left the battlefield and shifted loyalties. This act of desertion clearly shows to what extent the Rathore rulers depended on the imperial monarchy. To be with the loser would have endangered even his own position as a Rathor ruler which depended not much on the clan support any longer as on the imperial favours. It is in this context that the sacrifice of Ratan Singh was cherished and exalted even more. He became a hero because he was guided by his own traditional sense of *Dharma* and *Kartavya* (duty) as against those Rathors who threw their fate with the groupings of imperial court and were guided by the desires to retain the high position enjoyed in the imperial hierarchy.<sup>80</sup> The author was an eyewitness to this battle.

Jagga also praises Ratan Singh's Ranis (queens) for committing Sati thereby maintaining the tradition and value system. Jagga also includes '*shringar rasa*' in his poetry while describing the way the queens of Ratan Singh dress up before committing sati. There are many personality traits of Ratan Singh that we discover from this *vachanika*. This creation is one of the greatest contributions to the Dingal literature.<sup>81</sup> However Tessitori remarked that the above tradition is interesting, but hardly contains any truth. There seems to be confusion with regards to two Jagos mentioned in the manuscripts. One who was killed in the battle and the other who wrote the *vachanika*. The name of the former was given by all Jodhpur chroniclers in the list of killed, so there can be no doubt that he fought in the ranks of Jaswant Singh. But our Jago of the *vachanika* must have been a servant of Ratan Singh of Ratlam.<sup>82</sup>

*Jhulana* has been a popular verse form or *chhand* in Rajasthan and we have a number of *Jhulana* compositions by the charan poets. For example, *Raja Man Singhji-ra-Jhulana* by Dursa Arha is a remarkable composition for the sheer richness of similes drawn from nature, mythology and historical traditions. Man Singh's extraordinary achievements have been described by the poet, albeit with exaggeration and we may admit that the bard's hyperboles fail to conceal that they are hyperboles. Raja Man Singh's strong unpretentious personality, his devotion to his religion and cultures, his

<sup>80</sup> Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal, Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, p. 33.

<sup>81</sup> Jagmohan Singh Parihar. *Madhyakaaleen Charan Kavya*, (Jodhpur, 1979), pp. 80-82.

<sup>82</sup> For detail explanation and description of the *vachanika* refer to L. P. Tessitori, *Vachanika Rathore Ratan Singhaji ri Mahesadasota ri, Khiriya Jaga ri Kahi*, part I : Dingala Text with Notes and Glossary (Bibliotheca Indica, 1917).

military exploits from Kabul to Bengal, his wisdom in all he did and said deeply impressed his contemporaries, including the bards.<sup>83</sup>

With regard to *geets*, the charans did not compose it for vocal music but for declamation and spirited recital in assemblies to fill the listener with a peculiar feeling of thrill and enthusiasm.<sup>84</sup> Here I would like to highlight about Dursa Arha who was one of the greatest poets of medieval times in India. He was famous for his *geets*, *chappaya*, *Jhulana*, *dohas* etc. that mirrored the contemporary feelings about Mahrana Pratap, Akbar, Rao Surtan and others.

Dursa Arha wrote in praise of Rao Surtan as well, who was an intrepid freedom loving ruler and also braved the Mughal hostility. He was highly respected by Rana Amar Singh, who advanced Bari Pol to receive the celebrated Charan poet.<sup>85</sup> He was receiver of *Lakh Pasao*<sup>86</sup> and *Crore Pasao*<sup>87</sup> and was one of the richest charan poets in the medieval period.

There is one special type of composition in bardic literature called *Pawada* which may be taken as synonym of ballads. The famous *pawada* is that of Pabuji Rathor commonly known as *Pabuji-Ra-Pawada*. It was composed by Vithu Meho. Pabu met a glorious death at the hands of Khichi Jida Rav while trying to rescue some cows owned by a Charan women (Deval), stolen by the latter. Smith notes that the agent in the Pabuji narrative is not the hero but the Charan Goddess, 'it is Deval who makes the story happen'. Bharucha corresponds this oral epic to a specific agricultural zone. The oral epic of Pabuji is located in the bajra zone which is a cattle breeding area rather than an agricultural zone. Further he mentions that Pabu story is sung with the accompanying instrument called ravanhattha (fiddle).<sup>88</sup>

Pabuji himself was a Rajput prince; he is widely worshipped as a deity by Rebari herdsmen, charans and others throughout Rajasthan countryside. The text on Pabuji was originally written by the Charans and not the Nayaks. The language in which the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>84</sup> K. R. Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, 1971, p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> Mohan Lal Jigyasu, *Charan Sahitya Ka Itihas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Jodhpur, 1968) p. 141.

<sup>86</sup> *Lakh pasao*: Total honour amounting one lakh to charans by the state in form of cash, land, cattle, horses etc.

<sup>87</sup> *Crore pasao*: Total honour amounting one crore to charans by the state in form of cash, land, cattle, horses etc.

<sup>88</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan An Oral History. Conversation with Komal Kothari*, (Delhi, 2003), pp. 91-92.

epic is composed is archaic in some respects. It is known from a statement of Muhta Nainsi that bhopos of Pabuji were well established as early as the early sixteenth century, and it seems likely enough that these bhopos too were epic singers. The depiction of the epic is through the par- method of narrative depiction. The par painter comes from the Joshi community. The par of Pabuji is just a narrative depiction. The story of Pabuji presents the hero as something of a brigand: he rustles livestock, engages in blood feuds and does battle with the enemies and rivals.<sup>89</sup> The epic is presented in the form of re-telling of Ramayana where Pabuji is the Rama. He points out that there is a process of legitimization in the inclusion of classical references in the oral epic. According to Bharucha the real reason why Pabu is worshipped has nothing to do with his association with Rama as such, but with his very direct intervention and impact on life's manifold problems and through possible solution and blessings. Despite Pabuji's interventionist capacity, Bharucha says that there is no reason to assume that the cult surrounding him has emerged out of the death and subsequent deification of an actual 'bhomiya', a real historical figure whose identity remains unknown. There are far too many unverifiable historical factors here that beg the question of history itself. Alf Heltebeitel claims that it is fundamentally flawed in its 'rationalized and historicized hermeneutic'.

Pabu's performance is invariably staged to mediate a particular problem faced by a family or community. It is also performed as an offering – for instance, if a man's cows have fallen ill, or if he has no children, or if he is facing a legal problem, or if his family wishes to ward off an evil spirit. In such situations, Pabu's story can be rendered to appease the gods for solving human problems.<sup>90</sup> There are many interpretations and depictions of *pawada* of Pabuji by different bhopos all over Rajasthan. Through the depiction of the life of Pabuji the bhopos depict the social and moral value system and traditions like courage, *vairshodhan*, giving refuge and protection, cattle protection, following women's duties, sati etc.<sup>91</sup>

Another important theme that the bards chose to write was poetry for setting and valorizing the ideal value system for the women by valorizing sati. They in this way acted as the preservers and transmitters of value systems to one generation after

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<sup>89</sup> For detail information refer to John D Smith, *The epic of Pabuji*, (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 1-52.

<sup>90</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan An Oral History, Conversation with Komal Kothari*, 2003, pp. 104-117.

<sup>91</sup> Pratap Singh Rathore, 'Pabuji Rathore Aur Unse Sambandhit Rajasthani Sahitya', *Maru Bharti*, April 1987, no. 1, pp. 26-33.

another through their oral poetry. Varsha Joshi in her book reflects on this role of Charans. As the court bards, charans prepared the psychological ground for this by providing a suitable ideological rationale and made it a strong model of female chastity by identifying this with *pativarta dharm*. By valorizing the act, they transformed self immolation into a heroic sacrifice and effectively linked it to the honour and prestige of women's natal and conjugal clans. Through their forceful poetry, the charans conditioned Rajput women from their childhood to accept and even welcome immolation by glorifying it as *sati*. They portrayed it as an ideal for Rajput women, and sacred *kulreet*. By eulogizing previous *satis*, they inspired subsequent generations of Rajput women. In one of the poems of Suryamal Mishan, a wife says to her husband:

I aspire to become *sati*. If you run away from the battlefield and return home like a coward, with whom will I become *sati*? If you have any hesitation in mind, send me to my father's house, at least then I will be saved from seeing the face of a coward.<sup>92</sup>

Women were powerless to resist this custom as the charans had created such hype about it. In one of the cases, Akhayraj Sonagra's two wives who did not commit *sati* with their husband, a charan who visited their village six months after their husband's death, recited a couplet for them, which said:

Jeta and Kupa are having luxurious dinners and are living very proudly.  
Sonagra who is without his wife, poor man, has to cook his own bread!

Both the queens immediately immolated themselves.<sup>93</sup> Such was the power of charan's poetry. They connected *sati* with *pativarta* and *suhag* of women. Therefore it is quite evident that the charans ingrained values and customs in the Rajput society.

Very often we think that it was because of the charan and his poetry that the practices like *sati* and female infanticide took shape and momentum in Rajasthan. Dube in her article suggested a subtle co relation between the treatment of elite Rajput daughters and the treatment of bardic castes in Rajasthan. Critiquing Brown's view<sup>94</sup>, Dube opines that in feudal Rajput society, daughters and bards enhanced the father's

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<sup>92</sup> Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among the Rajputs*, (Jaipur, 1995), p. 152.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>94</sup> Brown suggests a Rajput marriage inheres in portraying the father as bonding with his daughter on the occasion of her marriage while 'rueing' the event of her birth.



prestige: the former's marriage secured prestigious alliances for the father and the brother; the latter's presence at the marriage helped to circulate far and wide the news of the prestigious marriage spectacle through ballad and song. Traditionally the hospitality and gifts meted out to the bard on marriage occasions were not only part of the feudal obligation of gift giving in *dana*, additionally it was also an index of fatherly benevolence towards his daughter. A handsome dowry to the daughter inevitably meant generous gifts to the assembled bards. Dube further inferred that it was this complex interdependence that the bard functioned as the watchdog for daughter's right. The Bhats and the Charans fulfilled their pro-daughter function through the bardic genre of memorizing and praising every item of the dower. Contrary to Brown's assertion, she believes that the bardic satire is far more likely to satirize the father on behalf of the daughter. There is a curious symmetry between the increase of female infanticide in the nineteenth century and the obsolescence of the bardic function in Rajasthan in communities. When daughters became disposable in elite Rajput clans, the bards also became inconvenient.<sup>95</sup>

However interestingly we find references in the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahi* records of latter half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, where the state strictly limits the amount that a charan could take as gifts and *neg* during a Rajput daughter's wedding. This was done because; it seemed that there was mass scale practise of female infanticide among the Rajputs because of the heavy *neg* that they had to give, which they many a times could not afford. In 1774 AD, the state ordered in the Bhela pargana of Jodhpur that whenever any marriage takes place, the Rajputs are required to pay *neg* at the rate of Rs 25/- per thousand rupees of estimated revenue of the marriage. Adjustments were also to be made according to increase and decrease of estimated revenue. All the charans had given an undertaking that if any charan makes illegal demand in contravention of the rule, then he will be out casted. Instruction was also given to the Rajput that; if they indulged in female infanticide then no charan will accept *neg* from him. If he killed his daughter, then he should be ostracized from the region.<sup>96</sup> Therefore we see that there was state intervention in these issues aiming to limiting charan's exactions and also curbing female infanticide. It is more probable that

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<sup>95</sup>Rashmi Dube, Renu Dube, Reena Dube., 'A Poetics of Resistance: Investigating the Rhetoric of the Bardic Historians of Rajasthan' in Shail Mayaram, M.S.S Pandian, Ajay Skaria (eds.), *Subaltern Studies XII, Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*, (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 232-234.

<sup>96</sup> *JSPB 14*, April, VS 1831/ AD 1774, f 301B.

although the charan never directly promoted the practise of female infanticide however because of his greed for more *neg* at the time of daughter's marriage, pressurized the Rajputs to kill their daughters to avoid the burden of their marriage since by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the material status and wealth had deteriorated among different levels of the Rajput community. It is evident that despite state's measures for controlling the charans and the practise of female infanticide, this cruel practise continued for long.

The piling of praise and flattery is only a preamble for the rhetorical unmasking of the bardic historians. When the bard sang *raso*, he did not invariably lull his audience to pleasant nostalgia about idealized visions of chivalric past of Rajasthan. The bard stimulated audiences to ponder the question of values in relation to the true Rajput ideals for men and women. Thus far from simply functioning as a tool for flattering the patron, there is sternness and majesty in the praise poem at its best. Similarly, Satire as a rhetorical mode had a distinctive function in the bardic writings. According to Bhartendu Harishchandra, a 19th century nationalist, satires were directed against the ruling classes in order to make them recognise their political responsibilities. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century charans used satires as a nonviolent tool for accomplishing various purposes. This worked in Rajasthan because politics of reputation played a crucial role, for which a ruler or a lay could do anything. For a good reputation in the present and future, Rajput rulers did everything possible to seek praises and not satirical comments from the charans. Bardic genres like the *bhumd*<sup>97</sup> were characterized as forms of blackmail through which the bard extorted money from his patron. Charans were not parasitic dependents but constituted a semi autonomous caste of hereditary retainers. They derived their autonomy from a network of reciprocal duties and obligations between the community as a whole and a caste with traditions of literacy and service.<sup>98</sup>

A good deal of manoeuvrability was employed in the bardic recitation and narratives. The story may be simple and brief but the creative and imaginative way that the bard told determined its popularity. The bards were more than fillers and entertainers.

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<sup>97</sup> *Bhumd* is a specialized form of ridicule in poetic metre, which is recited only.

<sup>98</sup> See C. Von Furer- Haimendorf, 'The Historical Value of Indian Bardic Literature', in C. H. Phillips (ed.) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, (London, 1967), pp. 80-90. Rajendra Joshi, 'Charans: The Contextual Dynamics of Caste in the Rajput System (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century)' in N. K. Singhi & Rajendra Joshi (eds.) *Religion, Ritual and Royalty*, 1999.

Zeigler observed that 'the primary media through which young Rajputs were traditionally educated', and as an educational tool the tales gave the community a sense of their history and schooled (them) in the moral values of their fathers; and tutored (them) in their future roles in society.<sup>99</sup>

The above discussed Bardic Literature was used by most of late medieval chroniclers in the compilation of their works. To begin with the 17<sup>th</sup> century writer Nainsi wrote his *khyat* and *vigat* largely on the basis of the bardic accounts and references. Similarly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century James Tod based his work entirely on the basis of the information furnished by charan poets. There are similar innumerable accounts of medieval as well as modern day scholars who based large part of their writings on the oral literature provided by the charans. Bardic literature encompassed almost every aspect of life in Rajasthan. Although these cannot strictly be regarded as the genuine books of history (with few exceptions), but at the same time they do provide us with certain historical data. They were mostly conceived by their authors not as historical texts, but primarily as medium for showing their literary skill and ingenuity and thus to receive approbations from their masters or patrons. Nevertheless charan literature is capable of giving an insight into the underlying deeper developments and the dynamics of change.

A. K. Forbes expressed the opinion that whereas the bardic accounts are accurate in so far as they reflect social conditions, they are very defective in so far as chronological sequence is concerned.<sup>100</sup> According to Haimendorf, neither Forbes nor Tod, whose works are largely based on bardic literature, undertook a critical analysis of their sources. Such analysis is contained in Tessitori's work that makes a distinction between bardic poetry and the prose chronicles of Rajasthan. The historical poems and commemorative songs fall directly or indirectly within the former section and these are almost exclusively the production of bards such as the charans and the bhats. The prose chronicles, on the other hand, are to a very large extent not the production of the bards and can be divided into categories: chronicle proper (*khyats*) and genealogies. The *khyats* emanated as a result of influence from the court of Akbar.

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<sup>99</sup> Norman P. Zeigler, 'The Seventeenth Century Chronicles of Marvara: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Traditions in Western India' in David Henige (ed.), *History of Africa : A Journal of Method*, vol III. 1976, pp. 129-30.

<sup>100</sup> C. Von Furer- Haimendorf, ' The Historical Value of Indian Bardic Literature ', in C. H. Phillips (ed.) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, (London, 1967), p. 89.

Tessitori emphasizes that the only people who could have compiled such historical records are the prince's officials, the *Pancholis* and *Mahajans*, collectively known as the *mutsaddis*. Only they could write correctly and view the facts objectively. They were trained in business transactions and methodical accurate work, whereas the bards had never had a reputation for orthographical and intelligible writing.<sup>101</sup>

While critiquing the Bardic literature, Tessitori said:

The charans have at all time been great masters of forgeries: they have invented wonderful stories and to arm ~~them~~ some kind of sanction, have often documented them with apocryphal testimonial sayings. Had the charans been as clever as they are wily, they would have clad their counterfeits in a garb of probability, thereby making detection difficult but fortunately for us and for history; they have always lacked the sense of discrimination between possible and impossible.....<sup>102</sup>

Tessitori's view is not unfamiliar but we must understand that a charan was not an 'objective' historian, but a seer, a guardian of legend and a conserver of tradition. As a seer, he was not a conscious manipulator of 'truth' or 'historical reality', but a preserver of truth and reality of what he saw.<sup>103</sup> Although the charan literary sources present many chronological and contextual problems, nonetheless they do contain a significant body of 'objective' data for reasonably accurate historical reconstruction. Among the other information, they provide us with social and cultural data, capable of providing insights into a range of important questions regarding caste interactions and ranking, the nature of local legitimacy and authority, the changing structure of political loyalties over time and many others. The oral tradition, folk aesthetics expressions and local cultural practices reveal diversity of Rajasthan and also highlight subaltern histories which have a significant bearing on the contemporary life. A systematic study of the historical data can be based on the epics and poems of a large number of bards of as many castes as possible. While the biases and distortions are present, they by no means render these Rajasthani materials unusable. Infact these biases and distortions in themselves comprise an important body of data. Because of their oral nature, these materials do present events and ideas in an idiom compatible with the expectations of a contemporary, sixteenth and seventeenth century

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>102</sup> Tessitori, "A Progress Report on the work done during the Year 1917....." p. 48.

<sup>103</sup> Norman P. Zeigler, 'The Seventeenth Century Chronicles of Marvara: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Traditions in Western India' in David Henige (ed.) *History of Africa: A Journal of Method*, vol III, 1976, p. 137.

audience.<sup>104</sup> They fulfil the broad political ends, the social function and the establishment of the ideal society in Rajasthan. Therefore the sources demand a careful handling. Not every aspect available maybe useful. Handling of the oral traditions requires an appropriate methodology and an appropriate technique of analysis. Myths, legends, proverbs and maxims may not be as factual as believed to be. It would be difficult to hypothesize the phenomenon on face value. The data sources will have to be clubbed with the already existing knowledge of social institutions and social life.

There are many works on the charan literature for which they were famous however we can see that there is hardly any initiative to enter the invisible space in the life of charans by analysing those sources that represents the life world of its subjects. The writings of the charans suffer from lack of objectivity and exaggerated accounts. Nevertheless through careful examination of oral and written sources that intersect and interpenetrate, we can understand the collective psychology of the charans and thereby reconstruct the value system and inter personal tensions among different castes and communities. Even in the societies in which the written word occupies a dominant place, documents tell us little about the groups further removed from power, generally speaking, then oral accounts provide a wider window on day to day life, layers of social life (e.g. Domestic life, emotional life, family, legal and illegal activities, clandestine political activities etc) and can therefore call into question or enrich institutional history. Their contents may relate to personal experience, popular tradition and adjoin myth which is no longer an enemy of history.<sup>105</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks:**

In the quest for legitimacy, the Rajputs did everything possible for pleasing the Charans and the charan gave his utmost loyalty to his patron Rajput. This intimate relationship is highlighted by the chronicles of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What the charans did for the state is evident in the fact that everything centred on legitimising every aspect of the Rajput life through poetry and literature. Charans could make or unmake reputations and had no qualms about subjecting their less than liberal employers to ridicule: speech turned to venom, and panegyric to satire. It is

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<sup>104</sup> Norman P. Zeigler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicle: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *IESHR*, April-June, no. 2, 1976, p. 237.

<sup>105</sup> Jean-Pierre Wallot, Normand Fortier, 'Archival Sources & Oral Sources' in *The Oral history Reader* by Robert Perks & Alistair Thomson (eds.), (Routledge, 1998), pp. 365-378.

clear that there is enormous research done on the Bardic literature however; the charans as individuals who penned this genre of literature are not looked into sufficiently. This chapter broadly discussed the origin, social structure of the charans along with their function as legitimisers and transmitters of culture and knowledge. The charans indeed were an important part of the Rajput system. This is widely accepted and written about.

Many works based on chronicles and other primary sources highlight this obvious relationship between the charan and the Rajput. For example the respect that charan women got is something that we take it for given and there is no further discussion in the chronicles but to our surprise there were many issues that these charan women were battling with in their daily life. It was not that their rights and honors can be taken for granted because as we engage in other primary sources like the *bahi* petition records, there are many voices of charan women who petitions to the state on various concerns and illegal interventions. How do we then bridge this gap of respect, honor on one hand and charan women as petitioners on the other? There is a huge dichotomy in the information that we get from the chronicles and that from the *bahi* document. Similarly clearly the charans were receivers of many benefits and respect from the Rajput; however to get a nuanced view about whether they got these privileges unopposed and in terms of absolute rights over it, is not very clear in the chronicles. These issues get reflected in the *bahi* records which are like the 'follow ups' of the state orders. And here, we can say that it was not a smooth cake-walk for the charans. While, it was fine, when orders from the state of giving respect and indiscriminate rights to the charans was concerned, as evident in the chronicles. But when it actually came down to the implementation levels, there were many issues that were involved in. This gets clear and more nuanced when we engage in the *bahi* records that we aim to study in the next chapter.

The charans received respect from the state and were superior to other castes and communities nevertheless the state also had to function with respect to what is *wajib* (legitimate) for all the other castes. In this case the state's decision many a times conflicted with the rights of the charans and honors that they commanded. The position, power and privilege that the charans had in the Rajput state vis-a-vis their compatibility with the other elements of society will be the broad theme of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### SOCIOLOGY OF CHARAN POWER, POSITION AND PRIVILEGES

Power, position and privileges are phenomena that are quite inter-twined. The position and status of the charans in the Rajput society is evident from the ancient past. Different sources recognise and reiterate their dominant position in the society. This legacy became a tool with which Charans asserted their dominant position and right for power and privilege in the Marwar region and they were recognised by both the upper and lower strata of the society. Based on a study of chronicles in the last chapter, I had derived that it was because of the sacral position, that they enjoyed all these rights and privileges.

It is important, however to look at sources beyond the chronicles which just eulogise them and talk about their high status and privileges. In this chapter I will critically examine the aspects of power, privilege and position in the social lives of charans by using a different genre of source material on charans and see how far they confirm, corroborate or contradict the perceptions created by court chronicles. I am referring to court records collated in the *bahi* documents that reflect different layers of meanings and connotations with regards to the position, privilege and powers of the charans. These documents in form of petition records do reflect on their high status in the Rajput society along with nuanced details that help us understand the problems that they had to face vis-a-vis these privileges that they received from the state. Power cannot be given to anyone in absolute terms. Where we draw a line to limit and restrict these privileges becomes important for peaceful coexistence in any society. This gets highlighted with our study of the petition records where the petitioner was a charan. We find innumerable cases where charans appealed in the state *kachedi* for (*wajib*) justice. The issues that concerned him get reflected in these petition records. These issues were often related to his privileges, which came in conflict or were encroached. Our understanding of charans becomes more nuanced once we focus on these records that highlight their relations with the Rajput overlords and also with other communities. It is interesting to see the difference in perspective in the chronicles vis-a-vis the petition records. We can say that these *bahis* offer 'extended information' or 'follow ups' on the status of charans as it actually was in society.

Another very important point that needs consideration is that since the writers of the state chronicles were generally charans who were engaged by the state, we can see that the context in which charans are mentioned are always from the perspective of powerful, praiseworthy and influential. Apart from this, in terms of their actual behaviour and position in the society, there is no reference. To bridge this gap and to bring alive the social history of the charans, we must engage with issues that they faced in their daily lives. I seek to explore this in the course of this chapter.

### *Genealogists and Recipients of Honours:*

As mentioned earlier, the Rajputs evolved a political system based on clan and kin relationships, hierarchy and loyalty (*swami dharma*) to the clan head. G. D. Sharma<sup>1</sup> elaborately talked about the *bhai bant* relationships between the Rajputs. Their entire political system depended on the unity of the clan, obedience to the clan chief, hierarchical subordination and ranking. The system could collapse with the loosening of these links. It was therefore necessary to back it with religious sanctity. Charans drew their power, position and privilege primarily from this requirement of the Rajput political and social culture. Genealogies had to be constructed to address these issues that emerge in Rajputana for the purpose of political pragmatism. Charans were concerned with formulation and representation of values, morals and norms which were appropriate in the changing context.

In an interesting study, A. M. Shah and R. G. Shroff highlight the importance of *Vahivancas* in the context of Gujarat who were parallel bards and genealogists like the Charans in Marwar. He suggests that a Rajput status in society depends on his position in genealogy of his lineage, whether he is a member of the ruling lineage in a state, or of a lineage holding *Talukdari* or *Wanta* estate (Rajput states in miniature). The genealogist is consulted at every succession dispute. No adoption can take place without consulting the genealogy. The genealogists were therefore indispensable for preservation of the Rajput political system. Even the British administrators kept detailed genealogical and historical records of Rajput states and estates. This

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<sup>1</sup> G. D. Sharma, *The Rajput Polity*. (New Delhi, 1977).



strengthened the position of the *Vahivanca's* caste.<sup>2</sup> The *Vahivanca* is not only a genealogist but also a mythographer, in order to make his book acceptable not only to his patron but also to the members of his occupation, he made use of a number of stories about Rajput heroes from different clans, which had come down to him from his ancestors. This gets easier for the bard as he's deep-rooted in the society and cultural legacy of his region. Charan had to reiterate the Rajput-Kshatriya model for his own survival. The relationship between them was mutual; both needed each other for their survival and legitimacy. If this model was not followed by the Rajputs, the charans often lost their patron. However because of the strong writing skills and written tradition, the charans never lost any of his patronage. They were completely embedded in Rajput society. The charan's genealogies provided proof of the antiquity for their patrons. Anyone who wanted to call himself a Rajput needed to show that he was a descendant of ancient Rajput dynasty, and it was only the Charan who was believed to be able to show this authoritatively. A Rajput's prestige as a member of his caste therefore depended on the Charan.

