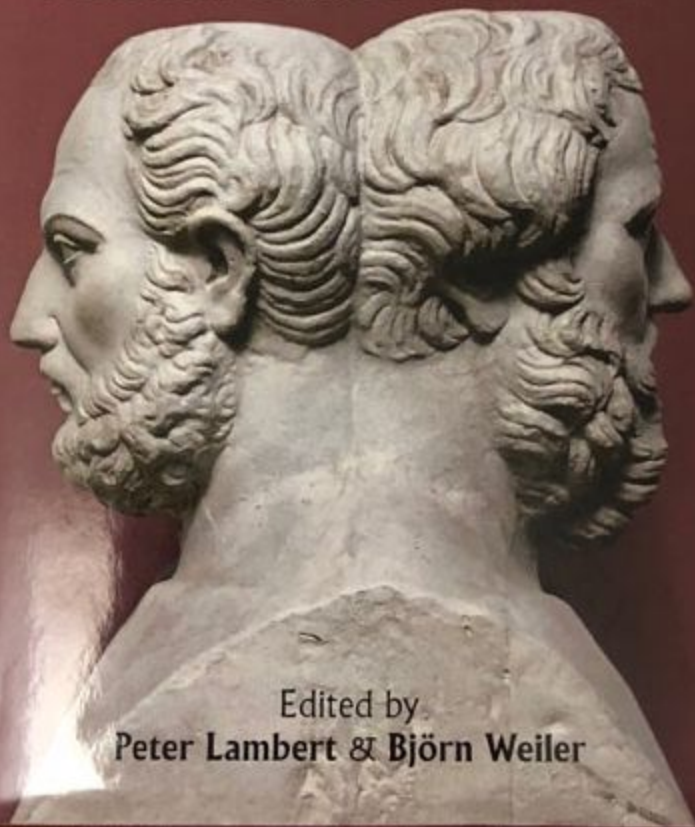# HOW THE PAST WAS USED

Historical Cultures c.750–2000

Edited by

Peter Lambert & Björn Weiler

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7

The Poetry of History in Early Modern India

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Recognising Historiographical Diversity

INFLUENTIAL NINETEENTH-CENTURY THINKERS, Hegel among them, denied Indians a historical consciousness. By Indians he meant 'Hindus', an assessment based in part on recent Orientalist encounters with classical Sanskrit texts that were held to be full of exaggerations, unwieldy literary representations rather than crisp facts.[1] The later Persian chronicles that were produced in India from the eleventh century onwards, often at the courts of Muslim sultans, can evince an annalistic and documentary character somewhat more aligned with modern western historical sensibilities and came to be accepted with far less hesitation as a valid tradition of history-writing.[2] Since Persian became the language of empire in Muslim-ruled India, Persian sources have always dominated the field of medieval and early modern historiography, supplemented on occasion by the inconsistently reliable accounts of European visitors.[3] In contrast, the more literary traditions of memory recorded in Indic languages have largely been ignored. Here I will consider the specific case of Hindi, which saw a remarkable efflorescence of historical poetry during the Mughal period (1526–1857).

This exploration of the Hindi tradition's vibrant 'poetry of history' seeks to contribute to this volume's expansive inquiry into global historical cultures by introducing voices from the Indian subcontinent. It is merely stating the obvious

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[1] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 2001), pp. 179–84. Also contributing to Hegel's historiographical world view were more provincial debates internal to European intellectual history.

[2] Hence the influential (if problematic) eight-volume tome prepared by H. M. Elliot and J. Dowson, *The History of India, as Told by its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period* (London: Trübner and Co., 1867–77).

[3] For a recent assessment of the English ambassadors to the Mughal court Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris, see S. Subrahmanyam, 'The Company and the Mughals', in *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 143–72.

to point out that pre-modern India is both temporally and spatially removed from even an early moment in the development of modern history as an academic discipline,[4] and we can hardly expect history to look the same everywhere. On the contrary, to do justice to the often deeply alterior sources found in global archives means that we must be willing to have a capacious perspective on what gets to count as history. Historians of India are increasingly recognising the essential fact of the region's rich historiographical diversity. Textualisations of the Indian past are now seen as multiple in genre and also linguistically diverse, for the region boasts more than a dozen major languages, Sanskrit, Persian and Hindi being just those in widest use. [5] Sanskrit was the primary language of letters in early India. With the arrival of Muslim dynasties in the medieval period Persian received a strong impetus, and vernacular writers working in a variety of languages further complicated the linguistic picture. With its astonishing linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, pre-modern India is a fertile site for studying historiographical traditions in dialogue (as well as conflict). Over the centuries multiple interactions across regions and communities produced competing claims on the historical record.

The Rise of Vernacular Historiography in Mughal-Period North India

A major tradition of Hindi historical writing enters the record from the sixteenth century and appears to be closely connected to the rise of the Mughal state. Political transition can be a profoundly generative force for history-making. The dynasty was founded by Emperor Babur (r. 1526–30), who descended from Tamerlane on his father's side and Ghengis Khan on his mother's. The Mughals followed in the wake of earlier sultans, most recently a short-lived Afghan regime known as the Lodis, but Muslim rulers had established a strong footing in India by the early thirteenth century when the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) first took shape. British colonial authorities would later promulgate a historiographical bifurcation

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[4] Many scholars trace the birth of academic history to the efforts of Leopold von Ranke in nineteenth-century Germany, although a good case for the eighteenth century can also be made. See the introduction to this volume and R. Harrison, A. Jones and P. Lambert, 'The Institutionalisation and Organisation of History', in P. Lambert and P. Schofield (eds), *Making History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 9–25 at 10–11.

