CHAPTER – II

Ecological, Political and Social Background to the Rise of Folk-deities
(15th-17th Centuries)
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I. The Ecological Setting and the Popular Religious Cults:

Religious life of the non-Brahmanical social groups and communities in Rajasthan, in particular the religious belief system that centered around the cults of local gods and goddesses, profoundly influenced- and in turn was influenced by- the ecological, social, economical and political conditions of the region. Invoking the family deity and making offerings to him/her while commencing any new activity was considered imperative. The worship of various local deities occupied a special place in the every day life of the believers. As per popular beliefs, the local or family deity, apart from fulfilling other mundane wishes of the believers, protected them from evil spirits and diseases by physically guarding their homes and village. It was found during the course of personal interaction with several people in such localities as Bikaner, Lunkaranser, Sri Ganganagar and Churu that several households, apart from believing in the gods of Brahmanical pantheon and other deities, also practiced the worship of their own family deities. To some, either Goga or Ramdev was the family deity. In most cases, the family deity happened to be a member of the family who had died akal maut (untimely death). Thirst and heavy dust storms, as narrated by a group of people at Runecha and Lunkaranser, often caused akal maut, during hot summer days. People travelling on foot through far-stretched sand dunes could lose path and direction if caught in a dust storm
and die of exhaustion and thirst. Many such victims posthumously were elevated to the status of divine beings by their family members. As will be clear from the following discussion, the process of the emergence, growth and transformation of the cults of local deities were closely linked to changing social and political milieu. But while eschewing the dangers of ecological determinism, it may be pointed out that the ecological setting of the region was also a major, if not the sole determining factor in shaping the social, economic, political and religious processes.

The existence of large number of deities and the emergence of various traditions around their worship therefore, cannot be understood unless the relationship between the ecological conditions of western Rajasthan and the religious universe of the local communities is explained.

The semi-arid region of western Rajasthan constitutes the geographical and ecological context of present study. As one proceeds eastwards from the western boundary of the region, the intensity of aridity is reduced and ecological features appear more conducive to human habitation. The semi-arid conditions of western Rajasthan, on the other hand, presents a contrast. Sand dunes covered with scanty tufts of coarse grass and shrubs known as *phog* and *bui*, low and precarious rainfall and unproductive conditions in general shaped the lives of the people differently from their counterparts living in the eastern side of the Aravalli hill range. The sub-regions of eastern and even southern Rajasthan were fortunate to have received relatively good rainfall; the lands here were more fertile making greater supply of food, fodder and subsoil water available to the people.¹

¹ *The Rajputana Gazetteer*, vol. I, Calcutta, 1879, pp. 3-4
The villages in the desert could never be reckoned as fixed habitations as their existence entirely depended on the supply of water in the wells. As soon as the well dried up or the water therein turned brackish, the habitants of the village migrated to another place. Scanty rainfall and light sand having little or no earthly admixture and only fit for the production of bajara, moth, mung, til, watermelon and plants of cucumber family made the cultivation poor and precarious. Nearly, the whole surface of Marwar ‘the land of death’ was covered with undulating sand hills from twenty to hundred feet high, which in some places had a scanty growth of harsh juiceless grass of minosas caper shrubs and phog, a shrub with light and tender stem and branches, serving as fodder for camels. The commonest tree in the region was the khejri (acacia leucopheloea), the pods, barks and leaves of which were eaten by cattle and, in times of famines, by the starving poor. Khejri and another tree jaal could survive without rainfall as their roots could penetrate deep into earth and extract moisture. They somewhat reduced the severity of the recurring famine as the poor survived on the fruits of these trees. As a result, such trees in popular perception began to be worshiped as sacred objects and beings, which protected the people in times of distress. A song composed in praise of Goga symbolically equates him with jaal tree and suggests a symbiotic relationship between tree worship and the cults of local gods.

1 The Rajputana gazetteer, Vol.1, Calcutta, 1879, PP.3-4
O! tree have you been watered by a gardener or your roots have gone deep into earth? The tree replies: Neither a gardener has watered me nor my roots have gone deep into earth. Goga is sleeping under bar tree with his face covered with a sheet.)

(The song is addressed to the tree Jaal grown over a platform situated on a sand dune. The tree is unusually green in contrast with dry ecology around and provides relief from scorching sun and heat in the same way as the local gods were expected to provide relief to their devotees.)

The main shrine of Goga at Gogameri in Hanuman Garh district of Rajasthan has many khejri and jaal trees around it. During a personal visit to the shrine in September, 1999, it was observed that people took special care and ensured that no damage was caused to the trees. Mohan Singh, a devotee informed that these trees are treated as special trees and it is believed that a branch broken from these trees would turn into a snake. Such popular beliefs, which treated Goga synonymous to trees, suggest an important relationship between cult of the deity and the ecological settings of the region.

