



Arik Moran

# Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland

Rajput Identity during  
the Early Colonial Encounter





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*Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter*

*Arik Moran*

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# A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Words, terms, and titles in South Asian languages appear with diacritics in the first instance only and follow the conventions of R.S. McGregor's *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1993]). An exception is made for the oral epic that is discussed in Chapter 1 (transcribed and translated in the appendix), wherein diacritics have been retained to reflect the particulars of the Western Pahari Kahluri dialect.



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# Introduction

On 5 November 1839, a recently widowed *rānī* ('queen') gave birth to a healthy baby boy at a secret location in the West Himalayan foothills. Three weeks later, the young mother marched on her late husband's kingdom at the head of an army of peasant-warriors, Afghan horsemen, and turbaned Sikh combatants; by the time she reached the capital, her opponents had all but dispersed. Entering the riverside palace she had once called home, the revenant crowned the suckling *rājā* ('king') over the kingdom's seven ridges. Confidants and diplomats travelled far and wide announcing the rightful heir's return, the tidings reverberating through the hallways of distant Lahore, where an imperial *farmān* ('decree') sanctioning the new regime had been negotiated in secret months before.

Back in the kingdom, the queen and her elder sister – a shrewd politician who had also been married to the late raja – began chastising their many rivals, from the envious noblemen who had a stake in the succession to the Tantric practitioner believed to have taken their husband's life by black magic. While the widowed siblings were exacting vengeance, the ineffectual ruler they had deposed beat a hasty retreat. Galloping southwards through the hills, the ousted monarch solicited the support of an aging distant relative, the ruler of the last mountain kingdom before the Great Indian Plains. Having secured an army in exchange for a fort, the royal fugitive retraced his path to wage a final, unsuccessful war on the ranis.

Humbled by repeated failures, the dethroned raja turned to the Leviathan that had placed him in power in the first place. Come spring, the soldiers of the British East India Company were stationed throughout the state, the ranis and their servants evicted, and the failed contender reinstated as sovereign under the aegis of British commanders in the field. With the kingdom back in the hands of a distinguished nobleman – and the widowed sisters out of sight – it seemed that peace and prosperity had finally been restored.

Present-day readers would be hard pressed to locate these events in the standard historical writings about the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, where the ranis and their rivals had clashed. For, in transitioning to the 'peace and prosperity' of Pax Britannica, historians of the West Himalayan kingdoms had reduced the rebel queens' exploits to an anomalous interlude in a string of political biographies centred on the male rulers of seemingly discrete, Rajput exclusive-states. However, the ranis' story, which appears

in alternate sources and is explored in detail in the final chapter of this book, is representative of the practise of kingship and polity in the early colonial Himalaya, c. 1790-1840.

During this period, the autonomous kingdoms of the Shivalik (Siwalik) Hills, then known as the *kohistan-i-punjab* ('Punjab Hill States'), were subdued by a series of superior powers, including Nepali Gorkhas, Punjabi Sikhs and, from 1815, the British East India Company (EIC). In adjusting to these changes, the Pahari ('mountain') Rajput<sup>1</sup> elite came to reconsider the meaning of sovereignty and its limitations from the vantage point of imperial subjects, inducing, among myriad things, a profound modification in its perception of the past. By the turn of the twentieth century, the alliance between Imperial Britain and its 'Hill Rájput' subjects had transformed the mountain kings into the inheritors of a singularly glorious tradition, the rulers of the 'most ancient' and 'most wholly Hindu' space in all of North India, where 'Bráhmaṇ and Kshatriya occup[ied] positions most nearly resembling those assigned them by Manu'.<sup>2</sup>

The perception of the erstwhile Hill States as a 'hermetically sealed and virginal domain of Hindu-Rajput culture' has had an enduring impact sustaining centuries of political dominance from the beginnings of the colonial era to the present. While scholars today rightly maintain that 'even the sketchiest study' of their history would unsettle such claims to antiquity (Rai 2004, 73), the Pahari Rajputs' reputation as noble warriors who are qualitatively different from their peers in the plains retains a currency that begs explanation. From the pervasion of military service as the career of choice for large segments of society to the preponderance of descendants of royal families in state- and national-level politics, the 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that cast the peoples and

1 The term 'Pahari' (H. *pahāri*, *pahāḍī*, N. *parbatiya*), meaning 'highlander' (n.) or 'mountain' (adj.) is customarily assigned to Himalayan societies and refers here to the Khas ethnic majority of Himachal Pradesh and its closely related Dogra neighbours in Jammu; the term 'Rajput', a rendition of *rājaputra* (Skr., 'king's son'), is commonly attributed to the landed elite of Rajasthan (West India), but is also assumed by other North Indian groups professing a martial heritage. On Khas' early history, cultural heritage, and position in relation to other Himalayan societies see, respectively, Adhikary (1997), Lecomte-Tilouine (2009), and Pacheco and Zurick (2006, 73-79). For instructive explorations of the term 'Rajput' and its usages, see Chattopadhyaya (1994), Kolff (1990), Talbot (2009), and Teuscher (2003).

2 Ibbetson (2002[1916], 155-166, quotation from p. 155). Renowned as an ardent empiricist (Talbot 2004), Ibbetson was an esteemed civil servant in British India at the high point of empire, rendering his comments representative of the Pahari Rajputs' exalted position in the socio-political hierarchy of the day. Although highly esteemed by coeval scholars, Ibbetson's findings had little impact on British Indian policy (Fuller 2016).

polities of the hills as modern incarnations of pristine Indic Kshatriyas is omnipresent.<sup>3</sup>

This book explores the circumstances that gave rise to this particular reading of the past, the sources that informed it, and its implications for modern interpretations of South Asian history and culture. It argues that the core set of ideas about Pahari Rajputs that are commonly accepted today was formed during the early colonial encounter, and that its resilience was facilitated by a temporary repositioning of the geographic borderland they had occupied along British India's imperial frontier c. 1815-45. This is achieved by following the interconnected histories of a group of politically dominant Rajput families from the kingdoms of Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur – territories that today occupy the same named-districts in southern and central Himachal Pradesh (see Map 1) – that had emerged from the transition to imperial rule as emblems of pan-Indian sovereignty.

Although the lineages and polities examined in this book were subsumed under the broad appellation of 'Dogra' soon after the period under study as a result of Jammu and Kashmir's rise as the most consequential of West Himalayan kingdoms following the Anglo-Sikh Wars (in 1845-6 and 1848-9, see Rai 2004, 18-127), it was precisely among the more modest sized polities of 'the Kángra and Simla Hills and the sub-montane tracts at their foot between the Beás and the Jamna' rivers that the modern interpretation of Pahari Rajput kingship first came into being.<sup>4</sup> As the rulers of this particular sub-region of the Western Himalaya came into contact with representatives of the colonial state, they infused new meanings into pre-existing ideas about kingship, social order, gender roles, and elite culture

3 Rajputs constitute around a third of Himachal Pradesh's population today, and the vast majority of chief ministers have hailed from erstwhile royal dynasties. On the beginnings of military service with the British, see Brief (1979, 53-64, 71-102); on the association of 'highlanders' with martial qualities in British imperial ideology, consult Streets (2004). For examples of erstwhile elites holding honorary positions in combat units from the hills in the British- and Republican Indian Army, see, respectively, Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 197) and Sharma (1990, 238).

4 Thus the authoritative Ibbetson, who found this particular sub-region's denizens 'the most interesting group of Rájput tribes' in all of Northern India (Ibbetson 2002[1916], 155). At the same time, the collapse of Lahore in the 1840s propelled the strategically placed Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir to the apex of Pahari Rajput leadership due to their newfound strategic position at the frontier of British India, and this despite their supposed inferiority to the groups studied in this book in earlier decades. Thus, if the Katoch rulers of Kangra preferred life in exile to intermarriage with the Dogras in the 1840s (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 193-4; Anonymous 2004[1870s], 23-25), by the turn of the twentieth century, 'all Rajputs who live[d] in the low hilly country between the Chenab and the Sutlej' were recruited into the British Indian Army's 'Dogra Regiment', a title and practise that persists today (Enriquez 1915, 18).

that subsequently reflected on North Indian Rajputs writ large.<sup>5</sup> It is the story of these transitions, their agents, motivations, modes of execution, and long-term consequences for modern interpretations of South Asian history and culture that this book seeks to tell.

### **Colonial knowledge and the modern interpellation of the 'Rajput State'**

The reformulation of kingship and polity in the West Himalayan kingdoms is part of a larger set of processes that reshaped South Asian societies in the modern era. Developed over centuries of interaction with British overlords, these processes were particularly potent – and most patently manifest – during the early colonial encounter. Unfolding at an uneven pace and with varying degrees of intensity across the subcontinent, the exchanges between newly arrived rulers and recently conquered subjects entailed a processual inflection of terms and concepts used to define local societies and hierarchies of power. Adhering to the dialectics of modernity, in which concurrent 'cultural programs' were enacted by 'reflexive civilizational agents' (Eisenstadt 2000),<sup>6</sup> these developments reformed South Asian societies along formats now considered 'traditional', and were most pronounced in the era of EIC expansionism (c. 1818-58).

Subsumed by a revenue-thirsty, technologically advanced superpower, indigenous leaders utilized the newcomers' ignorance of local history and customs to claim political authority 'from time immemorial', thereby assuming positions of dominance that in most cases carried into the present.<sup>7</sup> The Utilitarian underpinnings of EIC governance furthered these claims by granting the data collected on subject states the status of empirical facts as the imperial project expanded. The oceanic store of textual and material items

5 The distinction advanced by the British Indian state between the royal Rajputs of the hills and their 'so-called' peers in the plains was specifically addressed at the groups under study. Thus, the Chandela elite of Bilaspur was contrasted with its co-named 'aboriginal' counterparts in the Punjab, and further distinguished from the mass of its Pahari peasant followers claiming Rajput status, see Ibbetson (2002[1916], 131, 195).

6 While the debates spurred by Eisenstadt's thesis are beyond the scope of this book, the critique of its reliance on 'culture' as an analytical category instead of the uniform bases of modern capitalism (Schmidt 2006) informs the analyses of 'Rajput Tradition' advanced in this book. On modernity in South Asia, see Subrahmanyam (1997) and Washbrook (2010).

7 On the multidirectionality and deliberate obfuscations that characterized the early colonial encounter, see O'Hanlon (1988) and Washbrook (1993). On the social, economic, and political settings that framed these processes, see Bayly (1988[1983]).

that were accrued in this process, from the narrative histories and artefacts of local rulers to the voluminous reports of administrative bureaucracy, laid the foundations for the modern study of South Asia (Bayly 1996; Cohn 1997; Ludden 1993, 259). Collected, contextualized, analysed, and revised by administrators and scholars alike, this continually growing body of knowledge has informed the social, political, and academic discourses on South Asia to date.

A hallmark of this body of knowledge was the construction of pre-modern India in uniformly static terms that facilitated the instating of a stable socio-political order to be regulated and reformed by the legally sanctioned authorities of the modern state. The image thus construed posited a uniform, religiously sanctioned social order based on a Sanskritic fourfold division of society into *varṇas* ('colours', implying rank). In privileging this Brahmanical-Sanskritic perspective as the definitive version of South Asian history, colonial knowledge reified a distinction between 'indigenous' and 'foreign' elements that influenced the lived realities of millions. The paradoxes of its foundational layer's 'alien' origins notwithstanding, this narrative's edifying role in discourses on South Asia engendered a persistent division between 'authentic' agents of Indic civilization and the 'alien' invaders that had joined them over the long course of history.<sup>8</sup> The resulting taxonomies of peoples and cultures in the subcontinent abided by this broad division, pitting – to name but a few examples – Aryans, Rajputs, and 'tribals' (*ādivāsīs*) against Turks, Mughals, and Afghans, to be measured and evaluated in light of their perceived proximity to the ancient Indic past.

Among the indirectly ruled kingdoms of British India – alias 'princely states' – the authors of colonial knowledge generated classificatory schemes that were intended to explicate the political landscape through discourses intelligible to subjects and overlords alike.<sup>9</sup> The enmeshment of 'indigenous' and 'foreign' components in pre-colonial states was consequently reinterpreted to conform to Indic ideologies, spurring a distancing of groups perceived as external despite evident links to the political leadership and

8 On colonial knowledge, the quests for its origins, and its contestation, see, respectively, Cohn (1997), Trautmann (1997), and Sharma (2005). For an enlightening critique of the two dominant strands of colonial knowledge research in recent decades, see Pinch (1999). On the capacity of ideas and categories engendered by colonial knowledge to distort scholarly understandings of South Asian societies in the latter half of the twentieth century, most notably in structurally inspired analyses of 'caste', see Quigley (1993).

9 On the history and historiography of 'princely states', see Berkemer and Schnepel (2003), Peabody (2003, 1-12), and Ramusack (2004, 13-24). For a pioneering, South India-based study of the topic illustrating the importance of ethnographic context for the historicization of pre-colonial polity, see Dirks (1987).

their surroundings. As Norbert Peabody's analyses of early colonial-Kota reveal, incorporation into the body of empire disrupted multi-partied dynamics in and between royal courts so that their competing agendas, beliefs, and material interests were subsumed under novel readings of history and culture that served to further the objectives of local elites that had allied with the colonial state (Peabody 2003).<sup>10</sup> The immediate and ancient histories of ruling dynasties that were formulated in response to the contingencies of the early colonial encounter thus buttressed the recalibrated power structures that developed during the transition to British rule, setting the tone for future elaborations about the nature of the Rajput kingdoms of Rajasthan with the maturation of colonial knowledge.

The early encounters between West Himalayan Rajput rulers and EIC personnel followed a similar format, generating a series of presuppositions that laid the foundations for current interpretations of kingship and polity. Exploiting the conquerors' prejudices and limited understanding of the region, the leaders of these kingdoms advanced notions regarding their history and culture that lay beyond the grasp of British officialdom, and that played to the latter's widely held belief that Pahari Rajput society constituted the Indian version of European *noblesse*. The exchanges between the parties thus represented, formulated, and reinterpreted concepts from the local rulers' world to affect real political changes that secured their interests in home environments that were being rapidly transformed by their relocation along the imperial frontier. Within a quarter century, these concepts moulded the variety of sovereignty practises circulating in the hills before the arrival of the EIC into a uniform conceptual model of the (Pahari) 'Rajput State'. Although wildly incongruent with contemporaneous realities, this notion of Rajput polity became the yardstick through which local rulers were assessed, and has remained integral to the understanding of West Himalayan history and culture today.

The persistence of these ideas in the theoretical elaborations of post-colonial scholarship demonstrates the striking tenacity of the knowledge produced during the early colonial encounter today, and is perhaps best illustrated in the transformative roles of royal Rajputnis ('Rajput women') in pre- and early colonial Pahari states. In promoting a patriarchal image of West Himalayan courtly culture, modern historiography obfuscated

10 Peabody's empirically informed recovery of multivalent agency in Kota added important nuances to the postcolonial scholarship on Indian kingship, thereby responding to the line of enquiry that has developed from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) (e.g., Dirks 1992, but see also the important counter-readings in Price 1996).

the strong familial basis of sovereignty and the extensive participation of Rajputnis in politics that it entailed and that had indeed endured well into the early decades of British rule. The short-lived revolution of the widowed ranis noted above (explored in Chapter 5) is a particularly strong example of this, as are the reconstructed careers of dominant female leaders who served as regents to infant sons that are encountered in many parts of this book. Having exposed the factual locus of political power in the ruling family (rather than in the agnatic successor), these exercises may be extended to scholarly debates regarding Rajput ideals of womanhood, such as the rite of *sati* ('widow immolation'). Thus, among postcolonial discourse theorists affiliated with the Subaltern Studies movement, the application of postmodern literary theory to archival records narrating a Pahari Rajputni's threat to become *sati* could result in a paradoxical voiding of agency from one of the most powerful political leaders of the time (as explored in Chapter 3).<sup>11</sup> Exposing the gaps between historical realities and postcolonial interpretations demonstrates why scrutinizing the dialectical exchanges that re-created 'Rajput Tradition' during the early colonial encounter is so important, and ultimately lays the foundations for more a nuanced theorization of South Asian pasts.

### **Kingship and the Himalayan borderland: concepts and sources**

The discussion of kingship and its functions, forms, and representations builds on the Hocartian premise that pre-modern West Himalayan societies were organized into multi-caste political structures under the supreme authority of kings (Hocart 1950). The centrality of the king or leader of the 'dominant caste' in any given locale manifested through control over lands, means of production, and social relations, and was expressed through periodic rituals centred on the ruler with the participation of the entirety of the sovereign's subjects.<sup>12</sup> Since the goal of these rituals was to reify a

11 Subaltern Studies strived for a fundamental revision of the narratives that had emerged from nationalist histories and that dominated historical writing on South Asia since the 1970s by reading the corpus of colonial knowledge with a focus on the Gramscian subaltern (factory workers, soldiers, women, etc.), see the exemplary studies by Amin (1995) and Guha (1983). For a thoughtful introduction and a selection of key engagements with its ideas, see Ludden (2001). For a discussion of Subaltern Studies' polyvalent intellectual orientations, see Sivaramakrishnan (1995).

12 As Burkhard Schnepel (1988) observes, the coalescence of the interdependent yet 'irreducible foundations' of social life – religion, politics, economy, and kinship – in the ritual enactment of

prescribed cosmic order that would ensure the continued prosperity of state and society through the sovereign, it follows that the primary object of kingship was not the practise of political power per se, but the maintenance of order in all (material and immaterial) aspects of the realm.<sup>13</sup> The culture of the dominant castes consequently came to define that of the political body writ large, which explains the dissemination of the ruling strata's 'Rajput ethos' into virtually all levels of West Himalayan society (Parry 1979, 41).

As the embodiment of *dharma* ('religion' or 'law', broadly construed), the upkeep of Himalayan rulers was foundational for sustaining the religiously sanctioned universal order. The leaders' heroism and largesse (most pointedly, in the bestowing of lands on subjects) were the earthly expression of this ideal, which was embedded in popular and scholastic understandings of state, society, and religion (Michaels 2004 [1998], 276-280).<sup>14</sup> Because the functioning of polities hinged on the institution of kingship rather than on any individual king, the latter could assume different forms according to the political circumstances and cultural norms prevailing in any given polity at different points in time. This explains, amongst other things, why Rajputnis could act as sovereigns despite the ostensibly male-centred dictates of their culture.

If the early exchanges between Pahari Rajput leaders and British administrators saw the reformulation of certain key notions about kingship, their germination, solidification, and crystallization through the rise of colonial knowledge earned them a truth-value that permeates regional histories to date. Examining the formation of these nascent ideas about sovereignty thus necessarily entails a revision of modern West Himalayan historiography, which began in earnest with the mountain states' repositioning into the interior of British India during the 1840s. As EIC rule extended to the Afghan border, professional academics and administrator-scholars embarked on systematic explorations of these kingdoms; from the romantic admiration of ancient lineages in Sir Alexander Cunningham's *The Geography of Ancient India* (2006 [1871]) through the research of the Lahore-based *Panjab Historical Society* (active 1911-1931), the identification of the Pahari

kingship justifies its study as a distinct institution. For applications of Hocart's theses to Nepal, hinterland Odhisa, and West Himalayan highland polities, see Toffin (2005[1993]), Schenepel (2002), and Sax (2006), respectively. For a critique of this reading as inapplicable to South Asia due to the extra-Indic semantics underlying key concepts in Hocart's writing, see Appadurai (1988).

<sup>13</sup> These points are cogently explained in the introduction to Quigley (2005), and amply illustrated in Fuller (2004[1992], Chapter 5).

<sup>14</sup> On the sustained role of the raja as the 'pillar' supporting the ritually enacted cosmic order of West Himalayan polity *after* the dissolution of kingdoms, see Galey (1992).

elite with Indic civilization grew with the discovery of every document, fort, and temple.<sup>15</sup> These findings were ultimately enshrined in a master narrative entitled *History of the Panjab Hill States* (Hutchison and Vogel, 2 vols., 1999 [1933]), a monumental oeuvre that collated and contextualized the efforts of earlier generations and that remains the authoritative account of West Himalayan history to date. In charting the past through stone and copperplate inscriptions, written texts, architectural evidence, and works of art, these pioneers produced a formidable body of knowledge that is yet to be surpassed.<sup>16</sup> However, their fascination with the ancient past also affected their interpretation of more recent events dating to the transition to colonial rule, which were often inaptly assessed in light of the contours of classical Indic kingship.

The Pahari leadership played an active role in this project by patronizing research and commissioning and authoring accounts of its past. Cursorily noted in the antiquarian-minded *History of the Panjab Hill States* (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933]), these works render the reportedly ubiquitous but rarely accessible *vaṃśāvalī* ('dynastic rolls') of ruling families into *tawārīkhs* and similar Persian- and Urdu-influenced histories, the change in genres reflecting the transformation of the Pahari Rajput past in modernity.<sup>17</sup> Examining these seldom-read sources in conjunction with the archived correspondences that date to the early colonial encounter expose formidable gaps between the mountain kings' lived experiences and their later representations; the alterations introduced into the memory of these formative decades revealing the conscious efforts of regional elites at reshaping their immediate pasts.<sup>18</sup> A prominent characteristic of these

15 See, respectively, Cunningham (2006[1871], 136-141), which singles out the royal family of Kangra as significantly more ancient than 'the more powerful families of Rajputana' (138), the numerous papers in the *Journal of the Panjab Historical Society* (1911-1931), and Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933]).

16 For notable exceptions, see the continuation of Vogel's (1911) work on ancient Chamba in Chhabra (1957), and Mandoki, Neven, and Postel (1985) for a substantive study of Pahari art styles and their historical development.

17 Apart from the seventeenth-century Chamba-*vaṃśāvalī* (Vogel 1911), the Pahari poet Uttam's *Dilīparañjanī* (1705) is the only locally authored-history that is known to predate British rule. On Uttam and his work, see Guleri (2005, 167-171); for the *Dilīparañjanī*'s central findings, consult Shastri (1914); on Chamba patronage and collaboration with Jean-Philippe Vogel, see Theuns-de-Boer (2008).

18 Studies written after India's independence have largely elided political (dynastic) history. For notable exceptions, see Aniket Alam's (2008) exploration of monetization and growing class-consciousness as driving factors behind the national movement's success in the hills; Mridu Rai's (2004) detailed construction of Hindu kingship in Jammu and Kashmir; the politics of resource management explored in the fairly abundant environmental histories of past decades

histories is an emphatic identification of sovereignty with absolute control over clearly circumscribed territories (Elden 2013), reflecting a development of new concepts of authority alongside the reorganization of political spaces under the British. The division of the Hill States into 22 polities demarcated by clear territorial borders is a case in point. Although congruent with categories inherited from the Mughal era,<sup>19</sup> the rigid application of this division in modern histories tends to ignore the extensive relationships between the states and with entities farther afield. As with the retrieval of the familial basis of sovereignty, the archived communications from the early colonial encounter dispel the insular perspective implied in modern histories to reveal that at least two of the polities excluded from the ‘traditional’ division of 22 states (Sirmaur and Handur) were in fact deeply entangled in their neighbours’ affairs, intermarrying, claiming lands, assisting in battle, and coordinating grand strategic manoeuvres with the imperial powers (both indigenous and foreign) that affected the North Indian arena at large.

There is more to these incongruences than the mere triumph of imperial discourse as the hegemonic orientation of modern historiography. In occupying the seam between autochthonous ‘Zomian’ highlanders and ‘Indic’ civilization centres in the plains,<sup>20</sup> the rulers of the lower hills had long displayed a malleable disposition that secured their regimes, patronizing Pahari traditions in their home environments and approximating Rajput nobles in their relations with powers beyond their borders. The extension of the British Indian frontier to the very midst of these kingdoms c. 1815-45 tilted the balance between these cultural worlds, encouraging a progressive identification of the local elite as the last bastion of ‘high (plains-based) culture’ in a bid to curry favour with the new overlords. As the trials and tribulations that beset the Pahari elite during these decades reveal, the modern rendition of the West Himalayan ‘Rajput State’ was born of practical,

(e.g., Baker 2007, Guha 2000, Saberwal 1999, Singh 1998); and the new data on rituals of state described in Sharma (2001). For an appraisal of the challenges facing historians of the Himalaya region at large, see Moran and Warner (2016).

19 Islamic histories first refer to West Himalayan polities at the time of Mahmud of Ghazni, and become increasingly frequent under the Mughals, where the Pahari rulers are commonly labelled *zamīndārs* (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 3-4). For evidence of the division into 22 states, see Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 45-6, vol. 2, pp. 536-7, 545-6).

20 ‘Zomia’ originally referred to the state-evading societies of highland Southeast Asia (van Schendel 2002), but has since been expanded to include frontier zones throughout Asia (Scott 2011). For explorations of the term in the eastern, central, and western Himalaya, see Wouters (2012), Shneiderman (2010), and Moran (forthcoming), respectively. On the politics surrounding state recognition as ‘tribals’ among the largest ‘Zomian’ community in present day-Himachal Pradesh, see Kapila (2008).

almost prosaic responses to the contingencies that emerged from their transformation into a geo-political borderland. The modern formation of these kingdoms' 'ancient traditions' thus illustrates how spatial configurations imposed 'from above' can engender novel political identities at the grassroots level 'below' (e.g., Sax 2011).

But just what exactly did the 'Rajput State' look like before the onset of modernity? The evidence presented in this book suggests it was not entirely dissimilar to other polities in the hills, such as the Empire of Nepal under the Gorkha Shah dynasty (est. 1559, r. 1768/9-2008). As a 'warrior kingdom' with claims to antiquity, Gorkha Nepal shared significant structural features with its westerly neighbours, most notably in claiming to embody a pristine form of Indic (Sanskritic) kingship.<sup>21</sup> However, the trajectories of the easterly Khas Parbatiya Gorkhas and the westerly branch of their Pahari Rajput peers rendered them diametric opposites in modern historiography. The Gorkha subjugation of the western hills (c. 1791-1815) and subsequent replacement by the EIC thus encouraged the juxtaposition of these two groups and masked their affinities (a theme explored in Chapter 2). An examination of the multiple non-Rajput groups sustaining Nepali rule under the Gorkhas may nonetheless be harnessed to assess the functions of pre-colonial 'Rajput States' in the west. This is particularly evident in the case of monastic advisors.

Although often privy to state affairs, politically involved advisors affiliated with religious orders were perceived as dubious mischief mongers to be curtailed under the British and thus marginalized in modern histories. The textual and ethnographic research of recent decades has since established the centrality of Vaishnava and Shaiva ascetics to state formation across Himalayan states.<sup>22</sup> That the expansion of Gorkha rule to the west is habitu-

21 Colonial knowledge about West Himalayan Rajputs was nonetheless construed in tandem with reports from Nepal, the findings of the first British Resident to Nepal having informed evaluations of West Himalayan Paharis (e.g., Ibbetson 2002[1916], 131, which partly draws on Hodgson 1991[1874]). For an overview of Gorkha Nepal and its Sanskritic aspirations, see Whelpton (2005, Chapter 2). For rounded assessments of foundational figures in the scholarship about Nepal, see Bansat-Boudon and Lardinois (2007) and Waterhouse (2004).

22 The Kathmandu *darbar* ('court') extended its rule over the malarial jungles of the Tarai by entrusting revenue collection rights to indigenous Tharu headmen alongside migrant ascetic monastics, who established political-religious centres on state gifted-lands and dispensed justice on behalf of the political centre. In approximating the functions of Tharu headmen, monastics became important contributors to state formation. On Tharu relations with the centre, see Krauskopff (2000); on monastics in the western and eastern Tarai, consult Bouillier (1991; 2017, Chapters 6-7) and Burghart (2016), respectively; for studies suggestive of similar dynamics in the West Himalayan kingdoms, see Moran (2013) and Sharma (2009). For a recent exploration of the links between monastics and laywomen in pre-colonial politics, see Chatterjee (2013).

ally traced to one such individual, who became equal – if not superior – to his Pahari Rajput allies (explored in Chapter 4), suggests these non-Rajput agents were just as crucial in facilitating imperial manoeuvres as their peers were in other parts of South Asia (Pinch 2012). This reading is strengthened by the emergence of religious travel guides among marginalized monastics in the latter part of the nineteenth century, such as the *Jālandharpīṭhādīpikā* ('The Light of the Seat of [Power] at Jalandhar', Shastri 1983), a pilgrimage guide whose delineation of sacred sites along the Kangra Valley coalesces in uncanny perfection with those of the modern Rajput Katoch kingdom of Kangra. As with the role of Rajputnis in politics, tracing the transitions of non-Rajput advisors in the formative decades of the early colonial encounter retrieves a heterogeneity that is lacking in later depictions of the pre-colonial landscape but that is nonetheless discernable in archival records, artwork, and folk traditions. By subjecting these sources to novel readings, this book explores how such complex multi-partied entities became reinterpreted along 'traditional' lines during the geo-political borderland's transition to modernity.

### **The structure of this book**

The processual development of Rajput kingship, polity, and identity on the Himalayan borderland is presented in five (largely) chronologically sequenced chapters that narrate the intertwined histories of Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur. Roughly corresponding with the same named districts of present day-Himachal Pradesh, these were the largest of the mountain kingdoms (except the considerably more remote Bashahr on the easterly frontier with West Tibet) to come under British rule c. 1815-45. The trajectories of these kingdoms consequently became central to the modern transfiguration of sovereignty. Exploring the circumstances and reactions of these kingdoms' leaders in light of the substantial reconfigurations of power in coeval North Indian reveals how this relatively small group of families came to affect the modern understanding of an entire region. Chapter 1 outlines the modern interpretation of kingship through a comparison of its divergence from autochthonous antecedents in several narratives of a battle involving the three kingdoms that had been fought in the winter of 1795. An outline of the immediate histories and interrelations of Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur introduces the states and their leaders, and the events leading up to the conflict are summarized. An account of the battle in an oral epic from Bilaspur (reproduced in full in the Appendix) is presented,

and the local markers of kingly authority detailed; these are then contrasted with written accounts of the same battle by regional elites (c. 1900), wherein the local markers are discarded in favour of Sanskritic depictions that cast the mountain kings as pan-Indian Kshatriyas.

The second chapter investigates the paradoxical emergence of Sansar Chand of Kangra as the epitome of Pahari Rajput kingship. Although this ruler is credited with precipitating the Hill States' subjugation through decades of oppressing his peers that culminated in Gorkha (c. 1803-1815) and British (1814-1947) supremacy, his failings were ultimately used to advance a message of solidarity that promoted unity among Pahari Rajput Houses. Since the story of Sansar Chand was adopted as definitive of regional history, his enmity towards the Gorkhas generated a recurrent juxtaposition between the latter and the West Himalayan Rajput elite as antithetical opposites. The political biases informing this canonical, Kangra-centric account are exposed by consulting the seldom-read chronicle of Sirmour, which reveals profound affinities between the Khas Parbatiya Gorkhas and their West Himalayan Pahari peers that had been muddled by later authors. An examination of the different registers used by contemporaries to describe the raja of Kangra further demonstrates how the various kingship models that circulated among North Indian elites at the turn of the century were incorporated into the uniform description of Pahari Rajputs that had emerged from their transition to modernity.

The third chapter explores the agency of Pahari Rajputni elites with a special focus on the regent rani of Sirmour (r. c. 1815-27). Noting the congruence of oral traditions and modern histories in promoting stereotypical depictions of Rajputnis as either pious wives or malevolent mothers-in-law, it scrutinizes archival records, folkloric sources, and travellers' accounts to reconstruct the careers of several Pahari Rajputni royals who played an active part in war and governance. The misreading of women's agency in postcolonial scholarship is redressed by way of a constructive critique of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interpretation of the rani of Sirmour's threat to become *sati* soon after her assumption of power under the EIC (Spivak 1985), and an alternative interpretation accounting for the cultural specifics of her milieu proposed. The agreement of European and South Asian assessments of *sati* concludes the chapter to reveal how the extensive interactions between these seemingly alien cultures could nonetheless generate congruent perceptions between their members during the early colonial era.

The fourth chapter probes the effects of the EIC's demarcation of new state boundaries on political cultures in Bilaspur, c. 1795-35. Home to numerous

noble families who had customarily encroached on neighbouring tracts, Bilaspur's confinement within strictly enforced borders from 1815 intensified the competition for resources and power amongst its rulers and their kin. The suppression of non-Rajput advisors by the colonial state and the curtailment of imperial expansion 'from below' (exemplified in a conflict with Kangra in 1819) increased these tensions, which were compounded by its division between the mutually distrustful empires of Calcutta and Lahore (from 1809). Although Bilaspur was exempted from the close inspections awarded its neighbours, the succession of an inexperienced, independent-minded raja in the 1820s ended up accentuating tensions at court. With legal agreements securing his rule, this raja became the patron of itinerant warriors and 'destabilizing' (i.e., mobile and therefore untaxed) groups seeking refuge from the colonial state to the detriment of both his kinsmen and British interests. The combination of open-ended, pre-colonial patronage patterns with the prerogatives sanctioned by the colonial state thus generated a new political culture that was personified by this borderland ruler, who consequently became the obverse exemplar of Pahari Rajput kingship.

The last chapter investigates the emergence of a modern discourse about Pahari Rajput kingship in the final years of Bilaspur's 'despotic' ruler, c. 1835-40. The raja of Bilaspur and his antithetical brother-in-law at Sirmour prove central to this reading, their persons and regimes grounding a simplified discursive model that purported to explain the meaning of 'Rajput Tradition'. The raja's death in 1839 exposed the fallacy of this model, as the EIC's supposed allies, most notably the raja of Sirmour and his widowed sisters, orchestrated an elaborate coup that disproved the colonial milieu's reading of West Himalayan kingship and polity. Although barely acknowledged in standard histories, archival records and local histories reveal an enormous gap between the depiction of Pahari Rajput kingship as a male-led, caste-exclusive, lineage-based institution and the actual implementation of sovereignty at the time through male and female leaders who relied on various (Rajput and non-Rajput) agents to further their aims. Tracing the details of these manoeuvres exposes the vital adjustment of pre-colonial statecraft to the early colonial frontier, and the distance that ultimately emerged between the fluid dynamics of the time and their insipid representation in posterior histories.

In recovering histories that had become obscured by colonial knowledge and postcolonial elaborations, this book revises narratives that are today accepted as common wisdom in both popular and academic circles. The purpose of these explorations is to arrive at an informed approximation of a time and place that is now lost. Thus, while the rise of a regent rani

from exiled second wife to grand mistress of regional politics may occasion interventions with postmodern scholarship on questions of women's agency, and whereas the brilliant orchestration of a coup in a neighbouring kingdom by the same rulers' descendants may promote a discussion of modernity in borderland spaces, they do so only insofar as they help further the explication of how a small group of politically dominant families responded to its near haphazard propulsion to the edge of a vast alien empire. That these responses infused new meanings into extant customs in ways that define Pahari Rajput identities today is perhaps suggestive of a seldom-noted quality of geo-political borderlands as both generators and enforcers of long-term socio-cultural transformations.



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# 1 Memories of a Feud: Chinjhiar, 1795

Visitors to the Sutlej River Valley in the winter of 1795 would have stumbled upon a curious sight: a band of battered peasant-warriors marching towards a riverside palace, its banners at half-mast. Walking at a short distance from the rest of the crew, a stringed instrument thrown over his shoulder and his lips rhyming phrases to a set meter, the bard returning from the battlefield was composing a history of the war to be presented at court. Once approved by the king, his narrative would become the official account of the war used to inculcate future generations into the valiant ways of their ancestors. A century later, the descendants of that battle's participants wrote down their own versions of the events, adding a novel dimension to the established mode of oral transmission. No longer relying on the spoken word alone, these authors combined their childhood memories of oral recitations with their experience as the privileged vassals of a global empire, into which they had been integrated and to which they owed their positions of power. Informed by a century of extensive exchanges between royal elites and foreign administrators, these accounts evince the radical reorientation of kingship and polity in the modern era in their discarding of the locally grounded markers found in the oral tradition for a pan-Indian reading that associates the Rajput rulers of the hills with the Kshatriya monarchs of antiquity.

The battle that shook the Himalayan foothills that winter concerned a strategic fortress at the boundary of the kingdoms of Bilaspur (alias Kahlur) and Kangra. Although control of the *garh* ('fort') was the immediate concern of the rival kingdoms, the struggle quickly swelled into a regional affair incorporating numerous mountain kings, such as the ruler of Sirmaur, who died in battle while championing Bilaspur's cause (for the approximate locations of these polities, see Map 1). The intersecting fortunes of these three kingdoms in the Battle of Chinjhiar, in many ways the last of its kind, reveals a world that is now lost. As if oblivious to the gargantuan forces edging in on their territories, the mountain rulers were enmeshed in a conspicuously local drama seething with the ancient rivalries and betrayals that characterized West Himalayan politics at the close of the eighteenth century. While these dynamics remained central to regional politics in the decades that followed, the Hill States' incorporation into robust imperial structures affected them in markedly different ways: the erstwhile all-powerful kingdom of Kangra became the humble vassal of an indigenous (Sikh) empire; Sirmaur transformed into a 'model princely state' under foreign (British) masters; and Bilaspur's division between the superpowers engendered risks and opportunities that

mired it in controversies for decades. Despite these divergent trajectories, modern retellings of the battle cast the three kingdoms and their rulers in a uniform, somewhat romantic, and often nationalistic manner that is revealing of the fundamental shift in the practise and conceptualization of Pahari Rajput kingship and polity in the modern era.

This chapter examines the changing interpretations of West Himalayan kingship and polity in four phases. A review of the political landscape on the eve of the Battle of Chinjhiar and the interrelated histories of its main rivals opens the investigation. A detailed examination of the bardic narrative composed near the time of the events follows, illustrating how the mountain kings perceived their pasts in the local tradition. The third section explores the gaps between the oral tradition and coeval conditions in the hills to reveal important biases in Pahari Rajput tradition that are particularly apparent in the portrayal of the tragic hero of Sirmaur. The chapter concludes with an examination of accounts written by Pahari elites in the heyday of the British Empire, wherein the Battle of Chinjhiar is presented according to modern readings of the mountain kings as Sanskritized Rajputs, while the regional markers of their rule are suppressed.

### 1.1 The Bilaspur-Kangra Rivalry, c. 1750-1795

The wane of Mughal power in the eighteenth century encouraged its erstwhile *zamīndār* ('landlord') subjects in the *kohistan-i-punjab* ('Punjab Hill States') to reclaim their independence as sovereign rajas.<sup>1</sup> As political instability in the plains increased, the mountain kingdoms became a refuge for artists, mercenaries, and traders, facilitating a renaissance in Pahari Rajput culture and a growing competition between royal courts.<sup>2</sup> By the 1760s, the approximately two-dozen polities between the Yamuna and Ravi Rivers were divided between two main powers: the Katoch Rajputs of Kangra in the lower hills around the Beas (Vyas) River, and the Chandela Rajputs of Bilaspur (Kahlur), who occupied the lower Sutlej River Valley to the southeast (Images 1 and 3). Although broadly associated with their peers in the mountainous interior, the two groups grew increasingly powerful in

1 For a useful overview of this period, see Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 41-98).

2 Dressed as a Muslim trader, the traveller George Forster followed the customary path of merchants during this era through the hills, paying taxes at virtually every mountain pass and river crossing between Sirmaur and Jammu (Forster 1808[1798], vol. 1, pp. 226-47). On the renaissance in Pahari miniature paintings through the patronage of artists from the plains, see Goetz (1978).

**Image 1 The Kangra Valley, the view towards the west from the northeast (Mata Maheshwari temple and fort, Chota Bhangal)**



The Dhaula Dhar mountain range (on the right) separates the valley from Chamba to its north; the hills to the west fade into the Punjab Plains at Pathankot and Jalandhar; the hills south by southeast merge into Bilaspur.

this era of transition through sustained interaction with the technologically superior cultures of the plains.

During the seventeenth century, both Kangra and Bilaspur shifted their capitals from ancestral forts to market towns on the banks of major rivers, established close links with politically potent devotionalist sects in addition to the local cults that legitimized their regimes, and underwent unprecedented military and territorial growth complemented by extensive intermarriages that safeguarded their interests.<sup>3</sup> The two states' parallel rise to power and ensuing competition for supremacy had its antecedents in the Chandela migration to the hills (c. 700 CE). Summoned to the hills by a vision of the goddess, the Central Indian Chandela nobles were invited to a match of tent pegging by their already established Katoch peers. Trickery on the latter's part turned the friendly encounter into a bloody affair that left casualties on both sides.<sup>4</sup> Engrained in the warring sides' collective

3 Bilaspur replaced Kot Kahlur as the capital in the 1650s-60s, while Nadaun and Sujanpur-Tira replaced Kangra Kot (alias Nagarkot) around the same period. Religious sanction and income from pilgrims' taxes were afforded to each kingdom by its ruling line's association with the pilgrimage sites of Nainā Devī (Bilaspur) and Brajeśvarī Mātā (Kangra) (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 175-93, vol. 2, pp. 504-7).

4 The Katoch allegedly fastened one of the pegs to the ground, resulting in a Chandela prince's dismounting and subsequent death (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 497).

memories, this event encapsulates the mixture of legendary distrust and noble courtesy that has animated Katoch-Chandela relations ever since.

At the time of the Battle of Chinjhiar (1795/6), the rivals had become so deeply intertwined that their leaders actually belonged to the same extended family: Sansar Chand Katoch II (b. 1765, r. 1775-1823) was the renowned *Pahārī Pādshāh* ('mountain emperor') of Kangra, while his cousin Nagardevi Katochi (r. 1775-~1800) was the regent of Bilaspur. Nagardevi had a long running feud with her relative, whose grandfather Ghammand Chand (r. 1751-74) had usurped the Kangra throne from her branch of the family. Having seized her eleven princely brothers while their father's funerary rites were underway (c. 1751), Ghammand Chand had 'their eyes gouged, but very cruelly, and threw them into a deep and dark gorge [...] where they perished slithering in pain without water and food' (Dayal 2001 [1883], 28).<sup>5</sup> The usurper's descendants sagaciously wed Nagardevi to the ruler of Bilaspur, raja Devi Chand (r. ~1741-1772), with a view to distancing the rancorous rani from Kangra and assuaging tensions with their Chandela neighbours. The plan collapsed with the raja's death shortly afterwards, when Nagardevi became the regent of her toddler son, Maha Chand (b. 1772, r. 1775/1800-1824), in the very same year that Sansar Chand was crowned in Kangra. The rivalry between the branches of the Katoch family rekindled, the regent dedicated considerable time and resources to avenge her brothers' murder while her younger prodigy kin took to conquering the hills from his base in Kangra.

After eight years in power (1783), Sansar Chand grew sufficiently confident to claim the ancestral fort of Kangra from the Mughals (Image 2). The seat of Mughal power since its conquest in 1620,<sup>6</sup> control of the fort had by then become synonymous with political supremacy over the entirety of the hills between the Yamuna and Ravi Rivers. At the time of the attack, Kangra Fort was commanded by an obstinate noble from the plains with the backing of a formidable garrison of Hazuris. Although barely able to instate his authority over the region, the Mughal governor did retain control of the temple of Brajeśvarī Mātā in the adjacent town of Kangra, the site of the

For a more elaborate account, including the Chandelas' heeding of the goddess Jwalamukhi's call as legitimating their migration into Kangra territory, see Singh and Varma (1940, 2-3).

5 Sources from the hills differ regarding Nagardevi's place within the Katoch elite: Kahluri texts often cast her as Sansar Chand's sister, whereas those favourable to Kangra locate her with the more distant branch of murdered princes; see Singh and Varma (1940, 22-23) and Anonymous (2004[1870s], 39-40), respectively.

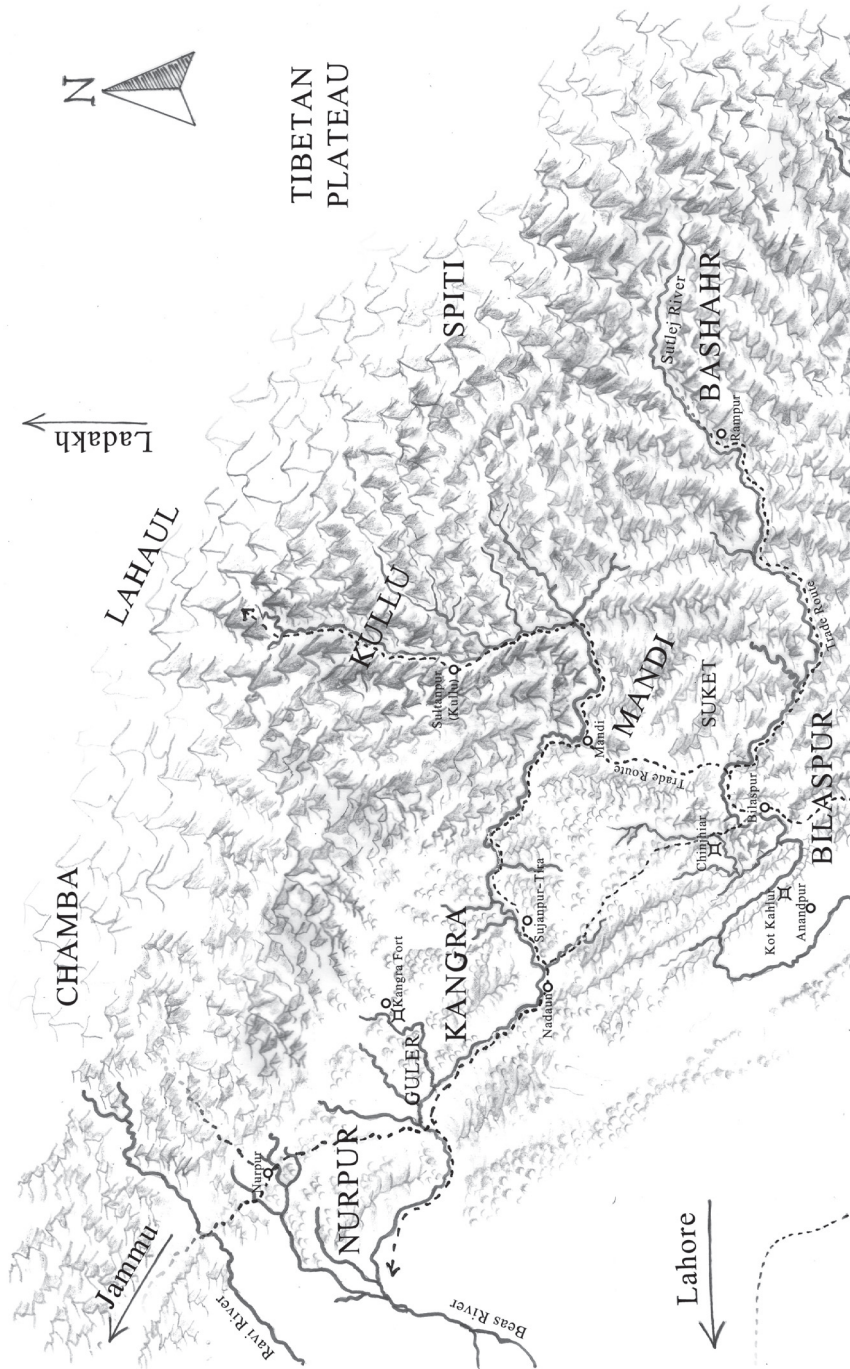
6 On the Mughal conquest, see Jahangir (1909-1914, vol. 2, pp. 183-186). For a contemporary description of 'Nagarcot' (Kot Kangra), see Terry (1777[1655], 82).

**Image 2** Kangra Fort (*Kangra Kot*)

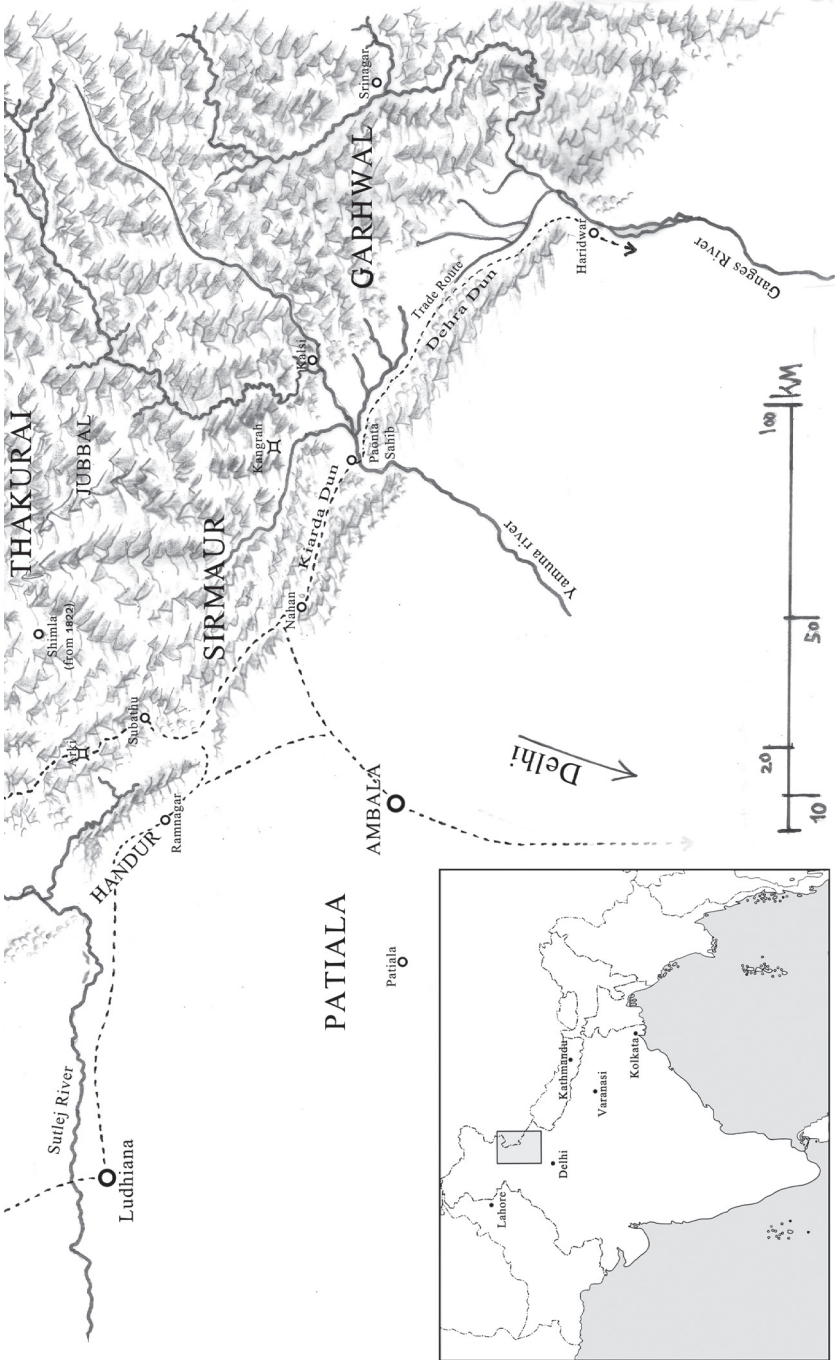


Ancestral fort of the Katoch Rajputs and regional headquarters under the Mughals (1620-1783). The visible fortifications date to the period of Sikh rule (1809-45).

Map 1 Rajput Kingdoms of the Western Himalaya



Cartography: Offek Orr



Katoch *kuldevī* ('family goddess').<sup>7</sup> The prospect of Sansar Chand regaining the fort and the temple and, by extension, supremacy over the hills, spurred his relative into action. Rallying behind the Mughal banner, Nagardevi led an army of '300 horses and 8,000 footmen, armed with matchlocks, swords, spears and clubs' on a tour of looting and plundering that curtailed her rival's ambition by decimating 'almost every village in Kangrah'.<sup>8</sup> Four years later (1787), Sansar Chand made a second, successful attempt on the fort, marking his transformation into the veritable 'mountain emperor' of the hills during the two decades that followed.<sup>9</sup> For all his power, Sansar Chand was still flustered by his cousin's defiance. In light of his earlier experiences with the rani, the mountain emperor prudently avoided confronting Bilaspur directly, allying with one of its fiercest opponents instead.

The Katochi rani's marriage into Bilaspur placed her at the helm of the senior branch of the Chandela Rajputs of the hills. There was, however, a junior branch that had seceded from Bilaspur in the twelfth century to form the kingdom of Handur (also Nalagarh) in the southerly hills and plains. With significant overlaps in their territories and a common ancestry, the two states' histories were deeply intertwined. In 1762, after a series of political upheavals led to the assassination of the Handuri raja by internal rivals, the junior Chandelas turned to the senior branch in Bilaspur for assistance, resulting in the instatement of a malleable Handuri noble on the throne and the barring of the late raja's son from power.<sup>10</sup> Stripped of his perceived

7 Along with Jwalamukhi, the temple at Kangra was famous for its riches and consequently looted by invaders at several junctures (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, pp. 109-121). Contemporary documents indicate that a portion of the taxes on pilgrims to the site was traditionally forwarded to whoever controlled the fort (Goswamy and Malhotra 1973).

8 Although impressed with Nagardevi's 'spirit of a heroine', the English traveller George Forster was less taken by her warriors, whom he found 'huddled together on two sides of a hill, in a deep state of confusion and filth' (Forster 1808[1798], vol. 1, p. 241).

9 Sansar Chand's mastery over the kingdoms between the Sutlej and Ravi Rivers marks the apex of Katoch dominance. The subordinated kingdoms included Nurpur, Kutlehr, Kangra and its four offshoots in the lower hills, and Chamba, Mandi, Suket, and Kullu in the elevated interior. The smaller polities were subdued first, while the larger kingdoms were only subjugated through sustained efforts. Thus, the ruler of Mandi was kept prisoner in Kangra for twelve years, and Chamba only surrendered after its ruler died battling Sansar Chand in 1794; see Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 181), and Dayal (2001[1883], 30), respectively. The durbar hall in Sujampur-Tira was fitted with eleven doorways in which the subordinated rulers were to present themselves during the annual celebration of Dasara (Dayal 2001[1883], 30).

10 Kahluri sources claim that Handur's elders requested that raja Devi Chand (r. ~1741-72) assume command of their kingdom, an offer he prudently declined. Instead, the Kahluriya placed the Handuri noble *miyan* Gajey Singh (r. ~1762-88) on the throne and furthered the latter's subservience by changing the suffix of his title from 'Chand' to 'Singh' (Anonymous

rights, *tikka* ('crown prince') Ram Singh, alias Ram Saran Handuriya (b. 1766, r. 1788-1848), quit the hills to lead the life of a freebooter in the plains.

Young, enterprising, ambitious, and with a deep resentment towards Bilaspur, the Handuriya proved a kindred spirit of Sansar Chand of Kangra. Thus, when Ram Saran returned to Handur as ruler in 1788, Sansar Chand ratified their 'growing friendship' by offering him marriage to a Katochi princess (Anonymous n.d. [1928], 51). Over the seven years that followed, Kangra and Handur repeatedly raided Bilaspur's northern and southern tracts from their respective bases. These encroachments entered a critical phase in the winter of 1795, when the raja of Kangra sought to establish a durable presence in Bilaspur by constructing (or re-fortifying) a fort on the ridge of Chajihār (also 'Chiñjhyār'). Located a mere day's ride from the Kahluri capital, Sansar Chand further humiliated his rivals by naming the fort 'Chātīpurī' to underline 'that he had sat upon the chest (*chātī*) of the Kahlūriyās' (Anonymous n.d. [1934], 66).<sup>11</sup> The consequences of this aggression are best left for the Pahari bard to tell.

## 1.2 The Bard's Tale

The narrative of the struggle for Chinjhiar is in the form of a Pahari oral tradition called *jherā* (henceforth, *jhera*), a term denoting a 'lengthy discourse' or 'waffling', but that for the purpose of analysis may be best described as a short oral epic. Customarily composed by bards attached to lineages of Rajput patrons, the *jhera* purports to narrate historical events as they happened.<sup>12</sup> Performed at public festivities, *jheras* played a central role in imparting the ruling class's vision of the past to Rajput audiences and their affiliates. In this respect, the narrative of the Battle of Chinjhiar approximates the discourse of Pahari warrior-kings as interpreted by the descendants of those who followed them into battle. Within the wider world of Indian oral epics, the *jhera* fits the 'martial-historic' sub-genre in the taxonomy outlined by Stuart Blackburn and Joyce Fleuckiger, with one significant difference: where martial-historic epics are generally inspired by real-life events that incorporate mythic elements, the

n.d.[1934], 65; Singh and Varma 1940, 22; Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 182). For the events leading to Bilaspur's domination of Handur, see Anonymous (n.d.[1928], 49-50).

<sup>11</sup> A similar etymology appears in Singh and Varma (1940, 24).

<sup>12</sup> The bards belong to various communities (Bhat, Damai, etc.) and form a distinct part of regional heritage (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a). Smith (1991) remains the exemplary study of epic narrative, performance, and religious cults in South Asia, but see also Kamphorst (2008) for a recent elaboration on the same, and Snodgrass (2006) on present day-Rajasthani Bhat.

*jhera* remains firmly grounded in worldly affairs by stressing the distinctly human characteristics of its protagonists.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while martial-historic epics tend to develop into cults centred on the worship of deified heroes, *jheras* remain closer connected to empirical realities by celebrating the worldly merits of their subjects.<sup>14</sup> In the account of Chinjhiar, historicity is discernible in the attention accorded to military proceedings (e.g., the construction of temporary bridges at river crossings) and the specification of army routes and battle sites, which suggest its composer(s) had personally participated in the events.<sup>15</sup> The naming of individuals partaking in or abstaining from the war effort similarly strengthens the *jhera*'s veracity, since recounting these details in public affects the social standing of the protagonists' descendants and is thus not taken lightly.

The Pahari bards' relation to the North Indian Rajput tradition is evident in the circumstances in which their compositions were created. The Charans of Rajasthan, for example, would compose works describing conflicts soon after their conclusion in consultation with the embattled parties to produce a consensual, historical 'truth' – a custom also reported in the Garhwal Himalaya.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, these accounts, like all historiography, are prone to bias insofar as they are commissioned by interested parties for public consumption and thus promote notions and stereotypes that conform to their patrons' worldviews. It is here that the *jhera*'s factual basis is most feeble, as names, dates, and sequences of events are manipulated in agreement with the political agendas of their patrons, leading to the casting of protagonists as friends or foes on the basis of familial affiliations rather than attested facts. As the version of the Chinjhiar story recounted below is in the Kahluri dialect spoken in Bilaspur, its depictions of the Chandela warriors and their Sirmauri allies is favourable and contrasted with the enemy state of Kangra. Bearing these biases in mind, the bardic narrative is nonetheless crucial for gleaning information about the cultural perceptions that were prevalent among late eighteenth century-Rajput elites. To understand how a struggle

13 On the classification of Indian oral epics, see Blackburn and Flueckiger (1989, 2-3). On deification in martial epics, consult Blackburn (1989).

14 Although not deified in *jheras*, fallen rajas are nonetheless often venerated in commemorative shrines erected at the site of their deaths. For mentions of shrines honouring the vanquished hero at Chinjhiar (1795/6) and the raja of Chamba (1794), see Anonymous (n.d.[1934], 66), and Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 317-8), respectively.

15 The presence of bards alongside their patrons in battle is also intimated in oral traditions from neighbouring Kumaon (Oakley and Gairola 1977[1935], 159-166).

16 William Sax, personal communication, Paris, 25 November 2011. On Charans, see Vidal (1997, 85-112).

between royal relatives could swell into an epic tale of heroism, love, and loss, it is necessary to delve into the details of this *itihāsa* ('history', lit., 'thus indeed it was') as per the bard's faithful report on things past.