Nainsi's *Khyat* is replete with genealogies of a number of Rajput rulers; for instance, Charan Khiriya wrote the genealogy of Sisodiya Chundawat.<sup>3</sup> There is also evidence from Charan sources about various branches of different Rajput clans like Charan Jhule mentioned branches of Gehlot, Pawar, Chauhan and Solankis etc.<sup>4</sup> Charan Gokul Ratnu gave genealogy of the Bhatias in form of *bat*.<sup>5</sup> The Charan and the Bhat bards involved in frequent attendance to their patrons for updating the genealogical record and the *vahi* was in the words of A. K. Forbes, 'a record of authority by which questions of consanguinity are determined when marriages are sought and disputes relating to division of ancestral property are decided'. The bard at frequent intervals recited the genealogies and also entered fresh remarks which had occurred in the fortune of his patron.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. M. Shah & R. G. Shroff, 'The Vahivanca Barots Of Gujarat : A Caste Of Genealogists And Mythographers' in Milton Singer (ed.) *Traditional India: Structure and Change*. (Jaipur, 1975), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol I, 2006, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 88-90.

<sup>5</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol II, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> C. Von Furer- Haimendorf, 'The Historical Value of Indian Bardic Literature'. in C. H. Phillips (ed.) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, (London. 1967), p. 89.

There were in fact a number of groups engaged in the compilation of genealogies - the *Mardumshumari* enumerates several<sup>7</sup> - this indicates that Charans by no means had a monopoly on this kind of service. But they distinguished themselves through the cultivation of unique literary skills that enabled them to eulogize their patrons' past and present achievements in powerful literary modes, endowing them with a special status amongst genealogists. Through the articulation of certain norms of behaviour they performed an important function of embedding military and political culture in literary forms. However, though all Charan groups are said to have engaged in the production of Dingal literature to some degree, as Ziegler noted, only few, such as the Maru Charans, were able to pursue this as their primary occupation. Charans did not by any means represent a homogenous community, a fact which emerges clearly from the *Mardumshumari*. The text lists a large number of Charan groups following different customs and maintaining different origin myths, though all groups are said to have engaged in the production of verse in the Dingal language. Therefore the extreme desire and dependence for myth building and writing genealogies made the elites as well as the commoners vulnerable and weak in front of the charans, thereby strengthening latter's position both in the state and society.

There were groups such as the Rani-Munga Bhats who specialized in keeping records for the Ranis or the females in Rajput families and in turn would receive gifts exclusively from the Ranis. In many cases the text provides the origin myths of the group that establish their own legitimacy and link them to a particular patron community. For instance Rani-Munga Bhats maintain that their ancestor Hari Karan was made a Bhat by Sita, the consort of Ramchandra.<sup>8</sup> Even among groups that had cultivated the necessary skill for the keeping of records and genealogies a number of higher status Bhat and Charan groups in turn had their own dependent groups who kept their genealogies and provided them with services similar to the ones they provided for Rajput ruling elites.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charans, Bhats, Motisara, Rawal, Mirasi, and Dom are listed as the chief groups engaging in the compilation of genealogies. All of the above categories contain numerous subgroups often specializing in particular patron communities.

<sup>8</sup> Munshi Hardyal Singh, *The Castes of Marwar*, (Jodhpur, 1990), p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> A group called Motisars is said to have been patronized exclusively by Charans. They are said not only to keep Charan genealogies but also make the same kind of praise poems about them that Charans composed in honour of their Rajput patrons. They can also sing and compose poetry without being lettered, which marks them apart from the Charans. However, the *Mardumshumari* states that their poetry though composed entirely orally is reputed to be more powerful than the Charans.

The position of the charans as genealogists and mythmakers proved to be the primary reason for all the power and privileges they enjoyed. Their privileges unfolded in various forms which I would explore during the course of this chapter. They were indeed the closest associates of the Rajputs that gave them an edge over other castes and communities in Rajasthan.

The charans played crucial role not only in the lives of few Rajputs; rather they had made major contributions in the social and political formation of dynasties in Rajasthan. In the history of Marwar specially during the war of independence under the lead of great Durgadas sallied out of Jaswantpura to cover the flight of the infant Ajit, Charan Sandhu and Misan Ratan were among those who laid down their lives to pay the debt of salt of Jodhpur.<sup>10</sup> Another reference from the history of Marwar tells that when Raja Man Singh was being besieged at Jalore by the furious Maharana Bhim Singh, Charan Jugta who resided in the fort with the fugitive prince often went out of the fort in search of food and money to help his master. When these efforts did not suffice, he handed over all the ornaments of the females of his family to his master to defray his expenses.<sup>11</sup>

Due to close proximity of the charans who were among the closest associates of the Rajputs, sometimes the Rajput princes honoured distinguished charans by paying visits to their houses, and dined with them at their residence.<sup>12</sup> Their undisputed predominant position in the eyes of state and society is reflected in the fact that they were considered as Conservators. In this light, their evidence was always taken as the best in proof of claims to land that depends upon the descent of the party.<sup>13</sup> The political dynamics and the sociology of power as it played out between the charans and the state is interesting to explore as we observe the state's confidence and reliability on the words of charans. The *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahi* has several documents that suggest their role as a part of the *kasids*.<sup>14</sup> The state was in continuous interaction with the state appointed charan officials who worked in running of state

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<sup>10</sup> K. R. Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, (New Delhi, 1960), p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> R. P. Vyas, *Role of Nobility in Marwar*, (New Delhi, 1969), p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> Maharana visited the house of Kaviraja Shymaldas, *Vamsa Bhaskar Madhya Peethika*, pp. 52-53. Cited by R. P. Vyas, 'The Position of Charans in the Social Life of the Rajputs and other people', *Rajasthan History Congress*, 1978, vol XI, March 1970, Jaipur, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> John Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India including Malwa & Adjoining Provinces*, vol I, (Delhi, 2001), p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> *JSPB* 2, VS 1822/AD 1765, f. 116 B, case 719, 721.

administration. They were regularly informed through letters that were sent by the state to charans for advice and implementation through *kasids* (news runners). Several administrative *bahis* highlight charan's power in their correspondence with the state. It is interesting to know that many a times the petitions were recorded by charans who were recruited for the purpose of documentation. Many petitions are recorded by Barhat Karnidan, who was an important state official working in the court as well as the administration of Jodhpur.

State's active patronage was also visible in the court culture where special place of authority was designated for the charans and their honourable position in the hierarchy of state officials who served the king. Among the troupe of officials with the ruler while at the horse back, we notice charan and other advisors to the rulers are also following him, on the back of fine horses. Shyamaldas give details of all the officials who were present with the ruler outside the court.<sup>15</sup> The charans are treated by Rajputs with greatest respect; highest ruler rose when one of this class entered or left an assembly, and the Charan was invited to eat first at a Rajput feast. He smoked from the same *huqqa* as Rajputs, and only caste-fellows could do this, as smoke passed through water on its way to the mouth. In the past times the Charan acted as a herald, and his person was inviolable. He was addressed as *Maharaj*<sup>16</sup>, and could sit on the *Singhasan* or Lion's Hide, the ancient term for a Rajput throne, as well as on the hides of the tiger, panther and black antelope.<sup>17</sup> Celebrated charan poet of Jodhpur Karnidan commanded so much respect that when he came to Udaipur to seek an audience with the king, Maharana Sajjan Singh himself came down from his palace to receive him at the temple of Jagannath Rai situated at a distance about three hundred steps from the premises of the palace.<sup>18</sup> The court began with the recitation of poetry by the charan.<sup>19</sup> Balzani argued that the incorporation of individuals and groups in the *darbar* happened at various levels; all had *darsans* of the ruler and were incorporated in this fashion with those who were physically closer to the body of the ruler, received maximal *darsan*. By offering *nazar*, or in case of Brahmin and charans, its equivalent (Brahmins and charans did not have to pay *nazar*) those present at the *darbar* found a

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<sup>15</sup> Shyamaldas. *Vir Vinod* vol I, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> Great king, the ordinary method of address to Brahmins.

<sup>17</sup> R. V. Russel, and Hiralal. *The Tribes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol II, (Delhi, 1997), pp. 253-54.

<sup>18</sup> Shyamaldas, *Vir Vinod*, vol I, p. 178. Cited in Manohar Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature (with exclusive reference to the contribution of caranas)*, (Jaipur 1976), p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol I, p. 131.

second means of incorporation and finally the award and acceptance of honours distributed by the ruler again incorporated members of the darbar into a unified symbolically potent order.<sup>20</sup> The political culture that was prevalent in the Jodhpur state was therefore one which attributed respect and honour to charans in several ways and means.

The rhetoric of power is further seen coming into its full play when we see the state seeking advice from the charans while dealing with their own counterpart rulers or *bhaibant* relations. An interesting incidence is cited by Shymaldas, when once Maharana Kumbha got into the bad habit of repeating something again and again, because of which the state was troubled since their ruler was losing his sanity. It was the magical couplets recited by a charan that made the Maharaja stop with his habit of repeating, thereafter the Maharaja was pleased and he awarded him.<sup>21</sup> In this case even Maharaja Kumbha's son tried to correct his father, but his efforts were in vain. Therefore, it was in almost every aspect of the state and the ruler's life that charan was supportive and indispensable. Even decision making process of the state was supported by the charans who were consulted at various times. When Maharaja Ajit Singh had problems deciding on an important issue of the state, he sought consultation from the 3 famous charans of Jodhpur, Udaipur and Amber: Charan Dwarakdas Dawadhiya, Charan Ishwardas Bhada and Charan Devidan Gadan respectively who were summoned and decision was effectively taken on that important issue of the state.<sup>22</sup> There are several more evidences in different kinds of sources on Rajasthan that reflect and reaffirm the close association of the charans vis-a-vis their Rajput patrons. This increased the bargaining power of the charans in every issue that concerned them. The most crucial bond that was advantageous and made them privileged was their relation with the Rajputs, because of which their Power and Position in Rajasthan was utmost and incomparable.

Clearly, the entire community of charans were respected and by and large enjoyed material wealth. However, among a few distinguished bards the competition for the favors of local Raja and Thakuras was there. Few of the most prestigious charans were accepted in the royal *darbars*, attaining title of *Kaviraja* or court-laureate,

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<sup>20</sup> Marzia Balzani, *Modern Indian Kingship: Tradition, Legitimacy and Power in Rajasthan*, (USA, 2003), p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol I, pp. 333-34.

<sup>22</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part 2, pp. 771-72.

assuming position of greater influence because of the power of their words. They were also given the honorary title of *Barhata* (“guardian of the gate”).<sup>23</sup> The title of *Kaviraja* is a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon; however the title of *Barhata* was prevalent from quite some time. Barhut is the title of respect for the Maru charans. Respectable persons of the community were often addressed as ‘Barhutji’. This word is probably a corrupt form of ‘Dwarhut’ or insistence at the gate, which is reminiscent of the custom that the charans demanded gifts on the occasion of marriage from the bridegrooms of Rajput families at the chief portal of the palace. This title is equally justified by the courageous act of the charans who in the Medieval era of gallantry and heroism stood in the front row to receive the first blow of the sword at the gate of the fort when it was besieged by enemies.<sup>24</sup> This privilege was exclusively for the charans thereby increasing their position in the state and society. The institution of Kaviraja or Rajkavi (poet laureate) is of later growth. Only the ruling princes of the states in Rajasthan engaged them. Its origin seemed to be in desire of the princes to patronise and honour some Charans who excelled in their poetic talents and administrative acumen. The institution started in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and developed very rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the earliest instances of a Charan being appointed as Kaviraja is that of Bankidas.

Many references in the chronicles mention the entitlement of Barhut to important charans of the state. Maharana Rohadiya gave the title of Barhat to charan Lakha with lakhs of rupees and villages.<sup>25</sup> Charan Ratan was appointed as the Barhat of Devraj as he impressed the ruler.<sup>26</sup> Apart from knowing that Barhat was an important title, *JSPB* throws light on other important privileges that a Barhat enjoyed. State took special care of them by supporting them in their myriad activities. Sarwan<sup>27</sup> Sivdaan was appointed to accompany Barhat Karnidan for his work. The state orders that a salary (Rs 8 /-) for 2 months of the *Sarwan* will be borne by the state<sup>28</sup> Five *charwadaars*<sup>29</sup> belonging to the Mali and Jat communities were sent with the Barhat to accompany

<sup>23</sup> Norman P. Zeigler, ‘The Seventeenth Century Chronicles of Marvara: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Traditions in Western India’ in David Henige (ed.) *History of Africa : A Journal of Method*, Vol III, 1976, p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> Manohar Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature (with exclusive reference to the contribution of caranas)*, (Jaipur 1976), p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 270.

<sup>26</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol II, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Sarwan*: A person with bullocks cart and helps in transportation and movement.

<sup>28</sup> *JSPB* 1, 1821/1764 (September), f. 7A.

<sup>29</sup> *Charawadaar*: person who takes cattle for grazing.

him in his trading activity for 2 months. The allowances were to be paid by the state.<sup>30</sup> State not only assisted the Barhats with men, but also with cattle and horses for their trading activities. Barhats were both for the court purpose and the administrative work. A Barhat (name unknown) requested the state for assistance of five people with payment of Rs. 5/- per person, along with food and fodder for 5 horses till his trade in Merta. After that the Barhat said that he would manage on his own. State did approve of his request and met his demands.<sup>31</sup> In its jurisdiction the state ordered regional treasuries to issue money in form of *hundis* to the Barhats if need be. For instance, the state of Jodhpur ordered treasurer of Merta to issue *hundi* worth Rs. 250/- and 45/- cash (*naqadi*) to Barhat Padam Singh and Musharaf who would go together with him to purchase some trade item.<sup>32</sup> Although the charans as discussed in the first chapter were inviolable and sacral, state did provide for security of the Barhats. In Jalore, Barhat along with few men in the village was going to the local deity Babaji Jadecha, the state ordered deputation of 2- 3 men from the darbar for their security.<sup>33</sup>

Tax concessions and exemptions were also given to the Barhats. In Nagor, the state ordered that for the year 1765 A.D., the *chowdharbaab*<sup>34</sup> should be cancelled for the Barhat Amar Singh and the state official who went to collect the tax from the Barhat should be called back and the Barhat should not be troubled.<sup>35</sup> Position of the Barhat is also reflective in the instance where in the reign of Maharana Raj Singh, Barhat Charan Kesaridas was given honour of Tuladan<sup>36</sup> from the state.<sup>37</sup> Generally tuladan is honoured only to the ruler and his family. The above case is suggestive of the enormous power, position and privilege that the Barhat enjoyed in the Rajput state. It is also evident that in cases of disputes (as evident from the *bahi* records) the state was quite liberal with the Barhats. Any dispute or conflict in which any Barhat was involved, he generally escaped and state winded up the issue by ordering: *jo wajib ho woh kariye dijiyo*. Thus not giving any clear punishment or levying any fine (*gunehgari*) on the Barhat. The state was conscious and much aware of the position

<sup>30</sup> JSPB 1, 1821/1764 (September), f. 7A.

<sup>31</sup> JSPB 1, 1821/1764, f. 7B.

<sup>32</sup> JSPB 2, 1822/1765 (November), f. 39 B, case 269.

<sup>33</sup> JSPB 8, 1825/1768 (November), f. 114B.

<sup>34</sup> *Chowdharbaab*: Panchayati tax

<sup>35</sup> JSPB 2, 1822/1765 (December), f. 20 B, case 126.

<sup>36</sup> *Tuladan*: practise of weighing an honoured individual generally from the royal family against materials like coins, grains, jewellery etc. and then distributed among the poor to get their blessings.

<sup>37</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part I, p. 449.

and power of the charans and the repercussions in case of non compliance or opposition to their demands.

The difference of respect given to a Brahmin and a Charan was very clear. The respect attributed to a kshatriya or a charan was hereditary and was received by successive generations however the respect given to Brahmins, vaishyas and other communities was for lifetime.<sup>38</sup> Although we notice that the Brahmins were equally respected and were given great amount of honour and power in form of wealth, status and position.

According to Shymaldas, Barhat are those charans who are Polpat's of the Rajputs and took *neg* only from them, especially when they arrived at the time of marriage.<sup>39</sup> A Polpat remained totally attached to one royal family and did not accept to be the mendicant of any other Rajput family. The earliest reference to the institution of 'Polpat' is of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Rao Deo Raj of Jaisalmer appointed Ratnu Charan as his Polpat. Then, we notice its reference in the history of the Parihars. Nahar Deo Parihar of Mandore removed the Ashiya Charans from the Polpatship in 1043 A.D. as one of them killed his son Dhoomkunwar in a dispute which arose while playing 'Chaupar'. Maharao Surtan of Sirohi (1571-1610) appointed Arha Dursa as his Polpat in 1583 A.D. Later instances of Charans being engaged as Polpat by the Rajputs are numerous so much so that almost every chief or noble had the privilege of keeping a 'Polpat' charan of his own. The Polpat charans were given land worth thousands of rupees and gifts of horses, elephants etc. in every erstwhile princely state of Rajasthan. The Rohariya Barhatta, the Polpat of Jodhpur state, for instance, had land in jagir yielding one lakh rupees annually. With the rise of Britishers as a paramount power in Rajasthan the original duties of the Polpat charans became obsolete and the institution itself gradually came almost to an end.<sup>40</sup>

The magnitude of gifts given to Charans on many occasions was in itself an indication of their status and formed a due part of Charan eulogies. Charans would eulogize their patrons according to the magnitude of gifts and honours showered on them on feasts and marriage occasions. The *Mardumshumari* cites numerous examples of gifts given

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<sup>38</sup> Krishna Singh Barheth, 1932, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part I, p. 466.

<sup>40</sup> R. P. Vyas, 'The Position of Charans in the Social Life of the Rajputs and other people', *Rajasthan History Congress*, 1978, vol XI. March 1970, Jaipur, p. 85.



to Charans on important political occasions. According to this source, Charans who were not satisfied with their reward would compose maligning or satirizing poetry (*bhumd*) about their patrons. The court chronicles also mentions many instances where the state honoured the charans with *lakh pasav*<sup>41</sup> or *crore pasav*<sup>42</sup>. The chief family bard in some cases received as much as a lakh of rupees. Such ceremonial gifts became therefore known as *Lakh Pasao*. More amounts were given which were referred as *Crore Pasao*, *Arab Pasao*. The desire of the Rajputs to be remembered in posterity through songs of the Bhats was so strong that no extravagance was spared to satisfy them.<sup>43</sup>

Lakh pasao generally comprised of jewellery worth Rs. 5000/- for the charan, jewellery worth Rs. 5000/- for the horses and elephants, 1 elephant and 1 horse, Rs. 25,000/- *naqadi* (cash), villages are donated with which the charan could draw specific amount of money, the Raja himself helped the charan to get on the elephant and made other kind of gestures to honour Charans with lakh pasav.<sup>44</sup> Maharaja Raj Singh on one of the occasions donated lakhs of rupees to charans and Brahmins.<sup>45</sup> On the same occasion, 206 horses were given to charans, bhats and other poets.<sup>46</sup> Maharana Amar Singh honoured Charan Karnidan with lakh pasav and village Aalavaas, for writing *Birad Shringar* which was based on the war with Surbuland Khan.<sup>47</sup> Asiya Charan Thakur Bankidas received lakh pasav along with jagirs and title of Kaviraja from Maharaja Man Singh.<sup>48</sup> Charan Jugta and Kaviraja Muraridan were honoured lakh pasav and Dhikayi village by Maharaja Man Singh.<sup>49</sup> Bahrath Ishwar Das was granted Rs. 100 lakhs (crore pasav).<sup>50</sup> Clearly the amount of money and honours that were attributed to the charans were magnanimous during the medieval period in Rajasthan. It seemed that no other community in Rajasthan was honoured at this scale and magnitude during our study of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Undoubtedly they

<sup>41</sup> *Lakh pasav*: Total honour amounting one lakh to charans by the state in form of cash, land, cattle, horses etc.

<sup>42</sup> *Crore pasav*: Total honour amounting one crore to charans by the state in form of cash, land, cattle, horses etc.

<sup>43</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891. Jodhpur, p. 337.

<sup>44</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part 2, p. 820.

<sup>45</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part I, p. 449.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 450.

<sup>47</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part 2, p. 846.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 961.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 990.

<sup>50</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol II, 2003, p. 223.

managed to accumulate huge amounts of wealth, thus adding to their power and position in the Rajput polity and society.

There are no two ways about the fact that charans did enjoy an undisputed position in the Rajput society vis-a-vis their Rajput patrons, nevertheless it was this greed for more wealth and material benefits like *neg* that they were perceived as extortionist by the intermediate layer of Rajput landlords who were probably not that rich. *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahi* throws light on this aspect of the social life of the charans. Conscious of their high position in the society, the charans out of greed and high handedness became extortionist. This reflects the negative tendency that crept in among the charans who were literally hated because of their behaviour in this regard.

The state also tried to undertake measures to control this situation. The Jodhpur state in many cases categorically restricted the amount of *neg* or *rekh* that charans could take or would receive in the marriage of a Rajput daughter. The Merta *kachedi* passed an order for all the Charans and Barhats of Kharikhurad Jodhpur area, stating that in the Sardar daughter's wedding, they must not ask for no more than 1000/- as *rekh*. Whoever fails to obey this order would be charged with *gunehgari* (fine) by the state.<sup>51</sup> General complaints by the other communities who were suffering because of enormity of *neg* demanded by charans at the time of marriage, was evident in petition records and *bahis* of almost all states of Rajasthan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By and large at the time of marriage, state complied with the customary laws and practises of different castes, while resolving any issue or in dispensing justice. Customarily, charans were indeed given *neg*, *rekh* etc. therefore state could not completely do away with this practise and followed the practise of *wajib* (customary). In Merta in 1770 A.D., the state ordered the panchayat of Merta to make the Rajput (who was petitioning against the charan) understand that whatever was customary must be done at the time of marriage. This was the dispute between a Rajput and a Charan on marriage. Panchas were instructed to supervise everything that happens should be according to the customary laws of the Charans and the Rajputs in general.<sup>52</sup> Despite state's intervention in the illegal extraction by the charans, many charans continued to demand large amounts of *neg*, which led to continuous flow of petition records by the Rajputs in the state *kachedis*. A charan (name unknown) was making undue demand

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<sup>51</sup> *JSPB* 7, 1824/1767, f. 247 B.

<sup>52</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (December), f. 97 B.

of *neg* on the occasion of marriage of a Rajput daughter, he was instructed by the state to demand as the other charans were receiving.<sup>53</sup>

Along with patronizing the charans and showering on them honours and material benefits, the state was also aware that there has to be a line of limit drawn to these obligations. The court chronicles here, does not give us any kind of information on the charans as extortionists. The chronicles, as mentioned earlier, were for most of the time written by the charans themselves, only tells us what and how much charans are honoured by the state. However our understanding on, what was the impact of these honours in daily life of the charans and the Rajputs gets clarified and nuanced with the help of these petition records where many petitions originate from the Rajputs who felt the pressure of these obligations of *neg* and customary gifts at the time of marriage. Therefore we cannot merely generalize a cordial relationship between the Rajput and the charans. There were issues on routine basis that frequently did disturb this relationship.

We have already seen charan's privilege of getting assistance from the state in terms of men (escorts), animals, horses, cattle, money, *kharach* (for animals) etc. Animals especially cattle and horses in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were assets for the family. Many could possess cattle but horses could not be afforded by all castes. We see repeated references of horses and cattle being owned by members of the charan community. However this privilege did not come to them without any obstacles and hindrances. There are many petitions from the charans related to dispute over their cattle and animal property. Animals became bone of contention in a number of petition records in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jodhpur state. Once a charan was taking his mare from the *haveli*, the jagirdar of the *haveli* forcefully captured the mare claiming that it belonged to him and a few days ago was stolen by his *chakar* (servant). The charan appealed to the state that an enquiry should be conducted, the issue must be resolved and his mare should be returned to him.<sup>54</sup> Social life of the charan was not as simple and smooth as shown in the state chronicles. On every privilege that the charan received from the state when it actually got implemented in the society we see a number of disputes emerging. Charans could not really exercise their rights and honours without any intervention and conflict. Even the highest honoured Charan Karnidan petitioned to

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<sup>53</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (July), f. 447A.

<sup>54</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766 (March), f. 303A.

the state; reporting that there was a transaction between him and a Gujjar Sabla, where all exchanges were cleared except for one. Karnidan had lent his bullock to the Gujjar for which he has not received any compensation. Karnidan appealed that either the Gujjar should return his bullock or pay compensation for it. The Gujjar was not listening to the Panchas. The state (*huzur*) ordered that both the parties should be heard and a compromise should be made to resolve the issue.<sup>55</sup> This issue reflects two points; firstly the dispute on the animal that the Charan lent to the Gujjar showed the capacity of the Charan who could lend his cattle to other castes. The high status of the charan gets showcased. Further, the order of the state was not in favour of anybody. Even when it is related to the most honoured charan Karnidan, the state attempt is to maintain its fairness and order an enquiry and compromise.

Despite charan's high position and power in the state and society as stated in the chronicles, while dispensing justice state was aware and conscious of its decision which should not favour any particular caste. Be it the most powerful and dominant. The position of Barhat is well recognised by the state; nevertheless, the following incident questions the respect that the Barhat received from the general people and villagers in Jodhpur. It was reported that a group of female camels belonging to Barhat Padam Singh was passing through a village. The residents of that village objected to their passage. The Barhat requested the residents to let go the camels as they would not cause any damage. The village resident beat up the rebaris<sup>56</sup> and the female camels of the Barhat. As a result, one of the pregnant female camels died. In this case, the state ordered to summon the villagers and make an enquiry and if the villagers lie, they must be punished; the Barhat should be compensated for the female camel that died.<sup>57</sup> There were a number of routine happenings that the charan had to face and study of these daily records in form of petitions helps us to analyze the true nature of the power, position and privilege of the charans in the Rajput society; who on one hand talk about high honours and respect and on the other hand forces us to question their actual position in the society.

Cases of theft of cattle and horses belonging to the charans were registered with the state *kachedis* of Jodhpur in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Kachela Charan of Jalor appealed to the

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<sup>55</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828:1771 (May), f. 24A.

<sup>56</sup> *Rebaris*: the community of people who take care of the herd of camels.