Given the scarcity of ground and tank water, agriculture in the desert mainly depended on rainfall, which was uncertain and scanty. Irrigation from the wells usually was impracticable, for not only was the supply of water too scanty but also the depth of the wells usually ranged from 300 to 500 feet or 40 to 60 puras below the surface.5

The rainfall was unequally distributed throughout Rajasthan. The desert tract of western Rajasthan came very near the limits of that part of Asia, which belongs to the “rainless district” of the world. Rain in this region scarcely averaged more than five inches as the rain clouds had to pass through extensively heated tracts before reaching the

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4 Sri Manohar Sharma; “Rajasthani Lok Geeton Men Goga Chauhan”; in Maru Bharti; Year 4; No. 2,3,4; July 1956-57; PP.14-25

plains and were emptied of much of their moisture on the nearest slope of the Aravalli. Want of rains functioned as an important factor in shaping religio-cultural lives of the people. How important the rains were for people’s lives is established from a popular proverb:

 सौ साड़ियाँ सौ करहला, फूंफ निपूती होय।
 मेहरला बूथा भला, होनी होय सो होय।

“Sau Sandiya Sau Kerhala, Poot Nipooti Hoy!
Meherla Butha Bhela, Honi hoy So Hoy!!

(Even if rain causes death of a hundred camels and she camels and if all the sons of a mother die due to rain, the rain should be welcomed). The local pastoral-peasant communities practiced different adaptive strategies in an environment characterized by low rainfall, extreme heat, sandstorms, inadequate and brackish underground water, sandy soils, frequent failure of monsoons. Whenever rains failed, people of the region dug wells called bera in the dry beds of seasonal rivers, rills, and pond to meet the scarcity. Pastoralism became the dominant mode of subsistence, drought resistant and mixed crops were grown, and spacing the meals at longer intervals was resorted to. When agricultural operations became difficult to carry out, the peasants herded their cattle to other areas in search of water and fodder. In times of droughts and famines, migrations became frequent and villages were deserted.

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9. For various adaptive strategies evolved by the peasants to survive against frequent droughts, famines and scarcity, see Carol Henderson; Famines and Droughts in Western Rajasthan: Desert Cultivators and Periodic Resource Stress; in Karine Schomer et al. eds.; *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*; Vol. II; Delhi; Manohar; 1994; PP.242-64
At the same time the long-term religious and cultural responses of the local communities, particularly the subordinated groups, to the severity of the environment also need to be explored. A wide range of beliefs and rituals (performed both individually and collectively) characterized a popular religion that catered to every day concerns and expectations of the people. Gods were frequently invoked to protect people, cattle and settlements, and to cause rains. One such ritual performed collectively by the village community since pre-modern times continues to retain its popularity in rural parts of western Rajasthan. Whenever rains did not come people of several villages decided to hold on a fixed day *gaam bare roti* (food to be cooked and consumed outside the village) and invoke their respective deities to cause the rains. Every household performed this ritual by cooking food separately and worshipping its respective deity. Apart from invoking family gods, prominent local deities such as Goga and Ramdev were also worshipped to ward off impending calamity caused by the failure of rains.\(^{10}\) Another ritual was conducted on the onset of the month of *Asad* (June-July) and as part of this ritual, girls hid their dolls for months as they were considered a bad omen for rains.\(^{11}\) It was hoped that the worship of the local gods and family deities would mitigate droughts and bring rain and prosperity. It was believed that wherever the divinities went and stayed, the dead and dried plants would become live and green. Numerous couplets to this effect were composed in praise of local gods such as Goga and Pabu. One such couplet describes how an orchard that had dried up more than twelve years ago became green again with the arrival of Pabu.

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\(^{10}\) Sri Mahender Bhanawat; "Rajasthan Mein Varsha Bulane Ke Vichitre Tarikey"; *Vishambhara*, Year 2, No. 4, 1963, PP. 112-114

\(^{11}\) "Versha Bulane Ke Tarike", *Vishambhara*, no. 4, year 2, 1963, p. 112. Name of the author is not given.
When Pabu entered the orchard that was dried up for twelve years, it became green.