In the city of Bilaspur, the rani draws her husband's attention to the enemy's latest ploy: Sansar Chand has taken the fort of Chinjhiar, which now hangs ominously over their heads (*sirā par koṭj hule*, line 2).<sup>17</sup> Visibly distressed, raja Maha Chand struts through the Sandu Grounds (*maidān*) towards the palace, his contemplation cut short at its gates, where the trusted *wazir* Sansaru warns of impending doom. Explaining that 'we, too, must live in palaces, brother' (*rahnā asā bī mahlā bhāī*, 14), he proposes consulting with leaders from beyond the kingdom. The raja summons his neighbours for a meeting, in which he explains the country's predicament: the Katoch are attacking from the north, while the Handuris plague the south. The respected elder Dipu Patiyal solemnly advises creating a united front, which the raja prudently accepts.

Beckoning servants to provide ink and paper, Maha Chand writes to the rajas of Chamba and Mandi and to the rulers of the *bārā thākūrāī* or 'twelve lordships', a group of smaller polities in the eastern highlands (today situated in the hills surrounding Shimla). Assuring him of their support, the rulers diplomatically defer, exclaiming, 'you have spoken well, brother, and we'll certainly come to your aid, but first summon that [other] raja too' (*teī tā likhī rā thīk hai bhāī/ ase aūhage teriyā majatī zarūr/ par lainā voh rājā sadāī*; 45-82). For, indeed, 'Sansar Chand was great and powerful, none dared face him' (*Sansār Cand balvān baṛā thā/ koi nī kharḍā thā sāmne āī*; 83-84). After several failed pleas, the Kahluriya writes to the raja of Sirmaur, whose domain lies beyond the enemy state of Handur. The raja selects the *sūtrī* ('resourceful') Kahluri nobleman Ramu to deliver the message, who replies with some concern regarding its feasibility:

*Haū nāh nī kardā*  
*par dekh it kanāre Kaṭocā rī dukkī.*  
*dūr kanāre lagī rī Handūrie rī,*  
*Svārgḥaṭ nī milnā ṭapaṇe.*

*Sarmaurie rī mateī, Kāṭocā rī dhyāṇ,*  
*ghaṭē ghaṭē pālūriyāñ tise caukiyā.*  
*je Kahlūrie re kāgad gae pakṛōi,*  
*tā tisā bhūā khal merī bharāñī.*

17 For the full text and translation, see Appendix.

Ramu said, 'I do not refuse,  
 but look, on this bank [of the Sutlej] are barriers set up by the Katoch,  
 beyond that, the Handuris hold their watch,  
 I shan't even be able to cross [the mountain pass of] Svarghat [before  
 I'm caught].

The Sirmauriya's stepmother, a *dhyāni* ('out-married daughter') of the  
 Katoch,  
 has raised check posts at every passage.  
 If the Kahluri paper is caught,  
 she'll fill my skin with fodder'. (97-104)

The road to Sirmaur is fraught with danger. Even if he were to make it beyond enemy lines, Ramu would still have to contend with the prospective ally's stepmother: a Katochi queen at the heart of friendly territory, whose *caukiyā* ('sentries') guard the passes in order to thwart Kahluri agents. Conceding that the mission is not without peril, the raja insists that Ramu agree and the servant humbly complies.

The nobleman's stratagems soon justify his master's judgment: adopting the guise of a saffron-garbed *bairāgi* ascetic, complete with *tumbā* drum and a cap of *bāgrī* grass, Ramu returns to beg for alms with cries of '*alakh*' as per the custom of peripatetic holy men. The disguise is so convincing that the wise Maha Chand alone seems to recognize his agent. Careful to keep the holy man's identity secret from potential spies at court, the raja secrets the letter into the folds of his supplicant's robe along with the customary alms. Faithful to his part, Ramu respectfully takes his leave and exits the palace.

The nobleman-turned-ascetic – 'Ramu *miyān*'<sup>18</sup> gradually gives way to 'Ramu *jogī*' and ultimately just '*jogī*' (121-38) – sets off for Sirmaur. Crossing hills and valleys, he maintains his disguise by camping outdoors, lighting a *dhūṇā* ('sacred fire', H. *dhuni*), and begging for alms along the way. Three days later, the yogi enters the Sirmauri capital of Nahan, salutes its raja, and presents him with the letter. Raja Dharm Prakash Sirmauriya turns the paper in his hands again and again, reading and rereading in evident disbelief. He then bursts into laughter, which turns into anger, and finally gives way to weeping, his emotional states mimicked by the attendants at court. Finally, the raja announces his decision by ordering the drums of war beaten.

18 The title *miyān* (*miyā*) was adopted by the Pahari elite during the Mughal era, when its princes were held as collateral in Delhi (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 62).

Hearing the commotion outside her quarters, the rani summons her husband for a meeting. His quivering moustache and trembling eyes reveal his decision, and the rani pleads he reconsider, for they are too young to venture ‘west, where the locusts fly, [and] from where they, too, never return’ (*pacchamā jo sahlī re ṭīśāśe jā de/ sah bhī haṭī ne kadī nī aūde*; 182-183). No sooner is she done than another rani steps out to the balcony. The much-reviled Katochi stepmother taunts the raja by ridiculing his miniscule army: ‘whatever soldiers you have, that many are my father’s horses [cavalry], which he sends grazing daily at dawn’ (*jitne ka tere sapāhī/ titne ka ghore bāpue mere gē/ ghāh jo jā de roj bhyāgā ī*; 186-8). Caught between a caring lover and a spiteful relative, the raja wrinkles his forehead and tightens his arms, announcing his resolve to go to war from underneath his trembling moustache.

Halfway into the narrative, the Sirmauriya finally sets off for Bilaspur. Assisted by a *ceriyadārā* (‘shepherd’, H., *carvāhā*)-turned-*syce* (‘groom’), the raja mounts his horse to retrace the Kahluri messenger’s path through the hills. Undeterred by the ominous signs along the way (a cawing crow is downed by a royal falcon, a howling jackal shot dead by an attendant), Dharm Prakash reaches the capital in three days. Having donned a suit of armour at the border, his pundits calculate the auspicious time and place to pitch camp, bringing the Sirmauri party to the Sandu Grounds before the Kahluri palace, where they join the twenty-two rulers who had heeded the distressed raja of Bilaspur’s call. The pundit-astrologers are once again summoned to prognosticate which of the assembled should lead the assault, and the lot falls on Dharm Prakash Sirmauriya.<sup>19</sup>

The raja of Bilaspur equips his champion with the best of weapons, lavishing him with promises of wealth and glory should he defeat the enemy. Responding with the humility of a true nobleman, the Sirmauriya only asks that *miyān Aggu Datta*, the raja of Bilaspur’s cousin and the immediate successor to the Kahluri throne, serve as his *sardār* (‘commander’). The Kahluri noble accepts the nomination, which is issued with a strident warning: he is to take special care of the Sirmauriya, whose bravery is only matched by his youth; for should he come to harm, the raja will cut open his skin and fill it with fodder.<sup>20</sup> The hierarchy of command established, the army makes its way to Chinjhiar. Aggu

19 A similar process reportedly took place in Kangra, where Sansar Chand consulted a trusted *fakīr* by the name of Faizal Shah regarding the battle’s outcomes. The holy man prophesied that Sansar Chand’s brother, Fateh (‘Fatooh’) Chand, would die in the war; this outcome was avoided by replacing the latter with a general bearing the same name, who indeed perished in battle (Dayal 2001[1883], 30).

20 This was a common form of punishment, and the filling alluded to connected to the once widespread goatskin bags that were used to carry wheat to be grinded at watermills. The ‘very

**Image 3** Bilaspur, the view towards the south from Garh Chinjhiar



Dakri and Ghumarwin lie to the left of the peak emerging from between the clouds, at the foot of the mountains; the Bandla Heights overlooking the capital (hidden from view) occupy the distant centre; the southern end of Kot Dhar (discussed in Chapter 4) is visible on the upper righthand side. Photographed by the author.

demonstrates his abilities by constructing a *lāhag* ('cargo bridge') over the Sutlej and sending troops to cross at another site (Bodi). The forces reconvene in Dakri, below the fort (today's Ghumarwin, immediately northwest of the capital), where other warriors have already gathered awaiting further orders. The army enters formation, engages, and successfully routs the enemy.

Pressing on towards the fort, the Sirmauriya is caught unawares by the shot of a 'lightening-like cannon' (*kharkā bijliye tophe*, 278) from the fort that

brave and kind' raja Bir Singh Pathania (r. ~1789-1846) of Nurpur, for example, was mainly remembered for skinning his uncle alive (Pathania 2004[1904], 55).

raises steamy splashes from the Dakri marshlands.<sup>21</sup> His memory jolted, the raja realizes he is marching through his maternal grandfather's territories and immediately responds with a '*jai devā*' salute by returning fire.<sup>22</sup> The valley reverberates with lion-like roars as three generously laden rounds are fired; with the third, the fort walls are breached and the enemy forced out into the open. The Kangra soldiers refortify nearby (in Badi Chowk) but suffer a severe beating from the assailants. As evening falls, the two sides retire to their respective camps.

Deprived of his tactical advantage and wary of the attackers' might, the raja of Kangra plots to defeat the enemy by killing its leader. He secretly summons the general Aggu Datta to his camp and offers him the best lands and riches of Kangra in return for the Sirmauriya's life. The Kahluri general agrees, resumes the Sirmauriya's side, and orders his troops to fire blanks in the next round of fighting (pretending that they had run out of ammunition) and threatens to skin whoever dares to disobey. The warriors take to the field the next morning and, following their commander's orders, fire blanks that allow the enemy to close in. Leading the attack, the Sirmauriya realizes he has been betrayed and hastily updates the Kahluriya through a messenger. Back in the palace, an enraged Maha Chand promises to take revenge on his treacherous kinsman, but it is too late for the Sirmauriya, who is fighting alone at the head of a rapidly dissipating army. As the bard recounts,

*Lagī larāi rāje sarmauriye rī,  
baithyā goliyā khāi.  
royā bharyā sarmauriyā rājā,  
mucchē phar-phar lāi.*

*Bārā te golī chaṭṭī,  
rājeriyā aḍiyā lagī.  
Goliyā rī badakhā lagī,  
rāje rā baṇī gayā chānaṇā.*

21 The marshy area was 'behind the petrol pump' in present day-Ghumarwin ('Dakri'); the water was necessary for cooling the cannons between rounds of fire (Ajay Singh Bahadur, personal communication, Shimla, 23 September 2013).

22 This would suggest that Dharm Prakash's *nānā* ('maternal grandfather') was from Bilaspur, a point also raised in the protagonist's earlier exclamation of intent to tour his *nānā*'s country (*nanihālyā rā dekhṇā des, Bilāspurā rī sair*, line 175 in the *jhera*). The link between the rulers of Bilaspur and Sirmaur, absent from written accounts, is thus supplied by the *jhera*, providing an implicit justification for the Sirmauriya's assistance in the struggle.

*Rājā bole, 'Mere sapāhiyo,  
ḍhālā rī koṭharī caṇāo.'  
Ḍhālāñ kaṭhiyā karī koṭharī caṇāī,  
koṭhariyā andar rājā kītā.*

*Ghāyalāñ jo tyāh hūdi barī,  
rājā bole, 'Mere sipāhiyō,  
pāṇiyē rī jalharī lyāyo,'  
klās bhārrī ke pītā rājē.*

*'Rāme Rām,' dhyāyā rājē,  
sukhapālā pāyā Sarmauriyā.  
Satlujā re kahaṇḍe andā,  
dāg Pañj Pipaluē ditte.*

Raja Sirmauriya began to fight,  
but being eaten by bullets was forced to sit.  
Tears swelled in the Sarmauriya's eyes,  
and his moustache began to tremble.

A bullet shot from the other side,  
it hit the raja's heel.  
A hail of bullets [followed],  
and his body was made into a sieve.

The raja said, 'My *sipāhīs*,  
shelter me with your shields'.  
So they collected their shields to form a shelter,  
and brought the raja under its fold.

The wounded became very thirsty,  
the raja said, 'My *sipāhīs*,  
bring a pitcher of water',  
and drank it to the full.

'Ram Ram', recited the raja [and died].  
The Sarmauriya was placed on a *sukhpāl* ('palanquin'),  
and having reached the banks of the Satluj,  
was cremated at Panj Piplu. (333-52)

The Sirmauriya's death concludes the *vīr* ('heroic') narrative of battle, and is followed by a *śṛṅgāra* ('romantic') coda. After the cremation, the raja's *astū* ('remains') are collected in a white cloth, placed on a *sukhpāl* ('palanquin'), and carried to Sirmaur under the watch of Kahluri guards. As it nears the capital, the entourage raises dust on the road from Bilaspur and the young rani, who had spent days and nights praying to the *devī-devtā* ('gods and goddesses') for her husband's protection, is filled with excitement at her beloved's apparent return. As they draw nearer, she notices the palanquin bedecked with flowers, the lowered flags (*nyūiyē dhuje*), and the stoop-necked-attendants who lower their load at the gates in thick silence (*sab cup cāp kharī re the*; 377-8). Her hopes crushed as the drums are beaten and the conch of mourning blown, the rani exclaims that she is no longer 'in debt' to her husband and summarily jumps from the balcony to her death, their souls reuniting (*rūhā ne rūh milī jāe*; 381-4). The orphaned subjects wail in grief, crying over their ruler, who 'died waging battle', and his wife, who 'became *satī*' (*rājā tā maryā laṛāṛyā laṛdā/ par rānī bī satī hoī*; 387-8). After her cremation, the royal couple's remains are taken to Haridwar to be submerged in the Ganges, where they are freed from rebirth. So ends the tale.

### 1.3 Enter Sirmaur

Rooted in the centuries-old rivalry between Bilaspur and Kangra, the *jhera* of Chinjhiar illustrates the capacity of seemingly limited conflicts to spiral into affairs involving scores of Pahari leaders. That its protagonist, Dharm Prakash, hails from Sirmaur is significant: although customarily perceived as external to the 'Jalandhar Circle' of West Himalayan states, the raja and his kingdom were in fact deeply enmeshed in the latter. The classificatory schemes inherited from British Indian historiography, which excluded Sirmaur from the ostensibly sealed group of 22 polities that became known as the *kohistan-i-punjab* ('Punjab Hill States'), are thus only partly correct.<sup>23</sup> As the *jhera* and similar traditions demonstrate, and despite substantial internal

23 The founder of Indian Archaeology, Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893), divided the kingdoms between the Chenab and Sutlej Rivers into two sets of 22 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' states (with Kashmir, Jammu, and 'Trigart' or Kangra occupying a particularly important place), a classification that has persisted into modern scholarship (Cunningham 2006[1871], 109-25; Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 45-46, 57). The *jhera*'s mention of '22 rajas' rallying in support of Bilaspur (line 227) suggests Cunningham was faithful to local categories, although the oral tradition is clearly exaggerating since full attendance would have included the enemy state of Kangra and its allies.

**Image 4** The highlands of inner Sirmaur



Note the contrast between the elevated topography of the Sirmauri interior and the lower hills of Bilaspur and Kangra.

variations, the geographically disparate polities east and south of the Sutlej formed part of the broader region of West Himalayan states that extended as far as West Nepal.<sup>24</sup> The removal of Sirmaur from its attested status as an intimate participant in regional affairs in the decades surrounding the early colonial encounter in recent history writing thus begs explanation.

Occupying the middle ground between the rolling hills of Bilaspur and Kangra in the west and the elevated reaches of Garhwal and Kumaon to its east, Sirmaur was both privy and external to the conflict over Chinihar. Geographically, the kingdom's composition of northerly highlands and southerly hills encouraged a composite political culture that combined the quasi-tribal confederacies of the former with the complex social structures of the latter (Image 4). This position is clearly brought forth in the history of the country's rulers, who are divided between an original dynasty that is said to have been wiped out in a flood about a thousand years ago and the parvenus from Rajasthan who had assumed the vacant throne in the fourteenth century. This combined heritage served the double aims of finding acceptance among the North Indian elite (through identification with the Bhatti Rajputs of Jaisalmer) and gaining legitimacy as overlords of the

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the bardic narrative of a war between Sirmaur and West Nepal in the early modern era in Lecomte-Tilouine (2004).

**Image 5** Raja Kirat Prakash of Sirmaur (b. 1747, r. 1757-73/4)

Courtesy of The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

highlands (through marital links and tribute from the highland polity of Jubbal, which was allegedly founded by the sole survivor of the flood that had destroyed the original dynasty).<sup>25</sup> By 1610, the new line had developed Sirmaur

<sup>25</sup> For the Sirmauri narrative of this origin myth, see Singh (2007[1912], 22-28), as well as a vague affirmation of its veracity in the chronicle of Jaislamer in Todd (2002[1829-1832], vol. 2,

into a formidable independent state whose ‘mightie prince’, according to the English traveller William Finch, could raise no less than half a million troops (though ‘few or no horse’) and who paid ‘little or no tribute’ to Delhi (Foster 1921, 180). Although in all likelihood exaggerated, this description suggests Sirmaur was then a robust kingdom on a sure path towards integration into the Mughal Empire. Indeed, less than a dozen years later (in 1621) the capital had shifted from a valley in the inner hills to its current of Nahan on a hillock overlooking the plains, a move that was facilitated by an alliance with a politically powerful lineage of devotional Vaishnavism.<sup>26</sup> The Sirmauri elite’s exposure to the urban-based culture of empire in conjunction with close ties to *bhakti* (‘devotional’) cults follows the established pattern found in neighbouring states, furthering its identification with the Rajputs of Western India while also sustaining their patronage of local traditions.

In the decades that preceded the standoff at Chinjhiar, Sirmaur enjoyed a brief golden age under Kirat Prakash (b. 1747, r. 1757-73/4; Image 5).<sup>27</sup> Through a combination of politics and military might, Kirat Prakash expanded his rule over plains and highlands, most notably by replacing Bilaspur as the overlord of the northerly *thakurāī*. Although these conquests were almost entirely lost under his successors (primarily due to the weakening of Sirmaur’s patron state of Patiala in the plains),<sup>28</sup> his reign set a standard for succeeding generations’ conceptualization of kingship and sovereignty. The description of Kirat Prakash’s firstborn successor upon his return to Nahan after defeat to the Sikh chieftain Jodh Singh Kalsia in 1783 confirms this. Entering the capital at the head of ‘some dozen horsemen, sorrily clad, and very slenderly mounted’, raja Jagat Prakash (r. 1773-92) was, according to the traveller George Forster,

[a] handsome young man, of a bright olive complexion, and taller than the middle size, [he] was dressed in a vest of yellow silk, and a red turban [...] armed with a sabre, a bow, and a quiver of arrows. [...] He is young

p. 196). The links between Sirmaur’s rulers and the highland *thakurais* are addressed in Sharma (1912[1894], 15-24) and corroborated by the respective houses today (personal communications, Ajay Singh Bahadur, 28 May 2008, and Yogendr Chand, 1 June 2008).

26 The close links between Sirmaur and the Mughals are evinced in *farmans* ordering for timber and ice (to be used for making sorbet) from the Himalaya to be floated down the Yamuna to Delhi (Grover and Chaudhary 2006, 137-145).

27 Unless otherwise stated, the dates of the reigns of Sirmaur’s rulers follow Singh (2007[1912]). For Kirat Prakash, see Singh (2007[1912], 217-9), which are corroborated by contemporary accounts from Patiala (Griffin 2000[1870], 42).

28 On state formation in Patiala during this period, see Dhavan (2011, Chapter 3).

and brave, and he liberally disburses what he extorts. The joy invariably expressed by the crowds who came to congratulate his safe return, gave me a sensible pleasure. They saluted him without noise or tumult, by an inclination of the body, and touching the head with the right hand: hailing him at the same time [as] their father and protector. The chief, whilst passing, spoke to them in terms affectionate and interesting, which, like a stroke of magic, seemed in an instant to erase every trace of grievance. Such were the advantages which pleasing manners and a liberality of temper, joined to the other alluring qualities of a soldier, gave to this prince. (Forster 1808 [1798], vol. 1, p. 233)

The image of this youthful, charismatic warrior-king agrees with the customary representation of Pahari rulers in regional histories, art, and folklore, including that of his younger brother and successor Dharm Prakash (r. 1792-95/6), the protagonist of the *jhera* of Chinjhiar.<sup>29</sup> Despite substantial challenges to their rule, the two brothers upheld their father's legacy as fierce warrior-protectors: Jagat Prakash assisted the Handur Chandelas against Bilaspur in 1787, and Dharm Prakash laid down his life on behalf of Bilaspur against Kangra at Chinjhiar (1795/6).<sup>30</sup> Economically, the two rulers followed a similar strategy that prioritized the retention of lowland estates over investment in the highlands so as to capitalize on the rise of trade through the hills by encouraging the migration of 'foreign merchants' to Nahan (Forster 1808 [1798], vol. 1, p. 233). While oral and written sources suggest these policies were a reflection of the rulers' adherence to 'Rajput *dharm*', the motives for Sirmaur's late eighteenth-century rulers were often related to concrete concerns about retaining political power. The gaps between the values and orientations denoted by the abstract term 'Rajput *dharm*' and empirical realities may be deduced from the *jhera*'s portrayal of royal conduct, gender roles, and ritual specialists.

The warrior ethos of the Pahari Rajput oral tradition is primarily evident in a moral code based on *ādar* ('honour') that is expressed in solidarity amongst the *birādarī* ('fraternity'). The contrast between the upright hero who heeds the besieged raja's call to arms and his avaricious betrayer exemplifies this

29 For a matching portrait of the raja's similarly attired brother, see Archer (1973, vol. 2, p. 197).

30 British Library, Oriental and Indian Office Collections (hereafter OIOC), India Office Records (hereafter IOR) IOR/F/4/571/13998(2), Extract from Bengal Secret Consultations, 'Statistical and Geographical Memoir of the Hill Countries Situated Between the Rivers Tamas (or Tonse) and Sutlej by Captain Robert Ross' (hereafter, 'Ross Report'), 27 September 1815, fo. 103-4.

tendency.<sup>31</sup> However, as in other parts of North India, warfare in the hills subscribed to the more fluid dynamics of the 'Hindustani military market', wherein cultivators periodically took service with warlords to supplement their incomes (Kolff 1990).<sup>32</sup> The Patiyal warriors are a case in point. As the representative of a sizeable community from the lower rungs of society, Dipu Patiyal would have been indispensable for countering the numerous forces mustered by Kangra and Handur.<sup>33</sup> Apart from the promise of loot and plunder, the Patiyals' loyalty earned them an association with the distinguished Chandelas, as evinced in the commemoration of Dipu as a senior advisor whose vast wisdom is somewhat oddly measured against the size of a buffalo (line 35). The fruits of this mutually beneficial relationship are apparent when viewed in a grander timeframe; classified as a 'tribe' affecting 'most of the customs of Rajputs' in the 1860s, the Patiyals had become 'the most distinguished of the second class Rajputs' by the beginning of the twentieth century (Punjab Government 1995 [1926], 166-7; Ibbetson 2002 [1916], 160).

If complementing the *jhera* with external sources evinces social mobility, its contents also point to important changes and innovations in late eighteenth-century warfare. Thus, while geographical constraints dictated that hill forts (*durg, garh*) would remain primary goals of conquest, the availability of cannons with which capture and protect them is a novelty worthy of elaboration.<sup>34</sup> In most other aspects, warfare in the Shivalik Hills proves congruent with that of the plains: hierarchy manifests in a division between mounted nobles and infantry-peasants, communication between rival commanders persists during hostilities, and combatants habitually retire from the field at night. At the same time, the oral account makes a number of important omissions, most notably failing to note the role

31 In a performance of the *jhera* by villagers from the vicinity of Chinjhiar in 2007, the web of treachery was expanded to include the raja of Sirmaur. Rather than dismount the fort that Kangra had occupied with guns, the Sirmauriya contracted a shepherd to poison its water tank. Having earlier 'taken Sansar Chand's salt', the shepherd regretted his actions and informed the occupiers, at which point they abandoned the fort to confront the Sirmauriya (personal communication, Ajay Singh Bahadur, Shimla, 23 September 2013).

32 In Kangra, this state of affairs persisted into the 1840s, when large groups of disbanded soldiers mobilized in opposition to British rule (Malleison 1872, 27).

33 The Katoch forces, which included contingents from the substantial states of Mandi and Suket, were said to have numbered some 20,000-22,000, whereas the Kahluri army boasted a mere 14,000-15,000 troops, of which 9000 were Sirmauris and an unknown number were from the highland *thakurais* (Chander 1907, 11).

34 On the increased access of eighteenth-century rural magnates to advanced arms and their contribution to Mughal decline, see Khan (2004) and Gommans (2003[2001]).

of foreign mercenaries from beyond the hills, such as the Afghan cavalry that facilitated Kangra's rise to power (alongside EIC deserters who served in Sansar Chand's Court) and that would play a pivotal role in 1830s-40s Bilaspur.<sup>35</sup>

Similar biases may be discerned in the portrayal of women and gender roles in state apparatuses. While a comprehensive enquiry into the agency of Rajputnis ('Rajput women') in Pahari courts is advanced in Chapter 3, a cursory review of their place in the *jhera* is sufficient for discerning the substantial entrenchment of cultural idioms from the West Indian Rajput world among the West Himalayan elite. Given its formal endorsement of patrilineality, Rajput historiography tends to downplay the importance of sovereign women; this explains the erasure of Bilaspur's regent rani from the *jhera* in favour of her son, Maha Chand.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the framing of the narrative by the actions of Rajputnis hints at their centrality to Pahari politics: it is the Kahluri rani who first draws attention to the threat from Kangra (her prudent warning reinforced by the state *wazir*), while the heartbroken Sirmauri rani who prefers death to life without her spouse concludes the tale. Sandwiched between these benign figures is the malicious Katochi 'stepmother', who seemingly lures the hero to his doom.

Pahari oral tradition thus oscillates between the ideal types of the benevolent spouse/sister who supports the male hero and the nefarious rani, usually a mother-in-law, who obstructs him. The precise relationship between a Rajputni and her male relation(s) is determined by the *jhera*'s commissioning patron(s), resulting in a positive portrayal of the Sirmauri rani and negative depictions of the enemy-affiliated Katochi.<sup>37</sup> The underlying message is pitifully clear: faithfulness to death ('becoming *sati*') is the ultimate ideal of womanhood insofar as it manifests a loving devotion that

35 Sansar Chand's downfall is widely believed to have been precipitated by his disbanding of the Rohilla and Afghan warriors who had supported his regime since the 1800s (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 183). On 'Colonel O'Brien', the EIC deserter who handled correspondence with the British and manufactured artillery for Sansar Chand's 2000-strong base army, see Garrett and Grey (1970[1929], 59-67).

36 Powerful Rajputnis primarily appear in origin myths and accounts of the distant past, where they are habitually sacrificed or 'domesticated' for the sake of a male-led kingdom. The instatement of Rajput rule in Kullu, for example, was achieved only after an invincible female sovereign was wed to the local dynasty's founder (Singh 2000[1885], 76). On state-sanctioned subjugation through the sacrifice of royal women at the site of fountains in Kangra and Chamba, see Sharma (2001, 38-63).

37 The Kahluri account's sympathy toward the Sirmauri rani is easily explained by a later performance (2007), in which she is explicitly claimed to have married into Nahan from Bilaspur (personal communication, Ajay Singh Bahadur, 23 September 2013).

**Image 6** A Nath yogi visiting a Rajputni harem in Chamba



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The grieving Rajputnis suggest the ascetic has delivered news of the raja of Chamba's death in battle with Sansar Chand of Kangra; Punjab Hills c. 1795.

transcends the temporal world, while proximity to power cannot result in anything other than disaster. These stereotypes are strengthened by the portents of the Katochi 'stepmother', whose taunts resonate with similar

tales of wars that were sparked by the inimical spouses of virtuous rajas.<sup>38</sup> By the close of the nineteenth century, this would become a regular feature of Pahari historiography, so that a local history from Kangra could squarely locate the blame for the battle at Chinjhiar with the sneering rani (recast as an evil wife) who repeats the *jhera*'s menace (lines 186-8) verbatim.<sup>39</sup> Although hardly accounting for the complexity of Rajputni agency, these polarized positions delineate the main notions underlying royal women in the Pahari Rajput imagination.

The devaluation of Rajputnis in oral traditions is doubly true of ritual specialists (Image 6). Apart from brief mentions of *jyotiṣaks* ('pundit astrologers') who calculate *sāit* ('auspicious moments') for pitching camp and nominating military leaders (lines 224, 228), the *jhera* has little to add about these groups.<sup>40</sup> However, as the following chapters reveal, specialists associated with religious communities were thoroughly embedded in Pahari administration as treasurers, confidants, divinatory specialists, and instigators of momentous geopolitical shifts. The importance of these groups is nonetheless hinted at in the *jhera*'s careful portrayal of the messenger Ramu's disguise as a '*jogī*' (specifically, a *bairāgī* ascetic).<sup>41</sup> Having settled in the hills in the early modern era, Vaishnava ascetics allied with Pahari rulers in various configurations and were an inseparable part of the landscape by the time of the conflict at Chinjhiar. The image of Ramu's disguise, which suggests his position as a 'neutral' agent unaffiliated with

38 See, for example, the origins of a seventeenth-century war between Bilaspur and Suket in the Kahluri raja's Suketi wife's provocations during a game of chess (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, pp. 500-1). In local histories, the game of chess is substituted with *chausar*, conjuring an implicit parallel between the Pahari king and the Mahabharata's Yudhishtira, the quintessential Hindu (Indic) king who is incapable of refusing a challenge (Singh and Varma 1940, 18).

39 Thus, the 'raja of Sirmaur had launched [an] attack on Sansar Chand because the latter's sister, who was married to raja Dharam Prakash of Sirmaur, had one day told sarcastically to [the] raja of Sirmaur that her brother possesses as much number of attendants of horses (*syces*) as he [the raja of Sirmaur] has the troops' (Dayal 2001[1883], 30). The actual circumstances of this Katochi rani are explored in Chapter 3.

40 However, the verbal commentary that accompanies *jhera* performances expounds on the (largely negative) role of Brahmin state servants. In a version performed in 2007, Sirmaur's Brahmin *wazir* colludes with the treacherous Kahluri general to ensure the Sirmauriya's lines of supply are broken while the former fatally shoots the wounded raja in the back (personal communication, Ajay Bahadur Singh, Shimla, 23 September 2013). This view is congruent with the official narrative of Sirmauri history (Singh 2007[1912]), which holds the *wazir* responsible for the misfortunes of Dharm Prakash's successor (see Chapter 2).

41 For a useful overview of the relation between ascetics and rulers in the hills, see Bouillier (1989). On the phases of *bairāgī* involvement in West Himalayan politics, see Moran (2013).

the warring parties, would have thus been immanently recognizable to the *jhera*'s audiences.<sup>42</sup> While *bairagi* ascetics retained considerable clout in later decades, their involvement in matters of state was invariably deplored in later Rajput-authored accounts. As with the representation of royal Rajputnis, the revised vision of kingship that developed in the transition to modernity was averse to ancillary elements beyond the male elite, resulting in their suppression and/or derision in modern histories – as is readily apparent in modern retellings of the Battle of Chinjhiar.

#### 1.4 The Rajputization of Pahari Kingship: Narratives of Chinjhiar, c. 1900

The practise and representation of Pahari Rajput kingship was radically changed in the century between the clash at Chinjhiar and its re-inscription by regional elites in the heyday of the British Empire. Barred from bickering over hamlets of negligible value, the area's leaders turned to the wider vistas that were open to supporters of empire under the Pax Britannica: some sustained their martial heritage as honorary officers in the British Indian Army; others assumed appointments as magistrates in their ancestral territories; and enterprising individuals boldly invested in business ventures in and beyond the hills.<sup>43</sup> Although these processes unfolded at varying paces in each of the kingdoms, by the beginning of the twentieth century the Rajput past was largely perceived in a uniform manner that framed the local kings as modern versions of the Kshatriya sovereigns of antiquity. As a result, the commentators on Chinjhiar produced amplified versions of the martial ethos encountered in the oral tradition that occluded ancillary elements (e.g., women, ascetics) to bequeath an amalgamated vision of the Rajput past. This is particularly apparent in the writings of Kishan Chander.

The son of a failed contender to Bilaspur's throne, Kishan Chander spent the majority of his adult life as a member of Sirmaur's landed gentry.<sup>44</sup> In 1907, Chander published a voluminous compilation of maxims for the cultivated

42 On the particular type of ascetic identity assumed by householders setting off to war, see Kolff (1990, 74-85).

43 The continued importance of military service is evinced in Enriquez (1915, 8, 26) and, more generally, in Punjab Government (1995[1926], 464-9). On investment in British-initiated tea plantations, see Moran (2009).

44 Chander inherited an estate in the plains from his uncle but resettled in Sirmaur following an apparent bankruptcy. On Chander's grandmother and her attempts at claiming Bilaspur, see Chapter 5.

gentleman entitled *Updesh Kusumākar (Bouquet of Sermons)*. Written in a mixture of Persian and Urdu and interspersed with sprinklings of Sanskrit and English, the text opens with a lengthy account of its author's family history, which includes a detailed exposition of the Battle of Chinjhiar. Similar to the *jhera* in content, the account diverges in flavour and interpretation according to the prevalent understandings of Rajput kingship at the turn of the century. Thus, as in the oral tradition, Chander locates the root of the conflict in an affront to honour. However, rather than the factual aggression on Bilaspur (lines 1-16), the *casus belli* is traced to the Kangra aggressor's cancerous 'pride' and reduction of fellow rulers to 'slaves' (Chander 1907, 10).<sup>45</sup> This qualitative shift reflects what Nicholas Dirks (1987) has termed the 'substantiation' of kingship in British India through ceremonials: the conceited raja who ignores his peers breeds disaster, whereas the humble ruler who follows custom is glorified.

The assessment and validation of a ruler's worth evinces similar transitions, the specification of clan and warrior names in the oral tradition being replaced with broader themes pertaining to North Indian politics writ large. The raja of Bilaspur is thus presented as the overlord of the 'twelve well-known *thakurians*' that surrounded Shimla, and his lofty standing with the 'Emperor of India' as a matter of considerable pride (Chander 1907, 10).<sup>46</sup> This seeming novelty is, in fact, rooted in the earlier practise of taking recourse to external powers from beyond the hills to legitimate local authority, as evinced in Nagardevi's support of the Mughal governor against Kangra in 1783 and in Sirmaur's coeval ascendancy by allying with the Phulkian kingdom of Patiala in the plains. The stress on *bhāicārā* ('brotherhood') between local leaders and between the latter and their patrons is complemented with a general tendency to downplay non-Rajput elements of statecraft. Thus, *wazir* Sansaru and Dipu Patiyal are entirely omitted from Chander's account, while the *jhera*'s Ramu is substituted with the raja of Bilaspur's uncle, *miyan* Zorawar Singh (Chander 1907, 11).<sup>47</sup> These incongruences are indicative of the shift in the orientation of modern Rajput kingship: the oral tradition recognizes its audiences' merit by noting the presence of faithful

45 A manuscript translation of the text by Amar Nath Walia is available from the Department of Languages, Arts and Cultures Library at Shimla. The emergence of Sansar Chand as the paragon of West Himalayan kingship is discussed in Chapter 2.

46 Although subservient to Bilaspur since the time of Ajmer Chand (r. 1672-1741), the *bārah thakurāi* ('twelve lordships') of the Shimla Hills frequently changed hands between Bilaspur, Handur, Sirmaur, and Bashahr. The bulk of these states came under Handur upon Ram Saran's abovementioned return to power in 1788, see 'Ross Report', fo. 103-104.

47 A similar reading was taught in Bilaspur's schools (Anonymous n.d.[1934], 66).

retainers and loyal allies, while the written word divests its non-Rajput supporters of agency in a bid to foreground the ruling elite.

The wandering 'ascetics' of the subcontinent were particularly vulnerable to these processes. In the Himalayan foothills, *bairāgi* ascetics who were once crucial powerbrokers bore the brunt of these changes, as may be gleaned from the depictions of 'Bairagi Ram' in modern regional histories. Famous as the Bilaspur regent's trusted advisor, Bairagi Ram began his career as tutor and *wazir* to the child raja Surma Sen (r. 1781-8) of Mandi, a sizeable state in the inner hills north of Bilaspur. According to a modern history of Mandi State, following the *wazir's* counsel the *raja* expelled a substantial number of nobles from court soon after attaining majority, weakening the state and allegedly enabling its conquest by Kangra in the reign of his successor, Ishwari Sen (r. 1788-1826) (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933], vol. 2, p. 394). In faulting Bairagi Ram for virtually all the failings of the Pahari elite, these sources reworked complex historical realities into Rajput-exclusive pasts that cast politically powerful monastics as enemies – a theme that recurs in writings from within and beyond the hills.<sup>48</sup> The hostility towards politically engaged ascetics, Rajputnis, and non-Pahari participants in regional history formed part of a broader strategy to foreground male leaders at the expense of competing factors in turn-of-the-century historiography, which amalgamated the local characteristics of kingship and pan-Indian tropes to produce a new reading of the past, as is particularly evident in Chander's retelling of the Battle of Chinjhiar.

### From Headmen to Kshatriyas: Chinjhiar in twentieth-century historiography

Kishan Chander's account is emblematic of the modern reading of Pahari Rajput kingship. Although faithful to the oral tradition's narrative plot, Chander devotes a great deal of attention to the moral stature of its heroes in light of the loosely defined yet universally recognizable codes of the ruling class that revolve around honour and solidarity. It is thus the 'old ties' between Sirmaur and Bilaspur that account for the Sirmauriya's valour, while the conflict itself is implicitly explained by the subversion of normative

48 The evidence suggests that Bairagi Ram left Mandi for Bilaspur in 1785 to serve as the regent Nagardevi's advisor. In both states, the *bairagi* is blamed for various failings, the former uncannily gleeful in reporting his decapitation and the severed head's subsequent public beating with shoes by 'all the miyans' (Singh 1930, 79-83); see Anonymous (n.d.[1934], 66) for the Kahluri perspective. In modern historical fiction from Bilaspur, the *bairagi* is tortured to death by Nagardevi's son (see Chapter 5).

social behaviours entailed in the *māmā* ('maternal uncle') of Kangra's attack on his Kahluri *bhānjā* ('nephew'), which counters the prescribed role of *mamas* as the latter's guides and mentors (Chander 1907, 10-11).<sup>49</sup> The text's agreement with the *jhera* regarding social mores notwithstanding, it also introduces new elements from beyond the hills that are fleshed out in the story's climax:

[T]he warriors demonstrated utmost courage and chivalry. Just when the battle was at its utmost intensity, the Kehlour army, on a hint from its commanding officer, took to its heels. This raised the courage of the enemy twofold and all the pressure of fighting fell on the shoulders of the Sirmaur army. The ruler of Sirmaur was a strong man of determination and fortitude [*mazbūt irāde kā mālik*]. He was on his horse at the centre of the battlefield issuing commands to his army. [...] Considering it below the dignity [*sān*] of a Kshatriya to flee from the battlefield, he kept bolstering the spirit of his army. Nature [*qudrat*], however, was bent upon giving defeat to the Kehlour and Sirmaur armies. [...] A sniper's bullet hit the maharaja of Sirmaur's thigh, rendering him unable to ride his horse. He then sat in a palanquin, but was encircled by enemy forces.

Now many a coward fled to save their lives. Even the palanquin-bearers left the maharaja's palanquin on the ground and fled from the battlefield. The maharaja, supported by a few loyal servants of his state, continued showering bullets on the enemy while sitting on his knees. He thus bravely sacrificed his life in battle and left a mark of shame [*badnāmī kā ṭikā*] on the forehead of Kehlour, which shirked to help a kind friend at a critical juncture. Having seized a part of Kehlour territory, the enemy returned to Kangra amidst the sound of trumpets of victory after raising a memorial to its victory on the battlefield. (Chander 1907, 10-12)

If Chander follows the oral tradition in spirit and narrative sequence, his lauding of the protagonist draws on somewhat different ideals. Instead of the formulaic structures and topical themes advanced in the *jhera* – from the failure of fellow rajas to assist Bilaspur through the Sirmauriya's pursuit of *dharmic* ('proper') action despite foreboding signs of disaster – Chander expounds on the hero's 'determination and fortitude', the 'Kshatriya dignity' that has him spur soldiers into action till the very end, and ultimately replaces the *jhera*'s Homeric shot in the heel with the proverbial thigh of

49 On *mama-bhanja* ties in the hills, see Moran (2011).

Bhima.<sup>50</sup> This imagery reorients Rajput kingship from the oral tradition's locally grounded markers towards the characteristics of Hindu warrior-kings in Sanskritic sources, such as the protagonist's qualification as a 'Kshatriya' – a term that is entirely foreign to the *jhera*.

The novelty of these influences is even more pronounced in Sirmaur's official history, the *Tawārīkh-e-Sirmaur-Riyāsat* (Singh 2007 [1912]). Although purporting to narrate the state's history, the author openly concedes his reliance on 'books in English for gathering information about the temperament and lifestyle of Hindus, as well as the basic principles and beliefs of Hindus and Muslims'. These sources cover a broad spectrum of disciplines and backgrounds, from British (Mountstuart Elphinstone, William Hunter) and Bengali (R.C. Dutt) historians to Arya Samajist (Harbilal Rai's *Hindu Superiority*) and Orientalists writings on Islam and Ancient India (Whitney and Max Müller, respectively) (Singh 2007 [1912], 16). In incorporating the discourses of neo-Hindu reformists, academic Orientalists, and British historians into modern readings of the past, such local histories have facilitated the internalization of patently modern readings of South Asian history and society by later generations of readers.

While this shift towards a uniform representation has been lamented for degenerating India's independent leaders into 'museological fixtures of later colonial display' (Dirks 2001, 64-5), recent studies reveal that many of these rulers successfully advanced their agendas by capitalizing on opportunities within the framework of British India.<sup>51</sup> Rather than obliterate pre-existing markers of Pahari kingship, the expanded vocabulary that transformed Rajputs into Kshatriyas articulated sovereignty in new ways that served the same goal of validating elite authority. A good example of how local contours of kingship and polity were retained in local histories may be found in *The Story of Bilaspur (Bilāspur kī Kahānī)*, Singh and Varma 1940). In recounting the aftermath of the Battle of Chinjhiar, this Chandela-authored text describes how the victorious Handuris pillaged Bilaspur on their way back from the battlefield. The junior Chandelas burned and looted their seniors' capital, including the capture of *mūrtis* ('images') from its temples. The most important of these images was that of Vimlādevī, the deified wife of the founder of Chandela rule in the hills (c. 700 CE) and the *kuljā devī* ('family deity') of the ruling line that was enshrined in the Sagirṭhī

50 The eighteenth-century *Bhāṣā Vaṃśāvalī* of Nepal recounts a similar fate for the last Malla ruler, who was shot in the leg during battle (Stiller 1973, 129).

51 For an example of a Himalayan state overcoming the constraints of British rule, see Moran (2007).

Mandir. The Handuris are described as severing the head of the image and carrying it off to their kingdom, exclaiming: ‘the head of the family goddess is ours, her house [alone] is with the Bilaspuris’ (*kuljā devī kā sir hamārā aur ghar Bilāspurvālō kā hai*). An account attributed to the Kangra raja’s son similarly tells of Sansar Chand looting ‘a very beautiful image (*pratimā*) of Narbadeśvar Mahādev’ that had been commissioned by ‘the forefathers of Mahan Chand’.<sup>52</sup> That these local histories delve into the details of stolen deities attests to the sustained importance of these local markers of sovereignty amongst Pahari readers in the modern era, despite their overall omission from sources aimed at the broader readership of British officials and Indian elites from beyond the hills.

The transformation of Pahari leaders from lineage-based warrior-kings in eighteenth-century oral traditions to pan-Indian Kshatriyas in early twentieth-century writings attests to the general reorientation of Rajput kingship and polity in the modern era. While both genres make use of local markers to flesh out historical personae, the communal solidarity underlying the oral tradition is accentuated in the written accounts by obliterating ancillary elements (women, ascetics) and underlining the pan-Indian qualities of its heroes. The recurrence of Pahari markers of kingship in both oral and written traditions have fed an amalgamated vision of sovereignty that runs through elite representations to date. The seeming continuity between the hill rulers of old and the subject rajas of British India is misleading, however; it took a few good decades for regional leaders to enjoy the empire’s unreserved support. During this period, the Hill States experienced enormous changes that irreversibly altered their standing, as vastly superior powers started encroaching on their domains. Beginning with the Nepali conquests of the 1800s and through the area’s division between Calcutta and Lahore (1809-45), the rulers of the Himalayan borderland recalled the twilight of their independence in decidedly romantic terms. The earliest signs of this envisioning are traceable to the preliminary contacts between the mountain kings and the British EIC in the decades surrounding the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16), when the Pahari ruling houses were re-organized in a complex matrix of hierarchies with the towering mountain emperor of Kangra at its head.

52 On the Handuri looting, see Singh and Varma (1940, 1-2, 24-5); on that of Kangra, consult Anonymous (2004[1870s], 40). For a wider assessment of the practise in Indian history, see Kulke (2001[1993], 114-36), on the idiom’s potency for political mobilization today, Brass (1997).



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## 2 Alterity and Myth in Himalayan Historiography: Kangra, Sirmaur, and Gorkha Rule in the West

The decades between the Battle of Chinjhiar (1795) and the beginning of British rule (1815) mark the definitive transition of the West Himalayan kingdoms to modernity. As the warring parties at Chinjhiar resumed their individual courses, the geopolitical landscape that surrounded them underwent momentous shifts that would dramatically impact their trajectories: the EIC's conquest of Delhi (in 1803) introduced the British as the major powerbroker south of the Sutlej River; Sikh unification under Maharaja Ranjit Singh Sandhwalia (r. 1799-1839) gradually absorbed the kingdoms north of the river into the Empire of Lahore; and the expansionist drive of Nepal under the Gorkha Shah dynasty (est. ~1559, r. c. 1768/9-2008) cast shadows over the entire region from as early as the 1790s, when the fledgling empire first crossed the Mahakali River into Kumaon. By 1803, the Gorkhas had invaded Sirmaur, traversed Bilaspur, and laid siege to Kangra. Six years later (1809), the Gorkhas quit Kangra and entrenched their hold on the hills south of the Sutlej for another five years, at which point (1814) they ceded their possessions west of the Mahakali to the EIC following defeat in the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16).<sup>1</sup> While the politically fragmented elite of the West Himalayan kingdoms tackled these transitions in starkly divergent ways – Kangra as a vassal of Lahore, Sirmaur and its neighbours as EIC allies, and Bilaspur somewhere in between – its experiences of this era assumed a largely uniform narrative that became foundational to the reinterpretation of Pahari Rajput kingship and polity in the modern era.

This chapter explores the discrepancies between the narratives engendered by these turbulent transitions and the realities that they hid. Specifically, it questions the master narrative that emerged soon after this period, which awarded raja Sansar Chand Katoch II (b. 1765, r. 1775-1823) of Kangra the legendary status of *Pahārī Pādshāh* ('Mountain Emperor').

1 On the Anglo-Gorkha (alias Anglo-Nepal) War in particular, see Pemble (1971) and Stiller (1973). Correspondences from the EIC and Gorkha sides are available in East India Company (1824) and in the *Regmi Research Series* (<http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/regmi/>).

As the grandest of rulers, Sansar Chand came to represent the collective of mountain kings, embodying qualities that, through his biography, were propagated as inherent to all Rajput rulers. At the same time, the details of his life story – particularly the hubris that led to his downfall – wove a coherent narrative explaining the radical reconfiguration of powers between the Battle of Chinjhiar and the Anglo-Gorkha War. In adopting this metanarrative as the defining story of the West Himalayan transition to modernity, the chroniclers of the Hill States advanced an implicit justification for the Rajput elite's plummet from independent warrior-kings to imperial subjects, cementing the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry's status as the axis around which history unfolded.

Among the central outcomes of this narrative choice was the engendering of an enduring perception of the enemies from Nepal as 'barbaric', diametrical opposites of the 'pure-blooded' West Himalayan elite.<sup>2</sup> With the Gorkhas positioned as culprits, the western rulers were exonerated from their failure to stand up to their demonized oppressors, while their subjects' surrender could be attributed to 'the tyrannies done to them by the *Gurkha* army', whose 'so-called religion' was 'so cruel that to kill a man was a very trifling matter for them' (Singh 1903, 19, 27-28); in this situation, the Rajput elite came to play the part of the saviours of their morally compromised subjects.<sup>3</sup> By drawing a clear line between locals and conquerors, modern historians provided a credible, authoritative explanation that promoted a stark sense of difference between these sub-groups of the Khas in Himachal Pradesh and West Nepal;<sup>4</sup> at the same time, the writings from monarchic Nepal portrayed Gorkha expansionism as a natural extension of its Shah rulers' pan-Himalayan empire (Pande 2014). Originating in the myopic perspective of dynastic histories, neither narrative is consistent with the realities of the time.

Taking the raja of Kangra's political biography as a starting point, the first section of this chapter scrutinizes the coeval depictions of the monarch to highlight the multiple registers that were employed as part of the conceptualization of kingship during the early colonial encounter. This is

2 Later histories thus habitually juxtaposed the Nepali conquerors with the 'ancient aristocracy' that had reigned independent for 'more than a thousand years', till the raja of Bilaspur's alliance with Kathmandu 'brought the plague of Gurkhas upon this once peaceful land' (Chopra 1940, vol. 2, p. 516).

3 An early example of Gorkha oppression may be had in Raper (1814). On the measures adopted for administering the western regions, see Regmi (1999) and Stiller (1973, 256-265).

4 In this respect, modern historians echo early anthropologists, who often mistook 'recent interventions' in their objects of study for 'deep rooted structures' (Appadurai 1988).

followed by an evaluation of Gorkha rule in Sirmaur on the basis of archival and historiographic sources. These reveal that contrary to the customarily accepted link between the raja of Kangra's high-handedness and the Gorkha invasion, the raja of Sirmaur actually played a key part in facilitating the Nepali conquests that is ignored by the standard narrative. The evidence from Sirmaur not only counters the standard Kangra-centred narrative, but also demonstrates that Gorkha rule in the west (or at least in and around Nahan) was actually conducive to economic growth (1803-15). The Sirmauri royals' exile to and return from the British-held plains (1809-15) illustrates how Pahari Rajput elites advanced inflated dynastic histories in their communications with EIC personnel on the frontier to secure their positions as sovereigns. Repeatedly iterated alongside (continually modified) demands for assistance, these narratives became the political currency that secured the exiled dynasts' return to power after the Anglo-Gorkha War and were ultimately incorporated into the metanarrative casting the raja of Kangra as an exemplar of kingship. The final section re-examines the reasons for the vilification of the Gorkhas in West Himalayan historiography, its contrast with accounts written in Nepal, and its contribution to the founding of a novel social hierarchy among the Pahari Rajput Houses in British India. As the variegated accounts of the 'Katoch Legend' reveal, this hierarchy was itself subject to widely divergent interpretations.

## 2.1 The Rise of the Katoch Legend

The earliest depiction of Sansar Chand Katoch II as a strategic genius, master conqueror, and magnanimous patron was written by the Punjabi *munshi* Ghulam Muhyi' ud-Din (alias Bute Shah) within two decades of the monarch's death; in later histories, this account became the basic narrative explicating the mountain rulers' subjugation by imperial powers.<sup>5</sup> The youthful raja's reclaiming of his ancestral fort from the Mughals in the 1780s opens the story, which follows his evolution from an upstart maverick into *Pahari Padhsah* ('Mountain Emperor') through ever-expanding conquests and architectural projects. Since these gains were largely made at the expense of his neighbours, the latter gradually turned to his Chandela rivals at Bilaspur

5 Commissioned by the political agent at Ludhiana and completed between 1840 and 1848, ud-Din's five volume-history of the Punjab relied on the work of Sohan Lal Suri, court historian at Lahore, and is considered factually accurate, especially in its account of Ranjit Singh (r. 1799-1839), which its author had personally witnessed (Singh 1962).

for relief.<sup>6</sup> Acting on behalf of the confederacy of mountain kings, Bilaspur invited the Gorkhas of Nepal to counter Kangra. However, once their armies had crossed the Yamuna, the Gorkhas instated a regime (1803-14) that proved even harsher than Sansar Chand's. The occupation was particularly harsh in the Katoch heartland, where it left a lasting impression into the 1850s; 'the memory of those disastrous days', wrote the EIC's settlement officer in Kangra,

[s]tands out as a landmark in the annals of the hills. Time is computed with reference to that period and every misfortune, justly or unjustly, is ascribed to that prolific source of misery and distress. [...]

Certain portions of the country were subdued and held by them: other portions, including the fort of Kangra and the principal strongholds, remained in the hands of the Kutoches. Each party plundered the districts held by the other, to weaken his adversary's resources. The people, harassed and bewildered, fled to the neighbouring kingdoms; some to Chumba [north of Kangra], some to the plains of the Jullundhur Doab [to its south]. Other hill chieftains, incited by Sansar Chund's former oppressions, made inroads with impunity, and aggravated the general disorder.

For three years this state of anarchy continued. In the fertile valleys of Kangra not a blade of cultivation was to be seen. Grass grew up in the towns, and tiggesses whelped in the streets of Nadown. At last, the Kutoch [besieged in Kangra Fort] invoked the succour of [the Maharaja of Lahore] Runjeet Sing, and, in August 1809 the Sikhs fought their first battle with the Goorkhas. The Goorkha army, exposed to the malaria of the valley, had suffered severely from sickness. Fever decimated their ranks and prostrated the strength and courage of the survivors. The field however, was long and furiously contested. At last, fortune declared in favor of the Sikhs, and the Goorkhas were obliged to abandon their conquests. (Barnes 1862 [1855], 23)<sup>7</sup>

The summary of the campaign in Kangra (1805-9) suggests that Gorkha occupation was a trauma affecting the West Himalayan kingdoms at large, and

6 Sansar Chand was behind the killing of the raja of Chamba, the lengthy imprisonment of the raja of Mandi, and repeated incursions into Bilaspur (including the Battle of Chinjhiar). In smaller polities, the mountain emperor freely deposed and installed rulers through direct (e.g., Siba, an offshoot of Kangra) or indirect (e.g., Sirmaur, addressed below) actions (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 176-193).

7 An adaptation of this text features in the canonical review of the Gorkha campaign in Kangra (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 183-7).

it is indeed recounted as such in local histories.<sup>8</sup> In toppling Sansar Chand's regime, the invaders ravaged the country, destroyed its infrastructure, and induced its leaders to seek protection with the grand empires of the plains. For the kingdoms north of the Sutlej River, the withdrawal from Kangra (in 1809) resulted in subjugation to the *Śer-e-Panjab* ('Lion of the Punjab'), Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1799-1839), whereas those to its south (e.g., Sirmaur) remained under Gorkha rule until they resumed their territories as EIC protectorates after the enemy's routing during the first year of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16). The 'mountain emperor' of Kangra, the master of 'all the potentates' between the Sutlej and Kashmir only a few years before, ended his life as a humble *zamīndār* ('estate-holder'), the subject of Sikh *sardars* ('commanders') deputed to his ancestral fort.<sup>9</sup>

The evocative story of Sansar Chand's rise and fall deepened its hold on the Pahari imagination long after the ruler's death, and today constitutes the classic point of departure into any discussion of the area's modern history. On a strictly informative level, the conjunction of the raja's outstanding career with the radical reconfiguration of the political landscape of north-western India at the turn of the century provided an accessible narrative for explaining the mountain kings' transition from autonomous rulers to subjects of the British Empire. By adopting a storyline that accounted for Gorkha expansionism (c. 1791-1815), the rise of the Empire of Lahore (1799-1845/6), and the growing presence of EIC forces in the region (from 1803), Sansar Chand's biography organized the drastic changes of the time according to elite sensibilities. At the same time, the stress on the mountain emperor's moral failings, and on the mistreatment of his peers in particular, added a moral thrust to the story that explicated the subservience of later generations: if the Icarian raja's beginnings convey a greatness that is inherent to all West Himalayan Rajputs, his downfall highlights the importance of solidarity for retaining their autonomy. The paragon of kingship thus became a ruler to emulate so long as the moral of his story was learnt.

But just what kind of qualities did historians associate with Sansar Chand? In the historical oral tradition of Bilaspur, the *balvān baṛā* ('great and powerful')<sup>10</sup> raja cuts an almost demonic figure, the dread of all but the

8 See, in chronological order, Anonymous (2004[1870s], 19); Dayal (2001[1883], 30-34); Chander (1907, 10-13, 39-41); Singh (1930, 83-84). This view persists in Himachali college textbooks today (e.g., Balokhra 2003[1995], 315).

9 Kangra revenues were assessed at 350,000 per annum before the Gorkha offensive but plummeted to 70,000 rupees by 1820 (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 188-193). On the position of Kangra and its neighbours beyond the Sutlej under Lahore, see Sharma (2017).

10 Line 83 of the *jhera* text in the Appendix.

Sirmauri hero who dares oppose him. The transition from this regionally grounded foe to the ‘mountain emperor’ of mainstream historiography seems to have occurred in parallel, and was informed by (at least) three models of sovereignty. Coeval and partly overlapping, each of these models – the Indo-Persian, North Indian Rajput, and local – bore distinct cultural markers that remain embedded in today’s canonical depiction. The most prominent of these appeared early on, in Ghulam Muhyi’ ud-Din’s foundational portrait of the raja (see also Image 7). According to Muhyi’ ud-Din, Sansar Chand

[w]as generous in conduct, kind to his subjects, just as Nushirvan, and a second Akbar in the recognition of men’s good qualities. Crowds of people of skill and talent, professional soldiers and others, resorted to Kangra and gained happiness from his gifts and favours. Those addicted to pleasure, who live for the gratification of others, flocked from all quarters and profited exceedingly from his liberality. Performers and storytellers collected in such numbers, and received such gifts and favours at his hands, that he was regarded as the Hatim of that age and, in generosity, the Rustam of the time.<sup>11</sup>

As if anticipating the image that would emerge in the age of empire, Muhyi’ ud-Din employed Indo-Persian cultural tropes familiar to a North Indian readership: a fountain of justice, the raja is likened to the immortal Nushirvan, is as discerning as the grandest of Mughal emperors, and as munificent as Hatim and Rustam of Persian fame.<sup>12</sup> The earliest written assessment of Sansar Chand’s qualities thus placed him on a par with India’s greatest rulers, a position retained in the authoritative *History of the Panjab Hill States* (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933]).<sup>13</sup>

Although the Indo-Persian register casts Sansar Chand as an imperial sovereign, visitors to the hills during the raja’s lifetime encountered slightly different assessments of the hill chief. Appending an overview of West

11 Ghulam Muhyi’ ud-Din (1848, Fourth Daftar), cited in Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 181).

12 Miniature paintings from Kangra confirm that this was no fanciful image. In one from c. 1820, an exiled nobleman from the plains is immortalized riding an elephant alongside Sansar Chand during celebrations of Holi in Kangra, while European influences reflecting the raja’s reliance on EIC deserters for manufacturing iron guns and overseeing relations with the British are evident in the Company-style uniform of his soldiers (Fischer and Goswamy 1992, 364-365, 376).

13 The narrative of Sansar Chand’s reign in this foundational text (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 176-193) is largely based on ud-Din’s assessment, which also informed the earliest English account of the raja’s life story (Barnes 1862[1855], 21-24).

Himalayan politics to his study of Nepal, Francis Hamilton reported that Sansar Chand was 'desirous of being called a Chandel, for this [Katoch] tribe is generally admitted to be descended of the family of the moon' (Hamilton 1819, 289). Based on conversations with a Kumaoni Brahmin who was privy to regional politics shortly after Kangra's subjugation by Lahore (1809), this report casts the quasi-invincible mountain king of mainstream historiography in refreshingly human proportions. Bereft of power, the erstwhile master of the hills seems to have sought alliances amongst his sworn enemies, the Chandelas of Bilaspur, who were linked to several kingdoms – including Kumaon, the home of Hamilton's informant – that could have provided the then-isolated raja of Kangra with a robust network of support to reclaim independence from the Sikhs. The mention of the lunar origins of the Chandelas further denotes an affiliation with the North Indian Rajputs of the plains, whose genealogies are customarily traced to the moon (*candravaṃśa*), the sun (*sūryavaṃśa*), or fire (*agnivaṃśa*).<sup>14</sup> In the realm of affine states, the mountain kings were thus considered related to North Indian Rajputs, from whom many claimed to have originated and with whom they still intermarry.