[5] A sampling of recent scholarship includes (for Bengal) K. Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009); D. L. Curley, *Poetry and History* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008); (for Maharashtra) P. Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); S. Guha, 'Transitions and Translations: Regional Power and Vernacular Identity in the Dakhan, 1500–1800', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24:2 (2004), 23–31; (for South India) V. N. Rao, D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India* (New York: Other Press, 2003).

between ancient 'Hindu' and medieval 'Muslim' epochs, stressing a narrative of Muslim conquest. This framework remains dominant in both popular history and in the writings of Hindu nationalists but is no longer endorsed by scholars, who understand the degree to which the Mughals gained authority by working in tandem with local stakeholders.[6]

The Mughals became an enormous force to be reckoned with after the middle of the sixteenth century through a combination of superior military might and effective political tactics. Between the 1560s and 1580s most of North India was decisively incorporated into the Mughal Empire under the able leadership of the third emperor, Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Akbar was quick to understand the diversity of the land he aimed to rule, and he actively cultivated the support of local Hindu rajas known as 'Rajputs', incorporating them along with members of the Central Asian and Iranian nobility into an impressive bureaucracy. Rajput rulers retained (or claimed to retain), to varying extents, de facto local autonomy in their home regions but they officially recognised the suzerainty of the Mughal overlord. They were offered revenue-generating land holdings and in exchange were expected to perform military service on behalf of the empire. These kings became conversant with Persian, the Mughal court language, but their primary cultural language was Hindi.[7]

Hundreds of historical poems written in old Hindi[8] dialects were produced at the regional courts operating within the power shadow of the Mughal dynasty. These texts have been very little tapped as a source of history. Few scholars are even aware of the existence of a major historiographical tradition in Hindi, albeit a deeply literary one. We have biographies of important local kings; martial ballads recounting turning points in Mughal history; occasional poems that celebrate the valour of local heroes who fought both for and against the Mughal Empire. Some Hindi poets evidently accompanied their royal patrons on sojourns to the Mughal court; a few travelled with their patrons on military expeditions; they also served as diplomats and teachers to both Mughal emperors and Rajput kings. These social roles helped Hindi writers to acquire first-hand knowledge of the contemporary events that find prodigious mention in their works.

Although the matter has not been adequately studied,[9] the new vernacular historiography was certainly in dialogue with the Persian traditions of the imperial centre, even if the genre codes and overall feel of the works are quite distinct.

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[6] A useful, if brief, discussion is C. Asher and C. Talbot, *India before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 2–5.

[7] Sanskrit too remained an important cultural language but the early modern period, in India no less than in Europe, witnessed a strong impetus toward vernacularisation.

[8] In this chapter the generic term 'Hindi' is used as a convenient stand-in for a range of dialects, including Brajbhasha and Rajasthani.

[9] An early but still valuable exploration of this theme is N. P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13:2 (1976), 219–50. Also see R. Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India c. 1500–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), especially ch. 3.

In the 1580s and 1590s the Mughal court itself embarked on a Persian historio-graphical undertaking of unprecedented scale.[10] The first major Hindi historical texts were also produced in this very period, two at the court of one of Emperor Akbar's leading Rajput generals, Raja Man Singh (r. 1589–1614).[11] Collectively, this corpus provides a significant basis for understanding complex processes of cultural and political accommodation between a powerful dynasty of Muslim rulers and an overwhelmingly Hindu populace. Some texts express a historio-political vision that is fully aligned with the imperial cause; others evince a more resistant ethos. Certainly many Hindi texts from this period offer insight into local perceptions of Mughal power, and to the crucial role that poetry has played in India as a vehicle for historical consciousness.

The boundaries between history and literature were never discrete in pre-modern India and the narratives in which the past was encoded shape-shift between genres and functions. For some Hindi writers, the chronicling of recent events served a didactic function, crossing over into the domain of ethics.[12] There are also intersections between history and panegyric, as in royal biographies or encomia to deceased warriors. Historians and poets alike adopt narrative strat-egies but poets are especially prone to structuring their narratives in strategic ways. What do the Hindi writers memorialise, and what do they prefer to forget?[13] When viewed alongside selections from some of the Persian records, we can evaluate questions about shared versus disputed visions of the past. Certainly we can uncover revealing absences, embellishments and dramatic changes in focus when we compare Hindi and Persian accounts of the same events (as I show in a couple of illustrative cases below). Hindi and Persian writers belonged to different textual communities and it is only natural that they would have catered to different interest groups. Their world views were not necessarily oppositional, as we shall see, but Hindi writers are prone to putting a 'Rajput face' on Mughal events. Many Hindi texts from this period are centred on the lives and deeds of Rajput rulers or, when they report on Mughal events, they tell them from the point of view of local actors rather than promulgating the ideologies of the imperial court that commis-sioned statist Persian chronicles.

[10] An overview of key texts and trends is H. Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976).

[11] These are discussed in A. Busch, 'Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah's World: Amrit Rai's Biography of Man Singh (1585)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55:2–3 (2012), 287–328; A. Busch, 'The Classical Past in the Mughal Present: The Brajbhasha Rīti Tradition', in *Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Sanskrit Literature* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 648–90.

[12] This can be seen, in the language of Jörn Rüsen, as an impulse toward 'exemplary narrative'. See his *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), pp. 12–14.

[13] On remembering and forgetting in the Sanskrit texts of this period, see A. Truschke, 'Setting the Record Wrong: a Sanskrit Vision of Mughal Conquests', *South Asian History and Culture* 3:3 (2012), 373–96.

Narrativising Mughal Succession Conflict

A single essay cannot begin to do justice to the multiple genres and positions of a whole corpus of texts spanning centuries, so here the aim is to demonstrate the kinds of questions that can be asked of vernacular literary sources. I have selected one especially compelling work from a cluster of Hindi narrative poems that document moments of intense political struggle at the imperial centre: Maheshdas Rao's *Binhai Raso* ('Tale of the two [imperial factions]', *c.*1660?), a moving account of a devastating succession struggle that broke out among the Mughal princes in 1657.