The close relationship between the ecological setting of western Rajasthan and the emergence of the cults of folk-deities among the non-Brahmanical peasants and pastoral communities can be further demonstrated by citing narratives that represent these deities as the protectors, defenders, augmenters of human life and cattle-wealth in the desert dominated natural environment. The folk-deity Pabu was traditionally regarded as the deity of the nomadic raikas, who belong to the lower rung of the caste hierarchy and whose profession was camel breeding. In popular perception, Pabu is considered instrumental in bringing camels to Rajasthan for the first time. A popular tale describes how with the help of his subordinate raikas, Pabu brought she-camels to Rajasthan from Lanka—a far off land located across the sea. The camels have since become indispensable to the survival of people of this region. The tale begins with Pabu promising to his niece a gift of she-camels on the occasion of her marriage. People were surprised at his promise as no one had ever heard of camels before. Subsequently, to fulfil his promise Pabu called his subordinates to his court and asked them to take up the challenge of identifying camels and bringing them to Rajasthan. Unaware of the existence of this animal, none-of his servants immediately came forward. Finally of

12 Pandit. Shree Lalji Mishra; “Pabu Ke Pawaron Men Lok Jivan” in Varda year 2; No.1, January 1959; pp.64-71
them, Harmal Raika, agreed to find out the camels. While Harmal Raika’s responsibility was to spot the animals, Pabu took upon himself the task of bringing them to Marwar. Harmal Raika disguised as a hermit went to a place called Lanka, and began to live with the local *raikas* and their camels. After staying with them for a few days, Harmal returned to Pabu and informed his master about the existence of camels in Lanka. We are then told how Pabu visited Lanka riding a mare that could swim across the sea. He gave instructions to his subordinates to seize the camels belonging to rich and powerful and not those belonging to the poor and weak. During the course of his camel-capturing raids, Pabu killed those who had resisted his campaign. On their way back, Pabu and his party were faced with the task of crossing the sea with She-camels. Using his miraculous powers, the hero built a bridge of peacock feathers over the sea and the men and the she-camels crossed the sea without any difficulty. The narrative then imparts a larger than life image to Pabu by suggesting that the print marks on the feathers of peacocks are the footprints of camels imprinted upon them while crossing the sea. Camels are seen as the gift of Pabu to Rajasthan—a gift that subsequently became source of livelihood for various peasant-pastoral groups, as it was camel alone that could make agricultural operations and travel possible in semi-arid parts of Rajasthan. Emphasis in the story on the arrival of camels from far-off Lanka and not from any neighbouring area suggests difficult nature of the task which could be undertaken only by a heroic figure like Pabu who is believed to have possessed supernatural powers. His miraculous powers and heroic characteristics are reflected in his single handedly killing his enemies in Lanka and in his building a bridge of peacock feathers over the sea. The tale therefore represents Pabu as not merely
an ordinary warrior but a figure endowed with supernatural powers. Such a belief in Pabu’s powers virtually raised him to the status of god in popular imagination.\(^\text{14}\)

Since agriculture had a precarious existence due to uncertainty of rains and long spells of droughts, cattle wealth was central to the people’s livelihood. The rearing and safety of the cattle became their prime concern. Many local chiefs, who had become legendary figures for laying their lives for protecting the cattle, continues to be looked upon as eternal saviours of cattle wealth. The desire for the safety of their cattle and their survival led the peasants and pastoralists to perceive the long dead heroes of the desert as divine figures worthy of being worshipped. Association of Goga with snakes and various myths surrounding him show popular fears about the lurking danger of snakes and their anxiety to cure snakebites. Dry physical relief covered with shrubs with thick branches made this region an ideal habitat for all kinds of snakes. The shrubs were cut and dried to serve as fodder. Danger of snakebite while cutting these shrubs or ploughing the field was real. It was believed that snake would not bite those who worshiped Goga and that anyone bitten by snake could be cured in no time if taken to Goga’s shrine. Goga is known as god of snakes that are found in abundance in dry physical relief of western Rajasthan. Goga is believed to command the snakes and, in popular perception, the appearance of a snake inside a house or in its vicinity is indicative of the deity’s displeasure with the residents of the house. Goga’s complete command over snakes is well narrated in several popular tales. In one such story, Goga is shown, even before his birth, ordering a snake from his mother’s womb to bite the bullocks of the cart that was

\(^{14}\) In different versions of the tale, Lanka is given different geographical locations. While in the one cited above, Lanka is shown as situated in a far-off region across the sea, in another version, it is shown as a locality in Sind. See Pushpa Bhati; *Rajasthan Ke Lok Devta Avam Lok Sahitya*; Kavita Parkashan; Bikaner; 1996; P.120
carrying the pregnant women to her parents’ house because the deity did not want to be born in the house of his maternal grand-parents. The bullocks fell and the journey had to be terminated and Goga’s mother returned to her husband’s place.\textsuperscript{15} Popular \textit{bhajans} represent the local deities as protectors of life who mitigate the sufferings of the people in the hostile ecological environment, bring rains, greenery and ensure livelihood for common people. The following prayer explains how the mere existence of the shrine of Goga in a place may be a source of happiness and prosperity to the people living in the vicinity.