There was, however, a third, altogether different way to describe the raja of Kangra that relied on entirely local categories. According to Hamilton's informant, 'many others' alleged 'that the Katauch tribe sprang from the sweat of the goddess, spouse to Siva, when she was cut to pieces; and, when these were scattered by her husband and Vishnu, her thorax fell at Kangra, which has ever since been considered as holy; and once, probably, this descent was considered more honourable than that from the family of the moon' (Hamilton 1819, 289). By recalling the Puranic account of Daksha's sacrifice and the emergence of the subcontinent's 52 *śakti pīṭhas* ('seats of power'), this origin myth connects the Katoch rulers to their lands through a powerful female deity – thereby providing a sanction for their authority in a region permeated with *śaktism* ('goddess worship').<sup>15</sup> The connection is,

14 On the emergence of lunar, solar, and fire origins as markers of Rajput identity, see Teuscher (2013). For a concise example of social mobility through Rajput categories in West Nepal, see de Sales (1993). In the Shivalik Hills, the lunar lines of Sirmaur and Bilaspur claim origins with the Bhatti Rajputs of Jaisalmer and the Chandela Rajputs of Malwa, respectively, while the Gorkha Shah dynasty is linked to the solar line of the Sisodiyas of Mewar. The salience of these categories as status markers may be gleaned from how the Bilaspur royals forced their junior Handuri branch to replace the title of 'Chand' with the more generic 'Singh' (Anonymous n.d.[1934], 65).

15 The identification with the goddess, though important for securing popular support, was not exclusive. In the *vaṃśāvalī* ('dynastic roll') William Moorcroft had consulted during his stay with Sansar Chand in 1820, Katoch descent was traced to 'Mahadeo' (Shiva) rather than the goddess (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 2-3).

in fact, even more explicit: the progenitor of the Katoch line, Bhumi Chand, allegedly emerged from a drop of sweat that fell from the goddess's brow during her battle with the demon Jalandhar, whose carcass lies under a ridge bearing the same name south of Kangra and that is one of the most ancient *śākta* sites in the subcontinent. Upon hitting the *bhūmi* ('ground'), the drop created a fierce warrior who assisted the goddess in battle and then ruled over the hills in her name.

The life story of Sansar Chand, or the 'Katoch Legend', was thus informed by at least three cultural spheres, each bearing distinct qualities: in the Indo-Persian or Imperial register, the ruler is a munificent fountain of justice; in the North Indian Rajput register, he is part of the landed warrior nobles of the plains; and in the local-autochthonous register, he holds an intimate connection with regional deities and, by extension, with the land. The 'soil-born' myth, which is now one of the most commonly encountered in popular discussions of Katoch origins, stands apart from its Indo-Persian and North Indian Rajput counterparts in ways that are, to an extent, uniquely Himalayan. The institutionalization of attachment to land through territorially grounded rituals resonates with the coronation rites of Kathmandu's Malla Dynasty that were performed in a designated *mūl cauk* ('core court') of the Bhaktapur palace, and which constituted the kingdom's cosmic pivot by virtue of an intimate connection with its presiding goddess.<sup>16</sup> Seen in this light, the West Himalayan rulers' connection with the land as professed in oral tradition (i.e., the Sirmauriya's salute through cannon shots in the *jhera* described in Chapter 1) and attested actions (the reclaiming of Kangra Fort by Sansar Chand) prove consistent with a deeper level of meaning that ties persons and places to the realm of the divine. This would also explain why it was only after Sansar Chand regained his ancestral fort (and the goddess temple attached to it) that he could transition from upstart ruler into all-powerful magnate. The conquest of Kangra Fort in 1783, like the mountain emperor's biography, thus incorporates the multiple registers of kingship outlined above as a symbol of (imperial) Mughal authority and a marker of 'primordial' links with territory (current among North Indian Rajputs)<sup>17</sup> and with an autochthonous, all-powerful goddess. In fusing the 'second Akbar' of the hills with a tale of divine origins, this idealized version elided the more trying times in which a volatile Sansar Chand considered

16 See Lecomte-Tilouine (2005, 101-122), Toffin (2005[1993]).

17 This claim to 'primordial' ties with the soil paralleled a similar stress on land ownership as a requisite for Rajput status that was accentuated under the Mughal (Timurid) Empire (Peabody 2003, Chapter 1).

**Image 7** Raja Sansar Chand Katoch II alias *Pahari Padhsah* (b. 1765, r. 1775-1823); Kangra c. 1840



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, IS. 189-1951

Although not explicitly stated in writing, the features recall those of Sansar Chand in coeval portraits (e.g., the cover photo of this book) and are thus suggestive of the ruler's depiction at the time of Muhyi' ud-Din's writing.

changing his name in order to gain Chandela support – and ultimately generated an authoritative and coherent portrait of what West Himalayan kingship is all about.

## 2.2 Beyond the Bilaspur-Kangra Rivalry: Sirmaur, 1795-1815

Despite its enshrinement as the canonical narrative of the West Himalayan transition to modernity, the life story of Sansar Chand overlooks significant variations in the reactions of mountain kings and subjects to foreign domination. The juxtaposition of autochthonous sovereigns with alien Gorkhas is particularly misleading, for events in neighbouring kingdoms suggest these two parties actually had a great deal in common. The artifice behind this facile dichotomy is particularly evident in the history of Sirmaur between the Battle of Chinjhiar and the instatement of British rule. Although indirectly affected by the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry, the easterly kingdom's trajectory reveals that the Gorkha conquests were directly facilitated by the raja of Sirmaur's failures in governance. By tracing the royal family's trajectory from despised rulers to exiles to EIC subjects the fluidity of the political landscape is laid bare, as are the shifting allegiances and modes of self-representation that were employed to gain the support of external powers. Indeed, by the time the royal family was reintroduced to the kingdom, its subjects openly preferred the 'alien' regime of the Gorkhas to their 'rightful' rulers. Exploring this paradoxical turn of events reveals the significant effects of chance and individual agency in the shaping of West Himalayan kingship during the early colonial encounter, as became apparent soon after the Sirmauri defeat at Chinjhiar.

The death of its ruler in battle placed Sirmaur on a steady path towards annihilation. Faced with a depleted treasury, disloyal ministers, and unruly tributaries sobered by his brother's demise, raja Karm Prakash II (r. 1795/6-1809, d. 1826) was precariously positioned from the beginning of his reign. The third of four brothers and an inheritor by chance (both his elder brothers had died childless), Karm Prakash lacked formal training in governance and his accession, like that of his predecessor, required the active intervention of Sirmaur's patron state of Patiala (discussed in the outline of Kirat Prakash's reign in Chapter 1). Deputed from the plains, rani Sahib Kour, the chief minister of Patiala, oversaw the coronation, lingering in the capital of Nahan for months to ease tensions with the successor's rivals at court before returning to the plains (Griffin 2000 [1870], 80). Over the following two years, the raja entrusted governance to his late brother's

ministers, who abused power ‘under the sanction of his name, but often without a reference to his will’.<sup>18</sup> In a poor attempt to assert authority, the raja executed the state *wazir* and his treasurer, sparking protests under the leadership of his ‘half-cousin’ *miyan* Kishen Singh, a popular military leader with close ties to Patiala.<sup>19</sup> After a brief raid of Nahan, Kishen Singh seized the prosperous tract of Narayangarh in the plains, which became the base of the opposition’s future contestations.

The aversion to Karm Prakash within the state was compounded by the encroachment of superpowers on the kingdom’s territory. In the plains, the unification of the Sikh *missils* of the Punjab by Ranjit Singh Sandhawalia (r. 1799-1839) saw the few lucrative plains tracts that still answered to Nahan fizzle away. Mindful of the new master at Lahore, Patiala reduced its support of the mountain state at the turn of the century, reclaiming the hilltop site of Pinjore that had been bestowed on Kirat Prakash and his descendants in the 1760s-70s (Griffin 2000 [1870], 34-5, 96).<sup>20</sup> Closer to home, the raja lost control over the *bara thakurai* (‘twelve lordships’) of the northerly hills to Handur, while the garrison installed in the lowland valley of Dehra beyond the Yamuna was similarly evacuated, allowing the rapidly advancing Gorkha armies to claim it in 1803.<sup>21</sup> While Bilaspur helped delay the Gorkha advance

18 Ochterlony to Lushington, 18 May 1810 in Punjab Government (1911b, 217-18). According to the Sirmauri chronicle, the state clerks had grown *manmuṭāv* (‘fat with pride’) under *wazir* Prem Mehta, a haughty official who was removed from power after insinuating that the raja owed him his position since he had advised his late predecessor to risk battle at Chinjhiar (Singh 2007[1912], 223).

19 Kishen Singh was the son of *kanwār* Ishri Singh, the younger brother of Kirat Prakash from a *rakheli* (‘concubine’), and thus a ‘half-cousin’ of Karm Prakash (Singh 2007[1912], 223-4). On Kishen Singh’s armed support of Patiala in the 1770s, consult Griffin (2000[1870], 48) and Krishen (1952, 331-2).

20 The opposition leader Kishen Singh seems to have lost Narayangarh in 1807, which Lahore then entrusted with *sardār* Fateh Singh Ahluwalia; see OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Ochterlony to Adam, 1 March 1813, fo. 7-8, and Ochterlony to Adam, 9 July 1814 in Punjab Government (1911b, 382). The consequent reverting of trade from the hills to the plains during Ranjit Singh’s tenure would have further weakened Sirmaur’s economy during this period.

21 Kirat Prakash fixed the border along the Ganges in 1773/4, and was cremated on its banks shortly afterwards (Singh 2007[1912], 218). A *dharmapātra* (‘pledge document’) renewing the boundary agreement with the Gorkhas was signed on 27 July 1792 (Regmi 1970; Bajracharya and Nepal 1970, 182). On Dharm Prakash’s deployment of Sirmauri troops in Dehra Dun, see Williams (1874, 103-4). On Kathmandu politics and Gorkha conquests c. 1791-1804, see Stiller (1973, 217-247, 295-325). Further insights from the private documents of EIC servicemen are available in Coleman (1999, 42-79).

into Sirmaur 'by a pecuniary douceur and by certain stipulations',<sup>22</sup> the threat of further conquests raised grave concerns among the hill chiefs.

Cognizant of the Nepalis' designs on Lahore and Kashmir, the mountain emperor of Kangra attempted to pre-empt their advance through his territories by supporting *miyan* Kishen Singh of the Sirmauri opposition with the assistance of raja Ram Saran of Handur. The *miyan* was to replace Karm Prakash as sovereign in Nahan with a view to instating a competent and militarily capable regime that would serve as a buffer between Kangra and the Gorkhas. As the Sirmauri chronicle reveals, these plans quickly backfired. In ways not entirely clear, Karm Prakash learned that Kishen Singh and the Handuriya were plotting his murder with *makkār ahalkār* ('cunning state servants') who were related to the recently executed ministers.<sup>23</sup> The raja withdrew from the palace to the isolated fort of Kangrah in the inner hills (not to be confused with the Katoch fort of Kangra) for protection. Kishen Singh and his men followed in close pursuit, laid siege to the monarch, ravaged the countryside, and ultimately lured the royals into battle. The death of an officer who closely resembled the raja during the fighting spread euphoria among the assailants, who consequently slackened their hold on the fort. As night fell, Karm Prakash and his entourage made their escape through a back door, walking for several kilometres towards the Garhwal border.

Arriving in the eastern township of Kalsi, the royals were informed of the coup's fruition at Nahan, where the raja's younger brother, Ratn Singh, had been crowned following the news of Karm Prakash's 'death' at Kangra. Believing his brother to be the *putlī* ('puppet') of evil-minded clerks, the fugitive raja turned to the Gorkhas across the river for support (Singh 2007 [1912], 225).<sup>24</sup> Convening with the commander of Nepal's western front, Amar Singh Thapa, the raja followed procedure by objecting to the Gorkhas' infringement of the Ganges boundary (a symbolic gesture, given that the Sirmauri troops had been withdrawn from Dehra Dun two years before), and proposed creating a *saṅgaṭhan sthāpit* ('united front') against the usurpers. Thrilled like 'a blind man who'd stumbled upon a pair of eyes' (*jaisā ki andhe ko do ānkhē mil gai hō*), Amar Singh Thapa sent his forces across the Yamuna at Paonta, whence they sped up the Kiarda Dun to Nahan to

22 Ochterlony to Lushington, 18 May 1810 in Punjab Government (1911b, 218). These 'stipulations' were advanced by the raja of Bilaspur, whose alliance with Kathmandu is explored in Chapter 4.

23 The details of this episode appear in Singh (2007[1912], 224-27). External sources confirm Kishen Singh was complicit in the plot (Ochterlony to Lushington, 18 May 1810 and Ochterlony to Adam, 29 August 1814 in Punjab Government 1911b, 218-19, 395).

24 The Gorkhas had been extracting an annual tribute from Garhwal since 1792 (Stiller 1973, 219-227).

reinstate Karm Prakash as sovereign (Singh 2007 [1912], 226).<sup>25</sup> Having left a force to oversee affairs in Sirmaur, the invaders joined their chief ally of Bilaspur on the Sutlej, and triumphantly pressed on towards Kangra, where they were to become embroiled in a lengthy siege.

The change of tide was strongly felt in Sirmaur. As the immediate facilitator of Gorkha expansion, Karm Prakash was spared his neighbours' fate of escaping to the plains as a fugitive. However, his role became largely ceremonial, since his beleaguered subjects quickly came to prefer the conquerors' more efficient administration. The Gorkha retreat from Kangra in 1809 compounded the Sirmauriya's position. Having failed to supply troops and resources during the siege of Kangra (1805-9), the raja sent a Brahmin envoy to greet the Gorkha general in atonement for 'repeated violation of promises'.<sup>26</sup> Unfazed by the gesture, Amar Singh Thapa executed the emissary, signalling his intentions towards the raja. Informed of the messenger's fate, the royal family fled the capital for the second time in less than a decade. For Karm Prakash, this departure was his last.

### Representing kingship in exile, 1809-15

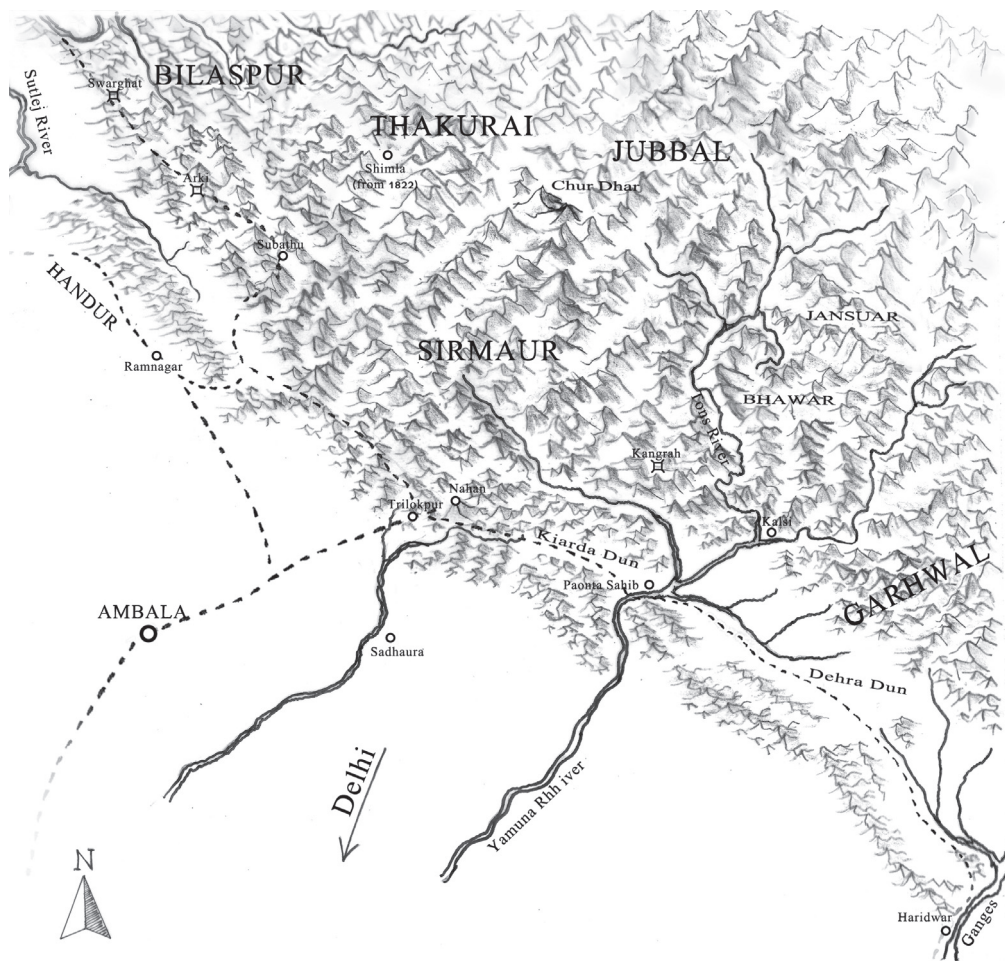
A latecomer to British territory, the unpopular raja of Sirmaur had little social or material capital with which to court his hosts upon arrival. Since he had fled Sirmaur in 1803, the opposition leader Kishen Singh had positioned himself as a valuable ally of the EIC, and the most likely candidate for reclaiming the kingdom in the upcoming war with Nepal. Supported by both Patiala and Handur (the EIC's main ally in the hills), Kishen Singh was a man of consequence, whereas Karm Prakash had descended into 'an absolute state of misery [...] without those resources which many of the lesser chiefs had secured'.<sup>27</sup> Although the British had already arrived at a fairly clear idea of their future collaborators in the hills, the Sirmauri royals persistently sought to turn their hosts in their favour. With no apparent goods to deliver, the

25 For a contemporary report on Simaur's conquest, see OIOC IOR/F/4/570/13990, Ochterlony to Adam, 29 August 1814, fo. 32-4. The fate of Ratn Prakash is unclear. The Sirmaur chronicle dryly notes that he was 'made to leave the kingdom' (Singh 2007[1912], 226), whereas the *Garh Rājavamśa Kāvya* of Mola Ram claims the usurper and his disgraced wives fled into the jungle on foot, while the conquerors 'cut off the nose, ears, hands, and feet of many of the enemy [...] surrounded the women of the town in their houses and raped them, or stripped them naked for public display' (see the abridged account in Dabral 1987).

26 OIOC IOR/F/4/334/7645, Ochterlony to Lushington, 18 May 1810, fo. 7.

27 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Ochterlony to Adam, 12 June 1815, fo. 19.

Map 2 Sirmaur



Cartography: Offek Orr

grandiosity and legitimacy of the exiled family's lineage became the chief currency with which to petition the foreign masters of the plains.

The archived communications between Karm Prakash and the EIC reveal a gradual sobering on the unseated monarch's part. While early petitions display an ignorance of EIC norms and improbable demands for armed contingents to chastise refractory *zamindars* and requests that the Gorkha general allow the raja's return as per 'former engagements', later documents are significantly more subdued. Instead of insisting on political and military

aid, Karm Prakash became firmly focused on securing financial support.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of content, the petitions were uniformly framed by elaborations on the banished ruler's noble antiquity and its contrast with his current circumstances. In describing his patrimony, Karm Prakash conjured a fantastic image of a kingdom spanning 'five hundred *cośś* on the hills, and [that] also includes several purgunnahs [*parganās*] which are situated below', a depiction second only to William Finch's inflated report of 'the mightie prince of Calsie' (Kalsi) from the 1610s.<sup>29</sup> The various calamities befallen the ruling house were similarly narrated at length and its downfall poignantly captured in the final paragraph of a petition submitted some four years after the royals' arrival in British territory, which was slyly capped with yet another request for financial aid:

In short, my above misfortunes have deprived me of all. My friends, they have withdrawn, and I have not a single span of ground left to me. Reduced from affluence to this deplorable situation I am obliged to stretch forth the hand of supplication and humbly request your lordship will have the goodness to give me some villages for my support or allow me a small salary for my maintenance, that I may be relieved from distress and thru [sic] your generosity pass the remainder of my life in ease and comfort.<sup>30</sup>

The years in exile had clearly taken their toll. The burning desire for revenge and restitution that dominated earlier pleas gave way to humbler demands for 'villages' (not necessarily in Sirmaur) that would maintain a lifestyle consistent with the petitioner's perception of self. There were additional reasons for this conciliatory tone. On a strictly physical level, the raja's visage was marred by symptoms of syphilis that precluded his participation in public events and diplomacy. On a practical level, the raja and his advisors had developed a more realistic assessment of the legal constraints under which the EIC operated.

Rather than tediously repeating demands for restoration, the Sirmauri Court-in-Exile was attentively studying and adapting to its future master's legalistic niceties through Bengali retainers familiar with EIC ways.<sup>31</sup> The claims against insubordinate *zamindars* who were accused of expelling the

28 OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Karm Prakash to Ochterlony, 27 January 1810, fo. 16.

29 OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Karm Prakash to Hastings, no date (probably February-March 1812), fo. 34. For Finch's descriptions, see Chapter 1.

30 OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Karm Prakash to Ochterlony, February(?) 1813, fo. 37-8.

31 Sirmaur's chief correspondent with the EIC was '*vakil* Summit Roy'.

ruler during his flight from Nahan in 1809 thus recur in later petitions in a sweetened tone: no longer a central demand, they were now appended as an afterthought, replacing earlier calls for revenge in compliance with ‘the tenor of the *ittikkāh nāmā* [the EIC’s court of law], which says that every *sirdar* is at liberty with regard to his own *misddars* [sic] and other servants.’<sup>32</sup> While familiarity with EIC regulations may have helped smoothen interactions with their soon-to-be overlords, the royal family’s return to power was ultimately secured by the relationship that developed between the raja’s wife and Sir David Ochterlony, the supreme authority in the region. While this will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, suffice it to note that the royals-in-exile were continually adapting to their future patrons’ system of governance by altering their requests and highlighting their pedigree.<sup>33</sup>

Back in Sirmaur, the removal of the incompetent ruler saw Amar Singh Thapa’s son transform the long-struggling state into a prominent vassal of the Gorkha Empire: when the British reclaimed Nahan in the early stages of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16), its residents openly contested the reinstatement of the ‘imbecile’ Karm Prakash, voicing preference for ‘the milder administration of Ranzor Singh’ instead.<sup>34</sup> Somewhat predictably, the Sirmauri chronicle overlooks the advances attained by the latter to decry the *nirās* (‘despair’) he had allegedly wrought on the kingdom by destroying its ‘many fine buildings’ (Singh 2007 [1912], 227). However, the archived correspondences available suggest Nepal’s policies in Sirmaur were no mean developments, but rather grand designs related to the Shah rulers’ efforts at expanding and sustaining their conquests.

### Gorkha rule in Sirmaur, 1803-14

The entrenchment of Gorkha rule in Sirmaur complicates the canonical, Kangra-centric narrative of the western hills’ apocalyptic enslavement by an ‘alien’ superpower. Here was a sizeable kingdom on par with both

32 OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Karm Prakash to Ochterlony, February(?) 1813, fo. 37-8. Such ploys were easily spotted, EIC authorities noting that the raja’s ‘vakeels have by long residence and observation attained a knowledge of the general principles on which government first formed and promulgated their regulations respecting this country [...] have now changed their original ground of claim’ (OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Ochterlony to Adam, 1 March 1813, fo. 6-7).

33 This practice persisted after reinstatement in power and included explicit attempts at Sanskritizing the Pahari dynasty. Thus, in a special communication regarding ‘the family title of the Rajahs of Surmoor’, the British Resident noted the Sanskrit ‘*prakāś*’ (‘light’) had been ‘erroneously written on their Persian seal’ as ‘Purgoush’ as per its pronunciation by the populace at Nahan (OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13998(1), Birch to Metcalfe, 29 February 1816, fo. 173-4).

34 Ochterlony to Adam, 9 July 1814 in East India Company (1824, 16).

Kangra and Bilaspur, but whose experiences were diametrically opposed to the devastation associated with Gorkha dominance in regional histories. As historian Mahesh Regmi (1999) shows, the regime instated beyond the current borders of Nepal during this period reflected a conscious effort at instating an imperial regime on the part of the Shah rulers. The congruence of military, administrative, and religious practises among the invaders and their subjects, in Sirmaur and elsewhere, suggests the differences highlighted in regional histories have more to do with narrative choices aimed at foregrounding a regional elite than with empirical facts.

Militarily, Nepali conquests beyond the Yamuna were characterized by lengthy sieges that starved opponents into submission, as was common in the earlier local engagements in both Chinjhiar and Kangrah (in Sirmaur).<sup>35</sup> The tactics of Gorkha expansion thus constituted an improved version of local warfare by a larger and more cohesive political entity. The administration of the conquered territories similarly subscribed to the prevailing norms, modified in accordance with the requirements of each phase of the campaign. Upon reaching Sirmaur, the invaders were primarily concerned with keeping up the momentum of conquest so as to reach Kangra. Since warriors and supplies were readily available from Bilaspur, the recruitment of Sirmauris was deemed secondary to securing a stable presence in the strategically positioned kingdom connecting Kathmandu with the western front (via the Kiarda Dun and Nahan).<sup>36</sup> The Gorkha retreat from Kangra in 1809 intensified this policy. In a letter dated 1810, the Kathmandu Durbar admonished its officers in the west for failing to make the land 'prosperous', ordered an end to trade in slaves, and forbade the taking of local Brahmin women as partners for its troops, which both aggravated locals and violated the Shah rulers' monopoly on caste relations (Regmi 1986).<sup>37</sup> Similar considerations guided policies towards religious authorities. Thus, while Brahmin claims over *mu'āfi* ('tax-free') lands were ignored and their income appropriated during the conquest of Kumaon in

35 See, for example, Ochterlony to Adam, 9 July 1814 in Punjab Government (1911b, 384). Starving and/or polluting the water sources of besieged enemies were widespread practices; a recent performance of the *jhera* of Chinjhiar noting the assailants' poisoning of the fort's water tank (personal communication, Ajay Singh Bahadur, 23 September 2013).

36 Orders issued by the Kathmandu Durbar in 1805 limited the appropriation of Sirmauri revenues for the invading armies' subsistence to 7200 Rs. per annum, allocating the surplus to material improvements and the conscription of 'additional musketeers' (Regmi 1987). The revival of the Kiarda Dun into a 'luxuriant garden' within a year of Ranzor Singh's appointment as governor at Nahan suggests these directives were indeed followed (OIOC IOR/F/4/1429/56516, Clerk to Prinsep, 10 October 1831, fo. 13-14).

37 On the Nepali state's regulation of caste relations, see Höfer (1979).

1791 (Alavi 1995, 272), by the time the Gorkhas reached the Sutlej the rights of religious communities were assiduously protected.<sup>38</sup> Institutions that sanctioned the rule of local dynasties, such as the temple of Jagannath at Nahan (and its subsidiary branches), were crucial in this regard.<sup>39</sup> As in monarchic Nepal, the temple at Jagannath still keeps a two-sided sword that is displayed and worshipped by the royal family during Dasara, which is indicative of the temple (and its order's) significance for the sanction of kingship in Sirmaur (personal communication, Ajay Bahadur Singh, May 2008).<sup>40</sup> The subsuming of the old regime was completed with Ranzor Singh's patronage of the temple of Balasundari below Nahan, the most lucrative pilgrimage site in the kingdom, which remains closely associated with the Sirmauri ruling house today (Vashisht 2004, 93).<sup>41</sup>

The stability introduced by the Gorkhas counters their common depiction as ferocious barbarians, and is significant for explaining the lukewarm reception of the EIC forces that 'liberated' Nahan alongside representatives of the old regime in 1815. The embedding of Gorkha rule in Nahan was primarily facilitated by the deep cultural affinities that prevailed throughout the Khas Himalaya, such as the ubiquitous claim to Rajput descent by both the Shahs of Nepal and their peers in the west. The observations of contemporary visitors to Sirmaur, according to which 'most of the hill people call themselves Rajepoots [sic], when in fact they have no true title to the appellation' (although 'all the rajahs were certainly of that class') (Fraser 2008 [1820], 250) are thus echoed in comments about Nepal, where 'the families of the mountain chiefs, who have adopted the Hindu rules of purity' were 'universally admitted to be Rajputs' (Hamilton 1819, 17).<sup>42</sup> Since both West Himalayan and Nepali elites participated in Rajputization, the differences between them can ultimately be reduced to scale rather than quality. The patronage of pilgrimage sites is a case in point.

38 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13998(1), Birch to Metcalfe, 28 October 1815, fo. 76.

39 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13998(1), Birch to Metcalfe, 3 March 1816, fo. 177. See also the genealogy of the Sirmauri rulers that was with the Jagannath establishment until at least the 1930s (Punjab Government 1996[1934], 10-11).

40 On the anointment of Shah dynasts in Nepal, including the use of a two-sided sword, see Witzel (1987). For an illustration of the enmeshment of kingly and monastic powers in Rajasthan, see Fuller (2004[1992], 112-113).

41 The centrality of Trilokpur to Sirmauri sovereignty is explored in Chapter 3. For an illustration of the ways pilgrimage engenders a collective sense of 'belonging' among Uttarakhandis today, see Sax (2011).

42 For a concise review of Rajputization in Gorkha Nepal, see Whelpton (2005, 55-60). On the prevalence of Rajput identity in the West Himalayas, see Parry (1979).

Apart from replacing local dynasties as patrons of religious sites, the newcomers also expanded and improved existing institutions with pan-Indian appeal, such as the *choṭā cār dhām* ('four [little] seats') of Garhwal.<sup>43</sup> By the beginning of the nineteenth century these sites were directly managed by Kathmandu, whose allotment of neighbouring lands for feeding pilgrims (*sadāvrata*) outlived Gorkha dominance by at least eight decades (Pauw 1896, 41-42).<sup>44</sup> The widespread belief in *śaktism* ('goddess worship') throughout the Himalaya further facilitated Nepali entrenchment in the hills. The conquerors' perceived source of power, an image of Kali, was thus installed, protected, and worshipped at the strategic fort of Arki on a ridge halfway between Sirmaur and Bilaspur – and this display of reverence was readily comprehended (and feared) by the local population, who had fought for the possession of goddess images in Bilaspur after the Battle of Chinjhiar only a decade earlier (Singh 1903, 11).<sup>45</sup>

The divergence of Gorkha rule in Sirmaur from the common narrative of regional historiography situates Nepal's expansionism in the wider context of North Indian history. Although loosely connected with the doings of the Kangra Court, the extension of Kathmandu's sovereignty beyond the Yamuna derived from the contingencies of a weak ruler at Nahan, whose deposition provided the tactical conditions for advancing west, and a parallel invitation from Bilaspur on behalf of Kangra's enemies in the hills. While Nepali rule may have constituted an important change from that of local dynasties, the resistance of Sirmauris to the onset of British rule suggests that it was not as universally reviled as most accounts would have us believe. From its beginnings in 1803, and especially after the retreat from Kangra in 1809, Gorkha rule in the west matured into an imperial apparatus that improved living conditions, upheld peace and order, and sustained the patronage of *dharmic* institutions where Sirmaur's hereditary rulers had failed. The Sirmauri exception, however, is only faintly acknowledged in contemporary records and altogether ignored by later sources. To understand how and

43 The '*choṭā cār dhām*' are Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamunotri, and Gangotri. Archival records in Lucknow indicate the dilapidated temple of Kedarnath received lavish donations from Amar Singh Thapa from as early as 1792 (Khanduri 1997[1970], 40).

44 For a decree of the Kathmandu Durbar regarding the administration of pilgrimage sites, see Regmi (1988). Alongside Nepali patronage, the raja of Gwalior was said to have repaired the temple at Badrinath 'at a considerable expense' around the same time (Hamilton 1819, 282).

45 The prevalence of animal – especially buffalo – sacrifices further secured Gorkha acceptability in West Himalayan society, where it remains a key feature to date. On the antiquity and prevalence of animal sacrifices in Nepal, see Lévi (1990[1905], vol. 2, pp. 39-42). On the practise in Garhwal and Sirmaur, see Sax (1991, 139-59) and Singh (2007[1912], 182-3), respectively. For an intelligent explication of the rationale behind animal sacrifice in the hills, see Govindraján (2015).

why this came about, it is necessary to resume the canonical narrative of the area's transition to modernity, and the political motives underlying nationalist readings of Himalayan history.

### 2.3 Explaining the Silence about Gorkha Rule in West Himalayan Histories

Whether hinging on the raja of Kangra or others, the catastrophic images associated with Gorkha rule continued to gain currency as the collaboration between local elites and the British deepened and today dominate historical writing throughout the Western Himalaya (Pande 2014). The emphasis on differences between Gorkhas and Paharis is, however, only one part of the story. As shown above, the circumstances of the early colonial encounter ensured that the lineage-based narratives of the exiled leaders competing for the EIC's favour were incorporated into the overarching narrative of the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry that came to define regional history with the entrenchment of British rule. If the Sirmauri exception reveals the canonical account's masking of a complex political reality, accounts composed in the Kathmandu Durbar indicate that such tinkering with empirical facts extended throughout the Himalaya.

After its defeat by the EIC, the Gorkha Shah regime was forced to confine its pretence to pan-Himalayan dominance to historical writings. This is readily evident in an extract from a biography of the 'unifier of Nepal' Prithvi Narayan Shah (b. ~1722, r. 1742/3-1775) that was commissioned by the Kathmandu Durbar after the Anglo-Gorkha War and completed in 1836 (Acharya 1967 [1836], cited in Acharya 1970).<sup>46</sup> More than two decades before his conquest of the Kathmandu Valley, the young ruler spent a winter in the sacred city of Varanasi (in 1743-4), then rife with villains. Roaming the streets with weapons to the detriment of its numerous pilgrims, this rabble miraculously dispersed when the radiant mountain king came towards the gates of the Vishwanatha Temple (Acharya 1970, 123). As it turned out, the raja of Sirmaur was also in Varanasi at the time, but unlike his Gorkha peer, he was unable to reach the temple for fear of the 'hooligans'.<sup>47</sup> Prithvi

46 On Prithvi Narayan Shah's career, see Stiller (1973, 95-138); on Kathmandu policies after the Anglo-Gorkha War, see Whelpton (2005, 42-46). For a sober re-assessment of the 'unifier' of Nepal and the Gorkha conquests, consult Pradhan (2009[1991]).

47 The lack of evidence regarding a visit by a Sirmauri king to Varanasi at that time supports Baburam Acharya's claim that the meeting never took place (Acharya 1970, 125). The Sirmauri chronicle has raja Vijay Prakash (r. 1713-1749) ruling at that time, although the Nepali source

Narayan Shah learned of the Sirmauriya's distress, sent troops to clear his way, and subsequently agreed to receive the western raja in person:

After exchanging courtesies, the raja of Sirmur said to king Prithvi Narayan Shah: 'both of us are foreigners, but the local people regard your majesty with such awe as they do not show toward us. While your majesty was visiting the temple of Sri Vishwanatha [*Viśvanātha*], the people cleared the way when they saw twelve or fifteen of your men, and it was easy to offer worship at the temple easily. This has greatly surprised us. Your majesty is the raja of Gorkha, and has royal paraphernalia and some soldiers. I, too, am the raja of Sirmur, and am accompanied by 1,200 or 1,500 soldiers, along with royal paraphernalia. We are not here as ordinary persons. Even then, the people of the plains do not show any deference toward us. If the people of another country do not feel any awe even when they see a king and his soldiers, such a king does not gain in fame, nor will he be able to retain his kingdom. This is what has happened to me'. (Acharya 1970, 124)

The mountain kings are no 'ordinary' visitors, but warriors whose culture is distinct from that of the plains, and their differences a matter of scale rather than substance. The Sirmauriya, being a hundredth the worth of his benefactor, blesses the Gorkha king and predicts his mastery over numerous kings. The latter replies with a string of advice fit for a king (kings must befriend kings, remain alert of evil advisors, etc.), and the meeting concludes with the Sirmauriya's request for a '*dharmapātra*' ('document of friendship') that legitimizes the Gorkhas' future conquest of Sirmaur. A similar narrative is then repeated for the raja of Doti (in West Nepal). As this semi-historical account makes clear, the divergence of historiographies from either side of the Mahakali obliterated any inkling of affinity between the mountain peoples. Thus, if West Himalayan histories cast the Gorkhas as antithetical others, the rulers of Kathmandu espoused a vision of 'Greater Nepal' that radiated from their capital into the western hills and deep into the plains all the way down to the River Ganges (Gaenszle 2002, 17).<sup>48</sup>

Given the pronounced divergence of dynastic fortunes during the transition to British rule, the privileging of the Katoch-centred narrative in regional

most likely intended to invoke the eminent (if still unborn) Kirat Prakash (r. 1757-1773/4) (Singh 2007[1912], 215-216).

48 The perception of the Ganges as Nepal's southern boundary also features in the writings from c. 1800 that were posthumously attributed to Prithvi Narayan Shah, see Baral (1964, 25, 45).

histories begs explanation. There were three central factors that contributed to the story's adoption as the defining narrative of the regional elite writ large. The first and most straightforward concerns the basic fact that history is written by the winners, in this case the British and their allies. Because EIC personnel had allied with and gleaned data from the rulers who were embroiled in the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry to different degrees over decades, the dynamics of this rivalry became the prism through which the military and political processes leading to the Gorkha conquests were viewed. Since the EIC ultimately went to war with Nepal, adopting the perspective of their enemies' victims was a natural step in the creation of a coalition. Ram Saran of Handur, the Kangra raja's chief ally south of the Sutlej whose conflicts with the Gorkha armies provided the *casus belli* for the Anglo-Gorkha War, came to represent this perspective in the practical dealings with the EIC, while his north-westerly ally Sansar Chand came under the authority of Lahore and was consequently disjoined from the group of rulers who came under British authority (until the collapse of Lahore in 1845/6). Thus, if the raja of Handur emerged as a stalwart supporter of EIC rule in the hills, his alliance with Kangra ensured that the accounts of the past would remain sympathetic towards them, cementing the Katoch-centred narrative among British personnel along the frontier.

Second, the division of the Punjab between Calcutta and Lahore in 1809 furthered the entrenchment of this canonical narrative.<sup>49</sup> Since Kangra had come under Lahore's complete authority, displaying empathy towards its ruler entailed no practical consequences for the British. If anything, endorsing the story of Sansar Chand as the definitive account of regional history yielded a practical advantage for justifying British rule in the hills, since his misery as a subject of Lahore could be employed to contrast the relative prosperity of his Calcutta-protected peers south of the Sutlej. This, in turn, facilitated the universal recognition of Sansar Chand as the greatest leader of his generation. The portrayal of Sansar Chand as the last of the fearless, enterprising, independent mountain kings could only gain in appeal as the hill states came under increased regulation from British and Sikh rule, encouraging his transformation into the epitome of West Himalayan kingship in historical writing and popular memory. In incorporating this ideal within the ethos of EIC rule, the martial values of the subject kings were affirmed and thus brought closer to the British overlords who protected their regimes – with practically no consequences for either party.

49 On the intricate diplomacy leading to the Punjab's division along the Sutlej, see Kiernan (1971[1943]).

The third and arguably most significant factor that sustained the Katoch Legend's currency was the fact that the Gorkhas actually remained deeply enmeshed in the region long after their war with the EIC had ended. Incorporating defectors and prisoners of war into its executive arm in the region, the EIC established four Gorkha battalions to enforce its policies in and beyond the hills until Indian independence.<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite the considerable efforts of later writers to denounce the Gorkhas as barbaric invaders, the erstwhile 'oppressors' remained alive and well under the new matrix of powers. The cultivated contrast between the groups was enforced by the particulars of the EIC's campaign in the hills beyond the Yamuna, which were conquered, according to Sir David Ochterlony, by 'the discord existing between the chiefs [rather] than by force of arms'.<sup>51</sup> Subscribing to coeval notions of environmental determinism, the commander of British forces in the west was clearly perplexed by the 'most singular want of energy, of courage, of common activity, and of every quality which are generally the characteristics of a highland people' in 'the country between the Jumna and Sutlej'.<sup>52</sup> This perceived distance between 'lethargic' subjects and 'industrious' conquerors carried into the early decades of EIC rule, as recruitment into the battalions that policed the hills remained almost exclusively reliant on 'real' or 'ethnic' Gorkhas, who were believed to possess the martial qualities so blatantly lacking in their West Himalayan peers (Coleman 1999, 191-194).<sup>53</sup> The mountain peoples between the Yamuna and the Sutlej would require a long period of adaptation before they could be integrated within the British Empire's conception of these societies as inherently martial.<sup>54</sup> In the meantime, it was up to their leaders to play the part of pacified warrior-kings.

The multifarious elements influencing the historiography of Gorkha rule in the West Himalaya are replete with manipulations and distorted facts,

50 For an excellent study of this topic based on hitherto unexploited material from the private papers of David Ochterlony and William Fraser, see Coleman (1999).

51 Ochterlony to Adam, 9 July 1814 in Punjab Government (1911b, 384).

52 Ochterlony to Adam, 29 August 1814 in Punjab Government (1911b, 406).

53 Internal variants within the region were nonetheless conceded under the general rule that 'the farther removed from the plains, the heat, and the more accessible parts of the country, the higher does the highlander seem to rise in activity of mind and body' (Fraser 2008[1820], 236). These claims are particularly important given the composition of the Gorkha Regiments, which were in fact largely manned by Tibeto-Burmese groups (Gurung, Tamang, etc.) from Nepal and not by members of Khas society proper. Conscriptio into the Gorkha Battalions continued to favour defectors from Nepal for decades (Coleman 1999, 165).

54 For more on this process, see Brief (1979).

depending on the time and place of their composition. Despite the divergence of historically verifiable events in the dynastic histories of Kangra, Sirmaur, and Nepal, the appeal of Sansar Chand's life story – and its political expediency for reclaiming the hills – ultimately emerged as the chosen narrative of regional history among the elite, persisting in academic and popular accounts of the past. Determined by the contingencies of British expansionism, exiled chiefs' claims to distinguished warrior lineages were reconciled with their actual inferiority by linking lineage-based narratives with the mountain emperor's remarkable career. Subsumed under the towering figure of Sansar Chand, the ruling houses' respective histories embraced his story to espouse social cohesion in opposition to the Gorkhas, their seldom-acknowledged *de facto* superiors as the EIC's police in the hills.

The conclusion of the Anglo-Gorkha War seemed to put an end to the mayhem of fugitive kings, besieged monarchs, crisscrossing alliances, and imperial interventions that had unsettled the hills since the Battle of Chinjhar, even as it sowed the seeds for a novel collective identity among the elite. Acclimatising to their status as imperial subjects, the mountain kings' immediate pasts were woven into a coherent narrative that accounted for individual dynastic histories through the prism of the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry, wherein the 'mountain emperor' of Kangra played the paradoxical part of both the harbinger of the West Himalayan loss of independence and the embodiment of its rulers' virtues. If the play between fact and fiction during the early colonial encounter facilitated the rise of the Katoch Legend as emblematic of the Pahari elite, their effect on understandings of royal women were arguably even more sinister, impacting the perception of Rajputni sovereigns by locals and scholars long after the dust of war had subsided.

### 3 *Sati* and Sovereignty in Theory and Practise

The modern interpretation of Rajput culture as an exclusively male-dominated sphere is contradicted by historical evidence from the West Himalayan kingdoms, which indicates Rajputnis frequently played a leading part in politics, especially when acting as regents for minor sons. This chapter examines the roles and actions of Pahari noblewomen in the decades surrounding the transition to British rule to illustrate the creative methods devised by such Rajputnis for handling power, and the relation between these faculties and the contentious rite of *sati*. Commonly translated as ‘widow immolation’, *sati* was a multivalent, malleable concept that had already emerged as an ideal of Rajput womanhood before British rule, was significantly altered in the latter period (including its supposed ‘suppression’ in 1829), and has persisted in various forms to date (e.g., Kishwar and Vanita 1987). In scholarly circles, *sati* engendered heated academic debates that have extended beyond the question of female agency per se and into the wider field of postcolonial studies. Examining these debates illuminates the deep interplay between empirical facts and imaginative theorization that fed into the fabrication of colonial knowledge and that sustained its afterlife in academe today; a trajectory that is particularly discernible in the works of the prominent postcolonial discourse theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

In ‘The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives’ (1985), Spivak presented a literary analysis of the archival records pertaining to the settlement of Sirmaur by the EIC shortly after its conquest in 1815. Straddling the interface between empirical history and literary theory, Spivak wished to show that the discourse emanating from the colonial records was in itself part and parcel of the colonial project’s subordination of indigenous societies. These ideas were further developed in the more widely circulated ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (Spivak 1988). The somewhat grim answer to this question was an unequivocal ‘no’, because, Spivak explained, the inextricable ties binding language to power served to perpetuate colonial/imperial oppression right up to the global capitalist empires of the present.<sup>1</sup> Given

1 In this respect, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ is representative of the second phase of development of the Subaltern Studies movement as outlined by Richard Eaton, in which empirical research was replaced by postmodern literary criticism – thereby reducing its relevance for historical research and contributing to the movement’s demise. On the ensuing impoverishment

the unprecedented influence of 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' on postcolonial studies and related disciplines, a critical examination of its embryonic predecessor, the 'essay in reading the archives', is crucial for contextualising the state of research on women and, more broadly, of subalterns.<sup>2</sup>

The central argument in 'The Rani of Sirmur' concerns the 'allegorical predicament' of the kingdom's regent rani, alias the Guleri rani, who, being caught 'between [indigenous] patriarchy and [British] imperialism', proclaimed her intention to become *sati* – that is, to kill herself – which was interpreted as an Austinian 'speech act': the sole means for this doubly oppressed woman to assert her will and recover agency (Spivak 1985, 267, 269).<sup>3</sup> This portrayal of the rani as a passive marginalized figure is incongruent with the historical evidence, which indicates she was a strong, independent leader who played a central part in the establishment of a robust regime that influenced regional politics long after her death. By situating the Guleri rani in the wider context of women's agency in Pahari Rajput courts of the time, it is possible to make sense of the apparent chasm between the historical realities and their subsequent interpretation in scholarly works on women in South Asian societies.

This chapter explores the careers of several early colonial-Pahari Rajputnis and that of the Guleri rani in particular, including a minute examination of her threat of *sati* and its postcolonial interpretation by Spivak. The next section sets the background for this enquiry through a review of the careers of royal women in Pahari Rajput courts c. 1775-1825 in light of the key events that impacted developments in Sirmaur. It shows that ranis held a dual position in Rajput society by both serving as status symbols for the male members of their milieu and simultaneously acting as independent leaders. The second section follows the Guleri rani's career prior to and after her appointment as regent (1815-27). It demonstrates the considerable clout she held in Pahari politics, the similarities with other Rajputni regents in the hills, and then probes the circumstances that led to her threat to become *sati*. The clash of these findings with Spivak's reading calls for a reassessment of the rite in its contemporary setting through a context-sensitive analysis of the incentives for the rani's unaccomplished *sati* that also takes issue with Spivak's divergent findings – a reassessment presented in the third

of scholarly debate, exemplified in the failure to distinguish between analytical categories like 'colonial' and 'imperial', see Eaton (2000, 70). For a useful introduction to and reproduction of key debates between proponents and opponents of the movement, see Chaturvedi (2000).

2 According to Google Scholar (accessed 15 July 2018), 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has been cited over 20,000 times since its appearance. The article was revised and combined with 'The Rani of Sirmur' in the third chapter of Spivak (1999, 198-311).

3 The term 'Speech Act' was introduced in Spivak (1999, 273).

section of this chapter. This is followed by observations on three texts of divergent authorship and literary styles that touch upon instances of *sati* among Rajputnis in the hills – a Pahari Rajput history, the autobiography of an Euro-American mercenary, and a work of fiction by an EIC officer – and that highlight the variety of contemporary attitudes toward the rite and its practitioners among different social milieux. In doing so, it complicates Spivak's understanding of the rani's story while showing how novel readings of source material can nonetheless be used to enhance historical understanding in a multi-cultural setting. The motives for *sati* and its appreciation in local circles are addressed in closing, highlighting the connections between the internally driven, psychological factors that may induce *sati* and the external circumstances in which the rite is invoked.

### 3.1 The Multiple Roles of Royal Women, c. 1775-1825

Pahari Rajput historiography customarily portrays Rajputnis according to carefully circumscribed gender roles. Assessing their impact is nonetheless possible by sifting through the allusions to their actions interspersed throughout archival records, travellers' accounts, and local histories. The data thus collected have been analysed in light of supplemental folkloric materials (specifically, oral traditions) that contextualize the subject matter in its socio-cultural milieu, allowing for the location of Rajputni agency within the restrictions imposed upon it by the customs and traditions of the Rajput elite. Acknowledging Rajput mores is particularly important in this exercise, since in the centuries preceding British rule Pahari rulers had consistently modelled their world after that of Rajasthani Rajputs. In the early modern era, this meant following their Rajasthani peers' example by entering Mughal service, where Pahari rulers gained *mansabs* ('formal ranks') and partook in imperial campaigns in and beyond the subcontinent.<sup>4</sup> The otherwise marginal aristocracy of the hills was consequently imbued with the culture of the imperial elite in a process that was paradoxically accentuated with the waning of Mughal power in the eighteenth century, when participation in imperial enterprises decreased even as assimilation into its culture was on the rise. The rulers of the modest-sized kingdoms on the fringes of the Himalaya thus

4 Jagat Singh Pathania (r. 1619-46) of Nurpur, for example, began his career with a modest *mansab* of 300 footmen and ended it leading 12,000 troops and 8000 horsemen on a Mughal expedition to modern day Uzbekistan (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 249, 253).

emulated Mughal behavioural norms by, among other things, avoiding 'the disturbance and contamination by the world of plebeians in the bazaar' (O'Hanlon 1999, 71), while simultaneously remaining firmly entrenched in their home surroundings through paternalistic modes of governance and ritual.<sup>5</sup> The Rajput elite thus became peculiarly positioned between 'uncouth' subjects, on whose loyalty it depended to maintain its rule, and its close association with the sophisticated urban-based culture of the plains that distinguished it from the latter and that earned it recognition as worthy noblemen in and beyond the hills.

The seeming incompatibility of the acculturated (Rajput) and indigenous (Pahari) aspects of West Himalayan elite culture stems from a fundamental tension between 'tribal' and 'caste' elements that characterizes Himalayan societies. As David Gellner notes, the place South Asian societies occupy along the spectrum of these two extremes can be effectively gauged by evaluating their attitudes towards women. Drawing on research among communities in the Kathmandu Valley, Gellner (2003 [2001]) proposed an alternative model based on a trichotomous movement between tribal, caste, and mixed social norms and behaviours. Attitudes towards women among the Pahari elite suggest this model is also applicable to the West Himalaya, where the adoption of Rajput norms saw respected women subjected to *pardā* ('veiling'), which set them apart from the mass of Pahari women who 'appear[ed] abroad as unreservedly as men'.<sup>6</sup> Such restrictions could not, however, prevent the occasional rise of women to positions of power, especially when serving as regents for infant rajas. At the same time, popular and written accounts minimized their actual scope of action, thus altering the way such women were remembered in order to comply with the ideal of womanhood prescribed by Rajput culture.

### Sovereign ranis: the case of Nagardevi Katochi

A good example of the reduction of the role of elite Pahari women can be found in the factual inaccuracies and typecasting of oral traditions concerning the Battle of Chinjhiar (1795/6). As the exposition of the *jhera* of *Garh*

5 For a telling example, see the Sirmauri raja's homecoming in 1783, quoted in Chapter 1.

6 While the alleged promiscuity of Pahari women features in most travellers' accounts, this particular quotation is important for conveying the impressions of British officials upon first entering the Sirmauri capital in 1815. Women in Nahan, they observed, 'far from flying at the sight of strangers [...would] remain and converse, showing no other feeling than the occasional shyness natural to all uneducated women introduced to the presence of persons they never saw before' (Fraser 2008[1820], 80-1).

*Chinjhār* ('Fort Chinjhiar') in Chapter 1 has shown, this particular oral tradition tells of the Katoch ruler of Kangra's forceful occupation of a mountain fort belonging to the Chandela nobles of Bilaspur (alias Kahlur). This act of aggression evolved into a full-scale battle between several mountain states, in which Kangra was victorious and the Kahluri champion, raja Dharm Prakash of Sirmaur (r. 1792-1795/6), was killed.<sup>7</sup> As noted in the earlier discussion, what the *jhera* describes as a heroic confrontation between warring monarchs was actually a singularly charged episode in a series of conflicts between the kingdoms of Kangra and Bilaspur, then respectively headed by the 'mountain emperor' Sansar Chand Katoch II and his kinswoman, the powerful regent queen Nagardevi Katochi (r. 1775-~1800). In keeping with the sensibilities of the Rajput milieu that had commissioned its composition, the *jhera* effaces Nagardevi from the narrative and casts her son as the ruler of Bilaspur instead. This line persists in written histories from the region that were composed a century after the events, albeit in an attenuated form.

Subscribing to contemporary understandings of the discipline as a narrative construct based on verifiable facts, more recent Pahari historians could no longer afford to ignore Nagardevi's three decade-long career, but still portrayed her according to the prevailing sensibilities of their milieu; rather than reporting on her achievements as a political and military leader, these authors chose to celebrate her (less threatening) accomplishments in the civil sphere, such as the commissioning of public works and care for her subjects. Nevertheless, these later histories do feature fleeting references to the rani's political activities, such as noting the tough stance she adopted toward subordinate states after succeeding to the throne, which rendered the elite 'very fearful of the maharani' (Singh and Varma 1940, 24).<sup>8</sup> Nagardevi Katochi's agency is also apparent in the first-hand impression of traveller George Forster, who admiringly reported how she had surmounted 'every attempt to subvert her authority' despite 'the many difficulties incident in this country to her sex, the most embarrassing of which was a preclusion from public appearance [i.e., *pardā*]' (Forster 1808 [1798], vol. 1, p. 217). Having personally witnessed the Bilaspur-Kangra hostilities of 1783, Forster further noted that although the Kahluri warriors were led to battle by the kingdom's top-ranking nobleman (and chief contender to the throne), he was ultimately acting on the rani's orders (Forster 1808 [1798], vol. 1, p. 217). The shrewdness of this act should not be overlooked: by admitting a prominent member of

7 On the oral tradition and its retellings, see Chapter 1.

8 A similar account informed Bilaspur pupils in the history used in classrooms of the early twentieth century (Anonymous n.d.[1934], 66).

the elite to a key administrative position that sustained his public dignity, Nagardevi could pretend to adhere to the cultural dictates of her male peers while retaining real power in her own hands. Such deft manoeuvres could not, however, abate the threats a regent mother would inevitably encounter from noblemen at court, which manifested in a continuous fear for the life of her son, the child-*raja*.<sup>9</sup> The astute rani successfully parried these attempts by outmanoeuvring the opposition. Thus, when the state *wazir* died in 1785, Nagardevi abjured his customary replacement by a member of the landed gentry who held close ties with the nobles at court, placed her opponents' leader in confinement ('during which he experienced lenient treatment'), and appointed an external candidate of her choice to the post instead.<sup>10</sup> Thus, by the time Bilaspur and Kangra clashed at Chinjhiar the rani was already a seasoned politician and a leader of considerable importance.

The regent rani's centrality to the politics of the time renders her omission from the *jhera* narrative all the more conspicuous. Such conscious alterations of fact are typical of the regional oral accounts that promote the male-centric worldview of Pahari Rajput patrons, in which women customarily occupy the polarized roles of either virtuous spouses or warmongering mothers-in-law. Thus, if the agency of flesh-and-blood leaders like Nagardevi is removed from the narrative only to be partly acknowledged in later (written) accounts, the stereotypical representations of womanly virtue and vice are profusely expounded upon. In the *jhera*, the virtuous Rajputni is epitomized in the Sirmauri hero's faithful wife, who persistently attempts to dissuade her husband from going to war, and whose grief at his death overpowers her to the point of suicide. This image is juxtapositioned with the *raja*'s malevolent mother-in-law, who lures the protagonist to war through taunts and teases that end up delivering him to his death. Thus, the *jhera*, although recognized locally as an authentic historical account, clearly adheres to the traditional views regarding gender roles in Pahari Rajput culture.

It is nonetheless possible to go beyond the *jhera*'s simplistic dichotomy of virtuous spouses and malevolent mothers-in-law by consulting alternative versions of the event from the region. The version recorded by Richard Carnac Temple in Kangra is a case in point (1884, vol. 2, pp. 144-147). Transcribed from an oral performance a century after the war, this substantially shorter

9 In a letter from 1782, Nagardevi sought protection with a neighbouring *raja*, citing as justification her rivals' plan to assassinate her son (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 505).

10 The rani's appointee was a *bairagi* *sadhu*, a choice that evoked excited responses from the Bilaspur soldiers, who presented their mistress's relationship with the *wazir* as a love affair transgressing caste boundaries (Forster 1808[1798], vol. 1, pp. 217-8).

narrative opens with an outline of the events that preceded the battle and concludes with ten sung lines that eulogize the Katoch victors. Although relatively lacking in historical exactitude (battle locations, individually named participants, etc., go unnoticed), the account reflects popular perceptions and customs among the Rajput elite with marked precision.<sup>11</sup> The gist of the story is as follows: the raja of Sirmaur challenged his Katochi wife, a sister of Sansar Chand, to a competitive game of chess with her brother's head at stake. The rani retorted with the same formulaic taunts attributed to the Sirmaur raja's Katochi mother-in-law in the *jhera*, and then related the affair to her brother, the raja of Kangra, who boldly came to her aid and defeated her husband in combat.<sup>12</sup> It is this latter scene of battle that comprises the sung portion of the account, which describes the Katoch forces preparing for war, the thundering roar of canons, and the conclusion of the affair with the freshly widowed rani's return to Kangra alongside her victorious brother.

This short composition successfully enhances the prestige of the Katoch clan by addressing two central themes of Pahari Rajput culture: the inherent bravery of its leaders and the explosive potential of domestic situations. By weaving the plot around Sansar Chand's rescue of his sister from an abusive husband, it offers an ideal vision of familial fidelity that supersedes political boundaries. This vision of unity could hardly be more removed from reality, which was characterized by a decades-long hostility between Sansar Chand and Nagardevi, both members of the Katoch elite (see Chapter 1). Apart from the recurrence of ideal types, it is worth noting the contested position Katochi ranis occupy in the two versions of the tale. In the defeated party's *jhera*, the Katochi rani is cast as an evil mother-in-law who is partly responsible for the hero's death, a point underlined by the contrast with

11 Despite its brevity, the text manages to confound fact with fiction in several remarkable ways: the raja of Sirmaur is said to be the then-unborn Fateh Prakash, while the Kangra ruler inexplicably joins forces with the raja of Bilaspur (his historical enemy), and both wage war on 'Mohan Chand' (most likely confused with the raja of Bilaspur, Maha Chand), the ruler of the tiny chieftdom of Kunhiar in the inner hills (Temple 1884, vol. 2, pp. 144-7).