<sup>57</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828:1771 (December), f. 259A.

state for a search for his three cattle which got stolen in Morsim village.<sup>58</sup> Similarly charan Memahiye of Merta reported that two of his cattle were stolen by thieves and sold to Nagarchi<sup>59</sup> Girdhar. In village Santhalan, the villagers recognized the cattle of the charan which was with Girdhar, who then refused to hand over the cattle to the charan, claiming that he got the cattle in lieu of his *rojgaar* (daily allowances). The state ordered for an enquiry and collection of facts so that the issue could be resolved.<sup>60</sup> In above cases we notice the interesting pattern in which state dispensed justice. Irrespective of any community, the charan had dispute with, the Jodhpur State made sure to order an enquiry and collection of facts that would eventually lead to fair judgement. In these cases of dispute the state restrained from employing mal practises of biasness and favouritism. Therefore despite the power, privilege and high position that the charans enjoyed in the Rajput state, when it came down to conflicts concerning daily issues of rights and duties, the state did not see what community it was dealing with. The state did not seem to be 'hard with the soft and soft with the hard'. It just preferred to follow the legitimate customary laws and practices (*wajibi*). Another petition from the Charan Karne of village Devali in Bilada stated that one of his bullocks was lost. Another man (name unknown) took the bullocks and sold it for Rs 7/-. The state ordered that Charan's bullock must be returned without any further delay and problem.<sup>61</sup>

Cases like above just exemplify the myriad issues that the charans had to face in their day to day lives. These conflicts and disputes in no way are peculiar to charan's personal social life, indeed many castes and communities may be facing these issues. What is important to highlight is that it would be ahistorical to just view charan as a community held high in Rajput society, as portrayed in the chronicles. There is no doubt that the charans were among the closest associates of the Rajputs, however, what we need to understand, is that we cannot generalize this for the entire community of charans. I have highlighted the above cases to support my argument that a study of social history of any community needs grappling with facts both from the statist point of view and also the subaltern points of view which highlight their real life, their day to day issues of concern and how their privileges actually came into

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<sup>58</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (July), f. 175 B.

<sup>59</sup> *Nagarchi*: drum beater.

<sup>60</sup> *JSPB* 6, 1824/1767 (March), f. 158 B.

<sup>61</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (December), f. 258A.

play when exercised in midst of larger social life that encompasses many other communities and castes with their own customary practices without forgetting that this society is also not isolated from the deviant behaviour and social conflicts.

### Charans and Trade:

Marwar traditionally styled as Marubhumi, Marusthal etc very often has been painted with an obverse picture that justifies the epithet of 'Land of Death' attached to this region. However, there were many travellers to this region, who even when writing centuries apart, commended the area's thriving trade and commerce. Hsieuun Tsang, a Chinese traveller who crossed the Thar Desert of Marwar in the seventh century, noticed the prosperity of the area. Col Tod, who described late eighteenth century Marwar, wrote eloquently about the buoyant urban centres of the kingdom.<sup>62</sup> The geographical location, to some extent impeded agricultural productivity of the region, also helped it develop alternate sectors of the economy. The crucial placement of Marwar in the transit trade of the region saw many cities such as Bhinmal, Jalor, Mandor, Nagaur and Pali became renowned for their commercial wealth.<sup>63</sup> Though the seventeenth century commentator Nainsi<sup>64</sup> described merely nine cities in his *des*, listing Jodhpur, Merta, Sojat, Jaitaran, Jalor, Sanchor, Pokharan and Phalodi, (see Map on p.70 a) the nineteenth century *Mardum Shumari*<sup>65</sup> mentions about two dozen cities, and many more qasbas. The trade had become very important is evident from the immense concentration of mercantile groups in the urban centres of Marwar. The mahajans, banias, bohras and sarrafs – the trading, transporting and money lending castes of the region – resided in large numbers here.<sup>66</sup> Nainsi also informs us about not only the Brahmins, but also a good number of non vaishya trading families such as Multanis, Khattris, Bhats, Charans, who were pursuing the profession of trade and business in different parts of Rajasthan.<sup>67</sup> As mentioned earlier in the first chapter, one group of charans known as the Kacchela Charans were actively involved in

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<sup>62</sup> Tod described the largest *shahar* Jodhpur, and claimed it contained more than 80,000 people inhabiting 20,000 houses. Cited in Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*. (Delhi, 2006), pp. 50-51.

<sup>63</sup> See B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*. chapter 4, 'Markets and Merchants in Early Medieval Rajasthan', (New Delhi, 1994) pp. 89-119.

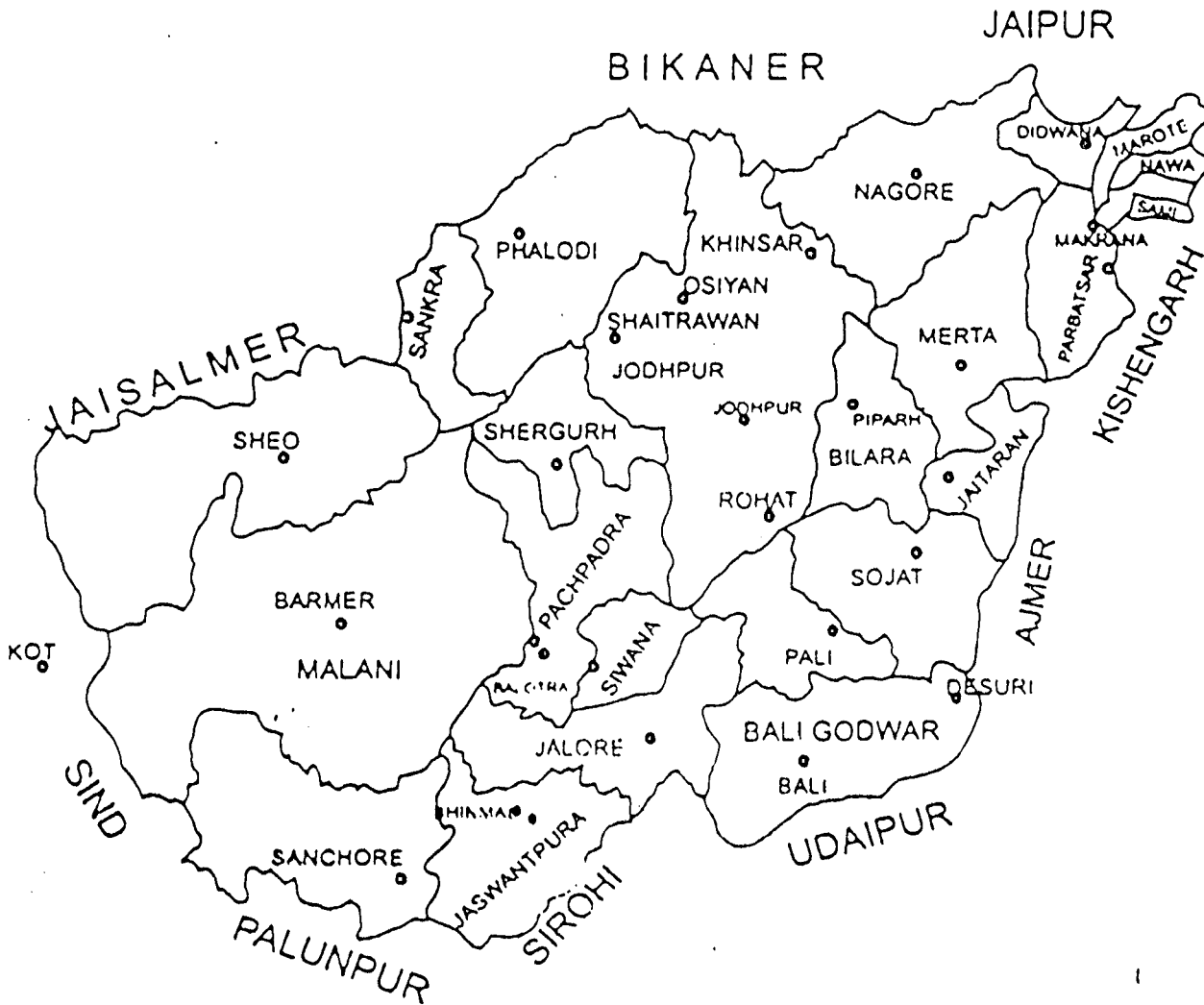
<sup>64</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Marwar-ra-Pargana-ri-Vigat*, Narain Singh Bhati (ed.) vols I-III. Jodhpur, 1968-69.

<sup>65</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, 2 vols, Jodhpur.

<sup>66</sup> For details see, Nainsi, *Marwar-ra-Pargana-ri-Vigat*, Jodhpur, 1968-69.

<sup>67</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Marwar-ra-Pargana-ri-Vigat*, op.cit. vol I pp. 86, 391, 496-97. vol II pp. 83-86, 221-24.

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Not to Scale

Parganas and Some Important Thikanas in Eighteenth-century Marwar

trading activities. Infact their primary occupation was as traders and not genealogists. Almost all the primary sources acknowledge the importance of Kacchela charans in the trading activities in Rajasthan. Nainsi cites several incidences in his *khyat* that highlights the role of Kacchela charans in trade and transportation.<sup>68</sup> Moreover it is also evident from the *JSPB* that the Kacchela charans were in constant interaction with the people of other trading communities. In 1772, Merta, Kacchela Charan sent messenger to the *bania* and fixed a deal for his cattle for Rs. 8,000/-. The Charan gave some cloth as a gesture of respect and also tied the turban.<sup>69</sup>

As a result of the environmental conditions the income of the state from land revenue was very limited. So, the state had to look for alternative source for its revenue income. The economic activities generated through pastoralism and transit trade (because of the locational advantage of this region) helped the economy of the region to sustain itself, state always provided encouragement and protection to the traders and merchants by giving them exemptions in various transit and sales tax levied under the name of '*sair-dam*', '*mapa*'<sup>70</sup>, and '*rahadari*'<sup>71</sup> and also giving them free lands to build shops and houses.<sup>72</sup>

Apart from the Kacchela charans, many charans conducted trading activities, evidences of which we would see in the course of this essay. There are many petitions documenting charan's appeal for concession on trade of certain goods and on commercial posts (*sayar*), which suggests active involvement of charans in trade. State very often supported and patronized the charans in their trading activities. This mediation gave protection to the charans from troubling money lenders, jagirdars, custom officers at the post and the undue harassment by state officials who were responsible for collection of tolls and taxes. This patronage and support helped many charans to develop into financiers, money lenders, exporters, wholesalers etc. In the event of any accident, like lost of cattle in the course of trade, the state swiftly took action with responsibility and ordered for search of the lost cattle, to support the charan in his trade. In village Deshnok, Charan's camels were loaded with goods. When the troupe was resting and after sometime made their way forward to Pali, the

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<sup>68</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol III, 1993, p. 64.

<sup>69</sup> *JSPB* 12. 1829/1772 (March), f. 98A.

<sup>70</sup> *Mapa*: tax on the import and export of trade.

<sup>71</sup> *Rahadari*: tax on merchants, for providing safe movement of merchandize on roads.

<sup>72</sup> G. D. Sharma, 'Vyaparis and Mahajans in Western Rajasthan during the Eighteenth Century'. *PIHC* 1997, pp. 377 -85.



charan noticed that one of his female camels was missing. He reported the case at the Pali *kachedi*, after which the state immediately ordered for the search of the lost female camel.<sup>73</sup> The state was impromptu in helping the charan traders in any kind of mishap or accident. Armed escorts, money and horses were provided by the state on the request of these charan traders to avert any danger and carry out unhindered transportation of merchandize.<sup>74</sup> In 1765, Merta, Barhat Padam Singh and Mushraff Manrup were going for some trade. State ordered that following should be arranged for both and the cost (which was borne by the state) should be deposited in the Mushraff's account: 1 *tabeendar* (army), 1 *sihlepos* (soldier), 1 *behalwaan* (bullock cart), 1 horse, 1 camel, a pair of bullocks and the expenditure on the fodder and water for the cattle.<sup>75</sup> Therefore we notice that like the charan genealogists were held in high esteem, similarly the charan traders were given respect and additional support by the state. In 1772, during the fair in Mundawa village, the state ordered the officials of the village to assist and help the charan traders with their goods, which primarily consisted of salt. The state clearly ordered the people of that village that the charan traders should not face any problem.<sup>76</sup>

The Rathore administration further posted its officials at check posts and instructed them to ensure that unnecessary harassment of traders did not occur due to unreasonable demands. Charan of Raniwal Village (Jaitaran) was taking cereals etc. At the transit post, the state officers demanded the *hasil*. On this, the charan argued and claimed that he had got the patta by Zorawar Singh, according to which he was not supposed to pay the *hasil* to the state. He appealed to the Jodhpur state that he should not be troubled unnecessarily, to which the state came to his rescue.<sup>77</sup> There are innumerable petitions recorded in *JSPB*, from charans who were harassed at the check post, petitioning that they should not be troubled unnecessarily. To which the state responded appropriately by ordering its officials to curb this practise and allow unhindered trade in the region. Despite state's attempts to protect the charan traders, the latter had to face repeated harassment. Overwhelming number of petition records highlight the harassment that the charans had to face from the state officials regarding concessions that they received. Village Doho's Charan said that on his sasan, he had

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<sup>73</sup> *JSPB* 6, 1824/1767 (April), f. 90 B.

<sup>74</sup> See footnote 30, 31, 32.

<sup>75</sup> *JSPB* 2, 1822/1765, f. 47A, case 333.

<sup>76</sup> *JSPB* 12, 1829/1772 (November), f. 286 B.

<sup>77</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (March), f. 129 B.

never paid *chowdharbaab*<sup>78</sup> tax. In 1765 A.D. he went to village Bikaner and now the chowdhary was asking for Rs. 20-25/- as *chowdharbaab*. He forcefully took the tax and is continuing to trouble the charan who appealed to the state that the above tax had never been taken from him, then why was he troubled this time.<sup>79</sup> The state officials at times harassed in absence of the charan. On the sasan of charan, *chowdharbaab* tax was excused for a long time. However in the absence of the charan, the state officers forcefully collected Rs. 15/- from the Jat who stays and works on that sasan. Charan appealed that this trouble should not happen again and the money of the Jat should be returned.<sup>80</sup> It was not the state officials always, but also men like the jagirdars who troubled the charans for their illegitimate demands. In Jaitaran, the Charan and Bhat carried out some business. The jagirdar of that area demanded extra tax called *Mapa*. The Charan appealed to the Jodhpur State that this tax has never been taken from him in past and he requested that it should not be taken from him in future.<sup>81</sup> This conflict between charans and the state over undue harassment continued. The interests and actions of different state agents often contradicted one another, and in the process generated incoherence and social conflict within the society. Nevertheless we must acknowledge the fact that the charans received maximum concessions and honours.

Clearly we do notice that the charans were actively patronized in their trading activities by the Jodhpur state. This privilege consequently increased their power and position in the state and society. Interestingly there is another angle as to why they received patronage in trading activities. Peculiar to the charan community only, the charans were used as sureties by the state and by traders. According to Dube, the person of the bard was magicalized; he could travel without being robbed by thieves and remained unharmed.<sup>82</sup> The pre-requisite for the bard's oppositional function was geographical mobility; he travelled from places to places, gaining access to far off places and villages without any threat of loot or robbery. Tod writes, "they took advantage of their sacred character among Rajput to become general carriers of the

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<sup>78</sup> *Chowdharbaab*: contribution by the villagers towards the payment of village headman's emoluments.

<sup>79</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826 1769. f. 24A.

<sup>80</sup> *JSPB* 2, 1822 1765. f. 22 B, case 148.

<sup>81</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825 1768 (October). f. 187 B.

<sup>82</sup> Rashmi Dube, Renu Dube, Reena Dube., 'A Poetics of Resistance: Investigating the Rhetoric of the Bardic Historians of Rajasthan' in Shail Mayaram, M.S.S Pandian, Ajay Skaria (eds.), *Subaltern Studies XII, Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*, (New Delhi, 2005), p. 257.

country. They carried salt, grain, grocery, sugar, ghee etc., within and outside Rajasthan.”<sup>83</sup>

Apart from protection from the state in the form of armed escorts; merchants also took precautions for the safety of their wares by adopting a unique practise of hiring the services of charans and bhats to act as guardians of their merchandize. The sacred character of the charans, who were held in high regard by both the Rajput chiefs and the tribes (Kolis, Bhils, and the Sahariyas) of the desert, was a sure way of avoiding mishaps. Foreign travellers who visited Rajputana in or about this period took particular notice of a strangely - touching custom called *chandani* (will discuss this aspect in detail towards the end of this chapter) or self immolation and vividly described it at length in their accounts. Heber wrote about the manner in which the robbers dreaded the anathema of *chandani*: ‘If robbers appeared, the charan stepped forward waving his long white garments, and denouncing, in verse, infamy and disgrace on all who should injure travellers. If this failed he stabbed himself with a dagger, declaring that his blood was on their heads and if all failed, he was bound in honour to stab himself to the heart, and a catastrophe of which there was little danger since the violent death of such a person was enough to devote the whole land to barrenness’.<sup>84</sup> In the safety of charans or the state guards, thus, commodities were transported from one region to another, often through long uninhabited stretches. Moreover when two parties entered into an agreement, one would ask the other to offer a Bhat or a Charan as surety. Each party feared that if he did not carry out the agreement, he would incur the wrath of his Bhat or Charan. The Bhat or the Charan was paid by the party for whom he stood as surety. They used to stand as sureties in transaction referring to the transfer of property, rent, trade and money. In Pali, in 1770, Purohit Radha Kishan accompanied a charan with him. The goods brought by Purohit were subject to taxes at the Jalor Post. Purohit’s taxes were outstanding and he was instructed to pay the same. He took the Charan with him as a surety for the fact that he had cleared all his outstanding taxes.<sup>85</sup> They offered themselves as sureties for the good behaviour called *Chalu Zamin* of feudatories, zamindars and village

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<sup>83</sup> James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or, The Central And Western Rajpoot States Of India*, vol I by W. Crooke (ed.), (London, 1920), p. 136.

<sup>84</sup> Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Province of India (From Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-25)*, 2 vols. (Delhi, 1993), p. 454.

<sup>85</sup> *JSPB* 10. 1827/1770 (March), f. 182 B.

headmen; and for perpetual attendance in court called *Hazrat Zamin*.<sup>86</sup> They also became sureties for treaties between chiefs, and the British accepted Bhats and Charans as sureties in some of their early treaties with the chiefs of Saurashtra. Since the sixteenth century, if not earlier, governments have recognised Bhats as sureties for the collection of land revenue. The system of Bhats and Charan surety was prevalent in agreements until 1816.<sup>87</sup>

With this extraordinary position and power that the charan commanded, as compared to other sections of society they enjoyed special concessions and relaxations. In their capacity as traders and merchants they were often exempted from different kinds of duties. If at all they were charged with any kind of tax on certain commodities, it was just nominal. For instance, the Jodhpur state gave 40% discount on the two taxes: *pan charai*<sup>88</sup> and *tol chapai*<sup>89</sup> that were prevalent. These taxes were high; nevertheless charan in his *sasan* land got the privilege of paying less. Asiya Jodha who was responsible for collecting the taxes in this region was instructed to collect the tax at the discounted rate from the Charan.<sup>90</sup> Several petitions and orders by the state highlight tax concessions and exemptions on a variety of taxes both agricultural and non agricultural.

In the context of Rajasthan, the state-merchant relation was especially strong and from early middle ages the groups were given portfolios in the civil and revenue administration. B. L. Gupta<sup>91</sup> while talking about the trade and commerce in eighteenth century Rajasthan mentioned that the state provided facilities and gave exemptions from taxes to merchants and traders. This, says Gupta 'was a result of the dependence of infant Rajput states on these moneyed groups; the dependence increased many fold as the Maratha's demands increased in the second half of the century'.

Important Charans like Karnidan were often excused from all the major taxes and the other Charan traders were given trade concessions and sometimes exemptions. The Nagor *kachedi* ordered to excuse Karnidan's trade tax (*hasil*). Also, further order was

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<sup>86</sup> R V Russel, Hiralal, *The Tribes of the Central Provinces of India*, vols 1, (Delhi, 1997), p. 263.

<sup>87</sup> A. M. Shah & R. G. Shroff, 'The Vahivanca Barots Of Gujarat : A Caste Of Genealogists And Mythographers' in Milton Singer (ed.) *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, (Jaipur, 1975), p. 44.

<sup>88</sup> *Pan charai*: tax on leaf-eating animals (camels and goats).

<sup>89</sup> *Tol- chapai*: tax on weights and measures.

<sup>90</sup> *JSPB* 1, 1821/1764 (September), f. 18 B.

<sup>91</sup> B. L. Gupta, *Trade and Commerce in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Rajasthan*, (Jaipur, 1987).

given that in future too, this tax should not be imposed on him and therefore he should not be troubled.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Barhat Padam Singh had a bounty of 21 *man* which he went to sell in Pali. State ordered that *hasil* should not be taken from him.<sup>93</sup> Apart from privileges to the honoured Charans of the state, there were several concessions that other charans received. Maroth *kachedi* gave 50% concession on the rahadari to the Charans and Bhats. The traders and mahajans generally sold their goods to these charan traders.<sup>94</sup> The jagirdar of village Latoti reported that the Bhats and Charans trading in certain food grains, cereals, sunham etc. No rahadari is demanded from them and instruction was given by the state that the rahadari should not be asked from these Bhats and Charan traders.<sup>95</sup> It is important to note that we must not make a generalisation that all charans got tax concessions and exemptions. The state was very clear in stating the details like place where the concession is valid, name of the specific charans of specific region, amount waived and sometimes even the goods on which the taxes are levied on discounted rates or exempted. For example, the tax (*zakat*) on the goods *kuchsu* and *musli* that Charan Dalo bought should be exempted from the date the petition was registered (*miti asadh sudh 13 guruwar*). In future however, it was ordered to be collected according to the rule.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, in Merta in 1772, the state ordered that the goods that Charans and Bhats traded with, along with their animal herd in Kisangarh, Kota, Jaipur, Merta, Parbatsar and Maroth did not have to pay *hasil*. Rest all the *hasil* of the pargana should be collected and sent to the state.<sup>97</sup> In many cases regular taxes like *chowdharbab* were also cancelled for the charan and state officials were directed not to harass them.<sup>98</sup> State issued letters stating the specific concessions given to the charans on trade conducted by them pertaining to the *mapa*<sup>99</sup> tax.<sup>100</sup>

Charan traders traded in all kinds of goods and commodities. However, we see a number of references of salt trade that charan traders conducted in the Panchpadra region of Jodhpur. Jodhpur State sent a *kasid* with the *parwana* ordering that the

<sup>92</sup> JSPB 5, 1823/1766 (June), f. 74A.

<sup>93</sup> JSPB 9, 1826/1769 (December), f. 139 B.

<sup>94</sup> JSPB 12, 1829/1772 (January), f. 252A.

<sup>95</sup> JSPB 10, 1827/1770 (August), f. 176 B.

<sup>96</sup> JSPB 5, 1823/1766 (July), f. 75 B.

<sup>97</sup> JSPB 12, 1829/1772 (January), f. 97A.

<sup>98</sup> JSPB 2, 1822/1765 (December), f. 20 B, case 126.

<sup>99</sup> *Mapa*: taxes on import and export of goods.

<sup>100</sup> JSPB 15, 1832/1775 (May), f. 147 B.

amount taken on one sack of salt from the charan should be taken, as per the past practise (usual rate = 1/4<sup>th</sup> /-). However the Kacchela Charan and the Bhamaniya Bhat who were exempted from rahadari should not be bothered by the state officials.<sup>101</sup> There are many references of trade in salt by Charan traders especially the Kacchela Charan, trading in the Panchpadra region. Many other areas of Rajasthan were rich in many non-agricultural and mineral resources which provided the charans and other local merchant much wanted opportunity to engage themselves in trading activities, both locally and inter regionally. Most important was salt. One region for manufacturing salt in Rajasthan was the depression of Sambhar. It was also manufactured on large scale from the lake of Didwana, Panchpadra and Nawa. Thus it was reported that Charan Deva etc. came to Panchpadra to collect salt. It was instructed that if the salt was collected from Sambhar and Nawa then the cost of salt collected should be as per prevalent in Sambhar and Nawa and if it is not collected from above places then, the cost of the salt collected should be taken as per applicable at Panchapadra.<sup>102</sup> The state also recognized the commercial potential of these traders in these regions, because of whom trade got bolstered in that commodity and indirectly contributed to the state's revenue.

Many a times the Jodhpur state issued *parwanas* stating specific tax concession for an individual charan. The reason for this is not very clear; nevertheless we can assume that individual charans may be filing a petition to the state for specific concessions, probably because of their incapacity to pay that amount. The state issued *parwana* to Kotadi Charan of Devaliya village paid Rs.100/- every year to the state for some reason (unclear). The state ordered to evade this and instructed the officials not collect it from them.<sup>103</sup> These *bahi* records do not clearly mention the reason for specific concessions and exemptions given to the charan, however, by looking at other sources and with our understanding of the status of Charans in Rajasthan and most importantly, the state's interest in proliferation of trade; the state did not mind giving these concessions to the Charan traders. Moreover clearly there were many charans who genuinely did not have enough money to pay certain taxes. It is important to note that not all charans were materially and financially sound. Many charan traders appealed to the state specifically for concessions as they could not afford payment of

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<sup>101</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (December), f. 269 B.

<sup>102</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (January), f. 324 B.

<sup>103</sup> *JSPB* 7, 1824/1767 (September), f. 190 B.

certain taxes. The charan appealed to the Maharaj of Parbatsar that he could not arrange for Rs. 5 /- that he was liable to pay as *kot baach*<sup>104</sup> to the state. He requested the state for evasion of this tax for him.<sup>105</sup> It will be a mistake to portray the status of charans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rajasthan as elite, comfortable and a rich community. Among the charans as well there was much diversity in terms of their status and position. The petition records reflect on what they were grappling with in their daily lives and activities, thereby defining their power, privileges and position in a much more nuanced way.

The repeated references in the chronicles citing tax concessions and exemptions for charans may lead us to infer that the entire community of charans was fortunate enough to get tax concessions. However, we must restrain from this kind of inference because rahadari and other state levied taxes were important source of revenue with which state functioned. The state was pragmatic to clearly see this sphere as an opportunity to raise finances through trade-related levies. The above stated measures and concessions offered were measures undertaken by the state to meet dual purpose; the trader would of course benefit from royal magnanimity, but more importantly, the increased sales from within Marwar would bring income to the state.<sup>106</sup> It was clear that on the goods and regions where concessions were not applicable, the state was strict enough to collect those taxes. In Sojat the state ordered collection of taxes on the sale of goods by the charan. The charan had not paid the entire amount. State clearly documented and stated in its order, the amount that had been paid by him and the amount that was outstanding and ordered that whatever had not been paid by the charan should be recovered according to the rule.<sup>107</sup> Categorically, the state reminded the charans who did not pay their taxes as per the rule. Charan Godhosablo reached Parbatsar with his cattle loaded with goods. The state issued an order to collect the *hasil* from him according to the rule and that it should be collected in future as well.<sup>108</sup> Deviant cases of non payment of taxes were seen vis-a-vis the charans. Despite the state's strictness with regards to collection of taxes as per the rule, many charan traders deliberately did not pay their due. In this case state passed strict orders that due taxes must be paid and any attempts to intervene in this process would lead to

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<sup>104</sup> *Kot baach*: tax in the name of court.

<sup>105</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (January), f. 221A.

<sup>106</sup> V. K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India, AD 1000- 1300*, (New Delhi, 1990).

<sup>107</sup> *JSPB* 12, 1829/1772 (January), f. 136 B.