Succession struggles have loomed large in the historiography of the Mughal Empire, for this was a politico-military culture that did not legislate primogeniture. Colonial-period historians derided Mughal dynastic conflict as evidence of the political incompetence of Muslim despots who precipitated India's near destruction (to be pulled back from the brink by British rule, according to the standard nineteenth-century narrative), but new research sees these events as stemming from the complexities of networking and alliance building that were at the core of princely training and comportment.[14] Operative in the Central Asian Timurid culture from which the Mughals hailed was an ethos of intense political competition. The prince who remained standing at the end of a dynastic struggle was the one who had the best networks and administrative capacity. He thus deserved to rule.

The most widely (mis-)remembered succession struggle in India today is the ousting of Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–57)[15] from power in a protracted war that lasted from 1657–9 (for convenience I will designate this 'the war of 1658', since the critical battles took place that year). The victor, his son Aurangzeb Alamgir, is reviled in popular history as an orthodox Muslim iconoclast who razed Hindu temples to build mosques in their place.[16] In the standard historiography, Aurangzeb is seen to have cruelly murdered his three brothers in a bloodthirsty coup. Particularly mourned in this narrative is Shah Jahan's eldest son Dara Shukoh, an enthusiast of Hindu philosophy today posthumously revered as a great intellectual and Sufi, whose death is thought to have heralded the end of a tolerant Mughal ecumenism.[17]

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[14] M. D. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[15] Shah Jahan is also remembered as the force behind the Taj Mahal, the spectacular white marble mausoleum that he commissioned in honour of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal.

[16] As noted by Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'The image of the Muslim iconoclast and plunderer is central to the Hindu communal imaginary', a trope frequently invoked to foment hatred and religious conflict in modern South Asia. See his 'Predicaments of Secular Histories', *Public Culture* 20:1 (2008), 57–73, at 68.

[17] As often, popular history carries the day over academic history but scholars have been increasingly concerned to bring nuance to our understanding of the figures of Aurangzeb and Dara Shukoh. See for instance K. B. Brown, 'Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of his Reign',

Hindi sources such as the *Binhai Raso* afford access to earlier, contemporary views of this controversial war between Aurangzeb and his brothers, which racked much of India, causing inestimable loss of life. Rajput rulers were called upon to take sides and entire families could be wiped out in a single battle. It was the Rajput courts and the Hindi poets in their employ who were uniquely positioned to tell their stories. Several poets have featured the war of 1658, potently illustrating how one use of the Hindi historiographical tradition was to grapple with both the promise and the challenges of Mughal rule.[18] Their works help us to better understand the specifically Rajput experience of Mughal dynastic conflict.

Maheshdas's patrons were the Gaur Rajputs, a small clan from the principality of Rajgarh, near Ajmer, located approximately 400 km west of the imperial capital of Delhi. Several Gaur chieftains appear in the Persian records as mid-ranking imperial servants under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. Raja Bithaldas Gaur played an especially important role in protecting Shah Jahan's interests when he was threatened by rebellions early in his reign and he was rewarded handsomely with military rankings and governorships over the course of a distinguished career.[19] His appearance alongside leading Rajput nobility and Mughal princes in a famous painting that commemorates Shah Jahan's coronation (after a fraught succession struggle[20]) suggests that he was considered an especially valuable imperial servant.[21] He died in 1651 before the start of the succession war and was reportedly grieved by the emperor himself. His brother, sons and other kinsmen came to the emperor's defence during his time of need. Their exploits are the primary subject of the *Binhai Raso*.

The use of the genre designation 'raso' in the title signals a tale of war. War was the stock and trade of Rajputs, and the bardic communities of western India cultivated a specific literary dialect known as Dimgal that was eminently suitable for constructing lively battle scenes.[22] Maheshdas reveals very little about himself, but crafting war poetry seems to have been the family business since several works have been attributed to his father and brothers, some of whom served the rulers of other nearby Rajput courts.[23] Perhaps Maheshdas was himself

Modern Asian Studies 41:1 (2007), 77–120; R. Kinra, 'Infantilizing Bābā Dārā: The Cultural Memory of Dārā Shekuh [i.e. Dara Shukoh] and the Mughal Public Sphere', *Journal of Persianate Societies* 2:2 (2009), 165–93.

[18] For a discussion of an old Hindi text that has comparable features to the *Binhai Raso*, *Vachanika Rathor Ratansingh Ri*, see V. Rathee, 'Narratives of the 1658 War of Succession for the Mughal Throne, 1658–1707', Ph.D. thesis (Tucson, AZ, 2015), pp. 92–141.

[19] N. S. S. N. Khan, *Ma'āthir ul-umarā*, trans. H. Beveridge, revised by B. Prashad (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1979), pp. 401–4.

[20] Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, pp. 34–8.

[21] The painting is discussed in M. C. Beach, E. Koch and W. M. Thackston, *King of the World* (London: Azimuth Publishers, 1997), pp. 167–9.

[22] An excellent recent study of the Dimgal tradition is J. Kamphorst, 'In Praise of Death', Ph.D. thesis (Leiden, 2008).

[23] Maheshdas Rao, *Binhai Raso*, ed. S. Shekhavat (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1996), pp. 4–8 (henceforth BR).

present at one or more of the battles that he describes (the work features three principal battles) since he seems intimately acquainted with the details.

A literal translation of Maheshdas's title *Binhai Raso* would be 'The Tale of Two' but there were more than just two sides and the war itself was protracted, consisting of numerous campaigns led by high-ranking Muslim and Rajput leaders. The trouble started in September 1657. Shah Jahan fell ill and rumours of his imminent death precipitated a crisis among his four legitimate sons. Dara Shukoh, the eldest, was favoured by his father and had long been groomed to succeed him. His brothers, however, took quick action to try to thwart his becoming emperor. Prince Shuja struck from his eastern base of operations in Bengal. Murad and Aurangzeb, respectively stationed in Gujarat in western India and the Deccan plateau to the south, teamed up for a period, although this alliance would disintegrate. When Aurangzeb Alamgir (r. 1659–1707) eventually won, he spared his father, although infamously kept him under house arrest until his death in 1666. Dara Shukoh was murdered in 1659; Murad in 1661; Shuja disappeared in the early 1660s in Burma, his fate unknown.[24] This struggle for the throne was a fecund, if potentially intimidating subject for a poet-historian.