12 In the Kangra version, the rani taunts her husband by exclaiming, 'my brother's slaves are as many as your whole army' (Temple 1884, vol. 2, p. 145). The more poetic formulation of the *jhera* runs: 'as many soldiers as you have, the same number are my father's horses, which he daily sends grazing at dawn' (*jitne-ka tere sapāhi/ titne ka ghorē bāpue mere gē/ ghāh jo jā de roj bhyāgāi*) (Sharma 2000, 132). The Kangra narrative is echoed in a written history from the kingdom, which explains that the 'raja of Sirmaur had launched [an] attack on Sansar Chand because the latter's sister, who was married to raja Dharam Prakash of Sirmaur, had one day told sarcastically to [the] raja of Sirmaur that her brother possesses as much number of attendants of horses (*syces*) as [... her husband's] troops' (Dayal 2001[1883], 30).

the virtuous wife (of unstated origins) who ends her life in a dramatic display of conjugal fidelity. In the Kangra version, the Katochi Rajputni is the vanquished raja's wife, who is justly saved from a vile husband by her brother. That the Kangra account insists on the rani's return to her brother's kingdom is significant, for it not only highlights unity among the Katoch, but also deprives Sirmaur of a substitute figurehead of state (a widowed rani) after its monarch's death, thereby further undermining the stability and legitimacy of its regime. The ignoring of Nagardevi's leadership of Bilaspur by both accounts, and the Kangra version's undermining of the Katochi rani's importance to Sirmauri governance after her husband's death (by noting her only in connection with her powerful brother) are indicative of the prevailing biases toward women in the Pahari Rajput milieu.

As stories aimed at predominantly male audiences in Rajput courts and public gatherings, neither account shies from manipulating the actual part women played to enhance its protagonists' prestige. Rather, they subscribe to stereotypical representations that are rooted in local culture and expressed in fixed thematic and formulaic terms. While it is possible to overcome these impediments to historical enquiry in the case of such prominent figures as Nagardevi of Bilaspur, it remains exceedingly difficult to trace the political biographies of mid-ranking women of the Pahari aristocracy, such as the widow of the slain raja of Sirmaur. The latter's identity can nonetheless be determined by consulting the archival records of the EIC, which also affords fascinating glimpses into the role of women in the Pahari Rajput world.

### Ranis as status symbols

In a letter addressed to the British Resident in his capital of Nahan, dated 1827, the raja of Sirmaur recounted how the company's first settlement officer, captain Geoffrey Birch, had 'ordered that the stipend of the ranees Kottogee and Boghdurree' be paid from the state treasury in exchange for their return from Kangra to Nahan. The matter, however, had 'remained in status quo' for the twelve years since, as Birch parted for Calcutta shortly afterwards and failed to ensure that his orders were followed.<sup>13</sup> The fallen hero of Chinjhiar thus had (at least) two wives who did not become *sati* after his death, but were actually taken to Kangra by the triumphant Sansar Chand.<sup>14</sup> These two queens aside, the recurrence of ranis of Katoch origins in the different

13 OIOC, IOR/F/4/1181/30743 (11), Fateh Prakash to William Murray, 16 February 1827, fo. 16-17.

14 The ranis' actual relation to Sansar Chand is unclear, although their titles indicate they hailed from Kotgur and Bhagat, two of the *bara thakurai* ('twelve lordships') of the Shimla Hills.

accounts of Chinjhiar can nonetheless be traced to a single historical person, namely, the wife of the defeated raja's elder brother and predecessor Jagat Prakash (r. 1773-92), who was indeed a sister of Sansar Chand of Kangra.<sup>15</sup> After her husband's passing, the widowed rani was granted a *jāgīr* ('land grant') by her brother-in-law and successor to the Sirmaur throne, Dharm Prakash (r. 1792-1795/6). The rani's privileges were initially respected under the next and far less successful ruler, Karm Prakash (r. 1795/6-1809), but her provocation of 'disturbances throughout the raj' in later years induced the raja to order her confinement, at which point she escaped to the safety of her Kangra homeland.<sup>16</sup> It is thus probable that the entanglement of a Katochi rani's memory with the different accounts of Chinjhiar, which alternately describe an evil mother-in-law (in the Kahluri *jhera*) and a courageous spouse who is rescued by her brother (in the Kangra version), is inspired by this particular individual, affording an important reminder of the considerable extent to which Pahari politics and domestic relations were intertwined.

Another important detail that is revealed in the letter of 1827 concerns the distance between the ideals of local tradition and historical realities, indicating that the wives of defeated Pahari rulers were regarded as victors' spoils rather than fuel for funeral pyres. The fact that the defeated side was expected to finance them in their new environment suggests this was more of an established custom than an exception, and incidentally points to a somewhat darker (if not entirely conscious) motive for the propagation of the *sati* ideal: it is, after all, far easier to praise a dead rani for her virtues than to pay for the upkeep of a royal widow in a former rival's court. The raising of the issue by the raja of Sirmaur a little over three decades after the battle of Chinjhiar attests to the continued importance attached to the absent ranis at the Nahan court, which was succinctly explained in a letter to the resident:

The maha rajah Dhurm Purkaush, my grandfather, was killed on the boundary of Kuttooch, and I am unable to send their stipend to Kungra. I request orders may be given that the ranee[s] return to Nahun and partake of our honor and reputation, this will greatly add to my felicity.

15 According to a Kumaoni Brahmin privy to Pahari politics, the fourteen-year-old Jagat Prakash insisted on passing through Bilaspur to attend the marriage ceremony at Kangra. As Sirmaur and Kangra were at that time (c. 1777) allied against Nagardevi Katochi's Bilaspur, the young raja effectively fought his way into matrimony and back (Hamilton 1819, 303-304).

16 For correspondence narrating the Katochi widow's meddling in Sirmauri politics, see OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 6 January 1816, fo. 77-81, which is also the main archival record informing Spivak (1985).

Should they return to Nahun, an addition will be made to their former stipend [as sending] it to Kungra reflects dishonor on me.<sup>17</sup>

The allocation of stipends and its relation to keeping face, it would seem, remained fundamental to Rajput political culture under British rule. The Sirmaur raja's offer can thus be understood as a business transaction, in which the monarch 'purchases' prestige and redeems his family's honour by ceasing to pay what would have in all likelihood been perceived as tribute in return for the increased expenditure to be incurred from hosting the noblewomen in his court. The raja's professed concern for the ranis notwithstanding, the Sirmauri royal family would have hardly needed the aid of an EIC middleman to conclude a deal with Kangra. Rather, the matter seems to have been postponed due to internal considerations; namely, the need of the Guleri rani, who was then acting as regent for the young raja of Sirmaur, to curb the influence of high-ranking Rajputnis in the capital. It was thus only after his mother's death (in 1827) that the raja could move towards resolving the affair, which explains his letter's appearance in the archival records at this particular point in time.

While the upkeep of royal women in neighbouring courts seems to have played an important part in Pahari politics, the role of ranis was not exclusively ceremonial. By establishing a marital alliance, a rani entering her husband's kingdom not only shared in his family's prestige, but also received land grants, access to *begār* ('free labour'), luxury commodities, and, once established in her new abode, was free to advance her natal family's interests by influencing the internal workings of court.<sup>18</sup> The relations between royal families were consequently continually tested, the benefits of prestige and material advantages weighed against each other afresh with every new proposal of marriage. The resultant flux in social hierarchies baffled British administrators, who found it difficult 'to indicate the line which separates the Rajpoot from the clans immediately below him'.<sup>19</sup> In the period under investigation, the consolidation of Kangra's dominance under Sansar Chand led the Katoches of Kangra to adopt increasingly rigid

17 OIOC IOR/F/4/1181/30743 (11), Fateh Prakash to William Murray, [16-22?] February 1827, fo. 17.

18 In 1840s Bashahr, for example, the raja's Garhwali wife was accused of usurping power by advancing servants from her home state to key positions in the administration; see New Delhi, National Archives of India (hereafter, NAI), Foreign Department, Political Proceedings, no. 2515, Edwards to Elliot, 23 November 1847, fo. 291-3.

19 This was the view of Kangra society in 1846, which persisted into the succeeding generation, when Rajput society was still found in a state of 'chaos'; see, respectively, Barnes (1862[1855], 83), and Rose (1914[1883], 282).

criteria for alliances through marriage, which rendered matrimony to a 'blue-veined katoch' the ultimate prize for aspiring rulers (Singh 1930, 87).<sup>20</sup> The beginning of the nineteenth century thus saw Katochi Rajputnis at the helm of the most substantial kingdoms surrounding Kangra, including Bilaspur, Kullu, Mandi, and Sirmaur. The latter kingdom's rani, the Guleri rani of Spivak fame, occupied a particularly important place among her peers owing to her provenance with the senior branch of the Katoch clan (the Gulerias), which granted her significant powers that remained viable well into the early decades of British rule.

### 3.2 The Guleri Rani of Sirmaur

The political biography of the Guleri rani exemplifies the trajectory of Pahari Rajputnis in the transition to British rule. As the spouse of an exceptionally unpopular monarch, the rani assumed a pivotal role in her family's resumption of power through negotiations with British authorities during the royals' exile in the plains (1809-15). In keeping with regional historiography, the kingdom's official history concedes the 'very intelligent (*buddhimān*) and knowledgeable (*samajh-būjh*) rani' was key to securing dynastic continuity, but then quickly moves on to stress the chaos and inefficiency that allegedly marked her regency (1815-27) to enforce the notion that women ought not to be in power (Singh 2007 [1912], 241-3). Reading through contemporary sources paints a very different picture, wherein the rani proves not only responsible for her family's restoration to power, but is also a key facilitator in the phenomenal empowerment of the tattered kingdom she had inherited from her husband. Although official accounts largely attribute these sagacious policies to her son, the details of the Guleri rani's career shows they were primarily her doing and thus demonstrate the continued agency of Rajputnis of the Pahari elite during this period of ostensible subjugation.

#### Exile and return, 1809-1815

As second wife to raja Karm Prakash (r. 1795/6-1809), the Guleri rani was already versed in regional politics before her husband succeeded the throne. Nevertheless, concrete evidence of her talents is only available from 1809,

20 Katoch selectivity in marital alliances led to hyper-endogamy by the 1860s, requiring British intervention to ease the criteria for arranging marriages with other Rajput families; NAI, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, no. 143, Wood to Canning, 24 December 1861, fo. 1.

when the royal family reached British territory as exiles after a tumultuous decade of rebellions, inner-court rivalries, a Katoch-orchestrated coup, and increased marginalization under the Gorkhas (1803-9).<sup>21</sup> As the preceding chapter has shown, the exiles' request for EIC support between 1809 and 1815 relied on grandiose depictions of their heritage that culminated, at the time of the ousting of the Gorkhas from Nahan, in the rani's reinstatement as regent for her son and the raja's removal from state. The records pertaining to this period reveal that the Guleri rani was key to steering the family back to power under these trying circumstances.

During their exile in British territory, the Sirmauri raja exhibited increasingly visible symptoms of syphilis that barred him from public appearances to the point of passing the royal seal to his wife. In her communications with exiled Paharis, the Phulkian patron state of Patiala, and the British, the rani made a particularly favourable impression on the supreme commander of Company troops in the region, Sir David Ochterlony (1758-1825), who was to be the future hero of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16). During their meetings, Ochterlony (then still not knighted) developed a deep commitment to the impoverished rani and her son that had a long-lasting impact on Sirmaur's future.<sup>22</sup> By the time the EIC went to war, the officer had cleared the rani's path to power by securing a written promise from her 'notorious' husband that he would avoid returning to Sirmaur should it come under British rule and that his wife would become regent for their infant son in his stead.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, when Nahan fell, the rani and her son resumed the capital while the raja and his remaining wives settled in Patiala.

After a few turbulent months of challenges to her rule by nobles and subjects alike, the rani seemed to have established her authority over the kingdom.<sup>24</sup> The regular administration of state was entrusted to an experienced *munshi* (effectively, *wazir*), and contact with her superiors was

21 On Sirmaur between Chinjhiar and exile to British territory, see Chapter 2. For a comprehensive review of Karm Prakash's reign, consult Singh (2007[1912], 222-229).

22 Ochterlony's failed attempt to secure a pension from his superiors in Calcutta for the Sirmauri family is the earliest evidence of his favourable disposition towards the rani; see OIOC IOR/F/4/425/10403, Ochterlony to Adam, 1 March 1813, fo. 10-13.

23 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Ochterlony to Adam, 28 September 1815, fo. 54.

24 On early challenges to the rani's rule, consult OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 10 February 1816, fo. 97-118. Ochterlony was also instrumental in suppressing the rani's political opponents, such as the erstwhile leader of the opposition, *miyan* Kishan Singh, who led the coup of 1803 and subsequently failed to deliver on promises to support the EIC during the Anglo-Gorkha War. A few weeks after the child-raja's coronation, Kishan Singh stormed into the durbar, exclaiming 'that he would never submit to be under a woman's government [and] that this Raj had never been [governed] so'. Ochterlony had the *miyan* removed to Patiala, where he

maintained through captain Geoffrey Birch, Ochterlony's personal choice of resident for Nahan. Underneath this veneer of stability, however, the rani still experienced difficulties in adjusting to her new role as regent, which contradicted established custom insofar as her husband, the erstwhile raja, was still alive. So long as Karm Prakash remained out of sight, the rani successfully navigated her anomalous position, but his reappearance at the capital's foothills shortly afterwards surfaced the contradiction between her position and the established norms of Rajput rule to provoke a veritable crisis that culminated in her famous threat to become *sati*.

### The rani's predicament: Karm Prakash in Trilokpur

The coming of the winter *navarātras* (the festival of 'nine nights') saw the pilgrimage town of Trilokpur below Nahan flooded with pilgrims (Map 2). Standing out among them was the Guleri rani's syphilitic husband, who violated his agreement with the EIC due to what was widely believed to be a deteriorated mental state. Thus, the raja's 'retinue and establishment', wrote the resident, were 'out of all proportion to his pension of three hundred rupees a month, having upwards of a hundred sepoy, and at least that number of private servants, and about twenty men whom he has hired to keep up the appearance of a durbar [official court] and bear him company, as he hires every one [sic] who will contribute to gratifying his vanities and follies'.<sup>25</sup> Wary of how these developments might influence the rani's regime, the British made concerted efforts to remove the former ruler from the site. At first, the raja was asked to abide by the terms of his pension and to choose an alternative dwelling place in the plains, but he refused to relocate to anywhere more than a day's ride from the capital. Ochterlony next suggested that the ruler of Patiala invite the raja to resume the Phulkian kingdom in what would 'appear as an act of friendship' rather than coercion. The ruler of Patiala, however, already encumbered by the presence of three other of the Sirmauriya's wives in his capital, politely refused the offer because although his family had 'been long on friendly terms with the Surmore family, they feared that his [the raja's] irrational disposition would create a breach in it and therefore did not wish him to be near them'.<sup>26</sup> In the

later died, clearing the rani's court of any real opposition; see OIOC IOR/F/4/570/13992, Birch to Ochterlony, 12 October 1815, fo. 23-24.

<sup>25</sup> OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January 1816, fo. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Karm Prakash had by that point ceased forwarding his wives' pensions (totalling 450 rupees a month) to Patiala. Wary of straining relations with the Sirmauri royals, the Patiala ruler refrained from evicting the ranis from the house they occupied in his capital despite their

meantime, Birch dispatched members of the royal family to discuss the 'mortifications and inconsistencies' that were sure to arise from the raja's sumptuous habits, instructing them 'to mention amongst his people' that 'they had better leave him as it was impossible they could be paid wages'. The raja's relatives, however, dared not 'touch on such a subject' for fear of being 'disgraced', at which point Birch sent his private secretary to explain the Company's position in person. This also proved 'totally useless', since the raja had by then become 'so void of all sense of discretion and propriety, [and] at the same time, so perversely violent in his temper' that any attempt at reasoning with him was deemed futile.<sup>27</sup>

The apparent deterioration in mental faculties aside, the logic behind Karm Prakash's establishing a makeshift durbar in Trilokpur was remarkably sound. The town's temple to the goddess Bālasundarī was closely associated with the rulers of Sirmaur, who habitually oversaw and participated in the *navaratra* fair (by sacrificing a buffalo or an ox), at the end of which they received a portion of 'the customs and duties collected at the great fair'.<sup>28</sup> The fidelity of the renegade raja's retainers was thus not merely related to a fear of breaking established norms, but also to concrete expectations of a share in the profits to be had from taxes on prospective pilgrims and merchants.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, the former monarch's encampment at Trilokpur was no mere threat to the rani's government, but a veritable reclamation of authority that contested the legitimacy of the British-backed political order at Nahan. Moreover, during this period, Karm Prakash consistently sent messengers to the rani imploring her to join him in exile and stressing the impropriety of their separation. This appeal to the breach of tradition, possibly accentuated by grief over her once-sane husband, seems to have greatly perturbed the rani and ultimately led her to voice her famous threat to become *sati*.

The raja's stay is reported to have plunged the rani into a deep state of dejection that persisted even after he had withdrawn from the town upon the fair's conclusion.<sup>30</sup> The regent's misery soon began affecting government,

inability to pay for its rent and continual expenditure on luxury goods. When Birch pressed the deranged raja to forward their allowances in order to settle their debts, Karm Prakash simply ignored his pleas and sent fifty soldiers 'to protect' his wives instead; OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January 1816, fo. 89-90.

27 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January 1816, fo. 87-89.

28 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Ochterlony to Birch, 27 September 1815, fo. 59. On the ruling dynasty's links with Trilokpur, see Singh (2007[1912], 182-3).

29 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January 1816, fo. 90-1.

30 After collecting the profits from the fair, Karm Prakash surrendered to EIC demands and relocated to the *qasba* of Sadhaura in the plains (today in Haryana). He resurfaces in historical

prompting Ochterlony's personal intervention in its affairs. In a letter to his protégée, the officer invited the rani and her son to visit him in the plains, where they would be instructed in governance so that 'the Sirmoor raj may prosper' and that 'when the raja comes of age there shall be money enough to recover the raja's ancestral territory to the extent held by former rajahs'.<sup>31</sup> This letter was to have significant ramifications for the later governance of Sirmaur, for unlike most British communications with Indian states that abound in vague terms (e.g., 'good governance') that were shifted and reinterpreted to perpetuate British rule, Ochterlony's wording is explicit. The letter thus subsequently formed the legal basis for a series of requests for the re-annexation of various tracts that were severed from the kingdom in 1815.<sup>32</sup> While most of these motions failed, the strategic valley of Kiarda, which stretches from below Nahan to the Yamuna river, was actually re-joined to the kingdom in 1832 on the basis of this document, despite contradicting the *sanad* ('deed') sanctioning the family's rule in Sirmaur, which forbade the Guleri rani's son 'to think of laying claim' to his predecessors' lands (Aitchison 1909, vol. 8, p. 317).<sup>33</sup> This achievement was, in fact, part of a wide set of measures devised by the Guleri rani during her regency and that would, by the 1830s, transform Sirmaur into a regional power centre, as may be gleaned from the following review of her accomplishments.

### The sovereign regent, 1815-1827

Within three years of her nomination to the regency, the Guleri rani had firmly established Sirmaur's position as a regional powerbroker. Although officially sovereign over the few tracts that remained legally bound to Nahan after the settlement of 1815 (i.e., about half the size claimed in communications with the EIC), the rani resourcefully exploited loopholes in the EIC's administration to extend her authority under various guises and pretexts. For one, Calcutta's insistence on its officers adhering to 'prevailing usages'

records only in connection with his death in 1826, when his remains were transported to Nahan (Singh 2007[1912], 242).

31 OIOC IOR/F/4/1483/58470, Ochterlony to Ranee of Sirmoor, 13 December 1816, fo. 13-14, emphasis added.

32 A useful review of Sirmauri petitions for restoring lost tracts is available in Krishen (1952, 331-332).

33 For a petition by the raja citing Ochterlony's written promise that 'whenever I grew up and had some money I should have restored to me these, my ancestral lands', see OIOC IOR/F/4/1483/58470, Rajah of Sirmoor to Clerk, 12 August 1832, fo. 12. The importance of Ochterlony's letter is similarly noted in the official history of Sirmaur (Singh 2007[1912], 243).

in settlement activities inadvertently helped entrench Sirmauri authority over tracts it was no longer officially in control of. The collection of duties in Kiarda, for instance, was entrusted with *miyan* Dalip Singh, a *zamindar* whose father had evicted the fugitive Sirmauri royals from his territory during their second flight from Nahan in 1809. However, the valley's close association with and proximity to Nahan allowed the rani to increase her authority over it and ultimately led the erstwhile refractory *miyan* to renew his deed of allegiance with the kingdom, thus strengthening the rani's regime.<sup>34</sup> One way this was achieved was by imposing taxes on transit goods at mountain passes and river crossings in contradiction to EIC policy, which sought to open the hills to free trade. This scheme was implemented in Kiarda and other parts of the kingdom with seemingly no objection from British administrators, who remained focused on increasing agricultural productivity in the tracts that they had annexed.<sup>35</sup> Sirmaur consequently experienced sustained economic growth in its first decades under the British, its annual income rising from 37,000 to 53,000 rupees between 1817 and 1830 alone.<sup>36</sup> This significant achievement would have directly contributed to Sirmaur's rise to prominence, since the redistribution of power after the war was carefully fashioned to balance the income levels of the area's four largest kingdoms – Sirmaur, Garhwal, Handur, and Bilaspur – at around 40,000 rupees per annum.

The rani's circumvention of EIC restrictions was complemented with tools derived from her position as an insider of the Pahari elite. Diplomacy and ceremonies, for example, allowed her to retain influence over former tributaries of the kingdom in the Shimla Hills, which were made officially independent under the EIC. The investiture of the *thakur* ('lord') of Tharoch

34 For Dalip Singh's appointment, see OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13998(1), Birch to Metcalfe, 3 March 1816, fo. 179; on the transfer of Kiarda's management to Nahan in 1819, consult OIOC IOR/F/4/1429/56516, Clerk to Prinsep, 10 October 1831, fo. 16; on the renewed deed of allegiance, see Punjab Government (1996[1934], 18). These state building measures would have further strengthened Dalip Singh's claims to his home tract of Ramgarh, whose 27 villages (officially located within Sirmauri territory) were contested by family members during the first decade of British rule. The pact with the rani thus strengthened her position in the central regime at Nahan *and* over subordinate tracts; see NAI, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 26 June 1834, no 62, Murray to Hisolp, 24 September 1827, fo. 428.

35 In Kiarda Dun, transit duties were assessed at 1000 rupees per annum in 1815, 3000 in 1824, and 13,735 by 1847. For the latter, see Aitchison (1909, vol. 8, p. 303). For the figures from 1815 and 1824, and additional notes on the taxation of wood felling and timber traffic along the Yamuna, consult OIOC IOR/F/4/1429/56516, Clerk to Prinsep, 10 October 1831, fo. 16-20.

36 This information was proudly furnished by the raja himself (Davidson 2004[1843], vol. 1, p. 158).

in 1818, for example, was presided over by the child-*raja* of Sirmaur alongside distinguished officers from Lahore. The order of seating and the presence of Khalsa officials deep in British territory (instead of, say, EIC officers) attest to the rani's considerable freedom in the conduct of foreign relations.<sup>37</sup> That such displays of power had concrete material benefits is evident in the case of Jubbal, a highland polity that was supposedly freed of its subservience to Sirmaur but still forwarding tribute to Nahan in 1831.<sup>38</sup> Farther east in the highlands, the vast and sparsely populated regions of Jaunsar and Bhawar, which comprised nearly half of pre-British Sirmaur but were under EIC rule at this point, also retained affiliation with Nahan. While Ochterlony had originally intended for the tracts to be 'improved' under British rule and then resold to Sirmaur, the region's strategic importance near the Tibetan border and its miniscule upkeep (around 500 rupees per annum) rendered its resumption unthinkable in EIC circles.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Birch's settlement ensured that Sirmauri influence in the area remained paramount. The agro-pastoral communities of this region had traditionally paid taxes (in kind) to Sirmaur by travelling to the erstwhile lowland capital of Kalsi six times a year, where produce quantities were recorded by a representative of the government and then transported to Nahan. Under Birch's settlement, the leaders of these communities or *sayānās* ('elders') were to arrive only four times a year, which would have undoubtedly weakened their allegiance to the political superstructure claiming to rule them. At the same time, the employment of former servants of the Sirmaur government as revenue collectors at Kalsi helped sustain Nahan's authority over the region despite its official status as an EIC dominion.<sup>40</sup> The lack of any real progress in increasing

37 OIOC IOR/F/4/1429/56516, Extract political letter to Bengal, 7 April 1824, fo. 5, citing letter of 15 January 1820 regarding the settlement of Joobul, and OIOC IOR/F/4/764, North-West Provinces: Political Department Report, 1 January 1841, fo. 1127-1128.

38 Jubbal reportedly forwarded 1000 of its 6000-7000 rupees annual revenue to Nahan (Jacquesmont 1933, 307).

39 The Resident at Delhi was vociferously opposed to the highlands' resumption by 'a foreign prince', forwarding the Sirmauri petition to Calcutta 'with every wish that it may fail'; see OIOC IOR/F/4/1181/30743(11), Metcalfe to Stirling, 21 June 1827, fo. 12. Ochterlony's original plan was to 'ameliorate' the underdeveloped highlands by placing them under British management for a decade, after which Sirmaur would purchase them for 200,000 rupees. In the meantime, the EIC stood to gain 20,000 rupees per annum in revenue, making a total profit of 400,000 rupees by 1825, when it was to be resold to the kingdom. Given Ochterlony's attested exertions on behalf of Sirmaur, it is likely the sum was calculated to secure his superiors' approval for the plan, which ultimately benefited Sirmaur more than it did Calcutta; see OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Ochterlony to Adam, 27 July 1815, fo. 36.

40 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13998(1), Birch to Metcalfe, 13 January 1816, fo. 160.

revenue over the first decades of British rule and the appointment of the region's leader, the 'wazir in the east', as *vazīr-e-ālā* ('head wazir') upon the royal family's return to Nahan indicate that Sirmauri authority remained pertinent even in those areas that Calcutta perceived as cardinal to its security.<sup>41</sup>

If British administrators maintained a *laissez faire* attitude toward the kingdom's relations with the highlands despite regulatory violations, they were considerably more concerned about the future monarch's receipt of a fully rounded education. Since he had first been spotted by Ochterlony during his parents' stay in the plains, the 'remarkable young boy' Fateh Prakash was briefly mentored by Birch, spent an apparently extensive period with the latter's *munshi*-turned-*wazir* Mohamed Khan, and finally (from 1823 and possibly earlier) received the attention of the political agent at Ambala, William Murray, who died a few years after the monarch assumed full power in 1827.<sup>42</sup> These variegated influences equipped the raja for dealing with western sensibilities and gained him the near unanimous praise of all contemporary travellers who visited his kingdom.<sup>43</sup> EIC officials were not, however, the only persons engaged in educating Fateh Prakash. As per the traditional practices of Pahari ruling families, the Guleri rani ensured her son was schooled in Sanskrit, music, and art, as well as in the cultural norms and traditions befitting his social rank.<sup>44</sup> Far exceeding the teaching of etiquette and princely conduct, the rani placed a particular emphasis on the art and on the patronage of miniature paintings, a natural pursuit for one brought up in Guler, which was home to some of the finest specimens of this art.<sup>45</sup> Her extensive knowledge of paintings and relations with painters were consequently transferred to her son, who became a

41 On stalling revenue incomes, see Williams (1874, 219-226). The nomination of the eastern *wazir* to a prominent position also served to assuage fears of the dynasty's return to power, as the former's father was among the key conspirators against the rani's husband before the Gorkha takeover of 1803 (Singh 2007[1912], 245).

42 A visitor to Fateh Prakash's court in 1830 noted that the raja was 'educated almost entirely under the kind and fatherly superintendence of Captain Murray, with whom he was esteemed a pet child, and had grown up a most decided favourite' (Davidson 2004[1843], vol. 1, p. 157).

43 The raja's physique similarly worked to his advantage, Governor-General Auckland's sister being sufficiently struck by the ruler to toy with the idea of marrying him (Eden 1866, vol. 1, p. 170).

44 Gerard to Kennedy, 20 November 1824 in Punjab Government (1911b, 314). Fateh Prakash imparted a similar type of education to his successor (Singh 2007[1912], 255).

45 It has been plausibly suggested that the rani brought a host of painters from her home state when she married into Sirmaur, and that these subsequently occupied important posts in her administration (Vashisht 2004, 89). The existence of similar artist-statesmen in the region (e.g., Mola Ram of Garhwal) seems to support this claim.

**Image 8 Pahari Rajputnis; Guler c. 1830**

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passionate and discerning collector in his own right.<sup>46</sup> This patronage was not without political significance: when the raja arranged for his sister to marry a descendant of the erstwhile master-patron of artists, Sansar Chand of Kangra, the alliance increased both houses' prestige as the Katoch prince brought his own host of artists to Sirmaur. This enriched and invigorated existing artistic persuasions in Nahan, engendering the rise of novel styles later dubbed the Sirmaur School of miniature painting, which further augmented the kingdom's prestige as the last bastion of royal patronage for the arts.<sup>47</sup>

46 Fateh Prakash continued to broaden his artistic spectrum long after his mother's death to include 'French prints' that were displayed before the Russian aristocrat-painter Alexis Soltykoff upon a visit to Nahan. The eccentric traveller seems to have been the only foreigner to have had a negative impression of the raja, whom he found a 'not a very impressive person', whose 'feet, in particular, were hideous' (Garret 1971[1934], 121).

47 The extension of royal patronage to painters largely withered in the latter half of the century. Examples of the Sirmauri School can be seen on the rani's memorial on the banks of the Yamuna River in Paonta Sahib. For a review of the Sirmauri School, see Archer (1973, vol. 1, pp. 413-16).

Finally, the rani's masterful management of kinship politics played a key part in securing the family and state's future prosperity. By keeping a check on the location and allotment of pensions to widowed relations, the regent safeguarded her position of power, as evinced by her prolonging of the exile of Dharm Prakash's widows in Kangra after the Battle of Chinjhiar so as to keep the abovementioned Katochi rani at bay. Looking to the future, the regent's meticulous arrangement of her son's marriages helped secure the family's prominence in the hierarchy of Pahari nobles: five of the young ruler's six marriages were concocted before he had turned fifteen, and the incoming spouses' movements were closely monitored once they settled in Nahan.<sup>48</sup> Establishing ties with neighbouring families was also aided by Company interventions, as Ochterlony awarded the regent a *phānt-bāhlārī* ('an exemption from the tax on royal marriages') so that her son's sisters might marry into the most prestigious families in the region (Punjab Government 1996 [1934], 18).<sup>49</sup> As a result, when the indefatigable rani passed away in 1827, her son ascended the throne in a ceremony that was presided over by the superintendent of the hill states himself, the raja occupying 'the chief seat in the darbar amongst all the rajas and sardars in the Shimla district' as 'the raja of the most ancient state'; these accolades, which regional historiography attributes to the young monarch's innate *rob* ('charisma'), were quite clearly indebted to his mother's policies (Singh 2007 [1912], 243-4). Indeed, from her period in exile to her death as a dominant ruler, the Guleri rani boasted a career worthy of previous Pahari Rajputnis, such as Nagardevi Katochi. As this brief review of her actions indicates, the rani cleverly manipulated and/or ignored British regulations intended to limit her mandate so as to increase her power, both independently and, at times, with the help of her high-ranking benefactor, Sir David Ochterlony. The problem presented at the beginning of this chapter may now be resumed, namely, how can the Guleri rani's indisputable capacity to act, rule, and practice agency be reconciled with Gayatri Spivak's depiction of the rani as a woman so utterly oppressed by the colonial and patriarchal milieu that her sole means for regaining a voice was to threaten to become *sati*?

48 The raja's retrospective accusation that his mother had poisoned his favourite – and therefore dangerously influential – wife suggests the regent remained closely involved in palace politics throughout her reign (Davidson (2004[1843], vol. 1, pp. 167-8).

49 Three of the raja's sisters were married in the final year of the Guleri rani's life: one in Garhwal and two in Bilaspur, more on which in Chapter 5. A fourth sister married into Handur in 1832 (Singh 2007[1912], 250-1).

### 3.3 Rethinking *Sati* and Women's Agency in British India

The demonstrated access of women of the Pahari aristocracy to power in the decades surrounding the early colonial encounter contradicts the discourse emanating from local (oral and written) traditions. While the adoption of this approach by officials of the colonial milieu is largely predictable, its perseverance in the writings of gender and postcolonial discourse theorists is puzzling. According to the latter, the privileged position of men in Indian society was claimed at the expense of women, who were further marginalized by the biases of British rule and their voices consequently suppressed from history. This argument is nowhere more apparent than in the legion of studies on *sati*, which is often depicted as the 'silencing rite' *par excellence*. In order to explain how and why these distortive claims gained acceptance, it is useful to assess the functions and meanings of *sati* in West Himalayan elite society at the onset of colonial rule, and their relation to Spivak's claims regarding the Guleri rani's *sati*.

#### *Sati* in the Pahari setting: manipulating tradition in Bashahr

The custom of becoming *sati*, i.e., the immolation of widows at their husband's death (*sahagamana*, literally 'going with' the husband), was known and practiced by the Pahari ruling class centuries before the British conquest.<sup>50</sup> While it is impossible to determine the actual extent of its implementation, it is clear that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the notion that widowed wives (and their servants) were to join their husband's funeral pyre had developed into the supreme ideal of womanhood among the local elite. This ideal diffused into other parts of society through the public worship of former ranis as *satīmātās* – the deities charged with the protection of kingdoms – and popular narratives praising past *satis*.<sup>51</sup> While the distance between the prescribed roles of women in Rajput tradition and their actual implementation was often vast, instances of Rajputnis becoming *sati* were reported throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and coincided with an increased preoccupation with the rite on the part of the British. *Sati* thus figured prominently in the exchanges between Pahari elites and EIC

50 For a survey of the *barselā* stones that commemorate *satis*, see Bindra (1982). On *sati* in the Nepali codex (*Mulukī 'Ain*) of 1854 and its later amendments, consult Michaels (1993). Key studies on *sati* in British India are referenced in the remainder of this section.

51 The looting of deities from Bilaspur's temples following the defeat at Chinihar, especially that of Vilma Devi, the deified wife of the kingdom's founder, left a lasting impression on the Kahluri elite (Singh and Varma 1940, 25). For songs lauding *satis* in the Shimla hills, see Sharma (2000, 168–81). On *satīmātā* worship in contemporary Rajasthan, see Harlan (1992, 172).

personnel, during which it acquired new meanings and novel interpretations. A good example of how this played out can be found in Bashahr soon after the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16), where one of the first recorded instances of such discussions took place.

Shortly after the EIC's triumph over the Gorkhas, captain Robert Ross, the second of Ochterlony's officers (along with Birch) entrusted with conducting revenue settlements, arrived at the capital of Bashahr, the largest and most remote state to come under British rule. Ross was instructed to form an administration based on 'local usages' that would be sufficiently stable to comply with the EIC's tribute demands from the kingdom. To achieve this, he first sought to establish a clear hierarchy of power at court, where some incoherence had prevailed since the late raja's passing a few years before. While the regular function of government was managed by the chief *wazir*, the role of paramount authority during the minority of the late ruler's son was hotly contested between two ranis: the child-raja's mother and late king's second wife, who came from the modest highland chiefdom of Dhami, and the deceased raja's first wife, who hailed from the infinitely more prestigious kingdom of Sirmaur.<sup>52</sup> This peculiar situation was noted several months prior to Ross's visit by William Fraser, then Company envoy to the hills, who had found the noblewomen on good terms and thus recommended 'the reins of government should partly be entrusted to the Surmoure ranee'.<sup>53</sup> By the time of Ross's visit, their relationship had considerably soured. The Dhamiani rani now demanded protection from the elder queen, whom she accused of conspiring to assassinate herself and her infant son.

After a careful investigation into the matter, in which he made 'every allowance for Asiatic exaggeration and for the unmeasured vehemence with which female resentment sometimes finds vent', Ross decreed that because there was 'little chance of cordiality after such an accusation', the notion of sharing sovereignty should be abandoned and the regency entrusted entirely with the young raja's mother.<sup>54</sup> In a letter explaining his decision, the officer repeated the arguments advanced by the Bashahri elite in the course of consultations, according to which the Sirmauri rani had 'indisputably ceased [to have a right to govern] on her neglecting to become *suttee* with the remains of her husband as that of every Hindoo female of

52 The royal household was depleted of additional contenders at the raja's cremation, when 'twenty-two persons of both sexes burnt themselves along with his body; of these, twelve were females, and three Ranees; one or two of his wuzzeers, and his first chobedar' (Fraser 2008[1820], 250).

53 OIOC IOR/F/4/570/13992, Ross to Metcalfe, 6 November 1815, fo. 56-7.

54 Ibid., fo. 58-9.

rank does, who being neither pregnant nor having children to nurture and educate declines immolating herself on the funeral pile [sic] of her lord'. Ross further appended a gloss on the affair in support of his decision:

While we shudder at a superstitious enactment of abhorrence to humanity, yet on a question of right and in arguing on usage it must be allowed its weight. If these premises therefore have been correctly stated, the Surmore rannee has no claim of right to a share in the government nor do I conceive her to possess any on the ground of expediency [... for] to give the Surmore rannee a share in the government of Bussaher would materially interfere with the simplicity of its form, would impinge on established usage and sow the seeds of faction intrigue and disorder.<sup>55</sup>

Resigned to the moral comfort of cultural relativism, the officer's solution was straightforward: the Sirmauri rani's failure to become *sati* upon the death of her husband excluded her from government. The transition from alleged custom to unwritten law is telling of the situation on the Pahari frontier, where the lack of written legal devices (the Bashahr state archives were allegedly burnt during the Gorkha occupation) saw regional traditions develop into rules whose meaning was open to interpretation. This allowed the Dhamiani rani to exploit the British officer's ignorance of local traditions to advance claims that marginalized her rival. The interpretation of the perceived custom of widow immolation as law thus worked to the satisfaction of both parties: conditioned by their respective cultural backgrounds, the rani used the rite to gain the regency and shame her rival, while Ross could come to terms with its 'abhorrence to humanity' by adopting a legal criterion for adjudicating similar disputes that were certain to arise in the course of his settlement activities.

It is worth noting the persistent importance of honour as a factor influencing the behaviour of Pahari elites. The Dhamiani rani's claims against the Sirmauri rani, for example, were supported by an appeal to the 'shame' incurred by her singular fault of having outlived her husband.<sup>56</sup> The elder rani's provenance in 'a once highly respectable and powerful family' similarly influenced the solution found to reduce her influence: allotting her a *jagir* of nine villages on the fringes of the kingdom that was sufficiently removed from the political centre.<sup>57</sup> Although officially a lucrative holding, the tract barely

55 Ibid., fo. 57-60.

56 Like other aspects of Rajput culture, the notion of honour is today central to Pahari women throughout the social spectrum (Narayan 2004).

57 OIOC IOR/F/4/570/13992, Ross to Metcalfe, 1 April 1816, fo. 112.

sufficed to cover the banished noblewoman's expenses. Nevertheless, the rani preferred to hide her descent into relative poverty and thus concealed the inconsistency between her living conditions and social rank, a discrepancy that Ross ultimately exposed and remedied.<sup>58</sup> The cardinal role of honour and shame in determining the comportment of women of the Pahari elite played a central part in the Guleri rani's threat to become sati, as did the growing concern over the rite among EIC personnel during this period.

### Contemporary attitudes towards *sati*

The role of *sati* in establishing a coherent hierarchy of power at court notwithstanding, the mention of it in Bashahr also tapped into a larger set of worries that haunted Ochterlony's settlement officer, for it was precisely at this juncture that the heated debates on the rite's abolishment were reaching their zenith.<sup>59</sup> As Andrea Major observes, *sati* came to reflect the 'internal struggle of a society' that was reinventing itself 'as progressive and humane' even as its different components – in both India and Britain – struggled to figure out what 'civilized behaviour' actually was (2006, 142). The exchanges between EIC officers and Pahari noblewomen over *sati* thus took place in a particularly charged environment independent of the clashes and displacements inherent to the colonial condition. For British administrators in the Himalaya, suppressing the rite helped affirm their 'humane' superiority in a region that was perceived as beyond the pale of civilization. This approach was accentuated in the decades that followed Ross's settlement in Bashahr and that officially culminated with the rite's abolition in 1829. Accordingly, the absence of *satis* upon the death of raja Maha Chand of Bilaspur in 1824 was advanced as proof that 'the brightest ray of civilization has lately burst upon them [i.e., the Kahluris] in their altered views of the obligation of human sacrifices' and juxtaposed with the latter's predecessor, Nagardevi Katochi's husband, who 'was accompanied to the flames [in 1772] by a number of martyrs quite incredible'.<sup>60</sup> Such confident

58 Ross initiated an enquiry into the elder rani's condition that revealed her plight and resulted in an addition to her *jagir*, where she passed her remaining days 'oppressing' local inhabitants and obliging high ranking visitors, such as the Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army, to admire 'the symmetrical proportion of her feet' (Archer 1833, vol. 1, p. 281).

59 For a nuanced analysis of debates in Bengal, see Mani (1988). On the history of European reactions to the rite, consult Major (2006).

60 Gerard to Kennedy, 20 November 1824 in Punjab Government (1911a, 319). In the mountains beyond British territory, *sati* persisted as before; the raja of Mandi's cremation in 1826, for example, entailed '26 ladies of the harem' joining the funeral pyre (Singh 1930, 93).

tones, however, ultimately say more about the zeal of Company servants in the hills than the actual prevalence of *sati*, as instances of widow immolation continued to be reported throughout this period.<sup>61</sup>

If EIC officials shared a common understanding of *sati*, attitudes among Paharis – and women of the aristocracy, in particular – were more complex. As shown above, women of the Pahari elite had no qualms about manipulating the rite to their advantage. In this capacity, *sati* falls under the same category as the allocation of pensions for women related to royal households, a type of ‘local usage’ that was redefined by Rajputnis in positions of power when interacting with British authorities.<sup>62</sup> That the profits to be gained from such manoeuvres were far removed from the experience of the average Pahari woman, let alone Indian women in the plains, is significant, for it is precisely the latter who inform the most elaborate scholarly studies on the subject. Thus, Lata Mani has persuasively argued that the multiple discourses emanating from the debates about the abolition of *sati* by the male-dominated parties of foreign missionaries, British administrators, and Bengali *bhadralok* (‘gentlefolk’) relegated women to a passive role that ‘erased’ their voice from the public arena and, consequently, from history itself (1988, 190). Mani’s assertion, which was offered as an alternative answer to Gayatri Spivak’s question, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, is acutely relevant to the case at hand, for where Mani found a voice that was silenced, Spivak determined that speech was not possible to begin with. The evidence presented above suggests that for Pahari Rajputnis of the ruling class, at least, neither was the case. Not only could these women speak, but they were also heard and actively participated in shaping their world well after the transition to colonial rule and, in some case, such as that of the Guleri rani, assumed unprecedented degrees of authority over their kingdoms. Why, then, did the rani threaten to kill herself in the early months of her regency? More importantly, was Spivak right in interpreting her actions as an attempt at asserting agency in face of an oppressive patriarchal milieu and an overbearing colonial officer? To answer this, it is necessary to re-examine the context in which the regent of Sirmaur first voiced her threat of suicide.

61 For instances of *sati* after the abolition of the rite in and beyond the British-controlled West Himalayas, see OIOC IOR/F/4/1483/58471, Kennedy to Fraser, 20 June 1832, fo. 5-7, and Vigne, Wilson, and Trebeck (1844[1842], vol. 1, pp. 80-5), respectively. The last *sati* in Sirmaur reportedly occurred in 1834, and is discussed in detail below.

62 The Sirmauri-born widows of the raja of Bilaspur (whose story is explored in Chapter 5) similarly exploited British biases upon their husband’s death in 1839, securing hefty pensions from Company officials in exchange for foregoing the rite; OIOC IOR/F/4/1829/75522, Clerk to Metcalfe, 13 April 1839, fo. 6-7.

### The Guleri rani's *sati*

At the time of her declaration, the Guleri rani was barely six months into her regency and still recovering from a series of disastrous attempts at governance that nearly ended in a popular revolt. Her husband's unexpected return to the kingdom and pitching of camp in the pilgrimage town of Trilokpur just below the capital compounded her condition, as it effectively defied the legitimacy of the rani's regime. During his stay, the raja communicated with his wife through messengers who scaled the seven-hour footpath from Trilokpur to the hilltop palace at Nahan bearing letters that stressed the impropriety of their separation and insisted she join her husband in exile. Several weeks later, the distressed regent announced that 'her life and the raja's are one'.<sup>63</sup> The Resident at Nahan interpreted this exclamation as a threat to become *sati* and swiftly reported the matter to his superiors, who made concerted efforts – including the recruitment of court pundits to provide scriptural authority for their decrees – to ensure the rani would retain the regency and see to the education of her son. Such is the information preserved in the archival records.

Considering that the rani ultimately did not become *sati*, but rather lived to dominate Sirmauri (and regional) politics until her death in 1827, her threat of suicide begs explanation. According to Spivak, the rani's threat comprised a 'speech act' insofar as it was the only means by which the rani, hemmed in by an intrusive British officer and an oppressive patriarchal husband, could assert agency. However, the rani demonstrated her capacity to take action both before (as negotiator on behalf of her husband during exile) and after this event (as sovereign in Nahan). Seen in the context of similar instances in which *sati* was used as a political ploy, such as the case of Bashahr, these factors suggest the rani may have well used the rite as a ploy to manipulate Birch: in intimating her intent to become *sati*, the rani may have pushed for the reinstatement of her husband or, somewhat more craftily, for his removal from Sirmaur so that she might administer the state unhindered.<sup>64</sup> Such a Machiavellian reading of the event is, however, not entirely satisfactory, for it fails to account for the role of Rajput cultural norms in the rani's actions. The reasons for the regent's declaration should thus be sought elsewhere.

63 OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 1 March 1816, fo. 123. For evidence of the raja's appeal to Rajput sensibilities, see OIOC IOR/F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January 1816, fo. 86.

64 Spivak briefly mentions the possibility that Birch may have not 'read the Rani right', suggesting she may have 'merely want[ed] to be with her husband and leave her colonized prison palace', but then dismisses this hypothesis as merely amounting to a crude form of 'critical subject-predication' on the officer's part (1985, 270).

Spivak correctly identifies the threat to become *sati* as a critical point in the Guleri rani's life. Nevertheless, the importance of this moment has less to do with her alleged twofold oppression than with the break from established tradition entailed by her service as regent while her husband was in exile. Her threat of suicide is thus best read as the climactic implosion of tensions deriving from these irreconcilable aspects of the rani's circumstances. The deranged raja's appeal to Rajput sensibilities – most notably, the need to avoid public humiliation – would have played a central part in provoking the rani and is, in this regard, reminiscent of his conscious choice of settling in Trilokpur. While the latter occasion saw the raja exploit the established role of Sirmauri sovereigns in pilgrimage festivities to challenge the new regime, his stress on honour and shame in his communications with the rani was similarly calculated to attain a concrete political goal, namely, recovering his wife and, possibly, regaining the kingdom by proving her inability to rule alone.

That the raja's actions were aimed at his spouse's core tenets is supported by ethnographic studies of Rajput women today. Drawing on research with urban Rajput women in Rajasthan, Lindsey Harlan concluded that 'a wife's all-encompassing responsibility is to protect the happiness and health of her husband' – a responsibility that manifests in a general fear of widowhood and a customary ban on widow remarriage that strengthen the notion that 'a woman must do everything in her power to safeguard her husband's longevity' (1992, 43-44). The link between these precepts and the fear of widowhood is apparent in the attitude of Harlan's informants towards women who become *sati*, which they explained 'as a corrective for the fault of failing to protect [... a] husband from premature death'. Thus,

[t]hose women who lacked the dedication necessary to die as *satis* were expected to lead a life of penance and privation. The general feeling was that a widow should want to live a hard life to make up for her failure as husband-protector [... or] *pativrata*, meaning 'one who has taken a vow (*vrata*) to [protect] her husband (*pati*)'. (Harlan 1992, 44-5)<sup>65</sup>

According to Harlan, this 'ethos of protection' pervades most aspects of Rajput women's lives and is particularly apparent in attitudes toward marital relations.

Although temporally far removed from early nineteenth century-Sirmaur, such insights into wifely norms and duties are useful for deciphering at

65 High-caste widows in Nepal and the West Himalayas share similar misfortunes; see Gellner (2003[2001]) and Berreman (1999[1963], 162), respectively.

least part of the Guleri rani's conduct. Under the unique circumstances of her situation, the rani could not afford the luxury of grieving over a dead husband, for although syphilitic and slightly mad, Karm Prakash was still alive, albeit in forced exile. Her nomination to the regency by the same power responsible for her husband's expulsion from Sirmaur would have compounded her misery insofar as it implied that she was somehow responsible for his humiliation. Thus, despite her phenomenal success as a political leader, in the domestic sphere the rani simply failed to live up to her duties as a wife/*pativrata* ('husband-protector'). It is for this reason that the threat to become *sati* is most aptly interpreted as a momentary surge of anguish resulting from her situation. In this respect, the threat to become *sati* does indeed constitute an assertion of agency, though not as a refuge from chauvinism and imperialism, but as a recourse to deal with the fundamental irreconcilability between the duties of a Rajputni wife and the reality of quasi-imposed sovereignty. The gravity of this inner conflict, it has been seen, perpetuated the *rani's* dismal state months after her husband left the region and was only alleviated by the efforts of her benefactor and friend, David Ochterlony. If the Guleri rani's threat to become *sati* reflects the conflicting worldviews plaguing her psyche in the transitory phase to British rule, then what should be made of Spivak's vastly divergent understanding of the affair? The discrepancy between these two readings may be partly uncovered by addressing the ideological underpinning of Spivak's writings.

### Deconstructing Spivak's deconstruction

The deconstruction of archival records by way of a literary reading was guided by a distinct political agenda that was developed and refined with the amalgamation of the original 'Rani of Sirmur' (1985) with its ideological successor 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) in the third chapter of Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). Since this is the most developed of Spivak's interpretations of the rani's story, the analysis that follows primarily addresses the 1999 version. What, then, does the regent rani's threat of suicide teach us about women in Indian history? According to Spivak, it reveals that:

[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development. (1999, 304)

David Ochterlony, the person responsible for the rani's establishment in power against the most trying of odds, is similarly reduced to 'a remote harbinger' of:

[t]he rationalization of sexuality, the invasive restructuring of gender relations, poor women's credit-baiting without infrastructural involvement in the name of women's micro-enterprise, the revision of women-in-development (modernization) to gender-and-development (new world economic order). (Spivak 1999, 223)

Spivak has thus reduced the Guleri rani ('as an object of knowledge') to an idiom for the plight of contemporary non-Western women fallen prey to the pernicious oppressions of global capitalism, an anonymous worker at the bottom of an all-encompassing chain of consumption fuelled by the inexhaustible desires of far removed – both spatially and temporally – imperialist consumers.<sup>66</sup> Although sweeping in vision and breadth, this interpretation overlooks contextual elements that have been shown to be indispensable for understanding the rani's *sati* – for the Guleri rani was not an anonymous labourer, but a privileged queen, and the people she confronted were not distant consumers, but the father of her children and a foreign officer whose lacunae in local knowledge frequently helped further, rather than obstruct, her goals. The ideology underlying this interpretation of the records has profound implications for empirical research.

While Spivak does concede that her analysis is 'not historical work' insofar as 'historical knowledge cannot be established on single cases' (1999, 198),<sup>67</sup> her misreading of the evidence goes beyond the boundaries of the discipline as such. Thus, despite having invested considerable time and energy in investigating the affair, she still failed to account for fundamental characteristics of the Pahari Rajput world, resulting in such improbable claims as 'Gulari', 'Gulani', and 'Guleri' being misspelled versions of the rani's first name, rather than the title signifying her provenance in the kingdom of Guler (Spivak 1999, 231). Similar inaccuracies abound,<sup>68</sup> and although

66 On the tendency of postcolonial discourse theory to address issues of immediate concern to its authors rather than actual subject matter, see Washbrook (1999, 608-9).

67 This important clarification is absent from the original article of 1985.

68 Notable examples include the claim that Dalip Singh was a member of the ruling 'House of Sirmaur' (Spivak 1999, 231), rather than a refractory *zamindar* who resumed allegiance to Nahan through the rani's policies; the grouping together of Kiarda and Dehra Duns as a single valley stretching between Nahan and the Yamuna River, rather than two distinct territories on either side of it (210); the attribution of Birch's comments on the remote highlanders of Jaunsar and

they do not necessarily detract from Spivak's theoretical exposition, their accumulation disserves our understanding of the case by ignoring key features of the political and cultural backgrounds against which the rani's declaration of intent to become *sati* took place. The result is a considerably impoverished version of the historical regent-queen: instead of restoring the Guleri rani's demonstrated agency, she only 'emerges in the archives [as an object of knowledge] because of the commercial/territorial interests of the East India Company' (Spivak 1999, 227). This claim is put forward more straightforwardly in Spivak's first and arguably more historically-inclined version of the paper, where she somberly concluded that 'caught in the cracks between the production of the archives and indigenous patriarchy, today distanced by the waves of hegemonic "feminism", there is no "real rani" to be found' (1999, 271). However, the evidence presented above suggests that it is not only possible to retrieve something of the Guleri rani as a person, but that the individual discovered through this effort is remarkably similar to her peers among the regional elite.

If Spivak's reading dooms the rani to oblivion, her discussion of the colonial milieu similarly depletes EIC frontier officers of their human complexity. Thus, despite the ostensible stress on the heterogeneity of the imperial apparatus, the subtlety of its makeup is lost in her overriding emphasis on its primary function as a force bent on turning conquered peoples into 'objects'. The descriptions of Birch and Ochterlony are a case in point. By foregrounding the former's instrumentality in implementing the 'anonymous technique of capital [...] mercantilism, free trade, or even [a] civilizing mission', the officer becomes as blurred as the rani and his unwitting empowerment of local elites through misguided settlement policies goes unnoticed (Spivak 1999, 212). With the settlement of Sirmaur reduced to a minor step in a grand narrative centred on the Western World's conquest of the globe through capitalism, the creative resistance of indigenous elites to imperial policies (e.g., the extension of Sirmauri authority over Kiarda Dun) is replaced by the commonplace depiction of South Asian elites as indolent facilitators of imperialism.

These oversights are even more pronounced in the case of Ochterlony, 'a gentleman' who 'cordially hated the hill people'. The Boston-born Scotsman who made India his home is thus lost to postcolonial stereotyping: his Indian wives and children, sponsorship of South Asian architectural projects, and pronounced integration into North Indian elite culture suppressed in

Bhavar to the bulk of Sirmauri society (213); and the dating of the rani's death to 1837 rather than 1827 (244).

favour of a more palatable description of the man as ‘the kind of person one imagines in the first flush of enthusiasm against imperialism’ (Spivak 1999, 213).<sup>69</sup> Even Captain Birch, the ‘pawn of British imperialism’, proves more complex a character upon closer scrutiny. According to a source who was familiar with the officer, Birch was in Maratha service until 1803, at which point he (re?)joined Calcutta to battle his former employers in the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-5) (Fraser 1851, vol. 1, p. 307).<sup>70</sup> The shift from mercenary service with local powers to fighting on the EIC’s payroll is consistent with the pattern of European adventurers-turned-patriots at times of conflict, attesting to the numerous career-building paths open to enterprising individuals in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century South Asia that go beyond the binary of rapacious imperialism vs. Chauvinist indigeneity.<sup>71</sup> In contextualizing Spivak’s interpretation, I am not offering an apology for empire, but rather calling for greater care when constructing the biographies of past individuals from the fragmentary historical materials available. It is, indeed, only by applying literary readings to different types of texts (e.g., oral traditions and local histories) that the relationship between language and power that Spivak so forcefully insists upon in her writings can be effectively exposed.

### 3.4 European and Pahari Rajput Appropriations of *Sati*

The preoccupation with *sati* exhibited in Bashahr and Sirmaur during the first months of British rule continued to elicit reactions from both Europeans and Paharis in the decades that followed. The variety of approaches towards the rite in the nineteenth century is discernible in three texts authored by persons of patently different backgrounds: a Pahari nobleman, an American mercenary, and an EIC officer. Despite their inherent differences, these writings convey a deep understanding of Pahari Rajput culture that was

69 For a concise biography, see Coleman (2004). On Ochterlony’s marriages with Indian women and Mughal influenced-architectural legacy at Lahore, see Dalrymple (2003[2002], 30-1, 326, 382-3). For a trusted first-hand account of the elder Ochterlony as ‘Eastern Prince’, see Heber (1828, vol. 2, pp. 392-393). Specifically in Sirmaur, Ochterlony’s professed intention to restore tracts to the kingdom mentioned above suffices to counter Spivak’s ‘conviction’ that the kingdom’s dismemberment was ‘in the cards’ (1985, 266).

70 In contrast, Spivak (1999, 213) has Birch in Company service from the age of sixteen. Birch would have thus come into contact with Ochterlony c. 1803-5, becoming his official subordinate in 1810.

71 For a famous instance from the region, in which a defector from Company lines entered Kangra service, see Garrett and Grey (1929, 59-69).

shared by their authors, suggesting that the gap between Europeans and South Asians was far from unbridgeable.<sup>72</sup> While such texts are by definition incapable of capturing the individual experience of Rajputnis, they provide important indices of the personal meanings attached to *sati* beyond the realm of socio-politics.

### A Pahari Rajput perception of *sati*

The official history of Sirmaur, the *Tawārīkh-e-Sirmaur Riyāsat* (Singh 2007 [1912]), features an interesting account of the last *sati* in the kingdom in 1834, five years after the rite's official abolition by the British. As a preamble, the text tells of a celebratory visit by the raja of Sirmaur (the Guleri rani's son) to the recently renovated *satīyō ke purāne mandir* ('old temple of *satis*') in Paonta, where widows of high standing used to sacrifice themselves to purify their spouses' corpses out of *pativrat dharm* ('dutiful loyalty').<sup>73</sup> The worship of *satīmātās* thus remained an important aspect of Pahari statecraft in the early years of British rule.<sup>74</sup> The EIC, however, directed that rulers were to enforce the ban on *sati* in opposition to the values of their milieu. The delicacy of this situation became acutely apparent soon afterwards:

Mian Hastā, who was an attendant (*sevādār*) of the raja sahib, died. His wife, who was a beautiful and faithful (*pativratā*) woman, prepared to become *sati* with her husband. The raja sahib made great efforts to explain that the English government had ordered to put a stop to *sati*. He personally went to her house and explained that she cannot become *sati*, but she was unshaken (*aṭal*) in her resolve. Mian Hastā's body thus remained in the house for two more days, as she would not let it go. Ultimately, the raja sahib gave her an order (*ājñā*) to become *sati* and on the morning of the next day she bathed, adorned herself with jewels (*abhūṣaṇ*), sat on the palanquin (*pālki*) behind her husband's corpse, and proceeded to the temple of Jagannath ji. The nobleman's (*thakur*) dead

72 On the agreement of the ostensibly disparate cultural worlds of Europe and Asia in the early modern period, see Pinch (1999). For a counter-reading of the same period, consult Subrahmanyam (2011).

73 The temple was established as the central site for Rajputnis to become *sati* in the time of Vijay Prakash (r. 1713-49) (Singh 2007[1912], 251).