\begin{quote}
\begin{scriptsize}
गूगो जी आया मां कांकड़ में,  
कोई चिमकी च्यारं कूट,  
जी गूगोजी की मढ़ेया च्याणणों,  
धुर मढ़ेया में च्याणणों,  
गूगो जी आया मां बागां में,  
कोई पाक्या दाढ़ू दाख,  
जी गूगोजी की मढ़ेया में च्याणणों,  
धुर मढ़ेया में च्याणणो।
गूगो जी आया मां सेहर में,  
कोई छटवां छाई हाट,  
जी गूगो जी की मढ़ेया में च्याणणो।  
गूगो जी आया रसोंया में,  
कोई संध्या जीनवा भात,  
जी गूगो जी की मढ़ेया में च्याणणो,  
धुर मढ़ेया में च्याणणो।
\end{scriptsize}
\end{quote}

"Gogaji came to the pasture,  
The animals romped in all the four directions,  
\textit{O}, there is light in Goga’s Shrine,  
There is light in the interior of the shrine.

\begin{quote}
\begin{scriptsize}
Gogji came to the garden,  
The pomegranates and grapes became ripe,  
\textit{O}, there is light in Goga’s Shrine,
\end{scriptsize}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Dr. Pushpa Bhati; \textit{Rajasthan Ke lok Devta Avam Lok Sahitya}; Bikaner, 1996; P 90
There is light in the interior of the shrine.

Gogaji came in our town,
A brisk trade flourished in the market,
O, there is light in Goga's Shrine,
There is light in the interior of the shrine

Gogaji came to our kitchen,
We prepared rice for him,
O, there is light in Goga's Shrine,
There is light in the interior of the shrine

The deities were also expected to mitigate the ecological hardships by providing water in times of dearth and miraculous powers were attributed to them accordingly. According to a popular legend, Ramdev, another folk-deity, gave Pokharan to his sister in her marriage. On his way to Ramdevra with his servants, where he finally settled, he saw that everybody was thirsty. Ramdev, then asked one of his servant Tularam to find water. Unable to find water in the desert, Tularam came back dejected. Ramdev, thereafter, smiled and asked him to remove a shila (stone slab). Tularam followed command of his master and there he found a well full of sweet water. Ramdev with his followers settled at this place and it was named as Ramdevra or Runecha, where the main shrine of Ramdev exists. ¹⁷

Ramdev is also worshiped for curing human diseases and for warding off the ghosts. According to a popular belief, those who died of thirst in the desert were destined to become ghosts. People dying of thirst while wandering and loosing way in the desert was a common feature. The region was sparsely populated and distances between the villages

¹⁶ S. P. Ruhela; *Society Economy and Folk Culture of a Rajasthani Nomadic Community*; 1999; Indian Publication; P.315-316

¹⁷ The story was narrated by Sultan Singh with inputs from Sajat Singh and Durjan Singh of the Tanwar family who manage the main shrine of Ramdev at Ramdevra. They believed that in a desert region where underground water is saline for miles sweet water in that well was a gift of Ramdev to the people of this area. Also see Pushpa Bhati; *Rajasthan Ke Lok Devta Avam Lok Sahitya*; 1996; P. 177
were enormous. People used camel as a mode of travel or walked on foot. There were frequent instances of travellers loosing their way in the vast desert, getting caught in sandstorms, wandering helplessly and ultimately dying of thirst. Popular belief and imagination turned all those who met such untimely deaths into ghosts. These ghosts were attracted to such travellers who either carried water with them or had eaten sweetmeats. Sweetmeats generally did not form part of the everyday diet of the common people and were regarded as delicacies. Only community feasts held on such occasions as marriage, childbirth, and kharach,\textsuperscript{18} included such items on their menu. Once a person became a Bhoot after his unnatural death, he was attracted to those foods or drinks, which he longed for in his real life. Ganesa Ram, an old man from Lunkaranser near Bikaner narrated the story of his brother Roop Ram who had died a violent death several decades ago. Roop Ram once had gone to a nearby qasba to sell the food grains. On his way back to his village, he bought ladoos. The sun had set and it was nearly dark and Roopram had still to walk a few miles to reach his village. As he passed under a Kikar tree, he heard a loud voice that asked for ladoos. Roop Ram walked straight without looking back. At that moment, Roop Ram felt a push and fell down. He did manage to reach home but ran high fever and could survive only for a few days. When he was given bath before cremation, people saw a print mark of a large palm on his back. It was believed that a ghost had killed Roopram and villagers avoided going near that kikar tree after nightfall. Worship of Ramdev, it was believed, would not only cure the diseases but also successfully ward off the danger of ghosts.