The Substance of Literary Style

At times, Maheshdas can be a tireless chronicler of the war. He knows the key battalion leaders on both sides, who fought in the advance party, who on the left and right flanks. He dates specific meetings and encounters. His work is especially valuable for providing the names and clans of local warriors who never made it into the more usual Persian sources.

The norms of pre-modern Hindi textual discourse make it far from easy to separate out documentary from literary registers, however, and it seems methodologically fraught even to try since, within the span of a few lines, Maheshdas can veer from acutely detailed facticity to a mood of extreme poetic exuberance. In reading the *Binhai Raso*, substantive arguments would elude those who are not willing to engage with the text's style. Indeed, adopting an approach more rooted in the discipline of literature than history often seems the right tack. We can, for instance, profitably examine the *themes* of the *Binhai Raso* to better understand what was at stake for this writer and the court that patronised him. While we know from Persian texts commissioned by the emperor that Rajput rulers were valued as imperial servants, scholars have generally not cared to study how the Hindi court poets of Rajput rulers present the Mughal relationship. Moreover, the technique of close reading, another branch of literary study, reveals the ethics, world view and aspirations of the communities that patronised Hindi historical poems. As in many cultures, the death of soldiers in battle can spur admiration, and some of

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[24] Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, pp. 38–41.

the Hindi corpus is definitely committed to an ethos of warrior masculinity that celebrates, and normalises, martial valour. At the same time, war also prompted reflections on tragic loss, senseless violence and worries about political disorder. Hindi historical poetry can thus help us to excavate layers of emotional history: what were the emotions that mattered to Rajput warrior communities and their leaders in the seventeenth century? Another function of these texts, given the grim reality of death in battle, was commemorative.

Let us begin with a few points about style. The first thirty action-packed verses introduce all four of the contending Mughal princes and set an almost dizzying pace that conveys deep anxiety about a fraught political situation. Dara Shukoh was at the Delhi court alongside his father and, as the heir apparent, became a target the minute his brothers caught wind of Shah Jahan's failing health. Shuja struck first. Maheshdas introduces him in dramatic fashion, using typical techniques from bardic poetry. These lines in the aptly chosen *tribhangi* ('triple-bent') metre, with its characteristic triple folds, perfectly capture the urgency of the situation as Prince Shuja musters his troops:

> *sūjā sulitāṇam, auha amāṇam, jāṃṇi javāṇam jamarāṇam*
> *ārambha umaṅge, aṅga su aṅge, taṅga turaṅge tāṇāṇam*
> *pakharāla pamaṅgāṃ, nāga sanaggāṃ, bāhi bihaṅgā bāṇāsam*
> *gaja jhampa sa jaggāṃ, dhārai dhajjāṃ, ūṛi sarajjā ākāsam*

Sultan Shuja, immeasurably powerful, appeared like a soldier of death.
He set forth with a fierce charge, squadron after squadron, cavalry cantering.
Horses caparisoned, elephants charging, arrows scattering the birds,
Elephants rushing forth, flags hoisted, clouds of dust enveloping the sky.[25]

This is a marvellous example of Dimgal (bardic) stylistics. Each line consists of three clipped phrases, set off by alliteration and internal rhyme, with a brief pause for emphasis at the end. The formal features of the composition help to create a sense of movement and danger: we can practically hear Shuja's armies galloping from the east.

Then suddenly we meet the other two contenders for the throne as Maheshdas uses the narrative technique of multi-voicing to excellent effect. Aurangzeb's messengers report to him in the southern city of Aurangabad. They have rushed there from Delhi and breathlessly convey the news that Shah Jahan is gravely ill.[26] The tone and register shift dramatically as the poet switches out of his earlier bardic mode to record the official report in a prose passage. Prose is rare in the work (and not the preferred medium in pre-modern Hindi textual culture generally), so such passages call attention to themselves. Although Maheshdas wrote in Hindi, he laces this section with Persian,[27] as though wishing to conjure up

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[25] *BR*, 1, 12.
[26] *BR*, 1, 18.
[27] Hindi draws its lexical stock variously from Sanskrit, Persian and more local dialects, rather as English vocabulary derives from Anglo Saxon, Latin/French, but also Norse, etc.

the world of the Mughal chancellery with its official letters and news reporters.[28] The sudden turn to Persianised speech may also be a Hindi poet's attempt to add verisimilitude to his narrative. The Mughalesque prose here lends a kind of documentary authority to the poetic text, suggesting to the reader or listener that the reported conversation really happened.

The Rajput Face of Mughal Power

Subsequently, another prose passage is used to promulgate a radically divergent historiographical perspective on the Mughal Empire. This one takes the form of a letter in which Aurangzeb and his brother Murad are portrayed as trying to ingratiate themselves with a hoped-for Rajput ally, Rana Raj Singh Sisodia (r. 1652–80) of the Mewar clan. The Ranas[29] of Mewar (based in Udaipur, in today's Rajasthan) were widely perceived as the most powerful of the Rajput kings and had been a thorn in the side of the Mughal Empire since the very start. In his memoirs, Emperor Babur inveighed against 'that infidel' Rana Sangha, whom he fought at the battle of Khanua in 1526.[30] Even fifty years later Akbar was still struggling to contain the Ranas of Mewar at the famed battle of Haldighati, where victory over Sangha's descendant Rana Pratap Singh eluded him. It was only Shah Jahan, when he was still Prince Khurram,[31] who finally succeeded in getting the Ranas of Mewar to accept a tributary relationship. These events of 1614–15 are celebrated with great fanfare in Emperor Jahangir's memoirs:

> My lucky son Sultan Khurram made things quite difficult for the Rana by stationing many outposts . . . He also had the victorious forces attack in rapid succession, despite the severity of the heat and intensity of the rain, and took prisoner the women and children of most of the inhabitants of the region. Since the Rana realized that if even a little time passed in this fashion he would either be driven from his kingdom or be captured, he had no choice but to submit and pledge allegiance. . . . he begged that if our son would plead for the forgiveness of his offenses, ease his anxiety, and obtain a royal hand print for him, he would come and pay homage to him and send his son and heir, Karan, to our court so that he might be enrolled among the servants of this court and render service like the rest of the rajas.[32]

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[28] The Mughals developed a documentary state on an unprecedented scale. On their impressive communication networks (later inherited by the British Empire), see C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[29] The Mewar kings took the title of Rana (or Maharana), a variant of the Indic word Raja (also Maharaja) or king.