74 As noted above, instances of *sati* persisted throughout this period, including among the wives of 'some of the hill soldiers of Nahn [*sic*]' during the Anglo-Gorkha War (Fraser 2008[1820], 250).

feet (*caranmrt*) were taken to the cremation ground (*śmaśān bhūmi*) and consumed. She there set fire to herself along with her husband's corpse. After this no wife in Nahan-Sirmaur ever became sati again. (Singh 2007 [1912], 251-2)

Beautiful, obstinate, and faithful, the widow's description indicates the *pativrata* ('husband-protector') ideal was still relevant to early twentieth-century readers. In highlighting the victim's volition, the text agrees with similar accounts from subject states (and differs from the Bengali case), which emphasize the agency of *satis* as a means of reifying Rajput values (Major 2010). The constraints imposed on subject rulers by the British are similarly noted, the story revolving around the Rajputni's insistence on becoming *sati* and the raja's attempts at both appeasing his masters and retaining authority as sovereign at home. In granting his approval, the raja brings the entire state machine into play (including the priests of the important temple of Jagannath in Nahan), showcasing his indisputable status as head of state by first forbidding the rite and then ordering its execution. The ruler thus transits from upholder of EIC law to custodian of Rajput heritage and back, his exceptional sanction of the *sati* sustaining the worship of *satīmātās* and, by extension, Sirmauri tradition. In this respect, the evolution of Pahari Rajput attitudes towards *sati* largely followed the course dictated by British superiors in the course of the nineteenth century even as it continued to underline the subject kings' authority. Responses to the rite among foreigners, whether freebooting adventurers or established officers of the EIC, were no less ambivalent or varied.

### A Euro-American mercenary's perception of *sati*

Company service was not the sole source of income available to foreigners in the subcontinent during this period. Stretching from the Himalayan foothills in the east through the plains of the Punjab to the Afghan border, the empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1799-1839) was a renowned haunt for European and American mercenaries in search of a livelihood, where they held key administrative posts and frequently adopted the habits and lifestyle of regional elites.<sup>75</sup> This acculturation is particularly evident in the case of Alexander Gardner (1785-1877, active in the Punjab from the 1830s), who recounted his story towards the end of his life from the comfort of his

75 On the presence of former soldiers of the Napoleonic Empire in Lahore, see Lafont (1986). For an account of an American Quaker's service there, see Macintyre (2004, 151-89).

Kashmiri home.<sup>76</sup> Among the numerous exploits in his biography, Gardner tells of a Pahari Rajput princess's *sati* that is revealing of coeval perceptions of the rite.

In the scramble for power that followed the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, Gardner sided with the faction of the Pahari (Dogra) Rajput Dhyan Singh, formerly chief *wazir* at Lahore and brother of the future founder of Jammu and Kashmir, Maharaja Gulab Singh (r. 1846-57). When news of Dhyan Singh's murder reached the capital, his wife, a princess from Nurpur, sprang into action. Walking among her deceased husband's soldiers, the Rajputni excited the warriors 'up to a frenzy' as she mobilized them to seek revenge, exclaiming 'she would not become *sati* until she had the heads' of her husband's killers. The aged adventurer narrated what followed with remarkable precision:

I myself laid the heads at the feet of Dhyan Singh's corpse that evening [...] During the day, while inciting the army to avenge her husband's murder, she had appeared in public before the soldiers, discarding the seclusion of a lifetime. When his murderers had been slain she gave directions as to the disposition of his property with a stoicism and self-possession to which no one beside her could lay claim: she thanked her brave avengers, and declared that she would tell of their good deeds to her husband when in heaven. There was nothing left for her, she said, but to join him. [...] They placed her husband's diamond *kalgi* (aigrette) in her turban, and she then fastened it with her own hands in the turban of her stepson, Hira Singh. Then, smiling on those around, she lit the pyre, the flames of which glistened on the arms and accoutrements, and even, it seems to me, on the swimming eyes of the soldiery. So perished the widow of Dhyan Singh, with thirteen of her female slaves. (Gardner 1898, 249-250)

Gardner's vivid account provides a rare glimpse into the conduct of Pahari Rajputnis in moments of crisis beyond British India. The princess's alien origins and noble countenance clearly attract the warriors' attention in this politically charged period of Punjabi history, which is reinforced by her 'discarding the seclusion of a lifetime'. The contrast between the *sati*'s life up to that point and her brief moments of public exposure add to her authority, enabling her to divide her husband's estate and nominate his successor with no apparent opposition from her mesmerized audience.

76 The doubts raised regarding Gardiner's seemingly fantastic autobiography (e.g., Garrett and Grey 1970[1929], 265-291) have of late been disproven (Keay 2017).

Thus, if the political activities of Pahari Rajputnis habitually took place in the confines of palace halls, the moments preceding the mounting of a funeral pyre offered a palpable demonstration of their authority by shifting it into the public sphere. Further, the widow's incitement to revenge and insistence on becoming *sati* point to significant continuities with Rajput tradition insofar as they agree with the martial aspects of the Rajputni ideal of *pativrata* ('husband-protector') and correspond perfectly with Lindsey Harlan's assertion that 'substituting for a husband is the basis for a woman's heroism' (1992, 189).<sup>77</sup> The distinction between the heroines of Rajput legend and *satimātas* (deified *satis*) is also pertinent, since these aspects of womanhood are believed to constitute the successive stages of realized *pativrata*s, as they do in the story of the Princess of Nurpur.<sup>78</sup> Lastly, the compatibility of Gardner's account with the tenets of Rajput society is supported by the young *sati*'s choice of words, which agree with expressions found in oral tradition. The devoted princess of the *jhera* of Chinjhar announces to her husband's corpse, 'I now owe you nothing' (*kuch nī deṇā huṇ asā terā*) just before jumping to her death, which parallels the stoic princess's remark that 'there is nothing left for her but to join' her spouse.

The congruence of Gardner's account with local perceptions is reflective of the adventurer's deep integration into South Asian society, an outcome of a unique personal history. Born to Scottish and Spanish parents on the shore of Lake Superior in 1785, little is known of his early career save that his knowledge of handling heavy guns was probably acquired during service in the EIC's army. In 1830, he began serving the rulers of Kabul and took an Afghan wife. Having made too many enemies and lost his spouse (who reportedly took her own life with a knife) and their child in an attack on his fortress, Gardner left for the Punjab, where he was engaged by Ranjit Singh and, after the latter's death, by the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir (Gardner 1898, 71). Recounting his tale from his Dogra master's domain, Gardner belongs to the seldom-heard group of European mercenaries who made Asia their home. It is thus not with remorse that he recalls placing the decapitated heads of his foes in the widowed princess's lap, but with

77 Contemporary Rajput women similarly tie the future *sati*'s enhanced authority to the abandonment of seclusion, the practical measure facilitating unhindered movement on the battlefield being interpreted as the internalization of the accumulated merits of a lifetime of veiling (Harlan 1992, 190-191).

78 Harlan notes a distinction in attitude towards heroines and *satimatās*: the former are revered, while the latter are worshipped (1992, 181). This reaffirms the male-centred worldview of Rajput culture, which although appreciative of warring women, ultimately holds *sati* as the supreme ideal of womanhood.

an empathic pride and appreciation of her qualities.<sup>79</sup> Although Europeans in the British controlled-portion of the Punjab adhered to pronouncedly different principles regarding *sati*, they were no more immune to the allure of Pahari Rajputnis than their counterparts across the border.

### A British official's perception of *sati*

While British officials may have found participation in a *sati* ceremony unimaginable, their fascination with the rite continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century and, in some cases, was sustained through fictional accounts. Sir Henry Lawrence (1806-57), a grand hero to the British public, authored a series of such accounts. Basing his stories on personal encounters with foreign adventurers in the Punjab (he met Gardner in Kabul in 1841), Lawrence wrote about a fictional European mercenary in the service of Lahore in short entries that were anonymously contributed to the *Delhi Gazette*.<sup>80</sup> His seductive prose and capacity to bring the region that he knew so well to life led to a demand to publish a book version of his stories, which was released under his real name as *Adventures of an Officer in the Service of Runjeet Singh* in 1845.

In *Adventures*, Lawrence awards Pahari Rajputnis a central role by weaving the plot around a love affair between the foreign mercenary 'Bellasis' and 'Māhtāb Kaur', the imaginary daughter of the dispossessed raja of Kangra, Sansar Chand.<sup>81</sup> Throughout the tale, the Katochi princess is gradually brought into the European fold: Bellasis meets her first when she is twelve years old and on numerous occasions thereafter (always in the presence of her mother); he teaches her English, she learns to read the bible and is even baptized to become 'in heart and soul a convert', after which the protagonists are united in marriage through the services of an Amritsar

79 While it may be argued that Gardner made this scene up so as to present himself as central to the events, his portrayal of Rajputnis and their place in Pahari society was modelled on concrete experiences and is therefore pertinent to this analysis.

80 See Kushwant Singh's introduction to Lawrence (1975[1845], vol. 1, pp. 3-5).

81 The Rajputni was probably modelled on Sansar Chand's real daughter, who was pursued by the upstart Dogra, Dhyān Singh. Sansar Chand's successor refused the alliance, preferring exile in British territory with his sister to a degradation of the Katoch name. Dhyān Singh, as seen above, ultimately married a Pahari Rajputni belonging to the Pathania elite of Nurpur (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 193-4). An account attributed to Jodh Singh Katoch, another of Sansar Chand's sons, takes this further by claiming Dhyān Singh's request for an alliance was a front for the aged Ranjit Singh, who secretly longed for the princess (Anonymous 2004[1870s], 21-25). The character of Bellasis may have been inspired by an adventurer with that name active in Bundelkhand a generation earlier, see Pinch (2012, 127).

clergyman 'by Christian rites, in the presence of god and man' (Lawrence 1975 [1845, vol. 2, pp. 113-4]).<sup>82</sup> Despite his evident sympathy for the Rajputni, Lawrence concludes the alliance on a tragic note: Māhtāb Kaur drowns in a river while fleeing 'infidel' soldiers from a faction opposed to her alliance with Bellasis. This is perhaps an unconscious attempt by the author to preserve the heroine's purity through quasi-baptismal waters that might quell the idolatrous *sati* flames (note that the absence of a funeral pyre does not disqualify the act from being labelled a *sati* in Pahari oral tradition as well, as seen in the *jhera*'s widowed rani who jumps to her death from the palace balcony). The novel concludes with the heartbroken hero leaving the heathen Punjab in despair.

Lawrence is fascinated by the noblewomen of the hills, but stops his fantasy short, lest it blur the boundary between the two cultures. The Rajputni's idealized portrait in *Adventures* points to the growing distance between Europeans and South Asians in the build-up to the events of 1857-8. Less than half a century after the era of Ochterlony, a new generation of British officials had come to the fore, replacing the openness of their predecessors with a wariness towards South Asian culture. Nevertheless, the coexistence of Gardner's radically different appreciation of *sati* and Lawrence's fiction testifies to the variety of approaches to the rite among foreigners active in northwest India in the 1840s. The continual contact with Pahari Rajput communities thus gained Rajputnis an almost mythic quality, their cultural heritage and physical beauty provoking the imagination of male contemporaries on either side of the British frontier, including in such precursors to Victorian conservatism as Lawrence's *Adventures*.

The centrality of West Himalayan noblewomen to Pahari statecraft during the early colonial encounter has been demonstrated in several case studies, and especially in the Guleri rani's achievements as the leader of a noble family and regent of Sirmaur under the EIC. This review of archival records, oral traditions, and travellers' accounts has shown that, contrary to the recurrent claims of postcolonial discourse theorists and despite the various restrictions imposed by indigenous culture and British rule, Pahari women in positions of power did find a voice and actively participated in the political struggles of their time. The custom of *sati*, hitherto regarded

82 Lawrence's familiarity with the region is underlined in his attribution of the heroine's successful transition to European culture to her Pahari provenance, which rendered her 'less fettered by custom and form than the people of the plains' and more open 'to new customs' (Lawrence 1975[1845, vol. 2, p. 169).

as the ultimate symbol of female oppression, has similarly proven more malleable than some scholars had claimed in recent decades: the struggle for power in post-war Bashahr was won by transforming the rite into a tool for political profit, while the Guleri rani's threat of suicide derived from a more complex set of reasons than the suffocating grip of global capitalism's invisible *videśī hāth* ('foreign hand').

Such misreadings need not discourage us from attempting to read different sources in new ways. When carefully applied to oral traditions, archival records, and literary texts, such efforts can lead to important insights that significantly enrich our understanding of the past. The explanations advanced for noblewomen's actions in this chapter thus result in credible narratives concerning Pahari Rajputnis, whose conduct is revealed as primarily guided by considerations of honour and purity. Having explicated the social frameworks wherein *sati* emerged and was practised, and having surveyed a variety of case studies (including their deep resonance with Gardner's eyewitness account), we have a solid enough basis to attempt a preliminary definition of the meaning *sati* may have held for Pahari Rajputnis. In 'going with' (*sahagamana*) the husband to become *sati*, the faithful wife renounces the transient world and enters a state of *vairāgya* ('detachment') that affords her undisputed political powers as a side effect. As Axel Michaels argues in the case of Nepal, while widows who declare their intention to become *sati* are 'ritually dead' to the world in the same way that ascetics sever links with society upon initiation, the extent to which the *sahagamana* may be equated with an ascetic remains unresolved.<sup>83</sup>

This central aspect of *sati*-hood is also noted by Paul Courtright, who links the wilful abandonment of the world with ascetic-like discipline and not, as popular accounts of Rajput tradition would have us believe, with romantic suicide (1995, especially 186-190). This important distinction also manifests in the cases at hand: the Sirmauri widow of the *jhera* kills herself out of grief for a dead spouse, whereas the otherworldly Rajputni of Nurpur mounts her husband's pyre in authoritative detachment. While both noblewomen are remembered as *satis*, the quality and efficacy of their actions is conditioned by their motives. Thus, the heartbroken suicide is internally consumed, so to speak, by the attachments concomitant with romantic love, while the Nurpuri princess tames her emotions to assume a detached posture that gains the admiration and submission of her followers. While separating the social from the personal in discussions of the obligations, feelings, and

83 The vocabulary pertaining to *sati* in the Nepali case is similarly associated with asceticism (Michaels 1993, 28-31).

actions of Pahari Rajputnis may be as impossible a task as the drawing of a distinct line between detached asceticism and romantic suicide, the question of these protagonists' agency has, at least, been resolved, and, as seen in Chapter 5 below, would continue to develop even after a quarter century of EIC rule over the hills.



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## 4 Statecraft at the Edge of Empire: Bilaspur, 1795-1835

In 1809, representatives from the British East India Company and the Sikh Empire of Lahore convened in Amritsar to sign a treaty that would fundamentally transform the political landscape of northern South Asia. Assiduously protected by the parties until the fall of Lahore in the Anglo-Sikh War of 1845-6, the Treaty of Amritsar divided the Punjab between the superpowers along the course of the Sutlej River, creating a singularly reliable constant that secured their expansionist drive on the river's two sides for decades (Kiernan 1971 [1943]). The boundary's benefits to empire notwithstanding, its application to the upriver hill tracts (Image 9) generated a novel set of problems that irrevocably changed the political culture of the Pahari Rajput kingdoms. Thus, subservience to Lahore reduced the once illustrious 'mountain emperor' of Kangra to a *zamindar* of modest proportions, while the incorporation of Sirmaur within EIC territory facilitated its rise as an exemplary 'model state' in British circles. It was, however, in Bilaspur, whose territories encompassed extensive tracts on both sides of the Sutlej, that the effects of the treaty were most strongly felt. Officially subservient to both Calcutta and Lahore but in practise almost entirely independent, the kingdom on the Sutlej emerged as the most consequential mountain state in the early decades of British rule. While the dominant discourse of regional historiography has come to dismiss this era as 'the darkest page in Bilaspur's history' (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933], vol. 2, p. 508), a careful examination of its trajectory between the Battle of Chinjhiar (1795) and the troubled reign of Kharak Chand (b. ~1813, r. 1824-39) reveals a vibrant kingdom that utilized its anomalous position to its benefit, developing a distinct courtly culture that defies the classificatory schemes customarily applied to 'Rajput states'.

This chapter investigates the development of Bilaspur's unique political culture in light of the contingencies that emerged from its division along the imperial frontier. In the field of Himalayan Studies, this address complements the growing body of work on the adaptation of highland societies to the redrawing of political boundaries in the modern era by shifting attention to the seldom-studied 'Indic' states of the lower hills.<sup>1</sup> In Bilaspur,

<sup>1</sup> For representative studies of highland societies' adaptations to modern boundaries, see Bauer (2004), Bergmann (2016), and Shneiderman (2015). On reactions to modern boundary

**Image 9** The Sutlej River Valley near Rampur-Bashahr



The river marked the imperial boundary between Calcutta and Lahore, c. 1809-45.

the coalescence of geographic and political borders along the Sutlej River compounded the challenges entailed in such adaptations, as the kingdom's newfound position along the imperial divide accentuated the gap between the novel regulatory practises instated by the EIC and the *'ancien régime'* dynamics of seasonal warfare that disrupted them (Kolff 1989). Thus, while the EIC's paramount concern of maintaining peace along the Sutlej did, in fact, grant the rajas of Bilaspur a more central role in government, the kingdom's repositioning along the watery boundary paradoxically freed it from the regulatory gaze of Calcutta and Lahore. In the absence of meaningful engagements by external authorities, Bilaspur had, by the 1830s, entered a perpetual state of crisis that pitted the ruler, his kinsmen, and their affiliates against each other in clashes that were directly connected to the imperial border that cut through the state.

The dismissal of politically potent non-Rajput agents in the aftermath of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16) – and those associated with monastic orders in particular – was a preliminary step in this process, and was followed by

placements in the lower Himalaya, see Michael (2012); on Tharu society and the state in Nepal's southern Tarai, see Guneratne (2002) and Krauskopff (2000).

a forceful termination (in 1819) of the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry's capacity to provoke large regional changes by way of 'empire from below'.<sup>2</sup> Distinctly pre-colonial and patently at odds with the EIC's interests along the frontier, these elements had sustained a pliable political culture that had balanced the Kahluri rulers' prerogatives with those of their noblemen peers in earlier decades; their removal, although intended to augment kingly authority, ultimately deprived the state of cardinal checks and balances that ended up increasing the friction between the raja and his kin. Imperial policies thus ended up facilitating a pronouncedly more absolutist form of monarchy along the frontier than in any of the neighbouring states – under the watch of the very power that pretended to temper such absolutism.

The strengthening of monarchic privileges in the Kahluri transition to modernity is explored in three phases. The intimate association of monastic affiliates, Brahmins advisors, and enterprising individuals outside of the Rajput elite with pre-colonial polity is examined first through biographic accounts of representative figures from Bilaspur and neighbouring kingdoms. Revealed as cardinal facilitators of trans-regional developments in the build-up to the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16), these high-level non-Rajput functionaries become increasingly scarce in later years, and the mention of their contribution to statecraft absent, marginalized, or derided in mainstream, Rajput-centred historiography. The termination of earlier dynamics of 'empire from below' is explored next through a review of the last armed conflict between Bilaspur and Kangra in 1819. The details of the affair highlight the continued relevance of ancillary groups in inter-Pahari Rajput struggles in the early years of EIC rule, while its narration in regional histories displays the gap between the implementation of authority in 'Rajput states' and its re-imagining under the British. The new order's implications for political, military, and economic behaviours on the borderland manifested in the improbable reign of Kharak Chand Kahluriya (1824-39), which is examined in the last section. Enjoying a free hand over his government because of the EIC's preference for peace on the frontier over meaningful intervention in the state, the inexperienced ruler pursued controversial policies that were resented by his peers, EIC superiors, and, ultimately,

2 By 'empire from below', I refer to the mutually beneficial process of political expansion by a superior ('imperial') power through interactions with smaller polities (in this case, Rajput kingdoms). Expansion may be either pacific, by extending political patronage and protection from an imperial centre towards the periphery, or hostile, by peripheral polities' *fitna* ('rebellions') against a centre as part of their processes of state-formation. For a detailed exploration of this topic in central India, see Wink (2008[1986]); on its iteration in the age of EIC expansionism, see Kolff (1989).

Map 3 Bilaspur



Cartography: Offek Orr

modern historiography. However, an evaluation of these policies in light of the deep changes triggered by the Treaty of Amritsar proves they were a largely (though in no way exclusively) logical reaction to the permutation of powers in the divided kingdom, and the political culture that they engendered an outcome of multi-partied, multidirectional interactions that go beyond the simplistic faulting of the ruler's 'tyrannical' character in mainstream historiography.

#### 4.1 Beyond the Rajput Fold: Brahmins, ascetics, and monastic advisors

The customary explanation for Gorkha dominance tells of a pact between Bilaspur and Kathmandu against Kangra, which granted Bilaspur a brief return to the limelight of Pahari politics between 1803 and 1815. The brokering and sustainment of the alliance, although customarily attributed to the raja, was actually the work of the ruler's prominent advisor Shiv Datt (or Bhatt) Rai. Contrary to the Chandela Rajputs, who had resided in the hills for centuries, Shiv Datt was the first of his family to be born in the mountain state. The court chronicle of Bilaspur, the *Shāhī Vamś Vinod* (1882, hereafter SVV) relates that Shiv Datt's father, Raghunath Bhatt, was 'a Brahmin from Varanasi' taken into service by the Kahluri noble *miyan* Sakht Chand.<sup>3</sup> Sakht Chand met Raghunath in Jwalamukhi at the end of a military campaign under his elder brother, raja Devi Chand (r. ~1741-1772), and offered him patronage after being impressed by his skilful poetry and knowledge in divination. Back in Bilaspur, Raghunath wed a Brahmin woman of his *gotra* ('clan'), with whom he had Shiv Datt.

After spending his childhood with the inner circle of the Kahluri nobles, Shiv Datt was initiated by his father into an (unspecified) religious lineage and then set off to Nepal, where he 'obtained a great influence on the raja's mind'; upon his return to Bilaspur, he became the channel of communication between the two states.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the Gorkhas marched on Kangra, Shiv Datt formed part of the Chandela entourage that accompanied the conquerors and that would continue to supply them with grain, arms, and fighters throughout the campaign (1805-9).<sup>5</sup> As the crucial facilitator of ties between Bilaspur and Nepal, Shiv Datt amassed great wealth and *jāgīrs* ('land grants'), becoming a leader of consequence among the state's Rajput Chandelas. The extent of his influence may be inferred from a letter from the Gorkha monarch to the Governor-General of India that was written about a year before the Anglo-Gorkha War. Addressing a recent spate of

3 Authored by court pundits, the *Shāhī Vamś Vinod* was commissioned by raja Hira Chand (r. 1850-82) (Chandel 2007, 81). Elderly Bhatts are still famous as witty impromptu poets today (personal communication, Ajay Singh, May 2008); see also, Kamphorst (2008).

4 'Ross Report', fo. 106. Communication with Kathmandu was officially entrusted to Bilaspur's *wazir*.

5 The raja of Bilaspur and his peers returned to Bilaspur after reaching Jwalamukhi, where Kahluri campaigns seem to have traditionally been concluded, apparently in order to pay tribute to the goddess who had originally summoned the Chandelas to the hills (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 496).

violence along the boundary between the Gorkha held-hills and the EIC's Handuri Chandela clients in the adjacent plains, the monarch recited the history of the conflict in some detail:

[I]n the sumbut year 1862 (or A.D. 1805), when the Gorkha army occupied a position on the [left] bank of the Sutledge, raja Ram Sing Hindorea and every one else who was inimical to this state and disposed to excite disturbances were expelled from their country while the Kulorea [Kahluriya] raja and such others as faithfully and zealously discharged the duty of allegiance to this government [of Kathmandu] and abided by their engagements were confirmed in their possessions, and *the villages in dispute were assigned in jaggeer to Dheodutt Raee, who from his ancestors was a dependent of this government; and he accordingly held possession of those villages until my army crossed the Sutledge on an expedition westward*, when rajah Ram Sing, taking advantage of that opportunity to dispossess Raee, reinstated himself in the possession of the villages in question, and began to raise disturbances and to commit various unwarrantable acts. In consequence of which [the Gorkha commander] kazeer Amer Sing Thappa again ejected him from the possession of those villages.<sup>6</sup>

The villages that were wrested from Handur and conferred upon Shiv Datt, which would subsequently serve as *casus belli* for the Anglo-Gorkha War, are telling of the state servant's cardinal role in the conflict. This also shows that while the war would ultimately be fought between Gorkha and EIC troops with the shifting support of local rulers, the opportunities that it generated extended beyond the clique of the Rajput elite. For the Gorkhali conquerors, conferring the management (and revenue) of villages on Shiv Datt Rai both rewarded a key facilitator of their westward expansion with material benefits that further indebted him to their cause and simultaneously entrusted a sensitive border area to an agent removed from the network of Chandela kinsmen. The intimation that 'Dheodutt Raee' was a dependant of the Kathmandu Durbar since 'the time of his ancestors' suggests that his father's ties extended beyond Varanasi to Kathmandu. Indeed, according to sources privy to Kahluri history, Shiva Datt's father had first established links between Bilaspur and Nepal, and it was only after his son had prognosticated in favour of the Gorkha attack that Amar

6 Rajah of Nipaul to the Governor-General of India, received 5 August 1813, cited in Stiller (1973, 243, my emphasis). Handur territory comprised both Gorkha-controlled highlands and British-protected lowlands, allowing Ram Saran to use the latter as a base for raiding the hills.

Singh Thapa took his armies beyond the Sutlej to invade Kangra (Chandel 2007, 81, 86-87).<sup>7</sup>

The advisor's prominence in Bilaspur was palpably evident to the EIC troops who scaled the Bandla Heights above the capital in the early stages of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16), as the army assembled to oppose them was led by none other than the Rai himself.<sup>8</sup> While the parties never clashed, the moment effectively signalled the end of Shiv Datt's career as Bilaspur's strongman. Rather than take the Kahluri forces head on, the British negotiated an alliance through the official manager of state affairs, the Kahluri *wazir*. Deprived of Gorkha patrons, the Rai fled beyond the Sutlej, leaving Bilaspur (and the historical record) for good.

If sources from Bilaspur provide a fairly neutral depiction of the Rai, regional histories from states that were opposed to the Gorkhas award him a far darker role. In Udhav Singh's *The Gurkha Conquest of Arki* (1903), Shiv Datt is faulted for every conceivable conflict that occurred between Kangra's rise in the 1780s and its suppression by Nepal (1800s-10s) (Singh 1903, 6-8). According to Singh, 'Kulwant Rae' was initially an advisor to the regent rani of Bilaspur, Nagardevi Katochi (r. ~1775-1800), and it was upon his poor counsel that the kingdom lost two of its northern forts (most likely Chinjhiar and Tiuni) to Sansar Chand of Kangra.<sup>9</sup> Shiv Datt then travelled to Kangra to plead for the forts' return, but after being rebuffed he 'took an oath not to return to Bilaspur unless he had destroyed the Kangra state'. Taking to the easterly hills of Kumaon, he returned at the head of fifteen Gorkha generals and 32,000 soldiers who laid siege to Kangra 'at the Rae's request' (Singh 1903, 7-8).<sup>10</sup> The inflated agency attributed to Shiv Datt in this and similar accounts is, as shown in Chapter 2, part of the general critique of the Gorkhas as alien-barbarians that guided the reformulation of Rajput identity in the hills over the long nineteenth century. However, the ferocity of Singh's attack belies the considerable power such non-Rajput, enterprising court affiliates wielded in Pahari Rajput polity before the British. The political mastermind of Bilaspur thus formed part of a larger class of privileged

7 On the establishment of the alliance between Bilaspur and Nepal in the reigns of Devi Chand and Prithvi Narayan Shah (1760-70s), see Chander (1907, 12).

8 On Shiv Datt Rai's wealth, see 'Ross Report', fo. 107; for his role as the commander of Chandela troops (apparently based on the *Shāhī Vamś Vinod*), see Chandel (2007, 86-87).

9 Singh thus conflates Shiv Datt Rai with Nagardevi Katochi's erstwhile confidant Bairagi Ram (see Chapter 1).

10 A more realistic assessment puts the number of Gorkha troops in the west at around 16,500 troops in 1804 (Stiller 1973, 283).

cosmopolitan advisors that propelled turn-of-the-century politics in the hills, and that are, in fact, closely related to the Joshi astrologers of Kumaon.

In his reports on Kumaon and Garhwal under the Gorkhas (1791-1815), captain Hyder Young Hearsey (1782-1840) went to great lengths to recommend a certain 'Hurruck Dos Jotshee' as a potential ally in the impending conflict with Nepal. An Anglo-Indian officer in EIC service, Hearsey travelled extensively in Gorkha-occupied Garhwal, where he encountered the 68-year-old former *dīwān* ('chief minister') of Kumaon, an 'active, vigorous', and astute Brahmin, whose 'name the Goorkas dread'.<sup>11</sup> A veritable 'Earl of Warwick of the mountains', Joshi was reputed to have the rajas of Kangra, Handur, and Garhwal under his thumb, as well as leading factions of the 'Kyooneeas [Kahluriyas] and Sermooreeas'.<sup>12</sup> As early as the 1780s, Joshi contacted British authorities in Lucknow as the raja of Kumaon's *vakīl* ('representative') to request support in pre-empting a Gorkha invasion.<sup>13</sup> Complications on the EIC's side induced him to return to Kumaon in 1790. Having withstood several assaults, he withdrew to Garhwal, where he made 'a stand of five years' and was ultimately betrayed by the local soldiery.<sup>14</sup> At the time of Hearsey's writing, Joshi had escaped his captors to Haridwar, where he continued his diplomatic work incognito through communications with the EIC and the hill chiefs.<sup>15</sup>

While the kingmaker from Kumaon evaporates from the records at this stage, the review of his doings reveals several common traits with Bilaspur's Shiv Datt Rai. Both individuals were valued diplomats of considerable influence in Pahari courts who were assisted by further links to religious centres in the plains (Varanasi/Haridwar), and both took an active part in warfare as military leaders. Far from the disparaging portrayals of later accounts, Joshi and Rai were politically engaged Brahmins, whose resourceful application of their talents rendered them astrologers, poets, diplomats, and military leaders all rolled into one. The gap between the prescribed and ascribed roles

11 Hearsey to Adam, 24 August 1814 in East India Company (1824, 47). On the Garga Brahmin statesman 'Harsha Devo Joshi' of Kumaon, see Joshi et al. (2014, 113-129); Pemble (1971, 14); Stiller (1973, 186-189); and his mentions in archival sources below. For a similar agent of the preceding generation, see Joshi (2012).

12 Hearsey to Adam, 9 September 1814 in East India Company (1824, 59).

13 The Kathmandu Durbar's order that the senior statesman of Kumaon be bribed seems to have yielded no results (Regmi 1999, 118).

14 Hearsey to Adam, 24 August 1814 in East India Company (1824, 47). Joshi's compliance was secured by his eldest son's residence in Nepal as a political prisoner.

15 Joshi was expected to muster over 6000 warriors in this event, a substantial number equal to contemporary EIC estimates of the Gorkha army (Hearsey to Adam, 24 August 1814 in East India Company 1824, 47-50).

of these non-Rajput strongmen is significant, for it relocates the trenchant question of caste identities in pre-colonial North India from the 'military market' of the countryside to the internal workings of Rajput kingdoms. Depending on context, such Brahmin advisors would be either deridingly labelled '*bhát* or bard by caste' in the Rajput historiography of British India (Singh 1903, 6), or as masters of divination from specific Brahmin *gotras* in the dynastic-focused chronicles intended for local consumption.<sup>16</sup>

The makeup of the Garhwal Court on the eve of the Gorkha conquest offers a third example of the non-Rajput personae animating Pahari politics at the time. Alongside influential Kumaoni Brahmins, the Garhwal Court hosted the celebrated poet, painter, historian, and diplomat Mola Ram (1743-1833).<sup>17</sup> Like Shiv Datt of Bilaspur, Mola Ram was descended from plains-based foreigners, his family issuing from a painter in the retinue of the Mughal prince Suleman Shikoh, who reached Garhwal in the late 1650s during the war of succession fought between his father Dara Shikoh and the future emperor Aurangzeb (b. 1618, r. 1658-1707).<sup>18</sup> When his master quit the kingdom, the painter opted to stay, increasing its prestige through the development of miniature painting. By the time of the Gorkha conquest, the family had become embedded in the Garhwali elite. As a subjugated underling of some talent, Mola Ram assisted the conquerors in governance, accompanying their armies west beyond the Yamuna, where he composed a verse account of their victories.<sup>19</sup> While it is unclear whether Mola Ram came from a Brahmin background, his career exhibits the same qualities found in his Kahluri and Kumaoni peers: a familiarity with the workings of court supported by extensive connections in North Indian political centres, and a capacity for simultaneously fulfilling palpably different professional callings.

It is important to distinguish this class of non-Rajput advisors from the professional scribes (*quanungos/kāyasthas* or, in South India, *karaṇams*) who were charged with the regular administration of state. The difficulty in discerning the formers' role as agents of change is largely due to the latter's incorporation into the imperial apparatus of British India. While the *quanungo* proficiency in record-keeping rendered them integral to

16 On the flux of caste identities among Rajput bards in Garhwal, see Sax (1995, 143-146). For an alternative perspective on the nexus of religion, diplomacy, and military action in Rajput courts, consult Peabody (2003, 80-111).

17 For appraisals of Mola Ram, see Lal (1982[1968], 25), and Kamboj (2003, 119). On the knowledgeable Kumaoni Brahmin 'Hariballabh', who also served Garhwal, see Hamilton (1819, 5).

18 Garhwali folksongs describing Dara Shikoh's flight to Garhwal are still sung today (personal communication, William Sax).

19 The *Garh Rājavaṃśa Kāvya*, noted in Chapter 2.

governance under the bureaucratized administration advanced by the EIC, enterprising individuals like Shiv Datt Rai, Harak Dev Joshi, and Mola Ram became a threat to stability. As a result, these facilitators of trans-regional conquests were cast into the shadows of history, assuming the role of secret messengers, confidants, or, at best, *vakils*.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, the Kahluri *wazir's* return to the centre of politics at the expense of the erstwhile virtuoso of pan-Himalayan diplomacy Shiv Datt Rai is reflective of the shift towards containing the Pahari states within clearly demarcated boundaries under landed gentries to the exclusion of more mobile individuals outside of the Rajput elite. While these changes had a palpable impact on royal advisors, the relations between the kingdoms themselves required significantly more dramatic developments to affect established dynamics, as may be discerned from the brief resurgence of the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry soon after the Anglo-Gorkha War.

#### 4.2 The Ends of 'Empire from Below': Kot Dhar, 1819

Four years after the instatement of EIC rule over the hills, the raja of Kangra launched an attack on Bilaspur with the backing of Lahore. As in earlier instances, the invasion quickly came to include several other groups from the region; under the new constellation of a divided Punjab, this posed a serious threat to peace along the frontier. As with other cases of 'empire from below', the affair essentially boiled down to sedition or *fitna*, that is, a pattern in which local interests lead to imperial expansion to the benefit of both parties.<sup>21</sup> Readily appreciable in the Kahluri collusion with Nepal against Kangra (1803-15),<sup>22</sup> this feature of the political landscape encountered new obstacles under

20 The *quanungos* incorporated into British civil administration often compiled the histories of their assigned territories. In the hill states, the *Tawārīkh-i-Kohistān-i-Punjab* of Hardayal Singh, a *quanungo* of the Katoch rajas who entered British service in the 1860s, was central in informing the *History of the Panjab Hill States* (Dayal 2001[1883], 65-6, 92). For similar biographies from the region, see Bhatnagar (2007, 91-127). On the impact of scribal practises from Mughal times in the era of British expansion in India, see Bellenoit (2014). On *karaṇam* contributions to a shift in historical consciousness in early modern South India, see Naryana Rao et al. (2001, 93-139); on the impact of bureaucratized government in the same region, see Raman (2012).

21 Recurrences of 'sedition' or *fitna* in the hills agree with the pattern outlined by André Wink in the rise and sustainment of the Maratha Empire, and which took diverse forms in various parts of the subcontinent during the second millennium (Wink 2008[1986], 34-66). On the evolution of periphery-centre interaction in colonial South India, see Dirks (1987); for an earlier variant from the Telangana region, see Naryana Rao et al. (2001, 24-92).

22 But note deviations from this storyline in Chapter 2.

the joint guardianship of Calcutta and Lahore, revealing how new meanings became imbued in political authority during the early colonial encounter.

Retrospectively attributed to the 'ancient' rivalry between Bilaspur and Kangra, the attack and its outcome were actually intimately linked to the former's division along the Sutlej. Having secured extensive liberties from the EIC in return for its break with the Gorkhas in 1815, the Kahluri regime was made practically free of British interference in the years leading up to the attack, most notably in its exemption from forwarding tribute to Calcutta.<sup>23</sup> The kingdom's tracts north of the Sutlej, though officially under Lahore, also went largely unchecked, since the considerably greater sums realized from kingdoms situated entirely within their territory (e.g., Kangra) occupied its collectors in the early stages of Sikh entrenchment in the hills.<sup>24</sup> Encouraged by this lax attitude and, from 1815, by the protection of the EIC, the raja ceased paying his dues to Lahore altogether. As the archived correspondences between frontier officers and their superiors in Delhi reveal, this policy backfired into a bloody confrontation some four years later (Sinha and Dasgupta 1964, 71-6).

Then entering his tenth year as Lahore's most distinguished Pahari subject, the aging raja of Kangra apprised the Sikh collector, *sardār* Desa Singh Majitha (Image 10), of Bilaspur's withholding of the revenues from its northern tracts. A joint force of Sikh and Katoch warriors advanced through the kingdom's northern parts soon after, encountering fierce resistance at Kot Dhar. Named after the *koṭ* ('forts') dotting the *dhār* ('mountain range'), Kot Dhar was a strategic asset paralleling the right bank of the Sutlej in a north-westerly direction, from the river's southern bend near the capital (the distance of about a day on horse) to the Kangra border in the area

23 Bilaspur stood out in the retention of most of its territory (except minor border corrections with Handur, the EIC's main ally in the region), and was spared taxation for maintaining roads. Its sole obligation was to supply *begārīs* ('unpaid labourers') at regular intervals for random tasks in the hills (Aitchison 1909, vol. 8, pp. 319-21).

24 The Pahari kingdoms north of the Sutlej were either annexed or subjected to heavy revenue demands, whereas Bilaspur forwarded a mere 10 per cent of the income due from its northern tracts. The revenue in the adjacent plains, by comparison, was levied at 30-50 per cent (Grover and Chaudhary 2006, 257). In the 1830s, Bilaspur forwarded 6000 rupees per annum to Lahore, a sum that was apparently paid as tribute since the establishment of the Sutlej as the imperial boundary in 1809; see OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838, fo. 45. Assuming Lahore did not dramatically increase its demands on the hill states in the 1840s, the Kahluri tribute would have also stood out as light in comparison with its neighbours. Thus, in Suket, a kingdom roughly equivalent to Bilaspur in size, population, and revenue income (about 60,000 rupees per annum), the tribute was fixed at 18,800 rupees alongside 'presents to certain sardars of the Lahore Durbar'; see NAI, F.D., P.C., 31 December 1847, no. 2559-2577, Erskine to Elliot, 27 May 1847, fo. 56.

**Image 10** A Sikh *sardar*, possibly Desa Singh Majitha, receiving a deputation of Hill Chiefs; Guler c. 1775



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, IS. 153-1952

today inundated by the Bhakhra Dam. Despite inflicting casualties on the invaders, the Kahluri forces ultimately lost the ridge. Turning to diplomacy, the raja attempted to bribe the *sardār* and even proposed the transfer of a fort 'on the frontier of Kangra known to be greatly coveted by' Sansar Chand.<sup>25</sup> Hardened by the loss of his men, the collector rejected the offer.

With the enemy dangerously close to the capital, the Sodhis of Anandpur in the *pargana* ('tract') of Mokhawal joined in protest. Situated a few hours' walking distance from the ancestral Chandela fort of Kot Kahlur and the pilgrimage site of Naina Devi, the Sodhis had a long and complicated history with the Chandelas. A sanctified Sikh community, the Sodhis were ever cognizant of the Kahluri raja's ousting of their progenitor, guru Gobind Singh, from Bilaspur in the 1680s.<sup>26</sup> The issue of sovereignty over Mokhawal

25 Ross to Ochterlony, 18 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 71). The fort in question could well have been Chinjhiar.

26 The guru's alliance with Sirmaur and settlement in Paonta were the direct result of his expulsion from Anandpur (Alam 2001[1986], 135). For more on this period, consult Bal and Grewal (1967, 65-83).

had remained murky since, as both the Sodhis and the Kahluri regime claimed rightful ownership over the ensuing centuries. Thus, when the Kahluriya attempted to tax the Sodhis in 1807 the latter retaliated by allying with Lahore, costing the mountain state a hefty 25,000 rupees in revenue (about a quarter of its annual income).<sup>27</sup> In joining the aggressors from Lahore and Kangra, the Sodhis not only encumbered Kahluri logistics – the additional front they opened stretched the 3000-4000-strong army to its limits – but also awakened sleeping demons from the raja's loss of Mokhawal a dozen years before. The accumulated blows to Chandela pride infuriated the raja, who declared that 'if he cannot retain' his lands 'himself, his enemies shall not have peaceable possession of them for, at least, a year to come'.<sup>28</sup> Messengers were sent to recruit mercenaries in the plains and an official invitation to join the war against Lahore was extended to the exiled raja of Nurpur, then residing in EIC territory.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, the dynamics of ad hoc coalitions that characterized the Pahari landscape during the Battle of Chinjhiar three decades earlier were alive and well in the early years of imperial rule.

British authorities south of the Sutlej initially followed the situation from afar through the reports of Bilaspur's resident *vakil* at Subathu.<sup>30</sup> The news of Kot Dhar's fall and the Sodhi uprising aggravated the situation, prompting the commanding officer, lieutenant Robert Ross, to personally inspect the state. Ross and his troops pitched camp a short distance from the capital, from where he updated David Ochterlony, his erstwhile commander in the

27 See Anonymous (n.d.[1934], 67), Chander (1907, 14), and 'Ross Report', fo. 109, for revenue estimates. In extending patronage to the Sodhis, the Maharaja of Lahore not only increased his revenues, but also furthered his claim to universal leadership of the Khalsa. On Ranjit Singh's patronage of religious groups (including the Sodhis), see Grewal (2008[1990], 108-109).

28 Ross to Ochterlony, 18 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 71).

29 Bir Singh Pathania (r. 1789-1815, d. 1846) had lost his kingdom of Nurpur to Lahore soon after the fall of Kangra (1809) and spent most of his adult life as an exile south of the Sutlej. He seems to have developed close ties with the Kahluri leadership during his prolonged residence in the Gorkhas' erstwhile headquarters of Arki, near Bilaspur. Nonetheless, in the conflict of 1819 he ultimately heeded the EIC's warning that 'the Sutlej is his Rubicon, which once crossed, he must succeed or perish, as retreat will be denied him' (Ross to Ochterlony, 18 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta 1964, 72). For a review of Bir Singh Pathania's career, see Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, pp. 263-6).

30 At the time of these events, Subathu came under the Ludhiana Agency, which, in turn, reported to Delhi. The frequent changes in the chain of command between Delhi and posts along the frontier during the early decades of EIC rule are summarised in Suri (1971, 6-12). On the enmeshment of military and civil duties among such agencies and its consequences, see Peers (1995).

Anglo-Gorkha War and current superior at Delhi (1819-22).<sup>31</sup> Conceding that 'Runjeet Sing's devastations' were readily apparent in the 'flaring villages' beyond the Sutlej, Ross was optimistic regarding the invaders' intentions, which he believed to be directed at the northern part of the kingdom alone, so he decided to stay put in wait of further instructions.<sup>32</sup> In the meantime, the events in Bilaspur acquired a momentum of their own.

Following the course of the Sutlej from Kot Dhar to a site opposite the capital, the Sikh, Sodhi, and Kangra soldiers caused 'the substantial and timid part of the inhabitants [...] to flee to the interior'.<sup>33</sup> The forces were nonetheless careful to abide by the imperial divide and limited their attack to the northern side of the river, allowing Ross and his 300 musket-armed Gorkhas to remain in place and urge the Kahluriya's restraint instead.<sup>34</sup> While the raja pretended to hold back, his agents were busy recruiting soldiers in the British-held plains. As news of these actions leaked, Ross sent a hurried communication to his superiors to enquire into the legality of these manoeuvres. Responding 'by way of express', Ochterlony judged the Kahluriya free to protect possessions north of the river with whatever forces he could muster, regardless of where they had been recruited. The Delhi agent's opinion concerning disruptions in Mokhawal was similarly unambiguous:

[I]f the [Sodhi] troops on this side the Sutlej should presume to do any thing beyond the mere act of demonstration, I not only think that Maha Chund has a right to resist, but that we [the EIC] are bound to repel any attack. I could wish therefore that the surdar in command [Desa Singh Majitha] should instantly be informed that the slightest real attempt on the Kehloor possessions on this side will be a breach of treaty.<sup>35</sup>

31 Ochterlony was then at the height of his power, 'ruling like an Indian Emperor' from Delhi, where he was charged with seeing to the Mughal family's needs, affairs in Rajputana and the Punjab, and relations with Lahore (Yapp 1980, 185).

32 Ross to Ochterlony, 18 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 71).

33 These included the 'Shroffs [*sarrāfs* or exchangers of gold], Banyas [traders], women, etc', see Ross to Ochterlony, 27 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 73).

34 The remaining corps of the 800-strong Nasiri Battalion was divided between garrisons in the hills (at a minimum distance of five days' march) and the 'large body of men' then accompanying the seasonal collection of revenues from the hills to Delhi. Ross was further impeded from embarking to Bilaspur due to having fallen from a horse on 'very rocky ground' some weeks earlier, the injury forcing his travel in a *champan* ('litter'); see Ross to Metcalfe, 27 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 74).

35 Ochterlony to Ross, 23 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 73).

This response from the grand architect of political hierarchies in the hills south of the Sutlej displays a clarity much lacking in his subordinate: seen from Delhi, stability along the imperial boundary superseded any tactical consideration of Bilaspur's local fighting. At the same time, since the affair had now come to involve the imperial centres, Ochterlony sent a messenger to Lahore requesting an end to the attack. The letter took the greater part of a week to reach the Maharaja, and about four days to reach Ross at Sahi. Meanwhile, the Subathu commander became increasingly disconcerted by the situation in Bilaspur, which, according to his sergeant's dispatch in the field, was rapidly deteriorating:

Last night I arrived at Belaspoor by request of the raja. All the villages on the banks of the Sutluj are on fire. The raja has taken up his abode in [the] rear of the city, the people of the city has made there [sic] escape from three and four coss [6-8 kilometres]. On this side of the city, this morning at daylight, Runjeet Singh's troops arrived on the banks of the Sutluj just in front of the city of Belaspoor, several musquet [sic] shots have been exchanged on both sides. [...] You are please to come yourself or send some sepahies [*sepoys*] for the protection of the raja and city [for] there will not a single person remain here, as there is no trusting to those people on the other side of the banks of the Sutluj. Between Belaspoor and Makawall, 200 of Runjeet Singh's troops have crossed the Sutluj and taken 46 villages of the Belaspoor raja's three days ago. A numbrous force still is coming down to the Sutluj in front of the city. [...]

N.b. This moment 40 or 50 cavalry has been attempting to cross the Sutluj near the city, but has been repulsed by the raja's troops.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, within a mere two weeks of the invasion, the Kahluriya's fear of impending doom had become alarmingly real. As Sikhs, Sodhis, and Katoch waged war on its northern possessions, the kingdom's army remained tensely undermanned, awaiting the arrival of new recruits from the plains. Within a few days, the Katoch cavalry began attacking the city's defences. The Treaty of Amritsar breached, Ross mobilized towards Bilaspur to support the besieged raja, only to find the aggressors retreat north of the Sutlej. The clash between Calcutta and Lahore was averted.

36 Gordon to Ross, 26 March 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 75).

## Solutions from above, histories from below

Whether it was the news of an advancing Gorkha contingent or explicit directives from Lahore, the cessation of hostilities saved Bilaspur from ruin. Later exchanges between Delhi and Lahore suggest the motivations for this abrupt change primarily concerned the importance of maintaining peace along the imperial boundary. Ochterlony thus insisted that the Sikh collector 'refund his plunder', including letters of allegiance obtained from landholders south of the Sutlej, and that the Sodhi leader publicly 'account for his conduct' by disavowing links with Lahore.<sup>37</sup> Disowning the Sodhi leadership was a first and necessary step in resolving this 'most gross insult to the British government', and it was only after the *sardār* offered his personal apology that amity between the empires was restored.<sup>38</sup> For Lahore, the apology was no servile gesture, but a strategic necessity, since its armies were then expanding towards Peshawar and Kashmir and thus particularly wary of opening an additional front on the Sutlej. Nevertheless, despite having been drawn into the conflict against his will, the Maharaja refused to return the ridge that had cost his soldiers' lives. Thus, despite being advised by Ochterlony, 'as a friend', to return Kot Dhar along with a *moumla* ('monetary compensation'), Ranjit Singh held on to the ridge until his death in 1839.<sup>39</sup>

The Maharaja's forceful policy towards Bilaspur was mirrored in the EIC's benign aloofness towards the state. No longer the critical frontier zone that it had been before the Anglo-Gorkha War, the hills and their rulers became a marginal region that was to be contained.<sup>40</sup> Writing to Ranjit Singh shortly after the events, Ochterlony marvelled at how the Sikh collector, despite 'his

37 Ochterlony to Ranjit Singh, enclosure of Ferguson to Metcalfe, 13 April 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 76).

38 Metcalfe would have forwarded this letter to Calcutta with some frustration, having personally concluded the treaty with Ranjit Singh almost exactly ten years earlier. For Desa Singh's apology, see Cunningham (2002[1849], 161). Although the *sardār's* actions were an embarrassment to Lahore, his career was not irreparably damaged; a few years later, he assumed the prestigious governorship of Amritsar.

39 Ochterlony to Ranjit Singh, enclosure of Ferguson to Metcalfe, 13 April 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 76). Kot Dhar came under the EIC after the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-6) and was returned to Bilaspur in 1867 (Punjab Government 1995[1910], 7).

40 The superpowers' agreement in resolution of this affair contrasts with similar instances of disputes in the far richer plains. Thus, Lahore's request that the exiled raja of Nurpur be prevented from re-crossing the Sutlej into his hill state in 1817 was quickly concluded, whereas Sikh incursions into the plains south of the Sutlej were only resolved after lengthy disputes (Sinha and Dasgupta 1964, 71-2, 191-4).

usual good sense and judgement', chose to rely on Sansar Chand of Kangra when it was clear that

[t]he animosity between the Kullooriah and Kutooch rajahs was so great as to render it probable he would carry his troops beyond the proper limits. And he ought to have known that Sunsar Chund would not be sorry for a breach between Maharajah [of Lahore, Ranjit Singh] and the British government as his least chance of getting back Kote Kangrah [lost to Lahore in 1809] and retaining his country of which he does not feel confident from his present engagements with the Maharaja.<sup>41</sup>

Relying on the intimate knowledge of the region that he had gained in preceding decades, Ochterlony identified the animosity between the hill states as the source of the conflict. The manipulative Sansar Chand proved remarkably astute in this respect, since his actions not only avenged Bilaspur's facilitation of the Gorkha invasion of his kingdom in 1805, but also aimed at bringing Calcutta and Lahore into a confrontation that would destabilize the region and ultimately free him from the Maharaja's grasp.<sup>42</sup> Given Ochterlony's considerable integration into the region and earlier attestations of centre-periphery dynamics, his assessment of Sansar Chand's motives seems largely sound.<sup>43</sup>

In resolving the conflict 'from above', the empires put an end to the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry's status as the driving force behind West Himalayan Rajput politics. Despite the evident truths that emerge from the records, regional histories subscribe to a markedly different interpretation of the conflict over Kot Dhar that is consummate with the mountain kings'

41 Ochterlony to Ranjit Singh, enclosure of Ferguson to Metcalfe, 13 April 1819, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 76).

42 Ranjit Singh seems to have agreed with this interpretation, the raja of Kangra being deprived of the honours he had previously been accorded during visits to Lahore soon after the war, and concluding his life (in 1823) in voluntary isolation (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 188). This stance is customarily attributed to the egalitarian undercurrents of Ranjit Singh's imperial ideology, which scorned the 'old nobility' of the hills. The granting of 'raja' titles to competing members of the Katoch elite in 1820 suggests that the souring of relations between Ranjit Singh and Sansar Chand was directly related to the events of 1819 (Grewal 2008[1990], 105).

43 For an important corroboration of Ochterlony's view that Sansar Chand was behind Desa Singh's attack, see Cunningham (2002[1849], 160-1). On Cunningham's exceptional knowledge and reliability, including his impartial mention of EIC officers bribing leaders from Lahore during the war on the Punjab in 1845-6 – a statement that cost him his career – , see Stephens (2004). For a similar instance in which Paharis exploited the boundary between Calcutta and Lahore to their benefit, see Moran (2010).

trenchant sense of autonomy and minimizes the impact of their imperial masters. This is particularly true of sources composed in Bilaspur, in which the supra-regional conflict is presented as a direct continuation of the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry, and the lower rungs of Rajput administration as its culprits. Thus, the loss of Mokhawal to Lahore in 1807 is pinned on a local commander's failings rather than collusion with Lahore, while the fall of Kot Dhar is squarely blamed on the state *wazir*. According to these accounts, *wazir* Sansaru Singh Chandel avenged his dismissal by travelling to Lahore, whence he returned with the Sikh collector to conquer Kot Dhar. Being a fellow Chandel, Sansaru soon underwent a change of heart and proposed to return the range in exchange for his reinstatement to the post. Although the raja accepted the solution, the loss of the Maharaja's fighters in battle doomed it to rejection.<sup>44</sup>

By replacing the vindictive raja of Kangra with Bilaspur's estranged *wazir*, Kahluri historiography advances *birādarī* ('fraternity') as the paramount value underlying Rajput polities. Rather than an inter-Pahari matter, the conflict is transformed into a familial affair between Chandelas, who may periodically disagree with each other but are destined to live together and should therefore seek amicable solutions to their quarrels. Instead, the real culprit is the sufficiently distant (and objectively culpable) Ranjit Singh of Lahore, whose snatching of Kot Dhar despite earlier promises to the contrary echoes the story of his capture of Kangra Fort in 1809.<sup>45</sup> Thus, much like the foregrounding of Shiv Datt Rai in Udhab Singh's *The Gurkha Conquest of Arki* (1903), Kahluri narratives cast a distinctly local agent (Sansaru) as the driving force behind events at the expense of the more immediate causal factors of Lahore policy and Bilaspur's withholding of revenues.

The events of Kot Dhar and their retelling are indicative of broader trends in Pahari political consciousness. For one, they persistently assign agency to locals at the expense of greater powers. The factual dependence on these superior powers for the local polities' survival is compensated by their moral inferiority in relation to the Rajput nobility. The histories composed in the hills thus counter the practical denouement of local authority with narratives that foreground the 'perennial' rivalry between Bilaspur and Kangra with intermittent mentions of ancillary components – be they the non-Rajput

44 This narrative appears in Anonymous (n.d.[1934], 68). See also Singh and Varma (1940, 26), which further faults the raja's ministers for sabotaging a deal proposed by Ranjit Singh, in which they would reclaim the tract in return for 5000 rupees as compensation for war expenses.

45 See Chapter 2.

agents who facilitated their dealings or the liminal groups that contested their authority. In adopting such narratives, Pahari histories successfully present the extension of Gorkha, Sikh, and British powers over the hills as currents flowing through a stream of events that radiates from a highly localized, formerly independent centre. Sansar Chand's manipulation of Desa Singh in 1819 thus comprises an elaborate coda to the Bilaspur-Kangra rivalry, capping the earlier era of Kahluri alliance with the Gorkhas (1803-15), the parties' standoff in the battle of Chinjhiar (1795/6), and, in the more distant past, Nagardevi's siding with the Mughals against the mountain emperor's attack on Kangra Fort (1783). In accordance with the pattern of empire from below, all of these events (with the exception of Chinjhiar, for which we have little external evidence), involved significant powers from beyond the hills.

#### **A kingdom contained: the raja and his kin, 1819-24**

The events at Kot Dhar, like the expulsion of Shiv Datt Rai before them, heralded the decline of pre-colonial practises along the imperial frontier. At the same time, the involvement of ancillary groups in Bilaspur's affairs highlighted the new types of challenges that faced the Kahluri regime in the early decades of British rule. Caught between imperial superiors and communities whose identification with the ruling elite was tenuous at best, the kingdom's survival hinged on maintaining a balance between its imperial masters, the landed elite, and sub-groups within and near its territory. While this balance all but dissipated under his successor, the closing years of Maha Chand's reign saw these elements contained by virtue of a careful distribution of powers within the state. Passing through the capital in 1820, traveller William Moorcroft noted that although its bazaar remained in a 'ruinous state' due to the recent attacks, the kingdom itself was largely prosperous.

[T]he revenues are said to be about Rs. 40,000 clear. The supposed produce of the country, where the rent is taken in kind, is divided [...] between the raja and his peasantry in five shares – one for the raja, one for payment of the peasantry when he wants their services, and the rest to the cultivators. The raja is popular. It is said that the full amount of his subjects exceeds not 20,000 and of the working members there is certainly a large proportion employed on his forts and he only pays them a seer and a quarter of flour [...] daily allowance. With so large an abstraction from the works of agriculture, as I have witnessed, this chief must have much merit to

be so well spoken of. The roads through his country are broad and good and they have been made at very light cost.<sup>46</sup>

An equine veterinarian by profession who doubled as an EIC spy, Moorcroft's report suggests the kingdom was largely unfazed by the events at Kot Dhar.<sup>47</sup> Thus, if revenue demands on the peasantry were similar to rates in the adjacent plains (40 per cent of produce in kind), the reported scarcity of cultivation suggests transit duties levied at mountain passes and river crossings along the country's 'broad and good' roads – cheaply maintained by *begāris* ('unpaid labourers') – remained an important source of income. It is also safe to assume that the estimated income from a revenue of 40,000 rupees referred only to Bilaspur's southern tracts. Given the slightly larger territory north of the river, which was estimated at 60,000 rupees per annum, and the reported 3000 households in the capital, the kingdom's total income reached 100,000 rupees, suggesting a population of up to 50,000.<sup>48</sup> The relative prosperity of the kingdom, as residents of the capital seemed to imply, was largely made possible by the raja's distance from the administration, as Maha Chand 'only shewed himself in the morning in his kuchcheree [*kachahrī*] to receive the obeisances of his servants, and shut himself up in his zunana [*zanānā*] for the rest of the day whilst his native officers managed the country in the way they thought best suited to their respective interests'.<sup>49</sup> Stability was thus gained by weighing the raja's sovereign rights against the aspirations of competing elements at court through the mediation of its 'native officers'. But just who were these competitors?

The Kahluri elite consisted of eight large families, descendants of the lawful sons of the grand innovator Ajmer Chand Kahluriya (b. 1692, r. 1712-41), who was behind the kingdom's expansion over the seven ridges that delineated Kahluri sovereignty in the early modern era (Hutchison and Vogel

46 OIOC IOR/MssEur/D236/A (II), William Moorcroft's journal, entry of 12 March 1820, fo. 43-4, and the description of the bazaar on fo. 49. For an abridged version of Moorcroft's journal, see Moorcroft (1838).

47 For a recent appraisal of Moorcroft, see Alder (1985).

48 This is consistent with the assessment of Kahluri revenues at 87,000 rupees per annum after the Battle of Chinjhiar, see 'Ross Report', fo. 100. The population of the state would have hovered between 30,000 and 50,000; statistics drawn up by the British military establishment half a century later (in 1873) assess the total population of Bilaspur at only 66,848; see OIOC IOR/L/P&S/18/D61, [anonymous] 'Confidential Memorandum', 4 April 1873, fo. 11. The figures of the 1881 census reveal the population had risen to 86,640, reflecting the increased migration of plainsmen to the hills. For these and other statistics, see Kanwar (1999, 94-5).

49 OIOC IOR/MssEur/D236/A (II), William Moorcroft's journal, entry of 12 March 1820, fo. 49.

**Image 11** Portrait of a Prince, possibly an Ajmeriya Mian; Bilaspur c. 1700

Courtesy of The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

Being coeval with Ajmer Chand Kahluriya (b. 1692, r. 1712-41), this unnamed prince may well be one of the eight 'Ajmeriya miyans', whose progeny would compete with Bilaspur's rulers for power during the 19th century.