<sup>108</sup> *JSPB* 7, 1824/1767 (December), f. 158A.

confiscation of goods of the trader. The charans, purohit etc. trading in goods like cotton were not paying the rahadari as per the rule. The state ordered that the rahadari should be paid by all and if any of them do not comply with state orders and creates problems, their goods would be confiscated and sent to Jodhpur post where it would only be released after the due taxes were paid or any negotiation was done.<sup>109</sup>

Therefore we see that on one hand the state was liberally giving concessions and exemptions to the charan traders but on the other hand it was also firm to discipline them and collect the due taxes that these traders had to pay to the state, according to the rule. Apart from the charans, there were many trading communities that the state had to deal with. State was indeed accountable to these traders who were key players in the successful and thriving trade of the region. If the state was legitimised by the charans on one hand as discussed in the first chapter, the merchants on the other hand were also an important group in Rajasthan providing loan and revenue to the state. The state had to balance both the communities for its own interest and survival. Conscious of its fragile hold over the community organs, the state engaged in considerable tight rope walking as a 'manager' between competing interest groups, thereby maintaining its precarious hold over different social groups.<sup>110</sup> The Jodhpur state could not push the interest of charans to absolute extents and had to draw some line somewhere. Multiple levels of social contestations and a variety of agents in the dynamics of trade influenced the relationship of the state vis-a-vis the charans, therefore giving a new meaning to the powers, privileges and position of the charans.

#### *Awards of Land grants:*

Gift of land has been eulogized as the most meritorious of all gifts from ancient times. It was indeed a common practise to give villages in recognition of a charan's services. According to the Census report of Marwar 1891, the charan community of the state had land yielding revenue of about 4 lakhs of rupees a year.<sup>111</sup> Raja Man Singh of Marwar, the hub of charan community donated lots of land to a number of charan poets who adorned his court. The villages granted to charans in jagir were known as

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<sup>109</sup> *JSPB* 12, 1829/1772 (July), f. 183 B.

<sup>110</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, (Delhi, 2006), p. 201.

<sup>111</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, vol II, Jodhpur, p. 102.



*sasan* and were free from payment of taxes.<sup>112</sup> These land grants made to Charans were part of a wider system of incorporating groups through land grants that provided services to Rajput elites or were essential to the economic and social fabric of Marwar. It also affirmed and established the high ritual status of Charan groups in material terms. Naturally, claims to high ritual status and privileged landed rights to land would tend to reinforce each other. Importantly, their landed status, as a material manifestation of their ritual status and value of their services and talents were established through an act of the king. In this sense, a major function of Charans was the validation of kingship and Rajput identity, this land granting pattern represents a symbiotic relationship in which both communities established and continuously reaffirmed each other's status.

Patronage was viewed as an integral part of the right to rule, and had a larger social and political function. Rulers "were not just expected to lead on the battlefield or dispense largesse to their followers and kinsmen, they were also expected to be active patrons of artists, artisans and cultural performers."<sup>113</sup> The particular land grants to Charans have to be seen in the context of state's attempts to assume a paternalistic role in integrating and binding communities essential to its functioning to its territory in an hierarchical system of different sets of rights to land and revenue that were afforded to communities according to the services they provided and their caste status. *Sasan* also known as *muafi* were granted to Brahmans as well as bardic communities such as Charans and Bhats and generally required no tribute though sometimes minor taxes were assessed.<sup>114</sup> It was also referred as the Dholi lands. *Dantal Patra* was given to the charan that acted as a proof of the land received. It included the name of the client who received it and the patron.<sup>115</sup>

To consolidate their monarchical power, redefine and legitimise their Rajput identities, the Rajput rulers gave huge land grants to the Charans. Almost all the sources on Rajasthan polity and society emphatically praise and highlight the rulers known for giving grants. Shyamaldas while writing about the geography and society

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<sup>112</sup> R. P. Vyas, *Role of Nobility in Marwar*, 1969, p. 216.

<sup>113</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, 2006, p. 56.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel Neumann, Shubha Chaudhuri, Komal Kothari, *Bards, Ballads and Boundaries – An Ethnographic Atlas of Music Traditions in Western Rajasthan*, (Calcutta, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>115</sup> For explanation see Shyam Singh Ratnawat & Krishna Gopal Sharma, *Essays on Bardic Literature*, 2001, pp. 116 – 125.

of Rajasthan mentioned clearly about the rent free land grants in form of jagirs offered to the charans at various times in history.<sup>116</sup> Many villages were granted by the rulers to different charans as a form of gifts on many occasions. Nainsi mentioned three villages (Khandokhali, Megharo, Deparo) given to Gadna Charans; village Varjagaro given to Kanhiyar charans and village Budaro given to Ratnau charans.<sup>117</sup> The desire of the Rajput to be passed in future as a generous and a great ruler made them give unreasonably large amount of lands with no returns from it in form of revenue etc. Local chronicles speak of Surtan Bhanot Rav as a great warrior and a generous ruler who granted some eighty four villages in *sasan* to Brahmans and Charans.<sup>118</sup> High praises and accolades were given to the rulers like Ramdav Udavat by both Persian and Marwari sources for his liberal bestowal of favours on Charan bards and others. Nainsi's *Khyat* describes him as a *vado datar* ("great giver"), while *Maathir-ul-Umara*, states:

He was unequal for his generosity and liberality. For one good story he would give a large sum of money. When he once gave a present to a charan, a *badfarosh*<sup>119</sup> or a musician, they every year in the same month received the same amount from his treasurer, and there was no necessity of altering the receipt.<sup>120</sup>

Similarly there are many references regarding details on the grants and villages that the charans received from various rulers ruling Jodhpur in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was not a single ruler of a dynasty rather, the tradition of giving grants to the charans was followed as a practise by all the rulers of that dynasty; thereby making sure that they are known for their generous nature. Many references in the chronicles and the archival documents reflect on this aspect of the Rajputs. The immense gratification that the charans received from Rajput rulers was so great that even a poor charan could make fortune by becoming a favourite of the ruler. Charan Khemraj who belonged to a poor family made fortunes using his talent and thereby improved his position and rose to the status of a jagirdar. He saved the life of Karan Singh and was declared by the Rana as his fourth son.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>116</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol I, p. 136.

<sup>117</sup> Muhnot Nainsi, *Nainsi-ri-Khyat*, Badri Prasad Sakariya (ed.), vol II, 2003, p. 136.

<sup>118</sup> Richard D. Saran and Norman P. Zeigler, *The Mertiyo Rathors of Merto Rajasthan: Select Translations Bearing on the History of a Rajput family 1426-1660*, (Michigan, 2001), p. 86.

<sup>119</sup> A Bhat, a musician or minstrel.

<sup>120</sup> Richard D. Saran and Norman P. Zeigler, *The Mertiyo Rathors of Merto Rajasthan: Select Translations Bearing on the History of a Rajput family 1426-1660*, 2001, p. 134.

<sup>121</sup> *Vir Vinod*, vol II, part I, p. 315.

State's patronage helped many charans to develop into big financiers, bankers, moneylenders, and jagirdars. Raghunath Singh Shekhawat highlighted various villages which were held by charans as their jagirs in Jhunjunu (Marwar). Aaidan Shekhawat Khiriya Charan was given 1500 *bighas* of land on which he established Shardulpur village.<sup>122</sup> Charan Karnidaan established village Kabirsar in Jhunjunu from the land that he received from the ruler along with 6,000 *bighas* of land.<sup>123</sup> *Bahi* records also reiterates that a large part of land as villages were with the charans, Charanawas being one of the villages of charans. It seems that as a result of charan's high position, after the rulers, they were big landed magnates.

Being jagirdars and landholders of their sasan and dholi lands, charans could not escape disputes and social conflicts that were related with land and its ownership. The Jodhpur state received phenomenal number of petition from charans appealing over some or the other land conflict. Rights over land and its ownership were not clearly defined and documented; especially over the dholi and sasan lands as a result we see petitions after petitions asking for justice related to ownership of their dholi land and sometimes forcible occupation of land by someone. Malwa was a favourite destination for charans for their trade and other activities, but many a times when the charan returned back from Malwa, he faced a host of problems. The most common problem that he faced was forceful usurpation of his land and house by some superior caste. There were many cases where charan's dholi land was forcefully occupied in his absence. Charan Kusalo appealed that he legally had a dholi in village Lachadi. However when he went to Malwa for some work and came back, he saw that the Jat of that village had forcefully occupied his dholi. Now the Jat is not allowing him to cultivate his land there.<sup>124</sup> A similar case was seen when charan Karnidan of Khuran village appealed in the Merta *kachedi* over his two fields that he held in dholi grant. In 1755 A.D., he was out of Merta for some work, in his absence his fields were appropriated by the chaudharies of the village. Then they refused to return his land, although half of his field is returned to him, the chaudhary refuses to return rest of his field.<sup>125</sup> Land was seen as a crucial asset and control over land was a symbolic of power and prestige. It looked that the charans were holders of large portions of land.

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<sup>122</sup> K. Raghunath Singh Shekhawat, Shardul Shekhawat, *Jhunjunu Mandal ka Itihaas*, Part I, (Jhunjunu. 1981), p. 423.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p. 425.

<sup>124</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766 (June), f. 217A.

<sup>125</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (August), f. 139 B.

Pulls and push over land occupancy and ownership remained a perennial problem that the Jodhpur state had to deal with. Village Harsada's charan Vitu, Vaktu and Karno claimed that they always had the agricultural land as their dholi in that village. The chaudhary of Harsada was troubling them vis-a-vis their dholi land.<sup>126</sup>

Conflict over land was extremely widespread where charans suffered from his land being forcefully occupied by people of other communities like the jats, jagirdars, chaudhary etc. The relationship between the jagirdar and charan gets jeopardized as we notice more and more petitions from charans complaining about the jagirdar over illegal trouble and exaction over charan's dholi land. As the local jagirdar also must be holding large amount of land under his ownership, there must be a social pressure and desire to grab more and more land for maintaining their status quo and power in their respective regions. Clear references to many jagirdars of different villages in the bahi records; throw light on relationship between the jagirdars and charans. Charan Zalim Vithu Singh of Badawara village petitioned that his dholi is in village Pava. Since 1757 A.D., the Jagirdar of the village forcefully occupied it and was not returning back.<sup>127</sup> Even when the jagirdar was ordered by the state to give certain land to the charan as his dohli grant from the state, the Jagirdar created obstacles and did not want to comply with the state's order. The Jagirdar of village Pava was told by the state to give 300 *bighas* as Dohli grant to Charan Zalim Singh. However, the Jagirdar was only giving 100 *bighas* to him. The Charan appealed to the state that he must get what is granted to him.<sup>128</sup> Deliberate torture and persecution by the jagirdars towards charans was a phenomenon widely witnessed in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The state had to act in a diplomatic way balancing the rights and desires of every community for its survival, therefore could not give any outright decisions. While giving most of the decisions, the state ordered for an enquiry and discussion with knowledgeable and known people. No judgements were passed until proper enquiry was conducted. Customarily the Jodhpur state followed the customary rights and practices while dealing with the petitions of the state without hampering any group's interest. State employed the tools of negotiations and discussions rather than giving any absolute decision. The judgements were not exact and clear and the state always adhered to the *wajib* (legitimate practices).

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<sup>126</sup> *JSPB* 6, 1824/1767 (August), f. 81A.

<sup>127</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (May), f. 42B.

<sup>128</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (October), f. 14A.

Furthermore the properties over these lands like the well and trees also became an object of dispute. Charan Hardaan had half village as his sasan grant. The jagirdar wanted to take over five trees that were planted on his sasan holding. The charan protested but the jagirdar did not pay any heat to it.<sup>129</sup> Unusually, the state's order was clear here, whereby the state ordered that the jagirdar should stop usurping the trees under the jurisdiction of the chāran and instructed the Jagirdar not to unnecessary trouble the charan.

The charans often gave their dholi lands for mortgage at the time of need for money. Here too the charans had to face conflicts and tension while reclaiming his land. The jagirdar whom for most of the time, the charan mortgaged his land behaved in a high headed manner refusing to return the dholi land of the charan despite payment of money. Charan Sardaram had a sasan which he mortgaged to the Jagirdar. When the Charan went to pay money to the Jagirdar to get back his sasan land, the Jagirdar refused to adhere to the contract thereby refusing to release charan's land. The charan appealed to the state to get back his sasan land. The state customarily ordered for an enquiry and took wajib decision.<sup>130</sup> Like other castes, charans also had to bear the brunt of the jagirdars in cases of mortgage. Many a times, for years, the charan kept paying back money for getting back his dholi land from the jagirdar that was mortgaged previously. Charan Surto held dholi in village Begsar. In 1755 A.D., he took a loan of Rs 70/- from the jagirdar by mortgaging his dholi land. He had been paying back the money to the jagirdar for years to get back his dholi land but the jagirdar was not settling the account. The state ordered for the settlement.<sup>131</sup> There were several issues that the charans had to deal with vis-a-vis his sasan and dholi land. Just merely getting the grant from the state did not guarantee privileges to the charan. The power and position of the charans is clear from the fact that they received large amount of lands as villages, sasan and dholi land, however when we get down to looking at the workings of the society and state, where different actors and pressures were at play, there were many times that these privileges got diluted as they became disputed. The charans had to make several petitions to the state reiterating his right over the dholi and sasan grant that he had received from the ruler, which became a bone of contention between different claimants.

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<sup>129</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (July), f. 101B.

<sup>130</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769, f. 188B.

<sup>131</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (May), f. 354A.

The death of a charan often led to disputes over ownership of his land. Issues remained un-ended and many a times, deceased charan's family and relatives had to face the wrath of the land disputes. In an incident in Merta Zalim Singh gave a vehicle to Charan Gorakh to plough his land. Gorakh died and due to some reason Zalim Singh took control of charan's sasan land. Charan's wife and daughter appealed to the state to get back their sasan land as they wanted to mortgage this land for completing the funeral rites of Gorakh. The state ordered that either the land be returned to them or money be given to the Charan family in lieu of their land.<sup>132</sup> The position of charan's land grant indeed becomes contestable and disputed after his death. Another interesting facet of charan's land grant comes into picture where we see that the charan could further donate a portion or the entire sasan land grant that he received from the state. The following incident substantiates the above inference. Bhagat Budhardas complained to the state that a portion of sasan land was donated to him by Charan Deva's wife after the death of Deva. Then Deva's brothers were troubling him by not accepting his claim on that piece of land. The Bhagat proved his claim by showing papers and witness documents that were made at the time of donation. The state ordered that the donated portion of sasan land that belonged to the Bhagat should be restored to him. Customs and traditions of charans should be followed while dispensing justice in this case.<sup>133</sup>

While dealing with the issues of land and its ownership, the state was firm even with the charans, if they tried to encroach on the lands beyond what was granted to them. The Jodhpur state clearly instructed its officials in Sojat to recover land that the charans had encroached beyond their dholi land.<sup>134</sup> Innumerable cases over land disputes that the charans had vis-a-vis other communities get reflected in the petition records; analysis of which makes the study of social history of the charans richer and interesting. Charan's role as money lenders and financiers will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Chandi and the Ritual Status of Charans:**

In the face of transgressions of traditionally sanctioned norms or a serious dispute, the charans used to go to extreme lengths by committing suicides in many gruesome ways

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<sup>132</sup> JSPB 6, 1824/1767, f. 182A.

<sup>133</sup> JSPB 16, 1833/1776 (December), f. 13A.

<sup>134</sup> JSPB 11, 1828/1771 (July), f. 164A.

as a form of protest. The evil consequences of a Charan being driven to undergo a violent death, can be alone averted by grants of lands and costly gifts to surviving relations; and the Rajpoot chief, whose guilt is recorded as the cause of such sacred blood being shed, is fortunate, when he can by any means have his repentance and generosity made part of the legend.<sup>135</sup> The person of a Bhat or Charan was considered sacred because of his position as a Deviputra. This belief was the basis of several sanctions at the disposal of Bhats and Charans. The charans devised their method of coercion called 'tragum' and 'dharnum' and 'Chandi' which roughly translated means 'extortion by self torture and mutilation'.<sup>136</sup> This practice consist of shedding one's own blood or the blood of some member of one's family, and in calling down the vengeance of heaven upon the offender whose obstinacy necessitated the sacrifice.<sup>137</sup> A Bhat or a Charan always carried a *katar* (dagger) which was his weapon.<sup>138</sup> There was a widespread belief that the shedding of the blood of a Bhat or a Charan brought ruin on the person responsible for it.

The haunted murderer would be impure and would get ill fortune on all who had to do with him, while the injury which a suicide would inflict on his relatives in haunting them would cause this act to be regarded as a sin against one's family and tribe. Even the ordinary fear of the ghosts of people who die in the natural course, and especially of those who are killed by accidents, is so strong that a large part of the funeral rites is devoted to placating and laying the ghost of the dead man. It was this fear of ghosts on which the charans relied. They did not hesitate a moment to sacrifice their lives in defence of any obligation they had undertaken or of property committed to their care. When plunderers carried any cattle belonging to the charans, the whole community would proceed to the spot where the robbers resided: and in failure of having their property restored would cut off the heads of their old men and women.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Sir John Malcolm. *A Memoir of Central India including Malwas and Adjoining Provinces*, vol I, 2001, p. 136.

<sup>136</sup> T. N. Dave, 'The Institutions of Bards in Western India' *Eastern Anthropologist*, vol 4, 1950-51, p. 170.

<sup>137</sup> A. M. Shah & R. G. Shroff, 'The Vahivanca Barots Of Gujarat: A Caste Of Genealogists And Mythographers' in Milton Singer (ed.) *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, (Jaipur, 1975), p. 44.

<sup>138</sup> For more information on the weapons of the charans see, Shyam Singh Ratnawat and Krishna Gopal Sharma (eds.). *Essays on Bardic Literature*, pp. 241 -244.

<sup>139</sup> R. V. Russel. and Hiralal, *The Tribes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol II, (Delhi, 1997), p. 259.

Russell quoted the following incidence from *Rasmala* highlighting suicide by charans and actual haunting by the ghosts: A charan asserted a claim against the chief of Siela in Kathiawar, which the latter refused to liquidate. The bard thereupon, taking forty of his caste with him, went to Siela with the intention of sitting *Dharna* at the chief's door and preventing any one from coming out or going in until the claim should be discharged. However, as they approached the town, the chief, becoming aware of their intention caused the gates to be closed. The bards remained outside and for three days abstained from food; on the fourth day they proceeded to perform *traga* as follows: some hacked their own arms; others decapitated three old women of the party and hung their heads up at the gate, as a garland; certain of the women cut off their own breasts. The bards also pierced the throats of four of their old men with spikes and they took two young girls by the heels and dashed out their brains against the town gate. The charan to whom the money was due dressed himself in clothes wadded with cotton which he stepped in oil and then set on fire. He thus burned himself to death. But as he died he cried out, "I am now dying; but I will become a headless ghost (*Kuvis*) in the palace, and will take the chief's life and cut off his posterity." After this sacrifice the rest of the bards came home. This time of *traga* by fire, is known as *телиyo* (from *tel*, oil) constitutes the supreme form of voluntary death for the charans.

On the third day after the Charan's death his *Bhut* (ghost) threw the Rani down stairs so that she was very much injured. Many other persons also beheld the headless phantom in the palace. At last he entered the chief's head and set him trembling. At night he would throw stones at the palace, and he even killed a female servant outright. In order to exorcise the *Bhut*, Jogis and Fakirs were sent for from many different places. Finally one of the foreign Jyotishi captured the *Bhut* into the lemon and buried it outside the region.<sup>140</sup> This reaffirms the position of the charans in Rajput society who were held high position because of their sacral nature and absolute reliability. The greatest of the Rajas in Rajasthan dreaded charan's *traga* and *dharna* and kept placating this group through various means and methods.

An overview of historical references to Charans suggests different traditions of self inflicted wounds or death. There existed no fewer than thirty two ways of committing *traga*, each region of the tormented body being a symbolic seat of power. The most

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, pp. 261-62.



basic form of *traga* consisted of piercing both cheeks with a lancer and, without displaying the slightest sign of pain, taunting one's adversary in a frenzied dance – an imitation of Siva's dance that incinerates the worlds, as well as a sign of possession. But the *traga* could also be elevated to the level of an art and a science. On certain stele, one sees a Charan piercing his own jugular vein in an art of auto surgical prowess known as "striking the throat" (*gale ghalano*). The expression "doing *candi*" (the word means "wound") designates the particular form of protest suicide in which one allowed one's blood to flow from a wound until death ensued. "To do *khaliyo*" (another local term for "wound") meant to sever one's head. Nothing, however could rival the violence of *traga* by fire, a macabre scene in which the act of burning oneself combined death and vengeance, rite and spectacle, hierophany and profanation. Transformed into a living torch, the charan would dance before his adversary until he collapsed, before his very eyes, into a heap of ashes.<sup>141</sup>

The *Mardumshumari* gives a vivid and detailed description of what was allegedly the established procedure most commonly resorted to when Charan land was either blocked or appropriated. In 1586 A.D., eleven thousand Charans whose villages had been confiscated by Rao Udai Singh (Motraja) of Jodhpur gathered in Auwa (Pali District) with the intention of performing "*candi*" under the protection of Gopaldas, a Champavat and a local Rajput chieftain, who embraced their cause. They sat before the temple of Mahadev (Siva), blocking its access to register their solemn protest and demand redress. The Rao sent his envoy in the person of Akkha-ji, his royal bard. Having come to negotiate the withdrawal of the charans and the relinquishment of their deadly intentions, Akkha instead declared his solidarity with his caste brethren. With the Rao threatening to send his army, the charans passed the night calling upon the goddess Jogmaya with their chants and then, before dawn, had the drummer climb atop the temple spire to give signal for mass suicide as the first light of dawn. After sometime, the drummer slit his throat and threw himself down from the temple. Taking up their daggers and knives, the charans then entered into the temple. One slit his throat and sprinkled the divine image with his blood, another cut off his head, a third disembowelled himself. Akkha-ji followed their lead. All was awash in blood. Gopaldas sought asylum for himself and his family in Bikaner, in the house of Rajah

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<sup>141</sup> Catherine Weinberger- Thomas. *Ashes of Immortality, Widow Burning in India*, translated by Jefery Mehlman and David Gordon White. (New Delhi, 2000). p. 61.

Rai Singh, whose brother Prithviraj convinced Emperor Akbar to return the confiscated villages to the charans.<sup>142</sup>

Ziegler cites another example of threatened violence against the self from a 17<sup>th</sup> century Marwari chronicle. The incident is said to have taken place during the reign of Rao Maldeji (1532-62). Barhat Isar Suravat and Barhat Aso Ditavat are said to have been granted villages by the ruler of Jaisalmer but hearing of the rising power of Rao Maldeji, Aso migrated, seeking employment at the court of Jodhpur. In this period, Rao Maldeji is said to have conquered territory from Muhammad Daulat Khan who had previously granted two villages within his territory to Barhat Aso Ditavat. Rao Maldeji revoked the grants made by Daulat Khan and upon Aso's protests offered to grant new *sasan* villages in lieu of the seized ones, since he did not wish to sanction land granted by the Khan. Upon hearing this, Aso along with several family members began to perform *dharna* at the Rao's residence. Although the Rao is said to have relented by granting them the previous villages, Aso and his dependents are said to have proceeded with slashing their bodies. The point they sought to enforce according to the text was that they could not accept these villages as grants since they had already been granted to them. This would undermine their initial rights to the land. 'If we accept these villages from you today, and tomorrow Nagaur comes under someone else's authority, then he may also say – "Now take these villages in gift from me" This we cannot endure'<sup>143</sup> The wounded Charan are said to have been nursed by Rao's wife Umade (who was the daughter of Raval Lunkaran Jaitsinghot Bhati, the ruler of Jaisalmer) who entreated the Charans not to speak ill of her husband.

As stated earlier, charans worked as escorts and insurers of the safety of people and goods; and at the time of attack they were ready to shed their blood first. This was also one of the methods and reasons for *traga* committed by the charans. An interesting incident explains this entire act in detail:

A Charan had become security on the part of Dossajee, the Rajah of Mallia, for a sum of money due to the Moorbea Raj. The time specified for the payment arrived, and Dassajee refused to pay the money. The Charan after repeatedly entreating the Raja to comply with his Bond, returned home, and after passing several hours in prayer called his family and desired his wife to prepare his daughter, a beautiful girl of 7 or 8 years of age for death – the innocent child taught to reflect upon the sacred

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<sup>142</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1891, Jodhpur, pp. 343-44.

<sup>143</sup> Norman. P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan'. *IESHR*. review 13, April – June, 1976, pp. 224-225.

character of her Father and the necessity with which he was bound to fulfil his Bonds, such as those he had contracted, required no adviser to point out to preserve for the honour of her family. She came forth a voluntary victim. After bathing (and) dressing herself in her richest clothes, she laid her head upon her Father's knee, and holding aside her long and beautiful hair, which had been unbraided for the purpose of bathing, she permitted herself to be murdered without a groan or struggle. The human heart can scarcely picture to itself a Father so cruel or a daughter so magnanimous.

The Raja who had been the occasion of this *traga*, alarmed at the Blood of a Charan being upon his head, did everything in his power to appease the wrath of the Supreme being by instantly paying the money, conducting the funeral ceremonies of the unfortunate little girl, in the most public and magnificent style, and erecting a monument to her memory. The inhuman Father received a Gift of lands, in return for the loss of his Daughter.<sup>144</sup>

What made *traga* significant was charan's identity as "children of Goddess" who possessed energy and sacred blood. In any act of *traga* they cast the blood of their wounds to one's enemy along with hurling curses, which served to reinforce the blood's efficacy. Here the symbol of blood plays itself out on three registers: impurity, magical power, and revenge. Like semen and saliva, blood is an eminently impure substance. But for the very same reason that it has a dangerous and polluting valence, blood can become an inexhaustible source of "power".<sup>145</sup>

Further there are many points that come out from the study of the above incidences of protest. Firstly, *traga* was a practise through which the Charans asserted their rights and sacral power, which probably no other caste in Rajasthan claimed of. Secondly, the importance of land and its ownership were important issues that charans were grappling with. In the patron client relationship that the charans shared with the Rajputs, they had to assert their right over the land that belonged to them, even if it came to them through state in form of sasan grant or other gifts of land grant. Charans did everything to protect their land; this is reflected in the innumerable cases where *dharna* or *traga* were a result of issues related to dispute in land. Thirdly, it is well known that the politics of reputation for the Rajputs was the most essential; in fact the charans gained their prestigious power, position and privileges because of this very desire of every Rajput. This fact further gets reaffirmed as we see the Rajputs who otherwise seems to be fearless at the battle ground; were the most fearful at the time of *traga*. A good reputation and belief in having a powerful and pure legacy both in

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<sup>144</sup> Catherine Weinberger- Thomas. *Ashes of Immortality, Widow Burning in India*, translated by Jefery Mehlman and David Gordon White, 2000, p. 63.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

political arena, society shaped the minds of Rajputs who pacified and placated the charans in every act of *traga* and other forms of protest. *Tragum* was one of the very important characteristics of charans power, position and privilege in the Rajput society.