[30] Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in association with Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 378–88.

[31] The Mughal princes typically adopted regnal titles after their accession, hence the different name. Thus, Prince Salim became Jahangir, Prince Khurram became Shah Jahan and Prince Aurangzeb became Alamgir.

[32] Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston

Maheshdas's prose letter reconstructs this history in considerably different terms from the official Persian chronicle:

> Prince Aurangzeb and Prince Murad wrote a letter:
>
> 'The imperial throne of Delhi was bestowed by the Ranas [of Mewar].
> If the Shah of Delhi sits on it, it is because the Rana seats him.
> That is how he gets his title "Badshah of Delhi."
> Just as formerly Rana Karan Singh gave the empire to Shah Jahan
> And accordingly it is recorded in the imperial chronicles.
> So now keeping this in mind,
> Might we have just a little help from His Excellency?
> And could Udaipur (i.e. Mewar) come to the aid of Aurangzeb and Murad
> And join forces against Delhi?'[33]

Somewhat improbably, two Mughal princes are ventriloquised as attributing their very empire to the Ranas of Mewar! This is certainly a refreshing change of perspective from the normal Mughal view that the Ranas of Mewar are unusually refractory Rajputs. There is doubtless some wishful thinking here, but the point to stress is that Hindi court poets like Maheshdas often foreground Rajput perspectives on political life. To reformulate the Mughal conquest of North India as having been critically spearheaded by Rajput military might is surely a remarkable comment on the uses of the past for regional Hindu kings of the seventeenth century.

In fact, Maheshdas often gives the imperial war of 1658 a distinctly Rajput face. He stresses the military expertise of local warriors. Another important theme is their sacrifices: many never made it home. It makes good sense, given the patronage of the *Binhai Raso*, that the prowess of Gaur warriors would be accorded special attention and indeed many are featured in the *Binhai Raso*, often in roles that stress the theme of *swami-dharma* (lit., code of conduct to the master) or a strong service ethic.

In one scene, en route to the battle of Ujjain (more commonly known as Dharmat or Dharmatpura) in April 1658, Aurangzeb tries to persuade Man Singh Gaur, the commander of a strategic fort in the outpost of Aser, to surrender:

> Fearless Aurangzeb sent a message:
>
> Gaur warrior, give up the fort. There are great advantages to joining me.
> I will give you a considerable military assignment.
> If you don't agree I will storm the fort and kill you.

Despite being threatened with death, Man Singh Gaur is not cowed. He protects the interests of his overlord, retorting:

> Listen Sultan Aurangzeb,
> Emperor Shah Jahan has kept me as his commander,

(Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in association with Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 164.

[33] *BR*, 1, 35.

and given me soldiers to protect. …
Progeny of demons, you can break my skull
but the fort of Aser will never be broken (i.e. surrendered).[34]

Aurangzeb does not press his luck and leaves Aser Fort untouched. Here Maheshdas uses the loaded word *asura* (demon), a typically 'othering' epithet from the Indian tradition that conveys severe moral disapproval. The simulating of reported speech adds drama and, overall, the passage allows Maheshdas to feature a Gaur Rajput in a central role, as singlehandedly warding off a pressing military threat.

A similar scene centres on the figure of Shivram Gaur, another stalwart who forced Aurangzeb to turn back—this time from the fort of Mandu. The accomplishment merits a well-crafted sextet that recurs in the work in celebration of the collective military achievements of the Gaur Rajputs who, the text vehemently argues, are defending key outposts for the empire.[35]

Occasionally, however, Maheshdas also suggests that more is at stake than simply the glories of imperial service. Shivram Gaur and Man Singh Gaur are accorded epithets such as 'lord of Ajmer' or 'Ajmer's pride', hints about ties to particular localities that must also have animated the warriors of this period.[36]

Warrior *Dharma*

Whether out of duty to the emperor or more localised sentiments, many Rajput noblemen and their troops fought in the imperial succession war of 1658. Why were they willing to die for this cause? There were powerful traditions in India that cast war as *dharma* or duty; we have already alluded to the specific case of *swami-dharma*.[37] In the overarching scheme of caste hierarchies, Rajputs were considered *kshatriyas*, the warrior/ruling classes, second in rank only to Brahmans.[38] If Brahmans prided themselves on their learning, Rajputs were conditioned to follow the prescriptions of *kshatriya dharma* or warrior ethics. One of the most famous sermons on this subject is contained in the *Bhagavad Gita*, originally composed in Sanskrit as part of the great epic *Mahabharata* but today revered separately as a Hindu scripture. The text's hero, Arjun, begins to lose heart as he sees his kinsmen lined up on both sides of the battlefield at Kurukshetra (an ancient city not far from today's Delhi). Lord Krishna then instructs him in his

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[34] *BR*, 1, 49–50.

[35] *BR*, 1, 52–9 (with the sextet in 1, 56 a reprise of 1, 29).

[36] *BR*, 1, 28–9, 198.

[37] On *swami-dharma*, see C. Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 171–7.