1999 [1933], vol. 2, pp. 503-4).<sup>50</sup> Collectively known as the 'Ajmeriya *miyans*', this progeny posed a continual threat to Bilaspur's rulers in stark contrast to the power structures in Sirmaur (whose rulers often died heirless) or the undisputed primacy of Sansar Chand of Kangra (whose competitor-kin were murdered by his grandfather). By the 1820s, the competition between the raja and the Ajmeriya *miyans* centred on the ruling line that issued from Ajmer Chand's firstborn successor, Devi Chand, and was then led by raja Maha Chand (Nagardevi's son), and that of the *dalyan* or second-in-line to the throne, *miyan* Jhangi Chand alias Jagat Chand Kahluriya (r. 1839-50, d. 1857).<sup>51</sup>

While Jhangi Chand would increasingly come to represent the collective of *miyans*, their dealings with the raja were primarily mediated by the state *wazir*, Sansaru Singh (active c. 1795-1832), a member of an ancient branch of the Chandelas, whose family had reportedly held the post for the better part of six centuries.<sup>52</sup> Lauded by local histories and contemporary records alike, Sansaru played a key part in maintaining the peace between the raja and the *dalyan*'s family, which, although respectful towards the ruler, remained closely involved in state affairs for decades, betraying the Kahluri cause at Chinjhiar in 1795/6 and enjoying benefits under the Gorkhas through its protégé, Shiv Datt Rai. The Kahluri *dalyans* were thus privy to the kingdom's running for at least two decades, and were in a good position to override the raja should he overstep his mandate.<sup>53</sup>

The deceptive stability of the Kahluri political structure in the closing years of Maha Chand's reign retained a continual tension between the ruling line and its relations, as per most Rajput kingdoms in Northern South Asia. The weakness inherent to this system of agnate succession and

50 The remaining 'Chandia' Rajput families (e.g., the Kaliyanchandia, Tarachandia, Sultanchandia) trace their descent to earlier branches of the ruling house (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 513).

51 Jhangi Chand was the grandson of Sakht Chand, raja Devi Chand's younger brother. Sakht Chand's eldest son, the conspiratorial Aggardatta of the epic of Chinjhiar, died heirless, which transferred leadership of the family to his second son, Bishnu, the father of Jhangi Chand from the daughter of Ishwari Sen of Mandi (b. 1784, r. 1788/1815-1826).

52 The Chandela *wazirs* split from the ruling line in the twelfth century and influenced state affairs since then, as partly evinced in their shifting of residences to remain close to the royal family throughout history (south of the Sutlej till c. 1650, and then to the north, where the new capital was established) (Chandel 2007, 100).

53 Maha Chand's royal pursuits ensured that this was never a threat. On the raja's devotion to horse riding and music, see Chander (1907, 16). For his somewhat less regal attempts at domesticating a wild boar on the capital's *maidān* ('green'), consult OIOC IOR/MssEur/D236/A (II), William Moorcroft's journal, entry of 12 March 1820, fo. 48.

the pressures it placed on the privileged stratum of royal kinsmen became alarmingly palpable under his successor. Departing from his father's limited interest in governance, the young monarch took a pronounced interest in state affairs. The dispersal of non-Rajput statesmen-advisors and the suppression of Kangra autonomy, like the delimitation of state territory, ultimately increased the pressure on the Kahluri elite in a toxic mix that would implode under the juvenile raja. Deprived of the usual checks and balances that distributed power among the elite, the minimally supervised raja exploited these conditions to his advantage in remarkably surprising ways. The result was a highly adaptive regime, where pre- and early colonial practises combined in an altogether novel type of sovereignty that was to play a central part in defining Pahari Rajput kingship in the modern era.

### 4.3 Kingship Recalibrated: Kharak Chand's Bilaspur, 1824-35

The improbable reign of Kharak Chand (b. ~1813, r. 1824/7-1839) was presaged by his birth under an inauspicious planetary alignment.<sup>54</sup> Reading disaster in his birth chart, the court astrologers forbade the father from seeing 'the face of the prince (*kumār*) until he turned twelve', and the newborn was sent to be raised in a village on the outskirts of the kingdom (Singh and Varma 1940, 27). Overcome with longing for his only son, Maha Chand disobeyed his advisors and summoned the child a year earlier than prescribed, only to die shortly afterwards. As the eleven-year-old successor was a minor, the administration of state was entrusted to an EIC-approved council consisting of the *wazir*, Sansaru Chandel (d. 1832), the *dīwān* ('treasurer') Balku Mehta, and *miyan* Ram Das (who had recovered Chinjhiar from Kangra in 1800) as the representative of the Ajmeriya families.<sup>55</sup> In 1827, after three uneventful

54 The raja's reign is cursorily covered in Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 2, pp. 508-9). The details of his dealings may be had in local histories from the turn of the century, namely, Chander (1907, 19-21); Singh and Varma (1940, 27-9); and Anonymous (n.d.[1934], 69). The ruler's negative depiction persists in recent publications, where he is described as a 'bigoted, cruel and, above all, an opinionated ruler' (Chandel 2007, 100). Archival records relating to Kharak Chand include OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, and NAI, F.D., P.C., 20 April 1840, no. 12-16, S.C.: 'Conduct of the Rajah of Nahan on Occasion of the Kahlur Disturbances' (hereafter 'Kahlur Disturbances', referencing file no. 12). The political turmoil surrounding his reign according to the Punjab Record Office files at Lahore is found in Krishen (1952, 343-355).

55 See Chander (1907, 19), which substitutes *miyan* Ram Das with 'Miri Mian', although subsequent events indicate the two persons refer to the same individual. Balku Mehta's role as treasurer is nowhere explicitly stated, but may be deduced from his ranking alongside the *wazir* as a 'principle minister and hereditary servant of the raja'; see OIOC IOR/F/4/987/27712, Political

years under the council, Kharak Chand assumed full powers. Shortly after ascending the *gaddī* ('throne'), the fourteen-year old monarch travelled to solemnize his marriage to a princess of Sirmaur at Nahan.<sup>56</sup> The ominous predictions of his horoscope quickly materialized, as an outbreak of cholera sent the guests to bathe in the river in droves, creating a stampede that left half the *barātī* ('wedding procession') dead (Singh and Varma 1940, 27).<sup>57</sup>

Upon his return to Bilaspur, the raja turned on the council that had run the state during his minority: the treasurer was hanged, the *wazīr* replaced by his inexperienced son, and the representative of the *miyans* imprisoned. It was at this point that Kharak Chand adopted the horrifying habit of trampling his subjects under his elephants' feet. While many fled the capital, the town was never entirely abandoned; rather, whenever the raja was seen leaving the palace on an elephant, the shops were immediately shut and the townsmen kept silent indoors (Singh and Varma 1940, 27).<sup>58</sup> This reign of terror was sustained by 300 Rohilla cavalymen from the plains, who maintained public order and kept the Ajmeriya *miyans* at bay, it being understood that any opposition would lead to a confiscation of their lands in Mokhawal. If Kharak Chand's stubborn and, at times, irrational disposition destabilized his court, the conflicting interests of Calcutta in the hills helped maintain his rule by impeding direct intervention in his affairs.<sup>59</sup> While frontier officials were quick to realize the dangers brewing in the mountain state, the overriding directive from their superiors was to

Letter from Bengal, 31 May 1826, fo. 1. This interpretation is supported by the customary role of members from the Mehta community as treasurers in neighbouring Sirmaur (Singh 2007[1912], 221).

56 The alliance was brokered by the Guleri rani of Sirmaur, who in all likelihood married off her real daughter on this occasion.

57 On the frenzy of communal bathing, see Singh (2007[1912], 250).

58 Thomas Godfrey Vigne, whose second visit to Bilaspur in 1839 coincided with a bloody battle between the raja and his uncles, noted 'a few hundred inhabited houses' around the 'comparatively deserted' bazaar (1844[1842], vol. 1, pp. 63-4).

59 During the 1820s-30s, the outpost of Ludhiana in the plains along the Sutlej grew into the most formidable political centre ('agency') on the frontier, relegating the hill states to an administrative backwater. While Ludhiana peaked, the political agency at Ambala assumed the responsibility for the mountain kingdoms alongside its main charge of the 'Protected Sikh [Phulkian] States'. By 1827, the management of most of the hill polities had been transferred to Subathu, which reported to Ambala, whose charge consisted of the larger entities adjoining the plains, namely, Bilaspur, Handur, and Sirmaur (Suri 1971, 6-12). On British policy during this period and the 'privileged position' of Phulkian kingdoms in the EIC, see Yapp (1980, 165-173; quotation from 171). The handful of Pahari representatives in residence at Ambala paled in comparison with the 150 *vakils* and agents of the Phulkian States there. For a list of the *vakils* in residence, see OIOC IOR/F/4/1483/58472, Fraser to Swinton, 29 November 1832, fo. 11-17.

contain the unrest and preserve the Sutlej boundary, rather than directly intervene in its affairs. This was readily apparent in the first of numerous interventions conducted by the EIC's agent at Ambala, captain William Murray.<sup>60</sup>

An industrious Scotsman who, with the notable exception of Sirmaur and Patiala, viewed the rulers under his charge as 'either idiots or accomplished villains', Murray reluctantly departed to inspect the mountain state upon news of the clash between the raja's Rohillas and the *miyans* (Jacquemont 1933, 316). Entering the capital with three Gorkha companies collected from Subathu, the agent put an end to the fighting, which he pinned on the 'considerable number of mercenaries' roaming about the town and palace hallways.<sup>61</sup> Since evicting the Rohillas from the state was beyond his mandate, the agent sought to diffuse the conflict by issuing orders that would stabilize the regime: the *miyans'* *jagirs* were to be restored, 'unsavoury' individuals banished from court, and *miyan* Ram Das and Sansaru Singh reinstated to the posts they had held in the regency council. While precious few of Murray's directives were ever followed, the recurrences of conflicts in Bilaspur were to make the agent and the raja regular acquaintances in the years that followed.

Passing through the hills in the winter of 1830, French naturalist Victor Jacquemont took part in a meeting between Murray and Kharak Chand that is telling of the unique relationship that had developed between the ruler and his superiors (Jacquemont 1834, vol. 1, pp. 322-3). Then seventeen, the raja had been forced out of his kingdom after trampling a subject to death under one of his elephants, the ensuing protests having threatened his safety. Arriving from Ambala, Murray interviewed the monarch at length, only to learn that apart from the immunity granted to the Ajmeriya *miyans'* *jāgīrs*, his reforms of earlier years were either ignored or overturned. The raja's drinking companions had thus replaced the agent's ministerial appointments and the able wazir Sansaru was dismissed from office and replaced by a tailor from Shimla. Despite the evident chaos in Bilaspur, Murray simply admonished the raja for his reckless behaviour and sent him back to his kingdom with assurances of the EIC's protection. Noting his visitors' bafflement at the nonchalance surrounding their exchange,

60 Murray pioneered the study of the Sikhs during the nearly two decades he spent in the Punjab (he was first appointed assistant to Ochterlony in 1816), his report providing the basis for one of the earliest accounts of Sikh history (Prinsep 1834). For contemporary accounts of Murray's diligence at Ambala, see Garret (1971[1934], 8) and Davidson (2004[1843], vol. 1, pp. 158-160).

61 Krishen (1952, 344), which notes Clerk's erroneous claim that Murray's visit took place in 1828.

Murray explained that because the *sanad* sanctioning the raja's authority precluded direct intervention in the state, there was little left for him to do but scold the ruler, who 'being a type of imbecile', was sure to resume his abuses once back home. Assuming that this scenario was repeated in the numerous meetings alluded to in the archives,<sup>62</sup> it seems the raja earned his reputation as much as frontier officers helped sustain it.

The disparaging portrait of Kharak Chand was sustained and accentuated by Murray's replacement at Ambala upon the agent's sudden death in June of the following year. George Russel Clerk (1800-1899) would play a central role in vilifying Kharak Chand and, through this assessment, in delineating the contours of Pahari Rajput kingship. The agent's bias against the raja manifested early. Having learnt of Kharak Chand's 'vicious disposition' and 'habit of compelling people to encounter mad elephants',<sup>63</sup> Clerk made a point of reprimanding the monarch in person soon after assuming his post. The death of Bilaspur's able mediator and manager Sansaru by 'a sudden bolt of lightning' on a routine journey to Ambala in 1832 compounded the young raja's position.<sup>64</sup> While Kharak Chand abided by custom in appointing Sansaru's son, Bishnu Singh, to the post, the latter was decidedly lacking in the experience and charisma required to sustain the post despite having briefly held it in 1827. As the administration showed signs of faltering, the Ajmeriya *miyans* (who may have purposely contributed to the new *wazir's* failures) persuaded their king to replace him with the *dalyan's* cousin, Bhangi Chand (Chander 1907, 20). Under the leadership of Jhangi and through the assistance of Bhangi (popularly recalled as 'Jhangi-Bhangi'), the Ajmeriya *miyans* gained a crucial channel through which to monitor the regime and protect their interests. The agent at Ambala, who first backed the raja's choice of *wazir*, ultimately lent his support to the *miyans*, believing the minor infringement of 'tradition' that it constituted outweighed its benefits.

The disruption of balance at court in favour of the *miyans* did not go uncontested. Reacting to the takeover of his inner circle, Kharak Chand

62 Both Murray and his successor, Clerk, seem to have seen more of the raja than the extant records indicate. For example, when Jacquemont returned from his extensive visit to the Punjab via Bilaspur on 9 November 1831, he found Clerk conducting an investigation in Bilaspur 'on account of some new knavery' on the raja's part, see Jacquemont (1834, vol. 1, p. 192). Despite the legal constrictions of their role, the agent assured his visitor that the distance between the subject chiefs' sovereignty and dispossession was but a 'stroke of the [Delhi agent's] quill' (Jacquemont 1933, 316).

63 Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 7-8.

64 For the *wazir's* death, see Chander (1907, 19). For an early appreciation of Sansaru's 'firmness, propriety and discretion', consult OIOC IOR/F/4/570/13990, Ochterlony to Adam, 14 May 1815, fo. 70h.

contracted an alliance with the Sodhis of Anandpur in Mokhawal (Singh and Varma 1940, 28). Although they had rebelled against his father in 1819, the Sodhis had become valuable allies over the intervening years. Resentful of Lahore for disowning them after the events at Kot Dhar, the Sodhis' frustration increased with the official transfer of Mokhawal to Lahore in 1829, which put an end to the hitherto ambiguous status that had spared them from regular taxation in the preceding years.<sup>65</sup> The nebulous boundaries between the residents of Mokhawal and the Kahluri and Sikh regimes are indicative of the predicament of the imperial frontier: the tract was at once home to the leading families of the Chandelas and their ancestral fort, rendering it central to Kahluri identity, but at the same time its inclusion of the 'priestly' community of Sikh warrior-peasants connected it to the broader world of the Punjab and Lahore.

To retain control of Mokhawal, the Kahluriya had to devise measures that would ensure the support of both groups while accounting for their divergent allegiances with the greater powers on either side of the Sutlej. By allying with his late father's foes, Kharak Chand earned eyes, ears, and arms capable of fighting in the heart of his Chandela competitors' territories. For the Sodhis, the raja's patronage offered protection from the *miyans* and a return to the ambiguous status that had served them profitably until then, since any demands from Lahore could now be deferred to their newfound patron in Bilaspur. By the mid-1830s, the erratic raja had attained a precarious balance of state. Shielded from external intervention by virtue of his kingdom's division between Calcutta and Lahore, Kharak Chand countered the empowerment of the *miyans* by the agent at Ambala by allying with the Sodhis to the benefit of both parties.

While this state of affairs was a direct result of imperial policy, for EIC personnel on the frontier it was an indicator of all that could possibly go wrong in a poorly regulated state. In the reports of the agent at Ambala in particular, the raja and his regime represented the worst type of kingship imaginable, a point underlined through repeated comparisons with Sirmaur. And although the two states were indeed strongly divergent in numerous aspects, the superpowers' insistence on peace along the Sutlej had a major contribution to their incongruent trajectories of development. Enquiring into the military, economic, and political consequences of the Punjab's division for these two states reveals how, despite official laudation of Sirmaur, it was in fact Bilaspur that emerged as the stronger of the two at the beginning of British rule.

65 While Lahore may have not taxed the Sodhis, it was certainly more involved in managing 'the affairs of the priestly class of Sikhs' than the EIC had been (Cunningham 2002[1849], 188).

## Warfare and economy in Bilaspur and Sirmaur, c. 1810s-30s

The phased implementation of EIC policy in the hills and the eradication of 'nomadic' and 'predatory' groups in particular bred very different military cultures in Bilaspur and Sirmaur. As glimpsed in the account of Chinjhiar examined in Chapter 1, the Pahari states formed part of the Hindustani military market insofar as their armed forces were primarily made of ad hoc coalitions of peasant-warriors (Image 12). With the instatement of British rule over Sirmaur, these groups were replaced with a modest, hundred-strong army outfitted in the style of EIC sepoys.<sup>66</sup> Providing regular pay and privileged access to the administration, the army was a prestigious prospect that attracted the country's finest, and although it saw little to no action, its soldiers did play a key role in enforcing policy and public works. By the 1850s, the Sirmauri Army had become an integral part of the state and its most visible expression of authority.<sup>67</sup> As a constructive executive arm, the army contributed to Sirmaur's development as a model kingdom that exemplified the benefits of Pax Britannica. The situation in Bilaspur, barely one hundred kilometres away, was strikingly different.

With Calcutta and Lahore turning a blind eye to Bilaspur's internal affairs, the hill state turned into a hotbed of the very same elements that the EIC was bent on eradicating. By employing Chandela warrior-peasants, Rohilla cavalrymen, and Sikh Sodhis, the regime transformed into a solitary bastion of the Hindustani military market that the EIC was then busy stamping out throughout the subcontinent. Kharak Chand exploited the lack of intrusion into his affairs to buttress his rule with a truly phenomenal array of supporters. A witness to these forces at 'the great fair' of Haridwar in 1830 described a colourfully chaotic retinue, where 'one man was dressed in yellow, with a white turban; another in scarlet, with a yellow one', the parade comprising a 'purely and truly oriental' sight. That the soldiers carried and fired their arms in defiance of the Gorkha guards stationed at

66 For contemporary descriptions of the Sirmaur army, see Davidson (2004[1843], vol. 1, p. 164) and Eden (1866, vol. 1, p. 170).

67 British recruitment efforts in Sirmaur were strongly opposed by the raja, who feared the former's increased salaries (6-7 rupees a month, compared with 3 at Nahan), elaborate pension schemes, and access to education would attract his ablest subjects and thus undermine 'the efficiency of his establishments'. A compromise was ultimately reached, in which 300 Sirmauris were recruited in return for a British commitment to sustain the mountain kingdom's army; see, NAI, F.D., P.C., 11 June 1858, no 164, Hay to Temple, 22 March 1858, fo. 6. By the early twentieth century, British officers were regularly training the raja's army; see Imperial War Museum Archives, London, 91/25/1, 'Col C E Colbeck'.

**Image 12 Pahari warrior-peasants; Punjab Hills (Kangra?), late nineteenth century**

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the fairground gates, where visitors were meant to entrust their weapons upon entry, strengthens the witness's description of Kharak Chand as 'the greatest Hindoo ruler' in attendance (Davidson 2004 [1843], vol. 1, p. 103). The impunity of the troops who had supported the Kahluriya in the conflicts of 1819 and 1827 underscores the remarkable freedom enjoyed by their master, who remained a sure source of patronage for mercenary warriors. The raja's Rohilla protectors are a case in point.

Most likely followers of the Afghan Ghulam Kadir Rohilla (d. 1789) who had settled in the Saharanpur region in the latter part of the eighteenth

century, the cavalrymen were part of the generation that was displaced by EIC's expansion in the 1770s (Gommans 1999 [1995]). As Seema Alavi notes, British rule in the plains of Rohilkhand (south of Kumaon) engendered a young generation of unemployed men who were barred from pursuing their elders' occupations of trade and conquest, and who consequently sought employment in less-regulated regions as soldiers of fortune (Alavi 1995, 211). Whereas the Rohillas' earlier conquests in Garhwal and Kumaon were sustained by tapping into pre-existing trade cycles between the hills and the plains, their presence in the turbulent westerly kingdoms a generation later offered the opportunity for reviving their earlier means of livelihood as warriors for hire. The benefit for the leaders of the Shivalik Hills is evident in Sansar Chand of Kangra's rise through the aid of the Rohillas, whose discharge in the 1800s may have been partly responsible for his failure to repel the Gorkhas in 1805-9.<sup>68</sup> The entrenchment of imperial rule across the Punjab would have constrained these mounted warriors, who found a rare and generous patron in Kharak Chand, whom they served faithfully until his death. Thus, the alliance between the Kahluriya and his 'mercenaries' was, despite the scathing criticism of EIC officials, to no small degree indebted to imperial policy along the frontier.<sup>69</sup>

For all the contributions of external henchmen, it was the warrior-peasants of the Chandela and their affiliates who contributed the most to the bellicose atmosphere in Bilaspur. Prior to the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16), EIC officers had already reported that 'every Kehlooria zemindar possesses a sword, and almost every village has some fire-arms belonging to it';<sup>70</sup> given the limited engagement of the imperial powers, these conditions probably did not alter much during the 1820s and 1830s. This also suggests that the pacific period between the attack on Kot Dhar (1819) and Kharak Chand's full assumption of powers (1827) actually comprised an anomalous interlude in an otherwise fairly belligerent region. Thus, while EIC officers were correct to view Sirmaur and Bilaspur as similar insofar as the two states formed part of the interconnected

68 For Kangra, see Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 1, p. 183). On Kumaon, consult Alavi (1995, 83-4) and the detailed account in Joshi (2012). The temple to Kastani (Kaṭāsan) Devi in the Kiarda Dun is credited to raja Jagat Prakash (r. 1775-1789), who constructed it to thank the deity for his victory over Rohilla invaders (Singh 2007[1912], 183).

69 This critique of Kharak Chand's cavalrymen was highly hypocritical, since the EIC also employed Anglo-Indian riders to fulfil similar functions at the time. The celebrated riders of Skinner's Horse, for example, secured EIC control of the plains south of Bilaspur and Sirmaur (today's northern Haryana) in much the same way that the Kahluriya's horsemen protected him from competitors at court (Alavi 2003[2001], 295-8).

70 'Ross Report', fo. 10.

Rajput lineages controlling the hills, it was the unruly latter rather than the irenic former that most faithfully represented Pahari Rajput polity.

Their divergent military cultures aside, the differences between the states were also caused by their positions relative to the structural shifts affecting the regional economy. While statistics for Bilaspur's income from taxes on travel and goods before the British are wanting, it is probable that it lost important sources of revenue due to the centralization of authority in the Punjab. In his visit to the kingdom in 1835, traveller Thomas Vigne attributed its 'declining prosperity' to the diversion of trade to the plains. Until the establishment of imperial powers over the Punjab, Vigne explained, 'the only safe road for travelling merchants from Hindustan to Kashmir, and the countries north of the Punjab, was through Bilaspur': the plains-based voyagers customarily began their journey at Nahan, thence to Bilaspur via Subathu, and onwards to Kangra, Mandi, and beyond (1844 [1842], vol. 1, p. 65). However, the stability introduced to the plains from 1809 undermined this important source of income, as traders resumed the easier roads and more lenient taxation below.

Despite the reversal of regional trade patterns, Bilaspur remained a key player in the sub-regional network of trade due to its central position along the Sutlej. The trade passing through Bilaspur connected the region with Tibet to the east and Kashmir, Ladakh, and Central Asia to the north. And while most of the business in these networks was conducted at the micro-level between relatively short distances (usually the size of a modern-day *tehsil*, with at least one annual gathering in the capital), certain groups of traders continued to traverse great distances to sell high-value items (e.g., musk) in the plains, and would (in most cases) have had to pass through Bilaspur.<sup>71</sup> While these routes were no competition for the Grand Trunk Road in terms of upkeep, comfort, and volume, they did constitute a viable network of inter-Pahari and trans-regional trade that linked the Indian, Tibetan, and Central Asian markets. The data on income from tolls and transit duties at river crossings and mountain passes that is preserved in the EIC's archives supports this. According to officials in the 1840s, 5 per cent of Bilaspur's annual 100,000-rupee income was derived from tolls. Similar investigations in the far less centrally positioned Sirmaur yielded just under 14,000 rupees per annum from toll taxes – that is, nearly triple the sum of

71 Trade leaving Bilaspur for the hills would have followed either a north-westerly or northern route. The former led through Jwalamukhi, Kangra, and Nurpur towards Kashmir or Amritsar and Lahore, and the latter entered the mountains through Mandi and then branched east into Bashahr and West Tibet or north towards Kullu and across the Great Himalayan Range toward Lahaul, Ladakh, and Central Asia (Rizvi 1999).

its better-connected neighbour. This discrepancy is most likely due to the Kahluri interviewees from whom the data was culled, who would have been pressed to downplay the figures for external authorities to avoid harming the state income, suggesting that Bilaspur's profits from these resources were significantly greater than officially recorded.<sup>72</sup>

The Kahluri Court was also quicker than its neighbour to profit from the shifts in financial activity under the British. Thus, while Sirmaur continued to rely on modest-sized *qasbās* for fiscal activities, Bilaspur embraced the rise of new commercial centres in the plains.<sup>73</sup> During his tenure at Ambala (1823-31), William Murray oversaw the transformation of the station into a bustling centre where migrant entrepreneurs catered to cantonment soldiers, diplomats in residence, and merchants. Within a mere five years, the agent's jurisdiction extended to several 'lapsed' estates along its borders, attracting peasants through what Murray dubbed 'equitable' tax policies and reaping an annual 50,000 rupees in land revenue alone.<sup>74</sup> With a net income comparable to Sirmaur's, the agency became a formidable commercial site, hosting a little under 500 merchants and numerous bankers in 1831 (Lal 1846, 4-5; Garret 1971 [1934], 3). While the agent was not officially involved in the business that took place on site, he was frequently called to mediate when transactions turned sour. Thus, when Kharak Chand stalled payments for an elephant he had purchased from an aristocrat-trader in the plains through credit advanced by an Ambala banker, the political agent became embroiled in resolving the complex monetary exchanges enacted in his domain – of which the Kahluri Court made confident (if not always honest) use.<sup>75</sup>

72 For statistics on transit duties in the hills, see NAI, F.D., P.C., 31 December 1847, no. 2559-2577, Erskine to Lawrence, 23 November 1846, fo. 22-28. The objection that Sirmaur would have earned additional profits from the rising volume of goods reaching Shimla may be dismissed since most traders would have bypassed Nahan and gone through Subathu; similarly, the introduction of exorbitant taxes in Sirmaur would have inevitably failed given its proximity to Shimla, where traders were sure to have their claims redressed.

73 During the first half of the nineteenth century, Sirmauri rulers maintained extensive contacts in Jagadhri and Sadhaura (nowadays lost in the urban sprawl east of National Highway 1). The annual collection of revenues that took place during Dasara at Nahan was 'deposited in the shop of Lālā Jamunādās Sāhūkār, a resident of Jagādhri who came to live in the state in ancient times, and was among the trustworthy men of the state [...] the expenditure, too, was [calculated] in his shop' (Singh 2007[1912], 247). On *qasbās* as economic catalysts in eighteenth-century India, see Bayly (1988[1983], 346-68).

74 See the relevant entries in OIOC IOR/F/4/1025/28135, 'settlement of the zamindars of the lapsed states of Amballah & Belaspore [1828]'.  
75 Kharak Chand left a debt of 2000 rupees in credit to his successor. The Ambala agent spent much time and energy resolving the affair, including an abortive attempt to return the elephant to its original owner, see OIOC IOR/F/4/1926/82668, Metcalfe to Clerk, 4 December 1839, fo. 9-12.

Ambala was not the only site serving Bilaspur's economic interests. The Phulkian or 'Protected Sikh States' south of the Sutlej, Patiala in particular, held further advantages that were quickly seized upon. Being the largest and most prized of the Phulkian states, Patiala paralleled and complemented Ambala's rise by virtue of its close association with Lahore. For the Pahari states, Patiala bankers became central interlocutors with Lahore and its dependencies, as evinced in the failed defection of Dewan Singh.<sup>76</sup> An affluent member of the Lahore Durbar, Dewan Singh was increasingly pressured to surrender his wealth to Ranjit Singh under various pretexts during the 1810s. Having learnt of the *sardar's* discontent during a visit to Lahore in 1819 (as part of the failed negotiations for monetary compensation over the loss of Kot Dhar), the Bilaspur raja's *vakils* encouraged the disgruntled noble's defection to the mountain state. Lured by inflated promises of 100,000 rupees in cash and a *jagir* ('land grant') in the hills, Dewan Singh took their offer, depositing his wealth with Patiala bankers with the aim of crossing the Sutlej into EIC territory, withdrawing his fortune, and settling in the hills. While the plan never matured (Lahore coordinated with the EIC to prevent Dewan Singh from crossing the Sutlej), its span of multiple regional centres reveals the extensive economic linkages developing at the time, and the creative ways in which enterprising rulers in the hills exploited them.

The vitality of political and economic dealings at the Kahluri Court counters the customary depiction of Kharak Chand as a degenerate, if not entirely deranged, ruler. If anything, the struggles that characterized his reign are indicative of the incredible stakes entailed in gaining control of the state during his rule. That these contestations ultimately centred on land is consistent with similar cases from British India, wherein the freezing of borders and constraints on military expansion resulted in increased competition over territory. While Sirmaur quickly learned to exploit the EIC's legal apparatus to advance these aims (see Chapter 3), the struggles for land in Bilaspur resulted in armed conflicts. The Austrian baron Charles von Hügel succinctly captured the clash with established practises in his comments on one of the raja's numerous uncles while he was passing through Bilaspur in 1835. The uncle, according to von Hügel's informants, had spent over a dozen years imprisoned in a *durg* ('mountain fort') as punishment for pursuing 'the same predatory course to which most of the rajas of the Himalayas owe their possessions; forgetting that what was all right and proper thirty years ago, is now a criminal offence on either side of the [Sutlej] river' (von

76 For details on this affair, see Ross to Ochterlony, 20 March 1820, cited in Sinha and Dasgupta (1964, 116-117).

Hügel 2000 [1845], 24). It was, indeed, precisely the rise in regulation that lent Kahluri struggles such ferocity: contrary to its neighbours, Bilaspur was but minimally impacted by the regulatory schemes of its imperial masters, and its lands and resources were therefore a veritable treasure trove for proprietors and enterprising individuals.<sup>77</sup>

Over the course of four decades, from the defeat at Chinjhiar to its ostensible descent into tyranny, Bilaspur developed a unique type of sovereignty wherein earlier modes of statecraft were adapted to the radically altered environment of the imperial frontier. The marginalization of non-Rajput, cosmopolitan advisors and the stemming of territorial expansion from below were counterbalanced by the invigoration of North Indian governance, military, and fiscal practises. The instability of the 1820s-30s, customarily attributed to Bilaspur's 'tyrannical raja', was thus a product of deep regional shifts affecting the West Himalayan region at large. Wedged between the empires of Calcutta and Lahore and with little direct involvement by either power, Kahluri kingship under Kharak Chand thrived by exploiting the constraints and opportunities engendered by its position on the frontier. Innovatively reconfiguring the distribution of powers within the established framework of the Rajput state, the young ruler created a regime that bears striking similarities with the failed pre-colonial monarchy of Sirmaur under Karm Prakash (explored in Chapter 2): sustaining the resentment of court officials by abusing the absolute powers of their position, executing administrators and – in Bilaspur – subjects, the two rulers were forced to quit their kingdoms in the face of public resistance championed by court nobles, only returning to power by appealing to the imperial powers beyond their borders. Although a generation apart, the two rulers and their administrations came to typify misrule in contemporary discourses on Pahari Rajput rule. By the close of the 1830s, Kharak Chand's remarkable adaptations had outgrown the confines of his state, dividing the regional elite between his

77 The tracts north of the Sutlej were particularly appealing to landholders since they were more loosely regulated by Lahore than the southern tracts under the EIC. This is apparent in the dealings of *miyan* Bhangi Chand (the *dalyan's* cousin) as *wazir* following Kharak Chand's death in 1839, who was 'more anxious to secure to himself the independent control of the Trans-Sutlej possessions than to cooperate zealously for the amelioration of the state' (Metcalfe to Thomason, 17 March 1840, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 36). Territorial expansion remained a central goal of governance in later years; the rajas of Bilaspur and Sirmaur clarified that 'additions to their titles' in recognition of their support during the events of 1857-8 'would not be prized [...] unless accompanied by an increase in their territories'; see NAI, F.D., P.C., no 356: Temple to Edmonstone, 29 October 1858, fo. 1.

autocracy and its opponents. It was through these struggles, their aftermaths, and the verbose elaborations on their origins and causes that the modern interpretation of Pahari Rajput kingship would ultimately take shape.



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## 5 Widowed Ranis, Scheming Rajas, and the Making of ‘Rajput Tradition’

The untimely death of the raja of Bilaspur in 1839 heralded an astounding bouleversement of West Himalayan politics that revived the pre-colonial practise of kingship and statecraft with a vengeance. Briefly alluded to in the introduction to this book, these upheavals culminated in a brilliant, if short-lived *coup d'état* under two of the late raja's freshly widowed wives with the tacit support of their brother, the raja of Sirmaur. Disproving the very foundations of the nascent re-conceptualization of Pahari Rajput sovereignty then advanced by EIC administrators and their allies, these events are parsimoniously acknowledged in modern historical narratives, whose focus remains firmly set on their male dynasts' biographies.<sup>1</sup> However, the scale, intricacy, and tenacious hold of the ranis' revolution on local memory indicate there is more to this episode than the brief allusions scattered in regional histories seem to suggest. As the archived correspondences surrounding the affair reveal, the 'rebellion' not only toppled the prejudices and misconceptions developed (and cherished) by EIC frontier officials over a quarter century of dominance over the hills, but also provided the framework through which the modern interpretation of 'Rajput Tradition' came to be defined.

This chapter explores the background, execution, and aftermath of this forgotten episode of West Himalayan history by uncovering the empirical realities that informed the reformulation of Rajput sovereignty in the early colonial Himalaya. Cogently articulated in the communications surrounding the final years of raja Kharak Chand Kahluriya (b. ~1813, r. 1824-39), the notion of a definitive type of 'Rajput Tradition' was formulated through the counterexamples of the Kahluri 'autocrat' and his 'progressive' brother-in-law, raja Fateh Prakash Sirmauriya (r. 1815/27-50). As the preceding chapter has shown, this reading of Bilaspur and Sirmaur as opposite exemplars of Rajput polity by British personnel on the frontier and their allies was facilitated by ignoring substantive differences between the kingdoms. As this chapter shows, this reading was further strengthened by the cataclysmic

<sup>1</sup> The authoritative *History of the Panjab Hill States* condensed the story into a handful of paragraphs (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, 509-10), its authors' biases evident in the simplistic depiction of the elder and younger ranis of Sirmaur as 'twin sisters', a narrative choice that circumvents the cardinal issue of succession in Bilaspur, more on which below.

geopolitical shifts that followed the EIC's engagement in Afghanistan (1838-40) and the reorganization of the Empire of Lahore upon the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1839). Balancing crises along the frontier with the substantial undermining of EIC sovereignty in the hills, British administrators and their allies developed axioms about Pahari Rajput kingship in conjunction with and in reaction to events as they unfolded. As a result, the singular circumstances and agents that animated the struggle for the Kahluri succession were extrapolated to ostensibly universal principles regarding 'Rajput Tradition' – and, by extension, kingship and polity – in the reports of British personnel on the frontier, the chimeric constructs that constituted this 'tradition' subsequently carrying into the ever expanding body of colonial knowledge as empirical facts (for a lucid explanation of these processes, see Peabody 1996). As the shifty alliances, shady dealings, and prodigious investment of multiple agents in Kahluri affairs that are detailed below demonstrate, the purist interpretation of the 'Rajput State' that ensued from these interventions entailed a substantial conceptual leap that ultimately transformed the vibrant, multi-caste polities that answered to male and female rulers into the isolated enclaves of Sanskritic culture under the supposed successors of ancient Indic Kshatriyas encountered in modern histories.

After this introduction, the troubles marking Bilaspur *c.* 1835-40 are explored with a focus on the complex familial ties that bound its rulers and the royal family of Sirmaur. The raja of Sirmaur's intercessions with his brother-in-law during this period, although ostensibly aimed at rectifying the latter's deviation from 'tradition', are shown to have largely revolved around the marital ties that linked the two monarchs' families, and are thus indicative of the considerable importance laid on marriage and the procurement of male heirs as a means for political empowerment among the Rajput elite under the British. The processual formation of the paradigmatic notion of Pahari Rajput kingship is explored in the second section, which examines one of the earliest recorded expositions on the nature of kingship and polity in the hills. Scrutinizing the style, content, and logic behind a detailed report on Kharak Chand's final year in power by the EIC's political agent on the frontier, it shows how this document's ominous evaluation of the repercussions of Kahluri 'misrule' for British interests relied on a highly specific reading of 'Rajput Tradition', whose basic contours informed later elaborations on the nature of Pahari Rajput polity – despite the fact that a majority of the text's assumptions were disproved shortly after its writing. The third section narrates the story of the Sirmauri ranis' conquests after their husband's death. From their brother's complicity in multiple arenas to the dazzling manoeuvres of clandestine

(Rajput and non-Rajput) agents, the events display the prudent adaptation of resurgent pre-colonial practises to the novel setting of EIC rule. Thus, in spurring a rudimentary discourse regarding the nature of Pahari Rajput kingship, the ranis' polyvalent revolution seems to have unwittingly launched the process of 'traditionalization' in West Himalayan society (Washbrook 1993).

### 5.1 A Marriage of Interests: the Sirmauri ranis in Bilaspur

Constrained by clearly defined geographical boundaries under the British, the Rajput polities of the hills became increasingly invested in marital alliances as a means of expanding their influence.<sup>2</sup> For noblewomen and their natal families, the primary purpose of a marriage – apart from land grants, material gifts, and influence at court – was to produce an heir to their husband's throne. The viability of these alliances was invariably measured against the parties' position in the social hierarchy as per the Rajasthani principal of 'upwards' marriage (in which Rajputnis marry Rajputs of equal or higher status) and determined by the families' material and social capital at specific historical junctures.<sup>3</sup> The empowerment of Sirmaur during the first two decades of British rule (c. 1815-35) was partly indebted to such marriages, specifically to those between its ruling family and the Kahluri leadership.

While dynastic chronicles seldom elaborate on the motivations behind these alliances, the records pertaining to Kharak Chand's final years are instructive of the interests behind their pursuit. Evinced in the interventions of Fateh Prakash of Sirmaur with his Kahluri brother-in-law on behalf of the political agent at Ambala,<sup>4</sup> the ostensible focus on Kahluri misrule reveals a triangular relationship between the royal families and EIC authorities. For the ruling family of Sirmaur, matrimonial arrangements with Bilaspur's elite

2 This pattern is consistent with that found in indirectly ruled states elsewhere in the subcontinent (e.g., Jhala 2008). For an exploration of the myriad consequences of marriages for Pahari women in Garhwal, see Sax (1991).

3 The rise of Kangra from the 1750s was largely indebted to 'upwards' marriages, which were frozen with Sansar Chand's rise to the status of 'Mountain Emperor' (see Chapter 3). The rise of Jammu and Kashmir as the strongest state in the hills a century later saw Dogranis of the ruling families eclipse the Rajputni Katochis of Kangra as the most coveted marital partners among Pahari Rajputs.

4 On Fateh Prakash's reign, see Singh (2007[1912], 243-59). The standard account of Kharak Chand's reign appears in Hutchison and Vogel (1999[1933], vol. 2, pp. 508-9), which is supplemented with details from archival records and local histories in the preceding chapter and below. On the political agent at Ambala's duties as EIC representative in the plains south of the Sutlej alongside the contiguous Hill States of Bilaspur, Handur, and Sirmaur, see Chapter 4.

were aimed at gaining influence in the inner circles of the Kahluri regime, which entailed reducing the customary ties with the highland *thakurais* to its north in favour of alliances with the Chandelas of the lower hills.<sup>5</sup> The powerful Guleri rani (r. 1815-27, discussed in Chapter 3) seems to have initiated these efforts. Having concluded two of her son's seven marriages to sisters of the Kahluri *dalyan* (second-in-line to the throne) in the first three years of her regency, the rani arranged her daughter's engagement to the raja of Bilaspur upon his assuming full powers in 1827. The rani's failure to conceive in the years that followed raised concerns at Nahan, where the raja had already had (and lost) a son by one of his Kahluri wives.<sup>6</sup> Eight years later, Fateh Prakash concluded a second alliance with Bilaspur by marrying his half-sister, Tripati Devi (1813-1858), to Kharak Chand.<sup>7</sup> A year on, neither of the Sirmauri-born ranis was pregnant.

The Sirmauriya then turned to courting his brother-in-law's sister (b. 1819) in an attempt to raise his family's status through *bātā byāh* ('the mutual exchange of sisters'),<sup>8</sup> an outcome the Kahluri court made sure to avoid by way of procrastination. The Sirmauri attempts to ascend the social ladder through marriages to the Chandelas affirm the continued importance of the public recognition of status in the hills during the early decades of British rule. For the raja of Sirmaur, these alliances were meant to complement his already-privileged position in EIC circles so as to cement his standing as a leader of consequence.<sup>9</sup> However, because the realization of these aspirations hinged on his Kahluri-wed sisters' giving birth to a male heir, and, to a lesser extent, on his own success in marrying his brother-in-law's

5 Four of Fateh Prakash's seven wives originated in the highland *thakurais*. The first spouse was from Keonthal, the largest and most prominent of the *bara thakurai*, and the remaining three from smaller states, including a Rajputni from the low-lying Baghat State whose son ultimately succeeded the throne (Singh 2007[1912], 254).

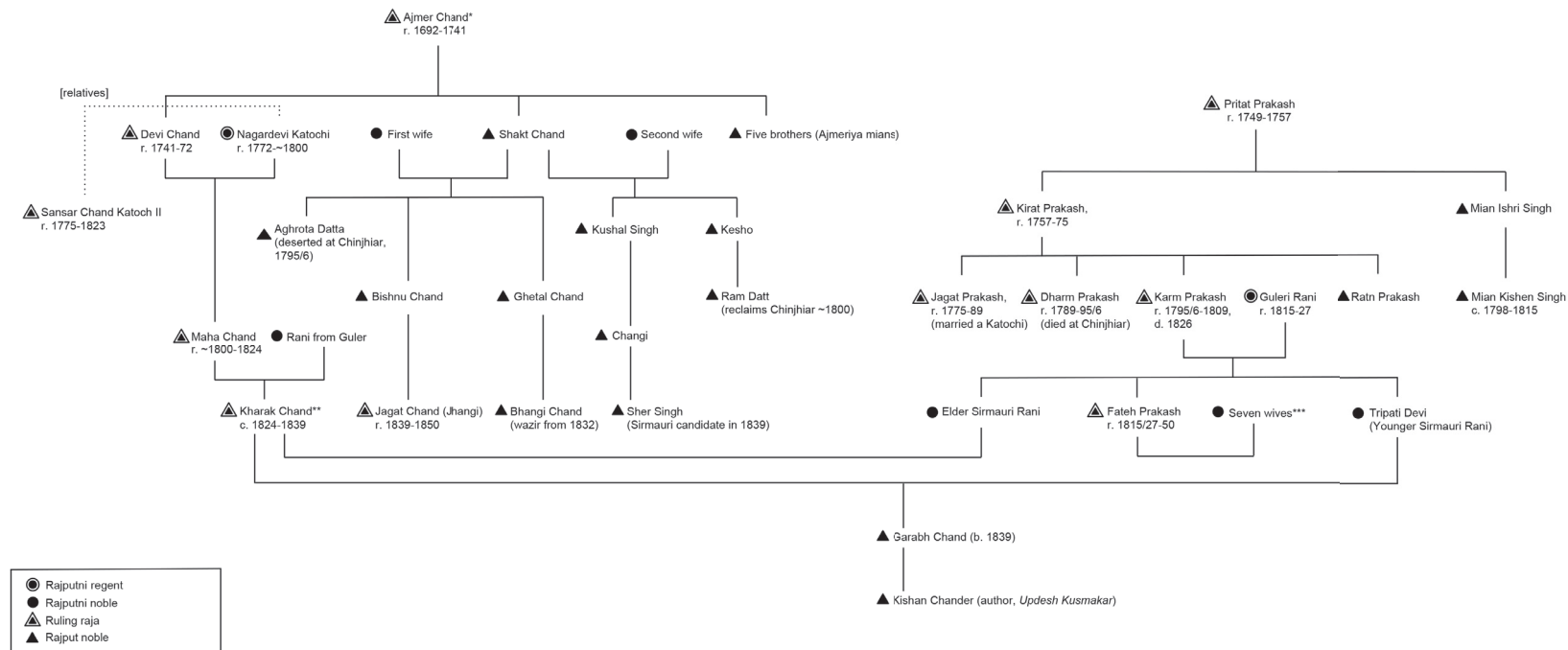
6 Although the first child died at some point prior to 1827, the younger Kahluri rani later gave birth to two future contenders for the throne, namely, Surjan Singh (b. 1829) and Vir Singh (b. 1832) (Singh (2007[1912], 251, 254, 260-1). The raja of Sirmaur's *dalyan*-related ranis enjoyed considerable prestige at Nahan: the younger rani was honoured with the construction of a *moṭī mahal* ('pearl palace') in the royal compound, and the elder undertook important public works, such as the digging of a large water tank (*joṛī bār*) and an adjoining *śivālay* ('Shiva temple') on the outskirts of the capital in 1836 (Singh 2007[1912], 193, 251).

7 For a short biography by Tripati Devi's grandson, see Chander (1907, 29-33).

8 Jagat Chand to Clerk, received 13 December 1839, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 43. Kharak Chand's sister was ultimately married to the younger brother of the future ruler of Jammu and Kashmir c. 1840, only to be widowed three years later (Chander 1907, 25). On the exchange of sisters between families of equal status among non-Rajputs in the hills, see Thakur (1997, 122).

9 The marriage of another of Fateh Prakash's sisters to a Katoch prince from Kangra was part of this strategy (see Chapter 3).

## Geneological chart



Geneological chart as per the political agent at Ambala, c. 1840 (NAI, F.D., P.C., 20 April 1840, no 12, 'Kahlur Disturbances'). Note the construed position of contender Jhangi (Jagat) Chand as *dalyan* ('next in line to the throne'), despite local evidence to the contrary (e.g., Chandel 2007, 71-72).

Fateh Prakash Sirmauriya failed to marry Kharak Chand's sister, but he did marry the Kahluri sisters of Jagat Chand (not noted in the chart), a Handuri princess, and three Rajputnis from the bara thakurai (from Keonthal, Baghat, Khumarsain); see Singh (2007[1912], 254).

sister, Sirmaur's position in the regional elite remained uncertain. It was at this point that the raja of Bilaspur inadvertently assisted the Sirmauri family in furthering its aims.

By 1835, the Kahluri treasury had reached a critical point, which the raja sought to replenish by appropriating the *jagir* of his Sirmauri wives. The rani lodged a complaint with the political agent at Ambala, George Russell Clerk (1800-1899), who turned to her brother in hope that familial ties would succeed where he had repeatedly failed since assuming his post in 1831. Several months later, Fateh Prakash reported back to the agent with a sombre summary of his travails:

In compliance with your wishes, I have used my influence (but to no effect) in advising rajah Kurruck Chund, and I hope you will now do all in your power for the good of the people and the preservation of the raj of Belaspoor, for which, indeed, that rajah himself will have cause to be thankful. Two of my sisters are married to him, and hitherto the rajah has taken one of theirs and not molested their jagheers [since]. Now that the British government will probably control affairs [...] I trust that the interests of my sisters be regarded with favour.<sup>10</sup>

The Sirmauriya's concerns reflect sentiments pervading landholders in the kingdom more broadly, whose estates were increasingly subject to Kharak Chand's erratic confiscations.<sup>11</sup> The implied confidence that EIC intervention was imminent would have relied on earlier (if unrecorded) intimations by the frontier officials at Ambala, Subathu, and their underlings, who had arrived at a similar conclusion after a decade of inconclusive dealings with the Kahluriya. The consensus between regional elites and frontier officers notwithstanding, the prospect of meaningful intervention in the state was decidedly slim. With policymakers in Calcutta fixated on the (in large part imaginary) threat of Russian expansion into South Asia, the introduction of changes that might disrupt the peace with Lahore were deferred to a later date.<sup>12</sup> Foreseeing his superiors' reaction, Clerk opted to persist in mediation and instructed his interlocutor to resume his efforts.

10 Fateh Prakash to Clerk, 5 December 1836 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 14.

11 The raja of Handur intimated similar worries on behalf of his relative, 'Meean Ram Dhu', who also owned land in Bilaspur (Ram Saran to Clerk, no date, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 15).

12 For an exhaustive, archive-based analysis of contemporary British policy, see Yapp (1980).

### The uses of 'Rajput culture'

Six months later, Fateh Prakash once again reported on his Sisyphean labours. Laying out personal grievances against the Kahluriya alongside new allegations regarding his apparently 'embarrassing' behaviour, the letter concluded with an emphatic reiteration of the need for EIC intervention:

Much as I devote myself [...] to advising rajah Kurruck Chund, he is wholly inattentive, and has adopted *habits that are altogether forbidden to Hindoos, especially Rajpoots*, and all his subjects are distressed and wretched. Besides this, my sisters (married to him) are so [badly] treated that I fear [for] their lives. It is therefore very desirable that the authority of the British government should be completely introduced in such a manner, that the rajah should have no thing to say to the management, in that the people may obtain rest. Whatever stipend may be assigned to the rajah, let him live upon that. Thus, my sisters' lives and jagheers [... shall] be preserved and the people restored to peace and happiness.<sup>13</sup>

Hardened by his brother-in-law's obstinacy, the Sirmauriya was no longer content with the appointment of a manager, calling for his total removal from government and demotion to EIC pensioner instead. This was, after all, the method adopted for dealing with Fateh Prakash's own father in Sirmaur just two decades earlier, to commendable effect. That the raja of Sirmaur could forcefully advocate the pensioning of a fellow ruler of superior status attests to his phenomenal rise in EIC circles along the frontier, the most senior of which had contemptuously described him as 'a foreign prince' only five years earlier.<sup>14</sup> This also explains why correspondences regarding the affair rarely point to the interests underlying Fateh Prakash's repeated calls for intervention, which were invariably cast as the legitimate concerns of a selfless nobleman who is understandably mindful of his sisters' well-being.

The backing of frontier officials granted Fateh Prakash's reports a weight that bore directly on EIC policy towards (or rather, against) Kharak Chand. In so doing, they advanced a distinct set of ideas concerning Pahari Rajput kingship, in which aberrations in a ruler's comportment played a central part. If the raja of Sirmaur's familiarity with EIC officials fed into his position

13 Fateh Prakash to Clerk, 24 June 1837 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 15, emphasis added.

14 Statement of the Resident at Delhi, in reference to Fateh Prakash's reclamation of the Kiarda Dun (discussed in Chapter 3) (OIOC IOR/F/4/1181/30743 (11), Metcalfe to Stirling, 21 June 1827, fo. 12).

as the exemplar of a noble Rajput tradition, his indication of a correlation between his brother-in-law's ostensible disavowal of elite norms with the chaos at his court sharpened the contrast between them, enforcing a particular vision of 'Rajput Tradition' in the process. By positing that Kharak Chand's adoption of 'habits forbidden to Rajputs' constituted a shameful anomaly to their milieu, the Sirmauriya not only discredited his relation, but also cast himself as an 'authentic' bearer of Rajput legacy by implying that he had intimate knowledge of its customs. Whether intentional or not, the comparison would have struck a chord with the political agent at Ambala, who had consistently condemned Kharak Chand's 'innate depravity' since being posted to the region some six years before.<sup>15</sup> The alignment of British and Sirmauri views on Bilaspur thus seemed destined to succeed where years of inter-familial politics had failed – namely, to facilitate a rise in the status of Sirmaur's ruling dynasty that would, over time, gain credence among the Pahari elite at large. While the fulfilment of this scenario was cut short by the events that followed Kharak Chand's death, the voluminous communications surrounding the affair played a decisive part in the way its protagonists came to be perceived by the British, their allies, and, ultimately, in modern historical writings.

Given the stress on Kharak Chand's divergence from custom, it is important to ascertain just how far the raja had actually strayed from 'Rajput Tradition'. According to one contemporary observer, this was not very far at all. Having reached the capital on a crisp October morning in 1835, the Bavarian-born baron Charles von Hügel was greeted by Bilaspur's *wazir* (most likely Bishnu Singh, the late Sansaru's son), whom he described as one of 'the real governors of the land, it being looked on as a disgrace for a raja to concern himself about the administration of his country, or even to know how to read or write'. The raja, by way of contrast, 'dragged out' a 'sluggish existence [...] in the Indian harem [*zanānkhānā*], in eating opium, drinking brandy, and smoking; and in his few sober hours' would either hold court or ride 'from one of his summer-houses to another'. While Kharak Chand's penchant for opium may have 'rendered him a disgusting object, with staring eyes devoid of expression, and a mouth always half open', in personal comportment and governance he largely followed the ways of his father, who was similarly described some fifteen years earlier (von Hügel 2000 [1845], 24).<sup>16</sup> However, while court nobles had managed to tame his

15 For earlier evidence of Clerk's bias against Kharak Chand, see Chapter 4.

16 For another unflattering portrait of Kharak Chand as a 'young, uncouth and unlettered [...] ruffian', consult Vigne (1844[1842], vol. 1, pp. 63-4). For William Moorcroft's impression of the

predecessor, this raja's active involvement in government tipped the balance between ruler and kin with alarming results. The Sirmauriya's reproaches, whether crafted to enhance his standing in EIC circles or not, thus addressed a genuine concern over the simmering tensions in the Kahluri Court.

If Kharak Chand had merely exercised his royal prerogatives to a greater degree than his father had, then his brother-in-law's complaints would indeed amount to little more than a contrived attempt at marginalizing his neighbour. However, in a note pencilled by an anonymous scribe on the margin of the records, the ruler's 'abnormal' habits were explained as 'alluding to the rajah's drinking, singing, playing and dressing his hair and clothes after the manner of the Mahomedans'.<sup>17</sup> Given Kharak Chand's reliance on foreign 'mercenaries' in the 1820s-30s, it is safe to assume that the persons referenced were his Rohilla associates and protectors, who were then completing a decade of service in his ranks. His embrace of an Afghan-derived strand of North Indian Islamicate culture (including a proclivity for alcohol) marks an important shift in Kharak Chand's political orientation that broadened his horizons from the confines of the Pahari Rajput milieu towards the wider vistas of the North Indian Plains.<sup>18</sup> It is, in fact, precisely this receptivity towards manifold cultural and material elements that sustained the raja's regime despite the evident shortcomings of his character. With this in mind, Kharak Chand would have most likely dismissed his brother-in-law's pleas to desist from 'forbidden' activities as the dull incantations of a well-meaning relative with a pitifully narrow worldview, if not as a malicious tactic aimed at undermining his power base so as to precipitate EIC intervention.

The political agent's inaction regarding Bilaspur in the months that followed induced the Sirmauri royals to expand their efforts. Intent on

raja's father in 1820, see Chapter 4. The continuity between the two rulers' practises is further evinced in Kharak Chand's patronage of the Pahari poet Rudradatt, a regular attendant at the refined court of Guler (Guleri 2005, 23).

17 Fateh Prakash to Clerk, 24 June 1837 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 15. The note is missing in the parallel file, OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, fo. 48.

18 Kharak Chand's reliance on individuals from outside the state appeared some years before, with the appointment of a Shimla-based tailor as *wazir* (Chapter 4, above), and persisted in the employment of entrepreneurs who had been banned from Shimla as key officiates. Thus, during an interview at the Kahluriya's palace in 1835, the traveller Thomas Vigne found the raja sat 'between two sycophant Bengalee servants, who spoke very bad English to me, and professed to teach him the best' (1844[1842], vol. 1, p. 63). The 'sycophants' lingered in their posts for at least four months (von Hügel 2000[1845], 21). On Kharak Chand's professed (or simply diplomatic) admiration of 'Simla and its elegant buildings', see OIOC IOR/F/4/511, Kharak Chand to Bentinck, 7 September 1832, fo. 6.

securing an heir to the Kahluri throne, the raja and his sisters circumvented the agent; Fateh Prakash apparently raised the matter directly with the Governor-General in 1837, when the latter visited Nahan.<sup>19</sup> A request for a similar meeting in Shimla the next spring was rejected, but the issue did enter the Governor-General's agenda in the form of a petition submitted on behalf of the raja's (most likely elder) sister. Opening with a detailed narrative (lost in the archived summary of the text) of the 'oppressive conduct of her husband' through which 'all subjects and dependants of the family have become utterly ruined', the rani elaborated on her husband's most recent transgressions: 'having kept his nephew's wife in his own house, [he] passes days and nights in her company, a conduct which is forbidden amongst the Rajpoot tribe, being totally regardless of his judicial and fiscal affairs, as also of his own welfare and prosperity'.<sup>20</sup> Having recounted the country's sorrows and divulged her bedroom woes, the rani shrewdly requested intervention on the grounds of the *sanad* issued by the EIC, in which the raja was explicitly ordered to 'devote his time to the happiness and comfort of his subjects' (Aitchison 1909, vol. 8, p. 320). The rani concluded her petition with a reiteration of her brother's earlier requests, namely, the introduction of 'measures' that 'may contribute to the ease and tranquillity of the subjects and dependants of her husband', and a request for 'the banishment of the aforesaid evil disposed woman'.<sup>21</sup> It was, no doubt, the latter point that weighed heaviest on the ruling family of Sirmaur, for although the union could not produce a legitimate heir, its outcome (an additional contender at court) would still threaten their aspirations, which, in turn, had not the slightest chance of being realized so long as the raja kept avoiding his Sirmauri wives.

That the lack of intimacy between the raja and his Sirmauri wives was openly disclosed attests to the dramatic slump in relations between the ruling families in the final years of Kharak Chand's reign. Nevertheless, for all its harrowing warnings, the rani's petition was met with silence by the Governor-General's establishment. Already marginal to decision makers in Calcutta, the West Himalayan kingdoms were then overshadowed by tensions between Kabul and Lahore over Peshawar. The collapse of EIC

19 For an account of Nahan by the Governor-General's sister, who commemorated the event in watercolour, see Eden (1866, vol. 1, pp. 170-171).

20 OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, Urzee of Ranee Surmooree, delivered by the Ranees Brother, 28 March 1838, fo. 55.

21 OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, Urzee of Ranee Surmooree, delivered by the Ranees Brother, 28 March 1838, fo. 55-6. The record does not state the 'evil' rani's identity, though she was likely the aforementioned raja's nephew's wife.

efforts to contain these (in 1837) further distanced the Pahari states from view, as Calcutta sought to dethrone the ruler of Kabul, thereby paving the way for Britain's catastrophic engagement in Afghanistan during the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1838-41.<sup>22</sup> Since mobilizing troops beyond the Maharaja of Lahore's territories entailed traversing the Punjab, any action that risked harming relations with the latter was summarily dismissed, the rani's petition included. This policy trickled down from Calcutta to the lower rungs of government so that even those who had formerly supported action in the frontier state began greeting the rhetoric emanating from Nahan with uncharacteristic coolness.