An interesting case in the *bahi* records suggests that the charans employed the technique of *traga* even in cases of land dispute. Charan Beeje Ratanu of Chumbaliya village reported that out of Rs. 240/-, his share was 1/4<sup>th</sup>, which the Rajput of the village was not ready to accept. Despite the charan doing *dharna* and *traga*, the Rajput is not yielding to his demand. Ratanu appealed to the state asking for his claim. The state ordered to conduct an enquiry and charan's claim to be given to him.<sup>146</sup> The above case reflects that all classes within the charan community did *traga* and *dharna* for asserting their rights and claims. Their issues may be different but the practise was so influential and strong that the other party, in most of the cases the state yielded to their demands. For charans in Rajasthan, the practise of *traga* worked wonders at the time of assertion of their power, position and privileges.

Although suicidal practices motivated by a desire for redress and revenge are found widely among other groups and in other regions of India (notable south India), the Bhat and Charan communities of western India elevated the individual practice of *dharna* to the level of caste duty, in quasi-contractual terms. In response, the Charans at least would further raise the stakes, in the luxuriant forms of violence that constitute *traga*.<sup>147</sup>

In memory of charans who committed *tragum*, a large number of villages in Kathiawar, another centre of the Charan community, one comes across "Paliya" or the guardian stone, at the entrance of habitation which is erected in honour of a charan man or woman who killed himself or herself to prevent the capture of cattle or to enforce their restoration. The name of the victims with dates and details of the circumstances of self sacrifice are recorded on the stones and a crude sculpture depicts the manner in which the sacrifice was committed. The man is usually seen

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<sup>146</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828/1771 (August), f. 142A.

<sup>147</sup> A. M. Shah & R. G. Shroff, 'The Vahivanca Barots Of Gujarat : A Caste Of Genealogists And Mythographers' in Milton Singer (ed.) *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, 1975, pp. 250-51.

killing himself on a horse-back with sword or spear and the women often transfixing her throat with a dagger.<sup>148</sup>

*Tragum* indeed elevated the power, prestige and position of the charan; however this absolute practise had to be controlled. Confirmed from Konkan to Kathiawar and Kutch, and from Saurashtra to Rajputana and Malwa, the custom of *tyag* gave rise to a series of measures; struck down by laws in 1795 and 1799, it was officially prohibited in 1827, but did not in fact disappear until the final decade of the nineteenth century. There were resistance and efforts to control this practise by few Rajput rulers but in vain as the notoriously innovative bards were constantly developing variations on the deadly scenario.<sup>149</sup> The state was “powerless” while dealing with charans with regards to *traga*. The ruler had to eventually succumb to the demands of the charans to avoid mass violent suicide that the charans were always ready to commit. Indeed in the age where spiritual, sacral and moral order played a crucial role, the tool of self destruction employed by the charans had major influence and immediate gains. To protect their rights over their land in the time of shifting borders and suzerainty and also to prove their position of reliability, the charans went to every extent inflicting mutilations and voluntary death and then ritualizing on them an impersonal and immutable character.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

Thus, though undoubtedly charans received immense honour from the state in different forms. They indeed enjoyed privileges, position and power in Rajput society. We saw various ways in which they were honoured. On one hand the state freely gave the charans land grants and trade privileges and on the other hand there was also a need to check these, when it was implemented in the society. Charan’s privileges should not be taken at the face value because a deeper study of these privileges reflects a different scenario that was not as conducive for the charans as it seems to be. The complex structure of society and the demands of various castes in the society, led the state to balance its acts and responses towards disputes and conflicts that charans had to face in their daily lives. Ironically these disputes were on those

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<sup>148</sup> Manohar Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature (with exclusive reference to the contribution of caranas)*, 1976, p. 32.

<sup>149</sup> Catherine Weinberger- Thomas, *Ashes of Immortality, Widow Burning in India*, translated by Jefery Mehlman and David Gordon White, 2000, pp. 60-61.

privileges that they received from the state because of their high position and power. Contrary to the picture that emerges from the chronicles on the status of charans, the petition records highlight a far more knotty and intricate relations that the charans had to face in their daily lives. It would be quite meaningless to talk only in terms of a dominant and high position of charans as highlighted in the chronicles because the ground reality was somewhat very different.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONFLICT AND COOPERATION: THE ENDOGENOUS WORLDS OF CHARANS

In the previous chapter we analysed the relationships of charans with the Rajputs patrons. The world of charans consisted of many more aspects, and mapping their social history would be incomplete without seeking to explore their relationships. Based on archival records representing charan petitions to the Jodhpur state and their resolutions, this chapter would look at the endogenous world of the charans.

This is important particularly because intervention by the state in social issues gives us a fairly comprehensive picture of what the state sought to uphold, what the moral and ideological norms were which the state sought to preserve or change, and the nature of its jurisdiction and intervention in the daily social life of those belonging to the charan community. The powers and privileges conferred on the charans were not guarantee of cordial relations either among themselves or with other caste groups. For example, because of land grants and gifts endowed on them, we notice innumerable cases of Property disputes among the charans. The study of the petition records reflects that the rules related to property were not clearly defined although the state in its own way sought to uphold the norms of the caste with regard to the right to property in family, including that of its female members. This chapter will discuss issues like these that focus on the domestic and social world of charans more closely.

Traditions and customary practices structured a range of interactions, whether within the community or sub-caste brotherhood with other sub-castes of the same castes, or even with other occupational groups higher or lower in the hierarchy. Practices related to commensality, endogamy, suitable marital partners, marriage rites, rules pertaining to widow remarriage, funerary rituals, questions of adoption, property rights of widows and sons-in-law, inheritance, and myriad other issues differed widely and provided each group with its special and exclusive mark of recognition. Through the study of the *bahi* documents, these issues of the charans and their relations with other communities will be examined.

As stated earlier, the charans were a heterogeneous group with many differences of status and class among them, the charans that we will be discussing in this chapter are not persons associated with the rulers and the court, and therefore were not as privileged as the charans who received patronage from the Rajput royalty and nobility. The court chroniclers while talking about charans in their chronicles fail to highlight this group among the charan community.

If we look at the nature of court documents collated in the *bahi* records in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they can be categorised into civil and criminal cases. Among the civil cases, issues like boundary disputes, monetary transactions, conflicts over property (land, house and cattle), adoption, marriage, inheritance<sup>1</sup>, mortgage etc. appear. State's decisions on these disputes were variable and often, confusing. Since there was a lack of written code for justice, the underlining principle was to enforce the customary laws of different communities. Although technically, as documented, the state's approach was first to make an enquiry of the particular issue and then resolve the issue as per the *reet* (customs) of that particular caste. Unlike the modern judicial system there was no fixed punishment for any particular crime or deviant action. The state did not want to indulge in complications by employing proper judicial methods of dispensing justice and therefore the most handy were the customary laws that enjoyed sanction among the people, and did not shake the foundation of 'legitimate' and the 'illegitimate', thus also leading to political legitimacy and stability.

Among the criminal cases that the state had to deal with included rape, murder, abduction and robbery. The tone of the state's decision was not too convincing, as it followed fairly conciliatory position while dispensing justice, as it did in the civil cases. Technically, the criminal cases should have been dealt with some severity but what is visible from the *kachedi's* decision is to summon the parties and after enquiry legitimate actions should be taken (*talab karke jo wajib huve jyu nyav kar dejo*). Surprisingly, even when a charan committed severe crimes like rape, abduction and murder, the state's attitude was 'soft', as only an enquiry was ordered to be undertaken, and *wajib* decision be given there after. Speculations can be made that the

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Rajputs, the charans do not follow the practise of primogeniture, resulting to issues of inheritance and property disputes.



state wanted to take a little time and indulge in enquiry before giving decisions when it came down to dealing with the higher caste of charans in relation to the other castes rather than just resolving the case at the earliest. Outright decisions like imposing *gunehgari* (fine), excommunication, ostracization was not ordered in the case of Charans. Judgements and adjudication in criminal cases were therefore subject to intercession, and powerful individuals negotiated with the judicial authorities – not merely to protect themselves, but also to intercede on behalf of their clients. Thus, Charan Bakhta of Bhubhaliya village appealed on behalf of his Chakar. There was some kind of an arrangement in the property of well between the Jat and Charan's Chakar. The Jat raped Chakar's wife and thereafter the Chakar hit the Jat with a sword. On this, the Jat captured the Chakar and put him in custody. He had been in custody of nearly 4-5 months. Charan appealed to the state to release his Chakar and the state did order for release of the Chakar.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter also seeks to undertake discussions on asymmetrical gendered relationships in charan society despite charan women's roles in their household economies and in their husband's occupation as poets and genealogists. Highlighting the concerns of the women folk through the petition records where they themselves are the petitioners throws light on their mindsets and state's response to their grievances. Further their intra-family, intra-castes and even inter- caste disputes together nuances our understanding of the life-worlds of charanis.

Therefore in the following discussion on charans, we will see that in matters relating to social institutions, i.e., family, caste, marriage, adoption, property and women rights etc., and in regulating and enforcing caste codes of conduct, the caste panchayats (one of the levels of judicial dispensation) exercised a great deal of influence. The major source of its strength was that its decisions could be implemented by the state administration, and that the state respected the rights and jurisdiction of these caste panchayats. Charan Peetha petitioned to the state that Chaena charan apparently owed a debt to Kothari Mayachand. The state bestowed authority to the Panchas to resolve this case and clearly stated that the decision of the Panchas would be final and binding. In case the parties refuse to adhere or oppose the

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<sup>2</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1761, f. 68B.

decision of the Panchas, they would be considered as offenders. Further the state ordered to get a bond signed from both the parties.<sup>3</sup> While the state used the caste panchayat as an instrument to intervene in the social affairs, it also entertained petitions made by individuals against the verdict of the caste panchayat, at times overhauling its decision and demonstrating its overarching authority. The state's primary concern was to protect and preserve its social order, which worked in favour of the King as the ultimate authority and in the state formation of Rajputana. The channels of communication with the charans vis-a-vis the state were many, however the petition records trace the dynamic social history of the charans in greater details as we notice that it was here that their relations of both conflict and cooperation were at its full play. We notice state's constraints in implementing the power and privileges of the charans while dealing with other communities in the society.

#### *Variegated Conflicts: Intra and Inter-Community*

As recipients of substantial land endowments and other gifts from their Rajput patrons many Charans possessed vast amounts of material assets. As such, they were often embroiled in property disputes. Dispute for Ancestral property was quite frequent. Charan Nathe of Modariya village had a position in the ancestral property which was obstructed by his brother's son Kesar. The Charan appealed that according to the property rights and customs, this was not legitimate. He petitioned to the state to take wajib decision as per the customs and traditions.<sup>4</sup> Similarly Charans Harupa, Deva and Ajba of Bhootavas village fought over their ancestral property. In this case again, the state bestowed the decision making to the knowledgeable persons of the village.<sup>5</sup> Troubles were also created by the bhaibant relations and the relatives of the charans with regard to property ownership. Charan Lakhe of village Charanvas reported that his *bhaibant* relations were forcefully taking his land that belonged to his ancestors.<sup>6</sup> Similarly Charan Hardaan of Modariya village complained that Charan Rupo, who belonged to his *bhaibant* relations, was forcefully acquiring his ancestral land.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> JSPB 12, 1829/1772 (August), f. 9B.

<sup>4</sup> JSPB 14, 1831/1774 (July), f. 108A.

<sup>5</sup> JSPB 16, 1833/1776 (August), f. 139B.

<sup>6</sup> JSPB 15, 1832/1775 (May), f. 128A.

<sup>7</sup> JSPB 15, 1832/1775 (August), f. 75B.

state dealt with cases like these on daily basis. Several numbers of petitions were documented in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that were related to property disputes. Barhat Rame complained that his brother Rau was consuming his father's land and well all by himself and was not allowing him to share the property with him. He appealed to the state for a *wajib* decision and fair claim in his father's property as he was also a legal heir to it.<sup>8</sup>

Jagirdars often abused their power to appropriate properties, especially when a charan mortgaged his property at the time of need for monetary assistance. Charan Gyane reported that after his father's death, he had a portion in his father's property. One of his brothers died. His property was mortgaged to the Jagirdar. When Gyane went to give money to the Jagirdar to get the land back belonging to his deceased brother, the Jagirdar refused to return it. Charan petitioned to the state to get his property back from the Jagirdar.<sup>9</sup>

Adoption was not a very simple process. Here too, customs and traditions were emphasized and reiterated by the state. Even for the family that was undertaking the adoption; the *bhaibant* relation always obstructed the process leading to disputes of varied kinds. Charan Nathe's *bahu* (daughter-in-law) adopted Ramchand (who was her daughter's son). Nathe's relatives objected on this adoption by saying that she should adopt somebody from their own line of descent so that the property could remain in the family itself.<sup>10</sup> The state ordered the officials to take *wajib* decision in this case. Later in 1767 A.D. this case again came up at the state's *kachedi* where this adoption was again questioned by the relatives of the Charan and the *bhaibant* relations. Ramchand claimed that he had the papers from the state stating that he was adopted by Charan Nathe's *bahu*. The state ordered that the official document regarding adoption should be followed and should be taken as the final authority. Further, for more clarification the relatives should be shown the solitary document of adoption that the state had in its *daftar* (office) as a record.<sup>11</sup> Of course the charans among themselves also preferred to adopt from their own male line of descent for

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<sup>8</sup> *JSPB* 13, 1830/1773 (May), f. 303A.

<sup>9</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (June), f. 255A.

<sup>10</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766 (May), f. 174B.

<sup>11</sup> *JSPB* 6, 1824/1767 (July), f. 98A.

property reasons however the state's decision in the above case where it agreed on Ramchand's (daughter's son) adoption by Charan Nathe's *bahu* questions the property rights and its implementation by the state. It is also probable that the preference of Nathe's relatives was to have someone adopted from their own male line of descent, despite the fact that adoption could be practised freely within the charan community.

In cases of adoption therefore, the Charan's adopted son had to face opposition in claiming his property. Charan Deve of Bagadi village was adopted by his grandfather legally through the *pag bandhai* ritual<sup>12</sup>. His grandfather and grandmother died after few years and Deve did all formalities with regards to the funeral rites and also adopted their property and took care of it. Then Prabhudaan who belonged to the *bhaibant* relations of his grandfather began interfering and creating problems. Deve was restricted from cultivating his grandfather's land and also taking care of the crop. Charan Deve appealed to the state that he should be given his claim and *wajib* should be done. Deve requested the state to also explain Prabhudan that he should not trouble the Charan in future.<sup>13</sup> A few customs and practices related to charan's property rights therefore get reflected with our study of the *bahi* records. The state's decision at times clearly stated and highlighted the customs that should be followed. In the dispute between two Charan cousin brothers regarding fields, Charan Ajba complained against his cousin Sagta who demanded half a share in the field that Ajba inherited from his father (this field was donated by Rajput Jujhar Singh to charan's father). The matter was reported and the state categorically ordered that the cousin (Sagta) cannot have rights over the property of charan Ajba.<sup>14</sup> The state was indeed very particular in following the customs and rules of each and every caste, thereby maintaining the social order and harmony among the members of inter caste or intra caste.

The state took upon itself to divide the property of the charans who died without leaving a will. In a dispute regarding inheritance of Charan Chaena's property, who died without any heirs; the dispute was settled by the state as under: Chaena's house, field and courtyard were equally divided between Charan Peetha and Dholabhan.

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<sup>12</sup> *Pagadi Bandhana*: symbol of acceptance of the ties.

<sup>13</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (May), f. 169A.

<sup>14</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828/1771 (July), f. 119A.

Since expenses on funeral rites of Chaena were incurred by Peetha, so Dholabhan was supposed to pay half of the expenses incurred. Household items were divided as per the Charan's customs and traditions. Only after *chalisa* (40 days after death) was over the division of the property could take place.<sup>15</sup>

As stated earlier the prime concern of the state was to maintain the social order, therefore we see that the Jodhpur state had various agents and means for dispensing justice. Surprisingly many a times it was the Panchas who could not give satisfactory decisions. Charan Hari Singh, Surta Dungar Singh Dev and Gyana of village Bugada had an internal dispute over property. The case was given to the Panchayat and was documented in 1768 A.D. The panchayat failed to give justice, thereby the state ordered that knowledgeable persons should be consulted and *wajib* decision should be taken.<sup>16</sup> It was not necessary that the panchayats were always preferred over knowledgeable people in the village. Very often the state preferred the knowledgeable people for decision making over the Panchas. The dispute between two Charans Surajmal and Mukane of Chotti Padu village, over property was only resolved when the state ordered that the case should be referred to the Chaudhari, Mahajan and other knowledgeable people of the village for decision making.<sup>17</sup>

Respectable Charans and Barhats were also among men who comprised the body of knowledgeable people often consulted by the state for imparting justice. Charan Sivdaan petitioned for a portion of all the four villages (in Bikaner) as his sasan grant but Charan Nathe refused to yield to his demand and said that how could he alone distribute the land. The state asked Charan Nathe to explain the customs and rights related to the sasan grant and if Charan Sivdaan failed to understand, then he should be sent to Barhat Padam Singh who would make Sivdaan understand the customs and traditions.<sup>18</sup> The state trusted the Barhat for his knowledge about different customary rights and often gave him the charge to take judicial decisions. Similarly the state gave responsibility to Charan with sasan grant in Parbatsar to resolve the property issue between Charan Inderbhan of Indarpura village and charan Bhawanidan of

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<sup>15</sup> *JSPB* 13, 1830/1773 (November), f. 19B.

<sup>16</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (December), f. 96B.

<sup>17</sup> *JSPB* 1, 1821/1764, f. 50A.

<sup>18</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (October), f. 87A.

Amarpura village.<sup>19</sup> This showed that charans with sasan grant were respected and state often restored decision making process to them. The state used its own discretion while referring different petitions to various levels of jurisdiction. There was a hierarchy that was generally followed in the process of decision making; however this hierarchy could be made flexible at the whims of the state.

Few petitions reflected that the decisions given by the panchayats were often flouted, and here again the state urged and ordered that the panchayat's decision should be followed. Charan Beeja of Bagadi village died without any heir. Then there was a property dispute between his brother and maternal grandson regarding his house and property. Panchas from five villages were deputed to resolve this matter. The panchayat's decision was that the house and field should be given to the brother of Charan Beeja and in return he had to pay Rs. 141/- to the grandson and both were instructed to abide by this decision of the Panchas.<sup>20</sup> Later when Charan's brother went to pay Rs. 141/- to the grandson Beeja, he refused to accept the money and was not willing to give up the house and field. The state again reiterated and instructed the parties to abide by Panchas decision.<sup>21</sup> Although rarely but charans were at times dealt with strictness. Realising that every individual represented a productive resource that was extremely valuable to the state and society, state orders reflect the concern for other communities while dealing with disputes and social issues. Charan Kana Khivkaran of Merta had to give some money that was due to Hemasi Jairaj. The state ordered that 56 cows of the Charan should be sold and Hemasi Jairaj's money should be returned.<sup>22</sup> Despite the powers, privileges and position that Charans enjoyed as a community in Rajasthan, there were instances where the state had to control them for maintaining the social order while dealing with other communities. Similarly in Nagor the Charan, Rajput and Jat community of the village Chillakuti took money from Baniya Maanmal and Daanmal, which now they are not returning. The state ordered that these communities should return the respective amounts to the baniya.<sup>23</sup> The state while giving wajib decisions, always tried to be fair and sound.

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<sup>19</sup> *JSPB* 12, 1829/1772 (October), f. 221A.

<sup>20</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (July), f. 170B.

<sup>21</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833/1776 (September), f. 87B.

<sup>22</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766 (November), f. 130A.

<sup>23</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766, f. 42A.

Clearly all charans were not rich. Many were struggling to pay their loans back and had to deal with the strictness of the state. In the first and the second chapter we studied about the charans who were honoured and were close associates of the ruler and the state. But majority of the charans had to face the ground reality of social life in terms of disputes of various kinds. The state did not follow a fixed trend or tradition while dealing with the petitions of the charans, rather the guiding force of the state was to follow *wajib* (legitimate and customary traditions).

The state followed simple methods for resolving the above disputes, the recommendation of the community leaders was an important input in the decision making process. Bohra Tarachand was instrumental in resolving a number of issues of intra-caste disputes. Some of intra-caste dispute was reported among Charans from Surpaliya village. The state ordered Bohra Tarachand who was respected in the community to resolve this dispute.<sup>24</sup> Customary laws relating to these issues were complicated; therefore the state had to work in close association with the *jati* and caste panchayats. Numerous cases indicate that rather than immediate recourse to direct intervention and keenness to take matters into its own hand, the state preferred resolution of disputes through popular assemblies. Indeed, their local roots and fuller knowledge of customary practices made them a force to reckon with, one that the state could ill afford to ignore. Further it was the desire of the petitioners also that his case should be resolved through the above method of discussions with the knowledgeable people; the charan himself did not want to get into complexities of judicial processes.

From our sources in the chronicles we are aware of the fact that charans were held in high esteem by the Rajput state; however in the *bahi* documents where charans are the petitioners we see relations of conflict as much as those of cooperation between charans and landed intermediaries like Jagirdars, Chaudharies and Bhomiya, as well as communities like Jats and Brahmins. Conflicts between them were on several issues which were of concern on daily basis. The interplay of forces between the elites

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<sup>24</sup> *JSPB* 3. 1822/1765 (March), f. 30B.

on one hand and the lower formations were dynamic and complex. They were plagued with myriad concerns that on one hand made them form peaceful alliances and on the other hand many a times, led to disputes. Evidence from Marwar suggests that the engagement between the charans and other communities was a far more complex two way traffic of power, demonstrating neither sheer conflict nor complete harmony. There was a need to accommodate and adjust to different customs and norms of various communities. As stated earlier every individual represented a productive force and resource for the Marwar economy, therefore the society comprised of a complex structured hierarchy where different groups of those invested with power like charans often had a relationship of friction with one another, and worked at cross purposes in a struggle to check the other.

Jats among all the other communities seem to have the maximum number of disputes with the charans. In my study of the petition records of Jodhpur in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I noticed that the Jat community were frequently in relationship of conflict with charans on various issues of daily life. In the Barhat village who got the land under Mudhyad patta, appealed that the Jat had to give some taxes that were due for 40 years. The state ordered that whatever was pending should be sought from the Jat and should be handed over to the charan of the village.<sup>25</sup> Similar issues were brought under light of the state authority where the Jat was unable to pay taxes due to the charans. On the other hand there were cases where the Jats illegally extorted lands of the Charans. To state a few, in the village of Barhat Karnidan (respectable charan of the state), Jat Kheevraj forcefully acquired fields, cattle, seeds of Karnidan. The state acquired everything from the Jat, however the Jats of other village got together in order to support Kheevraj. The state ordered the Jats not to assemble and support Kheevraj and ordered them to let the state carry out its function.<sup>26</sup> Charan Karnidan in this case received full protection from the state and the above case also reflects state's firmness to deal with issues that were affecting charans. There were a number of cases of illegal land, cattle and seeds acquisition that the charans had to grapple with in their everyday lives. The state did its utmost to protect them from any assault and persecution. Apparently the state in order to maintain equilibrium tried to be fair

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<sup>25</sup> *JSPB* 2, 1822/1765, f. 21A.

<sup>26</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766, f. 4B.



towards every caste and community. The jats also petitioned to the state in order to get justice in matters of dispute with the charans, here the state had to practise fair means and methods. Despite the fact that jats belonged to caste, lower in hierarchy as compared to the charans, the state resolved the case with fairness. Jat Asa complained to the state that the charan of village Hidoli threw him out of the village. The state ordered that to begin with, the Jat should be retained and should be allowed to take his crop; rest would be dealt later by the state.<sup>27</sup> Here the priority of the state was to protect the Jat rather than siding with the Charan's deceived act. Many cases were registered that suggests Charan's repressive behaviour over the Jats. The state again took the lead in supporting the Jats in this case. State issued a *parwana* to the Nagorkachedi stating that the Jat who was working on the property of Charan Bhala and Haridas and had his hut on that land, should be allowed to leave and the charans should give relevant amount of money in lieu of his house that was constructed on land of the charan.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that the charans in the above case were not allowing him to leave and forcefully wanted to keep the Jat on his land, disregarding the Jats desire to leave charan's land.

Ill treatment by the charans towards the jats was also well known. The high handedness of the charans made many jats petition against them. Jat Ruplo of Charanwas village appealed that Charan Satidaan was not giving him grain that he deserved in lieu of his service. Satidaan also forcefully took over the ancestral land of the jat and threw him out of his land. The Jat petitioned to the state for justice and right action be taken against the charan. The state in this case ordered for an enquiry and *wajib* decision making.<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the charans did ill treat the jats on many occasions, what was not clear in the petitions is whether the state attributed any punishments to the charan in cases of extremity or rounded the case off by only ordering for an enquiry. Until we know the state's mechanism of punishments for charans in specific; we cannot clearly infer what state's stand was when it had to deal with disputes between the charans and other communities.

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<sup>27</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (September), f. 13A.

<sup>28</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (March), f. 244B.

<sup>29</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768, f. 222B.

Interestingly whatever we know about the relationship between Charans and Rajputs is mostly from the official chronicles. In the first chapter we analysed this relation in detail. As per that the Rajputs were patrons of the charans and there was no instance of conflict that we could think, between them. However the *bahi* documents highlighted various issues that resulted in disputes between the Rajputs and the Charans in their everyday social life in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Village Kalyanpur in Parbatsar was held by Charan Sadhan in sasan grant. In the same village Salim Singh of Mertia had got his bhom land for cultivation that was attached with a well. Salim Singh was reported to be extorting from everybody in the village. The instruction from the state was that Salim Singh must be told not to make illegal collection and if he had made any, the money should be refunded. If he did not adhere to the state's orders then he would be punished.<sup>30</sup> The charans as moneylenders often lent money and other assets to the Rajputs. As a result of their high social power, position and privileges that they enjoyed, charans did manage to accumulate wealth and material status. Charan Durse had given two horses, one camel and Rs.50/- to Rajput Abhay Singhot. The total amount that the Rajput owed to the Charan was Rs. 450/- which he was not returning back to the charan. Durse petitioned to the state for justice and wajib decision.<sup>31</sup> Charans social relationship comes out more clearly with the study of the petition records that highlighted the issues of conflict between the two communities.