[38] The other two major groups were *vaishyas*, merchants and farmers, and *shudras* or servants and labourers. This classical four-fold typology dates to the Vedic period around 1200 BCE but the social practices on the ground were of course far more fluid and complex.

duty and urges him to fight, for 'there is nothing more befitting a *kshatriya* than a noble war'.[39]

In fact, a range of belief structures conditioned attitudes toward war and death. It was the norm in this part of India—Rajasthan ('the land of kings') has come to be especially associated with its martial history—to celebrate *death* in battle, rather than victory.[40] The advantages of dying in battle are specifically articulated. Soldiers in India were held to pierce the sun when they die, merging into the divine light. Another solace for the young men who charged into battle was the prospect of wedding a celestial maiden in death.

In a powerful passage from canto one, Maheshdas provides a poignant tableau of the Gaur warriors who must prepare to die if things go badly for them at the Battle of Ujjain. (They will.) An extended verse sequence shows an earthly warrior putting on his armour and readying himself for war, interleaving lines that form a parallel universe where the celestial maiden awaits his death on the battlefield:

> Here [on earth] the warrior undertakes a ritual bath and performs charity,
> There [in heaven] Rambha[41] does her toilette.
> Here the warrior intrepidly dons his chainmail,
> There the celestial maiden puts on her dress.
> The warrior puts on his socks,
> Meanwhile Rambha wears her anklets.
> Here the warrior girds his loins,
> There Rambha cinches her decorative belt.
> Here the warrior puts on his armour purposefully,
> There Rambha fastens her blouse ...[42]

The poem continues in this vein, ending on the note of how the beautiful maiden will be waiting for the soldier with a celestial vehicle to transport him to heaven the moment he dies. She too is getting ready but for lovemaking rather than for war.

We also witness an intimate scene that speaks powerfully to the sacrifice that Rajputs were expected to make for the imperial cause. The hero of canto one, Arjun Gaur, happens to be the namesake of the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita* and performs various preparatory rites expected of a Hindu warrior. He purifies himself in Ganges water (which Hindus consider sacred) and prays. He adopts the sacred thread traditionally worn by upper castes, wraps himself in a yellow robe and performs charity. He puts on a forehead ornament and meditates, chanting protective syllables. There is a stateliness and dignity to the private scene and we confront, along with Arjun Gaur, the magnitude of what it means to die.[43]

[39] *Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Wasudev Laxman Shastri Pansikar (Bombay: Nirnaya-Sagar Press, 1936), pp. 2, 31.
[40] L. Harlan, *The Goddesses' Henchmen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 36–7.
[41] Rambha is the name of a celestial maiden associated with the Hindu deity Indra.
[42] *BR*, 1, 75.
[43] *BR*, 1, 78.

Then, one by one, Maheshdas introduces other Gaur warriors who are facing a similar fate. We meet Shiromani, the superintendant of munitions and armour, who has a 'demonstrated commitment to swami-dharma'. We meet Arjun Gaur's uncle, Birabhadra, and other notable warriors from the Gaur contingent.[44] One Prithviraj took opium to ready himself for death. Maheshdas notes that 'damsels were waiting to wed him in heaven' and 'he would be of service to his overlord and never return'.[45] Raj Singh Gaur put on a saffron-coloured turban and full body armour before 'concentrating his heart on the divine light with which he would merge upon piercing the sun'.[46]

An especially dramatic verse shows Arjun Gaur at the moment of his own impending death. He remembers how his father Raja Bithaldas (as noted above, he was a Shah Jahan loyalist) taught him how to be a warrior:

> [my father] used to impart this lesson: once you engage in combat, never flee—this is the way of our family. [Thus] a son proves to be a worthy son.

> From birth my name has been Arjun—I will make [the battle of] Ujjain Kurukshetra [the site where the two warring armies face each other in the *Bhagavad Gita*] and obtain salvation by my sword.[47]

We glimpse an entire warrior culture undergirded by religious conviction and structured rituals, a kind of Hindu 'holy war'. Maheshdas taps into Hindu tradition to lend a deep moral weight to the Gaurs' sense of duty and honour. The Gaur warriors take purifying sips from a vial of Ganges water and charge forth into battle calling out god's name.[48] They fight to the death.

One critical distinction that Maheshdas makes is between those who could withstand the pressures of battle and those who couldn't cut it. Whatever the pull of dharma or the inducement of celestial women decked out and waiting, some warriors failed spectacularly in their martial responsibilities. Maheshdas is not afraid to point this out, even going so far as to list the names of those who 'wilted', fleeing the battlefield.[49] Among them was Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur, a leading Rajput king and general from the prestigious Rathore dynasty. No Gaur Rajput is caught behaving in such a pusillanimous fashion. Shah Jahan's son Prince Dara Shukoh, too, leaves the front and takes refuge back at the imperial capital.[50] Here it may be productive to consider how a text like the *Binhai Raso*

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[44] *BR*, 1, 81–7.
[45] *BR*, 1, 88.
[46] *BR*, 1, 90. The saffron turban signifies that the warrior expects to meet his death in an unwinnable war. Harlan, *The Goddesses' Henchmen*, p. 23.
[47] *BR*, 1, 159.
[48] *BR*, 1, 194–5.
[49] *BR*, 1, 154–6; *BR*, 2, 1.
[50] *BR*, 2, 39, 61. Dara Shukoh's lack of credible military experience, an arena in which his brother Aurangzeb far surpassed him, has been raised as an important factor in his failure to secure the throne. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, pp. 162–78.

inscribes normative emotions since the warrior ethics of soldier groups are both defined and reinforced by positive and negative example.