The agent at Ambala, by far the most sympathetic supporter of the Sirmauri cause, repaid the favour of Fateh Prakash's earlier intercessions by raising the issue during a private meeting with Kharak Chand a few months later. In the meeting, the Kahluriya carefully deflected criticism by diverting conversation from his bedroom interests to the legal practicalities to do with his wife's 'exceedingly liberal' *jagir*, which he vowed to keep intact. His hands tied by written agreements, Clerk reluctantly conceded that 'the ranees' grievances what to the raja's drunkenness and in contrary matters' could not justify intervention.<sup>23</sup> Thus, as the EIC went to war in Afghanistan, Kharak Chand gained the strongest assurances for his autonomy yet, while Fateh Prakash and his sisters saw their efforts in Bilaspur squandered by their imperial protectors.

## 5.2 Kingship and its Practise: Bilaspur, Sirmaur, and the 'Rajput State'

If the interactions between Pahari leaders and British officials addressed a specific set of problems pertaining to Bilaspur under Kharak Chand, their articulation was couched in a universalist discourse regarding kingship and sovereignty in Rajput states. By the 1830s, this discourse revolved around the polar extremes of Pahari Rajput kingship in the hills: the 'despotic' raja of Bilaspur, who exemplified its vices, and his 'progressive' brother-in-law in Sirmaur, who demonstrated its virtues. The most cogent exposition of this dichotomous reading appeared in a report by the political agent at Ambala

<sup>22</sup> For a review of British failures in Afghanistan in the context of the Sikh threat, see Hopkins (2008, 62-70). On the decade of deliberations that led to the signing of a treaty that facilitated the war of June 1838 from the viewpoints of London and Calcutta, see Yapp (1980, 200-303).

<sup>23</sup> OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, Clerk to Metcalfe, 4 August 1838, fo. 58.

after a particularly violent episode between Kharak Chand and his kin in the summer of 1838.<sup>24</sup> While the report's request for instating a Resident in Bilaspur was rejected by Calcutta, the arguments advanced in support of this proposal and their discrepancy with the conditions, motives, and actions of the involved parties evince the prejudices underlying the now-trenchant notion of Pahari Rajput kingship.

The events that prompted the report originated in Kharak Chand's tour of Mokhawal, the fertile tract where his opponents, the Ajmeriya *miyans*, held their estates. Upon reaching the abode of the *dalyan*, *miyan* Jhangi Chand, the raja learned that the latter had secreted his son to Mandi after its ruler (the child's maternal grandfather) had declared the boy was destined to succeed the Kahluri throne.<sup>25</sup> Anticipating a wrathful reaction, the *miyans* fled north of the Sutlej to the inner hills of Mandi. Kharak Chand's Rohilla horsemen followed in pursuit, occupied a portion of the kingdom for a fortnight, and then returned to Bilaspur. While the customary communications with Ambala that followed did force an apology from the *miyans*, the brazenness of the attack on a dependency of Lahore (Mandi) impelled the agent to personally visit Bilaspur. Once in the kingdom, Clerk adopted what had become the customary measures for restoring stability: the raja's 'disreputable courtiers and starving soldiers' were distanced from the palace, the *wazir*-ship was restored to its traditional (if inefficient) custodian, Bishnu Singh, and the *kacahrī* ('judicial court') was reinstated after a lengthy hiatus that had rendered the populace 'extremely dejected'.<sup>26</sup> While such measures had sufficed to abate violence in earlier instances, the boldness of the attacks and the seemingly insoluble gridlock at court persuaded Clerk of the necessity for introducing a British Residency to oversee the kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

After quelling the violence, Clerk retired to his tent on the *maidān* ('green') opposite the raja's palace, where he spent the several days composing an exhaustive report on the kingdom and its problems. The agent's report illustrates the active role mid-level Company servants had in generating discourses that fed into regional identities for years to come. Enumerating the benefits of a residency for ameliorating the internal, regional, and

24 Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 7-14.

25 See Singh and Varma (1940, 28), and more generally, Anonymous (n.d.[1934], 69). The child in question was Narpāt Chand (d. 1844), who though central to the events that followed Kharak Chand's death, died before his father's abdication thereby clearing the way for his younger brother (the *dalyan*'s second son) to assume the throne as raja Hira Chand (r. 1850-83) (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, pp. 511-512).

26 Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 7-9.

27 On the origins and development of British Residencies, see Fisher (1991).

supra-regional hazards affected by the raja's rule, the report presented the motion as a prerequisite for the kingdom's political evolution. Carefully explicating the reasons for strife and their implications for British interests, the report offers a compelling appraisal of Pahari Rajput kingship and polity from the perspective of EIC frontiersmen and their allies.<sup>28</sup> Drawing on the experiences of his predecessors as well as on his own earlier dealings with Rajput states as assistant to the Resident at Delhi (1829-31), Clerk purported to explain the restive kingdom's condition through local categories in a manner that was applicable to 'any Rajput state'. In practise, however, his interpretation adopted the perspective of Kharak Chand's opponents, which at this juncture aligned the Sirmauri royals with the *dalyan*-led Kahluri opposition. The highlighting of alleged deviations from 'Rajput culture' that were at least partly informed by the Sirmauri royals' input in previous exchanges thus gave birth to a skewed interpretation of sovereignty that was to carry into discourses on Pahari Rajput kingship for decades to come.

According to Clerk, Bilaspur was the nightmare of British officialdom, with an unimpeachable, drunken raja and a court infested with destabilizing elements that thrived under royal patronage at the expense of his subjects. Oblivious to reason, the raja proved 'so puerile that his little court is no sooner cleansed of one set of vagabonds than others flock hither and replace them',<sup>29</sup> and while

[t]he incapacity of the rajah for business arising mainly from habitual intoxication would be an unusual feature in the condition of a Rajput state, [...] the peculiar impediment here [...] is, that since the death of the old vizier [in 1832], the rajah's childish fickleness had deprived every administration he has formed of all stability and energy, and on most occasions, the ministers of his choice have unfortunately been from among the companions of his debaucheries. These are composed of musicians, [Pathan/Rohilla] horse dealers, servants discharged from Simla, and shopkeepers. The late minister was one of the latter description, a trader in Swiss wares at Simla.<sup>30</sup>

28 The proposal was drafted in collusion with various regional officers, from his immediate subordinates in Subathu to the chief authority at Delhi. The post of Resident in Bilaspur was tailored for one 'Captain Hamilton Cox', then an invalid at Shimla, and was supported by both the agent at Subathu and the raja himself; see OIOC IOR/F/4/1795/73789, Tapp to Macnaghten, 13 August 1838, fo. 51 and Cox to Macnaghten, 13 August 1838, fo. 52.

29 Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 7.

30 Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 8. On EIC bias against the Rohillas, see Alavi (1995, 72-73); for specific grievances against those in Bilaspur, see Chapter 4. The claim

In portraying the Kahlur Court as chaos incarnate, Clerk delivered a message that his superiors would have instantly recognized as a threat to British sovereignty. At the same time, the loss of an able *wazir* and the nefarious influences of traders, horse-dealers, and shopkeepers echo the chauvinist interpretation of 'Rajput culture' by the agent's Sirmauri allies in earlier communications. The disproportionate emphasis on a seemingly 'tarnished' regime at the expense of the factual transgressions of the repeated abuse of human life and recurrent dismissals of state officials is telling of the priorities of the EIC's frontiersmen at the time, and masks the considerably more complex state of affairs between the multiple parties in the hills.

Having discredited the raja's person, the agent turned to the strain his rule placed on the EIC's relations with Lahore. The agent's role as interlocutor with Lahore c. 1831-43 added weight to his comments, supplementing his deep familiarity with Kahluri affairs (in his capacity as agent at Ambala) with an informed assessment of its impact on relations with the empire beyond the Sutlej.<sup>31</sup> These included the Kahluriya's failure 'to repair roads and provide supplies' for a diplomatic mission from Lahore that had passed through his territories on the way to Shimla, his extension of military support to the Sodhis of Anandpur during a recent conflict with Ranjit Singh, and the recurrent delays in forwarding the tribute from the country's northern tracts – all of which were dangerously reminiscent of the policy that had nearly brought the empires to a clash following the loss of Kot Dhar in 1819 (discussed in Chapter 4). The Maharaja of Lahore had, in fact, already complained against Kharak Chand's 'reckless and oppressive conduct' towards his subjects in northern Bilaspur in 1835, but had refrained from pursuing the matter 'out of respect for the latter's connections with the British government'.<sup>32</sup> For the agent, these aggregate factors proved that the Kahluriya constituted a critical threat to EIC interests in the Punjab,

that individuals from Shimla hampered political stability, which was also espoused by the preceding agent, reflects a curious blind spot on the part of frontier officials, who consistently ignored their inadvertent contribution to Bilaspur's destabilization. On the early history of Shimla and its impact on the region, see Kanwar (1990, 13-33).

31 The agent's illustrious career in empire suggests that his report would have been carefully considered by his superiors. After his frontier posting, Clerk joined the executive council at Calcutta (in 1844), and intermittently vacated his seat for the governorship of Bombay (in 1847 and in 1860-62, twice abandoned for health reasons), and for an appointment in South Africa (1853), concluding his career as part of the Secretary of State's Council for India in London (1863-73) (Prior 2008[2004]).

32 See Krishen (1952, 344), and Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 8-9 and fo. 12-13 respectively. Kharak Chand did account for three of the accusations, blaming disobedient servants for failing to tend to the Lahore delegation while he was absent 'on [a]

and that this threat could only be overcome by introducing a Resident to manage his affairs.

Clerk's conclusion was based on the premise that 'Rajput states' had two paths of political evolution: the preservation of an indigenous, feudal-esque government that would be dangerously prone to despotism, or positive growth through adaptation to EIC norms, more often than not with the aid of a Residency.<sup>33</sup> While Clerk conceded that the 'little state' of Bilaspur hardly justified 'such a measure', the recent spillage of violence into an area officially subservient to Lahore rendered it an absolute necessity. Given the Kahluriya's utter hopelessness, the residency proposed was to wield significantly greater authority than the one established in the 'neighbouring state of Sirmoor', for if in Sirmaur, 'the child gave hopes, which were soon realized, that increasing years would yield the intelligence required to the management of his own affairs', Kharak Chand's 'imbecility', both 'mental and corporeal, [...] offer[ed] little hope of his amendment'.<sup>34</sup>

Gliding between universal theories on 'Rajput states', reasoned assessments of imperial interests, and *ad hominem* attacks on the raja, Clerk created a compelling, if somewhat audacious, argument: granted that Kharak Chand was tyranny incarnate, the Residency that would counter him would have to be doubly powerful. Backed by the 'sensible' Ajmeriya *miyans* and the model raja of Sirmaur, the agent proposed an institution that was to drastically reduce Kharak Chand's power at the expense of his peers.<sup>35</sup> With the raja as bogeyman, Clerk crusaded against the very foundations of the atavistic system of succession to steer Kahluri kingship from its 'absolutist' mode towards a shared sovereignty construct that was reminiscent of British sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the interpretation of conditions in the

visit to his brother in law, the Rajah of Nahan', and noting his withdrawal of the Kahluri troops sent to assist the Sodhis in Mokhawal upon Clerk's request.

33 The agent cleverly ignored the problem of enforcing the Resident's policies north of the Sutlej by highlighting the cheapness of his proposal. Thus, if Bilaspur's revenues barely sufficed to cover the raja's 'thoughtless extravagance', they were certain to cover the Residency's costs under 'decent management' (Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 12).

34 Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 10-11.

35 The agent's favouring of the *miyans* may be gleaned from his preventing their signing an agreement proposed by Kharak Chand shortly after the violence of 1838, since its terms seemed 'very far from readmitting them to the enjoyment of their sequestered fiefs' (Clerk to Metcalfe, 5 July 1838 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 9).

36 It is, of course, impossible to speak of a uniform model of 'Rajput kingship', as kingdoms labelled so were constantly evolving in response to developments on numerous fronts (imperial superstructures, ascetic movements, sub-polities, etc.). See, for example, the impact of trade and *bhakti* ('devotional religion') on kingship in the Rajasthani kingdom of Kota in Peabody (2003, Chapter 4).

kingdom and their prescribed solution point to a basic discrepancy between contemporary perceptions of sovereignty in South Asia and Europe. Where the British saw the absence of an intermediary stratum between the ruler and his subjects as nurturing 'Asiatic despotism', South Asians balanced claims to universal dominion with worldly politics to sustain an infinitely more complex structure than the feudal-derived European model (Wink 2008 [1986]). Whether or not he was subscribing to such views in laying out plans for Bilaspur, Clerk's reliance on Fateh Prakash's regime as the viable alternative to Kharak Chand's is suggestive of what he may have had in mind in promoting a Residency. An examination of the reforms and functions that guided the Sirmauri regime during the early colonial encounter reveals that it was neither indebted to British intervention nor particularly applicable to the Kahluri setting – not, at least, without a considerable stretch of the imagination.

As the harbinger of progress, the reforms attributed to Fateh Prakash (r. 1815/27-50) are awarded ample coverage in the Sirmaur chronicle (Singh 2007 [1912]). The success of these reforms is traced to the stability that was enabled by the ruler's reinstatement of powerful nobles and administrators who had been ousted during the *uthal-puthal* ('chaotic') reign of his father.<sup>37</sup> Committed to the glorification of Sirmauri monarchs, the chronicle is silent about the role of British Resident(s) in enacting these reforms. However, in this instance at least, the records actually corroborate local histories, as none of the EIC's appointees are found to have spent too long a period at Nahan. Thus, the first Resident, Captain Birch, who oversaw the transition to British rule in 1815 and who officially retained his post until 1823, actually left Nahan after less than two years.<sup>38</sup> The Residency building, a bungalow located 'on the top of a hill, within musket shot of the rajah's palace', was subsequently sold to the monarch and kept vacant, so that by 1830 it was already 'extremely dilapidated' and its outer offices 'completely in ruins' (Davidson 2004 [1843], vol. 1, pp. 152-3). This would suggest that even William Murray, who supposedly raised Fateh Prakash as a 'pet child', was only briefly present at Nahan during his tenure at Ambala (1823-31) (Davidson 2004 [1843], vol. 1, p. 157). Sirmaur's 'vigorous and healthy' government, as

37 For the details of the reforms, see Singh (2007[1912], 243-9). As shown in Chapter 3, many of these reforms were already advanced during the Guleri rani's regency (1815-27); on the calamitous reign of Karm Prakash (r. 1795/6-1809), see Chapter 2.

38 OIOC IOR/F/4/1181/30743 (11), Fateh Prakash to William Murray, 16 February 1827, fo. 16-7. Birch did remain near the kingdom, however, replacing Ochterlony as agent at Karnal in 1817-21 (Suri 1971, 10).

Clerk described it, was thus primarily indebted to state-sponsored, rather than EIC-directed policies.

The kingdom's location in the interior of British territory guaranteed this prosperity.<sup>39</sup> For one, EIC officers were free to purge hostile elements from Nahan with no fear of repercussions from Lahore, allowing Sirmauri leaders to extend favours to traditional co-sharers in power in ways that were unimaginable in Bilaspur. Sirmauri finances, for example, were managed by a long-serving *dīwan* ('treasurer'), whereas the Kahluri treasury was repeatedly undermined by recurring replacements since the treasurer's hanging in 1827. Sirmaur also trumped Bilaspur in foreign relations, the raja's *mīr munshi* ('chief secretary') doubling as *vakil* ('official envoy') to the EIC. A *kāyastha* scribe from the *qasbā* of Sadhaura in the plains below Nahan, the secretary/*vakil* was one of the numerous state servants estranged from Karm Prakash and reinstated with his removal from the kingdom after the British conquest. In reemploying the professional diplomat, the Sirmauriya evinced an orientation towards 'modern' governance that relied on skilled bureaucrats and allowed the furthering of goals to admirable effect, such as the reclaiming of the Kiarda Dun from the EIC through legal channels in 1832. In the kingdom along the Sutlej, on the other hand, the management of external relations remained closely intertwined with the ruling elite. Communications with the EIC were thus directly handled by the hereditary Chandela *wazirs* Sansaru (until 1832) and his son Bishnu, ensuring kinship and politics remained continually enmeshed.<sup>40</sup>

The exceptionally well-organized administration instated in Nahan earned the agent's greatest praise. Under the EIC, the kingdom was divided into twelve *parganas* (or *wazirats*), each with its own *wazir* ('chief administrator'), *gaulādār* ('security officer'), and *nambardār* ('revenue collector'), who represented the state to the dominant leaders or *sayānās* ('elders') in their territories (Singh 2007 [1912], 246-8). Presented before the chief *wazir* during the Dasara celebrations each year, the revenues were entrusted with the raja's confidant, a *viśvasanīya* ('trustworthy') merchant – ensuring the palace had direct control over finances. This allowed for the construction and renovation of numerous temples, palaces, and water tanks in and around the capital.<sup>41</sup> Visible testimonies to a newfound prosperity, the Sirmauri

39 On the basic structural differences between Sirmaur and Bilaspur in light of the Punjab's division between Calcutta and Lahore, see Chapter 4, above.

40 The intermittent replacements of Bishnu Singh with the raja's 'drinking companions' also undermined the regulation of justice, which, as in Sirmaur, was orally dispensed by the raja while being recorded and managed by the *wazir* (Singh 2007[1912], 246).

41 For specific sites, see Singh (2007[1912], 182, 192, 251-3). For a detailed description of Nahan in 1830, see Davidson (2004[1843], vol. 1, pp. 152-68).

chronicle credits these projects to the raja's acumen in readmitting low-level clerks to their posts and in his sensible trust of former opponents. Thus, the 'wazir in the east' (i.e., the Jaunsar and Bhawar region east of the Tons River), whose father had conspired against the raja's father, was advanced to *vazīr-e-ālā* ('supreme wazir'), while the raja's full- and half-brothers, relatives, and leading noblemen of state were entrusted with *wazirats* or appointed to key posts in the capital (e.g., stable-masters, palace officers).<sup>42</sup>

While Fateh Prakash incorporated potential enemies into his administration so as to transform them into *śubhacintak* (allies, lit., 'well-wishers'), his Kahluri neighbour found his friends in very different quarters (Singh 2007 [1912], 246). Other than the Chandela wazir, Kharak Chand maintained limited contact with his opponent kinsmen and apparently even less with his administrators, being more at home with Afghan Rohillas, Sikh Sodhis, the odd Shimla outcast, and Bengali advisors with questionable intentions. Moreover, unlike the purged court at Nahan, wherein one family reigned supreme, the Kahluri Court was undermined by the interests of the numerous progeny of the eight sons of its early eighteenth-century ancestor Ajmer Chand.

Finally, the personal histories of the two monarchs played a major part in their divergent histories. While Fateh Prakash grew in a stable environment that was nurtured by EIC favouritism, the lack of regulation along the frontier meant that Kharak Chand was parachuted onto the throne with almost no preparation at all. The transition from secluded childhood in the countryside to a privileged position in a court dominated by unruly noblemen could not have been more different than the Sirmauriya's cushioned ascension (both rulers assumed full powers in 1827), and would have engendered a frustration in the adolescent raja that nurtured an antagonism towards the *miyans* till his death. Given these obverse circumstances, the two rulers' presentation as opposites was almost inevitable: the universally praised Fateh Prakash taken as the embodiment of Pahari Rajput virtue, while the 'puerile' Kharak Chand denounced as 'the most rude and unpolished [...] of all the ignorant and unmannered native chiefs on this [British] side of the river'.<sup>43</sup>

42 Among the appointments made with a view to placating former enemies of state are: the son of the rebellious wazir of the 1790s Ṭhansīdatt Mehta, who inherited his father's post; the aforementioned Prem Singh, who received the title of 'supreme wazir'; and the erstwhile opposition leader *miyan* Kishen Singh, who returned to Nahan as *koṭwāl* ('chief security officer') after the Guleri rani's demise in 1827 (Singh 2007 [1912], 223-4). The chronicle explains these ranks by way of comparison with British Indian posts, comparing the 'supreme wazir' to 'a collector', and the raja's kin-turned-wazirs to 'tahsildars' (Singh 2007 [1912], 245).

43 As the Austrian Baron von Hügel wrote in 1835, echoing the impressions of EIC frontier officials (2000 [1845], 21).

To mitigate the deep differences between Bilaspur and Sirmaur, Clerk's discourse on Pahari Rajput kingship implied that it was applicable to 'any Rajput state'. While this selective reading assisted in measuring Pahari polities against a universal model that answered the needs of the EIC's administrative machine (insofar as it was comprehensible to personnel in Subathu, Ambala, Delhi, and Calcutta), the disparities between the kingdoms were such that the report was devoid of any operative value, since the chronic upheavals in Bilaspur were primarily due to the kingdom's position along a poorly regulated frontier that was ripe with economic possibilities for enterprising agents, whereas Sirmaur's uniform government and stability were facilitated by its geographical location within British territory.

Despite its biases, it would be wrong to dismiss Clerk's report altogether. For, although crafted to win approval for establishing a Residency in Bilaspur, the agent was ultimately addressing a subject that, from the point of view of Calcutta, posed a continual menace to sovereignty along the frontier. That these interests coalesced with those of the Ajmeriya *miyans* and the Sirmaur royals in the 1830s was a chance development that worked to the advantage of both parties. While this was not enough to persuade Calcutta to adopt the proposal,<sup>44</sup> it did seem to clarify which elements among the mountainous backwater's elite could be counted on to side with the EIC in the future. In the meantime, Kharak Chand and the *miyans* would pass the remainder of that winter on tensely cordial terms that imploded the next spring. Chancing through Bilaspur in March 1839, Thomas Vigne witnessed this final outburst of violence, and provides the last known description of Kharak Chand, then in his twenty-sixth year:

His two uncles [Jhangi-Bhangi?] had lately raised a rebellion against him, and a fight had ensued on the parade-ground. The rajah was victorious, and sat himself down to receive the heads of the fallen rebels; and whenever he saw one being borne towards him, he began most anxiously to inquire whether it was not at last the head of one of his uncles, and was much disappointed when the gory features grinned a negative. I saw ten heads, the fruits of his victory, suspended in different parts of a moderately sized tree, at the entrance of the town. (Vigne 1844 [1842], vol. 1, p. 64)<sup>45</sup>

44 The Governor-General's rejection bore the signature of his influential secretary William Macnaghten (1793-1841), the driving force behind British involvement in Afghanistan, who adamantly opposed interference in 'little kingdoms'; see Yapp (1980, 250, and 241-270 for an overview of Lord Auckland's deliberations as 'Hamlet in Shimla').

45 Among the casualties was a certain 'Bajiah', a junior member of *miyan Zorawar Singh's* family. It is unclear which other members of the nobility participated in the fighting.

Surrounded by his servants on the Sandu *maidan*, the Kahluriya still cut the figure of the 'great Hindoo ruler' as he had at nineteen on the fairgrounds in Haridwar. Battling rebellious kin with a mercenary army, the monarch followed the customary ways of Pahari warfare, commanding from afar and scaring his opponents into submission by tying their fellow rebels' heads to a tree for all to see.<sup>46</sup> What the *miyans* had failed to accomplish in their repeated attacks on the raja was finally achieved by nature: shortly after this victory, Kharak Chand contracted smallpox and died in the space of a few days.<sup>47</sup> The events that followed his death surpassed any of the havoc that had characterized his reign, bringing down not only the kingdom, but also the very foundations of Clerk's interpretation of Pahari Rajput rule and its most shining exemplar, raja Fateh Prakash Sirmauriya.

### 5.3 The Ranis' Revolution: Bilaspur, 1839-40

The magisterial *History of the Panjab Hill States* (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933]) summarizes the events that followed Kharak Chand's death in a few short paragraphs regarding the reign of his successor, raja Jagat (Jhangi) Chand (r. 1839-50, d. 1857):

Kharakh Chand died heirless, and, on hearing of his death, mian Jagat-Chand came and performed the funeral rites. Notice was sent to the political agent at Ambala, and he came at once. He was informed that there was no direct heir, and none of the widow *ranis* was *enceinte*. [...] After full inquiry, in the presence of the rajas of Sirmour and Hindur, the political agent reported to government in favour of Jagat-Chand, and he was duly installed, in April 1839.

Two of Kharakh-Chand's *ranis*, twin sisters, were from Sirmour, and had returned to that state on Jagat-Chand's accession. Some time later, it was given out that the younger *rani* was pregnant, and the fact had been concealed from fear of Jagat-Chand. A son was said to have been born in November of the same year.

Jagat-Chand affirmed that the child was surreptitious.

46 The severing of the head was a particularly gruesome warning, since it prevented the proper conducting of funerary rites that would allow transmigration, thereby damning the rebel to live on as a *bhūt* ('ghost').

47 Kharak Chand's death is dated 29 March 1839 (OIOC IOR/F/4/1829/75522, Clerk to Metcalfe, 13 April 1839, fo. 6-8).

The *ranis* then returned to Bilaspur with an army, furnished by the raja of Sirmour, and a force from Suket, to claim the *gaddi*. The officials and army officers of the state deserted Jagat-Chand and went over to the other side, and he had no alternative but to flee to Hindur to save his life. Information was sent to the political agent, who came with a force, and, after inquiry, dispersed the part opposed to Jagat-Chand and restored him to power. (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933], vol. 2, pp. 509-510)

Delivered in the factual language of imperial historiography, this summary of the event belies its authors' internalization of the discourse of Pahari Rajput rule: the elder and younger Sirmauri widows, reduced to 'twin sisters', advance fictitious claims that disrupt the rule of law, while order is restored by a seemingly neutral bureaucrat, thereby rescuing Bilaspur from 'the darkest page in its history'. Archived communications from the time suggest that the actual state of affairs was slightly more complex.

The inherent volatility of succession notwithstanding, the prospect of gaining control of Kharak Chand's minimally regulated frontier state spurred a competition between the raja of Sirmaur and his sisters and the *miyans* and their Handuri ally. Blind to the Sirmauri party's extensive interests in Bilaspur, the political agent failed to account for the pivotal role Rajputnis had traditionally played in regional politics. Palpably evident in the careers of the regent rani Nagardevi Katochi (Kharak Chand's grandmother) and the Guleri rani of Sirmaur (Fateh Prakash's mother), the Sirmauri sisters were the third generation of politically powerful Rajputnis in a land transformed by a quarter century of British rule. In the months that followed, the freshly widowed ranis and their brother, the 'model prince' of Nahan, devised a series of stratagems for regaining Bilaspur that culminated in its physical conquest by way of an armed revolution. As the archived correspondences reveal, these manoeuvres began to take shape almost immediately after the Kahluriya's death.

After confirming that Kharak Chand left no heirs, the political agent garnered support from the Pahari leadership to declare *miyan* Jhangi Chand the incumbent raja.<sup>48</sup> Unable to attend the *rājatilaka* ('coronation ceremony') due to the intensification of the Afghan campaign (Kandahar was conquered that April), the agent entrusted its execution to the rajas of Handur and

48 Clerk to Metcalfe, 13 April 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 18. For letters endorsing *miyan* Jhangi Chand, including some from his former opponents (e.g., Suket and Kutlehr), see 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 29-31.

Sirmaur. Then slightly over seventy, raja Ram Saran Handuriya (b. 1766, r. 1788-1848) was the most senior of the Pahari monarchs and an esteemed partner of the EIC, having excelled as the foremost of its allies in the hills in the early days of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16). In granting Fateh Prakash Sirmauriya an equal footing in the event, the agent signalled the significantly younger ruler's likely succession to leadership of the collective of mountain kings and simultaneously rewarded his earlier efforts by giving him a say in Bilaspur's future. However, when the rulers of the hills convened for the ceremony, Fateh Prakash unexpectedly withdrew his support of the candidate and called for his elder sister to assume the throne instead. The coronation was summarily postponed, the invitees dispersed, and the agent at Ambala began negotiating with his Sirmauri ally to affect a compromise.

Advised that the childless rani could under no circumstances lead the state, the Sirmauriya proposed *miyan* Shere Singh be crowned instead. The proposal was not entirely baseless, for Shere Singh hailed from the eldest branch of the Ajmeriya *miyans* (a progeny of 'Changhnian' Chandel) and was thus *dalyan* ('successor') by right of birth. However, by leading the struggle against Kharak Chand in the 1830s, Jhangi Chand had superseded Shere Singh, becoming *dalyan* by merit, a position ratified in the genealogical chart appended to the agent's report (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933], vol. 1, p. 510).<sup>49</sup> His amended proposal denied, the Sirmauriya turned to slander, claiming Jhangi was colluding with the raja of Handur to expel the widows from their quarters in order to seize 'all the goods [...] belonging to their husband'.<sup>50</sup> Sensing a crisis of some proportions unfolding, the agent ordered his Handuriya ally to resolve differences with the Sirmauriya, who still lingered in his widowed sisters' kingdom. Five days later, the elderly Handuriya wrote back with his assessment of 'the condition of things at Belaspor':

On one side are the people and the meeans (the collateral of the deceased) and the ministers, and with the others the widows. [...] All are for the succession of meean Jungee, and I cordially agree with them, as his succession will be the preservation of the territory and the happiness of the people. In the fraternity [of Ajmeriya *miyans*] and ministry there is not diversity of opinion on this subject. But rajah Futteh Purgash, and his sisters, appear to have other views, and such as would cause maladministration of the affairs of the raj, and dissensions among the meeans and ministers. I

49 On the manipulation of genealogies for advancing political interests, see Joshi (1990).

50 Fateh Prakash to Clerk, 22 April 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 28.

consider meean Jungee the heir to this raj for he is the 'dalyan', except him none has a right.<sup>51</sup>

Faithful to his candidate, the Handuriya presented Fateh Prakash and his sisters as irrational objectors to the agreed course of succession. His reading of the 'condition of things' was, however, only partly true. For, in fact, the Kahluriya's sudden death had left several groups (Rohillas, Sodhis, and others) bereft of patronage, and their erstwhile masters' enemies' assumption of power was a direct threat to their interests. The raja of Sirmaur's fickleness is indicative of this shift in the political climate, and concerned a concrete dispute over his sisters' holdings in Bilaspur, which their husband had given and his chosen successor now denied.

That the Handuriya's claim that subjects, nobles, and ministers had united behind the EIC's chosen successor was but partly true was revealed in a petition from 'the unprotected widows of Kuloor' that reached the agent two days later:

We wish this country to be taken by the British government, or given to us, or to Shere Singh [of the biologically senior branch of Ajmeriya mians]. Jungee [the *dalyan*] or Bungee [his cousin] have no right to it [...], according to justice it is Shere Sing's right. But let it be the Company's and let us go and reside and pray at some holy place, as they with evil charms killed our husband. [...] Ask [the tantric practitioner/priest] Hlabee Baksh [...], he is therefore in imprisonment in a fort. Send for him and enquire. We will never consent to the succession of Jungee or Bhungee. We have none but you for a protector. If you give the raj to them send a *chuprassee* to carry us away. We will go to Benares. There live and pray.<sup>52</sup>

Deviously widowed through black magic, the ranis claimed to have fallen victim to sinister elements that had penetrated the Kahluri Court through their late husband's opponents. With adherence to *dharma* their sole motivation, the widows merely sought justice by ensuring that power was handed to the 'real' successor, preferring to lead a life of piety and devotion in far-off Varanasi were it to be denied. Despite its strong emotive appeal, Clerk rejected the ranis' demands, which were all too similar to the claims earlier advanced by the petitioners' brother.

51 Ram Saran to Clerk, received 27 April 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 29.

52 Ranis of Sirmaur and Manglani, widows of Kharak Chand, to Clerk, received 29 April 1839, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 28-9.

The rift between the rajas of Handur and Sirmaur (and his sisters) attests to the considerable stakes involved in the competition for Bilaspur. While the parties resolved their differences in the short term by extending the widows' *jaqirs*, the tensions erupted soon afterwards. Convening in Bilaspur less than two months after the raja's death, the rajas joined 'ministers of several other of the Rajpoot states in the hills', the Sodhis of Anandpur, and representatives from Lahore to crown Jhangi Chand raja.<sup>53</sup> However, as soon as the investiture had concluded, the Sirmauriya began fuming once again, accusing Jhangi of tampering with his sisters' holdings, and stormed out of the ground 'in a fit of all humours, surrounded the residence of the widows with his own armed followers, and carried them off from Belaspoor unto his own territories'.<sup>54</sup> As Fateh Prakash resumed residence in Nahan, his sisters took to a secluded tract in the north-western mountains of Sirmaur, whence they came up with the ultimate plan for reclaiming their husband's kingdom.

A month later, the political agent passed through Bilaspur on his way back from Lahore to inspect the 'vigorous administration' he believed to have been instated by *miyan* Jhangi, now raja Jagat Chand. What he found instead was a town abuzz with rumours that the younger Sirmauri rani was pregnant. Although 'everywhere regarded as a palpable fraud', the rumours had clearly undermined the efficacy and legitimacy of the new regime.<sup>55</sup> Pressing on towards Ambala, the agent wrote a letter to Fateh Prakash, lambasting his persistent meddling in Kahluri affairs, from the inconsistencies surrounding the succession to the latest gambit of his sister's pregnancy.<sup>56</sup> Diplomatically attributing the 'scheme' to 'suggestions of evil counsel', the agent underlined the Sirmauriya's dishonesty by appending documents from the agency that disproved the supposed pregnancy. These included a document the ranis had signed shortly after their husband's death, in which they declared that neither of them was pregnant and thus wished to become *sati*.<sup>57</sup> Dismissing

53 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 June 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 23; the coronation took place on 17 May 1839.

54 Clerk to Metcalfe, 18 December 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 27.

55 Clerk to Metcalfe, 18 December 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 26. On rumours as a driving force in coeval Indian politics, see Bayly (1996).

56 Clerk to Fateh Prakash, 17 June 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 31-2.

57 In an earlier letter, Clerk proudly recounted how the widows were dissuaded from becoming *sati* (along with 62 servants of the raja) by his deputed commander's promises of a 'comfortable maintenance'; see OIOC IOR/F/4/1829/75522, Clerk to Metcalfe, 13 April 1839, fo. 6-7. On the uses of *sati* in this period, see Chapter 3.

the rumours as ludicrous at best, Clerk concluded in a damning tone hitherto reserved to the desperate likes of Kharak Chand:

It was to be regretted you should have entertained the project you at one time did, relative to your elder sister, and still more to the present one. Such conduct may involve you in unpleasant consequences, my friend. You have been entirely raised and fostered by the British government. Beware therefore how you lend yourself to schemes offending the welfare of the ancient family of Kehloor its ally. At a time when its affairs are just beginning to prosper, abstain from espousing any spurious claim, and cultivate a continuance of mutual good will, and reconciliation of all differences, with rajah Juggut Chund.<sup>58</sup>

The agent's didactic criticism hints at the difficulty he must have experienced in condemning an ally whom he had extolled as an exemplar of Rajput tradition only a year before. The accusations once levelled at Kharak Chand were now directed at his brother-in-law, whose hosting of his sister in 'a retired village in his own mountains' was decried as 'contrary to Rajpoot usages even were she not likely to give birth to an heir'.<sup>59</sup> The ease with which the paragon of progressive rule came to be recast as a villain attests to the potency of official discourse: rather than question his interpretation of political relations and implement the shifts in policy that it implied, Clerk simply stripped the raja of his positive attributes and marked him an enemy of progress instead.

The impending clash between agent and raja was averted by the sudden death of Ranjit Singh at Lahore ten days later (27 June 1839), which forced an extensive reassessment of strategy on the part of EIC personnel and regional leaders alike. In scrambling to map the reconfigured matrices of power in the Punjab, British officials relegated the mountain kings and their states to the recesses of decision makers' agendas. Accordingly, when the ranis sought a British *memsahib* to visit their station and ascertain Tripati Devi's pregnancy, their calls were met with silence; a few weeks later, they declared the birth of a healthy baby boy.<sup>60</sup> Thus, less than seven

58 Clerk to Fateh Prakash, 17 June 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 32.

59 Clerk to Metcalfe, 18 December 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 26.

60 The date of birth is given as 21 Kartik 1896 (or 5 November 1839), just before sunset at Bowghani (Chander 1907, 26). According to archived petitions from the ranis, the sisters left for Ambala immediately after their husband's death 'through fear of the mians', who ignored the younger rani's pregnancy. The agent at Delhi was the only official who responded to their letters (on 21 October 1839), which he received in Subtahu while touring the hills, but having no women

months after their husband's death, the Sirmauri Rajputnis seemed to have overcome the greatest obstacle that had troubled them during all their years of conjugal life: producing an heir to legitimate their claims to the rule of Bilaspur.

Three weeks later, a Gorkha sentry stopped a group of two dozen travellers at the pass connecting Sirmaur and Subathu for questioning. Suspicious of their abnormally large load, the watchman forced open their crates, where he discovered 'seven loads of gun powder, three of lead, and four bundles of the things of sepahes'.<sup>61</sup> The group was detained for the night and brought before the commanding officer the next morning. Further questioning revealed that its leader was a Kahluri Brahmin who had been in the elder Sirmauri rani's service since 1832. The rani had supplied her servant with the ammunition, which was to be secreted into forts at the entry to Bilaspur under his companions' watch while her confidant proceeded to the capital.<sup>62</sup> Their plans foiled, the officer disbanded the party and sent its leaders to his superior at Ambala. Three days later, a letter from the recently anointed raja of Bilaspur shed additional light on the matter, suggesting the intercepted party was part of a far grander scheme:

The rajah of Sirmoore (Nahun) has without any reason, created disturbances in my territory. [...] The servants of the rajah having arrive[d] in the adjoining Baghul territory [near today's Solan], have excited my subjects to rebellion, and I am now given to understand, that he has prepared troops on the Baghul frontier with a view to invade my possessions. You know the unhappy consequences, the deaths, and the depopulation, that must ensue from such designs of the rajah, and I therefore beg you will be good enough to adopt such measures, as you may think necessary to check the progress of the evil, to prohibit the rana of Baghal from allowing the Sirmoore troops to pass thro' his possessions, and to expel them from his frontier.<sup>63</sup>

in his entourage, was unable to confirm the pregnancy (NAI, F.D., P.C., 23 March 1840, no 144, Rannee Sirmooreha to Secretary to Government, received 17 March 1840, fo. 1-2; Chander 1907, 25). The lack of documents in the archival records strengthens the claim that the ranis' pleas were ignored.

61 Deposition of Palla son of Bhawania Brahmun, inhabitant of Belaspore, 29 November 1839, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 44.

62 Ibid., fo. 45.

63 Jagat Chand to Macausland, received 2 December 1839, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 41-2.

The Sirmauri ranis' henchmen were thus part of a more elaborate plan hatched in conjunction with their brother. Oblivious of his agreements with the EIC, Fateh Prakash Sirmauriya had mobilized troops through the territories of an 'independent chief' (where his sister's orderlies had secreted ammunition in advance),<sup>64</sup> enticed the subjects of a neighbouring ruler to rebellion, and, ultimately, prepared to execute an attack on a British protectorate.

The contrast between the confident raja of Sirmaur and his brother-in-law's feeble replacement could have hardly been greater. Barely six months in power, the once-valiant leader of the Kahluri opposition was fast becoming the victim of a sophisticated, multi-partied attack that rapidly closed in on his kingdom. Within a fortnight, Bilaspur was once again on the verge of anarchy. Unable to gather support at home, the desperate Jhangi (Jagat) Chand delivered a confidential letter to the agent at Ambala through a personal advisor, in which he enumerated the multiple threats facing his regime:

[t]hat men on the part of the rajah Futteh Purgash of Nahun, and his sisters, the widows of the late rajah Khurruck Chund, are always plotting to disturb my country; that Motee Ram of Nahun, and Bissun Singh son of Sansaroo, the agents of the ranee, having repaired to Nundpore Makhawal, have united with the Sodhees there to take my [ancestral] fort of Kote [Kahlur] in that vicinity; that ammunition and money is supplied by the rajah of Nahun, who has also dispatched his agents towards Kangra in the Punjaub Hills, to enlist troops; and that the rajah, who was once himself the suitor for the hand of the late rajah Khurruck Chund (my predecessor's) sister, has now promised her to the Sookait chief, if he will cooperate with him in raising disturbances in my country.<sup>65</sup>

The means employed by the Sirmauri royals were remarkable by any standard. From the diversionary tactics that surrounded the succession to the mysterious birth of an heir, through the dispatching of secret agents to infiltrate and stir rebellion in Bilaspur via Baghal, to alliances with armed groups both within and outside of the kingdom, and the pact with the distinguished leader of Suket through marriage, Fateh Prakash and his sisters exploited every possible channel to ensure their success.

64 Deposition of Goorsahae son of Danor Karyh, 29 November 1839, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 46.

65 Jagat Chand to Clerk, received 13 December 1839, in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 42-3.

Consider the enlistment of the erstwhile *wazir* 'Bissun' (Bishnu) Singh Chandel. Although ousted from his hereditary role by the *miyans* in 1832, Bishnu remained closely linked to court, becoming the 'influential favourite' of the elder Sirmauri rani, who used his diplomatic know-how to affect a calculated takeover of the kingdom.<sup>66</sup> The former *wazir* thus concluded pacts with several of the late raja's retainers, including the Rohilla cavalry, the Sodhis of Anandpur, and peasant-warriors from the loosely regulated northern part of the kingdom (specifically, from the miniscule tract of Kutlehr in the Kangra Hills adjoining Bilaspur), where the North Indian military market was resurging after the death of the Maharaja of Lahore. The marital alliance proposed to the ruler of Suket was related to these processes, since the late Kharak Chand had in fact borrowed 25,000 rupees from the latter to pay for his 'Pathan mercenaries'. In offering the late ruler's sister in marriage, the Sirmauri rani earned a powerful ally at Bilaspur's border on the north-easterly road to Mandi, while compensating him for the earlier loss (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933], vol. 1, p. 366). By attacking on multiple fronts, the Sirmauri attack brought Jagat Chand's Bilaspur to the brink of extinction.

While Clerk would later attribute the 'impoverished' country's collapse to the 'prodigal, tyrannical, and reckless' legacy of Kharak Chand, his limited understanding of its politics was in no small part responsible for this outcome.<sup>67</sup> In the six months that had passed since the *dalyan* became raja, the Ajmeriya *miyans* failed miserably in delivering on their earlier promises to rebuild the state. Inebriated with newfound freedom, the late ruler's enemies fragmented the regime to an even greater extent by pursuing their individual interests.<sup>68</sup> By the time the rani reached the capital, the *miyans* had all but dispersed, leaving the recently installed Jagat Chand at the mercy of the invaders. The only leader of note to support his cause was raja Ram Saran of Handur. A member of the extended brotherhood of Chandela Rajputs, the Handuriya was eager to preserve his hard-won supremacy and no doubt relished his dominance over the senior branch

66 See von Hügel (2000[1845], 25), who noted the close relationship between the *wazir* and Kharak Chand's 'first wife' in 1835 – i.e., the elder Sirmauri rani, whom he married shortly after coming to power (in 1827). Bishnu Singh's political acumen is evident in the announcement of the birth of an heir to regional leaders and in the rani's dealings with Lahore (Chander 1907, 26).

67 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 40.

68 Metcalfe to Thomason, 17 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 36. The nomination of an illiterate (albeit moderately capable) *wazir* from the nobility further undermined efficiency (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 513).

of the family that had been the cause of much suffering in his youth.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, the aging raja had several reasons to hesitate to interfere on Jagat Chand's behalf.

For one, the overlap between the Chandela states' territories and Handur's joint border with Baghal, whence the Sirmauri forces were expected to arrive, would have exposed his subjects to attacks. Second, despite their differences over the succession, Ram Saran professed 'the most perfect friendship' with the ruler of Nahan, which had been ratified in his son and heir's marriage to the latter's full sister in 1832; were the Handuriya to side with Bilaspur against Sirmaur, he would have been forced into a confrontation with his daughter-in-law's sister (the elder rani Sirmauri) and consequently jeopardize his relations with Nahan.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the youthful warrior-king who had ruled supreme over the hills south of the Sutlej at the turn of the century (by allying with the erstwhile 'Mountain Emperor' of Kangra) was a far cry from the 'melancholy old man' he had become by 1840. Lacking in energy and devoid of access to the inner workings of the Kahluri court, the Handuriya was in no position to counter the Sirmauri royals' manoeuvres.<sup>71</sup> By leaving the arena open for contestation, the Handuriya enabled the last full-blown war between Pahari leaders to take place, in which he was also destined to take a part.

### The conquest and its outcomes

As if defying a quarter century of British rule, the Himalayan frontier was ablaze with old-world politics in the winter of 1839-40.<sup>72</sup> Departing from their mountainous abode with a thousand warriors in December, the Sirmauri sisters marched through the mountains into northern Bilaspur, where they joined warrior-peasants from the Kangra hills who had gathered there beforehand. The joint armies then marched south to capture the Chandelas'

69 On Ram Saran's enmity towards Bilaspur as a young man, see Chapters 1-2.

70 Clerk to Metcalfe, 18 December 1839 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 26. On the marital ties between Handur and Sirmaur, consult Singh (2007[1912], 250-1).

71 The Governor-General's sister had met the raja of Handur a year before the events, and attributed his apparent depression to 'the loss of his best' wife, 'the only one he really liked' (Eden 1988, 160). The Ambala agent also observed that Ram Saran's temper had 'in his old age become much soured' (OIOC IOR/F/4/1429/56513, Clerk to Prinsep, 29 September 1834, fo. 7).

72 See the preceding chapter, and, more broadly, Kolff (1989). The details of the ranis' conquests are available in 'Khalur Disturbances' (and the slightly different parallel copy at the British Library), as well as in the later history of Chander (1907). The latter source, written by Kharak Chand's grandson from the rani Mangalani (d. 1896, outliving her Sirmauri co-wives by some four decades), is based on family documents and interviews with its author's grandmother.

ancestral fort of Kot Kahlur, earning legitimacy for their endeavour. With the country's northern parts subdued and the southerly tracts surrounding Mokhawal secured by their Sodhi allies, the ranis sent a letter to Lahore reporting their position alongside the customary *nazrānā* ('cash tribute') expected of a subject state. While receipt of the letter and tribute were acknowledged through the issuing of a *farman*, an official recognition of sovereignty in the form of a *sanad* failed to materialize. The ranis nonetheless proceeded to recruit the kingdom's peasants 'by assuring them of having secured the support of Lahore',<sup>73</sup> and pressed on with the conquest of Bilaspur's remaining tracts south of the Sutlej.

Back in the capital, Jagat Chand made a futile attempt to rally his Ajmeriya kinsmen to counter the attack that culminated in his solitary flight south to Handur.<sup>74</sup> Negotiating a deal with his host, the refugee king was granted a fighting force under the Handuriya's cousin in exchange for two forts on the Handur-Bilaspur border (most likely Ratanpur and the fort overlooking Bilaspur's southern point of entry at Swarghat). Its eyes set on the strategic Kot Dhar, the replenished army marched towards Bilaspur, encountering the fortified Sodhis on a parallel ridge south of the Sutlej. The riposte was short lived: in the battle that ensued at the hilltop pilgrimage site of Naina Devi, the Handuri commander was killed and his soldiers quickly disbanded.<sup>75</sup> With Jagat Chand twice beaten, the ranis' popularity soared to new heights,<sup>76</sup> setting the stage for the decisive invasion of the kingdom's central valley. Within days, the conquest of Bilaspur was complete.

Embroiled in Afghan affairs and the frenzy of diplomatic activity spurred by the interregnum in Lahore, the political agent at Ambala greeted the news of Bilaspur's fall with dismay. Hastily writing to demand an explanation from the ranis, the multi-tasking agent/liaison with Lahore assembled an army and stormed Bilaspur to reinstate Jagat Chand as ruler.<sup>77</sup> Although the details of this attack are missing from most sources, a petition filed by the elder Sirmauri rani some two months later paints a disturbingly violent picture of the means used to crush the widows' regime. Having reclaimed the kingdom from those who had 'with evil charms' killed their husband,

73 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 38.

74 Local tradition holds that the raja first attempted to engage the ranis, at which point his generals abandoned his cause (Chander 1907, 26; Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 510).

75 Metcalfe to Thomason, 17 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 35.

76 By this stage, even Jagat Chand's father-in-law, the raja of Mandi, had sided with the ranis (Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 38).

77 The agent's 100 *sawārs* ('cavalrymen') from Ambala were assisted by 250 auxiliaries from Patiala and the forces of several Pahari rulers (Chander 1907, 16).

the ranis had barely settled into power before the unlawful successor ('mian Junga') returned to the capital with a 2000-strong army from 'the ancient enemy' of Handur. Overcoming significant popular retaliation, the vengeful raja forced the widows from their abode while performing acts of unimaginable cruelty towards their peers. The late Kharak Chand's sister, once wooed by the Sirmauriya and later promised to the ruler of Suket, was thus cuffed and chained in the fort of Ratanpur, while the aged queen-mother, a Guleri wife of Maha Chand, was forced out of the palace and beaten in public. These grotesque acts of 'tyranny and oppression' were reportedly supported and sanctioned by the EIC, whose soldiers and officers joined in Jagat Chand's revenge.<sup>78</sup>

Undeterred by the ranis' popularity, Clerk ordered the widows to leave the kingdom, which, having failed to secure a *sanad* from Lahore, they were obliged to do.<sup>79</sup> Their considerable fortune packed and loaded (including artefacts and miniature paintings), the ranis resettled in their natal kingdom while the twice-defeated Jagat Chand resumed the throne. Over the next days, Clerk stamped out the remaining pockets of resistance in the countryside, installed garrisons of Kahluri and Patiala warriors at key positions, and, ultimately, confronted the Sodhis on the range above Anandpur.<sup>80</sup> Come spring, the kingdom on the Sutlej was regained, but at no trifling price: ravaged by punitive expeditions, entire villages had been burnt down, wells and ponds poisoned, and the prospect of future improvement under the 'respectable but not energetic' Jagat Chand seemed particularly bleak.<sup>81</sup>

A week after leaving the kingdom and with his tenure at Ambala nearing its end, Clerk made a final attempt to rectify the ailing state by reiterating his

78 NAI, F.D., P.C., 23 March 1840, no 144, Rannee Sirmooreha to Secretary to Government [Maddock?], received 17 March 1840, fo. 2. The rani dated their last stand in Bilaspur to 30 January, suggesting they had held the kingdom for approximately two months.

79 *Wazir* Bishan Singh reportedly advised waiting to attack the capital until a *sanad* from Lahore was received, but his advice went unheeded in the rapid conquests that followed the second victory over Jagat Chand's forces (Chander 1907, 27).

80 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 39. The Sodhi leader, singled out as a central associate in the affair, managed to flee beyond the Sutlej through 'the neglect, if not connivance, of the Lahore Authorities at the ferries' (NAI, F.D., P.C., 20 April 1840, no 15, Clerk to Tapp, 4 March 1840, fo. 7).

81 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 40. The prodigious investments needed to rehabilitate the state notwithstanding, Jagat Chand also owed 120,000 rupees to the Handuriya for his assistance, which were repaid by levying a 4 rupee tax on Kahluri cultivators (suggesting a Kahluri population of roughly 30,000 c. 1840) (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 510).

demand for establishing a Residency in Bilaspur.<sup>82</sup> Already convinced of its necessity prior to the events and doubly so after the recent upheavals, the Resident at Delhi forwarded the recommendation with a copy of the extensive report that Clerk had drafted 20 months earlier, in which the measure had first been proposed. The unanimous support for a Residency among the EIC's personnel on the frontier notwithstanding, Calcutta remained unmoved: Bilaspur was simply 'too insignificant in extent and revenue to warrant the employment of a European officer to manage it', and its rehabilitation would be better served by locating 'the most fitting person that can be found' to serve as *wazir*.<sup>83</sup> While the upheavals in Bilaspur failed to move the imperial centre, they did force a thorough reconsideration of Clerk's understanding of the region.

The flurry of secret agents, furtive confidants, wayward international diplomacy, and fervent military market engaged by the agent's supposed allies in Sirmaur revealed a political reality that was remarkably congruous with pre-colonial patterns of rule. The ranis' confidants thus hark back to the non-Rajput agents who facilitated the Gorkha conquests two decades earlier; the sanctioning of authority by Lahore recalled earlier alliances with Kathmandu (1803-15) and Calcutta (from 1815); and the exchange of military support from Handur for forts persisted as it had through virtually every armed conflict since the Battle of Chinjhiar (1795/6).<sup>84</sup> These seeming continuities were nonetheless adapted to the constraints of British rule, and to the delineation of the imperial border along the Sutlej in particular. The warrior-peasants who joined the ranis, for example, were for the most part recruited from beyond the river rather than from the interior of British territory, while the collaboration of the Sodhis of Mokhawal was similarly enabled by their ambiguous standing with Lahore. The stealthy operations and coordination required to bring the Sirmauri ranis' plan to fruition display a degree of sophistication that surpassed most (if not all) instances of inter-Pahari rivalry examined thus far, suggesting the Rajput elite had successfully adapted to its changing circumstances even as it exposed the abysmal misunderstanding of the region and its leaders by those purporting to rule it.

82 Clerk was appointed to Ludhiana but retained his duties as agent at Ambala until 1843, when he gained the prestigious post of Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Provinces.

83 Secretary to the Governor-General [Maddock/Macnaghten?] to Thomason, 20 April 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 53-4.

84 Territorial expansion by conquest persisted even among the EIC's most trusted allies, the raja of Handur having erected a fort to claim lands in the plains as late as the 1830s (OIOC IOR/F/4/1429/56513, Clerk to Prinsep, 29 September 1834, fo. 5-8).

The political agent's failure to detect the plot in Bilaspur was both embarrassing and painful. Having cultivated a distinct set of ideas regarding Rajput states, the discovery that his assumptions were largely baseless exposed an ignorance that his superiors would have found deplorable. While Clerk's later postings suggest he had weathered the storm (as does Delhi's support of his final call for establishing a Residency in Bilaspur *after* the ranis' deposition), the breach of confidence by 'the most beholder' Fateh Prakash of Sirmaur would have been deeply disappointing.<sup>85</sup> Somewhat vindictively, Clerk insisted on 'signal punishment' for his ungrateful friend, and in his rage dispensed with protocol by denying him a hearing altogether.<sup>86</sup> A few months later, Fateh Prakash's reputation had been tarnished throughout EIC ranks, costing him his good name and a hefty fine of 25,000 rupees ('a moiety of his annual income') for complicity in the events.<sup>87</sup> While the Sirmauriya rolled the brunt of the fine over to his sisters, his relationship with the agent was beyond repair. Stripped of his former privileges, the raja was subjected to the same treatment as his peers, and was harshly criticized and repeatedly threatened with the loss of rights for any perceived shortcoming.<sup>88</sup> Within a decade of his death, frontier officials would recall the erstwhile champion of progress as little more than a 'very avaricious' mountain king.<sup>89</sup>

Among his countrymen, or at least among the court historian of Nahan, Fateh Prakash remained unblemished. Just and pious, the Sirmauriya was remembered as the grand reformer who ushered in an era of wealth and prosperity, and who had increased the kingdom's territory through peaceful, conciliatory policies. Glossing over the coup, the chronicle (Singh 2007 [1912]) conforms to the Indic registers of turn-of-the-twentieth-century

85 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 38. The EIC's esteem of Fateh Prakash was unanimous. The Governor-General thus praised the Sirmauriya for offering to lead his troops into battle to support the EIC in Afghanistan, even as plans for conquering Bilaspur were underway; see NAI, F.D., S.C., 6 February 1839, no 57-67, especially 'Services in aid of Afghan expedition offered by Raja of Nahan', no 63, Auckland to Fateh Prakash, 8 November 1839, fo. 743-4.

86 The agent's superiors corrected this 'oversight' by granting Fateh Prakash a hearing (Thomason to Metcalfe, 25 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 47).

87 Clerk to Metcalfe, 12 March 1840 in 'Kahlur Disturbances', fo. 39. Fateh Prakash denied playing part in the coup but was penalised for allowing the plot to mature in his territory.

88 The impact of this slump in status was captured by the Russian prince Soltykoff during a visit to Nahan in 1842. Having informed Fateh Prakash of Clerk's intention to visit the state to enquire into reports of civil unrest, Soltykoff observed 'the unfortunate raja [...] trembling in his shoes' (Garret 1971[1934], 122).

89 NAI, F.D., P.C., 20 February 1857, no 234: 'Reported Death of the Raja of Sirmoor', Hay to Jamel, 25 January 1857, fo. 13.

historiography, transforming warrior-kings into saintly figures in old age. Like his sisters' threats to retire to holy sites during the conflict over the succession in Bilaspur, Fateh Prakash concluded his career with a grand pilgrimage to Gaya and Varanasi in the plains. The Sirmuariya's Kahluri rival followed suit. After a decade of difficulties in power, Jagat Chand ceded his throne to his son in order to live out his remaining seven years in 'Brindaban and other holy places'.<sup>90</sup>

In reducing the ranis' conquests to a residual episode in the long list of embattled mountain kings, imperial historiography advanced a conformist view of regal behaviour as per coeval perceptions of EIC officials on the frontier. However, the magnitude of the event and the Sirmauri widows' centrality within it still had to be explained. Kahluri histories resolved this problem by highlighting the ranis' agency in launching a *kāgazī laḍāī* ('war of papers') against the state after their final ousting from Bilaspur, while simultaneously emphasizing their religiously motivated dealings in later life.<sup>91</sup> The Tripati Devi of later years is thus described as *Lakṣmī-svarūp* ('[the goddess of] munificence incarnate'), selflessly spending her wealth on pilgrimages and public works: a real life heroine on par with the grandest goddess-queens. Likened to 'Damayanti, Draupadi, and Sitaji', the historical rebel-rani seemed to have assumed the customary role prescribed by Pahari Rajput historiography (Chander 1907, 33).<sup>92</sup> If the events of 1840 saw the final instance of warring ranis in the hills, they were nonetheless closely related to contemporary developments among North India's women rulers. This was, after all, the age of the Kashmirian (Dogra?) Begum Samru (c. 1753-1836), who held a vast estate with the support of sophisticated armies, and a time when Punjabi ladies in the plains adjoining Handur could pass

90 The raja's abdication in 1850 was attributed to his 'devotional spirit', leading to the succession of his grandson, Hira Chand (r. 1850-83) (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, pp. 510-511).

91 On the ranis' 'war of papers', see Singh and Varma (1940, 30). The ranis rejected Kahluri compensation and travelled to plead before Calcutta shortly after the events, where the elder rani died from dysentery in May 1841. Resuming the hills, the younger rani Tripati Devi was readmitted into the fold of the elite and granted a pension from Bilaspur in 1844. Tripati Devi later submitted an affidavit regarding her circumstances to the EIC with the backing of numerous rulers (i.e., Bashahr, Handur, Kutlehr, Simraur, Suket, nine of the twelve *thakurais*, the Sodhis of Anandpur, and 'two Singhpuria Sardars'), but was ignored (Chander 1907, 28). Her son continued the struggle by hiring a self-proclaimed barrister by the name of 'Mr. Tylor' to present his case before the Privy Council in London in 1866, but the latter disappeared after collecting his client's documents and a 5000-rupee advance (Chander 1907, 36-7). Enquiries with archivists at the British Library's OIOC and the Privy Council seem to confirm this, as no such claim appears on record.

92 The rani also went to great lengths to pay for her husband's *barsi* and *cau-barsi* rites (on the first and fourth anniversaries of his death).

days on end in shootouts from neighbouring mud forts in defiance of EIC law.<sup>93</sup> However, if the Begum remains an icon for politically empowered women and a precursor to the celebrated rani of Jhansi, and while Sikh women still assert their independence by strolling about in *curidars*, the aristocratic Rajputnis of the hills became traditionalized in both historical memory and in practice.

The events surrounding the death of Kharak Chand reveal the continued vitality of Pahari statecraft under British rule, and its considerable divergence from the discourse on Rajput kingship that was generated by EIC officers and their allies. For the Pahari elite, this period saw a growing concern with marital ties as a means for expanding power when open warfare was no longer an option, or at least a last resort. Paralleling these efforts was Calcutta's need for a stable, peaceful boundary with Lahore, which drew the agent at Ambala into the thick of negotiations between the states under his authority. As the parties' exchanges drew on, the material concerns of the ruling families came to include particular claims regarding proper 'tradition', which would inform a deceptively cohesive notion of what Pahari Rajputs were meant to be, coherently formulated in the report on Bilaspur written shortly before Kharak Chand's death.