\textsuperscript{18} A feast offered to fellow members of the community at the death of an elderly member of the family to ensure his place in heaven.
From these narratives of beneficent powers of the local folk-deities, it is evident that there existed an inextricable relationship between the everyday experience, concerns and material expectations of the peasant-pastoral communities living in the specific environment of the Rajasthan desert, and the growth of a popular religion based on the worship of local gods and goddesses. Each one of the deities was assigned a specific role in sustaining human life in the desert setting. Popular faith in these gods of the desert helped various groups and families to develop the bonds of solidarity in times of adversity and evolve a culture that would strengthen their ceaseless struggle against the forces of nature.

The process of deification of local heroes was accompanied by assigning a specific function to each one these deities. Goga and Teja were expected to protect their devotees from snakes and cure the snakebite, whereas Ramdev was worshiped to ward off ghost, and cure the mentally ill. Pabu was worshipped to ensure safety of cattle and cure cattle diseases.

At this stage of the discussion, it is important to examine the lives and careers of these deities. Were they merely mythical figures who became objects of community worship or were they actually existing historical figures who heroically responded to the circumstances of their times to rescue their followers and the common people. How does one reconstruct the outline of their lives if they were historical personalities? Following sections of this chapter address these issues and seek to offer an integrated picture of the emergence, growth and transformation of the cults of the four folk-deities under discussion. In these discussions, focus shifts-although not entirely- from ecological conditions to the socio-political milieu of Rajasthan. While ecological factors played
important role in shaping the phenomenon of the worship of the local deities, focus on the long term historical developments-particularly changes in social and political structure-is indispensable to the understanding of the process of the emergence of deities and the changing social composition of their followers.

II. Political and Social Context of the Emergence of Folk-deities:

Two important developments influenced the course of political change in Rajasthan between the 8th-9th and 15th-16th centuries: (i) the emergence of Rajputs as a distinct ruling group in Rajasthan leading to the formation of various Rajput states, particularly those of the Rathore Rajputs in Jodhpur and Bikaner, and (ii) the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in the early thirteenth century causing long drawn conflicts for territory not only between the Turks and the Rajputs, but also between different Rajput clans. Conventional scholars since the days of James Tod have explained the ‘origin’ of the Rajput in various ways-either in terms of their foreign origin19 or indigenous origin.20 On the other hand, R. S. Sharma, Irfan Habib and B. D. Chattopadhyay have linked the process of emergence of the Rajput clans to far-reaching changes that were taking place at the base of the social formation. These theories stress the ‘mixed’ composition of the Rajput clans and see them as emerging from the process of transition from ancient to the medieval period of Indian History. R. S. Sharma in his theory of Indian feudalism treats the Rajputs as feudatories who emerged as a result of political decentralization and feudalization of polity, economy, and society during the post-Gupta, pre-Sultanate

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19 For foreign origin theory of the Rajputs, see James Tod; Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan; Vol. I; First published in 1829, Reprint (two volumes in one) 1950, pp. 70-71 and V. A. Smith; Early History of India; Oxford; 1958

20 For the indigenous origin theory, see for instance, C. V. Vaidya; History of Medieval Hindu India; Vol. II; Poona; 1924; p. 7, and Dashrath Sharma; Rajasthan Through the Ages; Vol. I; Bikaner; Rajasthan State Archives; 1966; p. 106
Irfan Habib on the other hand, while not disagreeing with R. S. Sharma's basic formulations, sees the period between 7th and 12th centuries in terms of the growth of 'clan monarchies' or 'proto-Rajput' kingdoms. Habib also makes the 'important observation' that the term 'Rajput' in the sense of a caste group begin to appear in Persian literature only from the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Persian sources of the Sultanate period do not use the term 'Rajput' for various landed chiefs of Rajasthan and northern India.22

Norman P. Ziegler, putting forward radically different view of the status and value-system of the medieval Rajputs, rejects the conventional wisdom (as reflected in the works of Dashrath Sharma and other Rajasthani historians.) that Rajputs emerged in the process of opposition to 'Muslim invaders'. Ziegler suggests the history of Rajput relations with the central powers (e.g. Delhi Sultanate and other regional sultanates, and later the Mughal Empire) cannot be explained merely in terms of religious and cultural conflict. Using the Rajasthani bardic sources, he asserts that the Rajputs perceived the Muslim rulers as belonging to the same caste (jati) as themselves, but different in status and power. Once the Turks and the Mughals established themselves as sovereign central powers in northern India, many established and emerging Rajput families accepted their subordinate position and evolved a value-system in which these chiefs viewed themselves as King's sons (Rajput) in a socio-political order in which the Turks or Mughal rulers came to be accepted as sovereigns. Service and loyalty to the master in return for the grant of territory, rank and position at the court, became the dominant values of the