Maheshdas presents war as necessary and honourable but he also stresses that it leads to horrific death. Two out of three of the battles that he describes were catastrophes for the Shah Jahan contingent, occasioning massive casualties. The poet does not spare his readers the extreme carnage. In a lengthy verse labelled 'account of revulsion' Maheshdas uses the simple but effective technique of repetition to bring home the point:

> *Kahum parai bīra khaḍaha bihaṇḍa, kahum parai suṇḍa daṇḍaha pracaṇḍa*
> *Kahum parai danta antaha ulajhjhi, masihāra phirai tiha bāra majhjhi...*
> *Kahum parai sūra sira-dāra sāra, asi parai, kahum parai yesavāra*
> *Taraphata kahum maccha tuccha toya, kahum parai yeka kahum parai doya*
> *Kahum parai bāmha galabāmha gaththa, kahum parai chakra kahum parai rattha*

> Here lie the fallen heroes, their bodies dismembered.
> The trunks of fearsome elephants are lying severed.
> Strewn about are tusks mired in gore.
> Birds of prey circle the battlefield ...
> The finest warriors lie fallen, their swords stilled.
> Some soldiers, fallen from their mounts, lie writhing like fish.
> Here lies one solitary soldier, over there lie two.
> Here lies a severed arm, there limbs are entangled.
> Here lies a wheel, over there lies a vehicle.[51]

Dimgal poets, as noted, prided themselves on their ability to construct vivid war scenes, and certainly this meets the mark. In this shockingly visual tableau of the battlefield, war suddenly seems as devastating as it is honourable.

Almost incantatory catalogues of the Gaur dead turn the almost cinematic focus to the scale of human loss. We had just seen all of these men alive:

> Fallen in battle was Birabhadra, who lost his life.
> Fallen in battle was the famous warrior Murari.
> Lying side by side were Prithviraj and Askaran.
> Gods and demons from on high beheld the spectacle.
> Fallen were Raj Singh and his brother Man Singh,
> and kinsmen Shyamdas and Kushalesh, brave fighters.
> Fallen was chieftain Kishandas Patalaut,
> Fallen was soldier Shyamdas, warrior of Ajmer ...[52]

The verse continues in this vein and, as with the 'account of revulsion', most lines begin with the Hindi word *parai* or 'fallen', which through insistent repetition underscores the pathos of war. These were not faceless wars; they were peopled by warriors who were bound to each other and to imperial authorities through ethical codes of service. Their sacrifices were now immortalised in the *Binhai Raso*.

[51] *BR*, 1, 199.
[52] *BR*, 1, 198.

Although we do not have at our disposal a good reception history of early modern Hindi historical literature, it is nonetheless possible to envision a likely scenario for the functions of a work like *Binhai Raso* in its textual community. Maheshdas's poem was commissioned by a local Rajput chieftain from the Gaur clan so in all likelihood it would have been performed for the survivors, as well as for the families and friends of the many heroes who died in a gruelling imperial war. These soldiers fought bravely for *dharma*, for the emperor, as well as for the glory of their family and community. Their sacrifices were not forgotten. In this sense, Maheshdas's *Binhai Raso* was an important act of commemoration. We might even think of it as the early modern Rajput equivalent of a war monument.

The *Binhai Raso*, to be sure, has a less material and enduring presence than a modern war monument since it survived not on stone but on ephemeral paper. Still, in this region of India texts were part of a vibrant oral culture and many genres of poetry had a performative as well as manuscript-based existence.[53] Certain modes of Rajput history lived on the tongues of traditional bards who had unsurpassed skills in memory and techniques of transmission. They were also great performers. We noted above some of the codes of Dimgal poetic representation, the lively descriptions that so effectively recreate the aural atmospherics of war. There are also sombre moments that ennoble death, layering it with meaning. Quasi-genealogical features are another element: sometimes dozens of verses consist of long lists of individual warriors and a concise note or two about their lineages. In fact, individual Gaur Rajputs are always named in the *Binhai Raso*, as are important warriors on Emperor Shah Jahan's side generally. There are exceptions, but Aurangzeb's and Murad's and Shah Shuja's armies are less likely to attract specific description. This may simply be because Maheshdas was less familiar with the details. It may also be that naming is an act of empathy and helps to build community. By collectively remembering and by inculcating normative emotions, by establishing the parameters of honour and dishonour, Hindi historical poetry helped to constitute its Rajput patrons and listeners as an 'emotional community'.[54]

The *Binhai Raso* can, additionally, be seen as an attempt to mould the self-perception of local political groups as indispensable to the functioning of the Mughal Empire. And here we see Maheshdas actively advancing particular claims. The *Binhai Raso* is local history, to be sure, but the sheer number of instances where a Gaur fighter is hailed as 'the lord of Ajmer' or 'Ajmer's pride' suggests that Maheshdas was not only endorsing the warrior ethos or commending loyalty

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[53] For recent work on this topic, see F. Orsini and K. B. Schofield, *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015).

[54] Here I use a term coined by the history of emotions scholar Barbara Rosenwein. See her 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *American Historical Review* 107:3 (2002), 821–45, at 842.

to the emperor but was also in some sense articulating a domain of local sovereignty within an imperial regime.

How he gets there is a long and complicated story, but despite the known outcome of 1658—a resounding defeat for Shah Jahan and his son Dara Shukoh—Maheshdas chose to close his narrative at an earlier moment in the succession war, after an initial victory over Shah Shuja, rather than describing the bitter end. His last canto gives special prominence to another Gaur chieftain, Aniruddh Singh, who manages to achieve a victory for his general in a particular campaign. Aniruddh Singh Gaur pays his respects at the imperial court and the emperor's son Dara Shukoh praises him extravagantly, saying 'I am victorious because of you. I will rule but *you have given me the empire*'.[55] Ultimately, Dara Shukoh *lost* the empire to his brother Aurangzeb, but in some cases poetry is better than history. In Maheshdas's text the Gaur Rajputs get the last word. And Maheshdas's construction of the situation, as with Aurangzeb's overture to Rana Raj Singh of Mewar earlier in the work, is that imperial power is only possible because of Rajput military service. If the Mughal wars could not be lost or won without clans like the Gaur Rajputs—and this is very much the claim of the *Binhai Raso*—the Rajputs possessed an indispensable, and undeniable, authority.

Conclusion

In much of India literature was the mode in which history in general and the political in particular typically found expression. Certainly much of the Hindi historical record is composed precisely in genres that freely intermingle the reporting of events with carefully crafted scenes of poetic beauty. These shed light on early modern political ethics and provide a regional perspective on empire that we normally cannot access when we rely only on official Persian histories.