Land dispute as detailed in the second chapter and in the beginning of this chapter was a bone of contention and the reason for conflict between the charans and other communities too. Charan Gajja Dade sold his dholi to Charan Geedha Peema for Rs 400/- and was cultivating this piece of land for a long time. The Bhomiya of this village (Navad) had illegally acquired the fields of the Charan. The Charan petitioned to the state stating the claim over his land and for proof had the papers and documents of transaction furnishing his claim. He appealed to the state to get back his land. The state ordered for enquiry to know the reality and conferred decision making to the knowledgeable persons in the village.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the quarrel between the Brahmin Bikha of Bikharniya village and Charan Sagta of village of Khanpura village was

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<sup>30</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (August), f. 237A.

<sup>31</sup> *JSPB* 13, 1830/1773 (March), f. 296A.

<sup>32</sup> *JSPB* 3, 1822/1765 (July), f. 108, case 500.

registered over a land dispute. The Charan had mortgaged his land to the Brahmin, but the Brahmin illegally took possession of the land completely. The state clearly ordered the Brahmin in this case to just hold the part of land that is allotted to him as per the deal (written document) and the rest should be returned to the Charan.<sup>33</sup> A case of land dispute was also registered between Brahmin Sobha of Sojat and the Charan of the village. The state ordered for an enquiry and the most efficient Panchas to take decision with discussion and impartiality.<sup>34</sup> Conflict between Charans and Brahmins over land was an ongoing affair. Both the castes were entitled to land grants from the state at various occasions, therefore the struggle for the land and its ownership was something that was a perennial feature of the Rajput society. Other castes like that of the Mahajans also faced problems with the charans vis-a-vis land. Mahajan Kheeme complained to the state that on his land, Charan Sivdaan was having *bhog*<sup>35</sup> and gave *hasil* to the Mahajan regularly. But later the Charans stopped paying the hasil and his bhaibant were having *bhog* on his land forcefully.<sup>36</sup>

At the time of need for money, the Charan resorted to mortgage of his land in most of the cases to the jagirdar of the village. Traditionally the jagirdar for most of the time is known for conflicting relationship with other communities. The charans too faced discord with jagirdars especially in cases of mortgage. Charan Padme of Lamba village appealed to the state stating that his dholi land that he had mortgaged to the Bohra Devkaran in 1757 A.D. is now in danger as the Bohra was not ready to leave the land despite the charan returning him complete money that was to be returned to get the land back. He appealed to the state to get his land back from the Bohra.<sup>37</sup> Similarly Charan Sade had mortgaged his sasan land to the jagirdar of the village who was not returning his land despite payment of all the dues. The state here again resorted to enquiry of the case.<sup>38</sup> Evidence such as these were many, they just exemplify multiple identities involved in certain issues that the charans had to deal with in his social life. Charan's sasan grants also got disputed when jagirdars forcefully acquired it from them. Charan Sade of Khinawadi village complained that

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<sup>33</sup> JSPB 3, 1822/1765 (July), f. 51A, case 276.

<sup>34</sup> JSPB 8, 1825/1768 (September), f. 154B.

<sup>35</sup> *Bhog*: right to regularly draw income from the crop of that land.

<sup>36</sup> JSPB 15, 1832/1775 (March), f. 206B.

<sup>37</sup> JSPB 15, 1832/1775 (September), f. 82B.

<sup>38</sup> JSPB 8, 1825/1768 (January), f. 221A.

half the village was his sasan grant. The jagirdar forcefully acquired the house and field on the sasan of the charan. The state once again ordered to give *wajib* decision and resolve the issue.<sup>39</sup> There were many claimants to one piece of land resulting to frequent land disputes among different caste and communities. The above also reflected the state's reaction and response to myriad problems and concerns that charans in Jodhpur grappled with.

Another way that the state employed to resolve the cases of dispute was to get an undertaking signed from the parties involved in the dispute. For example, the dispute between Charan Karamchand and Jat Mugda over agricultural field and well was resolved in presence of a Brahmin as the witness, by getting an undertaking (*muchalka*) of Rs. 101 /- (that had to be paid) signed from both the parties.<sup>40</sup> This practise was followed by the state so that the case does not come to the state's *kachedi* again and the verdict is final and binding on both the parties. After the state got the undertaking, it was firm in getting the required payment by the parties involved in the dispute, even if it was a charan. The state's firmness in this aspect reiterates that state's decision must be honoured by all communities. In the dispute between Bohra and Charan Aidaan Mahes regarding money, the panchayat resolved the issue by getting an undertaking of Rs. 11/- from both. After this it was decided that the Charan had to pay Rs. 84/- to the Bohra. Out of the total amount, Rs. 72/- still had to be paid by the Mahajan Naimidas who represented the charan. The state ordered Naimidas to make the required payment to the Bohra as decided previously by the state.<sup>41</sup>

Customary practise of taking oath was also followed to resolve petty disputes of transaction. In an internal dispute between the Charan and Sarraf Kachara regarding loss of a document that stated the transaction was registered. In order to establish Charan's truthfulness, his mother kept the letter on her head and swore. The state declared that if nothing happened to the Charan's mother, the charan would be considered right and Sarraf wrong. Charan's claim was taken as truth and Sarraf's claim as wrong.<sup>42</sup> In the age when laws and codes of conduct were not properly

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<sup>39</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (September), f. 228B.

<sup>40</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (January), f. 106A.

<sup>41</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (May), f. 185B.

<sup>42</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (March), f. 120A.

written and sanctioned, the state had to follow practices like these in order to resolve issues on daily basis.

Land being an important asset, there were other related disputes that emerged from this, boundary disputes being one of popular issues of conflict among the charans, with other communities and also between villages that were inhabited by the charans. Village Vada and village Bhavrani had a dispute over the boundary of the villages. The state in this case ordered the Mustaddi of Malgarh and Jalor to enquire and ask the known people of the village and then take a *wajib* decision to resolve the dispute.<sup>43</sup> The panchas decision in many cases could not resolve the dispute, where again the state preferred to give the case to the knowledgeable people of the village who could amicably resolve the conflict. The dispute between Charan of village Gudesar and the Jagirdar of village Chandani over village boundary could not be resolved by the Panchas of nearby villages who issued a *parwana*. The matter was then suggested to be resolved through knowledgeable persons.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly the state followed a policy of minimal intervention in civil suits that generally amounted to be non-issues for them. In the absence of a dependable source to testify, the panchas often sought divine sanction and also many times made the defendant go through torturous ordeals to prove his innocence. Economically, without having to incur great expenses in erecting full-fledged judicial mechanism, there was an interesting practise that was observed in resolving the conflicts on boundary disputes. The practise was known as *aalo chamblo*, which meant that to prove the truthfulness and genuineness of a claim one had to carry wet flesh of an animal on his head and take a round of the village. This strange practise was customarily followed in Jodhpur to resolve disputes related to boundary. Surprisingly the state sanctioned this practise and used it to dispense justice. It is probably because it is considered impure and is condemned to touch flesh of animals by the upper caste and if one dared to do it, it would mean that the claim is really genuine. In the boundary dispute between villages Nibi and Gore, the state ordered four Jats<sup>45</sup> of Nibi village to carry *aalo chamblo* to sort the boundary dispute. In continuation to the above case, the state ordered that if the Jat was unable to do the act then the Barber (*nai*) Jairam should be told. Finally

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<sup>43</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (December). f. 297B.

<sup>44</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775 (December). f. 100A.

<sup>45</sup> Jats: Bhago, Parmanand. Chatro. Har Ram, Bhaglo.

the state ordered Charan Surto to carry wet flesh on his head and take a round of the village to prove the truthfulness of villagers of Nibi for their boundary.<sup>46</sup> The Jodhpur state also got an undertaking (*muchalka*) for their good behaviour from both the parties to avoid any confusion in future. In this way the quarrel was resolved by the state by staying out of the entire conflict. Charan was chosen especially for this practise because he belonged to the upper caste. A similar case was registered in the Sojat *kachedi* which was a boundary dispute between Charan Satidaan of Palas village and Jagirdar of village Gujrawas. Both the village was summoned and written undertaking was signed stating that whosoever will carry wet flesh on the head and go around the village boundary would be considered truthful.<sup>47</sup>

Several other issues of dispute came into light in the petition records. With land and water, the importance of cattle and animals was also immense in the life of charans. There were several petitions to the state regarding loss of cattle. Charan Memahi's two cows were stolen by thieves. The thieves further sold it to Nagarchi Girdhar. The villagers of village Santhalan recognised these cows. The Nagarchi claimed that the cows were given to him in his *rozgar* (salary). The Charan petitioned to the state to get justice.<sup>48</sup> The Jodhpur state took special care of the traders like Kachhela Charans to help them in trade activities. Kachhela Charan Visaram petitioned that his three buffaloes were stolen near the boundary of the Morsim village. He tried to search for the cattle but his efforts ended in vain. He requested the state to search for his cattle.<sup>49</sup> Jodhpur state strictly ordered its officials to assist the traders to carry out unhindered trade by helping them in protection of their cattle, animals and other goods.

Charans even lent their animals to other castes for some period. As they were materially prosperous and owned cattle and horses, they lent their cows, buffaloes and horses to other castes. Here too in the transaction, we see large number of petition by the charans in different *kachedis* of Jodhpur. Charan Karnidan reported that there was a transaction between him and Gujjar Sabla. All exchanges were cleared except for the compensation for one bullock that Charan had lent to the Gujjar. Karnidan

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<sup>46</sup> JSPB 9, 1826/1769, f. 24A.

<sup>47</sup> JSPB 9, 1826/1769 (April), f. 120B.

<sup>48</sup> JSPB 6, 1824/1767 (March), f. 158B.

<sup>49</sup> JSPB 15, 1832/1775 (July), f. 175B.

demanded that either the Gujjar return the bullock or pay for it. The Gujjar was not obeying the Panchas decision and therefore the Charan had to report the matter to the *huzur* (highest authority). The state ordered the Panchas to relook in the matter by listening to both sides of the party and make a compromise. The Panchas order would be final and binding.<sup>50</sup> In the above case two things are clear, first that the state respected and trusted the panchayats decision and ordered the people to respect that. Secondly, in cases of exchange and transaction, the state initiated an enquiry and discussion before asking any of its judicial authorities to give wajib decision. In this case, a person from lower caste i.e. Gujjar was involved, irrespective of that the state ordered for a compromise and settlement between the two rather than randomly punishing the Gujjar for his fault.

From our understanding of the charans from chronicles of the state, it is clear that charan owned horses. After the Rajputs, it was the Charans who had the privilege of owning horses. The petition records also reflect the issues pertaining to dispute in the ownership of horses. In an incident, Charan Sujo was taking his mare from the *haveli*, when the Jagirdar of the village forcefully captured the mare claiming that he owned it and it was a few days ago stolen by his *chakar*. The Jagirdar forcefully took the mare. Charan Sujo appealed to the state to conduct an enquiry and his mare be returned to him.<sup>51</sup>

### **Charan Crimes and 'Penalties':**

One of the most important issues that the chronicles do not address regarding the charans is their criminal and deviant activities that may include robbery, burglary, rape, murder; attack while travelling etc. Criminal and deviant activity projects the nature of societal pressures and other stresses that the community faced at a period of time. To understand the social history of any community it is important to delve in this aspect. The administration of criminal justice was often, though not always, a

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<sup>50</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828/1771 (May), f. 24A.

<sup>51</sup> *JSPB* 5, 1823/1766 (March), f. 303A.

political as well as judicial process. It was therefore by nature variable, arbitrary, subject to negotiation and intercession, but also to exemplary displays power.<sup>52</sup>

The charan community was generally hailed as sacral and high in honour, prestige and social position, however they were not bereft from doing deviant activities, in amidst of the society while cohabiting with other communities. It is interesting to see the reaction of the state as a penal regime while dealing with these kinds of escalated stresses and activities. By and large their reactions and redressal to the above kind of stresses reflect their stand while dealing with these issues which otherwise call for crippling fines, heavy punishments and trials. If we compare the punishments that are generally meted out to other communities in Rajasthan apart from charans we notice that the so called 'punishments' meted to charans was minor.

While discussing the Indian Penal Regime in Maharashtra in the eighteenth century, Sumit Guha argued that with regards to criminal justice under the Maratha state, the influence of scriptural law and customs was very limited, and that the Maratha regime drew upon a set of punitive techniques that had evolved over centuries in which arbitrarily violent yet politically unstable regimes had sought to sustain their power against challenges from within and without.<sup>53</sup> However in Rajasthan incidences suggests that the customs or customary practices and privileges – endorsed and transmitted through the rural community in their diverse regional and local variations, constituted the informal structures of law. Hence, the parameters of law in medieval Indian society were defined both by administrative regulations and customs.

In case of theft, the state tried to resolve the case amicably by restoring the authority to the person in-charge of that land or village. The Jodhpur state resisted in resolving these petty issues and handed over the charge to the local head. Charan Baldiya of village Badram was resting along with his goods that included salt in village Badiya. His belongings and goods got stolen in village Badiya. This village was held by a Purohit as a charitable grant. He tried to trace the thief but could not find him. The state ordered the Purohit to look into this matter and resolve it amicably where either

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<sup>52</sup> Sumit Guha, 'An Indian Penal Regime: Maharashtra in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 147, 1995, p.103.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 103.



the Purohit find the thief or the Charan be compensated for the loss.<sup>54</sup> In another case where the Charan's *bhaibant* Paema burgled Charan Fateh's house and stole his household goods, jewellery, utensils and hurt two of his cows. Fateh appealed to the state to enquire and retrieve his goods from Paema's control. Charan Fateh further requested the state to document the entire incident of theft and Paema be made responsible for it so that in future he does not attempt such an act again.<sup>55</sup> The altercation between the Charans tied in *bhaibant* relations must be in vogue; probably that is why the charan made sure that all his dispute and conflict vis-a-vis his *bhaibant* relation were documented for future references.

Many incidences reflect that the sacral nature of the charans did not play much role in protecting them from robbers. There were several cases where the plaintiff petitioned to the state on behalf of his deceased Charan brother who was killed in the course of his journey to some destination. In the first chapter we studied that the charans were respected because of their sacral position because of which they remained unharmed by robbers however the *bahi* documents have something else to suggest. The charans were indeed a much diversified group in terms of the power, position and privileges that they commanded from other communities. The plaintiffs in the *bahi* documents are the ones who probably did not enjoy that kind of respect and position thereby becoming more vulnerable to adversities like these. Rajput Rame robbed Charan Lakhe of village Falsudh while he was on his way to Jaisalmer to get his wife from his in-laws house. On his journey a Rajput robbed Rs. 400/-, goods, camel, clothes etc. of Charan Lakhe and even killed him. The Charan's brother appealed to the Jodhpur state to enquire into the case and give justice by at least retrieving the goods and money back to the Charan's family from the Rajput.<sup>56</sup> In another case documented in pargana Jalor, Charan Jeeva reported that his two brothers went to their in-laws village. While returning, there was a fight between them and Badar<sup>57</sup> Bakhta. Later in the course of their journey they had a fight with Badar Haroop over their horses that the Badar took away after killing charan's brothers. Charan Jeeva then appealed to the state that the two horses that belonged to the Charans should be

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<sup>54</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1833:1774 (July), f. 171A.

<sup>55</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833:1776 (August), f. 48B.

<sup>56</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833:1776 (May), f. 22B.

<sup>57</sup> Badar: caste

recovered from Badar Haroop and given to him.<sup>58</sup> In both the disputes above we notice that the killing of the Charan was not highlighted and the appeal to the state was for the materialistic goods that were lost in the conflict. It may be suggested that the cases like these where the charan was killed was resolved and justice was dispensed at a different level. Generally criminal cases were resolved by the state and in above cases the culprit responsible for killing the charan must have been punished. However, this does not get reflected in the *bahi* documents because of its limitations. It was generally observed that number of disputes especially those related to social factors were arbitrated within the village without reference to the state. Nevertheless, in cases cited above I argue that the onus of enquiry and arbitration and adjudication must have been carried out by the state. Undoubtedly the state must be taking assistance of the panchayats and local heads of the parganas and villages for enquiry and other proofs as they were equipped with knowledge of social norms of the village, precedences and their close relationship with the inhabitants of the village; but the final decision making in the criminal cases was in the hands of the highest authority i.e. the *huzur* or the state.

In my study of *bahi* documents, there were many cases where we notice hard core criminal activity by charans. In these disputes too, the attitude of the state was mild and lenient. Charan Fatto of village Toliyasar had two Baniyas in his custody, he killed one of them and the other Baniya was still in his custody. The state ordered for an enquiry and the release of the baniya and justice should be dispensed through *wajib* decision.<sup>59</sup> Similarly Charan of village Bhadora of pargana Nagor killed the Doom<sup>60</sup> of that village on the day of holi. The Charan was summoned, enquired and sent back. The state ordered that whatever their dispute is should be settled and *wajib* should be done.<sup>61</sup> In another case Charan Mode of village Kuda killed Sami Sijhiyapuri. In this case the Charan was summoned to Pali for enquiry on the entire episode of killing which would then be reported to *Shri Huzur* (highest authority). However later we noticed that the state withdrew its order to summon the Charan to Pali and instructed

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<sup>58</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828/1771 (July), f. 146B.

<sup>59</sup> *JSPB* 12, 1829/1772 (October), f. 279B.

<sup>60</sup> *Doom*: caste that are in profession of singing.

<sup>61</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (April), f. 47B.

for local enquiry and adjudication.<sup>62</sup> Yet another case documented in the year 1768 A.D., where the Charan Padme aiming to kill Charan Uday by mistake killed Charan Uday's mother, the state ordered for an enquiry from people of Dharmasar village who were witness to this incident and also instructed consultation from the nearby village to find the actual details about this crime and thereafter resolve the dispute. The state again ordered to adhere to *wajib* and strictly told the officials that this case should not come back to the state for redressal.<sup>63</sup> It is quite probable that this case might have come to the state for redressal a number of times in the past. This reflected the dissatisfaction of the plaintiff towards the justice dispensed to him at various levels of jurisprudence. As stated earlier there was hardly any severe punishment attributed to the charan in case of any crime or deviant activity. This reflects the Jodhpur state's bias towards the charans. Again, it is important to mention here that the *bahi* documents lack in details regarding the background of all the cases that were documented in the *kachedis*, thereby making our analysis of the social history of charans incomplete. Here with our corroborative study of different kinds of source material which includes chronicles, archival, anthropological sources helps us correct and clear our understanding of the dynamics of the charan's social relations.

### **World of Charan Women:**

The androcentric nature of the Rajput society comes from the fact that the contribution women made to any processes viz, production, family, work, culture etc was deliberately and invariably structured in a manner that rendered women relatively invisible. As discussed by Nandita P. Sahai in her study on artisans of Jodhpur in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the organization of production for artisanal women was mostly in the seclusion of individual homes as part of an extension of their house-wifely chores, supposedly performed during leisure hours, made them invisible. The social customs appeared incongruous in view of the deep roots of patriarchy embedded across different arenas of Indian culture.<sup>64</sup> In a period which accepted male domination and in which it was difficult for a woman to raise her voice against the injustices done to

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<sup>62</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833/1777 (March), f. 113B.

<sup>63</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (March), f. 134B.

<sup>64</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, 2006, pp. 90-91.

her for want of social security, implicating one's husband or any other male member in the family for mental and physical torture might have proved counter-productive.<sup>65</sup>

Despite this, we find widespread reporting of intra family social disputes where the petitioner was a Charani. However the documents generally recorded the names of Charans alone, usually leaving women nameless, identifiable only with reference to their male guardians, be they husbands, fathers or brothers. Even in the situation where a charan woman approached the administration with a petition, her name was in most cases excluded from the record, and she was merely referred to as the mother, sister, wife or daughter-in-law of the male head of the household. The phallogocentric lens of male notaries and scribes who recorded the petitions could discern a world of males alone, ensuring that they viewed women as no more than mere appendages of their male relatives. Ironically we notice a change in the position of charan women vis-a-vis the state and society when we compare our archival source (petitions) to that of the chronicles and other secondary works done on the charans in Medieval Rajasthan. In the first chapter we had seen the role of charan women who epitomised Sakti and was treated sacral by the Rajputs. She was pertinent in resolving many issues that she faced through her knowledge and ability. While on one hand we see respect and privileges attributed to the charan women, on the other hand we notice the conflicting world of the charan women in her social and everyday life where she was victimised and as plaintiffs approached the *huzur* (state) for justice and conciliation. Along with the ambiguity in the treatment of charan women, state intervention in gendered disputes also suggests anomalous and multiple responses, dependent on the specificities of the case.

The husband was not, however, the only perpetrator of injustice against his spouse. The records tell us numerous stories of harassment by in-laws and other relatives. In this case the charan woman directly petitioned the state in order to seek justice. Barhat Rasa's daughter-in-law claimed that she owned some bits of land in village Aagdos and village Kutasi. However, her brother-in-law's son was not giving her share of land. She appealed to the state to conduct an investigation and verify the facts. The

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<sup>65</sup> Dilbagh Singh, 'Regulating the Domestic: Notes on the Pre-Colonial State and the Family', *Studies in History*, vol 19, no. 1, 2003, p. 71.

state ordered an enquiry and ordered that her share be given to her.<sup>66</sup> In another case where a Charani asserted her rights was from Nagor pargana, Charani Sajani petitioned that her house was forcefully captured by her brother-in-laws and they refused to vacate the house. She proved her claim by showing the solitary document which stated her rights over the house. The state ordered the brother-in-laws to vacate the house and restore it to the Charani.<sup>67</sup> The property of the charan women always seemed to be disputed, thereby creating perennial conflict. Charani Sajani of village Bhaguri complained against her long distance brother-in-law who had forcefully usurped her land and refused to give it back to her. The state ordered to summon Charani's relatives and whatever *wajib* land was hers' be given to her.<sup>68</sup> Therefore the degree of intensity of women's protest as contained in these records may not be very clear or may be in a passive form; even so, the limited information available on this matter is significant. The state did seek to uphold the right to property of female members of the charan community according to the norms of the caste.

After a charan's death, a portion of the *dholi* grant or the revenue grants appears to have been inherited by the female descendents in the form of *retainer*. Here too the relatives of the deceased charan created raised objections regarding the Charan's land and right of the Charani over the *dholi* land of her deceased husband. Thus, after the death of Sagta Charan, his widow petitioned to the state against her brother-in-law who was troubling the peasants working on her husband's *dholi* land trying to illegally usurp the *dholi*. The *dholi* of the Charan was not returned to the state after the death of the Charan and was inherited by the widow as per the rule. The state in this case issued an order instructing the Charani's brother-in-law to stop the interference in the charani's property.<sup>69</sup> Similarly Charani Sahebadin of Basdari village sought justice from the state regarding her property that she inherited from her deceased husband. Charani's brother-in-law Jagram Narayan ousted her from her land, she appealed in the *kachedi* Parbatsar where she was conciliated and the decision of giving her the entitled property was done. However her share was still being interfered by her brother-in-law. She complained to the state and appealed for

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<sup>66</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768 (August), f. 154A.

<sup>67</sup> *JSPB* 8, 1825/1768, f. 37B.

<sup>68</sup> *JSPB* 7, 1824/1767 (March), f. 41A.

<sup>69</sup> *JSPB* 3, 1822/1765 (June), f. 49B, case 269.

justice. The state ordered that her portion be given to her and everything be documented in the *kachedi*. Moreover whatever was wajib and as per the customs should be given to her.<sup>70</sup> In case charan's property was not divided; the state took upon itself to divide the property when the dispute regarding charan's property originated after his death. Charan Daidaan's brother Sagatdaan's daughter-in-law claimed that village Todiwana was always her husband's dholi. In 1765 A.D. the *chaudhary* and *hawaldar* of village Lasu sent their peasants and started cultivation there and created problems for the Charani by stopping the yield and also interfering with the well on that land. After sometime the dholi land was not being cultivated by anyone. The state ordered that whatever needed to be given to the Charani as per her rights and dues should be given to her. The collection from water should be given to the men of *Rani* and the rest of the *hasil* should continue to be given as per the previous practise to Mankesar Aahiwal<sup>71</sup> who was taking care of the well on the dholi land.<sup>72</sup> In yet another case, after the death of Bakhta Charan, his widow adopted Umaida's son. There was some conflict between the charani and her adopted son because of which the Charani cancelled the adoption. Umaida was creating troubles for the Charani by stopping her *hasil* from the land of her deceased husband that she rightfully had as her claim. The state ordered for an enquiry and justice through negotiation between both parties as per the customs of charans.<sup>73</sup>

There are innumerable cases that reflect the ferocity of disputes and assertion of Charani's right over her property. We do not see the Charan women as passive subjects under the domination of male counterparts. There is a reflection of her autonomy and awareness of her rights both when her husband was alive and also he died. As per the contract, in village Binawadi in pargana Jaitaran, one third of land was under Barhat Bhawani as his sasan grant and the rest was Har Ram's share. Bhawani's family went to Malwa in 1765 A.D. where Barhat Bhawani passed away. The wife and mother of Bhawani then asked for their share in the sasan grant of deceased Bhawani which had been usurped by Har Ram. He gave some portion of the crop to the Charanis but not the entire share that they were entitled to. The wife and

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<sup>70</sup> ?JSPB 16, 1833/1776 (November), f. 141A.

<sup>71</sup> *Aahiwal*: person responsible.

<sup>72</sup> JSPB 5, 1823/1766, f. 115A.

<sup>73</sup> JSPB 5, 1823/1766, f. 65A.

the mother of Bhawani appealed to the state to get whatever is wajib property that they were entitled to.<sup>74</sup> The state indeed did not ignore the injustices committed against the charan women, probably realising the fact that these women belonged to higher caste in the Rajput society, their treatment and redressal was much more convincing and better than the other communities like the artisan women<sup>75</sup>, peasant women<sup>76</sup> etc. Thus charani Gumani complained that her husband's second wife's son Sado and Jadho who were interfering in her right over one third of her husband's property. The state instructed investigation in the case and accordingly restore the property of Charani as per the property rules of Charans.<sup>77</sup>

By and large the plaintiffs in all the cases of disputes too wanted the state to adhere to the customary practices of different caste and communities in their social conflict and in case of aberrations sought to protest by means of petitions to the state. It was reported by wife of Charan Deva that her step son Bheema had forcefully appropriated the produce of her property that included a well and a field. She claimed to have got the *hasil* from that land for a number of years. She even furnished the *parwana* order from the state's *kachedi* stating her right over it but Bheema refused to accept it. One of the fields belonging to her had been sold to a Chaudhary and payment made in that regard is misappropriated by Bheema. The state ordered Bheema to return all the acquisitions that he forcefully took from the Charani and also further instructed him not to harass her.<sup>78</sup>

The state's intervention in regulating community relations was evident from its attempts to uphold the honour and self-respect of individuals without being influenced by issues of gender, caste, community or status.<sup>79</sup> This seemed to be quite true with regards to ways that the state dealt with the petitions of the charan women. In our study and analysis of petition records we notice that the charan women owned

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<sup>74</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (April), f. 130A.

<sup>75</sup> For detail study see Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*. Delhi, 2006.