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21 R. S. Sharma; Indian Feudalism; C. 300-1200; Calcutta; University of Calcutta; 1965
Rajput political culture. Conflict took place only when the central powers seized the territories of the Rajputs and consequently lowered their ranks. Thus, according to Ziegler, both conflict and cooperation of the Rajputs with the Turks-Mughal rulers can be explained in terms of the belief-myths and values of the Rajputs.23 Another authority on medieval Rajput history, Dirk Kolff has offered a new interpretation of the concept of ‘Rajput’. In his opinion, various mobile groups from pastoral background and possessing martial characteristics rose to prominence in Rajasthan and northern India throughout the medieval period. It is these groups which formed in Kolff’s opinion, the ‘open status group’ of Rajputs.

“Some of these flourished for centuries, others fell back into obscurity much sooner. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, a greater number of such pastoralist groups than previously succeeded in achieving, and passing on to their heirs, some measures of landed status. It is possible that agricultural expansion and demographic growth during the sultanate period of North Indian history were among the causes of the emergence of these local gentries. They did not constitute endogamous castes, but formed largely open status groups of clans, lineages or even families and individuals, some of which were connected to each other by exogamous connubial ties. Inevitably, a certain group identity grew among these families; it was summed up in the name of Rajput. This word literally means ‘son of a King’. At first used to denote various individuals who achieved such statuses as ‘horse-soldier’, ‘trooper’ or ‘headmen of a village’, and then pretended to be connected with the

family of some King, it became a generic name for this military and landed class as a whole.”. 24 Kolff then goes on to discussing the process of differentiation and hierarchy among the Rajputs. He argues that by sixteenth century, “something like a great Rajput tradition” had emerged among the Rajputs of Rajasthan. The Rajputs belonging to this tradition used genealogy to legitimize their power and status. But outside Rajasthan—particularly in North India, mobile fighting groups and soldiers from obscure social background continued to enter the open status group of Rajputs until beginning of the modern period. In this sense, the Rajputs, according to Kolff, constituted a group in which fighting men were recruited, not born. 25 In Rajasthan, however, the Great Rajput Tradition— with rigid clan hierarchies and grand genealogies— had already emerged under the Mughal influence.

The researches of scholars such as G. D. Sharma 26 and B. L. Bhadani 27 have also stressed the role of the influence of the Mughal institutions such as land-revenue system, land-revenue assignment system (jagir) and bureaucratization of nobility, on the process of Rajput state formation under the Rathore Rajputs of Jodhpur. However, neither the social-military history oriented approach of Drik Kolff nor the Mughal-centric studies of G. D. Sharma and B. L. Bhadani help us in understanding the complex interplay of

25 Ibid. 289-90
26 See G. D. Sharma; Rajput Polity: A Study of Politics and Administration of the State of Marwar 1638-1749; New Delhi; Manohar; 1977; particularly chapters 2, 3, and 4. Sharma clearly traces the development of centralized polity under Jodhpur state—including the growth of land-revenue system and pattadari system to the increasing influence of the Mughal institutions on the Rajput polity and administration.
27 B. L. Bhadani; “The Ruler and the Nobility in Marwar during the reign of Jaswant Singh”; in Irfan Habib eds. Medieval India I, Delhi, oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 183-93. Bhadani’s conclusion is that the land-revenue assignment system of the Rathor state of Jodhpur-called the Patta system tended to become practically a replica of the jagir system, though its origin lay in the distribution of territorial acquisitions of rulers among their clansmen, p. 193
indigenous factors—social, economic, political and ideological—that went into the making of the ‘Rajputization’ phenomenon in Rajasthan between the 8th - 9th and 15th - 16th centuries. Here the pioneering research of B. D. Chattopadhyaya is of crucial importance. Eschewing monocausal and deterministic interpretations of the emergence of Rajputs in Rajasthan, Chattopadhyaya draws our attention to the dynamics of social, economic and political change in early medieval Rajasthan. 28

Rejecting both the ‘foreign origin’ theory of James Tod and ‘indigenous origin’ theory of Hindu Communal historians and conventional Rajasthani scholars, Chattopadhyaya also clearly disassociated himself from the ‘Indian feudalism’ thesis of R. S. Sharma. Instead of viewing the emergence of Rajputs as a product of political decentralization and break-up and economic decline of empires, Chattopadhyaya emphasises the role of such historical processes as growth of agricultural settlements in tribal areas followed by rapid social change marked by conflict for power and territory among various social groups and then by the growth of state formation under powerful chiefs many of whom emerged from obscure origins. The emergence of state-societies at local and regional levels, according to Chattopadhyaya, was the most characteristic feature of the transition from ancient to the medieval period of Indian history. 29 Disassociating himself from the various ‘origin’ theories, Chattopadhyaya links the ‘Rajputaization’ process to various developments such as transformation of pastoral communities into peasant societies, formation of new castes, evolution of chiefdoms into state societies and the efforts of the