The ensuing struggle for succession compounded an already delicate situation, bringing these parallel worlds into a clash that exposed an abysmal lack of understanding on the part of the EIC's officers. Given the chasm between the reality of the hills and the official discourse used to describe them, its resilience is somewhat surprising. It is here that a *longue durée* perspective is instructive of how the discourses of politically dominant powers, by feeding into the body of knowledge on South Asia, manage to alter group identities over time. The *ancien régime* stratagems of shifting alliances, multi-faceted diplomacy, and rooted modes of warfare along the frontier were to dissipate with the region's incorporation into the subcontinent. Subjected to intense research during the Victorian Age, the kingdoms' pasts gradually transformed into the Sanskritic domain of Kshatriyas that is familiar today, and that distinguished the Pahari rulers from (and reflected back upon) their Rajasthani peers. By the 1930s, the historians who committed the

93 In the 1820s-30s, Begam Samru's *jagir* at Sardhana (a few days ride south of Ambala) yielded 500,000 rupees per annum, approximately ten and five times the income of Sirmaur and Bilaspur, respectively (Alavi 1995, 220-5, Fisher 2010, 13-77). For an eyewitness account of 'four Sikh ladies' passing days on end in firing 'great guns' from neighbouring turrets in the plains near Handur, see Eden (1988, 160).

annals of the hills to writing had reduced the ranis' conquests to three short paragraphs about the 'twin sisters' of the raja of Sirmaur – a curious factoid in the long history of Pahari Rajput kings.

# Epilogue

In November 2017, the long-standing Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh Virbhadra Singh stood for re-election. While the candidate's track record spanned decades of state, national, and international level politics that bolstered his credentials for the job, within the state he was most popularly known as 'rajaji' in reference to his inherited position as the head of the ruling dynasty of the erstwhile kingdom of Bashahr in the inner highlands. In classical sociological terms, this seasoned politician illustrated the fruitful combination of components outlined by Weber as integral to the practise of authority, supplementing personal charisma with institutional (elected) and traditional (inherited) facets of power; it is the creation and reformulation of the latter sphere that this book has explored.<sup>1</sup> If the traditional sources of authority that sustained the candidate's public image have been shown to originate with the concrete exchanges between the mountain rulers and the British during the early colonial encounter, the drama that unfolded on the national level in parallel to Rajaji's campaign for office stretched the notion of 'Rajput Tradition' even farther.

In metropolitan centres across India, politicians and publics affiliated with the Rajput community decried the impending release of *Padmavati*, the most expensive Bollywood production to date, citing the film's historical inaccuracy and deliberate offense to Hindu sentiments. *Padmavati* narrates the fall of the Rajasthani fortress of Chittor to Ala' al-Din Khalji in 1303, which culminated in a suicidal charge of its besieged Mewar Rajputs and the voluntary immolation of the women and children left behind under the leadership of the raja's valiant wife, Padmavati. With right-wing activists and politicians inciting violence against the film and its creators, historians took pains to explain that the story of Padmavati was devoid of a factual basis, having been first conceived by a Sufi poet from Awadh (present day Uttar Pradesh) more than two centuries after the Delhi Sultan's triumph. In transforming myth into historical fact for political (and material) profit, the resurgence of the story in the public sphere illustrates the multifaceted registers of cultural memory in South Asia.<sup>2</sup>

1 See the delightful illustration of these concepts in Freeman (2007). On the modern reformulation of kingship in Bashahr, see Moran (2007).

2 For a meticulous study of the legend of Padmini and its incarnations, see Sreenivasan (2007). For a concise critique of the politicization of its Bollywood rendition, see Jha (2017).

Between the historical reconstruction of West Himalayan polity as pan-Indic kingdoms and the national uproar over the fictional Rajputni of Mewar, the Rajput ethos retains a currency that pervades the modern South Asian political imaginary. Despite originating in the divergent realms of documented lived experiences and poetic inspiration, the iconic status of the mountain kings and Padmavati (alias Padmini) share affinities that are considered self-evident today. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these affinities are lucidly manifest in an historical novel from Bilaspur that tells the story of the widowed ranis' conquest of the kingdom in the winter of 1839-40 (explored in Chapter 5). Although dismissed from standard histories as an anomaly, the story of the ranis' revolution was retold by residents of the erstwhile kingdom over several generations and ultimately committed to writing in Shyam Lal's aptly titled *Kahlūr kī Padminī* or *Padmini of Kahlur* (Lal 1983).<sup>3</sup> While Lal does not seem to have read the records or sources that inform the reconstruction of these events in the preceding chapter, his narrative displays the same complexity of multiple sub-plots, covert operations, and epic military action, alongside imagery and values that are concomitant with the story of Padmavati.

Set in the final years of Kharak Chand's reign, *Kahlur ki Padmini* centres on the amorous relationship between the Chandela *dalyan* ('second in line to the throne'), *miyan* 'Shyam Chand',<sup>4</sup> and a Kahluri Rajputni of high standing. The narrative opens with Shyam Chand's return from exile after his banishment by the false pretender to the throne, *miyan* Jangi (the historical successor Jagat Chand). Motivated by patriotic concern for the raja, the protagonist is on a mission to prevent *miyan* Jangi and his mysterious guru Mast Ram from usurping power. Greeted by a fellow Rajput of rank in a fort at the edge of the kingdom, Shyam Chand is apprised of the raja's descent into a life of vice and intoxication and summarily gallops towards the capital. After a brief interlude at the side of a well, during which he falls in love with a Kahluri noblewoman, the hero builds a coalition of royalists to oppose the

3 A resident of Bilaspur, Lal committed the story to writing after retiring from his post as judge at the Shimla High Court. On the prevalence of the ranis' story 'among the folk of Bilaspur', see Chandel (2007, 104).

4 Shyam Chand is presented as the son of Aghar (alis Aggal) Datta, the conspirator behind the loss of Chinjhar according to the oral tradition explored in Chapter 1. The character is apparently fictional, as records indicate that Aghar Datta died childless, although he could also represent Shere Singh, the rebuffed *dalyan* whose cause was championed by the raja of Sirmaur in the struggle for succession. For these figures' relative place in the Kahluri leadership, see Genealogical Chart.

conspirators with. Meanwhile, rani Tripati Dei (the younger Sirmauri rani) confronts her husband, whose debaucheries threaten to sink the kingdom. Entering the royal chamber, the rani reprimands her drunken spouse and demands the reins of state. As if awakened from a spell, the raja repents, composes couplets in honour of his intimate saviour, and in the amorous night of reconciliation that follows impregnates Tripati Dei. The next day, the reformed ruler departs for Ambala to reset relations with the EIC, but is poisoned before these can thaw by his trusted servant Hazri Nath, whose name implies a connection to an ascetic order of yogis and, by extension, to the Chandela conspirators' mysterious guru.

The raja's death sets the stage for confrontation. Tripati Dei leads the royalists with the support of *wazir* Bishnu Singh and the protagonist Shyam Chand. The rebellious nobles assemble under *miyans* 'Jangi-Bangi', who collude with the agent at Ambala 'Stuart' (the historical Clerk). Before taking to the field, the *miyans* consult their chillum-smoking guru Mast Ram in the grounds facing the palace. The guru is exposed as the mastermind behind the protagonist's exile, the late raja's intoxications and murder, and the numerous smaller schemes that run through the story's various sub-plots. The conspiratorial spiritual master's motives are revealed with his unmasking shortly before the final battle: Mast Ram is actually Agin Ram, the son of the infamous Bairagi Ram, who had slyly positioned himself as *wazir* to the late raja's grandmother Nagardevi Katochi only to be tortured to death by her son (the late raja's father) Maha Chand. The corruption of the Rajput court is thus the result of a vengeful ascetic's vendetta against the royal milieu.

The novel concludes with an orgy of violence on the Sandu *maidan* (Lal 1983, 71-81). Although the royalists are 'eaten by bullets', the damages they inflict on their opponents before being defeated are pointedly just: the lead conspirators' noses are cut and fed to the crows, the treacherous guru's heart is pierced with his own tongs, the eyes of the lecherous EIC agent at Ambala are gouged out, and the arm of the Delhi Resident Metcalfe (a literary addition, as the historical Metcalfe was absent from these battles) is cut in two. In a coda to the tale, the author muses on the semblance between the royalist protagonists and the freedom fighters of 1857: *wazir* Bishnu Singh is likened to a Pahari Nana Sahib, Shyam Chand to Tantya Topi, and Tripati Devi becomes a mountain variant of the famed Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, who is in spirit none other than 'Padmini of Kahlur' (Lal 1983, 83-84).

In giving voice to oral traditions current in twentieth century-Bilaspur, the *Kahlur ki Padmini* subverts the dominant historical discourse to vindicate

the losing party in the struggle for Bilaspur c. 1839-40. The 'surreptitious heir' of imperial historiography is legitimated; the biologically senior *dalyan* ('second in line to the throne') outshines his historically factual junior replacement (Jagat Chand) to become Bilaspur's truly selfless hero; and the conspirator nobles who assumed the state are implicitly exonerated by revealing their enslavement to a vindictive ascetic, representative of the Pahari Rajputs' pre-colonial allies who had been transformed into villains under the British. Attuned to the cultural characteristics of the hills, the rivalry between the parties spans generations, occasioning visits from the historical figures encountered throughout this study. The powerful regent of Bilaspur, her ascetic advisor, the Chandela *miyans*, and the trustworthy Kahluri *wazir* who were at the nexus of regional politics were each, in their respective domains and times, cardinal players in West Himalayan politics. As the facilitator of the conspiracy, the agent at Ambala is particularly reviled, his advances towards royal Rajputnis echoing the covetous gaze of the villainous Sultan in Padmavati and are poetically punished with a loss of vision.

The transmutation of pan-Indian concepts, pro-Rajput sentiments, and the national movement's opposition to British rule, makes for a curious mixture of idioms and ideals that were advanced in various stages of South Asian history. In this respect, Lal seems to have internalized the basic premises about Rajputs that were generated into fact with the maturation of colonial knowledge. From the hallowing of agnate succession and the determination of hierarchical privileges by right of birth to the vilification of politically powerful ascetics as the scourge of the Rajput ruling class,<sup>5</sup> Lal's novel follows the cultural vectors that emerged in the early colonial encounter to a fault. However, the novel's reliance on popular traditions in Bilaspur also highlights the prevalence of an alternative memory of the past that is excluded from standard histories. Thus, while the politically dominant classes belittled the ranis' *coup d'état*, the events remained deeply engrained in their home environment by way of oral tradition until their resurgence in print for modern day readers. Rather than ignoring the past altogether, the erstwhile subjects of Bilaspur preserved the memory of these local heroes of the hills for over 150 years, ultimately attributing to them a

5 That Lal casts his ultimate villain as a *bairāgī* strengthens the claim that ascetic orders had significant sway over politics, as is indeed evident in Baron von Hügel's encounter with a much revered 'bairagi' by the name of 'Tamū Shah' on his way from Bilaspur to Kangra in 1835. Surrounded by an admiring crowd, Shah professed to have formerly been the 'wazir of the raja of Nadaun' (i.e., Kangra), but to have since quit the latter in order to serve 'a higher [spiritual?] master' (von Hügel 2000[1845], 31).

host of additional characteristics that cast them as Pahari forerunners of the heroes of India's national movement for independence.

This book set out to explain the long- and short-term effects of the South Asian encounter with modernity. Cognizant of the pronounced impact that early exchanges between indigenous and foreign agents had on the reshaping of the subcontinent's societies, political cultures, and histories, it argued that these transactions were accentuated in borderland regions. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the West Himalayan foothills met these conditions to a fault, their geographic, political, and cultural characteristics exemplifying the fluidity inherent to frontier zones. Divided between politically dominant families whose sources of authority were enshrined in unwritten customs, the fragmented mountain polities adjusted to the regulatory policies of the colonial state by devising stratagems that advanced their interests within the constraints imposed from above. Within a quarter century, these processes had yielded a set of ideas about its rulers, their traditions, and the lawful practise of sovereignty that continues to underlie regional identity today. In transitioning from fluid alliances and ad-hoc coalitions to exemplars of British India's 'princely states', the Pahari Rajput rulers revised their pasts along the lines of Indic Kshatriya kings to display what is possibly the most successful case of regional integration into the body politic of modern South Asia.

The demarcation of rigid boundaries in a country beset by mountain passes, forests, and rivers introduced a set of novel concepts that escalated these processes of transformation. As the lines drawn on maps translated into political realities, the Gorkha warriors who had ruled over the hill states with varying degrees of acceptability became barbaric Others, while the borders between the states engendered new methods for distinguishing between their ruling families. Within these states, male and female Rajput rulers redefined power, tradition, and legitimacy in response to the new order, securing marriages with dominant elites; advancing claims on the basis of religious codes, such as the rite of *sati* ('widow immolation'); and quoting 'timeless' custom to sanction actions that aimed to improve their positions in the present. These processes were most palpably evident on the imperial frontier that followed the course of the Sutlej River, c. 1809-45. Cutting through the Chandela kingdom of Bilaspur, the border that provided decades of precious stability to the empires based in Calcutta and Lahore was the source of incessant strife for the hill states, and consequently the site where the modern contours of Pahari Rajput tradition, kingship, and polity were articulated.

The modification of kingship and polity in the early colonial Himalayan borderland that had crystallized in the exchanges surrounding the Sirmauris' revolution in Bilaspur provided the basis for a regional identity that would continue to evolve in the modern era. As the imperial border stretched beyond the Sutlej to encompass the entirety of the Punjab (through the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845-6 and 1848-9), the kingdoms that had been at the forefront of empire were eclipsed by their Dogra peers in Jammu and Kashmir, who furthered the ideas about sovereignty, state, and society among Pahari Rajputs through their integration into British India. As 'pacified' subjects of the British Indian Empire, the descendants of the once-embattled families of Sirmaur, Bilaspur, and Kangra retained political and economic relevance by capitalizing on the opportunities afforded South Asian leaders within the framework of the colonial state.

For the Kangra Katoch, lineal prestige secured appointments as military commanders of local recruits, magistrates in their once-independent kingdom turned civil district, and investment in business ventures in and beyond the hills.<sup>6</sup> In the internally stable and topographically diverse kingdom of Sirmaur, new technologies were employed to harvest natural resources and develop industries, including a state-owned foundry that processed ore mined in the highlands and a thriving timber industry, alongside real-estate investments in Shimla and the ownership of tea gardens beyond the state's boundaries.<sup>7</sup> In the erstwhile frontier state of Bilaspur, such ventures remained consigned to the realm of fiction. Hindered by a continually expanding number of nobles, the Kahluri Court remained in a near-perpetual state of crisis.<sup>8</sup> Although no longer taking to arms to oppose their rulers, Kahluri *miyans* in the 1900s voiced grievances that were uncannily similar to their ancestors' in the 1830s, accusing the state's inexperienced young raja of chronic disengagement from his duties and an unsavoury association with 'foreign shopkeepers from Shimla'.<sup>9</sup>

6 The rise of a British-backed tea industry from the 1860s, for example, strengthened ties between landowners and tenants, attracted labourers, and augmented the revenues of the elite, who retained the best lands in the region (Moran 2009). The reliance on timber in highland states is explored in Moran (2007).

7 The tea gardens beyond the Yamuna, which were contiguous with the Kiarda Dun, craftily expanded Sirmauri sovereignty into the civil tracts of British India; see the alarmed report of 1902 in OIOC IOR/R/1/1/283, 'Acquisition of British Territory by Native States', fo. 2-7.

8 The entitlements of Kahluri nobles from the state in the 1930s amounted to some 40,000 rupees or 17 per cent of its annual income (Hutchison and Vogel 1999[1933], vol. 2, p. 513).

9 The remarkable history of the sickly Bijay Chand (r.1889-1927, d. 1931), who spent a vast portion of his inherited wealth constructing mansions in Varanasi, from where he pretended to rule, is reviewed in Chandel (2007, 124-144).

Their divergent trajectories notwithstanding, the Rajput elite was united in propagating a modern view of their pasts through the writing of histories. Encouraged by British officials, these histories became part of the imperial project's perception of the mountain kings as the key to deciphering the secrets of ancient India. Amalgamating foundational elements of classical Hindu civilization with components of local provenance, modern historiography provided the baseline for current readings of regional elites as both Sanskritic and autochthonous. Historians of the Pahari elite culled the researches of imperial savants, archaeologists, and antiquarians to buttress their dynastic accounts, bequeathing a trenchant notion of their past as both Sanskritic and Pahari.<sup>10</sup> Whether these claims corresponded to a lived reality or not became largely immaterial, for what this study has shown is that the *substance* of the modern reading of Pahari Rajput sovereignty was informed by events that were conspicuously recent, when the Himalayan foothills constituted the frontier of empire.

In the final analysis, the resilience of the modern interpretation of Pahari Rajput kingship, polity, culture, and, by extension, identity, is related to the circumstances that saw its inception. Drawn from decades of sustained interaction between British administrators and local rulers, the interpretation of kingly authority gained credence with subsequent generations precisely because it had been formed in an era of intimate contact between the two milieux. This afforded it a familiarity that was increasingly difficult to obtain in later years, as the rift between South Asians and Europeans widened. In this regard, the political agent who formulated a model of kingship and 'Rajput tradition' in reaction to coeval developments in Bilaspur and Sirmaur, although miserably failing to account for the motivations of the rulers under his command, cannot be said to have entirely misunderstood the West Himalayan variant of Rajput kingship. In envisaging a canvas of ideal types on the basis of intense personal interactions with Pahari Rajput leaders, the agent's nascent interpretation of sovereignty delineated a spectrum of kingship models spanning 'virtuous progressive' and 'villainous despot' rajas that local rulers could identify with.

In navigating between these extremes, the rulers of the hills displayed a creative agency that endowed their actions with meaning, and that was recognizable and acknowledged by their peers and superiors. That this reading of kingship endures as a fundamental characteristic of West Himalayan

10 The Ashoka Pillar in the ancient capital of Sirmaur at Kalsi and the Brahmi and Kharoshthi inscriptions scattered throughout Kangra evinces ancient links between the hills and the subcontinent. For references to key studies on the topic, see the Introduction.

society today attests to the exceptional success of the region's integration into British India, and to the important ways in which a local elite came into its own through dialogue with its alien overlords. Thus, when the forefathers of modern West Himalayan historiography, John Hutchison and Jean-Philippe Vogel, lamented the loss and destruction of 'so much that has been sanctified by the ages' (Hutchison and Vogel 1999 [1933], vol. 1, p. 11) in the face of the revolutionizing influences of the early twentieth century, they would have perhaps drawn comfort from the fact that much of this perceived antiquity had actually come into being through the protracted interactions of the preceding century, when Pahari Rajput identity was first recast and interpreted.

## Appendix: The *Jhera* of Chinjhiar

The *jheṛā* or ‘short oral epic’ of ‘Gaṛh Chiñjhyār’ recounts a conflict between Bilaspur and Kangra over a mountain fort in the winter of 1795 that is surveyed and analysed in Chapter 1. The version below was first recorded and transcribed in Devanagari script by Balakram Bhardwaj in the 1970s and subsequently reprinted in Sharma (2000, 125-40). The narrative is in the Kahluri dialect spoken in Bilaspur, which is one of several non-standardized Western Pahari languages, and thus conveys the losing party’s perspective on the events. While the majority of formulaic repetitions (e.g., ‘x said’) and variant spellings of proper names (e.g., *Aggu* vs. *Agal*, *Kahluriya* vs. *Kahluria*) have been retained to comply with the aesthetics of the oral tradition, evident typesetting mistakes have been corrected (e.g., *sab* for *sac* in line 378).

- Line # Kahluri text*
- 1 Rāṇī bole, ‘Suṇayā mere rājā  
sirā par koṭ jhule.  
Gaṛh Chiṅjhār Kāngre re hatthe  
ase kis banne lagie?’
- 5 Mahlā te nikalyā rājā Mahācand  
pheṭiyā kyāriyā ḍhilkadiyē jaṅge  
socdā-socdā sādū laṅhe  
rājā Mahācand kacahriyā jāye.
- 9 Rājā bole, ‘Suṇo mere bhāiyo,  
bagat asā jo aukhā āyā.  
Duniyā baṇī dusmaṇ asā dī  
kilā Chiṅjhār chātiyā sāmṇe āe’.
- 13 Sansāru bole, ‘Suṇ rājā Mahācandā,  
rahṇā asā bī mahlā bhāi,  
socā samjhā kuch bacārā,  
tā asē dekhge koī hor kanārā’.
- 17 Rāje ik sabhā sadāi,  
saugī sadāyā Dīpū Paṭiyāl.  
Dīpū bole, ‘Suṇ Mahācand rājeyā,  
merī ūci jay debā suṇyā’.
- 21 Dīpū bole, ‘Suṇ Mahācand rājeā,  
hākhī rā haū mucchā anhā  
kannā rā haū bolā  
uccā bolgā tā byorā ḍhgā’.
- 26 Rājā bole, ‘Suṇo bhāi,  
bure din gaī re asā jo āi  
Kaṭoce cakkī rā maihjar  
Chijhyār lei leā kilā.
- 29 Dūe pāse koṭā riyā dhārā  
hoyā chātiyā sāmṇe koṭ kilā  
kuch tā socā, kuch bacārā,  
huṇ koī karnā, cāhindā cārā’.
- 33 Arjā kardā Dīpū Paṭiyāl,  
‘Suṇ tū, rājā, man lāi.  
Bhaīs baṛī nī, akkal hundi,  
merī gall suṇ tū man lāi.

<i>Line #</i>	<i>English translation</i>
1	The rani said, 'Listen, my raja, this fort is dangling over our head – Garh ('fort') Chinjhiar is in Kangra's hands, now what shall we do?'
5	Maha Chand left the harem, neck tilting, legs staggering, he crossed the Sandu maidān ('green') lost in thought. Raja Maha Chand went to court.
9	The raja said, 'Listen, my brothers, hard times have come, the world has turned against us, the Fort of Chinjhiar presses on our chest!'
13	[Wazīr] Sansaru said, 'Listen, raja Maha Chand, we too must live in palaces, brother. Let's think this through, consult some, and then find a solution'.
17	The raja convened a meeting, and summoned Dipu Patiyal. Dipu said, 'Listen, raja Maha Chand, heed my loud [salute of] jai deva!'
21	Dipu went on, 'Be clear now, O raja – my eyes are blind, my ears are deaf, speak up so that I don't miss a thing'. The raja spoke first, 'Listen brothers, 26 bad days have come. The Katoch is stirring trouble, and has taken the fort of Chinjhiar.
29	The fort is in their hands and bears heavy on our chest. Now let's do some thinking, deliberate a while, decide what to do, and devise a plan to win it back'.
33	Dipu Patyal asked to speak, 'Hark, raja! Pay attention! The buffalo may be big, but wisdom is far greater! Heed my words then, listen with care:

- 37 Maṇḍyāḷ, Cambyāl hor bhī  
 ṭhārā ṭhakurāiyā Sarmauriyā rāja  
 inhā jo leā tū sadāi  
 tā kile parā jo mahim de yāclāi’.
- 41 ‘Lāo meriyā kalmā kane davātā’.  
 Hor, ‘Lyāo kore kāgdā rā bastā’.  
 Kāgad likhe Mahācand rāje  
 deṇe Cambyāl rāje tāi.
- 45 ‘Suṇ o bhāiyā tū dhyān lagāi  
 e kāgad deṇe tū Cambyālā tāi’.  
 Mājle mājle jā dā sadik  
 Cambyāliye geñ hu hāzar jāi.
- 49 Jay devā kardā Cambyālie jo,  
 kanne dēdā tinhā kāgadā pakṛāi.  
 Cambyāliyā rāja bāce kāgadā,  
 ‘je kyā bhejiyā Kahlūriē farmāi?’
- 53 Likhī likhī kāgadā Cambyāliyā dēdā,  
 ‘Tāi tā likhī rā ṭhik hai bhāi  
 ase aūhage teriyā majatī zarūr,  
 par lainā Maṇḍyāḷ rājā sadāi’.
- 57 Mājle mājle sadik caldā,  
 haṭī ne pūjeyā sah Kahlūrā jāi.  
 phikke mūhaē jay devā kardā  
 dēdā kāgadā sah rāje tāi.
- 61 ‘Lyāo meriyā kalmā, kanai davāt’.  
 Hor, ‘Lyāo kore kāgadā rā bastā’.  
 Kāgad likhe Mahācand rājē  
 deṇe e Maṇḍiyā re rāje tāi.
- 65 ‘Suṇ o bhāiyā tū dhyān lagāi  
 e kāgad deṇe tū Maṇḍyāḷ rāje tāi’,  
 Mājle mājle jā dā sah sadauk [H., sadik, ‘messenger’]  
 Maṇḍiyālie ge hūda, hājir jāi.
- 69 Jay devā kardā Maṇḍyāḷā jo  
 kane dēdā tinhā kāgadā pakṛāi.  
 Maṇḍyāḷ rājā bāce kāgadā  
 ‘Kyā bhejyā Kahlūrie farmāi?’
- 73 Likhī likhī kāgadā Maṇḍyāḷ deṇdā  
 ‘Tei tā likhī rā ṭhik bhāi  
 ase aūhage jyūā jāmyā  
 par lainā Jubaliyā rājā sadāi’.

- 37 The Mandyal, the Chambyal, and others, too,  
the Eighteen Lordships [*thārā thakurāī*], and the Sirmauriya –  
summon them all,  
and only then launch a campaign for the fort’.
- 41 [The raja ordered his servant,] ‘Bring my pen and ink pot,’  
[and to] another [attendant:] ‘Bring a bag of plain papers’.  
Raja Maha Chand wrote a letter,  
addressing the raja of Chamba [Chambyal].
- 45 [He then ordered a messenger:] ‘O my brother, listen carefully,  
give these papers to the Chambyal’.  
The messenger went *mañjle mañjle* (‘stage by stage’),  
and presented himself before the Chambyal.
- 49 He performed the jai deva before the raja,  
and handed him the letter.  
The Chambyali read the letter,  
‘What message has the Kahluriya sent?’
- 53 The Chambyaliya wrote several sheets in reply, and handed them [to the messenger]:  
‘You have written well, O brother,  
and we’ll most certainly offer our aid (majatī, H. madad),  
but you should also call the Mandyal raja’.
- 57 The messenger went stage by stage,  
and returning, reached Kahlur.  
He performed the jai deva with a fallen [lit., ‘bland’, H. phukke] face,  
and handed the raja the letter.
- 61 [Maha Chand ordered:] ‘Bring my pen and ink pot’.  
Another [servant was told:] ‘Bring the bag of papers’.  
Raja Maha Chand wrote a letter,  
which he addressed to the raja of Mandi.
- 65 [The raja commanded his messenger:] ‘Listen, O brother, pay attention!  
Give this paper to the raja of Mandi [Mandyal]’.  
The messenger, he went stage by stage,  
and presented himself before the Mandyal.
- 69 He saluted the Mandyal with a jai deva,  
and placed the letter in his hands.  
The Mandyal raja read the papers,  
‘What message has the Kahlurie sent?’
- 73 The Mandyal wrote a long letter and handed it [to the messenger],  
‘You have written well, brother,  
and we’re deeply committed to your cause,  
but first summon the raja of Jubbal [Jubaliya]’.

- 77 Mājle mājle sadauk caldā  
 haṭī se Kahlūrā pūjeyā.  
 Phikkā mūh jay devā kardā  
 Mahācandā ge deṇḍā kāgadā āi.
- 81 Īhyā hī likhdā Mahācand rājā,  
 ṭhārā ṭhakurāiyā leiyā partyāi.  
 Sansār Cand balvān baṛā thā,  
 koi nī kharḍā thā sāmne āi.
- 85 ‘Lyāo meriyā kalmā kane davātā,  
 Hor, ‘Lyāo mere kāgadā rā bastā’.  
 Kāgad likhe Mahācand rāje,  
 deṇe Sarmaurie rāje tāi.
- 89 Rāje likheyā parvānyā ca,  
 ‘Tū, o rājā, aukhiyā nuāreā  
 Sarmauriyā rājā je tū āe,  
 tā kilā chinjhyār ḍhalōḍā’.
- 93 Uār pār dekhe Mahācand rājā,  
 ‘Kāgadā lei kuṇ jāye Sarmaurā?’  
 Rājā bole, ‘Suṇ oe Rāmūā,  
 jāṇā zarūr tū hī Sarmaurā.’
- 97 Rāmū bole, ‘Haū nāh nī kardā,  
 par dekh, it kanāre Kaṭocā rī dukkī.  
 Dūr kanāre lagī rī Haṇḍūrie rī,  
 Svārghaṭ nī milṇā ṭapaṇe.
- 101 Sarmaurie rī mateī, Kaṭocā rī dhyāṇ,  
 ghaṭē ghaṭē pālūriyā tise caukiyā.  
 Je Kahlūrie re kāgad gae pakṛoi,  
 tā tisā bhūā khal merī bharāṇī’.
- 105 [Rājā bole,] ‘Rāmuā tū baṛā hī sūtrī,  
 jāṇā bī hā tū zarūr.  
 Tū bājhī kamma nī calṇā  
 tijjo jāṇā pauṇā zarūr’.
- 109 Rāmuē bhagameṇ kīte kapṛe,  
 bagṛī rī bahḍī kāssī  
 tisā rā baṇāyā mukuṭ,  
 bhe[ī]s barāgiyā rā hoyā.

- 77 The messenger went stage by stage,  
resuming his course, he reached Kahlur.  
He performed the jai deva with a fallen face,  
approached his master and gave him the papers.
- 81 Raja Maha Chand wrote the very same [letters],  
and tried the Eighteen Lordships [in today's Shimla Hills].  
[But] Sansar Chand was very powerful,  
none dared face him.
- 85 [Finally, the raja ordered:] 'Bring my pen and ink pot.'  
[He then ordered] another, 'Bring my bag of blank papers!'  
Raja Maha Chand wrote a letter,  
which he addressed to raja Sirmauriya.
- 89 The raja wrote a message,  
'You, O raja, in these difficult times [*'aukhiyāñ nuāreāñ'*],  
if you come, Sirmauriya raja,  
only then will Fort Chinjiar fall.'
- 93 Raja Maha Chand looked here and there,  
[thinking:] 'Who shall take this letter to Sirmaur?'  
The raja said, 'Listen, O Ramu,  
it is you and you alone who must make the journey to Sirmaur'.
- 97 Ramu said, 'I do not refuse,  
but look, on this bank [of the Sutlej] are barriers set up by the Katoch [i.e., Kangra],  
beyond that, the Handuris hold their watch,  
I shan't even be able to cross [the mountain pass of] Svarghat [before I'm caught].
- 101 The Sirmauriya's stepmother, a *dhyāni* ('out-married daughter') of the Katoch,  
has raised check posts at every passage.  
If the Kahluri paper is caught,  
she'll fill my skin with fodder'.<sup>1</sup>
- 105 [The raja replied:] 'Ramu, you are very resourceful,  
and clearly the most suitable person for this mission.  
Without you it simply cannot be done,  
you really must go!'
- 109 Ramu put on a saffron robe  
and cut a sheaf of *bāgrī* grass,  
which he made into a *mukut* ('crown'),  
transforming into a veritable *bairāgī* (lit., 'bereft of emotions', i.e., Vaishnava ascetic).

1 This image references the hitherto ubiquitous goat-skin bags used to carry wheat to watermills to be grounded into flour.

- 113 Jholī tūmbā pāyā Rāmuē,  
 barāgī baṇī alakh jagā dā  
 kakahriyā āi ne alakh jagāi  
 kisi jo pachyāṇane nī āyā.
- 117 Rāje hūde pañjā pīrā rī loe,  
 rājē leyā seh pachyāṇī.  
 Khīse de kaṛhe rāje kāgad  
 Rāmue rī jholiyā bhicchā pāi.
- 121 Bhicchā leī Rāmuē mīyā  
 capher pherī leī rājerī.  
 Caraṇō jo matthā ṭekayā  
 kane mūh dakhṇā jo kitā.
- 125 Mājle mājle caleyā mere Rāmuā  
 baiṭheyā Kāṛhe sah jāi.  
 Kaṛhe paṛauā baiṭhyā Rāmū,  
 dhūṇā leyā tinī lagāi.
- 129 Mājle mājle caleyā mere Rāmuā  
 baiṭhyā Badiyāñ sah jāi.  
 Badiyā baiṭhyā Rāmū jogī,  
 dhūṇā leyā tinī lagāi.
- 133 Mājle mājle caleā mere Rāmuā  
 tie ḍere pūjeyā Sarmaurā jāi.  
 Rāmū jogī pūjeyā Sarmaurā,  
 othī leā dhūṇā lagāi.
- 137 Lagī kacahrī rāje Sarmaurie rī  
 jogiē othī alakh jagāi.  
 Jay devā tinī kitī rāje jo,  
 dite tis jo kāgad pakṛāi.
- 141 Kāgadā bāce rājā Sarmauriyā  
 ‘Kyā bhejyā Kahlūrie farmāi?’  
 Pherī gherī kāgadā bāce,  
 naiṇā bharī-bharī sah roye.

- 113 Ramu placed a *tumbā* drum in his [*jholī*] bag,  
and begged for alms like a *bairāgī*,  
he entered court crying '*alakh*' [as begging ascetics do]  
and nobody could tell who he was.
- 117 The raja was as sharp as the five *pīrā* ('holy men') combined,<sup>2</sup>  
and thus recognized his messenger in disguise.  
He took the letter out of his pocket  
and secreted it with *bhichā* ('alms') in Ramu's bag.
- 121 Ramu miyān took the alms  
and encircled the raja in reverence.  
Having touched the sovereign's feet with his forehead,  
he turned towards the south.
- 125 My Ramu went stage by stage,  
he went and reached Karanh.  
Ramu halted at Karanh,  
and lit his *dhūnī* ('sacred fire').
- 129 My Ramu went stage by stage,  
he went and reached Badi.  
Ramu *jogī* halted at Badi  
and lit his sacred fire.
- 133 My Ramu went stage by stage,  
and on the third day reached Sirmaur.  
Ramu *jogī* reached Sirmaur,  
and lit the sacred fire.
- 137 The Sirmauri raja held court,  
where the *jogī* called for alms ('*alakh*').  
He saluted the raja with a *jai deva*,  
and handed him the papers.
- 141 Raja Sirmauriya read the letter,  
'What is this that the Kahluri has sent?'  
The raja read the letter and then reread it once more, he went through it again  
and again,  
and his eyes began swelling with tears.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, the reference is to the 'brightness' or 'light' (*loe*) of five *pīrs*. Imperial administrators interpreted 'panjpiri' as a common appellation of 'Zahir Pir of Guga' in the Western Himalaya (Rose 1914[1883], vol. 1, p. 121). Regional sites for this deity are scattered in the hills and adjoining plains, including at Jalandhar and Pathankot (personal communication, Amar Nath Walia).

- 145 Kāgadāṅ badlī ke rājā bācdā,  
 ‘Sarmauriyā rājā je tū āe  
 to kilā Chiññhyār ḍhalōdā  
 nāī tāṅ sah nī ḍhaloī sakdā’.
- 149 Kāgadāṅ bācyā hāsyā rājā  
 dekhī ke sārī kacahrī hāsī.  
 Hāsī badlī krodhā bic,  
 Sarmauriyā rājā roye āyā.
- 153 Rājā bole, ‘Mere nagāricayo,  
 tikkhā nagārā bajāo.  
 Eisā tikkhā nagārā bajāo,  
 duniyā sārī roye bharī jāo’.
- 157 Tikkhā bajeyā thā nagārā,  
 rāñiyā jo patā gayā hoī.  
 Haram khāṇe rāñī bajāghī  
 ‘Kisī kanāre mahīm paī gaī’.
- 161 Rāñī bolī, ‘Jāo goliyo,  
 choṛcāre jāyā bolyā’.  
 Rāñī bole, ‘Bādlo rājeā  
 pal bhar beṛheyā āyā’.
- 165 Rāje tel dhotī lāī rī,  
 svārṇā rī chaṭī hatthā leīrī.  
 Rājā rāñiyā re beṛhe āo  
 rāñī bole, ‘Bādlo rājeyā.
- 169 keṛhe pāse paūdī āī mahīm  
 tikkhā nagārā pharkdiyā mucchā  
 tusā riyā hākkhī dasdiyā  
 zarūr peī rī kitī mahīm.’
- 173 Rājā bole, ‘Suṅ merī rāñī  
 dekhṇā Chiññhyārā rā kilā jāī.  
 Nanihālyā rā dekhṇā des, Bilāspurā rī sair  
 parsū beṛheyā jo jāṇā āī’.
- 177 Rāñī bole, ‘Suṅ mere rājeyā,  
 bālak choḍeyā rāy tē.  
 Merī terī bālak bares,  
 asā pradesā jo nī jāṇā’.

- 145 The raja turned the papers and read,  
 'Sirmauriya raja, if you come  
 then the fort of Chinjhiar will fall,  
 it cannot be won without you'.
- 149 When he first read the letter, the raja laughed,  
 and seeing this, those assembled at court also laughed.  
 The Sirmauriya's laughter then turned into anger,  
 and finally he began to weep.
- 153 The raja said, 'O my drum-beater,  
 beat the nagārā loudly.  
 Beat the nagārā so strongly  
 that the entire world should come to tears'.
- 157 The nagārā was beaten with such force  
 that the rani realized [something was on].  
 In her quarters, the rani started (*bajāghī*),  
 'Somewhere, war has broken out!'.
- 161 The rani said, 'Go, maids,  
 tell him [the raja] to come immediately'.  
 The servants relayed the rani's message, 'Dear raja,  
 do come to my dwellings for a while'.
- 165 The raja was wrapped in a brocaded *dhotī*,  
 and held a golden staff (*svārṇā rī chaṭī*) in hand.  
 He came to the rani's quarters,  
 and the rani said, 'Dear raja,  
 where has battle broken out?
- 169 The deafening nagārā, your quivering moustache,  
 your tear-filled eyes, these all reveal  
 that somewhere a conflict has begun'.
- 173 The raja said, 'Listen my rani,  
 I am going to inspect the fort of Chinjhiar.  
 I am going on a tour of Bilaspur to see my maternal grandfather's (*nānā*) country,  
 I'll be back with you here  
 the day after tomorrow'.
- 177 The rani said, 'Listen, my raja,  
 you are still a child.  
 You and I are both young,  
 we shouldn't go to foreign lands'.

- 181 Rāṇī arjā phirī phirī kardī,  
 ‘Pacchamā jo sahlī re ṭiḍḍe jā de,  
 sah bhī haṭī ne kadī nī aūde,  
 asā pradesā jo nī jāṇā’.
- 185 Chajje baiṭhī rāje rī mateyī,  
 sah bole, ‘Jitne ka tere sapāhī,  
 titne ka ghoṛe bāpue mere gē,  
 ghāh jo jā de roz bhyāgā ī.’
- 189 Boliyā lāiyā matiyā mateyē,  
 matthe tyūṛiyā hākhī khūnā re ḍore.  
 Muccheñ phar-phar bāhe bhariyā jore,  
 ‘Dekhṇā Chiñjhyār kilā jāī!’
- 193 Rājā bole, ‘Suṇ o caruye dārā,  
 ghoṛe jo jīn jhaṭ paṭ karā’.  
 Carūedār uṭheyā saṭṭī ghoṛe par jīn,  
 caruedār ‘jay jay’ kare, ‘Māhrāj, ghoṛā taiyār’.
- 197 Ghoṛe jīn hoyā Sarmauriyā,  
 ḍāliyā kāg bacāre.  
 Rājā bole, ‘Mere suṇ hāko,  
 kāgā jo mār cukāo’.
- 201 Chaḍyā tine jure bāz  
 kāg mārī bhuiyā saṭṭā.  
 Rājā bole, ‘Inī kusaugūṇ kītā,  
 is jo hī prāpt hoyā.’
- 205 Pherī ghoṛe svār hoyā Sarmauriyā  
 baūe kanāre sivē pukār pāī.  
 Rājā bole, ‘Mere bandūkiyo,  
 sibā jo mār mukāo’.
- 209 Calī bandūk hoyā ḍhalākā  
 sibā jo na mile giṇne cār.  
 Rāj bole, ‘Inī kusaugūṇ kītā,  
 is jo hī prāpt hoyā’.
- 213 Ā nī dekheyā tau nī dekheyā,  
 rājā hoyā ghoṛe svār.  
 Pahle ḍere rājā Sarmauriyā  
 baiṭhyā Bediyā āi uār.

- 181        Again and again the rani pleaded,  
           ‘[We mustn’t venture] west, to where the locust fly,  
           from where they, too, never return,  
           we should not go to foreign lands’.
- 185        The raja’s [Katochi] stepmother was sat on the balcony,  
           and said, ‘As many soldiers as you have,  
           the same number are my father’s horses,  
           which he daily sends grazing at dawn’.
- 189        The stepmother kept on teasing,  
           [and the raja’s] forehead wrinkled, his eyes turned red.  
           His moustache began to tremble and his arms grew tense,  
           [till he finally exclaimed:] ‘I’ll go to see Garh Chinjhiar!’
- 193        The raja said, ‘Listen, O syce<sup>3</sup>,  
           saddle the horses at once’.
- The shepherd arose and placed saddles on the horses,  
           he saluted ‘jai jai’ and announced: ‘Maharaj, the horse is ready’.
- 197        The Sirmauriya was riding his horse,  
           when a crow on a branch started cawing.  
           The raja said, ‘Listen, my guard,  
           attack that crow!’
- 201        The guard released a *bāz* (‘falcon’)  
           that beat the crow to the ground.  
           The raja said, ‘The crow made a *kusagun* (‘bad omen’) by cawing, and brought it  
           upon itself’.
- 205        The Sarmauriya again rode his horse,  
           when a jackal to his left began to howl.  
           The raja said, ‘My rifle bearer,  
           shoot that jackal down’.
- 209        A loud shot thundered,  
           and the jackal was dead before it could count to four.  
           The raja said, ‘The jackal portended ominous signs,  
           which it brought upon itself’.
- 213        Not lingering to look here nor there,  
           the raja remounted his horse.  
           On his first halt, raja Sirmauriya  
           set camp on the side of Badiyan.

3        Literally *caruye* or ‘shepherd’, which here doubles as a groom.

- 217 Dūe din baḍḍe tarake,  
rāje laṛāiyā re kapṛe pahne.  
Majle majle caldā rājā,  
baiṭheyā Kaṇḍhe āi uār.
- 221 Baihat borā rahyā Kuṇḍaluyē,  
rājā baiṭhyā Bilāspurā āi.  
Rājā pūjyā Bilāspurā āi,  
sāitī re tambū ditte lāi.
- 225 Lagī kacahrī Sā haḍue bicē,  
rājeyā maslat kamāi.  
Bāhiyā rājeyā droh kitā,  
rāje Sarmaurie jo sāit āi.
- 229 Mahācand bole, 'Suṇ Sarmauriyā,  
haū dendā ikkī gal galāi.  
Je dekhgā kilā ḍhālī ke āyā  
tā je tū maṅge sah tījjo nazar kariye'.
- 233 Sarmauriyā bole, 'Suṇ tū rājā  
je Aggū milge miñjo sardār  
tā bas kahlā maī jāṇū,  
ki kilā Chiñjhyārā rā jāṇo'.
- 237 Rājā bole Agal Dette mīyē jo,  
'Suṇ oe agal datyā mīyā.  
Sarmauriyā hai balvān,  
par umarā dā e hai bālak.
- 241 Hatthā par naiṇā,  
hatthā par lyauṇā.  
Je tattā bāt lagāye,  
tā bhūyē khal bharāū'.
- 245 Ahgū hoyā Agal Dattā mīyā  
Satlujā lā hag dittā lāi.  
Jāi tambūrā lahaṅgayā Boṛiyā  
chaṛā sapāhī Palathī jāi.
- 249 Pahle ḍere rājā Sarmauriyā,  
baiṭhyā Dakṛiyā jāi.  
Tyūnū, Calālū hor bi sāre  
mile sab Dakṛiyā āi.

- 217       The next day, at the crack of dawn,  
           he donned his battle dress.  
           Stage by stage went the raja,  
           and set camp at the side of Kandha.
- 221       The heavy cargo remained at Kumdalu,  
           while the raja arrived in Bilaspur.  
           The raja reached Bilaspur,  
           and calculated the auspicious moment for pitching the tents.
- 225       [The raja of Bilapsur] Held court in the Sandu grounds,  
           where the hill chiefs played diplomacy.  
           Twenty-two rajas had rebelled [against Kangra]  
           with the auspiciously named raja Sirmauriya [at their head].
- 229       Maha Chand said, 'Listen Sirmauriya,  
           I make you a solemn pledge:  
           If I see the fort conquered,  
           I'll grant you whatever you please'.
- 233       The Sarmauriya said, 'Listen, O raja.  
           If I have Aggu [Datta as my] sardār ('commander'),  
           I'll most certainly have  
           the fort of Chinjiyar meet its desired fate'.
- 237       The raja said to Aggal Ditta miyān,  
           'Listen, O Aggal Datya miyān.  
           the Sirmauriya is a great warrior,  
           but in age he is but a child.
- 241       Carry him in your hands,  
           return him in your hands.  
           Should he come to any harm,  
           I'll fill your skin with fodder'!
- 245       Aggal Ditta took the lead,  
           and had a *lāñhag* ('temporary bridge') placed on the Satluj.  
           He ferried the tents and supplies at Bodiya,  
           while the soldiers crossed at Palthi.
- 249       Raja Sarmauriya set his first camp,  
           and pitched the tents at Dakriya [near today's Ghumarwin].  
           The commanders of the forts of Tiuni and Chalail [on the parallel ridges immediately  
           north of Bilaspur],  
           and many other warriors, too,  
           they all convened at Dakri.

- 253 Tuhri, narsingā hor nagārā,  
juddhī bajantar sab bajāe.  
Sārī phauj Dakṛiyā,  
kaṭṭhī hoī gaī āī.
- 257 Bhediyā Sansār Candā rā,  
Ghāryā Chiñjhyārā jāī.  
Mahārāj phauj Kahlūrie rī  
pūjī Dakṛiyā āī.
- 261 Chiñjhyārā Kahlūrie rī thī toph,  
pakkā pañj sar pauā thā dāru.  
Ḍhāiyā serā rā goḷā,  
cauhā pāseyā peī jā dā thā raulā.
- 265 Par toph dāgī rājā Sansār Cande,  
mūhare peyā thā pānī.  
Tatte pāñiye re chitṭe,  
Dakṛiyā re hārā pae āī.
- 269 Paḷā paḷā rīyā khabarā bhejdā,  
Sarmauriyā rājā Mahācandā jo.  
Rāje Sarmauriye othī te likheyā  
rājā Mahācandā jo.
- 273 'Kahlūrie rī thī toph,  
rāje Sansār Cande dāgī.  
Haū tattā bāt nī lageyā',  
Rāje ustā kītī tophā rī.
- 277 Rāje bolyā, 'Khaṛkā, bijliye tophe,  
rāje rā lūṇ dhyāyā.  
Dhan hai tijo, tijo ghamāyā,  
garjeyā tū Kāṅṅre jāī'.
- 281 Dūye ḍere rājā Sarmauriyā,  
Badheyā Kasohlā jāī. Rāje boleyā,  
'Nānuē jo jay devā kītī hūdī',  
tophā ne jayā devā karie.
- 285 Rājā bole, 'Mere gulāndājī,  
tophā jo bharī mere bhāī.  
Pakkā pañj ser pāī tā dārū  
ḍhāiyā serā rā goḷā'.

- 253      The *tuhrī*, the *narsingh*, and the *nagārā*,  
the *juddhī bajantar* ('musical instruments of war') all were played.<sup>4</sup>  
The entire army there at Dakri  
had assembled in full force.
- 257      [With their charge] Sansar Chand's lines were broken,  
and [the assailant] advanced towards the fort of Chinjhyar.  
The army of the maharaja of Kahlur [Maha Chand]  
then came and reached Dakri.
- 261      There was a canon of the Kehluriya's at Chinjhiar,  
That could hold five seers of gunpowder.  
It would shoot balls of two and a half seers in weight,  
[and] wreaked havoc on all sides.
- 265      Raja Sansar Chand fired the gun,  
and since it still held water within<sup>5</sup>,  
warm streams came splashing out,  
and fell on the fields near Dakri.
- 269      News of every little detail was sent  
by the Sirmauriya to Maha Chand.  
From the battlefield, the Sirmauriya wrote  
to raja Maha Chand:
- 273      'Your Kahluri gun above,  
Sansar Chand had it fired,  
[but] we came to no harm.'  
The raja [of Sirmaur captured the gun] and praised it.
- 277      The raja said, 'Thunder, O lightening-like cannon,  
you've justified the [Bilaspur] raja's salt.  
Praises to you, salutations to you –  
Now go, thunder over Kangra!'
- 281      As his second camp, raja Sarmauriya  
advanced to Kasol. The raja [suddenly recalled that he was in his maternal grand-  
father's territory and] said,  
'I should have offered jai deva to my *nānāī* ('grandfather'),  
and fired the canon as a jaya deva [salute].
- 285      The raja said, 'O dear gunner,  
fill the gun with gunpowder, brother.  
Pack a good five seers of powder  
in that cannon ball of two and a half seers'.

4      A *tuhrī* is an elongated horn-pipe, a *narsingh* is an S-shaped horn, and the *nagārā* is a drum commonly used in folk ceremonies and weddings.

5      This refers to the water that would be poured in and on the guns in between shooting rounds for cooling.

- 289 Toph dāgī rāje Sarmauriye,  
bolī gaīyā cārō dhārā.  
Cārō dhārā iyā rambhiyā,  
tiyā je koī ser rambhdā.
- 293 Rājā bole, 'Mere gulāndājī,  
toph pherī bharo mere bhāī'.  
toph dāgī Sarmauriye rāje,  
nānuē jo jay devā hoī.
- 297 Rājā bole, 'Mere gulāndājī,  
toph pherī bharo mere bhāī'.  
Tijī toph dāgī rāje Sirmauriye,  
chaṭeyā Chiñjhyār kilā jāī.
- 301 Kilā toṛyā Chiñjhyār rā,  
Kaṭoc bāhrā jo daure.  
Jā de jā de bāṛiyā re caukā,  
pakkā morcā banhyā āī.
- 305 Jā de ne ṭākrā rakhī tā,  
lagī laṛāī rāj Sirmauriyā kampuyē jāī.  
Kaṭocā riyā phaujā mukne lagiyā,  
sañjh peī phaujā ḍere jo āiyā.
- 309 Maihjar kītā teryā Kaṭocē,  
milde agaḷ datte jo āī.  
'Mahal Modiyā sāsaṅ dēgā,  
bahutī dēgā Rajgīr'.
- 313 Agge tinhē pherī boleyā,  
'Suṅ, o bhāī Agaḷ Datyā.  
Mūh maṅgī dēhge māyā tijo,  
je rājā Sarmauriye jo deyo mārne'.
- 317 Hukm dittā mīye Agaldatte,  
'Phokiyāñ bandūkāñ calāo.  
sikkā dārū bandūkā pāye,  
tā bhūā khal bharāū.
- 321 Sikkā dārū mukeyā kile bic',  
eh hukm kardā mīyā Agaḷ Dattā.  
Kahlūri faujā jo hukm dittā,  
'Phokiyā bandūkā calāo'.
- 325 Rāje Sarmauriye Mahācandā jo likheyā,  
'Mandī kītī tere Agaḷ Dattē.  
Ghāṭiyā māmlā āyā tā je,  
Kaṭocā kane Agaḷ Dattā milī gayā'.

- 289 Raja Sirmauriya fired the gun,  
and all four mountain ranges resounded with thunder.  
The mountains rumbled throughout the land,  
as if some great lion had roared.
- 293 The raja said, 'O my dear gunner,  
fill the gun with powder once more, my brother'.  
The Sarmauriya raja fired the gun,  
which saluted his *nānā* with a jai deva.
- 297 The raja said, 'O my dear gunner,  
fill the gun again, my brother'.  
Raja Sirmauriya fired the cannon for the third time,  
and Chinjhiar Fort was cut into pieces.
- 301 The fort of Chinjhiar was broken,  
and the Katoch ran outside.  
Running fast they reached Badiyan Chowk,  
where they built strong fortifications.
- 305 The armies clashed there,  
and the fighting spread to raja Sirmauriya's camp.  
The Katoch army began to dwindle,  
and as evening fell, the armies resumed [their] camps.
- 309 Your Katoch hatched a plot,  
and went to meet Aggal Datta.  
'I'll give you the administration of Mohal Mori,  
I'll even give you Rajgir'.
- 313 He said to Agga,  
'Listen, O brother Agal Datya,  
we'll give you all the wealth you desire,  
should you deliver raja Sarmauriya to his death'.
- 317 Miyān Aggal Datte ordered [his troops]:  
'Fire blanks during the next round.  
Should the gunners use real gunpowder,  
their skins will be filled with fodder.
- 321 There is no more gunpowder in the fort.'  
This [false] order did miyān Agal Datta give.  
This was the order given to the Kahluri army:  
'In the next round, fire blanks [lit., empty rifles, *phokiyāñ bañdūkāñ*]'.
- 325 Raja Sirmauriye [discovered the plot and] wrote to Mahachand,  
'Your Agal Datta has done a bad thing.  
As soon he reached the valley,  
Aggal Datta joined hands with the Katoch'.

- 329 Rājā Mahācand bole,  
 ‘O drohiyā Agaḷ Dattā.  
 mere hatyā gē aūhgā,  
 tā dekhyā jāhaṅgā’.
- 333 Lagī laṛāī rāje Sarmauriye rī,  
 baiṭheyā goliyā khāī.  
 Royā bharyā Sarmauriyā rājā,  
 mucchē phar-phar lāī.
- 337 Bārā te goḷī chaṭṭī,  
 rājeriyā aḍiyā lagī.  
 Goliyāñ rī badakhā lagī,  
 rāje rā baṇī gayā chānaṅā.
- 341 Rājā bole, ‘Mere sapāhiyo,  
 ḍhālā rī koṭharī caṅāo’.  
 Ḍhālā kaṭhiyā kari koṭharī caṅāī,  
 koṭharīyā andar rājā kītā.
- 345 Ghāyalā jo tyāh hūdi baṛī,  
 rājā bole, ‘Mere sipāhiyō.  
 paṅiyē rī jalharī lyāyo’,  
 Klās bharī ke pītā rājē.
- 349 ‘Rāme Rām’, dhyāyā rājē,  
 sukhpālā pāyā Sarmauriyā.  
 Satlujā re kahaṅḍe andā,  
 dāg Pañj Pipaluē ditte.
- 353 Astū kaṭṭhe kīte rāje re,  
 cīṭe kaṇṇe jo bahnī pāe.  
 Khūb saajā gaṭṭh astūā rī,  
 sakhaṅe sukhpālā ca pāe.
- 357 Jāṅe vālā calī gayā,  
 rahādeā kamma kamāṅā.  
 Kahlūrie sardāre nyūiyē dhuje  
 sukhpāl Sarmaūrā jo jāe.
- 361 Rāṅiyē rokyā thā rājā bār-bār,  
 par maut nī ṭikṅē dēdi thī.  
 Kuṅ jāṅo kadī asā jo,  
 khī jī ne maut leī jāe.

- 329 [Reading the news from afar] Raja Maha Chand said,  
 'O, treacherous (*drohiyā*, H. *drohī*) Agal Datta.  
 Once you fall into my hands,  
 you'll get a taste of my wrath'.
- 333 [Back on the battlefield] Raja Sirmauriya began to fight,  
 but being eaten by bullets was forced to sit.  
 Tears swelled in the Sarmauriya's eyes,  
 and his moustache began to tremble.
- 337 A bullet was shot from the other side,  
 and hit the raja's heel.  
 A hail of bullets [followed],  
 and his body was made into a sieve.
- 341 The raja said, 'My *sipāhīs*,  
 shelter me with your shields'.  
 So they collected their shields to form a shelter,  
 and brought the raja under its fold.
- 345 The wounded become very thirsty,  
 so the raja said, 'My *sipāhīs*,  
 bring a pitcher of water',  
 And drank it to the full.
- 349 'Ram Ram', exclaimed the raja [and died].  
 The Sarmauriya was placed on a *sukhpāl* ('palanquin') [and carried away].  
 Having reached the bank of the Satluj,  
 he was cremated at Panj Piplu.<sup>6</sup>
- 353 The raja's *astū* ('remains') were collected,  
 and tied in a white cloth.  
 The remains were gathered in a decorated bundle,  
 and placed in a palanquin to dry.
- 357 Those who die are gone forever,  
 those who remain must tend to their duties.  
 And so, under the escort of Kahluria sardārs, with flags at half-mast,  
 the palanquin went to Sirmaur.
- 361 The rani had tried to stop the raja from going to war,  
 but death beckoned and wouldn't let him stay put.  
 Who knows when our end will come?  
 When will death come to take us?

<sup>6</sup> A 'well-known cremation-ghat on the bank of the river Sutlej' that existed prior to the creation of the Bhakra Dam (Chandel 2007, 13).

- 365 Rāṇī Sarmaurā rī,  
 kīyā na kīyā din kaṭḍī thī.  
 Rātī suphne bure dekhī ne,  
 devī devtyā jo dhyā dī thī.
- 369 Dhūr dhaṛāyanā uṛdā āyā,  
 ajj Bilāspurā re rāste.  
 Rāṇiyā rā dil chālī mārḍā,  
 kālhī rāje jo dekhū jāī.
- 373 Rāṇiyē dekhyā dūrā te,  
 sukhpāl phullē bhari rā thā.  
 Sukhpālā rī dhujā niyūī thī,  
 ghār bhī nhīthiā kyāṛiyā the.
- 377 Ḍyodhiyā agge sukhpāl rakheyā,  
 sac cup-cāp khaṛī re the,  
 bure saṅkh nagāre bajjī uṭhe,  
 sog saharā ca peyā thā.
- 381 Hākhī kane rāṇiyā re jabāb dittā,  
 ‘Kuch nī deṇā huṇ asā terā’.  
 Chajje parā te māri chāl tise,  
 rūhā ne rūh mili jāe.
- 385 Sarmaurī rōḍē dhārā pāī,  
 ‘Kis bal kariye pharyād jāī.  
 Rājā tā maryā laṛāiyā laṛdā,  
 par rāṇī bī satī hoī’.
- 389 Dāh dite rāṇiyā jo,  
 tīje din astu cuge.  
 Duhīre astu kaṭṭhe kīte,  
 tāre sah Haridvār jāī.

- 365 [While her husband was away,] rani Sarmaura  
 somehow survived the passing days.  
 She'd have nightmares all through the night,  
 and would pray to gods and goddesses.
- 369 A gust of dust was rising,  
 that day on the road to Bilaspur.  
 The rani's heart pounded,  
 and she went alone to see the raja.
- 373 The rani looked from afar:  
 a palanquin bedecked with flowers.  
 a flag at half mast,  
 and the bearers' necks were also stooped.
- 377 The palanquin was placed at the palace gates [*dayodhayā*, H. *dohrī*],  
 the air was thick with silence.  
 The conch was blown, the drums were beaten,  
 and grief descended on the *saharā* ('city').
- 381 The rani's reply was in her eyes,  
 'I now owe you nothing'.  
 She jumped from the balcony above,  
 and soul met with soul.
- 385 The people of Sirmaur wail and cry,  
 'To whom shall we express our grief?  
 the raja has died waging battle,  
 but the rani, too, has become *sati*'!
- 389 The rani was cremated,  
 and on the third day her ashes were collected.  
 The remains of both were placed together,  
 and scattered in the flow [of the Ganga] at Haridwar.



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