<sup>76</sup> For detail study see Dilbagh Singh, 'Regulating the Domestic: Notes on the Pre-Colonial State and the Family', *Studies in History*, vol 19, no. 1, 2003.

<sup>77</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (April), f. 168A.

<sup>78</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (March), f. 125A.

<sup>79</sup> Dilbagh Singh, 'Regulating the Domestic: Notes on the Pre-Colonial State and the Family', *Studies in History*, vol 19, no. 1, 2003, p. 78.

individual property like sasan land, fields, cattle etc. and not merely inherited her husband's property or was a claimant to that property. Thus Charani Ajbi of village Bhaburi reported that half the village was under sasan grant out of which four fields belonged to her share, which was partly under self cultivation and partly given on lease to others. She complained that her brother-in-law's son Sota forbade the muqatis (those who were given the field for cultivation) to pay the muqata<sup>80</sup> amount to her. She was solely dependent on the muqatam<sup>81</sup> money for her survival which was being restricted. The state ordered that whosoever was creating trouble and threatening the muqatas not to pay money to her should be strictly instructed to stop this practise. Further so long as she lives, no one should create any kind of dispute or harassment with regards to her fields. She should be allowed to take her muqatam as per the practise in the past.<sup>82</sup>

It is evident that the state clearly protected charan women and their rights over property. it might be because the property rights of charan women were respected that therefore restored to her at the time of conflict. Village Seeu in pargana Nagor was divided into three portions of sasan land. The fourth portion belonged to Sukha. Sukha's wife complained to the state against her brother-in-law Devbadha who was not giving her portion of land. Although the land was given to her but not in entirety that she was entitled to as per the rule. The state summoned Devbadha and instructed him to restore the land to Charani that she was entitled to as per the rule. Moreover the state strictly ordered Devbadha to avoid harassing the Charani with regards to her property in future.<sup>83</sup> In the period when land became an important asset for people, Charan women did not stay behind in asserting their rights over claims on their land. Even at the time of encroachment of her land by others, Charan women protested and resorted to petitions. Thus Charan Karna's aunt of village Bhesana appealed that the land adjacent to her village belonged to her. On this plot of land, there were five houses; two belonging to her and three belonging to begaries. This land was also a part of the Bhomiya settlement. A person (unnamed) was using the vacant part of her plot for organizing *haat*. The state clearly ordered the person obstructing Charani's

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<sup>80</sup> *Muqata*: Revenue Farming.

<sup>81</sup> *Muqatam*: Income from Revenue Farming.

<sup>82</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833/1776 (March), f. 3A.

<sup>83</sup> *JSPB* 15, 1832/1775, f. 21B.



property should stop doing it and instructed that the *haat* should not be established there.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed charan women's petitions were dealt with some specificity while judicial dispensation. The state of course adhered to what was *wajib* nevertheless as compared to other disputes that we have analysed in this study, the justice granted to charan women and their decision making in their regard was much more specific. This helps us in ascertaining the position of charan women in the social life of the charans in Rajput society. Thus, Charani Rasu of Bhesana village appealed that she had a certain amount of space in the village which was being interfered by the jagirdar who was not letting her have control over that. She wanted state to establish the truth so that she could have the control on her portion of land in the village. State therefore ordered for an enquiry and restoration of the land to her that she customarily deserved.<sup>85</sup> As stated earlier that Charan women also owned cattle, there was a case of animal dispute where charani asserted her rights over the buffalo that belonged to her. Charani Rajo lost three of her buffaloes. She found out that they were with Kachwaha Gordham of that village who had kept them for three months without any reason. The state imposed *gunehgari* on Gordhan and ordered him to return the buffaloes to Charani.<sup>86</sup>

Charan women's position and social space was also reflected in petitions where we notice her asserting not only her own rights but also the rights of her family members. Many documents reflected her role as a plaintiff. This was interesting to observe as we do not see these kind of references in chronicles where Charan woman asserted her rights, thus showcasing their autonomy and visibility in the Rajput society. Charani of village Bachakudi reported that after her father-in-law Gorakh had died, thereafter her husband spent Rs. 150/- on his funeral rites. The Charani's mother-in-law transferred his entire field etc. in the name of Charan Karna with a condition that so long as she (mother in law) was alive, her maintenance would be taken care by Karna. This field was cultivated by *Nai* Bheema who regularly manure the fields and took care of the crops. The Charani complained that Bheema was refusing to pay the

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<sup>84</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (July), f. 165B.

<sup>85</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (April), f. 167A.

<sup>86</sup> *JSPB* 10, 1827/1770 (September), f. 79B.

*kharkhar*<sup>87</sup> from the field which was needed for her mother-in-law who needs to be looked after as decided in the contract. The state summoned Bheema and the Charani (daughter in law of Gorakh) for resolving the dispute and instructed that whatever is *wajib* and had to be given to the Charani should be provided to her and *gaer wajabi* (injustice) should not be done.<sup>88</sup>

Although meagre, there were evidences of petitions filed by Charani and entering into the litigation process for some concession or justice for their husbands and male relatives. Indeed women of the charan community were instrumental in getting justice for their family and male heads. Thus Charani Aakhi of village Charanavas reported that Charan Sivdan was killed by Charan Rupo. The physical violence turned into a sword fight where Rupo was injured and after few months succumbed to injuries and died. Charani's husband was present at the time of the conflict between Rupo and Sivdaan and in this commotion picked a stone to hit but then threw it on the ground without hurting anyone present there. Her husband is now held on false charges of killing and as a part of the punishment had to pay *gunehgari* of Rs. 43/-. Charani Aakhi petitioned (*araj karai*) to the state that her husband was not involved in the killing and therefore should be freed from paying the *gunehgari* amount. The state summoned Rupo's son and Charani for enquiry and instructed that facts be established and if Charani's husband was not involved in the conflict he should be released and should not be troubled (*khechal*) for the *gunehgari* (fine).<sup>89</sup> This case again came to Parbatsar *kachedi* in the month of *bhadva* (September) in the same year 1771 A.D. where the charani again petitioned to the state to get concession in the *gunehgari* amount of Rs. 43/- that had to be paid. It seemed that the Charan was accused of killing Rupo. Charani had paid Rs. 12/- and 15.5 *aana* as a part of the fine and she petitioned to the state to waive the rest amount of Rs. 30/- and 1.5 *aana*. The state ordered to waive the amount.<sup>90</sup>

A very peculiar case that came in limelight in the course of our study of the petition records was: Charan Ajba's daughter-in-law petitioned to the state from Parbatsar *kachedi* defending her brother-in-law Gumane who was accused in an internal conflict

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<sup>87</sup> *kharkhar*: yield from the crops.

<sup>88</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (July), f. 181B.

<sup>89</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828/1771 (August), f. 248A.

<sup>90</sup> *JSPB* 11, 1828/1771 (September), f. 250A.

with Rajput Pratap Singh. A fine of Rs. 80/- was levied on him along with 40 mand grain. Gumane paid Rs. 20/- to the state and then left for Malwa. The rest amount of Rs. 60/- was paid by the Charani. The officials reported that they had not received the amount of Rs. 20/- and 40 mand grain from Gumane. Charani appealed in the *kachedi* and to get justice went to Pilwara Panchas. There the Panchas added another Rs. 20/- and 20 man grain on her, which totalled Rs. 40/- and 60 mand grain. From there she went to Parbatsar *kachedi* where she narrated the entire incident to the *ohdedar* (official) and complained about the Panchas. The Charani pleaded to the state that for such a small mistake of her brother-in-law she was facing enormous harassment. She requested the state to get all the details from Pilwara and all the documents pertaining to it. The state ordered for an enquiry in this matter and discussion with the Panchas and thereafter, all the details be documented and the case should be resolved with appropriate justice.<sup>91</sup> This case reflected few important features of jurisprudence in the Jodhpur state. Firstly, that despite the authority of the panchayats, their decision was not binding and representations challenging their decision could be made to the highest authority of *Huzur* (state). Secondly, it also reflected the high handedness of the Panchas who had the liberty to increase the *gunehgari* amount. Thirdly, the entire episode reflected the multiple levels of arbitration that the Jodhpur state was woven into. Fourthly, the endurance and visibility of charani also speaks of the easy mobility of charan women in her social life, who although was recognised and addressed as Charan Ajba's daughter-in-law in the entire petition, was perseverant in getting justice for her family despite being dissatisfied and facing disappointment at various levels of arbitration.

Charan women's role as a moneylender was also highlighted in few petitions where the dispute originated because of non-payment of money lent by Charani. Thus, charan Manroop's wife had made a transaction with Charan Sibhu, who had to return her money. The Charani complained to the state against Sibhu who was not returning her money. The state ordered to look into the papers of transaction and accordingly give *wajib* justice.<sup>92</sup> Another conflict which reflects Charan women's relation with other community suggests her autonomy and visibility in the Rajput state in the 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *JSPB* 13, 1830/1773 (September), f. 283B.

<sup>92</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (March), f. 120A.

century. The Jagirdar of village Mannana Dalal Singh owed some amount of money to the Charani. To claim her money she visited Mannana where she had an altercation with the Jagirdar. The officials of the state were sent to summon the jagirdar to Parbatsar *kachedi* to resolve the dispute. The order from the state was to summon the Charani and also the *thava* (genuine person of the village Mannana) to the *kachedi* to conduct an enquiry so that the case is solved at the earliest.<sup>93</sup>

The notion of *be-adbi* as improper behaviour was also invoked with respect to charan women. However, its precise nature is not revealed in the recorded cases. Only one document highlighted one Charan women's illicit relation with a man from Tiwari<sup>94</sup> caste. Charan Sivdan of Neembawas village complained that his brother Agra's wife had an illicit relation with Tiwari Govind who had been coming to their house for past three years. Sivdan reported that he warned the Tiwari to restrain coming to their house but he did not listen to him. When Charan Agra came from Sirohi he saw his wife and Tiwari together. Tiwari killed Agra and usurped Agra's house, two cattle, one buffalo, grains etc. Charan Sivdan appealed to the state to conduct an investigation and get his brother's land, house, cattle and grains back from Govind.<sup>95</sup> The only inference that we can seek from this case is that Charan women was involved in illicit relations with men from other communities. Something that we could not find was that how the state addressed the murder of Charan Agra. It was possible that arbitration and judicial dispensation for this may have happened at another level of adjudication. The limitations that the *bahi* records suffer from, creates loopholes in our understanding of the nature of the situation in its entire form and also how the state dealt with different kinds of conflict which vary in its intensity.

A large number of documents show the nature of the state's intervention in affairs relating to the institution of marriage. Non-adherence to prescribed customs and rituals were considered to be within the jurisdiction of the caste panchayats as well as that of the state. The state also responded to direct appeals from individuals that requested the resolution of such matters as per caste regulations. Ensuring that marriage ceremonies were performed as per the established norms of caste and

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<sup>93</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833/1776 (June), f. 146A.

<sup>94</sup> Tiwari: Brahmin caste.

<sup>95</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (July), f. 199B.

community were also considered to be functions of the state. There were many cases of dispute where marriage contracts were not honoured; here the state intervened to uphold the code of conduct and caste regulations. Charan Disae was engaged to Barhat Hardan's sister but later the Charan refused to get married. The Barhat appealed to the state wanting the marriage to be solemnized as per the *reet* (customs). The state ordered that Charan Disae should be explained the customs and traditions of the community and if he does not agree then the *hawaldar* of the village should be sent to convince him to get married to Hardan's sister.<sup>96</sup> At all cost, marriage contracts could not be undone. There were few documents on disputes resulting from the breaking of engagement. Thus Charan Jase uncle's son of village Jhunjunu was engaged to Charan Sayala's daughter. They had given jewellery, money, clothes etc. (worth Rs. 75/-) to Sagta as a part of the customs. However, later Sagta took his daughter to Malwa and got her married to someone else. The groom's family petitioned to the state to get refund of all the expenses that they had incurred on Sagta's daughter at the time of engagement. The state ordered for an enquiry and that *wajib* should be done.<sup>97</sup> Like any other community, the social lives of charans were full of these kinds of everyday conflict.

In case the charan was not able to solemnize the marriage because of financial strains, the state tried to help them in different ways. *Huzur's* decision could not be ignored and had to be followed, therefore, using this strength and position of the state, the plaintiffs petitioned to the state for some recourse at the time of financial strains. Thus Charan Dude reported that his brother Kano was engaged to Charan Sawai's daughter. Charan Sawai wanted the marriage to be solemnized in the month of *Asadh* (July) and for that sent a message to charan Dude. If the marriage was not conducted by decided month and date, Charan Sawai would marry his daughter somewhere else. Dude does not have money to conduct the marriage of his brother Kano. Charan Dude further reported that he had a family *bohra* (moneylender) named Bihari Keema who is in their service for past 60 years, but was refusing to lend him any money for the marriage. A field was also mortgaged with Keema and Dude pays 24 mand grains to him year after year, but despite this refuses to give him any assistance. The state

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<sup>96</sup> *JSPB* 6, 1824/1767. f. 182A.

<sup>97</sup> *JSPB* 9, 1826/1769 (May), f. 83B.

ordered the *bohra* to lend money to the Charan for the marriage so that it can be solemnized.<sup>98</sup> In this case the state took the initiative to arrange fresh money for the aggrieved party who could not carry out their customary traditions because of dearth of money. The main purpose of the state intervention in the domestic affairs of charans was to enforce the customary laws with respect to those applicable to charan community. The Jodhpur state also received its legitimacy partly in its upholding and enforcing whatever was treated as norms by the society with its punitive power at its disposal.

Therefore in our study of the chronicles and the petition records we do not see any dominant sight of oppression or aggression on charan women. They like their men counterpart were treated with respect and were heard by the state. The state was rather more precise and clear while dispensing justice to the charan women petitioners than to charan men. It is heartening to see state's response to the concerns of charan women in their daily life. It is likely that the role of charan women in the public sphere must not be great and therefore the state was quick in dispensing justice to them (as it did not mean much to state) as compared to the charan men who were influential in the public and professional sphere thereby making the state think and enquire in detail before dispensing any concrete decision in case of conflict. Although we find fewer petitions from charan women, nevertheless these reflect a great deal about their social life in Rajasthani society in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite acknowledging the presence and visibility of charan women in their daily life as inferred from the petition records, many writers have neglected them viz., their contribution in poetry and recitation which is a primary occupation of charans. Rustom Bharucha highlighted the role of women in the recitation of one of the important *pawadas* i.e. Pabuji's epic in Rajasthani bardic literature. As discussed in the first chapter, Pabuji is presented as a hero in the Rajasthani society who in history protected a charan woman, thereby becoming famous and being revered in the annals of charan literature. Bharucha highlights that the husband-wife rendition of Pabu story

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<sup>98</sup> *JSPB* 14, 1831/1774 (July). f. 104B.

is a hereditary function, even though it is only the men in this community who were formally initiated into the singing tradition when they were boys. Women, on the other hand, are allowed to sing in public only after they begin to live with their husbands - they may be married at a very young age, but they only leave their parents' home after puberty. How a young woman of seventeen or eighteen learns all the lines of the Pabuji epic, through informal instructions given to her by her husband and in-laws, remains a mystery. However, Bharucha reiterates the fact that not only does she learn the lines of the epic to sustain the livelihood of the family, she even sings close to seventy to eighty per cent of the text in actual performance. The man merely begins each line, but it is the woman who completes it. This fact is not always acknowledged. He further asserts that both Komal Kothari in his anthropological work and John D. Smith in his writing on Pabuji's epic failed to deal with the veiled presence of bhopo's or charan's wife in actual performance. Indeed she does not even face the spectators but stands sideways, facing her husband, feeding his performance. He urges that there should be a shift in focus of research to the women performers, who are not fully acknowledged, or even named. He emphasized that the authoritative text provided of 'Pabuji' by John Smith is based entirely on Parbu Bhopa's 'arthav' (explanation) of the text rather than the 'gav' (song), which is shared with his wife.<sup>99</sup>

Therefore there is a huge dichotomy in the position of charan women in the literature and sources for reconstructing their histories. On one hand they are considered as sacral and revered as Sakti<sup>100</sup> and on the other hand became invisible in daily lives or became marginalized in our imaginations.

### **Petitions and Notions of 'Wajib' or Legitimate:**

Apparently there were many forms of protest that the charans employed during the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. At the face of transgression of traditionally sanctioned norms and rights, the charans promptly resorted to spectrum of devices

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<sup>99</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan An Oral History, Conversation with Komal Kothari*, (Delhi, 2003), pp. 113-114.

<sup>100</sup> For example, see charan women's position as Sakti in Shyamaldas. *Vir Vinod*, vol I, reprint, (Delhi, 1986), p. 343.

that would help them protect their subsistence. One of the most peculiar methods of protest was *tragum*, details of which have been discussed in the second chapter. Petitions tended to be a common and most accessible method employed by the charans since it was one that was sanctioned by customs and enjoyed official approval too. In doing so, they merely were trying to retrieve what had for long rightfully belonged to them.

Undoubtedly politics fashioned not only the judicial processes but also the nature of documentation preserved by the rulers in form of petition records. The *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahi* records identified the litigants in dispute cases by their castes rather than their sub-castes. This may be explained by the fact that for purposes of administration, an individual's name, caste and place of residence were sufficient parameters for identification. However what we notice perennially in all the documents and especially the ones related to crime was that without recording any details about the cause of the crime and the relationship between it and the punishment ordered; judicial documents are extremely sketchy accounts of events. Those transcribing petitions stated very briefly the offence and punishment announced, the narration of events devoid of any details, and the decision taken by the judicial authorities lacking in the record of explanation or rationale for state orders. As mentioned earlier, the transparency in the rulings of the state would be fatal as it might expose them and their discretionary space.

Nevertheless with the help of these documents we can gauge state's reaction to various issues which although formed a part of the 'private matter', but came in the foray of 'public matter', when the dispute was taken to the local *kachedi*. The state's decision was influenced by different underpinnings. Many a times, cases where people from upper echelon (like the charans) are present, state's decision was coloured by biasness. However the lower castes also asserted their rights over some issue which the state could not disregard. The phenomenal number of petitions filed by the charans in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century indicates that despite being from the upper strata of the society there were many concerns and disputes that the charans had to face while dealing with the daily activities with their own caste and also with members of other castes.



The tone of the state was strict when its decision was not followed by the parties involved in the dispute. Although the soft attitude of state was predominant towards the charans in various situations and conflicts, nevertheless when the petitioners did not adhere to state's decision, the authority took strict note of it. In the dispute between Charan Asiya and Barhat Bakhtha where Bakhtha explained that the residents of village Peetholav were not allowed to go to the kachedi and were also instructed not to assess the crop till some issue pending was resolved. Despite this strict instruction the Jat got the assessment done. The state's firmness was visible in its reaction where the state ordered to summon everybody to know the details because if the order was not to assess the land then how could the Jat make the assessment.<sup>101</sup> Like any other community, all the contracts and promises had to be honoured. This meant that if a certain amount of due was had to be paid by the charan, he could not escape it and had to fulfil his obligation towards that. Thus, when a petition came to Maroth *kachedi* about Charan Ume, who had promised to pay Rs. 1/- to the temple for some event but refuses to pay the amount, the state strictly ordered the Charan to make the payment as per the contract signed.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore although couched in deferential language, and to that extent contributing towards the maintenance of the ideology of dominance, petitions at the same time represent resistance, for they articulated charan's plight and applied relentless pressures upon the state to abide by its high moral claims to legitimate authority. This path of resistance may have been docile, conciliatory and non provocative, but the objective was more definitely one of self-preservation, if not promotion.

Clearly the Jodhpur state in the eighteenth century worked within the framework of customary laws which were generally referred to as the *wajabi* in the documents. Indeed different interactions of charans with other communities that we saw through the conflicts reflect that the state always dispensed justice by ordering *ju wajibi huve ju karaye dejo*. The question is whether there was some particular *wajib* law that was

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<sup>101</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833/1776 (March), f. 16B.

<sup>102</sup> *JSPB* 16, 1833/1776 (June), f. 149A.

homogeneously followed by people from all community or was it distinct for each caste and community. Further what did the state meant by wajib decisions and was there any limit or restrictions on these laws or were they generally followed by the state absolutely without any limitations. Were not there clashes among different customary laws when the parties involved in the dispute belonged to different communities? These pertinent questions are very critical to our study as they will help us define the notion of wajib and also as to why the state made this as the foundation for dispensation of justice.

The assumption that Hinduism was a unitary, monolithic tradition that prescribed a singular body of laws for everyone over centuries stands exposed today. No longer is the centrality of scriptures alone as the source of Hindu traditions, or the key to understanding them, a perception that is subscribed to. In fact, the huge gap between customary traditions and Brahmanical prescriptions has long been recognised.<sup>103</sup> Traditions and customary practices structured a range of interactions. The practise of certain norms over generations had a certain hold over the psyche of charans and could not be thrown to the winds very easily. Thus the state felt constrained in the observance of conventional standards of wajabi. The early modern Indian social structure appeared to be an amalgam of contradictory and contestatory processes, puzzling rather than one that displayed easily discernible patterns. What is clear, though, is that the relations between the state and charans continued to be implicated in the notions of wajabi, though the gap between the state's reading and the charan's interpretation had widened considerably towards the close of the eighteenth century.

We, however, have no information as to how the state dealt with different kinds of conflicts in the seventeenth century because of non-availability of primary sources. In case of the eighteenth century, the bahi petition records were useful in reflecting myriad aspects of charan's social life, which included tensions and complexities in their daily lives. Never at any point of time did charans display any ambition or confidence to change the extant of power equations. Rather they were aware of the fact that the Rajputs were the closest among their patrons and this gave them an edge

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<sup>103</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, 2006, p. 97.

over other castes and communities. Usually, the state felt constrained to operate within the limits of wajabi, though the fluidity of this concept provided spaces for variable interpretations. Both the charans and other communities harnessed their own advantage. Tensions in their mutual relations, always present and common, got intensified in the latter decades of the eighteenth century where we notice the number of petitions increasing. This highlights the growing tensions and complexities that were gradually ascending with multiple identities and communities asserting their power and in their attempt to move up in the hierarchy and also reflects the increasing ambiguity of the customary laws that was no longer sufficient for pragmatic functioning of the state's administrative and judicial authorities. The charan's legitimate rights also got diluted with the coming of the British rule in India, which resulted in changing notions of the wajabi laws and rules that so efficiently worked for past centuries.

Therefore rather than viewing the Jodhpur state and its relations with charans as that of only power and privileges, the documents discussed in this essay gives us a different picture of the state. The state exercised an overarching authority and did not feel hesitant in employing its administrative apparatus to full use in regulating affairs of the state and society down to the level of reaching out to every distinct social group, family and even individual members of every community. Charans were an important part of the Rajput society and the state enjoyed legitimate authority over different convention and norms of charans, which they tried to balance while dealing with other communities in case of conflicting spheres between charans and people of other communities. It is important to take cognisance of the heterogeneity within the charans in terms of their class and material wealth. In the first and second chapter of this essay we saw the status and relations of materially sound charans, where their relation with the state was of power and privileges as the charans were like assets to the state; acting as genealogists, cultural transmitters, conservers, preservers, money lenders, sureties, traders. On the other hand, in the study of our petition records we notice the limited status of large number of charans who were humble and poor. The state's relation with them was of a different nature, it was in context of wajabi rights and laws that the state functioned vis-a-vis them.

Though this study recognizes the principle of wajabi or legitimacy as the anchor of the social space and as the foundation of dispensation of justice on one hand, it is also clear that there were gaps in readings of wajabi by the charans, the state and the other communities (both elite and subordinate). These limits of 'legitimate practice' were constantly contested, negotiated, transgressed, and redefined. As Hasan notes, 'power both empowered and oppressed the ordinary subjects. The normative system was both shared and contested'<sup>104</sup>

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There were different methods of arbitration and adjudication that the Jodhpur state employed while dealing with the disputes and conflicts concerning charans in their daily lives. Apparently all cases that came to the state's penal regime were arbitrated keeping the customary laws and rules of the particular caste. The centralized administration structure of medieval India, with its well defined administrative procedures and regulations provided a set of institutionalized norms for the administration of justice. As far as the study of documents and other primary sources like the chronicles goes, there were three levels of methods of jurisprudence.

Firstly at the local level or village level, where the rural functionaries and sometimes respectable persons of the village like the *hawaldar*, *chaudharies*, *mahajan*, *qanungos* and many a time Barhats of the villages - constituted the local bodies for the arbitration of dispute. The hereditary superior status of few people in the village community conferred on them the position of 'natural' arbiters. The panchayat- both village and the caste panchayat constituted another important body for judicial dispensation the most important function of the panchayats was to resolve disputes. Probably the greatest influence wielded by the village panchayat was in the realm of social disputes as they were aware of the knowledge of social norm of the village and each and every caste. Although the decision of the panchayat was not binding and representations challenging their decision could be made to the state (*huzur*), the state in actuality upheld the decisions taken by the panchayats and implemented them through the instrument of state administration. This provided additional source of strength to the panchayat. The highest body for arbitration was the *huzur*. Infact all

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<sup>104</sup> Farhat Hasan. *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730*, (Cambridge, 2004).

the petitions that we have cited are addressed to this apex authority. There were innumerable cases of disputes registered in the state Kachedi on daily basis. At this level the adjudication of disputes were conducted through the administrative head of the pargana, the *amil*, on the basis of instructions received from the *huzur*. For all the disputes referred to the state, whether adjudicated by the local level functionaries and respectable persons, or by the caste and village panchayats or adjudicated by the state through the *amil*; the implementation of the verdict was the responsibility of the administrative head of the pargana with assistance of various local officials.

As the disputes moved from the relatively 'private' to the 'public' domain and litigants sought direct state intervention, collaboration with their respective caste panchayats was the norm. Given the proximity of the panch to their caste members, the state did caution them not to show any favour to anyone (*harkora rakhjo matti*), and to be totally impartial in the discharge of judicial obligations.<sup>105</sup> Age old practices and customary laws were accepted as being of supreme importance in the disposal of disputes, and the state deliberated with all those who could help it determine the wajabi course of action, even if the reading and interpretation of wajabi was constantly manipulated to suit the state's immediate agenda.<sup>106</sup>

Despite several layers for dispensation of justice and state trying to reach to every individual from elite to subordinate, we notice laxity in central control within the state led to localization of administrative authority. It is perhaps a reflection of such localization of authority that the State's instructions to the pargana official on complaints from charans were at times disregarded and complaints had to be repeated.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *JSPB* 6, 1824/1767 (November), f. 90A. In the internal dispute over give and take between Charan of village Kuda and Manakchand (Surana caste) the state ordered to resolve the dispute by conducting an enquiry first and then taking decision with impartiality. The state said '*harkor kini ri rakhjo matti*'.

<sup>106</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, 2006, p.110.