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28 See his seminal article, “The Emergence of Rajputs as Historical Process in Early Medieval Rajasthan”, in Karine Schomer et. Al. eds. The Idea of Rajasthan. Vol.II, Delhi, Manohar, 1994, pp.161-91. This article was originally published in the Indian Historical Review, 3, (1), pp. 59-80

29 See, B. D. Chattopadhyaya’s criticism of the ‘feudalism’ thesis and theories of transition from ancient to medieval period of Indian history, see his The Making of Early Medieval India, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, particularly chapter I.
newly emerging ruling dynasties to seek *Kshatriya* status within the Brahmanical ideological framework. He stresses two chronological stages in the emergence of the Rajputs between the 8th and 15th centuries.

“In the first stage it was essentially a political process in which disparate groups seeking political power conformed to such norms as permeated the contemporary political ideology. As entry into the Rajput fold continued basically to be through political power, the traditional norms or the need for legitimization remained.

In this respect, the emergence of the Rajputs was similar to a pan-Indian phenomenon, namely the formation of dynasties, many of which sought legitimization through zealously claimed linkages with the *Kshtriya* lines of the mythical past. But in the second stage, which we would roughly date from the 11th – 12th centuries, the rise of the Rajputs became a comprehensive social phenomenon as well.” 30 It may be noted here that Chattopadhayaya sets his analysis of the emergence of various Rajput clans such as *Chahamanas* (Chauhans) and Guhilas against the broader social context of transition from tribalism to agriculture (‘colonization’) and the attempts of various obscure social groups to capture territory and political power and then to seek respectability through various legitimization mechanisms. As is clear from Chattopadhayaya’s study, the *Chahamana* (Chauhan) Rajputs had already obtained themselves as independent political power in parts of northern Rajasthan by 12th century. Various Chauhan sub-clans ruled in different territories of this region at the time of the Turkish conquest of northern India at the end of 12th century, the most powerful being the Chahamana kingdom of the Delhi-Ajmer region. The earliest of the folk-deities, Goga is believed to have been a Chauhan

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hero who fought against the Ghaznavid Turks. By the fifteenth century, however, the Rathores had emerged as the most powerful Rajput clan in western Rajasthan and accordingly, another folk-deity, Pabu was given a Rathore ancestry. Similarly, Ramdev is believed to have been a Rajput belonging to the Tomar (Tanwar) clan of Rajasthan. Given the obscure and unclear origin and multiple identities of these figures, it was perhaps possible to claim them as ‘Rajputs’ and link them, through genealogical claims and manipulations, to one or the other of the Rajput clans (depending on which Rajput clan was politically dominant in the period and region in which each one of them was believed to have lived). The Jat identity of Teja, however, was too well established right from the beginning to be historically forgotten and to be transformed into something else. Thus, while all these folk-deities, as will be shown underwent a process of Rajputization, in the case of Teja, ‘Rajputization’ was not a matter of caste but merely a code of conduct (i.e. chivalry, martial qualities etc.).

Chattopadhayaya’s theory of the emergence of the Rajputs in early medieval Rajasthan is relevant to our purpose because it suggests the image of a society constantly in flux- a society in which powerful territorial chiefs established themselves as ‘Rajputs’ to legitimize their hold over newly emerging agricultural settlements and the local peasant-pastoral communities. It was a period of internecine warfare among these powerful social groups, and also between them and the local communities who resisted the former’s dominance and highhandedness. While the new rulers (Chahmanas, Guhilas, Rathores etc.) emerged as great ‘Rajputs’ with mythical linkages being forged between them and the Puranic heroes by their Brahmanical and bardic ideologues, the desperate, helpless and oppressed local communities and peasants and pastoralists looked up to their
local chiefs, heroes and leaders to protect and sustain them. Goga, Pabu, Ramdev and Teja were relatively unknown local figures whose acts of bravery and heroic resistance to invaders from outside (dominant Rajput warrior bands and Turks) remained forever etched in popular memory. The gradual process of ‘Rajputization’ of these figures by the ruling Rajputs dynasties always remained as variance with, and in critical tension with the ways in which the peasants and other subordinate groups celebrated the memory of these heroes and venerated them as deities.