Persian was the bureaucratic language of the Mughal Empire, but many early modern Indians were multilingual, and certainly this is true of the historical record. In a society characterised by multiple languages and textual cultures, it is merely stating the obvious to say that multiple genres and registers of history were in play and these served diverse constituencies. I have argued elsewhere that Hindi textual culture was fully accessible to elite Mughal society,[56] but Dimgal, which is different from the classical dialects of literary Hindi that were in widest use, had a particularly local currency in western Rajput communities. Dimgal poetry was decidedly not composed with the Persianate Mughal emperor in mind

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[55] *BR*, 3, 78.

[56] The Mughal emperors participated in Hindi literary culture much more than has been previously acknowledged. See A. Busch, 'Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court', *Modern Asian Studies* 44:2 (2010), 267–309; A. Busch, 'Poetry in Motion: Literary Circulation in Mughal India', in T. de Bruijn and A. Busch (eds), *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), pp. 186–221.

and consequently there was scope for alternative—even oppositional—discourse. Local perspectives are frequently foregrounded, as when in Maheshdas's climax Aniruddh Singh Gaur is presented as carrying the day for the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh, and Rajput leaders for the Mughals generally.

And yet while recognising the need to assess the competing claims of historiographical subgroups in the Indian subcontinent, the discursive convergences between imperial and local world views are considerable. This too merits attention. The polarised climate of Hindu and Muslim relations in modern South Asia might lead us to expect to find in the Hindi texts of Rajput communities an entirely different vision from that of official Persian histories. Indeed, an early exploration of related material posited the Rajput vision in stark terms as a Hindu 'counter-epic' to Muslim power.[57] But, as demonstrated above, if Persian texts are obsessed with the rhetoric of imperial loyalty, this is also an important cultural value in the *Binhai Raso*.

As noted at the outset of this discussion, 1658 is now seen as a watershed moment in Indian history. The victory of Aurangzeb (followed by his execution of Dara Shukoh) is now considered, in the words of Mughal historian Rajeev Kinra, 'one of the most overdetermined moments in South Asian historiography ... the quintessential "what if?" moment, often viewed with modern (and post-modern) hindsight as a kind of civilizational tipping point away from Mughal policies of religious tolerance'.[58] And Hindu nationalist historiography posits a powerful counterfactual, claiming that if only Dara Shukoh had won instead of Aurangzeb, the character of India and, by extension, Hindu–Muslim relations would have been radically different. None of this is visible from the court of the Gaur Rajputs, who came out on the losing side. Not once does Maheshdas comment on Dara Shukoh's religious proclivities, which are just about all that is remembered about him today. He says barely anything about Dara Shukoh at all and when the Mughal prince does make a brief appearance as a military leader in canto two he is seen leaving the battlefield, about the worst thing a person could do in the moral imaginary of this text.

Religion is not a major focal point for Maheshdas, although he does give it a nod from time to time. We noted some of Arjun Gaur's ritual preparations for the battlefield, as well as the invoking of Kurukshetra, the scene of a cataclysmic battle now sacralised in Hindu scripture. Hindus and Muslims both fought on *both* sides in 1658, however, and even if the Gaur world view is a Hindu one, Maheshdas

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[57] A. Ahmad, 'Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83:4 (1964), 470–6. In more recent decades scholars have moved away from such binary formulations and are more cautious about reading modern Hindu and Muslim anxieties into a pre-colonial past. See C. Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37:4 (1995), 692–722; D. Gilmartin and B. Lawrence (eds), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

[58] Kinra, 'Infantilizing Bābā Dārā', 166.

occasionally makes room for, as he puts it, 'those of the other religion'.[59] There can be a refreshing ecumenism in the poet's treatment of soldiers of different faiths. Muslims too are shown engaged in ritual bathing and prayer.[60] Moreover, religious difference is sensitively handled, as when in assessing the dead at the end of the battle of Ujjain, Aurangzeb emerges as a consummate leader and orders that the Hindus are to be burned, the Muslims buried.[61]

If there were uses of the past for Maheshdas and the Gaur court in their reporting on the war of 1658, there are also uses of the past for us moderns. As I move to close this chapter (summer 2016), Hindu nationalist forces are causing consternation in India and beyond. The interpretation of the historical record is not an academic exercise; it has real life consequences, and secular scholars in India have been struggling for decades to counter a pernicious historiography that sees Muslims as cruel conquerors of a rightfully Hindu realm.[62] In the nineteenth century, the British officer Colonel James Tod spent a long period at the Mewar court, and he wrote admiringly of Rajputs in his influential *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*.[63] Recall that the Mewar kings took the longest to cede their realm to Mughal authority. Tod greatly admired Mewar's spirit of independence but he read it in terms of a Hindu–Muslim binary logic that became the norm in the colonial period. Rajputs today often see their own past in Hindu versus Muslim terms.[64] This has also been a formulation of the Indian past in textbooks, an ongoing site of vociferous contestation.[65] There has even been a recent call by Hindu nationalists to remove the Mughals from history books.[66] This agonistic spirit of religious intolerance was not the norm in either Persian or Hindi historical writing from the early modern period. Let the historical record continue to speak to us, in as many languages and genres as possible.

[59] *BR*, 2, 35.

[60] *BR*, 1, 72.

[61] *BR*, 1, 200.

[62] One recent reflection is Bhattacharya, 'Predicaments of Secular Histories'.

[63] L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph, 'Writing and Reading Tod's *Rajasthan*: Interpreting the Text and its Historiography', in Jos Gommans and Om Prakash (eds), *Circumambulations in South Asian History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 251–82.

[64] Harlan, *The Goddesses' Henchmen*, pp. 45–6; 49–55.

[65] S. Guichard, 'The Indian Nation and Selective Amnesia: Representing Conflicts and Violence in Indian History Textbooks', *Nations and Nationalisms* 19/1 (2013), 68–86.

[66] A brief overview of the issue is available at http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35709930, accessed 4 July 2016.

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