<sup>107</sup> *JSPB* 3, 1882/1765 (March), f. 14A / 30B. Charan of Surpaliya village had an internal dispute. The state had ordered Bohra Tarachand to look into the matter and take appropriate action. However we notice repetition of the same petition in the Nagor Kachedi twice in the same year.

### Concluding Remarks:

Therefore the petition records of the *JSPB* map 'everyday relations' between the rulers, local landed elements and the charans who were mediated by the culturally recognized, yet constantly negotiated norms of 'legitimacy'. Charans rather than a homogeneous class represented distinct castes following different occupational trades, enjoying differential ranking, social status and economic resources. Though a shared identity in terms of the same caste and high status in the social hierarchy were common for all of them, they did not present a uniform profile. When the rights of many charans who do not fall in the ambit of dominant and powerful, were transgressed, then they did not hesitate to challenge the violators. By and large charans who committed crime escaped harsh punishments or heavy fines. In Guha's words, 'The Penal regime is, after all an aspect of the political regime.'<sup>108</sup> The institutional core of the Rathor rulers' authority was rather fragile and, given the distributive component of kingship where the right to wield force, administer justice, and award punishment was a layered phenomenon, power and authority was dispersed rather than exclusively concentrated in a singular sovereign. Monarchical interventions had to therefore devise extraordinary justice for extraordinary subjects, assessing the weight of competing interests at play in each case. Such judgements were in many cases flagrant violations of *wajabi*, and a source of tension.<sup>109</sup>

Great deals of interesting insights emerge while analysing the tensions and concerns of the Charan community as a whole in respect to their social and domestic lives. Disputes are an inevitable feature of any community. The state comprised of a complex structured hierarchy with several layers of authority, the multiple levels of command often at loggerheads pursuing rival agendas. In case of charans, we could agree with Sumit Guha's argument, that the state was 'soft' with the 'hard' and 'hard' with the 'soft'. Nevertheless there were cases of state being 'hard' with the 'hard', when charan's activities and allegations on them were taken seriously by the state and

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<sup>108</sup> See Sumit Guha, 'An Indian Penal Regime: Maharashtra in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 147, 1995, p. 126.

<sup>109</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, Delhi, 2006, p 99.

dealt with firmly. To understand a community from close angles it is essential to study the issues that were bothering them on day to day basis.

Surprisingly the state's attitude towards charan women folk was also not coloured with gender biasness rather it was careful and precise while dealing with charan women petitioners. Interesting insights come in limelight with our study of the petition records, opening newer understanding and novel findings about the charans in Rajasthan, apart from what is known from previous studies that by and large looks at them as genealogist and elites in the Rajasthani polity and society at all periods in history, thereby not reflecting on the tensions and complexities of their lives in medieval India.

## CONCLUSION

What we know from the erstwhile writings about the charans is their elite statuses in the political fabric of the Rajput state; further their high position in the society as genealogists, traders, moneylenders etc. vis-a-vis the other castes and communities. We are also aware of their sacral nature and their role as legitimisers in the Rajput state and society. Apparently everything that comes to us as information on the charans lead us to perceive them as a very strong and influential caste in Rajasthan who were the closest associates of the Rajput rulers from times immemorial. However fresh questions need to be looked at to understand charans in other spheres of their social life that by and large have remained invisible as they were in closets of the petition records which have been scarcely looked at.

While situating the charans in the social, political, economic and cultural fabric of Medieval Rajasthan, we saw that their role in the lives of Rajputs was indispensable. Clearly as genealogists and transmitters of culture and ethics they could make or unmake the reputation of Rajput rulers and even dynasties. They were revered and were kept at a high pedestal because the aspiration of 'Rajput Dharm' was fulfilled by them. Even Brahmins could not accomplish what the charans could in serving their patron Rajput rulers. The importance of clan and kinship among Rajputs made them vulnerable to charans who would authentically attach them to the genealogies of strong dynasties in Rajasthan, thereby passing them in good name down to posterity. The preservation of authority became critical in an atmosphere which was vulnerable with clan feuds and dynastic fights rampant in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is in this situation when reiteration of clan genealogies and legitimation to rule all the more became critical for the Rajputs, thereby making them stick to the charan community.

Although there is a great deal of obscurity about the origins of charans, nevertheless their existence from the remote past is undisputed thus reconfirming the strong relationship that charans shared with the Rajputs. The social structure of charans was quite similar to the Rajput social fabric. As mentioned in this essay, by and large there were two main branches of charans i.e. Maru Charans and Kachhela Charans. Both were engaged in different activities thus contributing to the state and society of



Rajasthan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Through the study of the chronicles like Nainsi, the role of Maru charans as genealogists was emphasized and through the analysis of the petition records, we looked at the trading activities of Kachhela charans who carried trade activities in all kinds of goods within and outside Rajasthan.

An account of charan women as far as they were reflected in the chronicles and secondary literature highlighted their importance and their sacral nature. Karni Mata the most popular and revered, epitomised the sacral nature of charan women. Deified charan women were frequently depicted in groups of seven. What is interesting to observe is that with the study of the petition records we notice that the sacral nature of charan women who was the petitioner herself, gets diluted. Among the community of charans there was heterogeneity in terms of their position and privilege.

The most important and influential relationship that the charans shared was with the Rajputs. This mutual compact was characterized by legitimation and loyalty that gave thrust to both the communities in their survival in the larger realm of polity and society of Rajasthan. This relationship saw the interplay of both conflict and cooperation. To start with, the charans were influential and predominant in the court politics and proceedings. They helped the ruler resolve many problems and often act as mediators for treaties and forging alliances. Rajputs employed the tool of forging matrimonial alliances for expanding their kingship relations and charans very often negotiated and fixed these marriage alliances between different Rajput rulers. The deep rooted loyalty of the charan came into limelight as we noticed many charans laying down their lives to protect their Rajput patrons or to showcase their respect towards them. There are several evidences in the chronicles detailing stories of charans exhibiting their loyalties by laying their lives in battlefields or even otherwise to protect their patrons.

Interestingly we also observed that Rajput rulers expressed their love and respect for charans by writing and reciting poems and couplets for them. The privilege of providing *saran* was also with the charans, who protected not only their Rajput landlords but also the royal household. Many Rajput rulers left their heirs with charans to protect their legacy and future. The inviolability of charans protected many Rajput households and their future. Along with praises showered on the Rajput rulers,

the charans used their skills to write and recite satires to criticise the ruler who did not function as per the Rajput Dharm. For instance Bakht Singh was staunchly criticized by charan Kamidan for killing his father Maharaja Ajit Singh of Jodhpur.

The erstwhile historians have written enormously about the literature of charans as detailed in Chapter 1 of this essay. The prime reason for the charans writing different genres of literature dealing with different aspects of Rajput lives was to legitimate their authority and preserve their deeds for transmission to the future generation. The charans were writers, genealogists, conservators and transmitters of Rajputs, very often referred as the Voice of Rajasthan. Undoubtedly the bardic literature forms a major corpus of literature and source for reconstructing the historical narrative for Rajasthan. Although the validity of these writings is contestable nevertheless a corroborative study can help reconstruct a sound historical narrative on the social, political and cultural aspects of Medieval Rajasthan.

Therefore the first part of the study which was based on chronicles like Nainsi and Vir Vinod and also the secondary writings written on charan's social structure and their literature in Medieval Rajasthan reflects what they did for the state. Every source reiterated the fact that charans belonged to the creamy layer and were amongst the elites in Medieval Rajasthan. There seemed to be complete harmony and cooperation between them and the Rajputs. What we could not perceive from this study was their relationship of conflict and complexity vis-a-vis the Rajputs and other communities. To nuance and broaden our knowledge about the complexities and multiple connotations to the power, privileges and position of the charans, it becomes pertinent to look at other kind of sources that reflect the social structure of charans like the petition records of the charans in Late Medieval Rajasthan especially the Jodhpur state of the Marwar region.

Taking the thread from the fact that charans were held in a high position in the Rajput state, it was also seen that this community was entitled to various privileges from the Rajput state in the 17<sup>th</sup>- 18th centuries. These privileges and powers were not absolute and carried certain limitations and restrictions. The petition records in the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwana Bahis* were of great use as these petitions were filed by charans themselves in order to get justice over something that was illegitimately taken from

them by the state, people of their own community and the people of different communities.

Their primary role as genealogists and myth makers has been extensively discussed by A M Shah and R G Shroff in their article. Insights about why and how they became important and indispensable for Rajputs was detailed thus reiterating the importance of charans in the politico-socio fabric of Rajasthan. Nainsi while writing the political history of Rajasthan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century cites many charan genealogists who have traced and written genealogies of many rulers thus sanctifying and legitimating their rule. State's active patronage was also seen in the court culture where charans were given special place, position and honour. Without having to pay the *nazar*, the charans were able to have close interaction and communication with the Rajput overlord. They guided the ruler whenever any issue crept up bothering the state and its authority.

The several honours and rewards that the charan received as a result of his service made him rise in his position in the state and society. Titles like *Kaviraja* and *Barhat* carried a lot of weight in the court as well as the society. Along with this lakhs of money, with land, animals and other honours were given to felicitate charans for their contribution to the state formation. The petitions further highlight that money, men, animals and other kind of support were lent to charans in their occupation as traders or in their commutation on behalf of the state etc. Negligible punishments or minor amount of *gunehgari* (fines) was levied on them in case of any deviant act.

The complexity and limitations in privileges only comes in forefront once we observe and analyse the petitions by the charans who complained to state regarding encroachment over his customary rights and privileges by other charan men or people from other communities. Different connotations to their power and privileges come to limelight with our study of the petition records. The reactions and decisions of the state in different kinds of petitions highlight the nature of state's functioning whether with bias or not. We notice that for resolving all the disputes the state resorted to customary and legitimate laws (*wajib*) and rights of each caste. In many disputes the state did not take the side of charans and went ahead in ordering for enquiry against them and then dispensing justice with fair means.

While studying myriad problems that charans had to grapple with in his daily life, there were many instances like theft of cattle and goods dominant in the late medieval Rajasthan. Privileges come with certain problems that the so called 'privileged' charans had to face in the Rajput society. As traders their role was indispensable in the Rajasthani economy. Many instances of trade are cited by contemporary chroniclers and writers. Phenomenal numbers of petitions were also found in the petition records of Jodhpur state which were petitioned by the charan traders for various reasons. Clearly trading was an integral part of charan social life as their high position in the state facilitated them in their trading activities. They traded in all kinds of goods thereby contributing to the state's revenue and also were entitled to many trade concessions and exemptions. The Rajput state realised their sacral position that further acted as an asset in their trading activity. However we notice a number of petitions of harassment by the state officials troubling charans for various trade taxes. A great deal of conflict (*khechal*) was visible in the realm of trade conducted by charans in terms of dispute over trade concession, illegal demands, theft, official harassment etc. Despite their high status ironically we see that at the ground level while its implementation, it was not a clean sweep for them. Rather they had to face many more hard realities while working in midst of the social complexes where different customary laws and rights are at its play and have to be respected for social harmony and stability.

The state had to discipline the charans when they did not regard state's order for payment of certain taxes and revenue, thereby limiting and restricting their unreasonable behaviour. In the realm of trade the state was aware of the multiple partners in trade who too had to be respected and supported. A fair balance between and among communities and their customary rights were major strategies for state's pragmatic rule. We must restrain from inferring that charan's rights were absolute because all rights given by the state were with restrictions, that the chronicles fail to mention thus picturizing them as an absolutely strong caste who were a homogenously respected by the state and people in Medieval Rajasthan.

It is rather important to emphasis here that the charans were not a homogeneous group and comprised of charan men and women of different status with regards to economic status, material assets, respect, social status etc. The chronicles generally written from

state's perspective however just tends to highlight the lives and privileges of the elite charans in the Rajput state, thereby colouring our understanding of the charans. To holistically understand this community there is a need to look at this community heterogeneously and restrain from making generalizations. Looking at the complexities and concerns of their everyday lives I attempted to study this community from divergent angles.

Granting of land grants to charans in our study of chronicles seemed to be very smooth and unproblematic. There were enormous grants in form of land and villages given to charans as a part of their dholi and sasan grant, so much so that they ended up becoming landlords, jagirdars, landed magnates and moneylenders. Nevertheless, what is apparent from the petition records are number of disputes arising from these land grants regarding ownership, forceful consumption, encroachment and property disputes, which otherwise remain invisible in the chronicles. With the study of these petitions petitioned by charans to get their rights and ownership from the offender portrays large amount of conflict in the society that charans had to face. Information with regards to the ways charans used their sasan and dholi land also gets highlighted in the bahi documents where we notice that charan could give his land on mortgage and also for *bhog* to any person irrespective of the caste.

The Jodhpur state was even firm when dealing with land disputes. Tendency of encroachment by charans over other land was seen which the state handled with certain severity. Although these kinds of cases were less however what we observe is state's repeated recourse to *wajib* and legitimate. At the time when there was not any elaborate code of conduct and written laws, the customary laws worked sufficiently to deal and resolve disputes originating in the society.

One of the forms of protest that we saw was petitions, another form of protest peculiar to charans in western Rajasthan was the practise of *tragum*. As mentioned before that charans enjoyed certain sacral position that worked for their good, the practise of *tragum* existed from this characteristic of charans. Their ritual status helped them assert their rights at the time of transgression of traditional rights and honours. Numerous cases of *traga* which was dreaded by one and all are mentioned in the chronicles and other primary sources. On one hand while protesting against the Rajput

ruler it seemed that the practise of *traga* was initiated by respected and elite charans in lead and on the other hand other charans (not elites) while acting as sureties, if attacked were ready to commit *traga*. Here we notice that by and large all kinds and categories of charans could do *traga* and it indeed had an effect on the society. There is no evidence of any incident of *tragum* resulting in vain. It was rather a successful practise employed by charans to get what they wanted. *Tragum* undoubtedly raised their social position which made the Rajput state 'powerless' and had to concede to their demands thus strengthening the position of charans.

We always see charans as extortionists and victimisers, but in their role as guardians and custodians of commodities and goods, they many a times were themselves victimized while committing *tragum*. It's rather unfortunate that charans while doing *traga* brutally sacrificed the lives of their women and daughter. The practise was rather victimizing and inhuman for the charan women who to fulfil the commitment of their men had to sacrifice their lives.

Varsha Joshi in her erstwhile writing highlights the role of charans as transmitters of Rajput culture and values, thereby through their poetry and writings encouraged the practise of sati. Moreover many writers criticize charans for encouraging female infanticide. The charans were popular for demanding huge amount of *neg* at the time of marriage which burdened the Rajputs, thus leading to practise of female infanticide because of fear and incapacity of paying massive amounts to charans at the time of marriage in addition to the dowry that was to be given to the daughter for which Rajputs are famous. Dube on the other hand in her article on charans gives us interesting insights on the ways charan was not necessarily anti- woman in case of Rajput women. On the contrary she opined that a charan celebrated the Rajput father as a dower and satirizes those men who gave fewer dowries, thereby claiming to protect the rights of property of the Rajput bride. Variable readings and interpretations of charan literature and behaviour lead us, in seeing them as anti-women in some cases and pro- women in other.

While venturing into the invisible realms of charan's social life several kinds of disputes such as property disputes which included material assets, ancestral property and adoption were unravelled. The interactions between members of their community

as well as members of other community bound to be with conflict and cooperation. Thereby clarifying the social lives of charans vis-a-vis inter caste and intra caste. The property rights among charans did not seem to be clearly defined thus leading to several protest and petition by charan men and women for claiming their properties.

Looking at the charans as a heterogeneous group where there were both rich and poor charans, in their daily interaction with other communities diverse kinds of issues of conflict emerged that made charan petition to the state to get his right back that was transgressed. Among the communities that we saw this relation of conflict was frequent were the Jats, Rajputs, Brahmins, Mahajans, and Jagirdars etc. The issues of contestation were over mortgage, boundary disputes, animal dispute, land dispute etc. All these communities are from both the upper and lower strata therefore the state's reaction to these disputes became critical and interesting to observe. It was not only the charans who were the petitioners rather there were men from other communities especially jats who complained to the state against ill treatment done on them by the charans on several occasions. Some petitions against Rajput men also highlight the issues of conflict that charans had against Rajputs in their day to day lives. Otherwise known for a harmonious relationship, the Rajputs and charans could not escape the disputes emerging in the not so political atmosphere.

As discussed, apart from charans there were several other communities like Brahmins who received land grants from the state. Therefore we see disputes emerging between the charans and Brahmins over land. Jagirdars also being owners of large landed property had disputes with charans over land and property, mortgage and other give and take transactions. The boundary disputes were also predominant among charans and other communities vis-a-vis their land and sometimes even their villages.

Land, water and cattle disputes were also among rampant conflicts amongst the charans and other communities in Medieval Rajasthan. The state followed the policy of minimal intervention while dealing with these petitions; mostly giving the responsibility to the Panchas or the respected and knowledgeable people of the village. The Jodhpur state again took recourse to the customary and legitimate codes of conduct thereby trying to avoid favouritism and biasness.

The criminal activities of charans came in foray with the study of petitions. Cases of robbery, theft, rape, murder, abduction etc. were predominant among the charans and vis-a-vis other communities. At the times of escalation of stresses like these, the state dealt by ordering for regular enquiry and dispensation of justice. Even in the cases of murder, the charan did not receive severe punishments. The mechanism of punishments for charans was not very strict and was flexible according to the situation.

Surprisingly not so much as sacral but the visibility of charan women was also seen in the petition records where charani petitioned for her rights and also for the rights of her family member. Contrary to the image that we have of women in Rajasthan and their invisible position in the private and public matters, the charan women were both recognised by the state as well as the charan men. The petitions of charani and their concerns were dealt with seriousness and clear orders were given to resolve the matters. Infact the justice dispensed in case of charan women was clearer and precise than the justice dispensed to charan men. Although the number of petitions by charan women is less but nevertheless it does help in reflecting their lives and status in Rajasthani society.

Charan women's role as a money lender was also seen as few petitions reflected on this aspect of charans. The notion of *be-adbi* or improper behaviour was not too pronounced among the charan women. There was only one petition that reported charan women having an illicit relation with a person from an upper caste. It is probable that issues regarding the conduct of women were dealt within the village and were not taken to the state's kachedi. Further with regards to dispute on marriage the Jodhpur state was clear in maintaining the customs and norms of each caste. In case marriage contracts were not honoured, the state strictly ordered to follow the customs and honour the marriage. Although on one hand we notice in daily lives the visibility of charan women, they were invisible in the realm of charan literature and poetic endeavours. Bharucha in his anthropological work highlighted the role of *bhopis* (women singers), thereby highlighting the much forgotten and neglected women folk in the creation and delivery of the charan poetry.



The rhetoric of petitions also helped us to gauge the reaction of the Jodhpur state towards the charan petitioners. The tone and demeanour of the state authority cannot be judge in its totality because of lack of information in the petition records. Soft and hard – both kinds of languages were used while dealing with charans. The study of chronicles only suggests the soft attitude of state towards charans however during dispensation of justice there was certain differential treatment that charans received. We must not take the high position and privileges of charans at its face value and must see it against the grain to understand the complexity behind this.

The notion of wajabi was quite explicitly followed by the Jodhpur state even while dealing with charans in Medieval Rajasthan. Again the variable readings of wajabi by state, people of different communities and charan themselves makes the entire notion of wajib ambiguous, nevertheless the state tried to balance the myriad customary laws and codes of conduct while dealing with its subjects. It was indeed the foundation for dispensation of justice by the Jodhpur state. The various levels of arbitration and adjudication made the state deal with the everyday conflict and disputes. The relationship of charans at every level of judicial dispensation gets highlighted with the study of petition records.

The phenomenal number of petitions filed by the charans stops us to think as to why they were filing petitions in the court when in the chronicles and our general understanding about this community we see them secured and privileged. I would like to suggest that these seemingly innocuous acts of routine protests, presumably without any political significance were not trivial; they in fact influenced the contours of the early modern Indian state. The pressure from charan groups were dealt with and located within the parameters of notional wajib conduct. Although the boundaries of wajabi were constantly tested, it is important to consider the cumulative effects of such resistance which further defined their relationships with other communities. Despite the variable interpretations of the notion of wajib, the charans managed to harness these to their own advantage.

This study is just an introduction to the larger spectrum of social life of charans. Unfortunately what has always been focussed upon and studied extensively is what they wrote i.e. the Bardic literature. They are known for that in the annals of histories

of Rajasthan. However the petition records recount numerous instances that highlight the charans in many more ways. Despite being amongst the elites in Rajput politico-socio fabric, I felt that in our minds they are marginalized (in the way we look at them).

The charans are *marginalized* in our imagination because the window (sources) through which we are looking at them to understand their lives encompassing all aspects is incomplete and insufficient. Chronicles alone cannot define, explain and elaborate on the lives of the people of this community. The need of the hour is to broaden our horizons through venturing and grappling with other kinds of sources which we generally consider “marginalized” and irrelevant. We need to study this community from all tangents and angles to really understand the complexity and different paradigms of their world.

I am by no means arguing that the state chronicles are not important sources. Rather my point is that for understanding any community, we need to undertake a corroborative study of different types of sources which will make the study fuller and nuanced. Further there are many other issues and points that come into the limelight which otherwise we may find unnecessary or many a times even fail to appreciate. Every document and petition, if studied and looked against the background of that period originated because of some concern that the charans had to grapple with in their daily lives. The petition records gives us a great opportunity to really look against the grain and analyse their psyche and troubles that they underwent in their day to day lives. The pragmatism and idealism of the state in its daily dispensation of justice is further of great importance as we notice and observe a very thin line between being bias or unbiased. The state took the garb of customary laws and rules that were ingrained in the Rajasthani society. This study of course is the gateway to many more questions that are related to the social life of the charans in Medieval Rajasthan.

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# LIST OF THE THIRTY-SIX ROYAL RACES OF RAJASTHAN

OM: SACAMHARI MATA.

ANCIENT MSS. <sup>1</sup>	CHUND BARDAL. <sup>2</sup>	KOMAR PAL CHARITRA. <sup>3</sup>	KHEECHIE BARD. <sup>4</sup>	CORRECTED LIST BY THE AUTHOR.	
Ischwāca. Soorya. Soma or Chandra. Yadu. 3 Chahaman (Chohan). Pramara. Chalook or Solanki. Purihara. Chawura. 10 Dodia. Rahtore. Gobli. Dabi. Macwahana. 15 Nerka. Aswurem. Salar or Silara. Sinda. Seput. 20 Hun or Hoon. Kirjal. Huraira. Rajpali. Dhunpali. 25 Agnipali. Balla. Jhala. Bhagdola. Modan. 30 Mobar. Kugair. Kurjeo. Chadlea. Pokara. Nicoompa. 30 Sulala.	Ravya or Soorya. Suhra or Soma. Yadu. Cacoortha. 5 Pramara. Chohan. Chalook. Chnoduk. Silar. 10 Abhira. Macwahana. Gobli. Chapotkut. Purihara. 15 Rahtore. Deora. Tak. Sindoo. Anunga. 20 Patuk. Pritihara. Didiota. Karitpal. Korpala. 25 Hool. Gor. Nicoompa. Rajpalica. Kani. 30 Kalchorak or Koorcurra.	Sanskrit Edition—MSS. Ischwāca. Soma. Yadu. Pramara. 5 Chohan. Chalook. Chunduk. Silar ( <i>Raj Tilac</i> ). Chapotkut. 10 Pritihara. Sukrunka. Coopala. Chundail. Ohil. 15 Paluka. Mori. Macwahana. Dhunpala. Rajpalica. 20 Dabya. Toorunduleeca. Nicoompa. Hoon. Balla. 25 Hureal. Mokur. Pokara.	Gaurwatti Dialect—MSS. Gotchar Gobli. Uni Gobli. Catti or Cat'hi. Kisair. 5 Nicoompa. Hurbeta. Bawurea. Maroo. Macwahana. 10 Dahima. Dodia. Balla. Bhagel. Yadu. 15 Jaitwa. Jareja. Jit. Solanki. Pramara. 20 Kaba. Chawura. Chourasima. Khant. Khyera. 25 Rawul. Musania. Palani. Halla. Jhaln. 30 Dahira. Bahuria. Sarweya " <i>Chetrya</i> <i>ya Sar.</i> " Purihara. Chohan.	Gehlote. Pramara. Chohan. Solanki. 5 Rahtore. Birgoojur. Purihara. Jhala. 10 Yadu. Cutchwaha. Gor. These sub-divide: the follow- ing do not, and are called Yeka, or single. Sengar. Balla. 15 Kburwur. Chawura. Dahima. Dabya. Byce. 20 Gherwal. Nicoompa. Dewut. Jobya. Sikerwal. 25 Dabia. Doda. Mori. Mokarra. Abhira. 30 Kalchorak (Hya race). Agnipala. Aswaria or Sarja. Hool. Manutwal. Mallia. 36 Chabil.	Ischwāca, Cacoortha, or Soorya. Unwye, Indu, Soma, or Chandra. Grahlote or Gehlote . . . 24 Sacha. Yadu . . . . . 4 5 Tuar . . . . . 17 Rahtore . . . . . 13 Cutchwaha or Cutchwaha . . . 9 Pramara . . . . . 35 Chahaman or Chohan . . . 26 10 Chalook or Solanki . . . 16 Purihara . . . . . 18 Chawura . . . . . Single. Tak, Tauk, or Takshac. Jit or Geta. 15 Hun or Hoon. Catti. Balla. Jhala . . . . . 8 Jaitwa or Camari. 20 Gobli. Sarweya. Silar. Dabi. Gor . . . . . 5 25 Doda or Dor. Gherwal. Birgoojur . . . . . 3 Sengar . . . . . Single. Sikerwal . . . . . do. 30 Byce . . . . . do. Dahia. Jobya. Mobil. Nicoompa. Rajpali. 36 Dahima . . . . . do. Extra. Hool. Dahirya.

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Appendix I

<sup>1</sup> The text, after the invocation to "the mother protectress," says, "I write the names of the thirty-six royal tribes."

<sup>2</sup> The text Chund says, "Of the thirty-six names, the four Agnipalus are the greatest—the rest are born of woman, but these from fire."

<sup>3</sup> The text is chiefly followed with the names of Komar pal, who was of Chohan tribe; the author reserves it for a peroration to the last: "of all the mightiest is the . . ."  
<sup>4</sup> By some logic.



## Appendix 2

<u>S.No.</u>	<u>Hindi Months</u>	<u>English Equivalent (approx.)</u>
1.	CHAITRA	March - April
2.	VAISAKHA	April- May
3.	JAISHTYA	May- June
4.	AASHADHA	June - July
5.	SHRAVAN	July - August
6.	BHADRAPAD	August - September
7.	AASWIN or AASOJ	September - October
8.	KARTIK	October - November
9.	MARGSHIRSH or MIGSAR	November - December
10.	PAUS	December - January
11.	MAGH	January - February
12.	FALGUN	February -March