Apart from the focus on such political aspects as state formation, clan rivalries, conflict over territory and power between indigenous and new groups, recent researches have also drawn our attention to social and economic changes in western Rajasthan and the adjoining region of Punjab during the period between the 8th–9th centuries and 15th-16th centuries. In an important study, Irfan Habib has underlined the process of the transformation of Jats from a pastoral into a peasant community in northwestern India, particularly in Punjab in the period between 12th and 16th centuries. Habib attributes this process to such technological changes as the introduction of Persian wheel as an important water-lifting device, which facilitated the growth of agriculture in the Sultanate period. Although Chetan Singh has raised doubts about the linkages between spread of Persian wheel and the peasantization of Jats in Punjab, the gradual transformation of Jats into a class of agriculturists in north-western India remained undisputed historical phenomenon. In the case of Rajasthan, however, the transformation could never have been completed due to the peculiar ecological conditions of the region. It is interesting

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32 Chetan Singh, “Irrigation in Punjab: Persian Wheel Reconsidered”, The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 22, No.1, 1984, pp. 74-87
that we start hearing of Jats as peasants in western Rajasthan from 14th–15th centuries. In religious literature of 15th–17th centuries, there are increasing references to Jat peasant communities. Dhanna (15 century) was an important Jat peasant saint of the low-caste popular monotheistic movement. Large number of Jat peasants were also attracted to the Bishnoi movement during the later medieval period.

By the seventeenth century, large number of Jat peasants inhabited the villages of Marwar. K. D. Erskine, the author of the *Rajputana Gazetteers* (written at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century) informs us that Jats outnumber the Rajputs in the rural population of western Rajasthan. It is, therefore, clear that during the period between 8th and 15th-16th centuries, and in particular between 12th and 15th –16th centuries, far-reaching socio-economic changes were underway in western Rajasthan. These changes included agrarian expansion in hitherto tribal settlements, growth of tribals into peasant communities and emergence of Jats into an agricultural group. These changes were taking shape at a time when new Rajput states were also being formed. (Chahmana state of 11th–12th centuries and the Rathore states of Jodhpur and Bikaner in the 14th-15th centuries) The composition of the ruling class was undergoing a change and the balance of power in the local society was rapidly shifting. New groups established their dominance and local communities –both peasants and pastoralists- came under increasing threat of domination by the new powerful groups.

Western Rajasthan society was hierarchically organized, both socially and economically.

The economic and social division, to a great extend were overlapping. Two higher castes-


Rajputs and Brahmins owned 73.7 percent of the Persian wheel, which signifies their affluent economic status.\textsuperscript{35} If the caste composition of a village as discussed by B. L. Bhadani\textsuperscript{36} is taken as case study, the higher castes (who were economically affluent as they controlled the best of agricultural resources) comprised nearly 1/3\textsuperscript{rd} of the total rural population. Nearly 40\% were ordinary peasants, professionals, and menials and subject peasants were 30\% of the village populace. The lower castes such as Meghwals, Nais, Khumbhar and Dhehdh performed menial jobs and also worked as tenants and cultivated lands of higher caste peasants.\textsuperscript{37} The ordinary peasants were assessed at comparatively higher rates of revenue in comparison to higher caste cultivators. These differential revenue rates impoverished the ordinary peasants. The peasants sometimes resisted the rates and complaints were lodged with the Mughal court.\textsuperscript{38}

The land revenue in \textit{batai}, which was a dominant form of revenue collection, was fixed at half of the total produce. The sources indicate that many times it was increased to more than half and had invited protest from the ordinary peasants.\textsuperscript{39} Nainsi provides us the information regarding revenue rates for various crops grown in the region and even states prices of wheat, cotton, and paddy for Pargana Sojat. He also provides figures of \textit{hasil} (revenue realization) for almost every village in all Parganas of Marwar for a period of five years. This recording of the information in detail indicates that by seventeenth century the Marwar State had evolved a well-structured and centralized administrative system enabling reach out to every village and peasant.

\textsuperscript{35} B.L. Bhadani; \textit{Peasants Artisans and Entrepreneurs: Economy of Marwar in the Seventeenth Century}, Delhi, 1999, Page.122
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.} p.115
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.} P.116
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.} P.117
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.} p. 201
It should be borne in mind that religious phenomena such as the process of
deification of historical personages cannot be understood without reference to changes in
social and political structure. While not losing sight of the overall ecological context, it is
important to remember that there is no simple co-relation between ecological conditions
and religious experiences of the people. This relationship is always mediated by such
social and political conditions as the relations of domination and subordination based on
caste or class, process of state formation and search for political legitimization. The
complex nature of the relationship between religious change and its ecological, social and
political context will become clear as the thesis unfolds itself in the following chapters.